

Embryonic Afterlives?

Soteriological Reflections on the Problem of Early Pregnancy Loss

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Abstract: While much has been written on the moral and metaphysical status of fetuses in Christian bioethics, little thought has been given to how we might characterize the afterlives of the unborn, especially of those human biological individuals who die before even developing a body that could theoretically be resurrected. In this paper, I therefore undertake an examination of questions surrounding the afterlife, specifically as it relates to early pregnancy loss. I first lay out what I call the “problem of weird heavens” that arises when we consider that significantly more unborn human beings have died than have been born in the history of humankind. I then go on to consider questions surrounding both the soteriological status of the embryo and the status of any resurrected “body” it might have. I conclude with the germs of an alternative approach mirrored on the idea of embryonic resorption and mystical union.

Keywords: Miscarriage, Pregnancy loss, Pregnancy, Afterlife, Infant baptism, Augustine

CW: The following contains descriptions and discussions of pregnancy and pregnancy loss.

1. Introduction

In Chapter 23 of the *Enchiridion*, Augustine raises the question of the resurrection of “abortive fetuses” (*abortivi*), especially those who are “undeveloped”, as opposed to “fully formed”.¹ With regard to the former he wonders rhetorically, “who would not more readily think that they perish, like seeds that did not germinate?” In fact, he begins

¹ This might roughly track the distinction we make today between the “embryonic” (0 to ca. 8 weeks) and the “fetal” (ca. 8 weeks onwards) stages of pregnancy.

the chapter by referring to such fetuses as those “which are indeed ‘born’ in the mother’s womb, but are never so that they could be ‘reborn’” (*Ench.* 23.85²).

At the same time, Augustine is not willing to give up on the possibility that such *abortivi* might be resurrected:

But who, then, would dare to deny—though he would not dare to affirm it either—that in the resurrection day what is lacking in the forms of things will be filled out? [...] Nature, then, will be cheated of nothing apt and fitting which time’s passage would have brought [...]. [And] what is not yet a whole will become whole [...]. (*Ench.* 23.85)

This cautious “non-affirmation” is followed by a brief series of questions about when a human being begins to live in the womb and whether there might not be “some form of hidden life, not yet apparent in the motions of a living thing” of which we are not aware (*Ench.* 23.86). Augustine is skeptical that this question can be definitively answered (a point on which he may be correct), but he minimally holds it would be rash to deny that “those [formed] fetuses ever lived at all which are cut away limb by limb and cast out of the wombs of pregnant women, lest the mothers die also if the fetuses were left there dead”. The reference to embryotomy³ here is significant, for on Augustine’s account if such fetuses had indeed begun to live, then they could also die: “And, once dead, wheresoever death overtook [them], I cannot find the basis on which [they] would not have a share in the resurrection of the dead” (*Ench.* 23.86). Augustine is thus willing to extend life—and therefore death and resurrection—to late-stage fetuses, while remaining agnostic with respect to early-stage embryos.

The questions surrounding unformed *abortivi* that would concern Augustine in more than a few of his writings were threefold: (i) whether unformed human *abortivi* could be considered to have lived, such that they could also be said to have died and therefore to “have a share in the resurrection”; (ii) what the soteriological status of these and other *abortivi* might be, if they are indeed resurrected; and (iii) what their resurrected bodies might be like, given that they neither had the chance to develop fully-formed bodies nor

² The Latin edition of the *Enchiridion* is available online from the Hathi Trust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112023661587>. The English version quoted here (in the 1955a Outler translation) is available online at <https://ccel.org/ccel/augustine/enchiridion/>.

³ Embryotomy, or “the surgical excision of living or dead fetuses from the womb”, served as both a means of preventative abortion and a treatment for late-stage miscarriage or stillbirth (both aimed at saving the life of the mother), and it often involved dissection or dismemberment of the fetus (Mistry 2015, 30). Augustine’s discussion here echoes that of Tertullian, who also used the example of embryotomy to argue that a (formed) fetus must be considered alive and animate even before birth, given that it can purportedly be killed via such surgical excision. While embryotomy is seldom performed today, the use of the same procedures employed in induced abortions to treat pregnancy loss remains common practice in modern medicine, and such procedures can be life-saving for those who have miscarried fetuses.

to age to birth and beyond. He only ventures tentative answers to these questions, while at the same time refusing to take a firm stance on when a fetus becomes formed, whether or not vivification, ensoulment, and formation go hand-in-hand, and whether or not unformed fetuses are, in fact, resurrected (Wermelinger 1986-1994).

Still, the matter of what we might call “embryonic afterlives” troubled Augustine. Of course, his concerns had little to do with questions of personhood, induced abortion, or even the sanctity of life (Mistry 2015, 270) and more with addressing theological objections to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection coming from Manichean, Pelagian, and pagan sources. Still, his reluctance to settle the matter of what to think about early pregnancy loss might also indicate, as Danuta Shanzer (2009) suggests, that there was some degree of “personal history behind his refusal to commit himself on the unborn” (350). Whatever his motivations, Augustine displays a keen sensitivity to the complexity of these issues, and his hesitance to provide definitive answers to these questions displays an awareness that these problems go beyond mere concerns of doctrinal orthodoxy. They are not simply theological puzzles or abstract eschatological quandaries. Rather, they represent responses to very real issues that touched the everyday lives of the Christians of Late Antiquity.

This is not a paper about Augustine, nor is it about the (im)permissibility of induced abortion, the personhood or moral status of unbirthed human biological individuals, or the dignity and sacrosanctity of human life. Rather, it is one motivated by the recognition that, despite the very different challenges we face today and the radically different ways we tend to frame and conceptualize them, the question of the status and constitution of the unborn in the afterlife is one that, as in Augustine’s time, not seldomly weighs on Christians, especially those capable of gestating human beings in their bodies who have lost pregnancies before the zygote, blastocyst, or embryo was able to develop into a recognizable (and perhaps therefore more easily “mournable”⁴) fetus. Indeed, the problem of the afterlife as it relates to pregnancy loss is first and foremost an *existential* and *pastoral* one. But it is also a problem that cannot be addressed without venturing into the theological thorns, as Augustine himself was willing to do. Still, to follow him into the bramble requires thinking not only about those pregnancy losses in which the developing baby is grieved but also about instances in which pregnancy loss is met with ambiguity or even relief—or when it occurs without anyone (including the pregnant person herself) having ever been aware of the pregnancy.

⁴ I by no means wish to imply here that losing a developed fetus is easier than an early pregnancy loss. However, early pregnancy loss is often characterized as “less bad” or “grievous” than later losses. Moreover, there is often no recognizable corpse that can serve as a concrete subject of one’s grief (or as the object of various mourning rituals). This often makes these losses more *ambiguous* than fetal losses, which can also sometimes make them more difficult to mourn.

So whereas elsewhere I focus especially on instances of pregnancy loss that are lamented by those who undergo them, in this paper I want to approach the problem of the afterlives of the unborn from a slightly different angle—specifically, from the fact of the sheer *frequency* of pregnancy loss, especially in the early stages. I simply want to ask, *What if?*—What if the answer to Augustine’s question (i) is that, yes, “unformed” (or, for the purposes of this paper, pre-fetal and even pre-implantation) *abortivi* can be considered to have lived human lives (albeit very short ones), to have died human deaths, and hence also to have a share in the resurrection? In what follows, then, I will simply assume regarding (i) that human life—and thus the possibility of death and resurrection—is present whenever pregnancy begins, and I will explore some of the implications of this view as concerns (ii) the soteriological status of the unborn and (iii) the nature of their resurrected bodies.

2. Calling It What It Is? Clarifications and Disclaimers

It is difficult to calculate just how many pregnancies are lost each year, even in regions of the world with excellent prenatal health care and relatively reliable systems for reporting miscarriage. The rate of pregnancy loss varies depending on such factors (among others) as race, socio-economic status, accessibility to health care, and education (Lens 2021), but it is nevertheless generally agreed in the scientific community that the number of pregnancies that do not result in a live birth, even among women with greater degrees of socio-economic privilege, is extremely high. Moreover, the large majority of pregnancy losses occur before a woman even knows she is pregnant. For example, a survey of the literature by Benagiano et al. (2010) concluded that the rate of pre-clinical miscarriage (understood as pregnancies lost before an embryo is detectable via ultrasound⁵) may be even higher than 50%. Jarvis (2017) places the range between 10%-40%, concluding that the overall rate of embryonic and fetal death is likely between 40-60%—a rather moderate estimate in a scientific and medical corpus that has taken the total rate of pregnancy loss between fertilization and birth to be as high as 90% (Jarvis 2017, 3). While these rates are incredibly hard to determine, it is safe to conclude that every year nearly 100 million human pregnancies do not yield a human biological individual that survives to birth⁶—

⁵ In these studies, pregnancy is usually detected by measuring a relevant rise in hCG level.

⁶ Global pregnancy rates are incredibly difficult to come by. However, if we adopt the low end of Jarvis’s modest estimate for the percentage of pregnancies that do not result in a live birth (40%), and we proceed from a world population estimate in 2021 of ca. 7.8 billion and a global birth rate of 17.873 per 1,000 people (<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/WLD/world/birth-rate>), we arrive at ca. 92,939,600 lost pregnancies in that year alone. However, the difficulty in detecting pre-clinical losses, together with the rates of induced abortion worldwide, indicate that the number of embryonic and fetal deaths annually might be significantly higher.

and it is likewise not implausible to think that, over the course of human history, *as many as half of all human individuals conceived were never born.*⁷

Of course, much also depends on when pregnancy is thought to begin, a topic which is itself not uncontroversial (Gold 2005; Chung et al. 2012). For example, some medical sources understand pregnancy as commencing at fertilization, while others take it to begin at implantation, and still others set clinical confirmation of implantation as the starting point.⁸ In what follows, I will adopt an intentionally expansive view of pregnancy, designating it as the period between the time at which at least one (naturally, artificially, or even supernaturally) fertilized egg, zygote, or embryo comes to be in a location in the human body in which it could successfully implant or be gestated⁹ and the time in which the resulting biological individual (designated by a term like ‘zygote’, ‘blastocyst’, ‘embryo’, or ‘fetus’) ceases to be dependent for its continued existence on that body, whether this occur via birth, death, or some other event. I will take no position on whether the dependent biological individual is a person, has moral standing, or has a “right” to life or legal protection. Further, in this paper I will only consider instances of *pregnancy loss*, which is taken to cover the death of one or more dependent biological individuals inside the person gestating it and which minimally includes cases of (bio)chemical pregnancy, blighted ovum, spontaneous and induced abortion, and stillbirth. Moreover, although I will sometimes refer in what follows to *women* and *mothers* or use feminine pronouns when I speak about pregnant persons, the account I am providing is meant to be inclusive of pregnant men, non-binary persons, and all other human individuals capable of gestating a human being in their bodies.

3. Pregnancy Wastage, The Problem of Evil, and the Possibility of Weird Heavens

Before we specifically turn to soteriological concerns, it is worth looking at what I am calling the *problem of pregnancy wastage*¹⁰ more generally as it concerns philosophical

⁷ It is difficult to estimate whether, when, and why human fecundity has increased or decreased over the centuries (Smarr et al. 2017), but for the sake of argument I assume with Kline, Stein, and Susser (1989) that advances in modern medicine minimally offset any decreases in modern fecundity with respect to previous centuries. I suspect, however, that the number of non-birthed humans to birthed humans over the course of human history is likely much higher.

⁸ Cf. the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (1965), The Harvard Medical Dictionary (2011), and the McGraw-Hill Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine (2002), respectively.

⁹ This allows that ectopic pregnancies will count as pregnancies, whereas a fertilized egg’s being, say, swallowed or injected subcutaneously will not. Note also that male sperm plays no essential role in this definition, allowing for phenomena like meiotic parthenogenesis and purported cases of “immaculate” conception.

¹⁰ I find the term ‘wastage’ a troubling one. However, it is a term sometimes used in the empirical literature with respect to the magnitude of embryo loss, and it certainly throws the issues I will raise

theology. First, if it is true that 40–60% of all pregnancies do not result in a live birth, there are serious implications for the problem of evil and theodicy as traditionally construed. Not only does the utter magnitude of embryonic and fetal death provide ample fodder for the challenges posed by both the argument from natural evil and the problem of human suffering as traditionally construed, if (as some think) it is all-things-considered better for a human being to have lived a birthed life (however short) than not, then the fact that God would permit so many unbirthed human beings throughout the course of human history to die through no fault of the pregnant person herself represents a significant challenge for the classical theodist. Second and relatedly, there is the problem of the sheer inefficiency of the human reproductive system—another example of what Darwin called “the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature” (Letter to Hooker, 1856). We want to know why God would structure nature and the course of evolution such that so many human lives would be lost before they could even really experience the creation of which they were a part. While inefficiency problems have been discussed with regard to questions surrounding evolution and animal suffering, the issue has not yet been sufficiently addressed with regard to human pregnancy wastage. I will not advance any particular theodical strategy here, both because I find most “traditional” theodicies relatively unconvincing and because I suspect that, even if one of them should turn out to be true, advancing such a theodicy is likely to do more moral and epistemic harm than good to all concerned (cf. Griffioen 2018) but especially to those who have experienced pregnancy loss as a source of grief. Still, given the close tie between the theological and pastoral functions of theodicy and the work that Christian imaginings of the afterlife are supposed to do with respect to the idea that (to channel Julian of Norwich) “all shall be well”, a complete bracketing of the theodical question is impossible in a paper such as this.

There is, however, another rather odd consequence of tying resurrectable human life to the beginning of pregnancy that deals directly with afterlife considerations, which I call the *possibility of weird heavens*. Assuming that pregnancy wastage is really as high as it has been proposed to be and that all pregnancies in fact yield resurrectable human lives, then as Timothy F. Murphy (2012) points out, it would seem that “the afterlife would be mostly peopled by human beings who in their earthly histories never said a word, never took a step and never had anything but a biotic relationship with another human being, let alone known God [...] in any recognizable way” (687). In fact, the overwhelming majority of human beings who enter the afterlife would only have lived for a very short

presently into somewhat sharper relief. I will therefore continue to use it for the purposes of this paper, but I in no way wish to imply by this term that that what is lost in pregnancy loss is a kind of mere “material waste”.

time—perhaps only a matter of hours or days. This, as he notes, would make for a “very strange heaven”.

For some, this result might constitute a *reductio* of the claim in response to (i) that the beginning of a pregnancy always coincides with the beginning of a resurrectable human life. However, for my purposes here—and for those who want to continue to assert that all pregnancies as defined above yield resurrectable human individuals—I will simply take on the assumption that the Christian afterlife in general might be a weird one. I turn now to think more closely about what such survival could look like on a Christian model.

4. Soteriological Status and Eschatological Location: Happily Damned or Free to S(w)erve and Grow?

Since almost the very beginning, Christians have worried about the soteriological status of infants, especially those who die without being baptized. Roughly speaking, there appear to be two extreme soteriological poles on which these views fall—namely, eternal damnation due to the infant’s state of original sin and lack of baptism or eternal salvation due to its state of innocence and lack of moral responsibility—with various shades of “limbic” grey in between. On the relatively uncontested (though most certainly contestable) assumption that embryos and fetuses cannot be baptized,¹¹ it would seem that a number of parallels can be drawn between Christian soteriological teachings on unbaptized infant death and embryonic death. In what follows, then, I want to use discussions of infant death as a springboard to think more closely about various types of answers to question (ii), roughly differentiated by eschatological “location”—i.e., hell, limbo, or heaven—as well as what they might imply about (iii) the nature of the “body” who would occupy that “space”.

¹¹ The 1917 Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law (*The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law* 2001) claims that “no one should be baptized in the mother’s womb so long as there is a hope that he [*sic*] can be baptized correctly outside of it” (C. 746, §1), but claims that in cases of “imminent danger of death”, the exposed head of an unbirthed infant can be baptized absolutely—or another body part, conditionally (§2-3). The assumption here, however, appears to be that the water must be able to touch the skin of the fetus. This cannot apply to early-stage embryos, since not only do they lack proper “bodies”, the skin does not fully develop until approximately eighteen weeks. Moreover, in the case of many early pregnancy losses, it is often nearly impossible to recognize if and when an embryo has exited the body of the mother, let alone to extract it from its protective sac for “direct” baptism. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907) maintains that “where the issue is a mass that is not certainly animated by human life, it is to be baptized conditionally: ‘If thou art a man [*sic*]’”, but this again indicates a kind of Augustinian agnosticism regarding vivification.

4.1. To Hell in a ὑστέρῳ: Original Sin and the Necessity of Baptism

Augustine himself famously held that infants who died unbaptized were ultimately condemned to eternal damnation, a position upheld to varying degrees by such thinkers and movements as Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Antoine Arnauld and the Jansenists, Jonathan Edwards and various Puritan sects, and even some Christians today. For many, Augustine included, this result was unwelcome, but it seemed to follow from other doctrinal positions they held, including anti-Pelagian considerations and a strong emphasis on the efficacy and necessity of baptism as a means of redemption from original sin. Augustine himself, as evidenced in a late letter to Jerome, was deeply troubled by his own view: “Something supremely strong and invincible is needed to force me to believe that God condemns any souls without any guilt of theirs” (*Ep.* 166, §26). Still, despite his nagging worries, Augustine remained firm in his conviction that *omnis generatus, damnatus; nemo liberatus, nisi regeneratus* (*Sermo* 294.16.16¹²): All who are “born” are condemned in Adam through his sin, and no one is set free who is not “reborn” in Christ through baptism. This phrase is especially interesting with respect to those who are not “born” in the literal sense of having been birthed. Are embryos members of the class of *omnis generatus*? Do they share in original sin as set out in the Augustinian position and therefore, as unbaptized individuals, in damnation?

If *generatus* is *not* extended to include unbirthed individuals, then—on the assumption that unformed *abortivi* can still be said to live and die (unbirthed) human lives—if they are damned, it would not be on account of their having been “born” into original sin, which would raise the question of why infants have a share in original sin, while embryos do not. If *generatus* is extended to include these embryos, then there seems for Augustine and his ilk to be no way around the conclusion that even miscarried zygotes and embryos are *damnati* merely by virtue of having been “generated” at all. As with the case of unbaptized infants, this is a both sad and infuriating view—and one that meets with significant imaginative resistance—even if it is consistent with Church doctrine. As Leibniz would later put it: “I cannot even entertain the idea of the damnation of unregenerate infants, nor in general that [damnation] which arises from original sin alone” (*Theodicy*, §283). Certainly, consigning the dead unborn to hell preserves the efficacy and necessity of the sacrament of baptism. But at what cost?

If anything, miscarried embryos have, through no fault of their own, “inherited” a broken relationship with God—despite never having committed an action or having established a conscious relationship with God (or any human being for that matter). A weaker sense of original sin —e.g., that all human beings are disposed toward sin or that

¹² Quoted in Beatrice (2013, 84, n. 27).

those who develop the moral agency required for accountability will eventually sin in one way or another—is of little help here. There is still no opportunity for embryos to incur punishable guilt for individual sin, except in the counterfactual sense that, *had* they survived, they *would* have been disposed toward sinful acts, or *had* they lived to develop the capacity for accountability they *would* have actually sinned. Romans 5 notwithstanding, it is hard to see what notion of reprobation could justify such a punishment on the basis of merely counterfactual sin, a concern that seems to have even moved Calvin, who claimed that the reprobate must somehow “procure” their own damnation. This allows that all those who die prior to birth are redeemed (through a special act of God’s saving grace), but has the somewhat counterintuitive result that, in contrast to these dead unborn, all reprobate human beings will actually be *born* and *survive* to the age of accountability and beyond, so that they may deserve their damnation (Webb 1909). In any case, if the justification for the damnation of the unborn, including the countless embryos who have not survived to birth over the course of human history, involves an appeal to original sin, then the onus is on the defender of such a view to develop a robust enough notion of original sin to both explain in what sense the unborn find themselves in such a state and make plausible why that damnation is warranted by virtue of their being in that state. That is, they must be prepared to explain whether and how counterfactual sins could sufficiently justify embryonic damnation, or otherwise adopt a more plausible position concerning their soteriological status. Absent such an account, it would seem preferable to find an account on which, even if hell contains all those who are morally corrupt, it also does not contain all those who are, at least with respect to *actual* sins, wholly morally innocent (and who, as it turns out, represent the overwhelming majority of those human individuals who have ever lived).

4.2. Soul-Building for the Unborn? Limbo as an Interim Stage

Augustine himself attempted to soften his view on infant damnation by maintaining that deceased unbaptized infants (and presumably, if resurrectable, unformed *abortivi*), given their inability to have actually committed sins, would receive “the mildest condemnation” (*mitissima poena*).¹³ This would later be revised by medieval scholars such as Abelard and Aquinas to “only” include the loss of the beatific vision, as opposed to eternal pain or torment. On this view, which would come to be identified with the so-called theory of “limbo”, unbaptized infants would feel no sensible pain, even if they would be deprived of the greatest good human beings could enjoy, namely direct and full apprehension of or union with the Divine. As Bridget of Sweden put it: “Just as the sun shining into a house is not seen as it is in its beauty—only those who look into the

¹³ Cf. Augustine, *On the Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants*, §21.

sky see its rays—so too the souls of such children, though they do not see [God’s] face for lack of baptism, are nevertheless closer to [God’s] mercy than to punishment, but not in the same way as [God’s] elect” (*Revelations V*, Int. 6, ad. 1).

While some thinkers apparently favored the view that such “innocents” would be perfectly happy because of their ignorance, Aquinas thought it odd that a soul unencumbered by the body and guided by “right reason” should not know what it was missing. Instead, he claimed that such “rational” infants would simply not grieve that which it was not possible for them to attain; rather, they would “rejoice for that they will have a large share of God’s goodness and their own natural perfections” (*ST Suppl. IIIae*, q.1, a.2). Or, as the unbaptized infants in Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead* sing: “We praise him who created us, / But whom we have never seen / If we were suffering pain, we would forever lament; / But, as it is, we are doing quite well” (Bk. III.1). Dante, however, was not so convinced that such infants do not grieve, at least a little: “A place there is below not sad with torments, / But darkness only, where the lamentations / Have not the sound of wailing, but are sighs” (*Purgatorio*, Canto 7).

Even if not fully happy, the “limbous” approach appears to have a “leg up” over the view that the unborn are eternally damned, insofar as it allows that *abortivi* can at least be blessed in a restricted sense, even if they cannot enjoy the immediate company of the Divine. However, if we return to the problem of pregnancy wastage raised in Section 3, we must also consider how it is that the exclusion of these zygotic individuals from the beatific vision (whether via damnation or limbo) serves some greater *redemptive* purpose for God’s creation and/or for those who have lived and actually sinned. Pregnancy loss does not lend itself well to being construed as a necessary evil for the greater good of creation, nor does it seem a good candidate for a first-order natural evil that can serve as an opportunity for “soul-building” on the part of those who have suffered the loss of one or more pregnancies. Indeed, on the assumption that those who remain unbirthed are themselves precluded from “building” or “improving” their souls or characters (especially if we think they do not yet possess souls or characters), then even if some pregnancy losses do result in the acquisition of morally or spiritually beneficial second-order goods by the birthed persons who undergo them, given the sheer numbers of embryos lost, it would seem that the number of innocent humans “happily damned” would grossly outweigh the number of human souls who might actually be edified from undergoing or witnessing such a loss. This raises a serious selectivity problem with regard to soul-building, namely why some human beings have the opportunity to “make” or “remake” themselves and others do not.¹⁴

However, instead of assuming the dead unborn are simply lost to a naturally happy “no-person’s-land”, perhaps the idea of limbo can instead be employed to allow personal

¹⁴ Or, on a less Pelagian-sounding approach: to be “formed” or be “re-formed”.

growth for those human beings lost before birth. That is, instead of the traditional concept of the *limbus infantium* discussed above, we might develop something like what Kevin Timpe (2015) has in mind when he proposes an interim afterlife state for those human individuals “who, through no fault of their own, [have] no opportunity to become reconciled to God in the present life and are not able—due to age, development, disability or the like—to make such a choice at the time of their death” (283, n.12). In fact, Timpe explicitly extends this category to include human individuals in utero (n.14). On this view, then, for those who have died prior to birth, limbo could function as a place in which they could develop the capacities or skills “needed to cooperate with God in their reconciliation” (291), thereby allowing the unborn to develop their wills in the ways requisite for them to participate volitionally in their own redemption or damnation. (This assumes, of course, that they first receive or develop wills to begin with.) Put a bit differently, they would be granted the unconditional grace (the opportunity to receive and cultivate their wills) needed to accept—or reject—the gift of cooperative grace (reconciliation with the Divine), but in contrast to those who lived birthed lives and were able to develop the capacity for free rational choice or wholehearted willing during this time, they would first receive this opportunity in the afterlife.

On this approach, while it is possible that not all those human beings who die before birth will proceed to heaven—since some may use their newly developed capacities for informed choice to reject God’s offer of reconciliation—it minimally eliminates the selectivity problem mentioned above and tells a halfway plausible story about why those who are damned are in hell. Of course, Timpe’s own position rests on a libertarian understanding of free will and responsibility, according to which determinism is incompatible with free sinful agents being reconciled to God and experiencing “full” redemption (281). But the proponent of such a view might downplay the notion of positive desert or responsibility and merely appeal to considerations of something like *fairness* or even *restorative justice* to explain why it is necessary for the unborn and other human beings unable in this life to develop into the kind of volitional agent capable of autonomous, wholehearted, self-aware willing of the kind that would allow them to be active participants in the pursuit of their own flourishing and relationship with the Divine.

Theologically, however, more would need to be said. First, on the assumption that orthodox Christian models of the afterlife presuppose a bodily resurrection, the question arises as to what kind of afterlife bodies would be fitting for those human individuals who died before birth and how that resurrected embodiment would contribute to their development of the capacities for agency relevant for their soteriological status. I defer this discussion to Section 5 below. Second, the problem of pregnancy wastage yet again leads to potentially weird results—this time, that the majority of human beings who participate volitionally in their own salvation or damnation will never have been birthed, never have existed on Earth as distinct entities from their mothers’ bodies, never had

experiences outside the womb, never have developed a conscious, premortem relationship with God that could be corrupted through their own actions, and so on.

This raises the question of whether human beings with no *lived experience* to speak of could accept or reject the divine offer of reconciliation and redemption and what kinds of reasons they might have for doing so. For it is not merely the *capacity* to choose or to be held accountable that determines the intentional actions that we undertake. The *input* to those capacities also matters: Our past experiences, the upbringing and the parenting (or lack of it) we receive, the conditional development of our character over time, our environmentally-influenced situatedness and the behavior that results from it—all of these factors influence the attitudes and inform the choices that we, as mature rational agents, adopt toward God and our relationships with each other. Yet for someone who has had no upbringing, no significant parenting besides the limited care of the being gestating it, no real *extra-utero* experience to speak of in this life (other than, perhaps, the liminal “experience” of its death), the question arises as to what the basis could be for the limbus unborn’s choice for or against reconciliation with God and what kind of input the unbirthed would be given in the afterlife. Would they be parented? Who would parent them? Would they all receive the same parenting, the same experiences? Would things happen to them that they would experience as bad or from which they could grow? Would they emerge traumatized from their premature deaths? Would they form social relationships with one another over time? With individuals who were birthed? With God? Would they all be fully informed about God and God’s creation? Would they, like birthed human beings, see “through a glass darkly”, or would they simply be *infused* with the relevant information and granted the capacity to make this one choice, namely to cleave to God or to fall? On the basis of what would they decide?

These questions matter for the subsequent soteriological status of such individuals. On the one hand, if the unborn are given varying degrees of afterlife upbringing or quality and valence of experience, or if they are not equally informed about the nature of the Divine and the creation they never experienced, then a new selectivity problem might arise concerning what we might call “afterlife privilege” and who ultimately is in the best position to make the choice for reconciliation with God. On the other hand, if they receive parity of experience and information, it is difficult to see how, even if they in some relevant sense *could* choose differently, they *would* actually do so. Ultimately, the question remains as to what the basis for their choices could be or what reasons they could give for their choices, absent any lived experience in this life.¹⁵

Finally, there is the question of how important this kind of “spiritual growth” really is for human redemption. True, many Christian thinkers have historically maintained that

¹⁵ These questions obviously do not only arise in the case of the unborn, but the latter’s special situation can perhaps throw such questions into sharper relief.

God has given human beings the gift of free will and rational agency, and that the use of those volitional capacities by those who possess them to make moral and spiritual progress is important for both their flourishing in this (birthed) life and their redemption in the next (rebirthed) life. But why should we think that spiritual redemption in the afterlife always involves the “perfecting” of the individual in the sense of *agential* flourishing, especially for those who never developed the volitional capacities needed for such flourishing in this life? Perhaps what it means to “flourish” in right relationship with God differs based on whether the human being is a zygote, a child, an adult in the so-called “prime” of their life, or an elderly person. I will take this view up in more detail later on, but for now it will be sufficient to note that Christians who wish to take the view that human life begins and has moral standing at syngamy might do well not to put all their (fertilized) afterlife eggs in the “volitional capacity basket”, since the large majority of human lives (including many birthed individuals) will never be able to actualize the potential for agential flourishing in this life. The assumption that free, rational, autonomous agency is a great—perhaps *the* greatest good—might simply turn out to be yet one more example of potentially ableist—and, as we shall see presently, speciesist—bias.¹⁶

If we therefore move away from the idea that either baptism or spiritual “growth” to agential maturity are of central necessity for the redemption of those who get little to no chance to live birthed lives, then—on the assumption that unbirthed human individuals are, in fact resurrected—it would seem there is only one option that remains for them, namely that such individuals are universally redeemed. This would seem to be the option most preferable from a moral and pastoral view, perhaps even from a compassionate theological standpoint. But, as we shall see, this might open up the door for more than just humans to be saved.

4.3. All Embryos—and Dogs?—Go to Heaven

The 2007 Vatican document, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptized*, reasserts the Roman Catholic commitment to the necessity of baptism, and it notes that any reasons given for the salvation of unbaptized infants can ultimately only provide grounds for “prayerful hope”, as opposed to “sure knowledge”. But it also affirms the *reasonableness* of the hope for the universal salvation of such infants, arguing that “the need for the sacrament [of baptism] is not absolute. What is absolute is

¹⁶ I say *might* here because there is a real sense in both Christian Scripture and in the history of Christian theology that the exercise of our agency really is one of the greatest goods human beings possess and also represents our best shot at “imaging” God’s creative activity. But that such agency involves the kind of individualistic, libertarian freedom emphasized by post-Enlightenment thinkers is not obvious.

humanity's need for the *Ursakrament* which is Christ himself". It concludes that "God can therefore give the grace of Baptism without the sacrament being conferred, and this fact should particularly be recalled when the conferring of Baptism would be impossible".¹⁷ Such a view can clearly also be extended to the unborn, such that it might be reasonable to hope that they, too, will be saved and go to heaven. However here, too, some interesting questions arise. In addition to the question of what the glorified bodies of the unborn will look like in heaven, which I will take up below, there is a further question regarding what it is about unborn human creatures that makes them "redeemable", while other morally innocent creatures are not. If no non-arbitrary line can be drawn between the redeemability of unborn human beings and that of, say, non-human animals, then affirming the afterlife salvation of the former might also speak for extending salvation to the latter.

One obvious way to distinguish between these two categories of beings is to maintain that only humans are made in the image of God and therefore are valuable to God in a way that non-human animals are not. That is, there is something about their *humanity* that makes them the subjects of God's special salvific grace. Yet what is it that makes the human being the bearer of the image of God? Rarely is it maintained that our being made *ad imaginem dei* has (solely) to do with our genetic or biological makeup—at least so long as God is taken to be non-material and human beings to be (at least partly) material. Nor can it be our species' particular evolutionary history, unless this history were to mirror the history of the Divine in some relevantly analogous way. More commonly, we find claims that we image God in some feature typically ascribed to "normal" human beings and denied of (most) non-human animals—features like our capacity for rational choice, our personhood, our moral agency, the possession of a non-physical mind or intellect, and so on. But, as we saw above, it is unclear that a fetus—let alone a two-day-old zygote—has any of these features. Perhaps it possesses them "potentially", but in many cases the modal status of this claim would have to be drastically restricted, given that the majority of early miscarriages are the result of uninherited chromosomal aneuploidies—having extra or missing chromosomes—many of which are simply incompatible with life and are therefore incompatible with the development of the biological or physical complexity required to possess any of the above features ("International Glossary on Infertility and Fertility Care" 2019). That is, it would be difficult to say in what sense (other than, perhaps, mere conceivability) such embryos could reasonably be said to even possess these features "potentially". Expanding the notion of potentiality will not do either. Suppose we are willing to understand potentiality as maintaining that, absent its

¹⁷ Something like this appears to be the position of the Eastern Church, which has traditionally maintained that infants and the unborn are wholly innocent and therefore do not need to be prayed for. If anything, they are in heaven and pray for us. I am grateful to Grace Hibshman for alerting me to this point.

chromosomal aneuploidy (or, alternatively, given a “typical” chromosomal arrangement that it currently lacks), a particular embryo would (absent other intervening factors) develop into the kind of being who reflects the image of God. That is, we claim that the embryo suffers the privation of some relevant biological complexity or arrangement, the instantiation of which would allow it to develop into the kind of being who images God. What stops us from extending this notion of potentiality to non-human animals, who themselves lack certain biological complexities or arrangements that, under other enabling conditions, would allow them to develop into persons, or moral agents, or even *into human beings*?¹⁸ Perhaps we might again appeal to the notion of ensoulment, where ensouled beings (human animals) are said to bear the image of their Divine Maker in ways that unsouled creatures (non-human animals) do not. Such a view might be able to make a case for the salvation of unborn humans versus unsouled creatures. However, even apart from (not implausible) materialist concerns about the “spookiness” of souls in general, unless one holds both that ensoulment is restricted to human beings and occurs at fertilization, one can neither rule out the possibility that all non-human animals will be redeemed nor maintain with confidence that all embryos will go to heaven.¹⁹

A more plausible account that extends salvation to the unbaptized innocent might therefore include not only unbaptized human infants but also all the human unborn, as well as those non-human animals incapable of making premortem free, rational choices.²⁰ This will be a welcome result for some theists, but those who wish to maintain that all unborn human individuals are saved while denying that all dogs go to heaven will have to provide a plausible case beyond mere potentiality for what makes the former redeemable (or, minimally, what makes them actually redeemed), as opposed to the latter.²¹

¹⁸ Compare the doctrine of universal salvation put forward by Anne Conway (1614-1687), according to which all creatures are transmutable—capable of becoming *ontologically* better or worse—and perfectible, so long as they continually strive toward the good. For example, a worm may eventually become a horse, and a horse may improve itself to the point of becoming human. As Andrew Arlig notes, this means “that even the lowest of created beings—and here Conway explicitly mentions dirt and dung—are not permanently blocked from acquiring higher-order capacities” (Arlig 2023, n.17).

¹⁹ Further, accounts on which ensoulment is taken to occur at fertilization or shortly thereafter run into difficulties with respect to phenomena like monozygotic twinning that create further problems when it comes to individuation and personal identity.

²⁰ An interesting question here would be whether this kind of universalism might also have the result that the non-human unborn might be saved.

²¹ Even if one can make the case that human beings are the only creatures made *ad imaginem dei*, there is a further question as to why an omnibenevolent and all-loving Deity should prefer the salvation of something made in its image to something that does not resemble it, especially if that thing, as a creature made by God, is fundamentally *good*, as affirmed in Genesis 1.

5. “And a Zygote Shall Lead Them”? Embryonic Resurrection and Unborned Heavenly Bodies

Let us proceed by assuming as an answer to question (ii) that at least some human embryos and fetuses are redeemed, whether automatically by virtue of their innocence, by a special act of God’s saving grace, or as a result of spiritual growth and active cooperation with God’s redemptive work. What might we then say about (iii) with respect to the resurrected *bodies* of these individuals? There are a number of proposals one might make in this regard. In the remainder of this paper, I will very briefly discuss four directions these proposals might take, with the hope that these might serve as a springboard for future work on this topic.²² I will conclude with a very tenuous sketch of an alternative approach, which remains to be elaborated in more detail in the future. Importantly, however, any future discussions of these kinds must take care to explore not only which conceptions of heavenly embryonic “bodies” are metaphysically and theologically plausible but also how we can meaningfully imagine this kind of survival of death in a way that can also function pastorally to bring comfort to those whose bodies in this life have undergone pregnancy loss.

5.1. Solely Souls? The Spiritual Model

One possibility raised by Augustine in the aforementioned letter to Jerome (§§22-24) is that original sin attaches only to the *body*, not to the soul in its original, uncorrupted state. Therefore, the innocent souls of unbaptized infants and *abortivi*—who have had no opportunity to develop a will, act morally, and accept or reject grace—will survive death (as a matter of the first resurrection), but they will not receive bodies (in the second resurrection). For those interested in preserving a sense of the popular custom of referring to the miscarried and stillborn as “angel babies”, perhaps we can even think of *abortivi*, including embryos, as wholly spiritual beings, who—like the unfallen angels—have all their knowledge infused in them by the Divine Light and enjoy in the beatific (or at least intellectual) vision of God. They would thus have no need to learn, but they also would not have corporeal bodies. In this sense, the dead unborn would be “like angels in heaven” (Matt. 20:30), enjoying the presence of God, praying for human sinners, and remaining unborned into all eternity.

²² Each of these proposals has, in some form or another, been maintained in the history of Christianity, so perhaps future work on this issue will be more a matter of recovering and “reconceiving” past approaches rather than developing something wholly novel—which, I suppose, is preferable if one is concerned about maintaining a level of orthodoxy. That being said, however, it is sometimes the case that the uncovering or amelioration of a hermeneutical injustice requires innovative and even disruptive approaches in order, literally, to do justice to the problem.

Of course, the idea that original sin attaches to the body only is one at odds with much Christian teaching and practice. Augustine himself rejects it on the basis of “its very novelty” and incompatibility with the “absolutely fundamental custom of the Church” (§23-24). Moreover, if one takes corporeality to be, in some relevant sense, essential to human existence, then the unborn will forever remain “unformed”, “incomplete”, or otherwise “liminal”—neither angel nor human nor animal. Perhaps this is all we can hope for the unborn, but if being human means being embodied, then on this view the embryonic unborn will never be fully human.

5.2. Rebirth *qua* First Birth? Prospective Body Models

Another approach might be to maintain that the unborn, like all birthed individuals who are redeemed, will receive glorified bodies—but, like their unborn ancestors Adam and Eve, this will be their first “birth”, not a *re*-birth. There are a number of possible directions one could take this idea. For example, commensurate with the soul-building account discussed above, perhaps they will be physically gestated and birthed by a heavenly parent—and will develop physically as well as intellectually and spiritually. That is, their heavenly bodies, too, will grow, change, and mature. They may, like human children on this earth, even require nurturing and parenting within a community. Alternatively, one might maintain that these “newborn” human beings will emerge fully grown in the bodies that they *would have had* if they had grown to maturity and will be able to immediately interact on the same “level” as the rest of the community of the redeemed. Both of these proposals can be characterized as “forward-looking” or “prospective” body models, since they would involve either the gradual development or the immediate bestowal of the kind of body that corresponds to the heavenly version of a temporally later or structurally more mature stage of a human being.

On the one hand, this approach preserves the Christian intuition that corporeality is somehow central to our existence as the kind of beings we have been created to be. It might also allow that the unborn can enjoy a variety of actual experiences, on the assumption that glorified bodies are capable of forming new experiences and that one needs a body for (at least certain kinds of valuable) experience. On the other hand, the dynamic physical development account will require an additional account of who will be doing the gestating, birthing, and nurturing of this heavenly baby, while the static bestowal account must explain how this new human being is not simply a Davidsonian “swamp-embryo”, unable to remember, recognize, perhaps even to *know* things (given its lack of learning) in all the ways that mark the features of *human* cognition.

Additionally (and perhaps more troublingly), both accounts have to grapple with two closely related problems: 1) the problem of identity over time and 2) the problem of “standard” or “ideal” bodies. These worries plague most teleological accounts of the bodily afterlife, especially those that discuss disabled, trans, and other bodies that society

tends to view as “non-standard”, but the problem is heightened in the case of embryos, especially those who have not developed any “bodies” to speak of. I noted in Section 4.3 that the majority of miscarriages involve embryos with severe chromosomal aneuploidies that are incompatible with sustained human life. For such embryos, then, there simply is no counterfactually-grounded body that the embryo *would have had*, if it had grown to maturity, since this kind of development would be ruled out by the very chromosomal constitution of the embryo. Nor is it clear that if the physical development of the embryo picked up immediately where it left off before death that what would result would be a living human being capable of physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth. So either the relevant aneuploidies would have to be eliminated, “corrected”, or causally “neutralized”, or the regenerated bodies of these unborn embryos will have to be wholly disconnected from their actual premortem genetic makeup. In either case, however, the question arises: How is the resulting body *this* (previously bodyless, aneuploid) embryo and not some other?

Then there is the question of what kind of body they will receive: If, for example, we suppose that the aneuploidies’ effects are simply neutralized, such that it could receive or develop a “standard” or “ideal” body *despite* its chromosomal divergence, we run into a worry concerning what this body is supposed to be like. Here, the specters of ableism, ageism, sexism, genderism, and other biases engrained deeply in our cultural and social imaginations loom large. Which bodies are “standard”? Who is the “default” human being on which we model our concepts of what would be “ideal”? Trying to sidestep the problem by erasing difference and proposing that human beings will be given or develop “ageless”, “sexless”, “genderless”, “raceless” bodies—or that we simply won’t care about age, sex, gender, race, or ability in heaven—doesn’t help us much with those who never developed bodies. If they are, in fact, to have glorified bodies (even of the “x-less” kind), we inevitably run up against (1) or (2) or both.

So what are we to say if we want to continue to affirm that even early embryos can have afterlives in which they flourish? A disembodied existence might render them less than human; an embodied existence might replace them with “normalized” *simulacra*. In either case, we might wonder whether it would not be better to suppose that they simply “perish, like seeds that did not germinate”, as Augustine suggested in the *Enchiridion*.

5.3. Beatific Visions? Pluralistic Models of Flourishing

There is one more possibility I wish to briefly explore here—namely, the possibility that afterlife flourishing is a *plural* concept. Indeed, I propose that that a model of the afterlife which presupposes that there is only one relevant kind of flourishing in that afterlife—even with respect to human beings—fails both to appreciate the diversity of God’s creation and the eschatological possibility of a new (or covenantally re-newed) heaven and earth where that diversity is mirrored and celebrated. In one sense, this is not a

particularly controversial notion. The idea that what it is for a human to flourish is not what it is for an octopus or a dog or a tree to flourish is built into most teleological (and even evolutionary) accounts of nature and “naturalness”. However, I wish to go further, and to propose (still, I think, not all that controversially) that, even for human individuals, flourishing can take on forms beyond that available to wholly free, autonomous, rational human agents.

An embryo no more possesses free will than it possesses the ability to recite a Bible verse or run a mile. It may have the potential (absent severe chromosomal aneuploidies) to develop into a being who does possess and exercise such capacities—but it currently has neither the organic complexity required to possess them nor the skill and input to use them, and—as, perhaps, with non-human animals—it need not be characterized as a mark of *deficiency* or *imperfection* that it cannot, in its current state, actualize these potentialities, merely because of the fact that it *would* do so if it *were* to develop into a structurally more complex being at a later temporal stage of human existence. Another way of putting this is that there is nothing that says that the perfection of a human zygote need be identical to the moral flourishing of a human adult, even if there is a teleological line that one can draw from fertilized egg to human adult with respect to agency.

Even if what makes the death of unborn human individuals sorrowful is their untimeliness—including the fact that they will never develop into rational human agents who will flourish *qua* rational agents—I see little reason other than sheer custom to assume that, if such individuals are to share in the beatific vision or otherwise commune with God, they must do so in the way that mature, autonomous, rational agents do. Compare Katherin Rogers:

Here is what feels right to me: When someone below the age of reason dies, they achieve whatever beatitude is possible for someone who has lived as long as they have, and who had no hand in self-creation. The toddler, the infant, the embryo, are glorified, but glorified as the “inexperienced” human being they were when they died. [...] Heaven will be populated by human beings with wildly differing capacities for enjoying the presence of God. (Rogers 2017, 46)

This approach is not a contemporary version of the “naturally-happy-but-not-blessed” infants of Bridget, Mechthild, and Thomas. It maintains instead that these “happy dead”, too, enjoy the *visio beatifica*, but that the *Gottesschau* is not, as traditionally assumed, a single, *unified* “vision”. What it is to “see” (or “hear” or “touch” or “taste” or “feel”) the Godhead—to be reconciled to it and/or united with it—is not the same for all human individuals, and yet it can be equally *good* for each of those individuals according to their constitution, insofar as it is *God* with whom they are reconciled. In this sense, then, the

unborn can indeed have a “share in the resurrection”, but it is one that may look very different from that which is ours.²³

6. Microchimerism, Mereology, and Mystical Union: Toward a Future Model of “Glorified Resorption”

There are various ways of imagining what it might mean for a deceased embryo—who will never develop a body, have experiences, or form any human connections other than the short-lived physiological connection it had to its mother—to be united with God in a way fitting for it as such. As Rogers herself notes with regard to what she calls the “hiddenness” of heaven: “how all this actually works out on the other side I don’t have a clue” (46). Still, I wish to conclude by gesturing very briefly at one possible imagining of embryonic afterlives that is, I think, no weirder than any of the afterlife conceptions presented in Section 5 (and perhaps, even, better conceivable than these), as well as potentially of some comfort to those who have actually lost pregnancies.

Women who have been pregnant can attest to the myriad ways in which one’s pregnant body becomes tied up (quite literally) with that of the baby in one’s womb. Most of us are aware that oxygen, hormones, and important nutrients are transported from the mother to the fetus via the placenta. However, the traffic is not merely unidirectional: embryos and fetuses also transfer cells and genetic material to the mother, a phenomenon called “fetal microchimerism”. In humans, fetal genetic material has been detected in maternal organs as diverse as the skin, lungs, salivary glands, and even the heart and brain, becoming part of the mother’s tissue and sometimes remaining part of the mother’s body for decades after the baby has exited the womb (Cómitre-Mariano et al. 2022). This not only means that the embryo is physiologically integrated into the mother’s body, we might say it is no more spatially distinct from it than her kidney (Kingma 2020a, 1041). Indeed—perhaps, as Elseijn Kingma (2019, 2020b) has suggested, it might be best considered a *part* of her. This is not the place to engage in such a debate. It is merely worth noting that, even on the not uncontroversial assumption that an embryo is a distinct, living human organism, a) there are aspects of the embryo that make it very *part-like*, and b) its DNA and the mother’s DNA are inseparably fused in such a way as to cause scientists to call it a *chimera*. Furthermore, it is not uncommon—especially in early pregnancy losses—that an embryo or fetus disintegrates and is reabsorbed into the mother, rather than being expelled or bled out.

The lack of a discernable corpse is one reason many women find early pregnancy losses difficult to grieve, but together with the idea that our embryos remain “fused” to

²³ Note that, as in Section 4.3, this notion can be extended to non-human animals, and also to other living things capable of dying—perhaps even to organisms as small as a bacterium or as large as an ecosystem.

our bodies despite having died, the phenomenon of embryonic resorption might show promise for thinking about bodily embryonic afterlives. Perhaps, instead of an embryo's living an independent, spiritually or physically "birthed" afterlife, what it is for such an embryo to flourish is precisely for it to become united to its mother's resurrected body in a kind of "glorified resorption", one both physiological and spiritual. We can imagine, too, that the mother can perceive her baby's distinctive (even if corporeally indistinct) presence, and that the two (or more) individuals can and will co-exist in loving union in eternity—an "indistinct distinction" reminiscent of the way mystical union between the Soul and the Godhead is characterized in the Christian tradition. In this sense, then, the mother's vision of the Divine is simultaneously, even if non-consciously, *witnessed* by the unborn lives that now constitute part of her resurrected body—and this may be the way in which a deceased embryo can be said to *perceive, know, and even image* God, despite having never developed perceptual organs, intellectual capacities, or the minimal structural complexity required for agency.

Obviously, I shall have to postpone the elaboration of this incarnational model of embryonic afterlife for another occasion, and I hope to "flesh it out" in more detail in future work. But if something like this is right (or at least fitting), then we might be able to say that, for mothers and their lost unborn, heaven itself is no weirder than basic human physiology.

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