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On the problem of hell

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Abstract: **There is a conception of hell that holds that God punishes some people in a way that brings about endless suffering and unhappiness. An objection to this view holds that such punishment could not be just since it punishes finite sins with infinite suffering. In answer to this objection, it is shown that endless suffering, even intense suffering, is consistent with the suffering being finite. Another objection holds that such punishment is contrary to God's love. A possible response to this objection is developed.**

A popular traditional conception of hell holds that as a punishment by God the damned are tormented in fire throughout a never-ending, infinite time span. This view is subject to many difficulties. Those typically raised include the claims that: (1) such suffering is unjust since no finite sin deserves infinite punishment, especially so severe a punishment, and thus an all-good, just God could not inflict hell on the damned;[1] (2) such a picture of hell undercuts the Christian view of a loving God;[2] and (3) any putative revelation that includes such a doctrine must (using a well known argument of McTaggart) be self-defeating.[3] To Christians who find these objections telling, a couple of options may be available that need to be explored. One option, taken by both universalists and annihilationists, is to reject the existence of hell as a state in which one experiences unending suffering. A second option is to reject this popular conception of hell while identifying certain core features of a conception of hell, and maintaining that the existence of such a hell is consistent with that of a God who is not cruel but is loving and all-good. A major problem for the first option is to reconcile it with scripture and tradition; this is a problem I will not investigate here. Instead I shall consider the second option and investigate an argument which suggests that an account of hell that involves core elements of punishment, suffering, unhappiness, and unendingness can be reconciled with an account of God as just, loving, and all-good. A key part of the argument rests on developing a notion of the amount of experiential suffering one endures and making a case for the claim that it is possible for one's

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experience of suffering to be never-ending, even though one endures only a finite amount of experiential suffering.

I begin with a few preliminary remarks concerning the core elements of the proposed doctrine, starting with punishment. Typically, we think of punishment as externally inflicted on a person by the punishing agent. For example, the state may fine or imprison a person. I will count as part of imposed punishment the suffering that immediately results from the punishing agent's actions. Thus the pain that results from a whipping and the feelings of boredom, frustration, and anguish that result from imprisonment will count as part of imposed punishment. By way of analogy, we may speak of a related notion of 'natural punishment'. Natural punishment involves the suffering, deprivation, or bad consequences people incur as a natural result of their actions or states. For example, if I cultivate in myself haughtiness and hatred, I naturally become a haughty and hateful person. Here the 'punishment' is in a sense self-inflicted. And yet we may speak, by analogy and perhaps metaphor, of God as a punishing agent in the case where God creates a person with a nature of such a type that when the person performs certain actions they will result in 'natural punishments'. While I take it that punishment is a core element of the doctrine of hell, I leave it open whether the punishment is simply inflicted from outside, is a natural punishment, or is a combination of these types.

The core element of suffering has often been explained in terms of pains of loss and pains of sense. I will distinguish suffering of privation and a positive experiential kind of suffering. One might imagine someone suffering privation without realizing it. If a very young child was injured so that he or she could never develop intellectually beyond a typical four-year-old, that person would suffer a great loss yet might never understand this as a loss, and might be contented and generally cheerful. I take it to be part of the core doctrine of hell that there is a great loss suffered by one in hell, a loss of communion with God and the saints. But I also take it as part of the core doctrine that there is a positive experiential form of suffering. This view is thus incompatible with the view that the loss suffered by the damned merely consists in their being annihilated, and so losing everything that depends on life. The experiential suffering might take the form of the anguish that accompanies the belief that one has suffered a loss; it might take the form of frustration or pain, or it might involve some combination of these and other features. I leave it open just what form the experiential suffering takes.

I have included unhappiness as one of the core elements. It might seem that this is already included in the core element of suffering. But that is not clear. A fair amount of suffering may be compatible with happiness. Furthermore, if the loss of communion with God is a loss of the opportunity for supernatural union with God, then one might think that its loss amounts to a loss of a form of supernatural happiness, but not necessarily a loss of natural human happiness. To exclude these

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possibilities I count it as part of the core view that those in hell are not happy, and that the sufferings of hell even preclude natural human happiness.[4]

The last core element is unendingness. This element has been perceived as very problematic for the doctrine of hell, and it will be my main concern. Objections have been raised that if hell involved unending punishment, that would contradict God's being all-good (in particular His being all-just) and God's being all-loving. The objections might be formulated as follows:

Objection 1 Unending suffering of the sort set out above is infinite. But it is unjust to punish finite sins with an infinite amount of suffering. Therefore if hell is unending it is unjust.

Objection 2 God loves all creatures and in some sense is primarily motivated by love in His dealing with creatures. But that precludes God's allowing people to suffer endlessly.

Objection 1 has more plausibility if it is taken to apply to experiential suffering rather than to the suffering of loss. An example may illustrate what I have in mind here. This example is not intended to be theologically accurate. Suppose that Judas had been promised a permanent leadership role in heaven that was of great value to him and was to be of infinite duration, but after his betrayal of Christ this role was taken away and given to another. Then, even if Judas were later forgiven and came to enjoy communion with God and the saints but was never given back that role, he would have lost something of infinite value, in that were it not for his crime he would have had something of great value throughout an infinite time span. Such a loss, however, could hardly be construed as an injustice. The fact that a loss is infinite does not by itself make the loss unjust. To give Objection 1 a strong reading the sufferings referred to must be seen as experiential sufferings rather than losses.[5]

Objection 1 contains an unstated assumption that needs to be considered. It assumes that endless experiential suffering of the type we have specified must be infinite. To see the difficulty with this assumption it will be useful to develop the notion of the *experiential amount of suffering one endures*. Let's begin with an example. There is a famous thought-experiment that is often used in accounts of Einstein's theory of relativity. One brother leaves his twin on earth and travels in a spaceship at nearly the speed of light.[6] Eventually he returns to earth. On emerging from the space ship he is still youthful but his brother is an old man. A clock on the space ship may have measured out hours over the complete course of the journey, whereas a clock on earth may have measured out many decades. Let's add a bit to this story. Imagine that the traveller experienced only two headaches in the course of his life. Both were felt to be of the same intensity. He measured the first on his watch as taking one minute and the second as taking one hour. Furthermore, let's say that these measurements fit his felt experience, i.e. the first

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headache felt like it took about a minute and the second, an hour. The situation may be described by saying that the experiential amount of suffering associated with the first headache was far less than that of the second. Nonetheless, as measured by clocks on earth, the first headache may have taken years and the second just one hour. That could have happened if the first headache occurred when he was travelling at a particularly high speed,[7] and the second occurred when he was back on earth. A point to be kept in mind then is that *the experiential amount of suffering must be taken from the point of view of the sufferer*.

The next issue to consider is whether there could be unending suffering of sufficient intensity to preclude happiness if the experiential amount of suffering were finite. If it were merely required that the suffering be unending but not that it be of sufficient intensity to preclude happiness, and if it could be assumed that the intensity of suffering can diminish approaching zero, the argument would be straightforward. Imagine that today I have a headache of a given intensity; tomorrow it diminishes to one-half that intensity; the following day it diminishes to one-quarter of its original intensity, and so on, each day becoming half as intense as on the previous day. Then my total experiential suffering from the headache would be just two times the amount I suffered on the first day. But on this scenario the pain from the headache will eventually diminish to the point that it will not be a barrier to happiness. Alternatively, one might set up the example so that the intensity of the headache remained the same, but each day the headache only lasted one half as long as on the previous day. But here the same problem re-emerges: eventually the headache will be of such short duration each day that it seems doubtful that it will preclude happiness.

Our example of the man in the spaceship can be modified to yield an example in which the intensity of the suffering remains constant, the suffering is never-ending, and yet the experiential amount of suffering is finite. Imagine that, from our perspective on earth, the space traveller continually accelerates his speed, coming closer and closer to the speed of light so that (measured from earth) on day one his clock advances just one hour; on day two (measured from earth) his clock advances just one half-hour; on day three, a quarter-hour, etc.; for each succeeding earth-day, the space-traveller's clock advances only one half as far as it did the previous earth-day. Then, beginning from day one the space-traveller's watch advances just two hours over the whole course of history.[8] If the space traveller had a never-ending headache of constant intensity beginning on day one, then he would only have two hours of experiential suffering from that headache *even though his suffering would be endless*. What the example shows us is that we need to make a distinction between an experience being *endless* and its being *infinite*: the example raises the question whether an experience of suffering might be endless and yet finite.

We see then that Objection 1 relies on a questionable premise to the effect that unending suffering of the kind we are considering must be infinite. The example

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shows that we can consistently think of there being experienced suffering that is endless, intense, and finite. To be sustained, Objection 1 needs to be strengthened: a reason must be given to think that the unending suffering of hell must be infinite. It is not clear to me that this can be done. I, of course, do not mean to imply that temporal duration in hell would have to be thought of as being like that of the space traveller in the example. If there is a hell, I do not feel at all confident as to what the mode of consciousness and the experience of time would be like for one who endured it. Perhaps it would be like experiencing an infinite succession of days; perhaps it would be like experiencing a relatively long or a relatively brief finite span of time, or perhaps it would be quite unlike any sort of experience we can now imagine (maybe it is not experienced as taking place in successive moments). If we were merely told that hell is endless and the suffering intense, that would not by itself tell us how great is the amount of suffering. If an argument can be made that an all-good God would not allow a creature to experience infinite suffering as a punishment, then we may conclude that if there is a hell then the suffering of those in hell is finite – but that still leaves open the possibility that hell is unending.

At this point a couple of objections might be raised. It might be said that even if the imposed suffering were endless but not infinite, it would still be unjust – it is simply not fair to allow the punishment to be unending. Furthermore, as set out in Objection 2, God could not impose endless suffering on a person given that God's primary motivation is love. I do not feel confident that I can give a satisfactory answer to these objections. On the other hand, I do not find myself convinced by these objections either. What I will try to do is set out why I am unconvinced. In doing so I will appeal to an imaginary case in which a finite but endless punishment is inflicted upon someone. My example will also attempt to address some related difficult ideas that have often been associated with the doctrine of hell: that the state of those in hell is said to be hopeless; that there is no possible escape; and that the will of those in hell is somehow fixed so that they are no longer capable of turning to God (though if they could turn to God in genuine sorrow for their sin God would be forgiving and save them!).

I will set the stage with a preliminary example. Imagine a cruel and wicked man who viciously beats up his wife on a regular basis and feels that it is within his rights to control her as he wishes. Though his wife still has some love for him, and knows that if she leaves him he will burn with rage and be even more miserable than he is now, she decides to leave. When she leaves, the man will suffer a loss. If the wife is not vengeful, she may try to avoid adding unnecessarily to his experiential suffering. Nonetheless, we can imagine that for the sake of her husband the woman provides him with a letter setting out clearly exactly why it is that she is going. She does not do this in order to cause pain, though she knows that it will bring pain and rage and denial. The reason for writing is to put the truth clearly before him. She does this out of respect for her husband, that he may be told the

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truth about something of great importance to his life, even though it will hurt. She may (I think correctly) see this as a good thing to do for him despite the suffering it brings.

Now consider a wicked man who embraces his wickedness and rejects God and goodness. God decides to put an end to this man's ability to continue being wicked. He does this by denying the man further days to carry out his evil. This denial could be effected in a number of ways. One way would be to annihilate the man. But, as we have seen, there might be another way to cut short his time without annihilating him. God could have the man experience time like the space traveller in the earlier example who has finite time, measured experientially (less than a day), but unending existence. Let's imagine that God chooses this way. This denial of further days can be thought of as a punishment that brings the suffering of loss. We can also imagine the following as a way God might inflict experiential suffering on the man. For the man's own sake God may set before him clearly and explicitly exactly why the man is judged to be wicked and undeserving of the eternal life of heaven. To experience this final judgement may involve agony: the agony of frustration and rejection, of knowing what one has lost, of futilely trying to deny what is being set before one clearly, and so on. God's purpose might not be to make the person suffer, but instead God might be acting out of a respect for a part of the person. Given our nature as intelligent beings, it may be very good for us to see things as they truly are, especially when the truths we confront deal with such important matters as how well we have chosen to live, what it is that we really love, and what things are ultimately of worth.[9] Suppose that *measured experientially* it takes a short time span to be confronted with this last judgement but that this experience is never-ending for the man in question. It is as if, to use our previous example, he is cast off, hurled into space approaching the speed of light so that what his watch measures as brief in actuality consumes all of endless time.

In this case we can, by way of analogy, speak of God as punishing the person. There is the punishment of loss and an infliction of experiential suffering that accompanies the judgement. It is not clear to me that God would be unjust or even unloving in this example (though I do not claim to see things clearly in such matters). Furthermore, in this example we can see that the person's will might become fixed, not because after death a change takes place in the nature of the will which makes it inflexible, but because the person runs out of time to redirect his willing to conform with God's will. God, in denying him time to continue in evil, is denying him time to continue exercising his will. Of course, here I am speaking of experiential time. The man's situation has become hopeless; it is impossible to escape because it is too late.[10]

As I have said, I am not claiming that it actually is the case that hell involves unending, finite experiential time. But *if* the imaginary example we just looked at can be consistently described as a case in which an omniscient, all-good, perfectly just, and perfectly loving God condemned a person to a hell that fits the core

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features of the doctrine of hell set out earlier, then the example provides a defence, in Plantinga's sense of the term, of the doctrine of hell. Here is what I have in mind. Plantinga suggests that one way to show that a pair of propositions P and Q is consistent is find a proposition R such that the conjunction of P and R is both consistent and entails Q.[11] Give P and Q the following readings:

P God is omniscient, all-good, perfectly just, and perfectly loving;
Q God condemns a person to a punishment that involves unending suffering and unhappiness,

and let R be the story just told about the sinner whose days are cut short yet endures unending suffering and unhappiness in a finite experience of judgement. R may be a fiction, yet if it is consistent with P then, since P together with R entails Q, Q is also consistent with P.[12]

Notes

1. See, for example, Thomas Talbott 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice', *Religious Studies*, **29** (1993), 151–168; Jonathan L. Kvanvig *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *idem* 'Heaven and hell', in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 562–568; D. P. Walker *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Jerry L. Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).
2. See, for example, Thomas Talbott 'The doctrine of everlasting punishment', *Faith and Philosophy*, **7** (1990), 19–42; and Eric H. Reitan 'Universalism and autonomy: towards a comparative defence of universalism', *Faith and Philosophy*, **18** (2001), 222–240.
3. John McTaggart *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London, 1906), section 177. See also Peter T. Geach *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 134–36; and Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 9–10. This objection depends on Objection 1 or something similar to that objection.
4. Some people hold that there is an afterlife state of limbo in which people neither suffer the pains of hell nor enjoy the *supernatural* happiness of heaven; those in limbo may, however, be in a state of *natural* happiness. If limbo is counted as a part of hell (since it is not heaven), then the considerations of this paper are merely meant to address the state of hell for those who are not in limbo.
5. Another qualification one might want to make to Objection 1 is to restrict its scope to sufferings imposed from the outside and not what I have called 'natural punishments'. Thus, while it may seem unjust to inflict an infinite amount of suffering on another as punishment for a finite crime, it may not seem at all unjust to let a person suffer infinitely if that suffering is, so to speak, self-inflicted. And of course free-will defences of the doctrine of hell typically hold that hell is, to a large degree at least, a self-inflicted natural punishment: the sufferings of hell are largely (or completely) a natural result of freely rejecting God and the things God loves. I will not place this qualification on Objection 1 for a couple of reasons. First, it would bring us back to a difficulty mentioned earlier: it would raise the question of whether a natural punishment can be considered to be in some sense imposed from the outside by God if God creates a being whose nature is such that certain action will result in that natural punishment. Second, I want to explore a response to the objection that does not depend on whether the sufferings are imposed or natural.
6. From the perspective of earth.
7. Again, with respect to earth.
8. The watch approaches, but never actually hits, the two-hour mark.
9. In this example, God's imposition of hell provides a limited fulfilment of the sufferer's intellectual nature. For an interesting account of hell as a way God allows the damned to fulfil their 'second, self-chosen nature', see Eleonore Stump 'Dante's hell, Aquinas's moral theory, and the love of God', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **16** (1986), 181–198.

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10. One might think that even if an all-loving God wanted to confront the man with His final judgement, He would get it over with and let the person cease to exist. That is not clear to me. Though the person may not be happy he may be better off (and even prefer) being alive than dead.
11. Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 165; and *idem God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 25–26. Appraisals of consistency may, of course, be notoriously difficult (consider, for example, the surprising discoveries of paradoxical inconsistencies that plagued set theory and semantics in the early twentieth century).
12. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 2001 Mountain-Plains regional meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers. I have benefited from discussions of the paper there as well as from discussions with Rebecca Bensen.

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