



Eternally Choosing Hell: Can Hard-Heartedness Explain Why Some Remain in Hell Forever?

Eric Reitan¹

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Abstract

Recently, Eric Yang and Stephen Davis have defended what they call the separationist view of hell against an objection leveled by Jeremy Gwiazda by invoking the concept of hard-heartedness as an account of why some would eternally choose to remain in hell. Gwiazda's objection to the separationist view of hell is an instance of a broader strategy of objection invoked by other universalists to argue that God could guarantee universal salvation while respecting libertarian freedom—an objection that Kronen and I have dubbed the Infinite Opportunity Argument. Yang's and Davis's reply to Gwiazda thus amounts to a response to the Infinite Opportunity Argument, and the merits of their reply bear on the feasibility of the freedom-respecting version of universalism that the argument supports. I argue that the kind of hard-heartedness that must be posited in order to derail the Infinite Opportunity Argument—the kind of absolute hard-heartedness that Yang and Davis explicitly invoke—suffers significant problems that prevent it from posing a serious challenge to freedom-respecting universalism.

Keywords Free choice · Hell · Separationism · Universalism · Hard-heartedness

Introduction

Eric Yang and Stephen Davis (2015) have recently defended what they call the separationist view of hell against a concise objection leveled by Jeremy Gwiazda (2011). The view they defend is one according to which the damned experience eternal separation from God because they have freely chosen it. Gwiazda challenges the coherence of this view, arguing that the damned would have infinitely many chances to choose to leave hell, and that even a low probability of choosing to leave would,

✉ Eric Reitan
eric.reitan@okstate.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, Oklahoma State University, 257 Social Sciences and Humanities, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA

given infinite opportunity, guarantee that they would leave. Hence, Gwiazda concludes, the separationist view collapses into universalism.

While Yang and Davis offer a pair of responses to this view, their most crucial response posits that the damned acquire ‘hardness of heart’: they become so fixed in their choice of separation from God that the decision to remain in hell follows ‘deterministically from [their] character’, such that there is not even a low probability they will choose otherwise (Yang & Davis, 2015, 218). If the probability that they will choose continued existence in hell is 1 at each choice opportunity, then the probability that they will leave hell remains 0 even given infinite opportunities to leave. As Yang and Davis put it (2015, 218–219), ‘...the probability that Jones chooses to remain in hell over a single choice is 1. Even over an infinite amount of time, it still turns out that the probability that Jones chooses to remain over that time is 1, given that $1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \dots = 1$ ’.

The view of hell Yang and Davis defend is widely supported by contemporary Christian philosophers, and Gwiazda’s objection is a variant of an argument that has been developed by myself and other thinkers, an argument Kronen and Reitan (2011) call the Infinite Opportunity Argument (hereafter IOA). As such, it is worth asking whether Yang’s and Davis’s response succeeds in general as a defense of the separationist view of hell against this argument. In this essay, I situate the exchange between Yang/Davis and Gwiazda in the larger philosophical debate, develop the ‘hardness of heart’ defense that Yang and Davis endorse, and then identify two problems with this defense: (a) it assumes, problematically, that a fixed God-rejecting character can survive the objective horror of ongoing separation from God paired with God’s unending efforts to inspire the damned to rethink their choices; and (b) it assumes, problematically, that God’s respect for the freedom of creatures leads God to respect absolute hard-heartedness, even though it is far from clear that respect for the former would entail respect for the latter.

I should note that some might question IOA’s underlying assumption that free choices are amenable to assessment in terms of the laws of probability. Yang and Davis, however, do not directly challenge this assumption, and for the sake of focus, I will not consider its merits here.¹ Given this focus, we might characterize the central question of this paper as follows: assuming that the choices of the damned are amenable to assessment in terms of the laws of probability, can defenders of the separationist view of hell plausibly rebut IOA by positing among the damned a hardness of heart so absolute that the probability that they will repent and turn to God remains 0 (or the probability that they will persist in rejecting God remains 1) over an endless array of opportunities to repent?

¹ For those interested, the assumption is one I have defended in earlier works (Reitan, 2007, 420–422; Kronen & Reitan, 2011, 158–160). Arguably, Yang and Davis do not consider the merits of this assumption because their response makes the question of whether free choices are amenable to the laws of probability irrelevant. As they put it (2015, 219), if the probability of someone continuing to reject God is 1, infinite opportunity has no effect on probabilities, thereby ‘showing the irrelevance of the probabilistic model to our case.’ If my argument here is sound, then they are mistaken about this irrelevance.

The Separationist View of Hell and the Infinite Opportunity Argument

By the ‘separationist view of hell’, Yang and Davis have in mind the view ‘that some human beings will, after their deaths, exist eternally apart from God...and that such individuals do so because they freely choose to exist in such a state’ (Yang & Davis, 2015, 217). This view of hell is essentially what others (Kronen & Reitan, 2011, 24) have called the liberal doctrine of hell, a view that has emerged as a contrast to what has been called the classical doctrine (Kronen & Reitan, 2011, 23).

According to the latter, eternal existence apart from God does not result from the damned eternally choosing to reject God; instead, they die in an unrepentant state and either lose at death the capacity to make the choice to repent or, while still capable of doing so, find that their repentance is now impotent to change their fate. Either way, their fate is fixed by something other than the eternally ongoing choice to remain in hell. Generally, the classical view holds that the resultant state does not just include alienation from God but further punishments, and that both alienation and further punishments are imposed by God as a retributive punishment for sin.²

The liberal doctrine opposes itself most explicitly to this retributive view, holding that separation from God is something the sinner chooses (a choice God respects) rather than something God *inflicts*—and that the suffering of hell is limited to what naturally accompanies such alienation. However, the liberal/separationist view also opposes itself to *any* view of hell holding that the fate of the damned is fixed at death, whether or not it is fixed by God’s punitive rejection of unrepentant sinners. So, for example, variants of the classical view may hold that the capacity for repentance is lost post-mortem because of some feature of human nature or the nature of post-mortem existence. Of course, God (being the omnipotent creator of human nature) could presumably have designed human nature or post-mortem existence such that the capacity for and efficacy of repentance persisted post-mortem. If God chose otherwise, a complete understanding of eternal damnation would have to look beyond the free choices of creatures (and God’s respect for those choices) to consider God’s reasons for designing creation to truncate opportunities for repentance—reasons presumably springing from a motive in tension with God’s loving desire to save all (justice being the most obvious candidate).

In contrast, the liberal doctrine holds that the damned endure hell because, in an ongoing way, they freely reject God’s offer of communion. Were they to change their minds and accept divine grace, God would save them. And there is nothing God does, in the liberal view, to prevent this change of heart. If they are damned, it is because God did everything God could to save them, short of interfering in free choice, and these efforts were rebuffed by the exercise of the damned’s free will.

² Kronen and Reitan (2011, 22–24) spell out variants of both the classical and liberal doctrines and also identify a *via media* between the classical and liberal doctrines that combines the liberal view that the damned are in hell solely because they have freely chosen to be (not because God has placed them there) with the classical view that God heaps punishments on the damned above and beyond what naturally accompanies separation. Since these variations and alternatives do not impact my arguments here, I will not explore them.

While it is beyond this paper's scope to investigate why Christians might prefer the liberal doctrine to the classical one, the preference seems to rest on two beliefs: (a) God's moral character leads God to earnestly desire the salvation of all and (b) the demands of retributive justice, arguably because of the Atonement, pose no moral impediment to God realizing this desire. While these beliefs are generally shared with universalists, advocates of the liberal doctrine resist universalism by identifying an impediment to universal salvation distinct from retributive justice and purportedly consistent with God's desire to save all: God's respect for the freedom of those who reject communion with God. It is such thinking that inspired C.S. Lewis (1944, 115) to famously hold that 'the gates of hell are locked on the *inside*'. Similarly, Jerry Walls endorses the view (which he attributes to Wesley) that 'God is willing to do everything he can, short of destroying freedom, to save all persons' (Walls, 1992, 88). If any are damned, it is because their freedom stood in God's way.

Let us call this *the free-choice thesis*, a thesis about the *reason why* some are in hell. It holds that those who endure hell do so solely because of their free choices and God's respect for them.³ Davis clearly articulates this thesis in the original article to which Gwiazda is responding:

...I believe [the damned] are in hell because they choose to be in hell; no one is sent to hell against his or her will. Sadly, some people choose to live their lives apart from God, harden their hearts, and will continue to do so after death; some will doubtless do so forever...Allowing them to live forever in hell is simply God's continuing to grant them the freedom that they enjoyed in this life to say yes or no to God. (Davis, 1990, 179)

The other key thesis of the liberal doctrine of hell, what we can call *the hell-as-separation thesis*, is about the *nature* of hell and holds that hell consists in ongoing existence in a state of separation or alienation from God, and that the sufferings of hell are restricted to those that accompany such separation as opposed to consisting of additional pains inflicted by God. Again, Davis explicitly endorses this thesis:

...hell is separation from God as the source of true love, peace, and light. It is not a place of agony, torment, torture, and utter horror (here I am opposing the lurid and even sadistic pictures of hell envisioned by some Christian thinkers). (Davis, 1990, 178)

Both of these are theses that the separationist view shares with what might be called the freedom-respecting view of universalism. What distinguishes the separationist view of hell is a third thesis, which I will call *the infinite hell thesis*: at least some of hell's denizens will exist in hell eternally. The freedom-respecting view of universalism, by contrast, holds that while some may endure hell for a (potentially

³ I should note that, even if separationists like Davis explain hell by reference to human choices as opposed to a divine decision to cast some persons into hell, they must nevertheless account for the divine choice to *permit* some to damn themselves. Generally, separationists account for this by holding that divine respect for freedom is an expression of divine love, and it is of such importance that God is prepared to honor the choice to say no to God even if the result is hell. See, for example, Walls (1992, 136–137).

long) time, all are eventually saved. Let us call this *the finite hell thesis*. A key question in assessing the relative merits of the separationist view of hell and the freedom-respecting view of universalism is whether it is coherent to suppose that some could choose hell *eternally*. Davis answers in the affirmative: ‘I have little doubt that some will say no to God eternally’ (Davis, 1990, 184).

This claim is the focus of Gwiazda’s objection, which invokes a line of argument developed independently by me (Reitan, 2001, 2003, 2007) and defended at length by Kronen and myself in *God’s Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (Kronen & Reitan, 2011), where we dub it the Infinite Opportunity Argument (IOA)—a label I will use here even though Gwiazda does not. IOA makes a case for universal salvation while assuming both that God consistently honors the free choices of created persons and that the freedom thus respected is *libertarian freedom* in the sense that persons do not merely choose in accord with their dominant preferences (freedom in the compatibilist sense) but that they *could have chosen otherwise*.

As such, IOA stands in contrast with other accounts of why all are saved, in that it assumes there are things God could do to save all that God does not do out of respect for libertarian freedom. Most notably, IOA assumes God does not secure the salvation of all by the exercise of ‘efficacious grace’—a form of grace by itself sufficient to secure salvation, insofar as it so transforms the hearts of the unregenerate that they come to freely-but-infallibly choose union with God.

Kronen and Reitan (2011, 132–140) argue that God could produce such a transformation simply by revealing the truth of God’s choice-worthiness so vividly that, given the nature of created persons, any motive to reject God disappears. The idea is that, given the Christian premise that union with God is the end for which created persons were made and the only end that truly satisfies them, anyone presented with the beatific vision would not just cognitively affirm that union with God is infinitely preferable to separation but would experience this truth with their entire being so fully that any motive to reject God would vanish.

Along similar lines, Thomas Talbott (1990, 36–38) has argued that God can ensure that created persons freely-but-infallibly choose God simply by removing from them all ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire—thereby also removing any motives to reject God (since, on traditional Christian teaching, union with God is objectively the most choiceworthy possible thing for any created person). And even free creatures would never choose what they have no motive to choose. Furthermore, since these things are *impediments* to free choice, their removal shows respect for free choice by facilitating its exercise.

While some have no difficulty with the idea of God guaranteeing the salvation of all through such means, others are troubled by any approach to universal salvation in which some or all of the saved could not have chosen otherwise—in other words, any approach in which libertarian freedom does not play an instrumental role in the creaturely choices that culminate in salvation.⁴ In accounting for why this might be

⁴ Walls thus stresses that his case for hell rests on ‘a strong commitment to the value of libertarian freedom’ (1992, 136).

troubling, even in the face of Talbott's point that what God does to ensure salvation is remove impediments to fully informed free choice, the most weighty issue may be this: the kind of divine revelation that makes the choice-worthiness of union with God so abundantly clear that no other choice is possible is a divine revelation that *amounts to salvation itself*: an unvarnished experience of the beatific vision. If God can inspire the unregenerate to choose salvation only by bringing them into an unfiltered experience of God's love and majesty, then God has in effect inspired them to choose salvation *by first saving them*, and their free choice then plays no role in the process.

Walls expresses a version of this concern. He concedes that once we have 'absolute clarity of vision', every motive to reject God disappears, but he thinks, such clarity 'is only achieved as we progressively respond with trust and love to God's self-revelation' (2004, 210). In other words, the clarity that makes choosing God a certainty comes only at the *conclusion* of a process of making choices *without* that clarity. What the clarity does is ensure that those who have developed a relationship with God *constitutive of salvation* remain in that state. But perhaps God desires that the free choice of creatures plays an instrumental role in their final destinies, and perhaps any freedom that creatures exercise prior to experiencing the beatific vision will inevitably have a libertarian character: absent direct experience of the choice-worthiness of God there remains an epistemic veil that preserves the possibility of choosing separation.

The Infinite Opportunity Argument takes views along this line seriously and so makes a case for universalism on the assumption that all who are saved have first freely (in a libertarian sense) turned to God. As such, IOA can be seen as offering a basis for defending what I am here calling the freedom-respecting view of universalism. To defend this view, IOA grants that prior to choosing communion with God, created persons retain the freedom (in a libertarian sense) to reject God, and out of respect for that freedom, God allows those who do reject God to experience separation and its fruits. But IOA holds that even granting these things, God could still guarantee universal salvation by indefinitely sustaining the unsaved in a temporal state in which communion with God remains a standing offer, while ensuring that the conditions for (libertarian) free choice persist.⁵

In his critique of Davis, Gwiazda nicely summarizes why these conditions would guarantee universal salvation:

...though the probability of choosing to remain in hell on any single choice may be high, remaining in hell eternally seems to require infinitely many such choices. Thus, the probability of remaining in hell over all of these choices will decrease drastically, approaching 0. That is to say that each person will choose to be reconciled with God with a probability approaching 1, i.e., certainty. Thus, separationism based on choice is internally contradictory, in that it implies universalism. (Gwiazda, 2011, 694)

⁵ For a full development of this line of thought, see Kronen and Reitan (2011, 160).

Strictly speaking, this probabilistic argument entails universalism in the sense of *eternal* salvation for all only with one further premise: once someone is saved, it becomes guaranteed they will never freely choose separation from God (that is, they will continue to choose God with a probability of 1).⁶ Grounds for treating this premise as plausible have already been sketched: salvation consists in experiencing what, on traditional Christian teaching, is the only truly fulfilling state. Its infinite preferability to any other state becomes so manifest to the saved that no other choice is possible. The blessed are removed by the very fact of their blessedness from the conditions under which *libertarian* freedom exists, since the possibility of choosing otherwise requires some motive to do so and the blessed have none. And so the blessed are confirmed in blessedness. It is worth noting that this basis for thinking the saved keep choosing heaven with a probability of 1 does not generate a parallel argument for thinking the damned might keep choosing hell with a probability of 1, since the damned are choosing what is utterly *un*-choice-worthy. Any case for the latter must, therefore, be fundamentally different.

The merits of IOA matter insofar as many current defenders of hell, not just Yang and Davis, believe that the chief impediment to universal salvation is the freedom of creatures to reject communion with God combined with God's respect for that freedom.⁷ If IOA succeeds, then creaturely freedom and God's respect for it may not impose the kind of impediment to universalism that defenders of a liberal or separationist view believe. At least for those who accept the hell-as-separation thesis and the free-choice thesis, IOA would thus offer grounds for preferring the freedom-respecting view of universalism to the separationist view of hell.

The Response from Hard-Heartedness

The question, then, is whether Yang's and Davis's reply to Gwiazda offers a response to IOA compelling enough to salvage the separationist view's prospects. Their primary response, in brief, is that at least some of hell's denizens may remain eternally in hell because of *hardness of heart*: they have become so fixed in their rejection of God that even faced with infinitely many opportunities to rethink their choice they remain damned. If the probability that they will reject God at each such opportunity is 1, the probability that they will remain in hell after an infinite number of iterations of the choice is also 1. At least granting that this fixed God-rejecting character is the consequence of earlier free choices whereby the damned have *formed* this character for themselves, Yang and Davis believe that the damned are 'responsible for the choice to remain in hell' (2015, 218).⁸

⁶ Absent this premise, the probabilistic argument sketched out by Gwiazda still *does* entail that no one will remain in hell eternally. It just does not preclude their *returning* to hell once saved.

⁷ Notably, the two most important book-length defenses of hell by Christian philosophers in the last 30 years (Kvanvig, 1993; Walls, 1992) both adopt this position.

⁸ What distinguishes Yang and Davis's view here from versions of the classical doctrine where the damned's God-rejecting character becomes fixed at death is this: on the latter view, *God* (or the nature of the human post-mortem condition as determined by God's creative choices) hardens the hearts of

Characterizing the damned in terms of hard-heartedness is not unique to Yang and Davis.⁹ Walls, for example, identifies as the unifying feature of those in hell ‘the consistency of their evil’ (1992, 123). In unpacking this idea, he characterizes the damned as follows:

At every point at which grace could have been accepted, evil was preferred. Where such consistency is achieved, evil gains sufficient potency that the possibility of acceptance is all but foreclosed. The person for whom this is true may be accurately described as thoroughly immune to the grace of God. (Walls 1992, 124)

This is essentially what Yang and Davis have in mind by a hard-hearted God-rejecting character—with one important difference. What distinguishes Yang’s and Davis’s invocation of hard-heartedness is their use of it to counter IOA. For hard-heartedness to serve this role, ‘the possibility of acceptance’ of divine grace needs to be more than just ‘*all but* foreclosed’. It needs to be *absolutely* foreclosed. Walls is prepared to concede that ‘such consistency (of evil) does not altogether rule out the possibility of returning to good’ but can still explain ‘why some persons may never do so’ (Walls 1992, 123). But based on IOA, even a remote chance of changing course is sufficient, given infinite chances, to guarantee universal salvation. Hence, Yang and Davis are forced to construe hard-heartedness in even stronger terms than Walls does: hard-heartedness so fixes character that the possibility of turning to God is 0.

It is important to note that, in addition to challenging IOA with their hardness-of-heart response, Yang and Davis offer another response: those in hell might not face an infinite series of choices to remain in hell at all. But this response not only receives less attention but, I think, collapses into the hardness-of-heart response.

The reason is this: Gwiazda plausibly argues that if someone, P, is in hell eternally, P will never ‘make a last choice as to whether or not to leave hell’ because this would mean that P would ‘never think about the matter again for the rest of eternity’ even though ‘it is of utmost concern to P where to spend eternity’ (Gwiazda, 2011, 694). Thus, Gwiazda offers one presumptive reason to think the damned would never reach a last choice. To this we may add another: if God earnestly desires the salvation of the damned and the only impediment to this lies with a limit to their choice opportunities, God would continually *present* the choice afresh to the damned to ensure indefinite chances to be saved.

This latter point is one I will return to shortly. For now, it is enough to note that there are *presumptive* grounds to suppose the damned would face an endless sequence of choices about whether to remain in hell. To defend their first response to Gwiazda, then, Yang and Davis must adequately explain *why* the choice opportunities of the damned would be limited despite these reasons to think otherwise.

Footnote 8 (continued)

the damned; whereas on Yang and Davis’s view, the damned harden their own hearts through their free choices.

⁹ And it is worth noting that Davis invokes it in the earlier essay to which Gwiazda responds (Davis, 1990, 179).

One possibility is to suppose that at some point God withdraws the option to leave hell. But on this supposition, we confront a significant problem unless IOA can be shown to fail for some other reasons (such as the hardness-of-heart response): If IOA would succeed on the assumption of unlimited choice opportunities, then God could save all in a way that respects freedom simply by making the offer of salvation a standing one. If we posit that God chooses instead to truncate the damned's decision opportunities, we are thereby positing that God prevents the salvation of some who would have been saved had the offer not been withdrawn.

This amounts to rejecting the free-choice thesis. Of course, defenders of hell could, in accord with the classical doctrine, reject this thesis. But if we want to consider whether Yang and Davis have shown that the separationist view of hell as construed above is defensible in the light of IOA, rejecting the free-choice thesis is not the way to do that.

So if we want to posit a finite number of choice opportunities to leave hell in a way consistent with the free-choice thesis, we need a different account of what limits the choices of the damned. The most plausible candidate is hard-heartedness: the damned stop facing the choice to leave hell because their character eventually becomes so fixed on rejecting God that the question of whether to continue rejecting God never comes up again. On this interpretation, Yang's and Davis's two responses to Gwiazda *both* appeal to hard-heartedness: either hard-heartedness prevents the damned from facing infinitely many chances to leave hell, or it makes it certain that when confronted with such opportunities they will choose to stay.

There are reasons, however, to treat the latter version of the objection as primary, at least if we assume God earnestly desires the salvation of all. As noted above, such a God would presumably not stop reaching out to the damned and presenting the offer of loving communion. And if *God* presents the choice, then they *face* it even if it's guaranteed what their decision will be. Of course, one might think even God would eventually stop presenting the choice if its rejection were a foregone conclusion. But in that case, the limit to the number of choices is explained by the fact that, *were* an infinite sequence presented, the person would reject them all. Hence, one would still need an account of why an infinite series of choices would do no good—in other words, a compelling response to IOA. Does the hardness-of-heart response qualify?

The Horrors of Hell and the Relentless Love of God

When we think about hard-hearted people in this life, we generally think of those who are entrenched in habits of character that make them resistant to appeals to human compassion and unsympathetic to others' suffering. We do not typically envision those who are unsympathetic to *their own suffering*. Furthermore, we do not typically envision people so entrenched in these habits that there is no chance they would break them even under conditions intensely favorable to breaking them. But both of these things are what we need to imagine if hard-heartedness is to serve the role Yang and Davis want it to serve—as a permanent block on the damned rethinking the choice of hell.

The chief victim of the choice to reject God—the one who experiences most if not all of the suffering that comes from the choice—is the one who makes the choice. In this respect, rejecting God is more like drinking to excess than like ignoring the plight of the needy (even if both hurt others). The alcoholic *suffers* as a result of bondage to drink. While it can take time for alcoholics to admit that their addiction is a chief cause of their suffering (and some never do in this life), alcoholics routinely do face this truth—sometimes because of a ‘hitting-bottom’ experience where they directly confront the intolerability of chronic drunkenness, sometimes through the intervention of others, and sometimes a combination of both.

Like alcoholics, the damned suffer because of their entrenched choice patterns. Thus, unlike the conventionally hard-hearted who only need to be unmoved by the plight of others, the damned must be unmoved by *their own plight*: they must eternally resist changing their behavior in spite of its radically harmful effects *to themselves*. Add to this the point that, on our ordinary conception of hard-heartedness, the hard-hearted are strongly *resistant* to being moved or jarred out of their entrenched habits. And resistance is not the same as immobility. Narratives of hard-hearted persons who undergo transformation and repentance—such as Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*—are not mere fictions but find cognates in real-world narratives. These stories show that those we classify as hard-hearted *include* persons who ultimately change their choices and lives. Hence, to be hard-hearted, it is not necessary that one has a 0 probability of change. And the claim that *some* of the hard-hearted have a 0 probability of change is at best speculative.

There is an immediate problem with this speculative claim, given a core theme of the Christian theological tradition. According to that tradition, human beings were created by God in the divine image, and they were made *for* union with God. Even the most hard-hearted human beings retain the essential nature God made them to have: a nature oriented towards union with God and designed to find true satisfaction only in such union.¹⁰

Human beings who become firmly entrenched in God-choosing habits have a fixed character in harmony with this nature. The same cannot be said for those who have become firmly entrenched in God-rejecting habits. For them, there is a persistent dissonance between their character and their nature. Thus, there is difficulty with positing that those with God-rejection characters will continue to reject God with a probability of 1, a difficulty not faced by the parallel claim about those with God-choosing characters.¹¹ Put simply, their fundamental nature poses a constant challenge to their character, grating against it.

In this section, I want to expand on this idea in order to highlight the implausibility of the sort of *absolute* hard-heartedness that Yang and Davis have to postulate in order to respond to IOA. This implausibility is based on two interrelated

¹⁰ Yang and Davis provide no indication that they reject this theological idea, and so I will assume here and throughout that they accept it. Those who reject this idea may find some of the arguments that follow unconvincing. But if the only way for Yang and Davis to sustain their response to IOA is by rejecting the assumption that human beings are oriented towards union with God and can find true satisfaction only through such union, that is a significant conclusion.

¹¹ For a full discussion of this disparity, see Reitan (2007, 427–429).

points: first, the fact that the suffering produced by rejecting God would function as a persistent goad to rethinking the choice of separation, thereby threatening the stability of a commitment of character to such a choice; second, the fact that, based on the above arguments, on a separationist view of hell, God would not give up on the damned and so would bring to bear the infinite resources of the divine on the project of motivating a freely chosen change of heart. Under these conditions, it seems implausible to suppose that hard-heartedness would be *absolute*.

I begin with the first point. For creatures made for union with God, separation produces suffering as a natural consequence. This suffering is directly caused by the separation, and to the extent that this connection can or does become known or even suspected (or unconsciously recognized in the face of conscious denial) the suffering would function as a persistent motive to rethink the choices that produce the suffering. Furthermore, if we accept the common Christian view that rejecting God is the very worst thing that any created person can do to themselves, insofar as it involves cutting themselves off (to the extent that they can) from the source of every actual good and every real source of meaning, the resulting suffering would be the worst thing they can endure: hell. This is true even though, on the hell-as-separation thesis, hell does not include any punitive torments *in addition to* what naturally accompanies separation from God. As Davis puts it, ‘To be apart from the source of love, joy, peace, and light is to live miserably’ (Davis, 1990, 178–179). Marilyn Adams cautions against underestimating the horror of separation alone, at least when it is extended indefinitely: ‘For God to prolong life eternally while denying access to the only good that could keep us eternally interested would... eventually produce unbearable misery’ (Adams, 1993, 323). She defends this judgment with the analogy of a machine running contrary to its design—something that leads to its breakdown. For creatures designed for relationship with God, long-term separation grates and grinds and ultimately shatters them psychologically, resulting in a ‘torment of which this-worldly schizophrenia and depression are but the faintest approximation’ (Adams, 1993, 322). Although Adams envisions this in a context where separation is *imposed*, the same concept applies if it is freely chosen—unless, of course, the damned choose otherwise once things start to become unbearable.

Such misery is something we by nature long to escape. It is conceivable that the damned will for a long time try everything short of turning to God to assuage their misery, refusing to confront the possibility that they have made a horrible choice. They may erect illusions to preserve the notion that their misery has a cause other than rejecting God. On the separationist view, God in effect allows the damned to directly experience what their choice really means with all the unavoidability that characterizes persistent suffering. We can certainly imagine hard-hearted persons who, through self-deception and stubbornness, persist for a long while in the choices that perpetuate and even amplify their suffering—even for a lifetime. But what the absolute hard-heartedness posited by Yang and Davis requires us to suppose is that even if their torment does not diminish after a thousand lifetimes of trying *only*

God-rejecting paths of escape, their character is so fixed that it is not *possible* they will ever consider the one option they haven't tried.

But perhaps Yang and Davis do not need to posit *absolute* hard-heartedness. Perhaps all they need is a hard-heartedness sufficiently strong that at least some of the damned will persist in rejecting God to the point of despair: a point of such brokenness they stop making choices altogether. Willfully stubborn resistance to rethinking their choice eventually gives way to a catatonia of inaction. Perhaps we might say that at this point the probability of change is zero, because they have become characterized by a passivity that precludes *any* choices.

As a way of making sense of the idea that at least some of the damned have no probability of repenting over an infinite array of opportunities, this portrait of hard-heartedness leading to catatonic despair may be more plausible than absolute hard-heartedness. But before we can fully assess the plausibility of either, we must consider how a loving God who has not given up on the damned would act in relation both to the hard-hearted and to those in despair. The question is not merely whether it is plausible to imagine persons being so fixed in such states that the probability of changing course is zero. The question is also whether it is plausible to imagine this given a God who is *infinitely* powerful and wise, possesses *perfect* understanding of the damned's psychology, and who works ceaselessly to inspire change.

Confronted with the hard-hearted, such a God would presumably work to expose the illusions aimed at obscuring the connection between their misery and their alienation from God—and would do so using God's *infinite* wisdom and power. Not only do the hard-hearted confront, in the form of unavoidable suffering, the fact that the path they are on is not working, but God persistently shows them why and offers an alternative. And if they fall into despair before they change paths, God acts to offer hope, showing that despair does not reflect the truth of their condition. Whatever is the best thing to do or say to a damned soul at any given moment to help them escape the prison of their own making, God will do or say *that*. Whatever is the best conceivable circumstance for them to be in to inspire change, God will bring about *that*.

The question, in short, is how plausible the zero-probability-of-change hypothesis is, not only in the face of the direct experience of the unchoice-worthiness of what the damned have chosen, but given God's efforts to motivate a different choice. Put simply, of all conceivable conditions under which a person might be resistant to change, the damned exist under the conditions *least* conducive to such absolute intransigence—namely, the condition in which an infinitely wise and resourceful God is working without end to motivate a reconsideration of choices deeply harmful to those making them. Hence, Yang and Davis must not merely defend the plausibility of the claim that there are conditions under which some persons may become absolutely hard-hearted but must defend the plausibility of the claim that this actually happens in the conditions least conducive to its happening.

A possible objection here would be that all of this hinges on God actively intervening on behalf of the damned, and that such divine intervention would amount to refusing to give the damned the separation they have chosen. Hence, Yang and Davis might argue that while it is implausible to adopt their zero-probability-of-change hypothesis granted an infinitely resourceful God actively working to reform

the damned, such active intervention would amount to God refusing to respect the damned's choice to exist in separation from God. Insofar as the separationist view is premised on God valuing free choice enough to give the damned what they have chosen, Yang and Davis could argue that the line of response proposed here begs the question against the separationist view.

But while, on the separationist view, God is prepared *in a sense* to give the damned the separation they have chosen, Davis himself notes that the separation from God that hell offers is not 'total separation' because 'that would mean hell would not exist' (since on traditional theology everything that exists depends on God). As Davis insists, 'the biblical tradition denies that anything or anyone can ever be totally separated from God' (Davis, 1990, 178).

Giving the damned what they have chosen, then, does not mean letting them exist in total separation from God. The damned have rejected loving union with God. Letting them have what they have chosen means not forcing such union on them, instead letting them do without it and experience what that choice entails. If you are dying of thirst and refuse my offer of water out of fear that it's poison, respecting your choice means not forcing water down your throat. But I can still, consistently with such respect, leave water out for you and do what I can to allay your fears. Likewise, that God honors the choice of separation does not mean God withdraws the offer of union, and it does not mean God takes no steps to inspire a change of heart. This is not to say God *badgers* the damned. Badgering is rarely effective, and God would pursue the single most effective approach: choosing those moments when God knows the damned are most likely to be responsive and presenting the offer of loving union in the most effective conceivable way.

The hypothesis that there exist hard-hearted persons for whom the probability of changing their minds is zero *under these conditions* amounts to a speculative hypothesis so implausible that, absent truly compelling reasons to think it true, it should be rejected.

Respecting Hard-Heartedness

The other main problem with Yang's and Davis's appeal to absolute hard-heartedness is that it succeeds in undercutting IOA only by maintaining that the damned in effect lose their libertarian freedom. Those who remain eternally in hell remain there because it is *not* possible for them to choose otherwise. If this is right, then God's failure to save the damned can't be understood as motivated by respect for the libertarian freedom that the damned *actively possess* and which they continually exercise to reject God. Instead, it has to be understood as motivated by respect for *prior* libertarian free choices that brought about the condition (hardness of heart) whereby the damned have come to be without the libertarian freedom to accept divine grace.

Yang and Davis might argue that this fact puts them in the same position as those who say God should honor the fixed character that the blessed have come to enjoy out of respect for their prior free choices, even if that fixed character entails that the blessed lack libertarian freedom. While my earlier remarks should already suggest how I will respond, it is worth laying out the response with care.

Specifically, there are two important differences between confirmation in blessedness and hard-hearted alienation. The first is simply the difference in the welfare of the blessed and the damned: the former are experiencing the final end of human existence, that for which human persons were made and the best thing that can happen to anyone. The damned are experiencing the opposite. God honoring the state that guarantees blessedness thus expresses God's benevolent love *even if* one takes such honoring to involve permitting libertarian freedom to vanish away. God honoring a state that guarantees damnation does not, comparably, express benevolent love.

Put simply, there is a reason in the former case why an all-loving God would allow libertarian freedom to be forever gone: to restore that freedom to the blessed would be to change their character such that they are no longer consistently God-choosing people, thereby bringing it about that there are possible worlds in which they reject their blessed state. This would threaten the security of their blessedness. But restoring libertarian freedom to the hard-hearted in hell would amount to restoring hope by restoring to them the possibility of achieving the end for which human beings were made.

My second point is related to the first but focuses more on the fundamental nature and purpose of human freedom within the framework of Christian theology. In *God's Final Victory*, Kronen and Reitan (2011, 132–136) articulate a view of freedom—'rational freedom'—that we find in Aquinas. According to this view, the human will is naturally ordered to the good, such that when the truth about what is best is entirely clear, the will is determined by its nature to choose the best. Libertarian freedom is what such rational freedom looks like under conditions of uncertainty, where there is no unambiguously best choice and there is room for mixed or conflicting motives. Since the blessed no longer confront any uncertainty about what is best and no longer have any mixed or conflicting motives, the very same rational freedom ceases to exhibit the characteristics of libertarian freedom under the condition of blessedness. As such, for God to impose those characteristics on the blessed would involve a corruption or disruption of their freedom. But for the damned, their hard-hearted rejection of God is a result of their freedom already being corrupted by their own prior choices. Thus, restoring to them their libertarian freedom would amount to repairing what has been broken. Clearly, there is no parity between God acting to corrupt the exercise of human freedom and God acting to repair it.

In short, then, were God to exercise divine omnipotence to weaken the hold of hard-heartedness on the character of the damned so as to restore to them their libertarian freedom—even by so small a measure that the damned come to acquire a remote chance of changing their mind—God would thereby be healing a wound that the damned have inflicted on their own powers of free choice in a way that, given IOA, would bring about their salvation, liberating them from the worst fate imaginable and enabling them to freely choose the best. What reason would there be for a benevolent God to refrain from bestowing such a gift?

The most plausible answer is that, were God to do so, God would not be letting the damned become what they have chosen to become. Our libertarian freedom allows us to choose to be a certain kind of person. But the damned have chosen to be the kind of people who are hard-hearted against God. Were God to restore to them

some small measure of libertarian freedom, God would be failing to honor this prior free choice.¹²

There are three points worth making about this response. First, as Gwiazda shows, even a very remote possibility of choosing to leave hell would, given infinite opportunity, guarantee that the damned would eventually make that choice. And someone who is so set against God that they have only a one-in-ten-thousand chance of changing their mind would, under any ordinary understanding of hard-heartedness, be hard-hearted against God. Thus, if someone chose to make themselves hard-hearted against God, and God allowed them to become someone with a very remote chance of rethinking separation from God, God would then have allowed them to become what they had chosen to become—but in a form that did not preclude their salvation.

Second, there is the question of whether the choices that would lead someone to become hard-hearted against God are the kind for which the damned can rightly be called responsible, and hence the kind that a good God would properly be called upon to respect. Given traditional Christian teachings, such choices are based on a profound misunderstanding of the human good. Those who choose against God are choosing contrary to their own welfare. Worse: they are choosing to cut themselves off from the source of all goods and hence from a life worth living. But they surely do not know this.

In other words, if they make these choices, it is because they do not know what they do. They are not choosing alienation from God with a proper conception of what such alienation entails but under a false understanding. They are profoundly ignorant or egregiously deceived. The truth about what they have been choosing comes only later—when they have actually come to experience what this alienation means, based on the misery that mounts over time as they persist in being separated from ‘the source of love, joy, peace, and light’ (Davis, 1990, 178–179). But for Yang and Davis, by this point, they have become so hard-hearted they *cannot* change.

The picture we are left with is one in which choices made in profound ignorance or delusion lead to a hard-heartedness that prevents change once the natural consequences of those choices wash ignorance or delusions away. One starts out too misguided to make a good choice and ends up too fixed in one’s ways to change. This is the essential picture that motivates Talbott’s (1990, 36–38) argument that the choices of the damned are rooted in ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire—and hence do not exhibit a freedom that calls for respect. And it is what Marilyn Adams (1993, 313) seems to have in mind when she argues that the freedom of human beings is *impaired freedom*. On this picture, it is hardly clear that the damned are responsible for their fate at any point in this process, and it is not clear at any point that their choice has such a sacred character that God is obligated to preserve intact the unwavering hard-heartedness that results, even when preserving it means the creature is doomed to eternal misery.

¹² For a development of this line of argument, see Murray (1999, 63–64). For sustained responses to Murray, see Reitan (2001) and Kronen and Reitan (2011, 172–177).

My third and final point is this: while people might choose the actions that build habits and might even choose the habits themselves, they do not choose and are not independently responsible for *the degree of entrenchment* of the habits that result. But absolute hard-heartedness refers precisely to such a degree of entrenchment. As Kronen and Reitan note (2011, 176), people do not always or even usually choose to establish the character that emerges in them over time. Instead, they make choices in the moment that end up creating habits and patterns they did not directly choose. Thus, for example, we can suppose that many among the damned are those who have chosen to prioritize finite things over a relationship with God so consistently that it has become a habit, but it is not the habit itself they chose. But even when people do set out to become a certain kind of person by developing a habit, do they also choose their precise degree of entrenchment in that habit? Is their choice-making so refined that they choose not only to become a God-rejecting person but to become one whose probability of changing course is 0 rather than, say, 0.0001? Does it even make sense to suppose that anyone, in choosing their character, also chooses the total loss of libertarian freedom that, for Yang and Davis, is the essence of hard-heartedness?

I would argue that this is *not* something the damned have chosen, even if they chose the individual God-rejecting acts that formed the habit, and even if they set out to become God-rejecting people. Not only is the idea that we choose our degree of entrenchment implausible based on any introspective examination of human choices, but, more decisively, the damned did not choose the human nature with which they were created. If *absolute* hard-heartedness is a possible consequence of life choices, we can reasonably ask *why*. In a Christian context, the answer would have to be this: it would be because *God has so designed human nature that absolute hard-heartedness against God can emerge as a consequence of God-rejecting choices*. But even if God wouldn't design us without an ability to shape our character, we can imagine God so designing rational creatures that a consistent choice pattern generates a *high level* of entrenchment (thereby giving persons the power to shape who they become) without producing *absolute* entrenchment. Put another way, we could imagine God designing rational creatures such that there is an upper limit on the degree of entrenchment, so that the probability of continuing to choose in accord with an established pattern can rise to something like 0.999 but never to 1. Even if we suppose that created persons can and do freely choose to entrench themselves, no created person chooses the degree of entrenchment of which human nature is capable. As such, if they are able to become *absolutely* entrenched, it is not by virtue of their own choices but by virtue of God's.

Granted Christian theology, I would argue that there is evidence that God in fact has chosen otherwise. If God created humanity in God's image, implanting in us something of the nature of the divine at the most fundamental level such that our very nature orients us to God, this creative act could well be described as imposing an upper limit on how deeply we can entrench sinfulness in our souls. While we can, through sinful choices, make ourselves very broken indeed, we cannot reach such a degree of absolute depravity that there remains no lingering foothold for the good—because our nature, stamped with God's image, *is* that foothold.

And, given IOA, this is all God needs to ensure the ultimate salvation of all: permit people to become hard-hearted, but so design their character-forming capacities that there always remains a chance, however remote, that even the most hard-hearted will choose to change course. So, for Yang's and Davis's argument to work, we must assume that even though God *could* have designed human beings in this way, thereby guaranteeing the salvation of all in a freedom-respecting way, God chose otherwise. For their appeal to hard-heartedness to succeed against IOA, then, Yang and Davis must provide compelling reasons to think that a God who wants to save each created person chooses nevertheless not merely to grant them libertarian freedom and the capacity to form well-established God-rejecting character traits but also makes it possible for them to stumble into (presumably not directly choose) an entrenchment of character so absolute that they lose the libertarian freedom God initially gave them while God loses any hope of achieving His salvific aims for them.

Conclusion

Given all of these considerations, I can only conclude that Yang and Davis have failed to demonstrate that the hard-heartedness of the damned can be reasonably invoked to derail the force of the Infinite Opportunity Argument. The hard-heartedness in question must be more than a well-entrenched habit that is hard to break. It must be an absolutely immovable habit of choice that will never break (absent divine miraculous transformation) even under the pressures of endlessly experiencing the intolerable natural consequences of the choice and even given the unceasing efforts of a God with perfect knowledge of human psychology and infinite time and resources with which to inspire a change of heart. Furthermore, the defender of this view must confront the formidable challenge of explaining why a perfectly good God would design human nature such that choices made under conditions of profound ignorance have the power to establish not merely well-entrenched habits but absolutely immovable ones. And the defender of this view must, finally, explain why God would regard the resulting hard-heartedness as so sacred that even a modest divine intervention—transforming the hard-hearted person from being absolutely immovable in their choice pattern to being almost immovable in their choice pattern—is contrary to God's moral nature, even though such an intervention would save the damned, even though it is implausible to suppose the damned ever explicitly chose to be *absolutely* immovable, even though had they so chosen it would have been a choice made in profound ignorance, and even though God is a God of love who desires the salvation of all.

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