

Chapter 8

Heaven and the Problem of Eternal Separation

Eric Yang

Traditional Christian teaching involves at least the following two claims:

1. Some human beings will be in heaven eternally enjoying bliss and union with God.
2. Some human beings will be eternally separated from God (and therefore eternally miserable) in hell.

Some philosophers have objected to (2), suggesting that the concept of hell in traditional views is deeply flawed and so should be rejected. For example, even if one accepts an account in which the damned are in hell because they freely choose to be there, one can argue that there might be a morally sufficient reason for God to override such freedom to ensure the salvation of all, or that God could ensure that all human persons are saved while retaining their free will. Moreover, (2) might be criticized on the grounds that it is morally objectionable that God enact a punishment of infinite duration for a finite crime. Although these are interesting challenges to the traditional Christian teaching, these will not be our concern.¹

It will also not be our concern to adjudicate the disputes concerning how the blessed end up in heaven or the damned in hell. Perhaps the reason has to do with God having always determined that it be so, or that human agents have freely chosen their bliss or damnation. Nor will the actual nature of the bliss or damnation be discussed. Whether heaven involves a “Beatific Vision” that is either static or dynamic—or whether hell involves merely psychological anguish or also includes physical pain—will be set aside. The minimal core of the traditional Christian teaching relevant to our discussion is that some human persons will be completely happy in heaven and others will be miserable in hell, and that nevertheless God is morally just, good, and loving.

What will be the focus of this chapter is the objection to the traditional Christian teaching which argues that the acceptance of (2) comes into tension with adherence to (1). That is, the problem of hell is not just about hell but also a problem for the traditional conception of heaven. Some critics have attempted to show that the traditional Christian teaching must be rejected because it is incoherent to accept both (1) and (2).² Others have argued that since we should maintain (1), we should therefore reject (2) in favor of universalism, which is the view that all human beings will eventually be saved and so enjoy eternal union with God in heaven.³ The putative tension stems from the assumption that the residents of heaven cannot be happy given the eternal suffering of those that they loved in their premortem life. It should not be a surprise that defenders of the traditional Christian teaching have offered several responses to such worries.

After presenting a more detailed exposition of the alleged tension between (1) and (2), I will examine some of the extant responses to the problem and explain my reasons for regarding such responses as less than satisfactory. I will then present two currently underexplored theological ideas—namely the distinction between *passiones/affectiones* as it concerns the attribute of impassibility and the doctrine of the *refrigerium* (i.e., temporary relief or refreshment)—and show how such ideas can be incorporated in two distinct ways of responding to the problem. These two approaches avoid the worries that beset the extant responses and hence merit further consideration in discussions about heaven and hell.

LOVE AND THE PROBLEM OF ETERNAL SEPARATION

The problem of eternal separation is quite compelling because of the nature of love. Traditional Christian teaching requires that human persons love God and their neighbors. Moreover, we seem to be the kind of creatures to whom love comes quite naturally. Yet it is the very notion of love that engenders the problem. In the film *What Dreams May Come*, the protagonist Chris Nielsen (played by Robin Williams) dies in a car accident and enters into heaven. After his death, Chris' spouse Annie commits suicide and is thereby condemned forever to hell. Chris, with some additional assistance from people he knew in his premortem life, attempts a rescue operation to find Annie and to bring her out of hell. After several harrowing adventures, they come upon Annie who is suffering from a severe form of amnesia and hence cannot remember Chris. One of Chris' guides urges that he merely use this moment as a way of saying goodbye (for if he stays too long, then Chris will also lose his mind and be trapped in hell). However, Chris insists on staying with Annie in hell forever instead of returning back to heaven. In the end, Chris

and Annie are united, but Chris' love for Annie ensures that he will not give up on seeking that union, whether it be in heaven, earth, or in hell.

Now Chris' attitude is one to which we may have some sympathy. His passionate love for Annie would seem to make heaven unendurable if he knew that she is going to experience eternal suffering. Even if the pain is not physical (as depicted in the film by some of the denizens of hell), Annie's psychological and emotional anguish is too much for Chris to bear. In a recent critique of the traditional Christian teaching, philosopher Nicole Hassoun makes the following claim:

If one loves someone, one suffers if one knows that one's beloved is suffering. At least, if one's beloved is suffering that will normally make one worse off in some respect—certainly one could not be perfectly happy, or free from all suffering, if one knows that one's beloved is suffering.⁴

There are various accounts of love, but given some of the plausible views of love (such as love involving union, valuing, and having robust concern) it seems putatively reasonable to suppose that the knowledge of the suffering of one's beloved causes the lover to suffer too. 

Moreover, how can Chris be happy in heaven if it involves spending eternity without Annie, never enjoying or experiencing any union with her ever again? Although Chris is capable of experiencing joy in heaven and is even reunited with his deceased daughter, it is separation from Annie that makes heaven unbearable for Chris. If Chris is supposed to count as a member of the blessed in heaven, then it seems that there cannot be eternal separation of lovers. Since it would be unjust to consign Chris to hell, the only way to ensure eternal happiness requires that there be no eternal separation between them—hence, universalism naturally follows (especially if everyone is loved by someone who will end up in heaven).⁵

Chris' attitude also seems to fit a traditional conception of love provided by Thomas Aquinas. Consider the following remarks by Aquinas:

An act of love always tends towards two things; to the good that one wills, and to the person for whom one wills it: since to love a person is to wish that person good. Hence, inasmuch as we love ourselves, we wish ourselves good; and, so far as possible, union with that good. So love is called the unitive force. . . . And by the fact that anyone loves another, he wills good to that other. Thus he puts the other, as it were, in the place of himself; and regards the good done to him as done to himself. So far love is a binding force, since it aggregates another to ourselves, and refers his good to our own.⁶

According to Aquinas, love requires willing the good of a person and seeking appropriate union with that person. Now when Chris sees Annie suffering,

his love for her prompts his desire for the cessation of her suffering, which instigates his attempted rescue mission. When such an operation has apparently failed, he nevertheless desires union, even if it is union in the miseries of hell. If our love for fellow humans will continue in heaven (which seems to be a part of the Christian tradition that affirms the fellowship of the saints), then eternal separation of lovers becomes an especially acute problem for the advocate of the traditional Christian teaching who wants to affirm (1) and (2).

Given such considerations, philosophers John Kronen and Eric Reitan have recently presented the following argument against the traditional Christian teaching:⁷

- U1. Anyone in a state of eternal blessedness possesses both perfect bliss and universal love for all persons.
- U2. Anyone who possess universal love for all persons and who is aware that some persons are eternally damned cannot possess perfect bliss.
- U3. So, anyone who is aware that some persons are eternally damned cannot possess eternal blessedness (by U1, U2).
- U4. If anyone is eternally damned, then anyone who possesses eternal blessedness would be aware of this.
- U5. So, if anyone is eternally damned, then none possess eternal blessedness (by U3, U4).

So if we accept (1) of the traditional Christian teaching—that some will indeed experience eternal blessedness, especially those who earnestly repent and seek after God—then it follows that no one is eternally damned.

One might immediately object to the possibility of universal love in (U1). However, some of the premises of the argument can be weakened such that the blessed only have love for those they previously loved in their premortem life. The modified argument—which we will call “the Eternal Separation Argument”—can then be formulated as follows:

- E1. Anyone in a state of eternal blessedness possesses both perfect bliss and continued love for their premortem beloved.
- E2. Anyone who possesses love for their premortem beloved and who is aware that those persons are eternally damned cannot possess perfect bliss.
- E3. So, anyone who is aware that their premortem beloved is eternally damned cannot possess eternal blessedness (by E1, E2).
- E4. If a premortem beloved is eternally damned, then any lover of the premortem beloved who possesses eternal blessedness would be aware of this.
- E5. So, if a premortem beloved is eternally damned, then no lover of the earthly beloved possesses eternal blessedness (by E3, E4).

Thus modified, premise (E2) seems more plausible than (U2). For it is less obvious that one would lack perfect bliss if learning that a complete stranger or even an enemy is undergoing eternal torment. However, as in the case of Chris, it is much more difficult to see how anyone aware of the eternal damnation of someone they once loved in their premortem life could be perfectly happy. Moreover, (E4) is more plausible than (U4), as the eternal blessed may not be omniscient or may not know what has happened to every human individual. However, we would care about the fate and well-being of our loved ones, so much so that it seems plausible to suggest that we would actively seek out knowledge of them and their situation, much in the way that a parent would desperately seek out the fate of their child after hearing reports of her child being on a plane that had crashed.

Given the intense love we have for people right now, and in many cases a deep love for people we believe not to be in a saving relationship with God, the problem posed by the Eternal Separation Argument becomes much more than a mere theoretical problem for Christian theists. In some regards, the emotional problem partially constitutes the theoretical problem such that it is not obvious that the intellectual and the emotional worries can be separated as they have been for those discussing the problem of evil.⁸ Before presenting a couple of my own responses to the problem, I will first examine some of the extant responses and offer reasons why I find such approaches unappealing.

SOME EXTANT RESPONSES

Historical theologians were not unaware of the problem of how the saints in heaven can be happy despite the misery of the damned in hell. Classic responses to the worry can be found in the works of Aquinas and the eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards. For example, consider the following statements by Aquinas:

A thing may be a matter of rejoicing in two ways. First directly, when one rejoices in a thing as such: and thus the saints will not rejoice in the punishment of the wicked. Secondly, indirectly, by reason namely of something annexed to it: and in this way the saints will rejoice in the punishment of the wicked, by considering therein the order of Divine justice and their own deliverance, which will fell them with joy. And thus the Divine justice and their own deliverance will be the direct cause of the joy of the blessed: while the punishment of the damned will cause it indirectly.⁹

Aquinas avers that the blessed will in fact rejoice at the knowledge of the eternally condemned. Of course he acknowledges that the joy is not directly caused by their suffering; but their suffering indirectly causes them joy

because the damnation will be an enactment of divine justice, and the blessed will be glad that justice has been satisfied. Moreover, the blessed will be happy about their “own deliverance” of avoiding the fate of the damned.

Similarly, Edwards claims that the joy of heaven will be increased by the knowledge of the damned. He writes:

The saints in heaven will behold the torments of the damned. ... So they will be tormented in the presence also of the glorified saints. Hereby the saints will be made the more sensible how great their salvation is. When they shall see how great the misery is from which God has saved them, and how great a difference he has made between their state and the state of others, who were by nature (and perhaps for a time by practice) no more sinful and ill-deserving than any, it will give them a greater sense of the wonderfulness of God’s grace to them. Every time they look upon the damned, it will excite in them a lively and admiring sense of the grace of God, in making them so to differ ... it will make their happiness the greater, as it will make them more sensible of their own happiness. When they see others, who were of the same nature and born under the same circumstances, plunged in such misery, and they so distinguished, O it will make them sensible how happy they are. A sense of the opposite misery, in all cases, greatly increases the relish of any joy or pleasure.¹⁰

According to Edwards, the joy of the residents of heaven increases because they will be glad of their own escape and so will not take their state of beatitude for granted given how easily they could have ended up elsewhere.

The Aquinas-Edwards response denies (E2) of the Eternal Separation Argument. However, their response fails to address the heart of the problem, which is the separation from loved ones. Perhaps the blessed will be happy that they are not suffering, unlike their pre-mortem earthly beloved who is consigned eternally to misery in hell. But no explanation is provided in the response of exactly how they can remain happy while being aware that their beloved is suffering. The denial of (E2) by the Aquinas-Edwards response is due to the joy of witnessing divine justice and the gratitude of their own narrow escape. But nothing is said to mitigate the harm done to a lover who knows that her beloved is suffering and separated eternally. Imagine that someone’s child commits a heinous crime and ends up in a maximum-security prison with zero chance of parole and no visitation rights. Even if the parent recognizes that justice is being served, the parent seems to suffer given the separation and loss of union. So the mere joy of divine justice or of one’s own fortuitous state does not resolve the real worry that underlies the problem of eternal separation.¹¹ A satisfactory denial of (E2), then, requires an explanation of how such knowledge of one’s beloved does not threaten the blissful state of the residents of heaven.

Another standard response is to deny (E4) and to claim that the blessed in heaven may lack knowledge of the condemned in hell—even the knowledge of those that they loved in their premortem life. Philosopher Stephen T. Davis, an advocate of the partial-amnesia response, suggests the following:

[I]t seems that some sort of partial memory loss is the most viable option. It could not amount to radical memory loss, of course: that would endanger personal identity. ... My guess is that the experience of the presence of God will be so overwhelming that no worries, sorrows, or pains from the past can possibly intrude.¹²

According to this response, God would shield the blessed from such knowledge since awareness of the damnation of loved ones would cause too much pain for them.¹³ William Lane Craig, a Christian philosopher and theologian, even admits that “knowledge of loved ones’ damnation would undermine the supreme happiness of the redeemed,” but nevertheless it may be the case that “God obliterates from their minds any knowledge of lost persons so that they experience no pangs of remorse for them.”¹⁴

Unlike the Aquinas-Edwards response, Craig and Davis offer a response that directly addresses the problem. However, there are several concerns for the partial-amnesia response. First, this response does not accord well with scriptural data concerning our cognitive condition. Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, states that “we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ... Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (1 Corinthians 13:9–10, 12). And in the letter to the Hebrews, the author claims that “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), which refers to the faithful deceased. So heavenly existence seems to include richer cognitive capacities and states, and yet partial-amnesia makes the residents of heaven cognitively deficient. After all, if they are aware of earthly individuals and their affairs, then why wouldn’t they be aware of hellish individuals and their affairs?

Furthermore, it’s  **even clear** how the memory loss is even supposed to work. Does God erase all of those memorial beliefs that include the condemned beloved? There would then be large gaps in our memories. Of course there are already gaps in our memories. But suppose a married couple of fifty years were coworkers at the same company and engaged in most daily activities together, however one goes to heaven and her spouse goes to hell. Does God simply erase fifty years of memories? Wouldn’t that person in heaven wonder what happened, or would she think that she had arrived in heaven as the young person prior to meeting her spouse? And if so, does that make insignificant the person’s earthly existence after meeting her beloved? Or perhaps God doesn’t erase the entire memory but only those segments of the

memory belief that involve the lost beloved. But this seems equally strange. Does the heavenly resident have a memorial belief where she is standing at a wedding holding no one's hands and putting a ring on no one's fingers? Is a present on her birthday that her spouse handed to her just floating in the air in the memory? There would then be odd spatial gaps in one's memorial beliefs. Thus, it's not even clear from the response exactly how God is supposed to achieve partial-amnesia in the heavenly residents without yielding problematic or absurd consequences.

Another problem with the partial-amnesia response is that it seems to require that God play the role of a deceiver. It is easy to imagine that a resident of heaven might seek out their premortem human beloved, and yet God must ensure that such a person does not ever become aware of the beloved's fate or even their existence. God may not be a deceiver in a direct sense where he is causing the resident of heaven to hold a false belief, but he may be regarded as a deceiver in an indirect way such that he ensures that no one ever finds out something that would harm them if they were to make the relevant discovery. If one is constantly stealing from another but ensures that the person never attends to or is concerned with their finances such that the victim never forms a false belief (such as "my money is secure" or "I have the same amount today as I did last week"), there is still a sense in which the thief is deceiving the victim. Similarly, God would be deceiving the residents of heaven; but the role of a deceiver is incompatible with regarding God as a morally perfect being.

Craig has responded to such a concern, claiming that the prevention of discovery does not count as immoral deception. He goes on to state that "[w]e 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."¹⁵ But this response misses the force of the problem of eternal separation. Recall that the problem arises from the nature of love. Love seeks the good of the beloved and aims at union with the beloved. Craig and Davis might respond by stating that the residents of heaven have love for their earthly beloved, but it is merely dispositional and never manifest. But that would be counterintuitive. If they truly have love for their beloved, they would seek out knowledge of what happened to their beloved and desire their well-being. For God to shield them from such knowledge (or to "obliterate from their mind any knowledge of lost persons," to quote Craig), though not obviously immoral, does not seem obviously compatible with a morally just and loving God, for the removal of such knowledge or awareness might be regarded as morally pernicious in such a way as to constitute a legitimate harm on the residents of heaven.¹⁶ In the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel (played by Jim Carrey) undergoes a procedure to erase all of his memories involving his ex-partner Clementine (played by Kate Winslet) in order to eliminate the

excruciating sorrow he is undergoing after their break-up. During the process, Joel is in a dream-like state where he is witnessing his memories being erased before him. As he realizes the value of these memories, he attempts to fight back and preserve his memory of Clementine. The film highlights the human need to hold on to the past, even if it is a painful one. Even if my child were to die young, I would not opt for the removal of memories even if that would remove the associated suffering. So it is not adequate justification for God to remove memories simply to eliminate the associated suffering of being aware of the separation from one's beloved.¹⁷

Therefore, the Aquinas-Edwards and the partial-amnesia responses inadequately address the Eternal Separation Argument because they neither mitigate the worry nor appreciate the force of the problem having to do with the nature of love. If these responses were the only ones available, then perhaps universalism or the rejection of the traditional Christian teaching would be warranted. However, I hope to offer some under-investigated approaches that I believe avoid the worries that beset these extant responses.

EMOTIONS AND IMPASSIBILITY

The first response I want to propose adopts two claims: (i) that God is impassible, and (ii) that humans will be like God in heaven. Consider divine impassibility, which is a characteristic of God whereby he cannot suffer or be passively moved by anything external to him. Currently there is much suffering in the world, but God is fully aware of the suffering of creatures and yet remains perfectly in bliss. God is also aware of those who are damned and even loves those consigned to hell,¹⁸ yet his happiness is not diminished in any way. Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that the blessed will have become more like God in some (but not all) respects. Perhaps, then, something akin to impassibility might be attributed to them (and as I note below, there is some historical precedence for ascribing impassibility to the blessed). Of course the blessed will not be fully impassible, but neither will they be omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, etc. Yet they will be wiser, more knowledgeable, more free, more autonomous, and so forth. Thus, they may also be more emotionally impervious to external events. Thus, the residents of heaven can be completely aware of the fate of the damned and yet not be harmed by such knowledge.

Now Kronen and Reitan have argued that such a response is problematic insofar as it removes all emotions from God, and therefore all emotions from the residents of heaven.¹⁹ They go on to aver that they “do not think the Christian love ethic can divorce morality from emotions, since Christian love is emotional.”²⁰ If love is an emotion, and the citizens of heaven and God have

no emotions, then it follows that they lack love altogether in heaven. But such a view does not fit well with the traditional Christian view. Of the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love), Thomas Aquinas claimed that faith and hope will cease in heaven (since they will have been fulfilled in knowing and uniting with God), but love will persist since there will be the love for God as well as the love for one another in the communion of the blessed.

However, Kronen and Reitan's objection does not threaten the response I am proposing here since divine impassibility does not entail that God lacks emotions altogether. From the acceptance of (i) and (ii), the residents of heaven may be, in some sense, impassible while retaining emotions. In defense of this claim, philosopher Anastasia Scrutton has argued that historically influential views concerning divine impassibility distinguish between *affectiones*, which are active emotions, and *passiones*, which are passive emotions. She explains the distinction as follows: "what makes an affection an affection rather than a passion lies in the fact that it is a movement of the will, which is a part of the higher, inner, intellectual self, while the passion is an act of the appetite, an aspect of the lower, outer, sensual self."²¹ Accordingly, impassibility should not be construed as the inability to experience any emotions; rather, impassibility might instead be regarded as the inability to experience any passive emotions. Affections can be rational or at least expressive of reason, whereas passions are irrational or "a commotion of the mind contrary to reason."²² Moreover, some patristic theologians have conceptually linked the passions to sin. For example, here is how Athanasius, a fourth-century Christian theologian, states the connection:

And while He Himself [God the Son] being impassible in nature, remains as He is, not harmed by these affections, but rather obliterating and destroying them, *men, their passions as if changed and abolished in the Impassible, henceforth become themselves also impassible and free from them for ever*, as John taught, saying "And ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him is no sin."²³ [italics mine]

So if there is no sin in heaven, then neither will there be passions. There is, then, some historical precedence for thinking that the blessed in heaven will be impassible, which again does not necessarily imply that they will be emotionless, but only that they will be without passions.

To make this more perspicuous, consider the distinction between compassion and pity. Compassion is an active emotion whereas pity is passive. As Scrutton states, "compassion is rooted in the subject's personal involvement with the object whereas, in pity, the subject remains not entirely, but rather more, personally detached."²⁴ It is the personal detachment that makes pity passive since we find ourselves feeling sorrow for an individual's unfortunate

state. However, the “personal involvement” of compassion requires the active attenuation of one’s emotive state to the sufferer, and this is true even if there is a sense in which the sufferer deserves her suffering. Here Scrutton notes:

compassion may instead involve the belief that the object’s suffering is deserved and that they are morally responsible, but that their culpable actions are nevertheless understandable (though not justified) ... it would be possible for God to experience compassion even for things the sufferer “brought upon herself.”²⁵

What follows is that God can have compassion for those who are suffering without having to experience any suffering himself. Now if human compassion can be construed analogously to divine compassion, then the blessed in heaven can have affective attitudes for the denizens of hell even if they continue to believe that those in hell deserve to be in their unfortunate state. Hence, the kind of impassibility that the blessed will possess does not require the elimination of all emotions nor does it involve any harm from the knowledge that one’s loved ones are undergoing suffering. For impassibility at least means that one cannot be harmed by mere knowledge, nor will one have the emotions or feelings such as sorrow that can yield harm. But one can still have the emotions of compassion and love even to the lost loved ones who are suffering eternally. Hence, the residents of heaven continue to know and love the denizens of hell but are not passively moved by the sufferings of those in hell. Moreover, the loss of passions precludes any suffering by the blessed that is caused by the separation from their beloved.²⁶

The response proposed here, then, provides a way for the defender of the traditional Christian teaching to deny (E2) and (U2). And unlike the Aquinas-Edwards response noted earlier, this approach explains why there is no loss of heavenly bliss at the knowledge of the suffering by and separation from one’s beloved—which is due to the acquisition of a new property (impassibility) or the loss of some capacities (e.g., passive emotions). Indeed, this kind of bliss will be hard to imagine now given that we are subjects of passions. But if we can conceive of a being such as God who is in such a state (i.e., passionless bliss), then we can have some understanding of what it might be like.

A possible objection is that love and compassion, being active emotions possessed by the residents of heaven, will seek to improve the conditions of their loved ones. However, we can respond by adopting a view where the denizens of hell are such that their “hearts are hardened” in the sense that they have cultivated certain characters whereby they can never freely choose to leave hell.²⁷ Hence, God and the blessed will understand that nothing can be done to rescue them. Nevertheless, they will not suffer or be harmed by awareness of such suffering and separation since they are incapable of being so harmed.

REFRIGERIUM AND (PARTIAL) UNION

Next, I want to consider an entirely different type of reply to the Eternal Separation Argument, one that takes its inspiration from the notion of the *refrigerium*. The term *refrigerium* originally referred merely to the attainment of the sort of refreshment that comes from spiritual cleansing and healing, and hence it was sometimes used to refer to experiences had in purgatory or even in paradise.²⁸ However, it has also been associated with a temporary relief from the sufferings incurred in eternal damnation. Early indications of such a belief can be traced back to the New Testament parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–26. In this passage, Jesus delivers a tale in which a rich man neglects the plea for help by Lazarus. Both end up dying, and Lazarus enjoys solace and joy at the “bosom of Abraham” while the rich man suffers in the fires of damnation. In his pitiful state, the rich man cries out to Abraham, asking that he “send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue” (Luke 16:24 ESV). Though Jesus or the author(s) of the *Gospel of Luke* may not be offering any eschatological insight, this passage may nevertheless indicate some early evidence of the belief in the possibility of temporary relief for the damned.

Clear reference to the *refrigerium* can be found in the fourth and fifth centuries. Prudentius Aurelius Clemens, a fourth-century Christian poet, writes that, “[o]ften below the Styx holidays from their punishments are kept, even by the guilty spirits Hell grows feeble with mitigated torments and the shadowy nation, free from fires, exults in the leisure of its prison; the rivers cease to burn with their usual Sulphur.”²⁹ Such a view can even be found in the works of Augustine, an early Christian theologian from the fourth/fifth century, who writes in *The Enchiridion*:

It is quite in vain, then, that some—indeed very many—yield to merely human feelings and deplore the notion of eternal punishment of the damned and their interminable and perpetual misery. They do not believe that such things will be But let them suppose, if it pleases them, that, *for certain intervals of time, the punishments of the damned are somewhat mitigated*. Even so, the wrath of God must be understood as still resting on them. . . . Yet even in his wrath . . . he does not “shut up his mercy.” This is not to put an end to their eternal afflictions, but rather *to apply or interpose some little respite in their torments* [italics mine].³⁰

Picking up on this theme, Oxford literary scholar and popular Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, in his **fictional** novel *The Great Divorce*, enters himself into the role of the protagonist much in the way that Dante enters as the sojourner through hell, purgatory, and heaven in *The Divine Comedy*. In Lewis’ story, several citizens from the “grey city” take a bus ride to a paradisiacal location

(which turns out to be miserable for most of the visitors). And just as Virgil served as a guide to Dante, George MacDonald (a literary influence to Lewis) serves as Lewis' guide. Though MacDonald was a universalist, Lewis depicts him as having revised his beliefs and explaining the visit by the citizens of the "grey city" as a *refrigerium*, which he explains "means the damned have holidays—excursions, ye understand."³¹ The temporary holiday from hell in Lewis' tale involves the interaction between friends and lovers as well as between angelic beings and the damned.³²

Although the concept of a momentary relief from the sufferings of eternal damnation has not been widely accepted and is certainly not a part of any official teaching or dogma, it may serve as the starting point for a response to the Eternal Separation Argument. Suppose, then, that the denizens of hell can experience temporary refreshment. It does not matter for our purposes what the nature of the relief is (it may be dependent on who the person is) or whether the relief occurs in hell (such as the case for the rich man asking for a drop of water), heaven (as depicted in *The Great Divorce*), or in some intermediate location. Moreover, let us suppose that, as it is in the case for Lewis, the temporary refreshment can involve interaction between premortem lovers (whether between friends, romantic partners, parents and children, etc.).

Now premise (E2) is motivated by the assumption that the heavenly resident is aware of the suffering of the premortem beloved and is eternally separated from that person. But the *refrigerium* as described above goes some way toward mitigating that concern. Consider the situation between Chris and Annie. The original story makes no mention of God or the good of the union with God and with other heavenly residents (though Chris does share a touching reunion with his deceased daughter). Hence, it would be bad for Chris to abandon heaven and lose the highest good that fully actualizes his nature, namely union with God. However, the problem is that Chris, in his love for Annie, would also desire Annie's good and would seek union with her. The best thing that can be done for Annie is for her to be in her freely chosen state of separation from God (for it would not be good for God to annihilate her, nor can God bring her into union since that would require Annie to freely choose to do so).³³ Since Annie can experience temporary relief, it may be the case that her refreshment is brought about by Chris' actions. Chris can therefore seek her good by being the means or the instrument by which Annie experiences momentary alleviation. Furthermore, the time of refreshment for Annie involves a temporary and sporadic union between Chris and Annie. Though it is not complete and full union, it is the appropriate kind of union given their situation and so the most that can be had. Hence, there is no *eternal* separation in the sense that they never see each other again.

We can compare the situation to a separation that arises due to medical quarantine or incarceration. It is good for that individual and for the

safety of society that such a person be restrained, and someone who loves that individual might understand the necessity for it (suppose the disease is extremely contagious or the prisoner is quite violent). Suppose that the lover of such an individual is afforded the opportunity to engage in temporary and sporadic visitations—where such occasions also involve some (physical or psychological) relief that can be administered by some treatment, drug, or perhaps even that individual’s favorite food or drink. By such visitations and the proctoring of relief, the lover is able to bring some good to the beloved and enjoy some measure of union. Of course, the situations are not the same since (1) also offers the great good of union with God and other heavenly citizens. But the ache of the lover is somewhat diminished since they would not be separated forever and the lover would be able to offer some goods to the patient or prisoner.

The blessed in heaven, then, might understand that it is “meet and right” that divine justice is enacted by those condemned in hell. But unlike the Aquinas-Edwards response, the *refrigerium* response does not ignore the ache of separation by attending only to the joy of divine justice and one’s own fortunate plight. And unlike the partial-amnesia response, union with God does not require memory loss or the inability to express love to premortem loved ones. By taking seriously the *refrigerium*, there can be full knowledge and expressed love, where such love is satisfied through the limited offering of good and the temporary and periodic union that can occur between separated individuals.

Indeed, the response proposed here agrees with Craig and Davis that the joy of union with God is so immensely great that it does, in some sense, trump all other goods. However, this response does not require the inability to express or manifest love to those one formerly loved, nor does it ignore the sting of eternal separation. If there is a *refrigerium*, then intermittent fellowship of earthly lovers can be enjoyed, however brief, sporadic, and limited such a union might be.³⁴ The *refrigerium* response might also be preferred over the impassibility response since we can comprehend the situation more, given that the nature of our love and emotions will be roughly the same, unlike the impassibility response which involves a drastic alteration to our current emotional capacities.

CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that both of the responses offered should be regarded more like a defense than a theodicy.³⁵ That is, I am only offering *possible* ways for God to handle the problem of eternal separation. When it comes to certain theological problems, it may be the case that God has more resources than

what we can conceive. Nevertheless, I take it that a proponent of the traditional Christian teaching can adopt either the impassibility response or the *refrigerium* response as a way of denying (E2) and (U2), thereby mitigating the worries raised by the Eternal Separation Argument. No doubt that much of what was stated in these proposals will need to be elaborated and further defended in order to yield an adequate reply. However, I hope to have at least proffered some novel suggestions that are worthy of continued investigation and development, especially for defenders of the traditional Christian teaching who may be averse to the extant responses to the problem.³⁶

NOTES

1. For further discussion on some of these issues, see Kvanvig 1993, Murray 1998, Swinburne 1983, and Walls 1992.
2. Cf. Hassoun 2015.
3. For example, see Schleiermacher 1928, Talbott 1990, and Kronen and Reitan 2011.
4. Hassoun 2015, 634.
5. Moreover, it's easy to conceive how the traditional Christian teaching would extend the love for one's partner or friend to strangers suffering in hell, and hence all persons would have to be saved.
6. *Summa Theologiae* Prima Pars, Q. 20, a. 1., reply 3. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/summa/FP/FP020.html#FPQ20A1THEP1>. Accessed March 2016.
7. Kronen and Reitan 2011, 80ff.
8. Though I should note that it is not obvious that the intellectual and emotional problems of evil(s) are easily divorced, as it sometimes is in the current literature. For some notable exceptions, see Stump 2012 and to some extent Adams 1999.
9. *Summa Theologiae* Supplement Q. 94, a. 3. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/summa/XP/XP094.html#XPQ94A3THEP1>. Accessed March 2016.
10. Jonathan Edwards, "The Eternity of Hell Torments," IV. <http://www.jonathan-edwards.org/Eternity.html>. Accessed March 2016.
11. Stump (1986) has argued that God's love is compatible with the suffering of those in hell, for God would not annihilate them (since he preserves their good) nor would he be able to fulfill their true end (which is eternal union with God) since they would have to freely choose to do so (and the assumption is that they have freely chosen to reject God). Thus, God actualizes their "secondary" nature which they have adopted, so as to be fulfilled by what they desire to be fulfilled by (but leaves them in misery because their true nature is not fully actualized since they are separated from God), and hence God loves them by giving them what he can in their freely chosen state. Even if such a move works to show the compatibility of divine love and the existence of hell, such an account does not seem to help with the Eternal Separation Argument.
12. Davis 2015, 120.

13. Davis claims that possession of some memories is a necessary condition for personal persistence (i.e., a person S at some later time is numerically identical to a person S* at an earlier time only if S remembers the experiences of S*). Hence, the lack of psychological/memorial links would endanger one's survival. However, one might also endorse a biological criterion (cf. Olson 1997) or perhaps claim that there are no nontrivial necessary and sufficient conditions for persistence (Merricks 1998). Under these two latter views, radical memory loss would not threaten personal identity.

14. Craig 1991. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/talbotts-universalism>. Accessed March 2016.

15. Ibid.

16. Thus, I am not outright rejecting such a response; but clearly more must be provided if this response is to be regarded as adequately addressing the problem of eternal separation.

17.  Craig has also suggested that it may not be actual amnesia or memory loss.  Craig states:

[W]e 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 ... 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 (Craig 1991).

But the response, again, doesn't address the real problem, which arises from the nature of love. Lovers want to know the fate of the beloved, and it is hard to imagine that lovers would not be so curious as to inquire. Even though the bliss of eternal union in the Beatific Vision might be overwhelming, there is still the "communion of saints." Unless that line is mere lip-service, the residents of heaven will also be fellowshiping with one another. If so, then it seems natural that there would be a desire to fellowship with one's premortem lovers, and hence a natural desire to seek out their status.

18. Stump 1986.

19. Kronen and Reitan 2011, 81. Kronen and Reitan attribute such a view to Jerry Walls. Although Walls 1992, 109–110, does claim that God cannot be emotionally manipulated by the damned, it is not clear if Walls actually embraces divine impassibility. Moreover, Walls goes on to state that God and heaven dwellers might suffer or be harmed, and yet it does not diminish their bliss, though he never states exactly how this can be so.

20. Kronen and Reitan 2011, 82.

21. Scrutton 2011, 38.

22. Augustine, *City of God* VIII.17. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.VIII.17.html>. Accessed March 2016. In the same passage, Augustine also states that the angels and blessed in heaven are devoid of passions.

23. *Against the Arians: Discourse III*, 34. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.xxi.ii.iv.iv.html>. Accessed March 2016.

24. Scrutton 2011, 76.

25. *Ibid.*, 99–100.

26. It may be objected that the removal of passion from love makes that emotion unrecognizable as love. However, the Thomistic account of love noted earlier does not require passion, and such an account is at least defensible (cf. Stump 2012, ch.5).

27. That is, the denizens of hell may continue to choose separation, where such choices are “self-forming actions” that bring about later choices of remaining in hell. For a defense of this claim, see Yang and Davis 2015.

28. See LeGoff 1984, ch. 1. Tertullian seems to regard the *refrigerium* as Abraham’s bosom, referenced in Luke 16.

29. From “Hymn for the Lighting of the Lamp,” *Liber Cathemerinon*, cited in Hooper 1996, 280.

30. *The Enchiridion*, ch. 112. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/enchiridion.chapter29.html>. Accessed March 2016.

31. Lewis 1952, 62.

32. In the story, the character George MacDonald explains that for those who end up staying, their time in the “grey city” and in the outskirts is purgatorial, whereas those who return to the “grey city” merely experience an excursion.

33. Obviously these claims need further elaboration and defense. For more on this, see Stump 1986. However, I leave it open that it is in principle open for Annie to freely choose to leave hell, but that she may not do so given the character that she has formed given her choice of separation from God (see Yang and Davis 2015).

34. One might worry that this response is not consistent with the beatific vision. However, this is only true if we adopt a “static” conception of heaven, but we might also adopt a “dynamic” conception of heaven that is compatible with the beatific vision. For more on this, see some of the chapters in Byerly and Silverman forthcoming.

35. In the discussion concerning the problem of evil, a theodicy is a response that provides God’s *actual* reasons for permitting evil, whereas a defense is a response that provides what *might* be a reason for God to permit evil.

36. Many thanks to Simon Cushing, John Santa Ana, and Alissa Yang for helpful comments and criticisms on an earlier draft.

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