Free-will Theodicies of Hell

Christians have traditionally viewed hell as a form of eschatological punishment, a divinely imposed retribution for sins freely committed during an earthly life. But during the 20th Century in particular, some Christian thinkers began revising this traditional understanding by replacing the idea of a divinely imposed retribution with that of a freely embraced condition. C. S. Lewis, one of the earliest proponents of such an understanding, thus wrote: "In creating beings with free will, omnipotence from the outset submits to the possibility of … defeat.… I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*."[1] Such a view clearly rests upon an incompatibilist (or so-called libertarian) understanding of human freedom: the idea that not even omnipotence can causally determine, either directly or indirectly through secondary causes, our free choices. If that is true, then the creation of "beings with free will" carries the inherent risk, Lewis believed, that some of them will defeat forever God's loving purpose for their lives.

The Logical Limits of Free Choice

But why suppose it even possible that someone should *both* experience the unbearable misery of hell, on the one hand, *and* freely choose to lock its doors from the inside, on the other? Are there no limits of any kind to the range of *possible* free choice? If there are no such limits, then an undetermined free choice seems indistinguishable from sheer chance or utter randomness; and if there are such limits, then we must consider whether Lewis' imagined choice lies inside or outside of these limits. Any consideration of the latter issue, moreover, requires a much more complete analysis of *moral freedom* than the mere assertion of incompatibilism. For it is hardly enough merely to specify a single necessary condition of moral freedom—namely that a choice is free in the relevant sense only if it is not causally determined by factors outside the choosing agent's control—and then simply to leave it at that, as if there were no other necessary conditions of free choice. Not just any uncaused event, after all, or just any agent caused choice, or just any randomly generated selection between alternatives will qualify as a *free* choice for which the choosing agent is morally responsible. At the very least, moral freedom also requires a minimal degree of rationality—including, for example, an ability to discern normal reasons for acting, to draw reasonable inferences from experience, and to learn important lessons from the consequences of one's own actions. With good reason, therefore, do we exclude small children, the severely brain damaged, paranoid schizophrenics, and even dogs from the class of free moral agents. For however causally undetermined some of their behavior might be, most of us believe that they all lack some part of the rationality required to qualify as free moral agents.

Suppose, by way of illustration, that a schizophrenic young man should kill his loving mother, believing her to be a sinister space alien who has devoured his real mother; and suppose further that he does so in a context in which he categorically could have chosen otherwise (in part, perhaps, because he worries about possible retaliation from other sinister space aliens). Why should such an irrational choice, even if not causally determined, be any more compatible with genuine moral freedom than a rigorous determinism would be? Either our seriously deluded beliefs, particularly those with destructive consequences in our own lives, are in principle

correctable by some degree of powerful evidence against them, or the choices that rest upon them are simply too irrational to qualify as free moral choices.

According to my delightful colleague Jerry Walls, however, at least some delusions are self-imposed, the product of self-deception, or themselves a consequence of sins freely committed. In one place he seems to imply—and I agree with this most emphatically—that barely "a hair's breadth" of difference exists between my universalism, on the one hand, and his own free will theodicy of hell, on the other.[2] And as I have reflected on this hair's breadth of difference, it all seems to boil down to the issue of self-deception—a concept that I do not pretend to understand with any degree of clarity. But whatever its correct analysis, the very existence of self-deception surely implies some degree of preexistent ignorance and irrationality, even if not to a degree that would eliminate all freedom and moral responsibility. Under what conditions, then, does such preexistent ignorance and irrationality remain compatible with a genuine moral freedom? Like any other form of delusion, self-deception is compatible with moral freedom, I would suggest, only when it is *not* utterly and completely pathological—that is, only when the agent retains the minimal degree of rationality that genuine moral freedom requires and only when the self-deception thus remains in principle correctable. If, for example, I should deceive myself into believing that I have the skill to ski down a treacherous slope *and* should remain rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent in this matter, then a fall and a broken leg (or perhaps a series of falls on repeated occasions) would sooner or later shatter that illusion to pieces.

And similarly for those who deceive themselves into thinking that separation from every implicit experience of God would be more desirable than union with him: until such persons actually experience a true separation from God, they may have no idea what they are really choosing. For as Lewis himself once put it, "union with" the divine "Nature is bliss and separation from it [an objective] horror" and this is also, he rightly declared, precisely where "Heaven and Hell come in."[3] Now Walls argues persuasively, I believe, for the possibility that someone who consistently chooses the wrong path—someone so mired in sin as to become totally self-absorbed—may simply be in no position to appreciate fully, or even at all, the bliss of union with God. So if we agree on that, just where does our "hair's breadth of difference" finally come to rest? Right here, perhaps. Whereas I hold it to be logically impossible that someone who is rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent should *both* experience the horror of separation from God—in the outer darkness, say, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth—*and* continue to regard such a state as more desirable than finally submitting to God, Walls disagrees; he thinks it at least possible that some would continue forever to prefer such a state, however horrific it may be, as more desirable than finally submitting to God.

I doubt that anyone has expressed my side of this disagreement more forcefully than George MacDonald did when he wrote:

> For let a man think and care ever so little about God, he does not therefore exist without God. God is here with him, upholding, warming, delighting, teaching him—making life a good thing to him. God gives him himself, though he knows it not. But when God withdraws from a man [or the person withdraws from God] as far as that can be without the man's ceasing to be; when the man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of

> his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end . . . with no inbreathing of joy, with nothing [including the faintest experience of love] to make life good, then will he listen in agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door; then . . . he will be ready to rush into the very heart of the Consuming Fire to know life once more, to change this terror of sick negation, of unspeakable death, for that region of hopeful pain. Imagination cannot mislead us into too much horror of being without God—that one living death.[4]

Note the expression "that region of hopeful pain." MacDonald would have agreed with Walls that, on account of their many delusions and self-deceptions, those cast into the outer darkness are in no position to appreciate the bliss of union with God. He would clearly have accepted, in other words, the picture that Lewis painted in *The Great Divorce*, where the unrepentant who take a bus into the foothills of heaven find it an excruciatingly painful experience; indeed, Lewis probably got this very idea from MacDonald, whom he regarded as his own mentor. But there is also the following hair's breadth of difference between Lewis and MacDonald, which mirrors the hair's breadth of difference between Walls and me. Whereas MacDonald and I view a life apart from any implicit experience of God as so horrific that no one could continue freely choosing such a life forever, Lewis and Walls in effect view it as not quite that horrific. For insofar as God continues to shield sinners from the full horror of such separation and does so in order to safeguard their freedom to continue opting for it, the net result could only be a condition not quite as horrific as the tradition implies.

Observe also that, unlike a free will theodicy of hell, universalism requires no watering down of the New Testament imagery associated with Gehenna, the lake of fire, and the outer darkness. If the outer darkness, for example, represents the logical limit, short of annihilation, of possible separation from God; and if such separation is indeed an objective horror, as Lewis insisted, then that already explains why no one could *both* experience this objective horror *and* continue freely to embrace it forever. It also explains how God could shatter all of the illusions and self-deceptions that might make a life apart from God seem desirable and how he could do so without in any way interfering with our freedom to separate ourselves from him. For it is precisely when we exercise that very freedom and when God permits us to experience the very life we have confusedly chosen for ourselves that we begin to experience, and finally to discover, its horrific nature. Just as no one (with a normal nervous system) who is rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent could both shove an unprotected arm into a hot fire and retain the illusion that it causes sensations of intense pleasure, neither could such a person both experience the outer darkness and retain the illusion that some other imagined condition, such as submission to God, would be even worse than this.

As an illustration of the problem, consider the context in which John Milton's Satan defiantly exclaims, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n."[5] From whence comes the myth, I would ask parenthetically, that someone other than God might reign in hell? This hardly comes from anything in the Bible itself. In any case, the context in which Satan expresses his defiance of God is clearly one in which he still remains able to comfort himself with the delusion, self-imposed perhaps, that he "Can make a Heav'n of Hell," with the delusion that in hell he is at least free (despite his bondage to destructive desires), and with the delusion that in hell he "may reign secure."[6] But what he imagines here is a far cry from the reality of the outer darkness, a soul

suspended alone in sheer nothingness, with no one to rule and no physical environment even to experience.[7] I mean, how much more ignorant and delusional can you get? 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 even though the more pitiful (and even human) character in Book IV never comes to the point of actual repentance, he nonetheless seems well on the road to it.[8] And his final refusal to repent occurs in a context in which he is simply too irrational to qualify as a free moral agent. Listen to his words:

> So Farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear,
> Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost;
> Evil be thou my Good …

It is as if a human being with a normal nervous system should shove his or her hand into a flaming hot fire and exclaim, "Excruciating pain and torment be thou my intense pleasure!" You can't get any more irrational than that.

Observe, finally, that traditionalists, who view hell as a form of divine retribution, have no need to reject anything I have said so far. For as I observed at the outset, they do not view hell as a freely embraced condition in the first place; they view it instead as an externally imposed punishment, a supposedly just recompense for sins freely committed in the past. So they have no need for some further explanation of why a damned individual never exits hell, despite the unbearable misery that such an individual might experience there. It is simply not permitted.

A Modified Libertarian Account of Human Freedom

I myself am a convinced libertarian in this sense: like other libertarians, I hold that neither moral freedom nor moral responsibility (nor even independent rationality, I might add) could exist in a creation where, either directly or indirectly through secondary causes, God causally determines everything that happens in it. For if he did so determine everything that happens, then only one agent (capable of independent action) would exist, namely God himself.

So in that sense indeterminism has an essential role to play in any worthwhile creation. As free moral agents, we are not mere extensions of the physical universe, nor are our free actions the product of external sufficient causes, whether these should lie in the distant past before we were born or in eternity itself. That is the correct libertarian insight, and it seems to me utterly unlikely that *any* of our present actions are so determined, however determined some of them might be by more immediate beliefs, desires, and character traits. For we all emerge and start making choices in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, where indeterminism could easily play a huge role in the choices (or quasi-choices) we make, in providing the necessary break from the past that moral freedom requires, and in allowing us to emerge as independent agents who interact with our environment, learn from experience, and make discoveries on our own.

But why on earth would I claim that indeterminism plays an essential role in making God's creation worthwhile? Does not any degree of indeterminism in the process of creaturely deliberation and choice introduce an element of chance or randomness, even irrationality, into

it?[9] And is not sheer chance or randomness no less incompatible with genuine free choice than determinism would be? Indeed, if free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, as more than a few have argued,[10] then no room is left, it seems, for a coherent account of it. But there is, I believe, a way out of this particular quagmire, provided we come to appreciate one all-important point. Some of the very conditions essential to our *emergence* as independent rational beings and therefore as free moral agents—the ambiguity, the ignorance, and the required indeterminism—are themselves obstacles to full freedom and moral responsibility; they are obstacles that God can gradually overcome only *after* we have emerged as embryonic moral agents and have begun to interact with our environment and to learn important lessons about the conditions of our own happiness.

As an illustration, consider simple ignorance. If we were created with a full and complete knowledge of God, that knowledge would not be a personal discovery at all. It would not be acquired through a complex learning process in which we formulate hypotheses, test them in our own experience, and then learn for ourselves over time why union with God is bliss and separation from him an objective horror; nor would it require a complex process in which we choose freely, experience the consequences of our choices, and then learn from these consequences why love and forgiveness are likewise better than selfishness and estrangement. Herein lies the truth, I believe, behind the freewill theist's contention that our freedom in relation to God requires that we start out in a context where God remains hidden from us, at least for a season. But consider also how relative degrees of ignorance can severely restrict our freedom and, in that sense, can become an obstacle to a fully realized freedom. If I am ignorant of the fact that someone has laced the local water supply with LSD, then I have not freely chosen to ingest the LSD, however freely I may have chosen to drink the water. And similarly for the freewill theist's understanding of divine hiddenness: insofar as the ambiguities, the ignorance, and the misperceptions in a given set of circumstances conceal God from us, or at least make unbelief a reasonable option, they also make committing ourselves to God in these circumstances more like a blind leap in the dark than a free choice for which we are morally responsible. So if anything, God's hiddenness can render us *less* rather than more responsible for our failure to love the One whose true nature and very existence remain hidden from us.[11]

Now even as ignorance is both a condition of and an obstacle to our freedom in relation to God, so also is indeterminism. So the trick, I am suggesting, is to distinguish between the role that indeterminism plays in our *emergence* as free moral agents and the role it continues to play *after* we have become sufficiently rational to learn important moral lessons from the consequences of our undetermined choices. Put it this way: it is essential to our moral freedom that we begin making moral choices in a context where those choices are not fully determined by sufficient causes; for if they were so determined, they would most likely be determined by conditions external to the emerging agent. But it is also essential to our moral freedom that we should be rational enough to learn from our mistakes. So once we begin learning some relevant moral lessons—from our bad choices in particular—some of our freest choices may be those voluntary choices where, given our own rational judgment concerning the best course of action, the alternative is no longer even psychologically possible.

When our own powers of rational judgment enable us to assess a body of evidence reasonably and our own reasonable judgment concerning the best course of action determines

that we act in one way rather than in another, freedom does not require the psychological possibility of acting otherwise. At the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther thus famously declared: "I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. *I can do no other*. God help me."[12] Whether one agrees with Luther's stand or not makes no difference to the following all-important point. In no way do we have here the declaration of a man whose will was in bondage to something other than his own judgment concerning the best course of action, and it would be absurd, furthermore, to suggest that Luther lost his freedom at the very instant that, having become fully resolved to act in a certain way, it was no longer psychologically possible for him to reverse himself and to choose otherwise. We are freest, then, when our own reasonable judgments concerning the best course of action determine what we do; hence, Luther's refusal to recant was arguably a paradigm of free action.

Freedom, Necessity, and the Right Kind of Compulsion

Consider now how C. S. Lewis, despite his commitment to a free will theodicy of hell, described his own conversion to Christianity:

> I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England … a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape. The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. … His compulsion is our liberation.[13]

As this quotation illustrates, Lewis described his freedom in relation to his own conversion very differently than he described the freedom of the lost in relation to their damnation. Consider how carefully he chose his own words in the context from which the above quotation is lifted. He observed first that "before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice."[14] But lest he should be misunderstood, he immediately added the following clarification: "I say, 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. … You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think that this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most that I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom …."[15] So here he appears to argue like a compatibilist, recognizing that the crucial choice in his conversion was *voluntary* but not free in the sense that he could have chosen otherwise. He even spoke as if God had *compelled* his voluntary submission and as if such compulsion is quite compatible with his having submitted freely.

But why would Lewis claim, quite rightly in my opinion, that his act of submitting to God was both compelled and freely chosen? The answer, I would suggest, requires a distinction between two kinds of compulsion: the right kind, which rests upon the idea of *compelling evidence*, and the wrong kind, which is not a matter of evidence at all. By "compelling evidence" I mean (roughly) evidence that both *justifies* a belief (given that one's cognitive faculties are working properly) and removes one's power on some occasion to reject the given belief. If a man should torture you in an effort to convert you to his religion, this would clearly exemplify the wrong kind of compulsion, the very kind that Lewis attributed to human wickedness. For

however intolerable your suffering might be, this would in no way qualify as a good reason for believing that his religion is true; much less would it qualify as compelling evidence for its being true. Such compulsion might even provide you with a good reason to reject his religion, or at least his interpretation of it, even as it might also provide you with a good reason to pretend that you have been converted.

In contrast to such torture, which is clearly the wrong kind of compulsion, consider next an example of what I would regard as the right kind of compulsion. Given that you experience excruciating pain every time you come into direct contact with fire, you surely do have compelling evidence that fire burns and causes such pain. If repeated contact with fire did not compel the relevant belief in you, then you would simply be too irrational to qualify either as a rational agent or as morally free in this matter. Freedom of belief, therefore, hardly requires the psychological ability to believe whatever you might fancy believing; nor does it require an element of randomness in the process by which you acquire your beliefs; nor does it require the power of a rational agent to reject just any possible degree of powerful evidence. It requires instead independent rational judgment and a minimal ability to follow the evidence where it properly leads. Similarly, our freedom in relation to God hardly requires that he never change our beliefs with a stunning revelation of a kind that Christians believe Paul received on the road to Damascus, or that he remain forever hidden from us, or that he never shatter our illusions and remove our ignorance with evidence that he knows we will find utterly compelling. Although true freedom in relation to God is definitely incompatible with his simply implanting certain beliefs in us and thereby bypassing our own reasoning powers, it in no way requires the power to reject God in every conceivable set of circumstances. It requires instead the power to follow our own independent judgment concerning where the evidence leads and concerning the best course of action in relation to the evidence. So provided that our own judgments in these matters are sufficiently reasonable and the accumulated evidence for them is sufficiently powerful, our freest actions my indeed occur in a context that removes the psychological possibility of acting otherwise. For such freedom, understood as the power of reason to exercise control over one's own actions, in no way requires the power to deny oneself or to act against one's own most reasonable judgments.[16]

So Lewis was right on target, I believe, when he insisted that his submission to God was the freest of all actions even though he felt utterly compelled to submit in the sense that no real alternative seemed open to him. For if, as we are supposing, an absolute separation from God entails separation from all loving relationships as well as from every other conceivable source of human happiness; and if, alternatively, union with him is bliss, then any rational agent whose life experiences provide compelling evidence for such realities would likewise freely submit to God even as Lewis did.

Conclusion

The principal challenge facing any proponent of a free will theodicy of hell is to set forth a coherent account of moral freedom, one that establishes the possibility of someone freely embracing an objective horror forever. And the principal challenge to a coherent account of moral freedom is the seemingly plausible argument that determinism and indeterminism are each incompatible with moral freedom. The best solution to this apparent paradox, I have suggested, is to acknowledge that indeterminism is *both* a necessary condition of our *emergence* as free

moral agents distinct from God *and* an obstacle to full freedom and moral responsibility. Add to that the condition of minimal rationality and it seems impossible that anyone rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent would freely embrace an objective horror forever. So even if some become so mired in sin and rebellion that they cannot even experience the bliss of union with the divine nature, God nonetheless has a trump card to play that will guarantee their free submission to him in the end: he need only honor their own free choices and allow them to experience the very horror of separation from the divine nature that they have confusedly chosen for themselves.

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[1] C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, p. 127.

[2] See "A Philosophical Critique of Talbott's Universalism" in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p. 105.

[3] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955), p. 232.

[4] "The Consuming fire" in *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitethorn, CA: Yohannesen, 2004), p. 31.

[5] *Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 263.

[6] See lines 251-261

[7] When Paul quoted the poet Epimenides of Crete in order to make the point that "in him [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), this seems to imply, as I interpret it, that God is not only our moral and spiritual environment, but our physical environment as well. Even our experience of the physical order, therefore, is an implicit experience of God; hence, the relevant separation from God in the outer darkness would also exclude, I presume, even the experience of a physical environment.

[8] In Book IV an awakened conscience, so essential to moral freedom, leads Satan into despair (see line 83) and also leads him to acknowledge the extent to which "Pride and worse Ambition threw me down" (line 40). He even upbraids himself for being so stupid in "boasting I could subdue / th' Omnipotent" (lines 86-87) and also acknowledges the extent of his own guilt: "Ah wherefore! He [God] deserv'd no such return / From me, whom he created what I was / in that bright eminence" (lines 42-45). A little later he then laments: "Me miserable! Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath and infinite despair? / Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (lines 73-75). Because he has not yet lost his rationality altogether in the face of such misery, he even toys with the idea of repenting: "O then at last relent: Is there no place / Left for repentance, none for Pardon left?" (lines 79-80). But unfortunately, he still retains the illusion, which would itself easily be shattered in the outer darkness, that he can continue to rule over the legions of fallen angels in hell, perhaps even forever, and to receive worship and praise from them in return. That illusion together with the fear of being shamed in front of those he had deceived is simply too much for him to endure, and he thus finds himself unwilling to repent.

[9] For an excellent argument to this effect, see Peter van Inwagen, 'Free Will Remains a Mystery', in Robert Kane, *The Oxford Handbook on Free Will* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 158-177.

[10] See, for example, Richard Double, *The Non-reality of Free Will* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[11] For an excellent discussion of divine hiddenness and its implications, see the exchange between J.L. Schellenberg and Paul K. Moser in Chapter 2 of Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArrogon (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 30-58.

[12] Henry Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 282-83. Emphasis is mine

[13]Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 228-229

[14] *Ibid*., p. 224.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Elsewhere I have thus proposed the following as a sufficient condition of a free action: "(SCF) S does A freely in [a set of circumstances] C if the following conditions obtain: (i) S is rational enough to make reasonable judgments concerning which of the available actions in C is, all things considered, the best thing to do in C, (ii) S in fact makes a reasonable judgment that A is, all things considered, the best thing to do in C, and (iii) S does A in C for the very reason that S reasonably believes it to be the best thing to do in C" [see "God, Freedom, and Human Agency," 393]. For some similar sufficient conditions, see Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, 200–201. Common to all of Mele's sufficient conditions, tweaked differently for different purposes, as well as to my own, is the idea that an agent acts freely when the agent acts "on the basis of a rationally formed deliberative judgment that it would be best to do A."