

evil and
the
afterlife

a paradox
about
heaven & hell

Purgatory
and
proportionality

Evil and life after death

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Our topic today can be introduced by a question raised by Marilyn Adams:

“Suppose for the sake of argument that horrendous evil could be included in maximally perfect world orders. ... Would the fact that God permitted horrors because they were means to His end of global perfection make the participant’s life more tolerable, more worth living for him/her?”

The implicit assumption that Adams is making is that a good God would make every human life worth living. But it is hard, knowing what we know about the world, to see how that could be true.

Some children are born with conditions which make their lives very short and painful. Other people suffer such terrible evils that they question whether their lives were worth living.

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Some children are born with conditions which make their lives very short and painful. Other people suffer such terrible evils that they question whether their lives were worth living.

It is natural at this point for the believer in God to appeal to the existence of life after death. If there were no such thing as life after death, how could lives of this kind have been worth living?

And this raises the question: is what we are told about life after death by many of the major monotheistic religions compatible with the existence of a perfectly good God?

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The following passage from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the kind of view I want to discuss:

1038. The resurrection of all the dead, "of both the just and the unjust," will precede the Last Judgment. ... 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 get to heaven forever, and some others to hell forever. (If not 'forever', then the talk of the **last** judgement wouldn't make much sense.)

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Here is what Ted Sider says about this kind of view:

“A certain traditional conception of the afterlife is *binary*. After death one proceeds either to heaven or hell. Heaven is very, very good; hell is very, very bad. There are no possibilities for the afterlife other than heaven and hell, and membership in heaven or hell is never indeterminate or a matter of degree. The problem with the binary conception is that it contradicts God's justice. God must employ some criterion to decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. No reasonable criterion would be sharp; any reasonable criterion will have borderline cases. But the binary conception of the afterlife allows for no corresponding fuzziness in how the dead are to be treated. Hell must therefore contain people who are nearly indiscernible in relevant respects from people in Heaven. No just God would allow such a monstrously unfair thing.”

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Let's try to lay out Sider's reasoning by isolating the various features of the doctrine of heaven and hell that he thinks are inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly good God.

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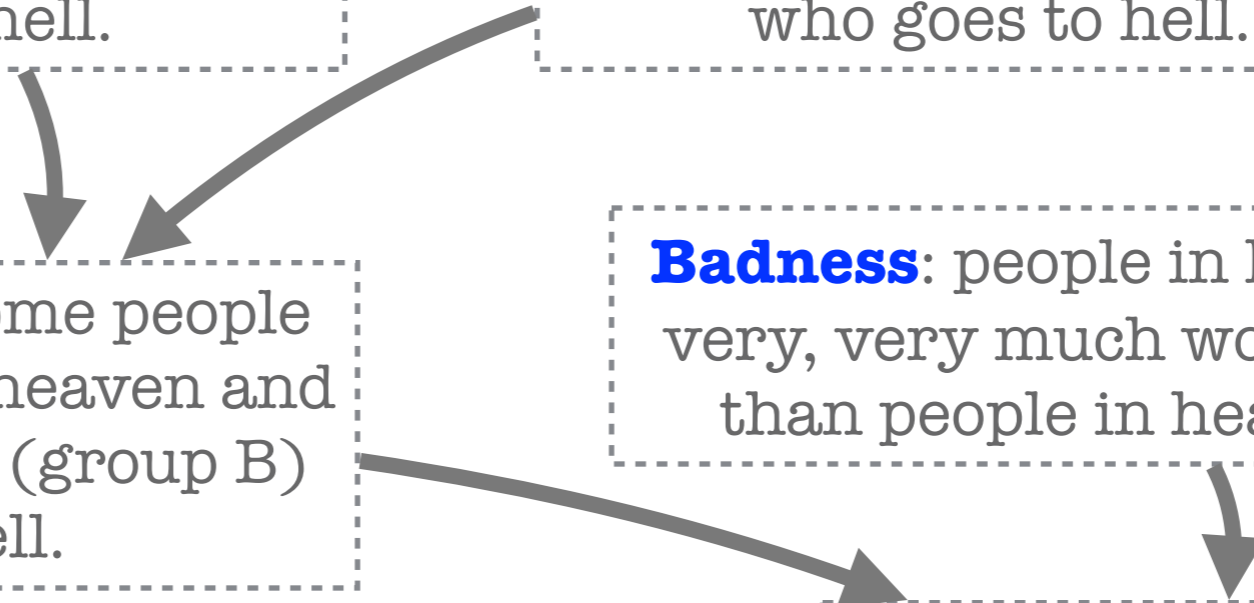
Non-universality: some people go to heaven, and some to hell.

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

God sends some people (group A) to heaven and some people (group B) to hell.

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

God makes group A much better off than group B.



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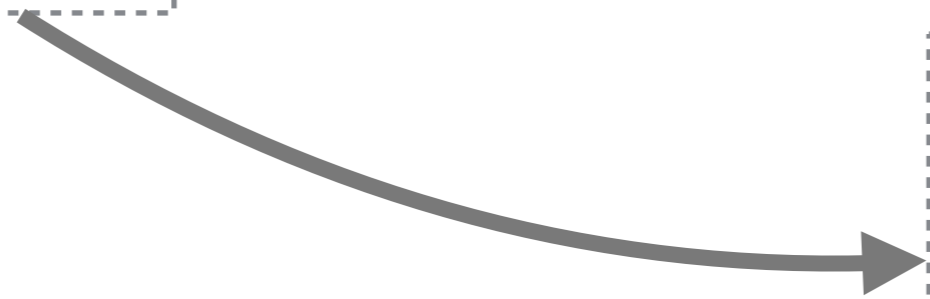
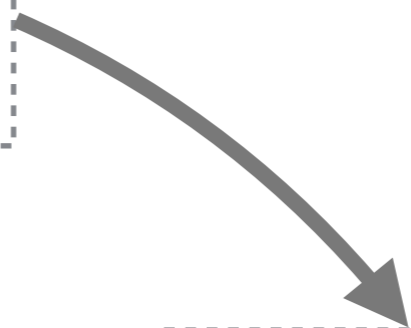
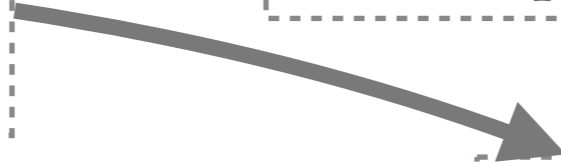
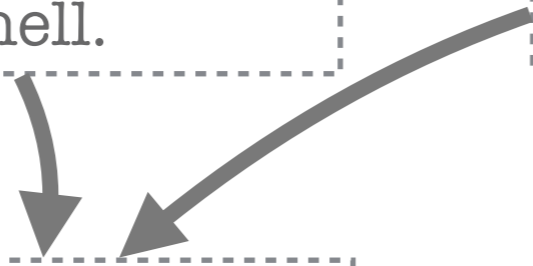
Badness: people in hell are very, very much worse off than people in heaven.

God makes group A much better off than group B.

Proportionality: justice 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.

No one in group A is very similar in relevant respects to anyone in group B.



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

There is some way of dividing all humans into two groups so that no member of one is very similar in relevant respects to any member of the other.

The reductio of heaven & hell

1. **Non-universality**: some people go to heaven, and some to hell.
2. **Divine control**: it is up to God who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.
3. God sends some people (group A) to heaven and some people (group B) to hell. (1,2)
4. **Badness**: people in hell are very, very much worse off than people in heaven.
5. God makes group A much better off than group B. (3,4)
6. **Proportionality**: justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects.
7. **Justice**: God's judgement about who goes to heaven & hell is just.
8. No one in group A is very similar in relevant respects to anyone in group B. (5,6,7)
9. **Dichotomy**: there are exactly two states in the afterlife, heaven and hell.

C. There is some way of dividing all humans into two groups so that no member of one is very similar in relevant respects to any member of the other. (8,9)

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The problem, Sider thinks, is that there is no way of dividing up the population of people which avoids putting relevantly very similar people into different groups.

The most straightforward way to reply to the argument is to say that the conclusion of the argument is true. Then the question is: what are the relevant respects? What are the properties that God looks at to determine who goes to heaven and who to hell?

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The most straightforward way to reply to the argument is to say that the conclusion of the argument is true. Then the question is: what are the relevant respects? What are the properties that God looks at to determine who goes to heaven and who to hell?

What could these properties be? Let's consider some possibilities.

the number of
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the number of
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serious they are

the number +
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someone has
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Consideration of these possibilities shows that it is difficult to simply hold that the conclusion of Sider's argument is true.

Let's consider a different possibility. What if, when God encounters a borderline case of the relevant properties (whatever they are) God does not send the person to heaven or hell, and instead gives the person more time to determine whether they deserve to go to heaven or hell.

In the Catholic tradition, this is close to the idea that some people after death go to neither heaven nor hell but rather to purgatory.

Could this provide a response to Sider's argument?

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Could this provide a response to Sider's argument?

On the standard Catholic view, any who goes to purgatory eventually goes to heaven. But 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.

Could a different view of purgatory, on which some people in purgatory eventually go to hell, help?

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Let's consider a different response, which involves rejecting one of the premises of Sider's argument.

Proportionality: justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects.

Sider considers a story in the Bible which might lead one to doubt Proportionality.

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Proportionality: justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects.

“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. About the third hour he went out and found some people in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you what is right.” So they went. He went out again in 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 doing nothing. He asked them, “Why have you been standing around all day doing nothing?” “No one has hired us,” they replied. He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.”

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard asked his foreman to call in the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the ones who were hired last. The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour each received a denarius. So those who were hired first 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 have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have worked in the heat all day.”

The landowner said, “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 pay the people who were hired last the same as I paid you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

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Proportionality: justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects.

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?