Love and Death

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# Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)

Imagine you find yourself in heaven after death, only to discover that the soul of your dearest love is suffering in hell. Would your bliss be marred by the suffering of your loved one? The “argument from love” (so named by Nicole Hassoun, 2015) challenges the traditional Christian conception of heaven and hell as places of perfect bliss and terrible suffering, respectively, on the grounds that no lover in heaven could be very happy if she were aware that her beloved was suffering in hell. Love requires concern for the well-being of one’s beloved, thus apparently rendering heavenly bliss impossible for those who love an unreformed sinner.

It is difficult to find a satisfying response to this problem, as opposed to a mere technical solution. The argument can be answered by any internally consistent picture of the afterlife that also conforms to traditional Christian doctrine. The trouble is that most solutions along those lines lack the resources needed to explain *in a believable way* how any good person could be perfectly happy while aware that their loved one is suffering. How perverse it would be if the best people, chosen by God for eternal bliss, are the sort of people who would not be particularly concerned about their loved ones suffering eternal torment. Such a lack of compassion is characteristic of a moral monster, not a moral hero.

Here I defend a traditional conception of heaven and hell against the perplexing mismatch between the blessed souls’ love for the damned and apparent indifference to their plight. I begin by describing the argument from love more carefully, pausing to consider how it relates to the more commonly discussed “Problem of Hell.” Next, I mention and set aside three technical solutions which follow traditional lines of thought in Christian apologetics. Each resolves the inconsistency, but only by making untenable concessions, for example, by abandoning anything plausibly called “love” on the part of the soul in heaven. Finally, I propose a conception of the afterlife that responds more meaningfully to the argument from love: I claim that if suffering has both objective and phenomenal components, then the souls of the damned may “objectively suffer” even while they do not experience suffering. A soul in heaven could then rejoice both in the justice of his beloved’s damnation and also in his beloved’s experience of contentment. In that way, I reject the unwelcome conclusion of the argument from love that there cannot be both happy souls in heaven and suffering souls in hell, while I acknowledge that the possibility of love between the blessed and the damned generates significant *prima facie* tension for traditional accounts of heaven and hell. My solution addresses that tension more convincingly than the technical solutions, not merely *asserting that*, but *explaining how* souls in heaven can rejoice even while their loved ones suffer. My account of the suffering in hell thus does a great deal of work toward supporting a plausible conception of heaven.

# The “argument from love” and the “problem of hell”

The argument from love arises from considering the love of a *blessed soul* for a damned one, but it closely parallels a more familiar question about the love of *God* for damned souls: would or could God, who is presumed to be perfectly loving, condemn a soul to suffer in hell for eternity? Marilyn McCord Adams (1993) has called this the “problem of hell.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Both of these challenges to traditional Christian conceptions of the afterlife—the argument from love and the problem of hell—lead us to reflect more deeply on the nature of love and the nature of suffering. My response to the argument from love will be clearer if I situate it within this earlier debate about the possibility of eternal damnation given God’s perfect love. As early as the third century, Origen, among the first Christian theologians, worked to address this concern. His answer was a version of universalism: the belief that God will ultimately reconcile all souls to himself, thus condemning none to eternity in hell.[[3]](#footnote-3) A simple argument for universalism is that God’s great love prevents him from damning someone if he could save them, and God’s omnipotence allows him to save anyone he wishes to; taken together, then, God’s love and power should save any soul from eternal damnation. But, of course, the universalist answer is not the only one available.

To demonstrate the problem of hell and three major ways to address it, Thomas Talbott (2013) uses an inconsistent triad[[4]](#footnote-4):

1. God loves all people equally, and so desires reconciliation and communion with every person, regardless of their wishes.
2. God will successfully achieve whatever he desires.
3. Some people will never be reconciled to God, and so will never be in communion with him.

The three statements cannot all be true, but that inconsistency can be resolved by rejecting any one of them. Augustine, and Calvin in his footsteps, reject proposition (1).[[5]](#footnote-5) That allows them to maintain both that God is omnipotent and that some souls are justly damned. The Arminians (after Jacobus Arminius) found untenable the proposition that God loves people unequally, and so they instead rejected (2).[[6]](#footnote-6) Such a position grants people a great deal of freedom in determining their own end, since it allows that God’s desire for reconciliation with a person could be thwarted by that person’s free choices. Like the Arminians, universalists insist on God’s equal love for people (1). But their solution is to reject (3), thereby denying that anyone is ever damned.

A common contemporary position echoing that of the Arminians is called “moderately conservative theism,” or “MCT.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Eric Reitan describes it thus:

MCT accepts DLS [the doctrine of limited salvation, that some but not all are saved], 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). (2002, p. 201)

That is, God’s respect for our autonomy permits us to choose damnation, though it is contrary to his loving will for us.[[8]](#footnote-8) Even if God can violate our freedom in order to save us, he loves us too much to do so.

Each of those solutions is problematic. Universalism is inconsistent with straightforward Biblical claims about the damnation of the wicked. Calvinism makes God seem arbitrary and cruel, not a loving father.[[9]](#footnote-9) Arminianism and its successor, MCT, suggest a less cruel God, but nevertheless one who knowingly created people so flawed that they must be damned forever. When we consider the relation between God’s love and human damnation, the central difficulty for MCT and for universalism is that love requires both respect for autonomy and compassionate mercy. When God is faced with an unrepentant sinner, then, it seems both that he should damn them, because he respects them, and that he should not damn them, because he pities and forgives them. It is not at all obvious whether respect for autonomy should trump compassion as an expression of divine love. On the one hand, against universalism, human free will would hardly deserve the name if all of our choices ultimately must result in loving communion with God. If we cannot freely choose to turn from God, then neither do we freely choose to turn toward him. But on the other hand, against MCT, God’s allowing people to turn against him does not obviously require eternal damnation; a merciful, compassionate God might be expected to reconcile even the most recalcitrant sinners to himself in time.

Let me leave that question open, for now, in order to confront more directly the argument from love: Just as *God’s* love for the damned may lead us to question whether he would or could condemn them to hell, a *blessed soul’s* love for a damned soul may lead us to question whether souls in heaven could be content so long as there are souls suffering in hell.

The argument from love has been made a number of times,[[10]](#footnote-10) most recently formulated by Hassoun (2015) in this way:

1. No one who loves another can be perfectly happy or free from suffering if they know that their beloved is suffering.
2. Anyone in hell suffers (at least as long as they are in hell).
3. Anyone in heaven is perfectly happy or at least free from suffering.
4. There can be no one in heaven who is aware of the fact that his or her beloved is in hell.

Hassoun argues persuasively for the first premise by considering several accounts of the nature of love. I will not recapitulate her argument here, but you may convince yourself of the premise’s force in this simple, intuitive way: think of a person you love deeply and how your happiness would be marred if you knew that person were suffering terribly. The problem is amplified if the perfected souls in heaven love more people more fully than we imperfect people do. Even our flawed love makes the prospect of the suffering of our loved ones painful to us. How much worse, then, would this sympathetic pain be for the blessed? The second and third premises of Hassoun’s argument are a restatement of the traditional doctrine at issue, so we must take them for granted if we wish to defend that traditional doctrine. Finally, the fourth statement follows from the first three. But the fourth statement violates the common Christian belief that souls in communion with God would not be wholly ignorant of the damned. In that way, the argument reveals some tension among these commonly held Christian beliefs about heaven and hell.

# First Response: Ignorant bliss

William Lane Craig argued (1991 and 1993) that God shields the blessed souls in heaven from any knowledge of the suffering of the damned. That is, Craig accepts the premises of Hassoun’s argument: that the blessed souls’ compassionate love would make them miserable if they were aware of the suffering of the damned. Craig also accepts Hassoun’s conclusion: Because God wants the blessed to enjoy perfect happiness in the afterlife, he must protect them from that painful knowledge. In their ignorance, the blessed enjoy uninterrupted bliss even while some of their loved ones suffer eternal torment.

One reason Aquinas gives for rejecting this possibility is that the happiness of the blessed would be increased by comparison with the suffering of the damned.

[E]verything is known the more for being compared with its contrary, because when contraries are placed beside one another they become more conspicuous. Wherefore in order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned. (*Summa Theologica*, Suppl, Q. 94, Art. 1)

While contrast does often heighten sensation, this answer immediately suggests the problem we have been occupied with: What about the blessed souls’ sympathy for the damned? In your daily life, when you see someone suffering, you might feel some degree of pleasure at your own comparative well-being, but such pleasure is normally swamped by the much greater pain of sympathy or pity for the person suffering.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A more intuitive problem with Craig’s proposal is in the consequences of such deep ignorance for the possibility of happiness and love. As an illustration of this problem, consider the opening of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina.* The novel begins with a compelling description of Darya Oblonsky’s discovery that her husband, Stepan, has been having a love affair with their children’s governess. Obviously, upon learning of the affair, Darya does not see herself as unfortunate because she gained a bit of unwanted knowledge; rather, she is upset because her husband has wronged her. More tellingly, she repeatedly cries that the harm is irreparable because he has become a stranger to her. What makes Darya so miserable is that she was mistaken in her love: her feelings for Stepan were based on confidence in their mutual love and confidence in the strength of his character—that he was a person worthy of her love. So not only did she discover that she was wrong to believe in Stepan’s love, she also found that her own love was not real; she loved an illusion, not the actual Stepan, who is a stranger to her.

One thing I mean to illustrate by that example is that love requires knowledge. If you are mistaken about central features of a person, you may love your image of that person, but you cannot love the actual person. Being eternally damned by God is an important feature of a person, at least as important as an instance of marital infidelity. And so it seems impossible for the blessed to love the damned if they are shielded by God from this key knowledge about their loved ones.

A second point we can take from Darya’s response to Stepan’s infidelity has to do with her happiness. Before she learned of Stepan’s affair, she believed that she was happy. Afterward, she both *is* unhappy and also believes that she *was* unhappy before she found out. Here we must distinguish between happiness as a transient experience of pleasure and happiness as something more like *eudaimonia*: thriving, living a life that is going well overall. It is possible to feel pleasure, and so to have a sort of “happiness” even if you are deeply ignorant about your circumstances. To enjoy the deeper sort of happiness, though, that comes from living well and correctly appreciating the value of your life, you must be right about how things are going. In that sense, the deceived Darya was unhappy, even when she did not yet know it.

It is in this way that ignorance is decidedly not bliss. Just as love requires knowledge, so too does happiness require knowledge. When operating under a mistaken impression about the nature of your circumstances or the nature of your beloved, you may feel as if you are happy or as if you love. In a shallow sense, perhaps you even are happy and you do love; it is the deeper sort of happiness and love that we place such high value on, however. A heaven of shallow pleasures, grounded in error, would be a paltry eternal reward.

# Second Response: Transformational communion with God

The bliss of heaven is frequently taken to be (or to be the result of) the communion of a soul with God.[[12]](#footnote-12) Just how that works is a matter of some controversy, of course, but it may plausibly be thought to involve significant changes to the soul, perhaps even the loss of individual memories or individual consciousness. If communion with God is so complete that one’s flaws are all perfected as one “loses oneself” in God, then one’s particular earthly love should be replaced by the perfect love of God. The picture is that souls are perfected in heaven not only by a simple removal of flaws, but are more deeply perfected by undergoing a profound transformation upon entering into communion with God. Such perfected souls would likely be aware of the suffering souls in hell, through their perfected knowledge. But a blessed soul with no personal attachments would feel no personal grief. Such an altered soul would share God’s loving reasons for damning her beloved, and so would accept the damnation in just the way that God accepts it.

That answer is somewhat unsatisfying. For one thing, it is unclear whether “you” are, in any meaningful sense, in heaven if you have been so transformed that your values and attachments are fundamentally altered.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is not a question of whether your soul is the seat of your identity, but rather the question of whether you can meaningfully anticipate an afterlife if the “self” that enjoys that afterlife would be unrecognizable to you. Your relationships with others, imperfect though they may be, probably play a defining role in your life. A fundamental change in those relationships, such as a marked lessening of your partiality, implies a fundamental change in who you are.

Perhaps a more significant objection, though, is that this answer seems only to “push the problem back” without providing a genuine resolution. We want to know how a lover could be fully happy when she knows her beloved is suffering; we similarly wonder how God can be content when his beloved creatures are suffering. So to address the argument from love only by saying that its resolution may be the same as that for the problem of hell, is not really to answer either. I do not think either of these qualms is wholly decisive, but each leaves this kind of solution implausible without significant further work.

# Third Response: Non-transformational communion with God

Suppose the dead retain their personal identity in the afterlife, in such a way that they clearly survive their deaths. A soul might still gain wisdom and goodness in heaven, but by hypothesis would not lose the personal characteristics that ground her identity. So she would, presumably, retain her earthly attachments, even if she recognizes the superiority of God’s love, including perhaps a superior balance between mercy and justice. In that way, a soul in heaven might be able to understand and endorse God’s damnation of her beloved, not through a radical personal transformation, but through the understanding she gains by communion with God. From our earthly perspective, condemning a soul to eternal suffering seems cruel, though it may in fact be optimally loving to do so. A blessed soul, who better appreciates God’s perspective, might understand and so partly share in God’s superior love.

This response avoids the objection that you would be so completely transformed in heaven that you cannot reasonably look forward to that afterlife. Instead, you can expect to experience your afterlife, as yourself. Nevertheless, it is also not wholly satisfying. The crux of the problem is that it is one thing to *theorize* that God’s love requires the damnation of some souls and entirely another thing to *understand* how the eternal suffering of the beloved is consistent with the bliss of the lover. As Hassoun makes clear, it is contrary to love (as humans experience it) to be indifferent to the suffering of one’s beloved. That does not prove that this response is wrong—divine love is, presumably, very different from human love—but it should give us pause. Divine love indifferent to suffering is unrecognizable as love; you might even wonder whether it makes sense to call God’s relationship to his creation by the name ‘love’ if it is so unlike anything else by that name. But few Christians would be willing to abandon the proposition that God loves his creation. We find the problem “pushed back” again, without resolution: the argument from love might be answered by means of a solution to the problem of hell. Ultimately, this kind of response rests on the mystery of how a loving, all-powerful God could be content to condemn his beloved creatures to eternal suffering.

# Fourth Response: Two kinds of suffering

If we are not able to accept that mystery, the damnation of our loved ones is apt to lead us toward rebellion. As Hassoun writes, “[S]tanding at the gates of heaven, common sense morality might suggest that one would do well to refuse to associate with any entity that would not do its best to prevent someone whom one loves from suffering terribly” (p. 635, fn 6). My own response to Hassoun’s challenge, however, does not depend upon absolute trust in God’s wisdom and goodness, in the face of apparently contrary evidence. It does require, however, a somewhat unorthodox conception of the nature of suffering in hell.

To start, suppose that the perfect happiness of heaven just is the presence of God, and the suffering of hell is his absence.[[14]](#footnote-14) Our lives on Earth, then, could be conceived as a period of choosing, perhaps by our actions, between two alternative afterlives: one with God and one without.[[15]](#footnote-15) That is consistent with MCT, described in Section I. That view, recall, holds that God’s respect for our autonomy overrides his mercy and compassion in such a way that although he could violate our freedom in order to reconcile us to himself, his love prevents it.

I mentioned earlier that MCT alone does not solve the problem of hell. Neither does it, alone, solve the argument from love. So, in addition to MCT, I propose that damnation could, in a limited way, contribute to one’s experience of happiness. It is natural to assume that hell would be a torment for those who choose heaven, but suppose that heaven would be similarly unpleasant for those who choose hell. The suffering of the damned would then be a matter of perspective: If you love God and long for his presence, hell would be terrible. If you instead agree with Milton’s Lucifer that it is “better to reign in hell, than serve in heav’n,” (Book I, line 263) salvation would be a torment for you.

That begins to solve the problem since, if the souls of the damned do not experience the absence of God as a torment, those who love the damned need not suffer in sympathy. The trouble here is the apparent inconsistency with Hassoun’s second premise, which I have accepted as given: “Anyone in hell suffers (at least as long as they are in hell).”

I avoid that inconsistency through disambiguation: Even while the souls in hell do not *experience* suffering, there is a sense in which they *are* suffering. From the objectively correct perspective of God, heaven is far better for humans than hell, so hell is a torment. Objectively, then, the souls of the damned *are* suffering, even if they do not experience their afterlife as bad. Had they better crafted their own characters during their lives, they would be the sort of people to value the joys of heaven, and so to be objectively better off. But because of who they became in life, the absence of God is not a phenomenal torment in death, even while it is objectively bad.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Where I disagree with Hassoun, then, is in what I consider her equivocal use of the word ‘suffering’. Let us call suffering from God’s point of view “objective suffering,” and suffering from the experiencer’s point of view “phenomenal suffering.” I would rewrite Hassoun’s argument in this way:

1. No one who loves another can be perfectly happy or free from suffering if they know that their beloved is **phenomenally** suffering.
2. Anyone in hell **objectively** suffers (at least as long as they are in hell).
3. Anyone in heaven is perfectly happy or at least free from suffering.
4. There can be no one in heaven who is aware of the fact that his or her beloved is in hell.

The blessed should be free from any sort of suffering, so I have not specified a type of suffering there. What I have further specified is that it is *phenomenal* suffering that evokes sympathetic suffering in those who love, but *objective* suffering that the souls of the damned undergo. To the extent that objective suffering can occur independently of phenomenal suffering, it is possible for the blessed to be perfectly happy even while their loved ones are (objectively) suffering in hell. The conclusion, therefore, does not follow from these modified premises.

To speak of “objective” suffering may seem strange. Suffering is, fundamentally, something experienced. So here is a more precise definition: A person suffers objectively to the extent that her happiness is incomplete, that is, lacking in something she could have that would significantly improve her phenomenal experience. Humans may only guess about objective suffering, but God knows what is objectively best for a person. So, for example, having no siblings does not typically cause phenomenal suffering, but could cause someone objective suffering. Perhaps if I had a little sister she would be my best friend, a delight in my life. I do not have a little sister, so I am missing out on that good, but I experience no suffering as a result. Similarly, a damned soul could instead have lived a pious life, thereby choosing eternity in heaven; although she is happy in hell, she is objectively worse off for lack of the greater joys of heaven—she is “objectively suffering.”

In life, we are never certain about objective suffering, so only phenomenal suffering can be of concern. After death, when the possibility of further soul-crafting is over, the best the blessed can hope for their wayward loved ones may be freedom from phenomenal suffering. After all, when God’s justice and the beloved’s choices require damnation, objective suffering is unavoidable. But the loving soul in heaven can rejoice, knowing both that justice is done and that her beloved *experiences* no suffering.

This response to the argument from love goes some way toward addressing the problem of hell as well. At least it allows us to see God’s love for his creation as something recognizable. Perhaps, like a loving parent or friend, God minimizes the suffering of those he loves as far as he can, consistent with the great good of human free will. His compassion and mercy are balanced against his respect for our autonomy, then, in a way that is recognizably loving. Talbott’s inconsistent triad is, nevertheless, a challenge for me to resolve:

1. God loves all people equally, and so desires reconciliation and communion with every person, regardless of their wishes.
2. God will successfully achieve whatever he desires.
3. Some people will never be reconciled to God, and so will never be in communion with him.

A simple disambiguation will not eliminate this problem. Instead, I propose to deny both (1) and (2), though only in part. God, on this account, respects our choices enough to allow us to be damned. So he may love all people equally, and sincerely desire reconciliation and communion with each of us, even while allowing us to make choices contrary to his will for us. So, through a love that is composed of both compassion and respect, God allows some of the people he desires to reconcile to himself never to be so reconciled.

# Objections

There are two objections to this view I wish to address before closing. First, why should souls in heaven be more concerned about their loved ones’ phenomenal suffering than about their objective suffering?[[17]](#footnote-17) That is, my proposed solution to the argument from love depends not only upon the distinction between phenomenal and objective suffering, but also upon the relative benignity of objective suffering. It must not be so bad that it triggers sympathetic suffering on the part of the blessed. But why should we think objective suffering is so benign? Loving people are typically averse to every sort of suffering.

It may at first seem easy to dismiss objective suffering as unimportant. In my example above, though I might be better off with a little sister, I do not phenomenally suffer for lack of her, and so it would be deeply strange for me to complain about it. When we consider examples of that sort, we might be led to think that objective suffering is hardly suffering at all. Such a response underestimates the potential significance of this sort of suffering, though. In ordinary experience, after all, we never know when someone is objectively suffering. Perhaps a little sister would not have improved my life, so that I am better off as I am than I would be with her. Given my ignorance about whether the addition of a little sister would improve my life, it would indeed be strange for us to put much weight on this case of possible objective suffering. When disconnected from phenomenal suffering, we cannot even tell whether objective suffering is occurring.

However, the blessed souls in heaven, *pace* William Craig, know with certainty that their loved ones in hell are objectively suffering. If uncertainty is the main reason we living humans are ordinarily untroubled by objective suffering, then souls in heaven seem apt to find objective suffering far more distressing than we do. So the problem is more serious than it might initially have appeared to be.

To address this, let me call your attention back to the conception of love that involves a balance of compassion and respect. If a person has rejected God, it would be compassionate for God to overturn that decision in favor of the reconciliation he desires. But that would favor compassion over respect for autonomy, undermining human freedom. Perhaps the most loving thing that can be done, then, is to allow those who reject God to be damned, but to prevent damnation from causing *phenomenal* suffering. In that way, the damned have the best afterlife possible for them, consistent with their freely willed choices in life. Both God and the blessed souls who love the damned, could then be content that the damned are doing as well as possible, suffering as little as possible, given the sorts of people they are.

That description is speculative, of course. God’s love, even if recognizable as love, may be quite different than we can imagine. What I am proposing is one way God’s love could be that is not only coherent and consistent with the possibility of hell, but that also seems properly called ‘love’. As long as there could be such love, and souls in heaven could share in it, then the argument from love and the problem of hell lose much of their force. A love that balances compassion and respect is recognizable as love, and could explain the necessity of damnation.

Now consider a second objection: Even if the blessed do not experience any sympathetic suffering, because their loved ones in hell are free from the sort of suffering that would provoke sympathy, the blessed would nevertheless be unhappy, simply because of their eternal separation from those they love.[[18]](#footnote-18) Whether we conceive of heaven and hell as distinct spatial locations, as separated by the presence or absence of God, or as separated by participation in a spiritual communion or exclusion from it, the damned are eternally separated from the blessed. This problem is independent of the argument from love, since they raise different hell-based challenges to the happiness of souls in heaven. Because of that, it does not directly threaten the progress I have made in resolving the argument from love. Still, the pain of separation from loved ones is a significant challenge to the particular conception of heaven and hell I have developed here. Extended separation from loved ones is a hardship; eternal separation would be immeasurably greater. Given that, could the blessed nevertheless be happy?

My distinction between objective and phenomenal suffering is not relevant here. My conception of love as a balance of compassion and respect, however, may help. As earlier, suppose that the damned have chosen separation from God, and so the best outcome for them, the outcome that best respects their choices and that will make them most content in their afterlives, is separation from God. The blessed, inspired by God’s loving example, would appreciate that their loved ones are experiencing the best afterlife possible for them, and so not only justice, but also love requires the separation of the blessed from the damned.

That may not be consistent with the nature of love, though. Perhaps heaven makes souls so selfless that their joy at their loved ones’ contentment keeps them from minding the eternal separation they must endure. But love that is indifferent to separation is almost as inconceivable as love that is indifferent to suffering. Another kind of solution would be to accept something like restorationist universalism: the view that although some souls do suffer in hell, they will all ultimately be reconciled to God after a period of purification. That is a more radical solution, since it denies the basic tenet that hell is an eternal punishment. It makes a purgatory out of hell, and so is not in keeping with my goal of defending the central elements of the traditional conception of heaven and hell. Because I do not see a ready solution and this issue is somewhat beside the point, I leave it unresolved.

In conclusion, I have proposed a way to defend the main lines of the traditional conception of heaven and hell against the argument from love, and I have suggested a parallel way to approach the problem of hell. My disambiguation of suffering, along with the specific conception of heaven and hell I proposed here, and my description of love as requiring a balance of compassion and respect, have provided the means needed to address these pressing questions.

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2. Similar arguments are common throughout the history of Christianity, but McCord Adams’s work on the subject is largely responsible for the shape of the contemporary debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This view can be found, for example, in Origen’s *De Principiis* Book I Chapter 6, and Book II Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have simplified Talbott’s triad for clarity. His exact wording is, “(1) All humans are equal objects of God's unconditional love in the sense that God, being no respecter of persons, sincerely wills or desires to reconcile each one of them to himself and thus to prepare each one of them for the bliss of union with him. (2) Almighty God will triumph in the end and successfully reconcile to himself each person whose reconciliation he sincerely wills or desires. (3) Some humans will never be reconciled to God and will therefore remain separated from him forever.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Augustine’s *Enchiridion*, Chapter XXV; Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “The Remonstrance,” put forth by the Arminians in 1610 as a rejection of Calvinism, includes this article: “*Universal Atonement.*—Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, and his grace is extended to all. His atoning sacrifice is in and of itself sufficient for the redemption of the whole world, and is intended for all by God the Father. But its inherent sufficiency does not necessarily imply its actual efficiency. The grace of God may be resisted, and only those who accept it by faith are actually saved. He who is lost, is lost by his own guilt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. MCT was so named by Talbott (1990). Versions of it have been widely accepted among prominent Christian philosophers, such as Swinburne (1983), Stump (1986), and Craig (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. By putting this point in terms of God’s respect for human autonomy, I may seem to have unfairly assumed that God is a Kantian. But this is merely a matter of emphasis. Rather than focusing on the nature of God’s love for humanity as involving respect for autonomy, we could instead focus on the nature of God’s will for humanity: that we should freely choose salvation for ourselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although Calvinism can be defended against this charge, the defense is most naturally effected by changing one’s foundational beliefs about love and love’s demands. Forgoing a recognizable conception of love is, I think, a desperate move, so I will not follow that line of reasoning here. I set Calvinism aside for the rest of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A compelling description of the argument can be found in (Schleiermacher 1928); a defense of the argument’s conclusion in (Reitan 2002); and a more thorough investigation into the nature of love, with respect to the argument, in (Hassoun 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Aquinas addresses this objection rather coldly:

Now mercy or compassion comes of the reason's choice when a person wishes another's evil to be dispelled: wherefore in those things which, in accordance with reason, we do not wish to be dispelled, we have no such compassion. […] in the future state it will be impossible for them to be taken away from their unhappiness: and consequently it will not be possible to pity their sufferings according to right reason. Therefore the blessed in glory will have no pity on the damned. (*ST* Suppl, Q. 94, Art. 2)

That is, in heaven souls are not moved by passion in ways that are contrary to reason. And reason dictates that we should only feel pity when there is still some possibility of eliminating suffering. Because the damned are damned forever, there is no rational cause for pity, thus the blessed would have no pity. I find this account of rational pity implausible. Even on a highly cognitive account of the emotions, we do not expect our emotions always to be rationally directed toward ends. We pity those who suffer without the possibility of relief, sometimes even more than we pity those who may be helped, not from irrational beliefs about the scope of possibility, but from simple fellow feeling. Pity need not be goal-directed to be rational. So this answer to the problem of love seems insensitive to the actual workings of pity and love. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), “Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ. This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description” (§ 1026-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This idea is developed both clearly and charmingly in Perry (1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As suggested in note 12, the presence or absence of God need not be understood spatially. It might instead be a matter of spiritual communion or exclusion from that communion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. McCord Adams (1975) describes that possibility: “it might be claimed that hell consists in separation from God itself and that God allows some people to be eternally separated from him, not as retribution for evil deeds, but out of respect for their freedom. Some people freely reject God in this life, preferring to persist in sinful patterns of behaviour. It is conceivable that some people should resist God forever and hence remain eternally separated from him. It might be argued that [this is] compatible with God's justice and even […] with God's love.” (p. 433, fn 2)

See also (Stump 1986) for an argument in favor of something like this sort of hell. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cushing (2014) considers a similar ambiguity in the context of the *prima facie* moral duty to alleviate suffering. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thanks to Karin Nisenbaum for raising this objection in conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to Amanda Udis-Kessler for raising this objection in conversation, and for thinking with me about possible replies to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)