

## The Agony of the Infinite: The Presence of God as Phenomenological Hell

A.G.Holdier

“God, it is said, is the Sun of righteousness, and the rays of His supernal goodness shine down on all men alike...Clay hardens in the sun, while wax grows soft.”

-Maximus the Confessor<sup>1</sup>

<break>

In his brief survey of Christian history, David Bentley Hart suggests that St. Maximus the Confessor “may well have possessed the single most impressive philosophical intellect in the history of Christian theology.”<sup>2</sup> In this chapter’s epigraph, Maximus describes the complicated nature of the presence of God and how it produces an array of different effects in the subjects lucky enough to experience it; notably, it produces contrary effects simultaneously, with the exact features of the result depending on the orientation of the subject experiencing God. It is the project of this chapter to relate this facet of God’s essence to both the structure and experience of the Afterlife to suggest that the beauty of the Infinite God enjoyed by the blessed might simultaneously be experienced as agony to the damned.

This is because many of these swirling controversies stem from the assumed identification of a fundamental difference between the natures of the two options for individuals to inhabit in the Afterlife: in their respective metaphysical essences, Heaven is taken to be blissfully good and Hell to be unbearably bad and, therefore, a different place or mode of being. Alternatively stated, it is generally presumed that,

1. Heaven and Hell are ontologically distinct.

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

If Heaven and Hell are indeed different places in which humans may somehow spend time, then the trajectory of much Christian theology, with its evangelistic stress on reaching the right post-mortem location, is understandable and the debates stemming from that theology are unsurprising. If (1) is true, then questions of the fairness of entrance rules for each location, of the justice of the experienced intensity and duration of punishment, of the benevolence of a God who would potentially subject someone to such abysmal conditions, and so on are significant problems.

However, an observation from C.S. Lewis is pertinent:

“Heaven will solve our problems, but not, I think, by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will all be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem. And, more than once, that impression which I can’t describe except by saying it’s like the sound of a chuckle in the darkness. The sense that some shattering and disarming simplicity is the real answer.”<sup>3</sup>

Denying (1) is as shattering as it is simple. It is the project of this chapter to do so.

<break>

### Heaven/Hell and the *παρουσία*

Before an Obdurationist view of Heaven/Hell can be defended, the standard nature of Heaven and Hell should be explained: in their starkest terms, Heaven is taken to be a place of blissful happiness while Hell is understood as a dungeon of horrible torment. In Christian theology, the explanation for this difference ultimately stems from the *παρουσία* or “presence” of God existing in the former, but not the latter, location.

Among the threadlines running throughout the Christian scriptures, the *παρουσία* is one of the most frequent in the overarching biblical story describes the interactions between God and Creation. From the opening pages of Genesis, God fashions humanity to dwell in His presence (Gen. 3:8) and, although the infection of sin required the protective banishment of our forebears from that blessed experience (Gen. 3:22-23), the soteriological story of the Bible explains how God is working to effect our return to that beatific space.<sup>4</sup> Along the way, shadows of this future homecoming are found in the holy places of ancient Judaism: first in the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 33:7-9) and ultimately in the Temple (I Kgs. 8:10-11) where God’s people could temporarily come before Him to worship and sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> This future reconciliation was once again foreshadowed temporarily in the person of Christ who, according to St. John the Evangelist, “became flesh and dwelt [*lit.* “tabernacled”] among us” (John 1:14). The Bible culminates with this foretold reunion becoming actualized at the end of the book of Revelation (21:3): Heaven and Earth are once more united, God dwells with His people, thereby fulfilling the covenantal promises that stretch all the way back to Genesis 17:7 and recreating the original intent for Creation.

Consequently, theologians have taken the experience of the *παρουσία* to be not merely the final, but the formal cause of existence itself;<sup>6</sup> not only was Creation started in order to allow for a space wherein God might be experienced, but Creation is both defined and consistently maintained moment-by-moment for this reason as well. Heaven contains beauty and bliss because it offers unrestricted access to that for which we were made but we currently only see “as though through a mirror dimly” (I Cor. 13:12); Hell offers nothing but torture because it amounts to utter existential deprivation from the source of life itself.

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

However, apart from a more robust doctrine of divine love, Hell wreaks havoc on the ontotheological<sup>7</sup> recognition of God’s sustaining connection to Creation; whether described as a Thomistic Unmoved Mover, a Leibnizian Necessary Thing, a Tillichian Ground of Being,<sup>8</sup> or simply the deity who “is before all things and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17), philosophical theology has long identified the universe as somehow dependent on God both for its creation and its continued existence thereafter.<sup>9</sup> If Augustine was right when he defined ontology as fundamentally positive insofar as “All of nature, therefore, is good, since the Creator of all nature is supremely good,” then total banishment from God would result in destruction, not suffering;<sup>10</sup> as Jonathan Kvanvig explains:

conceived in the starkest terms, the alternative to presence in heaven is nothingness. To choose to be dependent on God is to choose a path that results in presence in heaven, and to choose independence from God is, ultimately, to choose annihilation, for independence from God is not logically possible.<sup>11</sup>

It remains to be seen, then, why much of the key source material for historical views on the afterlife—that is, the Christian Bible—is replete with descriptions of two distinct postmortem options, one marked by nearness to the ontological source of reality and the other marked by separation from Him.

<break>

### The Obdurationist View

A denial of (1) allows this concern over the grounding of Hell’s existence to be considerably softened, perhaps to the point of negation. To promote this obdurationist stance, I first attempt to grapple with the exegetical source material that leads many to identify two distinct locations in the Afterlife before offering several philosophical reflections on this more

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

unified possibility suggested by thinkers like Harvey Egan and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Importantly, this defense of a homogenous ontology of the afterlife does not require one to reject biblical descriptions of punishment manifesting as suffering and pain for damned individuals, as Egan describes, “whose eternally obdurate use of their freedom to reject love has rendered them incapable of receiving and responding to it,” despite the fact that they will be in the very presence of God.<sup>12</sup> Instead, this obdurationist view of Hell allows one to maintain a focus on divine love and justice while avoiding the key metaphysical assumption that leads to the cottage-industry of controversy on approaches to Heaven/Hell.

For example, much recent literature on the afterlife has analyzed the justice of eternity and the notion that an omnibenevolent deity could rightly allow a person to experience eternal suffering in Hell. Two primary escapes have been historically suggested to wash God’s hands from the blame of such never-ending punishment for sinners: the ECT perspective mentioned above inclines to focus the culpability for one’s perpetual and painful condemnation in Hell away from God and onto the sinner’s own freely chosen actions; in contrast, both universalism and, in a different manner, annihilationism deny the eternality of the punishment on a variety of grounds, each of which is itself grounded in God’s inescapable love and certain victory over evil that inexorably brings all surviving souls into His presence in Heaven. Critics of ECT charge that it carries horrifying implications for theistic ethics; critics of universalism and annihilationism contend that they cannot bear the weight of Christian scripture.

One argument for the standard theoretical structure of the afterlife (which sees two distinct postmortem locations, each filled with conscious humans for eternity) might run as follows:

1. Heaven and Hell are ontologically distinct.

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

2. Heaven and Hell are phenomenologically distinct.
3. Heaven and Hell both contain conscious human persons.
4. Heaven and Hell are both eternal in duration.
5. Therefore, Heaven and Hell both contain conscious human persons for eternity.

Typically, annihilationists and universalists will deny either (3) or (4) to escape the conclusion that humans consciously suffer in Hell for eternity. However, if it can be demonstrated that the great divorce of Heaven and Hell as substantial categories in philosophical theology is itself the mistake, then the nature of Heaven could feasibly be ontologically identical to, but phenomenologically distinct from (and therefore appropriatable as) Hell. This unification of Heaven/Hell would thereby allow for a similar confluence of eschatological positions: defenders of ECT could maintain their emphasis on Hell as the just deserts of sin while universalists could simultaneously recognize that all humans are nevertheless welcomed into the loving presence of God – it simply is the case, as in the epigram from Maximus the Confessor, that the light of God’s love is simultaneously experienced in significantly different ways. Additionally, the metaphysical underpinnings of annihilationism’s extinguishing Hell would be likewise vindicated, even as such a separation from “the flame of the divine presence” would be recognized as a logical non-possibility.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, hermeneutical reflection on biblical descriptions of God’s presence through the theological lenses of thinkers like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Martin Luther, suggests that two individuals could receive the same substantial divine revelation, but perceive that gift in different ways: one as a blessing and the other as a curse. If being “in the presence of God” is essentially characteristic of Heaven, this suggests that one could affirm the eventual universal gathering of all souls into God’s presence in Heaven while simultaneously

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

admitting that not all souls would enjoy the experience. On this hypothesis, the beatific vision of the presence of God could potentially result in an experience of suffering and pain, and therefore Heaven (for some) might be treated simultaneously as Hell (for others) in the eschaton. When viewed in light of the comparatively similar biblical metaphors for both Hell and the presence of God, this suggests not William Blake’s “marriage” of Heaven and Hell, but an identification of one with the other; in short, Augustine’s two Cities share the same address.

<break>

“Heaven/Hell” vs. “Heaven and Hell”

As St. Maximus the Confessor commented on the nature of life in the eventual arrival of God’s kingdom, “there exists but one happiness, a communion of life with the Word, the loss of which is an endless punishment which goes on for all eternity.”<sup>14</sup> Much like Gregory of Nyssa before him,<sup>15</sup> Maximus was happy to play with Origenian symbolism and its hell-denying doctrine of *apokatastasis*, but never in a simple and straightforward way, preferring to ponder the mysteries of the dualities of the trees in the Garden of Eden or the simultaneous beauty and agony of the Cross to rest in a “holy silence” on the exact nature of the next life and its twin provocations of both pleasure and pain.<sup>16</sup> In this, Maximus demonstrates the rich theological tradition that, in the words of David Bentley Hart, “wisely makes no distinction, essentially, between the fire of hell and the light of God’s glory”<sup>17</sup> – a tradition that extends back at least as far as St. Paul’s second letter to the church in Thessalonika when he describes the return of Christ at the culmination of the eschaton:

...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

destruction [that comes] from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his  
might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled  
at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2  
Thess. 1:7b-10)<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously, the singular revelation of the presence of God (*παρουσία*) brings distinct  
appropriated experiences: suffering for the wicked and glory for the saints.

This phenomenological disparity can be supported by a consideration of the biblical texts  
that describe the experience of both postmortem options, for the scriptural conception of Heaven  
is, at times, shockingly similar to its depiction of Hell. Historical tradition, particularly through  
the work of artists like Hieronymus Bosch, seems to have been more influential in popular  
conceptions of the afterlife than what is required by Scripture.

<break>

Heaven

Ultimately, whatever biblical descriptions of Heaven might be proffered, the blessedness  
of each is first grounded on the experience of the *παρουσία*: not only do angels stand in God’s  
presence (Luke 1:19), but from Isaiah to Stephen to Paul to John,<sup>19</sup> each of the visionary  
experiences of the throne room of God focus primarily on the revelation *not* of the place itself,  
but of the God whose presence fills that space. In short, the Bible draws no fundamental  
distinction between the experience of Heaven and the revelation of the *παρουσία*, with each hint  
of God’s glory glimpsed through temporary means serving to ultimately point humanity to Christ  
as the one who “has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true  
things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” (Heb. 9:24).  
And, for Christians after Pentecost, indwelt by God’s spirit, the identification of the temple

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

system with the presence of God gives particular weight to Paul’s proclamation of the church as “the temple of the living God” before once again reciting the covenantal promise of the *παρουσία* (II Cor. 6:16).

<break>

## Hellfire

If the essence of Heaven is captured by drawing near to the presence of God, it would make sense to describe Hell as moving in the opposite direction; as Jesus indicates in Matthew 25:41, the wicked are commanded to *depart* in some way from His presence to experience punishment for their sins. Throughout scripture, removal from the presence of God is consistently equated with sin and suffering, from Jonah disobeying God (Jon. 1:3) to David lamenting the distance in which his infidelities with Bathsheba placed him (Psa. 51:11) to Ezekiel’s vision of God abandoning the Temple as an extreme punishment for the abominations by which Israel repeatedly broke their covenant (Ezk. 10:18) – each of these remind the reader of Adam’s natural inclination to hide in his sin away from the face of God (Gen. 3:8).

As humans approach the *παρουσία*, much ado is often made over the relevance of free choice and the cruciality for God to maintain a genuine option for individuals to either reject or accept His love if any experience of His loving approach is going to be meaningful.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to some basic critiques of the doctrine of Hell, God does not belligerently create individuals only to forcibly sentence them to damnation, but instead calls humans made in His Image to return home to be in His presence – if they do not, then only they carry the burden of their sentence.

Admittedly, Christian doctrines of election, reprobation, and predestination can complicate this picture,<sup>21</sup> but the majority of Christian traditions—especially those that simultaneously affirm some form of ECT—will look to the New Testament’s fundamental identification of God’s

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

essence as love (I John 4:8) to conclude that, however qualified, the love of God indeed prevents Him from arbitrarily condemning otherwise loved human beings. In the words of Thomas Talbott,<sup>22</sup> if a sinner stubbornly refuses to recognize her subordination to God, “then God, who would never himself reject anyone, is unable to achieve the kind of reconciliation he sincerely wants to achieve.” Talbott goes on to meditate on C.S. Lewis’ description of Hell’s gates being “locked from the inside”<sup>23</sup> to conclude that “the damned are precisely those who successfully defeat God’s loving purpose for their lives and freely reject him forever.”<sup>24</sup>

The biblical description of this rejection and its consequences is shockingly intense; because humans were made to be in the presence of God, life in His absence is unavoidably painful in the deepest sense – not merely a physical pain, but one that penetrates to the spiritual essence of each individual. More often than not, scripture uses the imagery of fire and brimstone to paint the fierceness of Hell in all its horror, where the pit (Job 33:24) filled with eternal fire (Psa. 11:6; Matt. 25:41; Mark 9:43; Jude 1:7) is ever-burning, where loathsome worms ever-feed on the inhabitants (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:48) as they weep, wail, and gnash their teeth (Matt. 13:42; Luke 13:28), and where demons are bound by chains of darkness (II Pet. 2:4). Describing the plight of some of the damned, John highlights how “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (Rev. 14:11). Indeed, though philosophical theologians debate the physicality of the experience,<sup>25</sup> separation from God, the source of all life and meaning, necessitates excruciating death and hopelessness.

However, a holistic reading of scripture will notice that many of these images—especially that of fire—are not confined solely to biblical descriptions of Hell, but reappear in descriptions of the *παρουσία* itself. The loving God of the Bible is not only named a “consuming fire” in his holiness (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29), but appears physically as such to Abraham at the

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

institution of the covenant (Gen. 15:17), to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2), the pillar that led the way through the wilderness (Ex. 13:21), and in the Tabernacle (Lev. 9:24); to Israel in the Temple (II Chron. 7:1); to the prophets in their visions (Isa. 6:6), miracles (I Kgs. 18:38), and deaths (II Kgs. 2:11); and to the apostles through several stories of Christ (Luke 12:49, 24:32; Rev. 1:14), at Pentecost (Acts 2:3), and in the process of sanctification (Rom. 12:1). Throughout the Bible, the fire of God is connected to both blessing (Matt. 3:11) and judgment (Num. 11:1-3; II Kgs. 1:10). Indeed, when the writer of Hebrews penned that “you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them” (12:18-19), he was not describing Hell, but Mount Sinai – the very mountain on which God’s *παρουσία* established Israel by revealing both the Law and divine glory (Ex. 33:18).

Therefore, however literal or figurative biblical hellfire might be, scripture describes the presence of God as constituted, at varying points, also as both literal and figurative flames. This provides an exegetical foundation for the denial of (1) by suggesting that the divine fire and hellfire may be identifiable with each other. If subjective phenomenology can be extracted from objective ontology, then not only would this explain how God could welcome unrepentant sinners into His presence in the totalizing reconciliation of the cosmos, but it would fit well with John’s vision of sinners “tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and *in the presence of the Lamb*” (Rev. 14:10, emphasis added).

<break>

Exegetical Difficulties

However, two exegetical difficulties loom for an identification of hellfire with divine flame: the chasm separating the Rich Man and Lazarus in Christ’s Lukan parable, and the biblical description of Hell as “outer darkness.”

Firstly, Jesus’ parable in Luke 16:19-31 of two men—an unnamed rich man and a poor beggar named Lazarus—might be interpreted such that Heaven and Hell are necessarily divided. After both men die, the parable depicts the rich man in hellish agony, surrounded by flames, while Lazarus escapes suffering at the side of Abraham. Although they are “far off,” the rich man pleads with the other two for the slightest bit of temporary relief, but Abraham explains the impossibility of such mercy on the grounds that, in addition to the rich man simply receiving his just deserts, “between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us” (Luke 16:26). It would be easy to assume that this separation likewise implies that Lazarus and the rich man have landed in fundamentally different places. However, there are at least three additional factors that indicate a different conclusion:

- i. The nature of this story as a parable might mean that such a divide is meant to be interpreted symbolically, with the pedagogical emphasis focused perhaps on the impossibility of changing one’s soteriological status after death – just as the consequent of Abraham’s explanation in verse 26 indicates.<sup>26</sup>
- ii. Jesus is adapting a motif common to various pre-existing folk tales, not to teach anything about the afterlife, but to instead reiterate the importance of lovingly caring for the less fortunate and being faithful with the material wealth given to us by God – the overall theme of chapter 16 as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

- iii. If meant to be interpreted literally, this parable may describe a temporary state that shall itself pass away in the process of the eschatological culmination of the universe.<sup>28</sup>

It is highly likely that at least one of these possibilities is true, particularly (i) and/or (ii) on both internal and external contextual grounds. If this is the case, then the problem of Lazarus’ Chasm for a homogenous ontology of the afterlife dissolves.

Secondly, the hermeneutical overlap between hellfire and God’s glory might be shaken by eschatological references to judgment as “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12, 25:30; Jude 1:13) instead of blazing fire, however, two considerations temper this concern. As with the last parable, as Kim Papaioannou explains, despite the darkness being filled with “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” cues surrounding each of these short references indicates that this parabolic context “is not intended to be a description of hell, but rather underlies the sadness of the loss of the kingdom (of Heaven).”<sup>29</sup> Most memorably, Jesus uses this language to contrast the experience of parabolic characters banished from fellowship with a king at a banquet with those still enjoying the King’s presence (Matt. 22:13); if “outer darkness” is the location beyond the firelight of this celebration, then that loss of fellowship would be the extent of the suffering – particularly when the terms for “weeping” and “gnashing of teeth” both indicate passionate outbursts of sorrow and rage based on jealousy, not exclamations in response to physical pain.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, if Sim is right that banquet stories like the parable in Matthew 22 are indeed reliant on the Book of Enoch,<sup>31</sup> then the full context of that source is enlightening:

And again the Lord said to Raphael: 'Bind Azâzêl hand and foot, and cast him into the darkness: and make an opening in the desert, which is in Dûdâêl, and cast him therein. And place upon him rough and jagged rocks, and cover him with

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

darkness, and let him abide there for-ever, and cover his face that he may not see light. And on the day of the great judgement *he shall be cast into the fire* (I Enoch 10.4-6a, emphasis added).

Ultimately, if Jesus was speaking to an audience familiar with this story, then it is likely that they would have naturally associated “outer darkness” with flames and the above connection to the fiery *παρουσία* is reiterated.

<break>

### The Obdurationist Defense

In one sense, this obdurationist characterization of Heaven and Hell amounts to a modified form of Bawulskian reconciliationism where, “all sinning ceases in the eternal state, and in some sense the reprobate participate in the cosmic reconciliation of all things to God: they are reconciled, not salvifically but in and through punishment.”<sup>32</sup> Seeking to chart a path between the twin pillars of annihilationism and universalism, Bawulski argues that a genuine reconciliation of sinners to God is achieved if they manage to contribute to the final eschatological cosmos as an example of God’s eternal justice, even if – contrary to many conservative interpretations – they do not continue to sin in Hell to perpetually rejustify their eternal punishment.<sup>33</sup> However, Bawulski maintains the traditional division of Heaven and Hell as ontologically distinct places: one that offers the metaphysical presence of God and one that does not; as he says, those in Hell

...do not experience the divine presence of blessing, but instead experience punishment, loss, shame, humiliation, pain, suffering, subjection, and lucidity of their wrongdoing and of God’s holiness and justice. They are defeated rebels, no longer able to continue in rebellion. They acquiescently accept their judgment and

Holdier, A.G. (2017). "The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell" in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

in so doing glorify God, under and through punishment praising him for his justice, an ability brought by the lucidity of God's right and their wrong.<sup>34</sup>

Although this picture might clarify how God could morally reconcile sinners into his loving fold, it still fails to explain the ontotheological absence of a ground for the reprobate's continued existence in the utter absence from the divine presence that Hell is supposed to constitute. Consequently, the homogenous ontology of obdurationism could appropriate Bawulskian notions of reprobate participation into a more coherent metaphysical structure that still identifies sinners as painfully experiencing God's presence.

Similarly, the obdurationist view suggested here modifies Kvanvig's view of Hell as lovingly issuant from God's holiness; Kvanvig defines Hell as "a composite system with a teleological component, which is annihilation, and a mechanical component, which involves continued existence," thereby recognizing the ontotheological consequence of total separation from God, but still preserving a unique metaphysical space wherein people temporarily suffer.<sup>35</sup> However, if, as Kvanvig puts it, "Hell is an afterlife journey toward annihilation," then the metaphysical space wherein the journey is undertaken must still draw its grounding from God and therefore not be completely separate from Him; i.e., this infernal journey space cannot ultimately mean Hell. This is particularly evident when Kvanvig suggests that "It may even be true that some never get to the end of the road toward annihilation; it may be, that is, that some eternally exist in hell, never coming to see the alternatives clearly or never changing their opposition to the heavenly community, and yet never achieving rationality for those beliefs and desires;" on these terms, it is once again hard to see how the message of reconciliation (II Cor. 5:19) has actually been preserved if eternally there are people who maintain some level of existence (however shadowy) apart from him in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

dwelt, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

In both Bawulski’s and Kvanvig’s cases, as with most considerations of Heaven and Hell, the truth of this proposition has been implicitly assumed:

1. Heaven and Hell are ontologically distinct.

But, if a denial of (1) can be supported on the basis of both metaphysical grounding concerns for Hell and on exegetical analysis of the *παρουσία*, then a philosophical and hermeneutical case for something like Egan’s obdurationism is founded, for, as Egan says, “the *presence* – not absence – of the eternal love of God, Christ, the saints, and creation constitutes hell for those whose twisted freedom renders them unable to accept and respond to it.”<sup>36</sup> Both Heaven and Hell are grounded on the *παρουσία*, therefore they are not ontologically distinct.

This denial of (1) could be framed as both:

- 1a. “Heaven” and “Hell” are not ontologically distinct.

as well as:

- 1b. Heaven/Hell is ontologically homogenous.

Therefore, if (1) is denied, then the grammar of the consequent affirmation fundamentally alters the earlier example argument as such:

- 1a. Heaven/Hell is ontologically homogenous.
- 2a. “Heaven” and “Hell” are phenomenologically distinct.
- 3a. Heaven/Hell contains conscious human persons.
- 4a. Heaven/Hell is eternal in duration.
- 5a. Therefore, Heaven/Hell contains conscious human persons for eternity.

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

Ultimately, if (1) is denied, then ECT theorists, universalists, and annihilationists alike would have little reason to reject any of lines 1a-5a. Functionally, this view allows the metaphysical concerns of annihilationists, the moral concerns of universalists, and the hermeneutical concerns of defenders of eternal conscious torment to each be given their fair treatment.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, in the Afterlife, to channel C.S. Lewis, those who say to God “thy will be done” will share in the glory of the *παρουσία*; while those to whom God says “thy will be done” shall “Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty” (Isa. 2:10).

<break>

#### Heaven as Phenomenological Hell

Finally, there are at least two hermeneutical points that can be made in support of this phenomenological view of Hell: the technical timeline of Genesis 3 and the traditionally sacramental view of the Eucharistic feast. Concerning the latter, Paul’s admonition of the Corinthian church concerning their observance of the Lord’s Supper indicates that some were “weak and ill, and some have died” (I Cor. 11: 30) on account of their failure to “discern the body [of Christ]” in the process of the Eucharist. While denominational debates abound about the proper interpretation of this passage, one thing seems likely: it could be possible for two individuals to break a blessed communion wafer in half, each eat a piece, and both of them experience different results – one blessing and the other a curse – if one eater was properly discerning the relevant factors of the experience and the other was not. But if identical substances could be received with different phenomenological consequences, then this case seems not indifferent to the phenomenological divergence of the afterlife described in this chapter.

What life might look like for the reprobate in the presence of God, apart from the biblical passages that describe suffering, might similarly be exemplified by a careful reading of the story told in Genesis 3, the very chapter that sparks a biblical need for any discussion of Hell in the first place. It is instructive to notice that although the man and the woman sin in verse seven, they are not banished from God’s presence until verse twenty-four, with important events happening in between. Much of that intervening passage describes the conversation the humans (and the serpent) have with God concerning the Curse placed on Creation, but first comes verse eight, “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” Sinful humanity’s first biblical action is to hide themselves from the *παρουσία*, a goal at which they fail, but one in which they might exemplify the experience of the Afterlife for obdurate sinners.

Imagine if Adam and Eve were not alone in this story, but shared the Garden of Eden with Amanda and Steve – two humans who did not succumb to the serpent’s temptation but maintained their holiness and, as such, did not need to be banished from God’s presence. What would life have been like in the Garden after Genesis 3:8, but before Genesis 3:24? Adam and Eve would be suffering in their shamefulness while Amanda and Steve continue to enjoy life as God intended with no immediate need for a geographical division of the human population; though speculative, perhaps this small post-lapsarian, pre-judgmental window offers a suggestion of what eternal life might be like in an ontologically homogenous Afterlife.

Admittedly, it is impossible to discuss exact elements of Adam, Eve, Amanda, and Steve’s interpersonal relationships during this window of time, but considerations of what daily life in an ontologically homogenous afterlife cannot help to avoid such speculation. Though it

assuredly warrants further study, a brief consideration of potential interactions between the reprobate and the blessed in the Afterlife suggests at least three possible frameworks,

- a) The saved might ignore the damned and avoid interaction as they appear to do in the aforementioned Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt. 22:1-14). Conversely, the reprobate might self-consciously avoid the blessed (as well as God) along the lines of Adam and Eve’s embarrassment in Genesis 3:8.
- (b) The saved could demonstrate an afunctional form of pity for the plight of the damned, as does Lazarus in the previously mentioned Parable of the Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:24-25).
- (c) The saved and damned could commune together as Jesus walked and ate with sinners during His earthly ministry; most notably in Mark 2:15-16, which comes a mere page (in many Bibles) after Jesus’ initial proclamation that the “Kingdom of God is at hand!” (Mark 1:15). This would be especially important if, as some have argued,<sup>38</sup> the opportunity to receive God’s salvific blessing (and thereby transition from the ranks of the reprobate to that of the saved) does not end at death; a relationship of the (c)-sort might help to motivate such decisions. However, even if final universal salvation is not attained, there would be marked aesthetic differences in the quality of the subjective experiences of these two post-mortem groups.

<break>

### The Agony of the Infinite

To conclude this speculative expenditure where it began, David Bentley Hart describes the shadowy history of the doctrine of Hell as “the name of that false history against which the true story, in Christ, is told, and it is exposed as the true destination of all our violence, by the

Holdier, A.G. (2017). "The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell" in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

light of the resurrection, even as Christ breaks open the gates of hell and death."<sup>39</sup> For those who might see it, the Beauty of the Infinite Presence of God consummates every hope as the ground from which it originally grew; for those who see otherwise, the Agony of the Infinite is precisely the opposite.

### Bibliography

Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1999. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Adams, Marilyn McCord. 2014. "What's Wrong with the Ontotheological Error?" *The Journal of Analytic Theology* 2: 1-12.

Augustine. 1955. *Confessions and Enchiridion*, edited and translated by Albert Cook Outler. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Bauckham, Richard. 1991. "The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels" *New Testament Studies* 37 (2): 225-246.

Bawulski, Shawn. 2010. "Annihilationism, Traditionalism, and the Problem of Hell" *Philosophia Christi* 12 (1): 61-78.

Bawulski, Shawn. 2013. "Reconciliationism, A Better View of Hell: Reconciliationism and Eternal Punishment" *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (1) (2013): 123-138.

Blomberg, Craig. 1999. *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Davis, Stephen T. 1990. "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant" *Modern Theology* 6 (2): 173-186.

Egan, Harvey D. 2014. "Hell: The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy" *Theological Studies* 75 (1): 52-73.

Fackre, Gabriel. 1995. "Divine Perseverance." In *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, edited by John Sanders. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Hart, David Bentley. 2003. *The Beauty of Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).

[DRAFT VERSION]

Hart, David Bentley. 2009. *The Story of Christianity: A History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith*. New York: Quercus.

Kvanvig, Jonathan. 1993. *The Problem of Hell*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lehtipuu, Ouhii. 2007. *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke’s Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus*. Leiden: Brill.

Lewis, C.S. 2002. *The Great Divorce*. In *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. New York: Harper One.

Lewis, C.S. 2002. *A Grief Observed*. In *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. New York: HarperOne.

Lewis, C.S. 2002. *The Problem of Pain*. In *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. New York: HarperOne.

MacDonald, Gregory. 2012. *The Evangelical Universalist*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Maspero, Giulio. 2010. “Apocatastasis,” in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*. Edited by Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero. Translated by Seth Charney. Leiden: Brill.

Maximus the Confessor. 1981. “Number Twelve” of *Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God: Written for Thalassios*, In *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. 2, edited and translated by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Maximus the Confessor. 1985. “Commentary on the Our Father: A Brief Explanation of the Prayer Our Father to a Certain Friend of Christ by Saint Maximus, Monk and Confessor.” In *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, edited and translated by George C. Berthold. Mahwah: Paulist Press.

Papaioannou, Kim. 2013. *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus: Gehenna, Hades, the Abyss, the Outer Darkness Where There is Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.

Sim, David. 1992. “Matthew 22.13a and 1 Enoch 10.4a: A Case of Literary Dependence?” *The Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47: 3-19.

Talbott, Thomas. 2014. *The Inescapable Love of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Talbott, Thomas and John Piper. 1983. “Talbot vs. Piper: On Predestination, Reprobation, and the Love of God” *The Reformed Journal*. Available at

Holdier, A.G. (2017). “The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell” in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).  
[DRAFT VERSION]

<http://www.evangelicaluniversalist.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=45&t=1658>, accessed 12/1/2016.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. 1960. *The Divine Milieu*. New York: HarperCollins.

Tillich, Paul. 1951. 1957. 1963. *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Urs von Balthasar, Hans. 2003. *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*. Translated by Brian E. Daley. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Walls, Jerry. 1992. *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Wright, N.T. 2008. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maximus the Confessor 1981, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Hart 2009, 100.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis 2002, 686.

<sup>4</sup> Soteriology is the branch of theology concerned with the nature of salvation from sin.

<sup>5</sup> As N.T. Wright (2008, 105) puts it, “the Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself...There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed in God’s eventual new world.”

<sup>6</sup> Two of Aristotle four causes, final causation refers to the ultimate purpose of a thing (why it exists) while formal causation denotes the thing’s structure or shape.

<sup>7</sup> Ontotheology is a field of philosophical theology which focuses on explaining the fundamental nature of existence itself in theological terms.

<sup>8</sup> In the early twentieth century, Paul Tillich developed a view of God as Absolute Existence itself upon which every existing thing relies, but about which nothing can truly be said (for all language refers to existing things and this “God above God” is no “thing” at all). For more, see Tillich (1951, 1957, 1963). This view is worth mentioning here primarily as evidence that even under a radically different definition of God, the contingency of Creation is still explainable with some referent to Him/It.

<sup>9</sup> On the debate surrounding ontotheology and a defense of its validity, see Adams (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Augustine 1955, 343.

<sup>11</sup> Kvanvig 1993, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Egan 2014, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Teilhard de Chardin 1960, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Maximus the Confessor 1985, 112.

<sup>15</sup> On Gregory’s view of Hell, see Maspero (2010, 55-64).

<sup>16</sup> Urs von Balthasar 2003, 355-356.

<sup>17</sup> Hart 2003, 399.

<sup>18</sup> On this translation choice, see MacDonald (2012, 152). Some Bibles, such as the English Standard Version, include a comment on this variance in the margins.

<sup>19</sup> See Isaiah 6:1-13, Acts 7:55-56, 9:3-4; II Cor. 12:2-4, and Rev. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview and critical assessment of this position, see Adams (1999, 32-55). For examples, see Talbott (2014, 167-171) and Lewis (2002, 588-600).

Holdier, A.G. (2017). "The Agony of the Infinite: Heaven as Phenomenological Hell" in *Heaven and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Cushing (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press).

[DRAFT VERSION]

---

<sup>21</sup> For one example that well represents the complicated interplay of these doctrines concerning who, how, and when particular beings are saved from Hell, see the extended exchange between Talbott and Piper (1983).

<sup>22</sup> Talbott 2014, 154.

<sup>23</sup> This line can be found in Lewis (2002, 626); the same concept is imaginatively illustrated throughout Lewis' *The Great Divorce* available in the same volume.

<sup>24</sup> Talbott 2014, 154.

<sup>25</sup> See Walls (1992, 139-153) for an analysis of such debates.

<sup>26</sup> As Davis (1990, 178) points out, "It is a parable, i.e., a made-up story designed to convey a certain religious message. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that heaven and hell could be separated by a "great chasm" which cannot be crossed but across which communication can take place." See also MacDonald (2012, 145) and Wright (2008, 176-177) for similar points.

<sup>27</sup> Lehtipuu 2007, 29-38. Blomberg (1999, 123) makes an additional narrational connection between the name of the character Lazarus and Jewish history (in the story of Abraham). See also Bauckham (1991) and MacDonald (2012, 146).

<sup>28</sup> As theorized in Talbott (2014, 86-88) and MacDonald (2012, 145-147).

<sup>29</sup> Papaioannou 2013, 240.

<sup>30</sup> Papaioannou 2013, 178-184.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Sim 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Bawulski 2013, 124.

<sup>33</sup> On the rejection of continuing sin in Hell see Bawulski (2010, 70-73).

<sup>34</sup> Bawulski 2013, 124.

<sup>35</sup> Kvanvig 1993, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Egan 2014, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Additionally, it leaves easy space for discussions of postmortem salvific decisions and additional concerns surrounding exclusivist/inclusivist/pluralist soteriologies.

<sup>38</sup> For one example, see Fackre's (1995) defense of what he calls "divine perseverance."

<sup>39</sup> Hart 2003, 399.