

11. GOD, FREEDOM, AND HUMAN DESTINY

“No matter how many eons it takes, he will not rest until all of creation, including Satan, is reconciled to him, until there is no creature who cannot return his love with a joyful response of love.”

Madeleine L’Engle

In the previous chapter, we saw something of the importance that Arminians attribute—correctly, in my opinion—to the idea of free choice. Insofar as freedom and determinism are incompatible, free choice introduces into the universe an element that, from God’s point of view, is utterly random in that it lies outside of God’s direct causal control. Accordingly, if I should freely act wrongly—or worse yet, freely reject God’s grace—in a given set of circumstances, then it was not within God’s power to induce me to act otherwise, at least not in those precise same circumstances. So in that sense, our free choices, particularly the bad ones, are obstacles that God must work around as he tries to bring his loving purposes to fruition.

Now so far, the Arminian picture seems to me essentially correct. But Arminians hold not only that our free choices are sometimes obstacles that God must work around; they hold also that we are free to defeat God’s loving purpose for us altogether. They hold not only that we can reject God for a season, during the period of time we are mired in ambiguity and illusion, but also that we can reject him forever. They deny, in other words, that God is *almighty* in the sense that he is able in the end to accomplish *all* of his loving purposes. According to William Craig, for example, it is quite possible, given the nature of free will, that some created persons are utterly irredeemable in this sense: Nothing God can do—that is, no revelation he might impart, no punishment he might administer, and no conditions he might create—would ever induce them to repent freely or successfully reconcile them to himself.¹ It is also possible,

¹See William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ.” *Faith and*

Craig insists, that some persons would repent freely only in a world in which others were damned forever; it is even possible that God must permit a large number of people to damn themselves in order to fill heaven with the redeemed. Craig himself puts it this way:

It is possible that the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell and that in any other possible world which was feasible for God the balance between saved and lost was worse. It is possible that had God actualized a world in which there are less persons in hell, there would also have been less persons in heaven. It is possible that in order to achieve this much blessedness, God was forced to accept this much loss.²

As this passage illustrates, Craig accepts at least the possibility that, because of free will, history includes an element of irreducible tragedy, and he exploits this supposed possibility in defense of a doctrine of everlasting hell. For it is possible, says Craig, that in order to fill heaven, God had to pay the “terrible price” of “filling hell” as well. So perhaps God, who is omniscient on Craig’s view, knows from the outset that his triumph will never be complete, and perhaps he merely does the best he can to minimize his defeat and to cut his losses.

Now to some, it may appear as if Craig’s picture of a defeated God is but a logical extension of some of my own remarks in the previous chapter. For as I insisted there myself, the Arminian is right about this: It is quite possible that, given the reality of free will, God could not have created a world with less evil in it *and* a better overall balance of good over evil than exists in the actual world. But if that is true, one might wonder whether Craig is not also right. For is it not likewise possible that, given the reality of free will, God could not have created a world in which no one is

Philosophy, VI (April, 1989), pp. 172-178. It is possible, claims Craig, that some persons suffer from what he calls “transworld damnation” (and what I have called “transworld reprobation”). For a further discussion of this idea, see Thomas Talbott, “Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny,” *Religious Studies*, XXVI (1990).

²*Ibid.*, p. 183.

damned *and* some are saved? And is it not possible that, if fewer people were damned, then fewer would be saved as well? If so, then perhaps God had no choice but to permit some persons to damn themselves freely in order to achieve a better overall balance of good over evil.

In what follows, however, I shall argue that Craig is quite mistaken about the range of possible free choice. But first I want to point out that his picture of a defeated God is in no way a logical extension of anything I have conceded in the previous chapter. For according to Craig, God willingly permits *irreparable* harm to befall at least some of his loved ones, and my own view carries no such implication. To the contrary, I assume that God permits no evil, however horrendous it may appear to us in the present, that he cannot eventually turn to good; and he permits no harm to befall his loved ones that he cannot in the end repair. I also assume that, given a long enough stretch of time, the Hound of Heaven can overcome all of the obstacles that our wrong choices present and can thus achieve *all* of his redemptive purposes; in that respect, he is like the grand chessmaster who, though exercising no direct causal control over the moves of a novice, is nonetheless able to checkmate the novice in the end.

We thus approach the fundamental point of dispute between the universalists and the Arminians. Both agree that God is a perfectly loving being. But they disagree over the question of whether God is *almighty* in the specified sense. As the universalists see it, God's love will eventually triumph; he will thus destroy evil completely and thus remove every stain from his creation. But as the Arminians see it, evil will defeat the love of God in some cases; and in these cases, God will try to minimize the defeat by confining evil to a particular region of his creation, known as hell, where he will keep it alive throughout eternity. Accordingly, against the Arminian picture of a defeated God, I shall now defend three propositions: (i) The very idea of someone freely rejecting God forever is deeply incoherent and therefore logically impossible; (ii) even at the price of interfering with human freedom, a loving God would never permit his loved ones to reject him forever, because he would never permit them to do irreparable harm either to themselves or to

others; and (iii) the Arminian understanding of hell is, in any case, utterly inconsistent with the New Testament teaching about hell. Then, in our final chapter, I shall consider again Paul's understanding of Christ's victory over sin and death, and examine the problem of human suffering in light of that victory.

(I) Free Will and the Concept of Damnation

Suppose that the parents of a young boy should discover, to their horror, that they must keep their son away from fire, lest he thrust his hand into the fire and hold it there. Suppose further that their son has a normal nervous system and experiences the normal sensations of pain; hence, the boy not only has no discernible motive for his irrational behavior, but also has the strongest possible motive for refraining from such behavior. Here we might imagine that when the boy does thrust his hand into the fire, he screams in agony and terror, but he nonetheless does not withdraw his hand. Nor does he show, let us suppose, any sign of a compulsion to get to the fire and thrust his hand into it; he sometimes just does it for no discernible reason and in a context in which nothing seems to force him to do it.

Is the story I have just told coherent? I doubt it, though perhaps more would have to be said to settle the matter decisively. But whether coherent or not, the story nonetheless illustrates an important point. If someone does something in the absence of any motive for doing it *and* in the presence of an exceedingly strong motive for not doing it, then he or she displays the kind of irrationality that is itself incompatible with free choice. A necessary condition of free choice, in other words, is a minimal degree of rationality on the part of the one who acts freely. Even on the assumption that nothing causes the boy to thrust his hand into the fire, his totally inexplicable act would be more like a freak of nature or a random occurrence than a choice for which he is morally responsible. Would his parents attribute to him some sort of moral guilt for his bizarre behavior? Not if they are thinking clearly. For moral guilt can arise only in a context in which there are discernible, albeit selfish, motives for what one does. We have

imagined, however, a case where the boy has no motive at all, not even a spiteful or a selfish one, for his bizarre behavior.

Now as we have seen, the Arminians insist, correctly, that free will is incompatible with determinism; that is, I perform an action freely, on their view, only if conditions outside my control do not causally determine that I perform it. But too often the Arminians have been content to leave it at that, to proceed as if there were no other necessary conditions of a free act, which there clearly are. As our story above illustrates, a free choice implies not only indeterminism of a certain kind, but a minimal degree of rationality as well. The latter is required in order to distinguish a free choice from a purely random event or chance occurrence, such as the unpredictable change of state of a radium atom, and it also limits the range of possible free choice. That which is utterly pointless, utterly irrational, and utterly inexplicable will simply not qualify as a free choice for which one is morally responsible.

So with that understanding, let us now consider what it might *mean* to say that someone freely rejects God forever. Is there in fact a coherent meaning here? Religious people sometimes speak of God as if he were just another human magistrate who seeks his own glory and requires obedience for its own sake; they speak as if we might reject the Creator and Father of our souls without rejecting ourselves, oppose his will for our lives without opposing, schizophrenically perhaps, our own will for our lives. Craig thus speaks of “the stubborn refusal to submit one’s will to that of another”.³ But if God is our loving Creator, then he wills for us exactly what, at the most fundamental level, we want for ourselves; he wills that we should experience supreme happiness, that our deepest yearnings should be satisfied, and that all of our needs should be met. So if that is true, if God wills for us the very thing we *really* want for ourselves, whether we know it or not, how *then* are we to understand human disobedience and opposition to God?

³William Lane Craig, “Talbot’s Universalism,” *Religious Studies*, 27 (Sept., 1991), p. 301.

As a first step towards answering this question, let us distinguish between two senses in which a person might reject God. If a person refuses to be reconciled to God and the person's refusal does not rest upon ignorance, or misinformation, or deception of any kind, then let us say that the person has made a *fully informed* decision to reject God; but if the person refuses to be reconciled to God and the person's refusal *does* rest upon ignorance or deception of some kind, then let us say that the person has made a *less than fully informed* decision to reject God. Now no one, I take it, would deny the possibility of someone's making a less than fully informed decision to reject God; it happens all the time. Even St. Paul, before his conversion to Christianity, presumably saw himself as rejecting the Christian God at one time. But what might qualify as a motive for someone's making a fully informed decision to reject God? Once one has learned, perhaps through bitter experience, that evil is always destructive, always contrary to one's own interest as well as to the interest of others, and once one sees clearly that God is the ultimate source of human happiness and that rebellion can bring only greater and greater misery into one's own life as well as into the lives of others, an intelligible motive for such rebellion no longer seems even possible. The strongest conceivable motive would seem to exist, moreover, for uniting with God. So if a fully informed person should reject God nonetheless, then that person, like the boy in our story above, would seem to display the kind of irrationality that is itself incompatible with free choice.

In an effort to establish a motive for a *fully informed* decision to reject God, Craig quotes the famous passage in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton's Satan declares that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. But that will never do. Even if Milton's Satan were a believable character—which, in my opinion, he isn't⁴—we have no reason to believe that such a character, with so

⁴Milton's portrayal of Satan, though enormously insightful in specific contexts, seems to me in the end as unrealistic as his depiction of the war in heaven (in which immortals fight each other with cannons and the like). Milton's artistic challenge was to portray Satan both as the Arch Fiend and as a free and morally responsible agent. That he was

many illusions yet to be shattered, could possibly hold out for an eternity against the love of God. Observe the many ways in which Satan comforts himself: with the illusion that he “Can make a heaven of Hell,” with the illusion that in hell he is at least free (despite his bondage to destructive desires), and with the illusion that in hell he “may reign secure.” He evidently never even considers the outer darkness (where he would have no one to rule and no world to experience); nor has he yet come to terms with the fact that his willful opposition to God, his desire for revenge, is in reality an attack upon himself. It is a tribute to Milton’s art, however, that by Book IV Satan has already lost most of the illusions that made the “heroic” speech of Book I possible; and had Milton’s art not been the slave of his theology, I have no doubt that the more pitiful (and even human) character of Book IV would have repented.

Far from illustrating a fully informed decision to reject God, then, Milton’s Satan in fact illustrates the essential role that ignorance, deception, and bondage to unhealthy desires must play in any intelligible decision to reject God. But ignorance, deception, and bondage to unhealthy desires are also obstacles to free choice of the relevant kind. If I am ignorant of, or deceived about, the true consequences of my choices, then I am in no position to embrace those consequences freely; and similarly, if I suffer from an illusion that conceals from me the true nature of God, or the true import of union with God, then I am again in no position to reject God freely. I may reject a caricature of God, or a false conception, but I would be in no position to reject the true God himself. Accordingly, the very conditions that render a less than fully informed decision to reject God intelligible also render it less than fully free; hence, God should be able to remove these conditions—the ignorance, the illusions, the bondage to unhealthy desires—without in any way interfering with human freedom.

As a counter to this, Craig makes the following suggestion: If God should shatter all of my illusions, remove all of my ignorance, resolve all of the ambiguities I face, and impart to me an absolutely

unable to unite both portraits into a believable whole in no way diminishes his artistic achievement.

clear revelation of himself, then that too would effectively remove any freedom I might have to reject him. Writes Craig: "It may well be the case that for some people the degree of revelation that would have to be imparted to them in order to secure their salvation would have to be so stunning that their freedom to disobey would be effectively removed . . ."⁵ But if Craig is right about that, then the very idea of someone freely rejecting the true God is simply incoherent. If both ignorance and the removal of ignorance are incompatible with the relevant kind of freedom, then there can be no freedom of the relevant kind. So it seems that Craig is impaled on the horns of a dilemma. Either I am fully informed concerning who God is and the consequences of rejecting him, or I am not. If I am not fully informed, then I am in no position to reject the true God, as we have seen; and if I am fully informed, then (as Craig himself insists) I am incapable of rejecting God *freely*. So in neither case am I free to reject the true God.

Perhaps this is but one more reason why, according to Paul, we do not choose our own destiny, which "depends not upon human will or exertion, but upon God who shows mercy" (Romans 9:16). The Arminians rightly stress the importance of human freedom and choice, of choosing "this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). But they are quite mistaken, I believe, in their assumption that we choose our eternal destiny; we no more choose that than we choose to come into existence in the first place. We choose instead which path we shall follow today, and it is God who determines where that path ultimately leads. As the proverb says, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

As we saw in Chapter 5, moreover, Pauline theology provides a clear picture of how the end of reconciliation could be foreordained even though each of us is genuinely free to choose which path we shall follow in the present. The picture is this: The more one freely rebels against God in the present, the more miserable and tormented one eventually becomes, and the more miserable and tormented one becomes, the more incentive one has to repent of one's sin and to give up one's rebellious attitudes. But more than that, the

⁵"Talbot's Universalism," p. 300.

consequences of sin are themselves a means of revelation; they reveal the true meaning of separation and enable us to see through the very self-deception that makes evil choices possible in the first place. We may think that we can promote our own interest at the expense of others or that our selfish attitudes are compatible with enduring happiness, but we cannot act upon such an illusion, at least not for a long period of time, without shattering it to pieces. So in that sense, all paths have the same destination, the end of reconciliation, but some are longer and windier than others. Because our choice of paths in the present is genuinely free, we are morally responsible for that choice; but because no illusion can endure forever, the end is foreordained. As Paul himself puts it: We are all predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (see Romans 8:29); that part is a matter of grace, not human will or effort.

(ii) Irreparable Harm and the Limits of Permissible Freedom

We have seen so far that the idea of someone freely rejecting God forever—of someone rejecting the true God, as opposed to a caricature of God—is deeply incoherent. I shall now argue further that, even if there were a coherent motive for such a choice, a perfectly loving God would never grant his loved ones the freedom to make it; his love would require him to prevent any choice that would, in the end, undermine the very possibility of supreme happiness not only in the one making the choice, but in everyone else as well.

The issue here concerns the limits of permissible freedom. Consider first the two kinds of conditions under which we humans feel justified in interfering with the freedom of others. We feel justified, on the one hand, in preventing one person from doing irreparable harm—or more accurately, harm that no *human being* can repair—to another; a loving father may thus report his own son to the police in an effort to prevent the son from committing murder. We also feel justified, on the other hand, in preventing our loved ones from doing irreparable harm to themselves; a loving

father may thus physically overpower his daughter in an effort to prevent her from committing suicide.

Now one might, it is true, draw a number of faulty inferences from such examples as these, in part because we humans tend to think of irreparable harm within the context of a very limited time-frame, a person's life on earth. Harm that no human being can repair may nonetheless be harm that God can repair. It does not follow, therefore, that a loving God, whose goal is the reconciliation of the world, would prevent every suicide and every murder; it follows only that he would prevent every harm that not even omnipotence can repair, and neither suicide nor murder is necessarily an instance of that *kind* of harm. So even if a loving God could sometimes permit murder, he could never permit one person to annihilate the soul of another or to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in another; and even if he could sometimes permit suicide, he could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves either. Just as loving parents are prepared to restrict the freedom of the children they love, so a loving God would be prepared to restrict the freedom of the children he loves, at least in cases of truly irreparable harm. The only difference is that God deals with a much larger picture than that with which human parents are immediately concerned.

So the idea of *irreparable* harm—that is, of harm that not even omnipotence can repair—is critical; and if one fails to distinguish between that kind of harm and others, then one will miss the whole point of the above argument. Jonathan Kvanvig, for example, clearly misses the point when he writes: “Contrary to what Talbott claims, freedom is sometimes more important than the harm that might result from the exercise of freedom.”⁶ For of course I have never claimed otherwise. I have claimed only that a certain kind of harm—that is, harm that omnipotence can neither repair nor compensate for—would outweigh not only the value of freedom but also the value of any conceivable good that God might bring forth from the misuse of freedom. Suppose, by way of illustration, that

⁶Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 85.

God should know the following: If he should grant me the freedom to annihilate the soul of my brother and I should exercise that freedom, then thousands of people who otherwise would not freely repent of their sin would, under these conditions, freely repent of their sin. We might imagine that the horror of such irreparable harm would induce these people to re-examine their own lives. Even so, God could not permit such irreparable harm to occur; an injustice such as I have just imagined—the complete annihilation of an innocent person—would outweigh any conceivable good that God might use it to achieve. In the end, it would also undermine the possibility of supreme happiness in everyone else, as we have seen in previous chapters (especially Chapters 8 and 9).

And similarly for the kind of case that William Craig asks us to imagine. Even if someone's damnation *would* induce thousands of people to repent of their sin freely, God could not permit, I contend, such irreparable harm to befall one of his loved ones. Some will no doubt want to drive a wedge between the kind of case where one does irreparable harm to *oneself*, perhaps by freely choosing to damn oneself, and the kind where one does irreparable harm to *another*. That seems to be what Jonathan Kvanvig has in mind when he first concedes that one might justifiably interfere with someone's freedom to commit murder, and then goes on to criticize my example of suicide in the following way:

Talbott has not . . . correctly analyzed the case of suicide. Sometimes interference in cases of suicide is justified, but it is not justified solely because suicide causes irreparable harm. . . Rather, what justifies our intervention is the fact that the person will come, or will likely come, to see that his choice of death was not what he really wanted or would have wanted if he had reflected carefully. Alternatively, if we are fully convinced and it is true that the person is competent to choose, is rational in choosing suicide, and cannot be persuaded otherwise, then, from a purely moral point of view, interference is not justified (except insofar as

the suicide has consequences for other persons such as dependent children).⁷

But this criticism rests upon a pair of misunderstandings. Observe first that Kvanvig imagines a case where a “person is competent to choose” and “is rational in choosing suicide.” Such a case is not difficult to imagine. If a person suffers from a terminal illness such as Alzheimer’s disease, or suffers persistent and excruciating pain for which there is no treatment, or possesses information that an enemy could use against comrades in arms, then it may be quite rational to see suicide as the lesser of two evils. In at least some such cases as these, those who love the suicide victim may view the suicide with relief or even as a noble act; and in all such cases God would retain the power to re-unite the suicide victim with his or her loved ones at some future time. The relevant cases for our purposes, however, are those in which the suicide is quite irrational, even as a fully informed decision to reject God would be quite irrational. In these cases, we can reason in one of two ways: We might insist that the decision to commit suicide, being irrational, is not truly free; or if we grant, for the sake of argument, that the decision is free despite its irrational character, we might then insist upon an obligation to interfere, where possible, with the freedom of others to harm themselves in a way that is both irrational and irreparable.

Observe second Kvanvig’s final proviso concerning the consequences of a suicide for other persons. In conceding the relevance of such consequences, he in effect concedes the very argument he has set out to criticize. For a person is not an isolated monad whose happiness, or lack of same, is independent of other persons; as we have seen repeatedly, it is simply not possible that one should destroy every chance of future happiness in oneself without, at the same time, undermining the future happiness of others as well. If I truly love my daughter as myself, for example, then her damnation would be an intolerable loss to me and would undermine my own happiness every bit as much as it would undermine hers. One simply cannot drive a wedge, therefore, between the kind of case

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 84.

where one does irreparable harm to oneself and the kind where one does irreparable harm to others. And if a loving God must prevent the latter, as Kvanvig himself concedes, then he must prevent the former as well.

This argument seems to me utterly decisive. But in an heroic effort to defeat it and to defend an Arminian conception of hell, Craig insists that God could indeed damn some without harming others; he could do so by foisting upon the redeemed an elaborate deception, thereby maintaining them in a state of blissful ignorance. For it is possible, Craig suggests, that God simply “obliterates” from the minds of the redeemed “any knowledge of lost persons so that they experience no pangs of remorse for them.”⁸ Here the suggestion seems to be that God performs a kind of lobotomy on the redeemed, expunging from their minds any memory that might interfere with their future happiness. In the case of those whose entire family is lost, this would mean, I presume, that God expunges from their minds every memory of parents and other family members; and I doubt that Craig has any conception of how much of a person’s mind that would likely destroy. He is right, of course, about one thing:

We can all think of cases in which we shield persons from knowledge which would be painful for them and which they do not need to have, and, far from doing something immoral, we are, in so sparing them, exemplifying the virtue of mercy.⁹

But withholding information for a season is one thing; obliterating part of a mind forever is something else altogether. The latter reduces God’s victory over sin to a cruel hoax; his hollow “victory” consists not in his making things right, but in his concealing from the redeemed just how bad things really are. Though utterly defeated in the end, God simply conceals from us the enormity of the defeat.

⁸“Talbot’s Universalism,” p. 306.

⁹*Ibid.*

Nor has Craig analyzed correctly the conditions under which it is appropriate to withhold painful information from a loved one. In every case, I would suggest, this is either a concession to someone's poor physical health—as when a doctor conceals from a woman, critically injured in a traffic accident, that her child was killed—or a concession to someone's psychological or spiritual immaturity. The blissful ignorance that results from such deception is not only not supremely worthwhile; it is even inferior to the experience of misery under certain conditions. For no one who truly loves another would want to remain blissfully ignorant of the other's fate, however painful the knowledge of such a fate might be. No loving father, for example—not even one whose daughter endures a brutal rape and murder and not even one whose son commits suicide—would want to remain blissfully ignorant about what happened. It is far better, he would judge, to know the truth of the matter; he might even take elaborate steps to discover the truth. And the idea that he might prefer to have all memory of a son or a daughter obliterated from his mind—that he might prefer this over his anguish—is simply preposterous.

On Craig's account, at any rate, God is the author not merely of a *temporary* deception, but of an *everlasting* deception as well. Now I have no doubt concerning this: In order to meet the needs of his loved ones, God sometimes does employ a temporary deception as a means of redemption; as Paul himself teaches, God sometimes deceives those who are unready for the truth in order to bring them ultimately to the truth (see Chapter 5). But here the goal of the deception is to prepare people for an ultimate unveiling of truth; as Jesus said, we shall know the truth, and the truth (not an elaborate deception) shall set us free (John 8:32). If the truth itself (and not an elaborate deception) is what ultimately sets us free, then that tells us something important about the nature of the truth. It tells us that the truth about the universe is ultimately glorious, not tragic; it is something that God can gladly reveal to us, not something that he must conceal from us, lest it should undermine our happiness in the end. But even if the truth about the universe were ultimately tragic, it would be far better, I believe, for God to reveal to us the full dimensions of the tragedy. For even then we might

find *some* consolation in sharing our eternal grief with others; and from love's point of view, honest grief is far better than blissful ignorance.

(iii) Free Will and the Misery of Hell

The theological and philosophical arguments, just considered, for preferring the universalist picture of a triumphant God over the Arminian picture of a defeated God are enough, I believe, to decide the issue in favor of the former. For those Christians who look to the New Testament for guidance and inspiration, however, I also want to point out how far removed the Arminian picture is from anything we encounter in the New Testament. In Part II of this essay, I tried to set forth the positive case for a universalist reading of the New Testament. Let us now examine, more specifically, the Arminian understanding of hell in light of the New Testament teaching.

As we have seen, the fundamental Arminian idea is that created persons are free to reject God forever (and therefore to defeat his love forever); and as we have also seen, the fundamental difficulty here is to discern any conceivable motive for a fully informed decision to reject God. Beyond that, there is this additional difficulty: The misery of hell, as depicted in the New Testament, would seem to provide the strongest conceivable motive for leaving the place *if* one were truly free to do so. According to C. S. Lewis and a host of others, God does not reject the damned; the damned, being successful rebels to the end, reject him. Hence, the gates of hell are closed from the inside; that is, though the inhabitants of hell are indeed free to repent and to vacate this place at any time they choose, at least some of them will never choose to do so. But here we must ask once again: How could anyone who is rational enough to be morally responsible for his or her actions prefer the misery of hell over the joys of reconciliation? What motive, what greater good from the perspective of the damned, would make the miseries of hell seem like the lesser of two evils?

A popular strategy among Arminians at this point is to suggest that, from the perspective of the damned, hell really isn't that bad a

place to be; at the very least, it is apt to seem far superior to heaven. The first step is to challenge the traditional image of a fiery furnace and torture chamber as overly barbaric and superstitious; the second is to suggest a motive for preferring hell over heaven. According to Jerry Walls, for example, "hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there."¹⁰ More than that, the damned may even experience a kind of illusory happiness.

Those in hell may be almost happy, and this may explain why they insist on staying there. They do not, of course, experience even a shred of genuine happiness. But perhaps they experience a certain perverse sense of satisfaction, a distorted sort of pleasure.¹¹

Though Walls denies that the damned are *genuinely* happy, he does not deny that they *believe* themselves to be happy; to the contrary, he insists that, for some lost souls, the illusion of happiness may endure forever and with sufficient conviction to explain why they never leave their preferred abode in hell.

Those who prefer hell to heaven have convinced themselves that it is better. In their desire to justify their choice of evil, they have persuaded themselves that whatever satisfaction they experience from evil is superior to the joy which God offers.¹²

This line of thought leads naturally to a conclusion that Eleonore Stump has explicitly defended:¹³ Because God knows that he can do nothing, short of removing their freedom, to induce the damned to repent, he simply employs his omnipotent power to make them as comfortable as possible and to prevent them from harming

¹⁰Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 128.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹³See "Dante's Hell, Aquinas' Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, June, 1986.

others. But this entire line of thought also seems far removed from the images and language of the New Testament, which are far more suggestive of a chamber of horrors than many would like to believe. Is it not precisely the New Testament that pictures hell as a “furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42) and where people will pray for the mountains to fall upon them (Revelation 6:16)? In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus alludes not to a freely embraced condition, but to a form of *punishment*, as we have seen; and in some cases at least, the punishment will come as a complete surprise. And in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:16-31), the rich man wants to warn his five brothers “so that they will not also come into this place of torment” (16:28). As depicted in the New Testament, in other words, hell is not the kind of place that even the wicked would freely choose to inhabit forever. For it really is a place of unbearable suffering and torment.

We can appreciate, of course, why the Arminians might want to water down the New Testament picture of hell as a place of unbearable suffering; an eternity of such suffering would be, after all, utterly pointless, and a god who would actually inflict such suffering forever would be unspeakably barbaric. But here, I would suggest, the universalists are in a far better position to accept the images and the language of the New Testament than the Arminians are. For the universalists can regard hell as a genuine form of punishment or correction, rather than a freely embraced condition; hence, they have no need to water down the New Testament image of unbearable suffering. Perhaps a period of such suffering is just what a Hitler or a Goebbels needs; and for that matter, perhaps it is just what they began to experience during the final days of their earthly life. So if, as John Hick has suggested,¹⁴ hell is but the continuation of the purgatorial sufferings of this life, then we have no reason to reject the language of unbearable suffering. Nor even to reject the image of a fiery furnace, which is as good a representation of God’s purifying love as there is. When people

¹⁴See John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), p.125.

deceive themselves and beat their heads against the hard rock of reality, they suffer and sometimes suffer unbearably. They may not *choose* to suffer any more than Hitler chose to be defeated in battle, but their suffering is an inevitable consequence of their misguided actions. And in the end, the unbearable nature of their suffering will shatter their illusions and reveal to them the error of their ways.

One reason that some Arminians reject the New Testament language of unbearable suffering and the image of a fiery furnace is this: If the consequences of living a sinful life include unbearable suffering, at least over the long run, and if unbearable suffering will, in the end, successfully shatter those illusions that make a sinful life possible in the first place, then no one is truly *free* to live in sin forever. As Jerry Walls puts it, “no finite being can continue endlessly to choose greater and greater misery for himself. So in the end, the knowledge which makes impossible the choice of damnation is not acquired through free choice, but is itself impossible to avoid.”¹⁵ That is correct. But consider the alternative. The only alternative would be for God to protect people forever from the consequences of living a sinful life and to do so for the purpose of sustaining the illusions that make such a life possible. That, it seems to me, would be incompatible with God’s moral character. Suppose that I should act upon the illusion that I can benefit myself at the expense of others. If God should protect me forever from the bitter consequences of such actions, then in a very real sense I would not be acting upon an illusion at all. I would be right on the most important matter. For I could indeed act selfishly with a degree of impunity. It is as if I should bring my hand near to a flame and God should protect me from the excruciating pain of the flame. In that event, my belief that I could so act with impunity would not be an illusion.

The fact is, moreover, people have their illusions shattered against their will all the time. A man who, upon entering into an adulterous affair, makes a total mess of his life may in time learn a hard lesson, one that he in no way *chose* to learn; and having

¹⁵Walls, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

learned his lesson, he may be utterly unwilling to repeat the experiment. And similarly for Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus: As I read the account in *Acts*, Paul in no way *chose* to have his illusions shattered; and neither did he choose to receive a revelation that would in a very brief time transform this "chief of sinners" into a Christian missionary. Indeed, his own experience on the road to Damascus probably explains why Paul consistently regarded redemption as no less a work of God than creation itself. But Pauline theology in no way excludes human freedom and moral responsibility altogether. For even if redemption is a work of God, free choice and the correction of wrong choices could still be, as I believe it is, an essential part of the process whereby God reveals his true nature to us and teaches us the (occasionally hard) lessons we need to learn as we travel the road to redemption.