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THE PROBLEM OF HELL, EFFICACIOUS GRACE, AND SKEPTICAL INFERNALISM

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ABSTRACT: For Christian philosophers, the putative existence of hell poses a particularly acute version of the problem of evil. The two most prevalent responses to this problem appeal to either God's justice or creaturely freedom as the countervailing goods which justify God's permitting the suffering of created persons in hell. In this paper, I argue that an Augustinian theology of grace renders both of these responses untenable and briefly sketch out an alternative response, based on Augustine's appeal to the mysteries of the divine will when explaining why God gives efficacious grace to some and not to others. I call this response skeptical infernalism, since it parallels the skeptical theist response to the problem of evil.[1]

KEYWORDS: Hell; grace; Augustine; free will; skeptical theism

Introduction

For Christian philosophers, the putative existence of hell poses a particularly acute version of the problem of evil. Hell, if it exists, is a place of extreme suffering.[2] At the

[1] I would like to thank the participants of HEAT 2025 and the Oriel Philosophy of Religion Work in Progress Seminar for their stimulating discussion of an earlier version of this article. I am particularly grateful to William Wood, Mark Wynn, Richard Swinburne, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and feedback on the article at various stages.

[2] At least, this is the case on any remotely traditional view of hell. It could be argued that annihilationist views – according to which those consigned to hell are annihilated, and so simply cease to exist – do not involve suffering *per se.* I will not consider such views here; I can see little warrant for this position in either scripture or Christian tradition. Moreover, it seems to me that annihilationism fails to avoid the philosophical problems associated with more traditional views of hell; see Bukareff & Plug (2013, pp. 135-137). For the purpose of this paper, I am neutral as to the nature of the suffering that the damned experience in hell – whether this should be conceived of in terms of active physical and/or psychological torment, or in simply in terms of the suffering which issues from the experience of divine absence. The problem stands whichever way we conceive of the suffering experienced in hell.

same time, most (though not all)[3] philosophers of religion hold that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient God could not permit gratuitous suffering. While the precise definition of "gratuitous suffering" is debated, for present purposes it will suffice to follow Rowe's definition of gratuitous suffering as "instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse" (Rowe, 1979, p. 336).[4] In other words, God can only permit instances of intense suffering if he has a sufficiently good reason to do so – namely, if his not permitting these instances of suffering would either (i) prevent some countervailing good from obtaining or (ii) would result in some equally bad or worse evil obtaining.[5] In practice, the distinction between (i) and (ii) is moot, since the avoidance of an equally bad or worse evil would (presumably) constitute a countervailing good for a given instance of suffering. The task for the Christian infernalist, then, is to identify the countervailing good that God explains God's decision to permit[6] the suffering of those consigned to hell. Otherwise, hell would appear to be a gratuitous evil, and so is incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient God.

The traditional view identifies "justice" as the countervailing good that God seeks to gain by permitting the suffering of those consigned to hell (see Adams, 1975; 1993; Bukareff & Plug, 2013). On this view, God permits the suffering of those consigned to hell because this suffering is just punishment for their sins: by allowing sinners to suffer in hell, God is ensuring his justice, a good which he could not obtain were he simply to forgive those consigned to hell. Another view identifies creaturely freedom as the countervailing good that justifies the suffering of those in hell.[7] On this view,

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[3] The main advocates of the compatibility of theism with gratuitous suffering/evil are Peterson (2012), Hasker (1992), and van Inwagen (1988; 1991). For an overview of the arguments, see Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1999). For the purposes of this paper I will assume that theism is incompatible with the existence of genuinely gratuitous suffering/evil.

[4] For some alternative definitions, see Rhoda (2010) and Hasker (2010).

[5] Note that this does not mean that every individual instance of suffering is *in-itself* necessary in order to bring about some greater good or prevent some equal or worse evil, but only that God cannot *intervene* to prevent said instances of suffering without thereby losing some greater good or allowing some equally bad or worse evil. I make this qualification with the following sort of example in mind. Say, for instance, God permits Jones to inflict suffering on Smith in order to obtain the good of creaturely freedom. It seems that God could obtain this good without having to permit the suffering of Smith: if Jones were to freely choose not to inflict suffering on Smith, then the good of creaturely freedom would still obtain without Smith's suffering. However, God cannot intervene to prevent Jones from inflicting suffering on Smith without losing the good of creaturely freedom. In this scenario, creaturely freedom still functions as the countervailing good for Smith's suffering, even though it is possible that this good could obtain without Smith suffering. As such, instances of suffering/evils which are *token-gratuitous* are not necessarily gratuitous in the sense defined above, and so are (potentially) compatible with theism. After all, God might have a good reason for permitting instances of suffering/evils eve if they are *token-gratuitous* (that is, even if the world is not all-things-considered better off for these having occurred) just in case his *intervening* to prevent said instances of suffering/evils would result in the loss of some countervailing good or in some equally bad or worse evil obtaining.

[6] For the purposes of this paper I will leave open the question of whether God is directly responsible for the suffering inflicted upon sinners in hell or whether he merely permits it.

[7] This view is most commonly associated with "issuant" and "escapists" theories of hell.

God permits his creatures to freely choose to reject God and so to consign themselves to hell in order to preserve creaturely freedom.

All too often, however, discussions of the problem of hell have been conducted without regard for other areas of Christian doctrine. This is a mistake. Christian doctrine is fundamentally interconnected: eschatology is inextricably bound up with the doctrines of creation, sin, incarnation, atonement, justification, and grace, to name but a few. It is the latter that I wish to focus on in this paper. In particular, it is my contention that an Augustinian understanding of grace undermines both of the above responses to the problem of hell.[8] For the purposes of this paper, I take the Augustinian view of grace as comprised, at root, by two key claims:[9]

(1) Grace is unmerited: no human action, belief, or decision can merit the gift of God's grace.
(2) Grace is efficacious: God is able to give grace in such a way as to guarantee its acceptance – and so its effectiveness – on the part of the recipient.

I take it that (1) is fairly uncontroversial: any remotely orthodox Christian is committed to the claim that grace is unmerited, lest they fall into the heresy of Pelagianism. (2) is more contentious: as the early modern debates regarding the resistibility of grace within both the Catholic and Reformed Churches attest (see Marschler, 2014, and Hampton, 2014), this claim never received universal acceptance, and while some (including, it seems, Augustine himself) have held that (2) is entailed by (1), this argument is open to challenge (Cross, 2005). Nonetheless, there are, I think, compelling theological arguments for accepting (2)) as true.[10] In any case, (2) has been held by a large portion (perhaps the majority) of Western theologians from Augustine onwards, many of whom (including Augustine himself) were also infernalists. As such, it is worth considering whether this claim (together with (1)) is consistent with the claim that God permits the (eternal) suffering of sinners in hell.

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[8] While I do offer some considerations in favour of this view of grace later on in this paper, it is not my purpose to offer a full-throated defence of an Augustinian theology of grace here. Rather, my aim is to reflect upon the implications of such a theology of grace for contemporary philosophical treatments of hell. As such, I will, for the most part, assume the Augustinian view of grace without offering detailed arguments in support of this view. I am not the first to notice that certain Augustinian theological principles are at tension with infernalism. Crisp (2003) argues that Augustine's views on election and predestination commitment raise a problem of evil that traditional Augustinians must address, arguing that "there appears to be no reason… why God could not create a world where all human agents were in fact elect because all their sin was dealt with in Christ." (142). My approach differs from that of Crisp by focussing on Augustine's theology of grace rather than his broader views on election and providence. It should also be noted that while Crisp's argument assumes theological determinism, my argument is (at least in principle) compatible with a molinist approach to divine providence.

[9] By this, I do, of course, not mean to suggest that Augustine's theology of grace is reducible to these two key claims. Augustine's theology of grace is rich and multi-faceted, offering (amongst other things) a rich and penetrating psychological account of how grace's operation is received and experienced by the individual. Wetzel (1992) remains, in my view, the best monograph on Augustine's theology of grace. In what follows, I largely follow Wetzel's reading of Augustine.

[10] I discuss these in section 2 of this paper.

Taken together, (1) and (2) fatally undermine responses to the problem of hell which appeal to either God's justice or creaturely freedom as the countervailing goods for hell. The doctrine of unmerited grace (1) subverts arguments which seek to identify justice as the countervailing good for hell, since it suggests that God can give sinners better than they deserve (by saving them from hell) without violating his justice. Approaches which identify creaturely freedom as the countervailing good, on the other hand, are challenged by the Augustinian view of grace as efficacious (2), inasmuch as this suggests that God is able to secure human consent to grace (and so the salvation of the sinner) without impinging upon creaturely freedom. When considered in conjunction with an Augustinian theology of grace, then, the problem of hell becomes more intractable. For, when taken together, the twin claims that grace is (1) unmerited and (2) efficacious pose a fundamental challenge to the two standard infernalist responses to the problem of hell in the literature.

In the first section "The Problem of Hell and Unmerited Grace", I will first set out the problem of hell, understood as a species of the problem of evil. I will show how the claim that grace is unmerited fundamentally undermines attempts to solve this problem by appealing to divine justice as the countervailing good for hell. "The Problem of Hell and Efficacious Grace" introduces the Augustinian claim that grace is efficacious. I offer a brief defence of this claim before showing that it undermines free will responses to the problem of hell. In "Skeptical Infernalism", I briefly sketch out an alternative response to the problem of hell, based on Augustine's appeal to the mysteries of the divine will when explaining why God gives efficacious grace to some and not to others. I call this response skeptical infernalism, since it parallels the skeptical theist response to the problem of evil. In the fourth and final section of this paper I respond to two objections to skeptical infernalism.

The Problem of Hell and Unmerited Grace

The predominant conception of hell in the Western Christian tradition is of hell as the place of everlasting torment and unhappiness to which certain sufficiently bad persons are sent at the day of judgement as a punishment for their sins.[11] Marilyn McCord Adams (1993) has argued that this view of hell is incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God. According to Adams, the following two statements are incompossible:

[11] Johnathan Kvanvig (1993) helpfully breaks down this "traditional" notion of hell into four theses:

(i) The Existence Thesis: hell is a place where people exist, if they are consigned there. (Hell =/= non-existence).

(ii) The Anti-Universalism Thesis: some persons are consigned to hell.

(iii) The No Escape Thesis: there is no possibility of leaving hell, and nothing one can do, change, or become in order to get out of hell, once one is consigned there. Thus, the suffering endured in hell is eternal.

(iv) The Retribution Thesis: The justification for and purpose of hell is retributive in nature, hell being constituted so as to mete out punishment to those whose earthly lives and behaviour warrant it.

(i) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
(ii) Some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.

Adams formulates the following argument for their incompossibility:

1. If God existed and were omnipotent, God would be able to avoid (ii).
2. If God existed and were omniscient, God would know how to avoid (ii).
3. If God existed and were perfectly good, God would want to avoid (ii).
4. Therefore, if (i), not (ii).

Responses to Adam's argument typically target premise (3). As Adams herself notes, the truth of (3) is not obvious (Adams, 1993, p. 304). (3) is motivated by the fact that (ii) represents an instance of extreme suffering, and by the intuition that a perfectly good God would want to avoid instances of extreme suffering as a consequence of his goodness. Thus, an argument for (3) might look something like this:

3.1. If God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid any preventable instance of suffering.
3.2. (ii) is a preventable instance of suffering.
3.3. Therefore, if God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid (ii).

Premise (3.1), however, is false. For, a perfectly good God might wish to permit an otherwise preventable instance of suffering if it is necessary in order to obtain some countervailing good (or if God's intervention would prevent a countervailing good from obtaining), or if it is necessary in order to prevent some greater instance of suffering from obtaining. So, the argument for (3) must be modified as follows:

3.1*. If God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid any preventable instance of *gratuitous* suffering (i.e. suffering for which there is no countervailing good).
3.2*. (ii) is a preventable and gratuitous instance of suffering (i.e. there is no countervailing good for hell).
3.3*. Therefore, if God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid (ii).

The question, then, is whether there is (or could be) any countervailing good which justifies God's decision to permit the suffering of created persons in hell. The standard infernalist response to this problem argues that God's justice functions as such a good. On this view, God chooses to permit the suffering of sinners in hell because this is necessary to achieve a greater good which outweighs this suffering, namely justice.

Understood this way, the problem of hell becomes a problem concerning God's justice. In order for justice to be a countervailing good for hell, hell must itself be just. The question, then, on this understanding of the problem, concerns how God could justly condemn someone to eternal suffering in hell.

Advocates of the claim that hell is an expression of God's justice must answer two particularly thorny objections.[12] The proportionality objection asks how God could justly consign human persons to hell, given the seemingly disproportionate nature of this punishment in relation to human sin.[13] Or, to put it another way: how can acts committed by human persons (who are finite) merit infinite punishment? The vagueness objection, on the other hand, focusses on the problems posed by borderline cases.[14] There must be some criterion by which God determines who deserves to go to heaven and who deserves to go to hell. Yet on any possible criterion there must be a cut-off point for heaven – a set boundary which divides those who get into heaven from those who get sent to hell. The problem is that, wherever we draw this line, there will always be one person who just makes the "cut-off" for heaven and another who just misses this "cut-off", such that the person just over the line who goes to heaven is only marginally better than the person just under the line who goes to hell. Yet even though the one person is only marginally better than the other, the contrast between the reward this person gets and the punishment the other person receives is infinitely great. It seems unjust that two people with marginal differences in their moral characters should receive infinitely better or worse rewards from God.

For the purposes of this paper, I am not interested in whether these objections succeed or fail. (There is ample literature on this subject already).[15] Even if these objections can be successfully responded to, there remains a further barrier to the claim that "justice" serves as a countervailing good for hell. For, the doctrine of unmerited grace fatally undermines attempts to present "justice" as the countervailing good for hell. That is to say, even if it can be shown that hell is just, this will not suffice to demonstrate that God's justice is (or even *could* be) a countervailing good for hell. In order see how this is the case, a brief comment on the nature of the countervailing goods is needed.

Countervailing goods, I take it, serve an explanatory function. That is, they serve to explain how it could be that an (omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good) God could permit the existence of a certain instance or instances of suffering. In order for a particular good (or goods) to serve this explanatory function, then, it must meet two criteria.[16] First, the good(s) in question must be of sufficient value to outweigh the disvalue of the instance(s) of suffering it seeks to explain. Were the value generated by the good(s) less than the disvalue of the instance(s) of suffering, then the explanation as to why God permitted the instance(s) of suffering in question would be incomplete, since it would fail to explain how the good(s) in question can serve as sufficient

[12] These are not the only objections facing this view, but they are the most prominent in the literature. For a fuller survey of the objections facing this view, see Buckareff & Plug (2013), pp. 3-4.

[13] Adams (1975) offers the classic articulation of this objection.

[14] Sider (2002).

[15] See, for instance, Kvanvig (1993); Talbott (1993); Kershnar (2005); Dougherty & Poston (2008); Konieczka (2011).

[16] The following account is, I take it, fairly standard; see, for instance, van Inwagen (2006), pp. 68-69.

justification for the instance(s) of suffering they are supposed to explain. Second, it must be the case that God cannot intervene to prevent the instance(s) of suffering without also preventing this good from obtaining. Again, this criterion must be met if the good(s) in question are to serve the explanatory function required of them. An explanation for why God permits a particular instance of suffering which appeals to a good God could have obtained without having to permit this suffering (and without having to permit suffering of equal or greater value) would not satisfy as an explanation, since such an explanation would fail to explain why God chose to attain the good *this way*, rather than some other way which would not require God to permit suffering (or would only require God to permit a lesser instance of suffering).

This latter point can be illustrated using a crude analogy. Say that Michael sees his friend Max about to cross the road into fast-moving traffic. Fearing for his friend's safety, Michael shoots Max in the leg, thereby preventing him from stepping out in front of a fast-moving truck which would have surely killed him. Let us further say that Michael has other means at his disposal by which to prevent Max from stepping out into traffic: he could have called out to his friend to stop, perhaps, or perhaps he was sufficiently close to his friend that he could rugby-tackle him to the ground before he stood out into the road. Later, in the hospital, Max asks his friend why he shot him. Michael replies: "in order to save your life, by preventing you from stepping out in front of a fast-moving truck". The good in question certainly outweighs the suffering: the good of still being alive outweighs the suffering caused by the pain Max feels in his leg, the inconvenience of the hospital stay etc. Yet Max would surely not be satisfied with this explanation. For, it does not explain why Michael chose to shoot him in the leg, as opposed to calling out to him to stop, or rugby tackling him to the ground. The explanation is incomplete, since Michael has not explained why he chose *this* course of action in order to save his friends life, as opposed to an alternative course of action which would have involved less suffering on Max's part. It is not enough for the good to outweigh the instance of suffering it is meant to justify: in order for the explanation to be complete, we need an explanation as to why this good could not be achieved without permitting this instance or suffering (or some instance(s) of suffering equal or greater disvalue).

We can define the criteria for a countervailing good, then, as follows:

> (Def.): For any Good, G, and any instance(s) of suffering, S, G is a countervailing good for S iff:
> (i) The value generated by G is greater than (or at least equal to) the disvalue generated by S.
> (ii) If God were to intervene to prevent S, *either* G would fail to obtain *or* some instance(s) of suffering of greater or equal disvalue to S would obtain.

Thus, in order for God's justice to serve as the countervailing good for hell, it must be the case that: (i) the value generated by God's justice is greater than the disvalue generated by the (eternal) suffering of sinners in hell; (ii) if God were to intervene to prevent the suffering of sinners in hell, then the good of God's justice would fail to

obtain (or else some worse instance(s) of suffering would obtain). As Adams notes, this requires that justice be conceived of as follows: a person is just, if and only if (a) she is fair (i.e., treats like cases alike); (b) she treats no one worse than he deserves to be treated and (c) she treats no one better than he deserves to be treated (Adams, 1975, p. 434). (c) is required if God's justice is to serve as the countervailing good for hell, since otherwise God could give save sinners from hell without violating his justice. If we remove (c) from our definition of justice, then God could avoid sending sinners to hell even if they "deserve" it without thereby ceasing to be just. If this were the case, then God's could attain the good of justice without having to permit the suffering of anyone hell. If so, then God's justice would not meet criterion (ii) of our definition of a countervailing good, and so could not serve as a countervailing good for hell.

The problem for the anti-univeralist who wishes to identify justice as the countervailing good for hell is that the above definition of justice contradicts orthodox Christian teaching on grace. On any orthodox understanding of grace, the gift of God's grace is unmerited. In other words, by giving grace to some people, God gives those people that which they do not deserve. The doctrine of unmerited grace, then, requires *ex definitio* that God treat people better than they deserve. But if this is the case, then it cannot be true that God's justice demands that God treat no one better than he deserves to be treated. As such, the orthodox Christian who accepts the doctrine of unmerited grace must reject (c) axiomatically.

Yet having rejected (c) from our definition of justice, justice can no longer serve as a countervailing good for hell. God can intervene and prevent sinners from going to hell – by giving unmerited grace – without thereby losing the good represented by his justice. God does not need to permit the suffering of people in hell in order to act justly, and so "justice" fails to meet criterion (ii) for being a countervailing good. To put it another way, the claim that justice is the countervailing good for hell comes at the cost of the doctrine of unmerited grace. For, if (c) is true, then God cannot give unmerited grace without ceasing to be just. This is too greater cost; and so orthodox Christians should reject the claim that justice serves as the countervailing good for hell.

This is not to say that hell cannot still be understood as an expression of God's justice. It is one thing to say that hell is retributive – that the suffering inflicted upon those in hell constitutes a form a punishment – and another thing to say that retributive justice is the countervailing good that explains God's decision to permit hell. Indeed, we might still suppose that being just is a necessary condition of God permitting persons to suffer in hell, even if it is not a sufficient condition. That is to say, it is plausible that God cannot permit anyone to suffer in hell unless they deserve it. Nonetheless, this by itself cannot serve as an explanation for God's decision to permit this suffering, since God is able to give people better than they deserve without thereby losing the greater good of his justice. Even if hell is just, justice alone cannot serve as the countervailing good for hell.

The Problem of Hell and Efficacious Grace

An alternative response to the problem of hell identifies creaturely freedom as the countervailing good for hell. This response is typically associated with issuant views of hell, according to which those persons in hell are there because they choose to be there, or else as a natural consequence of their own free choices (for instance, as a natural consequence of their free choice to be separated from the presence of God).[17] On this view, so the argument goes, God cannot intervene to prevent the suffering of people in hell without depriving those people of their creaturely freedom. Hence, creaturely freedom serves as the countervailing good for hell.

The free will response ceases to be viable, however, when viewed in light of an Augustinian theology of grace. As I noted above, the Augustinian is committed to two claims about the nature of divine grace:

(1) Grace is unmerited: no human action, belief, or decision can merit the gift of God's grace.
(2) Grace is efficacious: God is able to give grace in such a way as to guarantee its acceptance – and so its effectiveness – on the part of the recipient.

While (1) undermines the argument that God's justice serves as the countervailing good for hell, (2), I argue, renders the freedom response equally untenable. Before I make this argument, however, it is worth unpacking (2) in a little more detail. Augustine's understanding of the efficacy of grace first gains clear articulation in his response to the second question in his letter *Ad Simplicianum.* Augustine's account of the efficacy of grace emerges from his reading of Romans 9, and in particular from Paul's use of the example of Jacob and Esau as an illustration of divine election. The question, for Augustine, is why did God call Jacob and not Esau, given that this calling occurred in the womb, and so prior to any works or faith or act of the will on their part, and given that Jacob and Esau are twins, and so admit of no natural difference between them? The answer, for Augustine, is summed up in two Pauline propositions: *non ex operibus, sed ex vocante* ("it is not from he who works but from he who calls", Rom. 9.12); and *non volentis neque currentis, sed miserentis est Dei* ("it is not from he who wills nor from he who runs, but from God who has mercy", Rom. 9.16). From the former proposition, Augustine concludes that God's calling of Jacob is prior any meritorious act on Jacob's part (Augustine, *Ad Simpl.* 1.2.6). Not only that, it is also prior to God's foreknowledge of any meritorious act, since if God were to call Jacob on the basis of this foreknowledge, it would no longer be true that this calling came *non ex operibus* (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.8). God's calling must also precede faith or foreknowledge of faith, for otherwise Paul would have said that election comes "from he who has faith" as opposed to "from he who calls" (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.7).

[17] See, for instance, Kvanvig (1993), ch. 3. While this response is typically associated with issuant views of hell, some retributivists (e.g. Craig, 1989) have also argued that freedom is (one of) the countervailing good(s) that justifies God's decision to permit the suffering of sinners in hell.

Yet if faith and good works are consequent upon God's decision to give grace, as opposed to prior to it, then this means that God produces faith and good works in those whom he calls. This, for Augustine, is the fundamental significance behind the second proposition: *non volentis neque currentis, sed miserentis est Dei*. God's mercy is prior not only to human effort, it is also prior to any act of the will. This priority means that even the individual's willed response to God's calling is, in some sense, a result of God's grace. If God is unable to produce the response of the will in those whom he elects, then it would not be the case that grace comes *non volentis…sed miserentis Dei*, since there would be a sense in which their election was the product of the human act of the will as well as God's mercy:

> If he said, "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that hath mercy," simply because a man's will is not sufficient for us to live justly and righteously unless we are aided by the mercy of God, he could have put it the other way round and said, "it is not of God that hath mercy, but of man that willeth," because it is equally true that the mercy of God is not sufficient of itself, unless there be in addition the consent of our will. Clearly it is vain for us to will unless God have mercy. But I do not know how it could be said that it is vain for God to have mercy unless we willingly consent. If God has mercy, we also will, for the power to will is given with the mercy itself. (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.12)[18]

God's calling is entirely efficacious, in that God is able to call his elect in such a manner as to guarantee that they will respond to this calling. If this were not the case, then it would not true that grace comes "not from the one who wills…but from the mercy of God":

> For the effectiveness of God's mercy cannot be in the power of man to frustrate, if he will have none of it. If God wills to have mercy on men, he can call them in a way that is suited to them, so that they will be moved to understand and to follow. It is true, therefore, that many are called but few are chosen. Those are chosen who are effectually (*congruentur*) called. Those who are not effectually called and do not obey their calling are not chosen, for although they were called they did not follow. Again it is true that "it is not of him who willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that hath mercy." For although he calls many, he has mercy on those whom he calls in a way suited to them so that they may follow. But it is false to say that "it is not of God who hath mercy but of man who willeth and runneth," because God has mercy in the way he knows will suit him, so that he will not refuse the call. (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.13)

[18] Translation here and throughout this paper is from Buerleigh (1953).

God is able to guarantee the response of those whom he elects by calling them "effectively" (*congruentur*) – that is to say, God calls his elect in a manner perfectly suited to them and thereby ensures that they recognise the calling and are moved to accept it.[19] God's calling, then, "is the effectual cause of the good will so that every one who is caused follows it" (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.13). At the same time, it is important to recognise that Augustine regards the response of the elect to their calling as a genuinely free movement of the will.[20] For Augustine, grace's sufficiency – that is to say, its efficacy – lies in the very fact that it is able to guarantee that act of the will by means of which the human person accepts and appropriates God's grace, namely, the act of freely willed consent to God's calling (see Katayanagi, 1990; Wetzel, 1992, pp. 197-206). God's grace, in other words, does not override creaturely freedom; nor, however, can it be frustrated by creaturely freedom. Rather, God is able to give grace efficaciously precisely because he is able to give grace in such a way as to guarantee that those whom he wills to be saved will freely consent to freely consent to his call. God's grace is sufficient, in other words, precisely because it is able to guarantee the correct act of the will on the part of the recipient.

There are deeper underlying theological concerns which undergird Augustine's exegetical arguments in *Ad Simplicianum*. In particular, Augustine is keen, on the one hand, to avoid the implication that the elect could in any way merit – and so have reason to boast of – their salvation and, on the other, to uphold the absolute sovereignty of God's will over creation. If human beings are able to resist God's grace, then the elect would be able take pride in their not having resisted it. At the same time, if human beings are able to resist God's grace, then God's will to save someone could be eternally frustrated, which (Augustine thinks) is to unacceptably limit divine sovereignty. As Augustine puts in in *Ad Simpl.* 1.2.15: "Who would dare to affirm that the Omnipotent lacked a method of persuading even Esau to believe." For Augustine, God's will to save someone can never be frustrated; his mercy is never in vain.

I find Augustine's account of grace's efficacy – and the exegetical reasoning which supports it – theologically compelling. A full defence of this account, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, my interest is in the implications of this claim for the free will response to the problem of hell. Given an Augustinian view of the efficacy of grace, the free will response ceases to be tenable. For, on an Augustinian understanding of grace, God is able to intervene to prevent people from going to hell

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[19] This "congruent vocation" should not be understood in purely "external" terms, as J. Patout Burns (1980) suggests. Rather, Augustine presents grace as operating both externally and interiorly in order to move the will towards acceptance of God's call; c.f. Katayanagi (1990); Wetzel (1992), pp. 187-197; Harrison (2006), pp. 274-278.

[20] This point is often misunderstood. Take, for instance, Lynn Rudder Baker's (2003) articulation of the Augustinian/Reformed understanding of grace: "The grace of God through Christ is necessary and sufficient for salvation. No act of will (construed in a libertarian way or not) is needed for salvation." (p. 462). While it is true that Augustine thinks grace is both necessary and sufficient for salvation, he would, I think, reject the claim that no act of the will is needed for salvation. After all, Augustine holds that the acceptance of grace by the elect is an act which truly belongs to their own will, even if it has been brought about as a result of God's effectual calling. See, for instance, Augustine, *De Spir. et lit.* 34.60 (trans. Wetzel (1992), p. 207): "Assuredly God works in us even the very will to believe and in all things does his mercy anticipate us, but consenting to God's calling or dissenting from it belongs, as I have said, to our own will." C.f. Couenhoven (2007), p. 285 n.7.

without thereby violating creaturely freedom, by giving them grace in an efficacious manner. That is to say, God is able to give grace in such a way as to guarantee its free acceptance by the recipient, thereby ensuring their salvation. If this is the case, then condition (ii) of our definition of a countervailing good is not met: God can intervene to prevent an individual from going to hell without thereby losing the good of creaturely freedom, and so creaturely freedom cannot serve as a countervailing good for hell.

The infernalist may be skeptical, however, as to the plausibility of the claim that God is able to guarantee the free acceptance of grace by the elect. At first blush, the very fact that God is able to guarantee acceptance would appear to rule out the possibility that this response could be in any way a product of the creature's free will. The problem, for the Augustinian, is that efficacious grace appears to have the force of necessity: once God chooses to call someone effectually, to give them efficacious grace, it is necessary that said person accept the offer of grace and be saved. If, however, this acceptance is necessary, then it cannot be free (at least, in a libertarian sense) (see Baker, 2003; Rogers, 2004).

Of course, any argument about the compatibility of efficacious grace with creaturely freedom will depend, at least in part, on one's definition of freedom. Augustine himself appears to have held to a broadly compatibilist theory of freedom, according to which freedom has more to do with the internal coherence of a person's motivations, and the ability to act on these motivations than it does to do with the ability to choose between competing alternatives (Wetzel, 1992), pp. 219-235). For the card-carrying Augustinian, then, one option is simply to abandon the libertarian conception of freedom as requiring choice between competing alternatives: if libertarian freedom is incompatible with an Augustinian theology of grace, so much the worse for libertarian freedom.[21] While I am sympathetic to this move, I also want to suggest that Augustine's account of the means by which God gives grace efficaciously is compatible with the claim that those who receive it have genuine metaphysical freedom to choose otherwise (even if God has acted in such a way as to guarantee that they do not, in fact, choose otherwise). In order to make this argument, however, I will first have to say a little bit more about Augustine's conception of the means by which God gives grace efficaciously.

Central to Augustine's understanding of the operation of efficacious grace is what Peter Brown calls the "psychology of delight" (Brown, 1967, pp. 154-155).[22] In short, for Augustine God "moves the wills" of his elect by presenting before their minds something which will "delight" and "stir" it to movement (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.22). This enables God to achieve the acceptance of grace by the elect by supplying to them such a powerful motivation for accepting God's grace that they unfailingly do so. When God gives grace efficaciously to his elect, then, their acceptance of this grace follows not from metaphysical necessity but from psychological necessity. God's giving of efficacious grace unfailingly achieves its end, but this is only because "knowledge of the good is fully and finally motivating" (Wetzel, 1992, p. 217).

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[21] For this line of argument, see Baker (2003); Couenhoven (2024).

[22] See also, Wetzel (1992), pp. 157-158, 198-203; Harrison (2006), pp. 267ff.; Couenhoven (2007), pp. 284-5.

Augustine's thinking can helpfully be understood using a distinction William Wood makes in his analysis of Anselm's account of the fall of the devil. Wood distinguishes between a particular choice or course of action being a) metaphysically possible for an agent and b) subjectively rational for an agent. In the context of the devil's fall, Wood argues, it is not enough to explain how the fall of the devil is metaphysically possible by appealing to the devil's possession of libertarian free will; one must also explain how it could be subjectively rational for the devil to choose to disobey God, even if he is free to do so. Wood illustrates this distinction with the following analogy:

> [S]uppose a wealthy benefactor offers you the following "dilemma". You must either accept a huge sum of money with no strings attached, or else throw yourself out of a twenty-story window. Even if you are free to jump out of the window, why would you? More to the point, if we heard a story about someone who chose the window, we would surely not be satisfied with an explanation that appealed only to the brute fact that his choice was free. Nor would we accept the vacuous explanation that "he just wanted the window more". We would instead demand an explanation that presents this bizarre choice as intelligible and rational to the agent in question. (Wood, 2016, p. 226)

Applying this distinction to Augustine's theology of grace, it is not the case that resistance to grace is metaphysically impossible – Augustine does not need to make so strong a claim for the purposes of his account – but, rather, that resistance to God's grace can never be subjectively rational. For the person who has been called effectually, the offer of grace is so intrinsically motivating – and the alternative of rejecting this grace so intrinsically unmotivating – that the only subjectively rational option is to accept God's offer of grace.[23] The person who has been called effectually is like the subject of the "dilemma" in Wood's analogy: even granted the subject's metaphysical freedom, the intrinsic disparity between the goods on offer mean that the subject has no subjectively rational motivation for choosing to throw themselves out of the window instead of accepting the large sum of money.[24]

In fact, the disparity of goods on offer when God makes the offer of grace is infinitely greater than in the above analogy. On the one hand, the choice is eternal beatitude with God, the greatest (and so most intrinsically desirable) of all possible

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[23] As Wetzel (1992) puts it, "[t]here is no possibility of choice here, because alternative objects of attraction cannot be motivated." (p. 198).

[24] It is perhaps worth noting that one need not be committed to the compatibilist claim that we always choose that which we judge to be most desirable in order for this analogy to function as an explanation of how God calls the elect effectually, but only to the weaker claim that "every choice you make may be motivated by desires and, to some extent, explicable through reasons." (Rogers, 2004, p. 419). Even granting that we may sometimes find ourselves in a position of choosing something which we judge to be less desirable over something we judge to be more desirable, it is another thing entirely to argue that we might choose something we judge to be utterly undesirable over something we judge to be the pinnacle of all desire. Such a choice would, it seems, be entirely unmotivated by desires and utterly inexplicable through reasons.

goods. On the other hand, the choice is eternal damnation. While it may be metaphysically possible for someone to choose the latter, it could never be subjectively rational. As such, anyone who receives this offer will always unfailingly choose the former (so long, that is, as their cognitive and willing faculties are functioning properly).[25] Yet this response to grace is nevertheless genuinely free inasmuch as it is metaphysically possible for the elect to choose an alternative course of action. Indeed, seen from this perspective, the anti-Augustinian who wishes to affirm the resistibility of grace faces a harder problem than the Augustinian, inasmuch as they need to be able to explain how resistance to God's grace in this scenario is not only metaphysically possible, but also subjectively rational.[26]

On the Augustinian understanding of grace, then, God is able to ensure the salvation of those whom he elects without violating their freedom. God can achieve this by calling them effectually – that is to say, by calling them in such a way that, while it remains metaphysically possible for them to choose to reject God's grace, it is not subjectively rational to do so. If this is the case, however, then God is able to intervene to prevent sinners from suffering in hell without thereby losing the good of creaturely freedom. As such, creaturely freedom cannot serve as the countervailing good for hell.

Perhaps we have moved too quickly here, however. It could be argued that Augustine's notion of efficacious grace only commits us to the claim that God is able to call *some* people effectually, not that he is able to call *all* people effectually. That is to say, it does not follow from the fact that God is able to give grace to some in such a way as to guarantee its acceptance on the part of the recipient that God is able to give grace to *all* in this way.

This, I take it, is the nerve of William Lane Craig's argument against universalism (Craig, 1989). According to Craig, some persons who exist possess the property of "transworld damnation" – viz., the property of not freely responding to God's grace (and so being lost) in every world feasible for God. Craig develops this notion in response another account of grace's efficacy, namely the theory of congruous grace, as proposed by the late 16th/early 17th-century Jesuit theologian Francisco Suàrez. According to Suàrez, God calls the elect efficaciously on the basis of his middle knowledge. Through his middle knowledge, "God knows for any individual S under what circumstances S would freely receive Christ" (Craig, 1989, p. 181). All God has to do, then, is bring about these circumstances, and he can ensure that S freely receives

[25] As this qualification suggests, Augustine does not think it sufficient for God to merely infuse "beatific knowledge" into his elect. The gift of beatific knowledge is sufficient to motivate the will to acceptance of divine grace *if* the mind and will are functioning properly. However, this is not the case for human beings living in a state of original sin. The cognitive effects of sin are such that human beings are unable to accurately judge the value of (apparent) goods, while sinful habit means that human beings are unable to act on their knowledge of the good, even if they have such knowledge. As such, grace must already be operating interiorly, healing the intellect so that it is able to make accurate evaluative judgements, and strengthening the will such that it is able to overcome past sinful habits, alongside the gift of beatific knowledge.

[26] Of course, there may be scenarios in which it at first appears as though there is only one subjectively rational course of action, but where an alternative course of action is revealed to be subjectively rational upon closer scrutiny. This, I take it, is the case with the fall of the devil (as Wood argues), and perhaps also with Adam's first sin, but is not the case when God calls effectually.

Christ. Craig, however, argues that, for some persons, there are no feasible circumstances God can bring about under which S will freely receive Christ ("For some individual S, there are no circumstances under which S would freely receive Christ") and so "there are no worlds feasible for God in which S exists and is saved" (Craig, 1989, pp. 181-182). God can give grace efficaciously to some, but he cannot give grace efficaciously for those who have the property of transworld damnation, and so God cannot bring it about such that *no* persons will undergo suffering in hell without thereby losing the good of creaturely freedom.[27]

Whatever the merits of such a view, the Augustinian must reject it for the simple reason that Augustine himself rejects this view (or, at least, something very similar to it). On Craig's view, grace can only be efficacious for certain individuals who lack the property of transworld damnation. In other words, God is only able to give grace efficaciously to those who have a prior disposition (understood as the possession – or lack of – certain modal properties) to freely accept God's grace. As Katayanagi (1990) has shown, Augustine decisively rejects this view as early as *Ad Simplicianmum*. Augustine has two very good reasons for rejecting such a view. First, if only those who have a good disposition are able to receive efficacious grace, then it would not be the case that salvation comes solely *ex vocante*, but also from the good disposition of the elect. What is more, the elect would have reason to boast of their salvation, since they could take pride in their not being transworld-damned.

Second, the notion of transworld damnation pulls against the tenor of the scriptural evidence regarding conversion. It is a consistent motif of scripture (Augustine argues) that God is able to call even the most stubborn and obstinate of wills to faith, a point illustrated above all in the example of Paul, who prior to his conversion was will was "fierce, savage, blind", yet was nevertheless stirred up to faith "so that suddenly out of a marvellous persecutor of the Gospel he was made a still more marvellous preacher of the Gospel" (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.22; c.f. Wetzel, 1992, pp. 192-194). Of course, the example of Paul does not *prove* that there could not be transworld-damned people. Rather, my point (echoing Augustine) is that the very notion of transworld damnation runs counter to the way conversion is depicted in scripture, which emphasises God's ability to work the conversion of anyone he wills.[28]

Craig's notion of transworld damnation thus rescues the doctrine of hell in the face of efficacious grace, but at a theological cost which no good Augustinian should be willing to accept. Instead, the claim that God is able to give grace efficaciously should be taken as indicating that God is able to give grace efficaciously to all, not just to some. And, if this is the case, then God is able to save all from hell without thereby losing the good of creaturely freedom by giving efficacious grace to all. And, so, for the Augustinian, creaturely freedom cannot be the countervailing good for hell.

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[27] Of course, Craig must also explain why God would choose to create "transworld-damned" persons. In order to explain this, Craig proposes that "God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation." (p. 185).

[28] This point is put well by Katayanagi, (1990), p. 649: "If all congruous vocations require such good dispositions, God cannot call a person who has no such good disposition. God could save only the man who has a good ability to believe. But this is absurd. For God has all means to call suitably the man who has a stone heart and rebels against God, if God has mercy upon him. All depends on God's mercy."

The prospects for infernalism, given the Augustinian theology of grace sketched out above, do not look great. Against the justice response to the problem of hell, an Augustinian theology of grace suggests that God can give sinners greater than they deserve – by bestowing gratuitous grace upon them – and, thus, that God can intervene to prevent the sinner going to hell without thereby losing the good of his justice. Against the free will response, an Augustinian theology of grace suggests that God can guarantee the free acceptance of grace on the part of the sinner – by calling them effectually and bestowing efficacious grace upon them – and, thus, that God can likewise intervene to prevent the sinner from going to hell without thereby losing the good of creaturely freedom. Given this, both "justice" and "creaturely freedom" fail to meet criterion (ii) for being a countervailing good, and so, on an Augustinian theology of grace, neither God's justice nor the freedom of creatures can serve as the countervailing good for hell.

As well as undermining the traditional responses to the problem of hell, an Augustinian theology of grace gives rise to a related yet distinct problem for the infernalist: the problem of reprobation. Medieval theologians were well aware of this problem: for instance, Bonaventure raises it in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, while Thomas Aquinas addresses a version of this problem in his *Summa Theologiae*.[29] In short, the problem is this: if "God wills that all human beings be saved" (1 Tim. 2.4), how can it be that God reprobates – that is to say, does not elect[30] – some human beings. In other words, if God is able to give efficacious grace to all, why does he not do so?[31]

Historically, responses to this problem have generally followed one of two strategies. Some theologians have sought to explain God's reprobation of the non-elect by identifying some other good which explains and justifies God's decision not to elect (and so save) all human beings. Bonaventure, for instance, argues that God wills not to justify the damned so that his justice might be manifested (Bonaventure, *Comm. Sent.* I, dist. 41, q.2).[32] Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, argues that God reprobates the damned so that there might exist "diverse grades of beings", thereby rendering creation complete and manifesting divine goodness (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*

[29] Bonaventure, *Comm. Sent.* I, dist. 41, q.1; Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1, q.23, art. 3. On the history of this problem in medieval and early modern theology, see Sinnema (1985).

[30] Medieval and early modern theologians disputed whether God's reprobation of the non-elect was a positive act of the will (that is, God actively decides not to give grace to some people, and so to allow them to be damned) or a negative act of the will (that is, God simply does not will that some people receive grace, and those people are damned as a consequence). This distinction underscores the divide between double and single predestination. For our purposes, it matters little whether we regard reprobation as belonging to God's positive or negative will. In either case, God's failure to will the salvation of all people is sufficient to get the problem off the ground.

[31] See Crisp (2003) for an alternative formulation of this problem. Another, related problem concerns the relationship between election/reprobation and divine justice; see Anderson (2022).

[32] Note, Bonaventure's point is not that the reprobation of the damned is necessary in order for God to *be* just, but rather that this is necessary in order that God's justice be *manifested*. As such, it does not rest on the claim that God would cease to be just if he gave people better than they deserve, and so is not vulnerable to the objection I raised to justice-based approaches to the problem of hell earlier in this paper.

Theologiae I, q.23, art.5). John Calvin, for his part, suggests that the reprobation of the damned is for the benefit of the elect, who will recognise more clearly the extent of God's goodness and mercy by regarding the misery of the damned, and so will praise and worship God to an even higher degree as a result (John Calvin, *Comm. Rom.* 9.22-23).

Each of the above responses adopts a broadly theodical strategy to dealing with the problem of reprobation. Augustine, however, offers an alternative strategy. Rather than seeking to identify some alternative good that God seeks to gain by reprobating the damned, Augustine's strategy rests on an appeal to the mysteries of the divine will:

> Let this truth, then, be fixed and unmoveable in a mind soberly pious and stable in faith, that there is no unrighteousness with God. Let us also believe most firmly and tenaciously that God has mercy on whom he will and that whom he will he hardeneth, that is, he has or has not mercy on whom he will. Let us believe that this belongs to a certain hidden standard of equity that cannot be searched out by any human standard of measurement, though its effects are to be observed in human affairs and earthly arrangements… He decides who are not to be offered mercy by a standard of equity which is most secret and far removed from human powers of understanding. *Inscrutable are his judgements, and his ways are past finding out* (Rom. 11.33). (*Ad Simpl.* 1.2.16)

According to Augustine, God's will to reprobate some is based on "a standard of equity which is most secret and far removed from human powers of understanding." In other words, God's will to reprobate some human beings is not arbitrary: Augustine is not denying that there are some God-justifying reasons why God chooses not to have mercy on some people, but merely that these reasons are knowable to human beings.

It is Augustine's strategy that I wish to pursue here.[33] I propose that Augustine's appeal to the mysteries of the divine will offers a plausible line of defence for the infernalist when understood in light of the insights afforded by skeptical theist responses to the problem of evil. That is to say, belief in hell can remain rationally defensible for the card-carrying Augustinian if they become a skeptical infernalist. Like the skeptical theist, the skeptical infernalist is skeptical of our ability to make all-things-considered judgements regarding the sorts of countervailing goods that might justify God permitting the (eternal) suffering of people in hell.

The skeptical theist-type response has received surprisingly short shrift in philosophical discussions of the problem of hell.[34] Jonathan Kvanvig, for instance, dismisses the possibility of such a move at the outset, arguing that, while this is an

[33] For a discussion of theodical responses to this problem, see Crisp (2003).

[34] A notable exception is Dougherty & Poston (2008), who offer a skeptical theist-type response to Sider's problem of vagueness, although they do not seek to articulate a skeptical theist-type response to the problem of hell as a whole. Crisp (2003) draws on CORNEA to explain God's decision to fix the numbers of elect and reprobate as they are, but does not make this move when explaining why God reprobates some sinners in the first place.

appropriate response to the evidential problem of evil, it is a non-starter when it comes to the problem of hell:

> Whereas with most evils, the appropriate theological response I favor merely points out that the human condition is one of limited understanding, such a response is of no use when we are told the point of a particular evil. There is no issue regarding hell as to whether it has a legitimate point; the theological traditions that include such a doctrine explicitly state what the point is. (Kvanvig, 1993, p. 9)

Kvanvig's point seems to be that a skeptical theist-type response does not work in the case of the problem of hell for the very simple reason that we already know what the countervailing good for hell is *supposed* to be – namely, justice. The challenge instead lies in showing *how* justice could be a countervailing good for hell (and, indeed, how hell could be just). However, as I argued earlier, we can conceive of hell as being an expression of God's justice without thinking that justice is the countervailing good God seeks to obtain by permitting the suffering of people in hell. Even if we accept that scripture depicts hell as an expression of divine justice, it does not follow from this that justice is the countervailing good for hell. On the contrary, I have argued that justice cannot serve as the countervailing good for hell *even if hell is just*.

This distinction may best be grasped by means of an analogy. Consider: a father whose child is ill has a choice between two medicines, A and B. A and B are each equally priced and equally effective. A has no side-affects at all; B, on the other hand, will cause mild nausea and headaches for several days. At the same time, B does come with some ancillary benefits – perhaps it contains some microproteins thought to boost academic performance in infants. Let us now say that the father chooses to administer medicine B to his child. On the one hand, the *reason* he gave his child B was in order to heal them from their illness. On the other hand, this by itself does not explain why he chose medicine B, given this would cause greater suffering in his child than medicine A. The good of health is not the only good the father sought when selecting medicine B: he also sought to attain a further good in addition, namely, the improved academic performance of his child. It is this further good which explains the father's choice of medicine B specifically, and so it is this good which explains the father's decision to allow his child to undergo the suffering brought on by the side effects of B. By analogy, scriptural depictions of hell as an expression of divine judgement and justice may tell us the *reason* why some created persons are consigned to hell without providing a complete explanation of the goods God seeks to attain by permitting the suffering of people in hell. If this is so, then it is not the case (*contra* Kvanvig) that scripture tells us what the countervailing good for hell is. Thus, a skeptical theist-type response remains viable, as even if scripture does indicate that hell is an expression of divine justice, we may nevertheless be skeptical of our ability to recognise the full range of goods that God seeks to bring about by permitting the suffering of sinners in hell.

Skeptical theist responses to the problem of evil typically target two kinds of evidential argument from evil: Humean or abductive arguments and what are sometimes called "noseeum" arguments for the existence of gratuitous suffering

(Wykstra, 1996). It is the latter which is of interest here. Noseeum arguments appeal to the apparent absence of countervailing goods for certain instances of suffering as evidence for the existence of genuinely gratuitous suffering. Rowe's 1996 summary of his evidential argument from evil offers a classic example of this kind of inference (where E1 and E2 signify two instances of suffering (E1 = the case of a fawn trapped in a forest fire and undergoing prolonged suffering before dying and E2 = the case of a five-year old girl who is severely beaten, raped, and strangled):

> P: No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting El and E2;
>
> therefore,
>
> Q: no good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting El and E2;
>
> therefore,
>
> not-G: there is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good. (Rowe, 1996, p. 263)

For Rowe, our failure to see any countervailing good which explains (or could explain) why God permits E1 and E2 constitutes evidence for the claim that E1 and E2 lack countervailing goods (and so are gratuitous). The inference from P to Q is thus inductive: according to Rowe, P renders Q more probable, such that it is reasonable to believe Q on the basis of P. Skeptical theists, on the other hand, deny that our not-seeing of a countervailing good for an instance of suffering constitutes evidence for that instance of suffering being gratuitous, and so reject the "noseeum" inference from P to Q as invalid. To put it another way, skeptical theists deny that the proposition "we do know of no countervailing good for instance(s) of suffering *x*" provides rational grounds for affirming the proposition "there is no countervailing good for instance(s) of suffering *x*".

The argument for universalism I outlined in the opening section of this paper relies on a similar noseeum inference. Recall Adams' argument for universalism:

> (i) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
> (ii) Some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.
> 1. If God existed and were omnipotent, God would be able to avoid (ii).
> 2. If God existed and were omniscient, God would know how to avoid (ii).
> 3. If God existed and were perfectly good, God would want to avoid (ii).
> 4. Therefore, if (i), not (ii).

As I note above, premise 3 relies on the following argument:

> 3.1*. If God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid any preventable instance of *gratuitous* suffering (i.e. suffering for which there is no countervailing good).
> 3.2*. (ii) is a preventable and gratuitous instance of suffering (i.e. there is no countervailing good for hell).
> 3.3*. Therefore, if God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid (ii).

I have argued that the Augustinian should reject attempts to rebut 3.2* by identifying either justice or creaturely freedom as the countervailing good for hell. But should the Augustinian therefore accept 3.2*? As far as I can see, the case for 3.2* rests on our inability to identify a countervailing good which could explain God's decision to permit the suffering of created persons in hell. In other words, the failure of theodical defences of infernalism is the primary evidence in support of 3.1*. The case for 3.2* can thus be presented as follows:

> 3.2.1*, We do not know of a countervailing good which would justify God's permitting the eternal suffering of created persons in hell (given an Augustinian theology of grace).
> 3.2.2*, Therefore, (it is reasonable to suppose that) there is no countervailing good which would justify God's permitting the eternal suffering of created persons in hell.

The case for 3.2* thus rests on a noseeum inference. This observation is not by-itself sufficient to show that the universalist argument problem is vulnerable to a skeptical-theist type response. After all, most skeptical theists accept that *some* noseeum inferences are valid, even if the noseeum inferences used in evidential arguments from evil are not. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the same considerations which lead skeptical theists to reject the noseeum inferences used in evidential arguments from evil equally undermine the noseeum inference in support of 3.2*.

Skeptical theists offer a number of different reasons for rejecting noseeum arguments for the existence of gratuitous suffering. For present purposes, I will focus on Stephen Wykstra's CORNEA-based skeptical theism, although I suspect a similar case could be made, *mutatis mutandis*, for other varieties of skeptical theism. CORNEA-based skeptical theism argues for the invalidity of noseeum arguments for the existence of gratuitous suffering by appealing to a general epistemic principle, namely the Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access (CORNEA), originally stated as follows:

> On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim "It appears that p" only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the

> case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. (Wykstra, 1984, p. 85)

A few points of clarification will be helpful here. First of all, in spite of how it is sometimes treated in the literature, CORNEA does not purport to be a statement of the general conditions of epistemic warrant for claims of the form "It appears that p", but, rather, provides the conditions on which "It appears that p" can be said to be warranted *on the basis of* "cognised situation s" (see Wykstra, 2007, p. 95, responding to Graham & Maitzen, 2007). In other words, CORNEA is a principle concerning the evidential connection between some "cognized situation s" and the claim "It appears that p". In this context, a "cognised situation" is simply anything that can serve as evidence (perceptual experience, beliefs, other mental states etc) (McBrayer, 2009, p. 80). Secondly, while in its original wording CORNEA focusses on the evidential connection between some cognised situation and "appearance" claims (where the word "appears" is understood in an epistemic [as opposed to a phenomenal] sense, such that an appearance claim that p constitutes *prima facie* support for p), Wykstra's subsequent discussions of the principle have made it clear that it has broader application, setting out the conditions in which some cognized situation can serve as evidence for any given proposition or hypothesis p (whether via an appearance claim – "it appears that p" – or directly) (Wykstra, 2007, p. 88). Specifically, according to Wykstra's later treatments of CORNEA, the principle seeks to show the conditions on which any given cognized situation can serve as *levering* evidence for the truth a given proposition or hypothesis – that is, evidence "sufficient to move one from one rational square belief-state to another" (Wykstra, 1996, p. 131). Thirdly, the subjunctive conditional clause in the consequent of CORNEA ("if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her") should be understood as a probabilistic conditional rather than a counterfactual conditional, so as to avoid the sorts of counter-examples raised by Justin McBrayer (Wykstra & Perrine, 2012, responding to McBrayer, 2009; see also Perrine, 2022).

While CORNEA functions as a general epistemic principle for assessing whether a given cognized situation counts as evidence for some proposition or hypothesis, what is particularly significant for our purposes is that CORNEA provides a criterion against which to judge the validity of noseeum inferences. Noseeum inferences treat the apparent absence of some thing, x, as evidence for the actual absence of x. A noted above, these inferences are sometimes valid and sometimes invalid. For example, it appearing to me that there are no elephants in my office is (presumably) good evidence for there actually being no elephants in my office. By contrast, it appearing to me that there are no tardigrades in my office does not constitute good evidence for there actually being no tardigrades in my office. The intuitive weight of CORNEA lies in the fact that it provides a plausible account of why the former inference is valid while the latter is not. The difference between these two inferences is that I can reasonably expect (given my cognitive faculties and the use I have made of them) that things would likely appear differently to me if there were in fact an elephant in my office, whereas I cannot reasonably expect that things would likely appear differently to me if there were tardigrades in my office. This is why the apparent absence of elephants in my office

counts as evidence for the actual absence elephants in my office, while the apparent absence of tardigrades in my office does not constitute evidence for the actual absence of tardigrades in my office.

According to CORNEA-based skeptical theism, countervailing goods are like tardigrades: we cannot reasonably expect, given our cognitive faculties and the use we make of them, that a given instance of suffering would appear differently to us if it had a countervailing good. Skeptical theists offer a number of considerations in support of this claim, including (*inter alia*) the disparity of our cognitive abilities in contrast to God's supreme knowledge and wisdom (Wykstra, 1984, p. 88) and our lack of data regarding future goods (and in particular goods pertaining to the afterlife) that God might seek to bring about by permitting suffering in the present (Alston, 1991, p. 38). Yet by the same lights, the infernalist is equally entitled to be skeptical regarding the noseeum argument in support of 3.2*. In light of CORNEA, the relevant question is this: is it reasonable to suppose that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, things would appear otherwise if there were some countervailing good which would justify God's permitting the eternal suffering of created persons in hell? I suggest that it is not. There are strong scriptural grounds for supposing that our knowledge of eschatological matters is exceedingly limited. According to the synoptic Gospels, even the Son himself does not know the day and hour of the eschaton, let alone ordinary human beings: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13.32; Matthew 24.36; Luke 17.36). Paul denies that any human being knows the nature of the eschatological reward of the righteous: "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 3:9). In a similar vein, the Johannine epistles state that the eschatological state of human beings is unknown: "What we will be has not yet been revealed" (1 John 3:2). Given these epistemic limitations regarding eschatological matters, it does not seem reasonable to suppose that human beings are in a position to be cognisant of the range of actual and possible eschatological goods that might serve as countervailing goods for hell. As such, we are not in a position to know whether God is able to save all persons without thereby losing some countervailing good. The principle of CORNEA, then, provides grounds for skeptical theism and skeptical infernalism alike.

Of course, skeptical theism is itself controversial, and a skeptical infernalist stance which draws on skeptical theism (whether CORNEA-based skeptical theism or some other variety of skeptical theism) will be vulnerable to the same objections faced by skeptical theist responses to the problem of evil. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the skeptical infernalist is at least *no worse off* than the skeptical theist. Moreover, in at least one regard she is in a slightly stronger position. One of the more worrisome objections against skeptical theism in the contemporary literature concerns the implications of skeptical theism for ethical decision making. Put simply, if I do not know whether a particular instance of suffering is necessary in order for some greater good to obtain, I cannot know whether I should intervene to prevent said instance of suffering (Almeida & Oppy, 2003). This worry is less acute for the skeptical infernalist, however. No created person could hope to intervene to prevent the suffering of people consigned

to hell, and so the skeptical infernalist need not be troubled as to whether or not to intervene to prevent this suffering.

Objections to Skeptical Infernalism

Objection 1[35]

The skeptical infernalist position sketched out above rests on the assumption that it is at least epistemically possible that there exist certain unknown goods capable of serving as countervailing goods for the eternal suffering of the damned in hell. It is this epistemic possibility which grounds the skeptical infernalists skepticism towards 3.2* ("(ii) is a preventable and gratuitous instance of suffering"). Let it be granted that it is epistemically possible that there could exist certain unknown *global* goods which might outweigh the eternal suffering of the damned in hell. Even still, it does not seem epistemically possible that there could exist certain unknown goods that would make it good *for the damned themselves* to undergo this suffering. Yet this is precisely what is required for any response to the problem of hell to succeed. For, as Marilyn McCord Adams (1999) has argued, God's goodness requires not only that God is good in a global sense, but also that God is *good to* creatures. For Adams, this means that God is required to ensure that the life of each created person is good to them as a whole (Adams, 1999, p. 31). The upshot of Adams' argument is that global goods do not provide morally sufficient reasons for God permitting instances of suffering. Instead, the only goods capable of providing morally sufficient reasons for God permitting instances of suffering are goods which will ultimately benefit the one undergoing suffering. Not only that, but these goods must be such as to make it so that the sufferer's life (when viewed as a whole) is no worse for having undergone this suffering. Adams' argument thus presents an additional constraint on the sort of goods that could serve as a countervailing good for suffering, which can be captured with the following modified definition of a countervailing good:
(Def.)*: For any Good, G, and any instance(s) of suffering, S, G is a countervailing good for S iff:

(i) The value generated by G is greater than (or at least equal to) the disvalue generated by S.
(ii) If God were to intervene to prevent S, *either* G would fail to obtain *or* some instance(s) of suffering of greater or equal disvalue to S would obtain.
(iii) G is such that it will (ultimately) benefit the person who suffers S in such a way that the sufferer is no worse off than they could have been had the evil not occurred.

In the case of the suffering of the damned in hell, even if we allow that it is epistemically possible that there could exist certain goods that meet requirements (i)

[35] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for proposing the two objections set out in this section.

and (ii), it does not seem epistemically possible that there could exist certain goods that meet (iii). For, as Adams argues, the suffering of the damned in hell is the paradigm example of a "horrendous evil" – that is to say, the suffering of the damned in hell is such that "the life of damned cannot be a great good to them on the whole" (Adams, 1993, p. 304). But if this is the case, then *by definition* there is no good that could meet condition (iii) in the case of the suffering of the damned. Given this, then, it is not epistemically possible that there exist certain unknown goods capable of serving as countervailing goods for the eternal suffering of the damned in hell, and so the skeptical infernalist response cannot get off the ground.[36]

Response to Objection 1

In responding to this objection, it is important first of all to recognise that it applies only to what Adams calls the "grim" view of hell. According to this view, "the suffering undergone by the damned in hell is such as to make it hell is a condition that represents, not merely the prima facie ruin, but a decisive defeat of good by evil within the context of the individual sinner's life" (Adams, 1999, p. 41). In other words, the suffering of the damned in hell is sufficiently severe as to make it so that they would have been better off never having existed. By contrast, on the "mild" view, hell remains preferable to nonexistence, inasmuch as the suffering experienced there does not completely overcome the goods experienced in the life of the damned, so that they might still be said to have had a good life overall. So, for instance, Swinburne, Stump, and Walls each argue that God allows some created persons to go to hell as a result of their free creaturely decisions and in accordance with the moral characters they develop in this life (Swinburne, 1983; Stump, 1986; Walls, 1992). On this view, the damned comprise those created persons who have freely chosen to refuse the goods heaven has on offer, or who have formed characters in this life such that they genuinely do not desire and could not enjoy these goods. The suffering the damned experience in hell is thus compensated by the good of having genuine free choice and agency in the formation of their own characters. Significantly, this is a good which redounds to the damned themselves, inasmuch as it is good *for* the damned to have this sort of agency (and so this good meets condition (iii) above).

Now, the version of the mild view of hell offered by Swinburne, Stump, and Walls suggests that creaturely freedom (or some other closely related good like "personal agency in character formation") is the countervailing good for hell. Nonetheless, so far as I can see the claim that hell is "mild" does not *entail* the claim that creaturely freedom is the countervailing good for hell. As such, there is nothing to prevent an Augustinian skeptical infernalist from adopting a "mild" view of hell, even if (as I argue above) they have good reason to reject the claim that creaturely freedom is the countervailing good for hell. Since, on the mild view of hell, it is at least epistemically

[36] In this regard, this objection suggests one way in which skeptical infernalism is disanalogous to skeptical theism: while the skeptical theist has reasonable grounds for doubting the claim that there is no possible good which meets criteria (i)-(iii) in the case of the world's evils, there is no equivalent epistemic gap when it comes to the eternal suffering of the damned in hell, given condition (iii).

possible that there could exist some good that would meet conditions (i)-(iii), the Augustinian skeptical infernalist remains entitled to argue that there is some other, unknown good which explains God's decision to permit the damned to suffer in hell.

All that said, I share some of Adams' reservations about the cogency of the mild view of hell (Adams, 1999, pp. 44-49). Not only that, but the mild view is also hard to reconcile with scripture. After all, Jesus says of Judas that "it would be better for him if he had never been born".[37] This suggests that the damnation of Judas is such as to make his life is not a great good to him as a whole. As such, we must consider how (if at all) the Augustinian skeptical infernalist who holds a grim view of hell can respond to Adams' argument.

At its heart, Adams' argument rest upon a claim about the constraints on divine action. According to Adams, God is required to ensure that the life of each created person is good to them as a whole – let us call this *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT*. It is this constraint on divine action which gives rise to (iii) in our revised definition of countervailing goods above. As discussed above, it seems evident to me that no possible known or unknown good could meet condition (iii) on a grim view of hell. Indeed, *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT* is straightforwardly incompatible with a grim view of hell: by definition, the life of anyone who goes to a grim hell will not be good to them as a whole, and so a God who permits created persons to go to a grim hell will fail to meet *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT*. This is does not present an insurmountable problem, however, since we have good reason to reject this constraint.

To put it simply, it seems to me that the claim that God is required to ensure that the life of each created person is good to them as a whole is too strong. The considerations offered in support of this claim at most motivate a weaker claim, namely that God has a *prima facie* obligation to ensure that the life of each created person as a whole. They do not support the stronger claim that God has an *all things considered* obligation to do so. The objection requires the stronger claim to succeed.

To see this, let us look at the considerations Adams offers in support of *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT.* Adams' clearest argument for this constraint can be found on p.31 of *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*:

> God could be said to value human personhood in general, and to love individual human persons in particular, only if God were good to each and every human person God created. And Divine goodness to created persons involves the distribution of harms and benefits, not merely globally, but also within the context of the individual person's life. At a minimum, God's goodness to human individuals would require that God guarantee each a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole by balancing off serious evils. To value the individual qua person, God would have to go further to defeat any horrendous evil in which s/he participated by giving it positive meaning through organic unity with a great enough good within the context of his/her life. (Adams, 1999, p. 31)

[37] Matthew 24.26. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this scriptural text.

Although this passage does not constitute a formal argument for *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT*, it provides a fairly clear picture of the considerations which motivate it. Adams grounds her argument in an appeal God's loving nature. According to Adams, God can be said to value and love human persons iff. God is "good to" each individual human person he creates (where being "good to" entails ensuring that each individual person's life is good for them as a whole). This argument can be stated formally as follows:

(1) Necessarily, God loves and values all created persons.
(2) God loves and values a created person iff. God is "good to" that person.
(3) God is "good to" a created person iff. God ensures that said person's life is good for them as a whole.
(4) Therefore, necessarily God ensures that the lives of all created persons are good to them as a whole.

The problem with this argument is that (2) is by no means obviously true.[38] Say we understand God's love in terms of benevolence. According to benevolence accounts of divine love, "God loves by desiring and/or willing a person's good for her own sake" (Wessling, 2021, p. 142). Yet this by itself is insufficient to yield (2). In order to get (2), we need to say not only that God's loving a person (P) entails that he desires/wills P's good for her own sake, but that God's loving P entails that he acts on this desire by seeking to realise P's good for her own sake. However, God's desiring/willing P's good does not entail that God act to realise P's good. By analogy, a mother may desire/will the happiness of her murderer son, yet it does not follow from this that she will (or is required to) act to realise her son's happiness by helping him evade the authorities and thereby escape just recompense for his crimes. Nor would her unwillingness to assist her son in this matter mean that she loves him any less. It is simply that her desire/will for her son's happiness is trumped by competing ethical concerns and obligations. Thus, while love for a person may mean that we desire/will their good, it does not follow from this that we are under any obligation to promote their good. Indeed, in some circumstances (such as those of the murderer's mother above), we might be obliged not to do so. But if this is the case, it is hard to see how a benevolence account of divine love could motivate (2).

Now, many theologians and philosophers of religion reject a purely benevolence-based accounts of divine love in favour of a "value account", which Jordan Wessling defines as follows: "for God to love P is for God to respond to P's intrinsic goodness by valuing P's existence and flourishing as well as union with P" (Wessling, 2021, p. 143).[39] Yet this account of divine love only yields (2) if God's *valuing* P's existence and flourishing and union with P entails that God *realise* P's existence and flourishing and

[38] Premise (1) is by no means uncontroversial either. Although she does not state this explicitly, Adams appears to regard (1) as a corollary of the claim that God is maximally loving. However, it is unclear how we should understand the claim that God is maximally loving, and it is far from evident that God's maximally love entails that he loves all created persons, or that he loves them all equally. For an overview of the literature on this question, see Wessling, (2021), pp. 145-147.

[39] See Wessling (2020) for an extended discussion and defence of the value account of divine love.

union with P. It is hard to see how this could be so. According to Wessling, "to value" some state of affairs is to "is to perceive or experience as good the realization of" said state of affairs (Wessling, 2021, p. 143). However, God's *perceiving or experiencing* the realisation of a state of affairs as good does not entail that God *will in fact realise* said state of affairs. If it did, then God would be required to realise any and all states of affairs the realisation of which he perceived to be good. Christians should reject such a view, since it amounts to an unacceptable restriction on divine freedom. For instance, Christians typically hold that God's creation of this world was a free choice. That is, God could have chosen to create some other possible world, or not to create at all. But on this view, when God is surveying different possible worlds in order to choose which world to create, God would be required to actualise any possible world the actualisation of which he perceived to be good. If this were the case, then God would have no freedom as to which world to create, or even as to whether to create at all.[40]

So, God's valuing some state of affairs does not entail that God will realise said state of affairs. But if this is the case, then God's valuing P's existence and flourishing and union with P entails that God realise P's existence and flourishing and union with P. This being so, it is hard to see why God's loving P should entail that God is necessarily good to P, and so (2) remains unmotivated. So long as (2) remains unmotivated, so too does *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT*.

In fact, it seems to me that God's love towards created persons entails at most a *prima facie* requirement to be good to that person. That is to say, even if God's love of a person means that he will be good to that person in the absence of other considerations, there are circumstances under which God might nevertheless choose not to be good to a person whom he loves. In order to illustrate this point, consider one of the examples Adams offers of a horrendous evil: the rape of a woman and the axing off of her arms. The relevant question when considering *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT* is not whether God is required to ensure that this woman's life is good for her as whole, but whether God is also required to ensure that the rapist who axes off her arms has a life which is good for him as a whole. It is important to recognise the strength of the claim *ADAMS' CONSTRAINT* makes: if true, then God is *required* to ensure that each and every created person has a life that is a great good to them as a whole, even if said person has themselves perpetrated evils that are (*prima facie*, at least) horrendous.[41] Is

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[40] Even if we ignore the problem this poses for divine freedom, this is an unacceptable conclusion since it leads to modal collapse. Alternatively, we might suppose that God values non-compossible possible worlds. Indeed, the Christian has good reason to think this. As noted, Christians typically hold that God's choice to create is a free one, meaning that God could equally have chosen not to create. On this view, the possible world in which God does not create is equally compossible with God's goodness as those possible worlds in which God does create. This being the case, it seems that God will perceive both the realisation of W1 (in which God does not create) and the realisation of W2 (the actual world, in which God does create) as being good. If God's valuing a state of affairs (W) entails that God realise W, then God's perceiving both W1 and W2 as good would entail his actualising both W1 and W2. Yet W1 and W2 are not compossible, and so this would require that God do the metaphysically impossible. So, if God's valuing (W) entails that he realise (W), then we will either be faced with modal collapse, or God will be required to do the metaphysically impossible. Since both of these options are clearly inadmissible, we should reject the principle that God's valuing (W) entails that God realise (W).

[41] Adams' approach to perpetrators of horrendous evils is to note that they can themselves be said to participate in and suffer from such evils, and to argue from this that God needs to defeat evil in their

it plausible that God is *required* to be good to the axe-wielding rapist in this way? Maybe – but it is hardly obvious that this is the case, and I suspect many (perhaps most) people's intuitions would go against so strong a claim. It seems to me that it is more intuitively plausible to claim that God has a *prima facie* requirement to ensure that the life of each created person is good to them as a whole, but that this requirement may not hold in certain cases, specifically in cases when a created person has committed such horrendous evils as to not be deserving of good treatment.[42] To be clear, I am not saying that God's justice means he is *required* to not be "good to" some created persons. As I note above, the doctrine of unmerited grace means that God is able to give created persons better than they deserve without thereby ceasing to be just. I am simply arguing that, in such cases, God is under no *requirement* to be good to said person: even if God is able to ensure that such persons live a life that is good overall for them by giving them unmerited, efficacious grace, he is not *required* to do so. Indeed, if God were so required, then, this grace would no longer be freely given and, in the words of Augustine, "grace would no longer be grace".[43] If, however, God only has a *prima facie* requirement to be good to created persons, then it remains epistemically possible that there exist some known or unknown countervailing good for even a grim hell.

Objection 2

Skeptical infernalism leads to skepticism about divine goodness. According to the skeptical infernalist, it is not reasonable for us to suppose that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, our cognised situation would be different if there were some countervailing good which would justify God's permitting the eternal suffering of created persons in hell. By the same token, however, it is not reasonable for us to suppose that our cognised situation would be any different if there were *no* countervailing good for hell. To put it another way, according to skeptical infernalism we cannot reasonably expect there to be a difference in our cognised situation in a scenario in which God is good, and so only permits people to go to hell on the basis of some unknown or unknowable countervailing good, and a scenario in which God is evil and is happy to allow some people to suffer horrendously and gratuitously for eternity for no good reason at all. But if I cannot reasonably expect to be able to tell the difference between a scenario in which God is good and permits some to suffer in hell for some unknown or unknowable countervailing good and a

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lives as well as in the lives of their victims. Yet even if perpetrators can be said to be horror-participants, it must equally be acknowledged that they do not participate in the same way as their victims. It is important that we take their role in the perpetration of the evils seriously, just as much as we take the degradation of their humanity that results from this seriously. To focus only on the latter and ignore the former is to trivialise their complicity in the evil. Taking their complicity seriously means recognising that God's obligations to them may differ from his obligations towards the victim.

[42] As I note above, this claim is compatible with the claim that God nevertheless still loves such persons, since God's loving P does not entail that God will be "good to" P.

[43] Augustine, *de grat. et lib. arb.* 43.

scenario in which God is evil and permits some people to suffer in hell for no good reason then how can I be rationally entitled to my belief that God is in fact good?

Response to Objection 2

The strength of this objection will largely rest on whether or not the skeptical infernalist has strong independent grounds for believing that God exists and is good.[44] If she does, then her skepticism about our ability to discern God's reasons for permitting the suffering of the damned in hell should not lead her to revise or abandon this belief. Inasmuch as it is hard to see how skeptical theism could get off the ground unless she already had strong independent grounds for believing that God exists and is good,[45] it seems to me that skeptical infernalism will not lead to skepticsm regarding God's goodness in the vast majority of cases.

I contend that skeptical infernalism does not lead to skepticism about divine goodness – so long as one has strong independent grounds for believing that God exists and is good – for two reasons. First of all, it is far from clear that such a person should accept the claim that "it is not reasonable for us to suppose that our cognised situation would be any different if there were no countervailing good for hell". The skeptical infernalist denies that our current cognised situation (in which we are unable to discern any actual or possible countervailing goods for hell) serves as evidence for there actually being no countervailing good for hell. She denies this since it is not reasonable for her to believe (given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them) that her cognised situation would likely be different if there *were* countervailing goods for hell. It does not follow from this, however, that it is also not reasonable for her to believe that (given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them) her cognised situation would likely be different if there were no countervailing goods for hell.

Now, this claim might seem odd. Surely a cognised situation in which we are unable to discern any actual or possible countervailing goods for hell is exactly the cognised situation we would expect to be in if there *were* no countervailing goods for hell (even if we cannot expect a different cognised situation if there *were* countervailing goods for hell, surely it is reasonable to expect *this* cognised situation is there *are not* any countervailing goods for hell). Yet it is worth bearing in mind that the skeptical infernalist's actual cognised situation includes not only her inability to conceive of possible countervailing goods for hell, but also includes her background beliefs and the reasons for having these. Thus, so long as she has strong independent reasons for

[44] By "grounds" here I do not necessarily mean evidence. A belief's being properly basic could constitute "grounds" for said belief. So, the skeptical infernalist could have strong independent grounds for her belief that God exists and is good if this belief were properly basic for her.

[45] I say this for two reasons. (1) the debate between infernalists and universalists is an intra-Christian theological debate, and so works from the starting assumption that God exists and is good. (2) Whatever the motivations for infernalism, for most infernalists they will presumably include an appeal to revelation; however, this presupposes that revelation is trustworthy. If the infernalist did not already believe that God is good, then it is unclear on what grounds she would hold God's revelation to be trustworthy.

believing that God exists and is good, it is reasonable for the skeptical infernalist to believe that (given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made from them) things *would* appear different to her if there were no countervailing good for hell. For, if this were the case, then it would not be the case that God exists and is good, and so the skeptical infernalist could reasonably expect to have different background beliefs or could reasonably expect that the reasons that support those background beliefs would not be available to her.[46] Given this, the skeptical infernalist who has strong independent reasons for believing that God exists and is good *can* reasonably expect there to be a difference between our cognised situation in the scenario where God is good and permits some people to go to hell for a good reason and our cognised situation in a scenario where God is evil and permits some people to suffer in hell for no reason at all.

Secondly, even if the skeptical infernalist were to accept that she cannot reasonably expect there to be a difference in our cognised situation between these two scenarios, this need not lead her to be skeptical regarding God's goodness so long as externalism about epistemic warrant is true. The requirement that we must be able to subjectively distinguish our actual cognised situation from counterfactual alternative possibilities in order for some belief (P) to have epistemic warrant for us only holds if internalism about epistemic warrant is true. For, this requirement is grounded on the view that the factors which justify our beliefs must be internally accessible to us. Externalists, however, deny that internal access to the factors justifying our belief is necessary for warrant, and so reject the claim that we must be in a position to rule out alternative possible interpretations of our cognised situation in order for P to be warranted for us.[47]

Take for instance, Plantiga's Reformed Epistemology. On this externalist account of epistemic warrant, our skeptical infernalist's belief that God exists and is good will be warranted just in case this belief is produced by a cognitive faculty functioning properly, in an appropriate cognitive environment, according to a "design plan" successfully aimed at truth (Plantinga, 2000). Crucially, this belief will be warranted for her even if she is not in an epistemic position to distinguish her current cognised situation from one in which God exists and is evil. As such, her inability to distinguish he actual cognised situation from the cognised situation she would have in a counterfactual scenario in which God is evil does not constitute grounds for revising or abandoning her belief in the existence of a good God. What is more, on the skeptical infernalist account, her inability to conceive of any actual or possible countervailing

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[46] Note, I am not saying that her cognised situation *would* have been different, only that she can *reasonably expect that* it would have been different. Her background beliefs could well turn out to be false, in which case it might turn out that her cognised situation would not be any different. Nonetheless, insofar as these background beliefs are reasonably formed – that is to say, insofar as she has strong independent grounds for holding these beliefs – *it is reasonable for her to expect that* her cognised situation would be different were they false, even if it would in fact not have been any different.

[47] This does not conflict with CORNEA as I construe it above, since (as noted above) CORNEA is not a principle regarding the general conditions of epistemic warrant but rather states the conditions in which s serves as *evidence for* P. On an externalist view of epistemic warrant, one could be warranted in believing P even if one's cognised situation fails to meet the conditions required to constitute evidence for P.

good for hell does not constitute evidence against her belief in a good God, since it does not constitute evidence for the actual absence of countervailing goods for hell, and so does not amount to counter-evidence against this belief. So long as her belief in God's existence and goodness is ("externally") warranted, then, her inability to conceive of any actual or possible countervailing good for hell does not constitute a reason to revise or abandon her belief in God's goodness. As such, she remains entitled to her belief that God is good even while embracing skepticism regarding our abilities to discern the reasons for God's permitting the suffering of the damned in hell.[48] This being so, skeptical infernalism need not lead to skepticism about God's goodness so long as the skeptical infernalist has strong independent grounds for believing in God's goodness, and so long as externalism about epistemic warrant is true.

Conclusion

The Augustinian theology of grace rendered infernalism rationally inexplicable. It does not, however, render it irrational. The Augustinian can believe in hell, and can do so rationally, just so long as she adopts a stance of skeptical infernalism.

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[48] Although I here focus on Plantinga's account of epistemic warrant, I suspect a similar argument can be made on other externalist accounts of epistemic warrant.

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