

**Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte and Benjamin W. McCraw, eds.  
*Purgatory: Philosophical Dimensions*. London: Palgrave  
Macmillan, 2017. xv+325 pp. \$139 (hbk & paper).**

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There has been a resurgence of interest in the Christian doctrines of the afterlife among both philosophers and theologians over the past few decades, after having been largely ignored for several decades before. This is especially true of the doctrine of hell, which is recognized to be arguably the most difficult aspect of the larger problem of evil. There is an ongoing lively debate about hell with some defending the traditional view of hell as conscious eternal misery, while others defend universalism or conditionalism. Heaven too has begun to attract attention from the philosophers, although not nearly as much attention as hell.

The doctrine of purgatory, however, has remained largely neglected, even by many Roman Catholics, where it still remains official doctrine. The doctrine, of course, has been an ecumenical flashpoint of controversy, especially between Rome and Protestantism. Indeed, Protestants have typically acknowledged the doctrine only to repudiate it emphatically. It is very interesting to observe, then, that purgatory has recently begun to garner attention among philosophers and there are indications that some Protestants are taking a fresh look at the doctrine, and even defending Protestant versions of it. This volume is a significant reflection of these recent developments.

It is important to emphasize, however, that this book is not focused exclusively on the Roman Catholic version of the doctrine, or even the Christian version more generally. Rather, the editors aim to focus on dimensions of purgatory that are philosophical in nature, broadly speaking. However, a number of the authors represent a Christian viewpoint and approach the doctrine from that perspective. The essays are divided into three main parts, under the following headings: The Nature of Purgatory; Purgatory and Historical Considerations; and Extending Purgatory.

The first essay in the book, by Gordon Graham, entitled “Purgatory, Atonement, and the Self,” gets the book off to a great start by offering an elegant defense of purgatory within a Protestant framework. In particular, Graham answers the common objection to the doctrine that it significantly diminishes the work of Christ to save us through his atonement. In fact, we owe Christ a debt of gratitude for his inestimable sacrifice of love that saves us, and the only thing that will fit the bill is the sacrifice of ourselves in return. Graham suggests that we might think of purgatory as the removal and purging of those things in our lives that stand in the way of a true sacrifice of self.

This essay is followed by a look “Religious and Paranormal Experiences as Evidence for Purgatory” by Travis Dumsday. The author examines a number of such experiences, ranging from visions of the Virgin Mary to near death experiences, in which purgatory is

explicitly invoked as a reality, or in which it appears to be implicitly assumed. These are fascinating experiences that arguably provide at least some minimal degree of support for purgatory, but Dumsday is hesitant to make much of this evidence, and he concludes by noting that he leaves it to others to assess the value of it.

The next essay, "In the Twinkling of an Eye" by David Baggett and Jonathan Pruitt, is interesting because it answers an objection to purgatory that I have often encountered as a Protestant proponent of the doctrine. The objection is based on the notion that scripture teaches that postmortem transformation (as well as transformation of those still living when Christ returns) that perfects believers is instantaneous or nearly so. This belief is thought to be strongly supported by scripture, so it seems to rule out the sort of postmortem process that the doctrine of purgatory teaches is necessary to perfect us and fit us for eternal joy in the presence of a holy God. Baggett and Pruitt challenge this objection by arguing that the postmortem transformation could be experienced as a longer process in the time frame of the subjective experience of persons who have died, while only lasting a very brief interval in another time frame. So perhaps, they suggest, this common objection to purgatory is actually rooted less in the teaching of scripture, and more in an unwitting commitment to certain dubious assumptions about time.

Vincenzo Lomuscio follows with a highly suggestive essay on "Purgatory's Temporality." Sin understood as missing the mark, he argues, indicates not so much directly the evil we have done, but more indirectly the good we failed to do. If sin is understood as unrealized good, we can think of eradicating our sins as coming to realize and achieve the good we did not do. Every lost past represents a possible future that may yet be realized, which could happen in purgatory.

In the final essay in the first section, entitled "Indulgent Love," Neal Judisch takes up the rather challenging task of defending indulgences, an aspect of the Roman doctrine of purgatory that was grossly abused at the time of the Reformation and that remains a major flashpoint of controversy for the doctrine of purgatory today. While the logic of indulgences makes a certain sort of sense for "satisfaction" views which understand the need for purgatory in terms punishment to atone for sins for which penance has not fully achieved, it does not sit so well with the "sanctification" view of the doctrine, which understands purgatory as the completion of the transformation process necessary to fit us for heaven. While I remain unconvinced, Judisch makes a creative case for how indulgences make sense on sanctification views of purgatory as well.

The first essay in the second section demonstrates that Leibniz believed in purgatory, and also that he arguably had at least some sort of sympathy for universal salvation. I found this interesting not only because I had never heard of Leibniz' belief in purgatory, but also because I am unaware of any Protestant intellectuals prior to him who accepted the doctrine. Historical philosophy/theology is not my strong suit, so there may be notable Protestant proponents of the doctrine before Leibniz I am not aware of, but if there are none, then Leibniz was perhaps the Protestant pioneer in espousing purgatory.

The final essay of the section, "Aquinas and the Possibility of a Probable Reasoned Argument for the Existence of Purgatory" is by Jeremy Bell. He contends that a rational case for Purgatory can be constructed from various moral commitments of Aquinas that do not depend on special revelation. Despite suggesting in places that Resurrection cannot be defended on purely philosophical grounds, Bell contends that Aquinas actually does so in his account of the nature of ultimate human happiness. Aquinas's views about the

possibility that human beings may fail to orient themselves to their final end, and the sort of punishments that may be appropriate for this failure provide the raw material for a philosophical defense of purgatory.

The remaining three papers in this historical section are interesting for historical and other reasons, but in my view are less likely to interest philosophers as much as the other two. Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte's essay, "Mirror Geography: On the Emergence of Purgatory and the City," advances the argument that it is no coincidence that Purgatory as a formal doctrine emerged in the twelfth century, the period which witnessed the emergence of the communal form of living that grew into cities. He suggests that purgatory as a third place parallels the development of a third option for living that is situated between rural people and the ordained who lived in monasteries.

Stephen R. L. Clark's paper, "Climbing up to Heaven: The Hermetic Option," explores some possible precedents for the idea of levels of hell and purgatory, such as we see in Dante. A particularly interesting source is the scheme of ascent into heaven as a progressive stripping of vices associated with the various planets.

In the remaining essay of this section, "Poetry as Purgatorial: Dante and the Language of Purgatory," Giuseppe Varnier argues that Dante's ascent into heaven is also an ascent to a more perfect form of language, and even of the artistic transfiguration of language. By contrast, the language depicted in hell is chaotic, allowing little communication and accenting hardened individualism.

The final section of the book is rather diverse, and again, some of the essays are more pertinent to the interests of philosophers and theologians than others. The first in this section is "The Body in Crisis: Contemporary Articulations of Purgatory," by Anne Cranny Francis. She begins her essay by pointing to various contemporary art forms that depict purgatory, ranging from a ballet named *Purgatorio* to an episode of the popular TV show CSI. She goes on to argue that the interplay between body and soul, and between this world and otherworldliness represented by the notion of purgatory accounts for why it remains a live concept in contemporary culture even after the beliefs that generated it have waned in influence.

Benjamin McCaw, in "Praying for the Dead: An Ecumenical Proposal," makes a case for praying for the dead, a practice that was one of the early factors that first gave rise to the doctrine of purgatory. His argument is advanced in conversation with recent philosophical literature on the nature and rationale for petitionary prayer, including past-directed prayer. He contends that if the case for petitionary prayer is sound, that argument can also support prayer for the dead, and interestingly, he emphasizes that his argument is ecumenical in the sense that one need not accept purgatory to have reason to pray for the dead.

In Michael Bauwens's intriguing essay, "On the Metaphysics of Economics and Purgatory," he argues that economic reality grounds human freedom and the hard truth that our choices have consequences. Even granting that salvation is by grace, the fact remains, he urges, that there may be a price to be paid for our choices, and certain restorations that must be achieved. Critics of purgatory may be dubious of this on the ground that it amounts to salvation by works, but the proponent of purgatory may see here an interesting way to understand the call to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

The next essay, "Issues of Impermanence: Christian and Early Buddhist Contemplations of Time," by Christopher Ketcham, illustrates the fact that issues that lead to the doctrine of purgatory are not confined to Christian theology. The author's thesis is that early Buddhism, Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation independently developed constructs to deal with the reality of impermanence and temporality. While this is an interesting thesis, he makes some dubious claims about Christianity, for instance, that heaven, like nirvana, is outside of time.

The final essay in the book, "The Purification of Doubt: Is it Better to Exist in Purgatory?" by Nicolas Michaud, poses a provocative question to which the answer may seem obvious. Better than hell to be sure, but that is not his question. Rather, his question is whether purgatory might be better than heaven. Why he thinks it might be so is because of what he calls our "epistemic positioning." In particular, he argues that epistemic purgatory is a state of cognitive dissonance that motivates us to seek equilibrium, and this causes us to learn, to grow and to improve. Purgatory, then, is a state of dynamic growth and it is this state that the Michaud thinks may be better. Of course, one might hold that purgatory is about purifying us and cleansing us of all sin, but that we could still continue to learn and grow forever in heaven, as many theologians have held.

It is worth emphasizing that this volume is an international project, with contributors from several countries, and several of the writers are likely to be new to American readers. While all the essays are interesting in their own way, I reiterate that some do not focus on distinctively "philosophical dimensions" of purgatory, and are likely to be of more interest to academics of other disciplines besides philosophy. And as is normal with collections of this sort, not all the essays achieve the same level of excellence. But all in all, this is a valuable contribution that will spur further research on the fascinating doctrine of purgatory and how it relates to our ultimate destiny as human beings.