

Contemporary Shifts in the Christian Doctrine of Hell in Anglo-American Philosophical Theology

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Received: 2015-09-10; Accepted: 2015-11-15

Abstract: This problem of hell is a specific form of the problem of evil. The possibility that perhaps a great number of people will end up in an eternal hell is a problem for the Christian who also confesses faith in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God.

In this paper, I shall introduce issuantist views of hell and show that the basic formulations of this perspective do not provide an adequate answer to the problem of hell. Issuantist scholars themselves, however, recognize this weakness and add a wide range of possible supplements to their basic perspective. Some of these supplemented versions succeed in presenting reasonable answers to the problem of hell.

One of the key reasons for the shift in interpretations of hell is a perceived failure on the part of other interpretations of hell to give adequate answers to the problem of hell. It is my conclusion, however, that with the addition of some of the same supplements, versions of annihilationism/conditionalism and hell as eternal conscious torment can be advanced that succeed just as well in presenting answers to the problem of hell as those advanced by issuantist scholars, thus rendering some of their critique of retributive perspectives on hell unfounded.

Keywords: Hell, Eternal Punishment, Free Will.

Introduction

Nobody likes the doctrine of hell. Even among scholars who define hell in terms of eternal conscious torment, there is a certain repulsion at the idea that God would condemn perhaps a large portion of the world's population to everlasting punishment in hell. This tension between belief in a loving, good God and the possibility of eternal damnation is called the problem of hell. The problem of hell has been expressed in terms of a set of seemingly incompatible statements:

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1. An omnipotent God could create a world in which all moral agents freely choose life with God.
2. An omnibenevolent God would not create a world with the foreknowledge that some (perhaps a significant proportion) of God's creatures would end up in hell.
3. An omniscient God would know which people will end up in hell.
4. Some people will end up forever in hell.

Within Anglo-American theology, there are four main approaches to dealing with the problem of hell: Eternal Conscious Torment is a perspective that holds that whatever decisions a person makes in this life for or against faith in God are binding. Those who reject God's offer of grace will be punished forever in a conscious state of mind in hell. The issue of disproportionality between offense and punishment raised by the problem of hell is generally answered in terms of either the *status principle* or the *continuing sin* defense. The status principle is the idea going back to Anselm and Aquinas that the severity of the wrongdoing is measured not by anything inherent in the action itself, but by the status of the offended party. Since God is infinite—the being a greater than which cannot be conceived—all sins against God warrant an infinite punishment. Traditionalist defenders of the continuing sin defense, on the other hand, recognize that the harm done by the sins of a finite lifetime does not warrant everlasting or infinite punishment. They maintain however that people in hell continue in their rebellion against God forever and thus deserve to be punished forever.

Universalism is another major perspective in the history of Christian theology. Universalists emphasize God's sovereignty and God's loving desire that no one should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Although some people may experience hell after death, the fires of hell serve a remedial and purgatorial function such that no one persists in rebellion against God forever. All of creation is eventually reconciled to the loving God that created it.

A third historic perspective on the doctrine of hell is conditionalism or annihilationism. Conditionalist scholars reject the idea of the inherent immortality of the soul. They believe that only God is immortal and that God only grants immortality to those who place their faith in God. Those who reject God's offer of eternal life will eventually cease to exist as an expression of God's final judgment and as a consequence of the natural mortality of the soul—something the Bible calls “the second death” (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

Issuantism

In the past thirty years, a number of British and North American philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians have developed a new approach to answering the problem of hell. Scholars such as

Richard Swinburne (1983), Jerry Walls (1992), Stephen Davis (2010), Jonathan Kvanvig (1993), and N.T. Wright (2008) have not been content with the solutions to the problem of hell presented by defenders of eternal conscious torment, universalism, or conditionalism. They seek to “lower the temperature” of hell by reinterpreting hell along non-retributive lines. Instead of being an expression of God’s wrath, hell is seen both as an expression of the love of God for created beings and as the natural consequences of a person’s free choice to reject God.

As a fairly recent innovation in the history of theology, there is no scholarly consensus as to what such views should be called. Some scholars call these views *issuantism* or *issuant views of hell*, because of their insistence that both heaven and hell must issue from the same divine quality—the love of God (Walls 1992; Buckareff; Plug 2005). Other scholars use the term *choice model of hell* (Kvanvig 2011), because of their emphasis on a libertarian definition of human freedom. Still others call this perspective the *natural-consequence view* (Murray 1998) or a *separationist view of hell* (Seymour 1998; 2000), because of their rejection of retributive justifications for hell. Other suggested names include the *weak view of hell* (Hall 2003, 12; Hartman 2014, 72) and a *progressive understanding of hell* (Reitan 2003, 125–42).

In this paper, I shall use the terms *issuantism* and *issuant views of hell* for this family of perspectives. By this choice, however, I do not mean to give priority to the idea that both heaven and hell must issue from, or have their grounding in, the love of God. Indeed, I define *issuantism* as a category of non-universalistic views of hell that distinguishes itself from non-issuant views of hell by three *sine qua non* trademarks: the integration of divine motivations for heaven and hell in the love of God, a libertarian definition of human freedom, and a rejection of retributive interpretations of hell.

In regard to the first trademark—i.e., the integration of divine motives in the love of God—*issuantists* contend that there is a fundamental inconsistency to most retributive perspectives of hell implicit in the claim that eternal life issues from the love of God and that hell is an expression of a different divine character quality such as God’s justice, holiness, or wrath. *Issuantists* argue that both heaven and hell must issue from the love of God, since love is a more foundational character quality than justice or wrath. Love is an intrinsic quality in God, whereas wrath only expresses itself as a response to sin.

Regarding the second trademark—i.e., metaphysical libertarianism—*issuantist* scholars believe that only a libertarian definition of human freedom is capable of preserving the concept of human moral responsibility. *Issuantists* contend that any form of determinism, including the soft determinism of compatibilism, eliminates moral responsibility. If a person’s actions can be at least partially determined by outside causes while claims of freedom and moral responsibility are

asserted, then God would be morally culpable for not creating the world such that all people would freely choose salvation while at the same time being determined to do so.

Regarding issuantism's third trademark—i.e., the rejection of retributive interpretations of hell—not all issuantists state explicitly what they believe to be the purpose of hell. They are united, however, in uniformly rejecting retributive interpretations of hell in favor of other theories where hell serves the purpose of restitution or reparation, deterrence or prevention, incapacitation or quarantine, or rehabilitation or restoration. It is worthwhile to note an important corollary to the issuantists' rejection of retributive interpretations of hell. It would be possible to claim that a non-retributive interpretation of hell is consistent with the view that Jesus Christ took the punishment of the world's sins when he died on the cross. Very few issuantist scholars, however, accept penal substitution as a model for understanding what happened on the cross. If Christ was not punished on the cross for the world's sins, then neither should people be punished for their sins in hell.

These three trademarks—the integrations of divine motives for heaven and hell in the love of God, a libertarian definition of free will, and the rejection of retributive interpretations of hell—together form what I call basic issuantism. But how well does basic issuantism succeed in answering the problem of hell?

There are four main objections that can be raised against this basic form of issuantism. First, even if one conceives of hell as the natural consequence of a person's free rejection of God, one may still blame God for setting up a system where the natural consequence of one's choices is everlasting mental and possibly physical suffering. One could compare the doctrine of hell to a school principal who rules that any students caught fighting would be forcibly sodomized by the school janitor. This example presupposes a retributive interpretation of hell; there is no natural connection between the act of fighting and the punishment of being sodomized. According to issuantism, there is nonetheless a natural connection between a person's choice to live life without God and the natural consequences of those choices, being eternally separated from God and all the goods with which God wishes to bless people. Maybe a better example would be to say that if you cheat on your wife, she will leave you. Yet the disproportionality of an everlasting hell with a sinful lifetime of at most one hundred years would seem to have greater similarities to the disproportionality of being sodomized by the school janitor than it does with the natural consequences of marital unfaithfulness. Thus, it would seem that God would still be morally culpable for establishing a system whereby some people will suffer eternally, even if people can only blame themselves for ending up in that situation.

Second, the issue of finality can be a problem for basic issuantism. If human free choice is the deciding factor for determining one's postmortem destiny, then what is there to say that one cannot freely change one's mind? If God allows people to end up in hell in deference to their free choice, then people in hell must still be free. If they are free, then they must be free to leave hell. Likewise, it must be possible for the godly to freely leave heaven. If people are free to leave heaven or hell, then one's destiny has no sense of finality that is an integral part of any Christian understanding of the final judgment. One can easily picture a lift eternally shuttling people up and down between heaven and hell. If people are not free to leave hell, then what would be the point of God deferring to human freedom in allowing people to freely send themselves to hell if they then cease to be free? If people are no longer free, then it would certainly be better for God to save everyone, even if it means overruling their free rejection of God.

A third issue relates to gratitude. According to some forms of issuantism, God gets the credit for those who are saved, but not the blame for those who are damned. If humans cannot take credit for their salvation, how can they be blamed for their damnation? If the ungodly bear the sole responsibility for their infernal fate, then why aren't the godly responsible for their eternal life? This asymmetrical view is a corollary to the view that heaven is an expression of God's love while hell is an expression of God's wrath—a view that issuantist scholars patently reject.

One option would be to say that God is ultimately responsible for both the salvation of some and the damnation of others, an option found in Calvinism. Another option is to say that God is not responsible for either salvation or damnation. This option not only flies in the face of the Christian belief that salvation is a gift of God that one receives through faith, it also makes God largely redundant. It is on this basis that Moltmann calls issuant views of hell "atheistic":

The logic of hell seems to me not merely inhumane but also extremely atheistic: here the human being in his freedom of choice is his own lord and god. His own will is his heaven – or his hell. God is merely the accessory who puts that will into effect. If I decide for heaven, God must put me there; if I decide for hell, he has to leave me there. ... Free human beings forge their own happiness and are their own executioners. They do not just dispose over their lives here; they decide on their eternal destinies as well. So they have no need of any God at all. (Moltmann 2001, 45)

It has not been my desire to create a straw man which I have now swiftly destroyed. Basic issuantism by itself does not harmonize the ostensibly inconsistent premises of the problem of hell. But as a rarefied construction, maybe it was never intended to fulfill this purpose. Because of its failure at solving the problem of hell, most, if not all, issuantists seek to strengthen basic issuantism with the addition of one or more supplements.

Supplements to Basic Issuantism

The first supplement is the Not-so-Nasty Thesis, where the people in hell are content with their situation, since they have received what they genuinely want. This is an idea hinted at by C.S. Lewis (1974 [1940], 127) in his claim that the doors of hell are locked from the inside, and that the residents of hell are “successful rebels to the end.” On Lewis’ conception, the denizens of hell may be objectively unhappy while subjectively believing themselves to be happy. Lewis’ “ghosts” in *The Great Divorce* who return to hell after their excursion to the outskirts of heaven illustrate this warped sense of well-being (Lewis 1945).

The Not-so-Nasty Thesis is a common feature in many contemporary issuantist accounts of hell. Stephen Davis writes, “Having lived their lives apart from God, they will choose – eternally – to go on doing so. So it is not a bad thing that they do not spend eternity in the presence of God” (Davis 2001, 87). He believes that the ungodly will nonetheless be aware of the consequences of their choices: “Though they freely choose hell and could not be happy in paradise, I believe they will clearly understand what they have chosen to miss” (2001, 87).

Other issuantists who posit forms of the Not-so-Nasty Thesis are Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug,¹ Jerry Walls,² and Richard Swinburne.³

A second supplement to basic issuantism is the Less-than-Human Thesis. The loss of the goods with which God blesses people includes the ultimate loss of humanity for the formerly human denizens of hell. This supplement also has its roots in C.S. Lewis. Lewis (1974 [1940]) called the people in hell ghosts or ex-men, the remnants of what once were humans.

For Bishop N.T. Wright, the suffering of hell is the loss of the image of God. He sees the image of God as a gift given to humanity. However, when people worship other gods (i.e., commit any kind of sin), there is a certain atrophy of the image of God. “Those who persistently refuse to follow Jesus, the true Image of God, will by their own choice become less and less like him, that is, less and less truly human” (Wright 2008, 95-96).

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1. “While on escapism it is the case that the denizens of hell enjoy positive (quantitative) well-being and so there is a sense in which hell is not bad, we are hesitant to say that hell is good for persons who reside there without qualification” (Buckareff and Plug 2010, 79).
 2. “[Hell] holds no genuine happiness, but those who prefer it to heaven may savor a deformed sense of satisfaction which faintly resembles real happiness” (Walls 1992, 128). Walls subsequently revised his view on this point without totally abandoning it.
 3. “If someone does form their character in such a way as to be unalterably bad and if that involved their having no residual desire for the good which they cannot choose, they do not then desire the Vision of God; and so it is not a bad thing that they do not get it” (Swinburne 1998, 121).

A third supplement to basic issuantism is the Nearly-Empty Thesis—hell will be populated by only a small number of irredeemably evil beings. Although the Nearly-Empty Thesis is neither a necessary nor an adequate supplement to issuantism, it is sometimes added as a way of showing that God is not to blame if a small number of people choose to reject God forever. Eleonore Stump comments, “So long as some such speculation is not incompatible with Christian doctrine, it is not at all clear that the majority of people end in hell” (Stump 1985, 412). Without expressly affirming the Nearly-Empty Thesis, Walls gives the example of a military commander whose strategy includes being willing to sacrifice a small number of soldiers in order to achieve a greater military goal (Walls 1992, 102-03).

Perhaps the most helpful supplements to basic issuantism are various forms of Extra Chance Theses, where, in order to counteract the disadvantages of religious bad luck, God provides people with one or more postmortem opportunities to be saved. There are a number of different forms of Extra Chance Theses. Jerry Walls posits one possible opportunity for people who have not had adequate exposure to God’s optimal grace in this lifetime to make their choice for God (Walls 1992, 88). Eleonore Stump¹ and Stephen Davis (2010) admit the possibility of at least one, but probably not an endless number of opportunities. Other issuantist scholars leave the door open for many postmortem chances to receive God’s grace, either in purgatory (Swinburne 1989, 197) or in hell itself (Buckareff and Plug 2005, 39-54; 2009, 63-72; 2010, 77-90).

A fifth supplement commonly added to basic issuantism is the Fixed Character Thesis, where the formation of an evil character explains how people can chose to remain in hell. Issuantists affirm a libertarian definition of human freedom. As such, they do not believe a person’s character is determined by God or other external forces. A person may, however, through her free choices, gradually develop a character that may finally become fixed for good or for evil. Once a person’s character becomes fixed, she is no longer free in the libertarian sense, even though she remains morally responsible for her actions through the transitivity of moral responsibility.

An example may help explain this point. Suppose that Stefan is a successful businessman. On Monday, he will fly to London to negotiate an important deal that could mean millions of euros in profit for his company. Sunday afternoon, Stefan receives a call from an old university buddy whom he hasn’t seen in years. The friend is only in town for the day, so they decide to meet up. One drink leads to another

1. “As for those who live and die without the religious knowledge necessary for redemption from evil, it is not incompatible with Christian doctrine to speculate that in the process of their dying God acquaints them with what they need to know and offers them a last chance to choose” (Stump 1985, 412).

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and by the time Stefan crawls into bed at 3:30 a.m., he is in a drunken stupor. When he awakens at 9:30 Monday morning, he discovers that not only has he missed his early morning flight to London, but the important meeting is about to start in half an hour. In this case, Stefan is not free to attend the meeting; even if he wants to be there, it is not physically possible. Regardless of whether one is a compatibilist or libertarian, Stefan is not free. He is neither able to be at the meeting nor to act according to his desires to be at the meeting. According to the transitivity of moral responsibility, Stefan is nonetheless morally responsible for what does or does not happen as a result of his not attending the meeting. Although he is not free, he is still morally responsible, since he not only placed himself in a situation whereby he could not attend the meeting, but was in a position where he could reasonably have predicted the outcome of his actions.

The Fixed Character Thesis, as posited by issuantist scholars like Swinburne (1989, 177, 180-181) and Jonathan Kvanvig (2011, 21; 2012), succeeds in providing the sense of finality that is lacking in basic issuantism. Its power in contributing to a solution to the problem of hell is perhaps weakened by the fact that very few people succeed in developing a purely good or evil character in this lifetime. Most people are simply a mixture of good and bad.

One final supplement I have discerned in the literature of issuantist scholars is the Irrationality Thesis. In the Irrationality Thesis, God allows people to make irrational choices, even if those irrational choices entail that they end up in hell. In issuantism, people must have the freedom to make irrational choices, even with full knowledge that the effects of their choices will be harmful to themselves. Moreover, people must make the choice to reject God, even when they have no motivation to do so, and every motivation not to do so. This is an irrational choice that, on some accounts of issuantism where extra chances are granted, a person must continue to make forever. Davis comments, “[P]eople who continue voluntarily to choose hell ... will not be sensible. Their hatred of God will have overcome them” (Davis 2010, 96). Other scholars who posit forms of the Irrationality Thesis include Swinburne (1998, 206) and Walls (2004, 203-16).

One possible question raised by the Irrationality Thesis is why anyone would choose to go to hell if the person were truly free to decide. In other words, is it an intelligible notion to believe that some people could freely choose to do evil or to damn themselves if they really knew what they were doing? What could possibly motivate anyone to make such a choice? The only motivation a person would have for making an irrational choice with such eternal repercussions would be ignorance; one would simply not know what the natural consequences of his/her choices would be. Yet such ignorance would seemingly be at odds with belief in a loving God, who would not allow people to remain ignorant if it meant they would end up in hell.

Swinburne and Walls agree that God leaves a certain “epistemic distance” between himself and humanity because a full-disclosure from God’s side would so overwhelm humans as to render free choice impossible (Walls 1992, 131; Swinburne 1998, 206). Full insight is given only to those whom, according to Swinburne, God grants the beatific vision or who, according to Walls, have given an initial positive response to God’s grace.¹

A second question raised by the Irrationality Thesis is why a good and loving God would allow people to make such irrational choices, especially if the natural consequences have such eternal significance. Walls answers that if God is willing to allow the freedom for humans to hurt themselves and others in this life, why should God not allow us to do so in eternity? (Walls 2004, 212).

I have now presented six common supplements used by issuantist scholars to strengthen the case for issuantism as an answer to the problem of hell. Most combinations of these supplements are possible. However, not all combinations are helpful. For instance, a combination of the Not-so-Nasty Thesis and the possibility of escape from hell is logically possible, but what would be the point? Why would anyone want to leave a hell where one gets exactly what one wants?

The Less-than-Human Thesis is a supplement that has much potential at helping issuantism answer the problem of hell, but it is not compatible with views where people are allowed to escape from hell. The Less-than-Human Thesis may be applied to the inhabitants of hell, but does not work with purgatory; why would God make people (or allow people to become) less than human if they are only to be restored to full humanity through the sanctifying processes of purgatory?

The Fixed Character Thesis is compatible with the possibility of one extra chance after death (in particular as an antedote to bad religious luck) and may explain how a person can make a persistent choice to reject God, but at the possible expense of losing true libertarian freedom. This, however, need not be an insurmountable problem if one also posits the transitivity of moral responsibility.

The Extra Chance Thesis is perhaps one of the most helpful supplements to basic issuantism. In its escapist version (where a person can escape hell itself), it is nonetheless incompatible with the Less-than-Human Thesis and the Fixed Character Thesis.

Some supplemented versions of issuantism succeed in presenting coherent answers to the problem of hell through a redefinition of some elements of the duration, quality, purpose, and finality of hell.

1. “In my view, the knowledge that God is the source of happiness, whereas sin is the source of misery, is acquired in its full clarity only through free response to God’s grace” (Walls 1992, 130).

One of the main objections issuantists have raised against conditionalism and the view that hell is eternal conscious torment has been the charge that retributive conceptions of hell fail at providing satisfactory answers to the problem of hell. It is my conclusion, however, that the question of retribution is not the main factor in determining whether an answer to the problem of hell is successful or not. I believe it can be argued that all non-retributive explanations of the purpose of hell—with the possible exception of restoration—appear to presuppose certain notions of desert and retributive justice that are inconsistent with the issuantist rejection of retributive interpretations of hell.

Conclusion

I began this paper by outlining what can be called the problem of hell: the idea that the possibility of perhaps a great number of people ending up in an eternal hell is a problem for the Christian who also confesses faith in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God.

I have shown how in the past thirty years, a number of British and North American philosophical theologians have sought to answer the problem of hell by redefining hell in non-retributive terms. Hell is no longer seen as a punishment meted out by an angry God, but as the regrettable, natural consequence of a person's free choice to live without God.

However, simply recasting hell in non-retributive terms does not by itself solve the problem of hell. God is somehow still morally culpable for having set up a system where the natural consequences of a person's choice are so disproportional to the severity of the choices one can make. If hell is only the natural consequence of a person's free choice to live without God, then God becomes largely redundant and Jesus' words "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:31) are reduced to the level of a child who asks his parents if he can be excused from the table after a meal.

These shortcomings have led issuantist scholars to posit a number of supplements to basic issuantism. Some of these supplemented versions of issuantism begin to approximate an adequate solution to the problem of hell.

The main question for all scholars seeking to provide a coherent answer to the problem of hell would seem to be whether God can be justified in condemning some people (or allowing some people to exile themselves) to hell. Although time has not permitted me to develop this line of thought further,¹ it is my conclusion that even scholars who hold to retributive interpretations of hell as eternal conscious torment or

1. For a more detailed treatment, see Baker (2014).

annihilationism/conditionalism can take advantage of the same supplements and develop coherent systems that succeed just as well at answering the problem of hell as the supplemented versions of issuantism. I name just a few examples. William Lane Craig supplements his belief in eternal conscious torment with the Fixed Character Thesis and a molinist interpretation of divine omniscience (Craig 1989). Charles Seymour is another molinist scholar who adds the Extra Chance Thesis, the Not-so-Nasty Thesis, the Fixed Character Thesis, and the continuing sin defense to his views on eternal conscious torment (Seymour 1997; 1998; 2000). Clark Pinnock strengthens his defense of conditionalism/annihilationism with the Extra Chance Thesis and the Nearly-Empty Thesis (Pinnock 1992; 2004).

It would thus appear that the decisive factor in determining success at answering the problem of hell is not the question of whether one construes hell in retributive or non-retributive terms, but the supplements one includes in one's system. Thus the issuantist critique of non-issuant views of hell is not warranted in every case, especially where eternal conscious torment and conditionalism are supplemented along similar lines as supplemented issuantism. It would thus appear that it is the supplements and not the larger categories of eternal conscious torment, conditionalism, or issuantism that make or break the theory.

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