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THE JUSTICE AND GOODNESS OF HELL

John Lamont

The paper considers the objections to Christianity raised by David Lewis, which accuse Christians of immorality on the grounds of their worshipping a monstrous being who punishes finite evils by the infinite punishment of hell. It distinguishes between the objection that God is a monster because such punishment would be unjust, and the objection that even if damnation is just, God is a monster because he wills or allows the dreadful evil of hell by creating beings that can be justly damned. It asserts that Aquinas's defence of the traditional Christian doctrine of hell provides an answer to this objection. The traditional doctrine is that those who die having committed serious sins for which they have not repented will be punished by endless mental and physical suffering in hell. Aquinas argues that the endless punishment of the damned is just because the damned endlessly and freely choose evil, and that it is good because the punishment of impenitent sinners, while bad for the sinners, is good absolutely speaking. The basis for his claim that the damned freely choose evil forever is his understanding of practical reason as ultimately motivated by a choice of a particular kind of life to live, and his view that all motivations that are independent of practical reason have a physical basis. The basis for his claim that the punishment of the damned is a good thing absolutely considered is his teleological view of good and evil. The paper defends these bases and their application to the question of damnation.

I

Hilaire Belloc claimed that one of the pleasures of heaven will be throwing rocks at the damned. This sort of view is not popular nowadays, and the Christian teaching on hell has been used to argue against the morality, as well as the truth, of Christian belief. David Lewis has given an argument of this kind:

God has prescribed torment for insubordination. The torment is to go on forever, and the agonies to be endured by the damned intensify, in unimaginable ways, the sufferings we undergo in our earthly lives. In both dimensions, time and intensity, the torment is infinitely worse than all the suffering and sin that will have occurred during the history of life in the universe. What God does is thus worse than what the worst of tyrants have done.



... Appearances notwithstanding, are those who worship the perpetrator of divine evil themselves evil?¹

There are in fact two distinct arguments that can be made for God's being a monster in consequence of his inflicting hell, which are not clearly distinguished by Lewis here. The first argument is that God is a monster, in the Christian account of him, because he treats the damned unjustly; he inflicts an infinite punishment for sins that can only be finite in nature. The second argument is that God is a monster because he causes or allows the dreadful evil of hell. We can distinguish the second argument from the first by noting that one could grant that if people like the damned exist, it is just for God to punish them with hell, while pointing out that he could still have avoided the dreadful evil of hell by refraining from creating the damned in the first place, or by refraining from creating beings who might possibly become like the damned. The second argument asserts that God is a monster because he wills or allows the dreadful evil of hell by creating beings that can be justly damned, an evil that no good resulting from the creation of such beings can justify.

Objections to hell became a topic of debate in Christian theology as early as the third century, due to the universalism of Origen, who claimed that all persons in hell, even the devil, would eventually repent and be saved. This universalism had some influence on the thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa, but it was generally rejected by Christian theologians. Its rejection was understandable given the biblical evidence, which contains a number of clear threats of unending punishment for sinners, many of which are uttered by Christ himself; "Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:41, RSV) is a typical one. The best account of the traditional doctrine of hell seems to me to be that of St. Thomas Aquinas, and it is Aquinas's version of it that will be defended.

The traditional doctrine, as understood in this paper, asserts that all who die in a state of personal grievous sin go to hell; that hell is a place of punishment inflicted through severe pain both mental and physical, where no happiness can be experienced; that punishment in hell is unending; and that some people are in hell. I will assume the natural immortality of the soul, and the claim that justice involves proportioning punishment to evil-doing and reward to good actions.

The traditional view of hell is hotly contested among contemporary philosophers of religion, and is often alleged to face obvious and

¹David Lewis and Philip Kitcher, "And Lead Us Not," *Harper's* magazine, December 2007, 28. (See also David Lewis, "Divine Evils," in *Philosophers Without Gods*, ed. Louise M. Antony (Oxford: OUP, 2007). This essay is based on an outline Lewis wrote before his death in 2001. Although Lewis's objection and this paper are concerned with the Christian doctrine of hell, it is worth noting that the notion of hell is common to many religions, not just Christianity—Polybius praises the pagan Romans for their wisdom in promoting belief in the punishments of Hades (*Histories*, book 6, sec. 56). This fact has some relevance to the debate, by demonstrating that belief in hell is not the product of some peculiarly Christian aberration of thought, but has a wider currency.

unanswerable objections.² This allegation should provoke *a priori* scepticism, on the grounds that it is unlikely that several schools of great thinkers explicitly considering a difficult topic for almost 2000 years will have somehow overlooked decisive objections to a position they hold in common. When positions that are widely held by important thinkers in the past are now seen as obviously untenable, this is often because the contemporary opponents of these positions do not realise that their objections are based on assumptions that they take for granted, but that the adherents of these positions did not hold. This is the case with St. Thomas Aquinas's understanding of hell and his defence of it against objections. The philosophical assumptions that underlie this understanding will be described in this paper, and it will be argued that when these assumptions are brought to light, Aquinas's account of hell is reasonable.

II

The first objection given above to the doctrine of hell is an obvious one, and Aquinas offers several replies to it in a number of different discussions.³ The weakest reply that he mentions is sometimes given as the standard defence for the traditional view of hell—for example by Jonathan Kvanvig, who asserts, "According to defenders of the traditional view, punishment deserved is also a function of the status of the individual one has wronged, and they argue that all wrongdoing constitutes a wrong against God, and that wronging God is as bad a thing as anyone could do—they are infinitely bad thereby justifying an infinite punishment."⁴ If, as Kvanvig holds, this reply is the principal defence for the traditional doctrine of hell, its weakness would cast doubt on the intellectual respectability of the doctrine and its upholders. In fact, Aquinas himself effectively criticises this reply in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, where he asserts that "properly speaking, the punishment corresponds to the degree of departure from the order of justice that is found in the sin that is punished, rather than to the dignity of the person against whom the sin offends; for on the latter supposition, any sin at all would be rewarded by a punishment of infinite intensity."⁵ His argument for sins not deserving a punishment that corresponds to the dignity of the person against whom they offend is that venial sins, which come under the heading of "any sins whatsoever," deserve and receive a limited rather than an unlimited punishment; but if sin as such deserves infinite punishment because it offends

²See e.g., Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 67.

³His principal discussions of the objection are found in the *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 144; *Compendium of Theology*, ch. 183; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 87, a. 3; and *Commentary on the Sentences*, book IV, dist. XLVI, q. 1, art. III, and q. 2 art. III. The discussion in the *Commentary on the Sentences* is the longest and in many ways most interesting one, but it is not much considered due to the work's remaining largely untranslated into modern languages.

⁴Jonathan Kvanvig, "Heaven and Hell," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2007 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2007/entries/heaven-hell/>.

⁵St. Thomas Aquinas, *In libros Sententiarum*, (Parma, 1858), lib. 4 d. 46 q. 1 a. 3 ad 6, 1142.

against the infinite God, they should deserve and receive an unlimited punishment. He also points out that created beings, since they are finite, cannot be subjected to a punishment of infinite intensity.⁶

In contrast to this weak defence against the first objection, a defence inspired by Aristotle (for its Aristotelian inspiration see *Commentary on the Sentences*, lib. 4 d. 46 q. 1 a. 3 s. c. 3), Aquinas offers a strong defence that he seems to have developed himself.⁷ It is that because the damned are eternally sinning, due to their will being obstinately and permanently fixed in sin, they therefore eternally deserve punishment.⁸ Whether we parse this claim as “the damned deserve eternal punishment” or “the damned eternally deserve punishment” does not make a difference to Aquinas’s position here. It would make a difference, if Aquinas were to hold that the penalty of eternal punishment is decreed by God at a given moment in time, regardless of what the sinner were to do at any later time. But he makes clear that this is not the case: “There would be no everlasting punishment of the souls of the damned if they were able to change their will for a better will; it would be unjust, indeed, if from the moment of their having a good will their punishment would be everlasting.”⁹ He states this position succinctly in *De Malo* q. 1 a. 5 ad 15um, where he says that the eternity of the guilt is the cause of the eternity of the punishment. We can, on this view, point out that God, in punishing the damned, is always punishing at any time *t* a person who is seriously sinning at *t*. To punish, at time *t*, someone because they are sinning seriously at time *t* is not unjust, so the punishment of the damned is not unjust.

Some contemporary philosophers of religion have offered accounts of hell that could be mistaken for this defence of Aquinas’s. Richard Swinburne has offered this account of the existence of hell:

⁶Aquinas, *In libros Sententiarum*, lib. 4 d. 46 q. 1 a. 3 co, 1141; see also *Compendium of Theology*, book 1, ch. 183.

⁷It is not found in either St. Augustine or in St. Gregory the Great, who are Aquinas’s chief sources for his discussion of this question. Aquinas cites St. Augustine, *City of God*, book 21, ch. 12, and St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, book 4, ch. 46, but St. Augustine’s discussion is concerned with Adam’s sin and the resulting Fall, not with the mortal sins of other individuals. The text from St. Gregory the Great argues that the sins of evildoers are finite only because their lives are finite, and that they would, if they could, live forever so that they could sin forever—the proof of which is that they never cease sinning throughout their lives; and that as a result they deserve a punishment that goes on forever. This reasoning, unlike Aquinas’s, is not based on the claim that the damned actually do go on sinning forever. Aquinas clearly distinguishes this argument of Gregory’s from his own argument that because the damned sin eternally, their punishment should be eternal. He states this latter argument succinctly in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, book 4, d. XLVI, q. 1 art. III ad 5: “punishment . . . per se corresponds to the guilt of the infected soul: and because this guilt is everlasting, its punishment is also everlasting (poena . . . per se respondet animae culpa infectae; et quia culpa in perpetuum ibi manebit, ideo etiam poena erit perpetua).” Aquinas, *In libros Sententiarum*, 1142.

⁸St. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae ad fratrem Reginaldum*, in *Opuscula theologica*, ed. R. M. Spiazzi and R. A. Verardo, vol. 1 (Rome: Marietti, 1954), book 1, ch. 183, paras. 357, 359, p. 85.

⁹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, book 4: *Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O’Neill (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), book 4, ch. 93, p. 341.

A person's character is her system of desires and beliefs (principally moral beliefs); and just as it is good that agents have the choice of seeking to improve their beliefs or of not bothering to do so, so it is good that they should have the power to modify their desires over time. . . . Humans are so made that, by forcing themselves to do good actions when it is difficult, it becomes easier and easier to do them, until finally we desire to do them—our inclinations naturally lead us to do them. . . . And it does seem to be also the case that we can yield so frequently to whatever desire happens to be the strongest that we lose the habit of choosing between desires on the grounds of the goodness of them. So often our strongest desires are bad desires . . . if we allow ourselves continually to yield to those desires, we close the possibility of choosing the good because it is good. We cease to have a free choice between alternatives on the basis of their overall goodness (that is, on moral grounds). We become a theatre of competing desires in which the strongest (and so often the worst) wins.¹⁰ . . . our acts so mould our characters that firm and continued wrong acts and lack of any regret for them will get us into the condition of incorrigibly rejecting the good.¹¹

When people get in to this condition of incorrigibly rejecting the good, they can justly be damned:

the incorrigibly bad have, through their own considered choice over time, allowed themselves to develop stronger unalterable desires for states of affairs incompatible with the desire for the good. They desire not to be penitent for their wrongdoing, not to be generous with their lives, and to dwell on their own imagined greatness rather than worship God. A good God, I argued earlier, will respect a considered choice of destiny. . . . for those with wrong desires fixed incorrigibly there will inevitably be suffering.¹²

Charles Seymour has made a similar point:

Hell does not arise because a particular sin deserves everlasting punishment, but because the damned keep on sinning and so continue to earn finite periods of suffering. . . . The power of bad habits that the wicked developed on earth and continue to develop in hell could explain why some people choose to remain in hell.¹³

Swinburne and Seymour both offer what Kvanvig calls a choice model of hell, where hell "may be a place where some people are punished, but the fundamental purpose of hell is not to punish people, but to honor their choices."¹⁴

Aquinas, however, does not offer a choice model. Despite the resemblances between his reply to the first objection to hell and Seymour's reply, these two replies do not have the same purpose. Aquinas's reply is

¹⁰Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 91–92.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 197.

¹²*Ibid.*, 197–198, 200.

¹³Charles Seymour, "Hell, Justice, and Freedom," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 82.

¹⁴Kvanvig, "Heaven and Hell."

simply an answer to an objection against hell; it is not, as Seymour's is, an explanation of why people are damned. One reason for this difference between Aquinas and Seymour is that Aquinas accepts a feature of the traditional model of hell that the choice model jettisons. This feature emerges clearly in one presentation of the traditional model:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, . . . he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." (Mt. 25:31–33, 41–46, RSV)

The damned here are condemned for what they did in this life, not for the sins they commit after death as a result of having a will immutably fixed in evil. This reason for damnation is succinctly expressed in the description of the dead being "judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done" (Rev. 20:12). (Other statements of this position are to be found in Rev. 14:9–11, 21:8, 22:15; Romans 2:6–8; Heb. 13:4; Jude 14–15; 2 Cor. 5:10.) Aquinas, following Catholic tradition, interprets this view in a strong sense as asserting that damnation is the punishment deserved for a single unrepented mortal sin—i.e., for a single unrepented sin that is serious in nature, and committed with full knowledge and consent of the will.

This strong view, it should be noted, cannot be harmonised with the view held by some defenders of hell, according to which only that small minority of individuals who have chosen evil activities as the main occupation of their lives will end up in hell. Many if not most people commit at least one mortal sin in their lives, and many of those who do commit mortal sins do not on the face of it repent for those sins. Of course, the appearance of having committed a mortal sin and not repenting it will not always correspond to the truth; sometimes full knowledge or consent to the sin will be lacking, and at other times the apparent lack of repentance may be illusory. But it does not seem that such appearances, if based on thorough and intelligent observation, could be always or usually mistaken. The number of people who are at serious risk of damnation, and the number of people who are actually damned, will thus be quite substantial if the stronger view is accepted. This fact is pertinent to criticisms of Lewis's second kind.

From the theological point of view, Aquinas's position has the advantage of accounting for the biblical insistence that damnation is a serious danger for everyone, an insistence expressed in such texts as "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), and "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those that find it are few" (Mt. 7:13–14). It can be argued that the latter text does not mean to literally

claim that only a small minority of the human race will be saved,¹⁵ but it is clearly meant to convey the meaning that salvation is difficult for everyone, and that damnation is a real possibility for everyone. This would not be the case if, as the choice view holds, damnation requires a degree of moral corruption that is rarely found and difficult to achieve.

There is also a philosophical advantage to this position, which is that it furnishes a reply to the objection that the punishment of hell must be unjust because it gives rise to radically different treatments of people whose behaviour is not radically different.¹⁶ Having committed or not having committed a serious sin for which one is unrepentant is a binary distinction of significant moral import that does not fit in to a continuum of moral goodness or badness (repentance, it should be noted, includes a real choice to not commit any serious sins again). There are borderline cases where it is not clear whether or not a given sin is mortal, but there are two possible responses to such cases. One is to say that God, in virtue of his omniscience, will always know which side of the border any sin falls on. The other is to say that in cases where there is real, as opposed to simply epistemic, vagueness about the seriousness of a given sin, God will give the benefit of the doubt to the sinner; so that it will only be sins that are clearly mortal that will be punished by damnation. The definition of mortal sin as requiring full consent of the will seems to support this latter view.

One may well feel that what Aquinas gains in logical consistency and fidelity to the Bible by claiming that a single unrepented mortal sin will be punished by unending hellfire, he loses in plausibility. The binary distinction between having committed and not having committed an unrepented mortal sin is certainly a morally serious one, but is it serious enough to justify eternal punishment? Is Lewis's first objection not an unanswerable refutation of Aquinas's view? And how can this view be reconciled with Aquinas's claim that if the damned were to repent, they would be forgiven?

III

The answer to this last question is the key to a defence of Aquinas's position. He holds that a single mortal sin produces a permanent attachment to evil—and that in a certain respect it is a choice of such a permanent attachment. To understand his philosophical reasons for accepting this view of mortal sin, we need to understand his conception of human action—a conception that is radically different from the conception accepted by most contemporary philosophers.

¹⁵The claim that in fact only a small minority of the human race will be saved has been most fully argued for in a lengthy work of 553 pages by F.-X. Godts C.S.S.R., *De paucitate salvandorum quid docuerunt Sancti?* 3rd ed., (Brussels: de Meester, 1899), which is available online at http://jesusmarie.free.fr/elus_f_x_godts_de_paucitate_salvandorum.pdf. The author, a Catholic priest, is insistent about the certainty of the claim that the majority of the human race will be damned, but is content to hold that the view that the majority of Catholics will be damned is merely the more probable opinion.

¹⁶This objection is raised by Theodore Sider in "Hell and Vagueness," *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002).

The currently dominant conception of human action can be called a “goods-driven” conception. For such a conception, the ultimate motivations for all human actions can be given by providing a list of general kinds of thing to be sought or avoided, where “kind of thing” may include experiences, states of the agent, or activities of the agent. Satisfaction will be explained in terms of success at achieving or avoiding (some or all of) the things on this list. A characteristic that is shared by all the goods and evils on the list is that their enjoyment takes up part of a life, not all of it. Examples of enjoyments of goods of this kind are drinking, completing a crossword, and subjugating an enemy nation. Examples of suffering of evils would be twinges of pain from arthritis, unrequited love, and failure to gain a valuable promotion at work. Some of these take longer than others, but all of them are episodes in a human life rather than the whole of a life. Living a happy human life is a matter of doing well at getting these satisfactions and avoiding these evils.

A simple form of such a conception is hedonism. The object of action, according to the hedonist, is to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. Pleasure maximisation takes the acquisition of pleasurable experiences as its object, with the relative desirability of pleasurable experiences being a function of their duration and intensity. Pain minimisation seeks to avoid painful experiences, with the desirability of avoiding them again being a function of their duration and intensity. Some common scale for pleasure and pain is used for cases where the two have to be balanced against each other.

From this description of hedonism, we can get the general idea of goods-driven conceptions. Different goods-driven conceptions could be derived from hedonism by adding objects of pursuit—knowledge, for example, could be thought of as desirable independently of any pleasure that it confers—and by varying the strategies by which goods are pursued, evils avoided, and goods and evils weighted against each other. Such strategies could include absolute prohibitions of some evils, or absolute commands to seek some good; a goods-driven conception is not equivalent to consequentialism. What the goods (and evils) will all have in common, however, is that they are things that happen in a human life, rather than being a form of human life itself. Goods-driven conceptions are very widely accepted by contemporary moral philosophers, so widely that the idea that the right conception of action must be a goods-driven one is often simply taken for granted.

In contrast to this view, Aquinas had what can be called a “life-driven” conception. This appears clearly in the title he gives to question 1, article 4 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*—“*utrum sit aliquis ultimus finis humanae vitae*,” “whether there is an ultimate end to *human life*” (my italics). The article gives an affirmative answer to this question, and the subsequent articles make clear that this ultimate end of human life provides the ultimate motivation for every voluntary action. On this conception, the goal that ultimately rules human action is that of living a life of a certain sort. Obvious examples of lives that are devoted to a goal are

those of a revolutionary or a monk, but there are many everyday kinds of human lives. In the ordinary course of life, people decide to get married and raise children, or to dedicate themselves to a certain career, and these choices do not simply amount to the pursuit of goods of some kind. They give a life a certain pattern, a certain story, that cannot be reduced to the goods they yield or the evils they avoid.

One might question whether the difference between these objectives really corresponds to a fundamental difference between categories of goods. Are they not instead at different ends of a continuum, upon which no dividing line between fundamentally different categories of goods occurs?

The existence of a fundamental division between life goals and other goals can be discerned by looking at certain features of the former category. Only the pursuit of a life goal can have a complete narrative structure, a structure that is the story of a person as such. Winning the gold medal in the Olympic marathon has a narrative structure: first stirrings of athletic ambition, struggles in training and competition, and final triumph. But Olympic marathon winners have lives before and usually after winning the marathon, so the narrative structure of being such a winner cannot be the narrative structure of the winner's life. Furthermore, only a life goal permits the complete subordination of all other goals to it. Other goals, of their very nature, will always leave room for the pursuit—even if very limited—of other, entirely independent goals. Only a life goal can be the goal of a complete human existence.

It might be admitted that there is a difference between life goals and other goals, but denied that everyone actually chooses a life goal. To answer this denial, we need to distinguish between consciously formulating and pursuing a life goal, and choosing a life goal. This distinction can be drawn because in some circumstances, failing to choose is itself making a choice. Failing to consciously adopt and pursue a life goal will itself involve some choice of a life goal, as soon as one realises that one *has* a life and that the choices one makes will determine its nature—a realisation that is arrived at reasonably early in life by everyone of normal mental development. For example, neglecting any long-term plans and pursuing the whim of the moment will produce a life of a certain kind, the life of a shallow irresponsible wastrel. Many if not most people do not consciously adopt and pursue a life goal, but that does not prevent us from rightly evaluating their lives as a whole, and holding them responsible for their lives. The presupposition of this evaluation is that they have chosen the overall patterns of their lives, and the justification for this presupposition is that they knew or ought to have known the shape that their choices would give to their lives over time.

The difference between these two conceptions can be seen by considering what someone might think on his deathbed. A person who just wanted to maximise enjoyment (supposing such a thing to be possible) would think, "Well, I achieved X amount of enjoyment, and that's not bad (or terrible, or great, as the case may be)." A person who devoted his life to

maximising enjoyment would think “I achieved X amount of enjoyment, and *also* succeeded in devoting my life to my chosen goal.” If such a person were actually not very successful in getting the enjoyments he wanted, he could think, “I didn’t get very much of the enjoyment I wanted, but at least I succeeded in having a life that was devoted to the pursuit of the goal I valued, even if I wasn’t very successful in that pursuit.”

When the life-driven conception is understood, one can see why, given Aquinas’s premises, a single mortal sin is incompatible with taking God as one’s final end. If the life-driven conception is accepted, taking God and friendship with God as one’s ultimate end will mean choosing to live a life that has God and friendship with God as its ultimate end. God is infinitely and perfectly good, is in fact infinite goodness itself. That means that evil is hateful to him. A life that is lived with the object of pursuit of and friendship with God must therefore be a life that is entirely devoted to good, and that rejects evil. But to choose, with full knowledge and consent of the will, to do a seriously evil act, is incompatible with living such a life. So in the very making of such a choice, one is choosing to not take God as the ultimate end of one’s life. “Full knowledge” is here understood to include not only cases where one actually knows that the act one is doing is seriously evil, but also cases where one does not actually know this but could and should have known.¹⁷

It should be noted that not all Christian theologians have accepted the distinction between mortal and venial sin; some claim that all sins suffice to earn damnation, or even that all sins are of equal guilt. This is one position in the long-standing dispute between Roman Catholics and some (not all) Protestants over the existence of a distinction between mortal and venial sin. It should be noted that Aquinas’s claim that committing a mortal sin is incompatible with taking God as the end of one’s life is not in itself incompatible with the stronger claim that any sin at all is incompatible with taking God as the end of one’s life. I will not attempt to settle the debate over the distinction between mortal and venial sin, but will only remark that I agree with Aquinas’s further claims that there is such a distinction, and that only mortal sins constitute a rejection of God as one’s final end and hence lead to damnation if unrepented. I will not argue for these claims; the claim that is argued for here is simply that *at least* the commission of one mortal sin constitutes the rejection of friendship with God as one’s life goal, whether or not the commission of lesser sins does so as well.

It is possible to think of cases that are analogous in their results to the commission of a single mortal sin, even with created objectives. There are human relationships—friendships, love affairs—that can be destroyed by a single serious act of betrayal. A lawyer might be, by law, permanently

¹⁷This account of the knowledge necessary for sin is that of Aquinas in *Summa theologiae, Prima Pars*, q. 76, and especially art. 3; see also Elizabeth Anscombe and Joseph Ratzinger in the works cited in fn. 18 below.

disbarred in consequence of a single substantial act of embezzling a client's funds. These cases are likely to provoke the protest, "is not God more forgiving than that, simply in virtue of his being perfectly good?" This protest misses the point. What these acts do is make the agent a person who is not trustworthy; and this change that they effect in the agent is of a kind that destroys relationships that depend on entire trustworthiness. It is not a matter of what the friend, or lover, or cheated client thinks or feels or does.

These analogies with human relationships help us to see that the choice to reject God need not involve anything like explicitly thinking "I choose to reject God," or even reflecting that one's action will be a rejection of God. Being unfaithful to one's lover can end a love affair without the infidelity having to be motivated by the intention of ending it, or even being accompanied by the knowledge that the infidelity will end it—in fact unfaithful lovers often do not have such intention or knowledge. What matters with the infidelity is that, if undertaken with full freedom, it is intrinsically irreconcilable with a faithful love. Absence of intention to destroy such love, or knowledge that it will be destroyed, is not *as such* an extenuating circumstance for infidelity. The most crass and shameless infidelities can be unaccompanied by any awareness of their fatal implications for a relationship, and if this lack of awareness is the result of the moral corruption of the unfaithful person, it does not lessen guilt.¹⁸ The possibility of such unawareness is the rationale for the prayer in Psalm 19:12, "But who can discern his errors? Cleanse thou me from hidden faults."

The rejection of friendship with God as the end of one's life that results from serious sin is also liable to be obscured by an unthinking acceptance of a goods-driven conception of action, an acceptance that is promoted by the fact that a goods-driven notion of satisfaction is continually being presented as the correct one in consumer societies. On a goods-driven conception, unlike a life-driven conception, a single action will not normally fundamentally alter the goods one pursues and the way one pursues them (with the exception of untypical actions like deafening one's self, which would exclude the pursuit of the good of listening to music).

It might be objected that the rejection of God involved in committing a serious sin and not repenting of it can certainly justify God's not admitting someone to heaven. But not being admitted to heaven—a place of endless bliss where one enjoys friendship with God—is not the same thing as going to hell, where one suffers endless severe pain with no mitigating features. Why might there not be an intermediate state, a sort of limbo that is not as good as heaven but not as bad as hell, that would be the destination

¹⁸Elizabeth Anscombe has persuasively argued against the claim that knowledge of the sinfulness of a bad action is necessary for the action to be seriously sinful; see her "On Being in Good Faith," "Morality," and "Sin," in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008). Joseph Ratzinger makes a similar point in Joseph Ratzinger, "Conscience and Truth," in *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 17.

for those who do not repent for a single serious sin that they have committed, but who have not lived lives of utter moral depravity?

The answer to this objection is that committing a single serious sin *and not being sorry for it* is not only incompatible with friendship with God. It is also incompatible with any life goal that involves being a good human person. Being a good person involves not committing serious sins. Those who do commit such sins can become good persons only if they are sorry for what they did, and if they resolve not to do such sins in the future—and carry out that resolve. Absence of such effectual repentance thus means that one's life goal does not involve being a good person, but is instead that of being an evil person of some kind. The amount of evildoing one is thereby committed to is to some extent accidental; if one is resolved to sin in a certain way, the number and degree of sins one commits will depend on the number of opportunities to sin in that way that one encounters, and such opportunities will always be to some extent beyond one's own control. But choosing to be an evil person is an offence grave enough to deserve punishment in hell. There are of course degrees of evil that one can choose; but this is accommodated for by the existence of degrees of punishment in hell.

It is important to grasp Aquinas's position on the connection between mortal sin, the resulting permanent attachment to evil, and the penalty of damnation. When he says that if the damned were to cease to sin they would be forgiven, he is not denying that mortal sins are the reason for the punishment of damnation, or claiming that the resulting permanent attachment to evil is needed in *addition* to the evil of mortal sin in order to make the punishment of damnation a just one. He clearly asserts that mortal sins in themselves deserve damnation, and that damnation is the punishment for them. Permanent attachment to evil is *produced* by mortal sin, and hence the evil of this attachment implies that the mortal sin that is responsible for this attachment is at least as evil as the attachment itself (cf. *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae q. 87 a. 3). In holding this position, Aquinas is faithful to the scriptural texts that describe damnation as the punishment for sins committed in this life. As he remarks, "in the man who commits mortal sin, the intention of his will is completely turned away from his ultimate end . . . therefore, for the one who sins mortally, this is the proper punishment: to be completely cut off from the attainment of the end. . . . Natural equity seems to demand that each person be deprived of the good against which he acts, for by this action he renders himself unworthy of such a good."¹⁹

Presupposed by these assertions is Aquinas's view that the principal pain of hell is the pain of loss of salvation, which is the ultimate end of human beings. If not properly understood, this view is puzzling. One can see the logic of holding that rejection of God through mortal sin is justly

¹⁹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, book 3: *Providence, part II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), chs. 143, 144, pp. 212–213, 215.

punished by loss of friendship with God, and consequent loss of the beatific vision of God in which salvation consists. However, it is not so easy to see how the loss of salvation could constitute a punishment for the damned, who *ex hypothesi* have freely chosen to reject friendship with God—a difficulty that arises in a sharp form for Aquinas, since in the *Summa Theologiae* 1a q. 48 art. 5 he defines punishment (poena) as that which goes against the will. Nor is it easy to see how experiencing the loss of salvation as a loss is consistent with being damned. How is it possible both to have one's will fixed in rejection of God, and at the same time to experience as a supreme suffering the frustration of a desire for God?

Aquinas's examination of the nature of the pain of loss resolves these difficulties. On his analysis, this pain has two components. One component is the state of suffering that results from the absence of the happiness to which human nature is directed. This suffering is not in itself the product of frustrated desire. It can be understood on the analogy of a person who has quarrelled with those closest to him, and refuses to forgive them or make up the quarrel—refuses so deeply that he has no desire for reconciliation, and is only disgusted by the idea of it. This estrangement will produce misery, because a breach of friendship with one's nearest and dearest is necessarily fatal to natural human happiness, but the misery will not consist in the frustration of the desire for friendship with these people. As the absence of this natural happiness will produce misery, even though the happiness in question is not desired, so the absence of supernatural happiness will produce a deeper misery in the damned.

The pain of frustrated desire is the second component of the pain of loss according to Aquinas, but it is not a frustrated desire for God; it is the frustration of the desire for the things that the damned have chosen in preference to God.

If the will of evil men is obstinately fettered to evil after death, they will forever continue to desire what they previously desired, in the conviction that this is the best. . . . But we should understand that those who are condemned to final misery cannot have after death what they craved as the best. Libertines in hell will have no opportunity to gratify their passions; the wrathful and envious will have no victims to offend or obstruct; and so of all the vices in turn. . . . Therefore the wicked regret the sins they have committed, not because sin displeases them, for even in hell they would rather commit these same sins, if they had the chance, than possess God; but because they cannot have what they have chosen, and can have only what they have detested.²⁰

This component of the pain of loss explains one way in which the damned who are guilty of worse sins experience a more severe punishment. Greater sin will produce a stronger desire for evil, and the greater the desire for evil, the more painful the frustration of this desire will be. This disparity of suffering is necessary for the just proportioning of punishment to sin in

²⁰St. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1948), trans. Cyril Vollert S.J., ch. 175, p. 191.

the damned, since the sins for which they are damned are of varying degrees of severity, and hence involve different degrees of attachment to evil.

The attachment of the will of the damned to those things they have chosen in preference to God accounts for the second and subsidiary element of the pain of hell according to Aquinas, which is the pain of sense: “again, the sin committed against God deserves not only the punishment of loss, but the punishment of sense, as we showed in book 3 [ch. 145], for the punishment of sense answers to the fault in regard to the soul’s turning towards a changeable good, as the punishment of loss answers to the fault in regard to its turning away from the unchangeable good.”²¹ Most contemporary defenders of the notion of hell are uneasy with the notion of hell involving physical agony,²² but it must be admitted that Aquinas is loyal to the Scriptural evidence here. Scriptural descriptions of hell all centre on features of physical pain and agony—fire, burning, wailing, and the like; the pain of loss, on the other hand, is never clearly referred to, and is more a deduction (although a sound one) from the whole of Scriptural teaching on salvation and punishment than an explicit Scriptural claim. The unease felt at the notion of hell involving physical pain seems to be more a product of imagination than reason. The purpose of hell is to punish, and punishment involves pain. There is nothing about physical pain that makes it inappropriate as a means of punishment—it is indeed an appropriate punishment, as theologians have observed; since most sins involve the body, it is right that the pains of hell be bodily as well as mental.

IV

This exposition of Aquinas’s account of hell makes it clear that the crucial issue for this account is his claim that dying when unrepentant for mortal sin produces a permanent attachment to evil. If this claim is true, his account is a good defence of the traditional doctrine of hell; if it is false, the traditional doctrine is untenable.²³

Before considering his philosophical examination of this issue, we need to mention the theological positions he holds that are relevant to it. Following Catholic dogma, Aquinas holds that repentance for mortal sin is impossible without the help of grace. Aquinas understands by grace a

²¹Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, book 4: *Salvation*, ch. 90, p. 333.

²²See, e.g., Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 200, which reduces the notion of the pain of sense to the frustration of evil desires that Aquinas categorises under the heading of the pain of loss.

²³Th. Deman, in his article “Péché,” in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 12:1 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1933), col. 220, notes that some theologians—Leonard Lessius S.J. and the Carmelites of Salamanca—tried to argue that mortal sin deserved endless punishment even aside from the permanent attachment to evil that it produced. Deman rightly sees this development as a falling away from Aquinas’s thought. Michel Labourdette asserts that Lessius’s ideas led to the predominance in Catholic theology of the weak defence of hell noted above, that of an offence against a being of infinite dignity deserving an infinite punishment; see his *Cours de théologie morale: des vices et des péchés* (1a2ae qq. 71–89), Toulouse 1958–1959 (unpublished course notes), 176. This development might partially explain Kvanvig’s claim that the weak defence is the principal defence of the traditional doctrine of hell.

free undeserved gift from God, that is bestowed out of love, and that confers on the rational creature a good that no possible created being could achieve through its own powers (cf. *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae qq. 109, 110). The doctrine that repentance is impossible without the help of grace was firmly taught in Catholic condemnations of Pelagianism at the council of Carthage in 418 and Semi-Pelagianism at the second council of Orange in 529, and holds a central place in Catholic understandings of grace. Its relevance to the traditional doctrine of hell comes from the further theological claim that grace is no longer offered after death to those who lack it at the moment of death. From the doctrines that repentance is impossible without grace and that grace is not offered after death, it follows, as Aquinas says, that “because guilt remains eternally, and cannot be remitted without grace, which man cannot obtain after death, punishment should not cease while guilt remains.”²⁴

The doctrine that grace can be first obtained or regained only in this life was the consensus view among Christian theologians who rejected Origen’s universalism, and was justified by Christ’s remark in John 9:4 about the night coming, when no man can work, and by the biblical texts that imply that reward for good deeds and punishment for evil ones follows immediately after death (Luke 16:22ff., Luke 23:43, Phil. 1:23, 1 Cor. 13:12, 2 Cor. 5:7, 2 Cor. 5:10, Gal. 6:10, Rev. 2:10). No intrinsic necessity has been claimed for grace ceasing at death, and the claim that it does so cease has been based entirely on divine revelation. It would seem that divine revelation is the only way of knowing whether or not the offer of grace ceases at death, since the making or not making of this offer depends entirely on God’s free decision. Theologians have given reasons for the fittingness of God’s confining the time of choice between accepting and rejecting him to our earthly lives, but these reasons have not been presented as requiring him to do this. The fact that God is not required to cease offering grace after death does not mean that he acts unjustly in ceasing to offer it. What makes grace grace is that it is freely given and cannot be deserved. There can thus be no injustice in God’s deciding to not give it after a certain period; there would indeed be no injustice in his never offering it to anyone at all.

Might one say that although it would not be unjust for God to never offer anyone grace, it is implausible to hold that he never does so, because we can expect a perfectly loving God to make this offer? It seems plausible that we can expect this, in the sense that to every person in need of grace God at some time offers that person grace, and even that God repeatedly and generously offers that person grace. It is the common Catholic teaching that God does indeed do this. But this is compatible with the offer of grace ceasing at death. To deny that the offer of grace does not cease at death, we would need a stronger expectation, to the effect that for every person in need of grace, God always offers that person grace. But it is not clear that God’s love and goodness suffice to justify this stronger expectation,

²⁴ Aquinas, *In libros Sententiarum*, book, 4, d. XLVI, q. 1, a. III sol., 1142.

and there are reasons to suppose this stronger expectation will not be satisfied. Rejection of grace is a choice that a person makes about his ultimate goal. For God to continually offer grace regardless of how many times a person rejects it would not seem to be respecting the choice of the person in question. Rejection of grace is also a sin. If God never ceases to offer grace to a person who rejects it, there would never be a time when sinners are punished for rejecting God by God's rejecting them. But God's rejecting sinners is the just punishment for sinners rejecting God. It is compatible with God's justice for him to always show some mercy, even abundant mercy, to those who deserve punishment, but it seems hard to reconcile justice with a resolve to never give the appropriate punishment for evil-doing, no matter how often such evil-doing is repeated and the offer of forgiveness for such evil-doing is spurned. Finally, for a Christian the claim that God never ceases to offer grace is not compatible with the New Testament, which frequently refers to a time when God's mercy to sinners will end and be replaced by judgment. So the stronger expectation about God's offering of grace is unwarranted; and since it is this stronger expectation that is incompatible with God's ceasing to offer grace at death, there is no objection to the idea that he ceases to do this.

It is useful to clarify the role of this theological position about grace in Aquinas's thought on hell. Catholic teaching on grace does not play a role in his defending the justice of damnation or the permanent attachment to evil of those who die in a state of mortal sin; he thinks these doctrines are knowable purely philosophically, as well as being theological dogmas. What this teaching on grace adds to the knowledge attainable through philosophy is knowledge of the possibility of the conversion of mortal sinners prior to their deaths—a conversion that naturally speaking is impossible, and that is strictly miraculous. It does not *justify* the conclusion that people who die in a state of mortal sin remain permanently attached to evil, because this conclusion does not need theological justification on Aquinas's premises. It is what would happen in the course of nature, absent an extraordinary intervention by God.

What then does justify this conclusion for him? He offers two reasons for accepting it. One reason, given in *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae q. 109 a.7 and *Summa contra Gentiles* book 3 chs. 143–144, 147, 150–151, 155–159, is the claim that a single mortal sin produces a permanent attachment to evil. This means that people who die in a state of mortal sin will have wills permanently attached to evil, because their wills must have been in this condition ever since they first committed mortal sin. Theology, of course, tells us that this attachment can be miraculously removed by grace prior to death; but if we accept the teaching of theology on this possibility, we must also accept its teaching that no grace is offered after death. A second reason, given in *Summa contra Gentiles* book 4 ch. 95, is that all human souls after death have wills that are immutable in their attachment to an ultimate end. From this it follows that those souls who die with a will attached to sin continue in their attachment to sin forever.

The first reason is not clearly separable from theology, since it involves the claim that the theological virtue of charity is the principle of good action and is needed for repentance. It will therefore not be defended here, although it may be possible to argue for it philosophically on Aquinas's premises. It should be noted, however, that if the central claims of Catholicism and traditional Protestantism on the necessity of grace are accepted, it is theologically unassailable.

The second reason is a purely philosophical one that, as far as I can discover, is original to Aquinas. His interesting and somewhat surprising reason for holding that the soul's attachment to its ultimate end is immutable after death is that the absence of the body makes a change of ultimate end impossible. This assertion seems excessive; but if we consider the role that Aquinas held the body to play in the motivation of actions, and the state in which a disembodied soul would find itself, it becomes more plausible. Aquinas holds that all the passions involve physical change in the body (1a2ae q. 22). He includes under the passions all the emotions that are provoked by memory, imagination or sense experience—functions which themselves all essentially involve bodily states and/or bodily change. Now consider the state of a disembodied soul. With its body gone, its emotions will have gone too. If a person dies willing a particular life goal, what can there be in the exiguous state of a disembodied soul that can motivate him to will something else? He will possess no emotions, no attractive or repulsive sense experiences, no imaginations, no memories with affective power, and virtually no opportunities for action in pursuit of some other goal. The only motivation that remains in the possession of such a soul will thus be the life goal that it possessed at the moment of death (and any motivations subordinate to that goal). This goal will remain because the reason, unlike motivations that are linked to the body, survives death; and the life goal is the goal that an agent has accepted as the ultimate object of rational action. So there is nothing left to the disembodied soul that can serve as a motivation for willing a different life goal. There will thus be nothing that can influence him to change his existing state of will—as Aquinas perceived. But in the absence of a motivation for acting, no voluntary act can occur. So the voluntary act of choosing a different life goal is not open to a disembodied soul.

One might object that on Aquinas's account damned disembodied souls, by some unexplained mechanism, suffer physical agony as a punishment for sin; should that not be enough to motivate a change of mind? Aquinas's answer to this is that physical pain can motivate sinners to try to avoid it, and can thus motivate them to avoid sin on account of its leading to physical pain; but it cannot motivate them to avoid sin on account of its being contrary to goodness. However, it is aversion to sin as incompatible with goodness that is required if one is to have goodness as a life goal. That is why servile fear on its own cannot lead to salvation on Aquinas's view, and why the physical pain experienced by the damned cannot motivate them to choose goodness as an ultimate goal.

This first reason of Aquinas's for holding that the wills of the damned are immutably attached to evil is thus a convincing one. It is helpful not only with the rational objections to the doctrine of hell, but also with the emotional obstacles to its acceptance. We find it difficult to accept that those whom we love but who have sinned unrepentantly, or even those whom we hate who have sinned unrepentantly, could suffer unending torment. The idea of such suffering is unbearable to many. Even a temporary sojourn in the agony of hell would seem to demand the exercise of mercy from any reasonably decent person—and how much more does it demand mercy from an infinitely good and loving God?

This emotional reaction depends on us imagining a damned person as being to some extent the way they were in life—possessing at least some kindly emotions, some decent tendencies, some good qualities. Adolf Hitler, to take a stereotypically extreme example, was courteous and considerate towards his secretary. Aquinas's account lets us see that this exercise of the imagination is a mistake. What happens at the death of a person who is damned is that all the qualities that make a person lovable or at least a possible object of pity cease to exist—because the bodily life that constitutes or sustains them ceases to exist. A life goal that is directed towards an evil end will not include any willing of the good, except incidentally as a means to the achievement of that evil end. The existence of kind and good actions and motivations in someone who has chosen an evil life goal thus cannot result from the rational will that chooses that goal. If such actions and motivations are not a feature of the rational will, which since it survives death is immaterial, the only thing left to explain them is the body. The body, as assumed above, can be the seat of emotions, desires, and habits, all of which can motivate good actions. Such motivations will provide the explanation of the good actions of people who choose a bad life goal. But all these motivations will vanish with the death of the body, since the body is their basis. What is left of the person who is damned is thus an entity whose entire volitional activity is directed towards the evil end that was its ultimate goal during life, an evil end that no longer coexists with any other motivations. This shedding of every good impulse explains why the damned, according to Aquinas, wish that everyone else was damned. In a way it can be said that at the death of someone who is damned, the person who was loved or who could at least be pitied by those who knew him dies and is no more. Hitler, in his current state as a damned soul, would (and could) no longer be courteous towards his secretary if he had the opportunity, and regrets the courtesy he showed in the past, because it was a diversion from the evil end that is now the sole object of his volition.

If Aquinas's case for the fixing of the will of the damned in sin is accepted, there is still an objection that can be made to his defence of the justice of hell. It could be asserted that because the will of the damned is fixed in sin, they are not free in their adherence to evil. But punishment is only justly assigned to offences that are freely chosen; the punishment of the damned for their adherence to evil is therefore unjust.

One might deal with this objection by accepting that the damned are not free in their adherence to evil, but claiming that because their state of adhering to evil is a result of a prior free choice of their own, it is justly punished. This defence can present its conclusion as compatible with free will, by arguing that freedom of the will permits or even requires the possibility of freely choosing to fix one's will permanently in a particular direction. The fact that one's will is fixed after such a choice would on this view be a result of free will rather than a negation of it. Making a choice that forecloses further possibilities for choice is after all part of the human condition; for instance, choosing to live in Australia precludes choosing to live in Argentina, and hence precludes all the choices one could make if one lived in Argentina rather than Australia.

However, Aquinas would not accept this defence; he holds that the adherence of the damned to evil is voluntary, although unalterable (see e.g., *De Malo* q. 2, art. 11 ad 11um, where he says that the freedom of choice of the damned is neither increased nor lessened by their damnation). This is consonant with his view that only voluntary actions deserve praise or blame (see e.g., 1a2ae q. 21 a. 2).

Aquinas defends the voluntariness of the adherence of the damned to evil by arguing from the fact that the ultimate end is not a subject of deliberation (*Compendium of Theology*, ch. 174). Clearly he does not mean by this that ultimate ends are never chosen or rejected, since he thinks that this happens whenever someone in a state of grace sins mortally and whenever a sinner repents. Instead, he is pointing out that if something is taken as an ultimate end, it is not deliberated about. Since this end is not an object of deliberation, it is not chosen or rejected. It is nonetheless voluntary, since all voluntary action requires an ultimate end and is done for the sake of that ultimate end. Given that a given end that is sought as ultimate is not deliberated about or chosen so long as it is accepted as ultimate, but is still sought voluntarily, Aquinas's idea is that whether or not some alternative ultimate end is ever entertained as a possibility by the agent makes no difference to the voluntariness of the pursuit of a given ultimate end. If it happens that an agent is irrevocably committed to a final end, the agent's pursuit of it will be voluntary nonetheless. Theologically speaking, this position has the advantage of being able to reconcile the freedom of will of the angels and saints in heaven in loving God with their inability to sin and reject him. Philosophically speaking, it harmonizes with the "ethics of happiness" that Aquinas shares with Aristotle and other ancient philosophers. Aquinas thinks that the fundamental reason for actions having an ultimate end is that rational action as such seeks a particular goal, that of happiness; that happiness is the condition where all desire is completely satisfied, because the good to which human nature is directed has been attained; and that those who reach happiness will never reject it, because they cannot have a desire to do so. This being the case, the condition of being irrevocably attached to a final end is in fact what all voluntary actions ultimately seek. On the "ethics of happiness"

view, it thus makes no sense to say that such irrevocable attachment in itself rules out freedom.

Aquinas's talk of deliberation and free choice being compatible with irrevocable commitment to a particular ultimate end may seem puzzling. It can be understood, however, if we keep in mind his life-driven conception. There are versions of good-driven conceptions where irrevocable commitment to a given end is difficult to reconcile with freedom. If one's sole object of pursuit is the maximization of pleasure, for example (assuming for the sake of argument that this notion is coherent), then it seems inevitable that given a choice between alternative actions, one will choose the one that one believes will maximize pleasure. On this conception, every choice one makes in this life will be entirely determined by its circumstances, which is incompatible with freedom. A life-driven conception, however, will leave elbow room for choice in the pursuit of an ultimate goal, because there are typically a variety of ways in which such a goal can be pursued. For example, taking wealth as one's ultimate goal in life does not as such settle the choice between the myriad different ways in which this goal can be pursued. This explains how Aquinas can attribute free choices between alternative actions, as well as freedom of the will, to the blessed in heaven and the damned in hell.

V

The above has given Aquinas's answer to Lewis's first objection to the doctrine of hell, which is that it involves God's treating the damned unjustly. Lewis's second objection was that even if the damned are justly punished, it is wrong for God, by creating beings capable of damning themselves, to have permitted the dreadful evil of hell to exist. To defend Aquinas's position against this objection, we need to use his answer to the first objection; but we also need to bring out a further difference between his philosophical assumptions and those of contemporary philosophers such as Lewis. This difference concerns the ways in which good and evil are understood by Aquinas and by contemporary philosophers. Aquinas's view can be labelled the teleological conception of good and evil, and the contemporary view can be labelled the accounting conception of good and evil.

On the accounting conception, both good and evil are features of the world that can be thought of as quantities of some kind or other. They are subject to rough quantitative measurement, both in themselves (greater vs. lesser goods, greater vs. lesser evils) and in comparison to one another. A state of affairs A will be better than a state of affairs B if the good in A minus the evil in A is greater than the good in B minus the evil in B.

On the teleological conception, both good and evil are functions of the ends of beings; goodness consists in a thing's achieving its end, badness in its failing to do so. Teleological and accounting conceptions part company in the teleological conception's analysis of the relation of the good or evil of a part of a thing to the good or evil of the whole thing, where the whole thing has a function into which the parts fit. It is possible, on the

teleological conception, for the good of a part to be the evil of the whole of which it is a part; and as a result for the good of the part to be evil considered absolutely speaking. An example would be a huge increase in the number of rabbits in Australia. This would be a good thing for the rabbits, but a bad thing for Australia as a whole. On the teleological view, evaluating the increase would not mean balancing the good for the rabbits against the evil for Australia; because the increase is a bad thing for the whole of which it is a part, it is a bad thing absolutely, with no further consideration of the good involved to the rabbits being relevant to its evaluation. The converse also holds. Killing the excess rabbits is a bad thing for those rabbits, but it is a good thing absolutely, because it is a good thing for Australia; and the evil involved for the rabbits does not count against the good involved for Australia, and indeed is *not* an evil absolutely speaking. It is an evil *for them*, but that *very same* evil for them is good absolutely considered, because it is a good for the whole—the Australian ecosystem—of which the rabbits function as a part. The teleological conception is succinctly expressed by St. Augustine when he says that “just as a picture is beautiful with black in its right place, so the whole universe, if anyone could see it, is beautiful even with sinners.”²⁵ In this analogy sin, in the place it has in God’s providential plan, *contributes* to the beauty of the universe, just as blackness contributes to the beauty of a picture: the blackness is not a loss to the picture that is made up for by some other feature that it makes possible.

The distinction between accounting conceptions of good and evil and teleological conceptions of good and evil means that philosophers who hold these differing conceptions are talking past one another when it comes to the problem of evil in general, and of the evil of sin in particular. Aquinas does not think that there are in the end any happenings whose evil makes the world a worse place than it would otherwise have been, in the sense of subtracting from the net goodness of the world. In this he is following the traditional view of Christian theology, which held a teleological view of evil. The traditional answer to the problem of evil, as found in Augustine and Aquinas, is not that evil is necessarily permitted for the sake of goods that outweigh it, but that God brings it about that the whole of creation is entirely good in the end.²⁶

We should distinguish between this sense of “teleological” and the sense of “teleological” used by C. D. Broad, for whom a typical teleological understanding of ethics would be one that held that “‘X is a right action’ means that X is likely to produce at least as good consequences as any action open to the agent at the time.”²⁷ The sense of teleology applied

²⁵St. Augustine, *City of God* 11.23, in *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200–600 AD, volume 2; Physics*, ed. Richard Sorabji (London: Duckworth, 2004), 96.

²⁶See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 22 art. 2. ad 2; and Augustine, *Enchiridion* ch. 3, which Aquinas quotes in this passage.

²⁷C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001), 278.

by Augustine and Aquinas to societies of rational beings is the Aristotelian one, according to which the end of a society, the achievement of which makes it a good society, is a distribution of rewards and punishments to its members that corresponds to their just deserts. Understanding teleology along Broad's lines as a form of consequentialism has been used to justify enormous crimes by the rulers of totalitarian states, but such consequentialist justifications are incompatible with the Aristotelian approach.

For Aquinas, the whole of which sin is a part is the entire story of the human race, which culminates in God's approbation of the good and reprobation of the evil on the day of judgment. This whole is a good whole, because it ends up in a just distribution of reward and punishment. Within this whole, the evil of unrepented sin will not turn out to be evil absolutely considered; it will be evil in itself, but good absolutely considered, because those who exercise it will be justly paid back by punishment, while those who innocently suffer from it will be amply rewarded for their sufferings. The evil of forgiven evil actions will be good absolutely considered because they are part of a whole that includes repentance and atonement by the sinner and atonement by Christ, and mercy exercised by God.

The discussion of the state of the damned given above shows how the teleological conception will account for the existence of hell. The will of the damned is fixed solely on evil ends. To this total devotion to evil corresponds a total misery that is its just punishment. The fact that this punishment is just means that the evil that the damned are guilty of and the evil of their punishment together contribute to the good of the whole of creation, by making the order of creation a just one. The existence of the evil will of the damned, thanks to the punishment of hell, achieves the only good that such existence can achieve; that of being entirely frustrated and thwarted. For total devotion to evil to be totally frustrated and entirely miserable is itself a good thing, which hell achieves. In doing so, it completes the universe by enabling it to display as it were both sides of God's goodness. His mercy and love of the good is one side, his hatred and punishment of evil is the other side. Both these sides belong to goodness as such, so the existence of hell is a way for creation to give glory to God.

The limited aim of this paper, that of showing that Aquinas's understanding of hell is reasonable, can be said to be achieved. This understanding depends on the life-driven conception of action and the teleological conception of good and evil. These are defensible philosophical positions which it is not unreasonable to hold. Showing that these positions are true as well as reasonable would go beyond the limits of a paper, and beyond the limits of a discussion of hell.²⁸

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