

CHARLES SEYMOUR
ON CHOOSING HELL

The doctrine of hell has always been troublesome for philosophical theology and has particularly captured the attention of philosophers in the past decade. Those contemporary philosophers who defend the doctrine of hell inevitably argue that it is the result of free choice on the part of the damned. Richard Swinburne in his ‘Theodicy of Heaven and Hell’ says that ‘It is good that God should not let a man damn himself without much urging and giving him many opportunities to change his mind, but it is bad that someone should not in the all-important matter of the destiny of his soul be allowed finally to destroy it.’¹ William Lane Craig believes that hell is consistent with God’s justice and love since ‘Those who make a well-informed and free decision to reject Christ are self-condemned ... By spurning God’s prevenient grace and the solicitation of His Spirit, they shut out God’s mercy and seal their own destiny.’² Similar passages could be culled from the recent books of Jerry Walls and Jonathan Kvanvig.³

Disregarding variations in approach, the strategy common to these philosophers is to argue that hell is neither unjust nor unloving if it is freely chosen by the damned. Such a strategy is moot if it turns out that no one can choose hell. In a much discussed passage, Thomas Talbott denies that the notion of freely choosing hell is coherent. I will first examine Talbott’s argument in an attempt to understand it. Then I will show how the published responses to Talbott fail to strike at the heart of the argument. Finally I will present my own defence of hell, based on two strands in early church theodicy.

I. TALBOTT’S ARGUMENT

In his article ‘The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment’, Talbott writes:

The picture I get [of some theists’ views] is something like this. Though a sinner, Belial, has learned, perhaps through bitter experience, that evil is always destructive, always contrary to his own interest as well as to the interest of others; and though he sees clearly that God is the ultimate source of all happiness and that disobedience can produce only greater and greater misery in his own life as well as in the life of

¹ Richard Swinburne, ‘A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell’, *The Existence and Nature of God* (ed. Alfred J. Freddoso), p. 49. (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

² William Lane Craig, ‘“No Other Name”: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ’, *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 176.

³ Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 130, 152; Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 111, 133.

others, Belial *freely* chooses eternal misery (or perhaps eternal oblivion) for himself nonetheless. The question that immediately arises here is: What could possibly qualify as a motive for such a choice? As long as any ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom; but once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly 'free' to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself.⁴

The claim is that any choice to reject God can only be made out of 'ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire'. God can respect the sinner's freedom while removing these sources of rebellion, which would leave nothing left but a desire for happiness.

Even if this eradication of bondage, ignorance, etc., is against the person's will, such interference is justified for the sake of the person's own good. He says, 'a loving father may also physically overpower his daughter in an effort to prevent her from committing suicide'.⁵ Likewise, a loving God will protect us from the ultimate self-inflicted harm, damnation. In Talbott's words:

We still have every reason to believe that everlasting separation is the kind of evil that a loving God would prevent even if it meant interfering with human freedom in certain ways ... he could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves. Just as loving parents are prepared to restrict the freedom of the children they love, so a loving God would be prepared to restrict the freedom of the children he loves ...⁶

Before evaluating Talbott's argument we need to understand it, which proves not to be an easy task. Why is it that 'once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed ... there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself'? Talbott's guiding example is that of a drug addict who is no longer free to resist taking the drug.⁷ God is like the beneficent physician who cures the addiction in order to 'restore the possibility of free choice'.⁸ This example is not well chosen, for once a person is cured from her addiction she is then free to develop it again. Having experienced the pains of addiction and withdrawal, she may have new motives to refrain from taking drugs, but the pleasure drugs afford is always present as a temptation to begin the habit anew. It is an empirical fact that a person may continue to pursue bad habits even after experiencing their painful consequences. Consider the following account of a psychiatrist who could not convince a manic-depressive to take his medication:

That he would get well again, I had no doubt. How long it would last was another question. Lithium worked remarkably well for him, but once his hallucinations and abject terror stopped, he would quit taking it ... Suicidal depression would inevitably follow, as would the indescribable pain and disruptiveness to his life and to the lives of the members of his family ... No amount of psychotherapy, education, persuasion,

⁴ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment' *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), 37.

⁵ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 38.

⁶ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 38.

⁷ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 36.

⁸ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 37.

or coercion worked; no contracts worked out by the medical and nursing staff worked; family therapy didn't help; no tallying up of the hospitalizations, broken relationships, financial disasters, lost jobs, imprisonments, squanderings of a good, creative and educated mind worked ...⁹

John Hick is, like Talbott, a universalist, yet in comparing God to a psychologist admits there are some patients who never confront their problems despite all the work and insight of the therapist.¹⁰

In the face of such facts it is clear that merely removing ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire will not prevent a stubborn person from rejecting God forever. Even if bondage to desire is broken, the desires themselves remain. Thus God will have to remove or at least weaken the desires which motivate the choice for damnation, in order to ensure that everyone is saved. The manic-depressive in Jamison's story was released from his bondage to suicidal desire by lithium, yet he returned to this bondage again and again. To ensure that her patient would break free from this cycle, the psychologist would have to remove or mitigate the desires which motivated his choice to quit taking the drug, whatever these may be. (Perhaps he was too lazy to keep up the medical regimen of lithium tablets, or too attached to the pleasure of manic phases to wholly desire being rid of his illness.) Similarly, God, to ensure our salvation, must not only remove our ignorance, deception and bondage to desire, but also remove or weaken the motives which prompt us to choose damnation – cowardice, love of pleasure, pride, etc.

A second problem in trying to understand Talbott's argument lies in his suggestion that God would override a person's freedom before allowing her to choose eternal damnation. Here God is compared to a father who has the right to 'physically overpower his daughter in an effort to prevent her from committing suicide'.¹¹ Again, this example is not perfectly suited to make Talbott's point. Talbott believes that separation from God is in itself an evil great enough to make even the most prosperous life on the whole bad. In the passages quoted above he says that 'everlasting separation from God is the kind of evil that a loving God would prevent even if it meant interfering with human freedom in certain ways', and again that 'God is the ultimate source of all happiness and that disobedience can produce only greater and greater misery.' However, merely physically preventing a person from sinning is not enough to unite them with God. To press Talbott's analogy, a father may prevent his daughter from committing suicide but that alone will not make her believe life is worth living. She may still intend to kill herself when she has the chance. Likewise, God could physically prevent a person from sinning, but this will not necessarily make the person love God. They might

⁹ Kay Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 107–108.

¹⁰ John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). Hick preserves universalism in the face of this fact by arguing that God, being omnipotent and omniscient, has an advantage over the human psychologist.

¹¹ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 38.

still have the intention to sin when given the opportunity. And this intention is enough to separate the soul from God and bring on the alienation from him which Talbott believes causes so much misery.¹²

Perhaps Talbott would not want to adopt the details of his example too closely. Hell is so horrible that God is justified in ‘interfering with human freedom in certain ways’. The example of the father and his daughter is meant only to prove the general point that freedom is not an absolute; it is not meant to show exactly how God would interfere with our freedom. But what are these ‘certain ways’ that Talbott speaks of? Mere physical obstacles are not enough. Somehow God has to block the interior use of our freedom. But how would this work? Could God remove our free will immediately before we use it to choose damnation, and restore it when we are safe from that danger? Talbott does not say. In any case, we will see that there are other important disanalogies which make Talbott’s example inapplicable.

Having made these preliminary points, I move to an evaluation of Talbott’s universalist argument. First I will look at contemporary responses which attempt to describe how a person could choose eternal damnation.

II. TALBOTT’S ARGUMENT: CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES

Talbott’s article has provoked responses in Jerry Walls’ *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, Kvanvig’s *The Problem of Hell*, and Craig’s article ‘Talbott’s Universalism’. Walls argues that the damned may have the *power* to reform, but they will never do so because they have made a ‘decisive choice for evil’. He offers two definitions of this phrase. The first, based on passages from Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*, states that a person has made a decisive choice for evil ‘when the choice of evil has become fully consistent’, when ‘evil is present through and through a personality’.¹³ For such a person, sin has become a way of life, so entrenched in her personality that her identity is caught up in sin. For this person to attempt goodness would be to reduce her to utter weakness, confusion, and self-conflict; the momentum is all on the side of wickedness.

The second definition is inspired by Harry Frankfurt’s discussion of freedom. In defending the compatibilist notion of free will Frankfurt had distinguished between first-order and second-order desires. The former include ordinary desires such as the desire to watch television. The latter include desires to have or not have first-order desires: the desire not to desire watching television would be a second-order desire. Walls adopts this distinction to define a decisive choice for evil. One who has made such a choice ‘would be a person who consistently wanted evil at all levels of desire’.¹⁴ At no level of desire does the person want anything related to goodness.

¹² This is especially true given the assumption that evil intentions are themselves sins.

¹³ Walls, p. 120. Walls cites from Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 236, 238–239.

¹⁴ Walls, p. 121.

We still face Talbott's question as to what would motivate a decisive choice for evil. Walls thinks the answer is pride. He quotes Lewis' *Great Divorce*, in which one of the damned refuses to enter heaven because people he considers beneath him have been accepted. By rejecting heaven, this fictional soul had the pleasure of feeling superior to the heavenly 'clique'.¹⁵ He quotes Kierkegaard again, who gives an example of a man who holds on to his suffering and bitterness 'for thus he can convince himself that he is in the right'.¹⁶ We might imagine someone who falls on hard times yet refuses to accept charity: such a person prefers the misery of poverty to the humiliation of asking for money. Likewise, a soul may prefer the unhappiness of hell to the self-abasement of repentance.

How can the damned continue to sin while knowing that sin leads only to unhappiness? Walls says that self-deception is clearly a possibility.¹⁷ Although the damned know that union with God is the only way to happiness, they persuade themselves that independence from God is good, and ignore any thoughts to the contrary: 'Self-deception is not a matter of lacking information, but rather a matter of not attending to what one knows, or of suppressing it and refusing to act on it.'¹⁸ Self-deception is not an obscure idea. The person who has a toothache and knows that he must go to the dentist can easily shove this thought from the surface of consciousness for the sake of avoiding the drill.

Self-deception may seem to be precluded by Talbott's suggestion that 'As long as any ignorance, or *deception*, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom.'¹⁹ Talbott assumes that any and all deception can be removed by God without interfering with our freedom. This assumption is valid in cases of involuntary deception. If I have a ticket for New York but by mistake step on the flight to Chicago, my freedom is not curtailed, but rather promoted, when the steward corrects me. However, self-deception is, according to Walls, a freely maintained state of 'not attending to what one knows'.²⁰ Once someone corrects our mistake and gives us the facts, we are then free to ignore the new-found information. God could reveal himself to the damned as the only source of lasting happiness. The damned are then free to disregard this truth and remain in hell. Only by removing the freedom of the damned could God ensure that they do not ignore his warnings.

Kvanvig's approach is similar to Walls'. He is not quite as specific as Walls in describing the state of the irredeemably wicked; for Kvanvig, the depraved are simply those who have a 'fundamental, basic desire and intention to pursue evil over good'.²¹ This, he says, must be admitted as a possibility if

¹⁵ Walls, p. 126. Quote from Lewis, *Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 36.

¹⁶ Walls, pp. 126–127. Quote from Kierkegaard, pp. 205–206. ¹⁷ Walls, pp. 129–133.

¹⁸ Walls, p. 131. ¹⁹ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 37. My emphasis.

²⁰ Walls, p. 131.

²¹ Kvanvig, p. 82.

we maintain that the soul is perfectly free: 'God could remove the impact of developed habits and the like that result from the depravity, but removing the depravity itself simply amounts to overriding the will rather than freeing it.'²² Like Walls, he imagines a sort of self-deception in the depraved. There is this difference, however: whereas Walls imagines the damned simply blocking unwanted knowledge from their minds, Kvanvig imagines them modifying their world view in order to protect their cherished illusion.²³ Just as a scientist, when faced with some unexpected results, has a choice between abandoning her theory, distrusting the instruments used in the experiment, suspecting outside forces, etc., so the damned, when faced with misery, can conclude either that obeying God is the only way to happiness, or that they have not pursued the right sort of pleasures, or exploited enough people, etc.

Kvanvig agrees with Walls that pride is an ample motive for this sort of refusal to admit one's need of God: 'It remains a possibility that some persons have a fundamental, basic desire and intention to pursue evil over good, perhaps by preferring self-exaltation or self-determination over anything else.'²⁴

Craig also thinks that pride is fundamental: 'But is it not at least possible that the motive for rejecting God is the will to self-autonomy, the stubborn refusal to submit one's will to that of another? ... 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?'²⁵ As an example he quotes Satan's famous proclamation in *Paradise Lost* that it is 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven'.²⁶

IV. THE UNANSWERED QUESTION: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL MOTIVES?

We have seen how Walls, Kvanvig, and Craig have answered Talbott's question as to the motive of choosing damnation. Their answer is that pride can motivate this choice and self-deception can maintain it in the face of unhappiness. But what of Talbott's suggestion that God could remove any motive one might have to choose hell? If pride is the chief of these motives, why could God not remove pride from our makeup? Or, better still, why could he not create us perfectly humble to begin with? Our contemporary defenders of hell have trouble answering this question.

At one point Walls suggests that even God could not remove the evil desires from a person without destroying the very identity of the person. He says, 'Indeed, if God were unilaterally to remove certain basic and morally significant preferences from a person and replace them with other pre-

²² Kvanvig, p. 82.

²³ Kvanvig, pp. 79–80.

²⁴ Kvanvig, p. 82.

²⁵ William Lane Craig, 'Talbot's Universalism', *Religious Studies* 27 (1991), 301–302.

²⁶ Craig, 'Talbot's Universalism', p. 301. The Milton quote is from *Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 263.

ferences, it is unclear whether this would even be the same person. In other words, questions of personal identity must be faced, given certain conceptions of how God might change a person.²⁷ Since Walls does not develop this idea further, it is hard to gauge its success. Furthermore, although it would explain why God could not remove pride from an already proud nature, it would not explain why God could not create people free from pride.

Other defenders of hell argue that God is a great respecter of freedom. The problem of hell is a variety of the problem of evil; and many, perhaps most, responses to the problem of evil claim that the value of freedom outweighs the evil that freedom sometimes causes. Extending the logic of this argument, we might say that freedom is such a good that it outweighs even the evil of hell. Thus the above-quoted passage from Swinburne: 'It is good that God should not let a man damn himself without much urging and giving him many opportunities to change his mind, but it is bad that someone should not in the all-important matter of the destiny of his soul be allowed finally to destroy it.'²⁸

Talbott has two responses to this appeal. First, he claims that God could remove any motive for evildoing without interfering with the person's freedom.²⁹ Second, he says that even if this is not possible, God would override the person's freedom for the sake of saving them.³⁰

Can God remove any and all motives for evildoing without interfering with the soul's freedom? Kvanvig says no: 'removing the depravity itself simply amounts to overriding the will rather than freeing it'.³¹ We would like to understand more clearly why this is so, but Kvanvig does not elaborate. The problem is this. Talbott assumes that without a motive for evil, a person will not choose evil. We can certainly agree. If we lack any desire to act in a certain way, we certainly will not act in that way; just as, if we completely lacked desire, we would not act at all.³²

But Kvanvig still faces a problem. He says that God could remove all the 'habits' from a person and that person might still be depraved. But by depravity Kvanvig means 'a fundamental, basic desire and intention to pursue evil over good'.³³ Why could God not remove this desire to choose evil over good? Kvanvig says that doing so would 'override' the freedom of the soul who is affected. Why is this? Is the idea that one can freely choose one's desires, so that having one's desires removed is having one's free choices nullified? But this involves us in an infinite regress; for we would have to ask why one would choose to have the desire to choose evil. It has to be a further

²⁷ Walls, pp. 134–135. ²⁸ Richard Swinburne, 'A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell', p. 49.

²⁹ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 37. ³⁰ Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 38.

³¹ Kvanvig, p. 82.

³² What about habit? Do we not sometimes act out of habit without really wanting to or even thinking about it? Yes, but habits are formed by actions that are consciously motivated. So all free actions are ultimately based on motives. If the motives had not been present at some time, the habit would never have developed.

³³ Kvanvig, p. 82.

desire that leads one to that choice; but then why do we choose to have this further desire?

Talbott's question remains unanswered: why cannot God take away our motives for sin when these would lead us to damnation?

V. HELL AND THE FALL

This question is related to a dilemma that the gnostics posed to the early church regarding the doctrine of the Fall. The gnostics asked 'Was Adam created perfect or imperfect? If perfect, then how could he fall? If imperfect, why did a perfect God create an imperfect being? Would not God be ultimately responsible for the fall?' The gnostics intended this dilemma to discredit the doctrine of the Fall and make gnostic dualism (the belief in two gods, one evil, the other good) the only viable explanation for evil. The fact of sin posed no problem for the gnostics because they could claim that sinners were created by the evil god; those created by the good god (i.e. the gnostics themselves) were perfect and did not sin.³⁴ The gnostics' argument against the Fall is similar to Talbott's argument against hell in that both rely on the assumption that God could create humans perfect. The gnostics assume God could have created Adam perfect and thereby prevented him from eating the fruit of the tree. Talbott assumes God could insure that all humans attain salvation by removing any of the imperfections (i.e. motives to sin) that might tempt us to choose damnation.

In dealing with the threat of gnosticism, the church fathers often attempted to describe the first state of humanity and the details of the Fall. By looking at their answers to the gnostic dilemma, we will find a basis for two responses to Talbott's argument.³⁵

Different Christian theologians had different views on the relative perfection or imperfection of the first parents. Many said that Adam and Eve lived in a state of 'childhood' or even 'infancy', and as Talbott would find appropriate, this infancy consisted both in ignorance and in subjection to inappropriate desires. Thus Irenaeus argues that humans had a childlike naïveté which made them easy to seduce.³⁶ Furthermore, their desires were not perfectly ordered to the good; they had to fight against the impetuous demands of the flesh.³⁷ Clement of Alexandria also posited inordinate desires

³⁴ J. F. Fallon, 'Gnosticism', *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Publications, 1979), p. 1506.

³⁵ Among the early theologians who explicitly describe the gnostic dilemma and respond to it are Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), pp. 39–40, 42; Tertullian, *The Five Books of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus Against Marcion*, trans. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868), p. 69; Clement of Alexandria, *The Miscellanies*, *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, vol. II, trans. William Wilson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1877), pp. 359–361. Others write about the state of our first parents and their fall without apparently aiming their discussion at the gnostics. This fact does not prevent us from considering their theories as possible responses to the gnostic challenge.

³⁶ Antoine Slomkowski, *L'Etat Primitif de l'Homme Dans la Tradition de l'Eglise Avant Saint Augustin* (Paris: Libraire Lecoffre, 1928), p. 41.

³⁷ Slomkowski, p. 41.

in Adam and Eve. In a strange revision of the Genesis account, he places the sin of the first couple not in their tasting of the fruit of the tree, but in their succumbing to sexual desire and having children before the time that God had planned for their marriage.³⁸ Other thinkers who stress the undeveloped, childlike state of Adam and Eve include Theophilus and Methodius.³⁹

On the other hand, the present Roman Catholic conception of the first parents as created in a state of ‘original righteousness’, free from disordered desires and blessed with the gift of knowledge, is also represented in the early church. Such luminaries as Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose asserted that Adam and Eve felt no impure passions.⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa and Athanasius stressed the clear knowledge of God that Adam and Eve possessed.⁴¹ This line of thinking finds its culmination in Augustine, who, by exalting the first couple, made their sin all the more reprehensible. Since their sensual desires were perfectly in order and their understanding clear, their fall was a sin of pure perversity, arising only from the will. It was not an understandable mistake of frail children succumbing to passion, as Irenaeus and others would have it, but a deliberate rejection of God.⁴² Hence Augustine says that the Fall incurs so much guilt because it would have been so easy to avoid.

Despite these different views of the prelapsarian state of humanity, it was universally agreed that Adam and Eve were free moral agents, able to choose to follow God’s law or not. It was this freedom which was seen to be the key which unlocked the puzzle of the Fall. If humans were created imperfectly, subject to passions and limited in knowledge, free will still gave them the power to obey God. On the other hand, even if humans were created with their desires perfectly in control and with knowledge that God is the ultimate good, they were still free to reject God’s rule. In either case, the responsibility of the Fall rests on Adam and Eve, not God.

So far so good. But a modern-day gnostic might pose a new dilemma in this way. ‘You maintain that God is free and yet unable to sin. I ask this: Was God able to create Adam and Eve free and yet unable to sin? If so, why did he not? If not, does not this cast doubt on God’s omnipotence? For the example of God shows it is possible for a being to be free and yet unable to sin. If it is possible for beings to exist free and unable to sin, an omnipotent being should be able to create such beings.’

This dilemma, which is here restricted to the single sin of the Fall, can be applied to any sin whatsoever. Why does God not create all of us free and

³⁸ Slomkowski, p. 49–50. It might seem inconsistent for Clement to describe Adam and Eve as childlike and at the same time believe their sin consisted in premarital sex. But Clement’s meaning is clear: ‘They were pressed into having children sooner than they should have, and, deceived by a lie, they reproduced, being themselves still young.’ *The Miscellanies*, III, 17. Quoted in Slomkowski, p. 49.

³⁹ Norman Powell Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd, 1927), pp. 176, 251.

⁴⁰ Slomkowski, pp. 81, 110.

⁴¹ Slomkowski, pp. 101, 110.

⁴² Williams, p. 364.

yet devoid of impure desires, so that there will be no sin, no suffering, no temporary or eternal punishment? This is a question that all Christians, Talbott included, must answer.

Let us call the ability to sin ‘peccability’, and the corresponding inability ‘impeccability’. The gnostic dilemma then becomes: if God is able to create us impeccable, why does he not do so? Why doesn’t he create us with the power of free will, but without the motives to evildoing that would give us the power of free choice between good and evil? On the other hand, if God is unable to create us this way, why not? Is not God said to be omnipotent? Talbott’s view is that if someone abuses their free choice to such an extent that they are headed towards hell, God can remove or lessen the temptations which motivate this choice. But the modern gnostic will simply ask why God did not remove or lessen the temptations which motivate any sin, not just the sin of final impenitence. Why is there sin at all, on Talbott’s view? He wants to prevent the sin of self-chosen damnation, but the same reasoning rules out any sin whatsoever.⁴³

In the following sections I will look at two ways one might answer this dilemma. These two ways have their source in the writings of the church fathers. These explanations for sin fall into two categories: those that claim it was valuable that God create us peccable, and those that claim it was necessary. We will see that both ways give us plausible reasons for not accepting Talbott’s universalism.

VI. THE VALUE OF PECCABILITY

Tertullian (born *c.* 160) addresses the issue of Adam’s peccability in Book II, chapter 6 of his book *Against Marcion*. Among other, less compelling arguments he gives for the value of peccability, Tertullian says that freely choosing the good allows us to develop a goodness which is truly our own.⁴⁴ If God were to create us impeccable, then our goodness would not be our own but would be given to us. Does this mean that God’s goodness is not really his own because he did not develop it by struggling against temptation? No, Tertullian says, God’s goodness is his by nature, but this is possible only because God is uncreated. Humans, as creatures, can either inherit goodness from their creator, in which case the goodness is not really part of their nature, or they can develop goodness through their own faculty of free choice. By following this path man develops ‘in a certain sense a natural attribute of goodness’, which is ‘a property of his own’.

The value judgement implicit in this passage is that it is inherently more

⁴³ The distinction between mortal and venial sins would complicate the above argument. Since venial sins do not lead to damnation, God could create us peccable and yet unable to choose damnation, as long as this peccability was limited to the ability to commit venial sins. Therefore I must be understood in this paragraph to be using ‘peccability’ and ‘impeccability’ in a limited sense, as referring to the ability or inability to commit mortal sins.

⁴⁴ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, p. 72.

valuable that humans develop their own goodness than that they inherit a ready-made virtue. And this idea has modern defenders as well. John Hick writes that ‘one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptation, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue’.⁴⁵ Likewise, Richard Swinburne says that free beings ‘determining in cooperation their own character and future, and that of the universe in which they live, coming in the process to show charity, forgiveness, faith, and self-sacrifice, is such a worthwhile thing that a creator would not be unjustified in making or permitting a certain amount of evil in order that they should be realized’.⁴⁶ Again, Plantinga says: ‘A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all.’⁴⁷

The belief that free moral choice is a great value plays a large role in theodicy. What can be said about the truth of this belief? One thing is certain: even if free choice is a value, it is not the only value or even the weightiest value God is concerned to promote. The doctrine of heaven makes this obvious. Depending on one’s theology, the blessed in heaven either lack the freedom to fall into sin, or lack any serious temptation to sin. Their significant freedom is reduced or eliminated, while their joy is magnified. Unfortunately, certain proponents of the Free Will Defence do not mention the afterlife: in the works cited above, neither Swinburne nor Plantinga talks about heaven.⁴⁸ The silent implication is that free choice alone is so valuable that it outweighs all the evil in the world, even if there were no afterlife to look forward to. Such a view, whether the two philosophers hold it or not, shows coldness towards the terrible reality of suffering and must be rejected. Free choice is not valuable enough in itself to outweigh the evils of this world: the afterlife is needed.⁴⁹

John Hick recognizes this fact: ‘Christian theodicy must point forward to that final blessedness, and claim that this infinite future good will render

⁴⁵ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 255.

⁴⁶ Richard Swinburne, ‘The Problem of Evil’, *Reason at Work*, ed. Stephen Cahn, Patricia Kitcher, and George Sher (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 611.

⁴⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Nature and Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 166.

⁴⁸ According to Marilyn McCord Adams, ‘Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers’, *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), 131, Plantinga has in correspondence agreed that the value of freely chosen moral good will not alone outweigh the evils of this world; it must be joined with a variety of other goods, including the eternal joy of heaven and the good of the Incarnation. Swinburne ignored heaven in his discussion of the problem of evil in Chapter 11 of *The Existence of God*. He wrote an article entitled ‘A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell’, but his purpose was to defend the idea that belief and action affect one’s chances of entering heaven, not to claim that heaven is an essential postulate in justifying the existence of evil.

⁴⁹ Cf. Lewis, *Pain*, p. 132: ‘Scripture and tradition habitually put the joys of heaven into the scale against the sufferings of earth, and no solution of the problem of pain which does not do so can be called a Christian one.’

worth while all the pain and travail and wickedness that has occurred on the way to it.⁵⁰ But we cannot embrace the opposite extreme of rejecting free choice altogether as an important good. Hick must in fact believe free choice is important, for if eternal happiness is the only good that God is concerned to actualize, one could ask Hick why God does not create everyone in heaven without forcing them to undergo the painful process of soul-making.

Talbott is in much the same situation as Hick and other free will theodiscists. On the one hand, he cannot believe that free choice is an absolute value greater than all others. He supposes that God would continually rid us of our ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire. But inasmuch as these imperfections are often the result of our free choices, God would then be erasing the consequences of our significant freedom, which is to lessen the value of that freedom. Furthermore, Talbott says that God should override a person's free choice rather than let the person choose damnation. Rather than believing free choice to be the highest good, Talbott prefers happiness to free choice; otherwise he would not argue that God would override free choice for the sake of happiness.

On the other hand, he has to admit that free choice is a good, because otherwise God would simply create us without the ignorance, deception, or bondage to desire that motivates all sins, including the sin of choosing damnation. Talbott's position, and the position of any free will theodiscist, will have to be that free choice and happiness are both goods, and that God attempts to strike the best balance between the two.

Having said this, we can defend the doctrine of hell by noting that different theodiscists will have different ideas as to the best balance between free choice and happiness. Talbott much prefers happiness to free choice. Because Talbott believes happiness is a greatly higher good than free choice, he concludes that God will always override free choice if this is necessary to prevent eternal unhappiness. However, because free choice is valuable as well, God did not create us all impeccable. Happiness outranks free choice, because free choice is never allowed to prevent anyone's eternal happiness. Yet because free choice often interferes with our temporary, earthly happiness, this world is truly a compromise between two often inconsistent values. This world-view allows Talbott to explain the existence of evil as a temporary concession to the value of free choice, while also defending universalism as God's ultimate preference for human happiness over human free choice.

Talbott's world-view is consistent and not demonstrably false. However, it is perfectly allowable for other theodiscists to disagree with his assessment of the relative values of free choice and happiness. In particular, they might think free choice is valuable enough to warrant God's allowing us to choose damnation. Thus Swinburne, in considering an objection very much like

⁵⁰ Hick, *Evil*, p. 340.

Talbott's, says of a person who has freely become corrupt and unable to repent:

Perhaps God could make the choice [of resisting temptation] for him, give him a strong desire to do the good, and annihilate all other desires in him. But that would be imposing on an agent something which, while he was still capable of choosing between actions in virtue of their worth, he had in effect chosen not to do – by yielding so continually to temptation. Free will is a good thing, and for God to override it for whatever cause is to all appearances a bad thing. It might be urged that no man would ever be allowed by God to reach such a state of depravity that he was no longer capable of choosing to do an action because of its overall worth. But in that case God would have prevented people from opting for a certain alternative; however hard a man tried to damn himself, God would stop him. It is good that God should not let a man damn himself without much urging and giving him many opportunities to change his mind, but it is bad that someone should not in the all-important matter of the destiny of his soul be allowed finally to destroy it.⁵¹

Naturally Talbott does not accept Swinburne's view of the matter; he believes that a loving God would remove any sinful habits we have acquired so that we are free once more to choose the good. In his eyes doing so promotes the cause of free choice:

The argument that a loving God would not interfere with human freedom has no relevance in a context where, *by hypothesis*, we are speaking of those who have already lost their freedom, who are prisoners of bad desires. A benevolent physician who treats her patient for his addiction to heroin by readjusting the balance of chemicals in his brain is in no way interfering with his freedom, not even if the patient is incapable of consenting freely to treatment; the man is, after all, already in bondage to the drug. The aim of the physician is to release her patient from his bondage and to restore the possibility of free choice. Similarly, if those in hell are already in bondage to their desires and have already lost their freedom, in what sense would God be *interfering* with their freedom when he releases them from their bondage?⁵²

As an attempt to prove that the free will defense of hell is inconsistent, this argument falls short. Swinburne would simply respond that to release sinners from their bondage is to nullify the free choice the sinners made in becoming bound by sin in the first place. If, every time our hypothetical drug user become addicted, a doctor stepped forward and cured the addiction immediately, the person would not be free to become a permanent drug addict. In this sense God would be interfering with our free choice if he continually released us from our bondage to sin.

However, Talbott's passage may be read simply as stating his preference for eternal happiness over the ability to choose damnation. Understood in this way, the argument cannot be refuted on Talbott's own terms. Hence, in following Swinburne, I do not thereby prove that Talbott's universalism is incoherent. I rather claim that anti-universalism is coherent against Talbott's arguments to the contrary. I am defending the doctrine of hell as

⁵¹ Swinburne, 'A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell', p. 49.

⁵² Talbott, 'Everlasting Punishment', p. 36–37.

coherent, not arguing that universalism is incoherent. Universalism is coherent given Talbott's opinion of the relative value of free choice and happiness; but anti-universalism is coherent given Swinburne's very different opinion.

To sum up: the first line of defence is to argue that the value of free choice might justify God's refusal to wipe out all our evil desires. The second, also found in early church literature, is that peccability is necessary.

VII. THE NECESSITY OF PECCABILITY

Irenaeus, in defending the Fall against the 'heretics' (i.e. the gnostics), suggests something like this view. According to him, nothing created can be created perfectly good. Only the uncreated God has always been impeccable:

If, however, any one say, 'What then? Could not God have exhibited man as perfect from the beginning?' let him know that, inasmuch as God is indeed always the same and unbegotten as respects Himself, all things are possible to Him. But created things must be inferior to Him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But inasmuch as they are not uncreated, for this very reason do they come short of the perfect. Because, as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline. For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, [but she does not do so], as the child is not yet able to receive more substantial nourishment; so also it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.⁵³

In the same vein, he says: 'God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.'⁵⁴ Irenaeus' concern to preserve the omnipotence of God leads him to the mysterious idea that it is within God's power to give us perfection, but it is our infantile nature which prevents us from receiving this perfection. This idea is obscure; how can we say that God has the power to do something but is necessarily prevented from doing so? Disregarding this problem, the essential point is that it is beyond the power of even an omnipotent God to create someone impeccable, as it is beyond the power of an omnipotent God to create an uncreated house or a round triangle.

Clement of Alexandria echoes Irenaeus' understanding of human nature:

By nature we are adapted for virtue; not so as to be possessed of it from our birth, but so as to be adapted for acquiring it. By which consideration is solved the question propounded to us by the heretics, Whether Adam was created perfect or imperfect? For they shall hear from us that he was not perfect in his creation, but adapted to the reception of virtue ...⁵⁵

⁵³ Irenaeus, Book 4, Chapter 38, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Irenaeus, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *The Miscellanies*, pp. 359–360. Quoted by Hick, *Evil*, p. 216.

Clement obviously agrees with Irenaeus in believing that people were not in fact created perfectly virtuous, but he is not as clear in claiming that God could not have done so. I think we can read the passage in this way, however. We are adapted for virtue, but we are not given virtue 'from our birth'. We must 'acquire' it. Nor is this simply God's will, but it is 'by nature', or as Irenaeus would say, is part and parcel of our being 'recently created'.

The position that I want to put forward as 'Irenaeian' consists in the claim that it is a necessary truth that no person can be created impeccable. The Irenaeian view does not necessarily follow Swinburne in thinking that the sufferings in this world, and in the next for the damned, are justified because of the value of free choice in itself. It could see free choice as a necessary evil: God could not create persons perfect, but has to let them suffer a long soul-making process of choosing him over earthly goods before they attain to eternal happiness.

Before bringing Irenaeus to bear on Talbott, I would like to point out a couple of problems with this view, problems related to its consistency with traditional Christian doctrines.

First, it is difficult to account for the Fall given an Irenaeian view. Traditionally it was believed that if Adam and Eve had not fallen then the human race would have remained in the Garden of Eden. Such an idea is hard to reconcile with the Irenaeian view that we must become perfect through a process of choosing the good against temptation. How could we do so if we inhabited a paradise? John Hick, who bases his theodicy on Irenaeus, consequently discards the notion of the Fall: he believes that, since developing virtues requires painful situations (e.g. courage requires danger, generosity requires need), there was never a Garden of Eden to be expelled from.⁵⁶

In response to this objection we can adapt a fragment from the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428).⁵⁷ Theodore, like Irenaeus, seems to have had a soul-making view in which the 'mutability' of this world is necessary as a test of our loyalty to God. After we are sufficiently tested we will enter the era of immutability and enjoy God's presence forever. As one commentator has pointed out, Theodore, like Irenaeus, faces the problem of the Fall.⁵⁸ For if humans were created 'mutable' for the sake of developing their moral character, then how can we say that Adam and Eve and their descendants were intended to remain in a paradisaical state? The following passage from Theodore appears to be given in response to such a problem: God did not give man all at once what was useful to him, in order that He may not be blasphemed against for not having given him immortality in the beginning. But he first established the law, knowing that men would not obey it. By promising immortality as the consequence of their obedience and threatening them with death

⁵⁶ Hick, *Evil*, pp. 277–287.

⁵⁷ See Slomkowski, pp. 119–128; R. A. Morris, *Manhood and Christ: A Study in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 161–183.

⁵⁸ Morris, chapter 14.

in the contrary case, He wanted to show men that they lacked faith in their creator and benefactor, so much that they hoped that disobedience would bring them not only immortality, but divine dignity.⁵⁹

The Fall serves two purposes. First, it prevents God from being ‘blasphemed against’. In other words, we cannot complain that we are in this world of painful soul-making, for we brought it upon ourselves. Of course, on Theodore’s view, it is better for us to be in this post-lapsarian world, for it allows us to develop into beings fit for heaven. But the choice of remaining in the Garden of Eden was given us. Secondly, the Fall shows people that ‘they lacked faith in their creator and benefactor’. The Fall highlights in a vivid way the peccability we are naturally created in. By contemplating the Fall we come face to face with our peccability and the eternal joy we can have if we overcome it.

Although this interpretation makes some sense of the Fall, it does not do justice to the feeling that the Fall was a tragic event. In fact, as Norman Williams points out, on the Irenaean view the Fall was a fall ‘upwards’, from a state of ignorance and stagnation to a state of moral testing and development.⁶⁰ It should be noticed, however, that conceiving of the Fall as tragic has always proved difficult for theology, whether one is an Irenaean or not. For if the prelapsarian state was really so much better than the postlapsarian state, it seems God would not have created Adam and Eve, but instead a couple whom he would foresee resisting the temptation to take the apple. Thus the phrase ‘O Felix Culpa’, ‘O Happy Sin’, which implies that the Fall was ordained or allowed in order to bring about the overwhelming good of the Incarnation.⁶¹ However, if the incarnation is inherently a great good for which the Fall is necessary, then again we begin to lose the notion of the Fall as a tragic event.

The problem in reconciling the Irenaean view with the Fall arises from Hick’s assumption that in a paradisaic state such as the Garden of Eden there would be no opportunity for soul-making. Perhaps the solution to the problem lies in denying this assumption. Hick is right in supposing that if there were absolutely no pain, dangers, or temptations in the Garden, then soul-making would be impossible. But we might imagine the Garden of Eden to be a place much more pleasant than the world is now and yet affording small opportunities for the development of virtue. Because the temptations and dangers would be minor, the process of soul-making would be gentler and slower. It might have taken a person hundreds or thousands of years, or even more, to become ready for heaven. We inhabitants of a fallen world, however, must take the kingdom of heaven by violence. Our ascent to heaven is more like scaling a sheer cliff than hiking a smooth mountain path. The Fall was a tragic event, then, not because it introduced the necessity of soul-making, but because it made soul-making a much more drastic affair.

⁵⁹ Slomkowski, pp. 127–128.

⁶⁰ Williams, p. 195.

⁶¹ Hick, *Evil*, p. 287, n. 3.

I offer this solution only as a suggestion. It is certainly questionable whether the process of soul-making can take place without the severe pains found in a world like ours but missing in a paradise like Eden. How could a high level of courage develop without high levels of danger, for instance? One could also argue that the Fall would not be tragic even on this suggestion because, although soul-making becomes more painful after the Fall, it is accomplished more quickly. In any case, the Fall is not the only traditional Christian belief that is hard to reconcile with the Irenaean view.

Another doctrine Irenaeus may have difficulty with is the impeccability of Jesus. Jesus' human nature was created, but then by Irenaeus' axiom his human will should be peccable. But tradition claims that Jesus, in his human nature as well as his divine nature, was unable to sin. He experienced temptation, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us,⁶² but he was not able to succumb to this temptation. Perhaps the difficulty can be met by saying that the human nature of Jesus is exempt from Irenaeus' general axiom because of its union with the second person of the trinity. But I offer no explanation as to why this is so.

Assuming that the Irenaean view is not made completely untenable by these two objections, let us see how it may be applied to Talbott's argument. If we must be created imperfect, and can only become perfect through a process of choosing the good under temptation, then the situation Talbott envisages, of God removing our motives for damnation, is not really possible. We are essentially fallible, and hence can freely choose to sin at any given time, and at all times, unless through a long series of good choices we develop in ourselves impeccability and enter heaven. Nor can God override our freedom, as a father might physically restrain his daughter from committing suicide. Free choice is essential to our being and hence not even an omnipotent God can override it for the sake of bringing us to heaven.

VIII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I have described two ways we can respond to Talbott's universalism. First, we can emphasize the importance of free choice and agree with Swinburne that it is a good thing if people are ultimately free to reject God. Second, we can adopt the metaphysical assumption of Irenaeus and others that created persons cannot be made perfect by someone else, but must choose perfection through a process of meeting temptation. The first approach denies Talbott's assumption that a loving God would remove our motives for damnation, and the second denies Talbott's assumption that an omnipotent God could remove these motives.

Neither defence of hell shows that Talbott is incoherent in being a universalist. They depend on premises which are hard to prove and not indubi-

⁶² Hebrews 4: 15.

table. It is not self-evident, at least to some rational persons, that the freedom to choose damnation is a good thing, or that we cannot be created impeccable by God. These two lines of argument are purely defensive, showing only that one can be coherent in believing in hell.⁶³

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⁶³ I would like to thank Philip Quinn and Thomas Flint for reading earlier versions of this essay.