

Heaven, hell, and vagueness

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In 'Hell and Vagueness', Sider gives the following sort of argument against what he calls the 'binary' conception of the afterlife, according to which every person goes either to heaven or to hell, and that at least some people go to each.

His idea is this: God must have some criterion for deciding whether a given person goes to heaven or goes to hell. That is, there must be some aspect of a person that God examines in order to decide about their fate in the afterlife. Whatever that aspect is, it seems that it will admit of degrees. For example, suppose that God decides on the basis of acts of charity; then one person will have performed acts of charity on 45.1% of possible occasions, someone else on 45.2% of possible occasions, So wherever God draws the line between those destined for heaven and those destined for hell, God will be consigning people who are in relevant respects extremely similar to fates which are extremely different. But this violates what Sider calls the proportionality of justice:

What might the criterion for the afterlife look like? Any just criterion of selection, whether for the afterlife or pay raises in the workplace, must make its selection depending on certain factors. Moreover, justice requires its judgments to be proportional to the factors. If Sally's performance is better than Jimmy's then, other things being equal, it would of course be unjust to pay Jimmy more; but if Sally's performance is only minutely better than Jimmy's, it would be unjust to pay Sally far more. Of course, human criteria usually fall short of complete justice. College admissions offices must sometimes make arbitrary decisions ("the cutoff must fall somewhere"), for admissions officers lack complete information and colleges have a limited number of available slots. But God is omniscient, and the holding capacities of Heaven and Hell are presumably boundless.

How should the defender of the traditional conception of the afterlife reply? Is there some criterion which is not a 'matter of degree' in the way that number of charitable works seems to be? Would introducing a third possibility, like Purgatory, help at all? Could we abandon the view that God acts according to a proportional notion of justice?