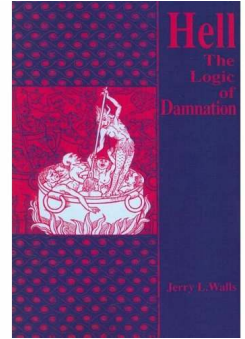


Hell. The Logic of Damnation.

By Jerry L. Walls



Reviewed by W. Simpson¹

Jerry Walls is not the first to observe that the doctrine of hell seems to have slipped from contemporary Christian consciousness. Among theologians, the slide towards annihilationism or universalism (in one form or another) has not been confined to the liberals². And in the culture at large, ‘genuine concern about hell seems to be lost in our past, along with powdered wigs and witch trials’.

A detailed account of how this has happened is beyond the scope of Walls’ study. But the question of why belief in eternal punishment has been increasingly abandoned among the more orthodox has a fairly simple answer: the doctrine of hell is ‘widely regarded to be morally indefensible’. In fact, the famous philosopher Bertrand Russell had no qualms about finding fault with Jesus Christ Himself on this point, since *nobody*, Russell argued, “who is profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment”. For James Mill, a God who sent people to hell represented ‘the most perfect conception of wickedness’.

In the face of high-powered criticism, and with its negative impact upon an already difficult ‘problem of evil’, it is not surprising that many have been tempted to drop belief in eternal hell as a stumbling block that is inconsistent with a Christian conception of a loving God, and an intellectual encumbrance on the gospel.

Nevertheless, for many conservatives, the attractive reinterpretations of biblical teaching proffered by theologians rejecting this aspect of the Faith, whilst not without merit, are not entirely convincing. Walls for one believes that, on reflection, the doctrine of hell turns out to be more intimately interwoven with the heart of traditional Christian belief than may at first appear. If this is the case, he argues, then Christians face an unpleasant dilemma: if belief in hell is a basic part of Christianity, and if it is a moral defect to believe in hell, then one cannot be a Christian without being morally defective. In this book, Walls’ argues that the doctrine of eternal hell can be construed in ways that are neither immoral nor unintelligible. In what follows, I shall attempt to offer a brief synopsis of his argument.

1. Hell and Human Belief

Interestingly, as Walls relates, the actual phenomenon of belief in eternal hell has been used against the doctrine - and on both flanks. On the one side, it has been argued that Christians themselves do not really believe in it. And on the other, it has been observed that some Christians seem altogether too willing to believe in it! No one, of course, is claiming that hell’s existence is actually contingent upon the intentional state of people’s minds. The arguments from belief (or non-belief) are epistemological.

¹ All quotations in this review are from Walls, Jerry, *Hell, The Logic of Damnation* (University of Notre Dame Press; New Ed edition, August 31, 1992).

² Evangelical theologian, William Fudge, for instance, argues for *conditionalism* (the belief that the wicked are punished by God and then destroyed). See William Fudge (Author), Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*. IVP Books (April 2000).

Some Christians have suggested that, when we honestly look into our hearts, we discover a universalist hope that cannot bear to think of anybody being lost, and that this presents us with a *prima facie* reason for thinking the traditional doctrine of hell to be untrue. People may *accept* the doctrine, but in their hearts they find they do not *believe* it, and the Christian heart is purportedly ‘shaped [in some measure] by the Spirit of God’. Further evidence that they do not believe it is that they do not *act* like it: we would immediately warn our unbelieving neighbour if his house was on fire, but we seem ‘strangely reconciled’ to his *eternal* fate. Walls takes these objections seriously, but ultimately rejects them. The burning house analogy, for instance, is flawed. ‘In the first place, if [our neighbour’s] house was on fire, he would certainly want to know about it. And second, he would surely consider it a real danger... However, these assumptions do not necessarily hold with respect to hell’. Nor can the seriousness of someone’s damnation be ‘instilled in a moment’. More troubling, however, is the thought that this sort of argument, if it went through, would place a good deal of Christian belief in question, besides the doctrine of hell. That few ‘seem to be appropriately moved... in the normal course of their daily routines’ by the extraordinary content of Christian teaching is interesting, and something we should reflect on, but not something we should accept as warrant for questioning the veracity of Christian doctrine. And there are shining counterexamples in the life and ministry of such saints as John Wesley. Regarding the evidence of Christian feelings, which ‘relies mainly on the testimony of contemporary Christians’, Walls contends that ‘the witness of the Christian heart is divided’. The same emotions may attend the state of ‘*regretting* the doctrine of eternal hell’ as well as the state of ‘*hoping* that is not true’, and Walls believes that many Christians fall in the former category. Moreover, ‘the compatibility of hoping for something while believing it is not very likely to happen blocks any direct argument from the existence of a widespread Christian hope that none will finally be lost to the conclusion that Christians “deep down” do not really believe in eternal hell’.

At least some of us, then, do believe in the doctrine, and indeed more than a few of its supporters throughout the centuries seem to have been much too eager to do so. That has prompted a strike on the other flank: belief in an eternal hell is just a ‘mythologized projection of the worst side of human beings’ – a way of lashing out against those who have hurt or frustrated us. Walls contends that it is a mistake to insouciantly dismiss this kind of attack as a *genetic fallacy*. ‘The Christian doctrine has been rooted in the teaching of Jesus... it would be unsettling if it could be shown that the doctrine... is rooted firmly in objectionable human feelings and instincts’. But it would also be very difficult to demonstrate vindictiveness in the case of someone like Jesus Christ. The most plausible tack – and the position Bertrand Russell seemed to take – would be to regard his belief on that point as a simple inconsistency with his otherwise lofty and moral teaching. In which case, as Walls points out, the dispute turns on whether or not the idea of an eternal hell is, in fact, morally objectionable. And Walls spends much of his book preoccupied with precisely that question.

Before passing, another sort of response to this line of attack is noted, one that turns the tables on the Feuerbachian shift from theology to anthropology. Berger, for instance, suggests that ‘certain aspects of our experience reliably direct our attention to a world of supernatural reality’. Some of the examples he offers are horrific experiences that ‘not only cry out to heaven, but also cry out for hell... if our sense of justice is to be vindicated’. The argument is not developed in any detail here, but the upshot is that, rather than being used as an argument against hell, the phenomenon of belief might be construed as *evidence* for it.

2. Hell and Divine Knowledge

In the second chapter, Walls argues that our view about divine foreknowledge has a definite part to play in our concept of hell. But Walls is not convinced that any particular theory of foreknowledge is exempt from wrestling with moral objections. He begins with the more traditional conceptions, where

God infallibly knows the future in specific detail. The objection here, most famously expressed by Mill, is that a God who created a world ‘with full awareness that many persons in it would be eternally damned’ is ‘directly responsible for a terrible evil’. The connection between foreknowledge and intention, however, can only be maintained where the principle of double effect³ cannot be invoked; if some are unavoidably damned, and God has created for a sufficient good, then God cannot be blamed.

Turning first to Calvinism, Walls observes that this theological tradition affords a ‘winsomely clear account’ of how God can have infallible knowledge of future events (he predetermines them), but ‘is far from successful as an account which can preserve human freedom’. If God knows our choices because he has predestined them, then it appears we cannot choose otherwise. God foreknew who would be damned because he freely determined it, and is therefore directly responsible for it. There can be no appeal to the law of double effect; He might just as easily have determined that all would be saved. On this account, Mill’s charge seems fully justified.

Molinism – the view that God arranges the world as He wills in the light of His ‘middle knowledge’⁴ – is not without its difficulties either. On this account of God’s foreknowledge, the future is absolutely certain *and* our choices are free. But, whilst God does not *intend* everything he foreknows, He is responsible for creating people in certain circumstances, and it seems plausible to think that the world might have been better arranged so that more people found themselves situated in circumstances more conducive to the free reception of God’s grace – and consequently ‘a world... in which fewer, or perhaps none, are damned’. So the way is still left open for God’s goodness to be challenged (and Walls will take up that challenge later). Furthermore, Molinism ‘is less adequate in providing an intelligible account of *how* God has foreknowledge’, and there are difficulties in grounding the truth of counterfactuals of human freedom. But these difficulties are not unlike those facing the attempt to find a basis for the truth of simple propositions about future free choices, and it is at this point that Walls moves on to consider some more fuzzy views of the future.

There are various ways of cashing out the claim that the future is not knowable by God, and Walls considers several different attempts. Typically God’s foreknowledge is restricted to what He determines; infallible knowledge of human choices is not included. The relevant implication of these accounts, for Walls’ thesis, is that ‘God did not know who precisely would be damned’. As Swinburne points out, ‘it is possible for a being who knows all the circumstances to predict human behaviour correctly most of the time, but always with the possibility that men may falsify those predictions’. This appears to thwart Mill’s libel that God created with the intention of damning. But if God does not have infallible middle knowledge, it seems He must take real risks if He makes free creatures. Might not a similar sort of objection pop up? Walls considers the analogy of a director who, in the first instance, starts a risky skyscraper project fully aware that it will likely cost a number of people their lives, and, in the second instance, begins the project knowing exactly *which* men will die. The second case would strike most of us as an outrage, but perhaps not the first (it is quite commonplace). If this assessment is accurate, it seems to support ‘the suggestion that those views which hold that God has only general foreknowledge accord better with our moral intuitions’. But then again, Walls wonders *why* we assess the two cases differently. ‘Perhaps the moral superiority of [this] view... is merely illusory’. Moreover, if God is risking, not just death, but eternal suffering, it might well be argued that there is no real moral difference between the two cases of specific and general foreknowledge. In short, ‘it is not at all clear’

³ The idea of this principle, as Walls explains, is that ‘if an agent performs some action for the sake of a sufficiently important good, and if bad secondary effects are unavoidably entailed by the action, the agent is not blameworthy for those effects if he does not intend them’.

⁴ Middle knowledge is knowledge of what created free wills would do in any given circumstances – an infinite set of metaphysically contingent truths, known by God prior to his decision to create.

that the one is ‘better situated’ than the other ‘to block Mill’s inference that in creating our world God intended for some to be damned’.

Among his other cogitations on this subject, Walls points out that one cannot sustain certain views of hell ‘unless one holds that God’s foreknowledge of the future is both specific and infallible’. If, on the basis of revelation, we believe that some will never be saved, we must assume it. If, on the other hand, we accept universalism, we must also believe it in order to maintain that God created in the knowledge that everyone would eventually receive His saving grace, of their own free will.

3. Hell and Divine Power

A necessary part of the Christian faith is that God is almighty, and an oft-repeated argument against the doctrine of hell is that ‘if God is all powerful, he can save anyone he will; if God is perfectly good, he will want to save all persons; therefore, all will be saved’⁵. One of Walls’ purposes in this book is to examine this argument carefully, including its appeal to divine power.

Noting that the Calvinist and the Universalist agree that God, being sovereign, can save anyone he wants to, Walls contends that both of these positions ultimately ‘slide into confusion when they try to reconcile their common assumption with human freedom’. He observes that the *Westminster Confession*, a classic exposition of Calvinist orthodoxy, clearly states that God ordains ‘whatsoever comes to pass’, but also seems to deny the obvious implication that human freedom and responsibility are thereby eliminated. An analysis ensues in which the ideas of ‘calling’, ‘effectual calling’, ‘enablement’ and ‘being made willing’ are probed, and of which the upshot is this: ‘Although the Westminster Confession seems to want it both ways, the only kind of freedom that can be maintained is of the compatibilist variety’. But Walls’ believes this kind of freedom is inadequate here. ‘If... persons are free only in the sense that they do what God has made them willing to do, then God could save all persons with their freedom intact’. Moreover, ‘God could also eliminate all evil’. The Westminster divines (apparently feeling the tension) sought to offer two grounds for why God will not elect some people: firstly, ‘for the glory of his sovereign power’ (in doing what He wills), and secondly, ‘for the praise of his glorious justice’ (in punishing sin). But, for Walls, this is just trying to have it both ways again. Regarding the first point, if God’s power is somehow a sufficient ground for damning some people, ‘justice is an irrelevant consideration’; God might as well demonstrate his power by creating a world of saints and damning the lot of them, or a world of gross sinners and glorifying all of them in heaven. And regarding the second, the idea of a *just* punishment ordinarily presupposes that the person involved could have refrained from wrongdoing, and that a common standard of judgement is applied to all people. Neither of these assumptions hold here. ‘When the claim that election show’s God’s justice is qualified... justice collapses into sovereign power’. This does not seem a very defensible position, and Walls respectfully suggests that the Westminster divines, on this point, unintentionally ‘fell into confusion’.

Turning now to Universalism, Walls consider the logical dilemma put forward by John Hick for this position: ‘the doctrine of hell has as its implied premise either that God does not desire to save all His

⁵ A more precise and technically valid formulation of the argument could be stated as follows:

- 1) If God is all powerful, then if he wants to save someone, he will save them.
 - 2) If God is perfectly good, he will want to save everyone.
 - 3) God is all powerful and perfectly good.
- Therefore, all will be saved

Its logical form can be captured in predicate logic: $P \supset \forall x (Wx \supset Sx)$, $G \supset \forall x (Wx)$, $P \wedge G \perp \forall x (Sx)$, where P denotes ‘God is all powerful’, Wx denotes ‘God wants to save x’, Sx denotes ‘God will save x’, G denotes ‘God is perfectly good’, \supset denotes the conditional (read it as ‘implies’), and \forall denotes the universal quantifier ($\forall x$ means ‘all x’).

human creatures, in which case He is only limitedly good, or that His purpose has finally failed in the case of some... of them, in which case He is only limitedly sovereign'. It has a lot in common with one of Mackie's arguments against the existence of God. But whereas Mackie finds the evil in this present life incompatible with God's existence, for Hick the problem lies with everlasting evil – he seeks to appeal to the free will defence to demonstrate the compatibility of present evil with the existence of a perfectly good, omnipotent God. However, according to Mackie, 'if there is no logical impossibility in a man choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there is no logical impossibility in him choosing the good on every occasion', so a world of free creatures who always choose what is right is a logical possibility that a good God would have availed Himself of. But the free will defence, thanks to Plantinga, is able to overcome this objection: 'if persons are free in the libertarian sense, it is partly up to them which worlds God can create', and thence 'not all worlds which are [logically] *possible* for God to actualise are *feasible* for him'. But of course, this conclusion has a direct bearing on Hick's argument for universalism: 'if we are free either to accept or reject God's offer of salvation, then perhaps God, even though omnipotent, *cannot* save everyone'. Hick's logical argument for universalism, then, fails to go through too. The problem with his position is further complicated by his belief that future free actions are unknowable in principle. It seems that 'the most Hick can consistently claim' is that if God is perfectly good and omnipotent, 'then very probably all will be saved' (though what divine goodness may or may not entail is the subject of Walls' next chapter).

Following further analysis of Hick's universalism, which Walls finds 'fraught with inconsistency and confusion', a number of proposed amendments are offered to restore coherence – the first three by modifying its doctrine of freedom, the fourth by adopting middle knowledge and thereby preserving it. They are each interesting moves. However, Walls notes that, in all these cases, 'the argument for universalism from God's goodness and omnipotence derives whatever plausibility it has from implicit but controversial assumptions about the nature of perfect goodness'. As far as omnipotence goes, it seems clear enough that, if libertarian freedom is true, God might not be able to save everybody. 'The real issue', Walls contends, 'is what is required for perfect goodness'.

4. Hell and Divine Goodness

In turning, at last, to the subject of divine goodness, Walls is careful to point out what is involved in the claim that God is perfectly good. Rejecting a merely metaphysical construal, Walls insists that God is also good in a moral or volitional (or 'agent centred') sense; God's goodness is 'displayed in extending love and mercy to all creation... God wants all people to accept salvation'. It is this sort of goodness that is at the heart of Christian devotion and makes the doctrine of hell so difficult. Having already concluded that 'Calvinism is incompatible with any defensible account of God's goodness', Walls begins by considering whether Molinism might be compatible after all.

The problem Walls pinpoints with Molinism is that it seems to entail that at least some of those who are damned might have been saved if they had been created in different situations. The pivotal question is this: 'does it make any sense to say that God does all he can to save all persons, short of destroying their freedom, if he allows some of them to be damned through unfavourable circumstances?' Walls is reluctant to join John Wesley in appealing to divine mystery at this point 'when God's goodness is so severely challenged'. If we press the logic, 'it seems reasonable to think that God might somehow eliminate the disadvantages', and Walls suggests that he does so by exerting the 'optimal amount of influence toward good' that He can on a person, without destroying their freedom. Whilst this 'optimal grace' will vary from person to person (not all may need as much, what is helpful for one may adversely affect another), God's grace is properly said to be 'distributed equally if grace of optimal measure is given to all persons and all are given full opportunity to make a decisive response to it'. By a 'decisive response', Walls means 'a settled response [or a rooted disposition] which is made by one

fully informed of the Christian faith'. A decisive *negative* response is only intelligible in 'the most favourable circumstances', afforded by optimal grace, which is sufficient to overcome a negative disposition due to contingent factors or influences, but does not help anyone whose negative reaction is 'shaped precisely by the persistent refusal of grace'. Walls contends that 'unless one thinks there is some reason why God cannot make up for the disadvantages some have, it seems to follow from his perfect goodness that he will do so'. Possible reasons for why it may be beyond God's power are considered, but Walls ultimately concludes that the problems with optimal grace 'gain much of their force from the assumption that grace cannot extend beyond the boundary of this present life' – an assumption that makes 'the idea that grace is unevenly distributed... fairly compelling', and one that Walls believes we must drop to avoid compromising God's goodness.

If Walls argument goes through, then Molinism, augmented by the doctrine of optimal grace, affords an account that 'may provide a way to maintain both that God is perfectly good and that some will be eternally damned'. Walls rejects William Lane Craig's proposal that God so arranged things that those who never hear the gospel suffer from transworld damnation⁶, and therefore do not require an equal opportunity to be saved. 'It is exceedingly hard to entertain seriously the notion that all the persons who have lived and died in countries the gospel didn't reach for centuries would have rejected it if they'd heard it'. Whilst the unsaved, on Walls' view, do suffer from transworld damnation, it isn't the case that those who fail to hear the gospel and die are among the damned in all feasible worlds. The hypothesis of optimal grace is needed to retain the plausibility of this account.

But Walls is sensible of possible objections to his take on divine goodness. For example, doesn't it encourage presumption about further chances beyond the grave? Walls doesn't think so: post-mortem grace is not a matter of giving some people *more* chances than others, but about ensuring they get no less; each person has 'no more than the opportunity to make a decisive choice'. Moreover, this gives no ground for supposing 'present choices do not count'. Those who reject salvation now on the presumption that they can repent later may well be 'forming, by that very attitude, a settled disposition to prefer their will to God's'. A more serious concern for some is that this leaves us with no motive to evangelise: 'missionaries do not convert people who would otherwise be lost'. Walls agrees that they do not – and it's a good thing too: 'the traditional view... entails that some persons may be damned largely because of the failure or disobedience of others'. But this does not mean evangelism is left without a motive. 'If the Christian message is crucial for human fulfilment and happiness, it is good for all persons to hear that message as soon as possible'. We are offered the analogy of a group of people suffering the pains of malnutrition. Would it be right to ignore their plight, even if we knew with certainty that they'd be getting all the food they needed in several years time? Another worry Walls deals with is that, on his account, grace is given 'as a matter of necessity' instead of being freely bestowed. Walls concedes that point, but disagrees with the characterisation of grace that lies behind it: 'what is essential to the notion of grace is not that it is bestowed or withheld at will, but that it is undeserved'. And of course, God did not *have* to create anybody to be good to. One of the more substantive objections to Walls' account (in my view) is the claim that a good God *wouldn't* create anybody he knew would reject His goodness, and be damned. Walls acknowledges this to be 'a serious difficulty', but questions the assumption that 'God could have created only persons who would accept grace'. Perhaps not, if his aim is to bring great multitudes to salvation. The important thing Walls emphasises is that nobody is lost in the actual world who would be saved in another feasible world. It is *not* the case that some are being sacrificed against their wills that others might know God; 'they willingly and persistently choose their role'.

⁶ That is, they are damned in all feasible worlds in which they exist.

Walls believes this account of divine goodness can be adapted to resolve the moral problems of the general foreknowledge view. The principle that ‘God does everything he can to save all persons, short of destroying their freedom’ is retained. The important difference here is that ‘God does not have the advantage of middle knowledge to help him create a world in which the number or proportion of the damned is kept at a minimum’; He is left with probabilities. And it seems at least a theoretical possibility, prior to creating, that all would be lost. The question, then, is whether it would be consistent with God’s goodness to create a world where there was such a possibility? Walls believes that it would: ‘God need not be able to save any fixed percentage... His perfect goodness consists essentially in the fact that he saves the highest number or proportion he can’. The alternative, with its entailment that no created person could ever receive supreme happiness, does not seem to Walls to be a better state than a world of free creatures who have that opportunity, even if many are damned in the end.

This summary does not exhaust the range of concerns covered in this chapter. But a recurrent issue in the discussion is the question of whether or not God, in His goodness, should respect or override human free will. The subject of hell and its relation to human freedom is further explored in the fifth chapter.

5. Hell and Human Freedom

Both compatibilism and libertarianism pose their own particular problems for the doctrine of hell. If compatibilism is true, God chooses our choices; how then can anyone end up in hell if God is perfectly good? But if libertarianism is true, we are forced to ask, ‘why would anyone choose to go to hell if he could do otherwise?’ Walls flags two distinct issues that need to be addressed: firstly, ‘What could it possibly mean to choose damnation?’; secondly, ‘Can any motive make any sense of the claim that evil can be chosen decisively?’

Walls commences his answer to the first question by exploring the Kierkegaardian notion of becoming a ‘self’ and the concept of a ‘continuity forming in the life of each person’. There is one sort of continuity established ‘in those who are willing to become selves as God intends’, and another sort that is the ‘consistency of sin’, and ‘just as a good man who wants to maintain his integrity and consistency will resist all thought of evil, so an evil man may protect his consistency by guarding against any impulse toward good’. ‘He has given up the good in despair’, explains Kierkegaard, ‘it could not help him anyway, he says, but it might well disturb him, make it impossible for him ever again to acquire the full momentum of consistency, make him weak. Only in the continuation of sin he is himself’. And the choice of evil is ‘decisive’ when it has become ‘fully consistent’. Thinking of a person as a hierarchy of ordered desires (a desire to eat cake, for example, is of the first order, and the desire not to desire that is of the second), someone ‘who had chosen evil decisively would be a person who consistently wanted evil at all levels of desire’. An example of a second-order desire conforming a first is offered by Goebbels’ momentary wavering in his wish to destroy Poland, and his self-confessed determination to harden his heart. He guards himself ‘against the “temptation” to good, preserving the ‘strength and power which accompanies consistency’. Walls suggests, however, that not all evil people possess this strength; many are defined by the consistency of evil simply by yielding, as a matter of course, to their strongest desire. Walls is thus able to characterise ‘weak evil persons as those who have allowed their second-order desires to be conformed to their evil first-order desires’ and ‘strong evil persons [as] those who have managed to bring all their first-order desires into line with their evil second-order desires’. And it is this consistency which makes it intelligible why some people never choose to return to the good. They have ‘closed off every apparent avenue by which good may enter’ and thereby made themselves ‘immune to the grace of God’.

Turning to the second question of motive, Walls considers the claim that, whilst people may have the power to choose damnation, the choice is *psychologically* impossible. Denying that assertion, Walls concludes that ‘there must be something about the subjective experience of choosing evil which can account for why some prefer it to goodness’, and hence, like Milton’s Satan, judge that it is “better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n”. Meditating on the example of a character in C.S. Lewis’s book, *The Great Divorce*, Walls suggests that ‘those in hell approximate happiness in some sense because they get what they want’. Whilst they do not ‘experience even a shred of genuine happiness... perhaps they experience a certain perverse sense of satisfaction, a distorted sort of pleasure’. Lewis’s character, for example, wants to hold onto his feelings that he has been treated unfairly. The choice of hell, for many, may be a matter of preserving a posture of moral superiority and self-righteous indignation – at some earthly distress that has been suffered, for example – holding out against repentance ‘in order to maintain’ their protest. Reflection on one of Christ’s parables suggests ‘the tendency of the damned to justify themselves by holding to their claim of righteousness’. Wall’s conclusion, in the end, is that ‘hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there. In each case, the choice of evil is somehow justified or rationalised’. Intriguingly, he suggests that ‘hell is a sort of distorted mirror image of heaven... It can offer no true righteousness, but it does offer the alternative attraction of self-righteousness. It holds no genuine happiness’, but provides ‘a deformed sense of satisfaction which faintly resembles real happiness’.

Of course, this implies that those who choose hell are deceived about what is good, in which case, have they really chosen ‘consciously and willingly’? Walls concedes their deception, but qualifies it: they are *self-deceived*. In their desire to justify their choice of evil, they have persuaded themselves that they are right; the ‘ability to deceive ourselves may be an essential component of moral freedom’. Whilst optimal grace involves ‘being fully informed about Christian faith and teaching’, and this entails the knowledge that God is the source of happiness, and sin the cause of misery, this does not preclude the possibility of self-deception, which, as Walls explains, ‘is not a matter of lacking information, but rather a matter of not attending to what one knows, or of suppressing and refusing to act on it’. The ability to deceive oneself entails the ability to avoid the clear perception of God’s relation to happiness; such knowledge is only ‘acquired in its fully clarity... through free response to God’s grace’.

Other issues of freedom and damnation are raised and considered, including the question of whether God might override freedom to prevent [ultimate] damnation, or simply permit the damned to commit ‘metaphysical suicide’, as some have suggested. But for Walls, the doctrine of hell involves a strong commitment to the value of libertarian freedom, and either one of these moves by God would undermine the seriousness of moral freedom, and the significance of our choices. The decisive choice of evil is not a ‘rash, temporary impulse’ that the moral agent might be grateful to have reversed or overridden, and the divine bestowal of optimal grace justifies God presenting us with choices that are highly significant because their ‘consequences are eternal and inescapable’. Everyone gets what he wants. And Walls is even willing to argue that ‘the distorted pleasures of hell are sufficient from the viewpoint of the damned to make life in hell preferable to extinction’. He writes, ‘the good according to Christianity is not an ordinary thing... it is the extraordinary opportunity to live before God, in conscious relationship to him... anything chosen in favour of such a relationship to God could only be hell in comparison’.

6. Hell and Human Misery

Walls’ final chapter offers some reflections on the nature of the suffering of hell. Conscious that some traditional accounts have been unbalanced in their lurid depictions of this place of misery, but that his own account is open to the opposite charge of failing to capture this aspect of hell, Walls endeavours to redress any imbalances. Whilst recognising that classical expositions of the doctrine have tended to

play up the physical aspect of suffering (and, in Augustine's case, play down the spiritual), Walls notes even in Jonathan Edward's account the common realisation that 'If God were to leave sin without restraint, nothing more would be needed "to make the soul perfectly miserable". Indeed, "if sin was not restrained, it would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven..."'. The misery of hell, thus construed, is not 'a remote, inconceivable mystery... [but] stands in clear continuity with our experience of this world'. For Walls, fundamentally, 'the suffering of hell is the natural consequence of living a life of sin rather than an arbitrarily chosen punishment'. Walls believes that 'God wants all creatures to be happy [and] the only way any could end up otherwise would be if their happiness were no longer possible'. But 'it *is* impossible, in the strictest sense of the word, for us to know our true happiness apart from God'⁷. Those who cultivate sinful attitudes and feelings are 'naturally and necessarily unhappy'. Regarding the 'distorted sense of satisfaction' argued for earlier, Walls urges that 'it must be viewed within the context of the fact that such feelings are essentially destructive of true pleasure. They are incompatible with genuine peace, joy and contentment'. But, whilst Walls emphatically rejects the notion of hell as 'an ingeniously contrived place of the greatest possible pain and agony', he also recognises a physical component to the sufferings of the damned as a 'natural accompaniment of evil passions and emotions'. Hell is [ultimately] an embodied experience, and 'if there is a fire in the breast which torments the soul, it will disturb the body as well'. He speculates that perhaps some of the damned will 'inflict physical pain on one another too', though maybe not everybody will suffer in this fashion. 'Each damned person will suffer in the way appropriate to his sin and the character he has formed'.

In commending his view as one 'in essential continuity with traditional theology', but with certain important distinctions, Walls argues that this conception of hell 'has a moral seriousness' and a 'stark realism' about it that renders the reality of this dreadful place much more believably. 'By contrast', Walls complains, 'sensational accounts... may actually have the effect of trivializing the doctrine or making it seem like an empty threat'. This charge is laid at the door of Jonathan Edwards. Whilst pragmatic assessments of Edward's sermons on hell are favourable, Walls wonders whether 'in the long run his frightful depictions of damnation may have helped to undermine serious belief in the idea'. The real difficulty here is that he (and others like him) fail to give 'a persuasive account of the moral connection between sin and the unspeakable torment' they describe. However, if 'the natural connection between sin and misery is kept at the forefront when discussing hell', it not only circumvents sensational excesses, but has a mitigating effect on 'Kantian-styled' objections which argue that one who is 'moral only to avoid hell... is not really moral'. Noting that such objections garner the most force 'when the misery of hell is conceived as externally imposed punishment, with no necessary relation to the nature of the sin involved', Walls is able, on his account, to rejoin that 'to choose evil *is* to choose misery, and the one who so chooses does so freely'. Like John Wesley, we can 'abhor sin itself far more than the punishment of it'. To the committed Kantian who insists that 'if you avoid sin because a natural consequence of it is anguish for you, then you are still selfishly motivated', Wall replies, 'not all self-interest is selfishness, and that proper self-interest is a legitimate part of genuine moral motivation'. Leaving Kantian hubris behind, with its unliveable dilemma of egoism and altruism, 'the traditional doctrine of hell adds positive moral import to the Christian conviction that it is impossible to further one's ultimate best interest by doing what is wrong, just as it is impossible to act against one's ultimate best interest by loving God and doing right'.

⁷ Italics mine.