Life after death

Is death bad?

Arguments for life after death

Heaven & hell

Our topic today is one on which we've already touched several times this semester: this is the topic of the possibility of life after death.

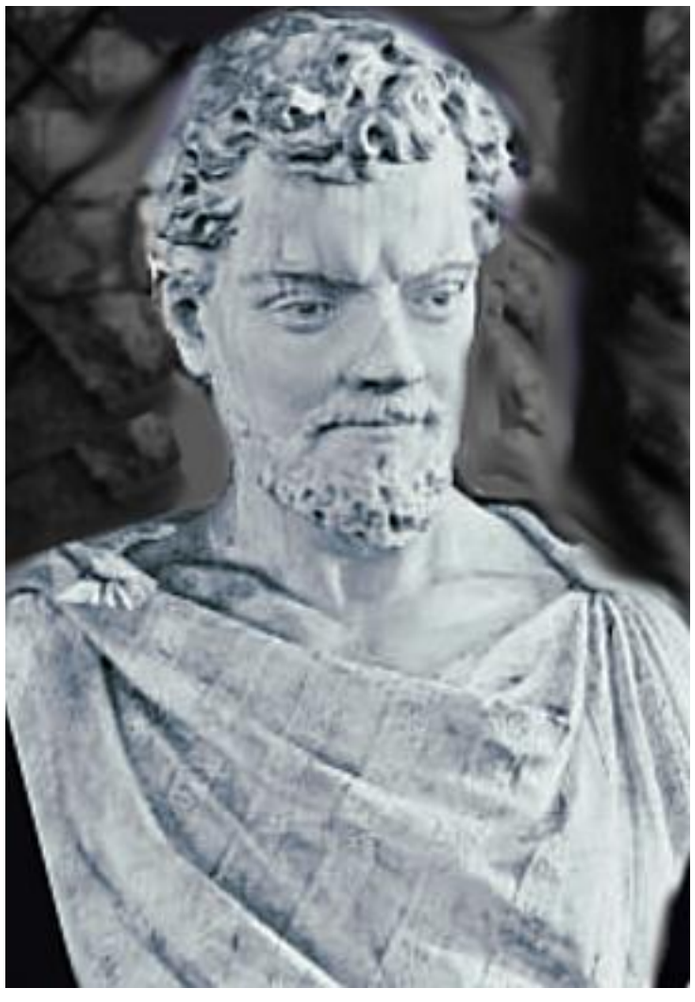
Today we will discuss three different philosophical questions about death, and life after death:

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

Is there life after death?

Does an afterlife in which some people go to heaven and some to hell make sense?

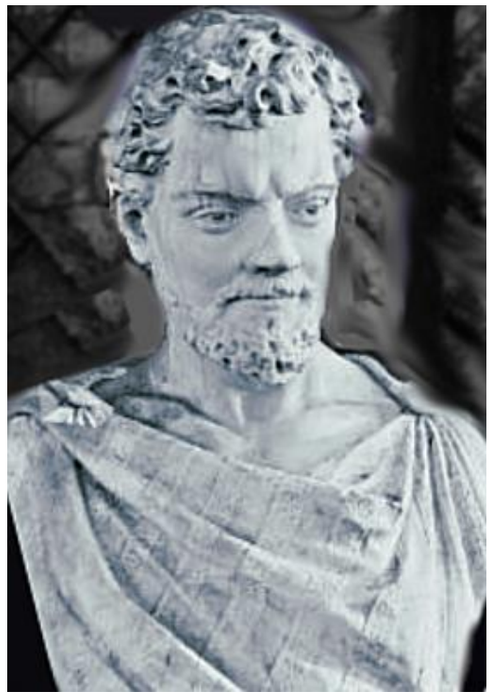
If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?



One reason for interest in the question of whether life after death is possible is the thought that, if there is no life after death, then death would be a terrible thing.

But there is an ancient tradition which says that this is a mistake: that death, even if there is no life after death, is nothing to be feared. (Note that we should distinguish the fear of death from the fear of dying — no one disputes that dying painfully can be a bad thing.)

Lucretius, a Roman philosopher who lived in the first century B.C., was part of this tradition. In his poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), he gave two short and intriguing arguments against the idea that death is at all a bad thing.



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Here is the first:

> If it happens that people are to suffer unhappiness and pain in the future, they themselves must exist at that future time for harm to be able to befall them; and since death takes away this possibility by preventing the existence of those who might have been visited by troubles, you may be sure that there is nothing to fear in death, that those who no longer exist cannot become miserable, and that it makes not one speck of difference whether or not they have ever been born once their mortal life has been snatched away by deathless death.

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Lucretius' idea is that after death we will not exist. But if we will not exist, it is impossible for us to be harmed in any way; and if this is right, there is nothing to fear from death.

In slogan form: 'If death is there, we are not, and if we are there, death is not.' So we have nothing to fear from death.

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Here is one way in which Lucretius' argument can be represented:

1. The only things I should fear are experiences which I undergo.
2. When I am dead, I undergo no experiences.

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C. I should not fear death. (1,2)

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Of course, one might dispute the second premise — but here we are assuming for the sake of argument that there is no life after death. Is the first premise plausible?

Here is a natural response to the first premise: 'Yes, it is true that I will have no experiences after I die. But just that fact is part of what makes death so horrible. What is bad about death is that after death I will not exist — and my non-existence is the worst thing that can happen to me.'

Those who fear death because they fear the end of their existence are unlikely to be consoled by Lucretius' first argument.

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> "Look back at time ... before our birth. In this way Nature holds before our eyes the mirror of our future after death. Is this so grim, so gloomy?"

Here Lucretius points out that we are already familiar with times at which we do not exist: namely, all of those times before our birth. When you think about times before your birth, are you filled with horror? Lucretius thinks not. But then you should not fear times after your death, because those will be just the same.

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A natural reply is to say: ‘OK, I agree that there is nothing especially fearsome about my past nonexistence. But future nonexistence is different; I should fear my future nonexistence even if I do not fear my past nonexistence.’

Most of us have a negative feeling about future nonexistence which we do not have about past nonexistence. Lucretius’ challenge is to justify this difference in our attitudes.

Why shouldn’t we feel about post-death nonexistence the same way we feel about pre-birth nonexistence? Why would it be rational to have very different attitudes toward two equivalent states of affairs just because they happen to occupy different locations in time? We don’t, after all, make parallel distinctions between events occurring in different locations in space.

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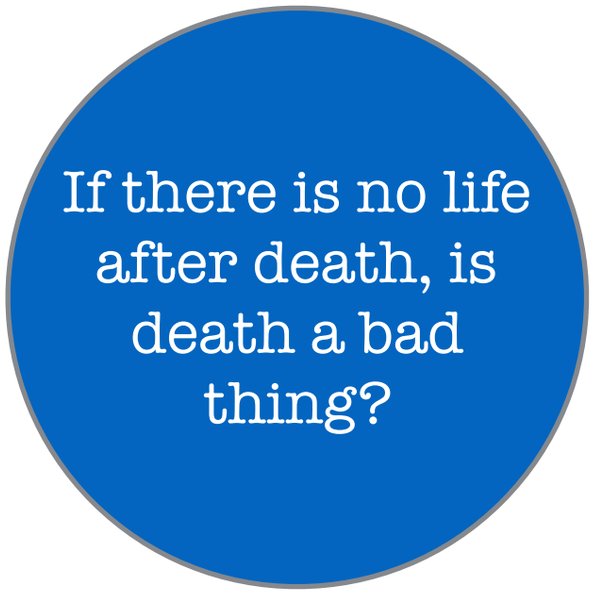
The fact is that people do systematically exhibit time bias: they prefer good things to be in their future and bad things in their past. The interesting question raised by the symmetry argument is whether this feature of human thinking is a rational one, or one we should attempt to overcome. If the latter is correct, then the symmetry argument has considerable force.

It is worth flagging one commitment of the attempt to respond to the symmetry argument via a defense of time bias: it appears to require a real distinction between past and future. As we'll see when we turn out attention to time and the possibility of time travel, this is not a trivial thing.



When we were discussing the nature of persons, we discussed the question of whether life after death is possible. Life after death seems pretty clearly possible on dualist or psychological views; matters are trickier if materialism about persons is true, but even here there is room to believe in the possibility of life after death.

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There are a number of arguments for and against life after death that I'll mention only briefly and then set aside.

The first is what might be called the argument from religion. There are as many versions of this argument as there are religions; here is one

1. Christianity is true.
2. If Christianity is true, there is life after death.

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C. There is life after death.

I'm not setting aside this kind of argument because it is bad. Rather, I am setting it aside because a discussion of the first premise would take us too far afield. We have already discussed arguments relevant to it — the arguments for God's existence, and the argument from evil.

The second argument I am going to mention and then set aside is the argument from near death experiences.

Many people who come very close to death report similar kinds of experiences — a feeling of looking down at one's body, of feeling disembodied, of moving towards a light. One might argue from these experiences as follows:

1. People have near death experiences.
2. If there were no life after death, people would not have near death experiences..

———————————————

C. There is life after death.

It is worth noting that this is an argument for life after death, but cannot in any obvious way (unlike the argument from religion) be turned into an argument for immortality.

The key premise here is obviously the second one. A serious assessment of it would have to look at the details of the kinds of near death experiences people report, and consideration of the possible explanations of these experiences.

The last argument I am going to mention and set aside is what might be called the argument from technological immortality.

According to this argument, we or our descendants will achieve something close to immortality, not by surviving death, but by indefinitely delaying it. Perhaps, for example, we could 'upload' ourselves to a kind of virtual world.

I set this one aside for two reasons. First, it is not really about life after death at all. Second, we'll discuss this kind of possibility more next class.

Instead we will look at the main philosophical argument for life after death.

The first argument has its origins in Plato's *Phaedo*. This is a dialogue which takes place between Socrates and his friends, after Socrates has been sentenced to death for corrupting the youth of Athens.

Socrates is unworried, explaining to his friends that death is nothing to be afraid of; death is just the death of the body, and not the death of him.

He gives a few arguments in favor of this view; the most influential is contained in the following passage:

> 'We ought, I think,' said Socrates, 'to ask ourselves this: What sort of thing is it that would naturally suffer the fate of being dispersed? For what sort of thing should we fear this fate, and for what should we not? When we have answered this, we should next consider to which class the soul belongs; and then we shall know whether to feel confidence or fear about the fate of our souls.'
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> 'Quite true.'
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> 'Would you not expect a composite object or a natural compound to be liable to break up where it was put together? and ought not anything which is really incomposite to be the one thing of all others which is not affected in this way?'

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Socrates begins by asking what sorts of things can be 'dispersed.' He considers two categories of things: composite things, which have parts, and incomposite things, which are simple and have no parts.

It seems clear that composite things can be dispersed, whereas simple things cannot. Being dispersed, after all, is just a matter of having your parts taken out of connection with each other, and simple things have no parts.

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The key question, then, is: are we composite, or simple?

Plato was, like Descartes, a dualist — he held that we are immaterial souls. If we assume this dualist view, then the question is whether immaterial souls are composite or simple.

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We can then give the following argument from the simplicity of the soul:

1. Persons are immaterial souls.
2. All immaterial things are simple.
3. Only composite things can be destroyed.
4. Immaterial souls cannot be destroyed. (2,3)

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C. Persons cannot be destroyed. (1,4)

We've already considered defenses of the first premise. Obviously, materialists and psychological theorists who reject those defenses are unlikely to be persuaded by this argument. But should dualists be convinced by it?

One might question either premise (2) or premise (3).

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The Scottish philosopher David Hume gives an interesting reply to this argument:

what is incorruptible must also be ingenerable. The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth: And if the former existence nowise concerned us, neither will the latter.

This begins with the plausible thought that if something cannot be destroyed then it also cannot be created. So, if we are things that cannot be destroyed, then we are also things that cannot be created. So, just as (according to this argument) we will exist after our death, so we must have existed before our birth.

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This poses a dilemma for the defender of the simplicity argument.

On the one hand, she can deny that we preexisted our births. But then she needs to explain why the argument for life after death is stronger than the argument for preexistence.

On the other hand, she can accept preexistence. (This was Plato's view.) But how good was your life before you were born? If life after death is just like the 'life' you had before you were born, then it does not seem to be a kind of life after death worth wanting.

Let's now turn to the third of our three questions.

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

Is there life after death?

Does an afterlife in which some people go to heaven and some to hell make sense?

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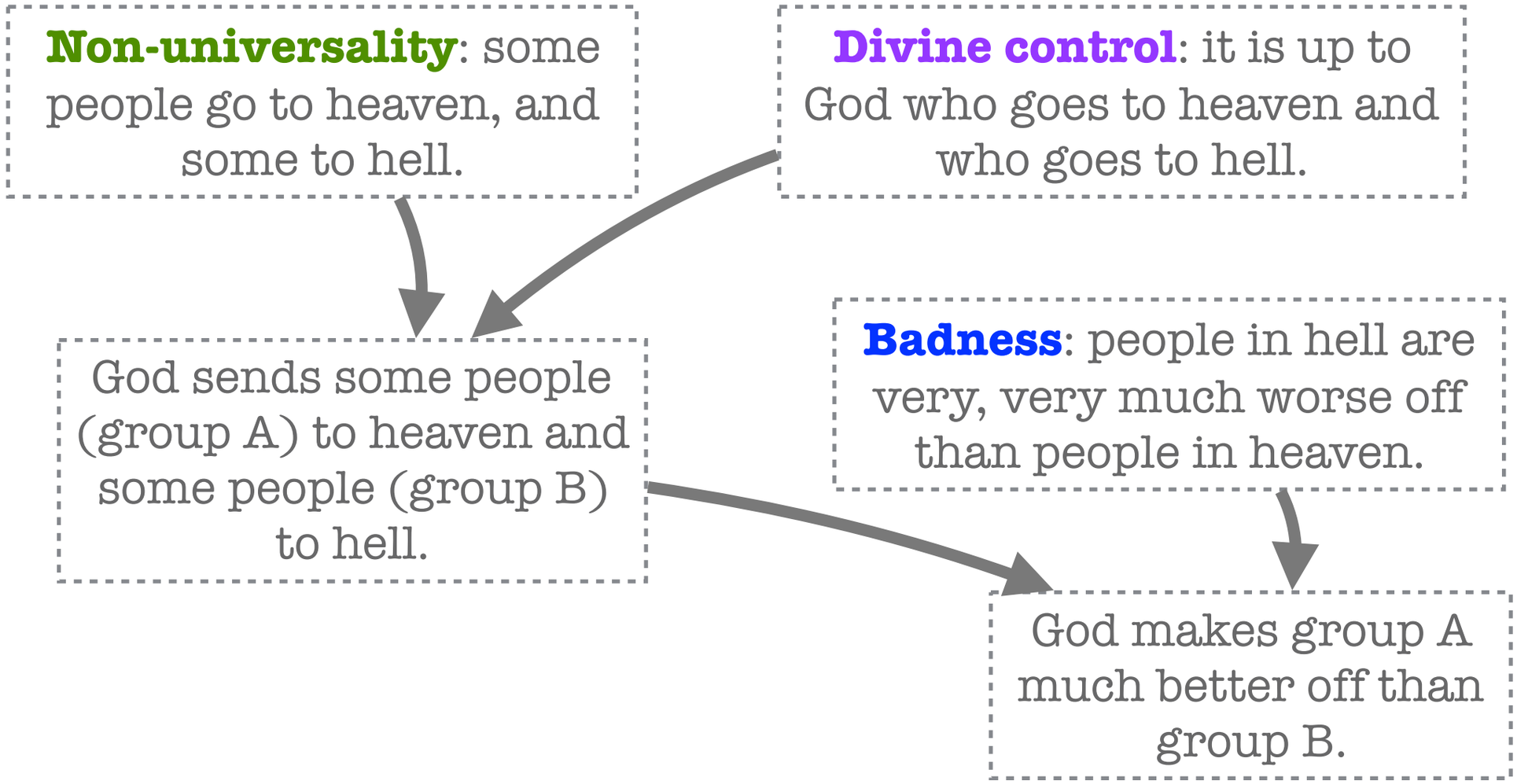
We'll approach this question by a paradox by asking, first, what Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, tells us about the afterlife.

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. ... 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 got to heaven forever, and some others to hell forever. (If not 'forever', then the talk of the **last** judgement wouldn't make much sense.)

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. Let's work through his reasoning.



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.

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

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.

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

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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.

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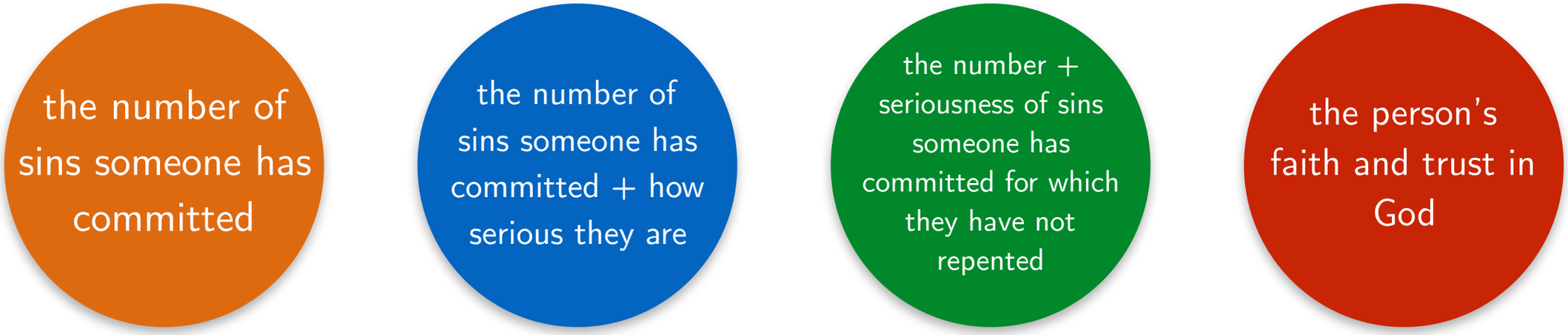
What could these properties be? Let's consider some possibilities.

the number of sins someone has committed

the number of sins someone has committed + how serious they are

the number + seriousness of sins someone has committed for which they have not repented

the person's faith and trust in God



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 help with a response to Sider's argument?

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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?

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.

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

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)).

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?