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The Phenomenology of Immortality (1200-1400)

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Discussions of immortality in the Middle Ages tend to focus on the nature of the rational soul and its prospects for surviving the death of the body. The question of how medieval figures expected to *experience* everlasting life—what I will be calling the phenomenology of immortality—receives far less attention. Yet expectations for immortal existence speak volumes about a whole nest of important philosophical issues, including views about God, embodiment, happiness, and love. Examining medieval positions on this topic provides important insight not just into ideas about unending existence but about what it means to be human.

In this paper, I explore the range of these expectations during a relatively narrow but intensely rich temporal and geographical slice of the Middle Ages (the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in the ‘Latin Christian West’). Scholastic and mystical/contemplative traditions during this time share a common focus on the final or ultimate end for human beings, although they differ with respect to methodology. Scholastics tend to address human expectations of immortality in discussions of the bodily resurrection, of perfect happiness (which we attain only in the life to come), and of Scriptural passages that were taken to refer to/discuss the afterlife;² these discussions tend to be entirely theoretical (as opposed to experiential), but they often display a lively curiosity about what our immortal experience will be like, speculating about questions such as how long our hair will be and how old we will appear.³ Contemplative and mystical works, by contrast, contain a wealth of first-person reports of union with God, many of which relate these unitive experiences to what the blessed will experience in the life to come.⁴ Some figures, such as Meister Eckhart (*ca.* 1260 – 1328) and Marguerite Porete (1250 – 1310), portray our final goal as a transcendent merging with the divine that includes “phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity.”⁵ Other figures, such as Hadewijch of Brabant (*ca.* thirteenth century), Angela of Foligno (1248 – 1309), and Mechtild of Magdeburg (*ca.* 1207 – *ca.* 1282), tend to portray our final end as a deeply intimate experience that nevertheless preserves a sense of self. The picture of medieval accounts of immortality that emerges from these diverse discussions is too complex to be comprehensively covered in one paper, but my contention is that it offers a more accurate framework for future discussions of this topic.

To that end, in section 1, I sketch the two central accounts of the rational soul and human nature (inspired by the Platonist and Aristotelian traditions) that set the metaphysical parameters for medieval discussions of our experience of the afterlife. In section 2, I address accounts that involve transcending the soul’s experiences of itself as an individual. In section 3, I turn to views that emphasize the embodied aspect of human existence and depict our unending union with God in affective and physical terms. In section 4, I argue that the views discussed in 2 and 3 form endpoints of an ‘experiential continuum of immortality’ that provides important context for scholastic accounts of immortality as well as expanding the traditional narrative of medieval philosophy.

1. The Metaphysics of Immortality

Questions of the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of immortality in the Middle Ages revolve around the relation of rational soul to human body.⁶ It was generally assumed that non-rational animals did not survive their death, and that intellectual, immaterial beings such as angels were necessarily immortal (since their lack of connection to matter meant that they were in no danger of corruption).⁷ The case of human beings was complicated by the fact that we are both animals whose bodies suffer corruption and rational beings capable of intellectual cognition. Our ability to transcend matter via intellection indicates that our existence itself might transcend our death;⁸ at the same time, the fact that we die at all—unlike other intellectual beings—raises worries about both how and what might persist. These worries are compounded by the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Philosophical traditions arguing for the immortality of the soul stretch back before Plato, but the insistence the soul would not only continue to exist but also be rejoined with an incorruptible body⁹ puts serious pressure on medieval accounts of our post-mortem possibilities.

To vastly oversimplify matters in ways that will be helpful for what follows, the main problem for Platonists—who tended to understand the soul as a *substance in its own right*—lay not in accounting for the survival of our souls but in providing any motivation for their continued connection to material bodies. The main problem for Aristotelians, in contrast, lay in explaining how the rational soul—which they understood in hylomorphic terms as *the substantial form of a material body*—could survive the death of that body (in a way that would also allow for its being reunited with that body again later).

If the soul is understood primarily as a substance in its own right, accounting for the soul’s persistence at the death of the human body poses no real problem. Substances are exactly the sorts of things that have independent existence, and both the soul’s immateriality and its intellectual nature put it in the same category as incorruptible and immortal substances such as the angels. This view also avoids worries about the continued identity of the human person through death and resurrection, since the person is identified with the soul that persists through these changes. The main problem for Platonic traditions arises from the doctrine of the bodily resurrection and its implication that the unity of soul and body is somehow essential for our continued survival in the afterlife. The doctrine states that our bodies will be raised incorruptible and that we will continue forever as physical and not merely spiritual beings, but (to put it bluntly) why bother with bodies if we survive in virtue of our souls? Bodies seem at the very least to be an unnecessary addition and (as the *Phaedo* famously argues) might even endanger our proper intellectual and volitional functioning. If the soul is a substance in its own right, it’s unclear how soul and body together would make up a human being that is a genuine unity, or what role our bodies would play in our continued existence in the afterlife.¹⁰

If the soul is understood primarily as the substantial form of the body, on the other hand, explaining the unity of the human being doesn’t pose a serious problem. On this view, popular among Aristotelian-influenced figures (most notably, Thomas Aquinas [1225 – 1274]), human beings are composites of matter and form. The rational soul functions as the substantial form that structures matter and makes the human being the thing that it is, but there is only one substance on the table, so to speak: the human being.¹¹ This view also provides philosophical motivation

for the doctrine of the bodily resurrection, since the body is an essential component of the human being and needs to be present for *you* to be present in the afterlife. The importance of the body raises issues of persistence and identity for this view, however. For one thing, how can a substantial form continue to exist in separation from the matter/body of which it is the form?¹² For another, even if we grant that the rational soul persists at the death of the body (in virtue of its intellective nature), this account faces further puzzles about personal identity through death and the bodily resurrection. Either the human being ceases to exist at the death of the body, in which case it's difficult to explain how the human being who is resurrected can be numerically the same as the one who dies, or the human being persists in virtue of the persistence of the rational soul, in which case this view picks up the problems associated with Platonism that are mentioned above.¹³

For the purposes of this paper, we can grant that the soul survives the death of the body and that there is a coherent story to tell about both the unity and the continued identity of the resurrected human being. The reason to sketch these views and highlight these puzzles is to provide the general framework—complete with internal and external tensions—within which medieval figures speculate about the phenomenology of immortality. As we will see, some accounts of the experience of immortality exemplify the Platonic focus on the soul as complete and as “us” (with a corresponding de-emphasis on affect and the body), while other accounts display the pull of the Aristotelian tradition between our intellective similarity to God and our status as rational animals whose physicality forms an integral part of human experience.

2. Transcending Matter, Becoming God

The majority of extant medieval contemplative literature originates from outside the university system and remains largely overlooked by contemporary philosophers.¹⁴ The one exception to this has been the work of Meister Eckhart, a late thirteenth/early fourteenth century Dominican and proponent of ‘apophatic mysticism.’ Apophaticism is the view that human language and thought cannot capture Divine Truth in any deep or meaningful way; apophatic mysticism applies this belief to unmediated experiences of the Divine.¹⁵ As the fourteenth century Franciscan tertiary Angela of Foligno complains, “When I return to myself after perceiving these divine secrets...[and] speak entirely from outside the experience, I say words that come nowhere near describing the divine workings that are produced in my soul. My statements about them ruin the reality they represent.”¹⁶ If we characterize mysticism generally as involving experiences that are inherently *phenomenological* (“concerning individual felt experience in addition to systems of knowledge or belief”¹⁷) and *transcendent* (“involving an encounter—whether direct or mediated, transformatively powerful or paradoxically everyday—with God”¹⁸), then we can think of the apophatic tradition as further characterizing the content of those experiences as inherently inexpressible.

This characterization might make apophatic texts seem like a non-starter for medieval views of immortality, but in fact they frequently contain detailed instructions for attaining the highest state available to human beings—namely, this ineffable and unending union that they can talk *around* if not *about*. Apophatic mysticism has roots reaching back to Platonism, and typically uses language of ‘ascent’ and ‘stages’ to describe the mystical life as progressing in natural degrees to a final end that we attain eternally in the afterlife.

One central theme in apophatic mysticism is the necessity of self-loss. Eckhart, for instance, repeatedly counsels his disciples to strive for detachment, not just from worldly goods but also from any sort of attachment to self. This process is portrayed as both ongoing and essential: “You should know that there was never any man in this life who forsook himself so much that he could not still find more in himself to forsake...But as much as you go out in forsaking all things, by so much, neither less nor more, does God go in.”¹⁹ Emptying oneself allows God to fill the void and, thus, facilitates mystic union.

In her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, Marguerite Porete describes the final end of this process in terms of radical self-annihilation:

All things are one for her [the Soul], without an explanation (*propter quid*), and she is nothing in a One of this sort. Thus the Soul has nothing more to do for God than God does for her. Why? Because He is, and she is not. She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because He is sufficient of Himself, because He is and she is not. Thus she is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created (ch. 135).²⁰

The desire to merge with God so absolutely that it is as though the individual person never existed is not unique to Porete. After detachment is complete, Eckhart says, “There is still one work that remains proper and his own, and that is annihilation of self.”²¹

What proceeds from this total self-abnegation is a state in which the human being’s will becomes identical with that of God’s and in which no sense of individuality remains in which the person could take pride, or for which she could claim responsibility.²² The climax of the *Sister Catherine* treatise (written by an anonymous follower of Eckhart in the fourteenth century) is the startling moment at which Catherine announces: “Rejoice with me, I am become God!” In the context of this tradition, however, Catherine is not claiming divinity for herself; rather, the claim is that God is there because ‘she’ no longer exists.²³ Whether or not the self-annihilation these figures advocate is actually ontological—something impossible to determine from the texts themselves, which so frequently appeal to the inadequacy of words to express the realities involved—we are at least called to conform our knowledge and love of God to the point where our *experience* of those states is indistinguishable from God’s. Whatever “our” experience of immortality is, then, it is nothing more or less than God’s own experience of eternity.

On this version of apophatic mysticism, the divine union which we seek is one that falls outside Christian orthodoxy. Indeed, both Porete and Eckhart’s views underwent extensive doctrinal examination by the Inquisition, and both figures were condemned: Porete to the flames on June 1, 1310, and Eckhart posthumously (on March 27, 1329). The mere fact that the Pope took the trouble to issue a bull against Eckhart’s views after his death indicates the level of official concern about this sort of “mystical heresy”, often referred to as the Free Spirit movement.²⁴

Other versions of apophatic mysticism were less extreme, but they all share an emphasis on transcending individual human experience, especially ones involving affective and physical sensations. Strongly influenced by Platonist prejudices against matter, apophatic texts like the anonymous fourteenth century English *Cloud of Unknowing* and Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection* (ca. 1340 – 1396) lay out detailed procedures for dealing with and overcoming

attachment to the body—including embodied mystical experiences such as “sounding of the ear, or savoring in the mouth, or smelling at the nose, or else any perceptible heat as if it were fire, glowing and warming the breast.”²⁵ In this, they join Eckhart, who repeatedly counseled his disciples that part of the essential process of detachment from self was detachment from sensible experiences, “tartly condemning those who want to see God with the same eyes with which they behold a cow.”²⁶

This push towards selfless union with God as the final end of human life constitutes one end of the medieval ‘experiential continuum of immortality’: immortality as endless undifferentiated experience of the divine (or loss of any sort of conscious experience whatsoever). In the next section, I lay out the other end of this continuum: union with God that involves not self-annihilation but *self-fulfilment*, and where the self is taken to include body as well as soul.

3. Embodied Immortal Experience

As I mentioned in section 1, the doctrine of the bodily resurrection constitutes a central constraint for medieval accounts of immortality. Not only were the souls of human beings to persist at death, but they were to be rejoined to new and improved bodies that were, nevertheless, numerically identical to their earthly bodies. Although this doctrine creates any number of problems for metaphysical accounts of identity, it undergirds a picture of the afterlife that resonated deeply with a number of thirteenth to fourteenth century contemplatives who viewed the urge to permanently transcend our bodies as ignoring the importance of the Incarnation. After all, according to Christian doctrine, Christ did not just *become* human; Christ *remains* human. In this tradition, Christ’s resurrected body was taken up into heaven, where its physical presence assures us that our immortal existence will not be that of disembodied angels but that of flesh and blood—albeit flesh and blood that have been transformed into incorruptibility. Thus, Mechtild of Magdeburg (a thirteenth century beguine) rejoices in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* that, “When I reflect that divine nature now includes bone and flesh, body and soul, then I become elated in great joy, far beyond what I am worth...The soul with its flesh is mistress of the house in heaven, sits next to the eternal Master of the house, and is most like him.”²⁷ When Mechtild goes on to describe our immortal existence in both spiritual and bodily terms (“There, eye reflects in eye, spirit flows in spirit, there, hand touches hand, there, mouth speaks to mouth, and there, heart greets heart”), she is not speaking metaphorically.

Reference to Christ’s resurrected body and its implications for our own experience of the afterlife appears in any number of contemplative texts at this time, crossing geographical regions and religious orders. In her late fourteenth century *Dialogue*, for instance, the Dominican-affiliated Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380) describes in colorful terms how the damned will react to seeing Christ in heaven: “When the wicked are reunited with their bodies, their suffering at the sight of my Son will be renewed and increased. What a reproach to their miserable indecent sensuality, to see their own nature, this clay of Adam, exalted above all the choirs of angels in the humanity of Christ joined with the purity of my Godhead!”²⁸ The problem here is not human individuality or union with matter—both of those things are specifically listed here as causes for celebration in the case of Christ. Rather, the problem is how the wicked used those bodies and exploited their ‘sensuality.’²⁹ Their experience of immortality will be one of embodied suffering, while the experience of the blessed will be that of embodied bliss. In his *Fire of Love* the

influential fourteenth century English mystic Richard Rolle (*ca.* 1290 – 1349) also describes affective and physical experiences of mystic union which he portrays as a foretaste of the life to come, and which include a ‘glowing’ or warmth in the breast, a taste of unimaginable sweetness, and the sound of celestial music in addition to intellectual and volitional fulfilment.

Angela of Foligno, a late thirteenth century Franciscan tertiary and influential mystic, speaks often of the “God-man” as a way of emphasizing both aspects of the second person of the Trinity, and intimately connects Christ’s humanity with her union with God. After one experience where, upon looking at the cross, she “saw and felt that Christ was within me, embracing my soul with the very arm with which he was crucified,” she is filled with joy and understands “what this man, namely Christ, is like in heaven, that is to say, how we will see that through him our flesh is made one with God.”³⁰ Again, it is our *flesh* that is made one with God in the life to come, not just our souls.

There is no thought here that our experience of immortality will be one of self-annihilation or transcendence of physicality. As Catherine of Siena puts it, “When my Son was lifted up on the wood of the most holy cross, he did not cut off his divinity from the lowly earth of your humanity...In fact, his divinity is kneaded into the clay of your humanity like one bread.”³¹ In this tradition, Christ’s status as fully human and fully divine both removes the need for any other intermediary between the human subject of experience and the triune God and offers us a way of understanding how our experience of immortality can involve embodied spirituality.

The affective movement (the tradition that considers affective and embodied states as well as apophatic states to be properly mystical) regularly employed the imagination in addition to the intellect and the will. In a popular devotional exercise of the time, contemplatives were encouraged to imagine themselves present at key moments of Christ’s life in order to “construct an inner space that creates affectively embodied access to the divine.”³² That is, rather than counseling practitioners to withdraw increasingly from one’s attachment to the self and its experiences (as Eckhart and Porete did), this tradition advocated facilitating certain affective and physical experiences as a way of developing an appropriate sense of self in relation to God. In general, strong emotion was seen as opening the subject to the divine presence, as were visions, auditions, smellings, and tastings. The “inner” and “outer” body were intrinsically connected, and the language of medieval mystics often moves seamlessly from the one to the other, as when Mechthild of Magdeburg writes: “I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit.”³³

Many of the contemplatives in this movement also frequently describe mystic union in terms of self-loss and dissolution, but unlike figures in the apophatic movement they do so without downplaying or denigrating the significance of affective and embodied unitive experiences. This acceptance of embodied mystical states, I would argue, actually constitutes the most important distinction between the apophatic and affective mindset. Figures like Porete, Eckhart, and Walter Hilton and texts such as the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* acknowledge that unusual embodied states such as visions and auditions regularly occur in the contemplative life, but they portray them as experiences to be ignored, suspicious of, and/or as part of an early stage that

needs to be moved past. In contrast, other figures such as Angela of Foligno and Hadewijch (a thirteenth century beguine from Brabant or Antwerp), both of whom are sometimes referred to as apophatics, regularly speak both of self-loss and self-fulfillment in depictions of mystical union.

In a letter to a fellow beguine, for instance, Hadewijch describes union simultaneously in terms of a loss of self via complete interpenetrability *and* in terms of an eternal self-awareness that includes physicality as well as spirituality:

Where the abyss of his wisdom is, God will teach you what he is, and with what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how they penetrate each other in a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul, while one sweet divine nature flows through both and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever.³⁴

The portrayal of the Scriptural metaphor “one flesh” for marriage here is striking; in speaking of God and the human being (God’s Beloved) in these intimate terms, Hadewijch stresses the beauty of both spiritual and physical union.

Importantly, this sort of unitive experience is also what we are told we will enjoy in the life to come. There is sometimes self-loss or being ‘taken out of’ oneself, but there is also a return to oneself. Angela of Foligno, for instance, describes alternating between profoundly apophatic experiences and deeply personal experiences that involve the embodied Christ. In the following passage, she explains how as an experience of unspeakable ‘darkness’ and indistinguishable union ebbs away, she remains intimately connected with the God-man:

When I am in that darkness I do not remember anything about anything human, or the God-man, or anything which has a form. Nevertheless, I see all and I see nothing. As what I have spoken of withdraws and stays with me, I see the God-man. He draws my soul with great gentleness, and he sometimes says to me: ‘You are I, and I am you.’ I see, then, those eyes and that face so gracious and attractive as he leans to embrace me.

Here again we see the sort of mystical identification of human person with God discussed in section 2: “You are I, and I am you.” Yet here it appears in a setting in which the second person of the Trinity is speaking those words to Angela with a human mouth and looking at her with human eyes, *after* her experience of darkness, not *during* it.

Angela immediately goes on to explain how her two sorts of mystical experiences are related to each other:

In short, what proceeds from those eyes and that face is what I said that I saw in that previous darkness which comes from within, and which delights me so that I can say nothing about it. When I am in the God-man my soul is alive. And I am in the God-man much more than in the other vision of seeing God with darkness. The soul is alive in that vision concerning the God-man. The vision with darkness, however, draws me so much more that there is no comparison. On the other hand, I am in the God-man almost

continually. It began in this continual fashion on a certain occasion when I was given the assurance that there was no intermediary between God and myself. Since this time there has not been a day or night in which I did not continually experience this joy of the humanity of Christ.³⁵

It is hardly obvious how to read the claims made here—and, indeed, Angela herself often exclaims at how poorly words capture her experiences. At the same time, although she says that she vastly prefers her experience of God’s inexpressible darkness, her union with the God-man is already unmediated, and there is no indication that her experience of Christ’s humanity is anything but an appropriate source of delight.

One reason this point is worth stressing is that the primary motivation for focusing on Christ’s humanity within the affective tradition was precisely to counter the sort of gnostic tendencies which run through apophaticism. Rather than hoping to move beyond contemplation of Christ’s humanity to an experience of divinity, the affective movement saw human beings as most closely joined with Christ’s divinity *through* his corporeity.

This ‘both/and’ approach has been all-too-frequently overlooked in philosophical discussions of mysticism, but it proves crucial for understanding medieval expectations for immortality. The following vision reported by Hadewijch, for instance, first describes the Man-Christ satisfying the “desire of my heart and my humanity” via a physical embrace during the celebration of the Eucharist:

With that he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time; looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful and beautiful, and with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another. Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported.³⁶

Here, Christ is repeatedly referred to as a Man, and as such speaks to Hadewijch’s human nature.

After this, however, Christ “dissolves” so that they became “one without difference”—an experience Hadewijch relates to the physical mystery of the Eucharist (via the metaphor of digestion): “So can the Beloved, with the loved one, each wholly receive the other in full satisfaction of the sight, the hearing, and the passing away of the one in the other.” This ‘passing away’ then turns into an apophatic experience of complete self-loss: “After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained of myself; and I was changed and taken up in spirit, and there it was shown me concerning such hours.”³⁷ As with Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena, embodied experience of Christ’s humanity forms a crucial component of Hadewijch’s mystical union with God. It’s not self-annihilation *as opposed to* affective experience on this view, but something much more complex—and complex in a way that recognizes the importance of body as well as soul.

In general, the thirteenth and fourteenth century emphasis on the Incarnation and Christ's permanently assumed human body (which was thought to be physically present in heaven, together with his mother, Mary) provided an embodied model of union with God that was enthusiastically explored by contemplatives from a wide variety of backgrounds. If we think of apophaticism's emphasis on phenomenological de-emphasis or erasure as one endpoint of the experiential continuum of immortality, then, affectivism's emphasis on embodied fulfilment can be seen as the other endpoint. In section 4, I discuss how scholastic views map onto this continuum; in general, the most relevant factor is not religious affiliation (that is, whether the author is Dominican or Franciscan, etc.) but rather whether the body is seen more as hindering or helping connect us with God.

4. Intellectual Union and the Scholastic Tradition

As we saw in sections 2 and 3, medieval expectations of immortality range widely, from loss of individual experience in union with an unknowable God to a deeply personal connection with God (via the Incarnate Christ) that includes affective and sensory as well as intellectual and volitional experiences. To demonstrate the breadth of this range, I have drawn on contemplative literature from a variety of literary genres and languages. In what follows, I turn back to the Latin scholastic tradition. One common way of distinguishing scholastic views of the afterlife is by whether they stress the primacy of intellect or the primacy of will in our final end—that is, whether we will be united with God first and foremost via knowledge or via love. When it comes to the phenomenology of the afterlife, however, this distinction proves much less helpful. Although many figures do emphasize either intellectual or volitional aspects of eternal union (often depending on whether they are Dominican or Franciscan), this turns out not to map neatly onto the experiential continuum discussed above. Instead, attitudes towards the Otherness of God and the material world correspond much more closely to what people expect the afterlife to be like from a first-person perspective.

We have, in fact, already seen wildly diverse portrayals of love as the primary experience of mystical union. Marguerite Porete stresses the importance of love for self-abnegation: the stage at which one “is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created” is reached by complete conformity of one's will with God and motivated by increasingly selfless love. Hadewijch also emphasizes love as the central act of mystical union, but in such a manner that God and the Beloved “at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever.” Mechtild of Magdeburg centers her attention on the unitive power of love as well, but in extreme contrast to Porete, she rejoices in the thought that the soul “with its flesh” will literally sit next to the “eternal Master of the house” (i.e., the resurrected Christ). Emphasis on the will (and love as the proper act of the will) thus does not incline towards one particular view of immortal experience.

In the remainder of this section, I use two ‘intellectualist’ accounts of union with God from within the scholastic tradition—that of Robert Grosseteste (*ca.* 1175 – 1253) and that of Thomas Aquinas—to show that an emphasis on the intellect (and knowing as the proper act of the intellect) also allows for a range of different expectations of immortality.

The centrality of the human desire for knowledge runs throughout medieval discussions of immortality. In fact, the ‘naturalness’ of our desire for both abstract knowledge and immortality was appealed to by Augustinian illuminationists, Neoplatonists, and Aristotelians alike as an indication that human beings are meant for more than just material existence. In addition, one thing on which both the apophatic and affective contemplatives agree is that knowledge of one’s self is the starting point for one’s journey towards divine union.³⁸ This is often intimately linked with the will and its love, as when Catherine of Siena gives voice to Supreme Truth: “You ask for the will to know and love me...Here is the way, if you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me, eternal Life: Never leave the knowledge of yourself. Then, put down as you are in the valley of humiliation you will know me in yourself, and from this knowledge you will draw all that you need.”³⁹ A closer connection to God is always portrayed as the ultimate end of self-knowledge, but medieval intuitions vary widely with respect to the results of introspection, and in ways that we have already seen. Are we immaterial souls who need to transcend our corrupt bodies, or are those bodies an integral part of who we are?

An important early thirteenth century response to these questions appears in Robert Grosseteste’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*—a work that is especially significant because it represents the Latin university system’s first attempt to address Aristotle’s system in what had been largely a Platonic world. Interestingly, Grosseteste avoids taking sides in what becomes an acrimonious debate, preferring instead to incorporate Platonic Ideas, Neoplatonic emanation, Aristotelian universals, *and* divine illumination into his complex framework. Although how best to understand details of the resulting framework remains controversial, what is clear is that on his view, ideal cognition is completely removed from matter.⁴⁰ In his own words: “Knowledge is most complete in these things that lack senses.”⁴¹

Grosseteste generally applies an Aristotelian epistemic framework to human cognition here on earth. His discussions of the levels of cognition, however, emphasize that this sort of cognition, which depends on sense perception and phantasms (essentially, mental images that we store in our imaginations), is the lowest sort. The higher the intellect, the less dependent on the senses and phantasms it is. Employing Platonist language of purity, Grosseteste explains that “for the intellect that is pure and separated from phantasms—able to contemplate the first light, which is the first cause—the principles of cognizing are the uncreated ideas (*rationes*) of things that exist from eternity in the first cause.”⁴² In fact, “when the pure intellect is able to fix its sight on them, it cognizes created things in them as truly and clearly as possible—and not only created things, but also the first light itself in which it cognizes other things.”⁴³ As becomes clear through the commentary, Grosseteste believes that we can gain true knowledge of God only when we have separated our intellects completely from their dependence on the body and its phantasms—that is, only after death.

There is no mention of a positive role for the body here. Indeed, although we appear to retain a sense of individuality in the afterlife on this view, it is not because we are essentially embodied. We must draw our mental gaze away from corporeal matters, for “divine things are more visible to the mind’s vision that is healthy and not clouded by phantasms.” Grosseteste goes so far as to refer to the mind’s vision “while we are burdened by the weight of the corrupt body and the love of corporeal things” as *unhealthy*.⁴⁴ Our love for the material world and corresponding reliance on phantasms is a sickness that actively interferes with our ability to know God: “The reason

why the soul's sight is clouded by the weight of the corrupt body is that the affection and vision (*affectus et aspectus*) of the soul are not distinct, and it attains its vision only by means of that by which it attains its affection or its love."⁴⁵ So long as the soul loves the body and its "enticements", the soul's vision is turned away from the source of its natural light. Our goal as human beings is to turn our love (*affectus*) towards God, so that our minds can follow suit, and we can spend eternity cognizing things through our cognition of the First Light.

The vision of immortality that emerges from Grosseteste, then, is one in which our connection with physicality is tenuous at best. If (as Christian doctrine insists) we are joined to incorruptible bodies, those bodies appear to play no role in our experience of our final end. Grosseteste's afterlife is one of intellectual fulfillment, intrinsically linked with volitional fulfillment. We may retain individual existence, but our primary experience of that individuality will be come via our experience of God as our First and Final Cause.

Robert Grosseteste's view is significant because it represents an early attempt in the Latin West to reconcile Aristotelian with Platonic intuitions; the resulting account, however, takes a decidedly Platonist perspective on the body. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, is known for advocating a thoroughly hylomorphic, Aristotelian conception of human nature. On his view, the human being is a composite of form and matter, and cognition is an activity that requires us to use our bodies as well as our rational capacities. To make an extremely complicated story short, human beings have the weakest intellects in the hierarchy of being,⁴⁶ and so the typical process of human cognition moves first from sense experience to phantasms, and then from phantasms to intelligible species (the proper objects of abstract thought). Furthermore, in this life, any time we are thinking, our intellects must refer back to the phantasms that ground the intelligible species that serve as the objects of our thought.

This general account of cognition makes it look as though Aquinas's account of immortality should be robustly embodied, with us drawing on our glorified sense perception to better know and love God. Aquinas's actual depiction of our final end emphasizes its intellectual, contemplative nature, however, and explicitly denies that sense perception plays a role in that act of contemplation: "In that perfect happiness in heaven to which we look forward...the operation by which the human mind is joined to God will not depend on the senses."⁴⁷ The reason for this is that Aquinas believes that the primary activity of the life to come is direct (unmediated) contemplation of God's essence—an activity we share with God and the angels, who are wholly immaterial. In this life, we require mutable bodies for gathering information from the world around us; in the life to come, we will still have sense perception, but there will be no *need* for it.⁴⁸ Human beings attain the beatific vision only when God gives us his essence as intelligible form and then illuminates our intellects so we are capable of cognizing it to the degree that we love it.⁴⁹ God is the First and the Final Cause in this cognitive story: "In such a vision, the divine essence must be both *what is seen* and *that by which* it is seen."⁵⁰

Our experience of immortality on Aquinas's view differs radically from our experience of mortal life, for it also involves a drastic shift in our experience of time. In this life, human beings employ discursive reasoning, moving from premise to premise to conclusion, rather than instantly comprehending an argument in its entirety. Aquinas argues that in the life to come,

however, we will exist in a state of perfection in which motion ceases: “Each thing rests when it reaches its ultimate end, since all motion is for the sake of acquiring that end, and the ultimate end of the intellect is vision of the divine substance, as was shown above. Therefore, the intellect which is seeing the divine substance does not move from one intelligible thing to another.”⁵¹ Our contemplation of God’s eternal and unchanging essence is “one continuous and sempiternal activity.”⁵²

Our rational souls will be joined to resurrected material bodies, which will be “brighter, more firmly impassible, much more agile, and with a more perfect dignity of nature.”⁵³ These bodies are glorified by sharing in the perfect happiness our souls receive from their contemplation of God’s essence. In fact, Aquinas claims, “there will be such an outflow to the body and the bodily senses from the happiness of the soul that they will be perfected in their operations.”⁵⁴ Yet, the beatific vision is everlasting and unchanging, and our experience of it will be likewise. Whatever information the sense might provide us with will at best enhance that vision.

Aquinas’s view of phenomenology of immortality, then, significantly downplays the role of our bodies and our senses. At the same time, our bodies are not portrayed as weighing down our intellects or as a burden we need to transcend, as they are in Grosseteste’s account. Intellectualist accounts of union with God thus also fall on different points along the experiential continuum. Although the spread is not as wide as that among the volitional accounts of union we observed, the close relation between the will and affect in medieval philosophical psychology should, perhaps, make that to be expected. In any event, it seems clear that what’s most relevant for medieval expectations of immortality is not a stress on love versus knowledge but rather attitudes towards the body and its connection (or lack thereof) to experiences of God. Platonist inclinations push towards self-abnegation in union with a God beyond being itself; emphasis on our connection to God via Christ’s humanity inclines towards mystical union with physical and emotional as well as intellectual and volitional components.

V. Conclusion

Traditionally, philosophical discussions of immortality in the Middle Ages have focused on scholastic arguments for and against the survival of the rational soul and questions of personal identity through death and the bodily resurrection. These views are important and certainly worthy of attention, but this focus fails to engage the full range of medieval perspectives on immortality and the afterlife (even just in the 13th-15th centuries, as I have shown here). There is a wealth of material in the contemplative tradition that has remained overlooked by philosophers but that is vital for an accurate understanding of these issues—material that is particularly relevant to the history of the philosophy of mind.

I close by reiterating the general need for philosophers to look outside the scholastic tradition for an accurate sense of the range of medieval perspectives on classical philosophical questions. As I have argued elsewhere, engagement with these contemplative texts both facilitates interdisciplinary conversations and corrects serious misimpressions about who ‘did philosophy’ in the Middle Ages and how they did it.⁵⁵ In this paper, I have been able only to highlight a few of the figures and ideas deserve contemporary philosophical attention; I hope that it proves

sufficient to inspire others to continue the work of bringing these marginalized voices more fully into medieval discussions.

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² Whether describing heaven's bliss or hell's eternal torments, medieval figures were clear that Scriptural descriptions of these states are to be taken literally, not metaphorically. Aquinas, for instance, argues explicitly in his *Questions on the Soul* 20 that the separated souls of the damned suffer from not just mental anguish but also physical fire.

³ There are far more scholastic texts dealing with our embodied resurrected state than most people realize: each candidate for a Masters in Theology at the University of Paris in the Middle Ages had to lecture on the four books of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, the final book of which concludes with a substantial discussion of the bodily resurrection. Because many of the masters revised their initial theses into independent treatises later in their careers, this means we find detailed discussions of the bodily resurrection in a huge number of medieval works. For a book-length history of this tradition (and its predecessors) see Bynum 1995.

⁴ See, e.g., Angela of Foligno, who reports after an experience of ‘unspeakable good’ that “This is the same good and none other than that which the saints enjoy in eternal life, but there the experience of it is different. In eternal life, the least saint has more of it than can be given to a soul in this life before the death of the body” (*Memorial IX*).

⁵ Gellmann 2014. For a discussion and critique of the definition of mystical experience offered in this entry, see Van Dyke, forthcoming.

⁶ For an excellent book-length discussion of the status of the rational soul at this time, see Dales 1934. Pegis 1934 is a classic treatment of the topic with special attention on Thomas Aquinas.

⁷ The question of celestial intelligences—the incorruptible ‘heavenly bodies’—was trickier. See, e.g., see Marrone 2006 and Dales 1980.

⁸ For Augustine and later adherents of increasingly complex illuminationist theories, the soul’s ability to grasp eternal, unchanging truths indicates that, like other intellective beings (such as angels and the celestial bodies spheres), human souls exist forever once they are created by God. See Marrone 2001 for a comprehensive (if slightly idiosyncratic) study of the development and decline of theories of illumination. Aristotelians disagreed about the mechanics of human cognition, but they agreed that the soul’s ability to grasp immaterial truths demonstrated that the soul itself was the sort of being whose existence (*esse*) transcended matter and thus *could* continue to exist in separation from the matter of which it was the form. See Pegis 1934.

⁹ The moment of body being reunited with soul was said to happen at the Final Judgment, when God would confirm each person’s everlasting status in either hell or heaven.

¹⁰ See Andrew Arlig’s chapter in this volume on the parts of souls for a discussion of different medieval attempts to solve the puzzle of the unity of the human being.

¹¹ For secondary sources that argue forcefully for this position, see Van Steenberghen 1980 and Van Dyke 2009.

¹² This has been a heated subject of debate since Aristotle’s *De Anima* 3.5 suggested that if any part of the soul persisted through the death of the organism of which it was the substantial form, it would be the intellective part. In the Islamic tradition, this claim famously inspired the doctrine of the Agent Intellect. (Reference to other chapters in this series that discuss that?)

¹³ This problem has received particular attention in Aquinas’s treatment of it. Brower 2014 and Stump 2003 both lay out and defend complicated (and different) views on which the soul’s survival is sufficient for the survival of the human being without being numerically identical to the human being; Toner 2012 allows that the human being ceases to exist at death on this view but argues for a view on which gappy existence doesn’t pose an insurmountable problem for diachronic identity. I argue (Van Dyke 2014) that Aquinas’s account of the separated soul is nonetheless insufficient.

¹⁴ There are a number of other complicating factors here as well, including political debates over what constitutes ‘mysticism’ both in general and specifically what constitutes the sort of mystical experience of interest to philosophers. See section 1 of my Van Dyke, forthcoming.

¹⁵ For a detailed treatment of this topic, see Turner 1995. .

¹⁶ Angela of Foligno 1993, *Memorial IX*.

¹⁷ See Watson 2011, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Council 4 of *Counsels*, in Eckhart 1981, 250.

²⁰ Porete 1993, 218, translation slightly modified. As Newman 2003, 203 notes in her discussion of Porete’s theory of self-abnegation: ‘In this dissolution of the ego no room remains for the

body: even the physical humanity of Christ is no longer cherished by the free soul'. Porete explicitly addresses the need to move past consideration of Christ's humanity in chapter 79. See also Hollywood 1995.

²¹ Counsel 23, Eckhart 1981, 280.

²² As Eckhart 1981, 286 writes in 'On Detachment': "Perfect humility proceeds from annihilation of self".

²³ See 'The "Sister Catherine" Treatise' in McGinn 1986, 358. For further discussion of this treatise and also this general tradition, see McGinn 2005. For a book-length treatment of this topic (that focuses particularly on Meister Eckhart), see Morgan 2013.

²⁴ Much of church officials' concerns about this movement, of course, stemmed less from the thought that God (and, eventually, we) transcends existence itself and more from the fact that it appeared to undermine church authority by claiming that lay people could have a relationship with God unmediated by priests. Despite official attempts to stamp this idea out, it became one of the cornerstones of the Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on Sola Scriptura and Sola Gratia.

²⁵ [The Scale of Perfection](#).

²⁶ Eckhart 1981, 61. The sermon referenced is *Sermon* 16b in Eckhart 1936, 272.

²⁷ Mechtild of Magdeburg 1998, IV.14.

²⁸ Catherine of Siena 1980, *Dialogue* 42.

²⁹ Catherine consistently talks about 'sensuality' when she is referring to the inappropriate use of the senses, not as a blanket terms condemning the senses themselves.

³⁰ Chapter VI, 4th Supplemental Step from the *Memorial*, in Angela of Foligno 1993, 175.

³¹ Catherine of Siena 1980, *Dialogue* 26.

³² Largier 2003. For further discussion of this meditation and its use of the imagination, see Matter 2012. For a close examination of the use of this meditation in one particular medieval religious community, see Flora 2009.

³³ Mechtild of Magdeburg 1998, IV.13.

³⁴ Hadewijck of Brabant 1980, Letter 9,

³⁵ Angela of Foligno 1993, *Memorial* IX, 7th Supplemental Step, 205.

³⁶ Hadewijck of Brabant 1980, Vision Seven, 281.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 282

³⁸ It is generally characteristic of the medieval tradition at this time that people are counseled to look for knowledge of God via introspection. For a fuller discussion of the importance of self-knowledge in the contemplative tradition, see Van Dyke 2016.

³⁹ Catherine of Siena 1980, Prologue, *Dialogue* 4.

⁴⁰ For discussion of both the controversies involved in interpreting Grosseteste's position on universals (with extensive bibliography) and my own interpretation, see Van Dyke 2010a.

⁴¹ *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* I.14; translation mine. References are to Robert Grosseteste 1981.

⁴² Robert Grosseteste 1981, I.7, 100-106

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I.7, 106-111

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I.17.353-363.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I.14, 279-286. See chapter 18, conclusion 28 for further discussion about love and desire moving the soul.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., the extended discussions of human cognition in comparison to other intellects in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia 84-89, *Summa contra gentiles* II 94-101, III 37-60, *Quaestiones de anima*, and *De veritate* VIII-X.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae 3.3.co. In his early *Sentences Commentary*, Aquinas mentions our seeing Christ's resurrected body and the glorified bodies of the martyrs as enhancing our experience of the Beatific Vision, but in his works, he removes any reference to this and claims that our vision of God's essence will be entirely intellectual, rather than also including a literal component.

⁴⁸ See also *Ibid.* III.62, 8 where Aquinas explains that the enjoyment of the beatific vision never ends; our intellects will not tire in their contemplation (with God's assistance), "and no act which is carried out through a physical organ coincides with this vision". Aquinas is careful in all his discussions of the beatific vision to make it clear that this vision is purely intellectual and not physical.

⁴⁹ This vision is given passionate voice by the later Dominican-affiliated Catherine of Siena 1980, *Dialogue* 85: "I have told you this, my dearest daughter, to let you know the perfection of this unitive state in which souls are carried off by the fire of my charity. In that charity, they receive supernatural light, and in that light they love me. For love follows upon understanding. The more they know, the more they love, and the more they love, the more they know. Thus each nourishes the other. By this light they reach the eternal vision of me in which they see and taste me in truth when soul is separated from body...This is that superb state in which the soul even while still mortal shares the enjoyment of the immortals."

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.51

⁵¹ *Ibid.* III.60. Aquinas reiterates this point at length in his discussion of peace in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae 3.2.ad4.

⁵³ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.86. These qualities are possessed only by the bodies of the blessed, however. The bodies of the damned Aquinas describes as dark, heavy, suffering, and degraded. Aquinas discusses the bodies of the resurrected at length in *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.83-89; unfortunately, the corresponding discussion in *Summa theologiae* is contained in the Supplement compiled after Aquinas's death by his followers, primarily from his much earlier *Sentences* commentary.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae 3.3.co. Although we will have bodies and sense perception, "All the occupations of the active life (which seem ordered to the use of food and sex and those other things that are necessary for corruptible life) will cease. Only the activity of the contemplative life will remain after the resurrection." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV.83.

⁵⁵ Van Dyke, forthcoming, section 4.