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# Is There Pain in hell?

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**Abstract**

I present a short summary of the traditional pagan and Christian legacy claiming that hell is above all a place of pain and the objections that have been addressed to it. Then I proceed to my main point:tracing a philosophical thread from Plato to Aristotle and then from Augustine to Aquinas, and citing a psychological experience of everyday life, I maintain that: 1) either there is no pain in hell, or 2) hell is not the worst thing that can happen to a human being. Then I present four possible objections to my thesis and attempt to counter them. In the last section I point to some practical consequences on the pastoral level that could ensue from a different doctrine on the nature of hell.

**Keywords**

Contemporary eschatology, hell, pain, pleasure, Plato, Aquinas

## The Purpose of this Article

This article is divided into five sections: the first two present the historical and philosophical context of the problem that I intend to deal with. The third and fourth sections deal with an important and, I believe, original philosophical thesis in a theoretical way, whereas the fifth points to its possible implications in ethics and education.

In particular, in the first section I intend to show how today the greatest doctrinal controversy between Protestants and Catholics has been resolved with the Augsburg *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. But the doctrinal unity (certainly not by chance) has been achieved precisely when the problem of justification has undergone a profound transformation. Today the question no longer concerns the distinction between those attaining heavenly salvation and those condemned to eternal damnation of hell.

In the second section I intend to briefly show how the Christian eschatology and its four points ("novissima"), towards which the

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problem of justification pointed, has changed dramatically in the last decades, especially in regards to hell.

In the third section, first I present a short summary of the traditional pagan and Christian legacy claiming that hell is above all a place of pain and the objections that have been addressed to it. Then I proceed to my main point: tracing a philosophical thread from Plato to Aristotle and then from Augustine to Aquinas, and citing a psychological experience of everyday life, I maintain that: 1) either there is no pain in hell, or 2) hell is not the worst thing that can happen to a human being.

In the fourth section I present four possible objections to my thesis and attempt to counter them.

In the fifth section I point to some practical consequences on the ethical and educational level that could ensue from a different doctrine on the nature of hell.

## A Transvaluation of All Values

*Sola fide* and *sola gratia* express that teaching of saint Paul (Eph 2:8) that was variously interpreted in the doctrinal battle between Catholics and Reformers five centuries ago. Actually, 482 years later, in 1999, at Augsburg, the Catholics and the Lutherans signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ), subsequently signed off by the Methodists (2006), the Anglicans (2016) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (2017). In it we see a substantial detachment from Trent decree[1] about this very crucial doctrinal topic, and, more importantly, a historic theological reconciliation between Catholics and Reformers:

> We confess together that good works - a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love - follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfil. Thus both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love.[2]

[1] Decree 6, chapter 10.

[2] JDDJ, 37, [http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html]. In substance, the Catholics and the Lutheran World Federation acknowledge in the declaration that the excommunications relating to the doctrine of justification set forth by the Council of Trent do not apply to the teachings of the Lutheran churches set forth in the text; likewise, the churches acknowledged that the condemnations set forth in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the Catholic teachings on justification set forth in the document. (Wikipedia 12/07/18)

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However, throughout the last five centuries, for all of the signatories, the meaning of the very concepts of justification, grace, works and the like, has changed to such an extent that it could be appropriate to describe the theology of our time by the Nietzschean phrase 'transvaluation of all values'. The change in eschatology, both Catholic and Protestant, is, in particular, one of the easiest to see: in the sixteenth century all Christians were discussing the roles of grace and good works in order to determine what might be the destiny of the individual human being: heaven or hell? Today nobody speaks (or thinks, for that matter) about hell. One of the major victories of the too much despised and criticized liberal theology is indeed the almost ecumenical agreement about eschatological universalism, if not explicitly, at least by means of omission.

Still today grace and works (as 'fruits' of the former) are meant to bring us to what both the ancient philosophers and the common sense of the everyday man call 'happiness', and, also to what Christians call 'holiness' or 'sanctity'. But: how so? Not any longer as a divide between inferior and superiors, damned and saved as two definite categories of fellow human beings. No. Today the Christian message has dispensed hierarchies and speculation about the 'afterlife sojourn' and the concepts *sola fide/sola gratia* serve first of all to maintain faith (within an increasingly atheistic world); secondly, they serve to provide ethical guidelines (as always), and, thirdly, to nurture an eschatological hope (not visualised any longer as an afterlife sojourn, but as a mysterious dimension of our lives).

*Sola gratia*, indeed. But while for John Calvin the acceptance of grace was as demanding as Ignatius de Loyola's exercises, for current theologians and most of Christians grace means mainly God's love and initiative for making us happy.

However, even though this is a non-demanding offer (unlike the sixteenth century), nonetheless it is not a magical automatism, because salvation and grace do not come from us but from God, which means according to his plans, not ours.

## The Once Future Things

In the Christian doctrine and also in the popular religiosity there used to be "quattuor novissima", that is, 'four ultimate future things': death, judgment, heaven and hell. But, after WW2, at an ever quickening pace, this interpretative angle of human life has changed and almost vanished. "Hell" has almost disappeared from the preaching and conversations of Christians. We know this phenomenon from

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our personal experience, but there are also surveys[3], and even Pope Francis (28 March 2018) has declared that the 'souls' who refuse the redeeming love of God do not suffer the torments of hell but are "annihilated".[4]

This (unofficial) papal pronouncement should not surprise a philosophically trained mind; in fact, contrary to Plato, human beings perhaps are possibly not provided with an "immortal" endowment called the soul, which is our true 'ego' and is secured from death, but they die for real, as Aristotle maintained and Aquinas substantially confirmed.[5] However, Christians believe that they can be resurrected from death because Jesus was resurrected. But he was raised by the Father to "eternal life". What is eternity? Many Christians say: it is God himself! Hence, despite some scriptural passages (like John 5:29), we feel very uncomfortable while speaking of a "resurrection to hell".

In our time, when explicit Christian faith has so diminished and atheism is so widespread, to believe in God and in the life he provides for his children is the important point, not the divide between hell and heaven. A reviewer of three recent monographs on the topic notices that they share a central idea: eschatology is concerned with "future hope" and, since it depends on God's initiative, not on human effort, it is impossible to figure out a "design" for predicting the future, and therefore we should drop Hegelian teleology.[6] This means that the harsh and long-lasting debates among the different Christian denominations about the means of understanding divine predestination to salvation or to damnation have almost completely ceased.

Also, is hell something concerning the "after-life", or, rather, this historical life on this side of the threshold of death? Andrew Perriman's pivotal Biblical studiy argue that the latter is true.[7] But, Bible apart, the Western culture of humanistic existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre tells the story of demons and hell on this earth: "L'enfer, c'est les autres". A recent book, *Game Over? Reconsidering*

[3] Robin Parry, "Hell", in Stephen Holmes (ed.), *What are we Waiting For? Christian Hope and Contemporary Culture*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster), 2008, pp. 98-100.

[4] The day after the Vatican spokesman declared that the meeting between pope Francis and journalist Scalfari was merely private and not a formal interview, but did not deny anything. [http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/03/29/0236/00512.pdf]

[5] I say 'substantially', because Aquinas thinks that the severed soul is incorruptible, yes, but is not the person, the self ("mea anima non est ego"): *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, chapter XV, lectio 2, n. 924.

[6] Michael Horton, review in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 4 Number 1 (2002), p. 94.

[7] Perriman, *The Coming of the Son of Man: New Testament Eschatology for an Emerging Church,* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

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*Eschatology*, in its 450 pages hardly touches upon the "novissima", namely death, judgement, heaven and hell.[8] To echo the title of T.H. White's tetralogy, we might rather call them the four "once-future-things" because once upon a time they used to be considered the last future things of human life, but not any longer in our time.

All these philosophical remarks from Existentialists and Thomists are gradually spreading throughout the affluent and educated Western society of our time, together with substantial changes to penal laws, practices and social understanding I will briefly treat below. The result is that the explanatory power of several aspects of traditional eschatological doctrines was undermined and eroded de facto, despite the fact that major established churches have not yet addressed an explicit change in their official doctrines.

These philosophical ideas, which are already present in contemporary culture, can also prepare the ground for further ones. In other words, the scepticism about the divide between an eternal heaven and an eternal hell, the increased importance of hope over design or predestination, the doubt about interpreting eternal life as an "after-life" that is an improved continuation of our life, and the focus on the future as a subjective perspective in the life we conduct this very day (rather than a date in history), may all come together to bring about further shift in the domain of theology, that I am presenting now.

## Unde impossibile est quod aliqua tristitia vel dolor sit summum hominis malum

In the Middle Ages, hell, which was the maximum evil for mankind, was represented by the torture of Dante's *Malebolge*, not just fire: for instance Caiaphas is crucified.[9] Before him the greatest theologians had already said this. Augustine argued that the omnipotence of God allows the human bodies of the damned to "suffer in fire and yet live",[10] and Aquinas maintained that the punishment of the damned can be infinite in quantity because it retributes an offence against infinite God.[11]

In the eighteenth century we might have heard this sermon:

> Wait, burning after a few days in hell, the soul will burn, and the body below the ground will decompose in worms and stench (...) And the same God... will only remember you to more strongly point

[8] Christophe *et alii* editors, (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017). I said "almost" because Karen Kilby's article's does deal with them, while she is supporting John Thiel's idea that the four last things "say something about the future, not a redescription of the present".

[9] Inf. 23: 121-123.

[10] *City of God,* Book XXI. Chapter 2

[11] *ST*, Ia-Iae, 87, 4.

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> his almighty right hand above you, to stoke up the flames which burn you and to say in his righteous wrath: 'You are not mine! I know you not!'[12]

In the nineteenth century in some groups of protestant churchmen long passionate debates started: "None caused more anxiety than the everlasting punishment of the wicked".[13] The three traditional critiques of hell were brought up again: 1) How can an infinitely benevolent God allow an eternal torment for his creatures?; 2) Why does a limited evil like human sin have to be punished in an infinite way?; 3) Since to humans sin is unavoidable (all have sinned), is it just to punish someone for something beyond his control? Gradually these arguments won more and more followers, Universalism (i.e. the doctrine according to which nobody is damned to an eternal hell) spread continuously at first among some theologians and devout people, then among the common public of the faithful. But it did not become mainstream.

What became mainstream in both Catholicism and Protestantism was the kind of pain/torment assigned to the damned: not physical anymore, but psychological/moral. In fact, in our times hell is represented as "suffering eternal separation from God" (*Catechism of Catholic Church*, No. 1035), or "pain of separation from God" ('Hell', *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*).

In both these contemporary texts (the former Catholic, the latter Anglican), hell, just as in the Middle Ages, is characterized by the presence of pain: actually, pain due to the separation from God.

The "evil of punishment" (*malum poenae*) in fact, with respect to the "evil of guilt" (*malum culpae*), has this particular feature: it has pain (it does not matter here whether physical or moral: see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, first secundae, quaestio 39, art 4, sed contra). In short, the popular preaching once preferred to place paramount emphasis the physical pain experienced in Hell, whereas today we tend to stress the importance of the moral pain resulting from the alienation from God. The common point is that, both in the past and in our times, the presence of pain in hell is affirmed.

Now it seems evident that if we compare the suffering that ensues from being alienated from some real good and an absence of suffering in relation to such an alienation, the greatest evil is the latter. As far back as the pre-Christian era, Aristotle stated that between the vicious "intemperate" (who does evil, forsaking good, but not suffering) and

[12] Pastor Bernard Zuzoric, reported by Divna Zecevic, 'Croatian Popular Sermons of the 18th and 19th Century', *Nar. umjet.* 32/1, 1995, p. 139.

[13] Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1974), vii.

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the vicious "incontinent" (who also does evil and forsakes goodness, but suffers in doing so) the worst of the two is the former (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1150b):

> But the intemperate man, as was pointed out before, is not inclined to be penitent, for he is tenacious of his choice. On the other hand, every incontinent man is given to repentance. For this reason, we are not here dealing with our original problem. Consequently, one (the intemperate) is incurable and the other (the incontinent) is curable.

And Augustine from Hippo wrote that "there is something good in those who are grieving for the loss of a good: in fact, if there were not something good in its nature, there would be no pain in the penalty caused by the loss of some good" (*Super Genesim ad litteram,* VIII).

And Thomas Aquinas observed that "the greatest evil for a man is neither physical pain (dolor) nor spiritual pain (tristitia)" (*Summa Theologiae*, first secundae, quaestio 39, article 4, respondeo). This last text is particularly interesting because here Aquinas states that the pain ensuing from the absence of a true good that is acknowledged as good, on the one hand, and the pain stemming from the presence of a true good that is acknowledged as an evil, on the other, are both evils, and the latter is a worse evil than the former, but, in any case, no pain can be the worst evil for a human being.

In these philosophers we see a shared idea, which is complex, not simple: 1) pain is always somehow an evil, because it implies a struggle and a diminishing of the goodness of the subject who suffers pain; 2) but in terms of logic and experience, it cannot be the worst evil, because it is always an escape from what is evil or, at least, from what is deemed to be evil.

If I think back into my past about times when I have been separated from something good (whether it be some particular thing, situation, action or person), but without suffering, and compare such times with instances where I have been separated from something good and have suffered as a result, the worse condition on balance has been the first, since in the first instance I would tend to omit taking any action, whereas in the second instance I would try to remedy my situation.

And if we extended our reasoning from what is good in general to the Supreme Good (God), we come to the problem we are dealing with. In simple terms, the considerations I have mentioned would seem to suggest that hell is either the greatest evil for a human being (and in which case it does not contain pain) or else in hell there is pain (but then the hell is not the greatest evil for a human being).

If the first hypothesis were true, then in catechisms and other religious instructions we should avoid saying that in hell there is pain. If the second hypothesis were true, it would appear that the

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infernal condition is a lesser evil than something else and one would then wonder what this something else is. And from both conclusions one could arrive at the opinion of a certain non-theistic humanism that asserts "L'Enfer c'est les autres", i.e. identifying Hell and a sinful life as synonymous and not making two distinct things of them. A life in sin which, at least in the moments of the worst "hardening of the heart", is without pain and, on the contrary, is accompanied by a certain type of pleasures. That is hell.

One could also express this perplexing conundrum in the form of a dilemma: either hell is the worst evil for a human, in which case it is not a punishment (as Plato already said: the sinner without punishment is more unfortunate than the sinner who incurs pain (a penalty), because punishment is a form of cure, see *Gorgias*, 479d), or else hell is not the worst evil and can therefore involve pain. Indeed, it is not the worst evil because if hell does involve pain then this implies that sinners in hell are suffering from an awareness of their wrongdoing and this indicates the will of repentance and change for the good, on their part.

Therefore, catechesis and preaching should change something about this point, emphasizing, perhaps, that the worst evil for a man is the "malum culpae", the sinful life, which is all the more free from pain the more sinful it is and is even impregnated with a sort of evil pleasure.

Has this analysis been presented by any scholar or preacher or novelist? To be 100% sure about what has been published or not in these times of over-abundant writing and publishing might be a rash presumption. I can say that this thesis is not maintained by the classical authors of the patristic period and Scholasticism, nor by the most influential apologists of the last century, such as Chesterton, Maritain and Lewis.[14] Nor is it argued in some of the most recent and advertised scholarly books about hell. In one of them we find the 'state of art' of current theological discussion and four positions about hell.[15] There, no authors propose a hell without pain as such. However, one position, annihilationism, is conceptually linked to it. In fact, according to this view (recently suggested by Pope Francis

[14] In his *The Problem of Pain* [1940], (Quebec: Samizdat University press, 2016, p. 80), he writes an hypothetical and obscure sentence: "Even if it were possible that the experience (if it can be called experience) of the lost contained no pain and much pleasure, still, that black pleasure would be such as to send any soul, not already damned, flying to its prayers in nightmare terror: even if there were pains in heaven, all who understand would desire them.". However the only one comment of this Lewis's text I could find interprets it in the 'usual' contemporary way, where there is "pain of missing Heaven" : see Max Anders, *What you Need to Know about Bible Prophecy in 12 Lessons* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 129).

[15] Preston Sprinkle (ed.), *Four Views on hell: Second Edition*, (Gran Rapids-Michigan: Zondervan, 2016).

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in an interview)[16] damned human beings dissolve and so there is no pain (nor pleasure, for that matter!).

## Objections and Replies to the Objections

Briefly, here, I present some possible objections to my tenet and the respective responses to them

First of all, a major difficulty are the New Testament passages about hell. They are quite a few and quite explicit. I have already mentioned N. T. Wright's and Andrew Perriman's biblical studies that maintain that hell should be understood as a dimension of our future historical life. I have already mentioned the opinion of the current Pontiff of the Catholic church about annihilation. Also, I mentioned the book *Game Over?* in which the theologians interpret the Biblical passages in two ways: 1) either apocalyptical, which means tied to a philosophy of history, 2) or ethical, hell is an element of preaching morality. And many contemporaries of ours know the long lasting nineteenth century argument about historical biblical studies: many stylistic devices and literary genres in the Bible are adapted to the mentality of the people living then, in Palestine 2,000 years ago.

But I recognize that so far all these ideas are insufficient: there is not yet a widespread and soundly based scholarship and receptive sensibility among the Christian churches which are capable of extending in depth the allegorical and historical interpretation of the "letter".

A second objection is about the philosophers I quoted in support of my thesis: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas. But they wrote about hell as it existed. My reply is that Aristotle did not. Plato explicitly in *The Republic* (10.614–10.621) says that this is a "myth" to illustrate the concepts of dualistic anthropology and ascetical ethics. Augustine, although prolific, wrote about it only in book 21 of the City of God, and his most famous quotation about hell is facetious: what was God doing before creation?, "He was preparing hell for those who pry into mysteries." As for Aquinas, his often quoted passage about the nature and partition of hell is not actually his, since it forms part of the *Summa Theologiae*'s 'Supplent' written after his death. It is true, however, that he treated in depth the torments of the damned in *Compendium Theologiae* 173–184. Here, to rebut the objection, we would need a large new historical study of Aquinas in his context, similar to what Henri De Lubac did on other topics. In

[16] Eugenio Scalfari, 'Il Papa: "È un onore essere chiamato rivoluzionario"', *La Repubblica*, 28 March 2018.

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particular, how could Thomas the philosopher, attempting to understand the moral psychology of pain, come to terms with Thomas the theologian dealing with a popular ideology that has such a strong social impact?

A third objection could come from the contemporary Western social sensibility which overrates pleasures and has difficulty comprehending that some pleasures can be evil: is not the claim that there are some pleasures in hell and not pain a possible move back to the repressive society of the fifties and before, when an ascetic contempt for pleasure was imposed by parents, teachers and culture? My reply wishes a never-ending detailed refutation of all the arguments that here and there can bring about moral relativism about drugs, bioethics, human relationships and education and a persuasive presentation of those pleasures that are evil.

A fourth objection could come from fundamentalist Christians, who still value the function of punishment as a form of retribution: a sinner is an individual who causes suffering to someone (God, for example) and now it is just that the sinner should suffer. God is omnipotent and can decide that human pain should not culminate in redemption or encourage repentance (in other words, God can prevent the damned from "exiting" hell). What is my reply? I already mentioned how human justice, since the Enlightenment (Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, 1764) has been gradually dropping the retributive element from the penal system. Some Christians, however, could object that this is only a secular and materialistic development, based on pragmatic utilitarianism, but not related to Christian ethics. A counter-objection is that to say that a thing is useful and practical does not mean that, as such, is against Christian ethics. The burden of proof is up to who contends that this actual specific useful and practical provision is against Christian ethics. In addition, on a more theological point of view, we can question the concept of 'omnipotence' disagreeing with Descartes and agreeing with Aquinas and try to persuade our interlocutor that an omnipotence that could contradict itself, would be absurd and pointless. While this very contradiction would be implied by a God who is able to annihilate the good living part that makes a sinner feel pain., and at the same time not to annihilate it.

## Conclusions

What practical or moral effects might ensue from such a change in interpreting the nature of hell? I realize that today, speaking in general, the concept of "hell" (if understood as a human condition applicable to some future extension of time after we die) is very little present in education and preaching.

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Anyway, however small, it seems to me that the practical effects could be: first, a less frightened and more "sympathetic" view of the experience of pain: it is not the worst thing either for humans or for God. Pain "happens" (even if it does not happen by chance), nobody searches for it. But in pain there is something positive, in it we must not despair, we must not "do everything" to avoid it, since there is something worse than pain that could occur.

Second, "free spirits" (i.e. those people who can be honest in their reflections on human beings, but have a certain dislike for the established religions) should no longer find - to the detriment of theism - the vision of a God who remains eternally separated from a human being who suffers for this separation, For a human who suffers from being separated from God is a human being who, at least in part, loves God. Otherwise, why would the separation cause them suffering? And such a human being is one with the possibility of changing their sinful orientation, of turning back to face God. As long as pain remains part of the concept of hell, so does the concept of hope.

These could be practical outcomes. A more theoretical one could be a historical overview. Why have Christians and Muslims, and, before them, the ancient heathens, maintained for centuries that hell (the punishment from God) entails suffering? Well, we may begin to detect that the "merciful" God of Muslims and Christians could be meant to provide us with a hell only as an inertial legacy from paganism. In fact, the pagans came first and, to this very day, when we mention some hellish torments we still refer to the heathens Sisyphus and Tantalus, and also to Achilles who, had it been possible, would have traded all the honours enjoyed in the Elysia with the condition of a poor servant who was, however, alive on earth.

Consequently, the more Christians have distanced themselves from that ancient legacy represented by anthropomorphism and the ruthlessness of paganism, the more have they dispensed with the physical pains of hell. However, a certain amount of anthropomorphism, whereby we imagine God as an individual person (or even an individual being), is still with us.

However, even though we cannot help avoiding anthropomorphism, at least to some extent, we should consider that humans after the Enlightenment have gradually learnt that prison must accomplish only two tasks: 1) to prevent current criminals from repeating crimes; 2) to prevent future criminals from imitating current criminals. In fact, the laws of the most civilised countries have got rid of the third – once very important – task: to exact vengeance upon criminals in retaliation for their crimes, thus making them suffer. Even more so should be God, I mean non- vengeful!

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I conjecture that we perceive it, although unconsciously. As Freud famously discovered many years ago,[17] every "symptom" (or "lapsus") is a compromise between a conscious force and an unconscious one. In this case the 'symptom' is the disappearance of hell from sermons, prayers and theological debates. The conscious psychic agent is the sense of guilt for appearing radical and despising both tradition and the literal reading of the New Testament where suffering in hell was a prominent feature. The unconscious psychic agent is the perception that this does not work for our current sensibility both about God and human beings. The result of this paralysing compromise is the removal of this subject – hell - from our religious life.

What would happen if – very hypothetically – hell and its nature were mentioned explicitly and analysed by a vast number of believers in their communities and homes and the idea emerged that, if complete happiness (heaven) is the Highest Good and includes pleasure, desperate unhappiness (hell) is the Highest Evil and includes pleasure as well, a black pleasure, but no pain? Would we start criticising the 'all-you-need-is-love (pleasure)' theory because we could realise that not all pleasures are good? Would we become less scared and obsessed by our sufferings, our children's and partners'?

Perhaps such a conviction would erode further the idea of hell as one of the "realms" of the after-life, leaving space for thinking of it as an aspect of this life. What aspect actually? The existence and persistence of wicked pleasures and their hazards. This brings us back to the first practical outcome I mentioned above.

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[17] Actually 117, because his *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* was published in 1901.

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