THE PARADOX OF THE END WITHOUT END

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In much of Christian thought humans are taken to have an ultimate end, understood as the highest attainable good. Christians also anticipate “the life everlasting.” Together these ideas generate a paradox. If the end can be reached in a finite amount of time, some longer-lasting state will be better still, so the purported end is not the highest good after all. But if the end is to possess some good forever, then it will never be reached. So it seems an everlasting being cannot have an ultimate end—a conclusion that apparently makes human life pointless. How can the paradox be solved?

The Paradox

Much Christian thinking about the ultimate human end has followed broadly Aristotelian lines. A thing’s ultimate end has been conceived as its highest attainable good. It must be attainable, since only an attainable good is suitable as a goal. It is “that for which a thing is done.”¹ The end must also be the highest such good, since otherwise it would not be the most choiceworthy good. It is, as Aristotle says, self-sufficient, i.e., it would be superfluous to add other goods to it.

An even more central feature of Christian thought is what the Apostle’s Creed calls “the life everlasting.” Unending life is sometimes explicitly treated as an element or feature of the ultimate human end, as in the Westminster Larger Catechism’s characterization of “the chief and highest end of man” as “to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”²

Taken together, however, the ultimate human end and the life everlasting are paradoxical. Hereafter, let’s use the word “telos” for the ultimate human end. Suppose that the telos is a good that can be reached in a finite period of time. For example, we might take the telos to be a vision of the divine essence. In this case, it seems that an ongoing vision of the divine essence would be better than a vision that one already had, which is to say that the finitely reachable good is not the highest attainable good after all. On the other hand, suppose that the telos cannot be reached in a finite period; the goal is not merely to possess some good but to possess it forever. In this case, the telos will never be reached, and indeed can

¹See Physics 194b33 and also Nicomachean Ethics 1097a, where a thing’s good is characterized the same way.
²Q&A 1.
never be reached. No one can reach the end of an endless future, and so the goal of doing anything forever is unattainable.

It looks, then, as if an everlasting being cannot have a telos. But that conclusion will hardly seem acceptable to the Christian. If human beings are created by God they are created with a purpose, whereas the absence of a goal would apparently make human life pointless.

So reflection on what Augustine calls “the end without end”3 unearths a genuine puzzle. For us his playful phrase may be an invitation to reinvestigate the character of the human future.

We may summarize the argument as follows:

(1) Each human being B is everlasting.

(2) B has a telos T only if it is possible for B to attain T.

(3) B has a telos T only if T is greater than any other good that B can attain.

(4) If B is everlasting and B can attain T in a finite interval, then B can attain a good greater than T.

(5) If B cannot attain T in a finite interval, then it is not possible for B to attain T.

∴ (6) No human being has a telos.

The argument assumes no particular view of what the telos is. Whether one thinks of the ultimate human end as an absorbing contemplation of God, a vocation of productive activity, or a relationship of harmony with God and all creation, the premises are prima facie true and they support a prima facie false conclusion. I will assume, however, that a person’s telos (if any) is a state or condition of that person, where state is a category broad enough to include conditions that are momentary, temporally extended, or atemporal; finite or infinite in duration; continuous or discontinuous; static or dynamic; and intrinsic or relational. To attain a state is simply to exemplify it or be in it.

The argument above is valid, so any attempt to resolve the paradox must either reject one of its premises or accept its conclusion. Let’s consider some strategies. Five of them will reject one of the five premises, and one will accept the argument’s conclusion. Each strategy will have some disadvantages. Having considered each, I will unveil an additional strategy that seems to me to have the best prospects.

Denying Premise (1): Atemporal Life

Premise (1): Each human being B is everlasting.

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3“There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end [fine sine fine]. For what other end do we propose to ourselves than to attain to the kingdom of which there is no end?” (The City of God, 22.30).
Denial of (1): The Scriptural promise is of eternal life, but “eternal” can mean “atemporal” rather than “everlasting.” After death, human beings enter eternity, and human life will be timeless. This is consistent with attainment of the human telos, which is to enter an atemporal relation with God.\(^4\)

Reply: The idea of a future atemporal state is incoherent. To be in an atemporal state is to lack temporal properties and relations. Being later than is a temporal relation, so no one in an atemporal state exists later than any temporal event. It follows that no human being existing at the present time will enter an atemporal state later than the present time. A corollary is that it would be folly to hope for such a condition. Whatever else an atemporal state may be, it cannot be something to look forward to.

We may also note that the present strategy is an uneasy fit with traditional Christian thinking on the topic.\(^5\) Augustine and Boethius made the notion of an atemporal eternity a widespread feature of Christian thought, but they reserved the notion for God. Neither suggested that atemporality was a feature of human existence, future or otherwise.\(^6\) Aquinas does argue that the beatific vision is “a sort of participation in eternity.” He argues, for example, on the grounds that what is seen in it is seen all at once, its object (the divine substance) is not in time, and its agent (the intellect) is incorruptible.\(^7\) None of these considerations, however, keep Aquinas from concluding that the felicity gained through this vision is perpetual, and from this it follows that it is temporal. In fact, Aquinas argues, the felicity “would not be the ultimate end unless it endured perpetually.”\(^8\)

Thus Aquinas’s case for human participation in eternity is not a denial of premise (1). Likewise, the other major figures of the tradition ascribe atemporal existence to God but everlasting life to human persons.

Could it be that the human future is sempiternal? Sempiternity is a condition of duration without change, and the duration, as the name suggests, is everlasting. So the thesis of human sempiternity is not an objection to premise (1) but an endorsement of it.

Perhaps some will be tempted to develop a non-traditional view on which a single unchanging “moment” follows all the times of one’s fully temporal life. To evaluate such a view we would need to see it and its motivating arguments spelled out, but in anticipation we can see at least one problem that would need to be overcome. Like any other static conception of the human end, the view would stand in *prima facie* tension with the Christian

\(^4\)One might also deny premise (1) by claiming that some humans will cease to exist, e.g., with an annihilationist account of damnation, but in the end this approach has no effect. It can be circumvented by replacing (1) with the premise that each human being is potentially everlasting (and adjusting (4) accordingly).

\(^5\)The King James Version renders ὅτι χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται in Revelation 10:6 with the phrase “that there should be time no longer,” but most contemporary English translations have “There will be no more delay.”

\(^6\)See, e.g., *Confessions*, Book XI.13 and XIII.36.

\(^7\)*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.61.

\(^8\)*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.62.3.
doctrine of resurrection. Christians anticipate an embodied afterlife, but it is difficult to see what use a body could be in an unchanging state.\(^9\)

Let's proceed, then, on the assumption that humans will have an unending temporal existence.

**Denying Premise (2): Asymptotic Approach**

Premise (2): B has a telos T only if it is possible for B to attain T.

Denial of (2): It is not necessary to think that a telos must be attainable. It can play its role as that at which human life is aimed if it can be approached asymptotically, i.e., if a human life can resemble the telos more and more, or overlap it more and more, so as to come to come arbitrarily close to it.

Reply: To treat the telos as unattainable would really be to replace the notion of a *telos* (that is, a goal, “that for which a thing is done”) with a guiding *ideal*, something that provides direction to a life without the possibility of a final arrival. In other words, the idea that human life asymptotically approaches an unattainable state is less a denial of (2) than an affirmation of (6). But either way, the present strategy is a departure. If this strategy were the most promising solution, the paradox would be noteworthy for that reason alone.\(^10\)

But in fact the strategy is dubious. Suppose that human life at its best approaches some ideal asymptotically. If the ideal were a state that could be attained in a finite interval, there would presumably be no need merely to approach it. So the asymptotic approach strategy assumes that the ideal is a state that cannot be attained in a finite interval. The most salient type of candidate is an everlasting state (e.g., loving and enjoying God forever). But if this sort of state is the ideal, it cannot be approached asymptotically, or indeed to any meaningful extent. However long one lives, one is no closer to having lived forever. In an everlasting life, the ratio of the amount of time one has already lived to the amount of time one has yet to live is always exactly zero (if we confine ourselves to the real numbers), or at any rate less than every positive real number (if we allow infinitesimals). One cannot be said to approach the purported ideal, asymptotically or otherwise.

\(^9\)Christina Van Dyke raises this issue for Aquinas's understanding of happiness. If the body of a participant in the beatific vision performs no actions, as Aquinas apparently believed (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.62.8), why should God raise such bodies at all? Not for doing anything. Perhaps the most promising Thomistic answer is that the body is integral to the identity of the human person. Whatever the detached soul may do, we ourselves will not be the subjects of the divine vision until our bodies and souls are reunited. However, this raises the question why God would make creatures whose fulfillment makes an integral part useless. See Van Dyke, “Shiny Happy People.”

\(^10\)The same goes for the idea that it is enough to be in the process of moving toward an unattainable telos without approaching it asymptotically. If the state is unattainable, then it is not a goal. Nor can a state of being in the process of moving toward an ideal be the telos since such a state is surpassable. (See the discussion of premise (4))
So an approachable ideal cannot be having a certain good forever. But a Zeno-esque state might have a suitable structure. Suppose that a human can be in a state S for any finite length of time, no matter how short (e.g., the state of existing, or of having some temporally intrinsic property). Let D be a discontinuous interval consisting of a half-year portion of one year, a quarter-year portion of the next year, an eighth-year portion of the year after that, and so on. Then let Z be the state of being in S for a full year of interval D in total. What we say next depends on what it is to approach a state. Z would require an infinite number of days to complete, so if approaching a state entails needing less time to complete it, Z cannot be approached. But if approaching a state is overlapping or including an increasing fraction of it, then Z can be approached. And because the overlapped fraction can be arbitrarily close to 1, Z can be approached asymptotically.

This suffices to show that there are states that can be approached asymptotically. But what state with this feature is a plausible candidate for the role of the ideal of human life? The suggestion that the ideal is Z (on a suitable specification of S) or anything with a remotely similar structure seems rather silly.

A possibility that isn’t patently ridiculous is that the ideal is the limit of some activity or characteristic that can only be gained with diminishing returns. For illustration, suppose that (i) the ideal is perfect adoration of God, that (ii) the quality of one’s adoration increases with experience, and that (iii) the extent of the gains inevitably decreases as the quality increases. Suppose further that (iv) the rate of decrease in the gains is such that perfect adoration cannot be reached in any finite amount of time, but one’s adoration can come arbitrarily close to perfection. Then the ideal is asymptotically approachable.

Again we have an abstract possibility, this time with a bit of initial plausibility. But we have not yet seen that this is in fact the correct way to think about the human ideal. What remains for the advocate of the asymptotic approach strategy is to identify the activity or characteristic of which the ideal is the limit and to provide independent grounds for thinking that it can only be gained with diminishing returns at a rate that makes the approach asymptotic. To my knowledge, this has not yet been done.

And there are reasons to doubt that it can be done. It is plausible—that the value of living as a human for a given length of time has some positive lower bound. A day of human life cannot be utterly without value, and human nature sets a threshold below which its value cannot fall. But if so, the values added to a life as the days go on do not become arbitrarily small, and so the total value of that life will eventually surpass any purported limit. At the very least, we can see that some relatively specific theses about the ideal and the values that accrue in a life that approaches it would need to be established to show that the idea of asymptotic approach is viable.
Denying Premise (3): Surpassable Happiness

Premise (3): B has a telos T only if T is greater than any other good that B can attain.

Denial of (3): Aristotle does not treat the telos as the greatest attainable good. Admittedly, he does characterize happiness as self-sufficient, lacking nothing. But in a number of ways his description of happiness makes it clear that it need not be the greatest possible good. For example, though Aristotle famously remarks that happiness is to be found in a complete life, he does not suggest that it must be the longest possible life.\(^{11}\) For another example, though great changes of fortune can tarnish one’s happiness, even the happy person will experience some bad fortune.\(^ {12}\) Since it is presumably possible that such bad fortune be avoided, the life that makes a person happy need not be the greatest possible.\(^ {13}\)

For these reasons we should distinguish between the greater-than relation and the done-for-the-sake-of relation, and between the orderings of goods that these relations generate. Aristotle treats happiness as the ultimate member of the done-for-the-sake-of ordering, but implicitly denies that happiness is the ultimate member of the greater-than ordering. So there are principled reasons for thinking that (3) is false. We may even say that the \textit{summum bonum} is not the highest good.\(^ {14}\)

Reply: Granting the exegetical claims, it remains puzzling how one could consistently affirm that the ultimate human end is not the greatest attainable good. Aristotle’s own thought supplies reasons to be puzzled about this. He says that if the complete good (i.e., the telos) were merely one good among others, “it would clearly be more worthy of choice with even the least good added to it. For the good added would cause an increase in goodness, and the greater good is always more worthy of choice.”\(^ {15}\) This appears to imply that the complete good cannot be improved upon (i.e., that the ultimate member of the done-for-the-sake-of ordering is not surpassed in the greater-than ordering) and that premise (3) is true. This is the reason that a state like \textit{beginning an everlasting life of}

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\(^{11}\)\textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, I.7 (1098a). Terence Irwin says that a complete life need not take a whole lifetime, citing 1101a6–13. See Irwin’s translation (185, a note on I.7, sec. 16).

\(^{12}\)\textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, I.10 (1100b).

\(^{13}\)Roger Crisp argues, “It is important to recognize here that Aristotle is not suggesting that a life can be happy only if it is itself unimprovable. That would be absurd, since any human life is always lacking something the addition of which would improve it. Rather, Aristotle’s point is a conceptual constraint on any conception of happiness is that it not be improvable by the addition of some good which it has omitted” (\textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Crisp introduction, xii).

\(^{14}\)In one sense. Among medieval authors “\textit{summum bonum}” often refers to God rather than to a good that can be achieved, such as the vision of God. Cf. Aristotle’s distinction between the Form of the Good and the kind of good that is the object of action (\textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, I.6 (1096b)).

\(^{15}\)\textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, I.7 (1097b).
great goods cannot be the telos, since the addition of one of the goods to come yields a greater state.

It may be that Aristotle also provides a solution to this puzzle. He repeatedly remarks that it is inappropriate to seek more exactness than the subject matter allows. If one regards happiness as a lifetime of virtuous activity or a state that closely resembles this, then one could arguably affirm both that the telos is, more or less, the greatest attainable good and that the state of one who attains the telos could be (or have been) improved.

This line of thought suggests a way in which one might regard attainment of the telos as something less than attainment of the greatest attainable good. However, it does not provide an effective solution to the paradox under consideration. Suppose we identified the telos with some good that is surpassed by a similar good. In a rich and everlasting life, still longer lasting and more inclusive goods will surpass the candidate telos and every good that approximates it. For example, putting the virtues into action over a normal human lifespan of seventy or eighty years is a great and noteworthy good, but putting the virtues into action over seventy or eighty thousand years outshines it by a wide margin.

What this shows is that even if premise (3) is false, we can repair the argument by replacing premises (3) and (4). There are a number of ways to do this. Here is one simple, serviceable replacement pair.

(3*) B has a telos T only if no other good that B can attain is much greater than T.

(4*) If B is everlasting and B can attain T in a finite interval, then B can attain a good much greater than T.

(3*) is a rather unassuming claim. If Aristotle is correct in saying that the greater good is always more choiceworthy, then the telos, that for which human actions are ultimately done, cannot be a decidedly lesser good (even if it can be less good than one that it approximates). (4*) is also eminently plausible, provided that an everlasting individual can always continue to live a life of sufficient value. Christians, of course, believe the life everlasting to be one of profound value. If the values of successive states are straightforwardly additive (i.e., for any state A of value x and state B of value y, the state of being first in A and then in B has the value x + y), all that is really needed to establish (4*) is that the values of intervals of this life will never approach zero, tapering off to nothing. But even if successive states’ values are not additive it is plausible (as suggested

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16 For example, one could replace the word “greater” in (3) and (4) with the words “more choiceworthy” to yield a paradox as potent as the original.

17 Apparently they are not. The enjoyment derived from the taste of food decreases quickly after the first few bites even if the taste itself remains the same, and so the value that the state of tasting food gets from its enjoyment also decreases. So facts about human psychology imply that the value of goods is not invariably additive. However, the relevant psychological facts are presumably contingent, and we should be cautious about assuming that they will continue to be true throughout an everlasting life.
earlier) that additional states of a given duration do add a value of at least a certain minimum, and in this case as well, adding enough of them will yield any additional amount of value that one cares to specify.

So even if we allow that, strictly, the telos need not be the very highest attainable good, we do not have a way out of the paradox.

*Denying Premise (4): More Isn’t Better*

Premise (4): If B is everlasting and B can attain T in a finite interval, then B can attain a good greater than T.

Denial of (4): We should think of the telos as a state that requires at most a relatively brief interval. For example, rather than saying that the telos is the state of loving and enjoying God forever, we would do better to say that it is the state of loving and enjoying God, adding that the redeemed will be in this state forever. The telos is either a short-term state or a general state that does not require any particular duration.

This way of thinking about the telos is rooted in the Aristotelian tradition. Aquinas, for one, identifies the telos as the vision of the divine essence, and he describes it as a vision that can be experienced at a given time. A separated soul, for example, can see the divine essence prior to the resurrection of the body. It need not be understood as an event spread over centuries or an unending future. But the vision is also the highest good, and nothing can add to its goodness.

Reply: This strategy will only make (4) false if some short-term or general state cannot be surpassed, but this is not so. Further, it is dubious that the telos is traditionally conceived as a short-term or general state. We can see this as follows.

Those who have a good for a short period of time ordinarily desire to keep it, or to acquire one that is better still. Better to be healthy for a lifetime than healthy for a year! Similarly, those who have had a good for a long time are typically glad to have had it for so long. Since these prospective and retrospective attitudes (and related ones like hope and gratitude) reflect judgments about what is good, it seems that we naturally regard the long-term possession of a good as better *ceteris paribus* than its short-term possession, and in general the longer the better.

Put in terms of states, longer good-possession states, such as *being healthy for a lifetime*, are better than the corresponding shorter states, such as *being healthy for a year*. It follows that no such shorter state is unsurpassable, even if it is the best possible state that can be attained in its timespan. Anyone who cares

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18 *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae 4.5.
19 E.g., *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae 2.8.
20 This judgment does not imply that the values of successive states are in general additive.
21 For convenience I have used temporally neutral examples like *being healthy for a year*, but there are also past states (*having been healthy for a year*), future states (*going to be healthy for a year*), present states (*being healthy now*), and mixed states (*having been, being, and going to be healthy for a year in total*). In such cases one attains a temporally neutral state only by
to challenge this observation owes some explanation of what is wrong with the ordinary judgment that more is better than less.

What of states that are not tied to any particular time frame? Being healthy, for example, is a more general state than both being healthy for a year and being healthy for a lifetime. Anyone who is in the state being healthy for a year is also in the state being healthy, but not vice versa. Since it is possible to be in such a general state without being in the best state, the general state is not itself the best state. This, too, is confirmed by our ordinary judgments. Those who are healthy, if asked, would say that they want to continue being that way. In a rather literal sense, general states leave something to be desired, if only continued possession of a good already possessed.

Initially it may seem that presentism, the thesis that only what is present exists, grounds an objection here. If momentary states (e.g., being healthy now) and general states (e.g., being healthy) are the only states, or the only attainable ones, then there are no longer-term states that can surpass them. But the problem with this tack quickly becomes evident. Presentism says that there are irreducibly tensed facts. These allow the presentist to affirm, e.g., that it was the case that dinosaurs rule the earth and that it will be the case that my grandchildren are thriving, even though there exist neither dinosaurs nor grandchildren of mine. But then the presentist has ample reason to agree that a person can be such that she has had her present goods for a year or a lifetime, and that such a state is the type of longer-term state that the argument requires.

Both short-term and general states, then, can be surpassed and thus are ill-suited to the role of greatest attainable good. These considerations regarding the nature of states suffice to show that the above strategy for denying premise (4) fails. But there is an additional theological puzzle for Christians who may be drawn to this strategy. Put as a pointed question, if more isn’t better, why is more always provided? God gives ongoing life as a gift, but it would be a strange gift that did not leave the recipient better off.

As for the traditional conception of the telos, the case that it is a short-term or general state is mixed at best. Aristotle concludes that the complete good is virtuous activity over a complete life, not simply virtuous activity. Though he may not assume that more is better without exception, as discussed above, he says clearly that a short time is not enough for happiness. Even Aquinas’s way of thinking about the duration of the telos seems flexible. Here is the argument from Summa Contra Gentiles mentioned earlier:

Again, the intellectual creature does not reach his ultimate end until his natural desire comes to rest. But, just as one naturally desires felicity, so also

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22Nicomachan Ethics I.7.
does he naturally desire everlasting felicity; for, since he is everlasting in his substance, he desires to possess forever that object which is desired for its own sake and not because of something else. Therefore, his felicity would not be the ultimate end unless it endured perpetually.23

Perhaps “felicity” names a short-term state, so that “everlasting felicity” names something like a compound of many such states. Or perhaps “felicity” names a general state, so that “everlasting felicity” names a specific sort of felicity. But even if “felicity” itself does not name an everlasting state, the conclusion gives us reason to think that Aquinas identifies the telos—here, at least—with everlasting felicity rather than felicity simpliciter.24

Denying Premise (5): Attainable Everlastingness

Premise (5): If B cannot attain T in a finite interval, then it is not possible for B to attain T.

Denial of (5): We may grant that a goal of doing something forever will not and cannot be attained at any future time since at each time there will always be more time to come. Nonetheless, we can see that (5) is false by considering this argument:

(7) God promises everlasting life.
(8) Everlasting life cannot be attained.
(9) God’s promise must fail.

The conclusion is unacceptable and the first premise is true, so everlasting life must be attainable in some way. There are at least two possibilities. One posits an atemporal sense of “attain,” and the other what we may call an infinitary sense of “attain.”

The atemporal sense is most natural in the context of four-dimension- alism, according to which future events exist as fully as present events do, or in the context of an atemporal, divine standpoint from which temporal events can be seen. A state is attained in this sense if its instantiation belongs to the existing future (or present or past) of the world, or if its instantiation is present in its entirety to God. So on the assumption of

23Summa Contra Gentiles, 3.62.3.
24Though this is not the place for a full examination of Aquinas’s account of the ultimate end, one difficulty is worth noting here. Resurrection, it would seem, is a great good. However, the visio dei, which can be reached before resurrection, is the ultimate end, and so no further good can improve the condition of one who has it. When discussing what is necessary for happiness (Summa Theologiae IaIIae 4.5–6), Aquinas makes a distinction. The body is not necessary for the vision of the divine essence (art. 5) but perfection of the body is necessary for “that happiness which is in all ways perfect” (art. 6). Presumably resurrection is needed for the latter but not the former. But if the vision of the divine essence and “that happiness which is in all ways perfect” are distinct states, as they must be, the latter is the better of the two. This contradicts Aquinas’s identification of the telos with the former.
four-dimensionalism or atemporalism it is correct to say that it is possible for a person to attain an everlasting life.

The infinitary sense gives us a similar result with fewer metaphysical assumptions. To motivate the idea, consider the goal of being faithful to your spouse “till death do you part.” It is not possible to accomplish this goal at any time prior to the death that comes first, though it is possible to accomplish it with lifelong persistence. Now suppose that you and your spouse will both live forever, and that your goal is to be faithful forever. Again, it is not possible to accomplish this goal at any time in medias res. But the goal is still attainable, since you may indeed continue to be faithful without fail.

Reply: Not everyone will agree that there is an atemporal sense of “attain” with a true application. Some theists reject both four-dimensionalism and divine atemporality and hold that purportedly tenseless verbs must be equivalent to disjunctively tensed verbs. “Attain” must mean “did attain, now attains, or will attain.” If this is what the atemporal sense amounts to, then premise (5) remains true, since it is not possible that a human being will attain (or has attained or is attaining) the requisite state.

Even if we grant that there is an atemporal sense of “attain,” though, there remains the question whether it is possible that an end be attainable in this sense alone. Suppose there were a mountain of infinite height and some intrepid mountaineer set out to climb all of it. He imagines the satisfaction that would come with accomplishing his lofty objective, the accolades of his peers. Can we allow that this is an attainable goal? Or is it rather like the illusory goal of those amateur mathematicians who set out to trisect an arbitrary angle using only a straightedge and compass? If the mountaineer’s goal is to come to the end of an endless task, the goal is ill conceived.

There may be a God’s-eye view from which an endless task is, in a manner of speaking, completed, but it is not clear that attainment of this atemporal sort could properly motivate human action or ground hope, which is a future-oriented attitude. Any temporal being pursuing an endless task would have to acknowledge that the goal has not yet been reached and that this will always be so. In this respect the case of the intrepid mountaineer resembles the myth of Sisyphus, the archetypal image of futility and pointlessness.

What this indicates is that an atemporal sense of “attain” is of no use in escaping the paradox of the end without end. The straightforward, temporal sense of “attain”—the one that is at work in the thought that an end

25 The term “infinitary” suggests an analogy with infinitary logics, which may allow infinitely long proofs of conclusions that cannot be proved in a finite number of steps.
26 Lara Buchak and John Pittard independently suggested this case.
27 See, for example, Wolterstorff, “God and Time.”
28 See Dudley, A Budget of Trisections.
must be attainable—makes the premises in which it appears true, and this sense is what generates the paradox.

The infinitary sense of “attain” has the same problem and another besides. The case of the everlasting marriage suggests something like this definition. For a person P, a state S is *attainable* in the infinitary sense iff (a) S is equivalent to being in state $S^*$ forever, and (b) it is possible for P to be in state $S^*$ forever (i.e., at all times after some time $t$). Working backward, a person P *attains* a state S in the infinitary sense iff (a) S is equivalent to being in state $S^*$ forever, and (b) P will be in state $S^*$ forever (i.e., at all times after some time $t$). Note that the future tense in the second clause of the *definiens* is needed. A present tense verb would render the clause incoherent, since at no single time can something be in a state forever, and an atemporal verb would make the infinitary sense another atemporal sense. So to attain a state in the sense of this definition is to have a certain kind of future.

Such a definition does not succeed in specifying a sense of “attain” that makes premise (5) false. It does make the consequent false; with suitable choices of B and T, it is possible for B to have the requisite kind of future. But since it is possible that B *now* has that kind of future, the antecedent is false as well, and so premise (5) is true.

In that case, what is the best solution to the promise puzzle? I will not attempt a detailed treatment of the logic of promises and future tense propositions here, but I will briefly suggest that the first premise of the promise argument needs to be disambiguated. Surely God does not promise the completion of an impossible task, reaching the end of an endless future. The promise of everlasting life to John, say, is rather the assurance that the duration of John’s life has no upper bound. If (7) is so taken, (7) and (8) do not appear to imply (9), and the argument does not motivate the denial of (5).

*Defending the Conclusion: Epektasis*

**Conclusion:** No human being has a telos.

Defense of the conclusion: Though there is an august tradition of Christian thought that regards human life as aimed toward a highest attainable good, there is a noteworthy dissenting opinion as well. Gregory of Nyssa uses the word “*epektasis*” for the soul’s ascent to God. The central theme of his account is that this ascent is perpetual progress. It is “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead” and not a final arrival or accomplishment. Gregory describes it as progress in love, growth toward the better, participation in the infinite Good, and tireless desire for divine beauty. The process is brought about by the Word’s repeated call to the soul, which attracts it and gives it both the desire and the strength for the next stage of the ascent.

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Gregory does not develop this account as a solution to the paradox of the end without end. He does not engage Aristotle’s views directly or (so far as I can discern) discuss the notion of a telos. The foundation of his view is the infinite nature of God and the human capacity to bear the divine image through unlimited growth. But *epektasis* does provide us a way of framing the rejection of a telos. There is no highest good for humans since each good is surpassed by another, more inclusive good.

Reply: Notice first that it won’t work to say that the human telos is to continue growing in goodness forever. That answer would face the same problem as any other answer that identifies the telos as acting in some way forever. Such an end would be unattainable, and a telos must be attainable. If the idea of *epektasis* were to furnish us with a solution to the paradox along these lines, it would have to involve a rejection of premise (2) or (5), and we have already seen the difficulties that these routes encounter.

It is better to interpret *epektasis* as above, that is, as a rejection of the assumption that there is a human telos. But it also seems untenable to deny outright that humans have a telos. In the Christian story, a wise and provident God created humans; they are intended for something. How can that be so without a target or destination? It is natural to say of a roadside accretion of garbage, say, that it lacks a telos. It is an unintended by-product, not something that was deliberately created for a purpose. Human life cannot be like this. If the present strategy is to be a satisfying one, we need some further explanation of how human life can lack a telos but differ from the products of mere happenstance.

Fortunately, there is more that can be said.

*Defending the Conclusion: An Infinity of Ends*

Another defense of the conclusion: There is no single human telos that is the highest attainable good. Rather, there are an infinite number of human ends, each attainable, but none the highest. Like all attainable ends, each of them can be accomplished in a finite interval of time. Though it has no telos, human life is teleological. It is unlike a pile of garbage in that it has ends, and indeed an infinite number of them. Not only that, but each end will be attained at some time, so on this view everlasting life is a life of fulfillment. In contrast, if the only end were infinitely distant, everlasting life would be a life of deferment.

The infinity-of-ends strategy does not specify to what degree the ends differ from each other. It would be consistent with this view to assert that each of the ends differs radically from each of the others. This approach might take its inspiration from Gregory’s emphasis on the infinite nature

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30 In *The Life of Moses* Gregory writes, “It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since, as I have said, perfection is not marked off by limits” (I.8). However, he later goes on to write, “For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness” (I.10). See also “Epektasis” in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, where Gregory is understood to reject a telos or term in human perfection.
of God. But it would also be consistent with this view to assert that the ends are quite similar to each other. It could even accommodate a static conception of the afterlife like Aquinas’s with the claim that for each positive real number \( n \), one of the ends is seeing the divine essence for \( n \) days.

Before we consider objections, notice first that the infinity-of-ends strategy must be employed with some care. If someone asked why God would create beings who were by nature directed toward an infinity of ends, there are some plausible general answers we might give. God wanted creatures who would bear his own inexhaustible image, we might say, or God wanted creatures to be the recipients of unending generosity. But as soon as the infinite array of ends is subsumed under some overarching goal, the solution to the paradox is lost. The overarching goal is the good that makes the other ends worthwhile, so it is the ultimate end. And since its fulfillment requires an eternity to complete, it is unattainable. So if the infinity-of-ends strategy is to succeed, we must carefully avoid saying that the many ends all serve a single, overarching goal.

Now we can see the first objection, viz., that recognizing an overarching goal is inevitable. Perhaps one of the general answers to the question about God’s reasons for creating humans is true. But in any case we can consider the conjunctive end whose conjuncts are the infinity of attainable ends. The conjunctive end is, of course, a greater good than any of the conjuncts. If a person has each attainable end, then as a matter of logic he or she has the conjunctive end, too.\(^{31}\)

The flaw in this objection is its final step. It does not follow that a person has the conjunctive end since the class of ends is not closed under conjunction. Theists in particular have reasons to deny closure, since they may well identify the natural ends of a creature as goods that the creator intends the creature to have. If this is correct, ends behave like intentions; the class of ends is closed only if the class of end-conferring intentions is closed. And this is doubtful. It does not simply follow from \( P \intends E_i \) and \( P \intends E_j \) that \( P \intends E_i \& E_j \) (where \( E_i \& E_j \) is a single, conjunctive state). I might intend to arrive at home by five o’clock and also intend to see Jerusalem someday, but it does not follow that I intend to arrive at home by five o’clock and see Jerusalem someday, a state of affairs that may never occur to me. Nor does God’s perfect rationality or omniscience entail that the class of God’s intentions is closed under conjunction. God may intend each of two states independently, foreseeing but not intending their conjunction. In general, closure fails because of the intender’s ability to identify and select a state as a goal without selecting what it (perhaps with other states) entails. In the case of human ends, God has good reason to refrain from selecting the conjunctive end. The reason is by this time familiar: the conjunctive end is unattainable. So one who believes in an infinity of ends is not forced to recognize a single, overarching end.

\(^{31}\)Cf. Summa Theologiae IaIIae 1.5.
One final worry: The future outlined in the infinity-of-ends strategy might seem inadequate in comparison with the traditional, Aristotelian conception of an ultimate end that brings all desire to rest. On the infinity-of-ends strategy there will always be desires that are as yet unsatisfied. Shouldn’t we prefer an understanding of human beatitude that entails perfect satisfaction rather than partial satisfaction?

Of course, it is not a question of what we would prefer, but of what the future actually holds, and we have seen reasons to think that any state that satisfies all desires at once is illusory. An everlasting person who is aware of at least some future goods and who desires some future goods of which she is aware will have some desires that are not yet satisfied. “Partial” satisfaction is not a substandard condition, but the natural condition of essentially temporal persons. In fact, the very beatitude of such a person will entail a future of great goods, and it will exclude both complete advance ignorance of them and complete indifference to them. So everlasting persons should regard the satisfaction of all desires at once not as a goal but as a state incompatible with their beatitude.

Furthermore, a state in which desires for the future are not yet met can be an immensely valuable one, both in the experience of its bearer and objectively. We see this to a degree in the current human condition, and we should expect it all the more when at last sorrow and sighing have fled. As to experience, unsatisfied desire does not imply dissatisfaction in a psychological sense. We all know that it is possible to look toward future goods with joyful anticipation. As to objective value, an ongoing life of increasing goods is compatible with the kinds of goods traditionally associated with an ultimate end (e.g., knowledge and love and enjoyment of God), as well as many others that have been claimed for human beatitude (e.g., the activity of praise, the power of bodily movement, honor, freedom of the will, intellectual knowledge, and rest; beauty, swiftness and endurance of the body, health, quenching of hunger and thirst, melody, wisdom, friendship, concord, power, riches, security, and delight in the blessedness of loved ones and of God).

The paradox of the end without end prompts us to consider what kind of final hope is available to naturally temporal creatures, those whose being is spread out over time. Both at first glance and upon examination, the argument appears to show that there is no highest attainable good in an unending life, and so the notion of an ultimate end is problematic from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, by positing an infinite number of

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32For the present. Aquinas’s discussion of whether human life has a single last end (ST IaIIae 1.4), for one, deserves a more thorough response than this initial exploration allows.

33Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 1.5–10. See also The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa: “Infinite perfection consists in immutability; in man’s case, perfection consists in stability which is given precisely through the stability of a constant progress in growth.”

34See, for example, Aquinas, Summa Theologiae IaIIae 1.8, 5.2.

35Augustine, The City of God, 22.30.

36Anselm, Proslogium, 25.
ends we can explain how the premises of the argument may be both true and consistent with a life of everlasting fulfillment.\textsuperscript{37}

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References


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