Hell and the Problem of Evil

Andrei A. Buckareff and Allen Plug Marist College and Malone University

1. Introduction

While accounts of the nature of hell vary within and between religious traditions, formulations of the traditional doctrine include at least the following five elements.

- E1 Some persons do or will reside in hell and will be there for an infinite period of time.
- E2 Hell is the residence of those persons who have failed to satisfy some condition(s) dictated by God as necessary to avoid hell and enjoy heaven.
- E3 The cumulative well-being and well-being at any moment of any resident of hell is negative.
- E4 Those in hell are blocked from leaving.
- E5 Those in hell are consigned to hell as punishment for either failing to satisfy the condition(s) God requires for one to avoid hell or for actual sins committed or both.

In this essay we explain why the doctrine of hell poses a problem of evil for traditional theists in the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) and how some have responded to the problem.

Our focus is entirely on recent work in analytic philosophical theology. Given that the recent philosophical debates over hell have largely transpired within the context of the Christian theistic tradition, Christian theism provides the backdrop for how we frame the problem and some of the responses in much of what follows. However, this should not be taken as an indication of the problem as unique to traditional Christianity or even that the responses to the problem considered are only available to those who are working from within the Christian tradition.

In what follows, we first summarize the case for why the doctrine of hell poses a problem of evil. Next, we consider recent traditionalist responses to the problem. Finally, we examine some non-traditionalist strategies that involve dispensing with one or more of the five elements of the traditional view.

2. The Problem Stated

Some philosophers have argued that the conception of hell that follows from (E1)-(E5) is inconsistent with the traditional conception of God. In particular, it poses a problem for theists who (a) believe in an afterlife and (b) believe that some persons will reside in hell forever. Such theists affirm the following two theses:

(i) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

- (ii) Some created persons will be consigned to hell forever. Marilyn McCord Adams (1993) has argued that (i) and (ii) are logically incompatible in the same way that (i) and
 - (iii) Evil exists

have been said to be logically incompatible. Adams' reasoning is in many respects characteristic of recent work on the problem of hell.¹ The case she presents is the primary focus in this section.

Adams argues as follows for the logical incompatibility of (i) and (ii) (1993, 301-303):²

- 1. If God existed and were omnipotent, God would be able to avoid (ii).
- 2. If God existed and were omniscient, God would know how to avoid (ii).
- 3. If God existed and were perfectly good, God would want to avoid (ii).
- 4. Therefore, if (i), then not (ii).

If Adams is right, then the truth of (ii), given (4) entails that (i) is not the case. Thus, if persons are sent to hell, then God either does not exist or God lacks one or all of the omni-properties.

The truth of the premises and, hence, the soundness of Adams' argument are, of course, not obvious and a matter of contention. But reasons can be articulated for the truth of each premise. Premises (1) and (2), assuming classical theism, are true. Regarding (1), nothing about the doctrine of omnipotence implies that God is locked into a soteriological scheme, especially if God is sovereign over creation. Moreover, not only would it be within God's power, but God would know how to effect a state of affairs that does not involve (ii) as an aspect of the divine soteriological plan. So God could and would know how to avoid (ii) (Adams 2003, 303-304).

We have reason to take premise (3) as true if God is perfectly good. Regarding the effects of the evil of hell, Adams asserts that, "Any person who suffers eternal punishment in the traditional hell will ... be one within whose life good is engulfed and/or defeated by evils" (1993, 304). Such a state of affairs is incompatible with divine goodness, especially if God's goodness extends to being concerned about persons created in the divine image. So if God is good, then God would want to avoid (ii).

Of course, one may argue that while it is evil, the evil of hell is not gratuitous since divine justice demands that certain persons be punished. It is gratuitous evils that are the problem. There is nothing gratuitous or unjust about agents receiving the punishment they deserve. But even if one were to argue that suffering is justified punishment for failing to satisfy the requirements for salvation, there are at least three objections to the traditional doctrine of hell that directly challenge the compatibility of divine goodness with the existence of hell.

¹ Similar reasoning can be found in Adams (1975), Hick (1978, chapter XVI), and Talbott (1990).

² We are not using the same numbering as Adams and we have substituted 'God' where Adams has 'He'.

Vagueness: The first comes from Ted Sider's paper, "Hell and Vagueness" (2002). Sider claims that the traditional conception of hell is committed to arbitrary cut-offs between the unsaved and the saved, and that the arbitrariness of the cut-offs is incompatible with God's perfect justice. It is incompatible due to the discrepancy in treatment between two extremely similar persons who happen to fall on either side of the cut-off.

Proportionality: Stephen Kershnar assumes that those in hell are being punished and that their experience of hell involves "an infinite net harmful state extended over an infinite amount of time" (2005, 103). He argues that if hell is just, then at least some human agents deserve an infinite punishment. But no human being deserves such punishment. Thus, hell is unjust (Kershnar 2005, 105). Assuming retributivism, there is a proportionality requirement for just punishment. A punishment must be proportionate to an agent's desert. Hell is only just if a person deserves an infinite amount of punishment. Kershnar argues that no human being could deserve such a punishment (2005, 107-117). Thus, we have additional reasons for thinking that hell is inconsistent with divine justice and, by extension, divine goodness.

Diminished capacities: The third problem comes from the limited powers of agents that impede their ability to make good choices prior to death. If God is omniscient, then God would be aware of the powers possessed by agents that both enable them and serve to block them from satisfying the conditions for avoiding eternal punishment. Divine aid in the form of prevenient grace notwithstanding, agents do not have it in their power to fully appreciate the gravity of their circumstances and respond appropriately. For instance, Adams notes an important limitation of human psychology that may contribute to the failure of persons to avoid hell that casts more doubt on the justice of hell. She notes that, "where suffering is concerned, conceivability follows capacity to experience, in such a way that we cannot adequately conceive of what we cannot experience." She adds that, in cases of moral agency, "agent responsibility is diminished in proportion to [an agent's] unavoidable inability to conceive of the relevant dimensions of [an] action and its consequences" (1993, 309-310). She concludes that mutatis mutandis we find a similar problem with hell. Specifically, "damnation is a horror that exceeds our conceptual powers" (Adams 1993, 310). The upshot is that human agents cannot make free choices for which they can be held eternally responsible by God "with fully open eyes." So everlasting torment in hell would be unjust because of the diminished capacities of human agents.

There are at least two disturbing practical implications of the incompatibility of hell with divine goodness that are worth briefly mentioning. The first is an implication for parenting and the second is a problem for religious practice.

Morally culpable procreation: Kenneth Himma (2010) has argued that if an agent believes that she has nothing about which to worry because she is convinced that she has satisfied the divine requirements to avoid hell, then at

the very least she should avoid procreating, since she cannot ensure that her children will follow the right path and avoid eternal torment. In fact, it seems that an agent would be morally culpable for her role in knowingly bringing it about that a human being is brought into the world that might wind up in hell to be punished for an eternity.

Religious practice: Adams argues that the traditional doctrine of hell "would make pragmatically inconsistent any worship behavior that presupposes that God is good to the worshipper or to created persons generally" (1993, 305). She adds that, assuming the truth of (ii), "open-eyed worship would have to be of a God who mysteriously creates some persons for lives so horrendous on the whole and eternally, that it would have been better for them never to have been born, of a God who is at worst cruel ... or at best indifferent to our welfare" (1993, 305-306).

Before moving on to consider some responses that have or may be offered by defenders of variants of the traditional doctrine of hell along with some alternatives, it is worth considering a less than promising but all too often articulated response to the problem of hell. We have christened this response the "Job objection" elsewhere (Buckareff and Plug 2005, 48).³ The Job objector questions the assumptions about divine goodness and the expectations placed on God in order for God to be perfectly good that are at play in framing the problem of hell. The Job objector may assume a simple version of divine command ethics and argue that the problem is a pseudoproblem. He may appeal to human fallibility, divine ineffability, and God's being above reproach – no matter what God does and no matter how bad it may seem to us. The Job objector argues that our limited, mortal perspective does not allow us to make judgments about what God can or should do or about what is or is not consistent with the requirements of divine justice.

The simplest, most direct, and best answer to the Job objection is that God's moral obligations do not differ from ours. Given that we do not have any other standards of moral goodness apart from those we apply in human situations, we should apply those standards to God. So we shift the onus on to simple divine command theorists and ask them: "Why should anyone desire to worship or expect non-theists to respect the concept of a being who appears not to be obligated to act as morally as some humans?" (Basinger 1996, 80). And if we believe that a judge or a parent would be unjust in punishing a criminal or a child in a way that is disproportionate and otherwise unfair given the infraction, then why should we think any differently about God? If God is good and there is a hell, then we should expect that either some morally sound justification exists for allowing for what appears to be a horrific state of affairs or that the traditional view of hell is wide of the mark.

3. The Traditional View of Hell

_

³ Kyle Swan (2009) defends the Job objection in his critique of Buckareff and Plug (2005). We reply to Swan in Buckareff and Plug (2009).

We begin our survey of responses to the problem of hell by examining objections and responses to the traditional view of hell in more depth. We discuss non-traditional views of hell in the next section. Here we will focus on the vagueness objection and the proportionality objection. According to both of these objections, at least some of the suffering experienced by those in hell is gratuitous and, hence, inconsistent with divine justice and, thus, God's being perfectly good.

Since both of these objections concern the suffering of those in hell, it is important to first note the reason for that suffering. According to the traditional view, the primary purpose for the suffering in hell is to satisfy the demands of justice.4 Given that according to the traditional view of hell those that are consigned to hell are there for eternity, the suffering in hell cannot be for rehabilitative reasons since those in hell have no hope for a place to which they can be restored. Nor can the suffering be for deterrence purposes. If hell has a deterrent effect, that effect is due to the threat of hell. It is not due to the actual suffering of those in hell since we, prior to being consigned to hell, cannot observe the suffering. So any deterrence is due to the threat alone. If the threat *alone* is a sufficient deterrent, then the actual suffering of those in hell is unnecessary to satisfy any deterrent purpose. So for traditional retributive views, the sole reason for the suffering experienced in hell is that suffering is necessary to satisfy the demands of justice. Such suffering is consistent with the existence of God only if it is actually necessary to satisfy the demands of divine justice.

3.1. The Vagueness Objection

A fully developed account of hell would include some criterion by which it can be determined who is saved and who is damned. This criterion could be based on whether one has led a sufficiently moral life, or on whether one has developed a sufficiently good character, or if one has a sufficient level of faith. The problem, according to the vagueness objection, is that any possible criterion would admit of borderline cases (Sider 2002). That is, there will be individuals on the border of either side of the cut-off line. Consider a pair of individuals, one of whom barely meets the criterion to enter heaven and the other barely fails to meet that criterion. These two individuals are very similar. Suppose the faith of one was just a little stronger than the other. The one with slightly stronger faith enters heaven while the other person goes to hell. It would be impossible to treat these two individuals in a more disparate manner - one receives the ultimate good, communion with God; the other receives the ultimate punishment, eternal damnation. According to the vagueness objection this difference in punishment is unjust. It is unjust because it violates a plausible principle concerning just punishment, what we shall call the *similarity principle*: if two individuals are relevantly similar, then they should be treated similarly. The traditional view violates this principle. The suffering of those who barely fail to meet the criterion is

⁴ For recent defenses of the traditional retributivist view of hell, see Cain (2002, 2010).

excessive – they should not be treated so differently from those who barely meet the criterion for heaven.

While different responses to the vagueness objection are on offer, we focus on only one because of how it intersects with another strategy found in the broader debates over the problem of evil. Trent Dougherty and Ted Poston (2008) argue that God would not actualize a world with borderline cases. That is, there are no actual cases of individuals that are relevantly similar and one is rewarded with heaven while the other is punished in hell. This is because such a state of affairs would conflict with God's perfect justice. God would not permit such a scenario. So there is a clear difference between the saved and the damned. Admittedly, we cannot identify which individuals are clearly saved and those that are clearly damned. But, according to Dougherty and Poston, there is good reason for this: there would be disastrous consequences if it were clear to us who the clearly saved were and who were the clearly damned. So God has good reason to only actualize a world where there are no borderline cases but yet only actualize a world in which people are unable to clearly distinguish between the saved and the damned.

This response is similar to the skeptical theist response to the evidential problem of evil.⁶ The skeptical theist claims that it is not surprising (due to our cognitive limitations) that there are certain evils that we cannot see as necessary for a corresponding good. But that is not evidence that there is no such good. Similarly, Dougherty and Poston suggest that it is not surprising that we cannot distinguish between the saved and the damned. But that is not evidence that there is no clear distinction between the two groups.

There are two problems with this response. First, we may not be in the epistemic position that this type of response requires. We are in one of two epistemic positions. The first position is that we cannot see a clear difference between the saved and the damned. The second position is that we see that there is no clear difference between the saved and the damned. We see that there are borderline cases. The first epistemic position is one in which we do not have any evidence that there are relevantly similar individuals who are treated very differently. The second is a position in which we have evidence that there are such individuals. Sider clearly believes we are in the second position. Dougherty and Poston are not clear about which epistemic position we are in, but if we are in the second position, then the proponents of the vagueness objection are in a much stronger position. If we are in the second, then defenders of this skeptical theist style response need to motivate not just that we are unable to identify the saved and the damned but that our cognitive faculties are in fact unreliable about the matter. In the first situation the absence of evidence that there is no clear difference between the saved and the damned, is (correctly) not evidence

⁵ Additional responses to Sider (2002) include Almeida (2008) and Konieczka (2011).

⁶ See Chapter 27 in this volume for more on skeptical theism.

that there is no such difference. In the second situation we do have evidence that there is no such difference. So the task for a skeptical theist type response is much harder if we are in the second position.

The second problem with Dougherty and Postons's response is that the vagueness objection does not depend upon the existence of borderline cases. This is because the motivating idea behind the similarity principle is that the difference in treatment between two individuals must be proportionate to the relevant difference between the two cases (see Corabi 2011). For example, a system where the punishment for slapping a person across the face was the same as for murder would be unjust. It would be unjust because it would fail to account for the difference between the two actions.

Consider two individuals, one of whom is in heaven, the other in hell. The difference between their respective treatments is infinite but the difference between the two individuals could not amount to an infinite difference. For example, if the relevant criterion is having a sufficient level of faith, then the difference between any two individuals, by that criterion, would be finite. But then the difference in treatment between an individual in heaven and one in hell would be disproportionate to the relevant differences between the two individuals. So the traditional view of hell is inconsistent with basic moral intuitions concerning justice.

3.3. The Proportionality Objection

If the traditional view of hell is correct, then some individuals deserve an eternal punishment. Stephen Kershnar (2005) has argued that it is impossible for any individual to merit eternal punishment.⁷

The amount of punishment a person may deserve is governed by the *proportionality principle*. The proportionality principle states that the degree of punishment that a person justly merits is proportionate to the level of her wrongdoing.

It is possible for a person to deserve infinite punishment only if it is possible for a person to commit an infinite harm. The problem for traditional theories of hell, according to Kershnar, is that it is impossible for us to be guilty of committing an infinite amount of harm (2005, 110-117). There are two possibilities to consider: (1) one action that brings about an infinite amount of harm and (2) an infinite number of actions that each cause finite harm. Neither of these is possible.

Consider (1) (Kershnar 2005, 112-114). A person may cause infinite harm by performing a single action if he causes infinite harm to a person of finite importance, or he might cause harm to a person of infinite importance (any harm to a person of infinite importance is an infinite harm). The only way to cause an infinite harm to a finite person is to cause that person to go to hell. Any other harm would merely be a finite harm. An infinite regress looms if hell exists solely to punish people for causing others to be sent to

⁷ Adams (1975) and Talbott (1993) also offer versions of this argument.

hell. It would be better, in this case, for hell not to exist because it would then be impossible for any person to cause infinite harm to another finite person.

If a person can commit an infinite amount of harm in one act it is only by harming an infinite being. The only infinite being would be God. But the problem here is that according to classical theism, God cannot be harmed. On the classical conception of God, God is impassible and, hence, not liable to being harmed by another being. So we cannot harm God. Since God is the only possible infinite being, it is impossible to commit an infinite harm by harming an infinite being.

This leaves (2): a person can perform an infinite number of actions that cause finite harm (Kershnar, 115-117). Since our antemortem existence is finite, the only possible way to commit an infinite number of harmful acts is if we continue to commit harmful acts postmortem. Heaven, according to tradition, is free from sin and evil. So the only possibility is that a person commits an infinite number of harmful acts by continuing to commit harmful acts in hell (and does so for eternity). But then the moral justification for hell depends on the existence of hell. The reason, on this view, for hell is to punish individuals for their actions in hell – but this justification is circular, in effect, hell is needed because hell exists.

There is another problem here as well for the traditional view. Those who are consigned to hell as punishment are consigned there for eternity. However, when a person is consigned to hell that person does not, at that point, deserve infinite punishment and so the punishment is unjust. One way around this difficulty is to reject that initial punishment is for an eternity in hell but rather for some finite period (a period proportional to the punishment the individual deserves). Hell becomes an eternal punishment due to the sins one commits while in hell that follow from having a sinful disposition. Such a view would be a retributivist variant of the natural consequence view, according to which being in hell is the natural consequence of an agent's exercise of free will.8 The actions of an agent on such a view would compound the punishment by aggregating finite punishments for an eternity. This would constitute a deviation from the traditional view as we have characterized it in this essay since on this view consignment to hell is not essentially permanent (the initial sentence is not one of permanent duration).

4. Non-traditional views of hell

A non-traditional view of hell is a view that rejects one, or more, of (E1)-(E5). We will consider retributive annihilationist views that reject the permanency of hell; the choice model, and universalism.

4.1 Annihilationism

⁸ While their views differ in some of the details from the proposal we mention here, see Murray (1999a) and Zeis (1986) for defenses of similar hybrid natural consequence/retributivist models. For critique of such proposals, see Himma (2003).

All annihilationists reject (E1). According to annihilationism those that do not enter into heaven are ultimately annihilated. Annihilation may follow a period spent in hell or it may be immediate. We will refer to the view on which individuals spend some period in hell and are then annihilated as *non-immediate annihilationism*. And the view on which individuals are immediately annihilated we refer to as *immediate annihilationism*.

There are non-retributive and retributive variants of annihilationism. In this section, we will only consider retributive annihilationist views. We discuss non-retributive annihilationist options in the next section.

Can annihilationist views avoid the vagueness objection or the proportionality objection? This will turn on whether the annihilation of an individual constitutes harm to that individual and, if it is a harm, the magnitude of that harm.

On immediate annihilationism, annihilation constitutes a harm to the individual. If it is not a harm, then there is no retributive aspect to the view (since there would not be any punitive measure) and so wouldn't constitute a retributive view. The problem, then, is that immediate annihilationism would be susceptible to a version of the vagueness objection. It is possible that we may have relevantly similar individuals who are treated very differently (one is saved and the other annihilated). So immediate annihilationism does not avoid the vagueness objection.

Furthermore, depending on the magnitude of the punishment, immediate annihilationism would also be susceptible to the proportionality objection. If annihilation constitutes a harm of an infinite magnitude, then annihilation is justified only if individuals are capable of deserving infinite punishment; which, according to the proportionality objection, is impossible.

There is reason to believe annihilation constitutes a harm of infinite magnitude. Annihilation is final. It is the ultimate end for an individual. Annihilation precludes any future redemption for the individual and, if Christianity is correct, it precludes any possibility of achieving the ultimate end for an individual, communion with God. It is, in this regard, not different than consigning individuals to hell for eternity. The ultimate punishment in an eternal hell is the permanent separation from God. Annihilationism is no different in this respect.

Does non-immediate annihilation fare better?¹⁰ If annihilation constitutes a harm of infinite magnitude, then non-immediate annihilationism is susceptible to the proportionality objection. It is susceptible because, on this view, the residents of hell would receive infinite punishment. Indeed, if annihilation is a harm of infinite magnitude, then non-immediate annihilation has the problem that the period spent in hell prior to annihilation would be pointless. It is pointless because everyone consigned

⁹ For a defense of this view by a systematic theologian, see Pinnock (1992 and 2007).

¹⁰ Non-immediate annihilationism is defended in Fudge (2011). The case made therein is a biblical case and is not philosophically sophisticated.

to hell is consigned to a punishment of infinite magnitude – the extra time in hell would not add to an infinite punishment.

If annihilation is not a harm of infinite magnitude, then whether non-immediate annihilation avoids the vagueness and proportionality objections depends upon the level of harm inflicted on an individual during a moment in hell. If a moment in hell inflicts an infinite harm, then those who spend any time in hell receive an infinite punishment. But if so, then the proportionality objection still applies. If a moment in hell constitutes a great deal of harm (but of finite magnitude), then non-immediate annihilationism may still be subject to the vagueness objection because individuals who fall just on either side of the dividing line are treated very differently. So individuals who are relevantly similar would receive very different treatment and their difference in treatment would not be warranted by their relevant differences.

If the harm that results from a single moment in hell is not too excessive, then non-immediate annihilationism does avoid the vagueness and proportionality objections. The punishment would be finite so the proportionality objection would be avoided. The degree of punishment comes in degrees and so the difference in degree of treatment between any two individuals will be proportionate to the relevant differences between the two individuals that would allow the view to avoid the vagueness objection. Still, the view has the problem of God only allowing persons to continue to exist postmortem for the purpose of punishing them. It is only if the agents willingly destroy themselves after being punished that their passing out of existence would appear just. Otherwise, it would seem that their postmortem existence was solely for the purpose of being punished. On such a view, once released, God would annihilate agents.

4.2 The Choice Model

While they vary in important respects in their details, all variants of the choice model (CM) dispense with (E5).¹¹ Thus, they differ from the traditional view by rejecting the retributive nature of hell. Also, if there are any people in hell it is because either they choose to be there or because hell is the natural consequence of their choices, both antemortem and postmortem. In this regard, by emphasizing free agency and the consequences of its exercise, CM is representative of the Augustinian response to the problem of evil.

Regarding (E5), broadly, on CM, hell is a place for those who do not wish to be in communion with God. Hell issues from God's love for all of God's creatures. God's ultimate desire is for all persons to enter into communion with God. However, some persons do not wish to be in communion with God. So, out of love for created persons, God provides a place, hell, for those who do not wish to be in communion with God. God does not consign persons to hell so that they may receive some putatively

 $^{^{11}}$ Variants of CM can be found in Buckareff and Plug (2005, 2009, 2010), Kvanvig (1993, 2011), Stump (1986), Swinburne (1983), and Walls (1992)

deserved punishment. Rather, the residents of hell are there because they choose or desire to be apart from God. Any negative postmortem well-being experienced by an agent at any time is a consequence of the choices the agent has made and continues to make postmortem.¹²

The vagueness and proportionality objections to the traditional view of hell rest on assumptions concerning just punishment – specifically, they rest on assumptions regarding the degree of punishment a person might justly deserve. Being in hell, according to CM, is not (primarily) retributive punishment¹³ and so the vagueness and proportionality objections do not apply. The main objection that at least some CM views might face is a version of the diminished capacities objection.

The problem is that at least some individuals who choose to be apart from God are not in a position to make an informed antemortem or immediate postmortem decision about such a matter. But the decision to be apart from God is final or has binding consequences and it deprives those individuals from ever obtaining the benefits of communion with God. But that it so deprives individuals is a result of God making residence in hell permanent. In effect, God is forcing individuals to make a decision of utmost importance when those individuals are not capable of making an informed decision. But that is unjust. It is not morally acceptable to permanently withhold a benefit from a person when that person is not in a position to make an informed decision regarding that benefit.¹⁴

To avoid this problem defenders of CM should deny (E4) – the view that those in hell are blocked from ever leaving. If it is possible to leave hell, then it would be open for a person to change their mind regarding accepting the benefits of heaven or perhaps even choose annihilation.¹⁵ In any case, what is important is that a person's initial refusal to reject communion with God is not, on this view, a decision to permanently reject communion with God.

There are two different ways one can deny (E4). One can endorse the view that those in hell have a finite period of time to decide to enter into communion with God, or one can endorse the view that those in hell always

¹² On most versions of CM, the state of affairs of one's being in hell is negative on the whole. An exception to this view is the escapist variant we have defended on which those in hell enjoy some positive well-being that is qualitatively inferior to the state of being in heaven. See Buckareff and Plug (2005 and 2010).

¹³ While some CM theorists reject the notion that hell is punishment, others do not reject any punitive dimension to hell. For instance, Kvanvig argues that God's primary motivation is love, but in loving those in hell, God "is forced to act in such a way that persons in hell are punished" (1993, 155).

¹⁴ Worries about religious luck and the differing obstacles agents must overcome in order to be redeemed are never far away. See Jones (2007) for more on religious luck and hell and Buckareff and Plug (2009) for a reply.

¹⁵ Some proponents of CM or views that approximate CM have endorsed or at least seriously considered the notion that God allows persons to effectively annihilate themselves as a consequence of their choices and characters developed. See Griffiths (2008) and Swinburne (1989, 180-184).

have the ability to decide to enter into communion with God. 16 If those in hell have just a finite period to decide to enter into communion with God, then the view is still subject to the diminished capacities objection. If, at the end of the period during which a person in hell may change his mind, a person chooses not to enter into communion with God, that person has effectively decided to reject the benefits of communion with God for eternity. But it is not clear that any finite person can fully understand the ramifications of such a choice. And if a finite person cannot fully understand the ramifications of such a choice, then his choice to do so would not constitute an informed decision. Only variants of CM according to which a person in hell always has the ability to choose to enter into communion with God avoid the diminished capacities objection. An upshot of such views is agnosticism about the truth of (E1) and room is made for a weak, contingent form of universalism. But a difficulty that remains for such views lies in accounting for the finality of hell.¹⁷ For reasons we have developed elsewhere, we do not think this is an insurmountable problem for such variants of CM (see Buckareff and Plug 2010, 83-89).

4.3. Universalist Strategies

Universalism avoids the problem of evil posed by hell either by denying outright that anyone will ever suffer in hell or by denying that anyone would reside in hell for an eternity. If persons are in hell, it is best understood as a temporary place of preparation for heaven. Thus, universalists reject (E1) and (E4) among the five elements that are constitutive of the traditional view of hell. Some also reject some or all of (E2), (E3), and (E5).¹⁸

Broadly, two versions of universalism can be distinguished (Murray 1999b). The first is *naïve universalism*. It is the view that every person is transformed at death and reconciled with God. This view has had few actual adherents.¹⁹

The second version of universalism, *sophisticated universalism*, has been the most widely discussed version of universalism in the recent literature on hell. In the interest of brevity, we only discuss sophisticated universalism given its prominent role in the literature. So, by 'universalism' we shall mean sophisticated universalism in what follows.

¹⁶ In the interest of rendering his version of CM compatible with the finality of the final judgment, Kvanvig (1993, 156) argues for the view that those in hell have a finite period to accept God's grace and enter into communion with God. Buckareff and Plug (2005) argue for the view that those in hell always have the ability to accept God's grace.

¹⁷ See Kvanvig (2011, chapters 1 and 2).

¹⁸ Universalism has also been offered as a way to avoid a problem of evil for those in *heaven*. Friederich Schleiermacher argued that the bliss and joy of the saved would be sullied by their awareness of the existence of persons suffering the torments of hell (1830, 721-722). Hence, he argued that all must be reconciled with God. For a recent defense of this argument, see Reitan (2002).

¹⁹ Jacques Ellul (1989, 192) appears to have endorsed naïve universalism. Daniel Howard-Snyder (2003) offers a defense of naïve universalism against Murray's (1999b) critique. Howard-Snyder does not actually endorse naïve universalism.

Universalists allows for an intermediate state before unredeemed persons finally enter into communion with God in which God continues to work on such persons until they have been reconciled with God. To the extent that this intermediate state may be accurately described as hell, the purpose of hell is redemption. For those who are not redeemed before death, this intermediate state is a stop on their way to heaven.

Some maintain that the postmortem removal of impediments to making a rational free choice and having the right sort of encounter with God would result in an agent's freely choosing communion with God (Talbott 2010, 24-27). Others argue that God may finally manipulate the wills of recalcitrant agents. Marilyn McCord Adams sees such divine maneuvering as "no more an insult to our dignity than a mother's changing a baby's diaper is to the baby" (1999, 157). Such an approach is problematic not only for those who endorse libertarian theories of free agency but also for most compatibilists. But the good achieved by such manipulation far outweighs the value of having the power to make a free choice in this grave matter, according to Adams. Thus, her approach represents a departure from the Augustinian tradition that emphasizes the value of free will as part of a response to the problem of evil.

We only focus on versions of two of the most relevant objections to universalism as a solution to the problem of hell. The first objection is the *gratuitous earthly life objection*.²⁰ The second objection is *the objection from the denial of autonomy*.

The gratuitous earthly life objection states that the earthly existence of human beings is a gratuitous evil if universalism is true. This is surprising since universalism is a proposed solution to a particular problem of evil. The problem arises for universalism because human beings experience a range of evils and make morally significant choices over the course of their lives. If everyone finally enjoys communion with God, then the choices of agents and the suffering experienced in their earthly existence are pointless in the end (Murray 1999b, 56). Our earthly existence appears pointless, since the final outcome for all persons is the same on universalism, even if it takes more time for some to be reconciled with God than others.

But, contra the critic of universalism, an agent's earthly existence does bear directly on how things go postmortem even if no one will finally reside in hell. While God will guarantee that all will eventually choose communion with God, an agent's choice may initially be motivated not by love for God and a desire for communion with God, but out of a sense of self-concern. For instance, agents may choose communion with God because God ensures that they recognize that the state of affairs of communion with God is infinitely better than any other alternative (whether actual or not). So nothing about the transformation God would have to bring about in order to guarantee that an agent chooses God necessitates that God would completely change the

²⁰ Murray (1999) originally formulated this as an objection to naïve universalism. We have made adjustments to make it a general objection to universalism.

character of an agent. Thus, there could be degrees of communion with God. And the postmortem degree of communion with God an agent enjoys depends upon the character of the agent at the time she chooses to be reconciled with God. In other words, while every agent who did not do so in their antemortem state may enter into communion with God in their postmortem existence, this does not require that the communion enjoyed be perfect.²¹ The agent may still be in need of growth in order to enter into perfect communion with God. How much growth is necessary is, in part, a function of the character developed over the course of an agent's antemortem existence (see Talbott 2001a, 103).

The notion of there being degrees of communion and postmortem growth is not foreign to Christian thought. If the doctrine of purgatory is correct, then some of the redeemed must first offer some satisfaction for their sins and/or complete the process of sanctification or *theosis* before they enter heaven.²² The universalist is extending the basic motivation behind this doctrine to include all created persons. Some persons need time and the right environment to finally make the right choice and begin on the path toward perfect communion. The antemortem choices such agents make bear directly on their postmortem state and how difficult it will be for them to choose to commune with God and begin the process of growing closer to God.

The foregoing response has a distinctively Irenean quality. Our earthly existence—including the evils experienced and the choices we make—is essential for the development of our characters. It is but one stage on the way toward the goal of perfect communion with God. That everyone will be redeemed and finally enter into perfect communion with God may be guaranteed. But how they get there and what they need to experience—both antemortem and postmortem—to get to that point may differ from person to person.

The *denial of autonomy objection* starts with the observation that what is central to Augustinian responses to the problem of evil is not just freedom of choice understood in libertarian terms. What is no less important is the *autonomy* of agents, where this is understood as the power to have an impact on the external world as a consequence of one's free choices (Murray 1999b, 58). The existence of creatures with this power is the good that outweighs the cost of permitting moral evil.

Universalism threatens autonomy, according to Michael Murray. Those who choose communion with God have their choices respected. They enter into communion with God. But the choices of those who reject communion with God are not efficacious, either antemortem or postmortem. They are never fully separated from God. Whether such an agent must simply

²² For representative philosophical defenses of the doctrine of purgatory from Protestant perspectives, see David Brown (1985) and Jerry Walls (2002). Neal Judisch (2009) presents a Roman Catholic response to what he takes to be some confusion in the Protestant formulations.

²¹ Daniel Howard-Snyder makes a similar point in defense of naïve universalism (2003, 346-348).

choose again or is instructed about the error of her ways and then must choose again, the problem is the same, according to Murray. He writes: "In the end, if I choose to cultivate a character which includes the disposition to shun communion with God, I will not be allowed to become that sort of person" (1999b, 64). The agent's choice is inefficacious. Hence, the agent's autonomy is vitiated.

In response to this objection, Eric Reitan (2001, 232-238) has argued that there are two ways to understand the postmortem choices of agents (2001, 233). On the first way, a choice, whether for communion with God or alienation from God, will deprive an agent of all future choices. On the second way, an agent is choosing communion with God at that moment or alienation from God at that moment. The first scenario is one that restricts our autonomy. On the second, an agent's choice is never rejected. The second way of understanding the choices of agents is consistent with universalism, according to Reitain. Reitain writes that, "all are ultimately saved ... because all eventually come to realize that communion with God is preferable to alienation, and all are eventually stripped of affective states that inhibit their capacity to choose what is preferable" (2001, 233). While Thomas Talbott does not explicitly endorse Reitan's reasoning, Reitan's reasoning is consistent with the sort of view espoused by Talbott. For instance, Talbott writes that, "The more one freely rebels against God, the more miserable and tormented one becomes: and the more miserable and tormented one becomes, the more incentive one has to repent of one's sin and to give up one's rebellious attitudes" (1990, 39). If Reitan and Talbott are correct, then it is not obvious that universalism commits one to a denial of autonomy.

Even if the universalist has successfully replied to the autonomy objection, one worry remains. Assuming that rational agents have free will, whether of a libertarian or compatibilist variety, there is still the worry that God cannot guarantee that everyone will be reconciled with God absent manipulating them.²³ Suppose that, as a matter of fact, everyone chooses to enter into communion with God without divine manipulation occurring. It may be argued that it is still the case that things could have been such that some may not finally have been redeemed since there may have been some wild cards that proved recalcitrant and unwilling to budge. Even if these agents actually choose reconciliation with God, they had the power to choose differently. And because of their possession of this power, it is possible that not everyone is reconciled with God unless God exercises manipulative control over some agents. This is so because these agents could have exercised their power to choose differently. Of course, some may not worry about this, particularly those attracted to the Irenean strand of theodicy with respect to the broader problem of evil. Recall that Marilyn McCord Adams

_

²³ For the case for why manipulation would not be necessary because of how an agent's range of choices is narrowed over time, rendering the agent more open to reconciliation given a variety of factors including what an agent learns about the consequences of previous choices, see Talbott (2007, 455-457).

finds divine manipulation no more problematic than the sort of paternalistic manipulation of a child by a parent done in the interest of keeping the child from harm. So those attracted to her position may simply insist that in a scenario where agents persist in their rebellion, it is best that God manipulates their wills, rendering agents powerless to choose differently.²⁴ But if we find anything attractive about the Augustinian strand and its emphasis on the value of free agency, we may be more sensitive to the problem raised by the means God would perhaps have to take to ensure universal salvation and thereby avoid the problem of hell altogether.²⁵

See also: THE OLD LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL (2); A NEW LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL (3); ROWE'S EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL (4); THE PROBLEM OF APPARENTLY MORALLY ABHORRENT DIVINE COMMANDS (9); A BRIEF HISTORY OF THEODICY (10); FREE WILL/SOUL-MAKING THEODICY (12); SKEPTICAL THEISM (27)

References:

Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1999. Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. . 1993. "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians. In *Reasoned faith*, edited by Eleonore Stump, 301-327. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ___. 1975. "Hell and the God of Justice." *Religious Studies* 11(4): 433-447. Almeida, Michael. 2008. "On Vague Eschatology." Faith and Philosophy 25(4): 359-375. Basinger, David. 1996. The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press. Brown, David. 1985. "No Heaven Without Purgatory." Religious Studies 21(4): 447-456. Buckareff, Andrei A. and Allen Plug. 2010. "Value, Finality, and Frustration: Problems for Escapism?" In *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Joel Buenting, 77-90. Burlington: Ashgate . 2009. "Escapism, Religious Luck, and Divine Reasons for Action." Religious Studies 45(1): 63-72. ___. 2005. Escaping hell: divine motivation and the problem of hell. *Religious Studies* 41(1): 39-54. Cain, James. 2010. "Why I Am Unconvinced by Arguments against the Existence of Hell." In The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology, edited by Ioel Buenting, 133-144. Burlington: Ashgate.

_

²⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, Talbott (2001b) argues that universalism itself does not require divine manipulation of the wills of agents. However, free will theodicies of hell (e.g., variants of the choice model on which persons do not actually leave hell) do require that God interfere with the free agency of persons in inappropriate ways.

²⁵ Thanks to Thomas Talbott for his helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

- ______. 2002. "On the Problem of Hell." *Religious Studies* 38(3): 355-362.
- Corabi, Joseph. 2011. "Eschatological Cutoffs." *Faith and Philosophy* 28(4): 385-396.
- Dougherty, Trent and Ted Poston. 2008. "Hell, Vagueness, and Justice: A Reply to Sider." *Faith and Philosophy* 25(3): 322-328.
- Ellul, Jacques. 1989. *What I believe,* translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Fudge, Edward. 1994. *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, revised edition. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.
- Griffiths, Paul J. 2008. "Self-Annihilation or Damnation? A Disputable Question in Christian Eschatology." In *Liberal Faith: Essays in Honor of Philip Quinn*, edited by Paul Weithman, 83-117. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Himma, Kenneth. 2010. "Birth as a Grave Misfortune: The Traditional Doctrine of Hell and Christian Salvific Exclusivism." In *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology,* edited by Joel Buenting, 179-198. Burlington: Ashgate.
- _____. 2003. "Eternally Incorrigible: The Continuing-Sin Response to the Proportionality Problem of Hell." *Religious Studies* 39(1): 61-78.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 2003. "In Defense of Naïve Universalism." *Faith and Philosophy* 20(3): 345-63.
- Jones, Russell E. 2007. "Escapism and Luck." *Religious Studies* 43(2): 206-216. Judisch, Neal. 2009. "Sanctification, Satisfaction, and the Purpose of Purgatory." *Faith and Philosophy* 26(2): 167-185.
- Kershnar, Stephen. 2005. "The Injustice of Hell." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58(2): 103-123.
- Konieczka, Matthew. 2011. "Hell Despite Vagueness: A Response to Sider." *Sophia* 50(1): 221-232.
- Kvanvig, Jonathan L. 2011. *Destiny and Deliberation: Essays in Philosophical Theology.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1993. *The Problem of Hell*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Murray, Michael. 1999a. "Heaven and Hell" In *Reason for the Hope Within,* edited by Michael Murray, 287-317. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- ______. 1999b. "Three Versions of Universalism." *Faith and Philosophy* 16(1): 55-68.
- Pinnock, Clark. 2007. "Annihilationism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, edited by Jerry Walls, 462-475. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____.1992. "The Conditional View." In *Four Views on Hell*, edited by William Crockett, 136-166. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Reitan, Eric. 2002. "Eternal Damnation and Blessed Ignorance: Is the Damnation of Some Incompatible with the Salvation of Any?" *Religious Studies* 38(4): 429-450.

. 2001. "Universalism and Autonomy: Towards a Comparative Defense of Universalism." Faith and Philosophy 18(2): 222-40. Schleiermacher, Friedrich. 1830. The Christian faith. Edited by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. Sider, Theodore. 2002. "Hell and Vagueness." Faith and Philosophy 19(1): 58-68. Stump, Eleonore. 1986. "Dante's Hell, Aguinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God." Canadian Journal of Philosophy 16 (2): 181-196. Swan, Kyle. 2009. "Hell and Divine Reasons for Action." *Religious Studies* 45(1): 51-61. Swinburne, Richard. 1989. *Responsibility and Atonement*. New York: Clarendon. . 1983. "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell." In The Existence and *Nature of God*, edited by Alfred J. Freddoso, 37-54. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. Talbott, Thomas. 2010. "Grace, Character Formation, and Predestination Unto Glory." In *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Joel Buenting, 7-27. Burlington: Ashgate. . 2007. "Universalism." In The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology, edited by Jerry Walls, 446-461. New York: Oxford University Press. . 2001a. "Universalism and the Supposed Oddity of Our Earthly Life: Reply to Michael Murray." Faith and Philosophy 18(1): 102-109. _. 2001b. "Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity." Religious Studies 37(4): 417-434. ____. 1993. "Punishment, Forgiveness, and Divine Justice." *Religious Studies* 29(2): 151-168. . 1990. "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment." Faith and Philosophy 7(1): 19-42. Walls, Jerry. 2002. Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy. New York: Oxford University Press. . 1992. *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press. Zeis, John. 1986. "To Hell with Freedom." Sophia 25(1): 41-48.