

An Anselmian Defense of Hell

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Abstract: This article constructively retrieves St. Anselm of Canterbury's theory of retributive justice and provides a defense of what can be called the retributive model of hell. In the first part of this article, we develop the place of retributive punishment in Anselm's thinking and discuss how and when retributive punishment is a good thing. In the second part, we apply Anselm's thinking on retributive justice to the problem of hell and provide a defense of how hell, defined as a state of receiving retributive, damnatory, and irreversible punishment, is good. We then address a series of objections. Despite some criticism that both Anselm and the retributive model of hell receive in the contemporary literature, Anselm's account of retributive justice can make unique and constructive contributions to the contemporary discussion of hell; by retrieving and applying Anselm's thought to the problem of hell, we intend to kill two birds with one stone.

Keywords: Anselm, Retributive Justice, Hell, Punishment, Order, Goodness, Moral Desert

For all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.
2 Corinthians 5:10 (RSV)

Introduction

This essay has two aims. Our first aim is to explain the account of punishment offered by St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm claims

that to satisfy God's justice, humans must either offer satisfaction to God or be punished for their sins (*CDH* 1.15, 267).¹ While much has been said about Anselm's idea that Christ's sacrificial death makes satisfaction to God for our sins, much less has been said about why he thinks punishment can also satisfy God's justice and create a good state of affairs. In the first half of this paper, we aim to resolve that problem. Our second aim is to update this thinking and provide a defense of what can loosely be called a retributive model of hell, meaning, the individuals who experience hell experience it as retributive punishment (more below). This paper is thus a constructive retrieval.²

Despite some criticism that both Anselm and the retributive model of hell regularly receive, Anselm's account of retributive justice can make unique and constructive contributions to further the contemporary discussion of hell. Indeed, recent literature contains various criticisms of such a retributive model of hell. For example, David B. Hart criticizes the traditional line of Anselmian reasoning that a sin committed by a finite agent merits infinite guilt and punishment. Hart maintains that, since humans are finite and endowed with finite moral capacities by God, God's justice to humanity will be proportionate to their capacities and thus not require an infinite punishment (*inter alia*).³ While these arguments are interesting, Anselm offers additional arguments that surpass and are not dependent upon his position regarding infinite demerit. Consequently, we seek to move this debate forward by offering a fresh Anselmian defense of hell that does not rely upon the standard argument and consequently is not subject to the standard criticism.

While we develop and retrieve Anselm's account of retributive punishment in this paper, this topic is conceptually independent of his account of the atonement. After all, Anselm's account of the atonement addresses how Christ's work makes

¹ Parenthetical citations of Anselm's works use abbreviated titles plus (book and) chapter numbers, followed by the page number in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, translated by Thomas Williams (2007). The following abbreviations are used: *CDH*, *Cur Deus Homo*; *DC*, *De Concordia*; *DV*, *De Veritate* (*On Truth*); *DCD*, *De Casu Diaboli* (*On the Fall of the Devil*); *DCV*, *De Conceptu Virginali et De Originali Peccato* (*On the Virginal Conception, and On Original Sin*); *M*, *Monologion*; and *P*, *Proslogion*.

² It is only "loosely" considered a defense of a retributive model of hell because the model we propose is also compatible with a choice model of hell, where God sends or allows people to enter into a state of hell to honor their choice. Without considering retributive justice to be the only reason why some people might go to hell, we choose to focus on how the state of receiving retributive justice in hell is a good thing, regardless of how one enters this state.

³ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (2019, 38–43). In this section, Hart also makes interesting remarks about willing evil and the good, but this is not as germane as the previous argument. In addition to such criticisms, alternative accounts of hell are being offered. See, for example, Jordan Wessling (2020, Ch. 6).

satisfaction (*inter alia*), and Anselm's doctrine of punishment addresses what happens in cases where satisfaction is not made or applied. For this reason, the criticisms of his account of the atonement, such as focusing too much on the 'divine side' of the problem that atonement resolves, do not readily transfer to his account of retributive justice and our account of the retributive aspect of hell. In line with this, Eleonore Stump, a noted critic of Anselm's understanding of the atonement, seems to accept an understanding of retributive justice that is compatible with Anselm's.⁴ We will discuss Stump's understanding of retributive punishment more in §2.4. For this article, we will only address Anselm's account of punishment and its application to the doctrine of hell.

In the first part of this paper, we develop the place of retributive punishment in Anselm's thinking and discuss how and when retributive punishment is a good thing. In the second part, we apply Anselm's thinking on retributive justice to the problem of hell and argue that retributive punishment is good in this context. We thus provide an Anselmian defense of the retributive model of hell.

1.1. Moral Goodness

To understand Anselm's account of punishment, we must first look at his broader ethical theory and in particular, his account of moral goodness. In their book on Anselm, Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams explain how one can view Anselm's account of moral goodness from either a practical or teleological perspective. From the first more practical perspective, moral goodness consists in submitting to God's will.⁵ In *Cur Deus Homo*, when Boso asks Anselm what we owe to God, Anselm responds by saying that "every will of a rational creature ought to be subject to God's will" and "this is the only and the complete honor that we owe to God" (*CDH* 1.11, 261). According to Anselm, to honor God is to submit to his will, and when we do this, we maintain the order God has established in his universe and our role in it.

As Visser and Williams correctly point out, "the importance of the notion of order in Anselm's thought cannot be overemphasized."⁶ For Anselm, something is ordered whenever it is in line with God's will. While most creatures do this automatically, humans can choose whether or not to obey God's will because of their free will. When they do obey him, they maintain the order in God's creation and are morally good, but when they do not submit to his will, they sin and create disorder.

⁴ Eleonore Stump (2018, 90–92).

⁵ Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams (2009, 198).

⁶ Visser and Williams (2009, 197).

The concept of ordering in Anselm's thought applies just as much to the created order and its beauty as it does to human beings. For example, how God chooses to order the world is limited by his desire to create a beautiful and harmonious universe, in addition to the demand to maintain internal consistency among his actions and desires.⁷ This emphasis on aesthetic qualities is especially apparent when he explains how one alternative is more fitting for God to choose than others. For example, in Book 2 of *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm says that since God has already created a human out of nothing (Adam), from a man without a woman (Eve from Adam), and from a man and a woman (the normal way of creating humans), "nothing was more fitting than for" the God-Man to be brought forth "from a woman without a man" (*CDH* 2.8, 296). By choosing this fourth option, God has created in every possible way that Anselm considers.⁸

While this first perspective on moral goodness may give practical advice about how we should relate to God, it fails to fully explain *why* we should do this. Looking at Anselm's ethics from the second perspective identified by Visser and Williams helps resolve this problem. From the second perspective, which is concerned with grounding his concept of goodness, Anselm can be interpreted as saying that "a thing is right or possesses rectitude when it achieves its intended purpose."⁹ While all things have a kind of baseline goodness because they are created by God (*DCD* 1, 169–170), things can still vary in goodness depending on how much of their purpose they achieve (*DCD* 16, 198).¹⁰ And since Anselm believes that as a rational creature, a human's purpose is to know and love the highest good, which is God, a human is good insofar as he does this (*M* 68, 66). Additionally, because humans have free will, their actions can be praiseworthy or blameworthy. This allows us to be morally good in so far as we achieve our purpose. The first perspective is, therefore, grounded in this second perspective because when humans submit to God's will, which commands us to know and love him (perspective 1), humans fulfill their purpose as created things who are subject to God's will (perspective 2). In this way, Anselm's consistent use of obedience-themed language is ultimately justified by his idea that a thing is morally good insofar as it fulfills its purpose.

⁷ Frank Burch Brown (1993, 334).

⁸ While referring to standards of beauty in this way may appear to undermine God's transcendence, one must remember that as a classical theist, Anselm believes that God is beauty itself (*M* 16, 24). This ensures that the requirement that his actions be beautiful is nothing more than the demand for internal consistency and not a submission to a standard outside himself that could compromise his transcendence.

⁹ Visser and Williams (2009, 196). Cf. *DV* 2, 119–123.

¹⁰ For more on Anselm's understanding of goodness, cf. Jeffrey E. Brower (2019, 9–12, esp. fn 10).

By grounding moral goodness and badness in a thing's nature in this way, Anselm's moral theory can avoid an arbitrary kind of divine command theory according to which any action can be morally good as long as God commands it. For Anselm, God's commands are limited by three things: his divine nature, the order he established in the universe, and the nature he gave us. His commands are limited by his own nature because, as a perfect being, all his actions, including his commands, must be good and consistent with his other actions. For example, God's perfection prevents him from lying because "there is no way that a will can will to lie unless . . . it has become corrupted by abandoning truth," which God cannot do if he is uncorrupted and perfect (*CDH* I.12, 264). In a similar vein, God cannot command something inconsistent with his broader plan for the universe because this would result in him both willing and not willing the same thing, and a perfect being cannot contradict himself in this way. Lastly, by creating humans and giving us our nature, God has given us a purpose that all his commands for us must be compatible with since doing otherwise would create another contradiction. For this reason, God cannot command us to do things like hate him because by creating rational beings like us, he has already given us the purpose of knowing and loving himself as the highest good. Therefore, what God can command is limited, but not in a way that limits his sovereignty since all these constraints are self-imposed.

While Anselm grounds moral goodness in an entity's purpose, we do not maintain Anselm was a standard Medieval Eudaimonist. That is, we are not subscribing to a Eudaimonist reading of Anselm according to which the unjust are unhappy because acting unjustly is merely an ineffective way of achieving happiness. While scholars such as Katherine Rogers and Tomas Ekenberg have proposed readings along these lines, we find them problematic.¹¹ We don't have space to defend our position fully here, but one of our primary concerns is that a Eudaimonist reading of Anselm seems incompatible with his idea that sinners are able to unjustly acquire happiness in the first place. On a Eudaimonist view, whatever happiness a sinner has *must* be the amount they deserve because actions are just or unjust insofar as they effectively give us happiness. However, because Anselm talks about God rewarding the righteous (giving them the happiness they deserve but do not have) and punishing the wicked (taking away the happiness they have but do not deserve), we find Eudaimonist readings of his work implausible.¹² Instead, for Anselm, we see the proportionate relationship between justice and happiness as a normative ideal that does not arise exclusively from our actions, but

¹¹ Katherin A. Rogers (2008, 67) and Tomas Ekenberg (2022, 166–179).

¹² For more on Anselm's view of happiness and how it is distinct from justice, cf. *DCD* 12–13 (especially pg. 191) and *DC* 3.11–3.12.

rather one which God will ultimately achieve through eternal rewards and punishments.¹³

1.2. Sin

With Anselm's account of moral goodness in mind, we can now look at his understanding of sin to help us make sense of how punishment can satisfy God's justice. Fundamentally, Anselm considers sin to be the abandonment of justice.¹⁴ Speaking of the devil's first sin, Anselm says that the devil "abandoned justice *because* he willed what he ought not to will, and he abandoned it *by* willing what he ought not to will" [italics in the original translation] (*DCD* 27, 211). Likewise, when we sin, we abandon justice by willing what we should not will, and in doing so, we gain what we should not gain. For example, if someone sins by stealing, they unjustly gain not only the particular item they stole but also the happiness that motivated their theft. By unjustly gaining these things, the sinner makes the world disordered because (1) things are no longer in line with God's will, and (2) the sinner's happiness is no longer proportionate to his justice. Because God providentially guides the world, and it is only disordered when it is out of line with his active will, God cannot leave the disordering of his creation caused by sin unresolved. As will be explained in more detail in the next section, Anselm thought that "although a human being or an evil angel may be unwilling to be subject to God's will and ordering, he has no power to escape it" in the long run (*CDH* 1.15, 266). Ultimately, all of God's creatures will obey him, whether they want to or not.

In addition to defining sin as the abandonment of justice in works that are more directly focused on the topic of sin, such as *De Casu Diaboli*, Anselm tends to explain sin in terms of debt and disobedience in *Cur Deus Homo*, which discusses punishment more directly. In Chapter 11 of Book 1, Anselm says that "sinning is nothing other than failing to pay back what one owes to God" (*CDH* 1.11, 261). While Anselm's use of *debitum* is commonly and accurately translated as "owe" or "debt," Visser and Williams recognize that *debitum* can also be translated as "ought"

¹³ Our understanding of the relationship between happiness and justice in Anselm's writings is more compatible with the non-Eudaimonist readings of Anselm offered by Jeffrey E. Brower (2004, 222–256) and Calvin G. Normore (2002, 29–47, especially page 39). Notice that, in our view, justice is not willed *as* benefit; rather, justice is willed for its own sake. This is not to say that to will justice necessarily requires self-abnegation; instead, the just are ultimately happy because of being in union with God and his reward. Finally, notice that the position that justice and happiness do not provide the same will is compatible with the claim that a human's moral goodness is grounded in reaching his purpose, for the will for justice is a part of human nature.

¹⁴ Thomas Williams (2018, 123).

because, “for Anselm, debt is a species of obligation.”¹⁵ As was cited earlier, Anselm believes that subjecting our will to God’s “is the only and the complete honor that we owe to God” (CDH 1.11, 261). So, although Anselm often talks about sin in terms of incurring a debt, it is important to keep in mind that we always, in a sense, owe God a debt of obedience even when we are not in a state of sin because he is our creator who gave us everything we have.¹⁶

When we do sin, we incur an additional debt and owe God something more than everything we have because sinning “takes from God what is rightly his and dishonors God” (CDH 1.11, 262). Sin takes what belongs to God by depriving him of the obedience of his creatures, and this disobedience likewise dishonors him because to honor God is just to obey him. In *De Concordia*, Anselm adds that sin also diminishes the honor and praise due to God by harming human nature. He states that “as much as human nature diminished or spoiled in itself the precious work of God, for which God himself was to be glorified, so much did it dishonor God by its own fault” (DC 3.7, 383–384).¹⁷ In other words, sin not only disorders an individual by making him no longer subject to God, but the first humans’ sins also harmed human nature itself which added even more disorder to God’s creation by making human nature no longer as God created it. This broken human nature with its desires for sin (e.g., concupiscence) is what we inherit from Adam because of the Fall (DCV 2, 330–331). As a result, if God is going to restore his honor and add order back into creation, he must restore order in particular humans. While the incarnation and atonement restore some individual humans, punishment is sometimes necessary to reorder particular humans.¹⁸

1.3. Punishment

Divine punishment restores this order in the universe in two ways. First, by depriving sinners of what they unjustly possess, punishment restores the proper relationship between justice and happiness. Let’s call this the Order of Moral Desert. On Anselm’s ethical system, when a creature obeys God’s just commands and is thereby just, they ought to be happy in proportion to their justice (*M* 69, 67). Similarly, when someone disobeys God, they ought to suffer in proportion to their

¹⁵ Visser and Williams (2009, 225). The same point is made by David Brown (2004, 292).

¹⁶ Visser and Williams (2009, 226).

¹⁷ Unlike other in-text citations, those made for *De Concordia* use the question, paragraph, and page numbers instead of the chapter and page numbers.

¹⁸ For more on whether Anselm subscribes to a universal human nature or a group identity of some sort, cf. David Brown (2004) and Joshua C. Thurow (2017, 431–46).

injustice. If this balance were not maintained, “he who is most just [God] does not distinguish between one who loves what ought to be supremely loved and one who disdains it,” but that is “incompatible with his nature” (*M* 70, 67). Additionally, in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm says that “happiness is a state of fullness in which nothing is lacking, and so it is suitable only for those in whom justice is so pure that there is no injustice in them” (*CDH* 1.24, 285). In other words, because happiness is the state in which we are complete, only the just should have it. Similarly, if someone is unjust and disobeys God, they should be unhappy (*DCD* 12, 192). For this reason, people ought to be as happy as they are just, and as unhappy as they are unjust (*CDH* 1.12, 263 and *DCD* 12, 192). Sadly, things are not always as they ought to be here on earth.

To restore this proper balance and order in the universe, God must take what belongs to sinners so that they are as unhappy as their injustice requires. As previously stated, when a sin is committed, the sinner disobeys God and thereby deprives God of the obedience that is properly owed to him. Because humans are created in such a way that they can only desire happiness or justice, sinners must sin for the sake of happiness which they will thereby acquire unjustly (*DCD* 4, 177). Therefore, to restore order in his universe, “so that there will be nothing out of order in his kingdom,” God must deprive sinners of their unjust happiness (*DCV* 6, 336). According to Anselm, “just as a human being in sinning steals what belongs to God, so too God in punishing takes away what belongs to the human being.” Using a monetary metaphor, Anselm goes as far as to say that “when, because of their sin, they are deprived of happiness and of every good thing, they are spending what is their own—unwillingly, of course—to pay back what they have taken” (*CDH* 1.13, 265). By forcing sinners to “repay this debt” through being deprived of their unjust happiness, God reestablishes the proper relationship between happiness and justice in the sinner and restores the Order of Moral Desert in his universe.

The second way divine punishment restores order in the universe and satisfies God’s justice is by forcing rebellious individuals to be subject to him. Let’s call this the Order of Relationship. When God punishes sinners by taking away what belongs to them (i.e., their happiness), he forcibly subjects them to his will and thereby ensures that these creatures are subject to him. Anselm says that since “only what is contrary to someone’s will is a punishment for that person,” and a sinner’s will is by definition contrary to God’s, when God subjects a sinner’s will to his own, this counts as a punishment for the sinner (*DCV* 4, 334). This act restores the Order of Relationship because “by taking control of the sinner and what belongs to him, God demonstrates that all these things are subject to himself,” and created things, which by their nature ought to be subject to God’s will, are once again subject to it (*CDH* 1.14, 265–6). Given their injustice, unrepentant sinners are subject to his will, and

thereby rightly related to him, by failing to achieve happiness in proportion to their injustice. Analogously, one might suppose that a justly imprisoned individual is placed in the right relation to society. So, even though unrepentant sinners don't do what God wants them to do, he makes the world as orderly as it can be given their unrepentant sinfulness. Additionally, because God is honored when someone is subject to him, when a punishment subjects a sinner to God, the sinner thereby honors him. In this way, subjecting a sinner to God's will restores God's honor.

Notice that restoring the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship promotes goodness from the two perspectives discussed early. Since it is part of the nature of being unjust that one does not deserve happiness and part of the nature of being just that one does, when God deprives unrepentant sinners of their unjust happiness, he restores the Order of Moral Desert. Similarly, depriving the damned of their unjustly gained happiness involves subjecting them to God's will, and this promotes goodness as obedience and restores the Order of Relationship. So, by restoring these two kinds of order, punishment also promotes two kinds of goodness.

1.4. Mercy Objection

At this point, someone might ask why God cannot just leave the world disordered and himself dishonored for the sake of mercy. An objector may point out that even Anselm says in his *Proslogion* that God is merciful in addition to being just (*P* 8, 85). Not only that, but Anselm seems to suggest that God can act justly by not punishing the wicked when he says that when God "spare[s] the wicked, this is just, not because it is in keeping with their merits, but because it is in keeping with your goodness" (*P* 10, 87). If God can do this to some degree for some sinners, why not do it for all sinners?

There are two main problems with this objection. First, it fails to recognize that God cannot force people to accept the reward for Christ's satisfaction. Because the primary purpose of the *Proslogion* is to propose a natural theology of God and not give an account of God's relationship to humanity, this text does not here distinguish between repentant and non-repentant sinners. While it is true that Anselm says, "no reasoning can comprehend why, from those who are alike in wickedness, you [God] save some rather than others," this does not mean that God can simply force all sinners into accepting his forgiveness (*P* 11, 88). God cannot show mercy on all sinners because, to receive his mercy, they must first accept it, which some refuse to

do. Those who refuse to accept the benefits of the satisfaction offered to God by Christ must, therefore, still be punished.¹⁹

The second and more fundamental problem with this objection is that it is incompatible with Anselm's idea that God's purposes must ultimately be achieved. In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm says that God saves some humans because "it was not fitting that God's purpose for human beings should be completely annihilated" (CDH 1.4, 249). If God's purpose for humanity must be achieved, it would seem to follow that God's purpose for the whole universe must also be achieved.²⁰ However, this could not be done if it was left disordered, which is exactly what would happen if God did not punish humans who do not offer him satisfaction for their sins. Indeed, Anselm says that forgiving sins without receiving satisfaction for them would "make injustice like God, since injustice is [would be] subject to no law just as God is subject to no law" (CDH 1.12, 263). This would effectively mean that if God does not reorder the world after sin, then humans could do whatever they want without being subject to God's will or his laws. If that were true, then we would be just as free as God because he is also not subject to anyone's will. However, this would undermine God's power since an all-powerful God's will must always be achieved and obeyed by his creation; otherwise, he would not truly be all-powerful. Therefore, in the same way that it was fitting for God to offer satisfaction for the sins of some humans because he could not leave his purpose for humanity unachieved, he likewise could not leave his purpose for the whole world unachieved by not punishing sinners who fail to offer satisfaction for their sins.

2. Is Such a Position Plausible? A Case Study of Hell and Damnation.

With Anselm's understanding of retributive punishment laid out, we can now move on to applying these ideas to a defense of a retributive model of hell. While such a

¹⁹ It should also be noted that this objection risks putting more emphasis on God's mercy than his justice, even though Anselm appears to do the exact opposite. According to William Mann, Anselm "maintains with regularity that God is completely and supremely just and completely and supremely good, but he never describes God as completely and supremely merciful." In "Anselm on divine justice and mercy," (2019, 474). For Anselm, God is "indeed merciful precisely because you [God] are supremely just," and because his mercy is derived from his justice, it would be rather odd if God sacrificed his justice for the sake of his mercy (*P* 9, 86). Therefore, even though God does show mercy to some sinners, he must still receive Christ's satisfaction to do this.

²⁰ This could be for one of at least two reasons. First, humanity could be the height of creation; if God will fulfill his purposes in this case, *a fortiori*, he will fulfill his purposes in other cases. Second, God could pursue all his purposes to completion, so it follows that he will do so for his purpose for one part of creation.

position has recently fallen out of favor, we suggest that the above aspects of Anselm's account of retributive justice offer a fresh defense of the retributive model of hell. This is not to say it is without problems, but it is to say that it has more going for it than individuals have given it credit.

Recall that moral goodness has two aspects: an obligation to maintain one's order in obedience to God (the practical aspect), and the fulfillment of one's nature along with the order and beauty of the universe as a whole (the metaphysical aspects). By remaining properly ordered and fulfilling one's nature, an individual honors God. This account of moral goodness explains what it means to sin, namely, to create disorder and fail to fulfill one's nature, which just is to dishonor God. While sin is understood as a failure to achieve moral goodness, and punishment is a response to sin, punishment does not necessarily restore human nature or individuals to their uncorrupted state. It is Christ's atoning work, not punishment, which offers satisfaction to God and restores both human nature and some members of humanity. Punishment, for Anselm, only helps directly re-order *creation as a whole* and subjects the sinful human to God's will, thereby restoring God's honor.

In this half of the paper, we will look at how Anselm's theory of punishment can inform a defense of the retributive model of hell. We define "hell" as a condition where people receive retributive, damnatory, and irreversible punishment. It is retributive in kind in that one of hell's main goals is to cause those deserving of punishment to suffer contrary to their will and thereby restore the proper balance between justice and happiness, as opposed to other kinds of punishment, such as restorative.²¹ It is damnatory in its degree, meaning it constitutes absolute disunion with God. Lastly, it is irreversible because it is everlasting in length and because those in hell cannot leave.²²

In defining hell this way, we acknowledge that other factors contribute to the achievement of such a state, e.g., the natural consequence of sin and an individual's

²¹ We specify that it is retributive but recognize that in addition to satisfying retributive justice, hell could also be motivated by divine love, or justified by the good of preventing others from separating themselves from God because they know some people are or could be in a state of hell for their sins. Regarding knowledge of people in hell, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, q. 87, arts 3, ad. 2.

Additionally, we do not wish to make any claims about the condition of those who die with original sin but without committing any serious sins, such as unbaptized infants.

²² This is with the possible exception of Christ and those whom he harrowed. Cf. Ephesians 4:7-9 and 1 Peter 3:17-22. If helpful, compare our definition with the four theses that Jonathan L. Kvanvig maintains are a part of the traditional doctrine of hell, in (2010, 632). Our definition of hell diverges in no significant way from these four theses. We do not, however, explicitly defend the anti-universality thesis (thesis 3) in this paper.

choice to reject union with God. Thus, for example, in line with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we also uphold that hell is a “state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.”²³ Yet for the purposes of this article, we shall exclusively focus on how the retributive punishment aspect of hell can be a good.²⁴

Notably, even those models of hell that focus on love and choice as reasons for *entry* into hell most likely must describe the *state* of hell as restorative, merely a natural consequence, or retributive. But, if such models claim that those in hell will never be properly united with God and this is humanity’s highest good (as most traditional models of hell claim), then hell as a restorative punishment would seem to be ultimately pointless with regard to humanity’s highest good since those in it would never actually be fully healed and united with God.²⁵ Moreover, we think it is fruitful to look for possible goods that hell could achieve even if the suffering in it is just a natural consequence of unrepentant serious sin and disunion with God. We consequently limit our focus to the retributive aspect of hell.

Anselm only briefly writes about hell, and when he does, it is in the context of whether those who are condemned such as the devil and fallen angels can be restored (*CDH* 2.21, 325), or whether God is justified in his punishment of seemingly innocent individuals, such as unbaptized infants (*DCV* 28–29, 357–359). Because Anselm does not directly address our concern in depth, we will move from the historical retrieval of what Anselm thought to the systematic and constructive upshot to such a position. Though the success of the argument does not technically depend on whether Anselm would have endorsed it, we consider the following account to be derived from, inspired by, and largely consistent with Anselm’s thought.

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (1997, 1033).

²⁴ Per Jonathan L. Kvanvig (2010, 630–638), this means our model is a retributive model of hell, as opposed to a choice model. According to the latter, God honors an individual’s choice of disunion. We consider this to be subsumed into the retributive model as a factor that leads to the state of hell, where the state of hell as retributive punishment is our main focus. Cf. Objection 4 in this work.

²⁵ A defender of a restorative model of hell may also claim that hell can be restorative but still be eternal if the damned are continuously improved by their punishments but never fully restored. We admit that this is an option, but we are unaware of any scholar who proposes this theory and will not be considering it here.

2.1. Retributive

In the first half of this paper, we argued that, for Anselm, restoring the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship are goods that ought to be pursued.²⁶ Largely in line with Anselm, we think that hell promotes these goods when the objects of punishment are unjustly happy, fail to submit to God, and more generally, atonement has been offered but not accepted by the guilty party such that receiving retributive punishment is the only way left to restore the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship.²⁷ Giving an agent retributive punishment would promote his ordering only if he is already disordered in these ways. For recall, Anselm considers punishment to be like an exacting of payment that submits the individual to God; this effectively causes the individual to be ordered with respect to God in both ways. Lastly, while Anselm does not endorse the following condition, we maintain for present purposes that there must be an option for fallen human beings to be united with God for individuals to be held responsible and justly punished for refusing union with God.²⁸ With these relevant conditions, the retributive punishment of hell causes and derives its goodness from the goods of restoring the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship.

Lest there be a misunderstanding, the punishment of hell is retributive and not restorative for two reasons. First, complete restoration of the individual cannot take place under these conditions, for we are talking about an individual who has rejected the atoning work of Christ and thus union with God. Since union with God is required for an individual's complete flourishing, restorative punishment is no longer a live option in this context.

Second, restoration of order does not require restorative punishment. Retributive punishment can still achieve its goals of restoring the Orders of Moral Desert and

²⁶ It should be noted that restoring the Order of Relationship also promotes God's honor, but since this is not done except by obeying him, we will hereafter limit ourselves to talking about the two orders.

²⁷ This entails that retributive punishment is extrinsically good, rather than intrinsically good. For more reading on this, cf. Michael J. Zimmerman and Ben Bradley (2019).

For this paper, we must bracket the issue of whether all people will actually, in their life on earth, have such an option, and the dilemma of whether someone is culpable for a choice when they are generally ignorant of the consequences. Importantly, we do not confine this to be a live option during a certain period of time, or in this lifetime. Thus, our approach is compatible with post-mortem choice.

²⁸ For present purposes, we must set aside how this relates to the possibility of infant damnation; one could, of course, maintain that our account is compatible with infants needing some sort of choice.

Relationship, but the punished individual still fails to achieve his end of flourishing in union with God. Restorative punishment is, in contrast, punishment for the purpose of restoring the individual such that he can reach his appointed end of flourishing and properly relate to himself and others.²⁹ While restorative punishment involves restoring the Order of Relationship, this is done for the sake of the punished individual's flourishing, whereas merely retributive punishment does not aim at promoting the person's flourishing. Thus, even if the retributive punishment of hell restores the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship, it is not necessarily a restorative punishment.

For example, consider an alcoholic who turns to violence whenever she drinks. The sentence she faces is five years of jail time for domestic violence. If the punishment were merely retributive, this person would be sentenced to five years in jail *for the violence* she is responsible for as a punitive measure. Whether she stops being an alcoholic would be irrelevant to whether the punishment is effective. If the punishment were restorative, the alcoholic could very well be sentenced to five years in prison, though she would also reasonably receive care for her alcoholism. One could then measure how effective the punishment is by the degree to which the individual rehabilitates. In the first sentence, the purpose of the jail time is to simply exact a type of payment and make it so that she relates to society in the proper way given her crimes. In the second sentence, the purpose of the jail time is for the individual to heal; it allows a certain amount of time to ensure that the individual recuperates and thus flourishes and rightly relates to others.

Crucially, both restorative and retributive punishment restore the Order of Relationship in the above example. In the case of restorative punishment, when the alcoholic recovers, she is rightly related to herself and others. She can now be in good relation to others as a mother, daughter, and friend. Likewise, in the case of this retributive punishment, the alcoholic is rightly ordered by submitting to her country. However, the retributive punishment also restores the Order of Moral Desert by taking away her unjust happiness.

While these examples help detail the difference between restorative and retributive punishment, they also serve to detail why some retributive punishments can't be restorative and how they can still achieve re-ordering. They cannot be restorative if the relevant conditions have not been met. Most prominently, the person in this case has not accepted union with Christ. But it nonetheless promotes

²⁹ As Aquinas has it, a subject can will his own restorative punishment though not his own retributive punishment. Even though a subject can will the suffering necessary to satisfy retributive justice, he can in no sense will his own retributive punishment because then it would not be a punishment strictly speaking. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, q. 87, art. 7.

order, for the person is put in the only remaining right relations to others and God available to her. This is essential to Anselm's notion of ordering, for while being rightly ordered entails that one rightly relates to God, it also entails that one is rightly related to oneself and others.

Thus far we have argued that, under certain relevant conditions, retributive punishment is a good because it successfully restores the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship. As is evident, these relevant conditions and the promoted goods are ones that Anselm broadly supports, and, as we have argued, are independently plausible.

2.2. Damnatory

With the first of these three conditions being met, let us turn to the second. Recall that retributive punishment is a distinction of kind, where damnatory punishment is a distinction of degree—the highest degree to which one can be punished, which is absolute disunion with God. That damnatory punishment is a good may not seem obvious, but it is simply an extension of our earlier claims. Damnatory retributive punishment does not alter the kind of punishment but the degree of this punishment. Retributive punishment is thus already in principle justified as a kind of good, though whether the damnatory degree is merited in this context must also be justified.

While one of the traditional Anselmian reasons that damnatory punishment is a good is that a finite sin can earn an infinite demerit, we will not pursue that line of argument here.³⁰ Instead, we will argue that damnatory punishment is a justifiable good because it simply is making effective what has been put in place. On the condition that atonement has been offered, damnatory punishment is simply making effective what was already nascent in the individual's choice: their own happiness over union with God. And because union with God is required for true happiness, the individual will fail to be happy against their will. This does not mean that at the moment of choice the individual will be fully aware of their inevitable failure to be happy. But the point is that sinners choose what they think will make them happy over union with God. Indeed, this is precisely Anselm's line of reasoning with the bad angels who fell. According to Anselm, the bad angel "sinned by willing something advantageous that he did not have and ought not to have

³⁰ For literature on this discussion, cf. Thomas Talbott (2000, esp. 144–5); Oliver Crisp (2003, 36–53); Gregory Macdonald (2012, esp. 29); Marilyn McCord Adams (1975, 433–47).

willed at that time, but that could have served to increase his happiness" (*DCD* 4, 178).

Given that God will either actively or permissively finalize the choice, *absolute* disunion must obtain. Now, given that happiness is only found in union with God, and suffering follows without it, it simply follows that any individual who has rejected union with God will suffer. For the individual will not have actually obtained the happiness he sought, and in line with Anselm, to suffer is to be in a condition that is contrary to one's will (*DCV* 4, 334). This is so regardless of whether God chooses to actively mete out punishment once the state of absolute disunion obtains, or whether it is simply a natural consequence of the choice the individual makes which he permits.³¹ Either way, God is said to deliver justice to the individual and thereby restore order and give deserved unhappiness to the unjust. God is still legitimately involved, for he either actively causes or passively allows the balance to be restored. Just as someone who could prevent their child from eating too much candy is involved in the child's choice, so too would God be involved in permissively delivering punishment. Both are logically compatible with Anselm's account, though for present purposes we need not tie the present account to either understanding of God's activity.

It is, of course, a perplexing issue why an individual would choose his own happiness over union with God. If God is the source of all goodness, how could it be rational to act in such a way? Moreover, there is a question of why God would permit choices which carry such grave consequences: how could that be just? Notice that the former question is equivalent to what William Wood calls the "harder problem of the Fall."³² While we cannot pursue Wood's suggestion here, we iterate that absolute disunion need not obtain after a single choice, but can also be, for example, a result from a series of choices that cements the individual's disposition towards God or from serious sins committed with full knowledge and consent.

2.3. Irreversible

This finishes our argument for the second aspect, that hell is a condition of receiving *damnatory* retributive punishment. Recall that hell is also irreversible because it is everlasting in length and because those in hell cannot leave. Here we offer two reasons to believe this. The first reason rests upon God's sovereignty and nature and the second is a reason to think that God will not annihilate the damned.

³¹ Since this is the case, notice that the retributive punishment here is very amenable to what is known as the 'choice' model of hell.

³² William Wood (2016, 223–45).

The first reason that the decree is irreversible rests upon God's sovereign purposes and nature. God's purpose for humanity, as Anselm maintains, is that humanity should flourish in communion with him. This is the very reason why Anselm thinks God does not annihilate humanity outright instead of offering atonement through the incarnation (*CDH* 1.4; cf. §1.4 of the present paper). This does not support the idea that all humans will be saved, however, because Anselm treats the individual's relationship to humanity as a constitutive sum or part-whole relation. If at least some of humanity (or one part of humanity) achieves its end, then God's purpose for humanity is achieved. However, using this general idea of God fulfilling his purposes, we can offer a good reason to believe that annihilating the damned is contrary to God's purposes and nature.

Anselm's argument for why God should save some humans rests on the idea that union is a right relation to God such that the individual flourishes in friendship or communion with God. Central to this claim is the notion of right order and God's sovereign purposes with respect to ordering all participants or parts of humanity. According to Anselm, humans have an eternal purpose because they were made "in order that it [they] might love the supreme essence without end" (*M* 69, 66–67). This entails that God will not annihilate a sinful person and instead order him, for if he annihilates the sinner he will fail to eternally order a being he wanted to live forever. If this is the case, then God must continuously reorder every human and, therefore, not annihilate the object of damnation. While God would prefer to order the sinner by restoring his original justice, this is the only possible type of ordering he can give to fallen humans who have rejected his gift of salvation.

Regarding the second reason why the decree is irreversible, we offer a reason to believe that hell does *not* entail annihilation. In support of annihilationism, Kvanvig argues that if hell is a state of disunion with God, and God is the source of life, then hell is logically equivalent to being annihilated.³³ To use our own analogy, disunion with God, the creator and sustainer of all things, would be equivalent to taking a person off of life support. But this argument fails to distinguish between two senses of union. One sense is the metaphysical, contingency relation that Kvanvig presumably has in mind. In this sense, if x is metaphysically contingent upon y , and disunion just means that x ceases to be contingent upon y , then x ceases to exist. Another sense of union is a relational state of communion, where the two individuals' wills align in support of at least one of the parties' flourishing. We are only claiming that hell is disunion in this latter sense, and this is not logically

³³ Kvanvig (2010, 635).

equivalent to annihilation. As a result, we can be disunited with God in this way while still existing because we are still united with him in the former way.

We thus conclude our argument for the three aspects of hell: retributive, damnatory, and irreversible punishment. In this last section, we offered independent reasons to believe that hell is irreversible: sovereign ordering and the failure to be annihilated. These reasons, in addition to the foregoing sections' reasons, are independent of the traditional reason that a finite sin against an infinitely good God deserves an infinite punishment. Throughout this last section, we gave attention to the possibility of annihilationism because this is a common description of what a retributive model of hell looks like. However, because an annihilationist model of hell fails to be eternal, it is and has been shown to be unsatisfactory.

2.4. Objections

Here we address several objections to our defense of hell. We first respond to a general objection to any retributive model of hell, and we then turn to objections that are unique to our Anselmian, retributive model of hell.

Objection 1: God's Loving Motivation

The retributive model of hell assumes that God's primary motivation with respect to the damned is retributive justice. However, God's two major actions of creation and redemption are motivated by love and cannot be made sense of in terms of justice. It is, therefore, both inconsistent and inappropriate to support the retributive model of hell, for it rests on the false assumption that God's primary motivation with respect to the damned is retributive justice instead of love.³⁴

Rejoinder: Above, we are clear that choice is an important factor in achieving the state of hell. Because it is a factor in achieving this state, God's primary motivation towards the damned before they achieve such a state, in the forging of hell, can be that of love. It is possible that God forges hell out of love to honor and respect the choice of the damned. Once individuals achieve such a state of hell, love could still be a primary motivation insofar as individuals remain in hell, for God consistently honors their choice. While some might object that such an idea is foreign to a true conception of love,³⁵ it is not implausible to say that love involves respecting an

³⁴ Kvanvig (2010, 638).

³⁵ Hart (2009, 35).

individual's desires and choices. Moreover, it is not inconsistent to claim that God is also motivated by justice at this point. He might plausibly have two motivations for a single action. Just as Odin could be motivated by both love and retributive justice when he banished his son Loki, so too can God be equally motivated by love and retributive justice in consigning individuals to a state of hell.

Notice that this position is conceptually independent from Anselm's account of the atonement. Even Stump, despite her rejection of what she calls "the Anselmian kind of interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement,"³⁶ maintains that someone can love others while still wanting them to receive retributive punishment.³⁷ She claims that these are compatible because receiving retributive justice can be good for wrongdoers and thus consistent with desiring their good, which is part of what it means to love someone.³⁸ For wrongdoers who are repentant, it can help them make amends, and for those who do not repent but are able to do so, it can help them see that what they did was wrong and repent. Even for wrongdoers who cannot repent, retributive punishment can at least prevent them from getting morally worse by showing them that they "cannot do evil acts with impunity."³⁹ While we do not wish to defend Stump's account of retributive punishment here, we highlight this position as a possible way to understand the compatibility of retributive justice and love offered by an individual who takes issue with Anselmian accounts of the atonement.

Objection 2: Good for People in Hell?

This argument does not demonstrate that hell is good since those experiencing eternal suffering would surely disagree! Hell is not good *for these people*.

Rejoinder: We are only arguing for the objective goodness of hell and have not claimed that the subjective, phenomenological value/feeling of being in hell is good. Surely, the individuals in a state of hell would say hell is bad or unpleasant *for them*. Yet this does not detract from claiming it is objectively good. To be clear, however, our argument does not require that hell be a state of feeling like one is literally burning, nor that of mind-blinding pain such that the individuals could not begin to form coherent thoughts. Hell involves suffering contrary to one's desires and

³⁶ Stump (2018, 71).

³⁷ Stump (2018, 91–92).

³⁸ According to Stump, the other part of love is a desire "for union with the beloved," but whether or not complete reconciliation is desirable or possible depends on the beloved. Stump (2018, 79 and 83–84).

³⁹ Stump (2018, 91).

disunion with God. Other conditions can fulfill this definition, such as loneliness, depression, being in a state of dread and fear, or even itching all-over one's body without the ability to appease the itch. This minimal definition of hell neither requires nor excludes any of these states. And none of these detract from our argument: that hell is objectively good.

Objection 3: God Cannot Do Wrong

Individuals who receive the punishment of hell cannot reach their appointed end of flourishing in union with God. This is a bad state of affairs. Because it is God who would finalize this choice, God would be causing a bad state of affairs to obtain. But God, being the source of all and only goodness, cannot act in such a way. Therefore, God does not send people to hell.

Rejoinder: We reply that God's choice is only one of the several conditions being met for this state of affairs to obtain. Recall that the other conditions are the individual's choice to commit a serious sin and his rejection of the atonement offered by Christ and accepted by some sinful individuals. As a result, God is not the sole cause of the people in hell not flourishing. Additionally, even assuming that God does play an active role in sending people to hell, it does not follow that he is morally blameworthy for this non-ideal state of affairs, or that he intends certain bad consequences. To see this, consider the doctrine of double effect. The doctrine of double effect maintains that it is sometimes permissible to perform an action with a bad effect as long as (1) the action itself is not inherently wrong, (2) the actor intends the good and not the bad effect, (3) the good effect does not happen by means of the bad effect, and (4) the good effect outweighs the bad effect.⁴⁰ To use St. Thomas Aquinas's example, killing in self-defense may only be permissible as long as one does not intend to kill, but only does so accidentally while intending to preserve one's life.⁴¹ Analogously, God only aims to achieve the goods of punishment, but a bad side effect of this action is that the particular person fails to flourish.

While it would obviously be better if no one went to hell because all sinners repented and accepted the gift of salvation, there is still the possibility that this will not happen. As long as some sinners do not repent, God must still make the best out of a bad situation by punishing unrepentant sinful humans to restore order to his creation. Because he cannot force people to accept his gift of salvation, if he does not punish the unrepentant, some sinners would still be separated from God, and the

⁴⁰ For a more in-depth explanation of the doctrine of double effect, cf. Alison McIntyre (2023).

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, q. 64, art. 7. While Aquinas's example of self-defense highlights the doctrine of double effect, this is not to say that Aquinas is correct on this point.

world would still remain disordered. To restore at least the Orders of Moral Desert and Relationship, God must punish unrepentant sinners. This is the best possible outcome, considering the relevant conditions, and because he only intends the good effect of reordering his universe and not the bad effect of certain humans not flourishing, it is morally acceptable.⁴²

Objection 4: Anyone Can Exercise Objective Goods

If hell is an objective good, then it is a good regardless of who punishes the subject. This means that anyone, even a vengeful sadist, can exercise this drastic punishment upon a sinful subject. But this seems patently false. Therefore, hell is not an objective good.

Rejoinder: Though hell is an objective good, it does not follow that any party can justifiably deliver this punishment. Even if an individual were capable of delivering this punishment, it is only proper for God to do so. When a citizen breaks the law, there are appointed authorities (e.g., the police and the courts) who address the crime and execute the punishment. Because hell is a state of disunion between God and an individual, and the punishment of hell rightly promotes and restores God's honor, it is only proper for God to exercise this punishment on an individual. God comprises both the court and the individual offended. Anselm himself goes even further than this by saying that legitimate earthly authorities who punish wrongdoers are simply acting as God's instruments. Even so, this does not mean that all deserved punishments are conducted by legitimate authorities. Anselm writes, "when a sinner is punished by someone who lacks the authority to punish him, it cannot be denied that the punishment is both correct and not correct, since it both ought to be and ought not to be: for the sinner ought to be punished, but this man ought not to punish him" (*DV*, 8, 131). In this way, even if Satan acts immorally by punishing someone in hell, this punishment can still be just because the person deserved the punishment.

Conclusion

We argued that Anselm's theory of punishment offers a good background for understanding the good of hell. We retrieved Anselm's account of retributive punishment and then used this to constructively argue that hell is an objective good.

⁴² For more on this discussion, especially an alternative view, cf. Marilyn McCord Adams (1999, 21 and 40–41).

We then addressed several objections more unique to our understanding of hell, and a general objection that any retributive model must face. While such a position has recently fallen out of favor, we suggested that the above aspects of Anselm's account of retributive justice offer a fresh defense of the retributive model of hell. This is not to say it is without problems, but it is to say that it has more going for it than individuals have given it credit.

In offering an Anselmian defense of the good of hell, we squarely place the retributive model of hell within the dominant Christian tradition, employ Anselm's account of punishment, and clearly detail in what sense hell is an objective good. In addition to offering a philosophical defense for the retributive model of hell, our paper also offers a robust, Anselmian understanding of what it means for hell to be a justified and merited good. Throughout, we have stressed the compatibility of our position with God's respecting individual's choices, since suffering is the natural consequence of choosing to reject God. We also noted that, even if one subscribes to a choice or divine love model of hell, any understanding of hell which allows for the option that not all people will be saved must face the question of the state of the unredeemed. Our Anselmian defense provides good reasons to believe that the state of the unredeemed is that of being punished with everlasting punishment, in a state of suffering contrary to their will, and in absolute disunion with God.⁴³

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⁴³ We would like to thank the two peer reviewers for their comments on this article.

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