

Hell

The language of heaven and hell as well as the doctrines associated with this language have their origin in the great monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The philosophical issues surrounding these doctrines have much wider significance, however, for every religion promises certain benefits to its adherents, and those benefits require by way of contrast some costs incurred by those who do not receive those benefits. The philosophical issues that arise out of the vivid imagery in western culture concerning heaven and hell arise in every religious context, though they are surely more pressing in some contexts. Here the focus will be on the problems arising for the doctrines in the great monotheist traditions, and especially within Christianity, but the issues discussed will arise for any religious tradition.

The doctrines of heaven and hell are doctrines concerning the afterlife. Recent theological work that denies existence beyond the grave has sometimes included metaphorical reference to heaven and hell as aspects of one's present earthly life,¹ wanting to retain the deep personal significance of our choices involved in talk of heaven and hell without endorsing the substantive metaphysical thesis of life after death. Though there may be a point to such metaphors, the doctrines of heaven and hell involve a commitment to the idea of an afterlife and to an eschatological significance of our present lives beyond the grave.

The doctrines of heaven and hell play an important social function as well. Even atheists have often held that the doctrines ought to be taught, even if false, because of the motivation they provide for good behavior. Here, however, the focus will be on the purely cognitive issues involved in one of these doctrines, the doctrine of hell: whether it is true or false, and the kinds of arguments used to defend various views on the matter.

1. Approaches to the Nature of Hell

The usual approach in Christianity to the topic of the afterlife proceeds in terms of a group of contrasts, contrasts between punishment and reward, between grace and reward, or between mercy and justice. With regard to the doctrine of hell, the dominant approach conceives of it in terms of punishment. On this basis, one might expect the doctrine of heaven to focus on the concept of reward. Though the

concept of reward plays a significant role in the Christian doctrine of heaven, the primary role is played by the concepts of mercy and grace. This fact raises the issue of the degree of fit between a conception of heaven and a conception of hell, a topic we will return to later, but for purposes of this section, the important point to note is the centrality of the contrast between punishment and reward in the standard conception of hell.

a. The Punishment Model and the Traditional Conception

The primary philosophical criticisms of the doctrine of hell have focused on whether it is fair or just for someone to be sent to hell, and these criticisms reinforce the centrality of the punishment model in discussions of the doctrine of hell. The traditional characterization of the punishment model involves a commitment to four separable theses:

- (1) The Punishment Thesis: the purpose of hell is to punish those whose earthly lives and behavior warrant it;
 - (2) The No Escape Thesis: it is metaphysically impossible to get out of hell once one has been consigned there;
 - (3) The Anti-Universalism Thesis: some people will be consigned to hell;
- and
- (4) The Eternal Existence Thesis: hell is a place of conscious existence.

We can call this particular elaboration of the punishment model “the traditional doctrine of hell,” and it, or a minor modification of it, is the primary doctrine of hell found throughout the history of Christianity. The minor modification arises from the doctrine known as the harrowing of hell, according to which between the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection, he preached to the inhabitants of hell, some of whom accepted his message and thereby went to heaven. The doctrine of the harrowing of hell thus implies the falsity of the No Escape Thesis, since according to that doctrine, some have escaped hell. The modification of the traditional view is only minor, however, since the escape in question results from a unique and unrepeatable event, so that it is not possible for anyone apart from this special event to escape from hell. This modified No Escape Thesis yields a minor modification of the Traditional Doctrine, but

one with little philosophical significance for the question of the justice or fairness of hell. This is because there is no distinction whatsoever between the modified view and the traditional view once the central events of Jesus's death and resurrection have been completed, and the questions surrounding the justice or fairness of hell do not involve any special considerations of the location in history of those who end up in hell.

This characterization of the traditional view of hell leaves open whether hell involves the same punishment for all in hell, or whether there are differences in the degree of punishment. The strong version of the traditional view maintains that the punishment is the same for all, and a mitigation of this strong view argues that the traditional view is correct but needs to be supplemented by a clause specifying how some people deserve harsher treatment in hell than others.

The standard argument for the traditional view of hell appeals to a principle concerning when punishment is justified, and this argument claims that punishment deserved is not simply a function of harm caused and harm intended, even though such considerations take center stage in usual non-teleological theories of punishment. The traditional view of hell cannot be sustained by appeal to a theory of punishment of this sort, for it would be at best contingent that hell is the appropriate punishment on such a theory. To defend the traditional view of hell, something stronger is needed. According to defenders of the traditional view, punishment deserved is also a function of the status of the individual one has wronged, and they argue that all wrongdoing constitutes a wrong against God, and that wronging God is as bad a thing as anyone could do. Indeed to wrong God is infinitely bad and therefore justifies an infinite punishment.

This argument would seem to be vulnerable at the point where it requires that all wrongdoing involves wronging God. Critics of the argument wonder how this could be. People generally do not *intend* to harm God or to defy him in some way when they act wrongly, though of course both are possible and, in all likelihood, occur much more often than we are aware. Defenders of the argument appeal to the ideas of ownership and dependence in response to these charges. One can wrong the Rockefellers, for example, by destroying their property, whether or not one is aware of whose property is being destroyed. Moreover, one can wrong parents by harming their children, whether or not one has any acquaintance with the parents (and even if, by some bizarre metaphysical reasoning, one has become convinced either that the particular

child in question is parentless or that no one has any parents).

Attention to the parent/child analogy is particularly instructive, for there comes a point in time at which parents are no longer wronged by harms done to their offspring, though they presumably will still be angered and offended by such actions. There is no precise cutoff point at which the parents are no longer wronged, but the moral difference here clearly has to do with the degree of independence from the parents that has been achieved. Middle-aged and fully competent adults normally have achieved such independence, whereas infants clearly have not.

Regardless of the vagueness of the concept of the dependence relation between parent and child, the relation itself is useful in a defense of the idea that all wrongdoing wrongs God. If one endorses the doctrine of divine conservation, according to which God sustains the universe at every moment of existence, one has grounds for thinking of the relationship between God and created things in a way that supports the idea that all wrongdoing wrongs God. For created things are even more dependent on God than the smallest infants on their parents, so if degree of independence is the right way to think about the conditions under which wronging offspring fails to wrong parents, no such degree of independence is possible between God and his creation.

The defensibility of the claim that all wrongdoing wrongs God has been taken to be the linchpin for a successful defense of the traditional doctrine of hell, but that claim is false. Even if all wrongdoing wrongs God and is therefore, in an objective sense, infinitely bad, it does not follow that an infinite punishment is deserved. A little attention to homicides and ways in which one can cause the death of another human being shows the inadequacy of such an inference. Causing the death of a human being is a very serious matter—in an objective sense, we may assume that it is among the worst things a person could do. Even so, punishment deserved is not simply a function of the badness of the action. The killing might have been accidental, for example, or it might have been done for the sake of justice, as in cases of capital punishment or in carrying out a just war. These examples show that even if an action rates very high on the scale of badness, other factors can diminish the severity of punishment deserved and, in some cases, eliminate it altogether. Included among these other factors are the intentions, plans, and goals of the person in question, and depending on what we find here, it is possible for a truly bad action to warrant no punishment at all—as often happens when people lose their lives in car accidents. The proper perspective,

then, is to recognize the traditional view has been undermined if the claim that all wrongdoing wrongs God cannot be defended, but that a full defense of the traditional view requires more than this claim.

b. Alternatives to the Traditional Conception

The difficulties involved in defending the traditional view have led, throughout the history of Christianity to denials of both the Traditional Doctrine and the minor modification discussed above. Various alternatives have been proposed, but all of the standard non-traditional doctrines still endorse the punishment model. Annihilationism in its usual form, or the related position called Conditional Immortalism,² understand hell primarily in terms of a reference to the state of non-existence. Such views thereby adopt the Punishment Model, clarifying it with theses (1)-(3) above, but denying the Eternal Existence Thesis. Second Chance theories, which hold that it is possible to choose heaven after finding oneself in hell, also accept the punishment model. They affirm all of the traditional conception of hell except for the No Escape Thesis, which they deny. Universalists, those who believe that everyone will be in heaven on grounds that a loving God could not allow anyone to suffer the disaster of hell, accept all of the traditional conception of hell except for the claim that some people will be consigned to hell. These alternatives to the traditional doctrine of hell compose all of the historically prominent options within the Christian tradition, and it is instructive to note that there is no such prominent alternative to the traditional view that rejects the first thesis above, the thesis that identifies the purpose of hell in terms of punishment.

In each case, the perceived need for an alternative to the traditional view concerns the injustice or unfairness of hell on the traditional construal of it. The same concern can prompt a different kind of alteration of the traditional view, one that denies that heaven and hell are exclusive and exhaustive of afterlife possibilities. For example, the need for a doctrine of limbo, addressing the issue of the eternal destiny of children short of the age of accountability or heathen who have never heard the Christian message, is best viewed as arising from some perceived injustice involved in the Traditional Doctrine. The doctrine of purgatory might be viewed in this way as well, though it is more typically understood as a part of heaven, a place where impurities are removed to make it possible fully to enjoy the blessings of eternal life.

c. Problems for These Views

Each of these views accepts the same underlying core picture of what hell is like, what I have termed the Punishment Model of Hell. Each of these positions begins from this model, and each view offers a *mitigation* of the perceived severity of the Traditional Doctrine. Each thus begins from the assumption that the Traditional Doctrine is unacceptable because it is simply unjust, or perhaps, unbecoming to a loving God. In this regard, it is a bit ironic to note the same problems plague these alternative views. Annihilationism, for example, views the cessation of existence as somehow preferable to unending conscious existence in hell. A primary difficulty with this response to a perceived inadequacy of the traditional view is that our ordinary conceptions of punishment, however, view capital punishment as a far more severe kind than life imprisonment. If the traditional view is embellished with vivid images of the sort that appear in Jesus' parable of the Lazarus and Dives, or in Dante's descriptions of hell, Annihilationism can be seen as preferable. Still, the fundamental tenets of the traditional view described above do not involve these embellishments, and without them, it is not clear how Annihilationism could be seen as less problematic than the traditional view; if anything, it appears to raise greater concern about the justice of hell inasmuch as capital punishment is more severe than life in prison.

Universalism has an advantage over Annihilationism in this respect, for it contains no features that appear to raise greater concern about the justice of hell than the traditional view. The fundamental issue for it is that its most promising variety fails to solve the problem of the perceived injustice of hell. Universalism can be offered as a contingent thesis or as a necessary one. If it is offered as a necessary thesis, the thesis that it is metaphysically impossible for anyone to end up in hell, it faces difficulty in explaining how human freedom is involved in any substantive way in determining one's eternal destiny. For no matter what one's choices or attitudes, no matter what one wishes or desires, one will end up in heaven on this view. Given this implication of necessary Universalism, the most common form of the view is a contingent one, according to which, even though it is metaphysically possible that some end up in hell, as a matter of fact no one will. The problem for this version of Universalism, however, is that it fails to solve the problem it was intended to solve. For the traditional understanding of God does not portray him

as good as a matter of happenstance, but rather as an essential feature of him. So if it is a merely contingent fact that all are saved and thus avoid hell, this universalist position still allows that it is possible for some to end up in hell, but if the traditional doctrine of hell threatens to undermine God's goodness because some *actually* end up in hell, contingent Universalism equally threatens to undermine God's goodness because some *might* end up in hell. Contingent Universalism thus only modally masks the underlying problem of the perceived injustice of hell.

Second chance views fare no better. Some views that go by that name are not alterations of the Traditional Doctrine of Hell at all, but merely insist that because of the severity of hell, persons deserve a second chance to avoid it after death (notice that nothing in the above four theses requires that presence in heaven or hell occurs immediately after one dies). Yet, if such a second chance is deserved, it is hard to see why the same considerations would not justify a third chance if the second chance were passed on, thereby launching an infinite sequence of delays of consignment to hell. The regress cannot be endorsed, since being in that condition would itself constitute residence in hell, this time with the possibility of escape. So second chance views that try to allow second chances prior to consignment to hell must explain how the regress is avoided.

Other second chance views claim that consignment to hell cannot be postponed, but that escape from it is not impossible; all that is needed to get out is the same change of heart, mind, and will required in one's earthly life to be fit for heaven. One difficulty for such a view is theological rather than philosophical, for such views fail to be truly eschatological accounts of heaven and hell. Eschatology is the doctrine of the last things, and one feature of this idea of culmination or consummation is that there is a finality to it. In Christian thought, this idea is expressed vividly in the idea of a final judgment, and any conception of the afterlife that treats residence in heaven and hell in the geographic way in which we think of residence in, say, Texas or California, simply does not fall into the category of an eschatological doctrine at all. If heaven and hell are conceived of as mere extensions of an earthly life, where people can pack up and move at will, such a conception has more affinity to religious perspectives that espouse endless cycles of rebirth than to religions with a substantive eschatology.

This theological issue raises an important point, for a tension exists in the doctrines of heaven and hell with regard to how much continuity is to be expected between this earthly life and the afterlife. One

example is the eschatological issue above concerning the loss of the idea of the notion of finality in the afterlife. Another example is hinted at above, concerning geographic assumptions about where one might reside. These latter ideas, together with perceived difficulties with the traditional view, lead to the doctrine of limbo. The more a view is inclined to model the afterlife on our present earthly experience, the greater will be the temptation toward geographic conceptions of the afterlife and quasi-reincarnational views. The alternative is to view heaven and hell as the exclusive and exhaustive eschatological options, because to be in heaven is to be with God and to be in hell is to fail to be with God. From this perspective, trying to find a third location or state, such as occurs with the doctrine of limbo, arise directly from a fundamental misconception of the afterlife. The misconception is of the same type involved in objectionable anthropomorphizing in theology: both cases involve the unwarranted extension of our present experience to theological topics radically different from that experience. From this perspective, it is better to address the defects of one's conception of hell than to introduce new metaphysical dimensions to the afterlife, and the clearest example of an alternative to the traditional view of hell targeted by this criticism is the second chance alternative.

In all these ways, typical alternatives to the traditional view fail to deal with the fundamental problem of the traditional view, and face enormous difficulties because of it. The fundamental problem for the traditional conception of hell is that people receive an infinite punishment for less than infinite sin. Even though there is a way to defend the claim that all sin is against God, and even though any sin against God is infinitely bad, more is required to justify an infinite punishment than these claims. Punishment deserved must be a function both of seriousness of wrong done, and some information about the intentions of the person doing the wrong. Furthermore, the latter information can sometimes yield the result that little or no punishment is deserved at all, even though the action performed seriously wrongs someone. For these reasons, an alternative to the traditional conception of hell can appear attractive.

d. An Alternative to the Punishment Model

This fundamental problem with the traditional view leads to positions on the nature of hell that deny the Punishment Model. Hell is conceived on this alternative model in terms of something a person

chooses. Hell may be a place where some people are punished, but the fundamental purpose of hell is not to punish people, but to honor their choices. There are a variety of conceptions of hell falling within this alternative model, and many of the same issues that face the Traditional Model arise here as well. For example, if hell is what a person chooses, what exactly is the content of the choice? If we think of the fundamental issue of heaven and hell as one concerning whether or not one's destiny will be with God, a natural view is that the content of the choice is either to be with God and all that requires or to reject that option. If so, the issue of annihilation is a central issue for the Choice Model, for there is no possibility of existing without dependence on God (a result that follows from the doctrine of divine conservation). Furthermore, God's perfect goodness constrains him to aim for our perfection always, so a choice to be independent of God, if fully informed, would be logically equivalent to a choice for annihilation.

Many of the same alternatives arise for the Choice model as arise for the Punishment model. One already noted is the issue of whether hell is conceived in terms of annihilation or in terms of eternal existence apart from God. Another issue is whether the Choice model is committed to something like a second chance alternative. At first glance it seems that it would amount to a second chance view, insofar as one's capacity to choose differently from what one had chosen in the past remains. One way to argue that the Choice model involves no commitment to a second chance view is to argue that there is no chance of escaping hell even on the Choice model if the choice needs to be rational and the most persuasive rational considerations that would prompt such a choice have already been exhausted. In a similar fashion, nothing about the Choice model itself argues against universalism, though the fundamental importance of freedom on this model might provide a basis for arguing against the idea that it is metaphysically impossible to avoid heaven.

e. The Possibility of a Unified Account of Heaven and Hell

Given human nature, it is not surprising that the issues of justice that arise regarding the doctrine of hell have received much more attention than those surrounding the doctrine of heaven. Most of us are more comfortable getting benefits we do not deserve or gifts that are inappropriate than we are shouldering burdens that are not ours or suffering pain we do not deserve. The fundamental point to notice here,

however, is that the doctrines of heaven and hell are not separable in this way. They are intimately linked, and the account one accepts of one constrains the kind of account one can develop of the other. These points may seem obvious, but they are ignored regularly, especially in discussion of the nature of hell. If we think of hell as a place of punishment, the logical contrast would seem to indicate that heaven is a place of reward. Yet, the Christian conception denies that heaven is fundamentally a reward for faithful service; it is, rather, the free and gracious gift of a loving God, unmerited by anything we have done. Another way to put this tension is to note that explanations of why some go to heaven and others go to hell seem to have little in common. On the usual position, admission to heaven is explained in terms of God's love, not his justice or fairness, whereas consignment to hell is explained in terms of his justice rather than his love. Such explanations are at best incomplete, for love and justice often pull us in different directions regarding how to treat people. Some ways of treating people are just, but unloving; and some ways are caring, but less than fully just. At the very least, some explanation is required concerning the interaction of the motives God has in establishing heaven and hell.

More can be said, however. In the Christian view, God's fundamental motive must be conceived of in terms of love rather than justice. Justice has no hope of explaining the two great acts of God, creation and redemption; only love can account for them. If so, however, one's account of hell ought to accord with this hierarchical conception of God's motivational structure as well. In particular, it will not do to portray God as fundamentally loving until we reach the point of discussing the nature of hell, and suddenly portray God as fundamentally a just God.

The most straightforward way to give a unified account of heaven and hell is to portray each as flowing from one and the same divine motivational structure. Whereas the Punishment Model of Hell has difficulty proceeding in this way, the Choice Model seems much better suited to such an account. For if hell is constructed to honor the choices that free individual might make, it is not hard to see how a fundamentally loving God could construct it in this way. For in truly loving another, we often must risk losing the other, and part of loving completely requires a willingness to lose the other completely as well. Such a unified conception of heaven and hell, where both are grounded in and explained in terms of God's love, comports well with Dante's conception of hell: hell was built by divine power, by the highest wisdom, and by primordial love.³

Adopting a unified account of heaven and hell does not by itself yield a complete view of heaven and hell, even when the unified account portrays both heaven and hell as issuing from the Divine motive of love. Even if one denies the punishment thesis of the traditional view, there are still questions arising from the other three theses. Depending on which theses are accepted, the choice model can be developed so as to involve a kind of annihilationism, or universalism, as well as the choice view closest to the traditional view of hell, the choice view that endorses all of the theses of the traditional view except the punishment thesis.

Still, many of the same difficulties arise for these views in the context of the choice model as arose in the context of the punishment model. Annihilationism would be hard to portray as a mitigation of the harshness of hell, since hell is no longer being conceived primarily in terms of punishment (though nothing about the choice model requires denying that hell involves punishment motivated by love). Universalism in its necessary form still will be difficult to reconcile with notions of freedom and autonomy, and contingent universalism will need a defense that doesn't advert to the unloving character of hell and the jarring thought of how a loving God could allow someone to suffer the ultimate disaster of hell as conceived in the traditional view of hell. Moreover any version of the choice model will need either to jettison the eschatological ideas of finality and consummation or offer some explanation of how these ideas can be affirmed in the absence of the kind of finality that rests ultimately on a divine decree.

2. Recent Issues and New Directions

Several decades ago, it was noted that no major work on the doctrine of hell had appeared in over one hundred years,⁴ but this paucity has been replaced in the last decade or so with an abundance of work on the doctrine. Recent work has carefully investigated the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the traditional account of hell and has also introduced a variety of alternatives to the traditional doctrine.

Several themes have emerged from this literature. Perhaps the most dominant theme among defenders of the doctrine of hell is the need to abandon the notion of punishment as the central guiding notion of the doctrine in favor of an approach that explains hell more in terms of individual choices.⁵ This point does not imply that theorists no longer think of hell in terms of punishment. It is to say, instead, that the guiding

motif is to explain continued presence in hell in terms of choices instead of in terms of some simple demands of justice regarding one's earthly life. In addition, the nature and defensibility of universalism has taken center stage, a development not unexpected since the attraction of universalism is obvious and pressing once one moves away from a traditional account of hell, and even more so once one adopts a unified account of God's motivations that put priority on divine love. Debates about universalism have centered around whether it reduces the significance of one's earthly life and conduct;⁶ whether it devalues freedom by making presence in heaven outweigh the constraint of autonomy that entails the possibility of preferring anything, including hell, to heaven; and, in ironic contradistinction to the last point, whether denials of universalism undervalue freedom by refusing God the option of removing interfering factors.⁷

As would be expected, these new approaches to the doctrine of hell include new objections to the doctrine. One of the most interesting of the new objections arises from the spate of work being done over the past quarter century on the concept of vagueness.⁸ The problem is that whatever basis is used to explain how escape from hell is possible (faith or good works or some combination of the two) comes in degrees, creating the need for a cutoff point allowing for escape from hell and leaving the possibility that two individuals nearly identical in terms of the basis for escaping hell differ in eternal destiny. Adopting some account of hell that is a version of the choice model may avoid this problem. The basis of a choice may come in degrees, but the choice itself does not; and continued presence in hell is not the simple result of some divine edict but rather the result of decided preferences and choices of hell over heaven.

In these discussions, several background issues deserve further discussion, and I will highlight two here. The first is that the logical space for doctrines of hell has not yet been adequately mapped, and progress on this score will be part of a better understanding of hell and the problems for any view that includes such a doctrine. Perhaps the most obvious example of the failure to map the logical space in question is in the Eerdmans publication *Four Views*, in which two of the four views are called the "literal" and "metaphorical" views of hell, but signs that the logical space is not well-understood can be found in the present discussion as well. Here, the focus has been on two models for understanding hell, the punishment model and the choice model. It is hard to find an account of hell that does not fall into one of these categories, but it would be absurd to suggest that these categories exhaust the logical possibilities available. To make progress on this issue, a theory needs to distinguish between the core aspects that any account of

hell must include, and indicate the various elaborations of these essential elements in a way that also explains why the elaborations delineated exhaust the possibilities available.

The other point I wish to highlight concerns the issue of the finality involved in any adequate eschatology. One of the virtues of the traditional account of hell is the way in which it is able to explain how one's eternal destiny is settled forever and finally should one be consigned to hell. Since the favored account of hell in recent discussion involves the Choice Model rather than the Punishment Model, this explanation is no longer available. Moreover, present examples of the Choice Model threaten to treat the afterlife more akin to reincarnation, where the next life continues whatever processes of moral development and choice were begun in this life. In short, the Choice Model does not lend itself to an explanation of the finality involved in the idea of the eschaton. Defenders of the Choice Model have not attended to this notion of finality sufficiently, in the usual case, allowing for the possibility of getting out of hell once there (and then either affirming universalism or finding some way of maintaining that this possibility will not be realized). Here one could wish for a fuller investigation of the extent to which non-universalist versions of the Choice Model are compatible with the finality involved in the idea of the eschaton.

Besides these background issues, there are substantive presuppositions of the debate over universalism that require attention. That debate focuses primarily on the nature and value of freedom, and here is one place that discussions of the doctrine of hell could benefit from attention to topics and issues generally brushed aside. The debate has presupposed a libertarian account of freedom as well as an account of moral responsibility that makes such freedom the central issue in determining responsibility. These assumptions about the nature of freedom and its connection to responsibility, however, deserve closer scrutiny than they have received to this point. Here I will point out one issue that deserves exploration in this context, the issue arising from what are called Frankfurt-style counterexamples, after Harry Frankfurt's original example.⁹ The example involves a monitoring agent who will interfere to make the watched individual do a certain action if the watched individual refuses. Since the watched individual does not refuse to do so, moral responsibility attaches to the action, but it is false that the watched individual could have done otherwise.

The relevance of the literature on this issue is that defenders of the choice model have assumed a libertarian account of freedom, and a common theme among those assuming such is that there is an easy

way around Frankfurt-style counterexamples. The simplest maneuver in response to the counterexamples is to go internal: even if you can't avoid the action in question, you can *try* to avoid performing that action.¹⁰ The problem is that no such maneuver can avoid the problem. To the extent that tryings are actions that have duration, the monitoring individual can detect the beginning of a trying and prevent that action as well. So not even internal actions such as tryings are immune from Frankfurt-style counterexamples, at least so long as these internal actions involve temporal duration.

The only recourse here is to focus on instantaneous actions, so that the monitoring individual has no time in which to intervene. But there are serious philosophical problems here. The first is whether there is any such thing as an instantaneous action. There are instantaneous events, we may suppose, but it is very hard to see what an instantaneous action could be. The second issue is whether such actions, if there be such, could explain moral responsibility. Such actions look like logical abstractions from substantive actions, and as such, not suitable to participate in substantive explanations of something as significant as moral responsibility. If my beginning to try to harm you is something I could have avoided, but neither my harming you nor my trying to harm you is avoidable, it is unclear why my control over the beginning of a trying should, by itself, explain any moral responsibility I might have for harming or intending to harm you.

Such problems lead to the theoretical possibility that libertarian freedom and moral responsibility are not as closely related as libertarians have assumed. Without such a connection, the argument against necessary universalism—the view that it is metaphysically necessary that everyone end up in heaven—is suspect indeed. The primary argument against necessary universalism appeals to the value of freedom and the impossibility of guaranteeing that a free individual chooses in whatever way choice is related to presence in heaven.

Yet, no matter what one's theory of hell, the important point to note is that those in hell must be morally responsible for being there, so the issue of freedom is only important insofar as it entitles us to read off conclusions about moral responsibility from it. And if the direction of the discussion above is correct, this connection may not withstand scrutiny; and if it does not, then any argument against necessary universalism will have to proceed via the concept of moral responsibility itself rather than libertarian freedom. In the face of Frankfurt-style counterexamples and the possible responses to such

counterexamples outlined above, perhaps the proper conclusion to draw is that libertarian freedom could at most be necessary for responsibility. Perhaps there is a way to avoid the counterexamples by finding some instantaneous hint of freedom in our ascriptions of moral responsibility, but such a hint of freedom in one's actions may not be sufficient to guarantee that it's your own fault if you're in hell.

This conclusion still leaves it possible for a person to be in hell because of their own fault. But the kind of possibility here is weaker than metaphysical possibility. It is the kind in which the truth of what is said before doesn't logically imply the opposite of the claim in question. That is, the kind of possibility here is logical possibility. There is no argument, however, from such a logical possibility to metaphysical possibility. In short, the best argument against necessary universalism needs buttressing in the face of some of the lessons of Frankfurt-style examples.

3. Conclusion

The doctrine of hell has a central place in any serious eschatology, and it is no longer true that this doctrine is one of the ignored aspects of eschatology. Current discussion focuses on the contrast between the traditional understanding of hell in which eternal presence in hell would be explained by appeal to deserved punishment and the more recent understanding of hell in which presence in hell is explained in terms of the choices and preferences of its denizens. In light of this alternative conception of hell, the question of whether universalism is true, whether in the end all will be saved, has come to occupy a central place in discussions of the nature of hell. Furthermore, perhaps the central issue concerning universalism has been put in terms of the nature and value of human freedom. As important as this way of approaching the issue of the tenability of universalism is, further understanding can be gained by attending to the issues involved in the connection between human freedom and moral responsibility, since there is no adequate account of hell available that does not attribute responsibility for presence in hell to those individuals themselves.

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Endnotes

¹ See John MacQuarrie, 1966.

² See Cullman 1964.

³ See Stump 1986; also Walls 1992 and Kvanvig 1993.

⁴ See Walker 1964, p. 3.

⁵ Defended by Adams, Kvanvig, Lewis, Seymour, Stump, Swinburne, and Walls.

⁶ Murray 1999 and Talbott 2003.

⁷ Talbott 2004 and Walls 2004.

⁸ Sider 2002.

⁹ In “Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities,” originally published in 1969 and reprinted in *The Importance of What we Care About*, (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ For a discussion of such an attempt, and references to the literature that includes such an attempt, see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998).