Religious Studies **40**, 225–227 © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0034412504006936 Printed in the United Kingdom

A hell of a dilemma: rejoinder to Talbott

JERRY L. WALLS

Asbury Theological Seminary, 204 Lexington Avenue, Wilmore, KY 40390-1199

Abstract: **In this brief rejoinder to Talbott's reply, I argue that his clarifications pose a dilemma for him: he must either modify his account of unbearable misery, or give up his claim that all sinners must reach a point where they can resist God no farther.**

I first encountered the work of Thomas Talbott as a graduate student in philosophy at Notre Dame while writing a dissertation defending the traditional doctrine of hell. My mentor recommended Talbott's work to me as a formidable defence of universalism that I needed to answer in order to sustain my case. I found his work deeply challenging because it deploys an impressive array of arguments, both philosophical and exegetical, in support of his claim that universalism is necessarily true, a claim that most who are sympathetic to universalism are reluctant to espouse. This is a version of universalism that you can sink your teeth into! I am pleased that Talbott considers me one of his better critics.

In his latest instalment in our interchange he has clarified his position in some important respects. First, it is clear that at the end of the day, he believes that sinners who persist in rebellion against God and experience ever-increasing misery as a result, finally have no choice but to turn to God. There is an upper limit to the amount of misery any finite creature can absorb, so the choice to turn to God, if this point is reached, is not free in the libertarian sense of the word. The choices we make to reach this point are free, but ironically, those choices take us to a point where our only option is to repent of all those choices.

Second, we now have a better picture of what Talbott means by 'unbearable suffering' and 'forcibly imposed punishment'. Apparently he does not understand these terms in the same way they are typically understood in traditional accounts of hell, as some of his other writings have suggested. His illustration of the foolish married man who has a frivolous affair and then suffers greatly for it is helpful for bringing this into focus. As Talbott puts it, 'the good in the worst of sinners – the indestructible image of God if you will – can itself become a source

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504006936 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of unbearable torment' (218). Again, 'insofar as God uses the man's suffering as a means of correction, or as a means of encouraging repentance, we can again say that the man has endured a *forcibly imposed punishment* for his sin' (218).

While these clarifications are very helpful for understanding Talbott's position, unfortunately, they are not so helpful for defending it. Indeed, these very clarifications produce a dilemma for Talbott that make his case for necessary universalism much less plausible. In short, it appears he must either give up his account of unbearable torment, or he must give up his claim that all sinners must reach a point where they can resist no farther.

Talbott's claim that all sinners will reach a point where they cannot but give in to God is persuasive if God will indeed forcibly impose punishment that is literally unbearable. The problem, however, is that the way Talbott has spelled out what he means by unbearable misery, it is not at all obvious that it must have this effect.

Let us come back to the example of the foolish philanderer. Granted that his actions and the subsequent course of events cause him extreme misery, is repentance inevitable? Surely God can use his suffering as a means of correction to *encourage* repentance, as Talbott notes, but there is nothing in the case as described that makes such a response inevitable. Rather than repent, he might become angry and embittered if he believes God allowed the murder of his wife and baby as a means of punishment for his affair. He might judge this an incommensurate punishment for his sin, and come to see God as a vengeful deity who does not deserve worship and obedience.

Or consider the incident in light of Talbott's observation that the good in sinners can become the source of unbearable torment. Well, one way to deal with such torment is to deaden or suppress the very good that is causing this torment. There are various ways of doing this. One may rationalize one's actions or cease to care about the issues that are causing one pain. Of course, this involves a certain degree of dishonesty, self-deception, and suppression of one's God-given nature, but it is a well-known observation that one can desensitize his conscience by repeatedly performing precisely those acts that caused one to feel guilt or regret in the first place.

Reflect now on this phenomenon in view of Talbott's opinion that we have the freedom, 'expressed in thousands of specific choices, to move incrementally either in the direction of repentance and reconciliation or in the direction of greater separation from God, and that freedom God always respects' (221–222). Now if this is true, it is far from clear why such incremental movement must inevitably shatter our illusions in such a way that we could not but repent and be reconciled to God. Indeed, it seems that just the opposite would be the case. The more we move away from God, the more we harden our hearts and dull our consciences, the more we rationalize our sinful actions, the less we will be inclined to repent and be reconciled to God. Objectively speaking, of course,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504006936 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such persons would be ever more miserable. But subjectively, the hardening and rationalizing make the misery more tolerable.

Talbott surprisingly suggests that my view implies that God interferes with human freedom in inappropriate ways. As he construes it, I hold that God must actually prevent sinners from continuing along the path of ever-increasing separation until they reach the limit where they can no longer resist. Indeed, God may even uphold sinners in hidden ways, warm their hearts, and the like.

But given what I pointed out just above, I would contend there is not necessarily a point beyond which sinners can no longer resist God. Indeed, the longer they resist, the easier it may become to continue doing so. The tendency to grow accustomed to sin is the natural consequence of choosing to move farther and farther away from God. God will not shield us from this consequence if we persist in resisting His love and grace.

So it is actually Talbott whose views require God to keep us from the consequences of our choices. Talbott's case is only plausible if God simply will not allow us to harden our hearts, dull our consciences, and the like. If God acts to sustain a morally sensitive conscience even in a person who tries to numb it, then arguably, such a person would inevitably repent eventually in order to achieve some sort of emotional peace. But if God will not allow us to numb our consciences and rationalize our actions, then we are not genuinely free to move farther and farther away from God, as Talbott claims.

Of course, God could also cause increasing pain to us in other ways as we moved farther and farther away from Him. He could, for instance, forcibly impose greater and greater physical pain upon us – turn up the heat higher and higher, so to speak – with each such incremental move. And were He to do this, then surely we should reach a point where we should crack. But presumably Talbott would reject this as inappropriate compulsion, as discussed in my earlier paper.

So again, Talbott has a dilemma on his hands. He can either modify his account of divinely imposed unbearable misery or he can give up his claim that all sinners must eventually reach a point where they can resist God no farther. If the only forcibly imposed punishment God metes out is the sort described in Talbott's reply, there is no convincing reason why sinners could not continue to resist Him forever. But if Talbott modifies his account of divinely imposed misery to make it truly unbearable, he will be endorsing the sort of compulsion he has repudiated as inappropriate. Moreover, he will undermine his claim that God allows us freedom to move ever farther away from Him.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504006936 Published online by Cambridge University Press