

Losing Your Soul

The danger of losing one's soul so poignantly contrasted by Jesus with gaining the whole world has been put to philosophical use in recent times to help address the problem of hell. That problem is a special case of the general problem of evil, and one way of formulating it concerns how an infinite punishment could be deserved for each and every wrongdoing, no matter how small or insignificant. The idea behind this appeal to Jesus's language is that one can lead a life that results in a loss of soul, and with this loss, comes the incapacity to escape hell. This incapacity is the result, not of punishment imposed, but rather as a natural consequence of the things people do to themselves. Our choices form a bent of character in us, and continual patterns of behavior in a certain direction can harden one to the point, one might claim, that certain choices are no longer open to one. Instead, in the arena in question, one has become nothing more than a stimulus-response mechanism, where the mechanism always and forever is inclined in a certain direction. If that direction is hardened in opposition to God, this loss of soul would be responsible for the permanence of hell, for in losing one's soul, one has intentionally become the kind of person for whom no alternative choice is any longer possible.

Such a theory attempts to supplement the most popular way of abandoning the traditional conception of hell. The traditional conception of hell conceives of it fundamentally in terms of punishment, thereby yielding a straightforward account of why hell is permanent. It is permanent because that is the form the punishment in question takes. Accounts that attempt to avoid this punishment model of hell prefer to explain the nature of hell in terms of the free choices of an individual among the available alternatives. If, however, presence in hell is a result of choice, it becomes much more difficult to generate any permanence regarding presence in hell. If being in

hell is a result of a choice, then a natural view to hold would be that residence in hell is no more permanent than one's choices are, and those are open to change. In order to avoid this result, the choice model must be supplemented in some way or other, and one way to supplement it is in terms of the idea of losing one's soul.

The loss of soul theory, as I will construe it here, is an ambitious approach to the problem of explaining the permanence of hell. While it is true that any account of hell can be supplemented with the idea of loss of soul, the theory I am concerned with here attempts to use the idea of loss of soul to shore up a difficulty faced by the choice model. To some, this problem has appeared to be so severe that it requires a limitation on the explanatory scope of the choice model, so that permanence is accounted for in other ways, even if initial presence in hell is a matter of choice. A full defense of the loss of soul explanation insists that no such limitation is warranted, and that a better explanation of permanence is found in full commitment to the choice model combined with the loss of soul idea.

I will argue that the loss of soul theory has fairly good prospects for defending the insistence on a full commitment to the choice model, but that it is less successful in defending the idea that loss of soul provides a good account of the permanence of hell. I will begin, then, by defending the full commitment to the Choice Model that the loss of soul theory needs. After doing so, I will devote some time to explaining more precisely the idea of loss of soul that is needed by the theory in question, and then to my reservations about it.

Limitations on the Choice Model

Restricted appeals to the Choice Model claim that though the ideal is for an individual to cooperate freely with God in the process of redemption, the nature of choice is such that no guarantee of success is possible. As such, for finality to be achieved, God must at some point end the uncertainty either by damning some forever or choosing to redeem a person against their will if need be. The former options include consigning some to permanent existence in hell forever or annihilating them. But since an attraction to the Choice Model is motivated by dissatisfaction with the more traditional Punishment Model, these views do not cohere well with the Choice Model, leading to a decided preference for coerced redemption over coerced damnation in those who see a need to limit the role of Choice in the story of salvation. The value of freedom is outweighed by the disvalue of eternal separation from God, and so redemption may occur against our will.

Loss of soul theorists resist such limited versions of the Choice Model, claiming that whatever conditions allow justified overriding of human freedom, they are not conditions present in the story of salvation. Hence, loss of soul theorists need to be able to give grounds for rejecting such limited endorsements of the Choice Model. Here I believe they have two bases from which to develop such an argument. The first issue concerns the respective values of freedom and existence, and which takes precedence when they conflict. In *The Problem of Hell*,¹ I argued that there is intuitive support for freedom taking precedence over existence when we are considering fully autonomous individuals. It is instructive to note in this regard that those who argue for preservation of being over honoring freedom often resort to examples involving children and their parents, where it is obvious that parents ought to prevent utter ruin from befalling their children rather than allow them full freedom of choice. Once we reach the level of full autonomy, however, the demand for intervention is no longer universal and unqualified. Instead, there is

strong support for non-intervention in the plans and purposes of other individuals in certain circumstances, even when they are mistaken and when disaster is quite predictable. The mere fact that disaster will ensue justifies persuasion and intervention, but it is far from clear that it justifies outright coercion in those who have rational and firm opinions that their lives are their own and any disaster that results is one they are willing to embrace.

There is a second argument as well, one concerning the relationship between sin, salvation, and the will. The condition of humankind to which God's redemptive plan is aimed is intimately involved with our will, with the story of the fallenness of humanity intimately connected with an inclination to take the love, honor, respect, and devotion that rightly belong to God and attach it to other things instead, most especially to attach it to self. The solution to this problem requires a change in human beings that results in the fulfillment of what the Westminster Catechism describes as the purpose for humanity: to love God and enjoy Him forever. The story of Scripture is, of course, that in a very real sense, we cannot do anything to accomplish such a change, and that the direct intervention of God is required in order for this purpose to be fulfilled. The important question, however, is not whether we have the power to accomplish such a change, but whether the change can be accomplished independent of any activity of our wills. It is true that if one refuses to endorse a libertarian conception of freedom, one can speak of God's causally necessitating the will in a certain direction and insist that no contradiction results. In the context of the Choice Model, however, such talk cannot be tolerated: we here assume a libertarian understanding of the will and so cannot speak of such necessitation. If the heavenly experience, the beatific vision, involves loving God and enjoying him forever, it is very hard to see how to conceive of this as not involving the free exercise of the will, at least in terms of our acquiescing

to the aims and purposes of God. Central to the fallenness of humanity is our rebellion against God, and reconciliation is not a concept that makes any sense apart from some role for the will to play in the process, even if only in terms of acquiescing to the grace offered. Even when the conversion experience is modeled on that of St. Paul on the Damascus road, there is still the acquiescing of the will displayed in asking, “Who are you, Lord?” and getting up from the ground to go into the city as directed.

We reach the same point when we ask what is involved in loving God with one’s whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. The loss of soul theorist can maintain plausibly that there is no beatific vision, no heavenly experience, apart from such love of God, and such love is impossible with the engagement of the will, at least in terms of acquiescing to the impulse to adore and worship the source of all goodness, beauty, and truth. No contradiction results from adding to the positive story concerning the conditions that lead to total conversion that these conditions may be accompanied by sheer rebellion to the end. If so, however, the conditions themselves do not explain the heavenly experience apart from the activity of the will. Such a conclusion should not surprise in the least for those of libertarian inclinations, since it should not surprise us at all to discover that the turning from a focus on oneself to a focus that includes another, a turning that is central to the nature of love, involves an expression of ourselves conceived as autonomous beings. This point about love is true at the most mundane level, whether the love is directed at a pet, or one’s children, or more abstractly at the environment of our planet. Love is, by its very nature, an expression of autonomy. Hence, love of God is as well.

There is an alternative account that contrasts with this one, however. The Calvinist picture takes us in an entirely different direction, toward the language of vessels created for redemption

and destruction (and universalism when we add that God is soft-hearted in love toward humanity rather than hard-hearted). It is instructive to note, however, that Calvinism does not pretend to any attraction for libertarianism. Theological determinism is the coin of the realm as far as Calvinism is concerned, and the argument above about the nature of love and its relationship to autonomy will be either denied or recast in compatibilist terms by Calvinists. But the loss of soul theorist can take refuge here in pointing out that one shouldn't waver between two opinions here: one should either cleave to the truth of libertarianism and its understanding of human nature and the autonomy central to meaningful relationships or it should deny this truth and cleave to the other. Hate the one and love the other, or despise the one and be devoted to the other.

The double-minded might press harder, however, insisting on a more compelling argument why we can't have it both ways. Why can't we have autonomy connected with love *in the usual and ordinary case*, but deny that the connection is essential, as the loss of soul theorist needs to claim? The proper response here is that once a plausible account connecting autonomy and love has been presented, an opponent of the view needs to present an alternative account of what it means to love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength that doesn't involve autonomy if a limitation on the Choice Model is going to be sustained. Merely suggesting that the connection between autonomy and love is common but inessential doesn't give any reason to doubt the account of the relationship between the two that the loss of soul theorist needs. Moreover, the loss of soul theorist can take solace in the following thought experiment. If we can be saved against our will, why not picture heaven to include the moral equivalent of the sullen teenager, stuck in the perceived unhappiness of home but lacking the resources to leave? Why, that is, must those in heaven *enjoy* it? The answer to these questions, the loss of soul theorist will

plausibly insist, is that the central fact about the language of heaven and hell is that it is about an unsurpassable quality of experience rather than inhabiting a certain locale, and that the experience of heaven requires turning from self toward God. Such turning is essentially an expression of an autonomous agent rather than that of an automaton.

This view that involves a limited appeal to the Choice Model can be presented as a version of universalism in two different ways.² The first version attempts a bit of probabilistic reasoning to get to the universalist conclusion that all will be saved. It begins by noting the deep love of God for his creation, and the lengths to which he will go to secure our salvation. These facts make it incredibly unlikely that any given person will resist God forever, it might be claimed, for given the resourcefulness and power of God, how could it be otherwise? If the likelihood of destruction is vanishingly small for each individual, it can also be vanishingly small for all, in which case it would follow that it is overwhelmingly likely that all will be saved. How likely? Well, nearly certain, or as close to certainty as most anything we believe. So it is as well-substantiated epistemically that all will be saved as most anything we believe, thus rendering universalism as a good a theological position as any reasonable person could ask for.

This account depends centrally on a detachment rule for probabilities. The idea is that in certain cases, we can go from a justified belief in a high probability for p to p itself. I believe, however, that there is a defect in appealing to such a detachment rule. One can have adequate evidence for there being a high probability for p , and one can have adequate evidence for p itself. But there is no adequate rule that allows one to conclude that p is true based only on adequate evidence that the probability of p has exceeded a certain high threshold. No matter how high the threshold, so long as the probability is less than 1, it is possible to have adequate evidence for

believing that the probability of p has exceeded that threshold and yet lack adequate evidence for p itself.³

This point should not be taken to imply that there can't be situations in which one both has adequate evidence for a high probability for p and for p itself. Nor does it imply that a given body of evidence can't be evidence for both a high probability for and for p itself, for that can happen when one has direct evidence for p itself of such a nature that allows us to infer a high probability for p from p itself. But when one gives an essentially statistical and probabilistic argument for a high probability for p , one can't rely on any general detachment rule that allows one to infer p from such a high probability. The failure of such a rule is one of the lessons of the lottery paradox: even if one's ticket will lose, remonstrance is the proper reaction to anyone asserting or believing that their ticket will lose on the basis of the probabilistic information alone. So, on the basis of the probabilistic argument above, the Limited Choice Theorist is not entitled to endorse the universalist conclusion, even if the argument shows that the universalist position is highly likely to be true.

It is true, however, that knowing that the probability of p is high, together with the absence of any defeating information for the inference from this high probability to p itself, would allow one to rationally believe p on the basis of its high probability. So the defender of this probabilistic route to universalism could revise the argument to add the codicil that there are defeaters for the inference in question.

This addition, however, adds a premise to the argument to which the universalist is not entitled. We can see this point by considering possible lotteries that differ from typical ones. In typical lotteries, it is known that there will be exactly one winning ticket, but we can imagine a

lottery in which all that is known is that nearly all of an extremely large number of tickets will lose. The lottery is set up in a way that leaves it an open question whether any ticket will win, but it is guaranteed that there will be very few winners, perhaps only one winner, if there are any winners at all. Even in such a situation, asserting or believing that one's ticket is a losing ticket is still unwarranted, so the inference from high probability to the claim that one's ticket is a losing ticket must be subject to defeat (on the assumption that high probability plus lack of defeat allows the inference to go through). These features of the unusual lottery situation mimic precisely the features present in this latest attempt to derive universalism from its high probability plus absence of defeat, so this latest attempt must contain a false premise as well. In particular, it must be false that there is no defeating information present regarding the inference from high probability to truth.

There is another problem with the argument that the loss of soul theorist may note as well. Note that the argument begins by concluding something about a given case, to the effect that in any given case, the likelihood of unending rebellion is very low. The loss of soul theorist may point out that estimating these chances is perilous. We may properly recognize the resourcefulness of God in accomplishing his purposes, but the extent of depravity at the core of the human heart is difficult to comprehend. Without assessing its contribution, we run the risk of drawing a probabilistic conclusion on the basis of mere partial information. We know of stories—in Scripture, for example—of God accomplishing his purposes using those obstinately opposed to these purposes, but the extent to which these examples are representative remains inscrutable to us.

Moreover, even if we grant the claim of low probability in a given case, there is still the agglomeration step that is needed. That is, we must get from probability in a given case to probability for the conjunction of all cases as well. As is well known, it is rare for the probability of a conjunction to be as high for a conjunction as for the conjuncts. It is possible that it is as high, but it is not likely to be as high.

So the probabilistic argument faces three problems. The first is the inscrutability problem for probability in a given case. The second is the need for a defense of the agglomeration step. These two difficulties do not present the kind of case against the argument that arises from the third difficulty, however. The third difficulty arises concerning a needed detachment rule, a rule that allows us to detach p from a high probability for p , and such rules founder because of the epistemic paradoxes such as lottery and preface. The problem is that such a justification for p is not strong enough to allow asserting or believing p because, as we may put it, it is not strong enough to put oneself in a position to know that p is true (even when it is true).

One may try to escape this last problem by remarking that theology is not a domain in which knowledge is possible, anyway, so we should allow the detachment rule in spite of having insufficient grounds for epistemic justification, that kind of justification necessary for knowledge. Or perhaps one might try to hold that one's attitude toward theological propositions is not one of belief at all, but some weaker state, so that one shouldn't be held to any strict rules about propriety of belief.

Regarding the former maneuver, I don't think it will help. Even in domains where skepticism is appropriate, arguments that must use the detachment rule in question are inadequate. The domain in question sets the standard of adequate defense for claims in that area, and any

defense relying on a detachment rule will fall below such a standard. The rule for assertion and for the kind of justification needed for it may depend on context in this way, but it doesn't change the way in which arguments that rely essentially on the detachment rule are not good enough arguments in the context. Remonstrance will still be a legitimate response to the assertion or belief of such a conclusion, when it appears to rely on such an unrestricted detachment rule.

Perhaps if the issue were one of hope rather than belief, this difficulty would disappear. For the standards that need to be met to make hope reasonable are much lower than for belief. But the issue here isn't so much which psychological attitude is in question regarding theological propositions. Instead, we are interested in the question of which theological propositions have adequate arguments for them and which do not. We are not inquiring about the justification of particular psychological states of any individual at all. What it takes for an argument (or body of evidence) to be adequate may depend on the particular subject matter in question, but once that issue is settled, the issue of justification is one concerning the claims in question, not the psychological attitudes of those endorsing or denying the claims in question.

Given the failure of the detachment rule, the remaining way to defend universalism is to hold that God will save some against their will if necessary. This position, the loss of soul theorist can plausibly insist, reduces to a position which doesn't actually succeed in getting to the conclusion of universalism, but instead only minimizes the disaster that befalls those in hell forever.

Here is how such an insistence may go. One way to approach the problem of hell is to minimize the nature of the disaster that befalls an individual who ends up in hell forever. One primary attempt at such mitigation is annihilationism, which holds that one doesn't suffer in hell

forever and ever, but instead ceases to exist altogether. Such a position counts as a *mitigation* of hell only by way of contrast with a truly horrible description of hell such as is found in Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Notice that if we contrast capital punishment with life in prison, the usual moral judgement is that the first is by far worse than the second. So if annihilation is preferable to eternal, conscious existence in hell, it must be so because of special features associated with the kind of eternal existence in question.

So one way to try to make progress on the problem of hell is to redescribe the disaster of ending up in hell. One might describe hell in less horrific terms, or one may hope to find some third state that counts as being in neither heaven nor hell. When a theorist talks of forced presence in heaven, the loss of soul theorist may claim, the proper way to understand such language is in one of these two ways, either as a redescription of hell or as an attempt to find some third alternative. Such a theorist may reject both such possibilities. The latter understanding can be resisted by insisting that a proper understanding of the logical space of possibilities finds only two: one is either united with God forever or one isn't. The first is heaven, the second hell. When one thinks of heaven and hell in geographic terms, it is easy to see how to generate the desire for a third alternative to heaven and hell, since if these are but two postal addresses, the possibility of other postal addresses is easy to imagine. But when one's conception of the afterlife is a relational matter with heaven involving a beatific vision and enjoyment of the divine, hell is properly understood as the contrast of such a relationship. Hence, even if heaven is a place with pearly gates and streets of gold, one still can't be in heaven by passing through the gates and walking on streets of gold.

Given these points, the loss of soul theorist can point out that the temptation to talk of necessitated presence in heaven is the temptation to try to solve the problem of hell through mitigation. Being in the land of pearly gates and streets of gold isn't heaven, but it is a place where God could, perhaps, put those who reject him. In such a case, hell wouldn't be the horrific place of the language of weeping and gnashing of teeth, but it would still be hell. For it wouldn't be the heavenly experience of the beatific vision, of eternal union with God that involves loving him with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength.

So a limited appeal to the Choice Model is one a loss of soul theorist can find substantial arguments for rejecting. Moreover, these arguments are not limited in their appeal in such a way that one would already need to be a card-carrying loss of soul theorist to accept them. Once we arrive at this point, the loss of soul position is especially attractive, since it hold forth the promise of explaining why presence in hell is permanent even though such presence is not a matter of an imposed punishment on a person but rather a consequence of the choices made by such an individual. Central to this explanation is the idea of loss of soul, to the clarification of which I now turn.

Losing One's Soul

Whereas in the words of Jesus the idea of losing one's soul is contrasted with gaining the whole world and is thus best understood in terms of a contrast between the temporal and the eternal, the loss of soul theory attempts to characterize the idea of loss of soul in more personal and psychological terms involving the notion of libertarian freedom. As such, it is important to

distinguish the loss of soul account from accounts that appeal to Molinist counterfactuals of freedom in order to explain permanence in hell. Both accounts agree on full commitment to the Choice Model, but the Molinist explains the permanence of hell in terms that the loss of soul theory rejects. The Molinist claims that for each person, and each possible set of events and experiences, there is a fact of the matter about whether that person would acquiesce to the Divine invitation were that person and set actualized together. Permanence in hell is thus explained in terms of the truth of what we might call disheartening counterfactuals of freedom: counterfactuals about eternal resistance to the divine invitation, counterfactuals shown to be true by one's actual resistance.⁴ There is a form of Molinism, according to which maximally effective efforts to secure presence in hell are not needed, but only God's knowledge of the disheartening counterfactual itself, but the form of Molinism that involves conditions as effective as any could be for securing acquiescence is, in my opinion, a more defensible version of the view.

The loss of soul theorist (the LOST), however, eschews appeals to counterfactuals of freedom in favor of the idea that a person can lose their soul and thus become incapable of leaving hell. Such a theorist maintains that an account of hell is unacceptable on which it remains an open question whether or not any remain in hell forever. The loss of soul theory takes Scriptural authority seriously when it speaks of the final judgment, of the final separation of sheep and goats, of the final eschaton toward which all of history is headed. Such a teleological conception of the universe is at odds with a picture of an afterlife that is simply unending and on which the elevator between heaven and hell sits forever with open doors to allow one-way, and perhaps two-way, traffic.

For such an explanation to succeed, we need an account of the notion of losing one's soul that makes it impossible for one to leave hell once there. According to LOSTs, freedom always operates within a limited sphere, and the sphere can expand and contract, based on prior history. For example, without athletic training, deciding whether or not to dunk the basketball after leaping toward the basket from the free throw line is not open to us. Needless to say, for nearly everyone, the decision isn't open even with athletic training, but for some it is. In this way, prior history can expand the range of free action available to a person.

Just so, the range of free action can contract as well. Some obvious ways in which this is true involve the process of aging. Even the most gifted athletes suffer decline of abilities, and thus come to lack the capacity to dunk a basketball. Moreover, not just degeneration can be responsible for lost abilities, but sequences of choices can be as well. Those whose lifestyle is nearly completely sedentary are in the process of making physical activity of various sorts more and more difficult, and the process in question is directed toward the point that many common physical movements have become impossible. LOSTs claim that what is true of external, physical reality is also true of the internal psychological realm. The process of character formation can make it easier to desire the good and the right, but it can also make it easier to resist as well. As the process continues, a description just like that given above about sedentary lifestyles is appropriate: the endpoint toward which the process is headed is one where the patterns of desire and preference have become hardened to the point that any other desiring or preferring is impossible.

The loss of soul theory results from applying this general idea to the afterlife itself. Regarding the greatest good possible for humans being, the experience of heaven, we may

conceive of the situation in which a hardening of desire and preference has occurred to such an extent that the choice of heaven is no longer possible. To be in such a position is to have lost one's soul. In that situation, there is nothing one can do or choose or decide or intend, including no sequence of choices, that would make possible the experience of heaven. That option, because of what one has become, is foreclosed forever. One has lost one's soul, and in losing one's soul, we have an explanation of how presence in hell can be eternal and how the finality of the Final Judgement can be understood.

This characterization of the idea of loss of soul must be refined in order to avoid an obvious objection. The objection begins by noting that in the physical realm, if an ability is lost through disuse, it can be restored by miraculous intervention. Just so, if one's character development has led one to the place where one can no longer desire a certain thing or prefer it to something else, miraculous intervention could restore such a possibility. So when it comes to the point of trying to explain the finality of hell, loss of soul alone seems an insufficient explanation, since it would seem to need to be accompanied by the additional claim that God refuses to intervene miraculously to restore the lost possibility.

To avoid this objection, the loss of soul theory must distinguish between two ways of arriving at the end point at which the ability is lost. One way to progress toward that end is to make certain choices that lead, via the laws of nature and logic, to the end point in question. In such a case, one is not choosing the end point as the intentional object of one's behavior. It is not the goal toward which one is aiming, but is rather the consequence of a sequence of such choices. In other cases, however, one's choices aim directly at such an endpoint. The loss of soul theory must focus on the latter possibility in order to avoid the objection just voiced, for if the result is

unintended, it is hard to see how the choices alone can explain finality. If, however, the loss of capacity in question is an intended consequence of the sequence of choices, then the loss of soul theorist can appeal to the value of autonomy to complete the explanation of why divine restoration of the possibility in question would be inappropriate.

The idea of such intentionally chosen loss of possibility is difficult to imagine, and one may resist the theory simply because it is so difficult to imagine. To rebut such resistance, it is worth taking a look at an example which comes very close to this possibility, an example found in Cormac McCarthy's recent novel in dramatic form, *The Sunset Limited*. The novel is a dialogue between a black minister and a white professor, a professor whose suicide attempt has been thwarted by the rescue efforts of the minister. The minister views it as his mission from God to help the professor. In the end, the minister fails, and is left perplexed and in emotional turmoil. After being pressed persistently by the minister to talk, the professor finally agrees to talk and explains his decision for suicide, which he does in a sequence of remarks:

Well, here's my news Reverend. I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death. If I thought that in death I would meet the people I've known in life I don't know what I'd do. That would be the ultimate horror. The ultimate despair.⁵

When the preacher asks whether he wants to see his own mother, the professor answers,

No I don't. . . . I want the dead to be dead. Forever. And I want to be one of them.

Except that of course you can't be one of them. You can't be one of the dead because what has no existence can have no community. No community. My heart warms just thinking about it.⁶

It is crucial to understanding the professor to note the last remark that he welcomes the loss of community, and his further remark that he doesn't think of his view of things as pessimistic at all. There is a kind of existential despair that is based on the belief that we are alone in the universe and that death is preferable to it. But the professor does not suffer from such despair. To spend eternity in community, with his mother and other acquaintances, would be the ultimate despair, for it would involve "start[ing] all of that all over, only this time without the prospect of death to look forward to."⁷

The professor longs for a church that would, instead of preparing one for more life, prepare one for death (non-existence). He suffers from alienation, saying about other humans, "Do I see myself in him? Yes. I do. And what I see sickens me."⁸ But it is an alienation, not in opposition to his fundamental desires, but rather an expression of them. All fellowship is, for him, a fellowship of pain: it is its intrinsic character, not an unfortunate accretion to something good in itself. He says,

And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash.⁹

The professor thus claims to have achieved the insight that the goodness of community and fellowship is but an illusion, not in some contingent fashion but by its very nature. It is for this reason that he seeks a community, a "church", that prepares one for death.

Here is a depiction of the sort the loss of soul theorist takes to exemplify the possibility in question. It is a possibility of self-chosen ends, ends which result in the loss of the possibility of choosing otherwise. What the minister encounters is an individual who has become immune to

the efforts of the minister, since for every good thing or rewarding experience the minister can point to, the professor has an interpretive scheme and nature that leads to aversion. A central part of this possibility is conceptual, for the professor has come to view things in a certain way and has developed a conceptual framework that is completely resistant to the goods of which the minister speaks. But another part is affective. The professor is not in a state of resignation regarding his preference for death. He doesn't partly want to cease to exist and somehow wish it were otherwise or in some way regret the desire at the same time. His alienation from things is not tinged with any such sense of loss. His despising of community, whether with other humans or God, is complete and thorough. Nor are these affective and conceptual features of his condition one's that surprise him or were unintended in any way: they are aspects that he embraces with his whole being, viewing them as central to what he is rather than as some optional accretion to his fundamental nature. The minister laments the professor's sad condition, but the professor says the worst thing should not be thought of as the situation the professor is in, but something else instead. The minister finds this remark perplexing and inquires about what could possibly be worse. The professor replies, "Rage is really only for the good days."¹⁰ What upsets the professor is not being in the condition he is in, but in experiencing good days that, presumably, present temptations to think and feel otherwise. Attempts to get him to see the error of his ways lead to rage, and anything suggesting that he is wrong in thought or attitude is interpreted as fundamentally misleading. Such a character at least comes very close to exemplifying what the loss of soul theorist needs, a character whose resistance is complete and the elimination of which would violate his autonomy.

I offer the example as an example only, and not as a decisive argument in favor of the position the loss of soul theorist needs. Moreover, those who remain unconvinced either that the dispositions in question are unalterable or that autonomy need not be honored in this particular case will find fodder for their view in some of the remarks that the professor makes.¹¹ The professor is alienated, especially from his own mother, and opponents of the lost soul description here may suggest the need for counseling (though, of course, the professor has already tried counseling, to no effect). Moreover, there are still a few signs of affective dissonance. The professor's heart "warms" at the thought of non-existence, and yet he describes his view as one of having recognized the "futility" of everything. In addition, he is firmly committed to atheism, and one might insist that it is open question what would become of the professor if this viewpoint were to change. Such points would certainly be well-taken, and further discussion could go on quite a bit about what the professor would be like once efforts at therapy and removal of cognitive and affective dissonance had occurred. But the point of the example is to give some substance to the idea of how a person can come to be in the position that the loss of soul theory claims is possible, and the example does a good job of generating some plausibility for the claim that such a possibility exists, even if it does not fully establish the existence of such a possibility.

It is on this idea of losing one's soul and the role it is claimed to be able to play in accounting for finality that I wish to turn a critical eye. I will argue that the theory fails in the next section.

Problems for the Loss of Soul Theory

The idea of losing one's soul is a special case of the idea of lost abilities, and the relevant lost ability in the present context is the ability to *choose*. The loss is a loss of freedom, rather than the loss of an ability to express the will in a given way. The will itself becomes constricted in its domain of operation, unlike cases of other lost abilities, such as the ability to dunk a basketball. That ability is lost, even though the ability to try, to will, to choose, is not. To have lost one's soul is to have lost the ability to choose in favor of God and against whatever focus on self (or nothingness, as in the case of the professor discussed above) results in the ultimate disaster of losing out on the greatest good of loving God and enjoying him forever. This idea of losing one's soul involves two aspects, one being the conclusion that one's history can take a shape such that the choice for God is foreclosed forever and the other being the explanation of how a history can take such a shape. The former aspect we have already seen; the latter aspect involves an appeal to psychological realities. These realities, unlike the physical, degenerative story about losing the ability to leap, are psychological: they involve a story about how habits develop, about how a sequence of choices can make a further choice psychologically impossible, and how acquiescing to the force of strong desires can make one's subsequent behavior nothing more than a war among desires, with the strongest always winning.¹² So there is both the conclusion claimed about what happens when one loses one's soul—that losing one's soul implies a restriction on the range of freedom so that the choice of heaven is no longer available--and the argument or explanation as to why losing one's soul implies this conclusion.

When a process occurs over time in this way, the difficulty of choosing otherwise increases, and when such a process is under discussion, we may inquire about the endpoint of the sequence. The endpoint in question, is, of course, the point at which the individual *can't* choose anymore for heaven.

There are two points worth questioning about this endpoint. We should note first that the loss of soul theorist is assuming that the endpoint can actually be reached. An alternative viewpoint is that the process can bring one closer and closer to such an endstate, making it increasingly difficult to choose to act out-of-character, but that the possibility of acting out-of-character always remains, regardless of how unlikely it has become.

One might attempt an argument for the logical or metaphysical possibility of losing one's soul by insisting that there is no contradiction implied or entailed by the idea of character fixation progressing to the point of impossibility rather than merely approaching it. Such a claim would have to be pitted against the alternative claim, that no contradiction is implied or entailed by the claim that the possibility of acting out-of-character always remains, no matter how unlikely. One of these claims must be false, since they contradict each other, and hence the appeal to the failure to imply some obvious contradiction in each case cannot be judged to be decisive in favor of either claim.

This concern may seem to be overdone philosophical nitpicking, but it is not. Merely describing a process that has as its logical endpoint the loss of soul doesn't properly explain the finality of hell unless those in hell have actually lost their souls. And, as is obvious, one hasn't lost one's soul unless it is possible to do so. Moreover, the history of mathematics ought to have sensitized us by now to the possibility that a sequence can approach a certain endpoint but never

actually get there. For example, the sequence of fractions having the same number as numerator and the denominator squared as the next step in the sequence approaches zero but never gets there. Finally, an intentionally chosen progression aimed at achieving such an endpoint is not anything we've ever witnessed, and so the interpretation of the process in terms of the possibility of achieving the endpoint is in need of defense.

Moreover, there is a way of modeling the idea that the endpoint can be approached but not achieved. On this model, we organize affective (or cognitive) states into levels, with base-level states being the typically outward-directed desires, preferences, etc. of ordinary experience, such as the desire for chocolate, a good espresso, or a nice evening with friends. Meta-level states would then be states that involve lower level affective states, such as the desire to desire to be good.

In the case of ordinary human beings, the hierarchical structure of levels of affective states is quite limited. Perhaps the ordinary human being has two levels of affective states, and perhaps some even have three, but it would be implausible to suggest that every human being has affective states of every level whatsoever. Central to our intellectual capacities, however, is the capacity to reflect on our own affections, to take attitudes both cognitive and affective toward items lower in the hierarchical structure in question. In so doing, we begin a process with the possibility of altering the items in the hierarchical structure. In reflecting about our desires, we may come to see them as perverted, and in so seeing them, begin a process of extinguishing them. Part of the process of extinction may, of course, require requests for help from others, either human or divine or both.

Such a model provides resources for resisting the idea that the endpoint of impossibility toward which the process of character entrenchment is directed can ever be reached. For the entrenchment in question is not plausibly thought of as functioning in such a way as to preclude forever some critical reflection assessment of the items in the hierarchical structure itself. No matter how much reflection has occurred and no matter how much integration and coherence among the items in the hierarchy, the possibility of reflection on such items always remains possible, and no matter what efforts of habituation and entrenchment have occurred in a person, they cannot have occurred intentionally with respect to anything more than levels in the hierarchy that are non-empty (since the intention in question would populate any level at which it aims by falling into the next meta-level). So whatever entrenchment we aim at can only close off options within the presently existing realms of the hierarchy, and thus cannot succeed in closing off further “metamind” possibilities. So long as such higher levels of reflection remain possible, even processes that get closer and closer to the endpoint of impossibility of choosing otherwise cannot actually arrive at that endpoint, for that would require foreclosure of further metamind operations.

I do not offer this model as an obviously correct account, or even one that I’ve provided an argument for. I offer it for purposes of illustration, to forestall the idea that only persnickety quibbling could lead one to claim that the endpoint of impossibility could be approached but not reached. Such an account has some attractions, and that is all that is needed at this point to make the worry in question a substantial one.

There is a second point to note as well. Even if achieving the endpoint is possible, we should ask what sense of possibility is involved in the description of the endpoint itself. The

description is that, at the endpoint, one can no longer choose for heaven, but what kind of ‘can’ is this?

The kind that comes to my mind first is psychological impossibility. Weaker notions of impossibility surely won’t do, as when our students say things like, “I just can’t learn to do proofs.” It isn’t psychologically impossible for them to learn, and maybe what they say simply isn’t true at all. But there is a charitable reading of what they say, that given all of their other interests and desires, and their lack of interest in learning proof theory, it can’t be done. Since all of these factors could change, however, the kind of impossibility won’t be of any use to the LOST. So a better suggestion is that the choosing in question has to become psychologically impossible for the individual in order for that individual to have lost their soul.

The problem here is that psychological impossibility isn’t the right sort of impossibility. For it to be the right kind of impossibility, it would need to be true that if it is psychologically impossible to choose to leave hell, then a person is no longer free to do so. The notion of freedom that is relevant here is that of libertarian theory, and the contrast to libertarian freedom is causal determination.

The inference from psychological impossibility to causal impossibility is, however, invalid. Here’s why. In the special sciences, every law will have to have a *ceteris paribus* clause to cover cases where interference occurs on the basis of factors outside the system being characterized by the laws in question. For example, whatever laws govern the operation of an ordinary television set do not take into account what happens when the TV is hit with a sledge hammer. Instead, they describe how things operate, holding fixed non-interference from forces outside the systemic factors involved in the ordinary operations of such entities. So when it is

electromagnetically necessary that the television respond in a certain way when the power cord is plugged in and the power switch is pushed, it doesn't follow that this response is causally necessary, since the same response would not occur were the antecedent of the law combined with intemperate use of a sledge hammer.

We should expect some connection between such special electromagnetic necessity and causal necessity, however. Perhaps the connection is as follows. Perhaps the laws of the special sciences are derivative in some sense from the fundamental laws of physics, and these laws need no *ceteris paribus* clause requiring non-interference from other factors within the natural order, since the fundamentality of such laws implies that they already take into account all such forces.

Assuming this picture, the psychological impossibility of opting for heaven won't imply the loss of libertarian freedom to choose heaven. The laws of chemistry are more fundamental than the laws of psychology, so even if making a choice is psychologically impossible in certain circumstances, maybe the *ceteris paribus* clause leaves open the possibility that if you eat more broccoli, you'll be able to opt for heaven. No one would think that freedom is lost simply because you can't make a particular choice without eating broccoli first, and the reason is straightforward: the trying in question isn't causally impossible even though it is psychologically impossible.

Of course, the broccoli example is just an example--I don't know what exact chemical conditions might be involved in the *ceteris paribus* clauses of psychological laws. For those whose humor inclines to the dark side, maybe they involve the laws of attention for donkeys, involving contact between a 2x4 and the head. The point, though, is that one cannot glibly associate loss of libertarian freedom with just any kind of necessity to one's behavior. The only kind of necessity that could imply the loss of libertarian freedom is the necessity associated with

the fundamental laws, the laws which are *ceteris paribus* clause-free for factors from within the natural order.

So the lost soul theorists will have to come up with an entirely different line of argument than the one proposed concerning the continuum involved in the process of character formation and transformation. For even if this process is assumed to be able to result in putting oneself in a condition where trying to do otherwise is psychologically impossible, that one's desires and preferences and dispositions to behavior are so fixed that no choice of heaven can be made for an individual with such a psychological makeup, that conclusion isn't strong enough to undermine the presence of libertarian freedom. In order to undermine freedom, the lost soul theorist will have to claim that it is possible to put yourself in conditions governed by the fundamental laws (of physics, presumably), so that no analogue of eating broccoli can arise, and thus making it nomologically necessary that one can no longer make a certain choice.

The LOST, though, may simply ask that we revise the description of loss of soul to accommodate this point. Instead of claiming that the process of character development can reach the point at which it has become psychologically impossible to choose otherwise, they can claim instead that the process can reach the point at which it becomes *causally* impossible to choose otherwise.

Doing so, however, enhances the need for an argument, for it was already unclear that the claim of impossibility was justified regarding the claim of psychological impossibility. If we strengthen the claim to that of causal impossibility, the argument must be correspondingly stronger. So while it is true that the objection just raised can be sidestepped in this way, it doesn't

much help to avoid an objection by strengthening a claim without providing an argument for the stronger claim.

Moreover, to the extent that we have evidence for the process of hardening that leads to loss of ability to choose, the evidence we have is evidence about psychological realities and not about causal necessities. The process of character formation is capable of producing ossification of such hardness as to preclude, perhaps, any possibility of acting out-of-character, but the possibility in question here is psychological possibility. We are familiar with the pronounced effects on behavior by various techniques of intervention, including pharmacological and even shock treatments, to say nothing of natural catastrophes such as the results of a stroke. The changes in behavior induced by such factors is remarkable, and provide strong evidence that even the most entrenched behavior patterns are causally open to revision even if not psychologically open to such revision.

Here, of course, the LOST will appeal to the unwarranted nature of such intrusion from any third party. But such an appeal is not to the point here, since many of these techniques can be self-administered or self-requested in the basis of meta-mind reflection as discussed earlier. It is not a question of who does the intervention, but a question of whether the possibility of such intervention exists. The use of such techniques provides evidence that the idea that hardening can make behavioral changes psychologically impossible, but not causally impossible.

The story told by lost soul theorists is thus weak. The story needs a defense of the claim that one's character can be so fixed that it becomes causally impossible to act out-of-character. Merely citing such a state as the boundary of the process of character formation doesn't show that it is a state that can be reached through the process in question. It is more plausible to claim that

acting out of character can become psychologically impossible, but even granting that point doesn't help, since loss of freedom is not implied by such psychological impossibility. The relevant kind of possibility needs to be causal impossibility, and lost soul theorists have provided no clue whatsoever as to how to get from psychological to causal impossibility. I conclude, then, that the inferences needed by lost soul theorists do not sustain the conclusion that losing one's soul is possible or that this possibility implies the loss of freedom central to the lost soul explanation of the finality of hell.

Conclusion

The proper conclusion to draw, then, is that so far the only version of the Choice Model of Hell that can account for the finality involved in the Final Judgement is a Molinist version of the view. In light of the difficulties facing Molinism, many will view this conclusion as a deep problem for the Choice Model. For others, however, it will be another sign that Molinism is the beautiful game of philosophical theology.

Endnotes

1. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
2. Here my understanding of the variety of universalist positions and the arguments for each have benefitted from Keith DeRose's work on the subject and to conversations with him about his views. His work on the subject is available online at his website:
<http://pantheon.yale.edu/~kd47/>
3. Standard approaches to the lottery and preface paradoxes note that while high probability alone is not sufficient for rational belief in the content in question, it is sufficient provided no defeating information is present. For discussion of this point, see Igor Douven and Timothy Williamson, "Generalizing the Lottery Paradox," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 57, 4 (2006): 755-779.
4. This is the explanation I propose in *The Problem of Hell*, (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 156-158.
5. Cormac McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited*, (Random House, 2006), p. 135.
6. *The Sunset Limited*, pp. 135-6.
7. *The Sunset Limited*, p. 135.
8. *The Sunset Limited*, p. 138.
9. *The Sunset Limited*, p. 137.
10. *The Sunset Limited*, p. 139.
11. It is worth noting that interpretations that look for such in the professor do some violence to authorial intent. The minister laments at the end that God has not given him the words to help the professor, but has instead given the words to the professor. The minister pleads for

reassurance from God, then claims that no response is fine as well, but succumbs again to the need for an answer. It is fairly clear that the “professor of darkness” is the hero here and not the minister, a point of view consistent with the McCormacian corpus, which is nothing if not full of darkness.

12. This latter notion of behavior being nothing but a war among competing desires for those who have lost their soul is Richard Swinburne’s. See “A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell,” *The Existence & Nature of God*, edited by Alfred J. Freddoso, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. pp. 37-54.