

Is the Existence of Heaven Compatible with the Existence of Hell?

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It has often been argued that the existence of hell would be contrary to divine justice, and that it would be unfitting given the loving nature of God. Eric Reitan takes up a rather different argument, based upon one put forward by Schleiermacher, which attempts to show that no one can "enjoy eternal blessedness in communion with God after death" if anyone suffers damnation.¹ I will consider this argument, leaving aside the question whether it would be a violation of either divine justice or divine charity for God to allow hell to exist.

Reitan formulates the argument as follows:

1. Anyone in a state of eternal blessedness possesses both perfect bliss and universal love for all persons.
2. Anyone who possesses universal love for all persons and who is aware that some persons are eternally damned cannot possess perfect bliss.
3. Hence, anyone who is aware that some persons are eternally damned cannot possess eternal blessedness. (1,2)
4. If anyone is eternally damned, anyone who possesses eternal blessedness would be aware of this.
5. Hence, if anyone is eternally damned, then none possess eternal blessedness. (3,4)

Reitan thinks that this argument refutes the position he terms "Moderately Conservative Theism" (MCT) which he sets out as follows:

MCT accepts DLS [the doctrine of limited salvation²], but also accepts that God is perfectly and universally loving and merciful, and hence rejects the idea that some are damned because they *deserve* to be. Instead, MCT holds that damnation is autonomously chosen by the damned. Hence MCT must assume that God either cannot act against the autonomy of the damned in order to save them, or won't do so out of respect for them (an extension of His love).³

Reitan claims that the Moderately Conservative Theist is unable, given his or her theological commitments, to raise any credible objections to the premises of his argument.

My purpose will be to consider the plausibility of the premises of the argument as it is used to attack MCT. In particular I will point out reasons a Moderately Conservative Theist might be reluctant to accept Reitan's first two premises. But first a preliminary remark is in order. I have been speaking as if Reitan's formulation provides us with just one argument to consider. This may be misleading. The 'argument' hinges on how we understand certain crucial terms, e.g., "eternal blessedness", "perfect bliss", "universal love", and "damnation". To the extent that these terms can reasonably be given differing readings, we in effect get different arguments. Thus in assessing whether Reitan provides an argument that overthrows MCT (given the background assumptions of those holding MCT) we need to consider whether the argument can be given a reading such that (a) one holding MCT will be committed to the premises and (b) the argument's conclusion will be incompatible with the Doctrine of Limited Salvation *as it is understood by the Moderately Conservative Theist*. If some version of the argument could be used to show that in *some* sense of 'blessedness' none can possess eternal blessedness if any are damned, it would not automatically refute the holder of MCT unless it were the sense of 'blessedness' that is expressed in the Moderately Conservative Theist's affirmation of DLS.

Let us begin with the notion of damnation. It should be emphasized that MCT is not committed to a view of hell as torment in flames, or permanent residence in a torture chamber, or, to use Schleiermacher's words, a form of "pure and irremediable misery".⁴ Typically Moderately Conservative Theists hold that hell's sufferings involve a loss of communion with God and those who love God, as well as suffering that results from alienation from God. One who holds MCT need not hold that there are additional torments. It might help to consider a couple of examples. Richard Swinburne tells us that the "all-important punishment is to be deprived of eternal happiness" and that for those who have "finally rejected the good" one possible outcome is that they "might continue to exist forever pursuing trivial pursuits ... perhaps not even realizing that the pursuits were trivial".⁵ The picture of hell sketched out by Eleonore Stump goes roughly as follows.⁶ It "is not within the power even of an omnipotent entity to *make* a person freely will anything".⁷ Thus God cannot force us to be suitable for heaven. God takes people who have "produced in themselves a second, vicious nature" and "confines them in a place where they can do no more harm to the innocent" and "he prevents their further disintegration, their further loss of goodness and of being".⁸ The form of suffering in hell envisaged by MCT must be kept in mind when assessing sympathy for the damned. If we think of the damned as burning in everlasting fire for finite crimes committed on earth, it is much easier to see how sympathy for the damned could prevent full bliss for those who are aware of the misery of the damned.

Reitan must build his argument so that it even applies to the account of damnation in which one damns oneself by freely rejecting God and God's ways and all one's suffering results from this alienation. I say this not because Reitan misses this point—he does not—but because hell is so commonly pictured as a torture chamber, that those not familiar with the literature may

miss the point. So let us imagine someone, X, who suffers damnation through rejecting God and voluntarily remaining in permanent alienation from God, and whose only sufferings are a natural result of rejecting God. Let us consider whether X's plight should lead, via Reitan's argument, to the conclusion that no one could then possess perfect blessedness.

Imagine someone else, Y, who loves God wholeheartedly but will always know about X's situation. Need Y be excluded from eternal blessedness? Reitan thinks so, and reasons along the following lines.⁹ In order to have eternal blessedness Y must have universal love. Thus Y loves X. Thus Y's knowledge of X's suffering diminishes Y's happiness. Thus Y cannot have eternal blessedness. But why must Y's knowledge cause a diminution of happiness? Reitan appeals to an account he develops of the emotional life—or perhaps I should say the emotional afterlife—of perfected humans who have universal love. Such persons' emotions will 'track' what they perceive as good or bad. Given universal love they will presumably have negative emotional experiences in response to perceived misfortunes of others. Furthermore, as happiness involves approval of one's situation, if one has universal love and finds oneself in a situation in which another person is in misery, especially everlasting misery, one will not fully approve, and thus will not be fully happy. Later in his article Reitan expresses as follows the relationship between people's happiness and their evaluation of the state of their situation:

(P) The emotion of happiness is *about* the state in which persons find themselves. And happiness implies an evaluation of this object—in particular, a positive evaluation of approval. Persons who are happy *approve* of the state in which they find themselves, and they are more or less happy depending on how much they approve, or how unmixed their approval is with elements of disapproval.¹⁰

The state in which one finds oneself will include the state of those one loves. For one with universal love it extends to everyone. Thus, Reitan holds, one with universal love cannot have full happiness while knowing some are excluded from salvation.

Need the Moderately Conservative Theist accept this line of thought which rest so heavily upon speculation about the psychology of the afterlife, and in particular need they accept the principle (P) upon which Reitan bases his account? One might well feel hesitant to speculate about the way the emotions function in the afterlife, so let me begin with an example closer to home. Imagine that you are at a party. A friend who might have been expected to attend is instead home sulking. Need your happiness at the party be diminished? We can imagine several reactions you might have. If your happiness increases because you are glad the person is sulking, it would be natural to question whether you really love the person, or, if you do, we might suspect that something else is wrong with you, something that either diminishes the degree to which your happiness is worthwhile or exhibits an imperfection in you as a human. Another reaction you might have is to be bothered, perhaps saddened, by the fact that your friend is unhappy and sulking. Here we need not doubt your love for your friend: your emotion matches your perception that your friend suffers and your happiness is diminished. But I believe there is a third possibility. You know your friend is sulking at home; you believe this is unfortunate for your friend; that is, intellectually you recognize it as unfortunate for your friend, and yet despite this knowledge, your emotions are not weighed down and your happiness is undiminished. Need this third case be one in which either your love for your friend is defective, your happiness shows a false assessment of things, or your emotional response is defective? I see no reason to hold that it shows any of these faults. We might think that a person of normal emotional character would be at least somewhat weighed down by the friend's unhappiness. Perhaps that would

normally be the case, but it need not be. Imagine that your friend is willfully and stubbornly sulking, there is nothing you can do within what you take to be reasonable bounds to bring him out of it, and your friend has done this sort of thing many times. Now, though you recognize that it is as an unfortunate thing that your friend should be like this, you are no longer saddened by it. Recognizing something as a sad state of affairs need not make one sad. I do not see that this response must show a deficiency in love or in one's emotional nature, nor does it show that one's happiness is falsely based. If this is so then it would appear that principle (P), upon which Reitan builds his case, fails.

Consider again the case of the afterlife. Reitan thinks that his argument works even if the suffering of hell turns out to be fully self-imposed. It is hard for me to see why Y could not love X, recognize that it is unfortunate for X that he or she rejects God,¹¹ and yet not be emotionally weighed down by X's plight. Y accepts X's having made this choice and is at peace with things.¹² It may be that a profound respect for the autonomy of others will allow one to be at peace with their decisions even in cases where their decisions are foolish.

Perhaps it might be objected that Y's happiness would be greater if X were in communion with God; thus Y's happiness is diminished after all, and thus X's damnation is incompatible with Y's eternal blessedness. To return to an earlier point, this conclusion only counts against MCT if the kind of eternal blessedness being denied here is of the same sort as the eternal blessedness that holders of MCT claim that some will find in the afterlife. It is not clear to me that one who affirms DLS claims that those who find eternal blessedness could not possibly have been even more blessed.¹³

¹ Eric Reitan, "Sympathy for the Damned: Schleiermacher's Critique of the Doctrine of Limited Salvation", *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 18 (January 2002): 201-211. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith (Die Glaubenslehre)*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), p. 721.

² The "doctrine that only some enjoy eternal blessedness in communion with God after death, while others suffer damnation (endless misery in alienation from God)", Reitan, p. 201.

³ Reitan, p. 201. Although Reitan takes his term "Moderately Conservative Theism" from Thomas Talbot, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment", *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 19-42 (esp. p. 23), they explain the term differently. I will understand the term as Reitan sets it out. In a footnote he states that MCT is "probably the most common version of theism to be endorsed by contemporary Christian philosophers", and as examples of those putting forward versions of this view he lists Richard Swinburne, Eleanor Stump, Jonathan Kvanvig, William Lane Craig, and Jerry Walls. Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell", in Alfred J. Freddoso, *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the love of God", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1986): 181-98; Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ", *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 172-78; Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame University Press, 1992).

⁴ Schleiermacher, p. 720. Schleiermacher argues that (unless human nature were completely destroyed) damnation could not consist in a state of bodily pain and suffering because "the alleviating influence of custom must be allowed for" and one might find some satisfaction in the ability to bear the pain; thus the pain would not bring "pure and irremediable misery". This argument assumes that if damnation were to be possible it would have to be "pure and irremediable misery" in this very strong sense, a sense that apparently rules out any partial alleviation of suffering and any satisfaction. MCT is not committed to the conception of hell that Schleiermacher is here rejecting.

⁵ Swinburne, p. 52.

⁶ The view of hell sketched by Stump is supposed to represent a view found in Aquinas and Dante.

⁷ Stump, p. 195.

⁸ Stump, p. 196.

⁹ See esp. Reitan, pp. 202-204.

¹⁰ Reitan, p. 206. I have added the label "(P)".

¹¹ Or prefers lesser goods, or (following Swinburne) forever follows trivial pursuits, or suffers in some other way that Moderately Conservative Theists have envisaged.

¹² Of course it should go without saying that I am not arguing that because one can be happy at a party while one's friend is sulking it follows that one can be happy in heaven while a loved one has willfully rejected God. The party example is merely supposed to call into question a general principle that emotional responses track judgments of good and bad in such a way that a negative judgment about a matter that concerns one *must* diminish happiness.

¹³ I am grateful to Rebecca Bensen for her comments and suggestions.