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Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity

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Abstract: **I argue that the idea of a freely embraced eternal destiny in hell is deeply incoherent and implies, quite apart from its incoherence, that we are free both to sin with impunity and to defeat God's justice forever.**

According to traditional Christian theism, we are free to sin, perhaps even to sin with a degree of impunity for a while, but we are not free to sin with impunity forever. That, indeed, is part of the rationale behind the traditional understanding of hell as a place of punishment. If we manage to sin with impunity during our earthly life and fail to repent of our sin, then in the next life we shall discover that we have not escaped our punishment altogether. So it is not surprising, perhaps, that the brief allusions to hell in the New Testament, particularly as they occur in the words of Jesus, always picture hell as a forcibly imposed punishment rather than as a freely embraced condition. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, those subjected to punishment not only do not choose their punishment; they are surprised to receive it. And in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man's torment (from which he begs relief) is hardly something that he has freely chosen to endure. He may have freely chosen *something* – to live selfishly or disobediently during his earthly life, for example – but he has not freely chosen the punishment or the torment to which he is being subjected as a result of his sin.

Now when the traditional understanding of hell as unbearable suffering, forcibly imposed as punishment for sin, is conjoined with the idea of unending duration, we get the diabolical picture of an eternal torture chamber of some kind. And few religious thinkers today, even among the most conservative, are prepared to swallow an idea as unpalatable as that. Most would concede that an eternal torture chamber is utterly inconsistent with a supremely loving and supremely powerful being. But if that is true, then any theist who seeks to retain a doctrine of hell must revise the traditional doctrine in one of two ways: either by rejecting the idea of unbearable suffering or by rejecting the idea that the suffering literally

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endures forever. Over the past decade, a number of Christian philosophers have set forth a free-will defence, or perhaps even a free-will theodicy, of hell[1] and have therefore chosen the first alternative; they have in effect replaced the idea of unbearable suffering, which no one could freely embrace forever, with that of a freely chosen life apart from God.

In what follows, however, I shall argue that free-will theodicies of hell require an unexpected assumption: namely, that we are free not only to act wrongly – to sin, if you will – but to sin forever with at least a degree of impunity. They require, in other words, the assumption that we are free to defeat God's justice forever, and without ever being forced to acknowledge the true nature of our selfish acts. I shall also argue that such theodicies are deeply incoherent in any case and that Christians should therefore reject them in favour of the alternative idea of hell as a forcibly imposed but temporary correction of some kind.

Freely embracing an eternal destiny

For all of their talk about freedom and being free in our relationship to God, those who propose a free-will theodicy of hell rarely, if ever, offer a clear explanation of what it might *mean* to embrace an eternal destiny freely. Here several preliminary observations are perhaps in order.

(1) It is easy enough to imagine how an eternal destiny might *hinge upon* a free choice of some kind. For suppose that I should choose freely whether or not to eat spinach on my next birthday, and suppose further that, unbeknownst to me, my eternal destiny in heaven or hell should hinge upon which choice I happen to make. Or suppose, to be no less absurd, that my eternal destiny should hinge upon whether I freely choose to eat *escargot* at some time during my earthly life. These would clearly *not* be cases of freely choosing an eternal destiny; much less would they be cases of freely *embracing* such a destiny in the sense to be explained below. And similarly for the case where my eternal destiny is thought to hinge upon my freely accepting Christ (whatever, exactly, that might mean) during my earthly life. If I regard Jesus Christ as just another human prophet like Mohammed, and therefore go through my entire earthly life without ever accepting the Christian claims about him, it hardly follows that I have freely embraced an eternal destiny apart from God.

(2) It is important, then, to distinguish between our free choices and their unintended consequences, the latter of which, by definition, are not freely embraced and may even occur against one's will. Hardened criminals typically do everything within their power to avoid a prison sentence, and not even drug addicts freely choose to become addicted to their drug of choice. Some addicts may freely choose to take a drug in the first place, or to begin experimenting with it, but they no more freely choose their addiction than someone on an unhealthy diet freely chooses to have a heart attack. It may sometimes happen, of course,

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that the bad consequences of someone's bad choices, even though unintended, are nonetheless foreseen as a potential danger, or perhaps in some cases as a practical certainty. For though most criminals probably commit their criminal acts in the hope of avoiding a prison sentence, a man full of hatred may commit murder in full public view, knowing that he will be apprehended immediately and punished in the end. The man's present hatred, in other words, may outweigh his present fear of punishment, and this might be true even where the likely punishment would be his own execution. But even in a case such as this, where the punishment is foreseen as a kind of practical certainty, it is not freely chosen; it is still forcibly imposed against the person's will.

(3) One might also freely choose a given destiny without a full appreciation of just what one is choosing and without, therefore, freely embracing the full consequence of what one is choosing. For just as one might freely choose to enter a teaching career without any awareness of how ill-suited one is for such a career – of how much one will in fact hate the classroom once one walks into it – so one might freely choose to live apart from God without any real awareness of what such a life entails. Indeed, one of the best ways for God to teach a hard lesson in this matter, or to teach one that one does not really want what one might think one wants, is simply to give a person what the person might think that he or she wants. But the important point is this: those who reject a caricature of God, as opposed to the real God, and choose to live apart from the god of some caricature, or choose some destiny without a full appreciation of what this destiny entails, have not yet freely embraced the chosen destiny, however freely it might initially appear to have been chosen.

(4) Finally, there is the limiting case where one freely chooses an eternal destiny with a full understanding of exactly what one is choosing and one's choice is therefore unencumbered by any relevant ignorance, illusion, or deception. A necessary condition of such a free and fully informed choice, I contend, would be that one never comes to regret the choice at some later time; for whenever one does make a choice and then comes to regret it, one of two explanations will hold: either (a) one incorrectly assessed some aspect of the choice when making it, in which case it was not fully informed, or (b) some compulsion determined the choice, in which case it was not truly free. But some may want to question my own conviction about this. Is it not at least possible, they will ask, to make a *free* choice in the full knowledge that one will eventually come to regret it? Even if this were possible, however, the mere fact that one should later come to regret a choice in the sense of wishing that one had never made it in the first place would prove that one no longer fully endorsed it; and furthermore, if one should ever come to regret a chosen destiny, then one either remains free to opt out of that chosen destiny (even as one remains free to change a career long after choosing to enter it) or the initially chosen destiny comes to be forcibly imposed at the very instant that it comes to be regretted.

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Now free-will theists often insist that genuine freedom requires a context of ambiguity, something other than full clarity of vision. But even if this should be true, so also is the following: when our free choices have unintended and unforeseen consequences in our lives, and these consequences are such that, had we foreseen them clearly, we would have chosen differently, then in no way have we freely embraced these unforeseen consequences. So perhaps we can tentatively explain the idea of a freely embraced eternal destiny (FED) as follows:

> (FED) A person S *freely embraces* an eternal destiny D if, and only if, (a) at some time *t* S freely chooses to pursue D rather than some other possible destiny, (b) S attains D in the end, *and* (c) the following subjunctive conditional is true: For any time *t** such that *t** is either *t* (the time at which S chooses to pursue D) or some time after *t*, if at *t** S should have possessed a full disclosure of truth about the nature of D, then at *t** S would nonetheless have endorsed fully (and without regret) this chosen destiny.

I call (FED) a *tentative* explanation because I am not fully persuaded that we have here a coherent idea, and it is up to the proponents of freely embraced destinies, not their opponents, to provide a coherent explanation in the end. But given (FED), we can indeed speak of someone freely embracing an eternal destiny, provided that the person never comes to regret the chosen destiny and would have chosen the same destiny even in a context of full clarity. So let us suppose that, in the ambiguous circumstances in which we humans now find ourselves, S should encounter God, freely submit to Him, and never come to regret such submission, despite a full disclosure of truth that resolves all ambiguity about the nature of the chosen life in fellowship with God. Assuming that S would also have chosen the same destiny in a context of full clarity, then S would clearly meet condition (b) of (FED) and would thus freely embrace a destiny in fellowship with God.[2] But if separation from God can bring only greater and greater misery into a life, as Christians have traditionally believed, then the very idea of S freely embracing a destiny apart from God seems to break down altogether. For how could a decision to live apart from God survive without regret a full disclosure of truth about the chosen destiny? And even if it could survive such a disclosure (either because S's bad choices confirm S in a systematic deception of some kind, or because they so alter S's character that S loses the capacity to regret having chosen such a miserable destiny), it still would not follow that S has freely embraced a destiny apart from God. If I am unaware that a pill will induce a systematic delusion, or perhaps even destroy my capacity for regret, then even if I swallow the pill freely, it hardly follows that I have freely embraced all of these unforeseen consequences. Nor is the case where S chooses a destiny apart from God any different in this regard: so long as S would have chosen differently had S known the consequences, it simply does not follow that S has freely embraced these unforeseen consequences. Given

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(FED), therefore, we seem to confront an important asymmetry: whereas a freely embraced destiny in fellowship with God is quite possible, a freely embraced destiny apart from God seems not to be possible at all.

Can a decision to reject God forever be both free and fully informed?

For reasons similar to those just set forth, I have defended the following proposition in previous papers: given the Christian understanding of God, the very idea of someone making a free and fully informed decision to reject God forever, or of someone freely embracing an eternal destiny apart from God, is deeply incoherent and therefore logically impossible.[3]

In so arguing I have relied, of course, upon a particular view of God's metaphysical nature and of His relationship to us. If God is supremely loving, then He wills for us exactly what, at the most fundamental level, we want for ourselves; He wills that we should experience supreme happiness, that our deepest yearnings should be satisfied, and that all of our needs should be met. Insofar as we, unlike God, are mired in ambiguity and subject to ignorance, illusion, and deception, we will no doubt misjudge our real wants and yearnings repeatedly and especially the means of satisfying them. But if God is supremely wise, He will not misjudge these matters himself; and if He is supremely powerful, He will also have the power to correct our misjudgements over time, without interfering with our freedom to act upon them in the first place. Indeed, our freedom to act upon our misjudgements may even be an essential part of the correcting process. For once we begin acting upon them – upon the illusion that we can benefit ourselves at the expense of others, for example – we can then begin the long, sometimes painful, process of learning from experience why love and reconciliation are better than selfishness and separation.

Many of my own critics, however, have wanted to challenge my claim that a free and fully informed decision to reject God forever is logically impossible. Accordingly, Michael Murray writes:

> **Is this claim true? It depends upon what Talbott has in mind when he speaks of being 'fully informed'. He may mean: that one knows all the relevant facts about the decision being made, and holds no relevant false beliefs about the decision. On the other hand, he may mean: that one knows all the relevant facts and ascribes the proper weight to the things known. The latter entails that one has additionally structured one's desires so that they properly reflect the importance of what is known.**[4]

Here Murray supposes that, with respect to a given set of known facts, two people with different interests and backgrounds might weigh the known facts differently, which is obviously correct. He supposes further that two people might know *all* the relevant facts about some decision and nonetheless weigh the known facts differently, and this may also be true in certain kinds of cases. For many

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decisions have little moral significance and involve matters of less than ultimate importance to the individual making the decision. But if Murray's distinction is to have any relevance to my own claim about the impossibility of rejecting God forever, then he must adopt an additional assumption that seems to me quite incoherent: the assumption that two people, each rational enough to qualify as free moral agents, might know *all* of the relevant facts about the ultimate source of their own happiness and the roots of their own misery, on the one hand, and nonetheless weigh these facts very differently, on the other. Has Murray or anyone else provided grounds for thinking this a genuine possibility?

The nearest thing I have found to an argument at this point is the empirical observation that people sometimes appear knowingly to act against their own interest, perhaps even their best interest in some cases. Murray thus comments: 'Someone can be fully aware of the fact that smoking or having an unhealthy diet or engaging in promiscuous sex is extremely dangerous, and yet, he or she can still choose to freely engage in the practices.'[5] And in a similar vein, Charles Seymour comments that 'a person may continue to pursue bad habits even after experiencing their painful consequences'.[6] As an illustration, Seymour cites a psychiatric case of a manic-depressive, no less, who could not be persuaded to stay on his lithium, despite the disastrous consequences of going off it. According to psychiatrist, Kay Redfield Jamieson, 'Lithium worked remarkably well for him, but once his hallucinations and abject terror stopped, he would quit taking it'.[7] And Seymour interprets this to mean that the poor man was 'released from his bondage to suicidal desire by lithium, yet he [freely?] returned to this bondage again and again'.[8] Seymour thus concludes: 'it is *clear* [my emphasis] that merely removing ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire will not prevent a stubborn person from rejecting God forever'.[9] Why not? Because 'God, to ensure our salvation, must … also remove or weaken the motives which prompt us to choose damnation – cowardice, love of pleasure, pride, etc.'.[10]

Now I think it fair to say that a good deal has gone wrong here. Just what is the point of Seymour's psychiatric example? The mere fact that lithium worked 'remarkably well' in controlling a man's 'hallucinations', 'abject fear', and 'suicidal desires' hardly implies that it had corrected *all* of his faulty judgements or had controlled *all* of his compulsions entirely. On the contrary, heavy doses of lithium, as may be required in the most serious psychiatric cases, can have some horrendous side effects – nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, and trembling being common – and these merely provide additional reasons for not taking it. Indeed, one side effect, even when the lithium seems to be working, is that it can itself cause mental illness and irrational behaviour. So I see little point to this example, nor do I see much point in citing, as Murray does, the examples of smoking and an unhealthy diet.

Yes, we know that smoking is dangerous. So also are mountain climbing and hang gliding. But the mere fact that an activity includes a degree of risk to one's

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physical health hardly renders it utterly irrational in the way, so I have claimed, rejecting God forever would be. And yes, given the different circumstances in which different people find themselves, not to mention the ambiguities of our earthly lives, some will no doubt choose a riskier lifestyle than others will choose. There is also the matter of shortsightedness: where someone knowingly jeopardizes some future good in order to satisfy some present (and more immediate) desire. The possibility of such shortsightedness is due, in large measure, to the huge difference between an abstract knowledge of some danger lurking in the distant future, something easily thrust out of one's immediate consciousness, and the actual experience of misery in the present. But as C. S. Lewis once pointed out forcefully, the latter, unlike the former, is impossible to ignore:

> **Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil: every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt … . And pain is not only immediately recognisable evil, but evil impossible to ignore.**[11]

As Lewis here uses the term 'pain', it signifies not merely a bodily sensation, but 'any experience, whether physical or mental, which the patient dislikes'.[12] I prefer the term 'misery'. So long as misery is merely a threat lying in the distant future, or merely a potential danger rather than a sure thing, one can easily discount it in the present or, as Murray says, assign an improper weight to the potential danger. But once intense misery thrusts itself into immediate consciousness, it becomes harder and harder, and finally impossible, to ignore. It is simply not possible to desire intense misery and suffering for its own sake, nor is it possible not to desire supreme happiness for its own sake.

So imagine now a person S in a state of prolonged misery or suffering or sadness, such as one might experience in hell as traditionally conceived; imagine also that S knows *all* of the relevant facts about the source of human happiness and suffers from no more illusions about the source of S's own misery. Given that all of S's ignorance has now been removed and all of S's illusions have finally been shattered, what possible motive might remain for embracing such eternal misery freely? It will not do merely to point out that S's newly acquired perspective, coming about as it does *after* going to hell, has come about too late; for either S retains the option to repent and to become reconciled to God even after entering hell, or else S remains there against S's will. Nor will it do to suggest that, even in hell, S might continue to reject God under some description other than 'choosing eternal misery for oneself', because we are here supposing that all of S's relevant beliefs are true and all relevant ignorance has been removed. If S should reject God under some false description, then at least one of S's relevant beliefs would be false; and if all relevant ignorance has been removed, then S would be under no illusion about this: one cannot reject the ultimate source of one's happiness

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without rejecting one's own deepest desires and yearnings and without choosing perpetual misery for oneself as well.

The question of motive

My question, then, is this: what conceivable motive could *both* survive in a context free from 'ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire', *and* prompt someone to choose damnation? In a passage quoted above, Seymour cites 'cowardice, love of pleasure, [and] pride' as possibilities. But given the Christian understanding of the world, it is hard to see how cowardice could even exist in a context of full clarity. Why should fear prompt someone to reject God's protection and to embrace freely the very condition, namely eternal damnation, that a rational person would fear more than any other? And why should a desire for pleasure motivate someone to reject forever the pleasures of heaven or to embrace forever the miseries of hell? At the very least, Seymour owes us some further explanation here.

The most frequently cited motive for someone's rejecting God is, of course, pride. William Lane Craig thus speaks of 'the stubborn refusal to submit one's will to that of another', and he goes on to ask: 'Is it not possible that the will to self-autonomy be so strong in some persons that they will act irrationally in preferring self-rule to God's rule?'[13] But the very question that Craig raises presupposes an incoherent distinction between self-rule and God's rule, between self-autonomy and submission to God. If sin delivers the will into a kind of bondage, as Martin Luther believed; if sinners gradually become 'a prisoner of bad desires', as Richard Swinburne has put it;[14] and if the mark of a bad character is the inability to follow one's own judgement concerning what is best, as I have elsewhere suggested,[15] then there can be no mastery of self, no self-rule, no real autonomy in the absence of submission to God. Indeed, given the Christian understanding of God, submission to God is not, in the end, submission to an external will or external power at all; it is merely a way of acknowledging and honouring one's own deepest desires and yearnings, the very desires and yearnings that God in his love also yearns to satisfy. So only a terrible confusion and a host of faulty judgements could possibly lead one to the conclusion that self-rule and self-autonomy stand in opposition to submission to God.

Like Craig, Jonathan Kvanvig also sees pride as manifesting itself in a preference for 'self-exaltation or self-determination over anything else',[16] and he suggests further that, for some, 'anything is preferable … to the abandonment of self that union with God entails'.[17] But just what does Kvanvig mean by 'an abandonment of self'? If no conceivable state is more exalted than oneness with divinity, then one might more accurately describe union with God as the greatest possible honour and a means to the highest possible form of exaltation. Union with God no doubt does entail the abandonment of *something* – of separation, alienation,

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error, and all the sources of human misery, for example – and this may also entail the abandonment of those dispositions and thought patterns that St Paul identifies as 'the old person' and others might identify as 'the false self'. But what are we to make of Kvanvig's suggestion that, for some of those rational enough to qualify as moral agents, 'anything is preferable' to such abandonment? Is this not again simply incoherent? You might as well say that, for some rational agents, anything is preferable to supreme happiness and nothing is preferable to the misery that alienation and separation inevitably bring into a life. Nor does Kvanvig explain, any more than Craig does, how a prisoner of bad desires, someone whose will is in bondage to sin, could be capable of self-determination. Why not say that a failure to discern (or anticipate) the full extent to which immorality brings enslavement (and therefore prevents self-determination) is precisely one of the deceptions that makes immorality possible in the first place?[18]

My own view, for what it is worth, is that pride, conceived of as a moral vice, has an inner character almost the opposite of its outward appearance. Its roots lie in a lack of self-esteem: the failure to think of oneself as *highly* as one ought. For those who appreciate their full worth as creations of God and continued objects of His love will feel no need to prop themselves up, or to engage in the kind of boasting that Paul consistently condemns. Even the desire to reign or to dominate others ultimately has its roots, I believe, in a kind of fear that could never survive in a context of full clarity about the nature of the world (as Christians understand it). But even if I am wrong about this, the question remains: how could pride or any other moral vice survive in a context free from ignorance and delusion? Presumably those in heaven and those in hell would see the world very differently; they would have, in other words, very different (indeed contradictory) beliefs about the nature of God, the nature of His intentions, and the nature of the world. So if the beliefs of those in heaven are objectively true, then the beliefs of those in hell are objectively false; if those in heaven have had their illusions shattered and are therefore free from error, then those in hell have not yet had their illusions shattered and are not yet free from error. It is as simple as that.

It seems to me, therefore, that those defending a free-will theodicy of hell should simply bite the proverbial bullet, as Jerry Walls does, and admit that a free and *fully informed* decision to reject God forever is logically impossible. Walls writes: 'I want to agree that those who choose evil, and ultimately hell, are indeed deceived.'[19] And again: 'We can grant that Talbott is correct in holding that the choice of evil is impossible for anyone who has a *fully formed* awareness that God is the source of happiness and sin the cause of misery.'[20] But Walls goes on to make a twofold claim: first, that the deceptions of the damned are *self-imposed*, a form of *self-deception*, and second, that our freedom to reject God forever includes the freedom to cling to our illusions and to our self-imposed deceptions forever as well. For if God were to shatter *all* of our illusions, remove *all* of our ignorance, and resolve *all* of the ambiguities that make a decision to reject God possible, then

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we would no longer be free in our relation to Him. So it is to these matters that I shall now turn in the following two sections.

Two kinds of compulsion

Behind any free-will theodicy of hell lies the standard libertarian analysis of free will, and that analysis involves two crucial claims: (1) a person S performs an action A *freely* at some time *t* only if it should also be within S's power at *t* to refrain from A at *t*; and (2) it is within S's power at *t* to refrain from A at *t* only if refraining from A at *t* is psychologically possible for S at *t*. For the record, I remain a libertarian myself in the sense that, in my opinion, creaturely freedom could never exist in a fully deterministic universe. But in a companion to this paper, I shall, nonetheless, argue against the standard libertarian analysis as just set forth, and also against any other analysis implying that we do the right thing *freely* only when acting wrongly remains a psychological possibility.[21] For if that were true, then God Himself would never do the right thing (or act in a loving, as opposed to a hateful, way) *freely*.

A full examination of this issue, however, would require a paper in itself. So for the purposes of this paper, I shall continue to use the term 'freedom' in the standard libertarian way, and simply point out how few first-person accounts of dramatic conversions sound anything like libertarian free choices. A host of free choices – including bad ones that unexpectedly lead to disaster and are thereby corrected, perhaps even against one's will – are no doubt an important part of the whole process that results in the typical conversion. But more often than not, the final act of submission seems to occur in a context where the alternative is no longer psychologically possible at all. When C. S. Lewis described his own conversion, for example, he even used such terms as 'checkmate' and 'compulsion' to describe the final act of surrender. Though he always stressed libertarian free will when he tried to imagine the damnation of a soul, the damnation of *someone else*, his account of his own conversion comes across very differently. He did say, it is true, that 'before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice'.[22] But he then immediately wrote, 'in a sense',[23] and he also made it clear that he had in mind a voluntary choice, but not necessarily a libertarian free choice. For he went on to write: 'I say, ''I chose'', yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite … . Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom.'[24] He even described himself as 'a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape', and concluded by identifying freedom in this matter with a kind of compulsion: 'The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.'[25]

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Stressing the right kind of compulsion in conversion, as even C. S. Lewis did, has several advantages for a Christian, not the least of which is that it seems to accord perfectly with the Pauline understanding of salvation as wholly a matter of God's grace.[26] Even with respect to the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world, Christians have typically wanted to say, 'there but for the grace of God go I'.[27] And either this is mere cant or false modesty when I say it, or it is a way of acknowledging that the difference between Hitler and me is *not* that I have made better free choices than he did. We might express this, roughly and inaccurately, by saying that in Hitler's shoes, and facing his demons, my free choices may have been no better than his were, and in my shoes Hitler's free choices may have been no worse than mine have been. But the important point is this: if Hitler (or anyone else) is condemned on account of his own free choices and I am not so condemned on account of mine, then I am in a position to boast along the following lines: 'At least I did not resist God as badly as Hitler did, and therefore my own free choices have been a lot better than his were!' To block such boasting, Paul consistently insisted that all credit for our salvation and for our eventual sanctification must go to God, not to us.

Still, we should not lose sight of Lewis's important qualification: a failure to distinguish between different kinds of compulsion, and different ways in which the alternative to a given choice may come to be a psychological impossibility, has indeed led 'wicked men', including many religious authorities, to abuse their power. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that these 'wicked men', so called, include some of the greatest theologians in the Western tradition, men still highly revered as heroes of the faith. For it was St Augustine who first defended using the sword and employing physical affliction as a means of coercing heretics, in this case the Donatists, back into the state Church. Augustine argued that, in so using the sword to coerce the Donatists, the Church was merely following the example of the Lord.[28] Did not the risen Lord, after all, compel Paul to come in? Even as he began his trip to Damascus, Paul was 'still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord';[29] but, according to the story in Acts, the revelation he received on the road to Damascus stopped this 'foremost' of sinners dead in his tracks and changed entirely the direction of his will. So if the risen Lord compelled Paul to come in, why should not the state Church likewise employ the sword, Augustine reasoned, to compel the Donatists, whose main crime was their belief in freedom of conscience, to come back to the state church as well?

Fortunately, few people today would fall for the sophistry in Augustine's argument. A stunning revelation such as Paul reportedly received, one that provides clear vision and *compelling evidence*, thereby altering one's beliefs in a perfectly rational way, does not compel behaviour in the same way that threatening someone with a sword might. A sword, as employed in typical cases of persecution, provides no evidence for the belief its wielder seeks to influence and therefore has no power to alter such a belief in some rational way. It typically

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alters behaviour without altering basic convictions. But some free-will theists seem almost as leery of clear vision and compelling evidence as they are of more sinister forms of compulsion. William Lane Craig thus writes: 'It may well be the case that for some people the degree of revelation that would have to be imparted to them in order to secure their salvation would have to be so stunning that their freedom to disobey would be effectively removed.'[30] And as for my own view that separation from God can bring only greater and greater misery into a life, Jerry Walls compares such a view to the medieval practice of inducing a plea by pressing the accused under increasingly heavy iron weights.[31] He then goes on to comment: 'We do not have the constitutional strength or capacity to absorb ever greater amounts of torment',[32] and he finally concludes:

> **If it is not within our power to avoid this knowledge [of what separation from God really entails], neither is it within our power to choose damnation. And if this choice is not within our power – as opposed to being psychologically possible for us – then we are not free with respect to it. Hence God cannot always remove our (self-imposed) deception without interfering with our freedom. If God allows us to retain libertarian freedom, some illusions may endure forever.[33]**

It seems to me, however, that such an argument, like many philosophical arguments about freedom, merely illustrate why we all need to heed Wittgenstein's warning about what can happen 'when language *goes on holiday*'.[34] Not that I would reject the *substance* of what Walls says, which is this: only someone mired in illusion or deception of some kind would be free, given the standard libertarian analysis, to choose evil. So neither God, who is subject to no illusions at all, nor the redeemed in heaven, who possess the beatific vision and are therefore no longer subject to any relevant illusions, are free to do evil, given the standard libertarian analysis. As Walls himself points out, 'The redeemed in heaven find sin impossible … because their character, shaped by the clear knowledge that God is the source of happiness, will not permit it.'[35] So as even Walls acknowledges, the way in which clarity of vision and knowing the truth compels obedience is very different from the way in which the medieval practice of pressing might compel a plea of guilty or not guilty. But then, if Walls himself denies that the redeemed in heaven retain their libertarian freedom, why should he object to my view on the ground that, if it is true, we do not retain our libertarian freedom forever?

What might Walls possibly have in mind, moreover, when he speaks of God 'interfering with our freedom'? That is, what *specific* freedom might he have in mind here? It could hardly be the freedom to make a *fully informed* decision to reject God, since absolute clarity of vision would be a necessary condition of any such freedom as that. And if, as I have argued and Walls seems to concede, a free and fully informed decision to reject God forever is logically impossible in any case, then there can be no question of God *interfering* with a freedom that was never possible in the first place. So does Walls perhaps have in mind a *less* than

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fully informed decision to reject the *true* God? If so, then I must again point out that this too is impossible. For insofar as a decision arises from ignorance, or illusion, or deception about who the true God is, it implies at most a rejection of some caricature of God or some false conception, not a rejection of the true God Himself. By the very nature of the case, therefore, a free decision to reject the *true* God, whether it be fully informed or less than fully informed, seems to be logically impossible, given the Christian understanding of God. And an impossible freedom is not one that God could enhance, nor is it one with which He might sensibly be said to interfere.

So again I ask: just what *specific* freedom does God interfere with when He shatters our illusions and corrects our faulty judgements? One thing is indeed clear: God cannot shatter our illusions without, at the same time, preventing us from clinging to these very illusions forever. So perhaps the relevant freedom here is merely the freedom to cling forever to those illusions and faulty judgements that make immorality possible and, whether we know it or not, prevent a full union with God. According to Walls, we are free to act upon such illusions and faulty judgements as these *and also* to cling to them forever even as we act upon them. But as I shall argue in the final section below, that too is logically impossible and it undermines, in any event, the whole point of hell, as traditionally understood.

The fatal flaw in free-will theodicies of hell

The place to begin, perhaps, is with a fundamental incoherence in C. S. Lewis's account of hell. According to Lewis, it is an objective truth that union with the divine 'nature is bliss and separation from it horror'.[36] But if that is an objective truth, even as it is an objective truth that a hand placed upon a hot stove will burn badly, then an important question arises: how could anyone, rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent, choose an eternity of horror over an eternity of bliss, or actually prefer hell to heaven? Would it not be far easier to imagine someone with a normal nervous system actually preferring the burning of a hot stove to the gentle warmth of 85-degree tap water? In the face of such questions as these, Lewis backs away from the idea of an *objective* horror and begins talking as if it were all a matter of perspective. 'There may be a truth', he insists, 'in the saying that ''hell is hell, not from its own point of view, but from the heavenly point of view''. … It is only to the damned that their fate could seem less than unendurable.'[37] But you might as well say, 'It is only to those who freely choose to burn themselves on the stove that such a burning could seem less than unendurable.' If those freely choosing to burn themselves have a normal nervous system, experience normal sensations of pain, and are rational enough to qualify as free agents, then such a statement makes no coherent sense at all.

Nor can one escape the charge of incoherence here by appealing, as Walls and Lewis both do, to an illusion that in effect takes the hell out of hell, at least as far

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as the damned are concerned. Following Lewis, Walls suggests that 'hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there';[38] and more than that, says Walls, the damned may even experience a kind of illusory happiness. 'Those in hell may be almost happy, and this may explain why they insist on staying there. They do not, of course, experience even a shred of genuine happiness. But perhaps they experience a certain perverse sense of satisfaction, a distorted sort of pleasure.'[39] Though Walls denies that the damned are *genuinely* happy, he does not deny that they *believe* themselves to be happy; on the contrary, he insists that, for some lost souls, the illusion of happiness may endure forever and with sufficient conviction to explain why they never leave their preferred abode in hell. 'Those who prefer hell to heaven have convinced themselves that it is better. In their desire to justify their choice of evil, they have persuaded themselves that whatever satisfaction they experience from evil is superior to the joy which God offers.'[40]

But just what are we to make of an illusion that supposedly conceals *forever* the objective horror or the misery of hell and makes it seem superior to the joyful bliss of union with God? It is of no help to say, as Walls does, that 'those in hell approximate happiness in some sense because they get what they want',[41] for in the present context, where the issue is how anyone could actually want hell, that is viciously circular. Just what is it that the damned think they want and think they are getting in hell? And how are they able to act upon their illusions without shattering them to pieces? If these illusions are self-imposed, as Walls insists, then we must bear in mind that, beyond a certain point, such as might occur in paranoia, self-deception is pathological and itself quite incompatible with freedom and moral responsibility. But suppose that I am rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent and therefore rational enough to learn from experience. If I should act upon the belief that fire does not burn, but instead produces highly pleasant sensations, then one of the following would be true: either (a) I would learn from experience and my experience would shatter my illusions about fire, or (b) someone (or something) would have protected me from the fire and its power to burn and to cause pain. If such protection should last forever, moreover, then my belief that I could thrust my arm into 'fire' without being burned – that I could so act with impunity – would not be an illusion at all. It would be the simple truth of the matter.

Nor is the more complex case of choosing hell essentially different in this regard – at least not if we continue to assume that I am rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent. If I should consistently act upon the belief that wealth, or power and control over others, or sexual exploitation, or a pattern of dishonesty can bring happiness and contentment over the long run, then one of the following would be true: either (a) my experience would eventually prove my belief to be illusory and the illusory belief would shatter against the hard rock of reality, or (b) someone (or something) would have protected me from the very choices I have made. A

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possible source of protection here might be the ambiguities of a normal earthly life, for these might enable me to delude myself, *for a while* anyway, concerning my mortality and the conditions of my own happiness. But suppose now that God should protect me *forever* from the consequences of acting as if I were immortal, invulnerable, and in no need of loving relationships with others. As an omnipotent being, He could easily shield me, I presume, from the reality of physical death, and in a variety of ways He could also prevent my weaknesses from frustrating my sense of invulnerability. If He were to do that, however, then the idea of an illusion would again make no sense at all. For if I never die, then there can be no *illusion* of immortality; and if I am able to separate myself from God without experiencing the full horror of such separation, then my belief that I can sin with impunity, perhaps even achieve a measure of what I believe to be happiness in the process, is no illusion at all. It is the simple truth of the matter.

In sum, you cannot coherently claim *both* that hell is an objective horror *and* that it is all a matter of perspective, as if two persons, each rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent, might disagree about this; and if the damned are indeed free moral agents, then neither can you coherently claim *both* that their beliefs, being objectively false, are illusory *and* that they can continue to act upon these supposed illusions forever without eventually shattering them to pieces.

Quite apart from the matter of incoherence, moreover, it is important to appreciate how the view under consideration undermines the whole point of hell, as traditionally understood. Is not the whole point to prevent the unrepentant from sinning with impunity forever? Lewis himself illustrates the point nicely in *The Problem of Pain*, where he begins his discussion of hell by asking us to imagine an utterly wicked man 'who has risen to wealth or power by a continued course of treachery and cruelty'.[42] One of the best writers I have ever encountered, Lewis's own description makes us feel this man's wickedness in all of its horror. He also asks us to imagine that the man is never 'tormented by remorse or even misgivings', that he eats like a schoolboy and sleeps like a healthy infant, that he is 'without a care in the world', and that he is 'unshakably confident … that God and man are fools whom he has got the better of'.[43] Would it not be an outrage of justice, Lewis, in effect, asks, for such a man to remain content with his own actions and never to be forced – even against his own will, if necessary – to see them for what they are? Lewis himself puts it this way: 'In a sense, it is better for the creature itself, even if it never becomes good, that it should know itself a failure, a mistake. Even mercy can hardly wish to such a man his eternal, contented continuance in such ghastly illusion.'[44]

Note the words 'even mercy'. Though the context here is a discussion of justice and retributive punishment, Lewis nonetheless sees clearly that in a case such as he has described mercy requires exactly the same thing that justice requires. And observe what justice requires, according to Lewis: it requires, first, that Lewis's extraordinarily wicked man should learn the truth about his own wickedness, and

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second, that the 'ghastly illusion' enabling him to remain comfortable in his wickedness should be removed.[45] I agree with that. At the very least, simple justice requires that such a man not be protected forever from the bad consequences of his wretched choices. But the irony is that Lewis's own account of hell excludes, even as Walls's account does, the very thing that Lewis says justice requires. For on Lewis's account, the damned never do discover that they are 'a failure, a mistake'; neither does God ever shatter the 'ghastly illusion' underlying their wickedness. On the contrary, from their own point of view, the damned are 'successful, rebels to the end',[46] utterly defeating God's omnipotent love and therefore utterly defeating His justice as well. I here emphasize God's justice for the following reason: if an unrepentant Hitler, for example, is never required to learn a hard lesson, if he is permitted to cling forever to his rationalizations and to his comforting illusions, then there is no justice, so far as I can tell, for the millions of victims who endured unspeakable horrors at his hand. Where is the justice in rewarding an unrepentant Hitler with exactly what he thinks he wants and continues to think he wants forever after? And where is the justice for Hitler himself? If he were free to cling forever to his 'ghastly illusion' even as he acts upon it, assuming that this were even possible, then for that very reason he would also be free to sin with impunity and to defeat God's justice forever.

Lewis claims, as does Walls, that it all comes down to free will: 'In creating beings with free will omnipotence from the outset submits to the possibility of … defeat'.[47] But really, why should this be true? Why should creating beings with free will (of the standard libertarian kind) include even the possibility of God's justice (or his love) suffering an *eternal* defeat? If, as Lewis himself insists, the objective truth of the matter is that union with God is bliss and separation from Him a horror, then, for God to win, He need only refuse to protect us forever from the consequences of our own free choices. He need only let us have the very thing we think we want. So if, for example, we repeatedly opt for separation and the logical end of separation is the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness – which has nothing to do with physical torture, by the way – then God need only allow us to experience the very thing we have confusedly chosen. As Walls would have it, God must perpetually shield us from our past choices, lest they bring upon us more misery and torment than our 'freedom' to continue deluding ourselves can bear. But God could hardly honour our freedom by perpetually shielding us, even as bad parents sometimes shield their children, from the very thing we have freely chosen. At some point He must allow us to experience the full reality of what we have chosen, however clear a revelation and however irresistible a means of correction such experience might be.

So long as we do not ignore the limits of possible freedom, therefore, a belief in free will need not require even the possibility of a defeated God who is unable to achieve justice in the end. For though it is a well-worn analogy, it remains as apt as ever to compare a supremely wise and supremely powerful God to a grand-

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master in chess who permits a novice to move freely, perhaps even allows the novice to 'get away with' some ill-advised moves, and still manages to checkmate the novice in the end. After all, God has reality on his side, and for that very reason, He can permit His loved ones to choose freely, perhaps even shield them from painful truths for a while, and still undermine over time every possible motive for disobedience. He can do for every other sinner, in other words, exactly what He did for Paul and exactly what He did for Lewis himself when this self-described prodigal was 'brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape'.[48]

Notes

1. See, for example, William Lane Craig '"No other name": a middle knowledge perspective on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ', *Faith and Philosophy*, **6** (1989), 172–178; Jonathan L. Kvanvig *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jerry L. Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Charles Seymour *A Theodicy of Hell* (Boston MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).
2. Because the person's choice of a destiny occurs in a context of ambiguity, it meets this commonly supposed condition of being free; and because the person would have chosen, however unfreely, the same destiny in a context of full clarity, the person also embraces all that is essential to the chosen destiny, however unforeseen some of it may have been. But if the person should ever come to regret the chosen destiny in the sense of wishing that he or she had opted for some other destiny instead, then condition (b) of (FED) would not be met.
3. See Thomas Talbott 'The doctrine of everlasting punishment', *Faith and Philosophy*, **7** (1990), 36–38, and *idem* 'Craig on the possibility of eternal damnation', *Religious Studies*, **28** (1992), 500–503. See also *idem The Inescapable Love of God* (Parkland FL: Universal Publishers/uPublish.com, 1999), ch. 11.
4. Michael Murray 'Three versions of universalism', *Faith and Philosophy*, **16** (1999), 61–62.
5. *Ibid*., 62.
6. Charles Seymour *A Theodicy of Hell* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 140.
7. Quoted in *ibid*., 140.
8. *Ibid*., 142.
9. *Ibid*., 141.
10. *Ibid*., 142.
11. C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain* (New York NY: The MacMillan Company, 1944), 80–81.
12. *Ibid*., 78.
13. William Lane Craig 'Talbott's universalism', *Religious Studies*, **27** (1991), 301–302. *Of course* it is possible that 'some persons [the mentally defective, for example] … will act irrationally'. And a dog or some other non-person might act non-rationally as well. But what does this have to do with freedom and moral responsibility?
14. Richard Swinburne 'A theodicy of heaven and hell' in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.) *The Existence of God* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 49.
15. See Thomas Talbott 'On free agency and the concept of power', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, **69** (1988), 241–254.
16. Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 82.
17. *Ibid*., 83.
18. It is by no means clear what Kvanvig means by 'self-determination'. Insofar as he contrasts self-determination with submission to God, the former is evidently something bad, on his view. But since free will or metaphysical freedom is a good on his view, the self-determination of which he speaks evidently has nothing to do with free will or metaphysical freedom. So just what is it that the damned supposedly choose when they opt for self-determination?
19. Walls *Logic of Damnation*, 129.
20. *Ibid*., 133.

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21. Many libertarians now concede that an action might be free even when determined by 'an appropriately formed' character for which the agent in question is responsible. (See, for example, Robert Kane *The Significance of Free Will* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 5, and James F. Sennett 'Is there freedom in heaven?', *Faith and Philosophy*, **16** (1999), 69–82. And though she might not call such an action 'free', Laura Ekstrom nonetheless argues in *Free Will: A Philosophical Study* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2000), 210–213, that we can be responsible for such determined actions.) These analyses are, I believe, giant strides in the right direction. But from the perspective of Christian theology in particular, several weaknesses remain. First, we must do justice to an important asymmetry: Whereas an action determined by a 'good character' may indeed be free in some cases, an action determined by a 'bad character' is never free, however that bad character may have been formed and however many undetermined choices may have contributed to its formation. Second, the idea that we, and not God, are responsible for a good character, where such exists, seems utterly inconsistent with Pauline theology. And third, a pattern of bad choices can be just as useful to God in shaping a good character in the appropriate way as a pattern of good choices can be. But a defence of these claims will have to await a separate paper.
22. C. S. Lewis *Surprised by Joy* (New York NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 224.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 229.
26. 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this [the faith] is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast' (Ephesians 2·8–9).
27. But the expression, 'There but for the grace of God go I', is also misleading insofar as it implies that the other person is less an object of God's grace than I am.
28. See Augustine *De Correctione Donatistarium*, ch. 23.
29. Acts 9.1.
30. Craig 'Talbott's universalism', 300.
31. Walls *Logic of Damnation*, 132.
32. *Ibid.*, 133. But just what does Walls mean by 'constitutional strength or capacity'? According to Augustine, our 'capacity to absorb ever greater amounts of torment' will be greatly enhanced in hell.
33. *Ibid.*
34. See Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (New York NY: The Macmillan Company, 1958), § 38.
35. Walls *Logic of Damnation*, 133.
36. Lewis *Surprised by Joy*, 232.
37. *Idem Problem of Pain*, 114.
38. Walls *Logic of Damnation*, 128.
39. *Ibid.*, 126.
40. *Ibid.*, 129.
41. *Ibid.*, 126.
42. Lewis *Problem of Pain*, 108.
43. *Ibid.*, 109. Lewis asks us to imagine that this man remains 'unshakably confident' and 'without a care in the world'. But how a dependent creature, facing his or her death, could remain unshakably confident while remaining unrepentantly wicked, Lewis does not explain. And perhaps that is but one more illustration of how misleading such imaginative accounts of wickedness can be. They inevitably encourage us to view wickedness from the outside, so to speak, or from the perspective of fear rather than that of love.
44. *Ibid.*, 110.
45. And, of course, that is just what mercy requires as well. For a defence of the claim that divine justice and divine mercy are exactly the same attribute, see Thomas Talbott 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice', *Religious Studies*, **29** (1993), 151–168. Much of the same material appears also in *idem Inescapable Love of God*, ch. 9.
46. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 115.
47. *Ibid.*
48. My thanks to two anonymous referees for this journal for some perceptive comments.

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