

Talbott's Universalism

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SUMMARY

Thomas Talbott rejects the Free Will Defense against the soteriological problem of evil because (i) it is incoherent to claim that someone could freely and irrevocably reject God, and (ii) in any case, God would not permit such a choice to be made because it would pain the saved. I argue that a Molinist account escapes Talbott's objections. It is possible both that in no world realizable by God do all persons freely accept salvation and that God alone will endure the pain of knowledge of the lost.

TALBOTT'S UNIVERSALISM

Introduction

In a pair of recently published articles, [1] Thomas Talbott has presented a carefully constructed case for universalism. He contends that from the principle

(P3) Necessarily, God loves a person *S* (with a perfect form of love) at a time *t* only if God's intention at *t* and every moment subsequent to *t* is to do everything within his power to promote supremely worthwhile happiness in *S*, provided that the actions taken are consistent with his promoting the same kind of happiness in all others whom he also loves

and the propositions

1. God exists
2. God is both omniscient and omnipotent
3. God loves every created person
4. God will irrevocably reject some persons and subject those persons to everlasting punishment

a contradiction may be deduced. For given (P3), (3) entails

5. For any created person *S* and time *t* subsequent to the creation of *S*, God's intention at *t* is to do all that he properly can to promote supremely worthwhile happiness in *S*.

But (4) appears to entail

6. There is a person *S* and a time *t* subsequent to the creation of *S* such that it is not God's intention at *t* to do all that he properly can to promote supremely worthwhile happiness in *S*.

But (5) and (6) are flatly contradictory.

Talbott considers three responses to this argument, which he calls "hard-hearted theism," "moderately conservative theism," and "biblical theism." I take it that these labels are intended to be somewhat facetious. For according to Talbott, "biblical theism" is universalism, which rejects (4) or any variant thereof. "So far as I can tell," he asserts, "not a single passage in the Bible would require a believer to accept such a doctrine [as hell] and the whole thrust of the New Testament is inconsistent with it" [2] Although the New Testament contains frequent references to hell, Talbott apparently takes such passages to refer to a merely temporary state of the unrighteous in the afterlife, not to a permanent state. In essence, he maintains that biblical theism teaches some version of the doctrine of purgatory, rather than the doctrine of hell. But such a claim seems preposterous. What will Talbott do with the assertion of Paul, for example, that God deems it just to inflict "vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (II Thess. 1.6-9)? [3] Although one might perhaps dispute whether permanent punishment or permanent annihilation of unbelievers is here contemplated, [4] there can be no reasonable doubt that the fate of the wicked is everlasting. If Talbott's argument is cogent, therefore, it is not merely conservative theism which is inconsistent: it is biblical theism itself which involves a self-contradiction. Talbott's argument is one more version of what I have elsewhere called the *soteriological problem of evil*. [5]

Now what Talbott labels "moderately conservative theism"--but which I prefer to call "the Free Will Defense"--would escape the contradiction by asserting that what Talbott calls "the Rejection Hypothesis" is at least possibly true:

(RH) Some persons will, despite God's best efforts to save them, freely and irrevocably reject God and thus separate themselves from God forever.

In response to this rejoinder, Talbott argues that (RH) is not possibly true. He provides two reasons for this conviction: (i) the choice specified in (RH) is incoherent, and (ii) even if such a choice were coherent, necessarily God would not permit it. In his defense of these two claims, Talbott rejects the Molinist position on these issues as necessarily false, and it is on his arguments against the Molinist version of the Free Will Defense that I wish to focus.

Is irrevocable rejection of salvation logically coherent?

Talbott contends that given

(D1) For any sinner S and time t , S finally rejects God forever at t if, and only if, (a) S freely resolves at t never to be reconciled to God and (b) there is nothing both within God's power to do *and* consistent with the interest of all other created persons that would (weakly) bring it about, either at t or subsequent to t , that S freely repents of S's sin and is thereby reconciled to God,

(RH) entails

7. There exists at least one sinner S such that nothing God can properly do would bring it about that S freely repents of S's sin.

In passing it is perhaps worthwhile to note that (D1) seems a bit too strong: S need not resolve at t never to be reconciled to God in order for his rejection to be in fact final. On the contrary, he may kid himself into thinking that his rejection is merely for the present, that later he shall appropriate God's salvation, unaware that because (b) is true he has forfeited his salvation forever. Fortunately nothing in Talbott's argument depends on this point.

Rather Talbott regards (7) as logically impossible. He interprets (7) to mean that ". . . no action God might perform, no punishment he might administer, no revelation he might impart . . . would bring about repentance in S." [6] But such an interpretation of (7) is mistaken. For (7) specifies that God's options are limited to what He can *properly* do, and from (D1) we learn that this entails that such actions be consistent with the interest of all other created persons. But as I have attempted to explain in the piece referred to above, [7] it is possible that even if for every created person S there is a set of circumstances C in which S affirmatively responds to God's grace and is saved, it does not follow that there is a compossible set of circumstances in which all created persons are saved. It may be a tragic fact of the matter, for example, that Joe, Jr. will freely respond to God's grace and be saved only if his father Joe, Sr. failed to do so. The matter is even more difficult than that, however: for even if S1 would in C1 freely accept God's offer of salvation and S2 would in C2 freely accept God's offer of salvation and C1 and C2 are compossible, it still does not follow that in (C1-C2) S1 would freely accept God's offer of salvation nor that in (C1-C2) S2 would freely accept it. Hence, it is simply irrelevant whether it seems intuitively possible that God could in some possible world or other win a free affirmative response to His grace on the part of any person. It is possible that in every world realizable by God, some persons irrevocably reject God. Hence, Talbott's task of proving that (7) is broadly logically impossible seems hopeless.

This consideration alone undercuts Talbott's argument for point (i), for we see that even if the sort of choice he envisions (to be explained below) is logically incoherent, that fact is irrelevant, since neither (RH) nor (7) depends upon the possibility of any such choice being made. It is possible that those who are lost would have responded to God's salvific grace had they been in other circumstances (such as

receiving greater punishment or revelation), but these may not have been circumstances which God could properly bring about. Of course, in any circumstances in which an individual finds himself, the Molinist holds that God imparts sufficient grace for salvation and wills that such a person respond affirmatively to it, so that God is neither unjust nor unloving toward those who reject His grace and are lost.

In the interest of theodicy, however, I cannot resist saying a bit more. Not only is the above view obviously *possible*, but it also seems quite plausible to me as well. When one reflects on all the complexities involved in a world, it does not seem surprising that there should be no feasible worlds available to God in which all persons are freely saved (unless, perhaps, those worlds are radically deficient in other respects, say, by having only a handful of people in them). It may well be the case that for some people the degree of revelation that would have to be imparted to them in order to secure their salvation would have to be so stunning that their freedom to disobey would be effectively removed (cf. Talbott's own remark that ". . . a degree of ambiguity, separation, and blindness is an essential element in the process by which God creates a free, independent, and rational agent" [8]). The notion that some sinners shall finally repent under the prolonged rigors of purgatory smacks of recantation under torture, and we all know how likely it is that such professions are voluntary or sincere. It seems more likely that sinners under God's punishment will grow even harder in their hearts and more determined in their hatred of Him for treating them thus. The idea that God "jumps starts" sinners by repeatedly removing them from their bondage and setting them on their course again until they go right might well strike us as manipulative and disrespectful of their freedom. [9] Thus, I think it is not at all obvious that there are significant, feasible worlds in which all persons freely come to know God's salvation.

Let us proceed, however, to examine why Talbott thinks that no one can irrevocably reject God's grace despite God's best efforts to save them. To make a clear-sighted rejection of salvation is to freely choose eternal misery for oneself. But this raises the question: "What could possibly qualify as a motive for such a choice? As long as any ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom; but once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is 'free' to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself." [10]

Now the question being raised here by Talbott is whether it is broadly logically possible that some creaturely individual essences suffer from what I have, in the article mentioned above, called *transworld damnation*, that is to say, the property possessed by an essence if and only if the exemplification of that essence freely rejects God's grace and so is lost in every world feasible for God in which that exemplification exists. [11] Talbott rejects this idea as "deeply incoherent" because for any person S there are feasible worlds "in which God undermines (over time) every possible motive that S might have for rejecting him." [12]

But is it not at least *possible* that the motive for rejecting God is the will to self-autonomy, the stubborn refusal to submit one's will to that of another? Thus Milton's Satan, vanquished from heaven into the abyss of hell, rages against God:

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost--the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?
That glory never shall his wrath or might
Extort from me.

. . . .

Farewell, happy fields,
Where joy forever dwells! hail, horrors! hail
Infernal world! and though profoundest Hell,
Receive thy new possessor--one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. [13]

Is it not possible that some human persons will similarly insist with William Ernest Henley:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul. [14]

Even omnipotent love can be spurned if that love requires worship and submission of one's will. Talbott might insist that such a motivation is irrational--but so what? Is it not possible that the will to self-

autonomy be so strong in some persons that they will act irrationally in preferring self-rule to God's rule?

Indeed, does there need to be any motivation for such rebellion at all? Is it not possible that some persons would deliberately choose evil for its own sake? In his short story "The Black Cat," Poe describes the springs of a man's brutality to the family pet:

And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul loves, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart--one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex itself*--to offer violence to its own nature--to do wrong for the wrong's sake only--that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;--hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart;--hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offense; hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin--a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it--if such a thing were possible--even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. [15]

It seems to me quite clear that the above two accounts of human rebellion against God are logically possible, and that short of a freedom-removing revelation of Himself, God may therefore be unable to win the free response of some persons regardless of the circumstances they are in. Of course, a person suffering from transworld damnation need not be a fiend; in some worlds he may be a very good person, perhaps very close to receiving God's grace, but nonetheless he fails to do so under even these circumstances. His motivations for not responding to God's offer of salvation may be numerous and diverse in the various worlds in which he exists; but even under the most favorable of circumstances such as Talbott envisions it is possible that human self-will and perversity are such that even then he will not bow the knee to God and be saved. Nor need God repeatedly "jump start" sinners or continually punish them in order to discover this fact. Via His middle knowledge God could have so providentially arranged the world that persons who do not accept His offer of salvation in this life are only those who also would not accept it if given a second chance or more. It is possible that only irremediably unbelieving persons are in hell; its door is thus locked, as Sartre opined, from the inside. In fact it is possible that after offering sufficient grace for salvation to someone for a time, there comes a point in a person's life after which God no longer pursues him but gives him up to his fate, knowing that further prevenient grace would be futile. What we come to see, therefore, is that (P3) is not true after all and

that (3) does not therefore entail (5). On the contrary because (RH) is possibly true, so is (4) and therefore (6).

This seems to me once more to settle the matter; but in the interest of theodicy I wish to add that such an account strikes me as entirely plausible. Human evil and rebellion are so severe that it seems quite plausible to me that some persons should freely and irrevocably reject God despite His best efforts to save them. It is at this point that one of the greatest weaknesses in Talbott's theological outlook emerges: it seems to me that he really does not have a serious doctrine of sin. I should say that he greatly underestimates both human depravity and human capacity to sin. Admittedly, it is insane that some people should resist every solicitation of the Holy Spirit and every offer of God's grace and perhaps even prefer damnation to submission to God's will, but that is the mystery of iniquity, a measure of the depth of human depravity. That Talbott does not fully appreciate the Christian doctrine of sin is evident from his comments on the self-collapse of evil:

. . . over a long period of time, moral evil inevitably destroys itself. On this picture, the root of all moral evil as well as the ultimate source of human misery is separation from God (and from others); and the motive for moral evil is the *illusion* that we can benefit ourselves at the expense of others. So the more we separate ourselves from God, the more miserable we become, and the more miserable we become, the more likely we are to shatter the illusion that makes moral evil possible. Many of us can, of course, continue to deceive ourselves for many years, perhaps even for the duration of our short seventy years or so in this life But in the end, according to the New Testament picture, moral evil will always destroy itself and thus becomes its own corrective. [16]

This is the picture of the New Testament? What has become of *Christus Victor*? It is God in Christ who has entered our hopeless estate to conquer sin, death, and the devil. Without God's supernatural grace, our separation from God would never be bridged; we should go from bad to worse. But on Talbott's view, Satan himself must eventually be saved. I am not saying that it is impossible to integrate the cross into Talbott's theology, and perhaps he has expressed himself poorly here; but the very fact that he can speak of moral evil as *self-destructive* and *self-corrective* rather than as *divinely* destroyed and corrected suggests that he lacks any profound appreciation of human sin and willful estrangement from God.

In summary, Talbott's first argument for the logical impossibility of (RH) fails because (i) he has not demonstrated that it is logically incoherent that some persons would freely reject God regardless of what freedom-preserving circumstances they were in, and (ii) he has not demonstrated that it is logically necessary that such persons exist in every feasible world of free creatures in order that all worlds of free creatures which are feasible for God are worlds in which some people freely reject God's grace and are lost.

Is it logically necessary that God prevent irrevocable rejection of salvation?

Talbott argues that even if the choice specified in (RH) were coherent, God would necessarily prevent anyone from making such a choice. In particular, if God could not have populated a universe with free agents none of whom are irredeemable (in the sense that they freely reject Him forever) and God knew this fact via His middle knowledge, then He would have faced a catastrophe of such proportions that He would have had no choice but to prevent it.

Talbott begins by asking whether it is possible that God was powerless to create a universe of free agents all of whom are, of their own free will, eventually reconciled to Him. We have seen that the Molinist could respond that no such world is feasible for God. Even if there are circumstances in which each person would freely be reconciled to God and even if various sets of such are compossible, it still does not follow that in such composite sets of circumstances, all of the persons would freely be reconciled to God. It is possible that there is no world feasible for God in which all persons are freely reconciled to Him. Talbott unfortunately misexpresses this position in the following way:

Some created persons will freely enter into everlasting fellowship with God only if others experience everlasting damnation and therefore everlasting separation from God. For it is at least possible . . . that God faces this dreadful reality: He must bring about (weakly) the damnation of some in order that he might bring about (weakly) the salvation of others; it is possible, in other words, that the company of the redeemed in heaven will remain faithful only because they have seen what happens to those who do not remain faithful. [17]

This last statement is completely erroneous, giving the impression that the reprobate are the instrumentality by which God secures the perseverance of the redeemed. But the theory implies no such thing; the redeemed could be completely unaware that there even are any reprobate, but it just happens to be the case that in all feasible worlds a number of people freely reject God's grace and are lost. Thus, the Molinist could agree with Talbott that ". . . a loving God would never engineer the damnation of some of those he could have saved . . . in order to save others." [18] The fact that some people freely reject God's grace and are lost could be simply the unfortunate concomitant of many people's freely accepting God's grace and being saved.

Now Talbott does not deny that God, in actualizing such a world, is neither unjust nor unloving toward those who are lost in such a world (since He supplies sufficient grace for salvation to all persons). But, Talbott argues, this defense of the compatibility of God's existence and particularism "has neglected one all-important point: that the lost, simply by being lost forever, would bring intolerable suffering, not only into their own lives, but into the lives of *others* as well." [19] What Talbott has in mind here is the "irreparable harm" done to the redeemed who must suffer the agony of seeing their loved ones who

have rejected God's grace eternally damned. [20] They cannot be supremely happy in heaven so long as they know that those whom they love are eternally tormented in hell. Moreover, if God could have saved their loved ones but did not, then the redeemed cannot truly love and worship God, since they must disapprove of what God has done. Talbott draws three conclusions: (i) ". . . blessedness in one person requires blessedness in others, and one person's ruin implies the ruin of others;" (ii) ". . . the misery of those in hell would inevitably undermine the blessedness of those in heaven;" and (iii) ". . . neither the salvation of one person, nor that of a given combination of persons, could possibly require, in virtue of certain true 'counterfactuals of freedom,' the damnation of other persons." [21]

Point (iii), admits Talbott, depends on what we mean by salvation. So he proposes as a partial definition:

(D3) God brings salvation to a sinner *S* only if, among other things, God brings it about (weakly) that the following conditions obtain: (a) that *S* is reconciled to God and in a state of supreme happiness, (b) that *S* is filled with love for others and therefore desires the good for all other created persons, and (c) that there is no fact *F* such that (i) *S* is ignorant of *F* and (ii) were *S* not ignorant of *F*, then *S* would have been unable to experience supreme happiness. [22]

On the basis of (D3) Talbott maintains that a Molinist position like

8. God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation

is not even possibly true. For ". . . the eternal damnation of a single person would undermine the salvation of all others; so an optimal balance between saved and unsaved could not possibly include any who are unsaved." [23] In point of fact, continues Talbott, nothing of substance really hangs on (D3):

In a nutshell, the argument is this. God necessarily wills that each created person should eventually achieve a special kind of blessedness: a kind that (a) exists only when one is filled with love for others and (b) would survive even a full disclosure of facts about the world. But such blessedness is simply not possible in a world in which some persons are eternally damned and therefore eternally miserable. [24]

The bottom line is that if God, via His middle knowledge, knows logically prior to His creative decree which persons or combinations thereof are irredeemable, then He would simply refrain from creating those persons. Instead He would restrict Himself to those feasible worlds in which all persons freely find salvation. If there are no such feasible worlds, then God would either refrain from creating any persons at all or He would interfere with human freedom and set his sights on goods that do not require free will." [25] But in no case would He create worlds in which even a single person rejects Him and is lost,

lest the supreme happiness of the redeemed be thereby undermined.

Now when one recalls that Talbott has set himself the heavy task of proving that the Molinist position is not even broadly logically possible, then I think it is evident that he has fallen short of his goal. For one could agree that knowledge of loved ones' damnation would undermine the supreme happiness of the redeemed, but maintain that it is possible that the redeemed in heaven have no such knowledge. Perhaps God obliterates from their minds any knowledge of lost persons so that they experience no pangs of remorse for them. Talbott objects, "He could, of course, always deceive me concerning the fate of my child, producing within me a kind of blissful ignorance; but on the Christian view, God is incapable of such immoral deception." [26] But I see no reason to think such shielding of His redeemed people from this painful knowledge is immoral deception. We can all think of cases in which we shield persons from knowledge which would be painful for them and which they do not need to have, and, far from doing something immoral, we are, in so sparing them, exemplifying the virtue of mercy. In fact, I see God's taking on Himself alone the suffering of knowing the state of the lost as a beautiful extension of Christ's suffering on the cross. Alvin Plantinga has written,

Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine. [27]

In shielding His redeemed people from the painful knowledge of the estate of the damned and bearing it Himself alone, God extends the suffering of the cross into eternity. The terrible secret of the condition of the lost is buried for eternity deep within the breast of God, a burden whose gravity only He can fully feel and yet which He willingly takes upon Himself in order that He might bring free creatures into the supreme and unalloyed joy of fellowship with Himself.

In any case, we need not appeal to God's action in expunging such knowledge from the minds of the redeemed. It is possible that the very experience itself of being in the immediate presence of Christ (cf. the beatific vision) will simply drive from the minds of His redeemed any awareness of the lost in hell. So overwhelming will be His presence and the love and joy which it inspires that the knowledge of the damned will be banished from the consciousness of God's people. In such a case, the redeemed would still *have* such knowledge, but they would never be *conscious* of it and so never pained by it. Such a solution seems obviously *possible*; indeed, I should go so far as to say that it is quite plausible as well. Thus, contrary to Talbott, (i) blessedness in the redeemed does not require blessedness in all persons; (ii) the misery of the lost would not inevitably undermine the blessedness of the saved; and (iii) the

salvation of any combination of persons may, in virtue of certain true counterfactuals of freedom, only be feasible if there are a number of persons who are lost.

But what, then, of (D3)? If we adopt as our possible solution to Talbott's dilemma the view that Christ's immediate presence drives from consciousness the knowledge of the condition of the lost, then all the conditions of salvation specified in (D3) are fulfilled. For the redeemed may know that their loved ones are lost, but may not be conscious of it. Hence, the Molinist solution specified in (8) is possible. Of course, Talbott could amend clause (c) of (D3) by substituting for "ignorant" something like "unaware" or "unconscious." But then we are surely justified in doubting that clause (c) is a necessary condition of salvation. So long as *S* is supremely happy, how is his salvation annulled by the fact that if he *were* aware of *F*, then he *would* not be supremely happy? Nothing seems to justify this condition either philosophically or biblically. How then is it incumbent on the Christian theist? Although Talbott thinks (D3) is inessential to his argument, the misgivings I have expressed about (c) also apply to clause (b) in his nutshell statement of the argument. I see no reason, biblical or philosophical, to think that God necessarily wills the special kind of blessedness which Talbott's argument requires.

In sum, it is possible that in the moment logically prior to His decree to create, God knew via His middle knowledge either that there were no feasible worlds in which all persons are freely saved or that any such feasible worlds possessed other outweighing deficiencies. In choosing to actualize a world, God determined to offer sufficient grace for salvation, not only to those who He knew would accept it, but even to those who He knew would reject it. Since He knew that due to the light of His presence to the redeemed in heaven, the misery of the lost would not undermine the blessedness of the redeemed, He was not obliged to refrain from creation nor to set His sights on lesser goods that do not require free will, but could create a world in which a great multitude from every tongue and tribe and people and nation should freely come to receive His grace and so enter into the boundless joy of His fellowship forever. The pain of the awareness of the state of the damned, persons for whom Christ died and who stubbornly resisted the drawing of the Holy Spirit, remains known to God alone.

Conclusion

A Molinist version of the Free Will Defense certainly seems to be logically consistent and therefore escapes Talbott's statement of the soteriological problem of evil. It is possible that in no realizable world do all persons freely accept salvation, since it is possible that either the circumstances in which each person would be saved are not compossible or that if they *are*, in the composite circumstances not every person would freely accept salvation. Moreover, it is possible that some persons out of self-will or perversity would freely reject God no matter what the circumstances He placed them in. The tragic fact that every world feasible for God is one involving persons who are lost would not force Him to refrain from creation or to annul creaturely freedom lest the blessedness of the saved be undermined, for it is

possible that the reality of lost persons is a fact which He alone shall endure for eternity. [28]

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#)

Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 19-42; idem, "Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 227-45.

[\[2\]](#)

Talbott, "Everlasting Punishment," pp. 19-20.

[\[3\]](#)

It is not open to Talbott to respond here as he does to Swinburne's citation of Matt. 25.45 that the word for punishment (kolasiV) always refers in Greek secular literature to remedial punishment and that one may not derive doctrine from the incidentals of a parable. For Paul is teaching doctrine, and his words for vengeance and punishment are edikhsiV and dikh, which carry the sense of divine retribution and revenge. Moreover, Talbott's claim about the meaning of kolasiV is false and in any case somewhat irrelevant, since kolasiV is used in Judaeo-Christian literature for punishment which is non-remedial, e.g. IV Macc. 8:9 concerning severe punishments preceding execution, II Cl. 6.7 concerning eternal punishment from which there is no salvation, Dg. 9.2 concerning punishment and death as the reward of the unrighteous (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, s.v. "kolazw, kolasiV" by Johannes Schneider). One need not be a Greek scholar to recognize that the "eternal punishment" (kolasiV aiwnioV) spoken of by Jesus cannot be remedial, since taking eternity to be purged of one's sin does not differ from never being purged of it! As for Talbott's hermeneutical point, the contrast between eternal punishment and eternal life features prominently in the parable and fits the context of divine judgement in the whole discourse, echoes Old Testament teaching (Dan. 12.2), and is straightforwardly affirmed by Jesus elsewhere (John 5.28-29; Mark 9.48).

[\[4\]](#)

See brief discussion and references in John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil: Can We Believe in the Goodness of God?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan: 1985).

[\[5\]](#)

William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 172-88.

[\[6\]](#)

Talbott, "Everlasting Punishment," pp. 36-37.

[\[7\]](#)

Craig, "'No Other Name'," pp. 172-88.

[\[8\]](#)

Talbott, "Human Destiny," p. 236.

[\[9\]](#)

A point made effectively by Larry Lacy, "John Hick on Universal Salvation," paper presented at the Eastern Division meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, University of Dayton, April 7-9, 1988.

[\[10\]](#)

Talbott, "Everlasting Punishment," p. 37; cf. idem, "Human Destiny," p. 228: "If God is the ultimate source of human happiness and separation from God can bring only greater and greater misery into one's life, as Christians have traditionally believed, then why should anyone want to reject God?"

[\[11\]](#)

Craig, "'No Other Name'," p. 184. Talbott cannot mean by God's best efforts what He can properly do in the actual world, for we have already seen that what God can properly do to win some sinner's repentance may be far less than the sort of optimal circumstances which Talbott envisions. What Talbott is speaking of is a choice to reject God's grace irrevocably under the most conducive of circumstances for repentance. The question is whether there is what Molinists call "congruent grace" for every free creature God could possibly create.

[\[12\]](#)

Talbott, "Human Destiny," p. 237.

[\[13\]](#)

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. with an Introduction by Northrup Frye (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), Bk. I. 105-111, 249-263; pp. 8, 12.

[\[14\]](#)

William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," in *Modern Verse*, rev. ed., ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Pocket Books, 1958), p. 111.

[\[15\]](#)

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," in *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 65.

[\[16\]](#)

Talbott, "Human Destiny," p. 244. Cf. idem, "Everlasting Punishment," p. 39.

"The more one freely rebels against God, the more miserable and tormented one becomes; and the more miserable and tormented one becomes, the more incentive one has to repent of one's sin and to give up one's rebellious attitudes. But more than that, the consequences of sin are themselves a means of revelation; they reveal the true meaning of separation and enable us to see through the very self-deception that makes evil choices possible in the first place. We may think we can promote our own interest at the expense of others and that our selfish attitudes are compatible with enduring happiness, but we cannot act upon such an illusion, at least not for a long period of time, without shattering it to pieces. So in a sense, all roads have the same destination, the end of reconciliation, but some are longer and windier than others."

The view expressed here is clearly Pelagian and obviates the need for any gracious action of God at all in drawing sinners to Himself. It grossly underestimates the lostness and hopelessness of sinners apart from God.

[\[17\]](#)

Talbott, "Human Destiny," p. 235.

[\[18\]](#)

Ibid., p. 238.

[\[19\]](#)

Ibid., p. 237.

[\[20\]](#)

Ibid., p. 238; cf. idem, "Everlasting Punishment," pp. 38-39.

[\[21\]](#)

Talbott, "Human Destiny," p. 239.

[\[22\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[23\]](#)

Ibid., p. 240.

[\[24\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[25\]](#)

Ibid., p. 241; cf. p. 245.

[\[26\]](#)

Talbott, "Human destiny," pp. 237-38.

[\[27\]](#)

Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, Profiles 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 36.

[\[28\]](#)

I am indebted to Thomas Talbott for his remarks on the first draft of this article.