

The paradox of heaven & hell

Today we'll be beginning our discussion of **theological paradoxes**. Theological paradoxes are paradoxes which arise either from the assumption that God exists, or from some particular claim about God. In other words, they are paradoxes which typically include among their premises either "God exists" or some more specific claim about God.

Many of the theological paradoxes we will discuss have been discussed and argued about for more than a thousand years. But the one we will talk about today is quite new: the paradox of heaven & hell, as presented in Ted Sider's "Hell and vagueness."

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Here is how the Catechism describes the Last Judgement:

1038. The resurrection of all the dead, "of both the just and the unjust," will precede the Last Judgment. This will be "the hour when all who are in the tombs will hear [the Son of man's] voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment." Then Christ will come "in his glory, and all the angels with him Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.... and they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This certainly seems like a picture according to which, after death, God passes judgement on all of us, and on the basis of our life, decides that some of us will go to heaven forever, and some others to hell forever. (If not 'forever', then the talk of the **last** judgement wouldn't make much sense.)

Most philosophical objections to this picture have focused on the question of whether a just God could ever send people to hell. Sider's paradox is a version of this sort of objection.

What does Catholicism tell us about hell?

The teaching about hell in the Catechism is pretty straightforward:

1035 The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire.” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.

In the Catholic view, God does not pre-ordain that certain people go to hell:

1037 God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance”...

The Catechism is also rather clear about what it takes to go to hell:

1033 ... To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice.

Mortal sin is defined as follows:

1857 For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”

In the reading for today, Sider's aim is to present a paradox involving a series of claims which, from the point of view of standard views about judgement and the afterlife, seem quite plausible. These are:

Dichotomy: there are exactly two states in the afterlife, heaven and hell.

Badness: people in hell are very, very much worse off than people in heaven.

Non-universality: some people go to heaven, and some to hell.

Divine control: it is up to God who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.

Proportionality: justice is proportional, in the sense that it "prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects."

Justice: God's judgement about who goes to heaven & hell is just.

By Non-universality and Divine control, it follows that God decides that some people - call them group A - go to heaven and that some other people - group B - go to hell. By Badness, it follows that group A is much better off than group B. By Dichotomy, it follows that every human being is either in group A or group B. By Proportionality (given that the people in group A are much, much better off than the ones in group B), it follows that if God is just, there must be some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups. So by Justice, it follows that there must be some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups.

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The problem, Sider thinks, is that there is no such way of dividing up the population of people; however we decide to divide up people into Groups A and B, we’re going to end up putting relevantly very similar people into different groups. If Sider is right, and if the informal argument just given is valid, it follows that one of the six theses with which we began must be false. But it is very hard to see, from the point of view of standard forms of Christianity, at least, how any of these theses **could** be false.

To respond to Sider’s paradox, it suffices to find **some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place relevantly similar people into different groups**. Let’s consider some candidates.

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Let’s consider first the view we seem to get from the Catechism: someone goes to hell just in case they die having committed at least one mortal sin for which they have not repented.

How would Sider argue against this view?

There appear to be various ways in which people who are quite similar will, on this view, meet maximally different fates. Consider:

- (a) two people alike except that one dies just before repenting
- (b) two people alike except that one committed a slightly graver sin than the other
- (c) two people alike except that one is just slightly more deliberate than the other in committing some sin.

In any of these three sorts of cases, wouldn’t sending one person to heaven and the other to hell violate Proportionality?

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Can you think of any other options which would fare better?

Option #1: God decides on the **goodness of the person’s life**; this involves the number of good, and the number of bad, things that the person does.

Option #2: God decides on the basis of the person’s **faith**; whether or not they believe in God (or believe some collection of things about God). Does this avoid the problems with the reliance on good works?

Option #3: When God encounters a borderline case, God does not send the person immediately to heaven or to hell; rather, they are sent to Purgatory.

Let’s consider this last possibility further.

There are two worries about the use of purgatory to solve the problem, which correspond to two different conceptions of purgatory. First, suppose that everyone in purgatory eventually goes to heaven (this is the standard Catholic view):

1030 All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

1031 The Church gives the name 'Purgatory' to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.

Then in deciding who goes to heaven, who to hell, and who to purgatory, God is deciding who eventually goes to heaven and who eventually goes to hell — which means that again we need some way of dividing the “borderline cases” from those who go to hell, and the problem is unsolved.

On the other hand, if not everyone goes to heaven - and some are sent from purgatory to hell - Sider's problem re-emerges as a problem about how God decides what happens to those in purgatory. Is there any reason to think that it would be easier to divide people into Group A and Group B after time in purgatory than after life on earth?

Maybe so. Perhaps purgatory could work like this: suppose that we can rate people on a scale of 1 to 100 on the basis of whatever measure God uses to decide whether someone goes to heaven or to hell. Suppose that at death people scoring 90-100 go to heaven, and people scoring 0-9 go to hell. Everyone from 10-89 goes to Purgatory.

Then perhaps everyone in Purgatory stays there until they either get to a score of 90, or drop to single digits. Then the first group goes to heaven, and the second to hell.

Here's a third possibility: perhaps "borderline cases" — people who don't clearly merit either heaven or hell — go to purgatory. Does this help?

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Then perhaps everyone in Purgatory stays there until they either get to a score of 90, or drop to single digits. Then the first group goes to heaven, and the second to hell.

This might seem like progress, since on this picture everyone eventually scores 90-100 or 0-9; thus sending the 90-100 people to heaven and the 0-9 people to hell does not involve treating any very similar people very differently. People just, on this picture, end up sorting themselves into two very different groups.

But in the end this might not help with Sider's problem. Consider one person who at death scored a 9.9, and someone else who scored a 10.0. They're both pretty miserable people, but are quite similarly miserable — it seems inconsistent with Proportionality for one to get the massively better option of going to Purgatory.

Let's consider a fourth response: perhaps salvation is a gift from God, rather than something that is earned by the person saved. Would this help resolve the problem?

One way in which this might help is that it might give us reason to deny Proportionality:

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Sider considers this idea, and suggests that one might find some support for this idea in Matthew’s parable of the workers in the vineyard:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These men who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” But he answered one of them, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20: 1-15 (NIV)).

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Does the landowner violate Proportionality?

Is the landowner in the parable unjust for giving those who worked much less the same reward as those who worked much more?

The landowner seems to defend his action by saying that he was not unjust to the people who worked all day - for they got what they were promised - and was simply generous to those who worked less. But, the landowner seems to think, being generous to some but not all is not the same as being unjust to some; generosity to A but not B need not imply injustice done to B.

Is the landowner right about this? How might the landowner's view be adopted to the case of heaven & hell? Would it change the story if the people to whom the landowner was not selectively generous were suffering, rather than simply recipients of a promised wage?

And would it matter if there was no bound on the amount of money which the landowner had to disburse to workers?

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It is worth noting that these seems to be a special challenge for the view that Proportionality should hold of God.

There are cases in ordinary life which might seem to be counterexamples to Proportionality, and these are cases in which one's options are constrained in such a way as to make conformity to Proportionality difficult or impossible. Here's one example:

Tired of general laziness among the undergraduate student body, Notre Dame's administration has decided to weed out the good students from the bad by eliminating every grade between A- and D. So, henceforth, every student in every class will get an A or an F.

It looks like any professor in a sufficiently large class who assigned at least one student an A and at least one an F would violate Proportionality. But would the professor, for that reason, be unjust?

Unfortunately, though, the professor provides no good analogy for God's decision to send some people to hell and some to heaven. The fact (if it is a fact) that the professor can justly violate Proportionality in this way is due to the fact that he is bound by the actions of the ND administration. His violation of Proportionality would not be excusable in the same way if the grading system were up to him. But this last possibility is the one which is more closely analogous to the case of God.