

evil & lives  
not worth  
living

the  
paradox of  
heaven and  
hell

replies to the  
paradox



# EVIL & LIFE AFTER DEATH

QUI COELVM CECINIT MEDIVM QVE IMMORTE TRIBVNAL LVSTRAVIT QVE ANIMO CVNCTA POETA SVO DOCTVS ADEST DANTES SVA QVEM FLORENTIA SAEPE  
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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.

Suppose that there were some human being whose life was not worth living for him or her. Would a perfectly good being be justified in creating such a being, even if there were outweighing goods for others which could not be realized without his or her existence?

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Many have thought not. A perfectly good being would not create beings whose lives were not worth living for them, just to add to the total greatness of creation.

Are there people whose lives are not worth living for them?

A reasonable argument can be made that there are. 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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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?

In this way, consideration of the argument from evil leads naturally into questions about the possibility of life after death.

What do the major monotheistic religions tell us about life after death?

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Within Judaism, positions on this question vary. But most Christian and Islamic denominations agree on the broad outlines of an answer. Here is the version of that answer given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

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."

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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.)

Our lead-in showed why it is plausible that responses to the argument from evil must depend on the possibility of life after death. We will now ask: is the kind of view of life after death we get here compatible with God being perfectly good?



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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 **traditional doctrine** of heaven and hell that he thinks are inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly good God.



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

It is part of the traditional doctrine that God decides whether people go to heaven and hell based on certain properties of those people. We will leave open for now what those properties might be; just to have a name for them, let's call them the **relevant properties**.

**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.

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

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

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God sends some people (group A) to heaven and everyone else (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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**Proportionality:** justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in their relevant properties.

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

God makes group A much better off than group B.

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

**Continuity:** There is no way of dividing all people into two groups so that no one in one group is similar in their relevant properties to anyone in the other group.



## THE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE OF HEAVEN & HELL

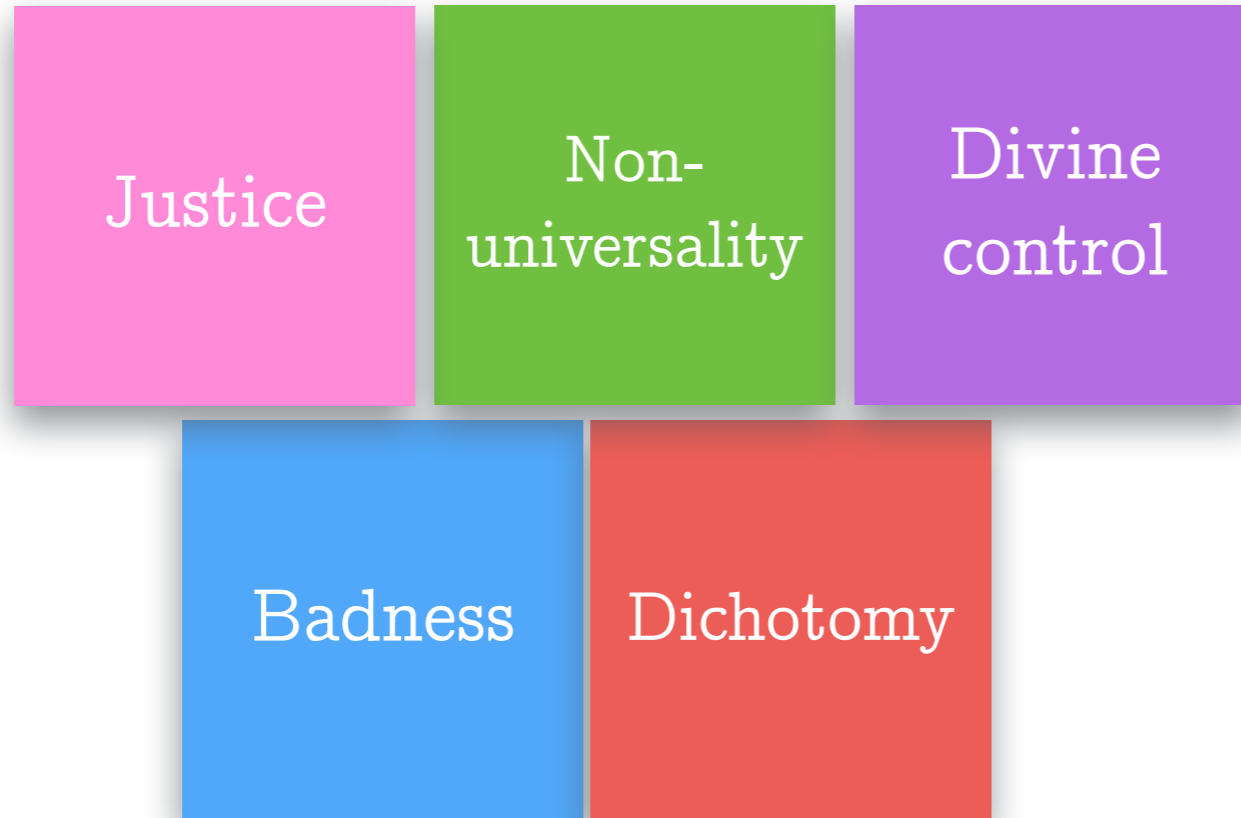
1. **Non-universality**: If the traditional doctrine is true, some people go to heaven, and some to hell.
2. **Divine control**: If the traditional doctrine is true, it is up to God who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.
3. **Dichotomy**: If the traditional doctrine is true, there are exactly two states in the afterlife, heaven and hell.
4. If the traditional doctrine is true, God sends some people (group A) to heaven and everyone else (group B) to hell. (1,2,3)
5. **Badness**: If the traditional doctrine is true, people in hell are very, very much worse off than people in heaven.
6. If the traditional doctrine is true, God makes group A much better off than group B. (4,5)
7. **Justice**: If the traditional doctrine is true, God's judgement about who goes to heaven & hell is just.
8. **Proportionality**: justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in their relevant properties.
9. If the traditional doctrine is true, no one in group A is very similar in their relevant properties to anyone in group B. (6,7,8)
10. **Continuity**: There is no way of dividing all people into two groups so that no one in one group is similar in their relevant properties to anyone in the other group.

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C. The traditional doctrine of heaven and hell is false. (9,10)



Here is a way to think about the argument. First, we have a package of five theses which are claimed to be part of the traditional doctrine of heaven and hell.



Next, we have two further theses which are used to argue that this traditional doctrine is false.



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Justice

Non-  
universality

Divine  
control

Badness

Dichotomy

Proportion-  
ality

Continuity

If you are a theist interested in defending the possibility of an afterlife, you have two options. First, you might reject one of the theses claimed to be part of the traditional doctrine.

Second, you might reject one of the two additional theses used to argue against the traditional doctrine.

It seems difficult to deny Justice, Badness, or Divine Control. So that seems to give the defender of the afterlife four main options.



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It seems difficult to deny Justice, Badness, or Divine Control. So that seems to give the defender of the afterlife four main options.

Let's consider these in turn.

From a Catholic perspective, a natural thought is to reject Dichotomy. That is because, according to Catholic doctrine, some people after death go, not to heaven or hell, but to Purgatory.

This is thought of as a kind of place of purification, in which sins not forgiven in one's life on earth might be forgiven.

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This is thought of as a kind of place of purification, in which sins not forgiven in one's life on earth might be forgiven.

However, on closer inspection, this Catholic doctrine is less helpful in the present context than you might think.

Here is a statement of the doctrine from the *Catechism*:

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.

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

The problem in our present context is that everyone in 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. If Continuity and Proportionality are true, this decision must be unjust.



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

Here's a possibility. Perhaps after death there are some people whose relevant properties (about which more later) make them clear choices for heaven, and some other people whose relevant properties make them clear choices for hell. The rest go to Purgatory, where they stay until they either become a clear choice for heaven or a clear choice for hell.

The result is that no one who is sent to heaven is very similar to anyone who is sent to hell. Does this solve the problem?

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The result is that no one who is sent to heaven is very similar to anyone who is sent to hell. Does this solve the problem?

There are two residual issues.

One is that this appears to be a doctrine of the afterlife invented to solve this problem, rather than one actually taught by any religion.

The second is that it is not completely clear that it does solve the problem. Take two people who are very similar in their relevant properties, one sent to Purgatory and one sent to hell. Isn't the former vastly better off than the latter? If so, then (given Proportionality) God's decision to send them to different places must be unjust.

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There is a different way of denying Dichotomy which deserves mention. This is the idea that heaven and hell are much less uniform than one might think. Perhaps (as Dante wrote) there are different “circles” of hell, which differ significantly in their badness.

If there were enough such circles — and corresponding “levels” of heaven — this might avoid violating Proportionality.

A residual problem is that on pictures like Dante’s, there is still an enormous gap between the “worst” part of heaven and the “best” part of hell. Giving this up would seem to mean giving up on an important part of the traditional view of the afterlife.



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Let's turn to our second option. An easy way to resolve the problem would be to say that all people eventually go to heaven. (Or to hell — but the former option is more popular.) This view is called “universalism.”

This is the view of some Christian denominations. (To my knowledge it is not taught by any denominations of Islam.) Unitarians, for example, are typically universalists.

There is even some evidence that some early Church fathers thought of hell as temporary, and endorsed a kind of universalism.

Universalism certainly seems hard to reconcile with the teachings of most main monotheistic sects. Going further would mean verging into theology rather than philosophy, so I'll leave the discussion of this way out of the problem here, and turn to our next response.

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Universalism certainly seems hard to reconcile with the teachings of most main monotheistic sects. Going further would mean verging into theology rather than philosophy, so I'll leave the discussion of this way out of the problem here, and turn to our next response.

Is it really true that there is no way to divide people into two groups, so that no one in one group is similar in their relevant properties to anyone in the other group?

This would seem to depend on what the relevant properties are. If God decided who goes to heaven and hell based on height, then Continuity would be plainly true. But of course height is not a relevant property.

What might the relevant properties be?

Let's consider some candidates.

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Let's consider some candidates.

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

the person's  
decision to be with  
God



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someone has  
committed for which  
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None of these choices of relevant properties seems to give us a plausible way to deny Continuity.

The core problem seems to be that whatever our choice of relevant properties, the following both seem to be true:

one can have the  
property to different  
degrees

one can have the  
property at some  
times but not others

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Can you think of any choice of relevant properties which might give us a more plausible way of rejecting Continuity?

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Let's turn to our last option: rejecting Proportionality.

This might seem at first like a tough way to go. Here's an example of treating people who are in relevant respects very similar in very different ways:

### **The dichotomous professor**

The instructor of an introductory philosophy class has tired of the diversity of final grades for students from which he is forced to choose, and decides to simplify his grading scheme. He decides that every student with a final average of 89.50 or greater will receive an A, and every student with a final average lower than that will receive an F.

Isn't it plausible that this professor is unjust precisely because he has decided to treat very similar students very differently?



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Despite this, as Sider points out later in the article, a parable from the Bible might be used to cast doubt on Proportionality.

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“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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## Does the landowner violate Proportionality?

It seems that he does. He is paying people very different hourly wages despite the fact that their relevant properties (the kind of work they were doing) was very similar.

## Is the landowner unjust?

The landowner seems to argue that he is not as follows.

First, he was not unjust to the people he hired first; he hired them for a fair wage, and paid that wage. They got what they deserved.

Second, he was not unjust to the people he hired later; he paid them more than a fair wage. They got more than what they deserved.

But, if he was not unjust to the people he hired first, and also not unjust to those he hired later, he was not unjust to anyone. But then he was not unjust at all, and Proportionality is false.



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But, if he was not unjust to the people he hired first, and also not unjust to those he hired later, he was not unjust to anyone. But then he was not unjust at all, and Proportionality is false.

How might this apply to questions about the afterlife? One thought familiar from various theological traditions is that people do not deserve to go to heaven, and that their being sent to heaven is gift which goes beyond what they deserve.

If so, God does not treat those he sends to hell unjustly; they are getting what they deserve. God also does not treat those who go to heaven unjustly; they are getting more than they deserve. So God is treating no one unjustly. But then God is not unjust at all.

Here's a different case to test your thoughts about the parable and its application to the afterlife.

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### The generous professor

The instructor of an introductory philosophy class gives out very clear standards by which assignments will be graded, and a very clear grading scheme for the class. At the end of the class, some students have A's, some A-'s, some B+'s, and so on down to a few D's and F's. The professor decides to be generous to the students with a B+ or higher, and gives them all an A; he leaves the other grades unchanged.

Can one defend the generous professor in the same way we defended the landowner? It might seem so. But many have the thought that the generous professor acts unjustly.

If you are tempted to think that the landowner acts justly but that the generous professor does not, the question to ask yourself is: Why are these cases different? What explains why one is just and the other unjust?

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We have been exploring one kind of question about the afterlife: the question of whether a certain traditional conception of the afterlife is compatible with a perfectly good and just God.

But there is another important philosophical question about the afterlife, which is the question of whether the very idea of an afterlife makes sense. Given well-known facts about what happens to bodies after death and burial, how could it make sense to say that we might survive our death?

This is a question to which we'll return in the third section of the course.