

## God is great, God is good: medieval conceptions of divine goodness and the problem of hell

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**Abstract:** Medieval views of both divine goodness and the doctrine of hell are examined and shown to be incompatible with our best understandings of goodness. The only manner in which God could be good to those in hell – by permitting their continued existence – is not sufficient to outweigh ‘the dreadful pains of eternal fire’. One might claim that God is good to them in the retributive sense; but I argue that retributive punishment is inadequate justification of eternal torment. The medieval notions of goodness and hell seem to make God more a sadistic torturer than a caring parent. Eleonore Stump, accepting the medievals’ axiology, ameliorates the doctrine of hell. However, I argue that her Dantean version of hell fails because *not to be* in certain circumstances is rationally preferable to continued existence. In addition, life under those conditions would result in frustration, not fulfilment, of one’s second nature and would result in a progressive loss of being. Indeed, it seems more reasonable to reject the identity of being and goodness which both the medievals and Stump embrace or to accept being as a *prima facie* good that is defeasible in the face of eternal damnation.

### Introduction

‘God is great, God is good, now we thank him for our food.’ This simple prayer reflects twin commitments in Christian belief to God’s greatness and God’s goodness. Yet Christian theodicies have often averred to God’s greatness to the detriment of His goodness. Let us interpret God’s greatness in a manner other than power. Indeed, let us consider God’s greatness, as the medievals understood God’s goodness, in terms of being: goodness and being are interchangeable;<sup>1</sup> God is the most real being; hence, God is the greatest being. God is great.

Let us interpret God’s goodness in a manner analogous to human goodness. I take God’s goodness as analogous primarily to the parent–child relationship; God is good, according to this analogy, as a father or mother is to his or her children.<sup>2</sup>

Caring for one's children is a paradigm metaphor in Scripture for God's care for his creatures. God is good.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the ramifications of these two views for the problem of evil and especially for the problem of hell. Medieval thinkers typically viewed hell as an eternal torture chamber, perhaps with God himself as the torturer. I shall expound both views of divine goodness, present some arguments in their defence, and then locate them within the context of a theodicy of human suffering. I shall argue that neither is singly adequate as an understanding of the divine nature; but, if both are maintained, a trilemma arises for the traditional doctrine of the eternal punishment of the damned. That is, I shall argue that one can hold the following three views only on pain of inconsistency:

1. God is great.
2. God is good.
3. There is an hell (an eternal torture chamber).

### **Medieval views of hell**

The conflict between God's goodness and the doctrine of hell arises only on sufficiently odious versions of the doctrine of hell. Let us briefly examine the medieval torture-chamber view of hell propounded by medieval thinkers. Augustine contends that the tortures of the damned are both physical and spiritual and that the damned, though consumed by physical fire, are kept in existence by God himself. Aquinas rejects the notion that the damned are tormented solely by fire, arguing that a variety of tortures will be employed. The term 'fire' is prevalent in Scripture to describe the intensity of the pain, not the specificity of the torture. Eternal suffering, likened to the horror of being burned, is inflicted by torment 'in many ways and from many sources' and without respite.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, hell will be so arranged 'as to be adapted to the utmost unhappiness of the damned', and there will be, he argues, just enough light to perceive 'those things which are capable of tormenting the soul'; (*Summa Theologica* Suppl. Q. 97, Art. 5). One will, for example, see the corporeal fires and smell their stench as they burn one's corporeal body. This never-ending fire, Aquinas believes, is sustained not by fuel but by the very breath of God.

### **Medieval theories of divine goodness**

Let us examine God's goodness as understood by medieval Christian thinkers. I shall paint the medieval Christian tradition with broad strokes. It is not my intention to offer careful historical exegesis. Rather, I am interested in gleaning a rough consensus from medieval thinkers concerning God's goodness. Although there are significant detractors and deviations from the main thrust of this tradition, I believe that there is a main thrust that captures an important sense in

which God is good. I will focus primarily on the works of Augustine and Aquinas. I believe their understanding of divine goodness includes both greatness, which has more ontological than moral import, and goodness, whose focal meaning has moral import. I shall speak throughout this section with the medievals by using, as they do, the single terms ‘good’ or ‘goodness’. I will show that the medieval term ‘goodness’ is understood as both what I called ‘greatness’ and ‘goodness’ in the opening section.

Medieval thinkers understand goodness *qua* greatness when they equate being with goodness (the most perfect being is the most real). Aquinas contends that ‘good and being are interchangeable’.<sup>4</sup> Being and goodness, according to Aquinas, are transcendentals; they transcend the categories; they don’t serve as properties which categorize anything since they apply to everything. Everything has being and is good. God is good in this ontological sense. To exist is good; so everything that exists is good. God is the most real existent. So God is the highest good.

How does Aquinas establish the connection between being and goodness? How does he argue that ‘goodness and being are really the same’? Very roughly and briefly put, his argument may be put as follows:

1. To say that something is good is just to say that it is desirable.
2. Something is desirable to the extent that it is perfected.
3. Something is perfected to the extent that it is in being.<sup>5</sup>
4. Hence something is good to the extent that it is in being.
5. Hence goodness and being are the same. (*Summa Theologica*, 1a.5.1)

I shall leave this argument without comment, simply noting that it is representative of the views of divine goodness of medieval thinkers. God is good, according to this view, because He exists and is fully actualized. God is good essentially – God is goodness.<sup>6</sup> God is great.

God is not alone with respect to this sort of goodness. Every being *qua* being is good (i.e., great). Lesser existents share in the divine goodness by participating in the highest good. ‘God is good through his essence, whereas all other things are good by participation... . Nothing, then, will be called good except in so far as it has a certain likeness of divine goodness. Hence, God is the good of every good.’ (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk 1, ch. 40) Everything that exists participates in the divine goodness. By participation, everything gets its being from God; goodness and being are convertible. Hence everything that exists participates in goodness. ‘Everything is called good’, Aquinas writes, ‘by reason of the similitude of the divine goodness belonging to it...’ (*Summa Theologica*, 1a.6.4) That everything is good led Augustine to develop and Aquinas to affirm the doctrine of evil as the privation of the good – it is a mere shadow of existence and does not really exist.

Not everything is equally good in this ontological sense. There is more goodness in a thing the more it is like God, the highest reality. So sentient creatures are more

valuable than non-sentient creatures, cognitive creatures more valuable than merely sentient creatures, etc. Indeed an entire scale of existents can be mapped according to the possession of progressively more valuable properties from the lowliest of existents up through human beings, and finally to God. As Augustine writes of this great chain of being:

All natures, then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good. And when they are in the places assigned to them by the order of their nature, they preserve such being as they have received.<sup>7</sup>

One will note an ambiguity here which is echoed in Aquinas. Are things good simply by virtue of the fact of their existing (being and goodness are convertible), or are things good by virtue of the fact of their existing as proper exemplifications of their kind? That is, do things have value simply because of their source, the creative and shared goodness of God, or insofar as they attain their end or perfection – to function properly as a fully actualized thing of their kind? Aquinas explicitly endorses both senses of goodness; something is good (i.e., great) simply by virtue of existence (it has being as a member of its kind) and something is good insofar as it fully becomes a member of its kind. The latter sort of goodness obtains when a being moves from potentiality to actuality in the fulfilment of its proper nature. So, for example, human beings gain more actuality, and hence goodness, as they increasingly manifest their natural capacity to reason (and, by extension, to be virtuous). A thing is good, therefore, to the extent that it fulfils its nature. (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk 1, c. 37–39 and bk 3, c. 6–7, 11–12)

The roots of the doctrine of the identity of being and goodness are clearly in the Neoplatonist tradition as filtered through Augustine. The Platonizing tendencies of the tradition are conjoined with Augustine's understanding of the doctrines of divine goodness and creation. According to Augustine's principle of plenitude, reality is better the closer it is to divine reality. God is good in a more distinctly moral sense if He shares His reality. God is good by virtue of His creating a multitude of diverse beings which share in lesser and greater part in the divine existence. God shares existence and, therefore, goodness. We were created out of God's goodness, which is the highest good.

God is good both by existing and by allowing things to participate in His existence (i.e., goodness). Aquinas defends the view that God is good by virtue of imparting existence, ergo goodness, to a multitude of things:

... the communication of being and goodness arises from goodness... . Now each thing acts in so far as it is in act, and in acting it diffuses being and goodness to other things. Hence, it is a sign of a being's perfection that it can 'produce its like'... . That is why it is said that the good is diffusive of itself and of being. But this diffusion befits God because... being through Himself the necessary being, God is the cause of being for other things. God is, therefore, truly good. (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk 1, ch. 40, art. 3)

There are two sorts of divine goodness, once again, that need to be distinguished here and both of these divide into two classes. First, God is good in the ontological sense simply by virtue of existence. This sort of goodness, so it seems, admits of degrees: the more godlike a thing is the more goodness it has. And Yahweh is the most godlike thing. Q.E.D. The sheer fact of God's existing and so well entails His goodness. But this seems more suited to judging, at least in anthropomorphic terms, that God is great. Likewise, something is good insofar as it fulfils its proper nature, and God is *actus purus*, all act and no potency; hence, God has maximally fulfilled His nature.

These two sorts of goodness are likewise manifested in God's relationship with His creatures. God is good to His creatures if He brings them into existence and if He facilitates the fulfilment of their proper natures. Let us put these two senses of goodness in terms of human beings. Humans are good (i.e., great) if they are diffusive of themselves – if they produce their like. Bringing other human beings into the world to participate in (their?) being produces both being and goodness. When humans multiply they are productive of beings that are given the honour of existing. This sense of goodness seems more, again in anthropomorphic terms, like greatness than goodness. But human beings are good not simply by virtue of sharing existence; they must also parent their children in such a manner as to facilitate the development of reason and virtue in them. So, too, God is good (in terms of greatness and goodness) to human beings insofar as He brings them into existence (God is great), and parents them in such a manner as to facilitate the development of reason and virtue in them (God is good). In the remainder of this essay we shall, where necessary, distinguish the two senses of goodness as follows: Goodness *qua* greatness is goodness<sub>gr</sub> and goodness *qua* parenting is goodness<sub>pa</sub>.

### **God's goodness to the saints**

It is not difficult to reconcile divine goodness with God's treatment of the saints. He is good<sub>gr</sub> and good<sub>pa</sub> to the saints. Consider the case of human suffering. According to Aquinas, their suffering is turned into a good that benefits the sufferer. The good is not capriciously added on at the end in such a way that the sufferer is so overwhelmed by the good that she forgets to ask the purpose of her suffering. Rather, the benefit is organically connected to the harm so that the suffering is essential to the benefit. God works everything for the good of those who love Him. According to Aquinas this means:

Whatever happens on earth, even if it is evil, turns out for the good of the whole world. Because as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*, God is so good that he would never permit any evil if he were not also so powerful that from any evil he could draw out a good. But the evil does not always turn out for the good of the thing in connection with which the evil occurs, because although the corruption of one animal turns out for the good of the whole world – insofar as one animal is generated from the corruption of another – nonetheless it doesn't turn out for the

good of the animal which is corrupted. The reason for this is that the good of the whole world is willed by God for its own sake, and all the parts of the world are ordered to this [end]. The same reasoning appears to apply with regard to the order of the noblest parts [of the world] with respect to the other parts, because the evil of the other parts is ordered to the good of the noblest parts. But whatever happens with regard to the noblest parts is ordered only to the good of those parts themselves, because care is taken of them for their own sake, and for their sake care is taken of other things... . But among the best of all the parts of the world are God's saints... . He takes care of them in such a way that he doesn't allow any evil for them which he doesn't turn into their good.<sup>8</sup>

God does not use the saints merely as instruments to the good of either Himself or other people or things. Rather the suffering of the saints is a means to the good of the one suffering.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine holds similar, although less explicit, views on human suffering. According to Augustine, 'All other punishments, whether temporal or eternal, inflicted as they are on every one by divine providence, are sent either on account of past sins, or of sins presently allowed in the life, or to exercise and reveal a man's graces.' (*City of God*, XXI, 13) Even the suffering of the apparently innocent is a means to a good end – they can detach us from undue reliance on the things of fortune and attach us to our ultimate satisfaction in the world to come:

Is innocence a sufficient protection against the various assaults of demons? That no man might think so, even baptized infants, who are certainly unsurpassed in innocence, are sometimes tormented that God, who permits it, teaches us hereby to bewail the calamities of this life, and to desire the felicity of the life to come.<sup>10</sup>  
(*City of God*, XXII, 22)

According to both Augustine and Aquinas, the suffering of the saints redounds to their own benefit. Presumably *these* benefits could not have obtained without precisely *that* suffering. What are the benefits? Evils, both natural and moral, could free us from devotion to the self and thus develop humility, prise our fingers from clinging to the transient goods of this earth and thus orient our character toward eternity, and make us aware of the limitations of self-sufficiency and urge us to seek divine assistance. All suffering, at least for the saints, is pedagogical.

If the saints end up in heaven as a result of suffering tempered by divine grace, then divine goodness<sub>pa</sub> is clearly manifest in the lives of the saints. God is good in the sense of a good parent: all suffering is pedagogical and the end result of suffering is a good so great that it trivializes all of the suffering of the saints in comparison. It trivializes suffering not by an unconnected but overpowering good, although the good is overpowering. Rather it trivializes the suffering both because the good overwhelms it and because it is (and is recognized as) necessary to this overwhelming good. God is indeed good to the saints. He acts as benevolent father, treating His children with respect and care, permitting only such harms as He can turn into his children's good – for fulfilment of their nature: growth in virtue and

participation in their highest good, namely God Himself. And by sustaining them in eternal existence God is also good<sub>gr</sub> to the saints.

### God's goodness to the damned

But what about the suffering of unbelievers? How is God good to them? All things work together for the good of those that love God, but what about those that don't? Do all things work together for their harm? One might think so, given the medievals' views of the nature of the eternal destiny of the damned. God, it appears, is not good to the non-elect. But such an inference is not so easily made.

How can God be good to the damned? If goodness is identical with being, then God can be good to unbelievers simply by allowing them to exist. God is good<sub>gr</sub> to them, recall, by virtue of creating them. As Aquinas writes:

...God loves all existing things. For all existing things, in so far as they exist, are good, since the being of a thing is itself a good... Now it has been shown... above that God's will is the cause of all things. It must needs be, therefore, that a thing has some being, or any kind of good, only inasmuch as it is willed by God. To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. (*Summa Theologica*, 1, 20.2)

As long as the damned continue to exist, their existence is good and, hence, God is good<sub>gr</sub> to them.

Augustine argues that existence is sufficiently good that it outweighs the suffering of the damned: 'And truly the very fact of existing is by some natural spell so pleasant, that even the wretched are, for no other reason, unwilling to perish; and, when they feel that they are wretched, wish not that they themselves be annihilated, but that their misery be so' (*City of God*, XI, 27). Here the argument assumes that the natural impulse to exist, which often prevents even people with the most wretched existence from committing suicide, persists in those who suffer in hell. Indeed, it persists in such a fashion that it outweighs their desire not to exist, given their sufferings.

But Augustine seems mistaken. Suppose we grant that people would prefer to exist rather than not, and that, hence, what people in hell desire is not annihilation of their existence but annihilation of their suffering. It seems, however, that no reasonable person would prefer continuation of eternal torment, what Augustine refers to as 'the dreadful pains of eternal fire', to nonexistence. If one were appraised of one's situation – that unspeakable torment vastly beyond any *ante mortem* suffering will continue without ceasing – one, if one's personality has not already totally disintegrated, would reasonably prefer nonexistence to existence. Even if one were not fully aware of the duration of the sentence, surely no reasonable person would rationally choose to continue such suffering.<sup>11</sup> The negative induction – 'I have suffered thusly for a hundred or a thousand or a million years,

therefore I shall continue to suffer thusly for a hundred or a thousand or a million years', is sufficient to rationally overwhelm one's desire for continued existence. People do, after all, choose suicide to eliminate the suffering of this life. It seems that reasonable people would choose annihilation over the infinite perpetuation of the 'dreadful pains of eternal fire'. Existence alone does not seem sufficient for God to be good to the non-elect if they are suffering in the medieval understanding of hell. Surely such persons could say, with warrant, it would have been better for them if they had never been born.<sup>12</sup> Existence is not so great a good that it could reasonably overwhelm any desire for nonexistence under any conditions, including those the medievals attribute to the damned in hell.<sup>13</sup> I shall return to this shortly.

### Retribution?

The medievals believed in one further sense of God's goodness: God is good by the retributive punishment of the damned. This view, I shall argue, is mistaken. Let us first consider the retributive defence of hell. The problem of God and hell addressed by the medievals is the problem of justifying God's goodness while God permits or inflicts intense pain and suffering for eternity. The immensity and duration of the pain and suffering are often justified by God's retributive justice: the damned, because of their *ante mortem* sins, merit this sort of punishment. Of course, most *ante mortem* sins seem *prima facie* deserving of less than eternal torment. Some lying here, a little adultery there, a spell of petty theft here, a bit of coveting there... Surely the punishments merited by these offences adds up to a sum considerably less than eternity. Even the worst of sinners, Hitler say, might deserve 100 years per person killed; supposing Hitler killed twenty million people, he would retributively merit two billion years of punishment – again, considerably less than eternity. And this addresses just the duration of the punishment, not the intensity of the pain and suffering. What earthly sins could merit *torture* eternally?

The medieval justification of eternal torture casts the offences in a different light than that suggested in the previous paragraph. The offence, according to this view, is ultimately an offence, not against mere mortals but against God Himself. Since God is infinite, the retribution is infinite. The punishment – eternal torture – fits the crime – offence against Infinity.

As a preliminary response to this view, let us consider God's goodness as a parent. God's goodness<sub>pa</sub> does not preclude retributive punishment *simpliciter*. A good parent's first inclination toward a wilfully disobedient child is punishment as pedagogy. A good parent will, to the best of her ability, arrange for a punishment which will assist the child in properly orienting her actions and subsequently her will toward the good. In some cases, however, the child might merit more



punishment than would be strictly required for rehabilitation. In other cases the child might be intransigent and remain obstinately opposed to rehabilitation. In both cases, the good parent might justifiably punish her child simply because she deserved it. It should be noted, however, that punishment for rehabilitation is the preferred option for parents with retributive punishment just a fallback option. Any good parent would prefer to mete out punishment that redounded to the benefit of the child rather than simply repaying the child for the harm done. Nonetheless, retributive justice is not incompatible with goodness<sub>pa</sub>.

God's goodness<sub>pa</sub> implies that God, insofar as He has opportunity, would punish His children for rehabilitation first and retribution only second. Retribution would be justified only if punishment were merited beyond what was necessary for rehabilitation or if God's children were intransigent. There's little reason to think that omnipotence would be frustrated by the relative obstinacy of most unbelievers at death. That is, God's first option in being good<sub>pa</sub> *post mortem* would be to rehabilitate His children and return them to Himself. Only after human character became decidedly fixed in vice would a good<sub>pa</sub> God give up and exact retributive punishment. Yet on a robust assumption of free will, this latter option is possible and, perhaps, likely.

Although retributive punishment is compatible with divine goodness<sub>pa</sub>, eternal torture as retributive punishment is incoherent. Is eternal torment merited by the *ante mortem* sins of the damned? In retributive punishment, the wicked person is repaid with harm for the harm he inflicted. In scripture retributive justice was delimited by 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', which prevents exacting retributive punishment beyond the harm inflicted. One merits exactly the harm one has inflicted. To justify infinite torment, there must be infinite harm inflicted. The medievals believe that God has been infinitely sinned against. Has God been harmed?

It seems clear that God simply cannot be harmed. Human beings have the capability to inflict a great deal of harm – on other human beings, to non-human animals, to the environment and even to themselves. These are the sorts of things that can be harmed. But God cannot be harmed. When we lack faith, defy God or commit blasphemy, it is only, at least for the medievals, a *façon de parler* to say that God is offended. God is not harmed by our unbelief or blasphemy, *we* are. Unbelief and disobedience are bad for humans, not for God. That God cannot be harmed is implied by the medieval view of God as impassible, immutable, impassible, *actus purus*, *a se*, etc. God's ontological and eudaemonistic independence of human beings place God in a state of unperturbed bliss. Because of the way God is, God cannot be harmed by human beings. And if God cannot be harmed, then we cannot offend God. And if we cannot offend God, then we cannot be guilty of an infinite offence against an infinite God. And thus, we cannot merit an infinite punishment for a so-called infinite offence. Retributive justice is an untenable justification of the eternal torment of the damned.

### **Eleonore Stump's theodicy of hell**

I have argued that ontological goodness, goodness<sub>gr</sub> or greatness, is an insufficient understanding of how God could be good to those suffering in the medievals' hell. God cannot be good to them, in this sense alone. Nor can He be good to the damned in a retributive sense. So, if God is to be good to them, He must be good to them as parent to child.<sup>14</sup> Eleonore Stump offers the most interesting and powerful recent defence of God's love and the problem of hell.<sup>15</sup> She draws from Aquinas and defends the view that God is loving to those who suffer in hell. I shall present and critique her views.

Stump, following Aquinas, contends that 'love for human persons consists essentially in treating them according to their nature;... God's love for a person involves helping to maximize that person's capacity for reason' (Stump, 192).<sup>16</sup> She defends Aquinas's conception of love and shows how it entails what we might call 'tough love' – God is not a pleasure-maximizer with respect to His children. He, while respecting their nature as autonomous and rational creatures, 'promotes in them moral actions, emotions not contrary to reason, and in general virtuous states of character' (Stump, 193).

Stump's theodicy requires a revision of the doctrine of hell. What I call 'revision', Stump calls a 'closer look'. I suggest that my term is more appropriate as she relies on an ameliorated view of hell inspired by Dante, not Augustine's and Aquinas's divine torture-chamber view. Even so, I shall argue that it would not be loving or good of God to permit people to suffer in hell for all eternity even if it is as Dante has written.

One can no doubt imagine why Stump prefers Dante's view to Augustine's or Aquinas's. To maintain that the eternal existence of the damned is consistent with divine goodness, one must hold that persons in hell could reasonably choose eternal existence under those conditions over nonexistence. This would require substantial alteration in the classical understanding of hell as something roughly akin to a medieval torture chamber. It is difficult to imagine anyone reasonably preferring eternal existence in such a systematically deprived state (assuming that if it is hell, what one is deprived of is a deeply human need). If one were deprived of God, the source of light and life, it is difficult to imagine that one would or could bear to go on living.

Stump, on Dante's view of hell, imagines that people may reasonably prefer eternal existence, apart from divine grace, because God has permitted the eternal willing of their preferred finite good – say lust, greed, or the desire for power – in place of the infinite good for which we were created, God Himself. People in hell 'have become habituated to irrational acts' (Stump, 195). In a sense, the damned simply get what they want. While conceding that the vices of the damned are wrong and destructive of their nature (and, hence, of being), Stump contends that

God wills to treat them according to their self-imposed ‘*second* natures’ – now as lustful, greedy, or power-seeking beings.

Stump rejects the notion that God would be good simply by annihilating such beings:

...to eradicate being on Aquinas’s theory is a *prima facie* evil, which an essentially good God could not do unless there were an overriding good which justified it. Given Aquinas’s identification of being and goodness, such an overriding good would have to promote being in some way, but it is hard to see how the wholesale annihilation of persons could produce or promote being. In the absence of such an overriding good, however, the annihilation of the damned is not morally justified and thus is not an option for a good God. (Stump, 196)

God is faced with a dilemma: He cannot annihilate the damned and He cannot work to fulfil their proper natures. The solution is that God treats the damned according to their second nature. He prevents them from harming the innocent, so keeping them from further evil, and He prevents any further degeneration of their character which entail a loss of being. God can, within these limits, ‘maximize their being by keeping them from additional decay’ (Stump, 197). She concludes: ‘[God] treats the damned according to their nature and promotes their good; and because he is goodness itself, by maximizing the good of the damned, he comes as close as he can to uniting them with himself – that is to say, he loves them’ (Stump, 197).

I have, of course, omitted much of value in Stump’s important contribution to a theodicy of hell. Nonetheless, I believe that I have faithfully recorded the heart of her argument. Does Stump’s theodicy preserve God’s goodness in the face of the horrific suffering of the damned? Is Stump’s theodicy an adequate account of hell and divine goodness? I think not. Let me offer three reasons to reject Stump’s view.

(1) The annihilation of the damned is rationally preferable to their continued existence. Aquinas himself concedes that there are some goods that result in a reduction in being. Indeed, these goods are just those involved in the relief of the suffering of the damned. He writes:

*Not to be* may be considered in two ways. First, in itself, and thus it can nowise be desirable, since it has no aspect of good, but is pure privation of good. Secondly, it may be considered as a relief from a painful life or from some unhappiness: and thus *not to be* takes on the aspect of good, since *to lack an evil is a kind of good* as the Philosopher says (*Ethic.* v. 1). In this way it is better for the damned not to be than to be unhappy... . In this sense the damned can prefer *not to be* according to their deliberate reason. (*Summa Theologica* Suppl. Q. 98. art. 3)

Aquinas contends that although *not to be* is (prima facie) evil because it is a reduction in being, it is also a good when it reduces unhappiness. Hence, *not to be* may be rationally preferable. If *not to be* may be rationally preferable in certain circumstances, then surely those who are suffering in hell are in precisely such

circumstances. Hence, their continued existence alone, unless outweighed by another good, is not sufficient for God to be good to them. Surely the good that Stump endorses, the good of fulfilling one's second nature, is not such an over-riding good.

(2) The continued existence of the damned will likely result in a loss of being. If there is a net loss of being then the continued existence of the damned is not a sufficient good (because not a good) to override the good of annihilation. Dante imagines a hell in which everyone is given over to their deepest desire. They exist in a situation where they are permitted the free fulfilment of their 'second nature' without harming the innocent. One wonders if this is even possible with certain vices. Some vices require innocent victims for their proper expression. Suppose that a man lusts only for virgins or for young boys. Or suppose that one enjoys swindling money from semi-senile grandmothers. People with such tendencies cannot fulfil their nature in a level of hell with like-minded people. Without innocent victims, the 'second nature' of such people cannot be fulfilled. I shall argue in the next paragraph that consummation of one's desire is required for human fulfilment.

(3) Even if it is logically possible for people to find fulfilment of their 'second nature' in a level of hell that contains only like-minded people, it is unlikely that this could become actual. Most vices require successful completion for their proper satisfaction. It is not enough to lust; one's desires must eventuate in actions for human fulfilment.<sup>17</sup> If the happiness of the damned were, to turn Aristotle upside down, (successful) activity in accordance with vice, then the modicum of flourishing permitted the damned would require the successful fruition of one's vicious desires. If one were restricted to like-minded people, vicious actions, at least with respect to many characteristic vices, would be unlikely to succeed. Imagine a group of people who delight in exploiting other people. Such are likely, given sufficient time, to find their desires frustrated.<sup>18</sup> Surely one's foes will eventually catch on (say after a thousand or a million years). If so, one's desires will not find expression in action, and will, therefore, be frustrated. The continued frustration of desires entails the lack of fulfilment of one's second nature and, hence, a loss of being. In such a situation, most people will degenerate into wrath. And, even if wrath could find its proper fulfilment without innocent victims or the cooperation of others, the degeneration from lesser vices to wrath will result, once again, in a loss of being.

There are other objections that could be developed. Surely most people are not totally habituated toward viciousness upon death. Their character will be an admixture of virtue and vice. The fulfilment of a single 'second nature' will result in the progressive dissatisfaction of one's other vicious tendencies as well as the shrinking of one's virtuous tendencies. This will result in a loss of being. And there is the problem that, deprived of the common graces of God that are essential to life, one's *human* being will slowly disintegrate resulting in a total loss of being

and, hence, goodness. The moral psychology that Stump and Dante countenance runs counter to ordinary human experience.

### **Divine goodness, greatness and the suffering of the damned**

Medieval conceptions of divine goodness created a trilemma for the theist. We can put the trilemma more precisely than at the beginning.

- (1) God is great ( $\text{good}_{gr}$ ).
- (2) God is good ( $\text{good}_{pa}$ ).
- (3) The damned suffer eternally in hell (either *à la* torture chamber or Dante/Stump).

Given this trilemma, how might one reconcile belief in divine goodness with their belief that not everyone will enjoy the eternal bliss of the saints? In what follows, I consider three possibilities.

(i) Affirm that existence is a *prima facie* good which is overridden by the good of the relief of the suffering of the damned by God's permitting their nonexistence. Unless the good of being outweighs the rational desire *not to be*, then annihilation will be rationally required. According to some versions of annihilationism, God retributively punishes the damned for a period of time commensurate with their crimes but then God removes his sustenance and they pass into nonexistence. This view is not possible for Augustine because there would be a reduction in good because something with being (= good) would cease to exist with no corresponding good (that is, with nothing coming into being). The nonexistence of the damned would result in a net loss of good (= being) in the universe.

But Aquinas might be able to accommodate this with his more commonsensical notion that a reduction in suffering, even when accompanied by a loss of being, is a good. If 'to lack an evil is a kind of good', and the only way to remove the unhappiness of the damned is by their ceasing to be, then their nonexistence is a kind of good. Minimally this view requires the claim that goodness *qua* being is only a *prima facie* good. But this view may prove more revisionary. If certain good states of affairs are morally preferable because of what they lack (that is, if goodness can increase when something passes from existence to nonexistence), then one may be required to deny the identity of being and goodness; that is, one may reasonably hold that there are some good states of affairs that result from a reduction of being. This view may be held with some suspicion because it seems to imply that things can be good without existing. This, of course, is ludicrous: nonexistent things have no properties whatsoever. However, states of affairs could result in an overall increase in goodness if a net evil were eliminated.<sup>19</sup>

A version of 'annihilation' would be to develop one's moral psychology sufficiently to account for the progressive loss of being of the damned. One might believe that God permits their continued existence according to their 'second

nature' until everything human has been lost. At this point, they will have lost their *human* being and, hence, their characteristic good. They will simply cease to be.

All of these versions of annihilation attempt to reconcile divine goodness with the exclusion of people from heaven. However, because they require either an outright rejection or revision of (3), they are wholly inadequate at reconciling (3) with (1) and (2). Nonetheless, they preserve the belief that God is (*prima facie*) good<sub>gr</sub> by creating and sustaining (at least temporarily) the damned but claim that God's goodness<sub>pa</sub> will justifiably eventuate in the elimination of the unhappiness of the damned by way of their nonexistence (*simpliciter* or *qua* human beings). Whether or not this requires the denial of the medieval thesis that goodness entails being hasn't been settled.

(ii) Deny that God is good to his children in any way similar to the way parents are good their children.<sup>20</sup> No (good) earthly parent would choose to bring a child into existence and then permit horrific suffering to that child which does not and could not benefit the child in any way. Hell, on both the torture-chamber and Dantean view, is not for rehabilitation. There is no benefit to the sufferer other than the benefit of existing; but existing, we have argued, is not sufficiently good to outweigh the harm of the suffering. Parents are good parents when allowing harm to their children only to the extent that they have the power to benefit the child.<sup>21</sup> God's increased ability to allow harm to His children and still remain good is tempered by His increased ability to rectify the situation in a manner that benefits the sufferer. If there is no outweighing good that benefits the sufferer, then the parent cannot allow the suffering and remain good. There might be some benefits due to the suffering of those in hell: those in heaven might see their narrowly missed fate and be even more grateful to God for their rescue. But no earthly parent could be good and allow harm to come to one of their children simply for the good of another of their children. Children cannot be used merely as a means to the (good) ends of other children.<sup>22</sup> If God were to allow some to suffer in hell for the benefit of those in heaven, He would not be good in any sense related to earthly parents. Indeed, our sense of divine goodness would bear no resemblance to our human sense of goodness (the only sense of goodness that we have).

This view preserves (1) and (3) but at the expense of (2). The costs of this view, for those who believe (a) that we are created in the image of God and (b) that God cares for us as a parent for a child, seem too dear even granting the benefits.<sup>23</sup>

(iii) Retreat to paradox or mystery. It is not difficult to reconcile divine goodness<sub>gr</sub> with eternal existence of the damned. God is good<sub>gr</sub> simply by sustaining the damned in existence. The difficulty arises when one considers how divine goodness<sub>pa</sub> is consistent with the suffering of the damned. One might continue to accept (1)–(3) above but, lacking understanding of their compossibility, simply trust that God is good<sub>pa</sub> to the damned. Suppose one affirms (3) but cannot see how the good of continued existence outweighs the suffering of those in hell. If

that person still maintains that God is good<sub>pa</sub>, she must accept a paradox or a mystery. Augustine writes, in another context, of God not shutting 'up in His anger His tender mercies...' (*City of God*, XXII, 22) Christians are compelled, Augustine believes to accept both God's justice and his mercy. However, if God continues to punish eternally the wicked in 'the dreadful pains of eternal fire' it raises a related conundrum: that God shuts up His tender mercy in His anger. How God can be merciful and just and allow people to suffer eternally in hell is at best a mystery and at worst contradictory.

### Conclusion

I have not disproved the doctrine of hell nor has that been my intention. Rather, I have examined medieval views of both divine goodness and the doctrine of hell and shown them to be incompatible with our best understandings of goodness. The only manner in which God could be good to those in hell – by permitting their continued existence – is not a sufficient good to outweigh 'the dreadful pains of eternal fire'. There may be other ways in which God is good to them, perhaps in the retributive sense; but I have argued that retributive punishment is inadequate justification of eternal torment. The medieval notions of goodness and hell, seem to make God more a sadistic torturer who keeps Her victims alive just so She can maximally inflict pain than a caring parent who would with all her power never cease attempting to benefit her child through her sufferings. Julian, in a letter to Augustine opposed to his views on the original guilt of infants, contends that such a view is beneath contempt.

It would show a just and reasonable sense of propriety to treat you as beneath argument: you have come so far from religious feeling, from civilised standards, so far indeed from common sense, that you think your Lord capable of committing kinds of crime which are hardly found among barbarian tribes.<sup>24</sup>

The same could be said for the medievals' views on divine goodness and their doctrine of hell.

Stump, accepting the medieval's axiology, rightly ameliorates the doctrine of eternal punishment. However, I have argued that her ameliorated, Dantean version of hell fails because *not to be* in certain circumstances (such as Stump's hell) is rationally preferable to continued existence in those circumstances. In addition, life under those conditions would result in frustration not fulfilment of one's second nature and would result in a progressive loss of being.

Indeed, it seems more reasonable to reject the identity of being and goodness which both the medievals and Stump embrace or to accept being as a *prima facie* good that is defeasible in the face of eternal damnation. There are, of course, other options open for reconciling the doctrine of hell with divine goodness: deny that God is good in any sense like our human understanding of goodness, or embrace



a mystery. The former is clearly too dear a price to pay and the latter provides little comfort for belief in divine goodness.<sup>25</sup>

### Notes

1. They are the same in reference but are not identical in sense.
2. I discuss the parent/child analogy for understanding divine goodness in Kelly James Clark 'I believe in God the father, almighty', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1995), 58–69. I contend that the analogy is good but fails in simple inferences such as: 'A good human parent could not permit harm *x* to her child; God is good in a matter analogous to human parents; therefore, God could not permit harm *x* to his child.' The inference does not typically hold because God is not limited (as are humans) in His abilities to bring harm out of good. Since God is unlimited in power and intellect (and humans are not), God is permitted to allow substantially more harms to His children than human parents are permitted to allow to theirs.
3. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the Dominican Province (New York NY: Benziger, 1948), Suppl.Q. 97, art. 1; hereafter *Summa Theologica*.
4. Thomas Aquinas *Truth*, vol. 3, translated by Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago IL: Henry Regnery, 1954), XXI.2.
5. I'm oversimplifying here a bit. Aquinas actually justifies this premise as follows: 2a. Something is perfected to the extent that it is in actuality. 2b. To say that something is in actuality is just to say that it is in being. Hence 2. Something is perfected to the extent that it is in being.
6. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, translated by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), bk 1, ch. 38; hereafter *Summa Contra Gentiles*.
7. Augustine *City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods (New York NY: The Modern Library, 1950), XII, 5; hereafter *City of God*.
8. From Aquinas's commentary on Job. As quoted in Eleonore Stump 'Aquinas on the sufferings of Job', in Eleonore Stump (ed.) *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 335–336.
9. Aquinas's view that each suffering of the saint is for the saint's own benefit is not acceptable without qualification. God could permit Saint A to endure some evil X, not because X will benefit A, but because, while X does no significant or lasting damage to A, it proves enormously beneficial to Saint B. In such a situation, A seems unlikely to harbour ill will toward God and would likely think that God's allowing X to occur was clearly the right thing to do. Of course, in such circumstances, God could also benefit Saint A by providing A the opportunity to grow in charity. I discuss this issue more fully in Clark, 'I believe', 65–68.
10. This does not fully support the thesis that I maintain. For surely a great deal of the suffering of unbaptized infants does not redound to their benefit because it could not. Surely the ability to benefit from most suffering depends on one's ability to grasp reality as well as one's moral and spiritual condition.
11. One might think that such a person is not rational because their cognitive faculties are not functioning properly. Were their cognitive faculties functioning properly they would judge that it is better to exist than not. But here we can only make our best judgement of how a person with properly functioning cognitive faculties might assess her post mortem existence.
12. This echoes Jesus' use of the phrase in Matthew 26.24. If Jesus spoke truly, as Aquinas and Augustine believed, then there is evidence within their own tradition that existence is not an unmitigated good.
13. The following issue was raised by an anonymous reader for this journal: 'The author claims that Augustine is mistaken in thinking that the doomed would rationally prefer continued existence in the "torture chamber" to annihilation. This is, of course, a much discussed and contested issue. However one assesses the debate, the "surely" seems much too strong. Can't we rather easily imagine a rebellious spirit in the torture chamber saying to God, "Go ahead! Dish it out! I can take it!" Can't we imagine such a spirit priding itself on its ability to endure such suffering, enjoying its continued defiance of God? Is there anything clearly contrary to reason in such an attitude? Might it not be that possessing such an attitude is in fact essential to being damned?'  
Perhaps 'surely' is too strong. However, people can, or so it seems to me, reasonably prefer suicide to continued existence with severe and unceasing pain. To understand the doctrine of hell,



exponentially multiply the pain both quantitatively and qualitatively and unceasingly extend it into eternity. Under these conditions, one can reasonably adjudge that no-one, should their personality survive (which seems unlikely), would reasonably choose continued defiance of God under these conditions over nonexistence. I make these judgements based on human physiology and psychology as we understand them.

14. One might contend that God is good to the damned in a retributive sense of justice. I shall leave these issues aside because they raise problems of moral judgement that are difficult to resolve. Are the sins committed of such a nature that retributive justice demands eternal punishment? Is God the kind of being that could be so hurt by sin that He must exercise his wrath so severely? Is God's glory unrecognized unless God shows His retributive justice on such a massive scale? Does God need creatures to recognize His mercy and justice (is it good for us or for God)? The medieval reasoning on these matters is unlikely to carry the same weight today. The most common, non-retributivist defence of hell justifies eternal punishment by reference to people's freely choosing not to be with God. People freely choose to cut themselves off from God and any blessings included.
15. See Eleonore Stump 'Dante's hell, Aquinas's moral theory, and the love of God', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986), 181–198, (hereafter Stump).
16. Stump seems to hold that God's love is in the mode of benevolence: He wills all that He can will for the good of his creatures. She seems not to include *eros* in her conception of divine love. *Eros* suggests a caring that can be unrequited and, therefore, unfulfilled. Benevolence suggests well-doing that is independent of human response. I don't propose to discuss this issue in the paper, but if God's love is *eros*, He probably can be offended and would seek our return to Him even *post mortem*.
17. The same holds for many virtues. One cannot fulfil one's desire to share money with the poor until one actually gives money and it is accepted (and put to good use). The failure to move from desire into (successful) action will frustrate, not fulfil, one's nature.
18. An omnipotent being could, of course, deceive such people into thinking their second natures have been fulfilled. However, this sort of deception does not seem appropriate to a perfectly good being.
19. Assuming that the unhappiness of the damned is a greater evil than the goodness of their existence.
20. Throughout section (ii) I will be talking about goodness<sub>pa</sub>.
21. See Clark 'I believe', 58–69.
22. At first glance it may seem that I reject the view of Richard Swinburne that being of use to someone is good for the person who is of use and so God would be justified in allowing certain limited such being-of-use. But if the person who is of use is benefited by being-of-use, then they are not *merely* or *simply* means to another's end which is the position that I reject. See Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 101–105.
23. Some, claiming that God is father only to the elect, have deemed the costs not unbearable.
24. *Contra Secundam Juliani Responsionem Opus Imperfectum*, 1.48, after Brown 1967, 391. As quoted in Christopher Kirwan *Augustine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 134.
25. I am grateful for the helpful criticisms and suggestions of my colleagues in the Calvin College Philosophy Colloquium, especially those of my former colleague, Jeffrey Brower.