

‘Eternity will nail him to himself’: the logic of damnation in Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*

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Abstract: Though Kierkegaard’s writings are rarely referenced in discussions of the problem of hell, the choice model of hell, I argue, can be strengthened by a close reading of the relevant passages of *The Sickness unto Death* that bear on the topic of damnation. Each of the two major forms of the choice model that are discussed in the contemporary philosophical literature are anticipated and developed in masterful psychological detail in this key Kierkegaardian text. The first form of the choice model, which sees damnation as the explicit and direct object of choice of those who are finally lost, faces the challenge of explaining motive: why would anyone freely choose eternal damnation? The second form, in which damnation is the natural consequence of certain free choices but not that which is chosen directly, faces the significant challenge of explaining why God does not annihilate the damned, mercifully putting them out of their misery. I argue that *The Sickness unto Death* contains conceptual resources for meeting both of these challenges.

The problem of hell is expressed in its traditional form by a simple question: why would a perfectly good and loving God consign anyone to eternal suffering in hell? This problem has received much attention in the contemporary literature, but Kierkegaard’s writings are rarely referenced in the discussion – an omission that is significant, given that one of Kierkegaard’s most important works, *The Sickness unto Death*, contains a penetrating analysis of the psychology of damnation. Jerry Walls is one of the few to draw on this text in his treatment of the problem of hell; his explanation and defence of ‘the logic of damnation’ in the choice model of hell is hinged on Kierkegaardian insights at certain key points.¹

Though Walls's treatment of *Sickness unto Death* is brief, his discussion suggests that Kierkegaard should be counted among the list of major historical proponents of the choice model. I think he is right in this suggestion and that the choice model of hell can be strengthened by delving more deeply into the relevant passages of *Sickness unto Death* that bear on the topic of damnation. This is the aim and purpose of the present article.

My first task will be to argue that Kierkegaard holds the view that damnation comes in different forms. Walls's distinction between 'weak evil persons' and 'strong evil persons' (Walls (1992), 123) parallels the two major forms of the sickness unto death that are explored by Anti-Climacus in great detail: the conditions he identifies in section titles as (respectively) 'In Despair Not to Will to Be Oneself: Despair in Weakness' and 'In Despair to Will to Be Oneself: Defiance' (Kierkegaard (1980), 49 & 67). I will argue that, in the development of these two forms of damnation, we find anticipated in *Sickness unto Death* at least two varieties of the choice model that have been developed in the contemporary philosophical literature. I will go on to make some further remarks about the way the Kierkegaardian view handles a major objection that each variety of the choice model faces, reserving the bulk of my comments for the discussion of 'despair in weakness', the variety of damnation that Anti-Climacus regards as more common, but which also turns out to be more philosophically problematic. In closing, I will assess the plausibility of the Kierkegaardian solution, defending it against what seems to me the most important objection.

The first form of the choice model

In contrast to the traditional view, which sees the primary purpose of hell as an instrument of divine retribution – a punishment selected by God and inflicted on the damned against their wills in order to right the scales of justice – choice models of hell claim, instead, that damnation is in some important sense *chosen by the damned* and that God is simply respecting human free will in consigning some to hell. Choice models are further subdivided into two general forms, corresponding to the way that damnation can be chosen either directly or indirectly. These two forms of the choice model are not exclusive options; each can be developed in such a way that it is compatible with the other. In the writings of some philosophers, such as Walls, both versions are found, the idea being that there is more than one road to hell and that different souls arrive at the same destination by different routes.²

In the first version of the choice model, hell is the explicit and direct object of choice of those who are finally lost.³ These individuals desire not to be in communion with God; they will to be separated from Him, no matter the cost. This is in many ways the most straightforward version of the choice model, because it is clear on this view that God, in consigning some to hell, is respecting the free choice of the damned, giving them what they desire and have deliberately chosen.

Each form of the choice model faces its own significant challenge, and for the first form, the most difficult task is to account for motive. Why would anyone desire or deliberately choose damnation? Thomas Talbott, a prominent critic of the view, argues that there is no possible motive for such a choice if that choice is supposed to be genuinely free. He writes,

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. (Talbott (1990), 37)

To answer the objection, Walls turns to Kierkegaard, drawing on Anti-Climacus's account of the way that sin can become a source of continuity for an individual's personality, which provides an explanation for why a person might choose evil decisively (Walls (1992), 120). Anti-Climacus claims that 'deep within itself sin has a consistency, and in this consistency in evil itself it also has a certain strength', and because of this 'the demonic person' can reach the point that '[o]nly in the continuance of sin is he himself, only in that does he live and have an impression of himself' (Kierkegaard (1980), 106–108). In other words, evil can become a point of self-identification: a person can come to regard his opposition to the good, his rebellion against God, as that which defines him, as what makes him who he is. At the upper limit, one can sink so far into evil that one comes to regard willing the good as a temptation to be resisted (*ibid.*, 108). At this point, Walls tells us, the choice of evil is 'decisive', 'present through and through a personality' and 'fully consistent' – that is, without any inner conflict or hesitation in the individual's willing of it – and consequently 'there is no place left for good even to get a foothold . . . and thus there is little, if any, prospect for a return to good' (Walls (1992), 120). This is the reason damnation is eternal, without any need for it to be decreed as such by God or imposed on the damned by any external source; as C. S. Lewis famously puts it, 'the doors of hell are locked on the inside' (Lewis (1947), 115).

The foregoing account is a psychologically sophisticated version of a traditional answer to the question of why anyone would choose damnation. The motive is pride; these are individuals who, along with Milton's Satan, judge it 'better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n', even if the only thing over which they rule is their own, unruly selves. But Kierkegaard develops an interesting nuance of this idea in *Sickness unto Death*. On Anti-Climacus's account, what motivates such a person is typically some prolonged earthly suffering: more specifically, *offence* over the problem of evil that the suffering causes, which over time ferments into a psycho-spiritual condition that Anti-Climacus calls 'inclosing reserve, or what could be called inwardness with a jammed lock' (Kierkegaard (1980), 72). He explains:

But this is also a form of the despair, to be unwilling to hope in the possibility that an earthly need, a temporal cross, can come to an end. The despairing person who in despair wills to be

himself is unwilling to do that. He has convinced himself that this thorn in the flesh gnaws so deeply that he cannot abstract himself from it . . . and therefore he might as well accept it forever, so to speak. He is offended by it, or, more correctly, he takes it as an occasion to be offended at all existence; he defiantly wills to be himself not in spite of it or without it . . . - no, in spite of or in defiance of all existence, he wills to be himself with it, takes it along, almost flouting his agony. Hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible - no, that he does not want. And to seek help from someone else - no, not for all the world does he want that. Rather than to seek help, he prefers, if necessary, to be himself with all the agonies of hell. (*ibid.*, 70-71)

This is despair at its uppermost limit, despair that, in Kierkegaardian terminology, has intensified to the point of becoming demonic. The individual becomes so invested in the significance of his own personal suffering that he becomes unwilling to relinquish it. Anti-Climacus continues:

Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony, but he was kept waiting; now it is too late, now he would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life, and it is of particular significance to him to make sure that he has his torment on hand and that no one takes it away from him - for then he would not be able to demonstrate and prove to himself that he is right. . . . What demonic madness - the thought that most infuriates him is that eternity could get the notion to deprive him of his misery. (*ibid.*, 72)

These passages suggest an interesting variation on the traditional view: it is actually hatred that is most fundamental to damnation, more so even than pride. The condition of the damned is actually less about 'ruling in hell' than about standing as a living witness against the goodness of the world and its Creator. As Anti-Climacus puts it,

It is not even in stoic self-infatuation and self-apotheosis that this despair wills to be itself . . . No, in hatred toward existence, it wills to be itself, wills to be itself in accordance with its misery. Not even in defiance or defiantly does it will to be itself, but for spite; not even in defiance does it want to tear itself loose from the power that established it, but for spite wants to force itself upon it, to obtrude defiantly upon it, wants to adhere to it out of malice . . . Rebelling against all existence, it feels that it has obtained evidence against it, against its goodness. The person in despair believes that he himself is the evidence, and that is what he wants to be, and therefore he wants to be himself, himself in his torment, in order to protest against all existence with this torment. (*ibid.*, 73-74)

So on one version of the choice model of hell found in *Sickness unto Death*, not only is hell freely chosen, but the very suffering of hell is continually willed by its inhabitants. The damned are so filled with hatred - the very opposite of love - so motivated by malice and spite - the very opposites of charity - that they will to remain in their state of torment, all for the sake of demonstrating that they are in the right, and that God is in the wrong.⁴ So consuming is their desire to be in the right in relation to God that they are willing to choose self-damnation to indulge it (Walls (1992), 127). Their refusal to repent is a desire for vindication, a prideful declaration of self-righteousness.⁵ On their perverse view of the world, they suffer for the truth, and they are 'witnesses to the Truth': the truth, as they see it, that God is cruel and unloving, a 'second-rate' Creator who made

an 'error' in creating the damned and allowing their earthly state of prolonged suffering. Anti-Climacus closes part I of *Sickness unto Death* with this analogy:

Figuratively speaking, it is as if an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error – perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production – and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author. (Kierkegaard (1980), 74)

The role of self-deception

The foregoing is the beginning of a sophisticated account of the psychology of damnation, but it is thus far incomplete in at least one important way. It is one thing to describe the mindset of the damned and the possible motives for choosing self-damnation; it is another to explain how one could get to this point: that is, how this choice could become a live option for a person. This issue is important, because on the Kierkegaardian account, those who make the choice of self-damnation are clearly in a state of profound spiritual blindness. But a state of spiritual blindness would seem to be a state of ignorance, confusion, and misunderstanding, which raises important questions about the level of responsibility of those affected by it. If one were to reach the point of being no longer able to perceive the truth, would this not actually mitigate one's culpability? Any spiritual decisions made in this state would be misinformed. How then would it be just for God to hold one responsible for a choice of self-damnation made under these conditions? What is needed is a plausible account of the means by which one's perspective could become twisted to the point that one is blind to the most fundamental truths about God and oneself, and it must be an account that makes it clear that the process itself is something for which the individual is blameworthy.

Though Walls does not always clearly distinguish the question of motive (Why would anyone freely choose self-damnation?) from the question of method (By what means could the choice of self-damnation become tempting for someone?), his analysis suggests that a proper understanding of self-deception is key to making sense of the relevant issues (Walls (1992), 129–133). The summary statement of Walls's position is that 'hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there' (*ibid.*, 128). Initially, this view seems to raise more questions than it answers, and indeed some commentators have been puzzled by it. Are the damned simply confused about what will bring them the most gratification? If so, why does God blame them for their choice? And why does He not simply correct their confusion so they can make a right choice?⁶ Walls goes on to explain:

Those who prefer hell to heaven have convinced themselves that it is better. In their desire to justify their choice of evil, they have persuaded themselves that whatever satisfaction they

experience from evil is superior to the joy which God offers. At the very least, they see some advantage to be gained in the choice of evil. (*ibid.*, 128–129)

These remarks are helpful, but they still leave crucial questions unanswered. How could anyone manage to convince themselves of something they can *plainly see* to be false? And *why* would anyone do this? The desire to justify one's past evil choices is understandable, but why would anyone deliberately deceive themselves in the matter of what will bring them the greatest satisfaction?

The clearest answers to these questions are found in a later article by Walls in which Kierkegaard is never referenced explicitly, but the analysis is thoroughly Kierkegaardian in its logic.⁷ Here Walls writes that:

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. (Walls (2004), 210)

These remarks, if I understand them correctly, are rooted in a profound Kierkegaardian insight: that in the case of the most important truths, the intellect is conditioned by the will. It is a recurring motif in Kierkegaard's writings that one's ability to perceive the truth is in part a function of one's character, passions, and will,⁸ and there are certain truths that can be apprehended only by those with a virtuous character, a love of truth, and a purity of heart to will only the good.⁹ The kinds of truth at issue here are the 'ethico-religious truths' – truths about right and wrong, the existence and nature of God, the meaning and purpose of human existence, etc. – and the deepest truths about oneself, including one's character, the moral status and true motives of one's actions, and one's standing before God. Such truths are often inconvenient, uncomfortable, even deeply offensive to one's pride, and this is why it is tempting to hide the truth of these matters from oneself.

There are two separate points that need to be distinguished here. One is a point about one's present power of self-deception, and the other is a point about the cumulative effect of one's past exercises of this power. Self-deception is the ability to suppress knowledge that conflicts with one's desires, to hide from oneself unpleasant truths – especially those revealed by conscience – and to accept in their place something else that one desperately *wants* to be true. For creatures like ourselves who possess this power, belief is not always entirely passive; one's inability to perceive the truth is sometimes due to one's *unwillingness* to perceive it. The immediate effect of exercising this power is the bringing about of some false belief in oneself. But there are long-term noetic effects as well. To engage in self-deception repeatedly, and especially habitually, is gradually to form in oneself the kind of character that renders one unable to perceive the deepest truths of existence:

the ethico-religious truths and the truth about oneself in relation to God. This is the phenomenon to which Scriptures refer as being blinded by sin.¹⁰

So on the Kierkegaardian view, there is indeed a misunderstanding that is essential to the choice of self-damnation, but it is far from an innocent ignorance. It is instead the darkening of mind that accompanies a vicious character, the natural concomitant of wilful persistence in sin. In particular, the belief that one is in the right in opposition to God is one that both proceeds from, and in turn further solidifies, the depravity of one's heart.

It is important to note that the cumulative effect of this process is not only the corruption of the intellect, but also the perversion of one's emotions and desires. Sin has a natural inertia, as self-deception begets further self-deception, each reiteration eliciting and strengthening one's desire for the bad and, conversely, weakening one's desire for the good. The motivation for the choice of damnation is thus not the culpable false beliefs that arise from self-deception *alone*, but rather these in conjunction with the desire for the bad and the satisfaction taken in willing it that is partly constitutive of wickedness.

So Walls is right, I take it, that the choice of hell may afford the damned a twisted sort of gratification. It is not that the damned *mistakenly* believe that hell affords them greater satisfaction than heaven, as some critics have understood Walls to mean.¹¹ It is rather that, because of their vicious characters, the damned *in fact* find no satisfaction in submission to God, and instead take satisfaction in defying Him. No doubt they *would* find obedience to God satisfying *if they were virtuous* – that is to say, if they were not the people they are – but in their present condition, their belief that rebellion gives them greater satisfaction than obedience is not a false belief. Again, this is part of what it is to be vicious: to desire and to delight in the bad rather than the good. The choice of hell is indeed irrational, in the sense that all acts proceeding from self-deception are irrational, and even maximally irrational, given that it is the exercise of self-deception in its uppermost limit.¹² But it is not unintelligible.¹³ It is highly motivated by the combination of beliefs and desires that are the psychological and spiritual fruit of persistent, wilful disobedience to God.¹⁴ In the words of the Apostle Paul, 'the wages of sin is death'.¹⁵

The second form of the choice model

Returning now to the final line of the passage from *Sickness unto Death* mentioned at the closing of the first section ('The first form of the choice model'), we find one plausible reason that God does not simply annihilate the damned, mercifully putting them out of their misery. In the despair of defiance, the damned *will* to exist; they 'refuse to be erased', that is, refuse to consent to being annihilated. In sustaining them in existence for all eternity in their state of torment, God is respecting their freedom, granting them their choice. The issue of annihilation is far more problematic for the second version of the choice

model, however, according to which hell is the consequence of certain choices made by the damned, but not that which the inhabitants of hell choose directly.

This version of the choice model – defended in various forms by Richard Swinburne (1983), Eleonore Stump (1985 & 1986), and C. S. Lewis ((1946) & (1947), ch. 8) – is typically developed as an extension of a soul-making theodicy: heaven and hell are the logical culminations of two directions that soul-making can take. It is key to this view that damnation is a *natural* consequence of one's choices, rather like losing control of one's car and crashing is a natural consequence of reckless driving, as opposed to receiving a ticket or having one's driver's license revoked, which are artificial consequences. Hell is not a place to which God consigns a person as an arbitrary punishment, but rather the psycho-spiritual condition that necessarily results when creatures with the kind of nature that we humans possess become entrenched in habitual sin.¹⁶ To make sense of this view, certain assumptions about the human psychological make-up are required: most fundamentally, that a person's present character is at least in part a function of past free choices the person has made, and that a person can reach a point at which it is psychologically impossible to will the good with any consistency.

In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard anticipates and develops in great psychological detail this version of the choice model under the title, 'Despair in weakness'. There are several forms of despair in weakness, distinguished by the degree to which the despairing individual is self-reflective. The 'man of immediacy' exemplifies despair in weakness in its most unreflective form (Kierkegaard (1980), 51–54). In colloquial terms, this is the person to whom 'life just happens'. Anti-Climacus tells us, '[i]ts dialectic is: the pleasant and the unpleasant; its concepts are: good luck, bad luck, fate' (*ibid.*, 51). In his earthly life, the man of immediacy is happy to the extent that circumstances are personally favourable, unhappy to the extent that they are not. Lacking the internal consistency provided by strength of character, he is blown by every wind of change, and when caught in life's storms is quickly blown asunder, like the fool of Jesus' parable who builds his house on shifting sands.¹⁷ If he believes himself to be in despair at all, it is for the wrong reason: he despairs over the loss of some beloved worldly good. But the truth, Anti-Climacus thinks, is that his condition is *essentially* one of despair because he fails to achieve the human telos of genuine selfhood, and thus he is in despair regardless of his self-assessed level of happiness (*ibid.*, 51–52).

What would be the logical culmination, the permanent form, of this kind of despair? Anti-Climacus does not tell us, but I think there is good reason to believe it would closely resemble Swinburne's description of the man who has 'lost his soul' by systematically and repeatedly yielding to bad desires until he loses the power to do otherwise. Swinburne explains:

Now people come into existence with a limited range of choice – a limited set of good and evil actions which are for them live possibilities. By our choices (encouraged or frustrated by our

bodily condition, mental state, environment, upbringing, friends and enemies) we shift the range of possible choice. (Swinburne (1983), 47)

There is, however, a natural inertia away from the good for fallen creatures:

Further, many of men's strongest desires are for lesser goods, i.e., for the bad. (This is part of what is involved in original sin.) Without effort man will slide toward the bad. (*ibid.*)

Without the exertion of sustained moral effort, then, a person will eventually develop a bad character. Worse yet, the more that bad desires are indulged, the more difficult it is to resist them in the future: greater and greater amounts of moral effort are required to resist the same temptation. Worst of all, desire for the good will become weaker and weaker each time it is resisted, until eventually the individual experiences no desire for the good at all.¹⁸ Damnation is the logical culmination of this natural process.

It is the extreme case of what we have all too often seen: people increasingly mastered by desires, so that they lose some of their ability to resist them. The less we impose our order on our desires, the more they impose their order on us. (*ibid.*, 48–49)

Eventually, Swinburne claims, the individual's agency is altogether destroyed.

There is no longer a 'he'; having immunized himself against the nagging of conscience, the agent has turned into a mere theatre of conflicting desires of which the strongest automatically dictates 'his' action. (*ibid.*, 48)

Put in Kierkegaardian terms, the continual failure to will even the first movements towards selfhood¹⁹ eventually terminates in a condition in which one's powers of agency are so atrophied that it is psychologically impossible even to make a start on the project. At this point, the condition is permanent. In this manner, the unreflective form of despair in weakness gradually and passively develops into the eternal condition of damnation, of 'losing one's soul'.

There are, however, important respects in which the Kierkegaardian analysis of despair in weakness goes beyond some prominent contemporary accounts. One such point of difference concerns the possibility of a permanent state of conflict, not only among the first-order desires of the damned, but between their first- and second-order desires as well.²⁰ Walls writes:

Broadly speaking, perhaps we can characterize weak evil persons as those who have allowed their second-order desires to become conformed to their evil first-order desires. They have not, as a matter of principle, chosen evil. They have simply rationalized themselves into it rather than resisted it. (Walls (1992), 123)²¹

Bringing their second-order desires into alignment with their first-order desires is the only means still available to the damned to achieve any inner consistency, given that they no longer possess the power to resist their first-order desires. Swinburne's aforementioned remark about the damned 'having immunized himself against the nagging of conscience' suggests a view similar to Walls's.²² While I agree that it seems possible that some of the damned strive for (and

perhaps achieve) this defective form of inner consistency, it also seems possible, I think, that the first and second-order desires of some of the damned remain perpetually in conflict – and that this is a part of their torment. Given that sinful desires are those which, by their very nature, are internally conflicted, this even seems the most likely outcome. Put in Kierkegaardian terms, it is purity of heart which ‘wills one thing’, whereas damnation is a kind of eternal ‘double-mindedness’ (Kierkegaard (2009), 7–154).²³ One aspect of double-mindedness is the conflict between first and second-order desires. Swinburne himself remarks that happiness ‘consists in doing what [one] wants to be doing and having happen what [one] wants to have happen’, but a person ‘will only be fully happy if he has no conflicting wants; if he is doing what he wants to be doing and wants in no way to be doing anything else’ (Swinburne (1983), 39–40). It seems plausible that at least some of the damned have conflicting desires about willing the good: they still want on some level to will the good, but find this second-order desire continually in conflict with, and overridden by, their first-order desires, resulting in intense self-loathing. This seems to be one of the various ways the damned could become trapped in a permanent state of double-mindedness, with happiness eternally out of reach.

The possibility of a permanent conflict between first- and second-order desires is important, because it is one way of characterizing the *reflective* form of despair in weakness, the category which most clearly takes us beyond Swinburne’s view and demonstrates the greater nuance and depth of the Kierkegaardian account. The unreflective version of despair in weakness – which, I have suggested, is essentially what Swinburne develops in a contemporary form – is characterized by passivity; moral apathy seems to be, on Swinburne’s view, essential to damnation. But for Anti-Climacus, this is not the case. In fact, in the reflective version of despair in weakness, it is a kind of obsession over one’s personal shortcomings, including moral failures, that leads to eventual entrenchment in despair. Anti-Climacus describes this possibility as follows:

When the self in a certain degree of reflection in itself wills to be responsible for the self, it may come up against some difficulty or other in the structure of the self, in the self’s necessity. For just as no human body is perfect, so no self is perfect. This difficulty, whatever it is, makes him recoil. (Kierkegaard (1980), 54)

‘Necessity’ here refers not to logical or metaphysical necessity, but rather to those features shaping one’s personality over which one has no control: factors such as genetic make-up (for example, a predisposition towards alcoholism), early childhood experiences (such as emotional scarring from abuse), the culture in which one was raised, etc.²⁴ What Anti-Climacus is describing here is the individual who has taken the first steps towards authentic selfhood in recognizing and striving to uphold the requirements of the ethical. But as this individual strives with all his might to become a certain kind of self – for example, to be a good and decent person – he finds that there is some part of his personality that is a constant source

of personal failure. He is *offended* at his inability to become, of his own power, what he wills to be. 'But now', Anti-Climacus explains, 'instead of definitely turning away from despair to faith and humbling himself under his weakness, he entrenches himself in despair and despairs over his weakness' (*ibid.*, 61). Rather than choosing the path of repentance, which involves an unqualified admission of one's failure, guilt, and inability to make things right of one's own power, the despairing one instead becomes shut up within himself (*Indesluttethed*), a condition rendered as 'inclosing reserve' in the Hong's translation (*ibid.*, 63).²⁵ His inner monologue becomes a broken record, endlessly repeating his weaknesses and failures, but his enclosure within himself indicates that at the deepest level he does not want to be helped. This reveals that the true motive of this form of despair is pride, a fact about which the despairing one is self-deceived.

If it were possible for anyone to share the secret of his inclosing reserve and if one were then to say to him, 'It is pride, you are really proud of yourself,' he probably would never make the confession to anyone else. Alone with himself he no doubt would confess that there is something to it, but the passionateness with which his self has interpreted his weakness would soon lead him into believing that it cannot possibly be pride, because it is indeed his very weakness that he despairs over – just as if it were not pride that places such tremendous emphasis on the weakness, just as if it were not because he wants to be proud of his self that he cannot bear this consciousness of weakness. (*ibid.*, 65)

On Anti-Climacus's account, the entrenchment of wounded pride is inclosing reserve, the permanent form of which is damnation, the natural culmination of the reflective form of despair in weakness.

Why not annihilation?

Anti-Climacus suggests that the 'weak' form of damnation is far more common than the 'strong' form – he notes that '[the demonic] kind of despair is rarely seen in the world' (*ibid.*, 72)²⁶ – and that even the highly reflective form of despair in weakness is 'quite rare' (*ibid.*, 65). He thinks the vast majority of despair in the world is unreflective and that 'most people virtually never advance beyond what they were in their childhood and youth: immediacy with the admixture of a little dash of reflection' (*ibid.*, 58). But this points to something deeply troubling with the second form of the choice model, a problem that plagues not only Anti-Climacus's view but also contemporary versions of the view. The problem is highlighted by a crucial passage from the opening section of *Sickness unto Death*. Speaking of the sickness unto death, Anti-Climacus writes:

To be saved from this sickness by death is an impossibility, because the sickness and its torment – and the death – are precisely this inability to die. . . . No matter how much the despairing person avoids it, no matter how successfully he has completely lost himself (especially the case in the form of despair that is ignorance of being in despair) and lost himself in such a manner that the loss is not at all detectable – eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his condition was despair and will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that

he cannot rid himself of his self . . . Eternity is obliged to do this, because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity's claim upon him. (*ibid.*, 21)

To begin to appreciate why this passage is so problematic, recall that the principal advantage of the choice model is its supposed ability to explain how God's love is expressed even in His willing that some are lost. The proposed solution is that God allows those who do not desire communion with Him – those who choose self-rule over self-surrender – to get what they want. As C. S. Lewis puts the idea in *The Great Divorce*, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it' (Lewis (1946), 69). We have seen that with the first version of the choice model, this description seems apt: the defiant damned *want* to remain in their suffering, forever standing (in their own eyes) as living witnesses against the goodness of God. For these individuals, whose will and desire is to exist in a state of eternal separation from God, it seems clear that damnation is a freely chosen state. But it is not at all clear how it is freely chosen by those who do not (knowingly) desire separation from God, especially those who are ignorant that their earthly condition is even one of despair.²⁷

At most, what the second form of the choice model seems to demonstrate is that, for those entrenched in despair in weakness, there is no alternative to damnation *other than annihilation*. The choice model holds that damnation is the natural end result of human persistence in sin. The trajectory of despair can be altered only by an act of repentance: a turning away from sin and towards God. But repentance must, of logical necessity, be an act of freedom: an action caused by something other than an agent *S* is not an act of *S*'s repenting. It follows that it is impossible for God to save a person against that person's will. And if something like the Swinburne model is correct, individuals can reach a point at which they lose the power of agency to turn away from their own sin: repentance becomes, for the damned, psychologically impossible. Nevertheless, even if God cannot save such persons, surely God has it within His power simply to annihilate them, mercifully putting them out of their misery once they have reached a point beyond which redemption is no longer possible for them. The challenge for defenders of this type of choice model – arguably, the biggest challenge – is to explain why God does not do this.²⁸

Anti-Climacus's claim that 'the sickness and its torment – and the death – are precisely this inability to die' suggests that at least some of the damned desire annihilation; they want their suffering to end. Why does God not respect their choice, giving them what they want?²⁹ The claim that 'eternity . . . will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self' suggests that the final state of the damned is (in some cases) not freely chosen, but rather imposed on the damned against their wills. But if the final state of the damned is imposed on them rather than chosen, it is hard to see how this most basic

tenet of the choice model – that damnation is a freely chosen state – is to be upheld; it seems, instead, that the choice model is being abandoned in favour of a more traditional view that sees damnation as a divinely imposed punishment. This is a fundamental problem under which the choice model is pressured to collapse into one or the other of its closest rivals: either annihilationism or the traditional view of hell. And it is not a problem simply for Anti-Climacus's view; any version of the choice model that is built on the idea of despair in weakness – whether or not the Kierkegaardian language is adopted – must explain why God allows some to remain in a state of eternal suffering *against their wills*.

Answer 1: natural immortality

In the remainder of this article, I will argue that a possible solution to this problem is contained in the very passage from *Sickness unto Death* that raises the problem, if only we unpack its meaning and implications. To understand this difficult passage, the first task is to discern the meaning of the term 'eternity' in it. This is a key term in Kierkegaard's writings (along with its variants, like 'eternal'), but it is not used univocally in them. C. Stephen Evans argues that in the writings of Johannes Climacus, we find the term used to refer variously to '(1) abstract logical possibilities, (2) moral obligations, (3) God, and (4) man's future life' (Evans (1983), 59). To what does the term refer in this passage by Anti-Climacus? The issue is important, because if 'eternity' here means 'God', then it seems Anti-Climacus is rejecting a key component of the choice model: the view that damnation is a *natural* consequence of an individual's free choices. If 'eternity' refers to God in this passage, then it would appear to claim that damnation is something *imposed* on the damned by God. Further problematic is the claim that eternity is *obliged* to nail the despairing person to himself. Why would God have any such obligation?

By contrast, if 'eternity' here refers to a post-mortem state of human existence, then the passage seems more in line with the logic of the choice model. Perhaps the meaning of the passage is that, in addition to the usual earthly consequences of wrongdoing, there are eternal consequences as well, and these consequences are somehow necessary. Eternity is a state of being rather than becoming, a state in which one's character is fully stable in the sense that significant change is not psychologically possible. Whereas God's nature is such that he never occupies any other state, human nature is such that this state is preceded by, and its content determined by, the free choices made during a prior state of temporal becoming. In concrete terms: the earthly choices one makes have lasting consequences for one's character and spiritual state in the afterlife, when the process of soul-making comes to an end, and this is so of necessity. On this view, the biblical teaching that 'a man reaps what he sows' expresses a necessary truth.³⁰ Eternity is 'obliged' to nail the despairing one to himself precisely because no other eternal outcome is possible.

But why, we might wonder, is no other outcome possible? Is it not a Kierkegaardian theme – as well as a biblical one – that with God all things are possible? Can God not simply bring it about that a person is spared the eternal consequences of bad earthly choices? At the very least, surely God could spare the damned eternal suffering by annihilating them. And if God *is* able to do so, why would He not do so, at least in every case of unreflective despair, given that He is not only omnipotent but also omnibenevolent and perfectly loving?

I think that we find two answers to this question (or rather, this cluster of questions) in *Sickness unto Death*, and I suspect that Anti-Climacus intends them to be equivalent answers, but in fact they are not. One answer suggested in the text as to why God does not spare the damned eternal suffering is that the human soul is naturally immortal because it is indestructible; once created, a human soul cannot be destroyed, even by God. One of the most famous arguments for the natural immortality of the soul comes from Plato, and at one point Anti-Climacus seems to endorse it, or at least a theological version of it. He states:

Socrates demonstrated the immortality of the soul from the fact that sickness of the soul (sin) does not consume it as sickness of the body consumes the body. Thus, the eternal in a person can be demonstrated by the fact that despair cannot consume his self, that precisely this is the torment of contradiction in despair. (Kierkegaard (1980), 20–21)

The reference is to book X of the *Republic*, in which Socrates argues that a thing can be destroyed only by an evil that is particular to things of that type (for example, rust to iron, rot to wood, disease to the body, etc.), and since the evil that is particular to the soul – namely, injustice – does not destroy the soul, it is impossible for the soul to be destroyed; thus the soul is – and must be – immortal.³¹ Anti-Climacus's theological spin on the argument is that sin destroys the soul in the sense of ruining it,³² but it cannot destroy the soul in the sense of causing it to cease to exist. 'To be saved from this sickness by death is *an impossibility*, because the sickness and its torment – and the death – are precisely this inability to die' (Kierkegaard (1980), 21; emphasis added). This seems at first to make good sense of the scriptural language of hell as 'eternal destruction': it is a kind of living death that does not – and cannot – ever end.

More careful reflection on the matter makes it clear, however, that the Socratic argument, thus construed, does not provide orthodox Christians with a reason to accept the doctrine of soul immortality; nor does it provide an explanation for why God does not mercifully annihilate the damned. As it stands, the Socratic argument – in particular, the premise that a thing can be destroyed only by an evil that is particular to its type³³ – is in tension with the Christian doctrine of divine conservation, according to which nothing metaphysically distinct from God exists at any time without God's actively sustaining it in existence. Were God simply to refrain from sustaining a human soul momentarily, it would thereby be annihilated; this is, on the traditional view, a metaphysical necessity.³⁴ Far from being indestructible, souls – like everything else in creation – are radically

contingent beings. Thus, if a good explanation is to be found in *Sickness unto Death* for why God does not in His mercy simply allow the damned to pass out of existence, it must be found in some other argument elsewhere in the text.

Answer 2: essential immortality

In fact, I think we do find another argument, and it is more impressive than the Socratic one. To develop it, let us first return to the Kierkegaardian/biblical claim that with God all things are possible. It is crucial to understand this claim properly in order to appreciate why Anti-Climacus thinks God cannot spare the damned eternal misery simply by annihilating them. The claim that all things are possible for God is easily and often misunderstood. Contrary to a popular reading,³⁵ Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist; he does not hold the view that faith is a matter of believing that which is absurd in the sense of being obviously false or logically contradictory. Nor is he a Cartesian, endorsing the view that God can do the logically impossible or make logical contradictions true.

The key to the biblical claim that with God all things are possible – and also, I would suggest, the key to the Kierkegaardian understanding of it – is the broader context in which this claim occurs in Scripture. Upon being told by Jesus that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples ask in astonishment, 'Who then can be saved?', to which Jesus replies, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'³⁶ This is not textual support for Cartesianism; it rather makes the point that in matters of salvation, God is able to accomplish that which is impossible for man. Perhaps we can also safely extract from this passage the teaching that God is able to do that which might *seem* to us impossible, in the sense that it is beyond our ken to understand or even imagine how it could be done. But either way, the passage does not claim that God can do that which is *in fact* (rather than merely to human appearance) logically impossible. The long-standing view about these matters in the Christian tradition is that omnipotence does not include the ability to actualize states of affairs that are genuinely logically impossible.³⁷

There is textual support throughout *Sickness unto Death* that Anti-Climacus holds this same view about omnipotence (more on this shortly); there is also textual support that he has in mind the above understanding of 'with God all things are possible'. In the section 'Despair as defined by possibility/necessity', subsection β., 'Necessity's despair is to lack possibility', Anti-Climacus writes:

What is decisive is that with God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true at every moment. This is indeed a generally recognized truth, which is commonly expressed in this way, but the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe*. But this is the

very formula for losing the understanding; to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God. (Kierkegaard (1980), 38)

To explain what he means, Anti-Climacus goes on to use the analogy of a person whose worst fear in life is suddenly realized. In such a case, he says, this individual's 'collapse' – his emotional and psychological breakdown – is 'altogether certain'; it would seem that there is no other possibility for him but consuming despair.

At this point, then, salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible! This is the battle of *faith*, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation. . . . The *believer* sees and understands his downfall, humanly speaking (in what has happened to him, or in what he has ventured), but he believes. For this reason he does not collapse. He leaves it entirely to God how he is to be helped, but he believes that for God everything is possible. . . . This is the good health of faith that resolves contradictions. The contradiction here is that, humanly speaking, downfall is certain, but that there is possibility nonetheless. (*ibid.*, 38–40)

Anti-Climacus's use of the term 'contradiction' here is noteworthy. Clearly, this is not about a struggle to believe that God can make logical contradictions true. Faith is the struggle to believe the scriptural claim that 'God works all things for good for those who love him'.³⁸ It is the struggle to believe that, even when all seems hopelessly lost, 'The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save'.³⁹ It is the struggle to believe that God will see one through the dark night of the soul, the struggle to believe that God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.⁴⁰

Understanding these points is crucial to understanding the Kierkegaardian view of damnation, because they help to explain why eternity is obliged to nail the despairing self to itself. Even though God's power extends to possibilities we cannot imagine, there are some states of affairs that we can know to be logically impossible, and divine power does not extend to actualizing these. In general, even God cannot bring it about that both P and \sim P are true at one and the same time. In particular, even God cannot bring it about that a being both is and is not human, and even God cannot create a human being without also creating a being that instantiates all the properties that are essential to humanity.

And what is a human being? Answering this question is one of the central tasks of *Sickness unto Death*. 'A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis' (*ibid.*, 13). 'The human self is . . . a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another' (*ibid.*, 13–14). A human being is a self, and '[t]he self is freedom' (*ibid.*, 29). Though much ink has been spilled trying to explain just what, exactly, we are to make of such statements about selfhood, freedom, syntheses, relations of a self to itself, etc., this much at least seems clear: for Kierkegaard, to be human is to be free in a significant sense, and the most significant use of freedom is the decision about how one will relate to God. *It is of the very essence of humanity that we are beings who choose our own eternal destinies.*

This is the reason eternity is obliged to nail the despairing one to himself: it is a metaphysical necessity that eternity do so, because *this is what it is to be human*. God could have chosen not to create humans, of course, but the decision to create humans was a decision to create beings who possess the dreadful power to damn themselves for all eternity.⁴¹ Human freedom and the possibility of despair – eternal despair, damnation – are thus metaphysically inseparable. Anti-Climacus addresses this point when he asks:

Is despair an excellence or a defect? Purely dialectically, it is both. . . . The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal . . . for it indicates . . . that he is spirit. The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness.

Consequently, to be able to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to be in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery – no, it is ruination. (*ibid.*, 14–15)

The passage brings to mind a famous line from Sartre: *man is condemned to be free*. But Kierkegaard might put it differently (though he would probably say equivalently): *man is condemned to be eternal*. As Anti-Climacus puts it,

to despair is a qualification of spirit and relates to the eternal in man. But [man] cannot rid himself of the eternal – no, never in all eternity. He cannot throw it away once and for all, *nothing is more impossible*; . . . A person cannot rid himself of the relation to himself any more than he can rid himself of his self, which, after all, is one and the same thing, since the self is the relation to oneself. (*ibid.*, 17; emphasis added)

We are condemned to be the kind of creatures who are capable of self-damnation, because we are of our very essence beings who are capable of despair. This is our perfection (freedom), but also the inescapable price of being human. Thus, 'eternity . . . will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self . . . Eternity is obliged to do this, because *to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity's claim upon him*' (*ibid.*, 21; emphasis added).

In defence of the Kierkegaardian solution

I have argued that *Sickness unto Death* suggests an interesting solution to the problem of annihilation that plagues the second form of the choice model. But is it a plausible solution? Among the likely objections that could be raised against it, I will here focus on the one that seems to me most important and that deals most directly with what is unique to the Kierkegaardian solution. I will not rehearse objections by critics such as Thomas Talbott and Marilyn Adams which are aimed at features of the choice model that are common to both contemporary versions and the Kierkegaardian version.⁴²

What is distinctive about the Kierkegaardian view, as I have developed it, is its claim that to be human is to be both free and eternal: more specifically, that it is of

the very essence of humanity that we are beings who freely choose our eternal destinies and must live out the consequences of our choices. But this view (goes the objection) seems to require one of two bizarre metaphysical claims: either (1) that God *cannot* stop sustaining a person in existence once He creates that person, or (2) that God's annihilating a person would bring it about that that person *never was* a human being. Option (1) seems to deny God's omnipotence. Option (2), in so far as it is coherent at all, seems to require some kind of backward causation, which is impossible. So it must *not* be the case that being 'eternal' (possessing immortality) is among the essential attributes of humanity, and thus the Kierkegaardian view is false and provides no plausible solution to the problem of annihilation that plagues the choice model of hell.

It seems to me that the Kierkegaardian has several options for responding to this objection, and the decision of which to take will depend on one's other philosophical intuitions and commitments. One option is simply to embrace the claim that God cannot discontinue His activity of sustaining human persons in existence once He creates them. The development of this response and its underlying commitments is most easily presented with the help of an imaginary dialogue:

Kierkegaardian: Option (1) is not really implausible at all. In particular, there is no good reason to think that it compromises divine omnipotence. All that is needed is an argument that it would be contrary to the divine nature for God to cease sustaining a person in existence. Since it is metaphysically impossible for God to act contrary to His own nature, it would then follow that ceasing to sustain a person in existence is an action that does not fall within the scope of divine omnipotence.

Critic: If you intend to stay within the boundaries of orthodoxy, that strategy is unworkable. God cannot be metaphysically dependent on anything in creation, so the divine nature cannot require the existence of any created being. It follows that the divine nature cannot require the sustaining of any creature in existence.

Kierkegaardian: That doesn't follow at all. Orthodoxy requires that God creates freely and contingently – in other words, that it was within God's power not to create – but once God creates, His nature places restrictions on the ways that He can subsequently act towards created beings. In particular, given that God is essentially good and loving, it is required by the divine nature that God act towards created beings in ways that are good and loving. It would be unloving for God to annihilate a person – that is, to stop sustaining a person in existence – and thus contrary to the divine nature for God to do so.

Critic: Presumably, God loves all of His creation, but there is no good reason to think that this requires Him to sustain each created thing in existence for all eternity. Why think that this is required for God to love human beings?

Kierkegaardian: Here Aquinas gets it right: to love a being is to treat it according to its nature, to help it – in so far as one is able – to fulfil its nature.⁴³ Combine this with Anti-Climacus's insight that the nature of a human being is (among other things) to be immortal. It follows that for God to love human beings, He must sustain each person in existence for all eternity. The annihilation of the damned is thus ruled out by the divine nature.

Critic: Even if we grant your Thomistic assumption, it is not enough to make your argument go through. Damnation involves the permanent thwarting of the human telos of eternal communion with God. So for God to sustain a person in hell, He is already treating a person contrary to that person's nature. Why think it would be worse to treat a person contrary to his nature by annihilating him than by allowing him to exist in hell? There must be a further, hidden assumption that is driving your argument. You are assuming that existence is a good that is not defeated even by the infinite suffering of a person in hell. But if *any* evil can defeat the goodness of existence, it is the infinite suffering of hell. So you are assuming that existence is *indefeasibly* good. And that seems to me a highly implausible assumption.

Kierkegaardian: That assumption is unnecessary for my view. Damnation is the result of bad acts on the creature's part: it is the failure of a person to treat himself according to his own nature, a failure to love oneself properly. Annihilation, by contrast, would be the result of a bad act on God's part: it would be the failure of God to treat another person – a human being – according to the other's nature, a failure to love the other. God always does His part in loving each person perfectly. Damnation is the result of human failure to do the same.

Critic: That response invites the obvious question: why would God not give humans the power to annihilate themselves? On your view, God has already given humans the power to thwart their own nature in one way; why not in another as well? In fact, the logic of the choice model – with its emphasis on human freedom – suggests that God would do exactly this. Only then will it turn out that 'All that are in Hell, choose it' (to borrow Lewis's line). In possession of this power, the 'defiant' ones would choose continual existence in hell, and those in 'despair in weakness' would exercise their power to destroy themselves.⁴⁴ Once again, the assumption that is needed to block this line of reasoning is the claim that existence is an indefeasible good – or, conversely, that annihilation is an indefeasible evil. That would explain why God does not grant this power to the damned. But on this point I have already expressed my own intuition: the claim that existence is indefeasibly good seems to me not even remotely plausible, and if anything can defeat the goodness of existence, it is the infinite suffering of hell.

The dialogue is meant to highlight the list of assumptions the Kierkegaardian will need to defend option (1). Some of the assumptions – for example, that omnipotence does not include the ability to do the metaphysically impossible – are already built into the Kierkegaardian view as it was developed prior to the discussion of this objection. But others – for example, that to love a being is to treat it according to its nature – are not already a part of the Kierkegaardian view and must be added on. This is not necessarily objectionable in itself, especially if the added assumptions are ones that one already holds on independent grounds, but it does highlight the cost of developing this line of response. In my judgement, if Critic is right that among the additional, required assumptions is the claim that existence is an indefeasible good, then the first Kierkegaardian response comes at too high a price to be acceptable.

A better line of defence

There is, fortunately, another response available to the Kierkegaardian. Recall the original objection: that the Kierkegaardian view requires either (1)

that God *cannot* stop sustaining a person in existence once He creates that person, or (2) that God's annihilating a person would bring it about that that person *never was* a human being. The first response was an attempt to defend option (1). The second response is not an attempt to defend option (2), exactly, but rather to show that there is an option that at first seems very similar to (2), but is not metaphysically problematic in the way that (2) is. The Kierkegaardian can argue that, while it is within God's power to annihilate any being that He so chooses, God's doing so would *entail* – not bring it about, but entail – that the being in question was never human. This claim, strange as it might initially sound, can be defended without any commitment to backward causation.⁴⁵ To make this clearer, let us assume that God either possesses foreknowledge or is timelessly eternal, in which case God knows, at the moment He creates a thing, the entire future of the thing He is creating.⁴⁶ At this moment, God knows whether He is creating a being whose existence will eventually come to an end or not. On the Kierkegaardian view, immortality is a property essential to human nature. So for God to create a human being, He must create an immortal being: a being He foreknows (or timelessly knows) He will forever sustain in existence after He first creates it.⁴⁷ If God creates a being whom He foreknows (or timelessly knows) will eventually cease to exist, then He thereby knowingly and intentionally creates something that is non-human. So in response to the question 'Why does God not simply annihilate the non-defiant damned?', the Kierkegaardian can respond, 'Because God cannot create a being that is both human and whose existence possibly comes to an end. That is impossible, akin to drawing a circle that has right angles.'

Of course, none of this explains *why* God creates human beings. On the Kierkegaardian view, it is analytically true that humans are immortal beings: creatures whom God will never annihilate but instead will sustain in existence at every time after their initial creation. So the Kierkegaardian response (thus far developed) just shifts the question. Rather than 'Why does God make all humans immortal rather than annihilate the ones who damn themselves?', the question now becomes, 'Why does God create humans at all? Why include humans in creation rather than human-like creatures who are either mortal or who have the capacity for immortality but do not possess it essentially?' The objection is developed as follows: it seems that, by creating creatures who were human-like in various ways, God could have obtained all the relevant goods in creation – creatures with free will, moral conscience, the capacity for love, etc. – without risking the great evil of eternal creaturely suffering. Surely this would be a better world. The Kierkegaardian view thus implies that God needlessly risks horrendous evil, making it an unsatisfactory version of the choice model.

This is a serious problem, and a fully developed solution would require more space than I have here. At present, I will attempt only a sketch of what seems to me the best solution available to the Kierkegaardian. I will argue that the solution lies in the direction of some further reflections on the nature of creaturely freedom:

more specifically, in an expansion of the basic contours of the soul-making theodicy on which the Kierkegaardian view of hell is built.

Consider first a question commonly raised in discussions of the problem of evil: why did God endow mankind with the capacity to inflict so much harm through individual and collective misuses of free will? It is a common complaint against proponents of free-will and soul-making theodicies that much of the moral evil in the world appears utterly gratuitous, and God's allowance of it pointless and unjustified. Even granting the assumption that moral freedom is required for soul-making, the problem remains: why are such egregious, utterly horrendous moral evils – the torture and murder of a child, for example – allowed by God?⁴⁸ God must put limits on the freedom of any creature He endows with free will – no creature can be given absolute freedom, for this would be incompatible with the divine nature⁴⁹ – and humans are, in fact, limited in various ways in their exercise of free will. Why did God not limit human freedom much more, restricting our capacity for harm to a much greater degree and thereby preventing the worst evils of the actual world?

I submit that a partial answer to this question is found in something like the following principle:⁵⁰

The Freedom-Harm Principle: The degree of moral freedom possessed by a creature is directly proportional to its ability to inflict harm through misuses of its freedom.

The case for this principle begins with the observation that the power to choose among alternative possibilities is morally significant only if the available alternatives include courses of action that could result in harm. Imagine a possible world with rational creatures who are the agent causes of their trivial choices – which socks to wear, what to eat for breakfast, etc. – but who altogether lack the power to take a course of action that would result in harm of any kind to anyone; such creatures possess metaphysical freedom of some kind, but not moral freedom. The Freedom-Harm Principle is a further extension of this idea. Not only is the *ability* to inflict harm necessary for moral freedom, but the *degree* of freedom is proportionate to the degree of harm one can inflict. Reflection on some concrete examples lends support to this further claim. Imagine beings X, Y, and Z with powers to inflict varying types of harm. If the worst harm that X can inflict on others is to cause them mild embarrassment, the worst harm Y can inflict on others is to cause them to experience moderately severe physical pain, and the worst harm Z can inflict on others is to bring about their complete psychological disintegration and death, it seems that, other things being equal, Y has greater moral freedom than X, and Z has greater moral freedom than either.

The Freedom-Harm Principle suggests that the highest conceivable degree of creaturely moral freedom would be the ability to bring about the greatest possible harm. Focusing just on human interactions, this would be the ability unilaterally to bring about everyone's damnation, the worst possible end for human

beings. It seems intuitively obvious that a perfectly just God could not permit this, for justice requires that undeserved suffering be finally requited or redeemed. So no person is given the power unilaterally to bring about another's damnation.⁵¹ Instead, the greatest possible harm of which free creatures are capable is self-directed, and creaturely moral freedom is then maximized by extending without upper limit in the temporal direction this capacity for self-harm. In short, the highest amount of creaturely moral freedom consistent with the requirements of justice would seem to be the power to bring about one's own eternal conscious suffering. This is the capacity for self-damnation, the power that (on the Kierkegaardian view) is essentially possessed by every human being.

Even if we grant the Freedom-Harm Principle, however, this does not by itself explain why God has chosen to create human beings. Why is it good for the created world to include creatures with the capacity to inflict such harm? Put differently: why is it good for any creature to have *so much* moral freedom? A further principle is needed:

The Freedom-Communion Principle: The degree of moral freedom possessed by a creature is directly proportional to its ability to commune with God.

This principle is more difficult to establish, but it still seems at least *prima facie* plausible. The highest forms of love, intimacy, and communion are inextricably tied to the exercise of moral freedom, and reflection on varying levels of freedom (analogous to the cases mentioned above in connection with the Freedom-Harm Principle) suggests that the highest possible forms of communion require the greatest possible moral freedom.⁵² According to orthodox Christianity, salvation – the highest possible good for created beings – involves an infinite form of communion: an eternal fellowship of the highest and most perfect intimacy with God and with other saints in heaven. It is thus possible only for creatures with infinite moral freedom.⁵³

The summary and common-sense expression of all this is a widely endorsed theological claim: we are creatures *made for* the highest good of eternal communion with God and the saints in heaven. The features of human nature that make this end possible for human beings – including immortality and maximal creaturely moral freedom – are the very features that endow humans with the power of eternal self-damnation. The capacity for salvation (eternal communion) and the capacity for damnation (eternal disunion) are two sides of the same coin; they are metaphysically inseparable. Because salvation is the highest possible creaturely good, God has a justifying reason to create beings capable of it; not only is God justified in doing so, it is an expression of His perfect goodness and love. Creating such beings is both an expression of God's love and goodness *for* individual persons (it is intended for their eternal happiness) and an expression of God's greatness (the world is greater for the inclusion of such beings in it).⁵⁴

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to highlight the depth and richness of insight in *Sickness unto Death* concerning the psychology and metaphysics of damnation, and to demonstrate the relevance of Kierkegaard's thought to the contemporary discussion. Specifically, I have tried to show (1) that both of the major versions of the choice model of hell developed in the contemporary literature are anticipated in sophisticated forms in *Sickness unto Death*; (2) that Kierkegaard develops a fascinating account of why, motivated by hatred and spite, one might directly choose not only hell but its sufferings; and (3) that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair offers a plausible explanation of why even a perfectly good, loving, and merciful God would permit the damned to experience the eternal consequences of their earthly choices, even if they do not directly choose or desire this. I have further attempted to sketch two possible ways that the Kierkegaardian view can be expanded to answer the objection that seems to me most troublesome for it. In the process, I hope to have articulated some ways that Kierkegaard's thought might be used to make progress towards an adequate solution to the problem of hell, and to have made clearer the logic of damnation in one of Kierkegaard's most psychologically masterful texts.⁵⁵

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Notes

1. See Walls (1992) ch. 5.
2. Walls contends that '[t]here is, then, no single type of damned character', but that the common feature of all the damned is 'the consistency of their evil' (*ibid.*, 123).
3. For an interesting version of the choice model that combines this idea with annihilationism, see Kvanvig (1993).
4. Note the contrast of this attitude with the theme of the closing 'sermon' of *Either/Or*, 'The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong' (Kierkegaard (1987), 339–354).
5. According to a dominant Christian tradition, evil is always a perversion of good, and on the Kierkegaardian view, hell is a perversion of heaven: an attempt to achieve selfhood through a prideful willing of (false) self-righteousness, rather than a humble admission of guilt and repentance which leads to true righteousness. See Walls (1992), 128.
6. Jack Mulder advances this sort of objection against Walls when he writes,

But the desire for perceived gratification in hell that outweighs the perceived gratification of heaven cannot be, according to Anti-Climacus, what actually motivates the choice of hell. If this were the case, then the ultimate sin of the damned issues from a false set of information. Walls's unfortunate construal of heaven's superior goodness as a *lesson that is lost* on the damned seems to fall prey to this objection. (Mulder (2010), 138; italics in original)

7. See Walls (2004), 203–216, esp. 209–213.
8. The most famous of these passages occur in the pseudonymous voice of Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, but the theme is also prevalent in Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous writings. One such passage is found in his discourse 'Love will hide a multitude of sins', in which Kierkegaard writes the following:

It does not depend, then, merely upon what one sees, but what one sees depends upon how one sees; all observation is not just a receiving, a discovering, but also a bringing forth, and insofar as it is that, how the observer himself is constituted is indeed decisive. When one person sees one thing and another sees something else in the same thing, then the one discovers what the other conceals. Insofar as the object viewed belongs to the external world, then how the observer is constituted is

probably less important, or, more correctly, then what is necessary for the observation is something irrelevant to his deeper nature. But the more the object of observation belongs to the world of spirit, the more important is the way he himself is constituted in his innermost nature, because everything spiritual is appropriated only in freedom; but what is appropriated in freedom is also brought forth. The difference, then, is not in the external but in the internal, and everything that makes a person impure and his observation impure comes from within. The external eye does not matter, but 'an evil eye comes from within.' But an evil eye discovers much that love does not see, since an evil eye even sees that the Lord acts unjustly when he is good. When evil lives in the heart, the eye sees offense, but when purity lives in the heart, the eye sees the finger of God. The pure always see God, but 'he who does evil does not see God' (III John 11).

A person's inner being, then, determines what he discovers and what he hides. (Kierkegaard (1990), 59–60)

9. C. Stephen Evans has written extensively on this issue in Kierkegaard's writings. See, for example, Evans (2006), esp. ch. 10: 'Kierkegaard and Plantinga on belief in God: subjectivity as the ground of properly basic religious beliefs'; ch. 11: 'Externalist epistemology, subjectivity, and Christian knowledge: Plantinga and Kierkegaard'; and ch. 17: 'Does Kierkegaard think beliefs can be directly willed?'
10. See, for example, Ephesians 4:17–19, Matthew 13:13–15, John 3:19–20 and 9:39–41, and 2 Corinthians 4:1–6. For some further, helpful remarks on self-deception, see Kvanvig (1993), 79–80, 148, and 169.
11. See n. 6.
12. This seems to me the kernel of truth in the Kantian idea that immorality has something essentially to do with irrationality. The kind of irrationality that is most salient to the moral life is self-deception, and its intensification is constitutive of the descent into depravity. Since entrenchment in despair is one of the natural effects of self-deception, the two increase in direct proportion to one another: the more intractable one's rebellion against God, the greater one's degree of self-deception, and the upper limit of this trajectory is a condition in which repentance is psychologically impossible. This, I take it, is the (eventual) condition of every creature who is damned. (More on this in the following section of the main text.)
13. Mulder seems to me to confuse the distinction between irrationality and unintelligibility when he states: 'Despair, then, is, at its root, inexplicable, but Anti-Climacus rejects the covert assumption that Talbott and his detractors seem to accept, namely, the assumption that no inexplicable or irrational choice can be blameworthy' (Mulder (2010), 138). I take it that irrational acts can be culpable, but any event that is genuinely inexplicable or unintelligible – that is, having no cause or reason by which to give even a partial explanation of its occurrence – would not count as an action; a fortiori it would not be something for which an agent could be held responsible. Despair is not inexplicable or unintelligible; it is motivated by emotion and desire over and against reason. The will has the power to choose between what is most rational and what is most desired, and people often choose something they themselves know to be self-destructive, simply because the desire or emotion that motivates it is so strong. To act in this way is irrational, but not inexplicable or incomprehensible.
14. It is important to note that the account I have given in this section does not attempt to explain an initial choice of evil originating in a state of moral perfection, but rather attempts only to explain how the process of moral corruption gains momentum, ultimately culminating in a state of complete spiritual blindness. The former, unaddressed issue is the mystery of the fall in its Augustinian version: a fall from a state of *perfection* would seem to be without any motive or explanation. Mulder takes this mystery of the fall to be the pressing issue in discussions of self-deception. In particular, he thinks despair must be understood in relation to the doctrine of the fall of Satan. He writes:

Now, despair has certain levels, and the most intense despair, the devil's despair, is to know precisely what one's blessedness is and to reject it. All despair is traceable to this form of despair, though the less 'intense' despairs occur when people pretend that they are not in despair, and hide their condition from themselves. Thus, if we can figure out what is meant by this most intense form of despair (defiance), we will have understood despair at its most fundamental level, the other types arising from self-deception. (Mulder (2010), 136)

I agree with Mulder that the fall of the devil and the fall of man (in its Augustinian version) both seem inexplicable, but I am not convinced that this mystery must be unravelled before we can understand damnation in its human form. All that is needed for present purposes is the doctrine of original sin. The fall is

mysterious because it is supposed to be a choice for evil made from a state of perfection, and it would seem that morally perfect creatures would be immune to self-deception. But given the doctrine of original sin, none of *us* (existing after Adam) begins in a state of perfection, so there is no mystery about how *our* wills could be tempted to engage in self-deception.

15. Romans 6:23.

16. Stump writes that:

on Dante's view, if I understand it correctly, the torments of hell are not physical pains which God has chosen to add to the burden of hell's inhabitants but the natural psychological state of those who have habitually made bad choices and whose will is not conformable to the divine will. (Stump (1985), 401)

It is clear from Stump's subsequent remarks that by 'natural' she intends something stronger than mere conformity to a contingent law of nature, which presumably God could suspend. She continues:

On Dante's view, then, the essence of Hell consists in the absence of union with God, a condition entailed by a person's psychological state which is a result of that person's free choices and which is naturally painful. (By a naturally painful psychological state I mean that human beings, in consequence of the nature they have, experience the state in question as painful; it is open to God to produce that state in people without the pain but only at the cost of altering their nature. Humiliation and grief seem to me examples of naturally painful psychological states) . . . Everlasting life in hell is the ultimate evil which can befall a person in this world; but the torments of hell are the natural conditions of some persons, and God can spare such persons those pains only by depriving them of their nature or their existence. (*ibid.*)

Stump goes on to remark that: '[o]f the various views of hell I know, the Dantean view seems to me the one most likely to be philosophically defensible' (*ibid.*).

17. Matthew 7:24–27.

18. Swinburne writes: 'Now those who (by yielding to such a bad desire) resist a good desire will have such good desires again. But if they systematically resist desires of a certain kind, they will gradually become the kind of person to whom such desires do not occur with any force' (Swinburne (1983), 48).

19. For Kierkegaard, these involve recognizing the absolute qualitative difference between good and evil (in contrast to the aesthete, who subsumes moral categories to aesthetic categories) and making a personal commitment to strive to will the good: the characteristic movements of ethical existence. The case for this is put in the mouth of Judge William in *Either/Or*, part II; see especially Kierkegaard (1987), 155ff.

20. Roughly, I intend 'first-order desires' to refer to that which a person wants, and 'second-order desires' to refer to that which a person wants to want. The distinction between the two is illustrated by the self-loathing alcoholic, who wants to drink, but desperately wants not to want to drink. For a more careful and detailed analysis of these categories, see Frankfurt (1971).

21. Walls continues: 'By contrast, strong evil persons are those who have managed to bring all their first-order desires into line with their evil second-order desires, which represent a more deliberate, calculated will to do evil' (*ibid.*).

22. Note also Swinburne's remark about the fading desire for the good in the damned mentioned in n. 18, above. Swinburne's position on this issue is somewhat ambiguous, however, as the forthcoming remarks about happiness in the main text will illustrate.

23. Kierkegaard writes:

Or is not despair [*Fortvivlelse*] actually double-mindedness [*Tvesindethed*]; or what else is it to despair but to have two wills! Whether he, the weak one, despairs over not being able to tear himself loose from the evil, or he, the presumptuous one, despairs over not being able to tear himself completely loose from the good – they are both double-minded, they both have two wills; neither of them in truth wills one thing, no matter how desperately they seem to be willing it. Whether it was a woman whom desire plunged into despair or it was a man who despaired in defiance; whether a person despaired because he got his will or despaired because he did not get his will, everyone in despair has two wills, one that he futilely wants to follow entirely, and one that he futilely wants to get rid of entirely. (Kierkegaard (2009), 30)

- He later remarks that 'all double-mindedness is indeed perdition' (*ibid.*, 43).
24. Evans makes a similar point about Johannes Climacus's use of the term. See Evans (1983), 67.
 25. For more on this term, see Rocca (2000), 78–79. Note that inclosing reserve ('inwardness with a jammed lock') is also the end result of the defiant damned, though it takes a different form in such cases.
 26. Curiously, Anti-Climacus follows this with the claim that 'such characters really appear only in the poets', but then immediately contradicts this with the next sentence: 'Nevertheless, at times despair like this does appear in actuality' (*ibid.*). Perhaps his point is that, whereas the demonic *form* of despair is found in the world, it is only in literature that we find it displayed in its uppermost limit.
 27. The reflective version of despair in weakness is a mixture of active and passive elements. On the one hand, this individual desperately wants to escape his condition – he consciously despairs over his weakness – but on the other hand, he wills to remain in it by refusing any help, in particular any divine help. His refusal of divine assistance – an expression of offence – makes his condition partially resemble that of the 'demonic' damned, whose wish to remain in a state of suffering is granted by God. It can thus be said of those suffering from the reflective form of despair in weakness that God is respecting their free will, giving them what they have chosen: basically, to be left alone to pursue selfhood on their own terms and by their own power. The problem under discussion is thus most acute in the case of the *unreflective* version of despair in weakness – which, according to Anti-Climacus, is the most common form.
 28. Presumably, this is the reason many defenders of this form of the choice model at least flirt with annihilationism. See, for example, Lewis (1947), 113–115; Swinburne (1983), 52; *idem* (1989), 182–183.
 29. Kvanvig argues that God *does* give them what they want, at least once they reach the point that their choice for annihilation is both rational and 'settled'; see Kvanvig (1993), ch. 4. The problem at hand is thus a challenge for those who wish to defend a more standard version of the choice model on which annihilation is not available to the damned, regardless of their preferences or choices.
 30. Galatians 6:7.
 31. Plato (1992); see esp. §608d ff.
 32. Anti-Climacus remarks that despair is 'ruination' (Kierkegaard (1980), 15).
 33. Socrates puts the premise as follows: 'Therefore, the evil that is natural to each thing and the bad that is peculiar to it destroy it. However, *if they don't destroy it, nothing else will*, for the good would never destroy anything, nor would anything neither good nor bad' (Plato (1992), 280, emphasis added). The passage is found in *Republic X*, §609a.
 34. The doctrine of conservation plays a key role in the case for the hybrid choice model/annihilationist view that Kvanvig defends; see Kvanvig (1993), 37–39, 70–71, and 150.
 35. See Pojman (1986). The view remains a part of the common lore about Kierkegaard's thought.
 36. Matthew 19:23–26.
 37. What power *is* omnipotence, then? This is a vexed question. Alvin Plantinga demonstrates in his development of the Free-Will Defence that it is not the ability to actualize just any logically possible state of affairs; see Plantinga (1974), 180–184. Nor is this the only technical hurdle to an adequate analysis of omnipotence; see, for example, Swinburne (1977), 38–49; Flint & Freddoso (1983); Martin (1990), 302–315. Fortunately, these issues can be set aside for present purposes, since the only point needed here is that omnipotence – whatever power it is, exactly – is *not* the power to do the impossible.
 38. Romans 8:28.
 39. Zephaniah 3:17.
 40. Anti-Climacus makes it clear that we cannot free ourselves from despair by our own power; see, for example, Kierkegaard (1980), 14.
 41. In the final section ('A better line of defence'), I will attempt to sketch an argument for why God would choose to create beings whose nature it is to possess this kind of freedom.
 42. In addition to the Talbott article previously cited, see Adams (1993); *idem* (1999), ch. 3.
 43. Stump (1986), 192; see also Seymour (2000), 96. Readers who find this to be an odd assumption to put in the mouth of 'Kierkegaardian' are encouraged to consider Kierkegaard's own definition of neighbour love, which turns out to be remarkably similar. He tells us in *Works of Love* that to love a person is to help that person love God (Kierkegaard (1995), 107 & 120) – a claim whose plausibility depends on the further Kierkegaardian idea that it is through loving God that we become ourselves, that is, become the individuals we are divinely intended to be. For further discussion of this issue, see Manis (2009).

44. Or at least, the *unreflective* weak despairing ones would do so. See n. 27, above.
45. Causal relations do not hold among propositions, so the claim that one proposition (*God annihilates S at time T₂*) entails another (*S is not human at time T₁*) involves no backward causation; indeed, it involves no causal relations of any kind.
46. If God is timelessly eternal, this ‘moment’ is the timeless present moment of God’s existence. Here the claim is that God timelessly knows the entire temporal span of the thing He (timelessly) creates.
47. The point in the main text has been simplified at the expense of some precision. It would be more accurate to say that if God is timelessly eternal, then God’s creating a human requires that God create a being *S* such that, for every moment *t* subsequent to the first moment of *S*’s existence, *S*’s existence at *t* is (timelessly) sustained by God.
48. The classic expression of the problem comes from Dostoevsky, who puts the objection in the mouth of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. See Dostoyevsky (1922), 248–259.
49. Only an omnipotent being could possess absolute freedom – an agent is not free to perform an action that she lacks the power to perform – and a created omnipotent being would jeopardize God’s own omnipotence; hence no created being can possess absolute freedom.
50. I say ‘something like’, because the principle as stated here is admittedly in a rough and overly simplistic form. It is meant only to introduce the basic idea for the purposes of the brief sketch I am attempting here.
51. This is not to deny that humans have the power to *contribute* to the damnation of others in various ways.
52. The Freedom-Communion Principle definitionally applies only to creatures. A stronger version of the principle correlating moral freedom and the capacity for communion *in general* could be developed to support the conclusion that orthodox Trinitarian theology seems to require: that the very highest forms of communion are found among the infinite Persons of the Godhead. But the stronger principle would also introduce the problem of divine freedom, making it much more challenging to defend.
53. It seems to me that these ideas are suggested by – or at least fit easily within – a Kierkegaardian anthropology. Recall, in particular, Anti-Climacus’s remarks about the nature of selfhood and the way that a human self is in part constituted by its relations to others: most importantly, to God.
54. Note that to judge it a bad thing that God chose to create beings with the power to damn themselves would be, on the Kierkegaardian view, to despair of the human condition. It is admittedly a disturbing idea, however, that the doctrine of hell could *tempt* some people – namely, those who deeply internalize the doctrine – to such despair. For further development of this problem, see Manis (2015).
55. I am grateful to Dan Johnson, Jack Mulder, and an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies* for helpful comments and critiques of earlier drafts of this article.