

Eternally incorrigible: the continuing-sin response to the proportionality problem of hell

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Abstract: According to the proportionality objection to hell, infinite suffering is out of proportion to any wrong that finite human beings could commit and is hence unjust and inconsistent with God's moral perfection. The continuing-sin response concedes that eternal consignment to hell is out of proportion to the sins people commit during their earthly lives, but argues that people in hell continue to sin while in hell and, in this way, extend their consignment to hell *ad infinitum*. In this essay, I evaluate the continuing-sin response. In particular, I argue that whether there is a proportionality problem to begin with and whether the continuing-sin response succeeds as a response depends on the character of the suffering that is experienced in hell.

Conservative Christians believe that authentic Christian faith is a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation. Persons lacking such faith, on this view, will be consigned to hell where they will suffer torments beyond any that can be experienced in this earthly life. And there is no end to this misery: the condemned are doomed to experience these terrible torments for all of eternity. Though conservatives will acknowledge that it is a great tragedy that many persons will suffer this awful fate, they believe that eternal consignment to such suffering is justified as punishment for sin.

Eternal consignment to hell, however, seems to many conscientious believers excessive and hence unjust. According to what I will call the proportionality objection, punishment is morally justifiable if and only if it is not excessive, given the magnitude of the wrong. But infinite suffering, on this line of analysis, is out of proportion to any wrong that finite human beings could commit. Thus, the argument concludes, if excessive punishment is unjust, eternal consignment to hell is never a justified response to human wrongdoing and is hence inconsistent with God's moral perfection.

Defending the conservative view, Michael Murray argues that while eternal consignment to hell may be out of proportion to the sins people commit during

their earthly lives, people in hell continue to sin and, in this way, extend their consignment to hell *ad infinitum*.¹ Just as a prisoner with a short sentence may legitimately have his sentence extended for continued wrongdoing, so a sinner whose worldly deeds merit only a finite stay in hell may legitimately have her stay in hell extended. Thus, Murray concludes, there is no proportionality problem.

In this essay, I wish to evaluate both the proportionality objection and the continuing-sin response. I argue that whether there is a proportionality problem to begin with and whether the continuing-sin response succeeds as a response depends on the character of the suffering that is experienced in hell. As it turns out, there are a number of different conceptions of what hell is like, and which, if any, of these conceptions is accurate will determine how the moral calculus comes out.

At the outset, I should point out that my analysis presupposes that persons in hell generally retain the psychological characteristics they instantiate during their earthly lives. There are two reasons for this. First, the traditional conception of hell presupposes this claim. The traditional conception assumes that hell is a physical place for persons with resurrected bodies that resemble the ones they had during their earthly lives in certain relevant respects. To the extent that the bodies we have in the afterlife can plausibly be characterized as *resurrected*, they must resemble our earthly bodies enough to be called *ours*. This presumably requires that a person's resurrected body resemble her worldly body in those psychological respects most intimately tied to personal identity, including the personality dispositions that help to account for why she makes the decisions she makes.

Second, the assumption that there must be dispositional psychological continuity between a person as she exists in this earthly life and that person as she exists in hell also seems to be presupposed by the continuing-sin response. The continuing-sin response attempts to justify eternal consignment in hell on the strength of behaviours or dispositions that occur in hell. But to the extent that a particular person is punished for these behaviours and dispositions, they must be attributable to the *same* person. This requires that the relevant psychological characteristics that explain or rationalize her free choices in hell be developed during *her* earthly life – and this, again, seems to entail, at the very least, dispositional psychological continuity between the two realms.

Unfortunately, this entails that recourse to highly speculative argument strategies will be necessary. One must attempt to predict what a person might do in hell on the basis of what she does during an earthly life of a vastly different character, and this will involve a good bit of conjecture. Though this sort of informed speculation is frequently employed by scientists in framing predictions and hypotheses, the risk of error is obviously higher here because we have no way of testing our conjectures about hell. As far as I can see, however, such methods are the *only* ones that will enable us to evaluate the proportionality objection and continuing-sin response. The best we can do is try to minimize the risk of error by

keeping in mind the speculative quality of the methodology; there is simply no way to avoid such speculation in theorizing about hell.

The conservative view

Most Christian philosophers who characterize themselves as conservative or traditional share a commitment to three propositions regarding the nature of hell:

- (1) The anti-universalism thesis: some persons are consigned to hell;
- (2) The inescapability thesis: no-one who is consigned to hell ever escapes hell; and
- (3) The penalty thesis: consignment to hell is justified divine punishment for sin.

These three theses reconcile eternal consignment to hell with God's moral perfection in the following way: since those who wind up in hell *deserve* to be there for all eternity, eternal consignment to hell is a justified response to human wrongdoing.²

There are a number of ways to construe the inescapability thesis. One can construe the inescapability thesis as compatible with the possibility of post-mortem salvation. On this construction (hereafter the weak inescapability thesis), hell is contingently inescapable: there are possible worlds resembling the actual world in which some people leave hell, but no one in the actual world ever does. One can also construe the inescapability thesis as making the stronger claim that '[t]here is no possibility of leaving hell and nothing one can do, change, or become in order to get out of hell, once one is consigned there' (*PH*, 25). On this construction (hereafter the strong inescapability thesis), it is not just contingently true that no-one ever leaves hell: no-one ever leaves hell because it is not *possible* to leave.

There are a number of ways to construe the strong inescapability thesis depending on how the modality is interpreted. One could, for example, construe the modality as logical; on this construction, it is not logically possible for anyone who is in hell to leave hell. Alternatively, one could construe the modality as metaphysical; on this construction, it is not metaphysically possible for anyone who is in hell to leave hell. Both of these constructions, however, seem to render the continuing-sin response irrelevant; if it is either logically or metaphysically impossible to escape hell, then it can't be a person's contingent behaviour that accounts for her not leaving hell. For this reason, I will assume in what follows that the strong inescapability thesis asserts that it is not humanly possible to escape hell in the following sense: given the psychological and physical characteristics of persons, it is not possible for a person to do what would have to be done in order to escape hell.

In addition to these theses, most Christian traditionalists take the view that only people with authentically Christian faith will be saved and thus subscribe to:

- (4) The exclusivist thesis: all and only persons lacking an authentic Christian faith are consigned to hell.

Though the exclusivist thesis is, strictly speaking, not part of a general theory regarding the nature of hell, it has profound (and disquieting) implications with respect to who will ultimately be consigned to hell. Together with the other theses making up the traditional view of hell, it entails that ethical unbelievers and devout ethical adherents of other faiths will deservedly spend an eternity in hell. Since such implications are of moral and theoretical significance, I will include the exclusivist thesis as part of what I will characterize as the conservative view.

The proportionality objection to the conservative view

One of the most natural objections to the conservative view is based on the uncontroversial moral intuition that punishment should not be excessive in relation to the magnitude of the wrongdoing.³ On this line of analysis, eternal consignment in hell is excessive in relation to human wrongdoing because no person is capable of more than finite wrongdoing. To begin with, our abilities to do wrong are quite limited: since we are capable of only finite acts, each of our acts has a finite moral value or disvalue. Second, these finite abilities are employed during the finite period of time defining our earthly lives. Thus, no matter how proficient at wrongdoing any person is, that wrongdoing will always be finite: since each instance of wrongdoing instantiates finite moral disvalue and no person can commit more than a finite number of instances of wrongdoing, the total quantity of wrongdoing accomplished by even the worst of persons will necessarily be finite.⁴ Thus, the argument concludes, it would be unjust to punish someone who has lived only seventy or so years with eternal suffering because an infinite punishment is out of proportion to even cumulatively finite wrongdoing.

Nevertheless, the proportionality objection overlooks the fact that any given punishment has two dimensions, duration and intensity, and both dimensions necessarily play a role in determining whether a punishment is proportional to the crime. In particular, the intensity of the punishment (i.e. the magnitude of the suffering it is intended to cause)⁵ matters with respect to determining whether it is proportionate to the crime. Whether or not, for example, life in prison is a proportional punishment for murder will depend on the conditions of prison. If convicted murderers have access to all the amenities of a five-star hotel, then the punishment isn't severe enough. If, in contrast, prisoners are made to live in squalid conditions of solitary confinement, then the punishment is arguably too severe. Thus, one cannot establish that a punishment is out of proportion to the crime simply by reference to its duration.

Whether eternal consignment to hell gives rise to a proportionality issue, then, depends on what hell is like. If, on the one hand, hell is extremely uncomfortable because the intensity of the punishment is high, it is reasonable to think that there is a *prima facie* worry about proportionality – and this is especially true if, as is commonly supposed, hell is infinitely uncomfortable (whatever that means). But if, on the other hand, hell is reasonably comfortable so that, relatively speaking, the intensity of the punishment is low (i.e. results in little suffering), then the fact that it is eternal does not obviously entail that it is out of proportion to finite sins.

Just how much does it hurt to be in hell?

For all the space devoted to the topic of hell, contemporary proponents of the conservative view have offered little in the way of articulating conceptions of what hell might be like. This is an important omission given that we cannot determine whether there is a proportionality issue until we have a sense of how much suffering is experienced by persons in hell. As we have seen, the mere fact that the punishment is infinite in duration and the wrongdoing finite does not entail a proportionality problem.

The hellfire conception

The most severe view of hell takes literally the biblical verses that describe hell in terms of being consumed by everlasting flames.⁶ For example, Matthew 18.7–9 warns of the painful consequences of succumbing to temptation:

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

As Thomas Talbott points out, then, under the hellfire conception ‘the wicked shall have to endure, first, everlasting separation from God, and second, everlasting “physical” torment in the form of literal flames which, though they produce the same experience as an earthly fire, never consume those who writhe forever in them’ (PFDJ, 153).⁷

Thus conceived, eternal consignment to hell gives rise to a *prima facie* reason to think it is disproportionate to human wrongdoing. If proportionality is defined by the fit between the suffering caused by the wrong and the suffering caused by the punishment, it is hard to see how eternal consignment to this horrible pain could be proportional to even the worst of human wrongdoing. Under the most reasonable empirical assumptions, it just doesn’t seem possible for any one human being to commit an act that results in enough suffering to merit being eternally consumed by flames. If I simultaneously set every person in the world on fire, I would cause tremendous suffering, but the amount would clearly be finite.

Notice that this remains true even if we take into account the fact that the premature death of each of those persons results in their losing all of the pleasures they would have experienced had they lived. Extending my stay in hell by one second for each second of life that is lost by one of my victims, which seems excessive, still results in a finite period of time in hell. Assuming that each of the six billion persons I have burned to death had seventy years of life ahead of them, my punishment would be increased by four hundred and twenty billion years. While that is an unimaginably long time to spend consumed by flames, it is still finite and hence an *infinitesimally small period of time relative to what a person would have to spend if the hellfire conception is correct*. Eternal consignment to all-consuming flames seems, under any plausible moral calculus, wildly disproportionate to human wrongdoing.

One might, however, respond that there is a great deal of suffering overlooked by my analysis. After all, there are many people in the above example who might have achieved salvation had I not prematurely ended their lives, but who will be condemned to an eternity of unhappiness as a result of my wrongdoing. Since, on this line of analysis, I have caused an eternal and hence infinite injury, I deserve an infinite punishment.

This response begs the question. The point of the proportionality objection is to challenge the idea that it is permissible to punish finite beings with a punishment that is either infinitely long or infinitely painful. The suffering caused to my victims by divine punishment can fairly be attributed to me only if it is morally just to impose that suffering as divine punishment. And that, of course, is exactly the issue at stake here. Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that there is, at least, a *prima facie* proportionality problem that cannot adequately be addressed by reference to the sufferings of my victims in hell.

Two separation conceptions of hell

A second conception of what hell is like emphasizes biblical language describing hell eternal separation from God. For example, according to 2 Thessalonians 1.8–10: ‘those who do not know God ... will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord’. Since, on this conception, hell is a place of eternal separation from God, it forever excludes a person from the profound fulfilment that communion with God brings to those who are saved.

As it turns out, there are two different conceptions of hell that are defined by eternal separation from God. One might take the view that, in hell, the unsaved sinner does not know that God exists and has forever excluded her from God’s presence.⁸ On this conception (hereinafter the separation-without-knowledge conception), the only source of punishment consists in the deprivation of the infinite benefit of communion with God. The punishment consists entirely in

being denied something one would otherwise have had; the condemned sinner has no idea that she lacks this benefit.

One might object that it is conceptually impossible to punish a person without her knowing that she has been punished, but there is little reason to think that punishment *must*, as a conceptual matter, involve knowledge on the part of the subject that she has been punished. Suppose, for example, that Jill, a labourer who hates her job, bought twenty tickets to a lottery drawing with a \$10,000,000 prize and that one of these tickets, unbeknownst to her, contains the winning number. Suppose further that, in response to some past wrongdoing, an omnipotent being changes one of the numbers on the winning ticket. The result is that Jill's life has irrevocably been changed for the worse by this act: instead of gaining lifelong financial security, she must continue to scratch out a living at a job she despises. While this may not be a paradigm instance of punishment, there is no other concept that adequately describes what has happened to Jill.

It is not clear that the separation-without-knowledge conception gives rise to any proportionality issues. The problem here is that we cannot assess whether hell is disproportionate under this conception without knowing how much suffering is experienced in hell, because whether or not a punishment is proportionate depends on how much suffering it involves; as we have seen, the mere fact that a punishment is eternal doesn't entail that it is disproportionate to finite wrongdoing. And we simply don't have enough information about hell under this conception to determine how much pain hell involves.

Indeed, Michael Murray goes so far as to argue that those who wind up in hell might very well prefer separation from God to communion with God:

For those who have become lovers of God, the natural consequence would be for them to enter into the divine presence to love God and enjoy him forever. But what of the others? What of those who simply have no interest in doing that? Why not, one might wonder, just accept them into the divine presence anyway? ... [I]f those who lived lives in which they rejected God were nonetheless forced into God's presence forever, such a life would be utterly odious to them. It would be like forcing one who hates opera to sit through *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for eternity. This wouldn't be eternal bliss for them. It would be an eternal nightmare. (HaH, 296)

While Murray implausibly equates agnosticism and atheism with hating God (a mistake that is made with surprising frequency),⁹ his analysis calls attention to the fact that it is not clear that unknowing consignment to hell is more suffering than sinners deserve. If such persons would be made miserable by having to commune with God and are satisfied with being excluded from God's presence, then hell can't be that bad for them.

In any event, I suspect that many proponents of the conservative view would reject the separation-without-knowledge conception on the ground that, thus conceived, hell is *too lenient*. On this odd and somewhat vindictive view, sinners

deserve much more discomfort than mere deprivation of the infinite benefit of everlasting communion with God. Thus, if there is a proportionality issue, it works in the other direction. The punishment is unjust because the sinner is getting off much too easy; considerably more suffering is needed to, so to speak, even the score. It is reasonable to conclude that there is no obvious proportionality problem (at least for persons who prefer exclusion from God's presence) if the only sanction associated with hell is separation from God.

In any event, most theorists assume that such punishment involves knowing that one has been punished and this involves knowing both that God exists and that one is eternally excluded from the benefits of such communion. On this conception (hereafter the separation-with-knowledge conception), the unsaved soul's punishment consists not only in being denied the fulfilment of an everlasting relationship with God, but also in knowing that one has been denied this benefit. The knowledge that one has been denied, on this line of analysis, compounds the suffering by producing, as Murray describes it, 'a deep, eternal regret [that] nags at the person who becomes a lover of self'.¹⁰

Whether there is a proportionality issue here depends on how much regret would characteristically be felt by someone who is motivated only by self-centred concern for her own happiness and wellbeing. It is, of course, true that our resources here are limited since we have little idea of what hell is like, but we are not utterly without guidance here. Again, if we assume that a person will be physically resurrected in the afterlife, it is reasonable to think there will be significant psychological continuity between who she is in the afterlife and who she was during her earthly life; how much regret a person is likely to feel in the afterlife, then, will depend on psychological characteristics that she possesses in her earthly life.

The factor most likely to elicit regret in someone who is motivated entirely by hedonistic self-interest is the realization that she is forever excluded from communion with God. To the extent that such a person recognizes that communion with God affords a tremendous personal benefit, she is likely to experience substantial regret at being excluded from that benefit. Even so, there is reason to think that such regret would be comparatively shallow. After all, her interest in God is purely a function of wanting to maximize her own happiness; how much greater her suffering would be if she valued God for non-self-regarding reasons! Thus, while someone motivated only by considerations of narrow self-interest would undoubtedly experience some regret over having lost such a great benefit, such regret would likely be comparatively superficial.

Indeed, we can get some sense for how much regret a person motivated entirely by self-interest might feel by looking at other exceptional punitive contexts. Recidivist offenders who spend much of their lives in prison don't seem to experience much in the way of regret. After all, it is difficult to make sense of an offender's decisions to re-offend if we assume she has experienced any substantial psycho-

logical regret or remorse. Other things being equal, a genuinely deep sense of regret and remorse usually operates to produce behavioural changes; a deep sense of regret is indicative of the operation of conscience and other psychological mechanisms that function to constrain behaviour. That there is a fairly substantial rate of recidivism among people who have been incarcerated suggests that someone whose primary motivations are selfish *need not* experience significant regret in response to even the harshest of punishments.¹¹

What probably explains this is that there are plenty of distractions in prison that allow for an existence that the inmate might regard as meaningful, if not optimal. Whether or not this would apply to persons consigned to hell is not clear; again, we would need to have much more information about the nature of hell in order to make these judgements with confidence. But in the absence of such information, we cannot determine with confidence whether eternal consignment to hell under the separation-with-knowledge conception is disproportionate to a person's worldly transgressions.

The continuing-sin response

The continuing-sin response begins with the concession that there is no wrong any person can do in this life that merits an infinite punishment and hence that infinite punishment would be disproportionate to his worldly wrongdoing. But this doesn't imply that those in hell are being wrongly punished because a person can continue to commit wrongs while being punished and thereby merit an extended punishment. Consider a criminal sentenced to five years in prison for a small crime. Suppose that although he would very much like to get out of prison, he won't refrain from petty wrongdoing and continues to commit comparatively small offences that don't merit much more than a small penalty; perhaps, he commits minor assaults against the other inmates. It is clearly justifiable for the authorities to extend his sentence for each one of these offences. As it turns out, however, the criminal winds up spending his entire life in prison – notwithstanding that he never commits a crime that by itself deserves such a sentence – because he simply won't stop committing wrongful acts. Such a situation is obviously unfortunate, but it involves no injustice towards the criminal; for every moment of time he spends in prison beyond his initial sentence is merited by some instance of his continuing wrongdoing.

The continuing-sin response assimilates the situation of someone in hell to the prisoner who is unable to stop committing criminal acts while in prison. According to this line of reasoning, what explains why people wind up spending an eternity in hell is that they continue to sin while in hell – sin being what got them there in the first place. Thus, while there is nothing a sinner ever does in this earthly life or beyond that by itself merits an eternal punishment, the sinner's continuing wrongdoing has the effect of continually extending the duration of his punishment

so that the end result is that his punishment justifiably winds up spanning an eternity. As Michael Murray describes the reasoning:

[While] no wrongs we do in this life *can* merit infinite punishment ..., this does not mean that those in hell might not be rightly punished for eternity nonetheless. To see why, consider a criminal who commits a crime, is caught, and is then sentenced to twenty years in prison. While in prison, however, he continues to commit further crimes, and for these further crimes he receives additional sentencing time. The result is that while none of the crimes he commits merits a life sentence, the cumulative sentence for crimes committed before and while in prison is never exhausted. Likewise ... those who are judged and sentenced to hell might not have a sentence which initially merits an infinite punishment. But their unchecked sinful desires continue to lead them to sin even in hell and so continue to mount penalties which are never satisfied. (*HaH*, 292–293)

Since the two situations are morally analogous and there is no injustice involved in the case of the criminal's spending his life in prison, it follows, on this line of analysis, that there is no injustice involved in the case of a sinner's spending an eternity in hell. In this way, the continuing-sin response reconciles the traditional conception of hell with the claim that nothing human beings do in this life can warrant an eternal punishment.

Intriguingly, the continuing-sin response is inconsistent with the strong inescapability thesis.¹² Insofar as moral accountability presupposes free will, the continuing-sin response assumes that persons in hell are capable of free acts of some kind (even if these are just volitions). Since the sort of freedom that is needed to support moral accountability entails being able to do otherwise, it follows that a person can engage in wrongful behaviour in hell if and only if she can do otherwise. This, of course, entails that it is possible (in some relevant sense) to refrain from engaging in those behaviours in hell. But to the extent that the only justification for keeping a person in hell eternally is that she continues to sin, it follows that it is possible (in the same sense) to escape from hell – which is exactly what the strong inescapability thesis denies. Accordingly, the continuing-sin response commits the proponent of the traditional view to the weak inescapability thesis, which allows for the possibility of getting out of hell but denies that, as a matter of contingent fact, anyone ever does.

Assuming that the weak inescapability thesis is true, then, the continuing-sin response can be adequately evaluated only by considering the various conceptions of what hell is like. Certainly, the continuing-sin response shows this much: we can't soundly infer the claim that divine punishment is disproportional to human wrongdoing from the claims that the duration of punishment is eternal and every instance of human wrongdoing is finite.¹³ But this, by itself, does not succeed as a defence of the conservative view against the proportionality argument; for unless we have some reason to think that people continue to sin in hell, the continuing-sin response gives us no reason to think that eternal punishment is a proportional response to finite human wrongdoing. Accordingly, whether the

continuing-sin response succeeds as a defence of hell depends on whether the proponent can identify a wrongful behaviour that can plausibly be attributed at every moment in time to each person in hell. And this, of course, will require taking into account the qualitative characteristics of the various conceptions of what hell is like.

The hellfire conception

The problem on this conception of hell is to make sense of the idea, as Murray expresses it, that the ‘unchecked sinful desires [of people] continue to lead them to sin even in hell’ (*HaH*, 293). Insofar as the conservative view includes the weak inescapability thesis, the continuing-sin response depends on this being true of every person in hell – regardless of what personality characteristics she might have that individuate her from other persons.

There are a couple of problems here for the conservative view. First, if Christian exclusivism is true, the most profoundly ethical of unbelievers and devout adherents of other faiths will find themselves in hell. Assuming that such persons will instantiate roughly the same psychological and personality characteristics that they instantiate during their earthly lives, it is not obvious that such persons can fairly be characterized as likely to let their ‘unchecked sinful desires’ lead them to sin continuously. While it may not be possible to lead an earthly life entirely free of sin, it is certainly possible to have *moments* that are free of sin. It is reasonable to think, for example, that persons like Gandhi experienced many moments in which they were able to keep their ‘sinful desires’ in check.

Moreover, such persons would be likely to commit a much smaller variety of sins than many other persons in hell. On the traditional conception, ethical unbelievers and persons of other faiths will exist alongside the most evil of persons, such as serial killers, rapists, and perpetrators of genocide. Certainly, if there is psychological continuity between a person’s earthly life and her afterlife, then ethical unbelievers and devout persons of other faiths are not likely to attempt to commit these gravely violent wrongs (assuming this is even possible in hell). But to the extent that ethical unbelievers and devout persons of other faiths are less likely to commit these wrongful acts, it will be less likely that their continuing propensity to sin will justify extending their stays in hell.

There is, however, a deeper problem here. Assuming that persons in hell instantiate roughly the same psychological characteristics they had during their earthly lives, it is difficult to make sense of the idea that they would continue to sin in hell if the hellfire conception is true. As will be recalled, the hellfire conception presupposes that existence in hell involves having a physical body that is consumed eternally with flames. The problem here is that the sinner would be so consumed by her pain that she wouldn’t have any inclination to do the sinful things that even the most ethical human beings routinely do. If I burn even a finger, I am utterly consumed by the pain for as long as it lasts. While I am hurting, I don’t

experience anything that remotely resembles lust, coveting, greed, jealousy, pride, or gluttonous desire. Intense pain simply has a way of blocking everything else out.

This is why people with painful terminal conditions sometimes wish to end their lives. Such persons no longer have what Donald Marquis calls a future like ours;¹⁴ although they remain conscious, they are no longer able to enjoy the experiential goods that provide the motivation for much of what we pursue in life. Of course, it is an unfortunate fact of life that a desire for these experiential goods naturally motivates wrongful behaviour. A desire for sex can, obviously enough, lead one person wrongfully to objectify another person – whether in thought or in deed. A desire for material comfort can lead to a wrongful preoccupation with increasing one's material wealth. But as those otherwise unobjectionable desires become extinguished in a person with an intensely painful condition, so are the sinful motivations to which those desires all too frequently give rise.¹⁵ If ordinary experience is any indication, the probability of sin rapidly diminishes in proportion to the amount of discomfort a person is in; sins resulting from lust, greed, gluttony, and envy are just not a possibility for someone in intense physical pain – as is true of persons in hell on the hellfire conception.

Even so, one might think there remains one sin *all* persons in hell are likely to commit: they are likely to experience tremendous anger and resentment about their fate. Indeed, in many ordinary cases, the natural concomitant of pain is anger. Whenever I have sprained an ankle, cut or burned myself, or stubbed my toe, I have experienced a good deal of anger and frustration over the discomfort.¹⁶ Insofar as anger and pain go naturally together, one would expect all persons in hell to be extremely angry about their condition. And notice this appears to be true, if our ordinary understanding of human psychology is any indication, of ethical unbelievers and devout adherents of other faiths as well. One can reasonably expect devout persons of other faiths to be exceptionally angry; after all, their mistakes seem, at an intuitive level, quite small relative to those of other sinners.

And resentment is an unfortunate but psychologically natural outcome of this sort of situation – at least if my experience is any indication. I recently learned of the death of someone I hadn't seen since I was as an adolescent. Though I didn't know him particularly well and, quite frankly, wasn't especially fond of him, I was mortified by my initial response to the news of his death. I visited a website memorial that featured a recent photograph of him. It took me some time to see the adolescent face I remembered emerge from the picture but, when I did, the first memory of him that came to mind was of an incident in which he deliberately pushed me to the ground after I had scored on him during a basketball game – for no other reason, I suppose, than to show me he could. I was appalled by my response: instead of sympathy for his friends and family, my first reaction was resentment over something that had occurred more than twenty-five years ago. He had hurt and embarrassed me, and apparently that pain stayed with me in the

form of a latent resentment that lingered for more than a quarter of a century. Unfortunately, my embarrassment and remorse over my response hasn't prevented me from dwelling on that incident more than once.

But if it is so difficult to refrain from resentment in response to such trivial slights (and I suspect I am not completely unusual in this regard), it is hard to imagine that anyone in hell would be able to refrain from resenting God in response to the all-consuming physical torment that is her never-ending fate according to the hellfire conception. Indeed, one would reasonably expect ethical unbelievers and devout persons of other faiths to be especially resentful; after all, they will find themselves treated no better than the worst of genocidal maniacs. Since, by hypothesis, the continuing-sin response concedes that hell is disproportionate to the sins that a person commits during her earthly life, the torments experienced by ethical unbelievers and devout persons of other faiths under the traditional conception are likely to strike such persons as disproportionate and unfair. The probable outcome of the combination of consuming pain and a sense of being wronged is the sin of resenting God for such a fate.

Moreover, it can plausibly be argued that ethical unbelievers and devout persons of other faiths will never cease to experience such resentment and hence will, as the continuing-sin response maintains, continue to have their sentences extended *ad infinitum*. Insofar as the intense pain never relents for even a moment, persons in hell never get a moment to reflect on why they are being punished. Given the intense pain that an individual feels at every moment in hell, one can reliably predict that she will experience an unrelenting anger and resentment and hence, under the continuing-sin response, have her sentence extended again and again.

But the very reasonableness of this line of analysis presents a problem. The torments of hell, as conceived by the hellfire conception, are not the sort that allows any psychological space for moral reflection. Someone who is incarcerated in response to a crime is likely to experience considerable discomfort; that, after all, is the very point of incarceration. But the magnitude of that discomfort is not so consuming that it precludes reflection about the circumstances and choices that led to the punishment. That is why incarceration, though intended to inflict great discomfort, allows for the possibility of rehabilitation. While incarceration is supposed to hurt, it is not supposed to – and doesn't – hurt so much that the offender can think of nothing else.

This, however, is simply not true of the torments of hell as conceived by the hellfire conception. So utterly consuming are these torments that they leave no room for the possibility of moral reflection and rehabilitation. But it is difficult to see how anger and resentment could be culpable under such circumstances. It is one thing to hold an offender accountable for continuing wrongs when there is a reasonable opportunity to rehabilitate oneself and refrain from wrongdoing. It is another thing to hold an offender accountable for continuing wrongs when

reflection and rehabilitation are impossible because the punishment hurts so much that it is not possible to step back and reflect on one's mistakes. If this is correct, however, the continuing-sin response fails inasmuch as it depends on the sinner's continuing to be culpable for those behaviours or thoughts that justify continuing punishment. If anger and resentment are unavoidable under the hellfire conception, then those emotions are not culpable and cannot justify extending the offender's punishment.¹⁷

The separation-with-knowledge conception

The continuing-sin response seems straightforwardly problematic on this conception of what hell is like – at least if our ordinary experience with human psychology is any indication. As we have seen, purely physical pain seems to exclude or diminish the likelihood of moral reflection precisely because it encourages anger and resentment; and the more intense and continuous the pain, the more likely the subject will respond with resentment and the less likely she will respond with moral reflection.

Indeed, this is one of the reasons that psychologists and child-rearing experts are increasingly discouraging the use of any form of corporal punishment in favour of other forms of punishment.¹⁸ Corporal punishment, on this conception, is problematic precisely because it breeds the sort of resentment and anger that makes reflection less likely and can result in long-term emotional problems.¹⁹ Of course, most experts agree that corporal punishment is appropriate when the child has put either herself or someone else in imminent danger of serious physical harm; in such exigent circumstances, corporal punishment can be useful to convey to the child that so serious a breach has occurred that the parents must resort to a special punishment. In most cases, however, experts recommend punishment that produces a merely emotional discomfort because, in the absence of physical pain, such discomfort is considerably more likely to produce a reflective response.

And ordinary experience seems to bear this out. The separation that results from the loss of a highly valued romantic relationship can produce some of the most intense grief that any person can experience. But when the loss is occasioned by the decision of the other partner, reflection is a natural, if not inevitable, response. In such circumstances, most people will reflect upon their roles in precipitating the dissolution. Of course, it may be that in many instances (perhaps even most) the partner who has been spurned will conclude that he or she bears little fault for the break-up, but it is certainly reasonable to think that many persons come to accept some significant measure of responsibility for the dissolution and resolve, at least temporarily, not to make the same mistakes in the future. While it is true that the emotional pain that accompanies a break-up can, and presumably does in many cases, lead to anger and resentment, it is also true that it can, and often does, lead to personal and moral growth.

Assuming again that persons in the afterlife instantiate many of the psycho-

logical characteristics they instantiated during their earthly lives, it seems reasonable to think, at the very least, that ethical unbelievers and devout persons of other faiths will have ample opportunity to realize, if the separation-with-knowledge conception is true, that they have made an important mistake of some kind. One might, I suppose, think that ethical unbelievers will have some difficulty trusting that their cases have been handled fairly and hence may not readily identify their mistakes or take responsibility for those mistakes; after all, such persons may not have developed the requisite capacity to trust in circumstances where the subject of trust is comparatively unknown. But it is clear that these difficulties would not necessarily arise for devout persons of other religions; for such persons are accustomed to putting their trust and faith in something of which they have only a limited understanding. Given the willingness of such persons to accept so much on faith, it is reasonable to think that they will experience genuinely reformatory moments under the separation-with-knowledge conception and will be capable of refraining from sin. If this is correct, then the continuing-sin response fails under the separation-with-knowledge conception.

In response, one might argue that sin, as a conceptual matter, consists in the state of being separated from God; thus, any person consigned to hell, as a conceptual matter, will be unable to refrain from sinning. Since sin consists in separation from God and hell necessarily involves separation from God, it follows that every moment spent in hell will be spent in sin. The problem with this response, however, is that it is inconsistent with the assumption that moral accountability for a behaviour presupposes the ability to do otherwise. On this line of response, it is conceptually impossible for a person in hell to refrain from sinning because being in hell itself constitutes a continuing sin. But if it is conceptually impossible for such a person to refrain from sinning, then it is either unjust or irrational to punish her for sins committed under such conditions. Thus, adopting a concept of sin that, as it were, makes it true by definition that persons in hell sin at every moment cannot rescue the continuing-sin response.

The separation-without-knowledge conception

As it turns out, the separation-without-knowledge conception is the only model of hell that can clearly be reconciled with the exclusivist thesis and the weak inescapability thesis. On this conception, persons in hell have no idea that they are in hell and that they are being punished for sins committed during their earthly lives. While it is not entirely clear what life would be like under this conception, it is reasonable to think, given ordinary facts of human psychology, that such people will not come to understand that they made grave mistakes during their earthly lives. Insofar as there is no apparent reason to think one has miscalculated on an error of substantial importance, one is not very likely to rethink her views on the issue (though it is worth emphasizing that this remains a fairly weak conclusion). To the extent that people in hell never come to rethink the miscalculations that

lead them to sin, it is likely that they will continue to sin. As a consequence, one can reasonably argue that, in such circumstances, it is justifiable to continue to extend their stays in hell.

In response, one might argue that continuing consignment to hell under the separation-without-knowledge conception is morally problematic for the same reason that it is morally problematic under the hellfire conception. The continuing-sin response got into trouble under the hellfire conception because there is no possibility for rehabilitation; it seems wrong to *extend* a person's punishment unless she had some opportunity to reform herself. Likewise, one might argue that since, under the separation-without-knowledge conception, the person in hell never realizes she is in hell, her punishment never provides any notice that she has made a mistake of some kind and hence provides no opportunity for the sinner to rehabilitate herself. And this, the argument concludes, is inconsistent with God's moral perfection.

There is, however, a significant difference between the two conceptions. Post-mortem rehabilitation is not just unlikely on the hellfire conception; it seems to be beyond human ability. As we have seen, the physical torments that are part of hell under this conception seem, as a psychological matter, to preclude any meaningful possibility of rehabilitation. But this is not true of the separation-without-knowledge conception. While post-mortem rehabilitation may be unlikely under this conception, it is not utterly beyond human ability; one can always come to realize one's mistakes without any sort of external prompting. But insofar as fairness requires only a meaningful possibility of rehabilitation, the separation-without-knowledge conception does not violate principles of fairness.

Summary

In this essay, I have considered whether the continuing-sin response succeeds as a defence to the objection that eternal consignment to hell is disproportionate to the sins of a finite being and is hence unjust and inconsistent with God's moral perfection. I have argued that the proportionality objection and the continuing-sin response can be adequately assessed only in the light of some sort of substantive conception of what hell is like to the subject; while this, of course, involves speculation, it is necessary to get a handle on the difficulties associated with the various conceptions of hell. In particular, I have argued that the continuing-sin response succeeds only on the separation-without-knowledge conception of hell, which is the conception that is most likely to be rejected by traditionalists.

The most likely response on the part of the traditionalist is to deny that there is any proportionality problem raised by the doctrine of hell. Since many traditionalists seem to regard this thesis as a core commitment of Christianity, they are unlikely to give up the exclusivist thesis. Further, the idea that hell is ines-

capable is so deeply entrenched among conservative thinkers that they are no more likely to surrender the weak inescapability thesis. The only remaining move, then, is to reject the assumption that gives rise to the need for the continuing-sin response, namely, the claim that human beings cannot do anything during their earthly lives that warrants an eternal punishment. In other words, the most likely response by traditionalists is to deny that punishment in hell is disproportionate to the sum of one's worldly sins and to embrace some form of the controversial thesis that sin against an infinite being is infinite.²⁰

Notes

1. Michael J. Murray 'Heaven and hell', in *idem* (ed.) *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 296 [hereafter *HaH*].
2. My discussion here owes an obvious debt to Jonathan Kvanvig's description of the strong view of hell; Jonathan Kvanvig *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) [hereafter *PH*].
3. See, e.g. Marilyn McCord Adams 'Hell and the justice of God', *Religious Studies*, 11 (1975), 433–447; and Thomas Talbott 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice', *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 151–168, [hereafter PFDJ]. Talbott finds a biblical foundation for the proportionality requirement in the Old Testament: '[T]he Old Testament principle of retaliatory justice – "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" – [was intended to convey that] we must measure the seriousness of a crime according to the degree of harm done, and we must proportion the punishment to the seriousness of the crime'; PFDJ, 155.
4. Indeed, the sum total of wrongdoing accomplished in the history of the world remains finite in magnitude – though it is, of course, a mind-bogglingly large quantity of wrongdoing.
5. It is part of the very concept of punishment that it is calculated to cause some discomfort. An act that is incapable of doing this is conceptually disqualified from being punishment. Giving a marshmallow to someone who wants one, other things being equal, cannot as a conceptual matter constitute punishment. Indeed, it is precisely because it is part of the nature of punishment that it is calculated to cause discomfort that the very practice of punishment (as opposed to specific kinds of punishment) stands in need of moral justification.
6. In what follows, I assume the traditional view that the afterlife involves the resurrection of the physical body.
7. Similarly, Clark Pinnock describes this conception of hell 'as a literal lake of fire where the damned are embodied in order to burn everlastingly in the flames'; Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 88.
8. I am indebted to Jon T. Wheeler for bringing this possibility to my attention.
9. More implausibly, it equates even devout commitments to other faiths as involving hating God.
10. What Murray has in mind by 'self-lover' is never made entirely clear; I will assume that such persons are motivated primarily by hedonistic considerations of self-interest.
11. Of course, the situation is different for the death penalty. Persons experience a high degree of self-regarding regret prior to being executed, but this is induced by the fear of losing one's conscious life – something that isn't a prospect on traditional conceptions of hell.
12. I am indebted to Dustin Tucker for this point.
13. As we have seen, this can be established in another way. I argued above that whether an eternal punishment is disproportionate to a finite wrong depends on the qualitative characteristics of the punishment. See above, nn. 9–11.
14. Donald Marquis 'Why abortion is wrong', *Journal of Philosophy*, 86 (1989), 183–202.
15. Notice that if the afterlife doesn't involve having a physical body, then there is no possibility of committing these sorts of sins. Without a body, lust makes no sense; without a body, greed makes no sense.

16. Of course, these are comparatively trivial episodes of discomfort. One might reasonably think that anger is possible in response to minor discomfort of this kind because the pain is not severe enough to consume all of the available psychological resources. This, however, may not be true of the worst sorts of pain, such as that experienced when consumed with flames. There is only so much pain that a person can experience and still have sufficient energy and psychic resources to divert to other responses. If so, then the above argument fails. As I have not had experience with such pain, I don't regard my intuitions as particularly reliable. This issue can be resolved only by the sort of empirical research that a philosopher is not in a position to do.
17. Thus, while the concept of punishment does not entail that rehabilitation is a necessary function of punishment, it is unfair to *extend* punishment for continuing wrongdoing unless there is reasonable opportunity for the offender to rehabilitate herself.
18. See, e.g. Jeffrey P. Kaplan 'Psychologists' attitudes towards corporal punishment', *Dissertations Abstract International*, 56 (1996), 5151. Kaplan reports that 75 per cent of psychologists interviewed 'strongly opposed' corporal punishment and 55 per cent characterized it as 'abusive'.
19. See, e.g. Murray Arnold Strauss and Denise A. Donnelly *Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1994), 9–10.
20. For an extensive discussion of this thesis, see *PH*, 40–50. See also William Wainwright 'Original sin', in Thomas V. Morris (ed.) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 34–35. For criticism of the thesis, see Adams 'Hell and the justice of God', 442.