

## A hell of a choice: reply to Talbott

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**Abstract:** In this article I respond to Thomas Talbott's criticisms of the view of hell I have defended. In particular, I argue that coherent sense can be made of the choice to be eternally separated from God. Moreover, Talbott does not successfully show how God can save everyone without overriding their freedom. Finally, I argue that there is no significant sense in which sinners defeat God or sin with impunity on the view I have defended. Talbott's case that universalism necessarily follows from God's perfect love and power then fails.

### Introduction

One of the most important and personally engaging of all questions has to do with the range of possibilities for human existence. In particular, what levels of happiness and fulfilment, on the one hand, and of misery and frustration, on the other, are possible? Traditional Christian theology has returned the answer that the possibilities are extreme. According to Christianity, human beings have the potential to experience perfect happiness, delight, and satisfaction, and to do so forever. Indeed, that is what human beings were created for: to experience perfect joy in an eternal relationship with God Himself. But the flip side of this is also possible, namely, that we can experience utter misery because we can choose to reject forever the love of God for which we were created. Obviously then, the claim that God exists and that we have the potential to be related to Him dramatically raises the stakes on our choices and likewise enlarges the possibilities for human fulfilment and misery.

In a series of recent essays, Thomas Talbott has extensively criticized certain key elements of this traditional account of possible human destinies. More specifically, he has rejected the claim that we can finally reject God and be forever separated from Him. In short, as Talbott sees it, heaven is inevitable for all persons, whereas eternal hell is impossible. Unlike some of his fellow universalists, Talbott defends universal salvation not as a mere possibility, nor even as a probability, but as a necessity. That is, he argues that it is necessarily true that if

God is all powerful and perfectly loving, then all will be saved in the end. Universalism is a minority position in the history of theology, but it has been judged an acceptable position to hope that all will be saved, and to pray for this end, at least in Roman Catholic theology. The notion of necessary universalism, however, is a much stronger claim, and has been rejected as an unacceptable position. But even if it is not rejected as a heresy, I want to insist that necessary universalism is a distinctly minority position that must bear the burden of proof.

In an earlier work, I have criticized Talbott's case for necessary universalism.<sup>1</sup> In a recent essay, Talbott has responded to my criticisms of his views, among others, and has offered a refurbished account of his central arguments.<sup>2</sup> Here, I want to return the favour. Talbott's attempt to make the case for necessary universalism hinges on two central claims that I now want to focus on for the remainder of this essay. First, he has argued in detail that the choice of eternal hell is incoherent and therefore impossible. Second, he has argued that if the punishment of hell is such that hell can forever be preferred to heaven, then we can in fact sin with impunity and even defeat God. The first of these claims is most crucial to Talbott's case so I shall deal with it at some length. Let us turn now to consider these claims.

### **The choice of eternal hell**

Talbott's claim that universalism is necessarily true follows straightforwardly from his view of the love of God, along with his claim that the choice of eternal hell is incoherent. It is the combination of these convictions that renders universalism necessarily true for Talbott. It is Talbott's view, then, that universalism is necessarily true in both the metaphysical and the epistemic sense. Not only is it the case that the choice of eternal hell is impossible in the metaphysical sense, but we can know this with certainty. Talbott's understanding of the love of God is crucial for his view. In his view, which I heartily accept, God necessarily loves all persons deeply and consistently. A weaker view of God's love than Talbott defends would make it relatively easy to explain how some might choose eternal hell. But given the view of God's love that Talbott endorses, he can plausibly advance the argument that the choice of eternal hell is simply incoherent.

Talbott's case that the choice of eternal hell is incoherent gains force because he has a very particular account of what is involved in freely choosing an eternal destiny. In short, such a choice must be fully informed, and once the person making the choice gets what he wants, then it must be the case that he never regrets his choice. This means that the person must be free from ignorance and illusion both in his initial choice as well as later. He must fully understand what he has chosen while freely persisting in that choice. Given these conditions, Talbott thinks there is an obvious and important asymmetry between choosing

fellowship with God as an eternal destiny, on the one hand, and choosing hell as an eternal destiny, on the other. Whereas the first of these obviously is possible, the latter is not.<sup>3</sup>

Talbott's argument also hinges on his view that hell is pictured in the New Testament 'as a forcibly imposed punishment rather than as a freely embraced condition'.<sup>4</sup> It is this view of hell that is also prominent in much traditional theology. If hell is indeed forcibly imposed misery, then it seems unintelligible that anyone could freely choose it forever. Talbott puts the point as follows.

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 [a person] 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?<sup>5</sup>

As Talbott sees it then, the forcibly imposed misery of hell will eventually move even the most recalcitrant sinners to repent and choose heaven for their eternal destiny. Moreover, he believes sinners will do this with their freedom intact. That is, sinners will freely respond to the punishment of hell and happily embrace a relationship with God.

It is important to emphasize that Talbott affirms the libertarian understanding of freedom in the sense that he believes 'creaturely freedom could never exist in a fully deterministic universe'.<sup>6</sup> He has deep reservations, however, about the standard understanding of libertarian freedom, which 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*.<sup>7</sup>

While Talbott plans to offer an alternative account, in this paper he says he will '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'.<sup>8</sup> This should be kept in mind when we examine Talbott's understanding of dramatic conversions below.

It is worth noting, in the meantime, that Talbott has elsewhere distinguished between having the power to do something, on the one hand, and being psychologically capable of doing it, on the other. As an instance of the difference, he cites Augustine's view that the redeemed in heaven will no longer even be tempted to disobey God. Indeed, they will see with such clarity that God is the source of happiness and sin is the source of misery that sin and disobedience will no longer be psychologically possible for them. But surely they will not be less free on this account Talbott points out, nor will it be the case that they lack the power to sin. Nevertheless, sin will remain a psychological impossibility for

them.<sup>9</sup> This distinction is important because it calls into question the second condition of libertarian freedom stated above.

I accept Talbott's distinction between power and psychological ability as a helpful one. However, even with this distinction granted, there are serious problems with his claim that persons who repent under forcibly imposed punishment are free in a non-determined sense. First, the notion of ever increasing misery, misery without a distinct limit, destroys the very notion of a free choice. The reason for this is that finite beings like ourselves are simply not constituted in such a way that we can absorb ever-increasing misery. At some point, we would either be coerced to submit, or we would go insane, or we would perish. We have neither the *power* nor the *psychological ability* to withstand constantly increasing misery, regardless of whether that misery is physical or emotional in nature. Our freedom, in other words, can only take so much pressure. Where exactly the limit lies is perhaps not easy to say, but clearly there is such a limit.

For punishment to elicit a free choice that is morally significant, the person receiving the punishment must come to see the truth about himself and his actions and genuinely want to change. He must achieve moral insight in the process and willingly desire to act on that insight. He must want to change because of the truth he has seen, not merely to escape or avoid the punishment that is being forced upon him. Consider now another passage in which Talbott alleges the impossibility of freely choosing eternal misery.

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* the relevant facts about the source of human happiness and suffers 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?<sup>10</sup>

Now, I am inclined to agree with Talbott that a person as he describes would have no motive for remaining in his misery. On the assumption that he is at least minimally rational and desires his own happiness, then it is difficult to conceive of any sort of motive to resist God in these circumstances.

As I have argued against Talbott before, the really crucial question is whether we are truly free to acquire the relevant insight or not.<sup>11</sup> And what must be clearly understood is that there is more required here than merely knowing all the facts. The knowledge that finally counts is personal knowledge – it is moral understanding, a right sense of values and the like. This is the biblical sense of what it means to know God, as suggested by numerous passages. For just one instance, consider Jeremiah 22.16: 'He defended the cause of the poor and needy and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me declares the LORD.' These are the sort of factors involved in knowing in a morally significant way the source of human happiness. For the source of human happiness is a right relationship with God and other persons. And one does not gain a meaningful understanding of

this without entering and growing in those relationships. As one comes to know and love God, one's understanding that God is the source of happiness grows and deepens accordingly.

The point to be emphasized here is that such insight and understanding cannot be coerced or instilled by forcibly imposed punishment. Rather, the truth must be not only discerned, but also willingly owned and appropriated if one is to achieve an understanding of God as the source of happiness that is spiritually and morally profound. Interestingly, Talbott apparently recognizes this point. He draws a distinction between two kinds of compulsion and defends what he calls the 'right' kind of compulsion, namely, that which comes from dramatic conversions such as that of C. S. Lewis. As he notes, when Lewis was finally converted, he had a sense of God closing in on him in such a way that it seemed impossible to do otherwise than to submit to God.

Over against this, Talbott repudiates the sort of compulsion defended by Augustine, who was willing to employ the sword to persuade the Donatists to come back to the Church. He writes: '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.'<sup>12</sup> Now Talbott is surely right that there is an important difference between these two kinds of compulsion, and that the latter is not only morally objectionable, but also incompatible with any meaningful sense of freedom.

However, it is somewhat puzzling that Talbott appeals to this distinction, given his view of hell as 'forcibly imposed punishment'. As we shall shortly see, he criticizes the view of hell I defend as not severe enough. By contrast, he aligns himself with the view, common in much traditional theology, that hell is a matter of 'unbearable suffering'.<sup>13</sup> It is also the case that many traditional theologians hold the somewhat paradoxical view that this unbearable suffering must nevertheless be borne forever. Indeed, some even suggest that God provides the damned supernatural strength and thereby forces them to endure what could not otherwise be borne.

As Talbott notes, this picture of hell is nothing short of the ultimate torture chamber and it is most difficult, if not impossible, to see how this can be compatible with the biblical picture of God as a being who is both supremely loving and supremely powerful. Thus, theologians have been inclined to modify the traditional doctrine in one of two ways. On the one hand, they can say the punishment of hell is indeed unbearable, but not eternal, or on the other hand, they can say it is terrible, albeit bearable, and can therefore be chosen freely as an eternal destiny. Talbott obviously takes the former option.

Again, the point I want to emphasize is that it is hard to see how this squares with Talbott's distinction between two kinds of compulsion, and his repudiation of compulsion by physical threats such as the sword. For those traditional accounts

of hell that Talbott endorses surely include physical pain of a rather intense variety. He owes it to us to be forthright on how he understands the nature of misery in hell. If he does not believe hell includes physical pain and punishment, then he should not pretend to endorse the traditional understanding of what makes the punishment of hell unbearable.<sup>14</sup> If he does endorse the traditional view, then to avoid outright inconsistency here, he owes us some explanation of how forcibly imposed punishment that produces unbearable misery is not the wrong kind of compulsion. Indeed, this point holds even if Talbott thinks the misery of hell is purely psychological or spiritual. If it is objectionable to compel repentance by the sword, it is objectionable to compel repentance by forcibly imposed misery, whether physical, psychological or spiritual.

But there is another problem with Talbott's account of the right kind of compulsion. Notice his italicized words above, namely, his appeal to 'compelling evidence' that alters one's beliefs in a perfectly rational way. Now I have no problem with the idea that evidence that is taken to be compelling can alter one's beliefs in a completely rational way. Indeed, it is arguably the very nature of rationality to be willing to alter one's beliefs in light of appropriate evidence, especially if that evidence is staring one directly in the face. I am more dubious, however, about the notion that evidence can ever be truly compelling. At least this is true if we are talking about evidence in the ordinary sense of the word. And Talbott's appeal to the example of C. S. Lewis suggests that this is how he understands the term.<sup>15</sup> But perhaps he has something else in mind. Perhaps what he *means* by 'evidence' includes the misery caused by sin. If this is what he has in mind, and the evidence includes ever increasing, forcibly imposed misery, then such 'evidence' would be compelling. But compulsion by such evidence would pose all the problems noted above.<sup>16</sup>

So let us assume that Talbott is speaking of evidence in the more ordinary sense of the term. In this sense, it is hard to make the case that evidence can ever be truly compelling. For the fact of the matter is that some persons simply may not wish to be fully and consistently rational, and they are prepared to dispute even such apparently undeniable truths as basic laws of logic. Moreover, there are various Cartesian-styled methods of doubting even the most obvious truths, and thereby giving one's scepticism an air of intellectual respectability. But when we come to religious truth-claims, it is notoriously the case that there is even more room to doubt for those who are inclined to do so. Indeed, God's very existence is a matter of debate, and it is widely agreed among philosophers that none of the arguments for his existence are entirely compelling. All of them are such that either they employ one or more controversial premises or the conclusion that God exists follows doubtfully from those premises. And things are even more difficult when we come to distinctively Christian claims such as the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus. These doctrines depend on controversial historical judgements and disputed interpretations of the biblical documents.

This is not to deny that there is good evidence in favour of belief. But there is a vast difference between adequate evidence and compelling evidence. Indeed, it is arguable that the evidence needs to be at least adequate for belief to be rational, but short of compelling, for us to be properly free in our response to it. Consider in this light Pascal's comment on the evidence for Christianity.

The prophecies, even the miracles and proofs of our religion are not of such a kind that they can be said to be absolutely convincing ... . But the evidence is such as to exceed, or at least equal, the evidence to the contrary, so that it cannot be reason that decides us against following it, and can therefore only be concupiscence and wickedness of heart.<sup>17</sup>

It is important for Pascal that the evidence for Christianity be at least as good as the evidence against it, for if it were not then it would arguably be irrational to believe. Such belief would have to be an act of the will to fly in the face of the evidence. But, as Pascal sees it, belief is not irrational in this manner. However, faith is not merely an intellectual matter either. Rather, it is also very much a matter of the heart. That is, it is a matter of having one's heart rightly disposed, of loving the right things for the right reasons, and so on. This is part of the reason that God is hidden, according to Pascal. He is not on display in order to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. Since He is hidden, we must seriously seek Him in response to His prompting, and as we do so, He reveals Himself to us more and more. But His self-disclosure varies according to our willingness to open our hearts to the truth and follow it.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the evidence is disclosed in this fashion is also important for a correct diagnosis of the true nature of unbelief. As Pascal puts it, it is a matter of 'concupiscence and wickedness of heart'. Unbelief, at the end of the day, is not a matter of lacking sufficient evidence. This is also why evidence alone can never be compelling if we mean by that to say that certain evidence is such that unbelief would simply be impossible in the face of it. For true faith is much more than assent to evidence or recognition of certain facts. God can and does reveal Himself to us quite clearly enough to make clear the disposition of our hearts. In this sense the evidence is compelling. But neither 'compelling evidence' nor 'unbearable suffering' can guarantee the sort of free response that God desires from His creatures. Evidence can never be compelling in the relevant sense, and unbearable suffering cannot elicit a response that is truly morally free. A response that is extracted by unbearable suffering is compelled in a sense that destroys any meaningful sense of freedom.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter. In response to my earlier criticism of his views, Talbott writes as follows.

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 fully informed decision to reject the true God?<sup>19</sup>

Well, these are good questions, so I shall attempt to answer them. My reply, in brief, is that the specific freedom I believe that God cannot interfere with without destroying is our freedom to trust and love Him or not.

Let me begin to spell out what I mean by addressing Talbott's claim that a fully informed decision to reject God would require 'absolute clarity of vision'. And freely rejecting God with such clarity is precisely what Talbott says is impossible. And I agree. However, here is where I part ways with Talbott. Such absolute clarity of vision is only achieved as we progressively respond with trust and love to God's self-revelation. Absolute clarity comes when we have responded to God's gracious initiatives and have allowed Him to form in us a character that is holy, like His own character. This kind of clarity is the result of coming to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as our self. When our character is formed in this fashion then we see with perfect clarity that God is the source of happiness and sin is the source of misery. And in this condition, we freely and gladly obey God and are no longer psychologically capable of sinning or rejecting God. This is the happy state of the blessed in heaven.

Are such persons still free? Yes, they are perfectly free within the happy limits of a character formed by the wonderful truth about God. In an important sense they still retain libertarian freedom, for their actions are not all determined. Precisely how they will honour God and express their character of holy love may be up to them. But sin and disobedience will no longer be an option for them, given the character they have formed. But here again is where I part ways with Talbott. We must freely respond to God's gracious initiatives with trust and love in order to form this kind of character, and such trust and love cannot be compelled. When God first approaches us in His gracious initiative, our characters are far from formed in holy love, and consequently, we do not have the absolute clarity of vision that precludes sin, disobedience, and rejection of God's will for us. To be sure, God informs us as fully as we can be informed in that condition.

We can then distinguish between two senses of being fully informed. In the *ultimate sense* of this term, it means to know with profound certainty in the depths of our being and at all levels of our character that God is perfectly good and wise and that He is the indispensable source of our happiness and fulfilment. As distinct from this, we can stipulate the *initial sense* of the term, and say that one is fully informed if he is given as much truth and insight as he is capable of receiving at the current level of his character and spiritual capacities.

Now here is the point I want to emphasize. If a person is truly free, then he can resist God's overtures at this point, he can refuse to trust Him, and consequently never form the sort of character that makes disobedience an impossibility. This is



where our true moral freedom lies, the freedom that God has granted us and will not override. If we exercise this freedom as God intends, our freedom is perfected and we become the kind of persons who gladly obey him and find our happiness and fulfilment in doing so. But on the other hand, if we choose to resist God and refuse to believe that He not only knows what is best for us but also wants it, then our characters can become fully formed by evil and we may never come to trust and love God. This is damnation. Recall that the initial sin in the Garden of Eden began with a failure to trust God. It was the fear that what God had forbidden was actually something good for them that led to the choice to disobey God. Indeed, it is important to stress that the very nature of trust is that it is exercised in a context of less than full disclosure. Trust is required when information or understanding is incomplete. By contrast, when we know and understand fully, trust is no longer required. In calling us to a life of trust and obedience, God calls us to believe that His intentions for us are good and that His will is directed toward our ultimate fulfilment and happiness.

God has many means to draw His children back to Him once they have chosen the way of mistrust and disobedience, including punishment. Certainly punishment is often effective in correcting rebellion, but there is no guarantee that it will have this effect. This point is suggested by a number of biblical texts. Let us reflect on a couple of them. First, consider Revelation 16.9, which describes the fourth bowl of God's wrath, namely, scorching heat from the sun: 'They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over the plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.'<sup>20</sup> Now what is striking here is the defiant response to even the intense pain of physical punishment. The point is that if punishment is properly seen for what it is, namely, the attempt by a loving God to correct His wayward children, then it can induce repentance, a sincere change of mind. But if not, it will only be experienced as a hateful thing that elicits cursing and further defiance.

Consider now the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which Talbott cites as evidence for the view that hell is forcibly imposed punishment.<sup>21</sup> This story is apparently a parable, and as such we cannot press all the details of the story and assume each of them is intended to make a specific point. A few observations are in order, however. First, there is nothing in the story to indicate the misery of the rich man was an unbearable punishment that led to his repentance and eventual salvation. That is precisely the scenario we would expect if Talbott's theory of hell is correct. Second, despite the rich man's misery he seems more concerned to justify himself than to repent and beg God's mercy. Although his first request is for relief from his pain, his next request is for Lazarus to be sent to his brothers to warn them so they can escape his fate. While this appears, on the surface, to be a loving gesture on behalf of his brothers, it may actually be an indirect attempt at self-justification. This is indicated by Abraham's response when he points out that his brothers have Moses and the prophets. When the rich man retorts that

more is needed, that they would repent if someone from the dead went to them, Abraham replies: 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead' (Luke 16.31).

The unspoken claim in the rich man's request is that if he had been better warned, *he* would not be there either. Indeed, his request is an appeal for compelling evidence, the sort of evidence that Talbott also thinks would be convincing and produce repentance. But the point of the parable is that the rich man is not in hell because he lacks compelling evidence. Just like his brothers, he had available to him Moses and the Prophets. And Moses and the Prophets warned against indifference to the poor, yet the rich man ignored Lazarus as he lay at his gate covered with sores. In other words, he was indeed fully informed but declined to act on the truth that was openly before him. He was fully informed in the initial sense of the term as distinguished above, but he was not compelled. In resisting the truth, he failed to form the sort of character that he would have developed had he responded to the truth that he was given.

As I see it then, hell is indeed a place of misery but not unbearable misery. This is why it can be freely chosen forever as one's eternal destiny. Talbott certainly raises an obvious question in asking what possible motive could explain such a choice. In response to this, I would begin by insisting that the choice of evil is ultimately irrational, although it has its own twisted sort of logic. The heart of this perverse logic is famously stated by Milton in words attributed to Satan: 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven'. The damned are not, then, altogether irrational. They have certain preferences and they make choices that make sense in light of those preferences. In short, the damned find a certain distorted sort of satisfaction in evil and they perversely prefer that satisfaction to the true happiness of heaven.

Although this notion is somewhat paradoxical, I believe it is coherent. It has, moreover, been depicted with striking psychological plausibility in literary sources, one of the more recent and well known of which is C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*.<sup>22</sup> In this fantasy, Lewis describes a number of characters from hell who are given a bus ride to heaven and given the option to stay there. In a series of scenarios that seem hauntingly familiar, either with respect to attitudes in our own hearts or in persons we have encountered, Lewis describes how most of the characters decline the invitation to remain in heaven and opt to return to hell. In each case, there is some sin they cherish, some resentment or jealousy, sense of injustice, or the like that they cling to as if their lives depended upon it. In each case Lewis describes the miserable satisfaction they derive from holding on to their sins and how they prefer it to the joy of heaven. Moreover, it is clear that repentance and transformation involve a certain amount of pain. While truth is not compelling, it does sometimes hurt and given the choice, rather than submit to the pain of transformation, they elect to hold on to their sins and the distorted pleasures they afford. The desire to avoid the pain of transformation is another

part of the complex motivations that make sense of the choice to embrace eternal hell.

I have written to defend the intelligibility of this notion at some length elsewhere, and I will not repeat myself here. However, it is important to note that the view that hell can be preferred to heaven obviously requires a profound illusion. Those who remain in hell because they take it in some way to be better than heaven are deeply self-deceived. The ability to decline the truth about ourselves, and God, and thereby deceive ourselves is an essential component of the moral freedom I have defended.<sup>23</sup> It is the ability to deceive ourselves that finally makes intelligible the choice of eternal hell. Let us turn now, more briefly, to Talbott's argument that this allows us to sin with impunity.

### **The horror of hell**

In arguing that the damned are self-deluded in this fashion, Talbott charges that I, along with Lewis, have in effect taken 'the hell out of hell, at least as far as the damned are concerned'.<sup>24</sup> After all, if the damned in some sense get what they want, is hell such a bad place after all? Indeed, Talbott argues that there is no coherent sense to the idea that the damned could forever conceal from themselves the objective horror of hell. Eventually, he maintains, those in hell must come up against the hard rock of reality and thereby shatter all their illusions to pieces. Talbott illustrates his claim with an example of someone who stuck his arm in the fire believing it would cause him pleasurable sensations. Either his experience would shatter his illusions about fire or someone or something would have shielded him from the fire and its ability to harm him and cause pain.

Likewise, if I act on the sinful illusion that I can promote my happiness and wellbeing apart from God, then either experience will shatter this illusion or someone or something must protect me from the reality of my choices. Furthermore,

... 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.<sup>25</sup>

Once again, Talbott is asking for those in hell to experience what they do not have the capacity to experience. Only one who is fully informed in the ultimate sense I distinguished above, and fully formed by the truth about God could truly understand the horror of being separated from Him. Only one who fully understood the goodness of God, and had a deep sense of His beauty, as well the joy of living in His presence, could truly grasp the horror of being separated from Him forever. Only someone who had responded in trust and love to God's grace and had been deeply formed by it could see with full clarity what would be lost for those who rejected it.

Ironically then, it is actually impossible for anyone fully to experience the horror of being separated from God. Those who are fully formed by the requisite truth and understanding are those who have freely accepted His grace and will forever enjoy His presence. Those who have not accepted His grace lack the capacity to experience in the fullest sense of the word what separation from God entails. The only way anyone could experience the full horror of being separated from God would be if they had been formed by the grace of God and loved God accordingly, but then God chose to reject them and exclude them from His presence anyway. While this may be conceivable in some sense of the word, I would insist that it is not actually possible. Since God is perfectly loving in His essential nature, it would be impossible for Him to act in such a fashion toward any of His creatures. The full horror of what it means to be separated from God cannot possibly be experienced, given God's essential nature as a being of perfect love. Indeed, perhaps this very impossibility is part of the mercy of God.

But this does not trivialize the loss of any who may choose to reject God's grace freely offered to them. Even given their limited spiritual capacities, they can experience enough of the horror of being separated from God to make them deeply miserable. So it is hardly true that we can sin with impunity on the account of hell I defend. Those in hell will know why they are there. Even though they will not fully understand what they have rejected since they have not experienced it, they will know they are not happy. So I must confess that I overstated the case somewhat in my earlier book when I said those in hell get what they want.<sup>26</sup> What the damned want is to be happy on their own terms. However, that is impossible. The only possible way we can truly be happy is on God's terms. So the damned choose what they *can* have on their own terms, namely, a distorted sense of satisfaction that is a perverted mirror image of the real thing. At some level they know this. Self-deception is not a matter of being unaware of truth, but of choosing not to attend to it, of turning our eyes away from it and acting as if it is not true. A person who is doing this cannot experience a deep sense of unity and integrity. There will inevitably be a deep sense of unease and unhappiness. The rock of truth does indeed hurt when we fall against it. While it does not necessarily shatter all of our illusions, it surely remains an insurmountable obstacle for any project of self-created human happiness.

These considerations also point up why Talbott is mistaken to claim that the damned succeed in 'utterly defeating God's omnipotent love and therefore utterly defeating His justice as well'.<sup>27</sup> For Talbott to employ the rhetoric of divine defeat when talking about the love of God is cleverly misleading at best. Language of defeat is appropriate when we are talking about a contest of strength, of wit, or of will. Well, the damned do not win a contest of strength, of wit nor of will by rejecting the love of God. God's love can be declined but it cannot be defeated. The only meaningful sense in which God's love could be defeated would be if He ceased to love those who rejected Him and His love turned into hate. But, in my

view, He never stops loving those who reject Him. Rather, His love shines all the brighter by remaining steadfast in the face of such rejection. In my view, God's will was to create free creatures to whom He could offer his love, knowing that it was at least possible that some of them would reject Him. His choice to create such a world means that ultimately His will is done even if things happen in that world that God does not prefer.

Even Talbott must agree that things happen in this world that God does not prefer, unless he wants to say that all the atrocities down the ages have been willed and determined by God. Of course, Talbott does not want to say any such thing. So the question can be fairly pressed: do such atrocities mean God is defeated? Surely not, as Talbott will agree. There are, however, those who hold that unless literally everything that happens is particularly willed by God, then God is less than fully sovereign. On this view to allow that anything happens that God does not will would imply a weak or defeated God. In employing the rhetoric of divine defeat Talbott reveals a curious affinity for this brand of theology. To be sure, he draws the line for divine defeat in a different place, but the fundamental idea is the same.

### Conclusion

I conclude then, that Talbott's arguments, while forceful, are not nearly sufficient to make his case, especially since he bears the burden of proof in this dispute. In the spirit of Pascal, I would insist that my arguments that the choice of eternal hell is both coherent and compatible with God's nature are at least as strong as Talbott's arguments to the contrary. It is possible that some persons may freely reject God forever, so Talbott's case that universalism is necessarily true fails.

### Notes

1. Jerry L. Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). See especially chapter 5.
2. Thomas Talbott 'Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 417–434. Talbott has also spelled out his views at some length in Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge (eds) *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003). This volume contains critiques of Talbott by several other writers, including the present author, as well as Talbott's replies to his critics.
3. Talbott 'Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity', 418–421.
4. *Ibid.*, 417.
5. *Ibid.*, 420.
6. *Ibid.*, 426.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Thomas B. Talbott 'On the divine nature and the nature of divine freedom', *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 13.
10. Talbott 'Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity', 423.

11. Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 129–133.
12. Talbott ‘Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity’, 427.
13. *Ibid.*, 417.
14. In ‘Replies to my critics’ in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, Talbott says the source of misery in hell is nothing ‘other than the sin that lies within’ and admits that his use of the phrase ‘forcibly imposed punishment’ is misleading if it is taken to mean more than this.
15. What then of testimonies like that of C. S. Lewis? It is important to note that Lewis wrote that ‘before God closed in on me, I was offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice’; C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 224. More importantly, it is crucial that Lewis was committed to following the truth, and that before his moment of conversion he had already begun to accept, however reluctantly, truths that profoundly altered his thinking. Had Lewis not made the decision to be honest with the truth on previous occasions, he would not have felt compelled as he did when the whole matter of God’s existence came to a head in his experience and thinking. For more on this matter, see Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 98–103.
16. I do not mean to deny that there is a natural connection between sin and misery, or that this is relevant evidence to be taken into account by anyone deciding whether or not to obey God or accept Christian faith. But I deny that God imposes ever-increasing misery. Such forcibly imposed misery would compel repentance, but it would not be freely chosen in any morally significant sense.
17. Blaise Pascal *Pensees*, A. J. Krailsheimer (tr.) (London: Penguin, 1966), no. 835.
18. For more on this, see Thomas V. Morris *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1992).
19. Talbott ‘Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity’, 428–429.
20. Cf. Revelation 2.21; 11.13; 16.11, 21.
21. Talbott ‘Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity’, 417.
22. C. S. Lewis *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).
23. For further details, see Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 129–133.
24. Talbott ‘Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity’, 429–430.
25. *Ibid.*, 431.
26. Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 126.
27. Talbott ‘Freedom damnation, and the power to sin with impunity’, 432.