

# Freedom of Choice in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*

S. Jolin Sheena<sup>1</sup>, Dr. A. Saridha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College for Men, Krishnagiri 635 001, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: jolinsheena@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College for Men, Krishnagiri 635 001, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: saridharagunathan@gmail.com

Correspondence: S. Jolin Sheena, Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College for Men, Krishnagiri 635 001, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: jolinsheena@gmail.com

Received: October 27, 2024

Accepted: February 4, 2025

Online Published: July 11, 2025

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n1p25

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n1p25>

## Abstract

The Free Will Explanation, as per the traditional perspective on hell, posits that the presence of certain individuals in hell can be attributed to their exercise of human freedom. The concept of human freedom also accounts for its punishment and ultimate conclusion: individuals in hell have willingly cultivated moral vices that serve as their own retribution and render redemption psychologically unattainable. Despite God's ongoing yearning for reconciliation with individuals in hell, those who are damned do not have the same longing for reconciliation with God. However, the explanation of hell's ultimate purpose based on moral depravity is not credible. It is contended that God possesses the ability and willingness to modify individuals' character, either directly or indirectly, in order to provide them with fresh motivational incentives that restore their capacity to repent. Consequently, it is likely that every condemned individual will ultimately be rescued, as there exists a possible infinite number of chances for voluntary remorse. Therefore, if the descriptions of hell and divine love provided by the Free Will Explanation are accurate, it is quite likely that every individual in hell will ultimately find their way to heaven.

**Keywords:** Free Will, Choice, Human freedom, God, Ethics

## 1. Introduction

God has an affectionate regard for every individual of the human species. Accordingly, God desires their well-being and desires to be united with them (Stump, 2010). Attaining oneness with God is the ultimate goal for human beings. Therefore, God wishes for the redemption of every individual. However, based on a conventional understanding of hell, God's intention for universal redemption is hindered due to the following reasons: (i) some human individuals are condemned to hell, (ii) those in hell are subjected to punishment, and (iii) those in hell are unable to find a way out (Kvanvig, 1995). How could the all-powerful will of God be thwarted in this manner?

The purpose of the Free Choice Explanation is to justify God's love and strength by identifying human free choice as the barrier to achieving universal human salvation. This type of free will affords philosophers and theologians the means to elucidate the rationale, retribution, and ultimate nature of hell as a consequence of human volition in a manner that absolves God from criticism. The following paragraphs elaborate on these three explanations. Some individuals are in hell because they have willingly chosen it, or their presence in hell is a predictable outcome of their own decisions.

Lewis introduces the notion of freedom starkly when the narrator states, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" This aphorism encapsulates the moral polarity that underlies the entire narrative, framing Hell as a byproduct of the will's ultimate autonomy.

Furthermore, hell is considered definitive due to the fact that the moral vices, which were previously obtained without any restrictions, prevent any damned individual from freely expressing remorse. In accordance with C. S. Lewis, he suggests that 'the doors of hell are locked on the inside' (Lewis, 1940). On the celestial side of the door, God patiently awaits the arrival of condemned individuals and hopes that they would choose to enter. God is prepared to offer them assistance and support, known as assisting grace, if it can have an impact. However, the moral vices of these individuals corrupt their moral judgment to the extent that they are unable to recognize any motivation to open the door. Consequently, they are unable to open the door without restriction.

The approach is as follows. Firstly, God has the ability to intervene in the depraved nature of humans in order to allow them the opportunity to freely choose to repent, based on current research on free will and character. Furthermore, there is a strong likelihood that every individual will eventually transition from hell to paradise (or from purgatory to heaven after purgatory), mostly due to the fact that doomed individuals have an infinite number of opportunities to freely express remorse.

The paper posits a conditional claim: if the models of hell and divine love in the Free will Explanation are accurate, there is a strong likelihood that every condemned individual would eventually repent of their own volition. This, in turn, suggests that the Free Will Explanation of the permanence of hell is not credible. Initially, the conditional's consequent states that there is a significant likelihood that

every individual who is condemned will be rescued. This statement is consistent with the fact that it is possible and true that certain individuals in hell will remain condemned indefinitely. Furthermore, acknowledging the validity of conditional thesis does not necessitate adopting its consequent, which asserts a high likelihood of ultimate voluntary repentance for every condemned individual. An individual is logically obligated to accept the consequent only on the grounds of the conditional thesis if and only if they also acknowledge the antecedent as true - meaning they affirm the accuracy of the representations of damnation and divine love in the Free Will Explanation. However, it is possible for someone to accept the conditional premise while rejecting one of those models. Consequently, it can be inferred that God's ultimate intention is to perpetually punish all condemned individuals as a form of retribution. Under those circumstances, it would be logical to accept the conditional proposition while dismissing the outcome of the condition. Therefore, advocating for the assertion is a strong likelihood that every condemned individual would eventually repent of their own accord. Instead, the argument exposes an inherent instability within the Free will Explanation on the permanence of hell.

## 2. The Concept of Human Freedom and God

There have been few scholarly papers that specifically focus on *The Great Divorce* in comparison to Lewis's other works. In the foreword of his reader's guide on *The Great Divorce*, David Clark notes that *The Great Divorce* is still relatively unknown and suggests that contemporary readers may not have the necessary intellectual background to fully grasp its profound theology and references to other literary works (Lewis, Hague and Downing, 2014). The majority of the scholarly essays and studies published on TGD include descriptive criticism. In this examination, we will specifically examine the books that are most relevant to our research of TGD.

Philosophical accounts of freedom often distinguish between compatibilism—which holds that free will can exist alongside determinism—and libertarian free will, which asserts that agents must be able to choose otherwise in order to be truly free. C.S. Lewis's framework in *The Great Divorce* leans toward libertarianism, emphasizing uncoerced, morally significant choices in response to divine grace. This view maintains that divine interventions—such as the provision of prevenient grace—enable but do not compel repentance, preserving the integrity of human moral responsibility.

Green and Hooper regarded TGD as a highly significant literary achievement. Hannay drew a comparison between TGD and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, highlighting the common theme of individual decision-making in both works. Hooper provides a glimpse into the genesis of the concept for *The Great Divorce* in Lewis's mind and previous writings. He highlights the essential point that Lewis believed God is unable to override free will, and that every individual possesses the freedom to decide their own fate. Kilby supports this viewpoint, stating in the introduction to his concise analysis of TGD that the book demonstrates the belief, prevalent in Lewis's works, that the countless decisions made in life inevitably shape a person's soul for eternity, and that these choices are a flawless reflection of the individual's will (Lewis, Hague and Downing, 2014).

More than ten years later, Kilby once again wrote about TGD, emphasizing that the primary purpose of the story is to assert that individuals end up in Hell because they consciously decide not to relinquish their own desires and ego. (Kilby and Clyde 1966) Lindskoog mentions TGD in two chapters that discuss Lewis's perspectives on Heaven and Hell, providing a limited number of references. Lindskoog says that Lewis's primary argument is to convey the need of either accepting or rejecting God. The author additionally observes that Lewis regularly portrays the concept of free choice, even in his works intended for children (Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin, 2007).

In his chapter-length commentary on TGD, Manlove offers valuable insights by elucidating the affinities between TGD and the works of T. S. Eliot, Charles Williams, Dante, and particularly George MacDonald. The author proposes the existence of a discernible pattern in the sequence of supernatural experiences. Specifically, they observe that the initial focus is on personal shortcomings, followed by a shift towards problems involving other individuals. Manlove emphasizes the significance of free will and highlights the father-son conversation between Lewis and MacDonald. This conversation concludes with a vision that emphasizes the idea that "In time we have the ability to choose; in eternity, the choice has already been made from the start..." Manlove ultimately asserts that TGD is a representation that simultaneously exists in the realm of imagination and reality. It juxtaposes determinism and free will. However, its purpose is also to disrupt our presumptions, to unsettle us from our convictions as well as from our own identities (Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin, 2007).

Martindale's analysis of TGD centers on Lewis's rhetorical depiction of Heaven and Hell. In the beginning of his study, the author introduces seven sentences that summarize "the core of Lewis's beliefs about Heaven and Hell" (Lewis, 1940, p. 130). He notes that every day we make a choice between Heaven and Hell, gradually transforming into someone who is more compatible with Heaven or someone who would not appreciate it even if it were available. Martindale asserts that the theme of "choice and our obligation to make decisions" is not just present in *The Great Divorce* but also runs across Lewis's entire body of work. Smith agrees with Lewis's perspective on "the self," which reflects his belief that individuals become who they are due to significant choices made throughout their lives. Consequently, Lewis considers each person accountable for their eventual condition of happiness or damnation.

Cox analyzes Lewis's perspectives on free choice and foreknowledge in TGD, noting that "free will... is a fundamental aspect of Lewis's narrative and his narrator." Loney analyzes the works *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters* to understand Lewis's viewpoint on the relationship between the physical body and the spiritual realm, the concept of time and eternity, and the nature of love. Loney concludes that both works ultimately present a central choice for the characters: to choose between the eternal love of God or any alternative option. Musacchio elucidates how the remarks made by the George MacDonald character in one of the stories in TGD directly address the central theme of the book, which is the concept of choosing between Heaven or Hell (Lewis, Hague and Downing, 2014).

Peters asserts that Lewis's most comprehensive contemplations on Heaven are included in *The Great Divorce*, characterizing the narrative as

portraying a broader depiction of the various methods individuals employ to persuade themselves that there is no discernible differentiation between good and evil. Peters recommends that readers analyze the various portrayals of good and evil in a text, paying particular attention to the author's exploration of concepts and influences that attempt to obscure the distinction between them. By engaging with the fantastical narrative and its imagery, readers are encouraged to stimulate their own imagination and contemplate ideas and fantasies related to Heaven (Lewis, Hague and Downing, 2014).

Lewis's reaction to William Blake's metaphysical masterpiece, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Wicher interprets TGD as a symbolic representation in which Lewis endeavors to depict Heaven and Hell as entirely separate entities, mirroring the full separation of good and evil. Raiger demonstrates how Lewis achieves this separation by employing the rhetorical technique of utilizing allegory and symbolism to "offer a Christian comprehension of sin and salvation in contrast to modernity's perception of human nature" (Lewis, 1952)

To summarize, current academic research on TGD reveals how Lewis utilized literary works to construct his own imaginative realm. However, only two studies have investigated the specific rhetorical techniques deployed by Lewis to shape people's perceptions of Heaven and Hell. The literature indicates that Lewis offers fresh insights into the concepts of Heaven and Hell. However, it does not explore Lewis's utilization of tales to emphasize the freedom of choice, a value identified by social psychologist Milton Rokeach as one of the most fundamental and universally recognized values across all cultures. Consequently, our analysis will explore how Lewis places great importance on the concept of freedom of choice in his extraordinary narrative.

In TGD, Lewis presents a core rhetorical vision centre on the concept of freedom of choice. He emphasizes that every human possesses the autonomy to determine their own fate. According to Brow's observation, Lewis spearheaded a significant movement within evangelicalism, moving away from emphasizing concepts such as wrath, sin, and Hell, and instead placing emphasis on the choices made by humanity. Lewis portrays both earthly existence and the realm beyond as realms where individuals possess the capacity to exercise their own volition, make decisions, and bear the outcomes. The notion that Lewis's fictional bus voyage progresses from Hell to Heaven contradicts the concept that an individual's bus ticket is predetermined for a sole eternal destination, devoid of personal choice.

### 3. A Lifetime of Choices

Lewis diverts his audience from both of these notions of fate by portraying Heaven and Hell as not only outcomes determined by isolated choices, but rather as extensions of existence in alternate realms that inevitably stem from a lifetime of individual actions. Lewis states in the preface of TGD:

“We are not living in a world where all roads are radii of a circle where all, if followed long enough, will therefore draw gradually nearer and initially meet the centre: rather in a world where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and each of those into two again, and at each fork you must make a decision” (88).

Character characteristics refer to the psychological tendencies that influence an individual's perception, cognition, emotions, and behaviour in situations that are relevant to those traits. For instance, in the presence of individuals experiencing distress, a compassionate individual exhibits an increased inclination to perceive their pain, acknowledge its negative nature, have sympathy for them, and be driven to take actions that alleviate their suffering. Character qualities are enduring, substantial, and can be evaluated according to societal norms. Put simply, a compassionate individual consistently exhibits compassion throughout time, showing empathy in a wide variety of situations where others are suffering. Having compassion is considered a positive characteristic of a morally upright person.

Moral vices can be defined as certain attributes of one's character. They possess morally reprehensible concentration, convictions, aspirations, and incentives, and they exhibit a strong inclination to engage in their distinctive behaviours in circumstances that are pertinent to their traits. Moral vices effectively suppress morally justifiable motives for conduct. The malevolent individual lacks the ability to sincerely celebrate the well-being of others.

This dynamic of distorted moral vision is illustrated poignantly through the character of Pam in *The Great Divorce*. When invited into Heaven, Pam refuses to let go of her possessive grief, insisting, “I must have my boy, and I will not be quiet until you give him back to me” (Lewis, 1946: Ch.11). Though she is offered joy and reunion in God's presence, she demands her son on her own terms. Her motherly love, once noble, becomes tyrannical—she would rather reject Heaven than yield control. This dramatizes Augustine's concept of *ordo amoris*, where a good love becomes corrupted when disordered. Pam's grief has become idolatrous; it is no longer about the well-being of her son, but about her own wounded will. Through Pam, Lewis shows that even love, when detached from divine orientation, can become a prison that disables free, salvific choice.

The moral vices of doomed individuals prevent them from freely accepting God's gift of salvation by suppressing the grounds to accept. Actions that are not subject to any constraints or limitations must be performed with specific justifications, as referenced in Timpe (2014) and Hartman (2020). Our ability to perceive the significance of reasons and the inability of wicked individuals to recognize grounds for repentance are both contingent upon our character. If a person must act in a particular way based on their identity, they are volitionally obligated to do so. She considers other possibilities to be unimaginable because she believes her reasons for not considering them are very strong. This is supported by Frankfurt (1988) and Williams (1993). Using Eleonore Stump's (1999, 323) illustration, imagine a situation where a mother is paid a small amount of money to chop her daughter into small fragments. In this scenario, the mother's moral integrity compels her to decline the offer. Her reasons for refusing are so compelling that she does not perceive any grounds to accept the offer. Naturally, she still possesses the overall ability to agree to the offer - she can verbally express 'yes' or indicate agreement by nodding her

head. However, in this particular situation, she lacks the deliberate intention to utilize those abilities in those specific ways (Frankfurt, 1988: 86).

This model of constrained yet voluntary agency is vividly dramatized in *The Great Divorce*, particularly in the encounter between the Fat Ghost and the Spirit. When the Fat Ghost defends his intellectual skepticism and suffering, the Spirit replies, “That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory” (Lewis, 1946: Ch.9). Here, Lewis not only affirms the salvific logic of redemptive suffering but also shows how entrenched pride blinds the Ghost from perceiving grace as a viable choice. The character chooses exile not because he lacks the ability to accept Heaven, but because his internal reasoning makes surrender unimaginable—a dramatization of the same volitional structure described by Frankfurt.

The moral vices of condemned individuals inevitably lead them to reject God's offer of salvation, as their dominating moral vices guarantee this outcome. Individuals who are condemned are unable to freely choose to engage in actions that would potentially restore their ability to repent. This is because they do not perceive any compelling reasons to regain the capacity to utilize their broader repentance abilities. The Free Will Explanation posits that the moral vices that damned individuals freely acquire are the reason why nobody can leave hell and why the doors of hell are internally locked.

An issue with this reasoning is that it assumes that the pertinent character attributes of individuals condemned to damnation are immutable. Indeed, it is accurate to claim that individuals who are condemned are unable to willingly alter their nature in a manner that restores their capacity to feel remorse, as they lack any motivation to do so and voluntary actions necessitate rational justifications.

However, an individual's character has the potential to undergo transformation throughout time, which can be greatly influenced or triggered by external factors. He transitioned from being a respectful and gentle individual to becoming disrespectful, irate, and lacking in patience. Aristotle (2014) concurs that excellent character might be compromised by significant and frequent misfortunes. For instance, when a person is enslaved, they are placed in circumstances that inherently reduce their self-esteem and independence due to the conditions of deprivation, abuse, and limited choices.

If external pressures and events have the ability to alter a person's character, then an almighty deity would have little difficulty in doing the same. Divine intervention has the ability to immediately modify an individual's character. In other words, God has the ability to eliminate or introduce mental tendencies, or perhaps do both simultaneously. For instance, God deliberately strengthens Pharaoh's will to the point that he adamantly denies the Israelites permission to journey into the desert for the sake of worshiping God. Put simply, God has the ability to put individuals in situations where they are likely to acquire accurate beliefs, discard incorrect beliefs, cultivate positive preferences, and abandon negative preferences. As an illustration, God ultimately instills humility in Nebuchadnezzar by transforming him into an animal, or God provides a challenging obstacle to Paul to keep him from growing arrogant. The feasibility of these processes is assumed in the current discourse on free will and a supremely powerful deity is evidently capable of actualizing them. (Arpaly and Nomy 2006)

Assume that God modifies or eliminates the moral flaws of individuals who are condemned, which had previously caused them to willingly reject God's offer of salvation. This intervention allows the condemned person to perceive reasons to feel remorse and change their ways. When God provides saving grace in a particular situation, the damned individual's ability to make choices is restored in both directions. This occurs because the person recognizes certain reasons to accept God's invitation to salvation, as well as other reasons to decline the offer. In this altered state, individuals who are condemned have the ability to willingly embrace God's offer of redemption due to their newfound capacity for perception.

Now, let's examine three objections to the argument that God has the ability to provide condemned individuals with new reasons that restore their freedom to choose to repent. I will then provide counterarguments for each objection.

God is unable to provide damned individuals with fresh incentives to repent, as these individuals already possess all the pertinent knowledge required to make a decision regarding God's gift of redemption. The acquisition of new information is the sole means by which a person might alter their perspective. As an illustration, individuals who are condemned now possess the knowledge of God's existence. They are fully aware of all the transgressions they have committed throughout their life before death, and they have witnessed the state of bliss experienced by those who have been saved.

However, the ability to find new reasons to feel remorse is not only dependent on acquiring new facts. Crucially, motivations to take action are not solely based on beliefs, but also on desires. God has the ability to increase or create desires and preferences for what is morally right in individuals who are condemned. Therefore, those who are condemned might nevertheless find fresh sources of desire to repent, even without obtaining additional knowledge. Despite the objection, it is also plausible to consider that those who are damned may not possess complete knowledge of the material that is crucial for making a decision about salvation. They may be fooled by themselves in ways that lead to a lack of attention or ignorance. God has the ability to bring up their underlying beliefs and bring them to the forefront of their notice. By doing so, God can alter the thought process involved in creating possible courses of action. God has the ability to implant fresh, accurate convictions regarding one's own cruel and miserable state, the ethical structure, and God's own nature. Therefore, the extensive understanding of individuals in a state of damnation does not negate God's capacity to instill in them fresh motives for remorse, which can restore their freedom to repent. (CC): S engages in voluntary action A solely if S has autonomously developed the components of her cognitive tendencies that drive and justify her execution of A (Strawson, 1994).

In order to counter that conclusion convincingly, the advocate of the Free Will Explanation must reject the concept of the CC. In order to understand the concept of free choice, it is necessary for her to accept that the ability to make choices freely arises from specific constraints that limit freedom (Hartman, 2018). The necessary prerequisites encompass a certain level of understanding regarding ethics and practical realities, as well as the abilities that allow for reciprocal manipulation of acts as outlined by proponents of leeway libertarianism. Human beings have little influence over acquiring these abilities during their lifetimes before death, assuming they acquire them at all (Hartman, 2021). Therefore, it is irrelevant for individuals who are condemned whether they acquire their abilities through divine intervention. Therefore, the second issue is effectively neutralized.

However, the CC\* should be strongly rejected based on the compelling argument put out by Taylor Cyr and other scholars, such as Kane, Lemos, and Hartman (2020). (Cyr 2020) I explicitly apply this reasoning to the specific instance of damned individuals. If a young person possesses the necessary information and control over their actions, they can freely choose their first action based on their character and motives. Similarly, this observation applies to those who have just undergone a change in their character by God and are now damned. There appears to be no discernible distinction in terms of the mental dispositions between these individuals and the kids, which is relevant to their freedom. Both the youth and the accursed individual fulfil the criteria in the CC\*. If there is a difference that is significant to freedom between them, it will be evident in conditions (ii) and (iii).

On the other hand, the transformation of a person's character into a negative state can be attributed to the intervention of God, or possibly indirectly through experiences of trauma, negative influences from the community, or other mechanisms established by God. The same applies to radical disorientation caused by the loss of a loved one or sudden disability. Therefore, as long as young people have a certain level of freedom to act, and there is no significant difference in terms of freedom between them, individuals who are condemned can also exercise a certain level of freedom. Therefore, the claim made by CC\* is proven to be incorrect, and the third argument is successfully refuted. One cannot anticipate any other valid arguments to the assertion that God's manipulation or suppression of the character qualities of condemned individuals can restore their ability to freely choose to embrace God's salvation. Additionally, God has the power to place individuals in specific situations that consistently result in changes to their character, thus reopening the potential for them to freely choose repentance. In the following section, it is examined that the rationale behind God's actions and the way in which perfect love allows for the reduction of human autonomy.

#### **4. The Concept of Human Freedom and Divine Actions**

God's nature includes the act of granting human beings the capacity to freely repent. During the period before a person's death, God actively intervenes to modify or conceal their true nature, so creating the opportunity for them to freely repent. According to Christian teaching, without supernatural assistance, human beings are unable to freely decide to accept God's call to redemption or to stop opposing it. This concept is supported by Pawl (2017) and may also be found in Romans 3:1-23. God's prevenient grace modifies or conceals human character features in order to broaden the range of choices available for human freedom by allowing individuals to perceive adequate reasons to accept or cease fighting God's gift of redemption. In this way, God empowers human beings to freely repent. If God influences human character in this manner during our lives before death, and God's love for human beings remains constant after they die, it is reasonable to anticipate that God would operate in a like manner in the afterlives of those who are condemned. Therefore, if individuals who are condemned deliberately engage in extreme wickedness that leads them to willingly reject God's offer of redemption, God will eventually act to restore their ability to choose to repent.

The disparity in culpability does not warrants such assertion. Both living individuals and those condemned can bear moral responsibility for their incapacity to exercise free will and choose to repent. If an individual consistently makes free choices that maintain a pre-existing mental disposition, they can be held morally responsible for that disposition. This responsibility arises from the fact that if the individual had made different choices, the mental disposition would have likely been weakened or eliminated. This concept is supported by Audi (1991) and Hartman (2020). Therefore, although a person who is about to die is not initially morally accountable for being unable to accept God's invitation to salvation, they can become morally accountable to some degree if they have chances to make voluntary decisions that would reasonably eliminate that inability, but instead they make voluntary decisions that result in the continuation of that inability. If an individual, during their lifetime, bears some moral responsibility for their failure to accept God's invitation to redemption, which is a predictable outcome of rejecting God's gift of salvation, they can be held accountable for their incapacity to do so. However, God continues to actively pursue her salvation. Instead, God consistently provides the prevenient grace required for her to willingly accept God's salvific grace. Arguably, the same can be said about deceased individuals in hell.

Essentially, it is consistent with God's nature to modify or conceal some qualities of damned individuals in order to restore their ability to freely choose repentance, by providing them with fresh motivations to do so. God already engages in this practice with human individuals before they die.

The value and importance of human autonomy are self-evident and should be upheld. However, it is equally crucial to prioritize the promotion of well-being. Occasionally, it is justifiable to limit the independence of individuals to a certain extent in order to improve their overall welfare. For instance, if a young adult who is in good physical health expresses a desire to take his own life years after experiencing a breakup with his lover, it is justifiable to intervene and prevent him from carrying out this act. Therefore, there are evident instances in which it is acceptable to limit the independence of others in order to enhance their welfare.

The stakes for the well-being of damned individuals are extremely high, as accepting the call to redemption entails a complete

transformation from eternal suffering to eternal prosperity. Given the significant consequences at hand, I contend that God is justified in carrying out the character interventions indicated earlier. This is because God is capable of doing so while adequately honouring human autonomy, and I present three grounds to support this claim.

Firstly, God would not incessantly intercede in the nature of those condemned to damnation. It is possible for God to abandon condemned individuals, as well as the other inhabitants of hell, for extended periods of time without intervening. During these periods, these individuals would continue to engage in their whole moral vices, resulting in the distinct anguish that accompanies their actions. These experiences can yield valuable data for future voluntary decisions when God grants the opportunity for repentance again, since the recollection of immense suffering might serve as an extra incentive to seize chances to adopt a different lifestyle. Furthermore, each supernatural intervention only slightly reduces the autonomy of doomed individuals. Each intervention preserves the majority of their character, initiatives, ambitions, and motives, for which they bear moral responsibility.

Those who are condemned maintain their agency in choose their eternal residence in either paradise or hell. The interventions provide those who are condemned the opportunity to freely decide whether to embrace or decline God's salvific proposition. Consequently, these condemned individuals retain the freedom to choose to reject the proposition. They consistently decline the offer without hesitation. In other words, whenever God allows doomed individuals to have the opportunity to freely repent, it is conceivable that they may choose to reject it and deliberately make their hearts even harder. Individuals who are condemned possess a certain level of self-governance in deciding between the options of paradise and hell. If individuals are confined to hell for a finite duration, they possess the ability to determine the length of their stay.

In this analysis, it is deduced that God would intervene in the lives of doomed individuals to allow them the opportunity to freely repent. This intervention is based on the premise that their autonomy is being honoured to a satisfactory degree and considering the significant consequences it holds for their overall welfare. However, this conditional is untrue mostly because of disparities among the interveners. God possesses qualities of perfect goodness, omniscience, and omnipotence, which distinguish Him from governments and private individuals. God consistently pursues virtuous objectives and executes them flawlessly, unlike governments and individuals who frequently fail to pursue virtuous objectives and, even when they do, often make mistakes in their execution.

Another complaint is that the reasoning is very comprehensive. Considering the significant consequences at hand, God has the ability to interfere by making more significant changes or suppressing certain aspects of individuals' character in order to make it likely, and even in line with their character, for doomed individuals to freely choose to accept God's offer.

## 5. The Ghosts as Theological Allegories

Lewis populates *The Great Divorce* with a range of ghostly figures whose resistance to divine grace dramatizes different forms of human refusal. These characters are not mere literary inventions but serve as **allegorical embodiments of moral and theological error**, demonstrating the diverse paths through which individuals forfeit the freedom to choose God. Through them, Lewis shows that hell is self-imposed, not by divine fiat, but by persistent acts of willful rejection.

### 5.1 The Episcopal Ghost: Intellectual Pride and Relativism

A striking case is the Episcopal Ghost; a former bishop whose urbane detachment exemplifies spiritual sterility masquerading as sophistication. He muses, "I'm interested in religion for its cultural value... I believe one should explore all mythologies," illustrating Lewis's deep concern with intellectual pride and relativism. For Lewis, this ghost's rejection of divine reality stems not from hatred or despair, but from a refusal to accept truth as anything more than personal perspective. His commitment to abstract theological chatter over truth-seeking mirrors modern forms of liberal theology that aestheticize belief while evacuating it of salvific power. In presenting a clergyman who is damned not for heresy but for evasive self-deception, Lewis warns against turning religion into an object of detached curiosity rather than existential commitment.

As such, the Episcopal Ghost dramatizes the moral danger of substituting intellectual openness for spiritual humility. His damnation is self-chosen, not because he misunderstood grace, but because he neutralized it with endless equivocation. Lewis's critique here aligns with his broader concern: that the freedom to assent to divine truth can be eroded by habits of prideful analysis or emotional evasion — not just by moral vice but by epistemic vanity.

C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* presents a gallery of spectral figures whose spiritual failures are dramatized through allegorical personifications. Each ghost embodies not merely vice or personality flaws, but theologically meaningful distortions of human freedom in relation to divine grace. These figures are not just sinners but illustrations of distinct patterns of resistance to redemption, shaped by free will and theological error. This section expands the analysis by examining the Episcopal Ghost and the Hard-Bitten Ghost—two particularly instructive examples of how intellectual pride and cynicism distort the capacity to accept divine love.

The Episcopal Ghost, a former bishop, embodies the perils of intellectual relativism masquerading as theological sophistication. When invited to enter Heaven, he dismisses the possibility of objective truth, saying: "I'm interested in religion for its cultural value... I believe one should explore all mythologies." His refusal is not rooted in ignorance or impulsive sin but in a self-imposed exile of perpetual speculation. He privileges abstract thought over lived surrender, thus illustrating Lewis's critique of modern theological liberalism that denies propositional truth in favor of subjective pluralism. In doing so, the ghost aligns with the very temptation Lewis critiques in *The Abolition of Man*: the surrender of objective value for the sake of academic detachment. Theologically, this character enacts Romans 1:22, "Professing

themselves to be wise, they became fools.” His failure is not merely intellectual but moral: he chooses a posture of perpetual debate over the act of trust that redemption requires.

Moreover, his resistance is a distortion of theological freedom. He believes himself to be exercising autonomy through critical inquiry, but Lewis shows that this form of pride leads not to truth but to paralysis. His endless questioning is a counterfeit of genuine freedom—a freedom that in Christian thought must include the capacity to assent to grace. The Episcopal Ghost refuses to allow himself to be corrected, exemplifying the danger of Pelagian self-sufficiency cloaked in intellectual humility. His damnation is not imposed by God but chosen by himself under the illusion of openness.

In contrast, the Hard-Bitten Ghost represents a hardened skepticism that masks despair. His default mode is suspicion: “I’ve been everywhere. I’ve seen everything. All a racket.” His tone echoes the nihilism of Ecclesiastes— “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”—but without the redemptive turn. For this ghost, all moral structures are exploitative, all joy is a scam. He is a victim of what Pope Benedict XVI termed the “dictatorship of relativism,” where disbelief is seen as more enlightened than faith. Yet, ironically, his skepticism is as dogmatic as any creed; he clings to it in spite of, not because of, evidence. His autonomy, like the bishop’s, is corrupted. He confuses cynicism with lucidity and thereby closes himself off from the grace that is constantly offered.

Both ghosts reveal how Lewis dramatizes the Augustinian paradox of human freedom: the will is most free when it is oriented toward the Good. Lewis shows that autonomy unmoored from grace is not true freedom but a self-imposed slavery to illusion—whether that illusion takes the form of hyper-rational detachment or entrenched bitterness. In both cases, the ghosts’ refusals are not simply rejections of divine hospitality; they are theological acts, expressions of heresy and despair that reveal the moral weight of human choice. As Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom.”

Thus, *The Great Divorce* presents character as theology incarnate. The Episcopal Ghost allegorizes the failure to submit intellect to truth; the Hard-Bitten Ghost, the collapse of trust into corrosive doubt. Their damnation is not due to divine refusal, but to their own distorted exercise of freedom. Each ghost refuses God not because God is distant, but because they are unwilling to be changed.

## 6. Conclusion

*The Great Divorce* offers a profound theological meditation on the nature of freedom, damnation, and divine persistence. Through allegorical encounters between ghostly souls and divine emissaries, C.S. Lewis dramatizes a Christian metaphysics in which human autonomy is honored yet tragically misused. The ghosts’ choices are not arbitrary acts of disobedience but sustained patterns of volition that, over time, harden into spiritual dispositions. These characters reject not merely an invitation to paradise but the very conditions of freedom itself—conditions that require humility, repentance, and an openness to grace.

The expanded analysis of the Episcopal Ghost and the Hard-Bitten Ghost reveals how Lewis critiques intellectual pride and cynical despair as theological distortions. Both figures operate under illusions of autonomy, yet they embody enslaved wills incapable of receiving the good. Their refusals highlight Lewis’s Augustinian conviction that true freedom is found not in self-assertion but in surrender to divine love. This is consistent with the paper’s earlier argument that God, as omnibenevolent and omniscient, works to restore the conditions for human freedom, even for those in hell. The ghosts’ damnation is not the result of divine abandonment but of human defiance that persists despite divine intervention.

Moreover, Lewis’s fiction affirms the theological principle that grace is prevenient, continually offered, and never coercive. The damned are not denied the opportunity for salvation; they are instead unwilling to be saved on any terms but their own. Yet even in their refusals, the narrative implies that God’s redemptive overtures do not cease. The possibility of repentance remains open, and divine love continues to pursue.

Ultimately, *The Great Divorce* insists that damnation is not God’s vengeance but the logical outworking of human freedom misaligned with the good. It is not the end of God’s love but the terminal resistance of the soul to that love. Lewis thus affirms both the seriousness of moral agency and the inexhaustibility of divine grace. The real tragedy is not that the ghosts are condemned, but that they choose their condemnation freely—an act made possible only because God continues to honor the dignity of their will.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the faculty members of the PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College for Men, Krishnagiri, for their valuable feedback during the development of this manuscript. Special thanks are due to the academic peers and mentors who offered insightful comments that helped refine the arguments and enhance the clarity of the analysis. The authors also appreciate the unwavering encouragement provided by colleagues and friends throughout the research process.

## Authors’ contributions

S. Jolin Sheena, Ph.D. Research Scholar, was responsible for the conceptualization of the research topic, conducting the literature review, drafting the manuscript, and analyzing the theological and literary dimensions of *The Great Divorce*. Dr. A. Saridha, Associate Professor and Research Supervisor, provided academic supervision, assisted in shaping the theoretical framework, and critically revised the manuscript for intellectual depth, coherence, and scholarly rigor. Both authors collaboratively refined the content and approved the final version of the manuscript. There are no special authorship agreements; contributions align with standard academic norms.

## Funding

On Behalf of all authors the corresponding author states that they did not receive any funds for this project.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare that we have no competing interest.

**Informed consent**

Obtained.

**Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

**Open access**

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

**References**

- Aristotle. (2014). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company,
- Arpaly, N. (2006). *Meaning, Merit, and Human Bondage: An Essay on Free Will*. Princeton University Press,
- Audi, R. (1991). Responsible Action and Virtuous Character. *Ethics*, 101(2), 304-321.
- Cyr, T. W. (2020). Manipulation and Constitutive Luck." *Philosophical Studies*, 177, 2381-2394.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (1988). *The Importance of What We Care About*. Oxford University Press,
- Hartman, R. J. (2018). Constitutive Moral Luck and Strawson's Argument for the Impossibility of Moral Responsibility. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 4, 165-183.
- Hartman, R. J. (2020). Indirectly Free Actions, Libertarianism, and Resultant Moral Luck. *Erkenntnis*, 85, 1417-1436.
- Hartman, R. J. (2021). Heavenly Freedom and Two Models of Character Perfection. *Faith and Philosophy*, 38, 45-64.
- Kilby, C. S. (1966). *A Mind Awake: An Introduction to the Thought of C.S. Lewis*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Kvanvig, J. (1995). Does God's Existence Need Proof?" *Philosophical Books*, 36(3), 213-215.
- Lambdin, L., & Robert, T. L. (2007). *Arthurian Writers: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO,
- Lewis, C. S. (1940). *The Problem of Pain*. Harper One.
- Lewis, C. S. (1946). *The Great Divorce*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity*. HarperOne, [originally published 1952].
- Lewis, C. S. (2014). *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*. Edited by M. Hague and D.C. Downing, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Strawson, G. (1994). The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility. *Philosophical Studies*, 75, 5-24.