

# The Debate on Eternal Punishment in Late Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century English Literature

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IN HIS DICTIONARY Dr. Johnson defines "religion" as "Virtue, as founded upon reverence of God, and expectation of future rewards and punishments." The extent to which this expectation was supposed to govern conduct in this life was very much a bone of contention in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his valuable book *The Decline of Hell*, D. P. Walker deals with the debate on eternal torment, from its inception up to and through the seventeenth century, when it begins to be attacked with new vigor.<sup>1</sup> Walker considers the debate in European terms, as does E. R. Briggs in two recent articles.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis of the present review is more exclusively on the English debate, as sustained in the period between the Cambridge Platonists and the Romantics. In an attempt to discover what men felt about the doctrine of eternal punishment as well as what they merely said about it, the sources cited and the method adopted here will be literary rather than theological or philosophical.

It is evident that the doctrine of future rewards and punishments poses fundamental questions about the nature of man and God. Is man such a fallible creature that he can only behave well under threat of damnation? Is God such a vindictive and unjust being that he consigns mortal creatures to an immortality of pain? This was a question which Davenant's Philosopher asked of the dying Christian:

<sup>1</sup> D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> E. R. Briggs, "Pierre Cuppé's Debts to England and Holland," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 6 (1958), 37-66. See also "Mysticism and Rationalism in the Debate upon Eternal Punishment" in the same journal, 24 (1963), 241-254.

Why should our Sins, which not a moment last,  
 (For, to Eternity compar'd, extent  
 Of Life is, e're we name it, stopt and past)  
 Receive a doome of endless punishment?<sup>3</sup>

Again, what is to become of those whom the Anglican prayer-book calls "Jews, Turks, Infidels and Hereticks?" The variety of answers provided to these and other questions confirms the view that the eighteenth century was far from monolithic in its thought, and that there were wide divergences of opinion on the most fundamental issues.

In *The European Mind* Paul Hazard spoke of Jansenism as "a spirit harsh, forbidding, austere, sternly opposing the progressive dulcification of faith and morals."<sup>4</sup> A similar conflict expresses itself in the English thought of this period. On the one hand there is Puritanism, with its stark alternatives of reprobation and election, and its representation of the life of faith as an oscillation between extremes of despair and joy. On the other hand is the spirit of which Hazard speaks, working to achieve a "progressive dulcification of faith and morals." The emotional shrillness of Puritanism, reflected in many spiritual autobiographies of the time, cannot have commended itself to the more moderate minds of the eighteenth century. Hume might have been speaking of Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* when he had Philo declare, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, that:

These fits of excessive, enthusiastic joy, by exhausting the spirits, always prepare the way for equal fits of superstitious terror and dejection, nor is there any state of mind so happy as the calm and equable. But this state, it is impossible to support, where a man thinks, that he lies, in such profound darkness and uncertainty, between an eternity of happiness and an eternity of misery.<sup>5</sup>

The movement of "dulcification" did not originate in the eighteenth century. The efforts of the Cambridge Platonists were already, in the previous century, being directed to such an end. Burnet speaks of Benjamin Whichcote encouraging his students to read Plato, Cicero, and Plotinus, and of his conception of Christianity as "a doctrine sent from God, both to elevate and sweeten humane nature, in which he was a great example, as well as a wise and kind instructor."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sir William Davenant, "The Philosophers Disquisition directed to the Dying Christian" in *Works* (London, 1673), p. 326.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hazard, *The European Mind (1680-1715)*, tr. J. Lewis May (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), p. 419.

<sup>5</sup> *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in *Hume on Religion*, ed. Richard Wollheim (London: Collins, 1963), p. 202.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *History of his Own Time* (London, 1724), I, 187.

Human nature is to be "elevated" and "sweetened" by reason, which Whichcote described as "the candle of the Lord." In accordance with this rational spirit, and in accordance with their conception of God as an essentially "good" being, the Cambridge Platonists tend to minimize the legislative aspects and emphasize the psychological aspects of divine punishment. Their interpretation of this doctrine is figurative rather than literal. Thus in *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659) Henry More declares that the rack of conscience is "worse than a perpetually repeated death."<sup>7</sup>

The closeness of the connection between Cambridge Platonism and Latitudinarianism is suggested by the fact that in Burnet's *History of His Own Time* the terms are used interchangeably. At the very least it may be said that there are strong personal links between the two groups. Having spoken of Whichcote, Cudworth, Wilkins, More and Worthington, Burnet goes on to say that "The most eminent of those, who were formed under those great men I have mention'd, were Tillotson, Stillingfleet, and Patrick."<sup>8</sup>

According to *OED* a "Latitudinarian" is "one who, though not a sceptic, is indifferent as to creeds and forms." Dr. Johnson, more censoriously, defines him as "one who departs from orthodoxy." Johnson's definition obscures the important fact that the divines of this age, as Mark Pattison puts it, "did not intend to be other than orthodox."<sup>9</sup> Nor did all of them proceed far along the road of dulcification. For example Simon Patrick, Rector of St. Paul's, Covent Garden (who had come under the influence of the Cambridge Platonist John Smith), has a lively sense of the deep-rootedness of original sin, and places a corresponding emphasis upon eternal rewards. These, he says, are "the great motive to well doing."<sup>10</sup> G. R. Cragg has related this emphasis in Patrick's work to the condition of Restoration morals, which reflected the light of natural reason but feebly.<sup>11</sup> Even at this stage, however, it is perhaps significant that Patrick has little to say about the more forbidding doctrine of eternal punishment.

As in Cambridge Platonism, the appeal in Latitudinarianism is to reason rather than dogma or authority. It is perhaps possible,

<sup>7</sup> Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London, 1659), sig. B4.

<sup>8</sup> Burnet, *History*, I, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Pattison, "Tendencies of Religious Thought in England, 1688-1750," in *Essays* (London: Routledge, n.d.), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Patrick, *A Friendly Debate Between a Conformist and a Non-Conformist* (London, 1668), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> G. R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

however, to discriminate between the *kinds* of reason appealed to: the inner light of Cambridge Platonism has some affinity with that of some of the Puritan sects, whereas the "reason" of Latitudinarianism and subsequent eighteenth-century apologetics was a rather more cerebral faculty which seems more concerned with enforcing assent to the doctrine than in enforcing the doctrine itself. Thus John Wilkins, Bishop of Chester, a friend whom Pepys described as "a mighty rising man as being a Latitudinarian" was anxious

to prove, against the Infidels and Scoffers of this Age, the Reasonableness and the Credibility of this great Principle of Religion, concerning a future state of *Reward* and *Punishment*.<sup>12</sup>

According to Gilbert Burnet, Wilkins was one of those who, at Cambridge, "studied to propagate better thoughts, to take men off from being in parties, or from narrow notions, from superstitious conceits, and a fierceness about opinions."<sup>13</sup> This might also have been said about Burnet himself, and of John Tillotson, who both came under the influence of Wilkins.

Tillotson, perhaps the most influential of the Latitudinarians, addresses himself specifically to the theme of eternal punishment in his sermon "Of the Eternity of Hell Torments" preached before the Queen at Whitehall on 7 March 1690. This sermon attempts to mitigate the grimmer aspects of orthodox teaching, and is a notable landmark in the process of dulcification. "What a charming Idea does he give us of the *Deity*," exclaims the freethinker Anthony Collins, with somewhat serpentine smoothness.<sup>14</sup> "It is alone sufficient, without any further Argument, to make the *Atheist* wish there were a deity." It is a measure of Tillotson's prestige that Collins should claim him as one "whom all *English Free-Thinkers* own as their Head." Tillotson, if he does "depart from orthodoxy," does so only obliquely. Much of his sermon, indeed, seems to be a vigorous defense of the doctrine of eternal punishment. He resists all attempts, including that of Origen, to dilute it and suggest that such punishment may not be a real possibility. He offers no solace to sinners who cherish "the uncomfortable and uncertain hope of being discharged out of being, and reduced to their first nothing."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John Wilkins, *Sermons preach'd Upon several Occasions* . . . (London, 1677), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Burnet, *History*, I, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* . . . (London, 1713), p. 172.

<sup>15</sup> John Tillotson, "Of the Eternity of Hell Torments" in *Works*, ed. T. Birch (London, 1820), p. 111.

Tillotson sees the doctrine as a general deterrent rather than a judicial response to particular offenses. Furthermore, God is not obliged to execute what he has threatened. Henry More had made the same point in his *Annotations on Lux Orientalis* (1682) where he argued that a threat, or commination, differs from a promise in that the comminator is not obliged to make good his promise. "So that," says Tillotson, "what proportion crimes and penalties ought to bear to each other, is not so properly a consideration of justice, as of wisdom and prudence in the lawgiver," and "whatever the disproportion . . . between temporary sins and eternal sufferings, justice cannot be said to be concerned in it." Tillotson concludes by urging his listeners to take good note of the appalling nature of the deterrent, and to govern their lives accordingly, rather than quibble about points of interpretation.

What gives the debate on future rewards and punishments much of its interest is the fact that it was not exclusively theological, but involved a whole cluster of fundamental and familiar polarities—liberty versus servitude, anarchy versus law and order, the old-fashioned versus the new, the traditional versus the newfangled. These polarities emerge in the course of an extended and rather abusive attack on Latitudinarianism in George Hickes's pamphlet of 1695, *Some Discourses upon Dr. Burnet and Dr. Tillotson, Occasioned by the Late Funeral Sermon of the Former upon the Later*. Hickes, as a nonjuror, attacks Tillotson for having supported William of Orange. He goes on to describe as "another Blemish of his life" that sermon in which "he openly and directly writes against the Eternity of Hell Torments." He accuses Tillotson of undermining the doctrine of Christ's satisfaction, and reasserts the reality of hell torments, "which God hath not only threatened as a Judge, and solemnly enacted and decreed as a Law-giver, but our Saviour taught, as the great Doctor and Prophet of his Church."<sup>16</sup>

Tillotson had suggested in the same "wretched Sermon" that there was room for repentance in the next world. Hickes sees this as unwarranted meddling with the machinery of divine law and order, "a most presumptuous, dangerous, and heretical Insinuation."

And accordingly when it was first Published, the Atheists, and Deists, and Socinians of the Town, carried it about them to show it in all Places, glorying everywhere in the Doctrines of it, and extolling the Author for a

<sup>16</sup> George Hickes, *Some Discourses upon Dr. Burnet and Dr. Tillotson* (London, 1695), p. 45.

Man who durst speak Truth, and set Mankind free from the Slavish Notion of eternal Torments.

What is at issue here is not an abstruse theological point, but radically differing conceptions of the nature of man. Hickes may be seen as the spokesman of an orthodox, Augustinian view of human nature, Tillotson (and Burnet) as those of a more optimistic and less dogmatic (or more secular) view. Where Hickes venerates tradition, authority and dogma, Tillotson venerates reason, freedom of thought and human nature. As might be expected Hickes is angered by Tillotson's use of the phrase "the just freedom of Human Nature," which he derides as "one of the golden Phrases of the Latitudinarians." This "deceitful insignificant Phrase"

may be used against Laws and Constitutions, that restrain mens Liberties in civil Societies, in any other respect, as well as in not resisting the Supreme Power, and would help to justify insurrections not only of Slaves, but of Subjects, and more especially of the common People all the World over.

In his reply to Hickes, *Reflections upon a Pamphlet, Entitled, Some Discourses upon Dr. Burnet and Dr. Tillotson*, Burnet employs the heavy armour in his theological arsenal. He represents Hickes as a displaced and therefore peevish Jacobite, and stands by "the just freedoms of Human Nature":

There is a sort of men, that because they hope to be the instruments of *Tyranny* and *Cruelty*, cannot with any patience bear the mention of *Freedom* or *Liberty*. They are too much *Slaves* themselves to be capable of Generous Thoughts. Our Author seems to fall into Fits when they are but named.<sup>17</sup>

One would not dispute that "the Age of Reason" is an inadequate description of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, "reason" is often invoked by critics of the doctrine of eternal punishment, and is indeed comprehensible if by it we understand not so much the unaided power of the mind to arrive at truth, but rather the avoidance of extremism, absurdity, and irrationality. These attributes, and the social, religious, and political climate favorable to their growth, are suggested more accurately by the word "reasonableness" than "reason." The deity that John Locke venerates in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) is in no way vindictive or capricious. Virtuous pagans will not be punished for having been "strangers to the oracles of God"; for them the light of reason will have proved a sufficient guide.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *Reflections upon a Pamphlet* (London, 1696), p. 116.

Locke's reasoning about the Christian doctrine of a future state is, characteristically, prudential. Self-interest exercises a much stronger motive force than aesthetic attractiveness. "The philosophers, indeed, shewed the beauty of virtue; they set her off as drew men's eyes and approbation to her; but leaving her unendowed, very few were willing to espouse her."<sup>18</sup> Locke criticizes the doctrine of eternal punishments largely by ignoring it. He appeals to the hopes rather than the fears of men, and has much more to say of rewards than punishments. Characteristically, again, he represents these rewards in terms readily intelligible to what C. B. Macpherson has called "possessive market society."

But now there being put into the scales, on her [i.e. virtue's] side, "an exceeding and immortal weight of glory," interest is come about to her; and virtue now is visibly the most enriching purchase, and by much the best bargain.

Here the complexities of the moral life are narrowed down to a simple either/or. A similar simplification of the ethical scheme occurs in *Spectator* 575, where Addison debates the question, "In which of these two lives [the present or the future] it is our chief Interest to make our selves happy?" He approaches the question of future rewards and punishment in a more sophisticated manner in *Spectator* 447. Good and evil are considered here in psychological terms, and as in some sense constituting their own reward and punishment. In a rather Platonic vein Addison represents evil as attachment to bodily things at the expense of spiritual.

Those evil Spirits, who, by long Custom, have contracted in the Body Habits of Lust and Sensuality, Malice and Revenge, an Aversion to everything that is good, just or laudable, are naturally seasoned and prepared for Pain and Misery.<sup>19</sup>

The pains of hell are, in this scheme, self-inflicted. The wicked "will naturally become their own Tormenters." As in the philosophy of Leibniz and Descartes, God's personal involvement with the world is greatly diminished. His justice is exercised through immutable laws rather than through personal arbitration. These laws, moreover, are discoverable to all men at all times. Addison goes on to commend John Scott, author of *The Christian Life*, for raising "noble speculations" on this subject. What he seems to find so attractive in Scott's

<sup>18</sup> John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I. T. Ramsay (London: Black, 1958), p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. D. F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), IV, 72.

"scheme" is his treatment of heaven and hell as the symptoms of moral order and disorder within the individual rather than a mechanical arrangement imposed by an external agency. Scott discusses the question in terms of psychology rather than religious dogma. The greatest incentive to religious belief is the supposition that

There is as inseparable a Connection between *Grace* and *Glory*, *Sin* and *Hell*, as there is between *Fire* and *Heat*, *Frost* and *Cold*, or any other necessary *Cause* and its *Effect*.<sup>20</sup>

Scott seems to imply that heaven and hell are states that may be achieved in this life, consequent upon virtuous or wicked conduct. In the practice of virtue "we do naturally *grow up* to the heavenly State, as, on the Contrary, . . . in the course of a sinful Life we do by a necessary Efficiency gradually *sink* ourselves into the State of the Damned." It must be observed, however, that in Part II of *The Christian Life* (1685) Scott seems to revert to a more orthodox position, asserting the degeneracy of mankind, the feebleness of natural, and the necessity of revealed religion. Future rewards and punishments are discussed at some length here, and the emphasis is again theological rather than psychological. It must be said that posterity has not endorsed Addison's high valuation of Scott: *The Dictionary of National Biography* gives him one column-space where it gives Tillotson twelve and William Sherlock four and a half.

In the writings of Locke and Addison there is a certain good-humored leisureliness in the discussion of rewards and punishments in the life to come. A good deal of time is spent in discriminating between the more and less "reasonable" parts of the Christian doctrine. Orthodox Anglican divines were quick to point to the dangers of excessive reliance on reason. William Sherlock deplored the atheism and infidelity of the age and said, "it is all owing to resolving our Faith more into Natural Reason than into Revelation."<sup>21</sup> Nor did Swift have a sanguine view of the powers of natural reason. Man is not intrinsically rational and clear-sighted, but a frail and feeble creature, enveloped in original sin. The acceptance of the doctrine of future rewards and punishments is a matter of obligation rather than choice: "human nature is so constituted, that we can never pursue any thing heartily but upon hopes of a reward."<sup>22</sup> The view of man expressed here is not exalted, but neither is it unorthodox. As Donald Greene

<sup>20</sup> John Scott, *The Christian Life* . . . (London, 1683), preface.

<sup>21</sup> William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Happiness of Good Men and the Punishment of the Wicked, in the Next World* . . . (London, 1704), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Sermons*, ed. H. Davis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), p. 244.

has pointed out in a recent article, it is perfectly conformable to Augustinianism, or that side of Christianity that strongly affirms the fact of original sin.<sup>23</sup> Such affirmations were frequently made by other churchmen of the period. Robert South, for example, writes that

The mind of Man is naturally licentious, and there is nothing, which it is more averse from, than Duty. Nothing which it more abhors than Restraint. It would if let alone, lash out, and Wantonize in a boundless Enjoyment and Gratification of all its Appetites, and Inclinations.<sup>24</sup>

Human reason is of no avail against these appetites, and it is only by erecting a powerful structure of rewards and punishments that any restraint can be achieved. This is not to say that sensibility to rewards and punishments is the prerogative of rational creatures. Gulliver tells his Houyhnhnm master that horses in his country "were indeed sensible of Rewards and Punishments; but his Honour would please to consider, that they had not the least Tincture of Reason any more than the Yahoos in this Country."<sup>25</sup>

Alexander Pope's attitudes to the subject are ambivalent. He has little to say of future rewards and punishments in *An Essay on Man*, a work which seems to breathe a certain sympathy with the movement of "dulcification" in theology. It is equally clear, however, that the "soft Dean" who, in the "Epistle to Burlington," "never mentions Hell to ears polite" is a figure to be ridiculed, as are the Latitudinarian divines of the reign of William and Mary.

The following License of a Foreign Reign  
Did all the Dregs of bold *Socinus* drain;  
Then Unbelieving Priests reform'd the Nation,  
And taught more *Pleasant* Methods of Salvation;  
Where Heav'n's Free Subjects might their *Rights* dispute,  
Lest God himself shou'd seem too *Absolute*.<sup>26</sup>

Pope (as a Roman Catholic) and South and Swift (as high churchmen) were hostile to incipient Pelagianism. They see human rationality as at best but a dim and imperfect manifestation, with little power to influence, and less to govern human actions. The Yahoo is a more recognizable image of man than the Houyhnhnm. The language of rewards and punishment has at least the advantage of being comprehensible to the meanest intellect. What South called "the two grand

<sup>23</sup> Donald Greene, "Augustinianism and Empiricism: A Note on Eighteenth Century English Intellectual History," *ECS*, 1 (Fall 1967), 33-68.

<sup>24</sup> Robert South, *Twelve Sermons upon Various Occasions* (London, 1718), III, 210.

<sup>25</sup> *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. H. Davis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), p. 241.

<sup>26</sup> *An Essay on Criticism in Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. A. Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), pp. 554-549.

Affections of Hope and Fear"—the pivots upon which rewards and punishments turn—are to be found in every breast.<sup>27</sup> In Fielding's *Amelia* we find Dr. Harrison urging the efficacy of Christianity on the same grounds, namely, that it appeals directly to these "grand Affections." Fielding appears to be critically aware of the ambiguous line taken by such writers as Samuel Clarke. According to Clarke "the view of *particular Rewards and Punishments* . . . is only an after-consideration . . . only an additional weight to inforce the practice of what Men were before obliged to by right reason."<sup>28</sup> He also says, however, that belief in such is necessary to make the obligations of morality and natural religion effectual in practice. South had made a similar distinction between "a *Sufficiency of Worth* . . . to deserve our Choice" and "a *Sufficiency of Power* actually to *engage* our Choice."<sup>29</sup> But where South is explicit on the necessity of the latter, Clarke is rather ambiguous. His is the dilemma of many a churchman of his time, a dilemma succinctly expressed by Mark Pattison: "The orthodox writers had to maintain the theory of rewards and punishments in such a way as not to be inconsistent with the theory of the disinterestedness of virtue which they had made part of their theology."<sup>30</sup> It would appear that future rewards and punishments are not such an "after-consideration" as Clarke had previously alleged:

though Virtue is unquestionably *worthy to be chosen for its own sake*, even without any appreciation of Reward; yet it does not follow that it is therefore entirely self-sufficient, and able to support a Man under all kinds of sufferings, and even Death it self, for its sake; without any prospect of future recompense.<sup>31</sup>

Shaftesbury's contribution to this debate is of the first importance. He regards Locke's "other-worldly Benthamism"—the phrase is Charles Vereker's—with considerable distaste. Where Locke argues that virtue is "the most enriching purchase, and by much the best bargain" Shaftesbury declares, in his "Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour" that "if Virtue be not really estimable in itself, I can see nothing estimable in following it for the sake of a Bargain."<sup>32</sup> The argument that virtue is "really estimable in itself" in no way compromises the Christian ethic; on the contrary it is threatened rather by the

<sup>27</sup> Cited by M. C. Battestin in *The Moral Basis of Fielding's Art* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* . . . (London, 1706), p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> South, *Twelve Sermons*, IV, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Pattison, *Tendencies of Religious Thought*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Clarke, *Obligations of Natural Religion*, p. 116.

<sup>32</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks* (London, 1737), I, 97-98.

rigid exponents of the doctrine of future rewards and punishments. As Theocles' friend says, in *The Moralists*, "by making Rewards and Punishments the principal Motives to Duty, the Christian Religion in particular is overthrown, and its greatest Principle, that of *Love*, rejected and expos'd."<sup>33</sup> Shaftesbury writes here like "the friend of man," and in exactly the same vein as Boileau's twelfth Epistle, "Sur l'amour de Dieu." He steers a skillful course between on the one hand, Augustinianism, and on the other, the utilitarian ethic of Locke: he succeeds in avoiding the pessimism of the former and the complacent selfishness of the latter.

At the same time, however, it is not true to say that Shaftesbury totally rejects the doctrine of rewards and punishments. Martin C. Battestin overstates his case when he argues that the "rod and sweet-meat" incentives of religion find no such place in Shaftesbury's "speculative idealism" as they do in Fielding's Latitudinarian models.<sup>34</sup> It would be more accurate to say that Shaftesbury operates a dual standard, one for gentlemen, and another for those who are not gentlemen. A study of Shaftesbury's ideas on this matter supports Ian Watt's observation that the Augustans "conceptualized the distinction" between the mob and the elite "and applied it more unremittingly than ever before."<sup>35</sup> Where the true gentleman obeys his own reasoned standards of conduct the common man requires the external restraints of reward and punishment. Unlike Locke, who (in this debate at least) seems to be on the side of the "generality," Shaftesbury is on the side of the gentleman. The very tone of voice in which the distinction is made is restrained, ironical, gentlemanly:

for those who have no better a Reason for being *honest* than the Fear of a *Gibet* or a *Jail*; I shou'd not, I confess, much covet their Company, or Acquaintance.<sup>36</sup>

In his "Inquiry concerning Virtue" Shaftesbury acknowledges the efficacy of rewards and punishments in public and private life. The doctrine of future rewards and punishments is also efficacious in religion: "How mercenary or servile soever it may be accounted, [it] is yet, in many circumstances, a great Advantage, security, and support to Virtue."<sup>37</sup> But in both spheres, with respect to both present and

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., II, 279.

<sup>34</sup> Battestin, *Moral Basis of Fielding's Art*, p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Watt, "The Ironical Tradition in Augustan Prose from Swift to Johnson" in *Restoration and Augustan Prose* (Los Angeles: University of California William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1956), pp. 20-21.

<sup>36</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, I, 125.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., II, 60.

future, it is "the mere Vulgar" who are most exercised by such considerations. Shaftesbury deplores the greedy spiritual individualism that grows to exclude the gentler feelings of family love and human kinship. He foresees the possibility of strife between self-love and social, and sees the dire implications of the doctrine of rewards and punishments in this pre-emptive role:

the other common and natural Motives to Goodness are apt to be neglected, and lost much by Dis-use. Other interests are hardly so much as computed, whilst the Mind is thus transported in the pursuit of a high Advantage and Self-Interest, so narrowly confin'd within our-selves.<sup>38</sup>

The debate about eternal punishment was cited by Anthony Collins in 1713 as "a Specimen of the Diversity of Opinions of the Priests of the Church of *England*, all pretended to be deduc'd from the Scriptures."<sup>39</sup> Collins, in his *Discourse of Free-Thinking*, took pleasure in arguing that "the most Divine of all Books lays . . . a foundation for difference of Opinion." Rather in the manner of Shaftesbury, Collins pours gentlemanly scorn on what he takes to be the manifestations of superstition—in this case "the conceit of immortal Ills." Collins rejects the conception of a jealous and vindictive deity in favor of one who takes a benevolent interest in our welfare. Commending Tillotson's "charming Idea" of the deity he asks "*Is it not every Man's interest, that there should be such a Governour of the World, as really designs our Happiness . . . we have reason to believe God to be such a Being, if he be at all.*"<sup>40</sup>

William Whiston's comment on this portion of Collins's argument, as expressed in *Reflexions on an Anonymous Pamphlet, Entitled, A Discourse of Free Thinking* (1713) was that "We have here *Superstition* and *Religion* perpetually confounded." So far from being servile or superstitious the Apostolical Constitutions and the Scriptures are

for certain the most just, rational, pious and regular Method of an holy Life, or divine Worship, of a righteous, charitable, and humble Behavior, of a regular Discipline and of an heavenly Conversation that ever was upon God's Earth; and that without any Terrors or affrightful Threats upon any, but the obstinately Wicked and Incurable.<sup>41</sup>

Though Whiston does not believe that the wicked will be eternally tormented, he says that God's vengeance is such as not to be thought of "without Horror, Agony and Amazement." There follows an Addisonian appeal to prudence: "what wise Man would run the least

<sup>38</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, II, 68.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony Collins, *Discourse of Free Thinking*, p. 68.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> Whiston, p. 24.

Risque of all this . . . ?” Of the eminent group of English Arians that included Locke, Newton, and Samuel Clarke, Whiston, as D. P. Walker points out, was the only one to publicly affirm his disbelief in eternal torment. This affirmation is to be found in *The Eternity of Hell Torments Considered* (1740).

It is evident from *Christianity as old as the Creation* (1730) that Matthew Tindal, its author, was a great admirer of John Tillotson, “that great and good Man Dr. Tillotson,” “the incomparable Archbishop Tillotson.” Like Tillotson, Tindal argues that God is properly an object of rational faith rather than superstitious terror. He deprecates the claims of those who “impute such Actions to him, as make him resemble the worst of Beings, and so run into downright *Demonism*. And let me add, Men of good Sense, and who mean well, will naturally fall into the same Sentiments; a Shaftesbury will say the same as a Tillotson.”<sup>42</sup> Like Shaftesbury, Tindal seems to feel that those who have to be induced by the incentives and constraints of future rewards and punishments are very much second-class citizens. He makes the same kind of distinction between gentlemen or men of principle, and those governed by what he calls “servile Motives.”

In the course of his discussion (Vol. I, chap. 4) Tindal refers to Thomas Burnet’s *De Statu Mortuorum*. This book was translated into English by Matthias Earbery in 1728, and is discussed at some length in D. P. Walker’s *The Decline of Hell*. Though Burnet concedes that the voices of Scripture and Christ himself seem plainly to assert the reality of eternal punishment, he evidently finds it a harsh doctrine to swallow. He points out the doubtful accuracy of “eternal” as a translation of the Hebrew word in the Scriptures, which may rather mean “a long and undetermined Time.” He appeals from the theology of cruelty and retribution to that of love and “reasonableness” and adopts the tone of voice appropriate for such an appeal:

if you will vouchsafe to hearken to me, not clamorously urging you, but gently advising you, I would rather have you call these indefinite than infinite Torments.<sup>43</sup>

Dr. Johnson’s affinities, in this particular debate, seem to be distinctly Augustinian. His views on the subject are cogently expressed in number 41 of the *Idler*. His estimation of humanity’s unaided powers is not sanguine. His pessimism expresses itself, however, in a generalized melancholy rather than in the bitter ironies and inversions of

<sup>42</sup> Tindal, *Christianity as old as the Creation*, 1730, p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Burnet, *A Treatise Concerning the State of the Dead . . .* (London, 1738), p. 394.

Swift. Frail man is forced by circumstances "to take refuge in religion."<sup>44</sup> Such deprivations as the death of friends "are the calamities by which Providence gradually disengages us from the love of life." Our present predicament is so gloomy that we are obliged to believe in a future life. This is the only answer to the rhetorical question posed at the conclusion of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*:

Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,  
Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?

Johnson concludes by discriminating between the arid consolations of philosophy and in particular those offered by Epicurus and Zeno, and the more substantial solace of the Christian faith.

Real alleviation of the loss of friends, and rational tranquility in the prospect of our own dissolution, can be received only from the promises of Him in whose hands are life and death, and from the assurance of another and better state, in which all tears will be wiped from the eyes, and the whole soul shall be filled with joy. Philosophy may infuse stubbornness, but religion only can give patience.

Johnson took the doctrine of rewards and punishments very seriously indeed. There is a well-known passage in Boswell's *Life* in which Johnson admits to his friend Dr. Adams, Master of Pembroke College, Oxford, that he is "much oppressed by the fear of death."

JOHNSON. "... as I cannot be *sure* that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned." (looking dismally.) DR. ADAMS. "What do you mean by damned?" JOHNSON. (passionately and loudly) "Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly."<sup>45</sup>

Boswell evidently feels it necessary to make excuses for Johnson's attitude. He explains that his "gloomy agitation" is the product of a melancholy temperament, and is in no way to be seen as a reflection upon the wholesomeness of Christianity.

Of the general drift of Hume's writings on religion Boswell had no doubt. In a letter to Johnson of 9 July [June?], he professes to be scandalized at "The Life of David Hume" which had recently appeared with a letter by Adam Smith subjoined, which mentioned Hume's intrepidity in the face of approaching death. "Is not this an age of daring effrontery?" asks Boswell, and suggests that Johnson might take it upon himself to "knock Hume's and Smith's heads together, and make vain and ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous.

<sup>44</sup> *Idler*, ed. W. J. Bate, J. M. Bullitt, L. F. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 130.

<sup>45</sup> Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), IV, 299.

Would it not be worth your while," he asks, "to crush such noxious weeds in the moral garden?"<sup>46</sup>

In actual fact Hume's "infidelity," if indeed it can be so called, is a good deal less "ostentatious" and more oblique than Boswell supposes. It is one of Hume's favorite devices to present sceptical opinions under the guise of speeches by fictional characters. Thus in part XI of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* scepticism about the notion of a future state is voiced by "a friend who loves sceptical paradoxes."<sup>47</sup> This friend engages to make a speech on behalf of Epicurus (who deems the doctrine of a future state an "arbitrary supposition") against his critics.

Hume extends this strategy in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, which are cast in the form of a debate between Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo. The main burden of Philo's argument, which is surely Hume's, is that "human reasoning and disputation" can tell us nothing certain about the truth of religion. Human reason is feeble enough "even in subjects of common life and practice." How much more so are its determinations in "theological reasonings," in "points so sublime, so abstruse, so remote from common life and experience."<sup>48</sup> Here the object of attack is the notion that religion is a science of demonstration, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.

According to Philo, religious motives such as the doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments are less effective than natural inclination. They degrade the Deity to "a capricious daemon, who exercises his power without reason and without humanity" and sometimes have bad effects upon conduct. Thus

the steady attention alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence.

Philo baldly characterizes such habits of mind as "the motives of vulgar superstition." "True religion," he says, "has no such pernicious consequences." But unfortunately this is "confined to very few persons," namely, those of a philosophical bent. Here again we meet Shaftesbury's dichotomy, though Hume speaks of "philosophers" rather than "gentlemen." Popular religion approximates to gloomy superstition in which terror is the primary principle.

Hume's early essay "On the Immortality of the Soul" (1741-1742)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., III, 119.

<sup>47</sup> *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 132.

<sup>48</sup> *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, p. 103.

also provides the context for some specific remarks on the doctrine of rewards and punishments. He argues that "it is the gospel, and the gospel alone, that has brought life and immortality to light": it is difficult to prove the immortality of the soul "by the mere light of reason." There is nothing in nature or reason that enforces the doctrine of a future state in which God administers rewards and punishments: "There arise indeed in some minds some unaccountable terrors with regard to futurity; but these would quickly vanish were they not artificially fostered by precept and education."<sup>49</sup> If there is indeed a future state "of infinitely greater consequence" then we may justly feel that we have been cruelly cheated by nature in not having been given some intimations to this effect. The concept that the present life is a probationary state has no support from reason or nature since, Hume says, "the half of mankind die before they are rational creatures."

In direct refutation of Bishop Butler, Hume argues that "the physical arguments from the analogy of nature are strong for the mortality of the soul." "How contrary to analogy . . . to imagine that one single form, seeming the frailest of any, and subject to the greatest disorders, is immortal and indissoluble?" Hume concludes that the powers of reason must confess themselves unable to support the doctrine of a future state, and the rewards and punishments that go with it. It is revelation, and revelation only, that can support it. The last paragraph speaks volumes by its very brevity. "Nothing could set in a fuller light the infinite obligations which mankind have to Divine revelation, since we find that no other medium could ascertain this great and important truth."

Gibbon's attitude to the doctrine of eternal punishment, as cherished by some of the early fathers, can be indicated by quoting two sentences from chapter XVI of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

The condemnation of the wisest and most virtuous of the Pagans, on account of their ignorance or disbelief of the divine truth, seems to offend the reason and the humanity of the present age. But the primitive church, whose faith was of a much firmer consistence, delivered over, without hesitation, to eternal torture, the far greater part of the human species.<sup>50</sup>

The cautious judiciousness of the first sentence is enforced in terms of structure as well as expressed in terms of verbal meaning. The second is stylistically jerky and halting; it has the air of having been extorted forcefully from an unwilling, even slightly appalled witness. Gibbon

<sup>49</sup> David Hume, *Essays* (London: Routledge, n.d.), p. 424.

<sup>50</sup> *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London: Methuen, 1897), II, 26.

goes on to quote a passage in which "the stern Tertullian" rejoices at the prospect of the sufferings of pagan philosophers and writers, the former "blushing in red-hot flames with their deluded scholars." Significantly, it was upon Tertullian that Whiston had conferred the dubious honor of being the first promoter of the doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments.<sup>51</sup> Here again Gibbon's response is one of gentlemanly withdrawal from a scene of barbarism. He breaks off Tertullian's speech with an abrupt hyphen and makes a gesture towards his readers at once deferential and flattering. At this point we can observe the mind of the eighteenth century in one of its most characteristic movements, rejecting passion, zeal, and doctrinal rigidity, and moving towards reason, moderation, and humanity. "But the humanity of the reader will permit me to draw a veil over the rest of this infernal description, which the zealous African pursues in a long variety of affected and unfeeling witticisms."

Tertullian, whose conception of God has been described as "the wickedest thing yet invented by the black heart of man"<sup>52</sup> was certainly not an eighteenth-century gentleman. Where his style is exclamatory and excitable, that of the historian is cool, ironical and given to understatement. Shaftesbury is implicit in Gibbon as an exponent of the gentlemanly style, though Gibbon has refined upon his predecessor's practice of laughing at absurdity and taken it to a fine art. The difference can be appreciated by comparing Shaftesbury's account of Jewish perverseness in *An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* with that of Gibbon in Chapter XVI of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

The fact that Gibbon's irony has a social bias does not justify A. E. Dyson's intimation that he was an insensitive and arrogant Pharisee: "One can almost hear the writer thanking his birth and breeding that he is not as other men are."<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, Gibbon pays his readers the compliment of supposing that they have the same humane standards as himself. Dyson goes on to observe that

some qualities which seem essential to history or biography at its best we shall look for in vain: the sympathy which understands other temperaments and ways of life, the sensitivity which can admire idealism and nobility even in those who are in error, the compassion which embraces the erring and thinks in terms of redemption rather than of censure.

By a curious inversion Dyson has attributed to Gibbon faults which are more properly attributable to the objects of Gibbon's censure—the

<sup>51</sup> William Whiston, *The Eternity of Hell Torments Considered* . . . (London, 1740), p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> A. E. Dyson, *The Crazy Fabric* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 55.

barbarous Tertullian, for example. It is perhaps significant that Dyson cites no evidence for these strictures upon Gibbon. His objections seem to be based on an *a priori* argument from the negative nature of irony as such rather than any particular passages of *The Decline and Fall*.

With the poems and visions of William Blake the wheel comes full circle from the attitudes of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Blake's Christianity is based on the New Testament rather than the Old, on "the Religion of Jesus, Forgiveness of Sin" rather than on the inflexible commandments of a jealous father figure. The very idea that sins are to be punished by authority is offensive to Blake. In the draft account of his painting "A Vision of the Last Judgment" he notes that the Furies are represented by men, not women, and adds, banteringly, "The Spectator may suppose them Clergymen in the Pulpit, scourging Sin instead of Forgiving it."<sup>54</sup> Inflexible unforgiveness, so far from being the teaching of Christ, is the hallmark of the damned. Blake's hell is populated by those who would maintain such doctrines as the eternality of hell torments. Hell is an inflexible and dogmatic state of mind. "In Hell all is Self Righteousness; there is no such thing there as Forgiveness of Sin."<sup>55</sup> In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he observes, in passing, that the enjoyments of genius "to Angels look like torment and insanity."

In the literature of the romantic movement the doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments receives scant consideration. Poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, with their insistence upon the human values of sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness, have little time for the harsh corrugations of dogma. Literal belief in eternal punishments becomes, in much of the literature of the latter part of the eighteenth century, the characteristic of such moral grotesques as Burns's "Holy Willie." Unlike many earlier writers, who had tended to dismiss the pretensions of the Puritan as mere hypocrisy, Robert Burns, and in the next century, James Hogg, made more of an effort to explore his psychology. Both Burns and Hogg attempt to get inside the mind of the extreme Presbyterian, and the result is to suggest that he is a self-deceiver rather than a hypocrite. There is also an element of perversity in his belief. The more gruesome doctrines of Calvinism, such as the belief in eternal damnation, are actually attractive to him. In *The Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* Hogg gives a penetrating diagnosis of those for whom such beliefs have an appeal. As the old

<sup>54</sup> *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. G. Keynes (London: Hart-Davies, 1961), p. 641.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, *Vision of the Last Judgment*, p. 65.

woman Lucky Shaw says, in giving an account of the devil's preaching at Auchtermuchty, "Nothing in the world delights a truly religious people so much as consigning them to eternal damnation."<sup>56</sup>

What general conclusions are suggested by the foregoing discussion of eternal rewards and punishments?

It is evident that a process of dulcification, initiated in the seventeenth century, was maintained in the eighteenth, both within and without the church. It is a process that the theology of our own day has not, in general, sought to reverse. In his book *Evil and the God of Love*, described by a reviewer as "required reading in the colleges," Professor John Hick describes the doctrine of eternal punishment as a "grim fantasy"; "to assert that the sufferings caused by earthly wrong-doing are eternal is . . . to go beyond anything warranted by either revelation or reason, and to fall into a serious perversion of the Christian Gospel."<sup>57</sup> In the period under discussion the doctrine of eternal punishment is under attack from two quarters, from churchmen such as Tillotson and Tindal, and from critics less friendly to Christianity, such as Anthony Collins, Hume, and Gibbon. The main grounds on which the doctrine is to be criticized are, for the former, that it is inconsistent with a just and compassionate deity, and, for the latter, that it is a piece of superstition kept alive by priests. Both parties may consider the question in terms of Shaftesbury's dichotomy between "gentlemen" and "the vulgar" and employ an ironical tone of voice at the expense of the latter. This not only discredits the doctrine of eternal punishment, but also that of eternal rewards. Thus the prudential ethic of Whigs like Locke and Addison comes to be criticized on the grounds that it appeals too narrowly to the selfish passions.

At the same time it is clear that in the period under discussion the process of dulcification did not receive unanimous assent. Some of the most powerful minds of the time strongly adhered to the doctrine of original sin, and made their belief in the complementary doctrine of rewards and punishments quite explicit. The belief in the application of these doctrines in the next world seems to go along with belief in principles of subordination and restraint in the present. George Hickes (the critic of Tillotson), Swift, and Dr. Johnson are all hostile to Whig ideology. Johnson confessed himself to be "a friend to subordination, as most conducive to the happiness of mankind," and such a preference seems implicit in both Hickes and Swift.

In view of the *prima facie* connection between these attitudes it is

<sup>56</sup> James Hogg, *Memoirs* (London: Cresset Press, 1947), p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 385.

difficult to give unreserved assent to Professor Donald Greene's argument that "the dominant ethic of the intellectual life of eighteenth-century England, sustained by the powerful traditions of both Augustinian Christianity and empiricist philosophy, was one of *disinhibition*." By "disinhibition" Greene explains that he means "the release of human potential, emotional and intellectual, for good, the freeing of the human spirit from the bondage of the self and its narrow lusts and fears, the growth of the human capacity for awareness and feeling, for love and understanding." But what strikes me about so much of the greatest literature of the eighteenth century is its assertion not of the human potential for good, but for evil, for bathos, for absurdity and stupidity. One may agree with Greene when he says that "Swift was not presenting the quiet, serene, vividly aware, emotionally sensitive Houyhnhnms . . . to be condemned." But one may also feel that the conduct of the Houyhnhnms is so dissimilar from that of ordinary human beings as to amount to a statement of despair rather than hope. The Yahoo, as suggested earlier in this essay, is a more recognizable image of man than the Houyhnhnm. The term "disinhibition," that is, the removal of restraints and checks, would seem more appropriately applied to the genial moral philosophy of a man like Shaftesbury than the troubled faith of a Dr. Johnson. Clearly, if one has an optimistic view of man then one can afford to loosen such restraints as rewards and punishment. But for the Augustinian Christian, with his low estimate of human rationality and his fear of the human potential for evil, the "inhibitions" of judicial rewards and punishments in this world, and eternal punishment in the next, are absolutely necessary for the preservation of some semblance of order. Where Greene enlists Pope, Swift, and Johnson as apologists of "disinhibition" I think there is a good case for regarding them as apologists, rather, of "inhibition." If, as Greene argues these are "Augustinian" writers, then the latter would seem to be the more intelligible standpoint to take.

What seems to be reflected in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a conflict between two conceptions of human nature that can be variously polarized as libertarian-authoritarian, Augustinian-Pelagian, and least satisfactorily perhaps, romantic-classic. The dispute over the doctrine of eternal punishments, which may superficially seem a rather arid theological debate, was in fact a strongly contested front-line behind which a deep and real conflict of ideas is massed.