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When Less is More  
OR  
The Joy of Looking Up

By Anna Vander Wall

“My son, it wasn’t tasting from the tree  
that led me into exile; but alone  
but trespassing the mark set down for me” (*Paradiso*, 26.115-17).

In his Divine Comedy, one of the main topics Dante considers is that of limitations and boundaries. Most Christians believe men have boundaries while on earth. After all, the violation of a boundary, that is, plucking and tasting of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil against God’s command, is the very cause of man’s current corrupted state. However, it is less certain whether men will have boundaries in Heaven. Heaven is often envisioned as a land wherein all are perfectly free from sin and evil, and this ostensibly indicates that there will be no boundaries there. On the other hand, Dante’s Paradise exhibits a world wherein the beings are free, but not free from boundaries, and know the joy of looking up. Considering that modern man stresses freedom and equality in a different way than all before him, it is critical to examine the place of boundaries in Christianity. That is what this paper attempts to address. Although it seems men are created to know God fully and to the same extent, men have limitations in knowing God and their capacities to know Him are inherently different because men are finite and, as observation and experience on earth evince, possess varying amounts of knowledge of God.

Before examining this topic, it is essential to define key terms, namely, limitations, capacities, and knowledge. Firstly, limitations are boundaries in which all men share that prevent them from knowing God fully. Secondly, capacities, as related to this paper, are the “amount” of God’s presence that a soul is capable of attaining and containing. For instance, an elephant has a larger capacity for consuming peanuts than does a possum by his very nature. Thirdly, the definition of knowledge will be dichotomized: firstly, there is factual, or scientific, knowledge, such as knowing that water appears blue because it reflects the sky. Secondly, the type of knowledge dealt with in this paper is knowing in the sense of participation, and, for the purposes of this paper, the author defines this knowing, as related to God, as participation in His energies.

One argument against the supposition that men have limitations in knowing God is that God desires man to know Him fully, as shown in His incarnation. As St. Athanasius writes, “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God” (*Incarnation*, 93). In other words, the purpose of Christ’s incarnation was to pull man up into His divinity. If God does not desire man to know Him fully, His incarnation seems almost pointless.

If men became fully God, however, the very nature with which God created him would change, and the distinction between Creator and creature would be obliterated. Men are finite by their very nature, and to change this beginning point of all knowledge is folly, for, as Calvin writes, man’s wisdom “consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves” (37). Thus, men need to know who they are, that is, that they have limitations, as well as knowing who God is and what the relationship between the two is. Dante states that people who are “too proud to live behind a boundary” are fools (*Paradiso*, 19.123). Although one cannot in this life fully comprehend what is meant by the promise that men will become divine, it is sufficient to state that they will do so by participating in His energies to the fullest possible measure that their limitations as men will allow.

These limitations are on man’s part since he is finite by his very nature, and are not arbitrarily established by God. C.S. Lewis writes that men strive to know God “without satiety, since they can never completely make His perfection their own, yet never frustrated, since at every moment they approximate to Him in the fullest measure of which their nature is capable” (*Image*, 119). Again, Lewis states, “love seeks to participate in its object, to become as like its object as it can. But finite and created beings can never fully share the motionless ubiquity of God” (*Image*, 114). As Lewis propounds, the limitations within which men live are proper to his nature.

Although men have limitations in knowing God, it is not yet proven that they have different capacities to know Him. It seems unfair and uncharitable for God to create men with different inherent capacities to know Him. However, this is a very modern view, and Dante disagrees with it. The words “fair and unfair” are terms to be applied to the government rather than to God’s kingdom, for men’s rights must be protected on earth since men are corrupt, but there is no indication that this was ever the way God ordained life to be or to remain. As Charles Williams notes, “the *Paradiso* is an account of the perfected universe” (Figure, 191). Dante’s *Paradiso* is a picture of a perfect universe and exhibits a world wherein the souls are unequal in their capacity to know God, as seen from the fact that the souls are divided into distinct spheres, some of which are closer to God than others. Although God is everywhere and dwells in all places, He is more fully present to some than to others merely because of people’s

different capacities to receive His presence; therefore, men do have different capacities according to Dante. As the poet records:

everywhere/  
in Heaven is Paradise, though the high Good/  
does not reign down his grace on all souls there/  
Equally” (*Paradiso* 3.88-91).

However, merely stating that Dante believes that men possess varying capacities in knowing God is not the same as proving that this is so. Therefore, it will be beneficial to test this theory using experience, authority, logical reasoning, and practical wisdom, or that which can be seen from history.

Although God loves men equally, experience and authority support Dante because they indicate that men have different capacities to know God while on earth. Although personal experience cannot prove this point, it seems to indicate its validity, for in the course of one’s life one meets people who seem to possess greater souls than others. In addition to this, experience from history seems to show that some souls are greater than others, such as Mother Teresa and Mary the mother of God, who played roles specifically ordained to fit their large capacities for God. Authority also supports the argument that men have different capacities in knowing God. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux states, “He (Jesus) wanted to create great saints who could be compared to lilies and roses. But He also created little ones, and these ought to be content to be daisies or violets destined to gladden God’s eyes when He glances down at His feet” (*Story* 3). In accordance with this fact, Dante writes, “for the world is penetrated by the light of God/ all things according to their dignity” (*Paradiso* 31.22-23). St. Thomas Aquinas expresses a similar sentiment when he speaks of the “diverse grades of perfection attainable by the diverse beings capable of happiness,” (*Happiness*, 29). Thus, experience and authority indicate that men possess varying capacities.

Logical reasoning also supports this theory, for considering that earth’s history is not erased in Heaven, men have different capacities to know God in Heaven, just as they do on earth. Logically, truth does not change, and so things that are true on earth remain true in Heaven. Here a literary example may prove helpful: in the *Divine Comedy*, the souls in *Inferno* are condemned to eternal punishment suitable to their malefactions on earth, the souls in *Purgatorio* must undergo refinement in order to cleanse them of the vices they committed while alive, and finally, the souls in Dante’s *Paradiso* rest in spheres appropriate to their actions on earth. In short, man’s nature, though it can be perfected, cannot change. Both on earth and in Heaven, men must dwell “in various ways, with various offices” (*Paradiso* 8.119). Therefore, men possess varying capacities.

Using Dante's literary example of Hell, an authoritative reference, logical reasoning, and historical examples, it can be shown that souls are endowed with different capacities to know God. Viewing this question from the light of Dante's Hell, it is apparent that the souls there are divided into various circles of sinners, some of which are farther from God than others. In support of Dante's view of Hell, Scripture records Jesus saying, "truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for *the* land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city", which heard the gospel and did not alter its ways (*Matthew* 10:15). The reputedly iniquitous Sodom and Gomorrah will be judged less harshly than others, according to Christ. If one accepts the fact that some sinners are farther away from God than others, then logically one must accept the converse, namely, that some saints are closer to God than others, according to how much their capacities will allow them to be filled with His presence. Concerning the day of judgment, Jesus also says, in the parable of the vineyard, that "each of them also received a denarius" (*Matthew* 20:10). Although this ostensibly contradicts this point in that the denarii seem to represent an equality in status, Aquinas remarks that, rather, "the uniformity of payment signifies a unity of happiness on the part of the object" (*Happiness*, 56). Thus, this parable does not necessarily mean that all men will have equal status in heaven, but that all Christians will receive a place in the kingdom of heaven. Also, it is commonly accepted that some men are more gifted than others, and therefore have both a greater potential for evil or for good. For instance, history shows that Henry the Fifth, Stalin, and Hitler were all incredibly ingenious men, bearing the potential for greater evil or good than most people. The fact that some can be more wicked or holier than others logically leads to the conclusion that some men can know God more fully than others.

Finally, one wonders if men can really be happy being unequal in their knowledge of God. Ostensibly, the arrangement that some men are closer to God than others can never result in the happiness of all God's creatures. Such an arrangement seems neither just nor proper for God to have created. Concerning the final book of the *Divine Comedy*, Charles Williams remarks, "the *Paradiso* is concerned to exhibit...proper relationship between men and men and men and God" (*Figure*, 190). One wonders how men can be happy in such an arrangement.

They may be happy, for true happiness consists in obedience. Men are truly happy when they are obedient to God's will, as the following quotations illustrate. Piccarda, a soul in the first sphere of *Paradiso*, explains:

We desire  
 but what we have, and thirst for nothing else.  
 If we should feel yearning to be higher,  
 such a desire would strike disharmony  
 against His will who knows, and wills us here (*Paradiso* 3.71-75).

Piccarda continues, “it delights the King in whose desire/ we find our own. In His will is our peace” (*Paradiso* 3.84-85). Again, the spirits know “that what the Lord may will, we too will so” (*Paradiso* 20.138). In fact, men are only happy when they are obedient—when their less is more. As a related point, variety in capacity makes the structure of Heaven as a whole more beautiful.

Conversely, disobedience results in unhappiness. The most miserable creature in Hell is Satan, and he is the most miserable creature because he is the most disobedient. In his essay entitled “The Freedom of Heaven and the Freedom of Hell”, Dr. Anthony Esolen writes:

Consider the flapping of [Satan’s] wings. It is natural for earthbound human beings to see in the flight of birds a symbol of freedom... Yet it is that very motion of the wings that raises the gale above the River Cocytus and freezes Satan in his place, along with all the other traitors. If he could cease to move those wings, the gale would subside and the Cocytus would melt. In other words, if he could cease to act on his will to rise, he would be able to rise (38).

It is only because of his rebellious act, his desire to trespass the boundaries and thereby become God, that Satan cannot rise, and it is because of his disobedience that Satan is prevented from enjoying true happiness, for if he could accept his status as creature rather than attempting to be God, he would be able to gain the freedom to rise by God’s grace. Satan’s desire for more freedom results in less freedom. In short, he does not know the joy of looking up.

Ostensibly, men are created to know God fully and to the same extent, but they have limitations in knowing God and their capacities to know Him are inherently different because they are finite and, as experience, authority, logical reasoning, and history evince, possess varying amounts of knowledge of God. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante addresses the ancient and modern error, the lie that when men cast off the shackles of the limitations and boundaries that have hitherto hindered their “progress”, the result is happiness. This is the ancient lie that caused Satan’s fall, resulting in a frozen state more contrary to freedom than can be imagined. This is the lie that caused Adam, Eve, and the whole of mankind to dwell in the state of sin that oppresses him daily. This is the modern lie that men are in such danger of falling into today, now more than ever, of thinking that they can trespass the boundaries of history, birth, and nature. This lie is the ancient lie that men can become God and rise above their appointed status in the order of creation. It will only be a fetter and can never bring freedom. Thankfully, doctor Dante has procured a remedy, and this is the proscription: true happiness is obedience.

## Annotated Bibliography:

Alighieri, Dante Paradiso. Trans. Anthony Esolen. New York: Random House, 2004.

Dante's famous *Paradiso* is the last book in his *Divine Comedy*, in which the erring sinner Dante is called by Beatrice to embark upon a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Guided by Beatrice, Dante travels through Paradise, conversing with various souls in various spheres. Finally, Dante is permitted a vision of the divine essence.

Aquinas, Thomas. Treatise on Happiness. Trans. John A. Oesterle. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001.

In his scholarly work entitled *Treatise on Happiness*, Aquinas delves into the particulars of what happiness is and how it is attained. He defines happiness as the vision of the divine essence, that is, God, arguing with his opponents in the style known as disputation. This vision consists in an activity of the intellect.

Athanasius. On the Incarnation. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.

St Athanasius, a revered saint and scholar of the Bible throughout the centuries, writes his *On the Incarnation* to Macarius, presenting this work as a brief statement of Christianity. Athanasius is often compared to the gospel writers for his simple but essential teaching of the Faith. In this work he offers a summary of Christianity, dealing particularly with the Christian view of His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, as well as defending Christianity against the Jews and Gentiles.

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In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin seeks to propound basic Christian doctrines. In addition, he writes his own view on scripture and Christian doctrine. He is particularly concerned to exhibit men's status as fallen creatures and God's relationship to men through faith, which unites them.

Esolen, Dr. Anthony. "The Freedom of Heaven & the Freedom of Hell" 37-41. First Things. #191. Ed. Richard John Neuhaus. New York: Institute on Religion and Public Life.

"The Freedom of Heaven and the Freedom of Hell" is an article written by the renowned translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Dr. Anthony Esolen. In this article, Esolen uses Dante's *Divine Comedy* to explore the different freedoms of Heaven and Hell. He shows how the freedom of Hell, that of attempting to exist from and for oneself, is really bondage, and the freedom of Heaven, the freedom of recognizing that one's being is from and for God, is true freedom.

Lewis, C.S. The Discarded Image. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

In his work *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis, a famous member of the Inklings, examines the medieval mindset. He presents an account of the medieval mindset, reviewing the classical and seminal periods, ending with a study concerning the heavens, the *Longaevi*, earth and the creatures therein, and the influence of the medieval and modern models. The section that is particularly relevant to this paper is the part in which Lewis discusses the ordered medieval view of the Heavens.

The New American Standard Version. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1997.

In *The Gospel According to Matthew*, St. Matthew records Christ's deeds and actions while on earth. Beginning with the birth of Christ, Matthew continues to relate His death and resurrection. Particularly relevant to this paper is the section in which Jesus instructs his disciples concerning the conversion of the world.

Thérèse. The Story of a Soul. Trans. Robert J. Edmonson. Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006.

In her book entitled *The Story of a Soul*, Thérèse of Lisieux sets forth an autobiographic account of her life. Thérèse wrote this book by the request of the Mother in her convent. Beginning with her life as a child, she recounts her spiritual journey, including her account of her life as a Carmelite nun.

Williams, Charles. The Figure of Beatrice. Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2005.

In his scholarly book *The Figure of Beatrice*, Charles Williams, a member of the Inklings, studies the *Divine Comedy*. He examines Dante's personal life, his relationship with Beatrice, and his writings. The section of this book that is particularly relevant to this paper is the section in which he studies the *Paradiso*.