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Why I Am Unconvinced by Arguments against the Existence of Hell

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There are a number of very strong philosophical objections to the view that hell exists, and yet I do not find them convincing. I want to try to explain why I am unconvinced. I will begin by considering what I take to be a bad account of hell and use that account to help single out some constraints that must be placed on any reasonably acceptable account. In terms of those constraints I will lay out some of the standard philosophical objections to the existence of hell and then consider whether the objections preclude the development of an acceptable account that incorporates certain standard features of the main traditional view. The features I have in mind include endlessness, punishment, suffering, unhappiness, and misery.

Consider the following claim, (C), which many people have believed:

(C) An infant who dies unbaptized will experience an endless sequence of days in torment in flames as a form of punishment by God for having died in a state of original sin.

The first constraint on acceptable claims about hell is what I will call the *grounding condition*: any substantive doctrine about hell that asserts its existence or describes the

conditions in hell must be appropriately grounded in revelation—either in scripture, religious tradition or some sort of revelatory experience.¹ I cannot attempt here to explicate how the grounding condition may be met, or even how one should decide on which scripture, tradition or experience may be used to ground beliefs concerning hell. One certainly needs to be careful not to be overly hasty in claiming that a doctrine is grounded in scripture, since scripture (at least if we take the Bible to be suitable scripture) employs exaggeration, analogy, symbolic use of language, and other devices that can make interpretation difficult. So without going into detail I will simply claim that (C) is not properly grounded in scripture and tradition.

The second constraint is the *consistency condition*.² If a claim about hell, claim (C) for example, is inconsistent with known facts it must of course be false. Furthermore, if (C) is inconsistent with other claims that we have good reason to believe or if (C) is inconsistent with such claims together with claims that we take to be grounded in scripture, tradition or experience that will to some extent cast doubt on (C). If the latter claims are better grounded than (C), then (C) will not be a tenable belief. We *know* that it would be unjust and morally repugnant to punish unbaptized newborn infants as set out in (C). Furthermore the claim that God is just and morally upright is certainly better grounded than (C), so (C) is untenable.

¹ Of course the nonexistence of hell might be taken to follow from arguments against the existence of God. I will not be concerned with such arguments in this paper.

² The grounding and consistency conditions need not be independent in their applications. One may, for example, have to appeal to considerations of consistency in order to determine what claims are grounded in scripture.

The third constraint, which will be called the *McTaggart condition* (in honor of John McTaggart³), goes as follows: Suppose for the moment that claim (C) was asserted as a part of a revelation put forward by a being powerful enough to make (C) be the case. Only a being who is extremely wicked would treat an unbaptized infant the way that is set out in (C). But we have little reason to trust the word of such a being. So if (C) were part of a ‘revelation’ put forward by one with the power to implement (C), we would have little reason to believe either (C) or the ‘revelation’ containing (C). In general if a purported revelation implies a wicked character on the part of the being who is the source of the ‘revelation’, the trustworthiness of the purported revelation is undermined. This seems to me a strong argument.

So I hold that the grounding condition, the consistency condition and the McTaggart condition are all violated by (C). My primary concern, of course, is not with (C), but with whether there might be a substantive doctrine of hell that does not clearly violate any of the three constraints and yet reasonably fulfills the biblical account of hell. I will not argue for the truth of such a doctrine; my purpose is to consider whether all such doctrines must be susceptible to the main standard objections against the existence of hell. What might such a doctrine look like? I will sketch out what I take to be a fairly reasonable version of such a doctrine—call it (D). (D) will then be subjected to some of the standard philosophical objections that are found in the literature. I will lay out (D) as a series of subclaims with comments interspersed.

(D₁) There will be a final judgment after which every human being will fall into one of two nonempty classes: (1) those that will enjoy an everlasting life of supernatural happiness in

³ See John McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968), pp. 215-16 (section 177). See also Peter T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 134-36.

which they experience the beatific vision of God and (2) all others. I will count all those in the second class as being in hell.

Note that I am using the term “hell” broadly here and it is not a matter of definition that all those in hell are miserable. I will leave it an open question whether that is the case, or whether some of hell’s inhabitants, like Vigil and the philosophers in Dante’s *Inferno*, are not in misery. If there exists a limbo this will count as a part of hell even if those in limbo do not suffer in misery, and even if those in limbo find a sort of happiness suitable to the human nature—though not the supernatural happiness of those in heaven.

(D₂) Those who are in hell will always remain in hell and will have a conscious existence.

(D₃) Hell is an arena in which punishment takes place. The punishments found in hell include pains of loss as well as experiential suffering. Many will experience inescapable endless misery there.

(D₃) as well as (D₁) leaves it open whether all in hell suffer punishment and misery.

Traditionally punishment in hell is divided into pains of the senses and pains of loss. I will speak of experiential sufferings and sufferings of loss. The former encompasses conscious states of suffering such as physical pain, anguish, boredom and the like. One may suffer loss without an awareness of the loss. It is even possible to suffer loss without any corresponding experiential suffering; for example a person who is in a vegetative state suffers a great loss but has no experiential suffering. To the extent that one suffers anguish at a loss that will be experiential

suffering. I will not assume that all in hell are punished with experiential suffering. So, for example, if the view that unbaptized infants do not go to heaven is correct, then it would seem reasonable to expect, following Aquinas, that they do not suffer pains of the senses or interior anguish as punishment.⁴ Among those who suffer experientially, the nature and amount of the suffering may differ. If one thought that an unbaptized infant does not experience suffering, it would seem odd to think that one who died as an older child and had only committed minor sins would experience grievous suffering. I will take it that hell does include some who do experience grievous suffering (which may include frustration, regret and sorrow) but it will be left open just what form this takes. The notion of punishment may be used analogically here; for instance it might be counted as a form of punishment that one who has cultivated vicious character traits has to endure a life in which those traits manifests themselves in characteristic ways—so for example one cultivates hatred and anger might experience unrelieved rage.

(D₄) A future of hell and misery is not a mere logical or metaphysical possibility, but a genuine threat for anyone (with one or two possible exception cases) who in this lifetime is capable of fully functioning as a genuine moral agent.

I will not be concerned with the question of whether most people—or even a large percentage of people—will suffer hell. But we should not think of hell as reserved just for the likes of Adolph Hitler and Ted Bundy. (The reason that I mention possible exception cases is

⁴ See Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, Question 5, Articles 2-3. English translation by Richard Regan, *On Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 237-41.

that I do not want to say that hell was a genuine threat for Jesus and I want to leave to the side the status of Mary.)

So far (D) may seem to be an excessively weak doctrine. Most people associate the term “hell” with a condition of inescapable endless misery. I have simply left it an open question whether all who are excluded from heaven endure endless misery. (D₃) asserts that some will endure inescapable endless misery.

Let us turn now to objections that might be raised against (D). If the New Testament (NT) and mainstream tradition are suitable sources for grounding religious doctrine, then it is hard at least *initially* to see that the grounding condition could be violated. On a first reading the New Testament certainly seems to endorse the existence of hell. I do not want to state categorically here that the doctrine *is* grounded in the NT. Determining what claims are grounded in the NT can be a difficult matter. In judging whether a given doctrine is grounded in scripture one may have to consider how it meshes with what else scripture has to say, and to do so one may well need to appeal to considerations of consistency. I will relegate such objections to (D) to our consideration of the consistency condition. It goes beyond the scope of this paper, however, to deal with the exegesis of scriptural passages—my concern will be with broadly philosophical difficulties.

A number of objections might be raised against (D) by appeal to the consistency condition. Some important objections go as follows:

- (1) Scripture and tradition depict God as just and morally upright. The doctrine of hell contradicts this characterization of God, for the punishment God is said to impose exceeds

what justice permits. This is especially the case when the punishment involves unending misery and is thus infinite in magnitude. The finite sins of a person's lifetime cannot deserve infinite punishment.

(2) Scripture and tradition depict God as loving. This is contradicted by the view that God permanently excludes some from full union with him in love.

(3) Scripture and tradition depict God as almighty and loving, and as having a plan for the salvation of all, but this is contradicted by the doctrine of hell which implies that the Almighty's plan of salvation will be frustrated.

(4) Scripture and tradition pictures those in heaven as enjoying unadulterated happiness, but the existence of hell precludes this, for those in heaven would either be in ignorance about those in hell (and this ignorance would adulterate their happiness) or their happiness would be marred by their knowledge of the conditions of those in hell.

The McTaggart condition might also be used to raise objections against the doctrine of hell. Some of these overlap substantially with objections already raised. For example, if the infliction of hell as set out in (D) involves a gross violation of justice as objection (1) claims, then the putative being who is the source of the 'revelation' that asserts the existence of hell would have to be wicked and thus not a trustworthy source of revelation. So, according to this objection, doctrine (D) lacks credibility. If objection (1) could be answered then so could this McTaggart-style objection; thus I will not list it separately.

One might anticipate that my response to the line of objection found here and in (1) will focus on the weak characterization of hell to which (D) is committed, and raise the possibility that a hell meeting the conditions of (D) might be possible without a violation of justice. Even if this rejoinder were to succeed, there is another, indirect, version of the McTaggart-style objection that we need to consider. It is directed at those who take the NT to be a fundamental source of revelation grounding (D), and it goes as follows:

(5) If one accepts (D) as grounded in the NT, then one will have to recognize that a sterner doctrine of hell is also grounded in the NT; this sterner doctrine holds that an eternity of agony in fire awaits the great masses of humankind. This latter doctrine falls prey to the McTaggart condition, and thus the NT, or at least the parts of the NT that pertain to hell, are disqualified as a source for grounding views on hell. But with this ground removed (D) becomes ungrounded as well.

I am inclined to agree with the part of this objection that holds that it would be unjust to inflict on those in hell an infinite future experience of torment in flames.⁵ So I am inclined to think that the doctrine of hell is only tenable if it does not include such torment. But, as objection (5) suggests, we cannot simply set aside biblical references to hellfire. One answer to this objection is to hold that biblical references to fire are to be taken symbolically and need not imply that people will actually suffer an infinite future experience of being burned. Let us add a new clause to doctrine (D) which makes this explicit:

⁵ Here and elsewhere when I speak of suffering pain or torment in fire, I of course mean suffering painful sensation immediately caused by the fire, where the pain is like, or worse than, the pain we normally feel when being burned.

(D₅) Humans stand in danger of a kind of suffering in hell that can be aptly symbolized in terms of burning in an unending fire.

It would of course be desirable to explain how (D₅) could be true without raising a new form of the McTaggart-style objection; viz., if the experience of hell with which we are threatened can be symbolized in this way, would not that show that its infliction is grievously wicked, and thus that it cannot come from a credible source? But, once again, if a satisfactory answer to objection (1) were forthcoming it could be used to answer this objection, and so there is no need to list it separately.

Let us now consider whether these sorts of objections can be answered. If (D) is in fact true then perhaps the most satisfactory response would be to give a somewhat full account of the afterlife and show how God's justice, power and love is manifest there in a way that avoids the difficulties of the objections. Unfortunately, we do not know in sufficient detail what the afterlife (if it exists) is like and so cannot provide such a response. A poorer, but philosophically legitimate, substitute for such an answer to the objections would be to do the following: First set out a (possibly fictitious) scenario in which a hell exists that satisfies the conditions in (D), and then show that the objections do not apply to the hell in this scenario. If that could be done it would show that the objections are not sufficient in themselves to show that (D) is untenable. A great difficulty confronting this method is that it requires us to make judgments about how God might or might not be able to manifest justice, power and love in our hypothetical scenario, and it is hard to feel at all confident about our abilities to make such judgments.

I am afraid that I must approach the objections in an even less satisfying way. If the objections are sound then they will apply to any description of hell that meets the conditions of (D). I will lay out a scenario which fulfills the conditions set out in (D) and then explain why I am not convinced that the objections apply in this case. In doing so I will thereby offer reasons why I do not find the objections to be decisive refutations of (D). To make my case the scenario meeting condition (D) need not actually be an accurate depiction of hell.

I will begin by focusing on objection (1) which deals with justice. I suspect that our intuitions are clearer on this issue than those that pertain to divine love. Objection (1) states that if God were to impose a hell of endless misery on a person then God would act unjustly, for it is wrong to punish a finite sin with infinite misery. A couple of preliminary points about the notion of punishment are in order. I mentioned earlier that though doctrine (D) holds that God punishes people in hell, I am allowing that the notion of punishment may be used analogically. Plato, in the *Republic*, paints a picture of the unjust soul that has thrown off reason to be ruled by the passions and the spirited part of the soul; the result is a many headed monster, a chaotic soul out of harmony with itself. The unhappy state of such a soul is not normally thought of as a form of punishment, but by analogy the notion might be applicable. God made us in such a way that a misuse of the will brings with it a disordered state of the soul. That state of the soul can be thought of as a ‘natural’ punishment. If a person suffering such a punishment were immortal, it is not clear that the punishment need be unjust on the part of God, especially if the disorder arises from a state of the will the agent continues to embrace.

Suffering the loss of heaven—even if this is an infinite loss—also does not seem to involve an injustice if what one has lost is not something one has a right to in the first place. But what about the experiential suffering that results from suffering this loss? If one feels misery at the

(partial or complete) realization of one's losses, that (by analogy) might also be counted as punishment in cases in which one has lost, by immoral action, what one could have had otherwise. Here again it is not clear that the punishment need be unjust.

One generally associates hell with the idea of punishments *inflicted* by God upon the recipient. One way to inflict punishment would be to bring about disagreeable sensations; another would be to intentionally put the recipient into situations that evoke inner states of suffering, for example states of anguish. If objection (1) is correct, this kind of punishment would violate divine justice if the inflicted suffering were endless. But even here I do not think that it would be an obvious violation of justice. If the suffering resulted from the natural punishments mentioned above or it arose as a natural reaction to one's awareness of loss, then even suffering of infinite duration might not be unfair if it was not wrong to give such a being an immortal life of infinite duration. But perhaps it might be thought that it would be immoral for God to keep a miserable being in existence endlessly, especially if the being had no hope of its misery coming to an end and the being had no desire to continue in existence: one might argue that God should in such a case either have the creature's existence come to an end or give it a meaningful chance of recovery. For God to do otherwise, one might object, would be to unjustly make the creature experience an infinite amount of suffering for a finite amount of wrong on the creature's part. But to hold that God is under such an obligation would seem to undermine (D), for according to (D) many in hell will experience *inescapable* endless misery. If God were required to provide those who desire non-existence an escape (at least through annihilation), then it might seem that God could not ensure that a hell conforming to (D) exists.

A lot could be said in response to this objection, but I want to focus on a crucial feature of the objection that needs to be questioned. It is assumed that if God were to inflict *endless* misery

on a creature then God would be inflicting an *infinite amount* of misery by making the being experience an infinite amount of suffering. This supposition need to be questioned. I suspect that it may be false.⁶

To see why I say so it will be helpful to consider a famous thought-experiment that is often used in explaining Einstein's theory of relativity. We are told to imagine a pair of twin brothers, one of whom takes a voyage in a spaceship while the other stays on earth. From the perspective of the brother on earth, the brother in the spaceship travels at very high speeds approaching the speed of light before returning to earth. When the space traveler returns he has hardly aged whereas the brother who stayed behind is many years older. Let us add a little to this story. Suppose that before leaving earth the space traveler experiences a pain of a short duration, for example he stubs his toe and it hurts for one minute as timed by his watch. During his trip he also stubs his toe and feels a pain of equal intensity which also lasts for one minute as timed by his watch. We may even imagine that he would describe the two experiences as involving the same amount of experiential suffering. However, if these two experiences of the space traveler's pain were measured by the watch of the brother on earth, we might find that the first experience was clocked at one minute while the second was clocked at one year. We would be wrong to think that the space traveler experienced more suffering the second time he stubbed his toe. Rather we need to measure the amount of experiential suffering that takes place from the point of view of the sufferer.

Now consider a further variation on the example. Imagine that the space traveler takes off and continuously accelerates to higher and higher speeds. From the point of view of those on earth he travels in large loops through space; each year (by earth time) his spaceship swings by

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this point see my 'On the Problem of Hell', *Religious Studies* 38 (2002): 355-62.

earth. He does this forever, circling past the earth an infinite number of times, in an unending series of loops. On the first pass he has aged $1/2$ minute since takeoff. On the second pass (now traveling much faster) he has aged an extra $1/4$ minute; on the third pass, $1/8$ minute, and so on—during each year of earth-time he only ages one half the amount he aged the year before.

Throughout all of infinite (earth) time the space traveler ages just one minute, the sum of $1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + 1/16 + \dots$. To finish out the example, imagine that at takeoff both the space traveler and his earth-bound brother stub their toes and suffer pain of equal intensity for the span of time which continues for the next minute as measured out by their respective watches. That is, the earth-bound brother feels a pain that ends when his watch says that one minute has passed, and the space traveler feels his pain as his watch measures off (what he experiences as) the minute after takeoff. Experientially the brothers suffer the same amount of pain. Clearly the amount suffered is finite since the earth-bound brother's pain ends one earth-minute after takeoff. The space traveler's pain, though experientially finite, is endless since his watch never reaches the one minute mark.

The point of the example is that it seems conceivable that God could impose *endless* suffering on a person without the experiential amount of suffering being *infinite*: God could do this by giving the person an endless but experientially finite future. So even if, as objection (1) states, it is unfair to impose infinite punishment on finite sin, it would not follow from that that God could not impose endless suffering, even endless intense suffering. If a finite amount of experiential suffering could be justly inflicted in such a way as to cause misery during the affliction, then it would seem that the same amount could be inflicted in a way that causes misery and yet is endless.

I want to explore a bit further the idea of endlessly enduring a finite experience. If there is an afterlife, for all we know there may be modes of consciousness there that are quite different from the way in which we now experience things. Over time our conscious experience in this life consists of a flow or succession of diverse perceptions⁷. But on occasion the flow, to some extent at least, seems to stop for a while; we might for example find ourselves focused on a single thought or experience for a short duration of time. Consider the possibility that the afterlife might be experienced by some as having a quality somewhat like a moment in which we do not feel a flow of perceptions. If such an afterlife were endless one might think that it would nonetheless be experientially infinite—it would just be one infinitely long uniform experience—and if one were experiencing suffering, then over the course of one’s afterlife one would experience infinite suffering if the afterlife were endless. I think that the example with the space traveler raises a difficulty about coming to such a conclusion. Recall that in the example after takeoff the space traveler orbiting the earth has only one minute of experiential time but that time period never comes to an end. Imagine that the space traveler has an experience in which the flow of perceptions seems to have stopped and that this takes place during the last two seconds (as measured by his watch) of the unending minute after takeoff. Here we may have an experiential approximation of what a qualitatively uniform, experientially finite, endless afterlife might be like. Perhaps for some hell may be a sempiternal, finitely experienced moment of loss that stands in a simultaneity relation with the infinite progression of time.

There is something especially frightening in these scenarios in which hell is experienced by some people as endless, yet of finite experiential duration. It would seem that a point would be reached at which so little experiential time is left that one would be, so to speak, endlessly at the

⁷ I am using the notion of *perception* in a broad Humean sense here.

point of death. If the suffering that took place in that last moment were intense—whether it was, say, pain, remorse, frustration, or a feeling of doom—then it might fittingly be symbolized in terms of being thrown into a fire from which there is no escape, and it might be compared to a living death in which there will be no new future thoughts or acts of will (and no time for repentance). And yet, it would seem that the amount of experiential suffering endured need not be more than one deserves.

I have looked at ways in which temporal features of the afterlife might play into our assessment of the objections. I want to briefly consider some other ways existence in hell could differ from our current mode of existence and consider how they too might play into our assessment of the objections. A common way of thinking of hell takes the experience of hell to be, in important ways, a straightforward continuation of our current experience: In hell we might have more intense experiences and perhaps new sensations, but consciousness there is to be understood as basically similar to our current consciousness. When thinking of hell on this view we might imagine that if someone from hell came to us and described it we could grasp the description and get something like a concrete feel for what hell is like. But perhaps that is an unreasonable assumption; perhaps we can at best only get a highly abstract conception of hell. Perhaps descriptions of hell as, for example, being like a furnace are at best figurative attempts to convey an aspect of hell that we are currently unable to grasp in terms of what the experience would be like. This might even be expected if the nature of the afterlife state were dramatically different than that of our present life. Suppose that we tried to give a rough sense of the comparison between our current life and our state in the afterlife in terms of a ratio: our current life is to the afterlife state as X is to Y. How might we fill in “X” and “Y”? Think of the

following series of comparisons. Our current life (in important relevant respects) is to the afterlife state as:

the mental life of a five year old is to that of an adult

the mental life of an infant is to that of an adult

the mental life of a mouse is to that of an adult human

the mental life of goldfish is to that of an adult human

the mental life of a slug is to that of an adult human.

As we move down the list and the comparison becomes more dramatic it becomes plausible that if such a comparison gave us an indication of the difference between our current life and the afterlife, then only a very abstract conception of the future life might be available to us, and it might best be given through figurative language. There might even be a richness and some goodness for (some of) those in hell that is lacking in this life, though there would not be a full supernatural union with God in the beatific vision. And this might even be the case for some who undergo quite significant suffering.

Consider too what it might be like if our intellectual powers were far more developed than they currently are. Given the interaction of intellect and will, this could lead to a striking difference in the way the will is exercised. Consider two ways in which we may form intentions with regard to future action. One way is simply to decide to perform a given action (a simple decision). Another is to conditionally decide that if so-and-so occurs then I will do such-and-such (a conditional decision). If the intellect were powerful enough to at once survey all the options which might face one in the future then it might be possible at once to form one's

intentions so thoroughly that the will's role in deciding future actions would in effect already have been completed; that is, if one's simple and conditional decisions managed to cover all contingencies, then no new decisions would need to be made in light of future conditions. The dynamics of changing one's mind and of repentance might be dramatically different in such a scenario. Perhaps in some such scenario escape from suffering through repentance would not be available because the necessary change of mind involved in repentance would not be available.

Now it is time to assess: First we need to consider whether a picture of hell can be drawn from our discussion that accommodates the doctrine of hell as set out in (D₁) – (D₅). Then we need to ask how it stands in light of the five objections presented earlier. On our picture of hell there is a final judgment in which all humans are permanently separated into two classes, those in heaven and those in hell. Those in hell have an endless conscious existence, though it is to be left open whether the conscious existence of some (or all) is of a finite experiential duration. Furthermore it may be the case that some of those in hell, even those who suffer endlessly, have a form of life that is rich in ways that we may currently be unable to comprehend in a way that gives us a concrete feel for their form of existence. Many of those in hell suffer in misery endlessly. This picture of hell would seem to accommodate (D₁) and (D₂). (D₃) says that there is punishment in hell, some of which involves inescapable endless misery; we have seen how this condition can be accommodated in a way in which the suffering experienced in the punishment is finite. (D₄) says that a future of misery in hell is a genuine threat for humans who in this lifetime are capable of fully functioning as genuine moral agents. One way to accommodate (D₄) is to hold that those who are capable of fully functioning as moral agents face the following two dangers: (1) they capable of acting so wickedly that they would justly deserve to have misery

imposed on them in a form that is endless, though perhaps experientially finite, and if they do act that wickedly then God might punish them in this way; and (2) they are capable of becoming morally corrupt to such an extent that were they to exist endlessly under certain conditions they would be miserable as a natural consequence of their moral state, and if they become so corrupt God may with justice place them in such a unending state (though perhaps their time there will be experientially finite). We have already addressed (D₅), which states that we stand in danger of a kind of suffering in hell that can be aptly symbolized in terms of burning in an unending fire.

So we must turn to the objections. The first objection says that the doctrine of hell contradicts the moral uprightness of God since the punishments are infinite and thus unjust because excessive. Once we allow that the experiential suffering may be finite this objection loses much of its force. It is hard to see that the punishments outlined above need be excessive. But perhaps, it may be said, the mere fact that the misery is *endless* is sufficient to rule it out as unjust. Other things being equal, endless misery does seem worse than misery of the same amount that comes to an end. But I do not see why endlessness need always rule a punishment out as unjust.

The second objection says that scripture and tradition depict God as loving and it claims that this contradicts the view that God permanently excludes some from full union with him. This raises difficult issues I cannot pursue here. So I will confine myself to a few remarks. I find it hard to make confident judgments about how a being of such a different nature from us would express its love in the matters before us. If someone asked me to state *a priori* how an all perfect, omniscient, almighty, first cause of the universe who is loving might act, I would not be able to say much. After all, who would have expected that a loving God would create a world like this one? There are some things I would say almost *a priori* about how a loving God would not act;

e.g., a loving God would not send unbaptized infants to everlasting agony in hellfire. But the problem before us now involves much more subtle issues that make it hard to know what to say. There are issues of freedom of the will, of God's respect for a sinner's freedom, of the role of free response in love, and of original sin and grace, to name just a few. This is further complicated by the problem noted above that we do not know what mode of existence awaits those in the afterlife and so it is hard to fathom how God's love might be expressed towards those who are not in full union with him.

One might think that we could turn to revelation to help ground our claims about how a loving God would act in this situation. I find it difficult, however, to see how the NT could provide us strong evidence that God's loving nature would not permit the existence of hell, when a doctrine of hell seems embedded in the NT. Similar remarks apply to the third objection, which holds that God's plans for salvation would be frustrated if there was a hell. The belief that God has a plan for universal salvation that is incompatible with the existence of hell needs to be grounded in revelation. But if the NT is used as a primary source for grounding this belief, then we are faced with the problem that the doctrine of hell seems embedded in the NT, where God's plan appears to include the existence of hell.⁸

The fifth objection has already been considered, so only the fourth remains. The fourth objection states that the existence of hell would preclude the possibility of those in heaven enjoying unadulterated happiness, for those in heaven would either be in ignorance about those in hell (and this ignorance would adulterate their happiness) or their happiness would be marred by their knowledge of the conditions of hell. This objection may seem to depend solely on

⁸ But I do not want to press the issue, as I claim no special expertise in biblical scholarship. Furthermore, as William Wainwright has pointed out to me, just as I treat the notion of hellfire symbolically, it is open to those who reject hell to interpret biblical references to hell symbolically (e.g., an annihilationist might treat reference to endless

familiar facts of human psychology. But of course it really goes far beyond such facts. We should expect the mental life of those in full union with God in heaven to be quite different from ours now. Those in heaven may, for instance, know those in hell with a thoroughness that far surpasses our current knowledge of ourselves. And they may have a God-like respect for the free will of others, a God-like sense of justice, and a God-like love of others. Perhaps under those conditions they may be at peace with the fate of those in hell.

So I remain unconvinced by the objections to the existence of hell, though I do not pretend to have complete answers to them. To me the possibility of hell, and of permanent separation from full union with God, remains a genuine worry.⁹

punishment as a symbol for permanent loss of God). A full discussion of these issues is beyond the purview of this paper.

⁹ I wish to thank William Wainwright for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.