

ETERNAL HELL AND IMPAIRED AGENCY: A REPLY TO MARILYN ADAMS

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In Marilyn Adams' *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, she argues that the presence of 'horrendous evils'¹ overwhelms the typical theodicies and defenses philosophers used in response to the problem of evil.² Further, Adams argues that God's goodness requires him to eventually provide some kind of good that is incommensurate with the 'horrendous evils' within the context of an individual's life in order to be consistent with the goodness of His character. Up to this point, her thesis is sound,³ but her argument begins to become problematic when she specifies how God provides this incommensurate good. Adams concludes her argument by suggesting that the way God makes good on 'horrendous evils' ultimately is through the final, universal redemption of all persons together with Christ—i.e., Universalism. Whether or not a person freely chooses to become united with Christ is irrelevant for Adams; given the effects of 'horrendous evils,' some persons' agencies are so impaired that God is no more violating their agencies than a mother who changes her infant's diaper.

In this paper, I reject such a view, and I argue that God can be relevantly good to horror-ruined persons in a way that is compatible with both the traditional doctrine of eternal hell and the protection of a person's libertarian free-will in her postmortem life. More particularly, by appealing to Jerry Walls' argument for 'optimal grace,' I suggest that God is entirely within his rights to rectify the impairments of horror-ruined persons' agencies so that they can be in a responsible position to make a decisive choice about their eternal fate before God. Adams objects that the kind of alterations that would take place in God rectifying the impairments of a horror-ruined person's agency would constitute a violation of agency that an advocate of 'optimal grace' is trying to protect, but I argue that God's reparative action does not constitute a violation of agency in the same way that reparative therapy does not violate the will of the participant. I then conclude that God's goodness withstands Adams' objection that it is incompatible with an eternal hell.

I. IMPAIRED AGENCY AND UNIVERSALISM

Adams begins her discussion of the problem of evil by defining what 'horrendous evils' (hereafter called HE) are along with the necessary conditions God must meet to overcome them in order for His goodness to be maintained. She writes that

Evil is horrendous iff participation in e by p (either as a victim or a perpetrator) gives everyone prima facie reason to believe that p 's life cannot—given its inclusion of e —be a great good to p on the whole.⁴

Within the context of an individual's life who has participated in horror in some way, God is good to this individual

iff God guarantees to p a life that is a great good to p on the whole, and one in which p 's participation in deep and horrendous evils (if any) is defeated within the context of p 's life...⁵

Pulling from the resources of Christian tradition, Adams thinks that God satisfies this condition of goodness by way of integrating the horror-ruined individual into 'the good of beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God [that ...] would [...] overcome any prima facie reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living.'⁶ Without this eschatological hope in the afterlife, Adams does not think that God would be relevantly good to persons who have participated in horrors.

Thus far, Adams' proposal is not all that controversial. For example, consider several select passages from Romans eight that clearly indicate that God will overcome the suffering we face in our antemortem lives:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us [...] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purposes [...] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [...] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.⁷

Then, compare these passages with the message of eschatological hope in the redemption of suffering persons in the book of Revelation:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'⁸

So, Adams' proposals—i.e., that persons suffer horrors and that God's goodness entails that He will make good to them by way of something like the eschatological, beatific vision—are tame at this point. Where she begins to veer out of bounds from Christian orthodoxy is when she raises questions about how something like an eternal hell would fit into such a redemptive scheme, for if a number of persons are consigned to damnation forever, then it appears that God has not overcome evil; rather, evil appears to have overcome—or at least, has only proven to be commensurate with—good. She makes this clear in her criticism of apocalyptic narrative when she writes that, in this traditional version of eschatology,

the Son of Man will come with His angels, who usher the righteous into heavenly bliss and consign the wicked to torture chambers either eternally or until they wither away. *According to this scenario, evil is not defeated, but balanced off in a retributive ordering...* The two collective actors swap positions, but do not change character...⁹

Thus, it appears that the problem of evil—which is usually concerned with antemortem evils—has been kicked back to the 'problem of Hell,' for if God is really good, He will (according to Adams) find a way to overcome the HE of eternal hell, since eternal hell 'offers not merely

prima facie but conclusive reason to believe that the life of the damned cannot be a great good to them on the whole.’¹⁰

Moreover, the more controversial component of Adams’ proposal is her argument concerning moral responsibility and man’s impaired agency. According to Adams, it appears that persons who reject God in their antemortem lives should not be held morally responsible for doing so because of how finite and unsophisticated their volitions are. For example, if we intuitively hold persons responsible for their actions insofar as they understand the nature and consequences of their actions, then Adams thinks we can never hold a perpetrator of a ‘horrendous evil’ responsible in an ultimate sense because they can never fully comprehend what they are doing.¹¹ She makes this argument (which raises obvious concerns for standard accounts of the doctrine of ‘original sin’) by describing the finitude of the human psyche:

(i) the human capacity to cause horrors unavoidably exceeds our ability to experience them [...] (ii) [...] we cannot adequately conceive of what we cannot experience [...] (iii) [...] agent responsibility is diminished in proportion to his or her unavoidable inability to conceive of the relevant dimensions of the action and its consequences, and [therefore, (iv)] human agents cannot be fully responsible for the horrendous consequences of their actions.¹²

There are a variety reasons Adams poses for why these descriptions are true. The way we are psychologically ill-suited to cope with suffering¹³—for whatever reason—makes us vulnerable to and inclined toward evil.¹⁴ Many of us come from problematic environments that inflict us with trauma beyond our control that consequently makes us prone to act irrationally.¹⁵ The list goes on. Therefore, Adams thinks that if persons are put before God to make a decisive choice to accept or reject Him, humans suffer so badly from their ‘impaired agency’ that ‘God would not thereby honor but violate our agency by crushing it with responsibility for individual and cosmic ruin.’¹⁶ This means that humans are not suited to make a decision about God, and they need something to help them avoid making this decision for themselves.

The solution, then, is universal: because human persons suffer so deeply from ‘impaired agency’ that they are not capable of making a proper decision concerning their eternal destinies, God will make that decision for them in reconciling all persons—regardless of their antemortem commitments to Him—to himself, even if this means overriding the agencies of these created persons. She defends this maneuver by comparing this analogously to a mother who might override the will of her infant in order to change the infant’s diaper.¹⁷ The difference between human persons in relation to God and the infant’s relation to the mother is that, in the former situation, the infant will grow up to maturity in a way that no longer requires the mother’s help. In the latter situation, there is such an enormous ‘metaphysical size-gap’ between God and created persons that humans will always need this sort of agency-enabling from God. Thus, the way Adams solves for the problem of hell is to adopt a universalist scope of redemption, even ‘If this should mean God’s causally determining some things to prevent everlasting ruin...’¹⁸ Is this the only solution?

II. THE PROBLEM OF OVERRIDING IMPAIRED AGENCIES

I think not, though I concede that there is, indeed, a vast ‘metaphysical size-gap’ between God and human persons, along with the idea that persons tend to grow up with some degree of impaired agency. I even concede that recent responses to Adams’ arguments have proven to be insufficient. Take Jerry Walls’ recent criticisms of Adams’ view: first, Walls thinks Adams’ parent-child analogy is not consistent with the Biblical narrative since God often issues commands

to humans and expects their obedience to them in a way that is more reflective of a marital relationship rather than that of a parent and child.¹⁹ But this concern is checked by Adams' appeal to 'honor-shame' codes in God's dealings with human persons, which 'allows even universalists to accommodate the Biblical threat that Judgment Day will put us to shame [because] God is [...] a being whose honor of virtue is necessary and unsurpassable; whereas we are almost nothing,'²⁰ and so this size-gap would still put us to shame as a form of accountability for our fallen actions.

Moreover, even if this were false, the parent-child analogy does not eliminate the space for all prescriptive actions and their subsequent consequences for failing to perform them *even if* the parent ultimately enables the agency of the child in the way Adams construes this process. Suppose a mother is trying to teach her child how to clean up her toys, and when the child fails to do so, the mother expresses anger toward the child; and still, nonetheless, the mother guides the child in cleaning the room even if the child does not desire to do so. Some children might be able to clean toys on their own; others need parental assistance.²¹ Still, the point remains that persons who are in some way coerced toward an action they initially failed to do can still be held accountable for the consequences of their original omission.

Further, Walls poses another objection: 'If God is willing to overrule our freedom...we may wonder why he does not do it now in light of all the horrendous evil that results from the abuse of freedom...' ²² But this objection appears to misunderstand how Adams suggests that one purpose of the Incarnation and suffering of Christ is for God to connect with the phenomenology of persons who have participated in horrors themselves.²³ Thus, when horror-ruined persons are integrated into the positive whole of the beatific vision, they will retrospectively look back at their horrors and not wish them away because their union with Christ endows them with meaning.²⁴ This view does not make horrors intrinsically good in themselves—and it does nothing like providing a sufficient reason for why God permits HEs—but it does give them a place in God's scheme to defeat horrors within the context of an individual's life.

But these are not the real issues with Adams' view. Perhaps the heart of the problem with Adams' eschatology is that it's ultimately unnecessary, since the Christian tradition has resources that render Adams' version of universalism extraneous. For example, take Jerry Walls' famous conception of 'optimal grace.' He writes:

[I]t seems reasonable to suppose that God might somehow eliminate the disadvantages of some because of unfavorable circumstances [so He can] give all persons an equal opportunity to receive salvation [...] Suppose that for each created person there is some measure of grace N which represents the optimal amount of influence toward good which God can exercise on that person's will without destroying his freedom [...] if God desires to save all persons, he will give to each person whatever is the optimal measure of grace for that person...²⁵

If something like this is plausible, then Adams' universalism is no longer necessary since there is a place in which any of damages a person has suffered by participating in HE can be rectified after God dispenses the proper amount of grace necessary for her to make a decisive choice about her eternal destiny. Within this scheme, a universal redemption is logically possible, but people even in the best circumstances appear to choose a life apart from God regardless.²⁶ So, it seems like horrors can be defeated without their being an overriding of persons' free agencies.

III. ADAMS' IDENTITY OBJECTIONS

At this point, the typical response of the universalist would be a question about the logical possibility of a person freely rejecting God eternally after He's fully revealed himself to her,²⁷ but

because of Adams' unique take on free will, this is not where she chooses to object. Instead, Adams objects to any mechanism that does away with the disadvantages of a person due to participation in a HE for the instrumental purpose of making a decisive choice about God because it constitutes an identity problem. Adams writes:

[W]here created agency is twisted by horrors [...] this fresh start would require massive miraculous repairs, drastic alterations of a sort Walls otherwise thinks we have a right against God not to produce [...] Walls's scenario does not represent a way for God to honor the persons such victims have become, because erasing the slate and repeating the test would not by itself defeat the antemortem horrors that so caricatured their lives.²⁸

There are actually two points of criticism here. First, Adams suggests the necessary alterations to persons who have participated in HEs is a process that appears to override a person's free will in a way advocates of libertarian free-will would object to. One consequence this entails is that the changes that would come from this violation would be so significant that the person's antemortem identity would look far too different from their antemortem identity. Secondly, the conditions God must meet to retain his goodness entails that He *must* defeat HEs with goodness, and merely setting up a person in the ideal conditions necessary to make a choice about eternal destiny does not meet this condition. So, this constitutes an objection to our identity as free persons and God's identity as a good God. My response subsumes both issues in the following way:

Optimal grace—or something that removes the disadvantages of HEs from persons so that their agencies might be repaired—does not require an instantaneous 'zap' that abruptly changes the very nature of a person.²⁹ When we consider participants in HEs and optimal grace, we should remember that, 'Given the history of deprivation and abuse in this person's life, he would likely need time for various forms of emotional healing before he would be in a position to understand the good news of the gospel and accept it...' ³⁰ At most, this is analogous to reparative therapy in the most ideal conditions possible, along with an extended period of time³¹ for the person to recover. Reparative therapy appears to constitute a change in one's identity in the sense that it progressively removes harmful components of one's life, but this does not appear to be problematic in the way Adams proposes.

But maybe this is not addressing the central point of Adams' objection. Perhaps Adams is suggesting that the kind of reparative measures that optimal grace might involve is one that violates a person's agency in a way that Walls would object to, and therefore Walls is arguing inconsistently. The argument might go like this: suppose a divorced mother feels concerned about how her teenage son who is dealing with the traumatic effects that comes from a familial separation, and suppose also that her son is deeply emphatic about the fact that he does not need any help. The mother pleads with him to go to the therapist appointments she schedules for him, but he vehemently refuses to go. Finally, the mother gets desperate after she notices signs of severe depression in her son's behavior, and instead of begging him to go to his therapy appointment, she instead lies to him and says that he has a dental appointment. When they get to the appointment, the son feels deeply wronged by his mother for lying to him, and he consequently refuses to cooperate with the therapy session.

Is this what is going on within something like optimal grace? I doubt it. All that Walls says is involved in optimal grace is that 'God deeply and truly loves all persons and does all he can to save all persons *short of overriding their freedom*.'³² Nothing more. If a person suffers child abuse and projects images of a hateful father on God, consequently rejecting a relationship with Him in her postmortem life, optimal grace might involve God showing her that His love is

nothing like the character of her biological father. If her rejection of God still persists, then perhaps God might take some other measure to reach a point where she can finally make a decision after God has done all he could—short of overriding her freedom—to remove the disadvantages suffered from the HEs she experienced.

So, Adams' twofold critique fails: the grace God extends to a horror-ruined person in order to repair their consequent disadvantages does not constitute a violation in her agency, and God does not need to override a horror-ruined person's impaired agency in order to satisfy the conditions necessary to maintain his goodness.

IV. CONCLUSION

At this point, I've only proven that Adams' universalist solution to the problem of hell—and ultimately, the problem of HEs—is not necessary; there are other solutions (e.g. Jerry Walls' 'optimal grace' or Kevin Timpe's version of 'limbo'³³) that do not require the overriding of a person's will in the way Adams insinuates is necessary. Since Adams has not proven that her version of universalism is necessary to defeat HEs, she may have at least proven that her scheme is one of several different possibilities. If this is the case, then the next question is whether or not Adams's solution satisfies other sorts of conditions about God's relationship to human persons. For example, do persons need to always retain libertarian free-will in order to have a genuine form of relationship with God? Are there arguments for the benefits of libertarian versions of free-will proper that trump the value of overriding persons' impaired agencies? While these are important questions, they go beyond the scope of this project's purpose of investigating whether or not Adams' universalism was necessary to defend HEs and the problem of impaired agency, and it appears that it is not.

Notes

1 M. Adams, 'The problem of hell: A problem of evil for Christians.' In Eleonore Stump & Norman Kretzmann (eds.), *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 304.

2 For example, Alvin Plantinga's 'free will defense' is a popular response Adams takes aim at. For Plantinga's original defense, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), pp. 29-33. Adams notes how Plantinga's defense fails to account for horrendous evils in Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), pp. 30-1.

3 I argue for this view contra Leibniz's 'Best Possible World' theodicy. See N. Hadsell, 'Leibniz's Horrendous and Unthinkable World: A Critique of Leibniz's 'Best Possible World' Theodicy,' *Heythrop Journal* (2020), pp. 1-7.

4 Adams, 'Problem of Hell,' p. 304.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 304.

6 M. Adams and S. Sutherland, 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1989), pp. 297–323, 306-7.

7 Holy Bible: English Standard Version. Crossway, 2001.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 138. Italics added.

10 Adams, 'The Problem of Hell,' p. 304.

11 David Bentley Hart makes the even stronger point that a person possessing perfect omnipotence is the only one who can be held culpable for their actions in a way that should determine their eternal fate: "[N]o mind save one possessing absolutely undiminished consciousness of reality is wholly free. This is why...we determine someone's mental competency or incompetency in large part from how clearly he or she understands

the difference between actions that serve his or her good and actions that do not.” See David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 177.

12 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 310.

13 Ibid, p. 313: ‘(A) We human beings start life ignorant, weak, and helpless...(B) We learn to ‘construct’ a picture of the world... under the extensive influence of other non-ideal choosers. (C) ... from early on we humans are confronted with problems that we cannot adequately grasp or cope with, and in response to which we mount...inefficient adaptational strategies. (D) ... the human psyche forms habits [and] become entrenched...(e)...the habits are unconsciously acted out for years, causing much suffering...(H) ...we are not as humans capable of organizing and regulating ourselves in [a] way.’

14 Ibid, p. 96: ‘If personality were not tied to an animal life cycle, if early childhood adaptations did not become so readily entrenched, adult human beings would not persist in operating out of such childish world-views and the sins of the fathers and mothers would not descend...If biology did not so easily dominate, even swallow psychology, we would not be vulnerable to the degradation through disease and radical deprivation of material needs.’

15 Ibid, p. 48: ‘...circumstances quite beyond the individual agent’s control...pose obstacles out of developmental order, confront agents with problems beyond their capacities to solve.’

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid, p. 104: ‘...what the mother does by way of training and controlling the child in its earliest stages is agency-developing and enabling; it cannot count as manipulation until the child’s agency is better formed. The metaphysical gap between God and creatures means that however mature adult human agency may seem in relation to other human beings, it never gets beyond (up to?) the infantile stage in relation to the Divine...such metaphysical incommensurability combines with the mother-infant analogy to make room for particular Divine providence without jeopardizing the phenomena of created voluntary action.’

18 Ibid, p. 157.

19 Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking The Things That Matter Most* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), p. 75: ‘Indeed, from the very beginning of the Bible, God gives commands and expects obedience. He makes covenants with people and expects them to honor those covenants. He expresses anger and disappointment when his children fail, and he holds them accountable for their sin and rebellion. None of this squares with Adam’s picture of the divine-human relationship. Indeed, one of the most prominent biblical images for the relationship is that of a spouse to a husband. We are God’s spouse, and he expects us to be faithful and to return his love.’

20 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, 127.

21 Though I fear this response might go outside Adams’ conceptual scheme, since she seems to posit all persons’ wills are too impaired to make an informed decision concerning their eternal destinies, such that, in keeping with this analogy, all kids need help in cleaning up their toys.

22 Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, p. 76.

23 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 127: ‘the Maker of all things has honored the human race by becoming a member of it, honored all who suffer horrendous evils by identifying with them through His passion and death. Still more amazing, God will be seen to have honored even the perpetrators of horrors by identifying with their condition, becoming ritually cursed through His death on a tree, taking His stand with the cursed to cancel the power of curse forever [...] through such identification, God has nullified the power of horrendous evils to degrade.’

24 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 167: ‘Retrospectively...human victims of horrors will recognize those experiences as points of identification with the crucified God, and not wish them away from their life histories... my approach makes present participation in horrors already meaningful because they are partially constitutive of the most meaningful relationship of all. My claim is that the Incarnation already endows participation in horrors with a good aspect...’

25 Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), p. 89.

26 Walls, *Hell*, p. 102: ‘To the contrary, all could be saved and if they are not, it is due to the fact that they have persisted in the choice to resist God’s grace...Whatever the number, there is, in a sense, infinite loss, so it seems incongruous to quantify and compare it in any way.’

27 For example, this is the line of argument David Bentley Hart takes in part of his recent *That All Shall Be Saved*. He argues for an ‘intellectualist’ version of freedom, which holds that ‘true freedom consists in the realization of a complex nature in its own proper good...Freedom is a being’s power to flourish as what it naturally is...’ Hart thinks all people desire the realization of their telos, and they only commit iniquity when they make a false judgment about what their telos is. Thus, in a position when God reveals himself fully to a sinful person, it makes no sense to think that they could persist in their misconceptions of the good. He writes that “Whatever

one wishes must then be what one sees as being ‘good’ in some sense or other, however perversely.” See Hart. *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, & Universal Salvation*, pp. 172, 175. Now, even Walls concedes the argument that clear perception of God’s goodness might be impossible to reject when he writes that ‘the choice of evil is impossible for anyone who has a fully formed awareness that God is the source of happiness and sin the cause of misery.’ See Walls, *Hell*, p. 133. Still, Walls makes the case in chapter five of his *Hell* that persons can intentionally delude themselves in their perceptions of God, and that God has no right to remove these delusions without violating a person’s will.

28 Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 48.

29 I borrow this from Kevin Timpe’s ‘zap-view’ in K. Timpe, ‘Upright, Whole, and Free’: Eschatological Union with God,’ *TheoLogica* 2 (2018), pp. 60-76. Timpe explains this view on p. 63.

30 Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, p. 201.

31 I was tempted to say ‘eternal’ here, but I’m afraid that would invite a lot of controversial metaphysical contentions that are not relevant to this project.

32 Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, p. 200.

33 Timpe’s version of Limbo is called the ‘Minimum Limbo Conclusion (MLC): If there are cases where individuals have not had an opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life, God will give those individuals an opportunity to do so in the next life.’ See K. Timpe, ‘An Argument for Limbo,’ *Journal of Ethics* 19 (2015), pp. 277–292. p. 283. I think Timpe’s version of Limbo could very well be the space in which God extends the ‘optimal grace’ to persons in the way Walls suggests.