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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Even more happiness in hell

Martin Lembke

Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
Email: martin.lembke@ctr.lu.se

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Abstract

Published in 1892, St. George Jackson Mivart's remarkably original article 'Happiness in Hell' was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* almost immediately. In his article, Mivart proposed a solution to the problem of hell whose core contention is that hell is horrible only from a heavenly point of view. From a this-worldly point of view, by contrast, hell is a place of breathtaking felicity. In my opinion, this proposal has some striking merits, at least if it is updated and developed in certain respects. The purpose of this article is to reconstruct it, to reassess it, and to put it back on the table of eschatological ideas.

Keywords: Hell; Problem of hell; Limbo; St. George Jackson Mivart

Introduction

What if hell is like hell only from a heavenly point of view? Essentially, this is what St. George Jackson Mivart suggested in his sensational article 'Happiness in hell'. Published in late 1892, it was placed on the Catholic index of forbidden publications by the following summer. It was formally condemned twice, no less, both by the Congregation of the Index and by the Congregation of the Inquisition (now known as the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith). Yet neither of these tribunals specified what was wrong with it. 'All that we know for certain', inferred the Jesuit Richard F. Clarke, one of Mivart's many adversaries, is that its 'general tendency' is 'in opposition to Catholic dogma' (Clarke (1893b), 500).[1]

Perhaps this theological verdict was justified at the time – the inherent backwardness of the *Index* notwithstanding.[2] 'Happiness in Hell' does contain some unorthodox suggestions, such as that the vast majority of the damned will have no longing for heaven whatsoever. Its key ideas, however, deserve a better fate; or at the very least they deserve a new hearing. I will argue in this article that, while there are elements in Mivart's proposal that need to be elaborated, theologically updated, or even rejected on philosophical grounds, its basic theory offers a striking solution to the problem of hell. And while I am at it, I will suggest that things in hell might be looking even brighter than what Mivart himself dared to assume.

The essential characteristics of hell

First there is the issue of definition. What exactly does 'hell' mean? Or more to the point, what are the essential characteristics of that which 'hell' is supposed to signify? In this

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article I am only interested in contemporary mainstream Christian accounts that can reasonably be called 'traditional' – not because they are more credible than their non-traditional eschatological competitors but because it is precisely the traditional accounts of hell that give rise to the problem of hell. The term 'traditional', however, is not confined to the dominant interpretation of any particular era in the past. Even if some undeniably traditional doctrine of hell was very influential for a long period of time, such as the one espoused by the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* in the sixteenth century,[3] it does not follow that only those subsequent doctrines of hell that conform completely to this particular doctrine deserve to be called 'traditional'. Traditions do not cease to evolve all of a sudden. Contemporary beliefs of hell must therefore be taken into consideration also by traditionalist accounts, and it is a sociological fact that today's predominant views of hell are decisively different from those of premodern centuries.[4] Arguably, some current views of hell are reasonably called 'traditional' since their logical overlap with the views of earlier generations is sufficiently extensive to preserve an essential kind of identity; and some current views are not. To say that some are not is emphatically not to suggest that they are false or less interesting or any such thing but only that they differ in some logically decisive way from their traditional cousins – which may or may not be to their theological credit.

Here is why this matters to us. The problem of hell, as it is regularly put forward and discussed, is a generic problem. It is not intended as a local problem about some specific theory of hell but rather as the problem of hell – in singular. It is for this reason that 'being traditional' is a matter of importance. An adequate solution to the generic problem of hell must presuppose not only a generally held view of hell but also a view that is in some logical sense the same view as that which gave rise to the problem of hell in the first place. Hence the need for an account of hell that is both traditionally representative and contemporarily relevant: one that does justice both to the historically dominant doctrines and to what present-day believers in hell actually believe. So, trying to pinpoint what contemporary Christian traditionalists mean by 'hell', let us begin with the following list of candidate essential characteristics:

A. Hell is *endless* – its inhabitants will remain alive and conscious forever.[5]
B. Hell is *final* – its inhabitants will never be able to escape or allowed to leave.
C. Hell is *inhabited* – and its inhabitants include human beings.
D. Hell is *penal* – its punishments are retributive rather than reformative.
E. Hell is *not preferred* – its inhabitants would much rather be in heaven.
F. Hell is *mentally painful* – its inhabitants suffer constant psychological discomfort.
G. Hell is *mentally dreadful* – its inhabitants suffer constant psychological torment.
H. Hell is *physically painful* – its inhabitants suffer constant physical discomfort.
I. Hell is *physically dreadful* – its inhabitants suffer constant physical torment.
J. Hell is *divinely ordained* – its inhabitants are predestined by God to end up there.

Augustine, the foremost Christian 'infernalist', to borrow David Bentley Hart's apt term,[6] would affirm all these claims.[7] So would Calvin.[8] Arguably, so too would Luther, though his position on proposition J is rather obscure.[9] But from this it cannot be concluded that only those definitions of hell that cover all (or almost all) the above propositions A–J warrant the label 'traditional', for reasons that we have already considered, not even if we were only interested in the mainstream Western Christian doctrine of hell. A simple observation will suffice to verify this contention: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is undeniably the world's most influential contemporary statement of Christian beliefs, explicitly denies J, and its short treatment of the doctrine of hell is tellingly silent about anything that resembles propositions F, G, H, and I.[10]

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So the question is which (if any) of the above ten characteristics are non-negotiable, or such that they must be covered by an adequate traditional definition of hell. In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, C.P. Ragland summarises the traditional model thus: 'hell involves permanent, conscious suffering for the purpose of punishing human sin' (Ragland 2008). On this view, then, it is clear that hell satisfies conditions A, B, C, and D, and then some depending on what kind of suffering one assumes. Ragland in fact distinguishes between three versions of the traditional view: the 'literal' (infernalist) view, the 'harsh psychological' view, and the 'mild psychological' view. On the literal view, hell involves all kinds of excruciating torments in a literal lake of fire, but on the two psychological views the sufferings are only of a psychological kind and the fires of hell are interpreted metaphorically. On the harsh version, the damned really want to leave hell, but cannot. The hopelessness of their situation will create never-ending feelings of despair, frustration, self-loathing, and regret. On the mild view, by contrast, 'though the damned suffer in hell, they do not suffer badly enough to want (all things considered) to leave' (Ragland 2008, section 1.a.ii.2). In sum, then, the literal version presupposes all the above propositions (except maybe J). The harsh psychological version presupposes all but the last three (H, I, and J), and the mild psychological version would at least seem to presuppose F (hell is mentally painful) in addition to A, B, C, and D.[11]

What is all but settled already is that any contemporary Christian view of hell that might reasonably be labelled 'traditional' needs to affirm the first four propositions above (regarding hell's endlessness, finality, habitation, and penality). Jonathan Kvanvig confirms as much in *The Problem of Hell* (1993) which has become a standard point of reference in the ongoing discussions about hell in analytic philosophy of religion. Describing 'the strong view of hell', namely, the view of hell 'held by traditional Christianity', Kvanvig identifies the following four commitments: 'the Anti-Universalism Thesis' (in effect affirming proposition C), 'the Existence Thesis' (in effect affirming proposition A), 'the No Escape Thesis' (in effect affirming proposition B), and 'the Retribution Thesis' (in effect affirming proposition D) (Kvanvig 1993, 19, 25). To this it can be added that the main alternatives to the traditional account of hell derive their alterity precisely from a rejection of some of these four propositions. Hence universalism and second-chance theories deny proposition B (hell is final), annihilationism denies proposition A (hell is endless), free-choice theories deny proposition D (hell is penal), and empty-hell theories deny proposition C (hell is inhabited).[12] Thus we can safely conclude that propositions A–D are essential to any traditional Christian doctrine of hell. All purported solutions to the problem of hell need to take this into account.

As for the remaining six propositions on our list of candidates there is little consensus to be found. Augustinian and Calvinist infernalists will insist that all of them identify essential characteristics of hell. The 'mild psychologists', on the other end of the traditionalist spectrum, will be content with affirming proposition F (hell is mentally painful). My own opinion is that the most plausible line of demarcation has already been drawn: the only essential propositions among our candidates are the first four (A–D). This is not to suggest that a view of hell is traditional as long as it affirms these four propositions; it is just to say that it is not traditional if it does not affirm them.

So what exactly do contemporary Christian traditionalists take 'hell' to signify? Based on the above considerations I venture the following explicative definition (or, more strictly, condition of adequacy): 'Hell is a postmortem state of endless existence where conscious people will be perpetually punished for their earthly wickedness.' I submit that this passes as a traditional Christian definition of hell, even if all infernalists along with some other traditionalists will consider it misleadingly vague.[13] Like the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* it is silent about the phenomenological experiences in hell: sufferings of any description and intensity are neither excluded nor affirmed. It is this minimal description of hell that I

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will presuppose in the following discussions. The problem of hell, thus understood, is about the apparent inconsistencies with the idea that a supremely just, all-loving, all-wise, and all-powerful being would inflict a never-ending punishment on anyone. It would seem that no matter what they did or believed, no-one deserves to be punished for the rest of eternity for it. Clearly there are many local problems related to more or less infernalist views of hell that are much more troublesome than this generic version of the problem. (Such as: how could the all-perfect being of Calvinism predestine anyone to endless physical agony of mind-melting intensity?) However, none of these more severe local problems of hell will be addressed here.

Like all traditional views of hell, the view of hell to be presented and defended in this article affirms propositions A (hell is endless), B (hell is final), C (hell is inhabited), and D (hell is penal). In addition, like the harsh psychological and the literal (infernalist) views, but unlike the mild psychological view, it affirms proposition E (hell is not preferred). All the other propositions (F–J) are being denied, including F (hell is mentally painful), which the mild psychological view affirms. Its unique selling-point, however, and that which also entails a solution to the problem of hell, is that its view of hell is fantastically bright and horrendously disturbing at the same time. It all depends on one's perspective.

The mediaeval notion of limbo

The mere idea that hell might be 'fantastically bright' from *any* perspective might seem utterly (some would say ridiculously) non-traditional and hence self-destructive to an alleged solution to the generic problem of hell. Before I present and start to advocate the idea in any detail, then, I will try to alleviate this immediate concern by briefly reviving the mediaeval notion of limbo. Although this idea plays little role in contemporary Christian eschatology it seems to have permeated both popular and scholarly Catholic imagery from at least the thirteenth century and onwards. According to 'The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized' (2007), written by the *International Theological Commission*, a top Vatican advisory board in doctrinal affairs, it was 'the common Catholic teaching until the mid-20th century' (*ibid*., § 26). Limbo, then, at least as it used to be understood, is a special region on the edge of hell – its first circle, as Dante saw it – to which the flames of fire do not reach. Here the saints of the Old Testament were believed to have been temporarily confined until the Harrowing of Hell when they were triumphantly liberated by the descent of Christ. Here, too, it was thought, is the abode of all those who have died without having committed any actual sin but whose Adamic taintedness had not been washed away by baptism: infants, in particular, but also the mentally impaired. The editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (see entry 'limbo') explain that, as to its felt qualities, there was a wide range of opinions, 'with some theologians maintaining that the infants in limbo are affected with some degree of sadness because of a felt privation and other theologians holding that the infants enjoy every kind of natural felicity'. On all accounts, however, it was agreed that the inhabitants of limbo are spared from severe sufferings in general and physical punishments in particular.

This idea of limbo, as clarified by the said *International Theological Commission*, remains 'a possible theological hypothesis' (2007, preface). Given its profound influence on the worldview of Christian eschatology throughout the better part of the last millennium, this seems reasonable enough, and for the purposes of this article this is an important observation. Perhaps contrary to popular opinion, the idea of a never-ending and even sublime happiness in limbo – that is, in hell – is by no means unheard of in the Christian tradition.

Closely connected to the idea of limbo, both logically and theologically, is the apparently even older Christian assertion that there are different levels of punishment in hell, some being milder than others. Famously, having been led to the counter-Pelagian conclusion

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that even unbaptised infants who die are doomed to hell, already Augustine hastened to add that these children will suffer only 'the lightest punishment of all … for there are diverse punishments in proportion to the guilt of the sinner' (*ibid*., § 18). From Peter Abelard and on, as the *International Theological Commission* points out, this 'mildest punishment' of which Augustine spoke was widely interpreted as the privation of the beatific vision in heaven, 'without hope of obtaining it, but with no additional penalties' (*ibid*., § 22):

> In the developments of medieval doctrine, the loss of the beatific vision (*poena damni*) was understood to be the proper punishment for original sin, whereas the 'torments of perpetual hell' constituted the punishment for mortal sins actually committed. In the Middle Ages the ecclesiastical magisterium affirmed more than once that those 'who die in mortal sin' and those who die 'with original sin only' receive 'different punishments.' (*ibid*.)

Indeed, to underline what has already been noted, mediaeval theologians came to the common view that the unbaptised children in hell, precisely because they only suffer the *poena damni*, the privation of the beatific vision, 'feel no pain at all or even that they enjoy a full natural happiness through their union with God in all natural goods' (*ibid*., § 23). This goes to reiterate that the contrasting notions of happiness and hell are not mutually exclusive in the traditional Christian world of ideas. Quite often it has been assumed that at least from one perspective, that of limbo, hell is indeed 'fantastically bright'.

The relativity view: Introduction

Thus having revisited the mediaeval ideas of limbo, we are now better prepared to appreciate and begin to understand Mivart's solution to the problem of hell. It needs a shorthand designation, to begin with, and I will simply refer to it as 'the relativity view'. Here is how Mivart himself introduces it:

> Let us imagine a man in perfect health of mind and body, intelligent, amiable and wealthy, enjoying the universal esteem of all who know him, the devoted affection of his family, the peace of a good conscience, and the happiness of a natural love of and union with God. Let us further suppose that all his wishes are gratified, and that he has a full and certain knowledge that this great felicity will exist unimpaired and be unceasingly enjoyed by him for all eternity. Yet such a being will be in hell. (Mivart 1892, 914)

In this introductory passage we are immediately drawn to the heart of Mivart's relativity view. For hell, according to this proposal, is a jaw-droppingly beautiful paradise – from a this-worldly point of view. It is 'an abode of happiness transcending all our most vivid anticipations' (*ibid*., 919). In effect, then, even if he does not explicitly say it, Mivart suggests that limbo is not only one of nine circles of hell, or anything of the like, but rather the prevalent condition of hell. In other words: hell on the whole is to Mivart what limbo was to countless numbers of mediaeval Christians.

From a heavenly point of view, by contrast, hell is a teeth-grindingly terrifying abyss. Such indeed, on Mivart's proposal, is the unfathomable difference between heaven and the rest, 'for the difference between what is divine and aught else is an infinite difference, and infinitely greater than any other contrast and distinction whatsoever it may be' (*ibid*., 918). That which alone makes all the difference, Mivart points out, with respect to the felt qualities of heaven and of hell, is the beatific vision. To enjoy it is to experience what is 'infinitely beyond' our powers of conception – a bliss of such intensity that we 'can neither imagine

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nor really desire' it here on earth (*ibid*., 916, 918). In comparison, as Mivart envisions it, even our most colourful images of paradise are black as death.

The uniqueness of Mivart's proposal consists precisely in this. By simultaneously looking at hell from two very different perspectives, one this-worldly and one heavenly, it creates a split vision that is able to encompass two otherwise incompatible features. Hence, despite the overwhelming happiness that it envisions in hell, the relativity view has the resources to explain in a straightforward way why hell is nevertheless a quite shockingly dreadful place.

In order to make sense of this extreme contrast, we may try to imagine someone in heaven who is enjoying the beatific vision: this crystalline vision of Goodness and complete experience of Love. All of a sudden she is told to go to hell: to that place of no return, that is, which from our earthly perspective is shimmering like Atlantis in a sunlit sea but which to our illuminated but tragic saint will appear like 'utter darkness'. Describe her acute despair in terms of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' if you like, or hell as a burning waste dump where 'worms never die'. As Mivart points out, 'the loss of heaven is an infinite loss' (*ibid*., 917), and no-one on the outside could ever understand what it really means.

This is why the inspired scriptures, prophets, and artists of the Church use such dramatic language, Mivart suggests. Burning sulphur, dungeons of darkness, battered bodies, flesh-ripping instruments of torture – the point of such grisly imagery is precisely to underline, from a God's Eye point of view, the horrendous reality of hell, and to warn thereof 'by means of such symbols as may, least inadequately and most effectively, strike the imaginations of the greatest multitude of mankind' (*ibid*., 917). About this divinely inspired pedagogy of contrasting narratives, Mivart's analysis is particularly vivid:

> If a painter had to depict, as best he could, a brightness which no pigment can approach, his only resource must be to deepen the shadows as much as his palette will permit – regretting all the time that he has no colors nearly black enough to convey, by contrast, a due appreciation of that unrepresentable brightness. Therefore, since it was utterly impossible to depict the bliss of heaven directly, it had been indirectly brought out by depicting hell as a place of all the horrors that the imagination could by any possibility gather together. (Mivart 1900, 569–570)

Accordingly, as Mivart points out, far from testifying falsely about the afterlife, the hellfire preachers and doomsday writers of the Church, along with her sculptors and her painters, 'have barely done their duty' (Mivart 1892, 917). They have, however, to the best of their abilities, borne true witness to the horrors of hell. All the same, the relativistic nature of their testimonies must always be kept in mind:

> [O]f course, all this horrible picturing must be exclusively taken as symbolizing the *difference* between eternal bliss and its non-attainment, and not by any means as depicting the difference between hell and life on earth. To take it in that old and too generally accepted sense, would be to bring back the horrible teaching which represents God as an execrable demon. (Mivart 1900, 570)

This is the heart of the matter. Taking stock, the relativity view gives a striking account of the awfulness of hell. It is able to do so, not in the morally abhorrent manner of extracting it from the extreme levels of torture that the citizens of hell all too often have been supposed to suffer, but simply by describing hell from heaven's point of view. The fiery horrors of hell, in other words, can only be comprehended from a divinely illuminated perspective. From our earthly perspective, by contrast, hell is a spectacular wonderland, and thus the

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problem of hell would seem to be completely undercut. Or as Mivart himself concludes, 'it seems that the objections of our own day against the Catholic doctrine of hell altogether fall to the ground' (Mivart 1892, 918).

A couple of theological updates

Not everybody, however, is happy in Mivart's hell. Being known as a devout and dogmatically vigilant Catholic, at least at the time of writing 'Happiness in Hell' in 1892, Mivart felt bound by faith to dismiss as heretical the idea that no-one in hell should have to suffer the *poena sensus*, the punishment of the senses.

> It is most certain that the Catholic Church is definitely committed to the doctrine that souls condemned to hell remain there for all eternity and that all of them suffer the loss of the Beatific Vision of God (the *poena damni*), while a portion of them further suffer what is technically denominated the *poena sensus* – the equivalent of 'hell fire.' (Mivart 1892, 900)

In fact, as he reluctantly concludes, there might even be those in hell who suffer intense pain:

> [W]e cannot think that right reason demands the belief that no-one in hell suffers severely, even compared with life on earth. For, although we may judge no man, and although reason tells us how almost impossible it is for us fairly to judge even ourselves … it would ill become us to represent hell as being in no case an object of just fear, nay of prudent, reasonable terror. (*ibid*., 915–916)

To Mivart, this admission constituted the 'one great difficulty, the real *crux* of the whole matter' (*ibid*., 915). His attempted solution was to reserve the heavier kinds of punishment in hell to a small minority, namely, to 'baptised Christians who lead bad lives and depart from the world in their [mortal] sins' (*ibid*.) – thus letting the great majority, such as unbaptised infants and 'millions of savages who were probably as irresponsible as little children' (Mivart 1900, 569), completely off the hook.

Here a few cracks in Mivart's proposal are beginning to show. The unfortunate admission that there are people in hell who suffer severely, 'even compared with life on earth', is surprisingly at odds with Mivart's overall and ingenious solution to the whole problem at hand. The proposal that hell is like hell only from a heavenly point of view is awkwardly compromised by the additional suggestion that some people in hell nevertheless have to endure extreme degrees of physical pain. That these unhappy souls may be rather few, as Mivart suggests, does nothing to ease one's moral misgivings in this regard. His relativity view thus needs a theological update. However 'hellfire' should be interpreted, the pain it may cause must be understood exclusively from heaven's point of view. As a result, hell might be an even happier place than what Mivart dared to assume. There may be all kinds of differences in the exact distribution of well-being, status, power, and possibilities (remember the age-old Christian assertion that there are different levels of punishment in hell), according to the merits and demerits of each person's earthly life, but the unique appeal of the relativity view is that hell is altogether, from a this-worldly point of view, a stunning paradise.

Mivart's original proposal should be theologically updated also in another respect. As we have seen, one of the essential traditional characteristics of hell is identified by proposition D (hell is penal), but Mivart's original proposal does not adequately account for this characteristic. Here is why. On Mivart's view, the inhabitants of hell are punished

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in the sense that they are banned from entering heaven. So far so good. But 'the overwhelming majority' of the inhabitants of hell, never having been regenerated through baptism into a supernatural mode of existence, 'could no more desire the supernatural state than fishes can desire to become birds, or oysters sigh because they are not butterflies' (Mivart 1892, 918, 915). Most people in hell are therefore naturally incapable not only of enjoying the beatific vision but even of longing for it, Mivart concludes. But this idea does not sit well with the alleged penality of hell, for it simply does not make any legal sense to prohibit or prevent people from doing something – entering into heaven, in this case – that by nature they could not do anyway. It would be like sentencing a bank robber to being forever incapable of becoming invisible. Hence Mivart's original proposal does not adequately satisfy the penal criteria laid down by proposition D.

It is easy to see, however, why Mivart was led into this way of thinking. In his days the idea of limbo was still part and parcel of Catholic eschatology, meaning that hell was widely believed to be populated by untold millions of unbaptised infants and other comparably innocent persons. It is to Mivart's credit that he tried to explain how the eternal 'punishment' of these individuals really is no punishment, even if the cost for doing so was that his proposed view no longer satisfied the traditional criteria of penality. Since Mivart's article was put on the *Index*, however, Catholic eschatology has undergone considerable changes. Today, the obvious strategy better to account for the traditional penality of hell, not available to Mivart and other observant Catholics at the end of the nineteenth century but readily available nowadays, is to relocate the unbaptised infants, together with all people of good will who die without deliberately and unrepentantly having yielded themselves to evil, to heaven (via purgatory, if need be). Hence, at one stroke, hell is reserved for those who actually deserve it, namely, the evildoers of this world: those who freely and deliberately and on the whole act so badly as to warrant perpetual punishment. And this punishment consists in being permanently banned from heaven: it is an entry restraint or spiritual imprisonment that, *pace* Mivart, prevents the inhabitants of hell from doing what they otherwise could have done and very much would like to do.

I thus conclude that the relativity view should be theologically adjusted in the following two ways. First, it needs to be wholehearted in its rejection of propositions F (hell is mentally painful), G (hell is mentally dreadful), H (hell is physically painful), and I (hell is physically dreadful), particularly of course as regards G and I. Second, its affirmation of proposition D (hell is penal) needs to be legally adequate, and this is accomplished by reserving hell for those who actually deserve never-ending punishment.

The relativity view: Analysis

Even so, certain aspects of the relativity view cry out for explanation. So far its main ideas have merely been introduced, but now it is time to develop the theory in some detail and to assess it properly. From now on, however, I do not claim to represent or defend any particular aspect of Mivart's spectacularly original account from the 1890s. For all Mivart's contributions, what really matters is the philosophical and theological substance of the view itself. In what follows I will try to cut to the chase by focusing on three critical questions: Does the idea that hell is brimming with happiness really make any sense? Are everlasting punishments even in principle compatible with the supreme justice and goodness of God? And even if hell is horrible only from heaven's point of view, why assume that it is a stunning paradise from our point of view?

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Happiness in hell: Does it really make any sense?

As we have seen, the relativity view upholds the first five propositions on our list: A (hell is endless), B (hell is final), C (hell is inhabited), D (hell is penal), and E (hell is not preferred). While affirming the first four is necessary for counting as 'traditional', it is not enough. Of obvious importance is also this: the view in question cannot incorporate elements that are patently foreign to the theological traditions of every main branch of Christianity. (For example, if some view X suggested that hell is the eternal abode of a necessarily existing force of cosmic evil, X would not be a traditional Christian view even if it affirmed propositions A–D.) But it might be plausibly argued that this is exactly what the relativity view is doing: by suggesting that the citizens of hell are abundantly happy it incorporates a phenomenological aspect that is profoundly at odds with all mainstream Christian conceptions of hell throughout history. Trying to alleviate this acute problem, I started off by reviving the mediaeval concept of limbo, concluding that the contrasting notions of happiness and hell are in fact not irreconcilable in the traditional Christian world of ideas. But of course limbo was always believed to be a special case (and as we have seen, it was even up for theological debate whether its inhabitants experience genuine happiness). Mivart may well have been the first public Christian figure to suggest that (almost) *all* inhabitants of hell are happy. There is no denying that this particular idea, which is crucial to the relativity view, is distinctively non-traditional.

But this is exactly where the split vision of the relativity view comes into effect. Despite the sublime happiness among the citizens of hell, it is true nonetheless that hell is a terrifying abyss from heaven's point of view. Yes, their happiness is sublime from our point of view, and the citizens of hell experience it as such, but from the perspective of the heavenly saints this very happiness is painfully bland. Hence it is emphatically not the case that the relativity view suggests that hell is kind of like heaven. It is rather that hell is the worst possible fate that could ever befall a human being in a world governed by the all-perfect being of theism, and this is so even if the citizens of hell are fantastically happy. And herein lies the solution, I suggest, not only to the present dilemma but to the problem of hell. While containing a distinctively non-traditional element, the relativity view *is* distinctively traditional in its affirmation that hell is the very epitome of horror – from a perfect point of view.[14] It straightforwardly accepts just about any traditional and even infernalist Christian pronouncement on hell's overall quality. What it denies, quite confidently even if it goes against some dominant ideas of the past, is that the phenomenological or felt quality among the inhabitants of hell is marked by unhappiness.

But then we need to consider another issue of immediate concern. According to the relativity view, hell is exclusively comprised of people (and demons and whatever) who deserve endless punishment. Leaving aside for the moment whether anybody could deserve such a thing (we will come back to that), the punishment consists in being permanently locked out of heaven, which is equivalent to missing out on the ultimate good. The citizens of hell will realise that they only have themselves to blame for this dreadful malady, and they will forever wish that they would have acted differently while they had the chance. As proposition E (hell is not preferred) affirms, they would much rather be in heaven. But surely the realisation of this ultimate loss will be an everlasting source of sorrow and regret, or even turmoil, and then how could hell possibly be a state of superabundant happiness?

To approach an answer to this psychologically crucial question, I suggest that we turn our attention to five important notions: time, transparency, resurrection, forgiveness, and love. Time, to begin with, has a well-known ability to heal wounds – and there is a lot of time in hell! The key tenet of the relativity view, that hell is a breathtaking paradise from

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our present perspective, does most certainly not entail a state in which the inhabitants of hell are constantly joyful. While the theory denies proposition F (hell is mentally painful), according to which the inhabitants of hell suffer constant psychological discomfort, it would unequivocally affirm something like proposition F-light (hell is *occasionally* mentally painful) or even G-light (hell is *occasionally* mentally dreadful). Following the all-revealing exposure on Judgement Day, the truth will burn like fire in the hearts of the damned. Fully realising what they have done and what the everlasting consequences will be, they might well be psychologically shattered by feelings of wretchedness and remorse. But time is on everyone's side. As it goes by, life goes on, also in hell. That which once caused such devastating feelings of guilt and despair will slowly turn into painful memories of an ever more distant past. And such memories, while their pain will never go away completely, do not necessarily exclude overall and even overwhelming feelings of joy. We know for a fact that this is so, even on earth.

Here I would like to draw a parallel to heaven. Not only the doomed will have reason to tremble on Judgement Day, and many will be saved 'as through fire' (1 Cor. 3:15). The sins of the saints are sins just the same, and even in heaven there will be painful memories and feelings of regret – perhaps even more so than in hell since the Truth shines so much brighter there. But no-one would ever suggest that therefore the saints cannot be really happy in heaven.

Transparency, to continue, will also work in everyone's favour. It is easier to cope with one's feelings of failure if there is nothing more to hide. Ever since Judgement Day, again, the truth about oneself is out there – and so is the truth about many other things as well.[15] That God exists, for example, and that self-loathing would serve no purpose, and that psychological strategies like machismo, pretence, and denial would only make oneself look ridiculous: all such things will be perfectly clear to the inhabitants of hell. And last but not least, they will know that they will never be allowed into heaven. This certitude effectively rules out all possible frustrations associated with false or deferred or unfulfilled hopes, and it thus allows for a certain peace of mind. Of course, if they also knew what they are really missing out on, their mental state would be one of constant torment. But this they cannot know, for no-one outside of heaven can have more than the faintest idea about what the beatific vision really is like.

The resurrection of all the dead will likewise have a beneficial effect on everyone. Even on this dawn of reckoning, when 'those who have done good' will be resurrected to life, and 'those who have done evil' will be resurrected to judgement (Jn 5:28–29), God will let his sun rise for all people, good and evil alike (cf. Mt. 5:45). That the dead bodies of all people will be supernaturally transformed and 'clothed with incorruptibility and immortality' (1 Cor. 15:54) is unanimously affirmed by traditional theologians, whereas the additional quality of impassibility has usually been reserved for the bodies of the saints.[16] But the relativity view unhesitatingly declares that impassibility will be characteristic also of the bodies of the damned. They may not be transcendently endowed with glorious brightness, agility, subtility, or any other physical effect of the beatific vision, but they will be invulnerable and perfectly healthy.

Moving on to forgiveness, suppose someone in hell turns to someone in heaven (like the rich man did to Lazarus) and says 'I am sorry' and really means it. Now imagine that this person in heaven is you: the wronged party of some really painful conflict that took place on earth. Living in a state not only of transparency but of crystal-clear illumination, knowing that the wrongdoer's contrition is genuine, how would you react? The question is rhetorical, of course; what I am trying to suggest is merely that, yes, of course you would accept the offender's apology! This is not for a moment to suggest that you would (let alone should) offer some kind of reconciliation, or start a new friendship, or even stop feeling some proper sense of resentment;[17] it is rather that you would assure the offender that everything

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is alright, that you have let it go completely, and that you will never exact revenge. In this minimal but arguably meaningful sense you would be offering forgiveness,[18] and to the wrongdoing party in hell this would be a cause for gratitude and, again, peace of mind.

It might be objected that the scenario just discussed is patently non-traditional – as if the characters in hell were somehow supernaturally purged from all wickedness and irrationality! Less categorically, it might be objected that the traditional Christian views of hell depict the doomed as being cemented in their own vices, forever locked in mental states of rebellion and turmoil, and the mere idea of them genuinely asking for forgiveness is ruled out, if not conceptually at least theologically. Objections like these, however, while probably containing a fair bit of truth, do not carry much weight. It is universally agreed that the notion of forgiveness is of utmost Christian importance, and to suggest that even those in hell might be forgiven (in the above specified sense), though admittedly an unusual idea, cannot be considered antithetical to Christian theology. And as to the objection that, as I have been describing it, the damned in hell almost seem to have been supernaturally sanctified (which clearly would be a quite unorthodox suggestion), I can only reiterate the universal effects of transparency following Judgement Day. It would simply be absurd to keep on raging and rebelling even when the truth about all that really matters is plain for all to see. A postmortem scenario in which that were the case, or in which it would somehow be impossible for the citizens of hell to feel genuine remorse and to say 'I am sorry', is one that lacks psychological credibility. People in hell are still people, not stereotypical caricatures.

Love, at long last, is what keeps all of it in existence – including hell. According to the relativity view, even if it clearly affirms proposition D (hell is penal), it is patently *not* the case that 'the justification for and purpose of hell is retributive in nature' (Kvanvig 1993, p. 19; see also Manis 2019, p. 285), nor is this an essential, traditional idea. As Eleonore Stump explains, even to someone as eminently traditional as Dante (who is representing the views of Aquinas, no less), 'hell is founded on God's love' (Stump 2022, 304). Yes, hell is retributive in character in the sense that its inhabitants are consigned there, as opposed to being admitted into heaven, as punishment for their wickedness; but it is fundamentally an expression of, and is being upheld in everlasting existence solely because of, the goodness of God. The damned are in hell rather than in heaven because of their sins, indeed, but they are being upheld in existence rather than being annihilated because of God's unquenchable love also for them. While it remains true that hell is the worst fate that could ever befall anyone in a world governed by the all-perfect being of Christian theism, it is equally true that it is the best thing that could ever happen to anyone – outside of heaven. I agree with Kvanvig that 'any adequate account of hell must begin with an understanding of the nature of God and present the possibilities of heaven and hell as flowing from this one nature' (Kvanvig 1993, 112), and that is precisely what the relativity view is doing. Whether they will be spending eternity in heaven or in hell, all human beings will be sustained in a supernatural state of psychosomatic harmony and health – all for the sake of love.[19]

How is everlasting punishment consistent with God's all-perfect nature?

Because the relativity view affirms hell's endlessness, finality, habitation, and penality (i.e. propositions A–D), we need to consider the possibility that, for all its brightness, it still is adversely affected by some of the usual objections against the traditional views of hell. (Spoiler: it is not!) There are two main lines of criticism that have been put forward in this regard: (1) that everlasting punishment is disproportional to any kind of finite wrongdoing and hence inherently unjust,[20] and (2) that such punishment, even if it were

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just, is inconsistent with God's infinite benevolence and undying love for all.[21] Kvanvig points out the difference: 'The first concerns whether consigning anyone to hell is morally acceptable. The second difficulty concerns the motivation and justification for the doctrine of hell, that is, whether consigning anyone to hell is consistent with God's nature and whether there could be a good enough reason to think that God *must* send anyone there' (Kvanvig 1993, 27). So the first objection is a moral one; the second is rather a conceptual one.

On closer inspection, however, it turns out that almost all versions of these objections are directed at more or less infernalist views of hell.[22] R. Zachary Manis, to give but one example, introduces 'the problem of justice' (i.e. the moral objection) as follows: 'a hell of endless conscious torment is an unjust punishment for any earthly transgressions because it sentences a person to infinite suffering for merely finite wrongdoing' (Manis 2019, 18). Well, I totally agree: not even for the most reprehensible crimes against humanity could endless conscious torment ever be a just punishment. But of course this has no bearing whatsoever on the relativity view, whose rejection of propositions F, G, H, and I is as resolute as anyone's.

Kvanvig is a lone but notable exception. In his meticulous chapter 2 of *The Problem of Hell* he argues that the moral objection is fatal to any traditional view of hell regardless of its particular assumptions about the nature of the punishments of hell. Hence whether or not it involves fire, brimstone, anguish, or pain of any description, it ultimately fails for one of two reasons: either because it posits an 'infinite' punishment for merely finite wrongdoing, or because it posits an 'equal' punishment for all individuals in hell (Kvanvig 1993, 27–28). Concerning infinite punishment, however, Kvanvig's line of argument is clearly inadequate. Suppose the punishment of hell would consist in someone's being denied dessert after dinner once every 10,000 years. The trivial fact that this punishment would be 'infinite' (in some strained sense) obviously does not entail that it would be unjustly harsh. Hence infinity in itself does nothing to establish a retributive disproportionality between a punishment and an offence.

Concerning equal punishment, Kvanvig's argument is that, even if it could be shown that all sinners deserve infinite punishment, some of them deserve a much more serious punishment than others, and thus it follows that any equal punishment version of the traditional view of hell is unfair (*ibid*., 51–55). Here I wish to put on record that most traditional views of hell are actually *not* of this kind – remember the ancient Christian assertion that there are different levels of punishment in hell! The relativity view, again, allows for any number of differences in hell regarding the exact distribution of well-being, status, power, and possibilities according to the overall merit (or rather demerit) of each person's earthly life. Having said that, however, it is true that the basic and incomparably most serious punishment of hell, according to the relativity view, is the *poena damni*, the loss of the beatific vision, and this punishment *is* distributed equally to all individuals in hell. So maybe here, at last, the relativity view is facing a real challenge?

Not really. To begin with, it is a soteriological axiom that *all* human beings deserve this punishment, completely regardless of individual merits, and that if it were not for the cross of Christ everyone would receive it. (Now *that* is a difficult view to explain, but the point here is just that it is universally accepted by mainstream theologians.) If it is unfair, well, so is one of Christianity's most fundamental principles. And then it must be kept in mind that, according to the relativity view, the inhabitants of hell are there because they genuinely deserve – as decreed by an omniscient and supremely just judge who has taken every single piece of mitigating evidence into consideration (whether it be of a physical, genetic, social, intentional, or other kind) – a very serious punishment. That not all of them are exactly as blameworthy does not matter much; whatever differences there are can be compensated for in any number of ways, as we have already seen.

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Why should we think that hell is a stunning paradise from our point of view?

Even if it is granted that hell is like hell only from a heavenly point of view, however, why assume that it is like heaven from our point of view? Why not rather think that it is a perpetual prolongation of our earthly conditions? Just because it is no longer horrific from our this-worldly point of view it does not need to be drop-dead gorgeous either! It would seem (it might be objected) that the relativity view is unduly lax.

By way of response I will outline two simple arguments. First, the harsher the everlasting conditions in hell are supposed to be, the weaker the relativity solution to the problem of hell will become. It is precisely because of its stunning vision of hell that it is able to handle the problem so decisively. And second, rather paradoxically, the less marvellous the everlasting conditions in hell are supposed to be, the less awe-inspiring heaven – the *real* heaven – will become. There cannot be a greater contrast than that between heaven and hell.[23] Hence whatever hell is supposed to be, and no matter how marvellous, heaven must be incomparably greater. But that which is incomparably greater than a marvellous place is more awe-inspiring than that which is incomparably greater than a merely ordinary place. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. The relativity view thus has a salient ability to explain why heaven is to be sought for its own sake rather than for the sake of avoiding hell.

Concluding remarks

When Mivart died in the year 1900 he seems to have taken the relativity view (or anything like it) with him to his grave. At least for all I can see, there has not been a single attempt to revive it since then. It did get a mention (or perhaps even nod of approval) in *The Problem of Pain* when C.S. Lewis quipped that 'there may be a truth in the saying that "hell is hell, not from its own point of view, but from the heavenly point of view"' (Lewis 1940, p. 114), but that seems to be it. By contrast, the watered-down idea that hell might not be altogether bad from an inside perspective, an idea that is imbedded in the mild psychological view of hell and its rejection of proposition E (hell is not preferred), has been advanced by several leading proponents of the free-choice (or free-will) theory of hell, notably and captivatingly by Lewis himself in *The Great Divorce* (1945), and more recently by Richard Swinburne,[24] Eleonore Stump,[25] and Jerry L. Walls.[26] Insofar as there is any happiness in hell at all, according to accounts such as theirs, it is either petty or delusional. And of course whatever joy hell might have to offer, it cannot be much better than that as long as heaven is pictured as the garden of Eden, lest the contrast between heaven and hell break down. The split vision of the relativity view offers a completely new perspective. Let hell be a place of breathtaking marvels and overwhelming happiness – it will still make the saints shudder with cold. To them, indeed, the entire hell is frozen in ice.

Let us leave it at that. I maintain that the relativity view offers an arresting solution to the problem of hell. Whether it is better than its rivals is a whole other issue, of course, as is whether its underlying view of hell is theologically more warranted than the non-traditional alternatives. But at least now it is back where it belongs: on the eschatological drawing board of speculative ideas.

Notes

1. Published in December 1892 in a journal called *The Nineteenth Century*, 'Happiness in Hell' caused 'widespread sensation' (Rolfe 1894, 119) and was immediately assailed by Christian traditionalists. Within months, Mivart, a renowned scientist who had for decades been known as a stout Catholic apologist, wrote two follow-up articles in the same journal: 'The Happiness in Hell' (1893a) and 'Last Words on the Happiness in Hell' (1893b). In July 1893 these articles were all placed on the *Index*, and shortly afterwards the readers of *The Nineteenth Century* were informed of Rome's decree by the Jesuit R.F. Clarke (see Clarke 1893b) who earlier that year had accused him of

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doing 'immeasurable mischief to the souls of men' by giving voice to his views on hell (Clarke 1893a, p. 92). Within months a formal submission to the decree was published by Mivart (1893c) – a submission, however, that he openly retracted towards the end of his life, describing 'Happiness in Hell' as 'perhaps the most important' text he ever wrote (Root 1985, 6). For his own account of these dramatic developments along with an emphatic restatement of his views, see Mivart (1900), published around the time of his death. For an illuminating historical reassessment, see Root (1985).

2. According to the Catholic watchdogs of the time, 'the reading of a forbidden book, or of a considerable part of it' (Betten 1909, 43), was considered a mortal sin. (The *Index* was not abolished until 1966.)

3. See its section on the Apostle's Creed, article 7.

4. See Walls (2005). The fear of hell started to disappear even before the Enlightenment. After the sixteenth century, 'hell never again provoked the same unanimous shudder that it did during the two centuries immediately following Dante' (Bernstein 1986, p. 88).

5. By this proposition I do not mean to suggest that the inhabitants of hell are necessarily conscious *at all times* – perhaps they are unconscious on Sundays, for example, as an anonymous reviewer suggested to me! The claim is rather that their general mode or state of existence (in which they are constantly alive, of course) is a conscious one. Even if it should be occasionally lost, their consciousness will never be permanently lost.

6. Bentley Hart (2019, p. 13).

7. Hunsinger (1998, pp. 410–414); Talbott (1993, p. 153). If propositions G and/or I are accepted then propositions F and/or H become logically superfluous, of course, but in what follows I will disregard this truism. Moreover, the distinction between 'painful' (in propositions F and H) and 'dreadful' (in propositions G and I) is admittedly vague. The point is merely to draw attention to the difference between mild and harsh versions of the traditional view of hell about which I will have more to say later (cf. Ragland 2008).

8. Casey (2009, pp. 180–183); Walls 2015, p. 155).

9. Wallace (1974, pp. 202–203). For an insightful comparison of Luther's mysterious doctrine of predestination with the more straightforward versions of Augustine and Calvin, see Pelikan (1984, pp. 217–232).

10. See §§ 1033–1037, 1056. Granted, expressions like 'unquenchable fire' and 'gnashing of teeth' are mentioned several times in these paragraphs, but always in a metaphorical manner.

11. That traditionalists disagree about the nature of hellfire is confirmed by Thomas Talbott who notes that 'many Augustinians view the agony of hell as essentially psychological and spiritual in nature' (Talbott 2021, sect. 2).

12. These theories of hell are regularly introduced as alternatives to the traditional Christian view. See e.g. Ragland (2008); Kvanvig (1993, ch. 2); and Manis (2019, part II).

13. According to one recent example, 'hell is a place of punishment inflicted through severe pain both mental and physical, where no happiness can be experienced' (Lamont 2011, p. 153).

14. An anonymous reviewer reasonably questioned this claim (that hell, even as envisioned by the relativity view, is the very epitome of horror from heaven's point of view). Would not an infernalist hell be a worse place even from heaven's point of view? The answer, I suggest, is simply that an infernalist hell is a metaphysically impossible state of affairs in a world governed by an all-perfect being. Being fully illuminated in this regard, and having no epistemic interest in impossible scenarios, the citizens of heaven know that hell could not possibly be any worse than envisioned by the relativity view. Hence to them, even on this view, hell is the epitome of horror.

15. What other things? I am not suggesting that post-judgement transparency entails anything like omniscience, of course, but rather that everyone will have a direct epistemic access to whatever has been revealed on the Day of Judgement. This includes a full appreciation of everyone's moral stature and of the perfect justice of all of God's decrees, along with an immediate vindication of the central tenets of Christian theism: that God is omnipotent, for example, and triune, and the omnibenevolent sustainer of both heaven and hell.

16. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907), 'General Resurrection'.

17. The idea that forgiveness puts an end to resentment is often attributed to Joseph Butler's famous sermons on the topic, but Butler's idea was rather that 'forgiveness functions like brakes on resentment – it serves to prevent resentment from giving rise to self-frustrating and antisocial behaviour' (Gubler 2022, p. 738).

18. See Gubler (2022) for an excellent summary of the relevant philosophical discussions about forgiveness, along with an overview of recent work.

19. The relativity view thus solves what Kvanvig calls 'the arbitrariness problem' (Kvanvig 1993, pp. 55–62), because on this view hell is the best possible afterlife alternative to heaven.

20. See e.g. Kvanvig (1993, ch. 1), Manis (2019, pp. 18–36), and Swinburne (1983, p. 51).

21. See Talbott (1990); cf. Kvanvig (1993, 27, pp. 119–130) and Manis (2019, pp. 39–45).

22. See e.g. Hick (1966, p. 377), Kvanvig (1993, p. 27), and Talbott (1990, p. 19).

23. Here an anonymous reviewer offers an interesting transitivity objection: 'if hell is better than the mortal realm, and heaven is better than hell, then isn't there a greater contrast between heaven and the mortal realm?' But the answer is no: from heaven's perfect point of view, hell is *not* better than the mortal realm. On the contrary,

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to the citizens of heaven, hell is incomparably worse than the mortal realm – despite it being fantastically bright from our this-worldly perspective. This is because in hell, as affirmed by proposition B (hell is final), there is no longer any possibility of being admitted into heaven. Between heaven and hell the door is forever locked, and this is why the saints find hell so abysmally dark. They would much rather relive whatever trials and tribulations life on earth might have to offer, together with the chance of being readmitted into heaven, than being relocated into hell and spending the rest of eternity there – no matter how awesome it is from our mortal point of view.

24. See Swinburne (1983).

25. See Stump (1986, pp. 194–198) and (2022, pp. 298–305).

26. See Walls (2015, chs. 3 and 8). For critique of the free-choice theory of hell, see McCord Adams (1999, pp. 43–49), Bentley Hart (2019, pp. 1–32), and Levine (1993).

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