

Threats, Coercion, and Willingness to Damn

Three More Objections against the Unpopulated Hell View

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ABSTRACT In this paper, I develop and evaluate three new objections to the Unpopulated Hell View (UHV). First, I consider whether UHV is false because it presupposes that God makes threats, which a perfect being would not do. Second, I evaluate the argument that UHV is false because it entails that God coerces us and therefore limits our freedom to an objectionable degree. Third, I consider whether UHV is false because it implies that God is willing to damn some individuals to Hell. I conclude that none of these objections defeats UHV. First, even if God's creation or allowance of Hell constitutes a threat, a perfect God might choose to threaten us when doing so is in our best interest. Second, God's creation or allowance of Hell is not coercive and does not limit our freedom to an objectionable degree. Third, although damnation in Hell is possible, God is unwilling to actualize it. In light of these findings, I stand by the conclusion from my initial article: UHV merits further consideration as a solution to the Problem of Hell.

KEYWORDS hell; problem of evil; problem of suffering; unpopulated hell

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© ⓘ FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 25 (2020) no. 2, 235–54
ISSN 1426-1898 E-ISSN 2353-7043

SUBM. 29 May 2020 ACC. 15 October 2020
DOI:10.35765/forphil.2020.2502.16

INTRODUCTION

In a recent paper, I developed and explored the merits of what I call the Unpopulated Hell View (UHV). UHV claims that Hell is “a place where eternal damnation could take place, although it never does” (Gillham 2020, 108).¹ I developed UHV because it offers a new solution to the Problem of Hell (PoH), which argues that the following two claims are incompatible: (1) God is perfect and (2) some individuals are damned to Hell eternally.² UHV has two primary attractions. First, it solves PoH. If no one goes to Hell, then there is no problem of Hell (Gillham 2020, 112). Second, UHV avoids some problems associated with more traditional solutions to PoH, e.g., the Free Will Defense, Retributivism, Annihilationism, and Universalism. I spent most of my initial article developing objections to UHV and defending it against them. One of these was the Empty Threats Objection (ETO). If Hell is unpopulated, then God must have sufficient reasons to create or allow it to exist. I replied that God does so in order to motivate individuals to avoid sin.³ ETO alleged that in doing so, God makes an empty threat. God creates or allows Hell to discourage sin by threatening damnation in Hell, but this damnation never occurs, so God makes an empty threat, something that a perfect God would not do (Gillham 2020, 113). In response to ETO, I argued that the threat of Hell is not empty just because no one goes there, for some could possibly go to Hell even though no one ever will (Gillham 2020, 113–4).

In this paper, I develop three related objections to UHV. First, I consider whether UHV is false because it presupposes that God threatens us, which a perfect being would not do in the first place. Second, I explore whether UHV is false because if God uses Hell to motivate individuals to avoid sin, then God coerces us into avoiding sin, and this limits our freedom to an objectionable degree. Third, I consider whether UHV is false because it presupposes that God is willing to damn some individuals to Hell eternally, but this willingness is incompatible with God’s perfection. I conclude that none of these objections defeats UHV. First, God’s creation or allowance of

1. As in my original article, I want UHV to be compatible with competing understandings of Hell, so I simply define Hell as a place where post-mortem damnation would take place if it were to occur. UHV remains agnostic as to whether God creates Hell or allows it to exist, whether the suffering that the damned would experience direct or indirectly results from a longing for the good, whether such suffering would be mental or physical (or both), etc.

2. As in my original article, by God I mean a perfect being, i.e., one who is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful.

3. I want UHV to be compatible with competing understandings of sin, so I simply define sin here as wrongdoing that would result in damnation if one committed enough of it to deserve damnation and damnation could be actualized.

Hell might be a threat, although this depends on which account of threats one adopts. Even if it is, one might reasonably believe that a perfect God would threaten when it is in our best interest anyway. Second, God's creation or allowance of Hell is not coercive, although this depends on which account of coercion one adopts. Even if it is, it is nevertheless false that God's creation or allowance of Hell limits our freedom to an objectionable degree. Third, there is nothing absurd about the claim that God creates a world where damnation in Hell is possible, and it does not follow from the possibility of damnation that God is willing to damn some to Hell. As such, although UHV might fail for reasons that I do not consider in this paper, it is not defeated by the three objections I explore here. For these reasons, I ultimately stand by the main conclusion of my initial article: UHV deserves further consideration as a viable solution to PoH.

I. THE PROBLEM OF HELL AND UNPOPULATED HELL VIEW

The Problem of Suffering (PoS) alleges that the existence of a perfect God is incompatible with the occurrence of great suffering. The basic claim is that if God is perfect, then great suffering would not occur. This is because if God is perfect, then God is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Consequently, if God were perfect, then God would not want great suffering to occur, would know how to prevent or eliminate it, and would have the power to do both.⁴ The contrapositive holds that if great suffering occurs, then God is not all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful. To many of us, however, it is obvious that great suffering occurs. So, by *modus ponens*, one of three things must follow: either God wants great suffering to occur, does not know how to prevent or eliminate great suffering, or God lacks the power to do so. Whichever is true, God is not perfect. If God wants great suffering to occur, God is not all-loving. If God does not know how to prevent or eliminate great suffering, then God is not all-knowing. If God cannot prevent or eliminate great suffering, then God is not all-powerful.

The Problem of Hell (PoH) is a version of PoS. If Hell exists and some go there, then there is great suffering. This is because, no matter what Hell is like, it is probably the case that the suffering experienced there is intense

4. To be clear, there are different versions of PoS. Mackie (1955, 200) and McCloskey (1960, 97) argue that it is logically impossible for God to be perfect and evil to exist. Rowe (Rowe 1979, 335–41) argues that the amount of evil that does exist would not exist if God were perfect, not that God's existence is incompatible with any evil. This paper focuses on the evidential problem, but UHV could also solve the logical PoH insofar as no one suffers in Hell.

and long-lasting.⁵ In this respect, PoH is a very strong version of PoS, for the worse the suffering that occurs, the stronger reasons we have to conclude that God is not perfect. God might have morally sufficient reasons to allow some suffering, especially if it creates the best possible world, but God needs stronger reasons to allow great suffering. Since the suffering that individuals probably experience in Hell is very intense and long lasting, God needs very strong reasons to create a world where individuals are damned to Hell. PoH alleges there are no morally sufficient reasons to allow damnation in Hell. The suffering experienced in Hell is so great that it cannot be justified. Thus, PoH has two logically possible outcomes. Either God is not perfect or God does not allow damnation in Hell.

The Unpopulated Hell View (UHV) opts for the second disjunct; it solves PoH by claiming that no one ever goes to Hell. Since no one ever goes to Hell, no one suffers in Hell. Since no one suffers in Hell, there is no Problem of Hell. Again, PoH alleges that there are no morally sufficient reasons to allow damnation. Since UHV alleges that no one is ever damned to Hell (whether temporarily or eternally), no such morally sufficient reasons are required (Gillham 2020, 112–3). My argument for UHV was thus straightforward and short. I spent the majority of my initial article (1) showing how UHV avoids problems that traditional solutions to PoH face, (2) exploring the greatest obstacles to UHV, and (3) arguing that UHV can overcome them.

One of those obstacles is fundamental to two objections I develop in this paper. Perhaps the biggest challenge for UHV involves explaining why God would create or allow Hell to exist if no one ever goes there and God knows this. In my original article, I suggested that God might do so to motivate individuals not to sin (Gillham 2020, 115–6). In other words, God creates or allows Hell to exist, even though God knows that no one will ever go there, in order to provide incentive to avoid sin. The problem is that if UHV is true, then no one ever goes to Hell, and it is difficult to see how Hell might motivate us to avoid sin when no one goes there, not even those who sin terribly.⁶ This led me to formulate what I called the Empty

5. Again, I want UHV to be compatible with competing understandings of what Hell is, how individuals might be damned to it, what their suffering would be like there, etc. The reader is thus free to interpret my claims in a way that fits with her account of Hell. For example, someone who believes that sinners damn themselves to Hell might take the antecedent “if God damns some to Hell” to read “if God allows some to damn themselves to Hell,” etc.

6. Of course, the threat of damnation in Hell might still motivate to avoid sin those who do not even know about UHV or think that it is false. But the question I wanted to answer in my initial article asked why God would create or allow Hell to motivate us to avoid sin when no one goes there, especially because God knows that if humans find out that Hell is unpopulated, then the threat of damnation might no longer provide any motivation for us not to sin.

Threats Objection (ETO) against UHV. ETO claims that if no one goes to Hell, then the threat of Hell is empty. That God makes empty threats is an absurdity, the objection alleges, so UHV must be false (Gillham 2020, 113–4). I then defended UHV against ETO by arguing that the threat of Hell is not, in fact, empty. Just because no one goes to Hell does not mean that the threat of Hell is empty. On this point I distinguished between empty threats and unrealized threats. I make an empty threat when I threaten to bring about certain consequences for noncompliance but fail to actualize these consequences as a result of noncompliance. I make an unrealized threat then I threaten to bring about certain consequences for noncompliance but never actualize them because the noncompliance does not occur. In my original article, I concluded that UHV takes the threat of Hell to be unrealized but not empty. I developed this further by taking UHV to claim that although it possible that some could end up damned in Hell, this damnation never happens and thus goes unrealized (Gillham 2020, 114). In doing so, I conceded that the prospect of an Unpopulated Hell is indeed a threat. Although it is not an empty threat, it goes unrealized. This brings me to my first objection against UHV: that a perfect being would not threaten us with Hell in the first place.

II. THE PERFECT DOESN'T THREATEN OBJECTION (PDTO)

Suppose a local mafia don wants me to launder money for him. I am initially hesitant to oblige, so he informs that if I do not launder money for him, he will cause me to experience great suffering. In so doing, the local mafia don issues a conditional threat to me. UHV seems to entail that God does something similar. Thus UHV appears absurd, since presumably a perfect God would not threaten to cause me to experience great suffering to motivate me to do something. I call this the Perfect Doesn't Threaten Objection (PDTO). More formally, it goes like this:

- PDTO1. If UHV is true, then God creates or allows Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin.
- PDTO2. If God creates or allows Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin, then God issues conditional threats to us.
- PDTO3. But this is absurd; qua perfect, God does not issue conditional threats to us.
- PDTO4. If God does not issue conditional threats to us, then God does not create or allow Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin.
- PDTO5. If God does not create or allow Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin, then UHV is not true.
- PDTO6. So UHV is not true.

This argument for PDTO is valid, so it defeats UHV if its premises are true. Are they? If PDTO presents a devastating problem for UHV, its defenders might simply insist that 1 is false. Proponents of UHV could either postulate an alternative motivation for God's creation or allowance of Hell, or they could decide to stay silent on this issue altogether. Whether 2 is true depends on what conditional threats are, which I consider in detail below. If God is perfect, then God is all-powerful and all-loving. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then God would not use the threat of damnation to motivate us to avoid sin. God's being all-loving dictates that God does want us to avoid sin, but creating or allowing Hell to accomplish this, PDTO alleges, is not something a perfect God would do. Since God is all-powerful, God could develop a non-terrifying technique that does not involve the threat of great suffering to motivate us, and being all-loving, God would certainly want to do this. Put another way, given the choice between infinitely many carrots and sticks, a perfect God would not opt for the stick, let alone a very terrifying stick, to motivate us to avoid sin. Now 4-6 follow by *reductio* if we accept 3. Thus, for PDTO to defeat UHV, it must accomplish two major tasks. First, it must show that God issues conditional threats in creating or allowing Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin. Second, it must show that making conditional threats is something that a perfect God would not do.

Whether PDTO can accomplish this first task depends on what conditional threats are. The literature on the nature of threats is extensive, and there are several competing theories about what a conditional threat is in the first place. Anderson (2011, 230) provides a helpful starting point, claiming that a threat is a sort of communication by a threatener to a threatened party expressing the proposition that at some future time the threatener will act to harm the interests of the threatened party. A conditional threat is then a subspecies of threats, one where the threatened, future harm is contingent upon the performance or nonperformance of an action by the threatened party. From here, what a conditional threat is becomes far more contentious. In what follows, I explain prominent theories about what threats are and then consider whether they render God's creation or allowance of Hell a threat in a way that makes premise 2 of PDTO true.

Nozick (1972, 101–35) thinks that A conditionally threatens B when, in order to render more probable the performance or nonperformance of some action by B, A offers some benefit to B that falls short of what is expected. According to Nozick, A threatens B only when two conditions are satisfied. First, A offers some benefit to B in order to get B to perform or not perform some action. Second, the benefit in question has to be less than what is customarily or morally expected in such cases. Crucial to Nozick's

proposal is the notion of a baseline.⁷ Threats occur when the benefit offered is below the baseline of what is typically expected for compliance of the party to whom the offer is made. On this analysis, the mafia don's proposal to me is indeed a threat. The benefit I receive from complying with his request is not to be caused to experience great suffering, and this is well below the baseline of expectations. It would neither be customary nor moral for the mafia don to cause me to experience very great suffering if I were to (and because I were to) refuse to launder money for him. Consequently, if we accept Nozick's analysis, then God's creation or allowance of Hell to motivate us to avoid sin does seem to be a conditional threat. God offers us some benefit for avoiding sin: not being damned. This benefit is well below the baseline because it is neither moral nor customary to cause someone to experience great suffering, of the sort that would be experienced by the damned in Hell, for noncompliance with an offer. Suppose the mafia don could torture me in a way that produces an intensity and duration of suffering comparable to that experienced by those damned to Hell. It would certainly not be customary for the mafia don to do this to me; no one is in the custom of subjecting another to such suffering, nor would it be moral. The suffering I would experience from the torture would be so extraordinarily bad that the mafia don could not have morally sufficient reasons to carry it out. This is why it would be neither moral nor customary for God to cause or allow damnation in Hell. If God were to do so, God would cause or allow extraordinarily bad suffering. The upshot of PoH is that there are no morally sufficient reasons for doing this, and since God would not do something for which there are no morally sufficient reasons, God does not cause or allow damnation. To do so would be immoral, but a perfect God would never do something immoral. Since a perfect God would not do it in the first place, then neither could God be in the custom of causing or allowing one to experience such suffering.

Frankfurt (1973, 115–6) offers a different definition of threats. According to Frankfurt, A threatens B when B needs the proposed benefit from A and A demands an unfair or improper price for the benefit. If the mafia don threatens to kill me when I refuse to launder money for him, then he

7. Commentators since Nozick have focused extensively on how to make sense of such baselines. Gorr (1986) and Rhodes (2000), for example, take the subject's preferences into account when determining the baseline. Wertheimer offers a moralized approach to setting the baseline. He argues (1987, 217) that a proposal is a threat when, if it is denied, it makes the recipient worse off by violating her rights. Hetherington (1999, 215) accepts Nozick's baseline criterion but insists that a threat differs from an offer by diminishing rather than enhancing the recipient's freedom.

seems to satisfy Frankfurt's conditions for threatening. I need not to be killed by the don and what he demands is the unfair and improper price that I launder money for him to keep my life. Unfortunately, it is somewhat unclear what Frankfurt takes the first condition to require; the conditions for needing the benefit in question remain ambiguous. Does B need the benefit to survive? For his interests not to be hindered? To what extent? For this reason, I will not consider whether God's creation or allowance of Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin proposes a benefit we need. In any case, this is immaterial because God's creation or allowance of Hell will not satisfy Frankfurt's second criterion. Expecting us not to sin does not seem like an improper or unfair price to pay in order to avoid damnation. Of course, this depends on how much and what kind of sin we are allowed to commit before meeting the qualifications for damnation. Nevertheless, whether we are allowed much or little latitude on this issue, it does not seem unfair or improper of a perfect God to expect us to avoid sin. If this is true, then on Frankfurt's analysis,⁸ God's creation or allowance of Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin is not a threat.

There are myriad other analyses of threats, some of which render God's creation or allowance of Hell threatening.⁹ Lamond, for example, argues that a coercive threat involves the maker of the threat proposing to bring about an unwelcome consequence unless the recipient of the threat does something, in order to make the recipient adopt that course of action. According to Lamond (1996, 225), there are three essential conditions here. First, the consequence proposed by the person issuing the threat must be unwelcome to the person being threatened. This bodes poorly for UHV since the prospect of damnation is unwelcome to almost everyone. Second, the consequence must be brought about by the person making the threat

8. Lyons (1975, 436) argues that the analyses of both Nozick and Frankfurt miss an important feature of threats: when A threatens B, the threat has a tendency to degrade B or contribute dangerously to A's power. If Lyons is correct, then God's creation or allowance of Hell does not seem to be a threat. After all, God does not degrade us in motivating us to avoid sin, and God's power cannot possibly be dangerous because God is all-loving *qua* perfect.

9. Gunderson (1979, 237), for example, argues that P successfully threatens Q if and only if the following conditions are met. (1) P intentionally makes Q aware that he (P) will intentionally bring about x (or allow x to happen) unless Q does some action, y. (2) Q does not want P to bring about x (or allow x to happen), and Q does not want to do y. (3) Q believes that he cannot both easily avoid having P bring about x (or allow x to happen) and easily avoid doing y. (4) P believes that conditions (2) and (3) hold, or at least P attempts to propose consequences that meet conditions (2) and (3). (5) In the case in which P threatens to allow x to happen, P has a *prima facie* duty not to allow x to happen. Whether UHV counts as a threat on Gunderson's analysis is irrelevant at this point, since I ultimately argue that PDTO does not defeat UHV regardless of whether God issues a conditional threat in creating or allowing Hell.

because it is unwelcome to the person being threatened. It also seems obvious that if God creates or allows Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin, it is because the prospect of Hell is unwelcome. This is what provides the motivation, after all. Third, Lamond says that the person making the threat must express a commitment to impose the consequence if the person being threatened does not comply. Presumably UHV must concede that Lamond's third commitment condition is satisfied, otherwise it would encounter more significant problems. If the commitment is not expressed, for example, it is difficult to see how it could motivate us to avoid sin, which is precisely why God allows or creates Hell, or at least my initial article on UHV suggests so. Thus, on Lamond's analysis of threats, God's creation or allowance of Hell to motivate aversion to sin counts as a threat.

In turn, whether PDTO can accomplish the first task necessary for defeating UHV, i.e., showing that God issues conditional threats, depends on which analysis of threats one accepts. If Frankfurt is correct, then PDTO fails because 2 is false. On the other hand, if Nozick or Lamond is correct, then 2 is true. I remain agnostic as to which analysis of threats is correct. Nevertheless, even if Frankfurt's analysis is inferior and God's creation or allowance of Hell is indeed a conditional threat, I remain skeptical as to whether PDTO is successful. This is because I doubt that PDTO can accomplish the second necessary task for defeating UHV: demonstrating that issuing conditional threats is something that God would not do insofar as God is a perfect being. The evidence for premise 3 of PDTO claims that a perfect God would not issue conditional threats because this is something a perfect being would not do. This is because a perfect being would be able to devise and want to devise a non-terrifying technique that does not involve the prospect of very intense and lasting suffering to motivate us. While this might be so, it is not clear that God's use or creation of Hell to motivate us is at odds with God's perfection, as the objection seems to allege. To see this, consider the following case. Suppose I have been addicted to heroin for years. I have a very loving father who has offered every reward imaginable to motivate me to quit using heroin, but none has been successful. Fearing for my health, my father tells me that he will call the police and have me imprisoned if I do not stop using heroin. Let us stipulate that in doing so, my father satisfies the necessary and sufficient conditions for issuing a threat to me; he threatens me with imprisonment if I keep using heroin. If my father were to do this, would he act imperfectly as a loving father? I think not. The stakes are so high that drastic measures are called for. The threat of imprisonment is certainly terrifying to me, but the ends justify the means. Quitting heroin is so clearly in my best interest

that my father has overriding reasons to threaten me with the prospect of something so terrifying to motivate me to comply, especially when nothing else has worked. In fact, I am willing to go further here. In threatening me with imprisonment, my dad is far from acting imperfectly as a father. On the contrary, he is expressing his perfections as a loving parent. He is behaving as a perfect father should in such circumstances, taking any means necessary to motivate me to do what is in my best interest.

Proponents of UHV might say that God's creation or allowance of Hell is similar in this respect. The fact that God creates or allows Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, something that is clearly in our best interest, expresses God's perfection; it does not undermine it as PDTO suggests. Here I am particularly indebted to Anderson (2011, 237), who argues that threats are only immoral when the person making the threat takes advantage of the power he possesses over the threatened party to create constrictive conditions on that party's possibilities for actions. In creating or allowing Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, God is not taking advantage of the power God has over us. Quite the opposite, God is creating conditions conducive to our interests by motivating us to benefit ourselves by avoiding sin. Whether a threat is immoral, I agree with Anderson, does not exclusively depend on the terms of the offer and how it would affect the person to whom it is made. Whether a threat is immoral also depends on nature and motivation of the person making the threat.¹⁰ The proponent of UHV might simply insist that even if God's creation or allowance of Hell is a threat, it does not involve the use of techniques that are incompatible with perfection. God creates or allows Hell to motivate us to do what is in our best interest, and this is what a perfect God would do. God is willing to take drastic measures to motivate us to avoid sin because doing so is firmly in our interest, and a perfect God would do everything possible to foster circumstances in which we are motivated to do what is best for us. One might wonder why a perfect God would use

10. There are many accounts of what makes threats immoral. In many cases, whether threatening is immoral depends on whether the threat is coercive and what makes coercion immoral. Ryan (1980) argues that coercion is intrinsically wrong because it violates rights, so we might suspect him to argue that threats are wrong when they violate someone's rights. If we accept this criterion, then God's use of Hell is only immoral if it violates our rights, and it seemingly does not. Lamond (1996, 2000) argues that coercion is immoral because it deliberately imposes a disadvantage upon the coerced, so we might suspect him to argue that threats are wrong when they deliberately disadvantage the threatened party. If so, then God's use of Hell is not immoral, for God's intention is to motivate us to do what is in our best interest, not deliberately disadvantage us. Lamond's explanation dovetails with my claim here: that the intentions of the party making the threat might suffice for making the threat morally permissible.

the threat of Hell, such a terrifying stick, to motivate us. The proponent of UHV can reply that a perfect God knows that drastic measures will be necessary to prevent many from sinning terribly, especially those who feel a very strong temptation to do so, for whom nothing else would suffice. A perfect God would want to motivate these individuals also to do what is in their best interest, which calls for the threat of damnation.

III. THE UNDUE COERCION OBJECTION (UCO)

In Section II, I considered the objection that UHV is not true because it presupposes that God creates or allows Hell to motivate individuals to avoid sin. In doing so, God issues conditional threats, which is something God would not do. I argued that regardless of whether God's use of Hell constitutes a threat on God's behalf, PDTO does not defeat UHV because God is not precluded in virtue of being perfect from using threats, and this is because if God threatens, it is only because God has the best interests of sinners in mind. This brings me to a second objection against UHV: although a perfect being might use threats, creating or allowing Hell to exist to motivate individuals to avoid sin constitutes an offer that is coercive and therefore limits human freedom to a morally objectionable degree. In other words, UHV is not true because it entails that God makes coercive offers, coercive orders limit the freedom of those to whom they are made to an objectionable degree, and this something that a perfect God would not do. I call this the Undue Coercion Objection (UCO). More formally, UCO goes like this:

- UCO1. If UHV is true, then God creates or allows Hell to exist in order to motivate us to avoid sin.
- UCO2. If God creates or allows Hell to exist in order to motivate us to avoid sin, then God coerces us into avoiding sin.
- UCO3. If God coerces us into avoiding sin, then God limits our freedom to an objectionable degree.
- UCO4. But this is absurd; God does not limit our freedom to an objectionable degree.
- UCO5. If God does not limit our freedom to an objectionable degree, then God does not coerce us into avoiding sin.
- UCO6. If God does not coerce us into avoiding sin, then God does not create or allow Hell to exist in order to motivate us to avoid sin.
- UCO7. If God does not create or allow Hell to exist in order to motivate us to avoid sin, then UHV is not true.
- UCO8. So UHV is not true.

This argument for UCO is also valid, so whether it defeats UHV depends on whether its premises are true. If UCO presents an insurmountable problem for UHV, its proponent might decide to reject 1 and offer an alternate explanation as to why God creates or allows Hell to exist, or simply remain silent on this question altogether. The crucial premises for UCO are 2 and 3. 4 seems obvious to anyone who thinks that a perfect God values freedom. I will stipulate this here, even though 4 will not appeal to deterministic theists. After all, my initial article presupposed that a perfect God wants us to be as free as possible, so I will follow suit in this article for the sake of argument. 5–8 follow via *reductio*, so whether UCO succeeds really depends on 2 and 3. 3 is less controversial than 2. Many philosophers, as I show below, concede that if an agent is coerced into doing something, then the agent does not act freely. This explains why we often grant that individuals are not fully morally responsible for actions they are coerced into performing, and we often hold them accountable for these actions to a lesser degree than we otherwise would if they freely performed them. I will not argue for these claims here. Instead, I simply stipulate their truth so that I can focus on the most controversial moves in UCO: that if God creates or allows Hell to exist to motivate us to avoid sin, then God coerces us into avoiding sin, and this limits our freedom to an objectionable degree. To determine whether this is true, I survey prominent theories of coercion and show that, on the most plausible ones, God's creation or allowance of Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin is probably not coercive. Whatever the case, God's creation or allowance of Hell does not limit our freedom to an objectionable degree.

According to Lamond (1996, 218), “the core idea [of coercion] is one person forcing or making another do as the former desires.” From there, analyses of precisely what constitutes coercion diverge widely. Debate about the nature of coercion became more prominent following Nozick's analysis (1972), which lays down the following 6 conditions for coercive offers. A coerces B iff (1) A aims to keep B from choosing to perform action C, (2) A communicates this claim to B, (3) A's claim indicates that if B performs C, then A will bring about some consequence that would make B's C-ing less desirable to B than B's not C-ing, (4) A's claim is credible to B¹¹, (5) B does not do C, and (6) part of B's reason for not doing C is to

11. Conditions 2-4 require coercion to involve claims, so that one can only coerce by making proposals. Several commentators have critiqued Nozick's analysis because this entails that the direct use of physical force cannot be coercive, e.g., Bayles (1972), Gunderson (1979), and Lamond (1996, 2000). McCloskey (1960) points out that if direct force can be coercive, then coercion does not require the coercee to act, but instead merely be acted upon.

lessen the likelihood that A will bring about the consequence announced in (3). If Nozick's analysis is correct, then God only coerces in creating or allowing Hell to motivate us to avoid sin if all six conditions are satisfied. Some of them would obviously be satisfied. (1) would be because God's aim in creating or allowing Hell is to keep us from choosing to sin, unless the proponent of UHV attributes an alternate explanation for this or remains silent on the issue. (3) would be satisfied because the whole point of the threat is to make sinning less desirable. So would (4), unless we concede that God's claims are not credible, which is absurd. However, whether Nozick's other conditions would be satisfied by God's use of Hell remains unclear. Whether (2) is satisfied depends on who must communicate the offer in question and whether God does so in the relevant sense. I am confident, however, that God's use of Hell fails, in many cases, to be coercion on Nozick's analysis because it does not satisfy conditions (5) and (6). Condition (5) requires the coercion to be successful.¹² If B does not oblige A, then coercion has not happened. For UHV, this means that if someone does not avoid sin, then coercion has not occurred. The frequency with which many of us sin therefore entails that God's use of Hell is not coercive. Furthermore, condition (6) requires that we must avoid sin in order to reduce the probability of our damnation in Hell, which also goes unsatisfied in many cases. When we consider the set of those who avoid sin, not all members of that set did so in order to avoid Hell. Plausibly some subset of them avoided sin for other reasons, e.g., simply to act morally. In such cases, God's use of Hell is not coercive. To be clear, if we accept Nozick's analysis, there might be cases in which God's use of Hell is coercive, but there will be many cases in which it is not.¹³ Regardless, I think Nozick's account is wrong because it neglects an important feature of coercion, which I describe below. Consequently, it is no blow to UHV that Nozick's account renders God's creation or allowance of Hell coercive, and this is because Nozick's account of coercion is just mistaken.

12. Commentators call (5) the success condition, which entails that unsuccessful coercion is impossible. If a proposal fails, then it cannot be coercive. Those agreeing with the success condition include McCloskey (1960), Gorr (1986), Murray and Dudrick (1995), and Berman (2002). Carr (1988), however, argues against the success condition.

13. That Nozick's analysis entails that the same proposal could be coercive for some but not others has led some to reject his theory, specifically objecting that his criteria focus too heavily on how a proposal affects the coerced. Anderson (2008) in response argues that an analysis of coercion must take into account the nature and motivation of the coercer. For similar reasons, Lamond (2000) distinguishes between coercion and coerciveness, where coerciveness has to do with the qualities of the attempt itself rather than the nature of the coercer or coerced.

This is because Nozick's account fails to account for the overbearing nature of coercive offers, how this undermines our freedom of action, and the consequences this has for our moral responsibility. I dealt with a similar problem in my original article. I considered the Freedom Objection (FO), which claims that UHV is false because it presupposes that God creates or allows Hell in order to motivate us to avoid sin. If God motivates us to avoid sin, then those on whom this motivation works do not avoid sin freely, and so God limits our freedom objectionably (Gillham 2020, 116). I responded that when God motivates us to avoid sin, it does not follow that we do not avoid sin freely (Gillham 2020, 116–7). Premise 4 of UCO captures a similar worry. If God coerces us by creating or allowing Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, then God limits our freedom to an objectionable degree, which is something that God would not do. Frankfurt's analysis of coercion explains this worry well. He (Frankfurt 1973, 75–6) argues that coercion must have such an overbearing effect on the coercee's will that, as a result of the coercion, the person being coerced could not have reasonably done otherwise. In other words, coercion occurs when the coercee is overburdened by the offer such that it is practically irresistible.¹⁴ When such overburdening occurs, Frankfurt argues, the coercee does not act freely, and as a result, she is not as morally responsible for her action as she would be if she were to have acted freely. Similarly, UCO alleges that UHV cannot be true because, if it is, then we are faced with an overburdening offer, i.e., an offer that we could not reasonably refuse: avoid sin or face damnation in Hell. If this offer is overburdening, then we are not free to accept it. Thus in posing or allowing it to be posed to us, God limits our freedom to an objectionable degree.

In response, proponents of UHV can argue that even if Frankfurt is correct that overburdening offers limit the freedom of actors to an objectionable degree, God's creating or allowance of Hell to motivate us to avoid sin does not overburden us, so that UCO fails. UHV's working hypothesis is that God creates or allows Hell to motivate us to avoid sin. On Frankfurt's criteria, this would only be coercive and limit our freedom objectionably if we were faced with an offer that we could not reasonably refuse. However, it is not the case that we cannot reasonably refuse the conditional threat of Hell. After all, proponents of UHV claim that no one

14. Feinberg (1986, Chs. 23–4) follows Frankfurt in claiming that coercion involves applying a special kind or degree of pressure on the will of the coercee. For Feinberg, in order for coercion to occur, it need not be the case that the proposal was irresistible, but that the total coercive burden of a threat still renders the coercee's decision unfree.

goes to Hell. Since no one goes to Hell, the conditional threat of Hell can easily be refused! When the local mafia don threatens to end my life if I do not launder money for him, I am not free to decline. Indeed, this is an offer that I cannot reasonably refuse because the mafia don will make good on his threat if I do not launder money for him. Contrarily, when God creates or allows Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, I am quite free to decline. This is an offer I can refuse because if UHV is true, then the threat will not be carried out anyway.¹⁵ In fact, I am free to decline even if I do not know that UHV is true. If the prospect of damnation were coercively overbearing to those who believe that one is damned to Hell for sinning, then none of these individuals would ever sin, but some do. Even those who believe that damnation in Hell will result from sin often refuse the offer proposed, and they would not be able to do this if the offer were overbearing enough to rise to the level of what constitutes coercion. For these reasons, UCO fails to defeat UHV. God's creating or allowing Hell to motivate us to avoid sin is not coercive. It would be coercive if one were to presuppose Nozick's account of coercion, but then it would be difficult to see how God limits our freedom to an objectionable degree in creating or allowing Hell, since, as I argued, an offer satisfying Nozick's six conditions appears insufficient for that same offer objectionably limiting the freedom of the person to whom the offer is made.

IV. THE WILLINGNESS TO DAMN OBJECTION (WTDO)

In Section III, I argued that if God motivates us to avoid sin, it does not follow that we cannot freely avoid sin. I also argued in my initial article that although God might create or allow Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, it is still possible for us to be damned to Hell, so that God does not make an empty threat. This brings me to a final objection that I would like to develop against UHV and then respond: that UHV is not true because it entails that God is willing to damn some to Hell, which is something a perfect being would not do. I call this the Willingness to Damn Objection (WTDO). It is true, according to UHV, that no one ever will go to Hell and God knows this. Still, in my response to FO, I conceded that it is nevertheless possible

15. This invites the Empty Threats Objection (ETO) back into the picture (or worse). If God creates or allows Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, but no one ever goes to Hell, then we are almost too free to refuse the offer, so that the threat of Hell will have no motivating impact, and thus be empty. I will not consider that problem here, but there are ways for proponents of UHV to respond. One has already been mentioned: simply deny premise 1 of PDTO and UCO. Attribute a different motivation to God for creating or allowing Hell, or remain silent on this issue altogether.

for some to be damned to Hell (Gillham 2020, 113–4). WTDO alleges that this is false because if it is possible for some to be damned to Hell, then God is willing to damn some to Hell. However, this is absurd, for a perfect being would not be willing to damn anyone. More formally, the argument for WTDO goes like this:

WTDO1. If UHV is true, then no one ever goes to Hell and God knows this, but it is still possible for some to be damned to Hell.

WTDO2. If it is possible for some to be damned to Hell, then God is willing to damn some to Hell.

WTDO3. But this is absurd; God is not willing to damn anyone to Hell.

WTDO4. If God is not willing to damn anyone to Hell, then it is not possible for some to be damned to Hell.

WTDO5. If it is not possible for some to be damned to Hell, then UHV is not true.

WTDO6. So UHV is not true.

This argument for WTDO is valid, so it defeats UHV if its premises are true. I conceded 1 in my initial article. If it is not possible for some to be damned to Hell, then God issues empty threats, so unless a proponent of UHV is willing to concede that the consequent of this conditional is true, she must accept 1.¹⁶ 2 requires elucidation. Suppose it is possible for some to be damned to Hell. If this is so, then there exist conditions that, if they were satisfied, some individuals would be damned to Hell (temporarily or eternally). Those sympathetic to WTDO might find this ridiculous because they deny that God would, under any circumstances, be willing to damn anyone to Hell. After all, if God is perfect, God is all-loving and all-powerful. If God were all-loving and all-powerful, then God would want to create a world where no one could experience very intense and long lasting suffering of the sort experienced in Hell and God would be able to create it.¹⁷ By contraposition, if there is a world where someone could experience very

16. Perhaps God would make empty threats. Suppose my father threatens to subject me to very intense and lasting suffering if I do not do something that would be in my best interest. Then I do not do what is in my best interest. My father might decide not to go through with subjecting me to the threatened suffering. Depending on his reasons, this might testify to his perfection as a father. He might decide not to go through with the punishment out of compassion. If so, his threat was empty, but the emptiness was justified by his love for me. God might make empty threats for a similar reason. This would entail that God does not do what God says that God will do, which perhaps poses larger problems for UHV. My only point is that WTDO needs not defeat UHV insofar as UHV needs not presuppose 1.

17. A retributivist might respond by claiming that if God did not damn anyone to Hell, then God would fail to punish severe sin appropriately, and would therefore not be perfect. A proponent of WTDO might here reply that if God is all-powerful, then God could devise a technique for punishing severe sin appropriately that is more consistent with God's being all-loving, one that does not involve subjecting some to very intense and lasting suffering.

intense and lasting suffering of the sort experienced in Hell, then God is not all-loving and all-powerful. Since I earlier escaped ETO by claiming that it is possible for some to be damned, it follows that God is not all-loving and all-powerful. In this respect, WTDO looks like a very strong version of the Problem of Suffering (PoS), except it claims not only that a perfect God would not create a world where very intense and lasting suffering does occur, but also that a perfect God would not create a world where very intense and lasting suffering could occur. This is because if God were to create a world where damnation in Hell were possible, then God would be willing to allow such damnation. But being all-loving, God is not willing to allow damnation in Hell, so God must not create a world where damnation in Hell is even possible.

The defender of UHV could rebut WTDO most easily by denying 2. It is true that in order for damnation in Hell to be possible, there must be conditions such that, if they were satisfied, some would be damned to Hell. Nevertheless, God could devise the conditions for damnation in Hell so that no human could satisfy them. For example, God might create a world where damnation to Hell is metaphysically but not nomologically possible. In other words, the world might be set up by a perfect being such that damnation in Hell does not violate any metaphysical laws, but what it would take for damnation to occur would violate the laws of nature so that no human could ever accomplish this. If so, then damnation would be possible in some sense, but the world would be set up to express that fact that God is unwilling to allow damnation to occur. It would be possible for some to be damned, but God would be unwilling to actualize this possibility. This is to say that the defender of UHV might rebut WTDO by showing that if God creates a world where damnation is possible, it does not follow from this that God is willing to allow damnation. UHV is compatible with the claims that God creates a world where damnation is possible and is nevertheless unwilling to allow damnation to occur. After all, plenty of things are possible for us that we are unwilling to do. It is perfectly possible for me never to have another beer, but I am very unwilling to do this. Of course, how God's possibilities and willingness interact is very different from how my possibilities and willingness interact, especially because God sets the limit for what is possible in the first place. Still, the defender of UHV can consider it false that if damnation in Hell is possible, then God is willing to allow it.

Still, this points to a respect in which UHV fares better than some traditional solutions to PoH. WTDO claims that a perfect God would not allow damnation in Hell, so if the argument for it is sound then any view

entailing that God allows damnation is false. Retributivism, the Free Will Defense (FWD), Annihilationism, and Universalism all have this entailment. Retributivists solve PoH by insisting that God has morally sufficient reasons to justify damnation in Hell; if it did not occur, then God would fail to punish sin appropriately, which would be unjust.¹⁸ Thus Retributivism entails that God is willing to allow damnation, and so is susceptible to WTDO. The same goes for those who advocate FWD. FWD claims that damnation in Hell makes our choices exceedingly important, which is one of God's aims.¹⁹ Thus damnation is justified by the fact that it makes our freedom so important, and so God is willing to allow damnation. The same is true of Annihilationism. Annihilationists solve PoH by claiming that damnation in Hell is temporary. After a finite sentence in Hell, God destroys or allows sinners to go out of existence.²⁰ This precludes their damnation from being eternal, but if God allows temporary damnation in Hell, then God is willing to damn. Universalists solve PoH by making a similar move. They concede that damnation in Hell must be temporary because eventually everyone goes to Heaven.²¹ In making such a concession, Universalists concede that God is willing to allow damnation, albeit temporarily. Perhaps Hell Denial can avoid this problem. After all, if Hell does not exist, then no one is damned there, and if no one is damned to Hell, then God seems unwilling to damn. Nevertheless, there are other respects in which UHV is superior to Hell Denial. I will not argue for this claim here. I only want to emphasize that if solutions to PoH are defeated in virtue of entailing that God is willing to damn some to Hell, only two solutions go undefeated. One of these is UHV, and both have enjoyed far less consideration in the literature than more popular solutions: retributivism, FWD, annihilationism, and universalism.

CONCLUSION

I have developed three new objections to UHV here and considered how its proponents might respond to them. The first was that UHV is false because it presupposes that God makes threats, which is something a perfect being

18. Quinn (1988, 99), for example, argues that sin must be atoned for, and if we regard sin collectively, there is likely to be so much that eternal damnation might be required, lest justice not be served.

19. Walls (1992, Ch. 5), Swinburne (1989), and Lewis (1944) all offer an FWD-style solution to PoH.

20. See (Pinnock 1997) for an overview of Annihilationism and its problems.

21. Defenders of Universalism include Talbott (1999), Kronen and Reitan (2011), and Adams (1993).

would not do. I argued that the success of this objection depends on what a threat is, but even if God's creation or allowance of Hell is a threat, UHV is not false. It is not implausible that a perfect being would issue threats, especially when they are in the best interest of the person to whom the threat is made, and the threat of Hell would be in our best interest. The second objection alleged that UHV is false because if God creates or allows Hell to motivate us to avoid sin, then God coerces us, and if God coerces us, then God limits our freedom to an objectionable degree. I concluded that this objection fails because on the most plausible theories of coercion, God's creation or allowance of Hell to motivate us to avoid sin is not coercive. Even if it were, this would not entail that God limits our freedom to an objectionable degree. Here I pointed out that even if my responses to these first two objections are wrong, the defender of UHV could avoid both objections by attributing to God a different motivation for creating or allowing Hell, or even remaining silent on what God's reasons are for doing so altogether. Indeed, PDTO and UCO both fail if their shared first premise is false, so proponents of UHV could rebut them by conceding that God creates or allows Hell, but just not in order to motivate us to avoid sin. The final objection claimed that UHV is false because it entails that God is willing to damn some to Hell, which is something an all-loving and all-powerful being would not do. I concluded that this objection fails because it does not follow that if God makes it possible for damnation in Hell to occur, then God is willing to damn some individuals to Hell. God might set the conditions for damnation so high that no human ever satisfies them, and this would testify to God's being all-loving and all-powerful rather than undercut it. Ultimately, then, I affirm the conclusion to which I came in my initial article about UHV. Although UHV might turn out false for reasons I have not yet considered, I think that it deserves further consideration as a solution to PoH, and I hope that others will help in this endeavor.

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