

***The Problem of Hell  
For Christians***

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# *Overview*

At one point or another, almost every human being has considered and questioned the possibility of the existence of some sort of higher being and of an afterlife. The Christian faith teaches that there exists such a being, God, who is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good, and that there exists an afterlife in which some souls are granted eternal salvation in heaven while others are consigned to an eternal fiery torment in hell. Yet frequently such questions arise as how can a perfectly good God allow innocent beings to suffer?, why would such a God have created a world in which there is evil at all?, and how could such a God eternally turn his back on a being he himself created and allow that being to suffer the worst imaginable torment for all eternity?. Because there is an apparent contradiction between God's perfect goodness, omnipotence, and allowance of evil both in this world and the next, many theologians and philosophers have attempted to give reason-based arguments in support of their compatibility. While some of these arguments may give good explanations for why a perfectly good God would allow for the existence of some particular evils in the world, it is my contention that none of them are able to give a rational basis for the existence of the hell of Christianity. Ultimately, God's perfect goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience are incompatible with the existence of a place of eternal torment, where God forever punishes the wicked for their misdeeds on earth, and if one is to believe in the existence of both then that belief

must be based on an appeal to their religious faith alone, for no rational argument can reconcile the two.

## *Chapter 1 - The General Problem of Evil*

### *The Problem of Evil Defined*

David McNaughton begins his essay, 'The Problem of Evil: A Deontological Perspective,' by asking the question, "how is it that an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God has created a world in which there is anything bad or evil? In particular, what could justify his allowing his creatures to suffer?" (McNaughton, 'The Problem of Evil: A Deontological Perspective', pg. 329). Eleonore Stump, in her work 'The Problem of Evil,' more formally defines this problem, known as the Problem of Evil, stating that there is a potential incompatibility between the premises that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and the premise that there is evil in the world, for if God was omniscient He would know how to prevent evil, if He was omnipotent He would be capable of preventing it, and if He were perfectly good He would want to prevent it (Stump, 'The Problem of Evil,' pg. 394). Thus, it seems that the Christian conception of God may be incompatible with a world in which there is evil.

In her book *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Marilyn McCord Adams formulates some of the ways philosophers have viewed this apparent contradiction between the belief in the God of Christianity and the existence of evil in the world. While there are many different versions of the general Problem of Evil, there are three versions that are most relevant here. The first is the aporetic version of the Problem of Evil, the second is the atheistic version of the Problem of Evil, and the third is the morally sufficient reason version of the Problem of Evil.

In the aporetic version of the Problem of Evil, according to Adams, there is not an explicit contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God, but rather this contradiction comes when the premises that a perfectly good being “would always eliminate evil so far as it could” and that “there are *no limits* to what an omnipotent being can do” are added (Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, pg. 8). Therefore, taken aporetically, the Problem of Evil is really “an invitation to probe more deeply into the logical relations among these propositions, to offer more rigorous and subtle analyses of divine perfections” (Adams, pg. 8). In other words, on this account the Problem of Evil is not the result of a necessary contradiction between the Christian God and the evil found in the world today, but is instead the result of certain assumptions people make regarding God’s omnipotence and perfect goodness.

Similarly, the atheistic argument from evil, as formulated by J.L. Mackie in his work 'Evil and Omnipotence,' states that religious beliefs do not merely lack logical support, but instead are "*positively irrational*," and that the theological claims that God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good and that evil exists "are inconsistent with each other," because it must be presumed that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do and a perfectly good being would always eliminate evil if He could (Adams, pg. 9). Thus, according to Adams, those such as Mackie who make an atheistic argument from evil admit that there is only a contradiction between the existence of a perfectly good, omniscient, omnipotent God and evil if there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do and if a perfectly good being would always eliminate evil. However, they also claim that logically this must be the case, and therefore theologians must revise one or both of these additional premises in a way that is "both reasonable and true to ordinary religious belief" in order to get around this problem and deny atheism (Adams, pg. 9).

Adams goes on to describe how, in his article 'Hume on Evil,' Nelson Pike argues that, even in an atheistic argument from evil, it has to be taken into account that, in typical human morality, blame is not always assigned if an agent merely fails to prevent, or simply allows, an evil that was within his or her power to prevent. Thus, the Problem of Evil only becomes a problem for theists when, in addition to the premises about God's goodness and omniscience, the premise is that "it is logically impossible for an omniscient, omnipotent being to have a

morally sufficient reason for permitting (bringing about) evils” is added into the argument (Adams, pg. 10). Therefore, Pike states that the “goodness” of God in the Problem of Evil is to be understood as moral goodness in the commonly understood sense, and God “is understood to be a moral agent whose creative activities are governed by moral obligations” (Adams, pg. 11). The problem for theists then, according to Pike, is the apparent inability to grant God all three perfections, along with the additional premises about those perfections, while still accounting for evil in the world.

In response to the general Problem of Evil, David McNaughton claims that there are two main arguments for the compatibility of God and the existence of evil in the world, both of which claim that evil is “neither pointless nor unnecessary” but instead is “the price we pay for the existence of certain goods whose value is at least sufficient to outweigh the evils needed to produce them” (McNaughton, pg. 329). These two arguments are the higher-order defense and the free will defense.

The higher-order defense states that “suffering is a necessary condition for the existence of some very good things, especially for the existence of many valuable human traits, such as compassion, courage, loyalty...” (McNaughton, pg. 329). In other words, “There are evils which it is not logically possible for God to eliminate without thereby eliminating a good...All the evils in the world are of this kind...The attendant goods...outweigh those evils...An agent would be morally justified in not eliminating an evil if he could not eliminate it without



thereby eliminating a good greater than the evil he would thereby prevent” (McNaughton, pg. 330). Thus, one response to the Problem of Evil is to argue that, if evil is a necessary condition for a greater good, then it is still good of the moral agent to allow it, and because all evil in the world today is such, evil is not inconsistent with the perfect goodness of God. Some, including Richard Swinburne, go so far as to say that the opportunity to display such good virtues as courage and compassion is in and of itself a good worthy enough to justify God’s allowance of evil. However, there are responses to this higher-order defense. One argument is that some evils are too horrendous to be outweighed by any good they cause. Another argument is that God’s omnipotence would allow him to bring about the goods in the world without also causing suffering.

The free will defense, which is defined by Alvin Plantinga in his essay ‘God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom’ as an effort to show that a possible world exists in which it is both true that “God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good (which [entails] that God exists)” and that “there is evil in the world” (Plantinga, ‘God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom,’ pg. 84), is basically the theory that “the good of free will makes possible, in our kind of world, the existence of sin and wrongdoing, with their harmful consequences” (McNaughton, pg. 330). Thus, by granting human beings the good of incompatibilist free will, God accepted the consequences of human sin which accompanies free will. Those such as Swinburne elaborated on this defense and argued that, “in creating a world containing free beings, God could not eliminate

the risk of wrongdoing, since it is not logically possible for anyone, even God, to foresee with certainty what free beings will do" (McNaughton, pg. 331), while Plantinga and others argue that "God could not create creatures who would not sin...because...all creaturely essences suffer from trans-world depravity" (McNaughton, pg. 331). Similar to the higher-order defense, there are responses to the free will defense which claim that "if it is only the *possibility* of evil which is a necessary consequence of the good of free will, then how does the defence justify the actual existence of evil?...God could have created a world...in which there were free beings who never sinned" (McNaughton, pg. 331). I will not, however, go into detail regarding the free will defense here, as it will be described in greater detail later in the thesis.

Thus, the general Problem of Evil is one which explores the apparent contradiction between an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God, and the existence of evil and suffering in the world. While I mentioned three of the main views regarding the problem, as well as two of the main theories defending the Christian concept of God against the Problem of Evil which are applicable to all aspects of the problem - the free will defense and the higher-order defense - there are many other facets to the argument when taking into account specifics. Problems such as why particular types of suffering exist in the world, why innocent people suffer, what natural evils, as opposed to moral evils, are, and what the types of suffering which produce other goods, and which are thus justifiable, are exactly, require further separate consideration. However, these

aspects and the arguments concerning them are not applicable to the Problem of Hell, since the Problem of Hell deals with a very specific and limited kind of suffering that needs to be dealt with independently from all other kinds – eternal damnation.

## *Chapter 2 – The Specific Problem of Hell*

### *The Christian Concept of Hell*

In his essay “Heaven and Hell,” Michael J. Murray gives two different accounts of what is meant by the term “hell” in Christianity. In what he calls the “natural consequence model,” God has granted human beings free will, which allows people “to enter into a genuinely loving relationship with God” since, without it, “those who professed love for God...and who strove to be imitators of him...would simply be robots or parrots, spitting back words of praise and behaving in ways that are simply a matter of preprogramming” (Murray, ‘Heaven and Hell,’ pg. 581). Because free will allows people to freely choose whether or not to love God, “this earthly life...[is] a time when we have powers to make free choices to be a person of one sort or another” (Murray, pg. 581). Thus, after one’s life on earth has come to an end and one has made himself into a certain type of person, “for those who have become lovers of God, the natural

consequence would be for them to enter into the divine presence to love God and enjoy Him forever," while the natural consequence for "those who lived lives in which they rejected God...would be eternal separation from God. And this is what hell is" (Murray, pg. 582). Thus, on this natural consequence account of hell, a human beings' freely chosen actions during his lifetime determine whether he loves God and thus will spend eternity in his presence, or whether he has voluntarily turned from God and thus will spend eternity separated from him.

While the natural consequence model of hell defines hell simply as eternal separation from God, the account that Murray calls the "penalty model" of hell gives the more widely accepted "fire and brimstone" version of the Christian hell. On this account, every human has sinned and "fallen short of the glory of God," and thus must suffer "a spiritual death, a death which involves separation of the person from God for eternity" (Murray, pg. 579). However, "God the Father wrought the Incarnation, yielding [Jesus] who was fully God and also fully human, yet without fault" and who thus could, "by offering himself in our place, satisfy the penalty on our behalf" (Murray, pg. 579). Therefore, if one repents and follows the teachings of Christ, he will be saved from eternal damnation, as Jesus' suffering will pay the penalty for his own sin. However, failure to follow a Christian lifestyle results in "eternal separation from God with the attending punishment that this separation brings" (Murray, pg. 579). While Murray notes that there are many variations of the penalty model of hell

throughout the various Christian sects, the basic idea that hell is a place of eternal punishment for those who were sinners on earth “represents a rough approximation of the intersection of the beliefs of a very wide range of Christians” (Murray, pg. 579). Marilyn McCord Adams, too, in her essay ‘The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians’ points out that the book of Matthew describes hell as an “outer darkness” where there is “unquenchable fire” and the “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” and where “the reprobate will be given over to their guilt and the torment of their inordinate appetites, deprived of both natural and supernatural happiness, and made to suffer perpetual fiery torture” (Adams, ‘The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,’ pg. 303). Thus, while the natural consequence model of hell “holds that the loss one feels [in hell] is the sort of loss felt by someone who recognizes that they are responsible for missing out on the highest in human fulfillment and happiness,” the more traditional view of hell, and the one referred to throughout the rest of this thesis, is that the damned eternally suffer the worst imaginable torment as punishment for their sinful lives on earth.

## *The Problem of Hell Defined*

The Problem of Hell is a more specific version of the Problem of Evil. While the Problem of Evil deals with the existence of all evil in the world and its

compatibility with the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God, the Problem of Hell deals specifically with the claim that such a God would allow created persons to be consigned forever to hell in the Christian sense of the word. Thus, while philosophers considering the Problem of Evil can take into consideration arguments such as those concerning the severity of the evil as weighed against the potential good that can come from it or the suffering in this world being made up for by the good of the afterlife, those considering the Problem of Hell must address the idea of God permitting certain souls to suffer the worst possible evil for all eternity without any hope of divine salvation. It is harder, then, to argue that such an evil is for some greater good, and even more difficult to argue that it does any good for the individual involved. Thus, this Problem of Hell adds a new dimension to the Problem of Evil by including the concept of eternal suffering and unimaginable torment.

As formulated by Marilyn McCord Adams, The Problem of Hell is essentially the contradiction between the premise that "God exists, and is...omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good," and the premise that "Some created persons will be consigned to hell forever," with hell here referring to the Christian concept of eternal damnation and suffering (Adams, 'The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,' pg. 302). It would seem that, if the first premise were true, then God "would be able to avoid (the second premise)...would know how to avoid (the second premise)...and would want to avoid (the second premise)" (Adams, pg. 303).

Adams defends this argument against the compatibility of the Christian God and hell by stating that "an omnipotent creator could altogether refrain from making any persons or could annihilate persons at any time," a claim that is supported by the works of theologians including Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and Calvin (Adams, pg. 304). Thus, God could simply choose not to create those persons who would eventually be consigned to hell, or could choose to end the suffering of those in hell by annihilating them. Furthermore, according to Adams, provided that the premise that God is perfectly good refers to his relationship with individuals rather than to a type of overall good for mankind and the world, then "God is good to a created person...iff God guarantees to that person a life that is a great good to that person on the whole, and one in which that person's participation in...horrendous evils...is defeated within the context of his life" (Adams, pg. 304). McNaughton also asks in his essay, "would not a just and loving God be concerned not only about the good of his creation as a whole, but also about the good of each individual in it?" (McNaughton, pg. 333), and therefore would not God's "infliction of undeserved suffering" on a person "as a means to bettering the soul of another" be wrong (McNaughton, pg. 342)? Thus, even if one argues that hell serves some greater good for humankind, because the life of an eternally damned person cannot be considered a great good for the damned person, and because a perfectly good God would be concerned with the good of all individuals as well as the good of humankind as a whole, hell is incompatible with a perfectly good God.

However, as was the case with the arguments concerning the more general Problem of Evil, the exact meaning and scope of both God's omniscience and perfect goodness are debated, and are used by some philosophers and theologians to formulate responses to arguments such as Adams', and to show that the belief in the Christian God and hell are in fact not in conflict with one another.

While Adams argues that the perfect goodness of God is meant to be taken as God's goodness towards individuals, others have argued that in fact the perfect goodness of God lies in his overall goodness in creating and ruling over the world. Thus, "divine goodness finds its expression in the world as a whole, that universal republic for the good of which the well being of individuals may be sacrificed" (Rutledge, pg. 2). For example, Aquinas argues that "since the purpose of creation is to show forth God's goodness, some must be damned to manifest his justice and others saved to advertise His mercy" (Adams pg. 305). Similarly, Augustine argues that "God is good to any creature simply by conferring the gift of existence, along with other natural endowments" (Rutledge, pg. 2). As explained in McNaughton's essay, Robert Adams, too, supports this view, arguing that "God has not injured, but has rather benefited us by bringing us into existence in this world, with all its attendant evils" and that "each person now alive has benefited from the policy of permitting evil that God has followed so far...by having a life worth living, a life we would not otherwise have had...It does not, therefore, seem to be 'a demand of fairness that



God should end the policy that has benefited us' and give up the worthwhile goals that he is pursuing, in order to spare us the unpleasant consequences of the continued implementation of the policy" (McNaughton, pgs. 343-345). In other words, some philosophers and theologians espouse the view that God's perfect goodness refers to his goodness towards humankind as a whole, rather than to any particular individual(s), while others claim that God's goodness is shown to individuals by the mere fact that they exist, and even if things end badly God was good by virtue of granting us the gift of life. Thus, as with the higher-order defense concerning general Problem of Evil, it can be argued that hell must exist and individuals must suffer in order that there be greater good for the world as a whole and in order for God to exercise his perfect goodness, and furthermore hell is not incompatible with God's goodness towards individuals because even the damned were blessed by God with the gift of life, regardless of the consequences faced in the afterlife.

However, with the problem of *eternal* suffering there is the additional factor that, as McNaughton points out, such a "policy [as argued for in Augustine and Aquinas] wrongs innocent people by making them suffer horrendous evils for some purpose other than their own good" (McNaughton, pg. 336). Therefore, it is not just the case with the Problem of Hell that some individuals must suffer for the good of humankind, but instead that some must suffer the *worst* possible torment *for all eternity*. Because of this, Marilyn Adams argues that, if there is such a place as hell and if God is omnipotent, omniscient,

and perfectly good, then “this assumption makes human life a bad bet...and it would make pragmatically inconsistent any worship behavior that presupposes that God is good to the worshipper or to created persons generally” (Adams, ‘The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,’ pg. 305). Why should we, after all, worship a God who is not concerned with our individual welfare and who has created a life for us which might end in his turning his back on us for all eternity? According to Adams, therefore, the only Christian faith that can be reconciled with the penalty model of hell is Christian Stoicism, wherein the believer “recognizes his...insignificant place in the universe and...humble accepts it (thereby submitting to God’s inscrutable will)...praises his Maker for His world-organizing activity, and...finds dignity in this capacity for self-transcendence” (Adams, pg. 306). However, others argue that such Stoic Christianity is not necessary to reconcile the Christian God with hell. Instead, as with the general Problem of Evil, they argue for a particular type of higher-order defense – the free will defense of hell.

Those who advocate the free will defense of hell assert that created free will is a very great good, and that for there to be this free will God must accept the possibility that some of his created persons will make choices such that they qualify for eternal damnation. In other words, “God has done a good thing in making incompatibilist free creatures...He has established a set of general conditional decrees, specifying sanctions and rewards for...free actions...His preference...is that everyone should be saved, but He has given us scope to work

out our own destinies...Damnation would never happen but for the errant action of...free creatures...It is not something God *does*, but rather allows" (Adams, 'The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,' pg. 306). Michael J. Murray defends the free will theory of hell, claiming that God has given us freedom which we can use "to *become a certain sort of person*. What does it mean to become a certain sort of person except to become disposed to think and desire and act in certain ways? So, it is essential for becoming a 'person of a certain sort' that we have such disposition-forming capacities" (Murray, pg. 582). Therefore, for God to show his love for us by doing whatever necessary to guarantee that we are all saved, he must "reverse the natural consequences of a life of self-love," and this reversal "makes freedom meaningless" (Murray, pgs. 590-591). Similarly, as stated before, Swinburne argues that "in creating any world containing free beings, God could not eliminate the risk of wrongdoing, since it is not logically possible for anyone, even God, to foresee with certainty what free beings will do" (McNaughton, pg. 331). Thus, many defend the compatibility of hell and the Christian God by arguing that, because human beings have free will, they can chose actions which lead to them being consigned forever to hell, and this fact has no bearing on the omnipotence, omniscience, or perfect goodness of God since he was good to give man free will and what man chose to do with it was up to man alone.

In his work "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," William Craig gives a variation of the

free will defense, claiming that “God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer from trans-world damnation” (Adams, ‘The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,’ pg. 307). He states that “‘if we take Scripture [Matt. 7:13-14] seriously, we must admit that *the vast majority of persons in the world* are condemned and will be forever lost,’” yet this is acceptable because, even if “‘the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell,’ God’s decision to create free creatures...and to accept this price does not count against his benevolence or fairness...their damnation is ‘of their own free will’” (Adams, pg. 307). Thus, for Craig, not only does the fact that the good of free will makes necessary the existence of hell allow for the compatibility of the Christian God and hell, but hell also must exist in order for God to create the best possible world whereby heaven is filled. However others, including Adams, argue that “damnation is a horror that exceeds our conceptual powers...For even if we could experience for a finite period of time some aspect of hell’s torments...we are unavoidably unable to experience their cumulative effect in advance...It follows that human agents are unavoidably unable to exercise their free choice with fully open eyes” (Adams, pg. 310). Thus, although it is technically in our power to choose rightly the actions which lead to salvation, even Augustine recognizes that “the corruptibility of human nature makes failure virtually inevitable, incompatibilist freedom notwithstanding,” an assertion supported by the fact that, in Craig’s view, most are damned to eternal suffering (Adams, pgs. 310-311). Similarly,

McNaughton argues that, from a deontological standpoint, “a distinction is often drawn between harms we (intentionally) inflict and harms we merely fail to prevent or eliminate” (McNaughton, pg. 335), and thus it is hard to hold human beings strictly responsible for all the consequences of their actions. In other words, it is within human nature to “slip up” and to not recognize such enormous consequences for our individual actions, and thus the demands of the free will defense are unreasonable, and to have to suffer eternal damnation for wrong choices on earth is an unusual and unfair punishment for worldly actions.

Furthermore, in his work ‘The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,’ William L. Rowe asserts that “intense human...suffering is in itself bad, an evil, even though it may sometimes be justified by virtue of being a part of, or leading to, some good which is unobtainable without it,” and thus, because the premises that “there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse” and that “an omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse” are true, the conclusion follows that “there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being” (Rowe, ‘The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism, pg. 129). In other words, for Rowe, as well as others, none of the arguments concerning God’s goodness or omnipotence can explain how an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good

God could allow for any horrendous suffering, let alone eternal horrendous suffering, and thus it must either be denied that such suffering exists or that such a God exists. Therefore, not only do the Problem of Evil and the Problem of Hell pose questions about the compatibility of the Christian God and hell, they also lead some philosophers to argue that atheism is the only logical explanation for the world such as it is.

The Problem of Hell is one which pushes the defenses of the Problem of Evil to their limits. While it may be valid and sound to argue that some evils have to exist in the world in order for all of the goods of the world to exist, is this argument as strong when the evil being considered is such that God completely turns his back on one of his creations, leaving him to suffer unimaginable eternal torment in the depths of hell? Is free will, God's omniscience, or God's perfect goodness such that it allows for such an evil, or are the Christian concepts of an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God and a place of eternal torment and suffering for God's creations incompatible with one another? Those such as Richard Swinburne, William Craig, and Augustine will claim that they are not. Others, including William L. Rowe and Marilyn McCord Adams, will claim that they are, and will favor either atheism or various alternatives to hell including Annihilationism, or the view that those who are not saved are punished for a time and then cease to exist, and Universalism, or the view that all are ultimately saved (Murray, pg. 578). Although I will not support any one of the numerous alternatives to the penalty model of the Christian hell, in this thesis I will

conclude that, if one is to accept the existence of both a Christian God and a Christian hell as defined in the preceding chapters, he must do so on faith alone, for no argument from reason can successfully reconcile the two.

## *Chapter 3 – Responses and Conclusions*

### *Introduction*

Because the Problem of Evil and the Problem of Hell are philosophical issues which concern religion, there is always the possibility that those whose beliefs are being questioned will simply fall back on the fact that, even without proof or logical argument, they believe what they believe because of their religious faith. Therefore, because the Bible and Christianity claim that God is such that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good and that hell exists and is a place of eternal suffering and punishment for sins, even if we cannot understand how this is possible, nevertheless it must be so. Perhaps they think that we as mere humans are incapable of understanding God, or that we do not have the right to even question divine authority. However, it is faith alone which leads to their acceptance of the coexistence of God and hell. While it is perfectly within a person's rights to have such a belief, philosophically nothing

more can be said, and no rational argument can be given that God and hell can coexist. However, others who claim that the Christian God and the Christian hell are two logically compatible entities attempt to give reason-based arguments in favor of their assertions. These arguments are the ones that I will consider in this chapter. I will argue that, in the end, one must deny the compatibility of the Christian God and the Christian hell or must accept that no logical argument can be made in support of their coexistence, and that ultimately one can accept the existence of both only by appealing to faith.

## *The General Higher-Order Defenses*

According to the higher-order defenses of hell, hell must exist and individuals must suffer in order that there be greater good for the world as a whole and in order for God to exercise his perfect goodness. Furthermore, some who advocate such a defense, including Aquinas and Robert Adams, argue that hell is also compatible with God's goodness towards individuals because God grants to everyone, even the damned, the gift of life, and the goodness of such a gift outweighs any bad that could come as a consequence of that life. However, it is clear to me that, by arguing in such a manner, one must either deny God's omnipotence, God's perfect goodness, or the eternity of hell.

Aquinas' argument that "some must be damned to manifest [God's] justice and others saved to advertise His mercy" is problematic in that it assumes



that God *must* act in a certain way to show us his justice and mercy. Could not an omnipotent God show his justice and mercy without causing the suffering of his creations? However, I am willing to accept the assertion that God, merely in virtue of being God, is perfectly good and just, and a just God must punish the wicked while a perfectly good God must be merciful. Yet, while this may allow for God's punishment of wicked souls, it does not account for the eternal nature of that punishment found in hell, for even Aquinas admits that the Christian God is a merciful one. Thus, even if one accepts the fact that God's justice and the goodness of his gift of life to humankind make it such that God does not need to assure individuals a good afterlife, the eternal nature of the damnation found in hell is incompatible with the Christian belief in a perfectly good, and therefore loving and merciful, God. Similarly, Craig's argument that hell must exist in order for God to create the best possible world in which heaven is filled is even more strongly in opposition to God's omnipotence than Aquinas' argument, for not only must God punish the wicked on this account, but he also must allow for a certain number of souls to be eternally damned in order to fill heaven. While I am willing to admit that God might have to punish people to exercise his justice, I am unwilling to admit that he must meet some sort of set quota in order to fill up heaven, or that he had to *eternally* damn the wicked to actualize this best possible world. Thus, for the general higher-order defenses of hell to work, either hell must be such that, while perhaps still a place of punishment, it is not eternal, God must not be omnipotent and therefore must not be able to control

the creation and nature of hell, or God must not be perfectly good and therefore need not show mercy for his creations. While perhaps one could then argue that we simply do not understand God's perfect goodness or omnipotence, this is not a philosophical argument but is instead merely an appeal to faith in God's divine authority. I will now turn to what I consider to be the strongest form of the higher-order defense and the argument that most strongly supports the coexistence of God and hell, the free will defense.

## *The Free Will Defense*

According to the free will defense of hell, it is the good of the free will that God has granted us which justifies the existence of hell. Those who make free will arguments assume that it is completely in accordance with God's perfect goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience for him to punish those who are guilty of sin. Therefore, because in granting us free will God had to allow for the necessary condition of sin, for if we did not have the options of acting in various ways we could not really have the freedom to choose our own way of life, and because hell is the place where God justifiably punishes those who abuse their free will and chose sin over virtue, hell is perfectly compatible with the Christian God. In other words, in its strongest form, the free will defense of hell is the claim that God has done us a great service by allowing us the freedom to make our own choices, yet along with this great good comes the possibility of human

sin, and God is completely justified in punishing his creations for such wrongdoing. Hell, then, is justified as the means for God's infliction of punishment for sin, and this sin and its concurrent punishment are outweighed by the goodness of free will and virtue.

This version of the free will defense of hell makes perhaps the strongest case in support of the compatibility of hell and God, for on this account God is good to give us free will and the knowledge of the moral laws by which we are to abide, and it is through our own error that we choose to sin. Furthermore, God acts within the confines of justice when he consigns souls to hell, for he is merely punishing them for their own misdeeds, which he did not bring about and in fact commanded against. However, I still think that this is an unsound argument. First of all, it assumes that God *must* punish evil-doers, which seems contradictory not only to God's omnipotence – for could he not have made a world where justice did not require punishment as we know it? – but also to Jesus' message of forgiveness. Even Richard Swinburne argues that “God provides the reparation and penance whereby humans may properly atone to God for their sins in the form of the life and death of Christ, especially in the suffering which Christ endured in his Passion and Crucifixion” (Quinn, pg. 286).

Even if, however, one were to accept that God does need to punish people for their sins, – for God in virtue of being God is just and good, and it would be unjust *not* to punish the wicked – it would seem to follow that such punishment from a perfectly good being would have the aim of some sort of rehabilitation

and eventual forgiveness of the soul in question. Yet the Christian hell is one of eternal damnation and the elimination of potential forgiveness. God essentially gives up on his creation and allows him to forever suffer the worst imaginable torment. Thus, hell requires that the Christian God, in addition to being perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent, must also be a punishing and unforgiving God as well. Clearly, this poses some problems for the followers of the New Testament concerning what exactly is meant by God's goodness, for how could the loving, just, good God of which Jesus spoke refuse the possibility of forgiveness and rehabilitation to one of his own creatures whom he made in his likeness? There is at least one potential answer to this question, given by Michael Murray in 'Heaven and Hell,' which states that "those who are judged and sentenced to hell...[have] unchecked and sinful desires [which] continue to lead them to sin even in hell and so continue to mount penalties which are never satisfied" (Murray, pg. 580). While I will attempt to assess the validity of such a claim a bit later, for now I will take for granted that perhaps there is some explanation which would justify the Christian God eternally denying forgiveness to one of his creatures.

Thus, I am even willing to grant - though not necessarily agree with - the fact that the God of Christianity is also a punishing and unforgiving God, and that this is perfectly compatible with his perfect goodness. However, Christian scripture states that the punishment should fit the crime. This is the *lex talionis*, or "an eye for an eye." That is, no more than an eye should be taken for the loss

of an eye. Therefore, because the punishment inflicted upon a soul who is damned to hell is both horrendous and eternal, the sin committed by that person must have been such that it warranted a horrendous and eternal punishment. However, I maintain that no human being can possibly have enough power to commit any act which has eternal consequences and thus would warrant eternal punishment. The most lasting crime that a human being could commit in this lifetime is that of murder, and provided one believes in an afterlife at all, the death of one's physical body is by no means an eternal death, and thus human beings, though perhaps capable of doing horrendous things worthy of great blame and punishment, are not capable of doing anything that would warrant eternal punishment. In other words, hell requires that God impose a type of divine punishment on non-divine, or human, creatures, and therefore even if one accepts a punishing, unforgiving God, the hell of Christianity cannot be justified due to its eternal nature.

In "Heaven and Hell," Murray responds to this objection to the penalty model of hell, stating that while "it seems that a necessary principle of fairness or justice is that penalties or punishments must be meted out in a way that is commensurate with the gravity of the offense" (Murray, pg. 579), this does not necessarily rule out the infinite punishment of human beings. Murray argues that God's punishment can be eternal either because "those who are judged and sentenced to hell might not have a sentence which initially merits an eternal punishment...but their unchecked sinful desires continue to lead them to sin

even in hell and so continue to mount penalties which are never satisfied," or because "all sin is sin against God, [and thus] all sin is of infinite weight since it amounts to a transgression against an infinitely great being" (Murray, pg. 580). Similarly, Marilyn Adams points out that St. Anselm argues that "the badness of sin is to be measured not simply in terms of what the creature is or does but in terms of the creature's relation to God, a being greater/more worthy of honor...Since God is infinitely worthy of honor, any offense against God is immeasurably indecent and hence infinitely culpable" (Adams, 'The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,' pg. 310). In other words, because "we have the capacity to cause infinite offense...eternal torment is merely the closest approximation that creatures can make to experiencing the just punishment" (Adams, pg. 310). Thus, some justify the eternity of the punishment of hell by stating that either the souls in hell continue to infinitely sin and thus infinite punishment is merely the just consequence of their actions, or that, because all sin is a sin against God, an eternal and infinitely great being, all sin is worthy of having eternal consequences.

I, however, do not think that these arguments about the justice of eternal punishment for human souls are sound. First of all, the theory that states that the souls in hell continue to sin infinitely and thus are rightly infinitely punished not only assumes a premise about hell not found in many of the Christian doctrines concerning hell (i.e. – that the eternally damned continue to *sin* eternally in hell), but it also falls victim to one of the very problems it is trying to

solve – free will. The whole point of the free will defense of hell is that souls are consigned to hell because they were given freedom of choice by God and chose to sin and are thus justifiably punished by God, who had to allow for sin in order that there truly be freedom of choice. Thus, on this account, sin is at least in part wrong because the person *freely chose* to go against God's wishes. However, Murray seems to assume that every soul consigned to hell will *necessarily* chose to continue sinning, and in fact cannot help but to do so. Therefore, once a soul is consigned to hell he no longer has the freedom to choose sin. Because of this, it can be argued that the original freedom of choice and concurrent sin that resulted in the damnation of the individual was, in fact, finite, and his continual "sin" in hell is really just a necessary and unavoidable consequence of that damnation, and thus infinite punishment from God is not justifiable.

Furthermore, in response to the argument that, because all sin is an offense against God, – an infinite being – the consequences of that sin then are necessarily infinite as well, I agree with Marilyn Adams that the "agent responsibility is diminished in proportion to his or her unavoidable inability to conceive of the relevant dimensions of the action and its consequences," and thus, because human beings are unavoidably flawed, "damnation is a horror that exceeds our conceptual powers" and "human agents are unavoidably unable to exercise their free choice with fully open eyes" (Adams, pg. 310). In other words, because we are incapable of fully understanding the consequences of our actions through no fault of our own, it is in a sense unfair for God to punish us as if we

could do so. Furthermore, as Adams points out, “suppose the powers that be threaten a nuclear holocaust if I do not always put my pencil down no more than one inch from the paper...Although it is within my power to meet such a demand, such disproportionate consequences put my pencil-placing actions under unnatural strain...I am...in some sense *bound* to ‘slip up’ sooner or later. Hence, the demand is unreasonable” (Adams, pg. 311). Even Augustine eventually gives up on his assertion that “God confers on each fallen human grace sufficient for salvation” and that the “reprobate bring damnation on themselves, because God has offered [sufficient] help,” and instead admits that “the corruptibility of human nature makes failure virtually inevitable, incompatibilist free will notwithstanding” (Adams, pgs. 311-312). Thus, those such as Adams argue that, because God the Father knowingly created us as flawed creatures, it would be unreasonable and unfair, and thus against his perfect goodness, for him to hold us to such severe punishments for our mishaps as eternal damnation. I am in full accord with this argument.

Even in our current penal system, offenses are less severe when, though the person knew they were committing a crime, they did not fully comprehend the gravity of the consequences of their offense. For example, a person who was speeding, and who because of this hit another car and killed the driver, would most likely be charged with manslaughter rather than murder in the first degree. Similarly, although we may know that we are doing something wrong, and are thus justifiably punished by God for acting in such a way, we as humans are



inherently both flawed and unable to comprehend any sort of eternal consequence of our seemingly petty actions on this earth. Furthermore, if all sin is a sin against God and therefore is justifiably eternally punished, then the implications of that argument are that even the slightest sin would merit eternal damnation, and is, say, lying to ones parents or cheating on a test really an offense worthy of an eternal damnation? Such an outcome would be similar to the court system awarding the death penalty for minor traffic violations. Surely, this cannot be just, even if all sin is technically a sin against God. Therefore, God, knowing that he created us as imperfect creatures, would not be a loving and fair God if he were to inflict an infinite horrendous punishment on a human being.

Thus, the free will defense of evil is unsound when used as an argument supporting the coexistence of God and hell. Even if one were to accept that God must punish the wicked and that sin is a necessary and acceptable consequence of the good of free will, the eternal nature of hell and God's perfect goodness ultimately come into conflict with one another. Not only is an eternal punishment unjust for the finite sins that a human being commits during his life on earth, but God's perfect goodness also requires that he eventually forgive his unavoidably flawed creatures for their mistakes. Therefore, one must appeal to the fact that we cannot fully understand God or question him, and must accept such doctrines as hell on faith alone.

## *Final Thoughts*

This thesis is not supposed to be a defense of atheism or of belief in any of the particular potential variations of the traditional Christian faith. In fact, I do not think that it would take much change in the traditional beliefs to make the existence of some model of hell and an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God rationally compatible. However, as hell and God are commonly envisioned, I think that every argument put forth to justify their coexistence falls into the trap of either relying on blind faith, not justifying the eternity of hell, or requiring some alternate perception of God that is not that found in traditional Christianity. Essentially, therefore, I think that Christianity unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile the hell of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament, and this failed attempt has led some to try and form beliefs which they can support rationally, including atheism and alternative views on God and the afterlife. Thus, while I do not pretend to know which alternative is more or less likely, I do think that reason causes us to justifiably question, and ultimately reject, the traditional Christian doctrines concerning hell and its compatibility with an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good creator.

## *Annotated Bibliography*

1. Adams, Marilyn McCord. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1999.

This work is a detailed account of evil in the world and its compatibility with the Christian God. It was particularly helpful in formulating the general Problem of Evil and in making the transition from the compatibility of God's perfect goodness with evil in general to the compatibility of God's perfect goodness with the specific evil of eternal damnation. It also provided useful summaries for the arguments presented by J.L. Mackie and Nelson Pike.

2. Adams, Marilyn McCord. 'The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians' in Stump, Eleonore, ed., *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pgs. 301-327).

This essay gives a very detailed and helpful account of the specific Problem of Hell. I used it primarily in my second chapter, as well as to support

some of my own arguments in the final chapter. In the article, Adams not only presents her own arguments concerning the incompatibility of the Christian God and the Christian hell, but also explains the objections to her own and others' arguments made by those such as Augustine, Anselm, and Craig.

3. Mackie, J.L. 'Evil and Omnipotence' in Adams, Marilyn McCord and Adams, Robert Merrihew, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pgs. 25-37.

This article provided helpful arguments which denied the possibility of the existence of evil with an omnipotent God. I used it both to outline the general Problem of Evil and to support my final views with regard to the Problem of Hell

4. McNaughton, David. 'The Problem of Evil: A Deontological Perspective' in Padgett, Allen G., ed., *Reason and the Christian Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pgs. 329-351.

This article gives very good outline of the issues concerning the Problem of Evil, including the consequentialist and deontological responses to the problem. I therefore used it as my main source for my first chapter regarding the general Problem of Evil. It also provided useful arguments which I was able to apply to the more specific Problem of Hell.

5. Murray, Michael J. 'Heaven and Hell' in Craig, William, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pgs. 577- 595.

This essay not only provided the basis for my description of the most commonly accepted Christian conception of hell (i.e. – the penalty model), but it also posed good objections to both my own arguments and those of others sharing my views concerning the justice of God's infliction of eternal punishment on humans. Therefore, I used this essay in both the second and third chapters of my thesis as a means to both clarify and strengthen my positions on hell, as it provided good support for the free will defense of hell.

6. Pike, Nelson. 'Hume on Evil' in Adams, Marilyn McCord and Adams, Robert Merrihew, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pgs. 38-52).

This article was helpful in clarifying the general Problem of Evil. I used it mainly in my first chapter to help make the distinction between God's merely allowing for evil and God's causing of evil.

7. Plantinga, Alvin. 'God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom' in Adams, Marilyn McCord and Adams, Robert Merrihew, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pgs. 83-109.

Again, this article was helpful in laying out the specifics of the general Problem of Evil. It was particularly useful as it gave a detailed account of and support for the free will defense of the Problem of Evil and the distinctions between moral and natural evil that are made concerning the general Problem of Evil.

8. Quinn, Philip L. 'Swinburne on Guilt, Atonement, and Christian Redemption' in Padgett, Allen G., ed., *Reason and the Christian Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pgs. 277-300.

This article gave a good account of Richard Swinburne's ideas concerning Christianity, atonement, and redemption. It was useful in that it provided the argument that even the staunchest Christians have to accept that God is a forgiving God, simply based on the fact that Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice so that God could forgive our sins.

9. Rowe, William L. 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism' in Adams, Marilyn McCord and Adams, Robert Merrihew, eds., *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pgs. 126-137.

This article concerned the general Problem of Evil, and explained Rowe's argument that the existence of evil can lead to the denial of the existence of the Christian God. While I did not use his claims concerning atheism per se, Rowe's arguments concerning the problems that evil in general poses for Christianity

were helpful in my final chapter and in my general outline of the Problem of Evil.

10. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: "Hell"*. Version 1.0. Routledge: New York, 1998.

This is an excerpt from the Routledge encyclopedia that presented a description of hell that I used in the second chapter of my thesis, as well as a gave a good summary of Marilyn Adam's work regarding the specific Problem of Hell. It also provided me with a very useful list of references to consult.

11. Stump, Eleonore. 'The Problem of Evil' in Craig, William, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pgs. 394-424.

I basically used this essay to help me formulate the general Problem of Evil and take into account the many facets of that philosophical issue. It provided a good summary of the Problem of Evil and some of the arguments concerning it.