

Not a Hope in Hell

It is frequently claimed that an all-loving and good God cannot permit anyone to end up in hell. In this book, the author shows that this issue of God's permission of hell has an intimate connection with age-old questions regarding why God would permit sin. Indeed, focus on why an all-loving and good God would permit hell is the best lens through which to explain sin.

Many arguments against the possibility of hell require affirming that God permits sin because God could not achieve goods for us without allowing sin. The author argues that we have independent philosophical reasons to reject that sin is necessary for us in any way, and, further, we have similar reasons to hold that hell is necessarily possible if the God of classical theism exists. In the end, understanding why an all-loving and good God would permit hell reveals that there is always hope for us, even when things appear most hopeless.

The book will appeal to those working in metaphysics, theology, philosophy of religion, and medieval philosophy.

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In honor of St. Jude, patron of those who think they have no hope.

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Introduction

Saving Souls from Hell

Many Christian missionaries have been motivated by a desire to save others from hell. Ignatius Loyola and his companion Francis Xavier reproached university students in Europe for their failure to be concerned for the salvation of others. Francis dreamt of running through the universities, shouting at the students and faculty: “Ah! What a multitude of souls is through your fault shut out of heaven and falling into hell!”¹ Ignatius Loyola made meditation upon hell a central part of his celebrated *Spiritual Exercises*. Wu Li (吳歷), a 17th-century Chinese master painter who entered the Society of Jesus and was ordained a priest, exemplifies the spirit of his predecessors, Ignatius and Francis, in his poems about his missionary work in northeastern China (Jiangsu 江苏 province):

Human life, disorderly!
Men grieve at poverty, low station, not that they lack the Way!
So hurried, the parting of death;
It waits not for teeth loosening, head turning completely bald.

Life and death a muddle, and no one understands:
Unless you learn to become aware, for certain you will boil and seethe!

Branching out chaotically,
Detours lead astray;
Men stay confused so long, not just
Because of hair turned frost.
Confucian scholars too quite often
Fall into this trap,
And yet they mock the Heavenly Learning
For deficiency in right reason.

They only seem like wandering sheep
Who've lost the road back home;
One never sees them find the Way
By following repentance.
Time is running out – it flies faster than an arrow;
No matter whether short or long,

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There's no escaping death.
If you do not accord a hairbreadth
With what is transcendent by nature
When your coffin is covered over
Your sin will go on forever!
Today, for whom am I ringing my bell
From one village to the next?
Ten years I've been stumbling along,
Tirelessly in motion.
How can I get a thousand hamlets, ten thousand villages,
All to turn themselves toward the Way,
To gain new life from death?²

These fervent souls and exemplar missionaries would not have taken it as an urgent moral task to save souls from hell if they held it was impossible for anyone to end up in hell eternally. Yet, hell is not usually a beloved topic of preaching these days, except for those who are apt to deny it. For many, hell is a serious *prima facie* obstacle to affirming the goodness of God, as it seems to many that an all-loving and perfectly good God would not allow that kind of harm to occur which is traditionally held to result for the damned in hell. What I argue in this book is that rejection of hell is a mistake. In fact, to deny the possibility of hell leads theists into insoluble problems concerning why God would otherwise allow moral evil.

'Universalism'

Those considerations which are supposed to show us that ending up in hell is impossible are what prompted this book. While one might think the doctrine of hell rests simply on Christian Scriptural or dogmatic commitments, or at best on intuitions that retributive justice must be done to wrongdoers, the case I make in this book is strictly philosophical and metaphysical, without appeal to any revealed theological justification as such. Indeed, my own insight into the topic of hell arose precisely because I *had myself* initially thought that the eternity of hell was simply a revealed datum which could be supported only through appeal to Scripture, where philosophy could only serve an ancillary role addressing objections to that doctrine.

Sometimes 'universalism' is used to describe other adjacent positions on which damnation is not impossible but just *very, very unlikely*, or where we cannot have 100% epistemic confidence that all will be saved, or we should 'hope' and pray that all are saved, or something along these lines. By 'universalism,' however, I mean solely those views according to which, given facts about who or what God is, or facts about us, it is impossible that anyone end up in hell. Getting involved in discussing other positions in the context of my project will be unhelpful for various reasons, but my project will have implications for these views.

While I do not directly address whether it could be highly likely that all will be saved, my arguments will undermine the basis for such positions indirectly. My case shows that it could only be a *future contingent truth* that 'all will be saved' – i.e., a proposition about future events like that concerning whether the White Sox

will win the World Series in 2267 (assuming the team exists at that time). My arguments entail that there are no objective grounds in God's nature or ours from which we could estimate the likelihood that all created persons will achieve supernatural union with God. *Knowledge* of such future contingent truths could only be gained through revelation.

Further, while discussing theological evidence (e.g., dogmatic authority or Scriptural) against universalism³ is irrelevant for my philosophical purposes, my conclusions will indirectly undermine such positions too. Universalists typically admit that readings of Scripture on which hell is eternal are *coherent* but not the *best* reading of Scripture, considering overall Christian theological commitments. Universalist interpretative claims then follow *only* if we grant their theological assumptions about the nature of those background commitments and what follows from them. However, as those universalist theological interpretations concern precisely what I will show to be false (in the arguments I make in Chapters 1 and 2), those universalist interpretations rest on false assumptions.⁴ My arguments thus indirectly show that we have no such revealed data that all will be saved.⁵ Similarly, one cannot be confident in holding the proposition that all will be saved if you have no good reasons for that confidence. My book aims to show there are no good reasons for holding that all will be saved which would rest on what is essential to God or human beings, on these facts supporting the high likelihood of universal salvation, or on theological evidence which requires extrapolation from those sorts of assumptions. Universalist confidence is misplaced when based on such grounds.

Yet, by contrast, positions associated with theological reasons to hope or pray for the salvation of all fundamentally concern *not* how likely it is that all are saved or the objective probabilities of ending up in hell, but rather *we should behave*. I conclude the book with reflections on these theological issues, because the philosophical conclusions I will defend aim to reveal a picture on which *understanding* God's permission of hell, rather than denying its possibility, reveals a better picture of a loving and good God than other alternatives.

Defensive Aims and Strategy

Universalist opposition to 'annihilationism,' for instance, reveals that their problem is not so much with eternal pain or suffering – as those who are annihilated would not feel pain – but rather with the prospect that God appears to allow pointless setbacks to our wellbeing. Embracing the possibility of hell looks dismal because of what it seems to say about God: God seems to allow lots of moral evil that He could prevent, while only preserving or saving from hell potentially a subset of those He could otherwise save. Those who reject hell do so, I suggest, because they have the forceful and correct intuition that God could not act arbitrarily toward those whom He loves, in ways that deeply affect their welfare (as with salvation and damnation).

For that reason, the book begins in the first chapter with a metaphysically minimalistic construal of the orthodox doctrine of hell, focusing on the necessary and sufficient conditions for damnation. Damnation is essentially nothing more than

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persisting forever in morally evil attitudes incompatible with being in a personal relationship with God, failing forever to consummate supernatural personal union with the deity. The strong modal claim of universalists is that God *cannot allow* such failures to occur. The point of beginning this way involves bracketing other concerns (for example, regarding the proportionality of eternal suffering with finite sins) helps us move from the presenting difficulties concerning God's permission of hell to see the deep connections with God's permission of moral evil more generally (I return to those bracketed questions about suffering, however, in the final chapter.).

After laying out in the first chapter those arguments against the possibility of hell which I take to be most serious or substantial, I show that these arguments involve implicit confusion about what is essential to God and to created persons. Universalism is true if and only if it is essential to God, or His desires to create persons, that He aims above all to achieve supernatural union with each of us. Then, in the second chapter, I argue that, even if this underlying universalist metaphysics were true, it would severely complicate rather than help resolve the apparent arbitrariness in God's Providence. It might be good to hope and pray that all persons are saved and achieve union with God, but, if universalism were true – if it were *impossible* for God to allow hell – then this would be *bad news* for us. Denying that hell is possible entails problematic views of God's permission of sin. The universalist God would allow moral evil only, e.g., because going through a process of sin is necessary for our salvation or because He could not prevent us from sinning.

The case made in the first two chapters concludes that we should leave aside these universalistic strategies for explaining sin, which imply that sin is necessary for our welfare, and instead deny that sin is metaphysically necessary for anything that God wants, intends, permits, and so forth. Sin is simply unnecessary, and its occurrence is contingent. Nevertheless, accepting that an omnipotent and all-loving God allows us to harm ourselves through sin, even though that self-harm is not necessary for our welfare, generates serious puzzles about God's good reasons to permit evil. Some concern God's providential control or omnipotence – namely, whether He could prevent that evil – and others concern God's perfect love for us or omnibenevolence – namely, whether He would have good reason to allow what He could otherwise prevent. What I do in the remaining Chapters 3, 4, and 5 is lay out a progressive case for a particular way of thinking about sin that rejects any metaphysical necessities in God's permission of moral evil, responding to each set of worries in turn.

Many theists have accepted both that God exercises total providential control over everything, and that God is not the author of sin. Broadly, such views require holding that God merely foreknows and permits (but does not intend or make the world such as to necessitate) the occurrence of any sin. Nevertheless, a distinction between God's mere permission of sin and God's positively intending sin has been heavily criticized by thinkers such as John Calvin. Calvin at time criticizes the distinction between God intending and merely permitting or foreknowing that we sin:

Hence was invented between doing and permitting; because to many persons this has appeared an inexplicable difficulty, that Satan and all the impious are

subject to the power and government of God, so that he directs their malice to whatever end he pleases... Those who are but moderately acquainted with the Scriptures will perceive...how nugatory and insipid it is, instead of the providence of God, to substitute a bare permission; as though God were sitting in a watchtower, expecting fortuitous events, and so his decisions were dependent on the will of men.⁶

Some contemporaries accept Calvin's criticisms of a distinction between God's mere permission and intending of sin, even if they do not follow Calvin's beliefs about damnation. For instance, David Bentley Hart agrees that there is no distinction between God's mere permission of and intending *eternal* damnation, given that such a state will obtain forever after, and thus that, if God allows damnation, He must positively intend it:

...if both the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of eternal damnation are true, that very evil is indeed already comprised within the *positive* intentions and dispositions of God. No refuge is offered here by some specious distinction between God's antecedent and consequent wills – between, that is, his universal will for creation apart from the fall and his particular will regarding each creature in consequence of the fall. Under the canopy of God's omnipotence and omniscience, the consequent is already wholly virtually present in the antecedent.⁷

The difficulty in seeing how to respond to such worries lies in the fact that – by lights of many classical theologians – human free decisions are within God's control and depend on His will for their occurrence. Sinful choices would not occur if God did not both permit them to occur and cause the individual to be engaged in the activities of choice. If God were not so involved, nothing at all would occur. As God's will is supposed to be the reason and ground of why *anything occurs at all*, it seems problematic to claim that human actions could have been otherwise in reference to God's Providence, His will, or His foreknowledge.

The third and fourth chapters address these worries about God's omnipotence. In the third chapter, I propose that only by relating the occurrence of sin to God's will in the right way can we understand why the contingency of sin is not simply irrational or arbitrary – God should be the first cause of all that occurs and able to prevent every occurrence of sin. Otherwise, it will not be possible to explain why the contingency of sin's occurrence does not put sin outside of God's control or as having no reason at all. In the fourth chapter, I show that nothing about God's will or foreknowledge or Providence requires that these be logically sufficient for the occurrence of sin. That is, God being in full control of what occurs does not require that sin occurs necessarily (relative to God's will or what God does or decrees). I thereby reject the sort of view that God set up the world so that “all are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation”⁸ in any way such as to prejudice affirming that sin *need not have occurred* or that God is not the author of damnation and sin. Rather, I defend the intuitive and

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classical position that created persons *alone* cause their sins, that God is in no way the author of sin, and therefore that there is an asymmetry in God's decisions to elect some to salvation and allow others to persist in their sins. Sin is an entirely contingent matter which results from creaturely free decisions, rather than being necessitated by God's permission.

The final chapter addresses the worries about God's benevolence. In the background of this chapter is a famous distinction Alvin Plantinga proposed between a theodicy and a defense.⁹ A theodicy aims to give God's actual reasons for allowing evil, whereas a defense only aims to dissolve apparent contradictions among theistic commitments. This book aims at the defense of God's permission of moral evil and of hell, not theodicy. Thus, while my final chapter will dip into theological hypotheses at some points, these are employed in service of 'defense,' a possible and plausible scenario that would show that God's permission of eternal damnation would be compatible with His love, omnipotence, and goodness toward us. For that reason, instead of exploring the *many, many* books and dissertations written on the historical development, theological interpretations of Scripture, or systematic proposals concerning the nature of grace, free will, and predestination, I will only appeal to other theories or proposals by way of contrast or potential clarification.

Having given sufficient background by this point then allows me to progressively build back up to a traditional conception of hell, a place of eternal punishment and suffering, within the context of my overall response to questions of God's permission of sin. The fifth chapter proposes a scenario in which sin and hell are not metaphysically necessary for our good (that is, God did not *need* to allow anyone to sin or go to hell), but where God has good reasons even for allowing some persons possibly to end up in a state of eternal suffering. That strong conception of divine Providence which I will at this point have laid out – an account on which God *could* have prevented all moral evil and on which evil plays no necessary role in achieving God's purposes – allows me to frame the right sorts of reasons God might have to permit this. I will show that it is no argument against the possibility of hell that the prospect of eternal suffering in hell does not present any obvious good to be gained from this situation; instead, as with classical free will defenses of moral evil, I will locate God's good reasons for allowing hell in His desire for persons. Nevertheless, my defense of hell and moral evil requires significant modification of that classical defense strategy, appealing not to possible goods that God could not have achieved without allowing hell, but rather to the very good of persons themselves and what the nature of persons entails for God's reasoning in creating them. In a nutshell, the good at which God aims in allowing you to sin is...you. You could have existed without sinning, but God will still love you even when you do sin, and He therefore has good reasons to allow you to sin simply because it is *you* that so chooses. From this 'personalist' perspective, the uniquely Christian theological datum that helps us understand the possibility of eternal damnation as being compatible with God's perfect love is that God has chosen to unite Himself to us indelibly, while we were sinners. God's love will be eternally effective, even in hell.

Saving People from Hell

John Henry Newman proposed that heretics recognize a true tension or apparent contradiction between doctrines. He thought Christian orthodoxy developed not in terms of coming to defeat the heresy (let alone destroy the heretic), but primarily in its ability to understand itself better through grappling with the theoretical problem posed by the heresy. There would be no Athanasius without Arius, no Cyril without Nestorius, no Augustine without Pelagius or Mani or Donatus, even no Aquinas without the problems posed by Avicenna, Averroes, William of St. Amour, or other figures of his time. These theologians developed new insights based on their engagement with their opponents, demonstrating in the process that they understood the heretics (and the logic of their position) better than the heretics understood themselves. That is my task here. I aim to propose a development of the views of Aquinas, Augustine, and the orthodox tradition which incorporates a better resolution of the problems surrounding hell and sin. Although universalism is *de jure* and *de facto* heretical in various senses, universalists have been prescient in seeing the outlines of a solution to God's apparent arbitrariness in salvation. We merely need to dissolve a few false dilemmas and incorporate the insights of universalism into orthodoxy; this does not require giving up the orthodox doctrine of an eternal hell.

I appeal particularly to the views of Thomas Aquinas as the basis for effecting this reconciliation, as Aquinas' views represent a powerful expression of classical theistic metaphysics as well as a synthesis of the orthodox Christian theological tradition, both East and West. The problems around hell and sin are, further, particularly thorny problems for Thomists, who hold a strong vision of divine providence and a form of Augustinianism about grace. Showing that these problems can be resolved even given strong views of divine providence like those of Augustine and Aquinas is ecumenically helpful too. As many have noticed, the Protestant Reformed scholastics of the Calvinist school appealed frequently to Augustine and Thomistic views of providence in defending their own views of grace.¹⁰ If my account is coherent, it will show at the same time that Aquinas is not committed to dark explanations of God's permission of sin as aiming merely to glorify Himself, and that Christians can embrace a strong vision of providence without abandoning the belief that God is in no way the author of sin. As I will argue, nobody who holds classical theistic metaphysical commitments has good reasons to embrace the view that God's providence makes it that they could not have done otherwise than sin.¹¹ Moral evil is in no way necessary.

My answers to these problems in this book will revolve around God's personal nature and love for created persons. God's love for us is reflected in the traditional Christian attitude on which saving souls from hell *is* to be concerned about those people for their own sake. One way to read St. Paul in Romans 9:2–3 is as expressing a wish that he himself could end up suffering *the pains of hell* to save others from going there: "I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren... ." Ignatius, Francis Xavier, and Wu Li have this attitude. As these great and holy exemplars

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of Christian faith loved God deeply, we can understand visibly that a solution to the problem of divine arbitrariness is possible. What these saints knew – which led them to believe both that it was bad for people to go to hell and that God only allows hell for good reasons – was that, in the Final Judgment, nothing anyone has done during their life could possibly prevent God’s Kingdom from coming, and that His coming Kingdom will be good: Christ will be all in all.

Why should anyone be shattered by the thought of hell? It is not compulsory for anyone to go there. Those who do, do so by their own choice, and against the will of God, and they can only get into hell by defying and resisting all the work of Providence and grace. It is their own will that takes them there, not God’s. In damning them He is only ratifying their own decision – a decision which He has left entirely to their own choice. Nor will He ever hold our weakness alone responsible for our damnation. Our weakness should not terrify us: it is the source of our strength. *Libenter gloriabor in infirmitatibus meis ut inhabitet in me virtus Christi*. Power is made perfect in infirmity, and our very helplessness is all the more potent a claim on that Divine Mercy Who calls to Himself the poor, the little ones, the heavily burdened.¹²

It is this insight which I will try to work out in this book, by means of philosophical and metaphysical considerations, as a possible response to the problems of Providence surrounding God’s permission of moral evil and its ultimate expression, eternal damnation. The universalists and other non-classical thinkers I engage will be shown to be misguided in trying to discover hope *in* hell – a vision as misguided as trying to find hope *in* our sins. Our hope lies elsewhere. And, once we find it, that hope will reveal God’s permission of hell in a new light.

Notes

- 1 Francis Xavier, Letter XIV, “To the Society at Rome, 1543,” in *Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. H.J. Coleridge (London: Burns and Oates, Portman Street, 1872), 155.
- 2 Jonathan Chaves, ed. and trans., *Singing the Source* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 156–157.
- 3 In many contexts and places, there are many councils and synods and Fathers that appear to definitively condemn the possibility of universal salvation (such as the Fifth Ecumenical Council). Universalists who want to adhere to the tradition need to mount a significant historical project to re-read all these claims as being non-definitive in various ways. For example, Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); *A Larger Hope?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).
- 4 John Kronen and Eric Reitan seem to argue this way in *God’s Final Victory* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), 63–65.
- 5 *Pace* Kronen and Reitan, 48–67.
- 6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1909), I.18.211.

- 7 David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 82.
- 8 Calvin, I.21.5.
- 9 Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1977), 10.
- 10 For example, Jordan Ballor, Matthew Gaetano, and David Sytsma, eds., *Beyond Dort and De Auxiliis* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).
- 11 See Kevin Timpe, “Weighing Compatibilism and Libertarianism in Analytic Theology,” in *Theological Perspectives on Free Will*, eds. A. Visala and O.P. Vainio (New York: Routledge, 2023), 47–74.
- 12 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York, NY: Harcourt Inc., 1948), 251.