

Misery and freedom: reply to Walls

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Abstract: In this brief reply to Walls's challenging critique, I try to do two things: first, clarify the most fundamental point on which I think Walls and I disagree, and second, argue that, as surprising as it may first appear, Walls's free-will theodicy of hell requires that God *interfere* with human freedom in inappropriate ways.

For a number of years now I have considered Jerry Walls to be one of my better critics. In part because his views are far closer to mine than appearances may initially suggest, his criticisms have often seemed to me especially important; and I therefore offer my heartfelt thanks for his latest critique, which is both challenging and persuasively argued. As will come as no surprise to him, however, I also doubt that he has successfully undermined my necessary universalism, as he calls it. Accordingly, I shall try to do two things in this brief reply: first, clarify the most fundamental point on which I think Walls and I disagree, and second, argue that, as surprising as it may first appear, Walls's free-will theodicy of hell requires that God *interfere* with human freedom in inappropriate ways.

A fundamental point of disagreement

For my own part, I am sceptical of the whole idea that we choose, freely or otherwise, an eternal destiny; we no more choose our destiny, I believe, than we do our own birth. In the early pages of the article that Walls criticizes, therefore, I sought to illustrate just how different the choice of an eternal destiny would be from any other choice of which we might have had some experience. I also drew an important distinction between our free choices, on the one hand, and their unforeseen and unintended consequences, on the other – a distinction that the story of the rich man and Lazarus illustrates nicely. For though the rich man no doubt made some bad choices during his earthly life – when he ignored the plight of Lazarus, for example – he hardly foresaw or embraced freely the torment from which he later begs relief. So, in that sense, we can perhaps describe the rich man's torment, which occurs entirely against his will, as a *forcibly imposed punishment*.

Or suppose, by way of a further illustration, that a foolish married man should have a rather frivolous affair with a woman who, unbeknownst to him, has an unstable personality; suppose further that, unlike the well-known movie plot, this woman's fatal attraction should result in the murder of the man's wife and baby; and suppose, finally, that the man's subsequent sorrow, remorse, guilt, and (above all) sense of loss should then become a source of unbearable suffering for him. Insofar as these unforeseen and unintended consequences of the man's sin (the murders in particular) fall under God's providential control and occur entirely against the man's will, they are, in that sense, *forcibly imposed*; and insofar as God uses the man's suffering as a means of correction, or as a means of encouraging repentance, we can again say that the man has endured a *forcibly imposed punishment* for his sin.

Now one virtue of this explanation is that it illustrates how the good in even the worst of sinners – the indestructible image of God, if you will – can itself become a source of unbearable torment. For if the man in our example cared nothing for his wife and baby and had no worthwhile desires at all, then neither would the murders have been a source of torment for him.

The above explanation also accords nicely with the New Testament idea that God is somehow active in our punishment. Contrary to a widespread misinterpretation, the New Testament never pictures either hell (*gehenna*) or the lake of fire as an escape from the *presence* of God. For if God himself is a consuming fire, as the author of Hebrews declares,¹ and if the image of fire signifies God's presence in holy judgment, as it does throughout the Bible, then hell and the lake of fire likewise represent God's presence, not His absence. Put it this way: the same divine presence that brings refreshing times to the repentant (see Acts 3.20) also brings destruction upon the rebellious (see I Thessalonians 1.9).² Or, as Revelation 14.10 explicitly states, those who worship the beast 'will be tormented with fire and brimstone ... in the presence of the Lamb'. And similarly for Luke 16: here, as elsewhere in apocalyptic literature, the image of being tormented in flames clearly signifies God's active presence in the torment. In no way, to be sure, could hell exist apart from the sinner's own deceptions and delusions; Walls and I probably agree about that. But whereas Walls *appears* to hold that the delusions of the damned somehow render their torment in hell more tolerable, I hold just the opposite view. I hold that the delusions of the rich man, for example, precisely underlie and explain the severity of his continuing torment, which the text describes in graphic terms.³ For only an unrepentant sinner, only someone who misunderstands the divine nature entirely or continues to cling to his or her delusions, could possibly experience God's love in the way that the rich man does: as a source of unbearable suffering.

So far, however, I see little reason for a serious disagreement. Walls holds that the delusions of those in hell are self-imposed, and I hold that these very delusions, whether self-imposed or not, partly explain the severity of the suffering

there. If a person S totally misconstrues the sources of human misery as well as the conditions of a happy life, and acts upon such delusions, then S will suffer the consequences; and if S should continue to cling to these delusions, despite the suffering they produce, then S's suffering will become increasingly unbearable. Of course the expression 'unbearable suffering' is an oxymoron, because no suffering that one, in fact, bears could literally be unbearable, however intolerable it may seem. But as a commonly used metaphor, 'unbearable suffering' merely signifies intense misery of a kind that undermines altogether any capacity for joy or happiness, and I see no reason why Walls and I cannot agree that this is just the sort of suffering that Luke 16 describes.

So just where, then, do our substantial disagreements lie? Not, I think, where they may appear to lie. According to Walls, 'the notion of ever increasing misery, misery without a distinct limit, destroys the very notion of a free choice'.⁴ For our freedom, he says, 'can only take so much pressure'.⁵ But in the very article that Walls criticizes, I had already spoken of the limits of *possible* free choice and had likewise insisted that unbearable suffering is a condition that no one 'could freely embrace forever'.⁶ So Walls and I clearly agree about *something* here. We seem to agree, for example, that I can freely reject God forever *only if* I can do so without bringing ever-increasing misery upon myself. We probably also agree that there is an upper limit to the degree of possible misery, a point at which, perhaps, a personality would simply disintegrate. But here is where we disagree: whereas I hold that a freely embraced life apart from God is logically impossible, Walls holds, to the contrary, that it is quite possible. Nor does anything in his discussion of compulsion, compelling evidence, or the limits of our ability to bear suffering have any relevance, so far as I can tell, to this specific point of disagreement. For the record, I would say (roughly) that S has compelling evidence for some proposition *p* when two conditions are met: (a) *S feels compelled* by the evidence to accept *p*, and (b) anyone else whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly, or at least anyone rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent, would likewise accept *p* if presented with the same evidence.⁷

Observe also that the dispute between compatibilists and incompatibilists, though quite relevant to Walls's thesis, has no relevance at all to my own. Here is why. A cogent argument for the possibility of someone freely embracing a life apart from God, which is Walls's thesis, requires a relatively complete analysis of freedom – much more complete, moreover, than any proponent of a free-will theodicy of hell has yet provided. For it is hardly enough to argue that the relevant choice satisfies some necessary condition of freedom, such as being causally undetermined. One must also show that it satisfies *all* the necessary conditions of freedom, or at least some non-trivial sufficient condition. But a cogent argument against the possibility of such a choice – or against a decisive choice of evil, as Walls sometimes calls it – requires only a partial analysis of freedom; it requires only that the imagined choice be inconsistent with some *necessary condition* of

freedom.⁸ And the necessary condition to which I have appealed is one that compatibilists and incompatibilists both accept. Surely we can all agree that, however causally undetermined some of their actions may be, dogs, small children, and paranoid schizophrenics lack the kind of rationality necessary for moral freedom. So if, as I have argued elsewhere, separation from God is an objective horror and no one rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent could possibly prefer such a horror to the bliss of union with God, then the very idea of someone freely embracing forever a life apart from God expresses a logical impossibility.

Separation and freedom

Just how do Christians understand the idea of separation from God? Short of annihilation, there can be, of course, no metaphysical separation from the omnipresent ground of all being; and as we have already seen, hell and the lake of fire are precisely manifestations of God's presence. But even short of annihilation, a near absence of any *experience* of God is perhaps theoretically possible; so if we think of hell or the lake of fire as a way in which the rebellious come to *experience* the perfecting love of God, perhaps we can imagine the outer darkness as the closest one can come to a life apart from any experience of God (beyond a rudimentary experience of self). With respect to hell, then, the relevant concept of separation is essentially a psychological or a spiritual one; it implies a condition of acute estrangement or alienation in which the consuming fire of God's love inevitably becomes an object of great fear and anguish. It also implies separation from all loving relationships and from anything else that might make life seem worth living. But even in hell, I believe, one can continue to resist God and to separate oneself from all experience of him; a rebellious sinner can choose, in other words, the only possible alternative to an experience of God, namely the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness. So in the end, separation from God includes separation from all human relationships, including such improper ones as master and slave. When John Milton's Satan imagines himself reigning in hell, his delirious fancy is utterly inconsistent with the New Testament picture. For who but God can reign in the lake of fire? Certainly not Satan, and certainly not the rich man as described in Luke 16. And over whom might a soul suspended alone in the outer darkness, without even a physical order to experience, appear even to itself to exercise power and domination?

Now separation from God is presumably a matter of degree and, given the ambiguities of our earthly lives, a matter that we sometimes misjudge both in ourselves and in others. A woman who genuinely loves her family, for example, may be far closer to the kingdom of God, despite her religious scepticism, than a self-righteous religious zealot may be. Nor is it at all surprising that in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and deception, most of us, if not all of us, should initially

find the broad road that leads to further separation (and finally to destruction) more attractive than the narrow road that leads to more abundant life. For at the beginning of our earthly lives anyway, we are all programmed to pursue our own interests as we perceive (or in many cases misperceive) them; and furthermore, our natural fears often tempt us to seek refuge in power relationships of various kinds. But what starts out, according to the imagery of Matthew 7.13, as a wide and easy road to follow – or the most natural way to behave – becomes increasingly difficult as we continue to experience the destructive effects of our own actions. So, as the consequences of our wrong actions begin to reveal the true nature of these actions, a correlation exists between our power to separate ourselves from God *freely* and our capacity, whatever it may be, to endure ever-increasing degrees of misery. For so long as we retain enough rationality to qualify as free moral agents, even God faces a hard metaphysical necessity here; that is, not even God can *both* permit us to separate ourselves from every possible source of genuine happiness *and*, at the same time, protect us from the resulting horror of doing so.

We thus approach the complicated question of human freedom.⁹ Suppose that I am standing atop the Empire State Building, with the intention of committing suicide by jumping off and plunging to my death below, and consider two very different ways in which God might interfere with my freedom in this matter. He might, in the first place, simply cause me to change my mind; that would effectively prevent the suicide from occurring. Or He might, alternatively, permit me to leap from the building and then cause me to float gently to the ground like a feather; that too would effectively prevent the suicide from occurring. I am not free to accomplish some action or to achieve some end, in other words, unless God permits me to have the thing I have chosen, however confusedly I may have chosen it; and neither am I free to separate myself from God, or from the ultimate source of human happiness, unless God permits me to experience the very life I have chosen and the full measure of misery that it entails.

As I see it, then, damnation is a process whereby the damned gradually learn from experience the true meaning of separation from God. At the beginning of our lives we might never have guessed that we cannot reject the creator and father of our souls without rejecting ourselves, or oppose God's will for our lives without opposing, schizophrenically perhaps, our own deepest yearnings and desires, the very yearnings and desires that God wants to satisfy. So in our confusion, we make wrong choices, and at this point God can either permit us to follow our chosen path, thereby respecting our freedom, or interfere with our freedom to follow it. And God frequently does interfere, no doubt, with our freedom to do specific things; if He protects me from someone's murderous intent, for example, then He interferes with this person's freedom to murder me. But we also have, I believe, a more general freedom, expressed in thousands of specific choices, to move incrementally either in the direction of repentance and reconciliation, or

in the direction of greater separation from God, and that freedom God always respects. In a sense, He even condemns us to such freedom, because He will not permit us to remain forever in ambiguity, opting sometimes for reconciliation and sometimes for separation. Instead, He will providentially control our lives in such a way that requires us to confront everything that stands between us and full reconciliation.

But here a further clarification is perhaps in order. According to Walls, 'The full horror of what it means to be separated from God cannot possibly be experienced';¹⁰ for only the redeemed, those in fellowship with God, are in a position to appreciate the full horror of separation from God, and it is hardly possible that a person should be both redeemed and separated from God. I agree – though certain (faulty) theories of the Atonement do imply that Jesus, at least, experienced the full horror of separation from God. In no way is it required, however, that sinners experience the *full horror* of separation from God; it is enough that they experience the full measure of horror that they *can* appreciate. For even if those who separate themselves to the point of landing in the outer darkness have no real conception of the love and the exquisite beauty of God, they can at least experience the horror of being separated from everything good in life; and even if, with respect to some specific good G, a person S should suffer from the illusion that G is possible apart from God, it simply does not follow that S can continue to choose ever increasing separation without eventually shattering this particular illusion to pieces.

In fact, even God, I contend, faces a dilemma at this point concerning human freedom. When sinners try to separate themselves from God as far as they can, God knows that at some point libertarian freedom will no longer be possible. For God can either permit sinners to follow their chosen path or prevent them from following it and from separating themselves altogether from the source of every possible good. In the latter case, God might continue to give Himself to the sinner even though the sinner does not know it; He might continue to uphold the sinner, to make life something of a good thing for the sinner, and even to warm the sinner's heart to some extent.¹¹ But though Walls may see such surreptitious acts as an expression of divine mercy, I do not. Where is the mercy in God's preventing a sinner from freely choosing the very condition that might finally shatter his or her illusions about God? In any case, such interference on God's part would clearly interfere with the sinner's freedom to continue along the path of ever-increasing separation. And if, alternatively, God chooses not to interfere with the sinner's freedom in this matter, but instead allows the sinner to experience the chosen condition of being separated from every source of human happiness, then the resulting horror will at last shatter any illusion that some good is achievable apart from God; it will finally elicit, furthermore, a cry for help of the kind that, however faint, is just what God needs in order to begin and eventually to complete the process of reconciliation.¹²

So Walls is right: there is indeed a limit to the range of possible free choice. But the issue is whether God will permit sinners to reach that limit by their own free choices, or whether He will prevent them from reaching it and thus interfere with their freedom to do so. Herein lies, as I see it, the fundamental difficulty with free-will theodicies of hell. Such theodicies require that God interfere with our freedom to continue choosing ever-increasing separation, and they require that He interfere at just the point where granting such freedom would in fact do the most good. And that, it seems to me, would be morally inappropriate.

Notes

1. See Hebrews 12.29: 'for indeed our God is a consuming fire'.
2. Unfortunately, many of our English Bibles (e.g. the RSV and the NIV) inject into I Thessalonians 1.9 the idea of being *excluded* or *shut out* from the presence of the Lord. But these translations are not only inaccurate, but also egregiously inaccurate. The idea of separation is simply not in the Greek text. Just as the refreshing times of which Acts 3.20 speaks come from the presence of the Lord, so the destruction of which I Thessalonians 1.9 speaks comes from the presence of the Lord. Translating '*apo*' as 'away from' makes no more grammatical sense in the context of I Thessalonians 1.9 than it does in the context of Acts 3.20. Indeed, the grammatical construction of both texts is identical.
3. Walls points out, correctly in my opinion, that 'despite the rich man's misery he seems more concerned to justify himself than to repent and beg God's mercy' (Jerry L. Walls 'A hell of a choice: a reply to Talbott', 211). In no way, however, is the rich man more concerned to justify himself than he is to mitigate his own suffering. For, of course, the former concern merely serves the latter. A typical first reaction to intense suffering, especially when one senses one's own responsibility for it, is to feel sorry for oneself, to ask 'Why me?' or some similar question, and to perfect the art of self-justification. Beyond that, the rich man seems utterly confused about both the *source* of his suffering and the extent to which his continuing refusal to repent explains why the gulf between him and Abraham's bosom remains so unbridgeable.
4. Walls 'A hell of a choice', 206.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Thomas Talbott 'Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 418.
7. Accordingly, I surely do have compelling evidence that fire burns and causes pain. As for the possibility of Cartesian scepticism at this point, I cannot take it seriously for one simple reason: I have never met any normal person who did not believe that a hand thrust into a fire (under certain specifiable conditions) would result in a burn and terrible pain. I have indeed met some who *pretended* not to believe this, and a friend of mine in graduate school also professed to be a solipsist. But the more he argued with me, the more he persuaded me that, despite his professed beliefs and clever arguments, he really did believe that I exist. Our *actions* are often more telling in this regard than what we *profess to believe*.
8. This point is as important as it is often neglected. Ever since Alvin Plantinga published his monumental 'free-will defence', his disciples have tended to suppose that proofs of possibility are, as a class, easier to construct than proofs of impossibility. But nothing could be farther from the truth, and my dispute with Walls is a case in point. For Walls's task of proving the possibility of someone's freely rejecting God forever is clearly more demanding in this sense: a successful argument will require a much more complete analysis of freedom than I need for my argument against such a possibility.
9. For an excellent review of some of the difficulties in the idea of a freely chosen damnation, see Eric Reitan, 'Human freedom and the impossibility of eternal damnation', in Robin Perry and Chris Partridge *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 125–142.
10. Walls 'A hell of a choice', 214.
11. This sentence is a rough paraphrase of something that George MacDonald wrote in his great sermon, 'The consuming fire'. See Roland Hein *Creation in Christ* (Wheaton IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), 165.

12. In no way, of course, does punishment alone, or even a vivid experience of the outer darkness, have the power, apart from a complex variety of additional experiences, to bring someone to a proper relationship with God. Profound misery can reveal that something has gone terribly wrong, but it cannot by itself set things right, or cancel out the bad effects of our bad choices, or undo the harm we have done to ourselves as well as to others. It can reveal the true nature of separation, but it may not reveal how to overcome that separation. It can shatter our illusions concerning our true needs and the conditions of our happiness, but it cannot by itself teach us to trust God or to love Him wholeheartedly. So once again, Walls and I probably agree about this. But here is where we disagree. According to Walls, love and trust are essentially something we generate in ourselves through libertarian free choices; in his own words, 'the specific freedom' that God will not interfere with 'is our freedom to trust and love Him or not' (Walls 'A hell of a choice', 210). But I question whether there is, or could be, any such freedom as that; I question whether trust and love are products of will or choice at all. I learned at a very early age to trust my mother implicitly – not because I *chose* to trust her, but because I *discovered* her to be altogether trustworthy. I also learned to love her – not because I chose to love her, but because she first loved me and demonstrated her love in thousands of ways. Indeed, she was also one of those rare individuals who inspired trust and love in almost everyone she met. And similarly for God: once the free choices of the damned bring all of their evil plans and ambitions to ruin and elicit, even in the outer darkness, a heartfelt cry for help, they will then learn that God is indeed trustworthy and that they can indeed love Him because He first loved them.