




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Hell? Yes!’ Moorean reasons to reject three objections to the possibility of damnation

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Abstract

Objections to the orthodox doctrine of an eternal hell often rely on arguments that it cannot be a person’s own fault that she ends up in hell. The article summarizes and addresses three significant arguments which aim to show that it could not be any individual’s fault that they end up in hell. I respond to these objections by showing that those who affirm a classical picture of sin have Moorean reasons to reject these objections. That classical perspective holds that all (serious) sin involves choosing eternal destiny apart from God and that no sin could possibly be caused by God. Consequently, it is necessary for ending up in hell that someone commit a serious sin, and it is sufficient for ending up damned that one persists forever in sin. Since the objections conflict with Moorean commitments central to the classical perspective, those who hold to such a classical perspective on sin would have good reason to reject all these arguments, which involve assumptions that would entail that such a perspective is false.

Keywords: hell; sin; universalism; responsibility; predestination

David Lewis once proposed an argument against the existence of God, relying on claims that God perpetrates the eternal suffering of those in hell or setting up the world such that some can end up eternally consciously tormented (Lewis 2010, 231–242). Laura Ekstrom fills out such an argument as follows:

1. Hell exists.
2. If hell exists, then either it is a person’s own fault that she ends up in hell or it is God’s fault.
3. It cannot be a person’s own fault that she ends up in hell.
4. If hell exists, then it is God’s fault that a person ends up in hell.
5. If it is (supposed to be) God’s fault that a person ends up in hell, then God does not exist.
6. God does not exist (Ekstrom 2021, 154).

I will review three prominent kinds of arguments in favour of premise 3. One kind relates to facts about freedom, arguing that nobody can freely *choose hell*. A second kind argues that facts about God make it impossible for creatures to be *at fault* for ending up in hell. A final

argument hybridizes the first two types. I will show that these arguments in support of premise 3 are unsound.

These arguments involve assumptions that contradict classical Christian perspectives on God's relation to sin. Classical perspectives hold that what is necessary and sufficient for ending up in hell is to persist in sin forever. Nothing more is required. But, if nobody could end up in hell through their own fault, nobody could sin through their own fault. Yet a classical perspective on sin holds that we can sin through our own fault and God is in no way at fault for our sins. Anyone with that classical perspective on sin therefore should reject any premise that entails premise 3.

Human responsibility

Ekstrom argues that facts about human freedom make it such that 'there is no action, and no series of actions, a human person can freely perform, in an informed state in the absence of relevant non-culpable ignorance, to merit ending up in hell' (Ekstrom 2021, 149). The purported dilemma is summarized by Talbott:

a freely chosen eternal destiny apart from God is metaphysically impossible. For either a person S is fully informed about who God is and what both union with the divine nature and separation from it would entail, or S is not so informed. If S is fully informed and should choose a life apart from God anyway, then S's choice would be utterly and almost inconceivably irrational; such a choice would fall well below the threshold required for moral freedom. And if S is not fully informed, then God can of course continue to work with S, subjecting S to new experiences, shattering S's illusions, and correcting S's misjudgments in perfectly natural ways that do not interfere with S's freedom. Beyond that, for as long as S remains less than fully informed, S is simply in no position to reject the true God; S may reject a caricature of God, perhaps even a caricature of S's own devising, but S is in no position to reject the true God. Therefore, in either case, whether S is fully informed or less than fully informed, it is simply not possible that S should reject the true God *freely* (Talbott 2022, sec. 3.1).

To avoid controversies on the nature of freedom, I will refer instead to moral responsibility. The dilemma above relies on the premise that being morally responsible in choosing 'eternal destiny apart from God' would require that a person be 'fully informed', where that person is 'fully informed about who God is', and so on. The argument then gives a conditional premise that, if one has knowledge requisite for moral responsibility, it would be irrational – given this knowledge – to choose anything but eternal union with God. The argument is therefore as follows:

1. Responsibly choosing eternal destiny apart from God requires being fully informed about 'who God is and what both union with the divine nature and separation from it would entail'.
2. Someone who is fully informed about 'who God is and what both union with the divine nature and separation from it would entail' could not responsibly choose eternal separation from God.
3. Therefore, nobody can responsibly choose eternal destiny apart from God.

The key premise is 1. At least one reason in favour of premise 1 is found in Talbott's summary: 'for as long as S remains less than fully informed, S is simply in no position to reject the true God'. The argument assumes that if someone fails to reject *the true God*, they are not

responsibly choosing eternal destiny apart from God. Further, rejecting the true God requires being fully informed about God's nature. The argument thus rests on at least two implicit assumptions: [1] rejecting the true God requires being fully informed about the nature of God and [2] intending to reject the true God is required for choosing eternal destiny apart from God.

A classical Christian view of sin gives us *prima facie* reason to reject both assumptions. Augustine defines sin as 'any transgression in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law' (1887b, XXII.27). An implicit element of the uniquely Christian understanding of sin, however, is that 'sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it' (Catholic Church 1993 [CCC], 1850). Thomas Aquinas notes that when we consider sin as 'perfectly' exemplifying the concept of sin, it turns us away entirely from loving God, being thus akin to a spiritual form of death. Since a 'mortal' sin of this sort destroys the principle (charity/love) by which one is united to God, it is 'irreparable according to nature' (Thomas Aquinas 1920 [ST], I-II, q. 72, a. 5, resp.), requiring divine intervention to change the will of a human being and restore them to a state of supernatural love of God. Left to themselves, then, a person who commits a mortal sin thereby 'destroys charity in the heart of man [and] turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him' (CCC 1861).

But Aquinas argues that anyone who sins mortally 'fixes his end in sin', i.e., *ipso facto* 'has the will to sin, everlastingly' (ST I-II, q. 87, a. 3, ad 1). As he notes elsewhere, 'the very fact that anyone chooses something that is contrary to divine charity, proves that he prefers it to the love of God, and consequently, that he loves it more than he loves God' (ST I-II, q. 88, a. 2, ad 1). Aquinas cites Gregory the Great approvingly, who says that anyone who commits a mortal sin thereby acquires a disposition such that '[they] would wish to live without end, that they might abide in their sins for ever' (ST I-II, q. 87, a. 3, ad. 1). Thus, when Aquinas discusses whether sin deserves eternal punishment, he affirms that mortal sin puts one in a position where the disposition toward moral evil introduced into the soul through the act of sin remains unless a contrary disposition is introduced into the will. But since only divine intervention could introduce charity into the will, the sinner naturally would remain disposed to love sin forever.

This classical Christian perspective on sin assumes that anyone who prefers moral evil to good thereby has rejected the true God. Rejecting the true God does not, on this picture, require being fully informed about God's nature, contra assumption [1]. Further, even though it is true that anyone who commits moral evil thereby has rejected the true God, it is not true that everyone who commits moral evil *thereby intends* to reject the true God, contra assumption [2]. Rather, anyone who commits moral evil, in virtue of preferring moral evil to good, has committed an act in virtue of which they prefer that evil to the true God – whether they have any specific intention *to reject God* is irrelevant to whether the act counts as an act of serious sin.

This perspective on sin is intelligible and consistent. 'One cannot love God and Mammon', for instance, implies that love of God and money are incompatible *in point of fact*, not a claim that loving money requires *consciously and intentionally* hating God. Similarly, I might responsibly choose to drink water, without even considering whether to drink milk instead. My choice to drink water did not have as either an explicit or implicit intentional object that I wanted *not to drink milk*. My choice to drink water 'counts' as a choice not to drink milk, just as it counts as a choice not to drink Gatorade or wine, given simply that I chose one among many possible others. Again, at no point did I have as my intention *to reject milk*, nor did I even consider milk. So, one might not infer that my responsible choice not to drink milk required that I be suitably informed about milk (and what it is not to drink milk, etc.) for me to responsibly choose to drink water. That is, there is simply a metaphysical fact that choosing to drink water is mutually exclusive of drinking milk, where being aware

of water does not require being aware of milk. Choosing to drink water counts as a choice not to drink milk *ipso facto*.

The classical perspective treats sin as leading to hell in a similar fashion: by choosing to commit a serious sin, one chooses something mutually exclusive with choosing eternal destiny with God. Being responsible for sin does not require being aware that one is thereby choosing eternal destiny apart from God. Rather, one *ipso facto* chooses eternal destiny apart from God by choosing something which, if one persists in that choice, results in eternal destiny apart from God. For this reason, premise 1 should be rejected as implying that one ends up in hell if and only if one has made intentional choices *to reject God*. Ending up in hell does not require any such choice.

The objector might insist the classical perspective is inconsistent or unintelligible. While the sinner knows that X is not to be done, in some way, that sinner is not suitably aware of the *full implications* of doing X, which involve eternal destiny apart from God. But, if the sinner is unaware of these full implications, it does not seem that they have chosen to do X *in preference* to eternal union with God. They would not be suitably aware of *why* they should not do X, since part of why they should not do X is because doing X involves rejecting God. So, we have good reason to think nobody intentionally chooses to prefer eternal destiny apart from God to eternal life with God. That is, even if they did X, their doing X was involuntary in some way, since they were not fully aware of what they were doing.

The objector has, however, made a mistake in conceiving of suitable awareness of the moral norms governing act X (sufficient for full moral responsibility) as something like being aware of the *full set of reasons* that one should not do act X. But it again begs the question to assume that being suitably aware of moral norms in a way sufficient for moral responsibility in performing act X requires being fully aware of all reasons that one should not do X. Nevertheless, lack of this full awareness of why one should not do X is typically *constitutive* of the moral fault rather than an excuse from moral responsibility. For instance, committing an act of sexual assault is morally wrong, but it is typically the case that those who assault others sexually are not fully aware of the effects that their actions will have upon others. This does not exempt those persons from moral responsibility, however. The assailant does not properly care about the effects of their act on others, but it is this *lack of care* that constitutes part of what is morally wrong with sexual assault. They discount those effects as not worthy of their attention, weighing reasons for action inappropriately. This lack of care is largely what makes their action wrong (see Rooney 2023). The assailant does wrong because they *are* suitably aware of a *relevant sub-set* of those facts relevant to why they should not commit sexual assault, and they culpably ignore or discount those facts accessible to them, on the basis of which they evince their disregard for coming to know any further relevant facts that might count strongly as reasons not to assault the other person.

The objector's mistake resembles those who argue that non-Christians do not believe in God, since they do not believe in God under the right description. For instance, Christians believe God is a Trinity, but Muslims do not. Some therefore conclude that Muslims do not believe in God at all, since they have a false description of God as necessarily non-triune. However, this position seems wrongheaded. Christians and Muslims, first, share a relevant sub-set of beliefs about God which seem sufficient to secure that both *refer* to the same thing. Second, the objection would seemingly imply that it is impossible to disagree about God's nature, since anyone who had a false conception of that nature would be referring to a distinct thing and not to God. The Muslims and Christians could not disagree, in principle, about what God was like, since 'God' necessarily refers to something different for each party. By the same token, practically speaking, it seems reasonable to believe that someone could reject the true God without believing in God under the right description, just

as someone might believe *in* God without having the right description for God or His nature. Such possibilities enable attractive views on which non-Christians can come to saving faith, despite not having the right description of God. Such views look neither inconsistent nor unintelligible.

Given the classical perspective on which mortal sin involves ceasing to love God and thereby putting oneself in a state of preferring eternal destiny apart from God, if assumption [1] was a necessary condition for committing a mortal sin, it would follow that mortal sin is impossible. If assumption [1] were true, nobody can perform an act by which they end up in a state where they would prefer eternal destiny apart from God, then it would be impossible for anyone to cease loving God. Further, every free or responsible agent would (presumably) have supernatural charity all times, since the conditions the objector outlines for acting freely or with moral responsibility entails that every responsible or free agent would at every time need to necessarily choose God in preference to anything else. But the classical Christian has strong reasons from Revelation to believe that mortal sin occurs, that it is false that everyone is always necessarily in such a relationship with God, and that some acts constitute acts of preferring eternal destiny apart from God to a life of moral goodness. The classical Christian thus has excellent reasons reject premise 1. Their view of sin constitutes a ‘Moorean’ fact that is more certain than any argument to the contrary; any argument which begins from premises which would entail that sin is impossible (i.e., that nobody can be morally responsible for mortal sin) should be rejected by such Christians as begging the question against their position.

A distinct but related species of argument insists that nobody could responsibly *persist* in preferring eternal destiny apart from God *forever* (e.g., Reitan 2022; Talbott 2001). Such an argument can be represented as weakening premise 1 to premise 1*: ‘Responsibly choosing eternal destiny apart from God requires being fully informed about what separation from God entails for that agent.’ Such arguments would nevertheless be question-begging in the same way as the focal case, since they assume that moral responsibility requires fully grasping moral reasons *not* to persist in sin. A related argument proposes that the damned would need to *maintain* their sinful attitudes under the weight of overwhelming and conclusive evidence that their attitudes are causing them eternal suffering. But anyone who maintains an attitude or belief in the face of overwhelming and conclusive evidence to the contrary is irrational, not responsible. Hence, the damned would necessarily be acting irrationally and not responsibly, if they were to persist in sin forever.

Nevertheless, this further weakening of the objection is not much better, since it continues to make assumptions that someone who holds a classical account of sin should simply deny. Apart from there being no need to assume that those in the afterlife need to maintain their sinful attitudes in the way that we do in this life (Rooney 2024), or that there is any preponderance of evidence which would necessitate anyone making an act of saving faith,¹ the weaker objection still implicitly presumes a principle like premise 1*, such that persisting in sinful attitudes would not be morally responsible as long as one is not fully cognizant of moral reasons not to continue in those attitudes. But this premise should be rejected, since it makes mortal sin impossible for the same reason as the other arguments; nobody could form an attitude by which they rejected the true God without being fully cognizant of what separation from God would entail, which in turn requires being fully cognizant of God’s nature, and the latter is a state where forming sinful attitudes is impossible. Those holding a classical account of sin have no good reason to accept the premises of such type 1 arguments. These arguments simply beg the question against the classical view of sin.

Divine responsibility

A second species of argument aims to show that those who end up in hell could not do so through their own fault, because their own decisions are not sufficient for them to end

up in hell. That is, God would need to do something (or fail to do something) to ensure that anyone ends up in hell. Indeed, this point seems to capture nicely the spirit of David Lewis's argument that hell would be ultimately God's fault and not that of human beings.

One popular version of this argument aims to show that God creating a world in which damnation was possible would make God morally responsible for hell, because God would thereby directly or positively intend damnation. Many advocates of the classical doctrine of hell hold that God *merely permits* the damned to end up in hell, even though God could have prevented it from occurring. David Bentley Hart denies that any sense can be made in distinguishing 'mere permission' of damnation from God's positive intention that someone be damned: 'If both the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of eternal damnation are true, that very evil is indeed already comprised within the *positive* intentions and dispositions of God. ... Under the canopy of God's omnipotence and omniscience, the consequent is already wholly virtually present in the antecedent' (Hart 2019, 82–83).

Hart's reasons that God's omnipotence (*'creatio ex nihilo'*) are supposed to entail this conclusion, however, are not very clear. Certainly, 'permitting' is a form of willing, and God foreknows what He permits, so God would not be surprised that anyone is damned nor would it be contrary to God's plan for the universe, but these facts do not show us that God 'positively intends' that anyone be damned. Hart gives an argument that, if God permits damnation on account of some greater good, that 'a greater good is by definition a conditional and therefore relative good; its conditions are already and inalienably part of its positive content' (Hart 2019, 82). He concludes that eternal punishment would therefore be willed for its own sake, because one could not have the greater good without the possibility of damnation, and therefore that God would positively intend damnation to occur. Yet, if damnation is only made possible, but is not necessary for, any goods that God requires, it does not follow that God bringing about those goods that make damnation possible require that God 'positively' intend anyone to be damned. Clearly, if God wants something, it happens! But, if God 'merely permits' damnation in light of some specific goods, there would be a possible world in which nobody is damned and those same goods exist. So, it would not follow that God permitting some state of affairs to possibly obtain entails that God positively intends that state of affairs to obtain.

Imagine a scenario that God continually aims to help each person accept His grace and come to love Him. Imagine that a person, Jim, rejects grace at every time. Nevertheless, God continually persists in aiming to persuade Jim to change his mind. Even if Jim at no time accepts grace and comes to love God, such that in the eschatological future Jim at no time achieves union with God, it would not follow that God positively desired Jim's damnation or created Jim for the purpose of ending up in hell. Thus, it does not follow that, if Jim is damned in the eschatological 'end-state', it was therefore God's purpose that Jim ends up damned, let alone that God has directly caused Jim to be damned.

Perhaps Hart's arguments are better construed as 'moral' claims that even if God were to 'merely permit' damnation, God would be morally evil. Such a perspective would seemingly rest on a moral principle which Hart does not either make explicit or defend. Such a principle might resemble one well-known principle from discussions of God's permission of evil:

For any state of affairs, and any person, if the state of affairs is intrinsically bad, and the person has the power to prevent that state of affairs without thereby either allowing an equal or greater evil, or preventing an equal or greater good, but does not do so, then that person is not both omniscient and morally perfect (Tooley 2021, sec. 1.4).

However, since Hart has already admitted the possibility that God might bring about goods which require the *possibility* of such evils, he seemingly admits the possibility that God

would be metaphysically constrained to permit evils on accounts of the goods He aims to achieve. In this case, the controversial principle above would need to be made *even more* controversial, as entailing that God would be morally imperfect for permitting *any* intrinsically bad state of affairs, whether or not doing so would bring about an equal or greater evil, or prevent an equal or greater good. Such a principle would not only be implausible, but also would seemingly undermine Hart's own case for theism, since it would imply God can permit no evils whatsoever.

Even if it were conceded that God *could* change the will of individuals, whether by simple causal intervention or by providing an irresistible experience like the Beatific Vision, such that it was possible for God to obtain universal salvation without any (real) possibility that sin or damnation occur, the defender of the classical view might argue that there is a relevant moral difference such that the controversial moral principle in question does not apply to God's permission of damnation. Damnation would involve God permitting a *person*, that is, a moral agent, to form morally bad attitudes and to persist in those attitudes.

While it is true that moral evil is an intrinsically bad state of affairs, it is not obviously the case that anyone who fails to prevent another from forming morally bad attitudes is doing anything wrong. We might be obliged at times to prevent certain bads from affecting others, but it is not obviously true that we are obliged to make others *desire* what is right. Assuming God has done what is sufficient for preventing evil from occurring, it is not apparent that He is obliged to prevent it, especially if this simply means He could not create a person intrinsically capable of sinning (which might be true of *every* created person God could create). If the objection presumes that 'God's omni-benevolent nature contains any moral principle that would make it logically impossible for God to create a significantly free person', it seems as if we should be free to reject such an assumption (see Pruss 2003 and 2008).

Better versions of this argument rely on no such contentious moral principles. They nevertheless insist that God's desires are incoherent if He desires the salvation of all but fails to achieve it. Kronen and Reitan's arguments from 'divine benevolence', 'divine complacent love', and 'efficacious grace' each exemplify this type of argument. Each of their arguments proposes that God has *no good reason* to permit damnation, as any such reason to permit someone to be damned would have to be weightier than God's reasons to save all, and no reason is possibly of such a character.

We can generalize that these arguments follow this pattern:

- 1 God desires that each person achieve union [revealed premise].
- 2 He will achieve His intention unless there is good reason not to do so.
- 3 But there is no good reason for God to fail to ensure each person achieves union.
- 4 Therefore, God will ensure each person will achieve union.

What constitutes a 'good reason' is the theoretically critical move in these arguments – that is, premise 3. Kronen and Reitan, for example, distinguish only two possible kinds of 'good reasons': either it is metaphysically impossible for God to ensure that each achieves union, or the means by which God would ensure each achieves union is morally impermissible (Kronen and Reitan 2013, 68, 71–72, 131). While Kronen and Reitan distinguish impermissibility from impossibility, whatever is impermissible for God to do is metaphysically impossible, since it is not (metaphysically) possible for God to do anything that is morally wrong. Kronen and Reitan's case therefore rests on the claim that the only 'good reason' God could have *not* to ensure universal salvation is that it is impossible for Him to do so.

Thomas Talbott's claim exemplifies the upshot of such arguments: 'opponents of universalism must either restrict God's redemptive love to a limited elect or admit that God's

love will suffer an ultimate defeat' (Talbot 2022, sec. 4.3). That is, if God does not save everyone, then God did not *really* desire their salvation at all. Such arguments are question-begging. Talbot's argument is more obviously so. For the defender of the classical doctrine of hell, God's love for individuals is not 'defeated' when that individual fails to love God in return, since God loves that individual in such a way that God would love them regardless of their reciprocation. Indeed, that's just what it means for God to love them. It is not then obvious that God failing to ensure their salvation would entail that God does not love that individual.

The dialectical strength of these claims arises from revealed Christian claims that God desires the salvation of all persons. But it would be question-begging to assume that God's desires for individuals are desires that aim to *ensure* the salvation of all, since this is precisely what is at issue. There is nothing obviously incoherent in the view that God aims to provide everyone with what they need to achieve union with Him, and not to make it necessary that anyone fail to achieve union but does not ensure that they will achieve union – if this is God's desire, it clearly aims for the salvation of all and seems a true desire that all be saved. And this sort of desire does not suffer 'defeat' when someone rejects God, since God's desire is that every person achieve union contingently, if they will it, and thus is logically compatible with persons failing to achieve union.

But the same is true even more so of Kronen and Reitan's argument, which appeals not to a *contingent and revealed* desire for union with all, but rather to an *essential desire* to ensure each person achieves union. Classical theists have good reason to reject that God has any such desire. If God had an essential desire to achieve union with each person, He would create persons necessarily so as to attain union with each of them. But on classical theistic metaphysics, God could have refrained from creating. Therefore, it is not essential to God to desire union with persons. Perhaps we imagine God has an essential desire such that, if He creates, He necessarily aims at the highest good of whatever He creates – and for persons that good is union with them. Nevertheless, we have reason to reject such an assumption as well. Perhaps there is no one unique 'highest' good for or best state of individuals. For instance, if individuals can continue to grow infinitely toward higher moral perfection, there would always be a better state they could attain.

More fundamentally, such an argument is question-begging in the same way as Talbot's. The objector assumes that God's desires are of such a kind that God aims to ensure the salvation of all, as long as it is metaphysically possible. Nevertheless, these assumptions about God's desires are neither obvious nor necessary. God's desire to achieve union could be contingent upon the way He aims to achieve union, this being essential to that good which God desires for persons. And if God aims to achieve union such that He aims to allow that person to reject that union, if they so desire, then it is not contradictory that God does not achieve union with every person, as long as those persons with whom He does not achieve union do not desire it. On different assumptions about God's desires, then, a person failing to *want* union with God would be a good reason for God to fail to achieve union with them, and it would not then be the case that God necessarily achieves union with all persons for whom He desires union. This is true even if God could change Jim's desire to cause Jim to desire union with God, as (given God's desires) God would nevertheless have a *good reason* not to achieve union with Jim at every time where Jim does not desire union reciprocally. If the objector insists that God's desire for union with Jim is such that, regardless of any time where Jim might not desire union with God, God desires to *ensure* union with Jim at some time or another in the future, then the objector has clearly assumed precisely what they intended to prove: that God's essential desires are of the requisite sort to ensure universal salvation and that God can have no good reason *not* to ensure universal salvation. But that is precisely what is at issue. The assumption that God's desires are of this kind can be rejected by anyone not already committed to universalism.

But, in the end, there is a particular issue salient to the classical view of sin which makes such assumptions even more problematic. If God has essential desires to achieve the salvation of each person, or their highest good, and the only good reason that God has for not achieving this good with each person would be metaphysical impossibility, then it follows that, at any time God fails to achieve union with Jim, or at any point that Jim does not desire union, these states of affairs are metaphysically necessary. But this implies that our sins and failures to achieve our highest good (assuming that to be the Beatific Vision) are metaphysically necessary. Classical Christians, however, have strong reasons to reject any picture which implies that sin occurs necessarily or is required for salvation (see Price 2009, 183–186). Further, it is also true to say not only that God truly or really desires all people be saved, but that nobody commit any sin, for each sin committed ('God desires that X does not Y at Tn'). Yet people do sin. On the classical view of sin, God's desires are not inconsistent; He does not want anyone to either sin or be damned. Rather, God wills that no sin occur in just the same way He wills that all be saved. So, classical Christians have excellent reasons to reject type 2 arguments that aim to show that nobody can end up in hell through their own fault. Such arguments would indirectly entail that sins are necessary or that God desires us to sin – Christians have 'Moorean' reasons to reject any such implication.

A hybrid argument

A final species of these arguments, however, deserves special attention. Some argue that the facts about divine action ensure that, if God did not ensure an individual ends up saved, then God would ensure that this person ends up damned. Since God's decisions *alone* ensure that anyone is damned, God *alone* is responsible for damnation. These arguments are hybrids of types 1 and 2, since they appeal to facts about divine action to show both that God 'positively intends' that individuals be damned and that the damned could not have done anything for which they were at fault which would be *sufficient* to end up in hell. The latter point is relevantly similar to that of arguments of type 1, which often claimed while we can commit sins (a necessary condition of ending up in hell), something else is required for us to *persist in sin forever*. The hybrid arguments claim that what is fully sufficient is God's reprobation: God deciding not to save a person is the only fully sufficient condition for that person ending up in hell.

Consider those facts about God providing providentially that an individual will, in the end, attain to salvation as God's 'election' of that person. We can give these arguments a simplified form as follows:

- 1 No creature has power over the facts of God's election.
- 2 No creature has power over the fact that the facts of God's election entail every fact about who ends up in heaven.
- 3 Therefore, no creature has power over the facts about who ends up in heaven.
- 4 If no creature has power over the facts about who ends up in heaven, no creature has power over the facts about who ends up in hell.
- 5 Therefore, no creature has power over the facts about who ends up in hell.

I have intentionally painted this argument as a form of Peter van Inwagen's 'Consequence Argument' (McKenna and Coates 2024, sec. 3.1), since its defenders often presume that theological determinism or compatibilism is true. Since it is at least a common intuition about such responsibility (although disputed) that one could not be held responsible for not avoiding what was impossible to avoid, it would not be in anyone's power to avoid going to hell, and thus ending up in hell could not be something for which created persons are responsible.

The easiest dialectical response would be for the defender of classical doctrines of hell to deny premise 1. There is dialectical force in the hybrid argument since orthodox Christian doctrine regarding grace and predestination *apparently* commit us to premise 1. Yet not every Christian is committed to a strong vision of ‘unconditional election’. It is a complicated historical and dogmatic matter to sort out the limits of orthodoxy. In my own Catholic dogmatic tradition, Molinism is doctrinally permissible. These views do not affirm that God’s election is *entirely* logically prior to whatever anyone could do but involves God’s foresight of what we do in counterfactual situations. On such views, the hybrid argument does not get past premise 1.

On the other extreme, John Calvin seems to have embraced the argument with its implications, defending a compatibilist account of blameworthiness or fault which did not require anyone to have power over ending up in hell to be at fault for ending up in hell (see Calvin 1909, I.18.211). Nevertheless, church councils which affirmed predestination to glory, and defined the orthodox doctrine of grace against Pelagianism, rejected predestination to sin or damnation (Denzinger 2012, nos. 333, 339, 340, 397, 623, 626f, 2001–2007, 4140, 4135, etc.). By contrast with Calvinists, Thomists defend that, while facts about God’s decision to elect are not in anyone’s power, facts about sin are *not* entailed by God’s decision not to elect (‘reprobate’) an individual, so that sinners have power over facts whether they sin, persist in sin to the end, and thereby end up going to hell (see Cai 2020, 433–444). Roberto de la Noval endorses a hybrid argument that specifically targets those positions which endorse premise 1 (and he argues that premise 1 is required by anti-Pelagian dogma) but reject the implications of the above argument, arguing that anyone who accepts unconditional predestination but rejects that God predestines to sin or hell is inconsistent. Due to their insistence that God does not predestine anyone to sin/hell (e.g., ST I, q. 23, a. 3, ad 2), De La Noval concludes that Aquinas, Augustine, the early councils which condemned Pelagianism, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are all inconsistently committed both to Pelagianism – in insisting God does not cause sin – and to its negation (De La Noval 2024, 536, fn. 22; 541, fn. 48; 545, fn. 75; 545, fn. 77; 549, fn. 88; 550, fn. 90).

If facts about election are in nobody’s power except that of God (De La Noval 2024, 532), and God can efficaciously cause any individual to repent/convert, then De La Noval alleges it is impossible for ‘appeal to human free will and its inviolability functions as an explanatory account for why people end up in hell ...’ (De La Noval 2024, 531). Instead,

the ultimate explanation for why one person is saved and another condemned lies not in the sinner but in God’s transcendent primary causality as manifested in the impartation or withholding of grace. The culpability of sinners is certainly a necessary condition for their ending up in hell, but it is not a sufficient one (De La Noval 2024, 539).

What is sufficient for an individual ending up in hell would lie in God’s decision *not* to elect them.

Nevertheless, De La Noval’s argument is problematic on Thomistic terms. Thomists reject premise 4 of the above argument. Thomists argue that the fact that election is outside of human control *does not entail* that facts about sin are outside of human control. A foundational commitment of the classical Christian picture of sin is that God does not and cannot cause sin, even indirectly. Figures like Augustine (Augustine 1981, q. 21, 1887a [*De Civitate Dei*], V.9–10, 1887c, no. 106) and Aquinas attribute sin *solely* to the free will of creatures, so that sin *in no way* is attributable to God as cause. God’s causality is merely a background condition, sustaining the existence of free creatures, so that God ‘merely permits’ sin to occur by foreknowing what sins will occur and not preventing them. Aquinas thus underlines that

God 'in no way wills the evil of sin, which is the privation of right order towards the divine good' (ST I, q. 19, a. 9, resp.), and draws the conclusion that 'sin, which the free-will commits against the commandment of God, is not attributed to God as being its cause' (ST I-II, q. 79, a. 1, ad 3). God's will being a sufficient cause for anyone ending up in hell would entail that God's will is the sufficient cause for sin. The classical picture of sin gives us 'Moorean' reasons to reject any such implication.

The way in which these thinkers maintain asymmetry between God's causality of good and permission of evil is subtle and controversial, but not obviously inconsistent with their rejection of Pelagianism. First, Thomists can propose counterexamples to the claim that God *not* electing an individual thereby consigns such a person to hell. Those who die as infants – Aquinas thinks – end up in a state where they fail to achieve supernatural union with God. They are reprobate, not elect. Nevertheless, these infants achieve perfect natural union with God and perfect natural happiness, suffering no pain or regret of any kind (see Beiting 1998). Then consider Joe who – unlike Jim – is born in a world where there never was a Garden of Eden or an offer from God for supernatural union with human beings. Joe will never achieve the Beatific Vision, and thus is not among the elect. But Joe is not necessarily going to end up in hell either. If these cases are possible, they undermine premise 4.

Thomists seem to be stuck in a dilemma, however, with post-Fall humans. In this state, they think, human beings inevitably sin if given enough time and opportunity. Consequently, if God does not elect an individual, and allows them to reach adulthood, then God's decisions not to elect an individual apparently make it inevitable that such a person ends up in hell. There are two subtle responses that each thinker offers. Augustine's account of original sin insists that the facts about whether any given person ends up in hell *were* in human control, but not necessarily *each person's* control. Original sin is what made it that post-Fall humans end up in this state of sinning inevitably, given enough time, and the occurrence of original sin was in the control of Adam and Eve. It was false that Adam and Eve would have sinned, simply given enough time, or that God did not provide what they needed to avoid sinning. As with infants that end up reprobated for no personal fault of their own, each human being that ends up in hell has Adam and Eve partially to thank. But God is in no way responsible for the sin Adam and Eve committed, and so is not at fault for this situation (see *De Civitate Dei*, XII.17, XIV.11).

Aquinas (and the Thomistic tradition) supplements this account. God not electing an individual 'does not take anything away from the power of the person reprobated' (ST I, q. 23, a. 3, ad 3). A post-Fall human falls 'into this or that particular sin ... from the use of his free-will', not because of God failing to provide something that person needed to avoid sin. Aquinas therefore insists that Providence leaves intact the powers of things – so while whether God elects an individual is not in their power, whether that person ends up in hell is the product of that person's choices. The operative principle is that 'although one may neither merit in advance nor call forth divine grace by a movement of his free choice, he is able to prevent himself from receiving this grace' (ST I, q. 23, a. 3, ad 3). Whatever grace God gives, God gives *even to the predestined* in such a way that it is intrinsically possible that they reject it, just as God does not withdraw His help from the reprobate (even though they will, in fact, reject it).

Aquinas claims that, for the elect, God overcomes their free resistance and sin by changing their wills through grace. But their sinful attitudes result from their own free will, not from God failing to give them the means to avoid sin. God not intervening to repair a sinful will was not thereby causing that will to have ended up broken in the first place. So, while it is true in a limited sense that God's decisions not to elect *post-Fall adult humans* entail that those who are not elected end up damned, it is not true facts about them ending up in hell are not in their power, since their decisions to sin and persist in sin forever are entirely in their power. God *merely* foreknows that they will freely sin,

persist in those sins, and end up in hell.² As Aquinas puts it, ‘the only thing God does concerning [the reprobate] is that he lets them do what they want’ (Thomas Aquinas 2012, no. 793).

Aquinas thus gives an account of election which *prima facie* allows Thomists to deny premise 4 in a manner consistent with their rejection of Pelagianism. On the one hand, it is question-begging to insist that these views are *manifestly self-contradictory*, as De La Noval does. On the other hand, it is true that many have argued that Aquinas’s account of predestination remains incomplete or unsatisfactory in some way, as witnessed by the long history of the *De Auxiliis* controversy and discomfort with many positions historically taken by Thomists (Brotherton 2016). And it may be the case that a fully satisfactory Thomist theory of grace or predestination remains far off. Regardless, if it turns out that Aquinas’s theory of predestination is impossible to reconcile with the baseline theistic commitment that God predestines nobody to sin or end up in hell, then this would simply give the classical defender of hell definitive reason to *reject* Aquinas’s views, not to accept premise 1 or 4.

This final response to hybrid arguments reveals an important truth about the classical Christian perspective on hell. Hell results only from us, the ones who choose to sin. God does nothing to damn except to let us have what we want. There might be different explanations of the way in which God allows that. But these accounts are evaluated, on the classical perspective, by whether they prevent God from becoming the author of sin. Such theists have good reason to accept no assumption which would imply – as is true of all three arguments here presented – that God is ultimately responsible for sin and hell. By the same token, these three arguments are arguments in favor of a universalism incompatible with that classical Christian perspective. There would be no comfort in a religion in which the deity has single-handedly ensured that we sin, or was ultimately responsible for sin, even if this same deity will also thereafter ensure that all end up achieving union. Union with such a deity would not be heaven but hell.

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Notes

1. Christian doctrine precludes that saving faith results from being exposed to evidence, e.g., CCC 179; ST II-II, q. 5, a 1, ad 1.
2. Later Thomists distinguish ‘negative’ from ‘positive’ reprobation: God’s decision to permit sin/hell is not in our control but does not cause any sin to occur; God’s decision to punish/damn logically follows the actual commission of sin, which is in our control.

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