

C. P. RAGLAND

*Saint Louis University*

**Joel Buenting (ed.)** *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*. Ashgate, 2010.

This book provides a helpful way in to current debates about hell in analytical philosophical circles, focusing especially on the question of whether hell's existence is compatible with the existence of an omniperfect God. Buenting's introduction gives a summary of each paper, notes and explains shared themes and assumptions, and helpfully relates today's debates to earlier seminal works (by Marilyn Adams, Hick, Walls, Kvanvig, etc.). The papers in the volume are of uniformly high quality, but are directed mostly to professional philosophers. So I would hesitate to send an undergraduate to this book for an introduction to problems about hell, though I think graduate students or faculty could use it for that purpose.

Because the chapters are each by distinct authors and each make a different point, the bulk of this review will simply summarize the main claims of each chapter (in the order in which they occur in the book). However, I will begin by noting four views that come up for repeated discussion throughout the papers. The first is *universalism*, the view that all people are eventually united with God, so that there is no such thing as eternal damnation. Virtually all the papers discuss this possibility, and two of the papers argue for it. On the second view, *annihilationism*, some people do not go to heaven, but they do not suffer eternally because they are annihilated (cease to exist). While frequently mentioned, this view has no advocates in the volume, and chapter three argues specifically against it. The most popular view by far is the *choice model* of hell, according to which God wants all people to freely enter heaven, but the damned prefer not to. Five of the papers explicitly explore, develop, or argue for this view, and another two appear to adopt it implicitly. Finally, several of the papers explore the claim that unending conscious suffering is a just *punishment* for sin.

1) Thomas Talbot's "Grace, Character Formation, and Predestination unto Glory" presents a universalist interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of God's grace: God has predestined everyone to develop a perfectly morally virtuous character, and this character development results from divine grace, not human effort. This may sound like a determinist

picture, but Talbott is at pains to show that libertarian freedom has “an important role to play both in the emergence of independent rational agents and in the process whereby they are finally reconciled to God” (24). It seems that on Talbott’s picture, God has determined our final end, but not the path we will take to get there. Our undetermined choices play a role in the formation of our character. Nevertheless, Talbott argues, we cannot take credit for our good character when it eventually develops. Often it results from our *bad* choices (we learn from mistakes). More importantly, because the long-term results of choices depend largely on factors beyond our control, we can never know for sure that our good choices will result in good character (and we would need to know this, Talbott seems to think, in order to deserve credit for our final character). This essay is notable for its realism about character formation, and its thought-provoking insistence that the most virtuous agents are least likely to take credit for their goodness.

2) Raymond VanArragon’s “Is it Possible to Freely Reject God Forever?” defends a choice model of hell against arguments (raised by Talbott) to the effect that it is *impossible* to continually and eternally choose hell over heaven. As VanArragon defines it, to reject God forever is to go on sinning or acting immorally forever. Talbott’s first objection is that because sin eventually produces bad consequences for the sinner, everyone would eventually lose the motivation to sin and turn to God. VanArragon nicely points out that while certain sins (say, substance abuse) may fit Talbott’s model, others (say, callousness towards the poor and needy) do not obviously harm the sinner, and could probably be continued indefinitely. Talbott also objects that God would necessarily intervene to prevent anyone from damning themselves, just as a loving parent would interfere with her child’s freedom if the child were about to do himself irreparable harm. In response, VanArragon denies that the damned ever make a single choice that irreparably harms them, because God would accept them if they repented, and they will always have the capacity to repent because God has good reason to preserve their freedom.

3) In “Annihilationism: A Philosophical Dead End?” Claire Brown and Jerry Walls revue the main philosophical arguments for annihilationism, and find them all lacking. They argue first that annihilation is not the inevitable and natural result of fully rejecting God, and that with respect to its implications for God’s supremacy, annihilation has no advantage over eternal conscious suffering. They also respond to three arguments suggesting that eternal suffering is inconsistent with God’s

moral character. They claim first, that if eternal suffering is an excessive punishment for merely finite crimes, so is eternal non-existence; second, that non-existence is not necessarily preferable to existing in hell, since the sufferings of hell may be mild (seeming bad only in comparison to the glories of heaven); and third, that God would not let the damned commit “metaphysical suicide” because God would want to give them the chance to repent.

4) On a choice or “natural consequence” model of damnation, God does not consign people to hell against their wills; rather, God gives them what they want (which is to be left alone). This model seems to conflict with the traditional claim that hell is a bad enough place to function as punishment, for how can a place truly be a prison if the inmates don’t *want* to leave? In “Compatibilism, “Wantons,” and the Natural Consequence Model of Hell,” Justin D. Barnard argues that the punitive and choice views can fit together, if the damned are what Harry Frankfurt calls “wantons”: beings who have desires, but no preferences about which of their desires should be effective. Such people would not be in hell against their wills, but they would still experience regret and have some desire to escape (a desire always overpowered by the self-love keeping them there).

5) On an “Issuant” conception of hell, it is not a place of punishment, but a place provided by God out of love for those who reject God (Choice models of hell are thus typically issuant conceptions). In “Value, Finality, and Frustration: Problems for Escapism?” Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug discuss three objections to “escapism,” an issuant view according to which the damned can repent and leave hell at any time. First, in a discussion that overlaps substantially with Barnard’s previous chapter on “wantons”, they argue that escapist hell would not count as unqualifiedly good for the damned. Second, they show that escapism does not conflict with the eschatological *finality* of heaven and hell (the doctrine that after a certain time, all those in either place will never leave). Finally, they argue that escapism does not allow God’s plans to be frustrated, because God’s purpose is not that *all* should be in heaven, but that all *who prefer to be there* should be in heaven. It is worth noting that the escapist model defended here seems to be shared by the earlier chapters by Brown and Walls, and VanArragon.

6) In “Hell, Wrath, and the Grace of God,” Stephen T. Davis explores possible scriptural and theological support for the issuant choice (escapist) model of hell, and also addresses the objection that this picture of hell removes its finality. He closes with brief arguments against

annihilationism and universalism. This paper defends roughly the same position as Buckareff and Plug's paper, but situates it in a much broader context; therefore, I recommend reading chapters 4-6 in reverse order (so that each of the three papers would be further scrutinizing a suggestion made in the prior paper).

7) Davis suggests that God already knows (for the Bible predicts it) that some people will remain in hell forever (even though they could leave). But how is this foreknowledge to be understood? One possibility is Molinism: prior to creating, God knows what any possible free creature would choose to do in any possible choice situation she might face; God also knows which creatures and situations God will create; therefore, God knows ahead of time what we will do. In "Molinism and Hell," Gordon Knight elegantly argues that if Molinism is correct, then even if damnation is freely chosen by creatures, hell is incompatible with divine goodness. For a God who loves individual creatures would never create someone who (God knows) will have "an eternal life that is much worse than never having existed at all" (112).

8) In "Hell and Punishment," Stepehn Kershner argues against the choice model of hell, suggesting that God would damn a person only if hell were a just punishment for that person. He then argues that because hell is infinite, it would be an unjust punishment for any merely finitely bad human character or action(s). Kershner concludes with brief arguments against annihilation, escapism, and 'mild hell' views, leaving universalism as the only viable option; his argument at this point rests heavily on the type of claim that VanArragon (Ch. 2) attacks in his paper – namely, that one could reject God forever only if one's faculties were impaired so as to remove moral responsibility.

9) In contrast to the previous chapter, James Cain's "Why I Am Unconvinced by Arguments against the Existence of Hell" develops an account of hell as eternal punishment and defends it against five important objections. In response to the "excessive punishment" objection (central to the prior paper), Cain draws on the relativity of time to suggest that a punishment could be unending but still finite from the point of view of the sufferer (and hence just). He also points out that many philosophical discussions of the afterlife implicitly assume that it will be pretty much like a continuation of our current existence; but this, he rightly emphasizes, is highly questionable, and so we should draw firm conclusions about afterlife experience only with great hesitation.

10) In “Hell and Natural Atheology,” Keith Yandell defends an issuant choice model of hell. He denies the common assumption that it would have been better for the damned never to have existed. Drawing on considerations of the “metaphysical” as well as moral value and dignity of human beings, Yandell argues that it is better for the damned themselves to continue in their rejection of God than it would be for them not to exist; therefore, hell is the best way for God to love them. He also emphasizes that because many very bad people die without getting their just deserts, divine justice gives theists considerable reason to believe in some kind of hell (postmortem punishment).

11) Many of the papers in this book refer at some point to C. S. Lewis, whose little book *The Great Divorce* is a powerful articulation of the issuant choice model. Bradley Sickler’s “Infernal Voluntarism and ‘The Courtesy of Deep Heaven’” explores Lewis’ choice view of hell in more detail, relating it to questions about the ultimate fate of non-Christians: because God is fair, Lewis argues, salvation through Christ must be available to all, even those who do not acknowledge it as such. Sickler also defends the choice model against three important objections, one being the suggestion that a loving God would eventually override the freedom of especially recalcitrant sinners, *making* them choose heaven. Against this, Sickler argues that such a transformation would amount to annihilating the sinner and replacing him with a doppelgänger.

12) In “Birth as a Grave Misfortune,” K. Himma argues that if (1) only Christians go to heaven, and (2) hell involves eternal suffering, then it is morally wrong to have children. By careful appeal to ordinary examples, Himma argues that it is morally wrong to have a child when the chances are sufficiently high that the child “will invariably suffer severe harm” (192). He then argues that given (1) and (2), the odds of any child going to hell seem sufficiently high to make conception wrong. Since it is intuitively *not* wrong to have children, Himma concludes that either (1) or (2) must be false.

13) “Species of Hell” by John Kronen and Eric Reitan offers a very perceptive and helpful classification of the various views of hell discussed in the book as a whole (for that reason, I think it might be best to *start* with this paper when picking up this volume). Each model of hell is shown to combine an account of the *nature* of the evil of hell with an account of the *cause* of this evil. For each of these issues, there are two basic options: the evil in hell could be purely negative – the absence of enjoying the beatific vision – or it could involve in addition some

positive conscious suffering; likewise the cause can be seen either as primarily human choice (God wants to save the damned, but they refuse to cooperate), or divine will (for some reason – e.g., justice – God doesn't will their salvation as an end). Kronen and Reitan use this classification scheme to generate six possible models of hell, and raise difficulties for all of them. Of special interest here is their point, which I have never heard before, that on some models, God responds to sin in a seemingly absurd way: by “acting to ensure that this affront to His dignity continues for all eternity” (218). While I found this to be one of the overall best papers in the volume, it was also a somewhat frustrating read: the authors abbreviated the various positions with letter and number combinations rather than name labels, and there were so many positions that I had to keep referring back to the original statements of the views in order to follow the argument.

*The Problem of Hell* is an important contribution to current debates about hell. Because it contains a number of genuine advances in the discussion, it is a “must read” for anyone seriously interested in these issues. I recommend it heartily.