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ANNIHILATIONISM AND THE ERADICATION OF ALL SIN
ANNIHILACIONISMO Y LA ERRADICACIÓN DE TODO PECADO

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ABSTRACT

Annihilationism claims that earthly death is followed by a divine judgment after which the wicked are condemned to a second (and irrevocable) death, while those who have lived their earthly life according to God's commands are blessed with a heavenly eternal existence. The aim of this essay is to show that, contrary to what defenders of annihilationism argue, the claim that God's victory over evil requires the complete eradication of all sin does not suffice alone to justify annihilationism.

Keywords: Annihilationism, Hell, Second Death, Sin.

RESUMEN

El annihilacionismo afirma que la muerte terrenal va seguida de un juicio divino tras el cual los pecadores son condenados a una segunda (e irrevocable) muerte, mientras que aquellos que han vivido su vida terrena de acuerdo con los preceptos de Dios son bendecidos con una existencia eterna en el cielo. El objetivo de este ensayo es mostrar que, contrariamente a lo que los defensores del annihilacionismo argumentan, la tesis que la victoria de Dios sobre el mal requiere de la completa erradicación de todo pecado no es suficiente, por sí sola, para justificar la doctrina annihilacionista.

Palabras clave: Anihilacionismo, infierno, pecado, segunda muerte.

1§. Annihilationists claim that earthly sins will be punished by God with the complete annihilation of sinners. Since there is still some kind of retributive punishment, annihilationism does not eliminate the notion of hell altogether, but changes its nature: earthly-death is followed by a divine judgment after which the wicked are condemned to a second (and irrevocable) death, whereas those who have lived their earthly lives according to God's commands are blessed with a heavenly eternal existence.

2§. Annihilationism's main metaphysical assumption is conditionalism; *i.e.*, the claim that humans are not naturally immortal, but they can become immortal through the help of God's grace. Annihilationists argue that the Bible teaches conditionalism, and they claim that the natural immortality of the soul is a Platonist theory not found anywhere in the Scriptures (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Pinnock 1990, 252-259). I will not enter into discussion about the plausibility of conditionalism and, just for the sake of the discussion, I will assume that conditionalism is an anthropological view consistent with the Christian notion of God. Note, however, that whereas conditionalism is a necessary presupposition if annihilationism is to be conceivable, it does not suffice to establish annihilationism since conditionalism is also consistent with the traditional understanding of hell as an everlasting punishment: there is still the possibility of arguing that God would concede eternal existence to earthly sinners for the purpose of condemning them to an everlasting punishment.

3§. When defending their view, annihilationists' main efforts usually focus on the task of biblical exegesis to show that annihilationism is the truly eschatological view founded in the Scriptures. However, it is worth noting that the claim that annihilationism is the true biblical view is far from clear and, in fact, goes against most of the traditional interpretation of Christian Scriptures, which sees hell as an everlasting punishment. Annihilationists are, of course, well aware that their biblical interpretation is far from tradition and they try to reinforce their annihilationist reading by attempting to undermine the plausibility of the traditional view of hell as an everlasting punishment, and by defending their own view on philosophical grounds. Since my purpose here is exclusively philosophical, I will not enter into discussion on issues of biblical interpretation but rather I will focus on one of the aforementioned arguments

used by annihilationists which aim to provide philosophical support for their doctrine.¹

4§. The argument claims that the execution of God's authority requires God's ultimate victory over evil, which is understood in terms of the complete eradication of all sin. Only if hell is understood in annihilationist terms, the argument goes, will God's victory over evil be ultimate. Clark Pinnock, one of the most salient defenders of annihilationism, formulates this argument as follows:

“Only if evil, death, devils, and the wicked go into oblivion does history issue in unqualified victory. Victory means that evil is removed and nothing remains but light and love. The traditional theory of everlasting torment means that the shadow of darkness hangs over the new creation forever.” (Pinnock 1996, 155; *cf.*, also, Hughes 2014, 195–6)

5§. Note, however, that even if the argument succeeds, it still does not suffice to establish annihilationism. The complete eradication of all sin is something that is also implied by the doctrine of universal salvation (*i.e.*, the view that, perhaps after some prior punishment finite in duration, all human beings will in the end be blessed with an eternal heavenly existence). Thus, taken in isolation, this argument cannot be considered a conclusive defense of annihilationism unless the doctrine of universal salvation is previously discredited.

6§. It is also important to point out that the claim that God's ultimate victory over evil requires the complete eradication of all sin is justified on scriptural, non-philosophical grounds, by appealing to the Biblical notion of a Final Judgment according to which there must be a clear distinction between the before and the after God's judgment and the execution of His justice: after judgment there can be no rebellion against God, but God's being “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

Obviously, if we are to accept the biblical notion of a Final Judgment, the very possibility of sinning in hell will be already discredited, but as I just pointed out, this reason would not be philosophical but biblical. From a strictly philosophical point of view, God's ultimate victory over evil does not *require* (although it may be consistent with) the eradication of all sin.

Suppose now that we were to claim that those who are condemned to hell are there not (only) for their earthly sins, but because of their continual sinning even

1 For discussion regarding biblical interpretation see: (Bowles 2001), (Fudge 1984), (Peterson 1994), (Pinnock 1996, especially 143–48), (Walvoord 1996), (Wenham 1998).

in hell. And their continual sinning is a consequence of their not submitting to God's authority. Leaving aside other philosophical objections this view might encounter, the important point for our discussion is that once it is granted that all sins would be justly punished, it could be argued that God's victory over those who endlessly sin in hell is already *ultimate*, in the sense of irrevocable, even if there is no final judgment involved at all: there would be a continuous judgment so to say, but God's laws would always prevail. Even if those in hell succeeded in sinning, in acting against God's laws, to the extent that they were punished for their faults, God's authority over evil would still be satisfied—and note here that the law works *not only* when there are no crimes, but when criminals receive the deserved punishment for their crimes. Furthermore, the fact that those in hell do not freely submit to God's authority does not undermine God's authority since it does not imply that they are not, *de facto*, under God's authority: after all, they are in hell because God has decided so. In short, the sinful activity of those in hell would undermine God's authority only if their sins remained unpunished, but this would not be the case in that those in hell are in such a position because they are receiving the punishment they deserve from God.

7§. Suppose that we come to agree with the annihilationist in that God's ultimate victory over evil *requires* the ultimate eradication of all sin and that the doctrine of universal salvation is not an adequate conception of hell. Under these assumptions, the argument is formulated as supporting annihilationism in so far as it is insisted that it would undermine the very possibility of the existence of hell as an everlasting punishment. The traditional view of hell, annihilationists say, implies that there is still evil to be faced and therefore, that God is incapable of exercising His complete authority and of securing an ultimate victory over evil.

However, this seems to be a distorted characterization of the traditional view of hell. On that view, hell is not a place (or a state) for carrying out evil, sinful actions but a place where (or a state by which) people receive the punishment deserved for the sinful actions they have committed during their earthly lives. It is true that an everlasting punishment implies the eternal existence of those that are in hell, but it does not necessarily imply that they are still sinners. Defenders of the traditional view of hell might claim that there is no evil in hell, in so far as the condemned, after being judged, reach an understanding and recognition of the motives for their everlasting punishment, and thereby freely submitting to (and even praising) God's authority.

This line of reasoning has to pay the price that God's punishments are exclusively retributive and not corrective at all, because otherwise we cannot

understand why if those in hell come to recognize God's authority and the inappropriateness of their actions, He does not simply redeem them. As far as I know, the most common response to this question is to claim that earthly sins are of such infinite seriousness that they deserve an infinite (and hence irrevocable) punishment. This would be so because God's laws are the expression of God's nature and intentions and so, when sinning, one is not merely acting against God's laws but against God Himself. And given God's infinite moral status, any offence against Him is a matter of infinite seriousness (and, hence, deserved of an infinite punishment).

This answer might seem unconvincing for several reasons and perhaps it could be argued here that non-corrective punishments are gratuitous, unjust, and hence inconsistent with God's alleged all-good nature. Annihilationists, however, cannot follow this line of reasoning since annihilation, which they claim to be a punishment of earthly sins consistent with God's all-good nature, has no corrective end at all: annihilation is irrevocable and, hence, it cannot serve any posterior purpose.

8§. Last, it must be mentioned that I have not aimed here to defend or reject the consistency of annihilationism or the traditional notion of hell as an everlasting punishment; in fact, I think that both of them face serious problems for which there is no easy answer. Rather, my aim here has been to show that, contrary to what defenders of annihilationism argue, the claim that God's victory over evil requires the complete eradication of all sin does not suffice alone to justify annihilationism.

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