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Eluding the Hound of Heaven: Will anyone escape the love of God?

The doctrine of eternal punishment has been, for many, the primary reasons that they have abandoned their Christian faith. In his autobiography, Charles Darwin, who once graduated from Cambridge seminary with a degree in theology, described his loss of faith by saying,

I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for as so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And that is a damnable doctrine.

Darwin, and many others, have reacted with disgust at the idea that God will punish people for not believing in him. How could a loving God consign those he loved to hell just because they were mistaken about his existence? If they believed that he existed and loved them, after all, they would have never rejected his love. The logical conclusion, many have argued, is that if hell exists, then God must not unconditionally love all people. And who would ever *want* to believe in such a monstrous God?

The challenge for Christians, then, is to show how “that damnable doctrine” could be compatible with a God that loves all people unconditionally, a God that is certainly worth believing in. One contemporary strategy for making hell compatible with God’s love is famously argued for by C.S. Lewis in several of his writings. In *The Problem of Pain*, he says, “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.” Again, in the *Great Divorce*, we are told, “All that are in Hell, choose it, Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find.”

The view could be more fully explained in this way. God always desires the lost will repent and return to him, even after death when they are suffering in hell. However, some people will be “rebels to the end,” eternally refusing to accept God’s love and mercy. God honors their decision to reject a relationship with him because he respects their freewill. God values freewill so highly, the argument goes, because it is essential for having a genuine love relationship. For our love relationship with God to be genuine, he must honor our freedom, including the freedom

to choose to reject him for eternity. In this paper, I will first look at two analogies Christians frequently use for God's love and then examine the question of whether or not a loving relationship with God demands that he honor our choice to reject him forever.

Christians often use two very different—and sometimes competing—analogs for God's love. God is sometimes portrayed as a passionate lover who hopes that we will choose to love him in return; other times, he is portrayed as a loving father who cares for us like little children. Both analogies, furthermore, seem to have a strong basis in scripture. The book of Hosea suggests that God's love for us is like that of a husband to an unfaithful wife, while Jesus tells us to address God as *abba* Father. The problem is that these two analogies have apparently contradictory visions for our relationship with God and the way in which his love for us will shape his actions.

Before examining the two analogies more closely, though, we need to establish a working definition for the term love. Love, as I see it, means that a person desires and works for the ultimate good of those he loves. Whether a man loves his wife or his child, he will never willingly hurt either of them without good reason and he will always desire the best for both of them

In a romantic relationship, my ability to act on my love for my beloved is limited by my respect for her freewill. If I genuinely love the woman that I am dating, then I will honor her free choices, even if some of her choices will eventually harm her. I will not physically stop her from eating unhealthy food, but I might try to persuade her to eat better food because I am concerned about her ultimate good. Even more importantly, though, I must honor her freedom to choose whether or not to accept my love. If our loving relationship is to be genuine, I must give her the option of rejecting our relationship forever.

If I have a small child, however, my love for him demands that I will frequently *not* honor his free choices. Good parents encourage independence in their children, and so will often let their children engage in "risky" behavior that often results in a skinned knee or a bruised forehead. The small amount of pain is an acceptable price to pay for giving the child the freedom that they need to develop into an independent person. A good father, though, will never allow his child to engage in behavior that is likely to lead to irrevocable harm. He will not let his five-year-old son run away from home, no matter how carefully the boy has thought through his

actions. A good father will not honor the decision of his young boy to end their relationship, but will instead find the boy and take him home—kicking and screaming if necessary.

When these two types of relationships are applied to God, they seem to suggest very different requirements for his love. If our relationship is like the romantic relationship, then God love will demand that he give us the free choice to accept or reject his love for us. If our relationship is more like that of a father to his little children, though, then God would be irresponsible and *unloving* if he allowed us to “run away from home” and reject his love and care for us.

While the two situations appear to have very different requirements for love, I believe that they are actually not that different. There are times, for instance, when love demands that I refuse to honor the free choices of my girlfriend. If, for instance, she decided to jump off a 20 story building after hearing of the death of a good friend, my love for her means that I will tackle her to the ground and even tie her up if necessary. I love her enough to give her the free choice of whether to accept my love or not, but I also love her enough to prevent from rashly committing suicide.

Both romantic love and parental love, I believe, function based on the same basic principles. Whether or not I honor a free decision of someone I love, in all cases, is based on **a)** amount of harm produced by the choice and **b)** whether or not the person has made a responsible decision. A decision is more or less responsible depending on the extent to which it is based on logically considered true beliefs.

So how would this system of deciding whether or not to honor another’s decision work in real life? I will not, for example, stop my girlfriend for freely choosing to eat half-a-dozen Krispe Kream donuts. I will have low demands regarding whether her decision is logical or based on true beliefs, since the harm she can do to herself is relatively low. If she decided to commit suicide, though, I would have an extraordinarily high standard for the responsibility of her decision. I would not, for instance, allow her to commit suicide based on the false belief that aliens would pick her up in their spacecraft if she did so. I would not even let her commit suicide base on the more “normal” belief that no one loved her, since that would also clearly be false. And so, as you can see, as the amount of potential harm goes up, the requirement that a decision be responsible goes up as well.

In the same way, as the capacity for making responsible decisions goes down, the amount of harm needed to justify not honoring a free choice also goes down. As a parent, for example, love will demand that I force my two-year old to eat his vegetables, even though the harm in not eating them is very small. I will not honor his free choice to not eat his green beans, since he has such a low capacity for making responsible decisions.

Now consider again why I would let my girlfriend to choose to reject my love for her. If she decided to reject our relationship, I would honor her free choice because I have the confidence that she can live a good life without me. Everyday, people who have gone through traumatic breakups either find new partners or live good, fulfilling lives as single people. There is no *necessary* connection between our romantic relationship and her ultimate happiness. I will honor her freedom to reject my love because the amount of ultimate harm she will do to herself is relatively low. Allowing her to leave me is therefore consistent with my loving desire for her ultimate happiness.

In contrast, however, our relationship with God *is* necessary for our ultimate happiness. Orthodox Christianity has always held that apart from God, human beings face either eternal conscious suffering or complete annihilation. Either way, human beings are *necessarily* rejecting any possibility of future happiness when they reject God's love. The harm, then, in rejecting God's love is infinitely great to the person who rejects it.

Because we rely on God for our ultimate happiness, our relationship with God is perhaps most similar to that of a father and his young son. A five-year-old is dependant on his parents for his ultimate happiness. Without the care of his loving parents, the boy will be unable to grow up to live a good and happy life. Thus, a good father would give his five-year-old son a certain amount of freedom, but he would not allow the boy to run away from home. In the same way, God will give us the freedom to sin, but he will not allow us to finally "run away from home" and leave a relationship with him. For without such a relationship, we will never have a good, happy existence. And if God loves us and desires only good things for us, he will not allow even our own choices to completely eliminate any possibility of our future happiness.

But, if we use the romantic model for our relationship with God, the situation is almost no different. I could imagine, for instance, an extreme situation in which I might allow my girlfriend to end her own life. If she was in horrible pain and knew that she naturally die in only a short amount of time, I might honor her free choice to end her life. I would have very high

standards, though, for the responsibility of her decision. It would have to be based entirely on true beliefs and valid logical reasoning. Because the harm of the decision is so great, I would not allow her to kill herself based on the false belief that I did not love her or that she would be picked up by aliens after she died.

The decision to reject God is even more serious than the decision to commit suicide. If my girlfriend ended her life in order to avoid extreme pain, at least the pain would be gone. There is, however, no circumstance in which any good would be achieved by choosing hell. The choice to reject God is the choice to reject any possibility of future happiness. Because the harm of rejecting God is so great, he would have incredibly high standards for our decision to reject him to be responsible. And he would only honor our decision if it met those standards. God would demand, for instance, that our decision to reject him was based on a rational consideration of true beliefs. Just as I would not let my girlfriend commit suicide based on the false belief that I did not love her, God would not let us choose hell based on the false belief that he did not love us. He would not let us choose hell because we had the false belief that he did not exist or the belief that hell would be a wonderful place of eternal joy.

Because God loves us, he would honor our decision to reject him only if it was based on a full knowledge of his love and the horrible consequences of rejecting him. No human being, however, would ever reject God if that had this kind of full knowledge. People reject God because they believe that he does not exist, or because they think he does not love them, or because they believe that faith in Christ has been the cause of the world's worst atrocities. Because God loves us and separation from him would be so horrible, God would allow someone to choose an eternity without him only if it was a responsible decision. This means that the decision *could not* be based false beliefs. And no one would ever choose to reject God if they had true beliefs regarding God's goodness, his love, and the unimaginable horror of living forever without him. Because of this, we can hope that no one will escape the hound of heaven and that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God—including our own free choices.