

# CONCERNING INFANTS WHO HAVE DIED PREMATURELY

## INTRODUCTION

Gregory of Nyssa's short treatise **Concerning Infants Who Have Died Prematurely**<sup>1</sup> examines a dilemma that has plagued every society from ancient times until now, namely, the death of newly born infants who have not had the opportunity to enjoy the light of life. The text is freighted with rhetorical devices, not to mention Gregory's usual self-deprecating attitude, for example, when he praises Hierios, a learned prefect of Cappadocia<sup>2</sup>. In the opening paragraph Gregory compares Hierios, the "crown of my head" (J.71.22), to himself as "an old horse past its prime for racing" (J.67.15).

A quick glance at the title may give the impression that Gregory is concerned with the sacrament of baptism as an introduction into the fullness of Christian life, but this sacramental character does not enter the picture at all<sup>3</sup>. Instead, the bishop of Nyssa composes a rather philosophical treatise to Hierios in response to the latter's inquiry about a person's future happiness which depends upon his or her behavior in this present life. True to his rhetorical style, Gregory asks the following question:

Does that soul [an infant's] see the Judge, stand with others before the tribunal and submit to the same judgment as those who have lived? Is it deemed worthy or is purged with fire according to the Gospel, or is it refreshed by the dew of a blessing? (J.73.13-17)

Shortly afterwards Gregory readily admits that he "is unable to comprehend the

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<sup>1</sup> The critical text, **Pros `Ierion: Peri ton pro Oras Anarpazomenon Nepion (De Infantibus Praemature Abreptis)**, is found in **Gregorii Nysseni Opera Dogmatica Minora**, Pars II (Leiden, 1987), edited by Hadwiga Horner, pp.67-97. The edition by J.P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graecae**, volume 44.161-192, (Paris, 1858).

<sup>22</sup> "Hierios ist zwar nicht selbst Monch geworden--in diesem Fall ware der rhetorische Aufwand der Schrift unangemessen--scheint sich aber doch auch personlich weitgehend einem `philosophischen Leben' zugewandt zu haben." An article entitled "Die Entstehungszeit des Traktats `De Infantibus Praemature Abreptis' des Gregor von Nyssa" by G. May: **Acta Colloquii Gregoriani III** (Leiden, 1974), p.92.

<sup>33</sup> "...Gregory does not seem to be concerned with maintaining the salvation of the infants in question [i.e., those who have died prematurely], but with the justice of their reward." An article entitled "The Fall of Man and Original Sin in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa" by Ernest V. McClear, sj, **Theological Studies** #9, (Baltimore, 1948), p.207. McClear later observes that failure to mention baptism may be attributed to the fact that Hierios, to whom the treatise is addressed, is a well-informed theologian "Who asked not about the salvation of children, but about the justice of their reward." (p.209)

state of such a soul because a reward and retribution apply to a state [God] had already anticipated, whereas they do not apply to a person who had not yet lived" (J.74.1-4). Here the subject matter of **De Infantibus** is clearly outlined in terms of a reward or retribution (*antidosis*). Common sense implies that an infant does not fall under this category. However, the question of premature death is used as a point of reference for a broader consideration of reward and punishment according to the merits of each individual person. The bishop of Nyssa illumines the theme of merit by alluding to Matthew 5.3 where Jesus Christ in the guise of a king delegates his affairs to his servants: "Since you have done this, you who are just will receive the kingdom." This Gospel passage should be viewed in the larger context of each person's responsibility to rid him or herself of evil which results from pleasure, "for we achieve virtue and alienation from pleasure with much effort" (J.75.10-11).

According to Gregory, humankind is divided into three classes: those who have lived virtuously and have merited a reward, those who have not followed virtue's path and deserve punishment, and infants who, by reason of their early deaths, do not fall under the first two categories. Because the theme of **Infants** does not apply to baptism but to merit, it thereby points to the larger issue of happiness and our capacity for making free choices which is essential for attaining such a goal. This point is illustrated by an example of two men suffering from diseased eyes, a symbol of two states of soul:

One person desiring to cure himself should apply a medicinal remedy provided that he has the patience. Another person with less discipline should employ baths and be subject to medical attention for restoring health to his eyes. We therefore believe that both persons have the consequence of their respective choices: the one deprived of light and the other person, its enjoyment. (J.82.11-13)

Here one man makes use of remedies available to him whereas the other does not. In each situation, the result or reward (*antidosis*) follows from employing the correct remedy to cure this infirmity. But in the case of infants, they have not yet attained the capacity to choose between good and evil, even though the illness of ignorance afflicts every person:

But for the soul which has not yet tasted virtue and is in an evil state, inasmuch as evil has not been present from the beginning, does not share in virtue because the superior life which a person had from the beginning gives rise to knowledge of God and participation in him. Such a person nourishes his soul by the food of contemplation, and he develops it as much as possible. (J.84.21-85.6)

This "superior life which a person had from the beginning" and which "gives rise

to knowledge of God (*gnosis*) and participation (*metousia*) in him" is a fundamental theme pervading all the works of Gregory of Nyssa. Those who have progressed in virtue will enjoy the fruits of virtue according to their practice of it. On the other hand, infants who have never "tasted" virtue will nevertheless see God according to their limited capacity. Thus the righteous and infant will both participate in the beatific vision despite their different conditions. It should be noted that both individuals are not afflicted by evil. The reason for their participation in God rests upon the fact that every person is made in his divine image and likeness, a biblical theme based upon Genesis 1.27, which is a favorite theme of Gregory of Nyssa: "And God made man in his image; in the image of God he created him."

**Infants** has two references to this key passage, J.77.22-23 and J.79.23-24. The first excerpt forms the basis for "a two-fold division which belongs to every creature and as the Apostle says [Col 1.16], is visible and invisible (J.78.3)." Gregory continues in the next sentence by saying that the invisible "signifies what is intelligible" whereas "the visible belongs to the sense and the body." Earlier in the same paragraph the bishop of Nyssa situates his reflections within a certain "logical order" (J.76.20) or *taxis* <sup>4</sup>. David Balas has commented upon this passage by observing that such a *taxis* allows participation in God, including the souls of infants, "which have not been prepared by the practice of virtue [who] will gradually become capable of more" (cf. J.84.19-20: "They [who practice virtue] partake of divine nourishment to a greater or less extent according to their capacity") <sup>5</sup>.

It is interesting to note that in another work of Gregory <sup>6</sup> the word *taxis*, together with *akolouthia*, signifies both the beginning, development and end of our sanctification with special mention of First Corinthians 15.20: "But as it is, Christ has risen from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." In other words, the presence of Christ is a sort of "dough" which leavens the entire loaf of bread, a symbol of humanity in its entirety. This sanctification follows a definite *taxis* which must be in accord with that "logical order" mentioned above where the end resembles the beginning but only in a newly transformed manner <sup>7</sup>. Thus both the infant who had died prematurely and the

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<sup>44</sup> *Taxis* is closely related to another key word, *akolouthia*, which means "sequence," "order." For a fuller treatment of this concept, refer to an article by Jean Danielou, *Akolouthia chez Gregoire de Nysse*, in **Revue des Sciences Religieuses** (Paris, 1953), pp.219-249.

<sup>55</sup> **Metousia Theou: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa** (Rome, 1966), p.95.

<sup>66</sup> **In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius** (PG44, 1313 B-C).

<sup>77</sup> "Das Ende ist schon im Anfang, die vollendete Gestalt des Leibes in ihrem Keime anwesend, weil Anfang und Ende wie ein Prinzip mit seinem Endergebnis durch einen notwendigen Entwicklungsgang verknüpft sind." **Die Einheit Des Leibes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa** by Reinhard M. Hubner (Leiden, 1974), p.101.

person who had lived virtuously will participate in that same growth in Christ.

Such growth in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ assumes a definite form, and Gregory employs a special word to signify it, *epektasis*<sup>88</sup>. This term implies stretching forth to attain a future spiritual goal and follows a definite taxis and *akolouthia* as already mentioned. Although the notion of *epektasis* does not occur in the following citation from Gregory's **Commentary on the Song of Songs**, its context is nevertheless delineated. Note the paradox of such *epektasis* or progress: it takes place within the context of a reality which already exists, namely, the perfection of human nature and its fulfillment:

Because creation exists from its very beginning by the divine power, the end of each created being is linked with its beginning: everything created from nothing comes into existence with its beginning. Human nature is also created but does not, like other created beings, advance towards its perfection, but right from the beginning it is created perfect: "Let us make man according to the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1.26). Here is the very summit and perfection of goodness. What can be more exalted than similarity to God? Thus the end of the first creation is simultaneous with its beginning, for human nature originated in perfection. (J.457-8)

Within the framework of Infants, the perfection of human nature "right from the beginning" supports Gregory's assumption that children who have died prematurely share the same capacity of growth or *epektasis* in perfection as adults who have lived virtuously. However, the former do not have to undergo that process of realizing perfection which occurs on the plane of temporal existence. They have been cut off from such development almost as soon as they were born. The bishop of Nyssa uses a word difficult to translate into English, *diastema*, which represents this spacial-temporal domain. Gregory employs this term to signify awareness of our separation from God. As T. Paul Verghese points out, *diastema* has two aspects: "One that it is always extended in space and time, from somewhere to somewhere and from a point in time to another point in time, but also secondly that such created existence is never self-contained or self-generated, but totally dependent on a reality which transcends space and time"<sup>99</sup>. Verghese refers to a passage from Gregory's **Commentary on Ecclesiastes** which points to the "one-way" gap between Creator and Creation:

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<sup>88</sup> For a fuller treatment of this word, refer to Jean Danielou's **Platonisme et Theologie Mystique** (Paris, 1944), pp.291-307.

<sup>99</sup> *Diastema and Diastis in Gregory of Nyssa. Introduction to a Concept and the Posing of a Problem*, an article in **Gregory von Nyssa und die Philosophie**, edited by H. Dorrie, M. Altenburger, U. Schramm (Leiden, 1976), p.252.

Thus all creation cannot transgress its natural limitations by a comprehensive insight; rather, it always remains within its own bounds and whatever it may view, it sees itself. And should creation think it beholds anything beyond itself, this cannot be, for it lacks the capacity to look beyond its own nature. All our notions are bound by time; they attempt to transcend their proper limits but cannot. Intervals of time constitute all our thoughts as well as the substance of a person who gives rise to such thoughts.

Our mind functions by using intervals within time, so how can it grasp [God's] nature which is not subject to temporal extension? Through the medium of time, the inquisitive mind always leaves behind any thought older than what it just discovered. The mind also busily searches through all kinds of knowledge yet never discovers the means to grasp eternity in order to transcend both itself and what we earlier considered, namely, the eternal existence of beings. This effort resembles a person standing on a precipice (A smooth, precipitous rock which abruptly falls down into a boundless distance suggests this transcendence. Its prominence reaches on high while also falling to the gaping deep below). A person's foot can therefore touch that ridge falling off to the depths below and find neither step nor support for his hand. This example may pertain to the soul's passage through intervals of time in its search for [God's] nature which exists before eternity and is not subject to time. (J.412-14)

"The soul's passage through intervals of time in its search for [God's] nature" invites greater sensitivity to the communication of God's presence. However, the gap between creation and Creator is primarily ontological since we cannot objectify God. Awareness of this interval is difficult to conceive<sup>10</sup>. The bishop of Nyssa acknowledges this in *Infants* yet is aware that the spacial-temporal diastema is a place requiring a certain nourishment. He comments upon First Corinthians 3.2, the source for his exegesis as follows:

Just as at the first stage of life an infant is nourished at the breast by milk, so does a person consume food when he becomes an adult. Thus I believe that the different stages of growth share a certain order and sequence [*taxis kai akolouthia*] according to one's capacity as he advances to the stage where people enjoy a life of blessedness. We have learned this from Paul who in one way nourishes persons who have grown through virtue and in another way an infant who has not yet grown up: "I have fed you with

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<sup>1010</sup> "We can conceive no mental image of such a gap [*diastema*], but it is our experience." **Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence** by Paulos Mar Gregorios (New York, 1988), p.95.

milk, not solid food since you were not yet ready for it [1Cor 3.2]." (J.83.6-17)

Gregory of Nyssa wishes to examine the subject of infant mortality "by considering its logical order" (*akolouthia*). As Jean Danielou has remarked concerning this passage, Gregory's use of *akolouthia* "consistera a partir d'abord une verite generale et certaine, puis a en deduire les consequences concernant le point particulier qui est en question" <sup>11</sup>. This *akolouthia* is proposed to Hierios with regard to the death of infants which was a dilemma confronted by ancient thinkers <sup>12</sup>. Gregory does not confine himself to mythological ideas but continues the philosophical reflection begun by Plato who "left unexplained much of what philosophers had discussed about coming back to life" (J.70.7-8).

In another treatise closely related to the theme of **Infants** Gregory of Nyssa speaks of a "new birth" which is a consequence of Christ's resurrection:

We can offer a different understanding of procreation, a promise made by God, which is worthy of his blessings because this capacity is altered to serve that [new] birth. The great Isaiah anticipated this when he said, "We have conceived, O Lord, because of your fear and have been in pain and have brought forth in the earth the breath of your salvation" (Is 26.18). If this birth is good and procreation is the cause of salvation as the Apostle [Paul] says (1Tm 2.15), the Spirit which brings forth salvation never deserts the person who has begotten through this birth a multitude of blessings.  
**Concerning Those Who Have Died**, J.63.

This passage sheds light on another one from **Infants** which intimates that

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<sup>1111</sup> An article entitled *Gregoire de Nyssa 'Sur Les Enfants Morts Prematurement'* in **Vigiliae Christianae** #20 (Amsterdam, 1966), p.163. Danielou mentions Christian sources which have influenced Gregory of Nyssa's reflections on infant mortality such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Jerome and Methodios of Olympos. Cf. pp.167-170.

<sup>1212</sup> Cf. J.70.7 where Gregory alludes to "the wise Plato" with reference to **The Republic**, 614B-C. Within this context, A.D. Nock has observed, "Long before the emergence of schematic theories, children dying in infancy did not receive funerary libations and were sometimes disposed in some manner other than that used for dead adults; they had not entered and were not leaving life in its fullness. It is natural to think of the dead as continuing to be at the age at which they died...In the Homeric Hades, which was always there in the background, the dead went on doing what they had done in life." Excerpted from an article entitled *Tertullian and the Ahori* from **Vigiliae Christianae** #4 (Amsterdam, 1950), pp.132-133. In this same article Nock makes allusion to the *ahori* or those (infants) who died without sin, pp.107-112. Also, cf. Tertullian's **De Anima**, 56,8.

newborn children who have died prematurely are not tinged by the effects of original sin:

However, the person who cleanses himself by an appropriate cure and removes the sore of ignorance from his clear-sighted soul is sincere and obtains a reward (*antidosis*) in this natural life. But the person who shuns purity of virtue and fosters an incurable illness of ignorance through deceptive pleasures becomes estranged from his true nature and does not share in life. On the other hand, a simple infant who is not ill with regard to the soul's eyes participates in the light; he does not require cleansing because his soul has not been unwell from birth. (J.82.21-83.4)

But as Danielou has pointed out, this is a philosophical question <sup>13</sup>, not especially a theological one. He remarks that all persons are created by God to participate in the beatific vision. However, personal sin goes contrary to this design as symbolized by that man mentioned above who does not take proper care to remedy his diseased eyes. While the question of a reward (*antidosis*) is certainly important, Gregory prefers to concentrate more upon a person's capacity to possess God which sets him or her on the path of perpetual growth or *epektasis*.

As Marguerite Harl has observed <sup>14</sup>, Infants have "trois zones concentriques" with their proper metaphors. The first "zone" discusses justice which is not specifically Christian, the second pertains to the Stoic doctrine of universal providence which has been Christianized <sup>15</sup>, and the third "zone" which employs philosophic terminology for discussing the nature of created beings. Harl says that this "zone centrale" pertains to nourishment which pertains to that spiritual sustenance derived from the contemplation of God. It is here that Gregory makes a transition from philosophical speculation to Christian reflection of the soul's relationship to divine life.

The participation in God which Gregory describes in terms of knowledge of God <sup>16</sup> does not belong to the realm of being or *ousia* but, as David Balas has pointed out <sup>17</sup>,

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<sup>1313</sup> "La necessite de poser la question non en fonction de la problematique de la retribution, mais de celle de la nature humaine apparait du fait que c'est seulement selon la seconde que le probleme de l'avenir eternel des enfants morts a leur naissance peut se poser." Ibid, **Vigiliae Christianae** #20, p.175.

<sup>1414</sup> An article entitled *La Croissance De l'Ame dans La Connaissance selon Le 'De Infantibus': La Doctrine et Ses Metaphores* from **Acta Colloquii Gregoriani III** (Leiden, 1974), pp.100-101.

<sup>1515</sup> For example, "We can never see the stars' hidden location, but they all lead the mind to above through wisdom." (J.71.20-21)

<sup>1616</sup> "the soul's participation in God and that knowledge which shares in it." (J.80.22-23)

<sup>1717</sup> Ibid, p.95.

takes place according to that order and sequence (*taxis kai akolouthia*). Here the category of relationship applies which enables both infants and adults (who have practiced virtue) to become capable of greater participation:

Just as at the first stage of life an infant is nourished at the breast by milk, so does a person consume food when he becomes an adult. (J.83.6-8)

We may contrast these two types of nourishment with Gregory's example of a banquet which plays a central role in the second half of *Infants*. Here a steward is present who knows exactly what to offer each guest and to regulate the behavior of those at the banquet in case anyone gets out of hand. Paul J. Alexander has noted with regard to details related to the food of this simile, "In addition, so he [Gregory] seems to argue, there are present in creation a number of elements necessary for the physical and moral functioning of human existence but capable of being misused by the individual. It is God's foreknowledge of the concurrence of the human penchant to evil with the existing opportunity for wrongdoing by the perversion of essentially beneficial elements that justifies the death of the *ahori* [i.e., those who have died prematurely] <sup>18</sup>." The lengthy figure of a feast concerns infants who have died prematurely in that God's providence prevents both the means and opportunity for evil which they may perform:

He [God] does not give an occasion for choosing it [evil] through his providential capacity which knows the effect of a depraved inclination to produce bad deeds <sup>19</sup>. (J.90.16-19)

Towards the conclusion of *Infants* Gregory employs the harsh words of Psalm 57, verse 11 <sup>20</sup>, to show the attitude "virtuous persons" should have towards "those living in evil." Although he says shortly afterwards that infants who have died "do not share that

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<sup>1818</sup> An article entitled *Gregory of Nyssa and the Simile of the Banquet of Life, Vigiliae Christianae* #30 (Amsterdam, 1976), p.58.

<sup>1919</sup> Compare another image of a banquet taken from Gregory's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, J.438-439: Since reason deviated both from the correct use of [God's] benefits and from what he appointed through evil counsel, man exchanged the time of useful actions for evil ones. This resembles a table which talented persons have carefully laid out to make a meal enjoyable and full of good cheer along with delicate cutlery for carving meat and silver soup spoons. Then some of the invited guests either cut themselves with a sword or a similar weapon; they either strike their own eye or another's, for they have turned what they were offered into something disrespectful. A banquet may be said to suffer abuse if a person fails to abide by the reason for which the guests were invited; instead, he introduces an evil use for passion among those who are unwilling to partake of it.

<sup>202</sup> "The just man will rejoice when he sees vengeance on the impious; he will wash his hands in the blood of the sinner." (J.96.1-3)



virtue which belongs to those have been purified" and who thus lay outside the scope of this verse, it nevertheless applies to them. The reason for this lies in the fact that such infants "are prevented from doing harm" and share in the same virtuous state as those who have lived a life of moral rectitude. Again, the bishop of Nyssa does not focus attention so much upon the reward or *antidosis* of children who have passed away; rather, he uses this subject as a broader foundation on which to contrast two human conditions represented by virtue and evil. The context of Ps 57.11 makes better sense when compared with a similar passage from **Gregory's Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms**:

When our humanity will be united with the angels and when the divine battle-order lifts it out of the present turmoil, it will sing a victorious song of triumph at the bloody defeat of the enemy. Then every spirit will praise God's grace forever, continually magnifying his blessedness by further graces. This I call true blessedness. (J.69)

Here (resurrected) humanity as a whole achieves its identity of "true blessedness" when it is "united with the angels." Such is the reward of overcoming the negative side of that *diastema* or perception of distance from God. The enemy represents the evils of this present existence which all persons must overcome by a life of virtue under God's grace. Gregory characteristically closes his treatise, as he does in many of his other words, with words of encouragement by saying that "consideration of the Apostle's [Paul] words offer consolation by mentioned [God] who made everything in wisdom and who brought about good through evil." (J.97.1-3)

Jean Danielou has dated **Concerning Infants Who Have Died Prematurely** around the years 385-386 <sup>21</sup>. This treatise does not offer to explain the blessed destiny of children who have died so young before attaining maturity. Instead, Gregory of Nyssa is satisfied to state the fact according to his Christian beliefs and reflections upon Holy Scripture. At the beginning of *Infants*, Gregory speaks of "our advanced age" which is an indication that he may have written it late in life, ten years before the generally accepted date of his death in 394. Despite this claim, Danielou (p.182) says that such a statement may be a rhetorical device, perhaps in deference to the younger Hierios to whom the treatise is addressed.

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<sup>2121</sup> *Le Traite 'Sur les Enfants Morts Prematurement' de Gregoire de Nysse*. Ibid, pp.181-182. On the other hand, G. May (*Die Entstehungszeit des Traktats 'De Infantibus Praemature Abreptis' des Gregor von Nyssa*, ibid, pp.92-96) dates **Infants** to the year 381. The reason for this date is because the treatise is related to **Concerning Those Who Have Died** which was composed approximately the same time (cf. p.95).

## THE TEXT

[M.161 & J.67] You know, my distinguished friend, that orators and writers are certainly qualified to praise the greatness of your achievements as though they were referring to a contest in a stadium. Any respectable person who can both speak well and develop an argument clearly realizes how to praise your outstanding accomplishments. Since our advanced age prevents us from participating in the contest, we will pay attention to you alone as though we excelled the noise and leaps of [rival] horses because we are urged on by a favorable report about you. Take the example of an old horse past its prime for racing. Often this animal stomps with desire, keeps its head erect, breathes ardently with attentive eyes, eagerly moves its feet and vigorously strikes its hooves in longing to compete, despite the fact that it can no longer [J.68] do so. Similarly, our remarks cannot compete due to our age, and we leave the stadium for erudite persons like you among whom you show promise in the prime of life.

But I do not wish to praise you further. We cannot add anything to your convincing, detailed report because it is impossible to add further laudable words for adequately making this comparison drawn from such paradoxical statements. Not only do protruding eyelids overshadow and obscure the eyes' splendor and purity, but they hide the gentle sun. Thus noble, high-minded behavior united with an abiding sense of humility does not obstruct [M.164] our vision but enhances it. As a result, neither does our gleam weaken nor does a spirit of humility disdain what lies hidden within us. Rather, each complements the other: one [humility] shares the honor of the other [noble behavior] while the other enjoys its esteem. Someone else should explain this and shield the soul's multi-faceted vision. We may compare the soul's eyes with the hairs of one's head which are located on both sides and are fully perceptive and discerning. In this way the soul can see both what lies far off and [J.69] nearby and not rely upon a teacher's experience for acquiring beneficial knowledge. Furthermore, hope sustains our eyes: one eye operates through the faculty of our memory and another thoroughly penetrates [the soul]. All these operations serve to order our mind and keep it fully enlightened.

A person can admire the hidden wealth of poverty provided that he is of our age and knows how to value it. If this were not the case, your example offers inspiration to imitate poverty, and your simplicity is of greater value than all Kroesos' wealth. What benefit can the resources of earth or sea impart since their abundance is of no value in comparison to your life? Just as craftsmen who strip off rust from iron make it gleam with the appearance of silver, so does the ray of your life which is always cleansed from the rust of money appear ever more radiant. I will allow more competent persons to speak of these matters because it is more appropriate to comment about the advantage of not being captivated by greed. Allow me to speak frankly not because you despise profit but because no one except you can attain the good to which we had just alluded. Instead of clothing, money or slaves, you acquire mens' souls and deposit them in the treasury of love.

[J.70] Writers and orators have the admirable task of extolling such matters. However, for the observations of our old age to be inspiring which step by step examine the question posed by your foresight, we must inquire about [infants] who have died prematurely and how birth is related to death. Among pagan philosophers, the wise Plato<sup>22</sup> left unexplained much of what philosophers had discussed about coming back to life. Clearly his reflections are far superior to theirs. If there is anything worthwhile examining here which can solve the difficulty of this problem, you will certainly agree with it; however, should you fail to take old age into consideration, you will graciously consent to [M.165] our position. History says that Xerxes, who united every nation under the sun and ruled over the inhabited world, gladly accepted the boon of poverty upon completing an expedition against the Greeks. Water was that gift which Xerxes held not in a container but in his own hands. You too must imitate him according to the greatness of your soul which enables you to accept a gift, even if it is a humble one like water.

[J.71] Both an educated and uneducated person can observe the beauty of heavenly wonders by looking up at the sky, yet whoever considers them by using philosophy sees them differently instead of relying upon sense impressions. (For example, one can delight in either the sun's rays, have a suitable opinion about the stars' radiance or be attentive to the moon's monthly path. On the other hand, a person with a discerning soul whose mind has been cleansed through discipline for contemplating the heavens and whose senses have forsaken whatever provides more irrational delight, sees its harmony and appreciates that unity in the heaven's rotation which encompasses contradictory elements. These observations pertain to heaven's inner circles which remain in a fixed circuit; their view from afar is manifest in stars whether they are close, distant, receding or in eclipse while their harmony remains constant through such mutations and produces the same effect. We can never behold the stars' hidden location,

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. **The Republic**, 614b ff.

but they all lead the mind on high through wisdom).

In similar fashion, you, the honor of my head, when considering the God's concern for the universe, omit trivial matters which concern most people. (By this I mean wealth, the vain desire for glory resembling the stars' radiance which both restricts and blunts persons of lesser intelligence). Neither do you leave unexamined **[J.72]** anything insignificant in your contemplation of the universe and in your careful scrutiny with regard to the inequality of human existence. Not only do you ponder both wealth and poverty or differences according to dignity and its various types (You realize that such categories are not self-evident but exist in the mistaken assumption with regard to anything which not only lacks substance but seems endowed with it. Any thoughtful person who reflects upon his own condition and sees that he is not endowed with glory yet remains puffed up with the fantasy of its splendor, is left with nothing despite the fact that his entire fortune lies buried in the ground.). You, however, take care to apprehend other aspects of God's providence. Anyone carefully considering this will prolong **[M.168]** his life to a blessed old age, while another person will enjoy having the breath of life and will live well up to the day of his death.

Since everything depends upon God's grace and providential will for existence, we have another reason for understanding his solicitude on our behalf. Anything rash and unreasonable is not from God, for according to Scripture, "In his wisdom, God has made all things" [Ps 103.24]. What is the significance of this wisdom? It brought **[J.73]** man into existence through birth where he draws breath and sighs with lamentation over life's afflictions before he can enjoy its pleasures. At birth man's senses were sluggish, and his limbs were not fully formed; he was tender, vulnerable and lacked coordination. We may sum up these observations by saying that before coming to birth (if reason is man's natural gift, he is not yet capable of it), man had nothing more in his mother's womb except the capacity for drawing in air or was in the same state when he disintegrated, has been exposed, suffocated, or spontaneously ceased living due to some infirmity. What need is there to consider this matter? How does it relate to those who have passed away? Does that soul see the Judge, stand with others before the tribunal and submit to the same judgment as those who have lived? Is it deemed worthy or is purged in fire according to the Gospel [Lk 16.24], or is it refreshed by the dew of a blessing?

**[J.74]** But I am unable to comprehend the state of such a soul because a reward and retribution apply to a state [God] had already anticipated, whereas they do not apply to a person who had not yet lived. When a favor is absent, there is no reason **[M.169]** to expect compensation, and where a reward is lacking, there is no reason for good or evil because both instances entail a recompense. When either good or evil is absent, compensation is also absent because the lack of harmony between these contradictory elements is self-evident; I am referring to good and evil since both are absent when we lack an example. If there is nothing of this sort, we cannot add anything further. Should

a person possess the good, God gives it and does not make recompense. What, then, can we say about free choice? How does it illustrate justice, and how does it agree with the Gospel? For example, a king dispenses his affairs to those worthy of them: "Since you have done this, you who are just will receive the kingdom" [Mt 5.3 & 10]. Since neither actions nor free choice play no role, what reason is there to hope in God? If anyone left this matter unexamined [J.75] which pertains to the good in this passing life, he shows that it is better not to participate in life even though one who is alive has foreigners for parents and is not conceived in a legitimate marriage. But the person legitimately born is defiled with evil to a greater or less extent, or even if he is completely devoid of evil, it is the result of much exertion; we achieve virtue and alienation from pleasure only with much effort. This is what happens to a person involved in a distressing situation who indeed shares in temporal existence or who has struggled for virtue or who has been afflicted by evil in life by the reward of sufferings. Nothing of the sort pertains to those who have been born prematurely; their death is considered beneficial if what we believe comes to pass. Therefore if a lack of unreason is deemed better, there is no reason for virtue. If no penalty pertains to the good and virtue, it would be useless and of no value to be distressed over this when [an infant's] lack of reason is taken into consideration at God's judgement.

You invite me to scrutinize these matters in order to obtain a firm opinion. When pondering such a difficult matter [J.76], we should resolve it by considering the Apostle's [Paul] words [M.172] when he reflected upon that which is unexplainable and said, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! Who can know the mind of God" [Rom 11.33]? Again the Apostle says that the spiritual man examines all things [1Cor 2.16] and receives the wealth of God's grace "in all utterance and in all knowledge" [1Cor 1.5]. I will not fail to investigate nor overlook by these words anything which is unsearchable and invisible. In this way I will not make a parallel between this argument which does not apply to the pursuit of truth with regard to a newly born infant before he comes into the light and matures as in the case of a person who perishes through neglect.

I do not speak rhetorically and with knowledge and am confronted with resistance yet wish to carefully reflect upon this issue by considering its logical order. What exactly is this order? It consists in knowing the origins of human nature and [God's] grace which brings us into existence. If we remain constant, we will not err from our proposed interpretation. Since everything comes from God, what is seen [J.77] in creation would be futile and no one, I believe, would assail our response when considering the truth of the matter. It is agreed that the universe has one cause and is not responsible for bringing itself into existence. But the universe as a whole is always uncreated, eternal, self-contained, transcends every concept of measurement, remains constant, is infinite and transcends all bounds. Its nature, time, space and everything in it lies beyond our grasp even if we could grasp anything which existed before it. Divinely inspired teaching also

includes human nature. God brings everything into existence; man's created nature is composed of various elements; it is also carefully composed from what is both divine and intelligible. God intended this to be so for man when he endowed him with a living likeness of himself. In this instance I think it is better to quote Scripture: "And God made man in his image; in the image of God he created him" [Gen 1.27]. The source of this living **[J.78]** creation which existed before us has a two-fold division which belongs to every creature and, as the Apostle says [Col 1.16], is visible and invisible **[M.173]** (The invisible signifies what is intelligible and incorporeal while the visible belongs to the senses and the body).

Therefore the two-fold nature of every creature (I mean the sensible and rational) including the angelic, incorporeal nature which is invisible, belongs to the transcendent, celestial realm where it dwells in harmony (Since our intellectual nature is subtle, pure, light, easily moved, the heavenly body is subtle, weightless and always in motion). On the other hand, what belongs to the earth lies is completely opposite, the senses, and does not conform to what the mind comprehends (For how can what which lacks mass and is light have compatibility with what is heavy and dense?). Certainly the earth has nothing in common with what is intellectual and incorporeal. Thus [divine] foresight has in mind something better for human existence by reason of the soul's intellectual and divine union with earthly life, and the soul has an connaturality with fleshly existence due to its affinity with what is heavy and corporeal. The goal of these created qualities is to glorify [God's] transcendent power through our intellectual nature as well as our heavenly and earthy qualities (By this I mean the person who turns his regard **[J.79]** to God), and to achieve unity with a single purpose in mind. The person who turns to God possesses nothing else than that life which is associated with the intellectual nature.

Just as earthly food nourishes the body and we comprehend a certain corporeal form in them, so does this apply to both beasts and rational beings. For this reason we must examine the intellectual life which is essential to human nature. If fleshly nourishment is consumed which stores life's power when ingested, how much greater is the participation of a person who never changes and always maintains this benefit! The natural eye's reward is to grasp whatever is connatural to it; neither a finger nor any other bodily member can see because their roles differ. Therefore if the life belonging to intellectual nature befits participation in God, this life is not a result of contradictory elements unless in some way it is natural to the person **[M.176]** who desires it. Scripture says that man is made according to God's image [Gen 1.27], so that like sees like. The soul's **[J.80]** life consists in seeing God as we have said earlier. Since ignorance of the true good represents an overshadowing of the soul's vision which becomes so dense that the rays of truth do not penetrate the depth of ignorance, the privation of light imparts no life. It is said that the soul's true life is participation in the good; ignorance thwarts contemplation of God and does not allow the soul to participate in God.

No one can say that ignorance is necessary by referring to its origin and end; rather, we should understand the implication of such ignorance because it reveals information about the soul along with its own knowledge. Nothing we comprehend and say can express anything about it because opinions vary. If knowledge does not exist but is an activity of the mind, how much further removed is ignorance about the mind since it does not exist at all! Thus we would have no basis to inquire about the origin of what lacks existence.

Since we are speaking about life, the soul's participation in God and that knowledge which shares in it, ignorance not only lacks substance but is the extinction of knowledge. It follows that where participation in God does not apply, alienation from life results (an extreme case is corrupt deeds); as a **[J.81]** consequence, [God] works for our benefit by extending a cure to us. Such a remedy is indeed beneficial, and whoever is unaware of this cure fails to consider the mystery of the Gospel. Therefore when evil alienates a person from God who is life itself, the cure of this illness reconciles him to God who bestows life. This life which is rooted in hope belongs to human nature; it is not inimical to us and is intended as a reward for persons who have conducted themselves well. In fact, it is similar to that eye we have already mentioned. We do not claim that a prize exists for an eye which has been purified and a reward for a person endowed with the faculty of sight or a condemnation for someone blind. However, it necessarily follows that a person endowed with the faculty of sight cannot see when passion captivates him. Similarly, a blessed life and those who have cleansed their **[M.177]** souls' perceptions upon which lies a sore of ignorance are impeded from participating in the true light. Not to have it implies that we do not take part in life.

It is time to offer some reflections about this problem. If there is a reward for persons who have done good and if a infant who has died has done **[J.82]** neither good nor evil, how can such an infant expect any reward? We respond to those who consider the consequence of this matter because the good proper to human nature is intelligence and is a reward in and by itself. We can explain this by referring to two types of illnesses pertaining to vision. One person desiring to cure himself should apply a medicinal remedy provided that he has the patience. Another person with less discipline should employ baths and be subject to medical attention for restoring health to his eyes. We therefore believe that both persons have the fruit of their respective choices: the one deprived of light and the other person, its enjoyment. We apply the term reward when it does not partake of offensive behavior. Our remarks concern infants because enjoyment of this life belongs to human nature, but the illness of ignorance controls fleshly existence. However, the person who cleanses himself by an appropriate cure and removes the sore of ignorance from his clear-sighted soul is sincere and obtains a reward in this natural life. But the person who shuns purity of virtue and fosters an incurable illness of ignorance through deceptive pleasures becomes estranged from his true nature and does not share in life. On the other hand, a simple infant who is not ill **[J.83]** with

regard to the soul's eyes participates in the light; he does not require cleansing because his soul has been healthy from birth.

This example bears a certain analogy to the life we envision. Just as at the first stage of life an infant **[M.180]** is nourished at the breast by milk, so does a person consume food when he becomes an adult. Thus I believe that the different stages of growth share a certain order and sequence according to one's capacity as he advances to the stage where he can enjoy a life of blessedness. We have learned this from Paul who in one way nourishes persons who have grown through virtue and in another way an infant who has not yet grown up: "I have fed you with milk, not solid food since you were not yet ready for it" [1Cor 3.2]. But for those persons who have attained maturity he says, "Solid food is for the mature" [Heb 5.14], referring to those who have trained their senses through practice.

Paul did not say that an infant and grown person are the same and that both are not ill **[J.84]** (for how can both enjoy the same food when they are so different?). However, when no illness afflicts them and they are alike, provided that they are free from passion, their enjoyment of food differs (For happiness consists in good words, generous deeds, giving leaders their due, allowing one's deeds to radiate by alms giving or by caring for one's wife and household. Life's pleasures also include meetings, spectacles, hunts, baths, gymnastic schools and pleasant activities of this sort. On the other hand, milk belongs to an infant content to remain quiet at its mother's breast since it is incapable of anything else.). In the same way, those who nourish souls in this life through virtue, as the Apostle says, exercise their mental faculties provided they follow a spiritual manner of living. By reason of instilled habit and personal strength they partake of divine nourishment to a greater or less extent according to their capacity. But for the soul which has not yet tasted virtue and is in an evil state, inasmuch as evil has not been present from the beginning, does not share **[J.85]** in virtue because the superior life which a person had from the beginning gives rise to knowledge of God and participation in him. Such a person nourishes his soul by the food of contemplation, and he develops it as much as possible.

We believe that the soul refrains from wickedness **[M.181]** by progressing in virtue, even though it has not yet fully shared in life, for it has not progressed through all life's stages. When speaking of the heavens, the Prophet [David] heard them declaring God's glory [Ps 18.2] and is led to contemplate the Lord of creation. By knowing him who is truly wise as seen in the wisdom of creation, a person is able to grasp through analogy the beauty of true light and comes to know by the earth's solidity [God] who made it stable and immense. He turns his mind to heaven's greatness and is led to the boundless, immeasurable power which embraces the universe. He also sees the sun's rays shining upon us and believes in God's providential concern which has reached us through them. If one light embraces the universe by a common luminous power and imparts itself



to everything without distinction, then how much greater is the Maker of this light! "That he might be all in all" as the **[J.86]** Apostle says [1Cor 15.28] and give himself to every person according to their capacity. Anyone may consider an ear of corn, a plant's growth, a cluster of ripe grapes, the beauty of their ripeness either in their fruit or flower, a mountain herb spontaneously reaching to heaven on high, fountains at the base of mountains abundantly gushing from their hollows, rivers flowing these hollows, the sea which receives them and which stays the same bounded by the shore without overflowing its bounds. How do these observations which cannot be fully understood pertain to theological teachings about God? Can they delight a person who comprehends them and lead us to virtue? I mean geometry, astronomy, comprehension of the truth through numbers, the pursuit of what is unknown, the confirmation of what is understood and the philosophy of divinely inspired Scripture which cleanses persons instructed in divine mysteries.

Neither the person familiar with these matters nor the one led to comprehend transcendent reality through the world is simple, untrained and has an undisciplined **[J.87]** mind. Our argument shows that this state is not more blessed **[M.184]** according to the contradiction already presented, namely, that the person who is alive is better than the one who is not. For the person free from living in evil would not only be more blessed but would not possess it from the beginning. The Gospel has informed us of Judas where that which does not exist is evil [Mt 26.24]. Does a punishment which uses purification always extend to the depths of innate evil when pain does not apply to what does not exist? We therefore believe it is not right to compare an immature infant to a virtuous person.

You inquire about an infant snatched away from life and God's providential care. But if you ask about an illegitimate birth and an infant wrenched from its parents, perhaps you are asking if God is the source of evil deeds, an argument which proves to be groundless. If anyone who is carefully raised, taken care of and prayed for by his parents does not participate in life, his sickness ends in death (which alone is the cause). We offer this **[J.88]** example because [divine] providence is perfect; not only does it cure passions but provides a defense inasmuch it offers genuine protection right from the beginning. For [God] who knows both the future and what will pass away thwarts an infant's development. God's foreknowledge does not hinder the evil about to be performed and takes into consideration our free will which can do evil in the future. This example is easy to illustrate. Consider a guest at a lavish banquet who is fully aware of the fare spread before him and can distinguish between what is well prepared and what is not. Furthermore, this guest has the ability to correctly choose by either accepting or rejecting the food set before him. He may have any combination of food as long as it does not make him ill; neither would he become stronger from becoming unpleasantly satiated by a wrong combination of ingredients.

We may also add that if a person is removed from a banquet due to drunkenness or

is about to become intoxicated when the feast is about to end, the steward **[J.89]** in charge gracefully prevents any trouble from those who are intoxicated and reeling from too much alcohol. A person denied the enjoyment of a sweet odor **[M.185]** is not deprived of what he yearns for but condemns this injustice and is cheated by reason of his own jealousy and lack of foresight. But if anyone considers a repulsive circumstance of drunkenness when a person vomits, becomes drowsy and talks nonsense, he has the compassion to make him refrain from such immoderate behavior. Perhaps this example enables us to more easily keep our inquiry focused upon the subject of our discussion. What do we mean here? What about divine grace when parents apply all their effort and God prematurely snatches a child away before it has the chance to mature? To persons posing these questions we again refer a banquet and a table loaded with many fine delicacies (I believe that the skill of preparing food involves not just sweet and pleasant items but more bitter ingredients used by experts to stimulate appetites). Since not all things in life are agreeable but resemble either salt, something harsh, pungent, biting or **[J.90]** sharp for the purpose of being ingested and contributing to a rich sauce, the bowls are disguised with all sorts of ingredients. Some persons are pompous in their conceit, others provoke derangement among those who are drinking, while some vomit shameful apostasy by malicious questions. A person does not remain long at this banquet who does not comply to such behavior and leaves more quickly in order not to affect the gathering by gluttony. I believe this example reveals the operation of a perfect providence which not only cures conflicting passions but restrains them. We suggest that infants die because he [God] who makes all things removes circumstances for evil out of love for mankind. He does not give an occasion for choosing it through his providential capacity which knows the effect of a depraved inclination to produce bad deeds.

Often a person fond of banquets denounces the deceptive compulsion of greed which inclines them to evil. Thus in my opinion, they do not reveal the falsely veiled illness of avarice through its misleading cover. Many boast of expanding **[J.91]** their avarice even further in order to make their offspring more wealthy; they unmask their own illness which their unborn children do not necessarily inherit. Many lack successors for whom they have toiled so much; since these persons lack hope, they desire to rear numerous offspring who are unfettered by **[M.188]** this all-consuming illness.

If anyone freely chooses not to live well, for example, cruel tyrants, persons who are slaves to every undiscipline, inclined to anger and who do not refrain from incurable corrupt deeds, thieves, murderers, traitorous fathers, or if there is anything more detestable than putting to death their fathers, mothers, children and engaging in unlawful activities, and if such persons grow old in evil, how do such persons illumine our earlier observations? If an infant's premature death prevents him from craving this life's pleasures such as banquets, how does the banquet of life prophetically reveal that he behave in a drunken manner until reaching old age, does harm to himself, and inflicts his

guests with the stale dregs of evil? <sup>23</sup> Our response is that God's providence does not fail to take these instances into account. The measure of evil gradually decreases through the various stages of life **[J.92]** and restores purity through the fullness of those who have been saved, a fact which is evident for those who realize God's power. For who is unattentive to God's nature while contemplating his works and is blind to his surpassing power by a flawed inclination of the will? If anyone wish to seek in a human manner, he will find it more difficult to discover the existence of heaven, earth and everything in creation and to lead the deceived soul back to life so that [God's] loving will might not be in vain. Whoever lacks divine assistance has an abundance of evil in life. The Maker of life has bestowed life, whereas one's free choice causes harm; without this inclination man would not be completely wicked. By itself, evil lacks existence but is the result of choice when one decides to live in sin. Thus if God does not cause evil, no longer would there be good reason for it to exist in a person.

But why, as you say, does [God's] compassionate providence snatch someone away before his will develops the ability to do evil and **[J.93]** permits this to happen to a person who has not yet been born [cf. Mt 26.24]? We respond to these more plausible objections by saying that there is often a better goal in mind for those who have lived well. Divinely inspired Scripture provides many witnesses where we learn about God's care for those worthy to share it. Since the text makes conjectures about unclear matters, our minds frequently lack proof. Not only is God gracious to parents responsible for bring a human being into existence by taking away a person from living immorally, but if nothing of the sort is found when they have been prematurely snatched away, it is sensible to consider which is more difficult: persons restrained from an immoral life or those known for living in sin. Many instances have taught us that nothing happens without God's aid. It is not without chance and logic that divine care administers everything when we know that God is the reason, wisdom, virtue and truth. He does not lack purpose, wisdom, virtue, truth, remains active and is not connected with anything untruthful.

Whether anyone is snatched away as a result of what we have already mentioned or for some other reason, **[J.94]** we should admit that these calamities happen for a better purpose. I know another reason taught by the wise Apostle, namely, that some persons abounding in iniquity were permitted to live **[M.189]** according to their own free choice [Rom 9.14,19]. For a person trained in the teaching of Letter to the Romans who has subjected himself to what is contrary to it, can be accused of evil. If evil is from God, nothing would then exist because he would be irresponsible for governing creation; thus a more profound examination of this matter would dissolve any objections. [Paul] says that God bestows to each person what he deserves and gives evil to some by his good intent

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<sup>23</sup> The Migne edition does not include the following lines in Hadwig Horner's critical text: J.92.22 through J.93.20.

[Rom 2.6ff]. Therefore he inflicted evil to newly born children, especially the Egyptian tyrant's son, to teach Israel by this calamity because there were very numerous [Rom 9.17]. God's power is equally made known through all persons and is beneficial for those worthy of it. He inflicts punishment due to evil behavior because it benefits the people which left Egypt, not that the Egyptians were evil in their ways. Therefore God's adversary, [J.95] Pharaoh, served as a champion and ally for those who did good; in this instance the two-fold operation of God became evident, and Israel obtained knowledge of it. He [Pharaoh] learned what is better for himself and seeing what is more lamentable and deserving of chastisement, realized God's superabundant wisdom which puts evil at the service of those who perform good deeds. Take the example of an artisan's work (if the Apostle's words confirm ours) who skillfully beats iron and makes it pliant for useful implements. Since this rigid material is not malleable, it is not easily softened by fire and fashioned into a functional instrument by reason of its hardness which is the goal of this trade; he uses an anvil so that by hitting iron, it becomes easily worked and soft, thereby resulting in a practical implement.

But someone may say that we cannot eradicate every depravity from life since virtuous persons cannot attain it by their own efforts. What, then, is the advantage for people to live dishonorably? Allow me to add something more sublime to these human views. The great David prophetically said that happiness lies in virtuous deeds when he contrasts the destruction of condemned persons with [J.96] those who are good: "The just man will rejoice when he sees vengeance on the impious; he will wash his hands in the blood of the sinner" [Ps 57.11]. He does not rejoice over their sorrows but realizes the result of living virtuously. These words signify that the acquisition of joy and its increase for virtuous persons is opposed to those living in evil. [David] says "He will wash his hands in the blood of the sinner," showing that purity attained by virtuous deeds consists in the destruction of sin. Washing signifies a reflection of purity. No one washes in blood except to defile himself, making the blessedness of virtue clear by this comparison with sinful persons.

We have added these remarks to the subject of our essay in order to remember them more easily. The death of infants prevents grief from afflicting them their life is over; neither do they share that virtue which belongs to those who have been purified because God's foresight had prevented them from an excess of evil should they have lived. The evil path of some persons thwarts this because thanks to their parents, they are prevented from doing harm. But in some instances, their parents do not teach them to confide in God nor to live properly. Often a person known for his cruel behavior would go unchecked, but a vile death prevents this. Also, if some attained [J.97] the highest degree of depravity, consideration of the Apostle's words offers consolation by mentioning [God] who made everything in wisdom and who brought about good through evil [cf. Ps 103.24]. If anyone persists in immoderate evil and is of no value for God's purpose, we mention those who have lived well who, as the Prophet [David] suggests, are

by no means insignificant nor unsuitable for revealing God's providence.