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INTOLERABLE BUT MORAL? THINKING ABOUT HELL

Paul T. Jensen

Thomas Talbott's recent argument for Hell's nonexistence is a sophisticated version of hard universalism. I suggest some reasons to question his argument and to accept the logical and moral possibility that some humans will not be saved.

If Hell does not exist, those who think it does are merely foolish; if it does exist, those who think it doesn't may be in great danger. Only if Hell exists can one end up there; but if it does not, no one can end up there even if they believe they can. A recent national survey indicates that 60% of all Americans, 66% of all Protestants, and 57% of all Catholics believe in Hell.¹ Are these people foolishly deceived? Thomas Talbott believes they are. I think he is wrong.

A garden variety argument for universalism may be put in the following way. There are two biblical ways of looking at salvation. One claims that only Christian believers will be saved; the other claims that all human persons will be saved.² The latter is more loving and hence must be true because God is love.³ Talbott recently presented a sophisticated version of this argument. In sum, he asserted that (using his numbering system):

(3) God loves every created person

and

(5) God will finally reject some persons and subject those persons to everlasting punishment

are inconsistent. Furthermore, that

(3') God loves some created persons but not all

is necessarily false. And the kind of choice described in

(5') Some persons will, despite God's best efforts to save them, finally reject God and separate themselves from God forever

is incoherent. And, even if it were coherent, it would be the type of evil "a loving God would be required to prevent."⁴ Talbott's argument rests on the assertion that God loves every created person and attempts to demonstrate the further claim that God's love entails universalism.



Before investigating these claims it might be well to point out that Talbott's conclusion seems to qualify as 'hard universalism,' the view that no person *can be* finally lost, as opposed to 'soft universalism,' the view that no person *will be* finally lost.⁵ Any view claiming that the salvation of all humans follows from the necessary attributes of God would qualify as hard universalism. Any view claiming that the damnation of some humans is logically and morally possible, but will never be actual, would qualify as soft universalism. Talbott's argument amounts to the claim that God's essential attribute of love renders it impossible that any person will be finally lost. How should this argument be assessed?

That God loves every created person is probably more widely held than any assumption about God. But even widely held assumptions require some justification. How would one go about justifying this claim? Might it be a truth of reason? To my knowledge no ontological argument exists to prove that God possesses essentially the attribute of love. Can it be derived from experience? The preponderance of evidence seems to stand on the negative side. Though many people experience unmistakable and even extraordinary instances of God's providence, which they interpret as evidence of God's love for them, they also weather considerable grief and pain, and witness more in others. This leads me to conclude that insufficient experiential evidence exists for justifying the claim that God loves all his creatures.

Thus, if such a belief is true, only God's special revelation of it could be a sufficient justification for believing it.⁶ And here the difficulty emerges, for the biblical theist finds intertwined with the assertions of God's love, God's condemnation of unbelievers and the assertion that they will perish. The most famous, of course, are the familiar verses found in John 3:16-19.

If one cannot know the truth of (3) apart from special divine revelation, it seems unlikely that one can discover the nature of God's love for his creatures apart from that revelation as well. If that is so, pronouncements about the composition of divine love demand a number of prior theological commitments, among which are the following: there is a special divine revelation; it is the only source for certain central Christian beliefs; and it stands as a control over those beliefs. Lest I be accused here of theological pedantry, I would urge that calling attention to these affirmations seems imperative in light of Talbott's claim that his conclusions regarding Hell represent *biblical* theism.⁷ If one wants to remain open to persuasion of Hell's nonexistence, as I do, it is well to be reminded of these; for, in the end, one may need to choose between faithfulness to a specially revealed truth and acquiescence to forceful and appealing arguments against it.

Along side the biblical affirmations of God's love are other more disturbing assertions of which the following are a sample:

You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. (Ps. 5:5)

The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. (Ps. 11:5-6) [Cp. Prov. 6:16-19; Jn. 3:36; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 2:1-3]

These texts, and many others, serve as a sober reminder that the Hebrew mind affirmed that God hates wrongdoers and acts in wrath against human wickedness. These texts can be dismissed as revealing nothing true about God, or they can be treated as equal in weight to the texts asserting God's universal love. The former tack leaves nothing to be discussed, but those who follow it must surrender the title "biblical theist." The latter tack requires harmonizing the dual affirmations of divine love and wrath; it means asserting in some coherent way that humans are simultaneously objects of God's love and God's wrath. Can this be done? I believe it can.

Calvin-bashing has become something of a cottage industry lately, and Augustine's unpopularity lags not far behind Calvin's. I haven't the space to defend them as faithful interpreters of the Hebrew scriptures or of St. John and St. Paul, but both offered a coherent and exegetically sound harmony of this paradox. The term "hate" used in the Hebrew scriptures presents the greatest difficulty.⁸ If it means detesting and intending to destroy, it seems impossible to hate and love the same object. But there is a way out of this dilemma: God may simultaneously hate and love the same individual by hating one aspect of that individual and loving another.

Augustine explained that God simultaneously hates and loves us because he knows how to hate us "for what we were that he had not made [*viz.* sin]...and to love what he had made."⁹ Calvin stated similarly that "God, apart from Christ is always angry with us," although he "does not hate in us His own workmanship, that is, the fact that he has created us as living beings, but He hates our uncleanness, which has extinguished the light of His image."¹⁰ Neither Augustine nor Calvin can be construed as believing God actually hates individuals if by that is meant that he hates what he has created. God's wrath against sin means he desires and intends to destroy it. It seems reasonable to hold that though God loves all created individuals, those who by their wicked choices destroy his workmanship and image fall under his wrath.

The issue then comes to this: can persons so distort and corrupt God's image as to be only worthy of his wrath/hatred; or can they so defile and pervert the divine creation as to destroy their status as beings loved by God? The Hebrew scriptures, the words of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, and the writings of St. John and St. Paul strongly imply that it is. My major point here is not to prove that Hell exists, but only to demonstrate that (3) and (5) are not inconsistent and that while (3') may be false, (5') is not incoherent.

It is one thing to say God loves sinners, quite another to say God loves evil. What separates universalists and those who believe in Hell's existence is not whether God loves all created individuals, but the analysis of what divine love means. If "God loves me" *means* that God must necessarily save me, then of course God cannot be said to love me unless he saves me. But I can find no scriptural warrant for this as the meaning of divine love. The New Testament presentation of divine love includes two assertions: (i) that God gave his one and only Son so that those who believe will not perish (Jn. 3:16), and (ii) that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). So far as I can see, neither of these explanations of the meaning of divine love entails universalism.

The question turns on whether human individuals can become evil by their own choices and actions and there seems abundant evidence to affirm that they can.¹¹ Karl Barth, whose enigmatic stance on universalism is well known, asserted at the end of his *Church Dogmatics* that "To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance."¹² A view of God's love that construes it as the Ananke which robs the divine will of the freedom to deal with humans in mercy or justice seems to my mind biblically misinformed and logically suspect.

The New Testament presents human salvation as the product of divine grace. Salvation implies deliverance from an unpleasant consequence; grace implies ill-desert. Is it the case that I do not deserve salvation? Unless it is, I am not saved by grace. The universalist must assert either (i) that all humans deserve salvation, or (ii) that all humans will avail themselves of the means of grace (soft universalism), or (iii) that God's love necessitates that all be saved despite their ill-desert (hard universalism). The difficulty with hard universalism is that genuine human ill-desert requires salvation to be the product of divine *supererogatory* goodness. But the very notion of supererogatory goodness, i.e., good acts which God can justly leave undone, makes the claim that God is required to perform them incoherent. Thus, if humans are ill-deserving of divine salvation, God can justly not save them. Talbott does not deny this, but his argument implies that divine love vitiates divine freedom: God's love necessitates that God perform supererogatorily good acts. I find this unintelligible.

The perfect love of Father, Son, and Spirit within the divine Trinity cannot be added to or subtracted from by virtue of God's relations to his creatures, nor can God's love be perfected only through creation and redemption.¹³ Thus, it cannot be argued that God's love is greater or fuller in the salvation of all individuals. But Talbott holds that:

In the case of an omnipotent and omniscient being...the claim that such a being loves a person for awhile and then ceases to love that person makes

no sense at all. Suppose that for fifty years God were to act towards Smith in exactly the way he would act towards someone he loves, and suppose that God were to do so in the full knowledge that forever afterwards he would act towards Smith in unloving ways. Could we then say that God loved Smith for awhile?—that for awhile he intended to promote the best interest of Smith? Surely not. In the case of God, it surely is a necessary truth that God loves a person at one time (in the New Testament sense of *agape* love) only if he loves that person at all subsequent times.¹⁴

But this does not seem to be a necessary truth at all. I believe it misconstrues the nature of divine love by failing to take account of divine wrath and human responsibility. Humans are mutable; God's love and wrath are constant. Which one I place myself under depends on the free choices I make. As a sinful individual I am simultaneously under both divine love and wrath. The issue is whether I can destroy what God loves. Can I willfully render myself solely an object of divine wrath? Talbott believes I cannot. The frightful truth about myself, however, is that when I contemplate my own being I find numerous reasons to think I can. Perhaps I should not have been given such power, but then, perhaps there are mysteries too deep for human reason to penetrate. If I willfully destroy what God loves, I cannot hold that God continues to love me unless I am prepared to subscribe to the blasphemous notion that God loves evil and wickedness. I, at least, am unwilling to endorse such a judgment.

Peter Geach opined that "People say rather lightly that they could not bear for a damned soul to be punished unendingly; but someone confronted with the damned would find it impossible to wish that things so evil should be happy—particularly when the misery is seen as the direct and natural consequence of the guilt."¹⁵ Talbott objects to this on the grounds that if he loves his daughter as he loves himself, her damnation would be an intolerable loss to him and would undermine the possibility of his own happiness. Furthermore, he argues that, from the premise that he could not wish to see his daughter *both* morally corrupt *and* happy, it does not follow that he would not wish to see her happy, for if his daughter should become as corrupt and miserable as Geach describes, that would *increase* his sense of loss and his desire to see her both redeemed and happy.¹⁶

It would be foolish and uncharitable to suggest that Talbott's feelings respecting his daughter are mistaken. Indeed, as a parent I am strongly inclined to agree with him. But my belief that humans can make themselves evil causes me to hesitate. So as not to offend Talbott unnecessarily, let me use my own son as the example. Let us suppose that, as I earnestly pray will never happen, my son were to destroy the image of God in himself and willfully place himself under the divine wrath by becoming wicked. Precisely who is it that I would desire to see both redeemed and happy? The son who once was, or the son who now is? Do not many parents tragically, but rightly, say to a

child, I love what you used to be, but hate what you have made of yourself? To hate wickedness and intensely desire that it be destroyed is not unloving and in no way vitiates the reality of one's love for a person *who once was, but is no more*.

This carries implications for the love of enemies as well. According to Talbott, "if supremely worthwhile happiness requires that I learn to love my enemies even as I love my own daughter, then the damnation of [a] single person is incompatible with such happiness in me."¹⁷ But surely the command to love our enemies is not a command to love their wickedness. We are commanded to love them because we are utterly ignorant of the state of their souls. Performing vicious and wicked acts does not mean *ipso facto* that they have destroyed God's image in themselves. (Has any recipient of God's gracious redemption not performed such acts?) God requires Christians to act in kind and generous ways toward their enemies precisely because we are ignorant of our enemies' motives, desires, and intentions. God does not lack such knowledge; he who knows every aspect of every mind acts towards individuals in love or wrath depending on the motives, desires, intentions, and choices of the individuals in question. When or if I become privy to this same knowledge I will presumably think as God does. I see no reason to suppose one cannot be supremely happy while hating wickedness. On the contrary, it seems incredible to me that anyone could be supremely happy who did not hate wickedness and earnestly desire its destruction. Thus, the possibility of the damnation of sinners is not removed by arguing that God's love requires him to prevent each person from "undermining the possibility of supremely worthwhile happiness in others."¹⁸ If I am damned it is because I have made myself wicked and thereby destroyed God's image in me. Unless supremely worthwhile happiness entails loving wickedness, no one's damnation can destroy supreme happiness in others.

I suspect many, like me, find the possibility of Hell intolerable but moral—intolerable, not because some people suffer the consequences of their sinful actions, but because it is intolerable for humans to act as wickedly as they do. Perhaps Talbott is right; perhaps an omnipotent and perfectly loving God would never permit sinners to place themselves under his wrath. If so, those who believe Hell exists are merely foolish. If not, it is exceedingly dangerous for me to believe that Hell does not exist. Since I have yet to find a reason to think God's love forces him to perform supererogatorily good acts, I am inclined to agree with Eleonore Stump who suggests that Hell may serve to protect the righteous from the wicked.¹⁹ Pray God it does not serve to protect the righteous from me.

NOTES

1. "Hell's Sober Comeback," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 25, 1991, p. 57.
2. I would deny that there are two biblical ways of looking at salvation, but that is not a topic that can be adequately dealt with here.
3. Cp. N. T. Wright, "Towards a biblical view of universalism," *Themelios* 4 (1979), p. 54.
4. T. Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), pp. 39-40.
5. I owe this distinction to Paul Helm, "Universalism and the Threat of Hell," *Trinity Journal* 4NS (1983), p. 36.
6. I use the term "special revelation" as a technical theological term, to be understood as a supplement to, and distinguished from, "natural revelation." Though not all special revelation need be "propositional," I see no way around the conclusion that if (3) is true, it must be a true proposition specially revealed by God.
7. Talbott, p. 23. Though this epithet seems somewhat arbitrary and leans toward the contentious, I won't quibble over a name he chooses for himself. To his credit, I should note that he calls his self-description as *biblical* theist, "a concession to my own biases."
8. An enlightening discussion of the biblical doctrine of divine hate is: Henry Stob, "Does God Hate Some Men?" in *Ethical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 250-55.
9. Augustine, "Commentary on the Gospel of John," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), volume 7, p. 411. Calvin quoted these words in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2.16.4.
10. J. Calvin, commentary on Rom. 3:25 from "Commentary on Romans," in *Calvin Commentaries*, 12 vols., ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).
11. One of the most penetrating defenses of this thesis can be found in M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).
12. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume IV, number 3 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), p. 477.
13. E. A. Blum, "'Shall you not surely die?'" *Themelios* 4 (1979), p. 60.
14. Talbott, p. 26.
15. P. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1977), p. 139.
16. Talbott, p. 39.
17. Talbott, p. 39.
18. Talbott, p. 39.
19. E. Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, p. 196.