

The Fatal Flaw in Free-will Theodicies of Hell

Christians in the West (though not necessarily in the East) have traditionally viewed hell as a form of eschatological punishment, a divinely imposed retribution for sins freely committed during an earthly life. But during the 20th Century in particular, some Christian thinkers began revising this traditional understanding by replacing the idea of a divinely imposed retribution with that of a freely embraced condition. C. S. Lewis, one of the earliest proponents of such an understanding, thus wrote: “In creating beings with free will, omnipotence from the outset submits to the possibility of ... defeat.... I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.”¹ Such a view clearly rests upon an incompatibilist (or so-called libertarian) understanding of human freedom: the idea that not even omnipotence can causally determine, either directly or indirectly through secondary causes, our free choices. If that is true, then the creation of “beings with free will” carries the inherent risk, Lewis believed, that some of them will defeat forever God’s loving purpose for their lives.

But why suppose it even possible that someone should *both* experience the unbearable misery of hell, on the one hand, *and* freely choose to lock its doors from the inside, on the other? Are there no limits of any kind to the range of *possible* free choice? If there are no such limits, then an undetermined free choice seems indistinguishable from random chance; and if there are such limits, then we must consider whether Lewis’ imagined choice lies inside or outside of these limits. Any consideration of the latter issue, moreover, requires a much more complete analysis of *moral freedom* than the mere assertion of incompatibilism. For it is hardly enough merely to specify a single necessary condition of moral freedom—namely that a choice is free in the relevant sense only if it is not causally determined by factors outside the choosing agent’s

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 127.

control—and then simply to leave it at that, as if there were no other necessary conditions of free choice. Not just any uncaused event, after all, or just any agent caused choice, or just any randomly generated selection between alternatives will qualify as a *free* choice for which the choosing agent is morally responsible. At the very least, moral freedom also requires a minimal degree of rationality—including, for example, an ability to discern normal reasons for acting, to draw reasonable inferences from experience, and to learn important lessons from the consequences of one's own actions. With good reason, therefore, do we exclude small children, the severely brain damaged, paranoid schizophrenics, and even dogs from the class of free moral agents. For however causally undetermined some of their behavior might be, most of us believe that they all lack some part of the rationality required to qualify as free moral agents.

Suppose, by way of illustration, that a schizophrenic young man should kill his loving mother, believing her to be a sinister space alien who has devoured his real mother; and suppose further that he does so in a context in which he categorically could have chosen otherwise (in part, perhaps, because he worries about possible retaliation from other sinister space aliens). Why should such an irrational choice, even if not causally determined, be any more compatible with genuine moral freedom than a rigorous determinism would be? Either our seriously deluded beliefs, particularly those with destructive consequences in our own lives, are in principle correctable by some degree of powerful evidence against them, or the choices that rest upon them are simply too irrational to qualify as free moral choices.

So why suppose it even possible, I am asking, that someone might *freely* lock the doors of hell from the inside? Would not the very act of embracing a truly hellish condition be far too irrational to qualify as an instance of acting freely? Consider how in Book I of John Milton's great epic poem *Paradise Lost* Satan embraces (or at least pretends to embrace) the hell to which God

has condemned him. When Satan defiantly declares, “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n,” he comforts himself with a host of irrational delusions: with the delusion, for example, that he “Can make a Heav’n of Hell,” with the delusion that in hell he is at least free (despite his bondage to destructive desires), and with the delusion that in hell he “may reign secure.”² Where he gets the absurd idea that someone other than the One who had already defeated him in battle might reign in hell the text provides nary a clue. But it is a tribute to Milton’s art that by Book IV Satan has already lost most of the illusions that made the “heroic” speech of Book I possible; and even though the more pitiful (and even human) character in Book IV never comes to the point of actual repentance, he nonetheless seems well on the road to it.³ And his final refusal to repent occurs in a context in which he is simply too irrational to qualify as a free moral agent. Listen to his own words:

So Farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear,

Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost;

Evil be thou my Good ...⁴

It is as if a human being with a normal nervous system should shove his or her hand into a flaming hot fire and exclaim, “Excruciating pain and torment be thou my intense pleasure!” You can’t get any more irrational than that.

² See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Merritt Y Hughes (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1976), Bk. 1, lines 251-263.

³ In Book IV an awakened conscience, so essential to moral freedom, leads Satan into despair (see line 83) and also leads him to acknowledge the extent to which “Pride and worse Ambition threw me down” (line 40). He even upbraids himself for being so stupid in “boasting I could subdue / th’ Omnipotent” (lines 86-87) and also acknowledges the extent of his own guilt: “Ah wherefore! He [God] deserv’d no such return / From me, whom he created what I was / in that bright eminence” (lines 42-45). A little later he then laments: “Me miserable! Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath and infinite despair? / Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell” (lines 73-75). Because he has not yet lost his rationality altogether in the face of such misery, he even toys with the idea of repenting: “O then at last relent: Is there no place / Left for repentance, none for Pardon left?” (lines 79-80). But unfortunately, he still retains the illusion, which would itself easily be shattered in the outer darkness, that he can continue to rule over the legions of fallen angels in hell, perhaps even forever, and to receive worship and praise from them in return. That illusion together with the fear of being shamed in front of those he had deceived is simply too much for him to endure, and he thus finds himself unwilling to repent.

⁴ *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 4, lines 108-110.

In the end, of course, Milton conceived of hell as an externally imposed punishment in the form of unending torment and not as a freely embraced condition at all. So he had no need to explain why Satan and the other fallen angels will never choose to escape their misery in hell; it is simply not permitted. But given the fierce New Testament imagery associated with Gehenna, the lake of fire, and the outer darkness, a free will theodicy of hell surely does require some account of how a sinner might come to embrace such horrific realities both freely and forever.

Consider more closely the outer darkness, which is perhaps the easiest of the three for a free will theodicy of hell to accommodate. If we think of the outer darkness as the logical limit, short of annihilation, of possible separation from every implicit experience of God, then perhaps it is indeed something that some sinners might confusedly choose for themselves, at least until they actually experience fully the loneliness and terror associated with it. For the following picture seems to accord very well with the New Testament teaching, as I interpret it. Whenever we try to benefit ourselves at the expense of others (and thus violate the command to love our neighbor even as we love ourselves), we thereby begin to separate ourselves from the loving nature of God. And if we persist in clinging to the old person, as St. Paul called it, or to the false self and its self-centered delusions, then we will sooner or later come to experience God's love as a consuming fire that threatens to destroy the very thing we *call* ourselves, namely the old person. So if we persist in our obstinate rebellion long enough, we will at some point confront the following choice: either submit to God and permit the consuming fire of his love to burn away all of our sinful ambitions and inclinations (in the lake of fire, if nowhere else), or separate ourselves from every implicit experience of God and thereby plunge ourselves into the outer darkness.

But although such a picture might explain why someone would resist God's purifying love for a while, perhaps even for an extended period of time, it cannot explain how a minimally rational agent could *both* experience the outer darkness—a soul suspended alone in sheer nothingness, if you will, without even a physical environment to experience—and continue to regard such a condition as more desirable than submission to the loving will of God. For as Lewis himself insisted concerning the divine nature, “union with that Nature is bliss and separation from it [an objective] horror.”⁵ And even if the reprobate should find themselves unable to appreciate, on account of their hardness of heart, the bliss of union with God, they could hardly misconstrue completely the horror of the outer darkness, where there is, at least metaphorically speaking, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Perhaps no one has described that horror more poignantly than George MacDonald:

For let a man think and care ever so little about God, he does not therefore exist without God. God is here with him, upholding, warming, delighting, teaching him—making life a good thing to him. God gives him himself, though he knows it not. But when God withdraws from a man [or the person withdraws from God] as far as that can be without the man's ceasing to be; when the man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end . . . with no inbreathing of joy, with nothing [including the faintest experience of love] to make life good, then will he listen in agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door; then . . . he will be ready to rush into the very heart of the Consuming Fire to know life once more, to change this terror of sick negation, of un-

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 232.

speaking death, for that region of hopeful pain. Imagination cannot mislead us into too much horror of being without God—that one living death.⁶

Note the expression “that region of hopeful pain.” Here MacDonald seems to recognize that, on account of their many delusions, those who choose a life apart from God may be in no position, apart from a painful transformation, to appreciate fully the bliss that union with God entails. He would presumably have accepted, in other words, the picture that Lewis painted in *The Great Divorce*, where the unrepentant who take a bus into the foothills of heaven find it an excruciatingly painful experience. According to MacDonald, however, a life apart from any implicit experience of God is infinitely worse than that; it is in fact so horrific that no one could both experience such a life and continue *freely* choosing it forever. And if MacDonald was right about that, as I believe he was, then a universalist can simply let the chips fall where they may on the issue of theological determinism. Personally, I seriously doubt that God causally determines every event that occurs, whether it be the change of state of a radium atom, a dog’s leaping this way rather than that while romping in the yard, or the free choice of an independent rational agent. But whether I am right about that or not, the above quotation from MacDonald provides a perfectly clear picture, I believe, of how libertarian freedom, indeterminism, and even sheer chance could fit into a predestinarian scheme in which a glorious end is ultimately inescapable.

The crucial point is that God need not do anything to us and need not control our individual choices in order for his love to win in the end; as a last resort, he need only permit us to experience the very condition of separation that we sometimes confusedly choose for ourselves. For at some point in the process of separating ourselves from God’s loving nature, if it continues long enough, we will begin to discover the horrific nature of such separation—unless, of course, we are simply too irrational to qualify as a free moral agent and are therefore in no position to em-

⁶ George MacDonald, “The Consuming Fire,” in *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitethorn, CA: Johanesen, 2004), 31.

brace freely anything whatsoever. For just as no minimally rational person (with a normal nervous system) could both shove an unprotected arm into a hot fire and retain the illusion that the fire causes sensations of intense pleasure, neither could such a person both experience the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness and retain the illusion that submission to the loving nature of God would be even worse than this.

So herein lies, I believe, the fatal flaw in free will theodicies of hell. Even if the appeal to free will could explain how some sinners might confusedly choose to separate themselves from the divine nature altogether and hence from the bliss of union with it, no appeal to free will can explain how someone who actually experiences such a separation could continue to embrace such a horror forever.

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