

## Some further reflections regarding the Talbot–Crisp debate on the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment

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**Abstract:** This article consists of a critical discussion of the debate between Thomas Talbot and Oliver Crisp on the philosophical justification for the traditional Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment in hell. First, I outline the debate, describing Talbot's challenges to the Augustinian retributivist understanding of everlasting punishment and Crisp's responses to them. Next, I analyse their main points of disagreement, indicating the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. Finally, I present conclusions arising from analysis of the debate in the framework of Christian theology, and I discuss possible implications for the thesis of everlasting punishment in monotheistic religious thought in general.

Belief in the everlasting punishment that sinners will receive in hell is one of the fundamental beliefs of traditional Christian theology. In 1993, in 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice' [hereafter 'Punishment'], Thomas Talbot sharply criticized the traditional Augustinian concept that divine justice obligates punishment for sins, and, as a part of this general critique, he pointed to problems in the Augustinian retributivist justification of the idea of everlasting punishment.<sup>1</sup> Ten years later, Oliver Crisp responded to Talbot's criticism with his own article, 'Divine retribution: a defence' [hereafter 'Retribution'], in which he defended both the idea of Augustinian divine justice in general, and the doctrine of everlasting punishment as one of its components in particular.<sup>2</sup> It seems that the main disagreement between the two lies in the question of whether divine punishment in and of itself stands as the one and only appropriate reaction for any sin against God, and thus exclusively and essentially represents divine justice. This is Crisp's assertion, following traditional Augustinian theology, while Talbot argues against this theological tradition.

In this article, however, I intend to focus on another important aspect of the Talbott–Crisp debate, that is, on the question of the philosophical and theological status of the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment. Firstly, I will give a clear outline of the debate between the two: Talbott’s challenges to the Augustinian understanding of the doctrine of everlasting punishment and Crisp’s responses to them. Next, I will offer a critical discussion of their main points of debate as I see them, indicating what seem to be the strong and weak areas of their arguments. Finally, I will present the conclusions that arise from analysis of the debate, in the framework of the Christian theology in which it is held. In addition, by removing this debate from its Christian context, I will use it to extrapolate other possible ways of justifying the thesis of everlasting punishment in monotheistic religious thought in general.

### **Talbott’s criticisms**

Talbott considers the doctrine of everlasting punishment to be one of the components of the Augustinian concept of the idea of divine justice. Talbott’s formulation of this concept of divine justice includes the following propositions:

- (1) God is a just judge, and as such, He desires that justice be implemented.
- (2) Since justice requires punishment for sin, God is right to punish the sinner for his sin, without consideration for the good of the sinner.
- (3) According to the doctrine of original sin, all human beings deserve everlasting punishment due to their descent from Adam, father of all humanity.
- (4) All humans receive the punishment they deserve, except for a chosen group that God in his mercy chooses to save from sin.
- (5) The punishment due to sinners who remain sinful is everlasting separation from God and everlasting suffering in Hell.  
(‘Punishment’, 151–153)

The last assertion, which characterizes the type of punishment due to sinners through divine justice, represents the Augustinian formulation of the doctrine of everlasting punishment (hereafter EP).

As mentioned above, Talbott’s criticism of the retributivist justification of this doctrine, on which I will focus here, is the first stage in his overall critique of the concept of divine justice of Augustine and his followers.<sup>3</sup> Talbott’s general argument against the Augustinian understanding of EP may be outlined as follows:

- (1) The Augustinian understanding of EP is clearly based on a retributivist theory of punishment.

- (2) The Augustinian understanding of EP is not compatible with some basic intuitions of the retributivist theory of punishment.

Therefore,

- (3) The Augustinian understanding of EP is not philosophically acceptable.

Talbot's basic assumption is that the Augustinian understanding of EP is based on an ethical-legal viewpoint, which argues that every sin requires punishment because justice requires the sinner to be punished (1). This view rejects any utilitarian justification of punishment, such as deterring potential sinners, rehabilitation of the sinner and returning him to good, or society's need to protect itself from sinful behaviour ('Punishment', 153–154).<sup>4</sup>

Talbot formulates the theory of retributivist justice as follows. It is justifiable to punish a man only if he has sinned, and only if he is truly responsible for his sin and therefore bears a certain measure of guilt with respect to that sin. The only justification of punishment as such is that it serves justice, and accordingly, the only goal of punishing the sinner is to supply the demands of justice. Moreover, justice requires adapting the punishment to the sin, and thus the severity of the sin must be measured according to the extent of harm done, in order to fit the level of punishment to the degree of sin and avoid punishment that is excessive or too mild in relation to the sin. Talbot calls this last assertion the theory of equal retaliation [hereafter ER] ('Punishment', 154–155).

To prove his proposition that the Augustinian understanding of EP is not compatible with the retributivist theory of punishment upon which it seems to be based (2), Talbot distinguishes between two possible versions of it. The first one places at its foundation the principle of ER, while the second is based on a principle formulated by Anselm of Canterbury, according to which the punishment should not fit the damage caused by the crime, but rather the level of importance of the one against whom the crime was committed, in other words, the eternal God. Talbot attempts to demonstrate that both versions of the Augustinian justification of EP are philosophically problematic.

Let's consider first the version based on ER. Given that EP, according to its Augustinian understanding, is based on the retributivist theory, and that ER is one of the components of this theory, therefore this concept of EP must agree with ER. Against this possibility, Talbot argues that there is a significant conflict between the Augustinian concept of EP and ER. His argument may be formulated as follows:

- (4) It would be correct to characterize everlasting suffering as ER only if the sinner has caused another person permanent damage that cannot be rectified, either by causing the complete loss of his body and soul, or by bringing him to a state of continuous suffering.

- (5) If God is omnipotent and perfect in His love, then sin expressed as causing permanent, irreversible damage would be impossible in a world that God has created and governs. This is because God's perfect love for His creatures requires protecting them from permanent, irreversible damage.

Therefore,

- (6) Given, according to ER, that the severity of a sin is determined according to the degree of damage caused, God cannot allow a sin that would require punishment on the level of everlasting suffering (required by EP). Since the severity of every possible sin is necessarily limited, the possible punishments that would fit the range of sins will necessarily be limited in scope – temporary and not eternal. ('Punishment', 155–156)

Talbott argues that in the world of a God with perfect ability and love, it is not possible to have a sin for which the appropriate punishment under the requirements of justice (according to ER) is everlasting punishment (according to the Augustinian concept of EP). At this stage, Talbott does not yet completely reject the Augustinian picture of EP, as its validity does not necessarily depend on the principle of ER. Those who uphold this doctrine may present their viewpoint in a manner that does not place the principle of ER at its foundation – and some have done so. Talbott is well aware of this, and thus he continues to argue against the other version of the Augustinian justification of EP.

Talbott criticizes supporters of the Augustinian understanding of EP who adopt a retributivist theory of punishment that does not include the principle of ER. He says that they must show that, although the damage caused by any sin is finite or limited in scope, for a particularly heinous sin and accordingly intense guilt for it, the sinner deserves everlasting punishment, even though this does not fit the actual harm done. On its surface, this assertion seems to him indefensible ('Punishment, 156). Still, one argument in its favour was first proposed by Anselm of Canterbury, and Talbott discusses it extensively. Anselm's basic assumption is that the severity of a sin is determined according to the status of the being against whom the sin was committed, not according to the extent of damage caused (or that might have been caused, or was planned to be caused) by the sin itself.

On the basis of this assumption, Talbott reformulates Anselm's argument in support of the Augustinian concept of EP, as follows:

- (7) If God's greatness is infinite, then even the smallest sin against Him is infinitely severe.
- (8) It is not enough for the sinner to pay for an infinitely severe sin with finite suffering; hence, either the sinner does not compensate for his

sin at all (which is impossible in a theistic system), or he must compensate for it with everlasting suffering.

- (9) Since every sin is against God, no sinner can compensate for his sin, even the smallest one, for a finite amount of time.

Therefore,

- (10) All sinners deserve everlasting suffering for their sin. ('Punishment', 158)

Talbot proposes three criticisms against this argument. First, he argues that its fundamental assumption is problematic. According to the retributivist theory of punishment, it is unacceptable that the only, or the decisive, measure in determining the severity of a sin be the status of the being against whom the sin has been committed. The measure of personal guilt of the sinner must be influenced, at least in part, by facts about the sinner himself, such as the level of responsibility for his rebellious impulses or his level of awareness of his choices and their consequences. In addition, Talbot argues that even supporters of the Augustinian theory of divine retribution adopt this criterion in ascribing particular wickedness to original sin because of the personal characteristics of Adam, which were on a higher level than those of ordinary human beings. If so, they also accept ranking the severity of sins according to the sinner's situation, and do not evaluate their severity as identical to each other because of the infinite virtue of God, against whom they were committed ('Punishment', 158–159).

Second, if the severity of every sin is infinite, and thus each sin deserves a punishment identical to other sins, meaning everlasting suffering, then some of the basic concepts that are essential to the retributivist theory collapse: the ranking of sins according to varying levels of severity, the negation of extreme punishment, and the demand for tailoring a light punishment to a minor sin. Talbot emphasizes that the belief (common in Christianity) that punishments in hell are quantitatively different from each other, or that there are varying levels of suffering for sinners according to the seriousness of their crimes, does not solve this problem.<sup>5</sup> This is because everyone who reaches hell receives the same qualitative punishment – eternal distancing from God and permanent loss of happiness. This invalidates a very important intuition of the retributivist theory, namely the idea that certain sins require less severe punishment than others ('Punishment', 159).

Third, even if the severity of the slightest sin against God is infinite, it is not necessary that everlasting suffering be a justified punishment for any sin. According to the retributivist theory, the severity of the punishment is indeed measured by the seriousness of the sin, but only to a certain point. From this point on, additional punishment seems Satanic and lacking any relation to justice. We may derive this from the fact that supporters of the retributivist theory

who view (at least theoretically) the death punishment as appropriate for a murderer who has killed one person, do not usually support long, drawn-out execution accompanied by indescribable suffering for a mass murderer ('Punishment', 159–160).

In conclusion, Talbott shows that the Augustinian concept of EP, whether it assumes the principle of ER or not, contradicts some of the basic ideas or intuitions of the retributivist theory of punishment upon which it is supposedly based. This means that even if we accept the retributivist theory (and Talbott himself rejects it later in his article) as forming the basis of EP, the traditional Augustinian view of divine punishment involves serious difficulties ('Punishment', 160).

### **Crisp's responses**

A lucid and direct response to Talbott's critical discussion analysed above appears in an article by Oliver Crisp, who proposes a defence of the traditional Augustinian view of divine justice against Talbott's attacks. The lion's share of Crisp's article is dedicated to a reformulation of the retributivist theory of divine justice, with particular emphasis on the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment in hell that Talbott attacks. Before presenting Crisp's responses to Talbott's critical arguments, we should note that the two seem to agree regarding these basic assumptions: the classical Christian view of the concept of divine justice is retributivist; the retributivist view holds that every sin requires punishment, and that the punishment must fit the sin; the retributivist view is essential for the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment, according to which all sinners deserve everlasting punishment in hell; the Augustinian picture of the doctrine of everlasting punishment is based on Anselm's argument, that sin toward an eternal being causes everlasting punishment ('Retribution', 35–37).

But Crisp's version of the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment differs from Talbott's, and based on it, he responds to the criticism Talbott voices against it. At the foundation of Crisp's version of this concept, which he calls IPT (infinite punishment thesis), lie several assumptions regarding the concept of hell: hell continues forever, although it was created and is not pre-existing; punishment in hell continues forever; hell will be populated forever and it is the final destination of the wicked; the general theory that hell is the place of everlasting punishment does not necessitate one particular understanding of the nature of hellish punishment, which describes what takes place there specifically ('Retribution', 37–38). Crisp's main purpose is to defend the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment against the contention that it invalidates the principle of ranking of punishments (or the proportionality of punishment), fundamental to the retributivist theory.

Crisp's IPT doctrine is comprised of four main assertions:

- (1) Everlasting punishment does not entail equal punishment. This is the core of Crisp's response to Talbot's second criticism of Anselm's argument.
- (2) The infinite nature of God is the basis for determining the severity of the sin. This is how Crisp responds to both Talbot's first criticism of Anselm's argument, as well as to Talbot's criticism of the first version of the Augustinian understanding of EP, which is not based on Anselm's argument.
- (3) Everlasting punishment does not entail everlasting suffering. In this manner, Crisp responds to Talbot's third criticism of Anselm's argument.
- (4) The doctrine of original sin is the basis for imposing guilt on all humanity. Here Crisp replies to the critical contention Talbot makes in his discussion of the doctrine of EP against another doctrine that underlies it in the Augustinian tradition, namely, the doctrine of original sin.

In the first three assertions, Crisp addresses, with a slight change in order, Talbot's criticisms of the Augustinian understanding of everlasting punishment in the two versions he claims to be possible. We will now examine these three responses in greater detail, and address the fourth component of his thesis (regarding original sin) in the section below.

Crisp's first assertion is that everlasting punishment does not entail equal punishment. One of the claims against the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment is that it is not just to apply everlasting punishment to two sinners who have sinned at differing levels of severity. The presupposition of this contention is that everlasting punishments, as they are by nature everlasting, are also equivalent to each other. If so, then it is not just to apply everlasting punishment, that is, the same exact punishment, to two sinners whose sins are not equally wicked.

Against this argument, Crisp asserts that if, according to IPT, all sinners receive everlasting punishment, it is not necessary for their punishments to equal each other. God has the ability to punish two sinners with everlasting punishments that differ from each other: everlasting, but different. For example, two sinners who reach hell and will be there forever may receive punishments whose frequency of application, or whose level of suffering, are different. Quite possibly, there may be a threshold of punishment, according to which the sinner deserves everlasting punishment for every sin, but still, sinners who have committed sins of varying levels of severity are punished at differing degrees of harshness. Thus, although the punishment for every sin, no matter what its nature, is everlasting punishment, this does not entail that all sinners receive exactly the same

punishment. Here the argument of injustice asserted against IPT collapses ('Retribution', 38–39, 43–44).

The second component in the doctrine of IPT that Crisp formulates is the status principle [hereafter SP]. According to SP, the severity of punishment for every sin is determined according to two criteria: (1) the severity of the actual damage caused by the sinner through the sin, or the degree of damage planned but not realized; (2) the type of being against whom the sin is committed. Crisp criticizes Talbott for presenting the retributivist theory of punishment at the beginning of his discussion without taking into account criterion (2) of this principle. Talbott argues there that no sin, no matter how severe, can require everlasting punishment, because this would harm the principle of ranking of punishments (proportionality) of the retributivist theory upon which the Augustinian understanding of EP rests.

In response, Crisp asserts that Talbott's contention may be justified in the case where a person sins against another person, but that a sin of a human being against God may require everlasting punishment. This is because the high degree of punishment expressed by its everlasting nature derives directly from the fact that it is committed against God: because God's value is infinitely greater than that of human beings, a human sin against God has infinitely severe consequences. As long as the sinner and the one sinned against belong to the same ontological group (namely, human beings), the evaluation of the intensity of sin takes into account the character of the sinner to a greater extent than the one against whom he has sinned. However, when the sin is committed against a being whose ontological status is greater than that of human beings, meaning God, this means of evaluation is not valid, since the value of the one sinned against (divine) is infinitely greater than that of the sinner (non-divine) ('Retribution', 39–40).

Above we have described two of the main differences of opinion between Crisp and Talbott on the question of whether the Augustinian understanding of everlasting punishment is compatible with the proportionality principle of the retributivist theory of punishment. These aspects reflect Crisp's responses to Talbott's first two criticisms of the version of this doctrine that is based on Anselm's argument. Crisp's response to Talbott's third criticism is different in character from its predecessors.

In his third criticism, Talbott argues that everlasting suffering is not justified, even for a sin of infinite severity. Even in the retributivist view, he says, there is a certain point beyond which there is no addition to the severity of punishment.<sup>6</sup> To this, Crisp responds that the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment does not entail that everlasting punishment be expressed through everlasting suffering or torture. As he argues at the beginning of his article, this doctrine relates only to the everlasting nature of the punishment applicable to a person who sins against God. It does not necessitate one specific type of that same

everlasting punishment, such as everlasting torture that continues unabated. Therefore, Crisp argues that Talbot's emphasis on the matter of everlasting suffering is an attempt to blur the philosophical issue through an appeal to the emotions of his readers ('Retribution', 46 and cf. 38).

### **Analysis and evaluation of the debate**

The first two assertions that Crisp makes in his reformulation of the traditional Augustinian view of everlasting punishment, and his responses to Talbot's criticisms which are based on these assertions, demand a renewed examination of the viewpoints and considerations that both describe.

Regarding the first point of debate, which relates to the question of whether everlasting punishment entails equal punishment, I identify a difference of opinion between Crisp and Talbot that is more fundamental than this issue. In his attempt to distinguish between various levels of punishment in hell, Crisp, as we have seen, relies on possible differences in the frequency of application of the punishment or in the type and intensity of suffering caused to the sinner. These differences are possible because, in his view, the doctrine of everlasting punishment only expresses the principle that every sinner requires everlasting punishment, but it does not obligate one specific description of the nature of everlasting punishment. In other words, everlasting punishment can have different practical expressions. According to Crisp, these differences are enough to create a hierarchy among punishments and to preserve the principle of ranking of punishments, which is essential for the retributivist theory. Talbot, by contrast, examines a similar suggestion and rejects it out of hand.

In his second criticism of Anselm's argument, Talbot asserts that any everlasting punishment, by nature of it being everlasting – everlasting distancing from God and permanent loss of happiness – is equal in nature to any other everlasting punishment. He argues that, according to the retributivist theory, every sin is infinitely severe and thus deserves exactly the same punishment as any other sin, namely everlasting theological death. As opposed to Crisp, Talbot regards the quantitative differences between the everlasting punishments in hell not as the practical expression of the everlasting punishment the sinner was sentenced to, that is, as identical with it, but rather as an additional punishment to the everlasting punishment, which in and of itself is identical and equal to every other conceivable everlasting punishment. Hence, although with respect to these additional varying bodily torments the demands of ER are satisfied, this is not the case for the basic everlasting punishments, which are by definition qualitatively the same. To Talbot, this is similar to the meaningless distinction between killing (as a punishment for a civil felony) in a more humane manner as opposed to killing in a less humane way. The main issue here is physical death and its justification, whereas the method of execution is secondary ('Punishment', 159).

To put it differently, the Augustinian understanding of everlasting punishment either violates the principle of ranking of punishments, in which case Talbott's second criticism of Anselm's argument in favour of this doctrine is valid, or it does not violate the principle of ranking of punishments, in which case Talbott's criticism seems invalid. The question of violation, however, depends on another question. Given that everlasting punishments in hell are quantitatively different from each other according to the severity of sins committed, does this preserve the principle of fitting the punishment to the crime (since the punishment does change according to the level of sin and is adapted to it)? Or, because there is no essential difference between punishments in hell, and all express everlasting theological death, then this represents a source of invalidation of this principle? In other words: after being separated permanently from God, thus losing the most important thing for a religious individual, is there still any meaningful religious value to one's existence that can be evaluated by the gradation of his physical suffering in hell? Apparently, here is the point of difference between Talbott and Crisp on this aspect of the debate.

In the discrepancy on this question, Crisp asserts that, absent any theological justification for rejecting the possibility that in hell punishments differ in frequency or strength (and Talbott does not offer this justification), then everlasting punishment also contains variance and gradations. He believes that this type of (quantitative) gradation supplies the demand for rankings that is essential for the retributivist principle of fitting the punishment to the crime. But one may wonder if Crisp really succeeds in showing that this gradation reflects a significant difference between sinners of differing levels of severity, given the fact that they all were condemned to everlasting theological death. Does he clarify what religious value might be ascribed to a human being who has been separated from God forever, even though his bodily sufferings are less severe than those of his fellow sinner?

From this aspect, Talbott's view seems the more convincing. Talbott does not reject the concept of quantitative gradation of punishments in hell. Rather, he argues that it is not enough in order to create the hierarchy necessary in the principle of ER, since this hierarchy is required within the main punishment and not just in the subsidiary bodily torments. The Augustinian concept of hell, namely everlasting separation from God sentenced to all sinners regardless of the level of severity of their sins, does not represent in and of itself any such gradation or hierarchy. His assertion is based on an analogy between punishment in hell and the civil death punishment: a death punishment ends the life of the one punished, and the manner in which the end to his life is carried out is secondary in importance. Although different methods of execution exist, distinguished from each other by the extent of suffering caused to the condemned and by their length, these variations are merely quantitative. Talbott attempts to argue that, just as the quantitative difference between the level of suffering

caused to the condemned by varying methods of execution does not create a sustainable distinction regarding the severity of punishment (eventual death in both cases), so the quantitative differences between punishments in hell (which all mean eternal death from a theological point of view) do not present differing gradations of severity in accordance with varying levels of sin.

I would like to take a deeper look into that analogy. Talbott is correct in his assertion that the gradation of the intensity of suffering caused to the sinner in the framework of everlasting punishment in hell has no decisive significance in relation to everlasting punishment in and of itself. Therefore, we can certainly understand the comparison with different methods of execution as secondary to the death sentence. His analogy also properly represents the idea of being excluded from everything good in life, which is compatible to the Christian concept of hell. However, I wonder if this analogy parallels his assertion that there are actually two distinct punishments (or at least two components of one punishment) involved in the Augustinian concept of hell: the essential theological death and the additional physical torment. Is it correct to ascribe this interpretation to the death penalty?

Further, it seems to me that from the point of view of this discussion, the death punishment differs from punishment in hell in an important aspect. In the death punishment, the difference between various methods of execution is specific and temporary (in the short run), and thus certainly insignificant for the fact of everlasting, bodily death caused through its implementation. But according to Crisp, the differences among punishments in hell are not merely preliminary, nor are they specific or temporary, but rather everlasting, and characterize the entire period of the punished person's everlasting stay in hell (the long run). Because of this, these differences, although they are quantitative and not qualitative, are indeed significant, for they give content to the simplified term 'hell', and thus create a hierarchy of severity of punishments.

To continue this line of thinking, I would like to propose another analogy that I believe may better explain Crisp's position, which gives weight to the quantitative gradation of punishments in hell, and in this case rejects Talbott's criticism, which nullifies the significance of these quantitative differences. This analogy compares, in a certain respect, punishment in hell to the punishment of lifetime imprisonment with forced labour.<sup>7</sup> In both, the framework of the punishment is uniform (everlasting stay in hell; lifetime stay in prison), and in both, the differences are the characteristics of the punishment given within this framework (between various levels of suffering).

Let us consider a punishment of lifetime imprisonment with forced labour imposed on two criminals who committed a particularly severe crime, such as murder. For legal reasons, one was sentenced to forced labour at a medium level of one day per month, while the other (who murdered in a particularly heinous way, or who murdered numerous people) was sentenced to forced

labour at a high level of one day per week. Like the characteristic of punishment in hell, the punishment applied to both is qualitatively the same – almost complete denial of rights and freedoms, and distancing from human society for the rest of their lives. Both will spend the remainder of their days between the walls of the same prison, and will have the same exact living conditions, except for the level of difficulty and frequency of the forced labour. In this case, the quantitative difference between the punishments of both persons clearly reflects gradation of the severity of punishment received. From this analogy, we conclude that the quantitative differences in the level of suffering to the sinner in hell and its frequency also reflect a gradation of various severities of divine punishment. If this analogy stands, it comprises a challenge to the basis of Talbott's assertion that the quantitative differences in punishment in hell do not fulfil the requirement of fitting the punishment to the sin in the retributivist theory.

Regarding the second point of controversy, the integration of Anselm's argument in the doctrine of everlasting punishment, at first glance Crisp's criticism seems strange. Crisp's argument is that in the first stage of his discussion Talbott ignores Anselm's consideration of measuring the severity of sin in accordance with the status of the person against whom it was committed, which he relates to as criterion 2 of SP. As we have seen above, in the first stage of his discussion, Talbott indeed does not take into account Anselm's argument, but this is only because he first examines another, more basic version of the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment. He does address it in detail in the next stage of his discussion.

Against this background, I would like to propose a different reading of Crisp's criticism, which will help us sharpen the distinction between his and Talbott's approaches to this aspect of the issue. Apparently, Talbott and Crisp define differently the principle of proportionality of punishment that determines the appropriate level of severity. According to Crisp, the severity of punishment is determined in accordance with this principle on the basis of the two components together: the degree of damage, and the existential status of the object of the sin (criteria 1 and 2 of SP). According to Talbott, however, this principle determines the severity of the punishment based on only one of these, either the severity of the damage or the status of the sin's object.

In the first stage of his discussion, Talbott identifies the principle of proportionality exclusively with estimation of the degree of sin according to the damage caused (Crisp's criterion 1 of SP). In the second stage, Talbott identifies this principle exclusively with estimation of the degree of sin according to the status of the sin's object (Crisp's criterion 2 of SP), and *explicitly not* according to the degree of damage caused, the potential damage, or the planned damage.<sup>8</sup> If so, possibly Crisp's criticism is directed against the separation between these two criteria in Talbott's definition of the principle of proportionality.

Whether or not Crisp intended it, the analysis above leads us to conclude that the two do disagree in their view of the principle of proportionality. The root of the debate between them on this point seems to lie in a basic disagreement over the correct interpretation of one of the foundations of the retributivist theory. Crisp's position seems logical; it is reasonable, when determining the severity of sin, to take into account the entire range of relevant data. In this case, Talbot's position seems less lucid; although according to him, the Augustinian understanding of everlasting punishment conflicts with criterion 1 on its own, the alternative is not necessarily what he chose to do, meaning abandoning this criterion in favour of criterion 2 (Anselm's argument). Certainly he could have chosen the combination of the two as another option.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Talbot's criticism of the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment (even if we accept all its components) seems incomplete, because it does not analyse it in light of the possibility that both these criteria may be combined.<sup>10</sup>

As I noted in the previous section, another aspect of the Augustinian view of everlasting punishment, also the subject of a fundamental debate between the two philosophers, is the doctrine of original sin as a justification of everlasting punishment for basically all of humanity. Talbot argues that according to the traditional Christian view, the doctrine of original sin means that all human beings, being descendants of the biblical Adam, are part of one sinful entity, and thus they all deserve everlasting punishment ('Punishment', 152). In other words, the guilt ascribed to all of humanity is inherited, and its origin is in Adam's sin. Even if a person bears no guilt for any other sin aside from this, original sin is enough to justify his everlasting punishment. This doctrine offers Talbot another justification for rejecting the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment: the idea of inherited guilt is incompatible with the basic intuition of the retributivist theory, that a person is not responsible for the sins of others and it is unjust to punish him for them. This idea is also illogical, for the inheritance of a sinful nature is supposed to lessen the measure of guilt and the need for divine mercy, and not the opposite ('Punishment', 157).

To Crisp, as well, the doctrine of original sin lies at the foundation of the traditional view of everlasting punishment, for according to it, every human being, including one who has not even had the opportunity to sin, bears guilt for at least one sin, and thus requires everlasting punishment ('Retribution', 39). Crisp proposes two responses to Talbot's criticism of the concept of inherited guilt:

- (1) Usually, guilt is not transferable from a guilty person to another, even if the other person agrees to bear the guilt for him. Still, Christian theology contains the idea of transferring guilt, not only in the doctrine of original sin, but also in the argument that Jesus took upon himself all of human guilt, and atoned through his suffering

and death for the sins of all of humanity. Thus there are clear theological reasons to try to show that guilt is transferable.

(‘Retribution’, 46–47)

- (2) Possibly, there is a double guilt connected to sin. The first is the corrupt tendency of all human beings, which stems from original sin. The second is the act of the individual sinner, the actual sin committed subsequent to his birth, which becomes a permanent principle of sin. This second dimension of guilt (unlike the first) reflects personal responsibility for the sin committed, and thus we can base everlasting punishment on it. (‘Retribution’, 47, and cf. 51, n. 16)<sup>11</sup>

In his first response, Crisp’s argument seems to be that the idea of transferring guilt that underlies the concept of inherited guilt is essential to Christian belief, and as such, may not be rejected even in the light of Talbott’s moral considerations. This response reflects a conservative religious viewpoint that ignores the philosophical problem of the concept of inherited guilt underlying the doctrine of original sin, and in fact represents no philosophical response to Talbott’s criticism. In his second response, Crisp seems to recognize this problem, but he tries to circumvent it by arguing that his justification of everlasting punishment for each and every sinner is not truly based on the concept of inherited guilt. But just as we have difficulty accepting punishment based on the concept of transferring guilt from the sinner to one who has not sinned, we have difficulty accepting punishment based on ascribing guilt to a newborn, which cannot rationally be considered as bearing responsibility for anything. In sum, Crisp’s position here seems difficult to defend from a philosophical point of view.

### **Conclusions and implications**

This article has addressed the debate between Thomas Talbott and Oliver Crisp on the justification of the doctrine of everlasting punishment as part of the traditional (Augustinian) Christian concept of retributivist divine justice. Talbott sharply criticizes the Augustinian view of everlasting punishment as the first stage of his critique of retributivist theology in general and as a step toward presenting an alternative view, namely his version of the thesis of theological universalism. Crisp responds to Talbott’s critical arguments of this concept in an attempt to defend the Augustinian theory of divine justice.

The main thrust of the debate surrounds the evaluation of Anselm of Canterbury’s argument (which asserts that the severity of the punishment is determined according to the status of the object of the sin, and thus the infinity of God as the object of religious sin justifies everlasting punishment for every sinner) as a component of the Augustinian theory of everlasting punishment.

Obviously, Talbot and Crisp share different theological intuitions concerning what would be the most appropriate reaction of God, as a morally perfect and an ontologically superior being, to sin – necessarily an everlasting punishment, as Crisp contends, or not, as Talbot does. However, what we tried in the above has been to examine the philosophical coherence of their conflicting positions concerning the Augustinian view.

From our discussion, we conclude that with regard to this aspect, Crisp's responses to Talbot's criticisms may have some support. On the other hand, we have also seen that in regarding the evaluation of the doctrine of original sin as a necessary component of the doctrine of everlasting punishment, Crisp does not find an appropriate philosophical answer to Talbot's strong arguments that indicate the morally problematic nature of the concept of inherited guilt, and for lack of a better alternative, he grasps the horns of the altar of Christian dogmatism.

In the final analysis, Crisp provides only partial philosophical support for the retributivist justification of everlasting punishment in its Christian context. Given that the doctrine of original sin is one of the basic principles of the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment, Talbot's criticism of the latter concept, as analysed above, consists of negation of the retributivist justification of everlasting punishment itself, and negation of the application of everlasting punishment to one who is not guilty of sin. Our discussion demonstrates that Crisp seems to respond adequately to the first part of the criticism by providing a philosophical defence for the theory that a person guilty of religious sin deserves everlasting punishment. Yet we cannot ascribe similar success to his response to its second part, since he does not give a valid philosophical argument in favour of the theory of inherited guilt.

Before concluding this discussion, I would like to propose another perspective, more general in scope, for the Talbot–Crisp debate. I would like to argue that the findings described above have an additional, fundamental aspect, aside from the specific context of the internal Christian theological debate between the two, an aspect in which we find Crisp's defence of the doctrine of everlasting punishment to be of great value.<sup>12</sup>

The starting point of my suggestion is that there is no necessary logical connection between the theory that the sinner deserves everlasting punishment in hell and the problematic doctrine of original sin, according to which everlasting punishment applies to the entire human race, even if actual guilt for any particular sin is not ascribed to each individual. Since these doctrines are not essentially dependent on each other then, aside from the Christian theological context, which mostly connects the two ideas, we can certainly speak of a theory that argues for everlasting punishment for sinners bearing guilt for their sins, and only for them. This means that from Crisp's argument in favour of the doctrine of everlasting punishment, we can deduce a quite solid philosophical basis for a

theory of everlasting punishment in hell that does not place the doctrine of original sin at its foundation, such as that present in Jewish philosophy,<sup>13</sup> as well as in Islamic religious thought.<sup>14</sup>

To continue the analysis just proposed, I would like to make an additional comment. A basic assumption shared by Talbott and Crisp is that the Augustinian concept of everlasting punishment rests clearly on the foundation of the retributivist theory of punishment. This presupposition is the foundation for both Talbott's criticism of the concept and Crisp's defence of it.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the Augustinian context in which the argument between them is waged, this is the accepted and common hypothesis, and thus they quite justifiably assume it as obvious.<sup>16</sup> However, outside this context, this is not a necessary assumption, and we can conceive of a doctrine of everlasting punishment on the basis of another theory, the very opposite theory, meaning the utilitarian theory of punishment. This line of thought circumvents the criticism that Talbott and others levelled against the doctrine in its retributivist form, and thus can serve as an alternative philosophical basis for the doctrine of everlasting punishment in monotheistic thought.

Utilitarian justification of everlasting punishment in hell can be found, for example, in the writings of the tenth-century Jewish philosopher, Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon of Babylon, in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (9, 7).<sup>17</sup> Sa'adia proposes the following question: What is the basis for the perpetual nature of reward for the righteous and punishment for the sinners – why should they be everlasting in length? He attempts to respond to this question using a logical consideration, and begins with the issue of reward. He argues that since God demands for each human being to worship Him, it follows necessarily that God will also give him the maximum incentive to convince him that worshipping God is worthwhile. As long as the incentive, or the promised reward for worship, is quantitatively limited, a person can conceive of a greater benefit that might arise if he does not worship God. Furthermore, as long as the promised reward is quantitatively limited, a person can argue that if he were promised a greater reward, then he would take upon himself to worship God. Only if the promised reward is everlasting, then a person has no excuse for not worshipping God.

Sa'adia applies this rationale to punishment as well: the need for the threat of maximum punishment (meaning everlasting punishment) is necessary, just as the promise of maximum reward (everlasting reward) is necessary. As long as the threat is quantitatively limited, a person can argue that if the threat were greater, then he would avoid sin. Only everlasting punishment completely prevents the possibility of making this assertion coherently. According to Sa'adia, then, the theory of everlasting punishment is based on the concept of punishment as a deterrent from sin ('His aim in warning them against everlasting punishment is to put them in the proper state of mind for serving Him'),<sup>18</sup> and this is one of the main considerations in the utilitarian theory of punishment. Here we

find a philosophical justification of the theory of everlasting punishment in monotheistic thought that relies on a utilitarian view of punishment, as opposed to the widespread view within Christianity that justifies everlasting punishment on retributivist grounds.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. Thomas Talbot 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice', *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 151–168.
2. Oliver D. Crisp 'Divine retribution: a defence', *Sophia*, 42: 2 (2003), 35–52.
3. In the second part of his article, after the critical section, Talbot proposes a summary of his alternative view of the idea of divine justice as nothing different, or separate from, divine mercy. According to his view, divine justice necessitates forgiveness for sinners for their sins, forgiveness which may in certain circumstances find expression in the form of a punishment. This view is part of his thesis of theological universalism, which he details in other articles. See, for example, Thomas Talbot 'Providence, freedom, and human destiny', *Religious Studies*, 26 (1990), 227–245; *idem* 'The doctrine of everlasting punishment', *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (1990), 19–42; *idem* 'Three pictures of God in western theology', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (1995), 79–94; *idem* 'Freedom, damnation, and the power to sin with impunity', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 417–434; *idem* 'Misery and freedom: reply to Walls', *Religious Studies*, 40 (2004), 217–224. For criticisms of Talbot's thesis of theological universalism, see, for example, William Lane Craig 'Talbot's universalism', *Religious Studies*, 27 (1991), 297–308; Paul T. Jensen 'Intolerable but moral? Thinking about hell', *Faith and Philosophy*, 10 (1993), 235–241; Robert Holyer 'Justice and mercy: a reply to Thomas Talbot', *Religious Studies*, 30 (1994), 287–294; Wilko van Holten 'Hell and the goodness of God', *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), 47–50; Jerry L. Walls 'A hell of a choice: reply to Talbot', *Religious Studies*, 40 (2004), 203–216.
4. Academic literature on the theories of retributivist and utilitarian punishment is extensive. For a concise and clear summary of each, see, for example, Joel Feinberg's introduction to the section 'Punishment', in Joel Feinberg & Hyman Gross (eds) *Philosophy of Law* (Encino and Belmont CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1975), 500–505.
5. In addition, this belief is not at all compatible with Anselm's contention that every sin against the eternal God is of infinite severity, and thus equal to all other sins against God.
6. See my summary of Talbot above, in the penultimate paragraph of 'Talbot's criticisms'.
7. By making this analogy, I do not mean to claim complete resemblance between all characteristics of the items under comparison. There is a substantive difference between exclusion from everything good in life that the concept of hell entails, and removal from society and life-long deprivation of rights.
8. See 'Punishment', 158: 'The gravity of an offence has nothing to do with the degree of harm done' (emphasis mine). Later, Talbot adds (*ibid.*, 160) that when we try to evaluate the degree of sin according to a criterion that is not the amount of damage caused (such as the criterion based on Anselm's argument), this invalidates the rationale of the retributivist theory that demands fitting the level of punishment to the severity of the sin.
9. For an interpretation of Anselm's argument as including both criteria, see Marilyn McCord Adams 'Hell and the God of justice', *Religious Studies*, 11 (1975), 441–444. Talbot also expresses himself in this manner, after arguing for a conflict between the Augustinian concept of EP and ER, when he determines that supporters of the Augustinian view must *reject* or *change* ER (see 'Punishment', 156). This also appears in Talbot's first criticism of Anselm's argument (*ibid.*, 158), according to which the personal guilt of the sinner must necessarily depend at least partially on facts related to him, such as his responsibility for the sin.
10. For our argument, we need only the assumption that this is a reasonable possibility. Some argue in a stronger voice that the combination of the two criteria of SP in the framework of the retributivist theory is necessary. See, for example, Jonathan L. Kvanvig 'Heaven and hell', in Philip L. Quinn & Charles Taliaferro (eds) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge MA & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 565; Paul Kabay 'Is the status principle beyond salvation? Toward redeeming an unpopular theory of hell', *Sophia*, 44: 1 (2005), 91–103.
11. The source of Crisp's discussion here, as indicated by him, is Jonathan Edwards's *Original Sin*.

12. The two concluding comments of this article are based on the rationale of the strategy of structural analysis, in keeping with the comparative trend in contemporary philosophy of religion. See Paul J. Griffiths 'Comparative philosophy of religion', in Quinn & Taliaferro *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 618–619.
13. For a list of sources regarding the issue of everlasting punishment in hell in medieval and early modern Jewish philosophy, see Alexander Altmann 'Eternality of punishment: a theological controversy within the Amsterdam rabbinate in the thirties of the seventeenth century', *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 40 (1973), 1–88; Meir Benayahu 'The positions of Rabbi Moses Zakuto and Rabbi Samuel Aboab in the polemics between Portuguese converts who returned to Judaism', in Daniel Carpi *et al.* (eds) *Shlomo Simonsohn Jubilee Volume: Studies on the History of the Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Period* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1993), 29–44 (Hebrew section). These sources present mainly interpretative and not philosophical discussions. For a broad philosophical discussion on the issue of the temporal or everlasting nature of reward and punishment in the world to come in late medieval Jewish philosophy, see Joseph Albo *Sefer ha-'Ikkarim (Book of Principles)*, part 4, chs 36–38. This discussion will require a separate treatment.
14. See, for example, Binyamin Abrahamov 'The creation and duration of paradise and hell in Islamic theology', *Der Islam*, 79 (2002), 87–102.
15. This contention appears in Talbott's discussion in several formulations of varying degrees ('Punishment', 153, 154, 156).
16. Charles Seymour makes a similar assumption at the beginning of his discussion of the theory of hell. In his view, the assumption that it is unjust to punish in a manner disproportional to the severity of sin is an obvious ethical principle. See Charles Seymour 'Hell, justice, and freedom', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 43 (1998), 69–70. But this is a retributivist presumption, which is not necessarily valid in a utilitarian theory of punishment.
17. See Sa'adia Gaon *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, S. Rosenblatt (trans. and ed.) (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1948), 344–345. Sa'adia's argument also includes an interesting treatment of the moral problem that characterizes everlasting punishment, which I intend to discuss elsewhere.
18. *Ibid.*, 345.
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