



The  
Logic  
of Hell

by Steve Hays

## **Preface**

The focus on this book is on philosophical objections to hell. I'm using "hell" as shorthand for everlasting conscious punishment or misery. That's the position I defend. The book is more about the concept of hell, with a few hermeneutical considerations along the way. Many people both inside and outside the church often have a view of hell based on folk theology.

## Contents

Retroactive prayer .....	5
Praying for the past.....	5
God's time-travelers .....	7
Falling on a grenade.....	8
Damnation in the multiverse .....	9
Into the cave .....	13
Why is postmortem salvation false?.....	14
God will wipe away every tear.....	15
Inclusivism.....	17
Krishna, Christ, and Manitou .....	21
What is faith? .....	23
What is faith? .....	24
Will few be saved? .....	25
Jewish evangelism.....	28
Reformed exclusivism .....	29
"The paradoxes of hell".....	31
Infinite loss, infinite comeuppance.....	53
So many Christians—so few lions! .....	55
Shades of faith .....	58
The wider hope .....	60
Gouging his eyes out.....	66
Are there babies in hell? .....	74
Elect infants.....	79
Valley of Hinnom.....	82
The general resurrection.....	83
"An everlasting Auschwitz" .....	85
Some objections to annihilationism .....	89
Kill the body, not the soul.....	91
Is annihilation objectively worse?.....	93
Body and soul in hell .....	94
Hell under fire .....	96

The hermeneutics of annihilationism .....	104
A Fudgesicle's chance in hell.....	107
Bedlam .....	113
Hell is what you live for.....	115
Life in the compound .....	117
Virtual hell.....	118
The dark island .....	119
Film noir hell .....	121
Posthumous punishment.....	122
Circumstantial luck.....	123
Scandinavian hell .....	125
Postmortem stages .....	126
Lost.....	128
"The damnable thing about damnation" .....	130
Punitive "torture".....	135
Hell is bad...except when it's good .....	137
The futility of atheist outrage .....	139
Dogs and wolves .....	140
Outer darkness.....	143
Hellfire.....	144
Hellfire.....	145
Lazarus and Dives.....	146
No Exit .....	148
When heaven is hell.....	149
A fate worse than death .....	151
The lost.....	153
Dembski on Eben Alexander's "heavenly" NDE .....	155

# I. Exclusivism

---

## Retroactive prayer

### Praying for the past

Turretin Fan recently did a post on prayer:

<http://turretinfan.blogspot.com/2009/04/prayers-for-to-and-through-dead.html>

Turretin Fan is an erudite, logical, and thorough apologist. In many respects a model apologist, both in style and substance.

I agree with everything he says about prayers to and through the dead. I agree with almost everything he says about prayers for the dead.

However, the final paragraph of §1 raises an interesting question:

Thus, there is no third category - no third option that exists, where prayers for the deceased would have any value. Accordingly, we reject prayers for the dead as vain and superstitious, and we do not engage in such prayers.

This goes to the larger question of whether it's ever appropriate to pray for a past outcome.

Keep in mind that God is timeless. At an ontological level, nothing is past, present, or future to God. At an epistemic level, God is, of course, aware of past, present, and future since he himself decreed the entire history of the world.

One unspoken assumption of TF's denial is that God cannot change the past. What's past is immutable. Over and done with.

I agree with that assumption. As such, it would be improper to pray for a past outcome if you know the outcome. That would be asking God to do something that even omnipotence cannot do. Asking him to perform a pseudotask.

But that leaves another scenario to deal with. What if the outcome is past, but we don't know the outcome? Is it permissible to pray for a past outcome under those circumstances?

Offhand, I don't see why not. That reflects a limitation, not on what is possible, but on what is known. We're not asking God to change the past.

Rather, we're asking a timeless God, who knows what we ask before we ask it, to have brought about a particular outcome.

Although it's not possible to change the past, it's possible to affect the past. Not to change what was, but to change what would have been—absent prayer.

I don't think this scenario is that unusual. We hear about a loved one who was involved in a life-threatening accident or natural disaster. A plane crashing. A coalmine caving in. A tornado striking a small town.

By the time we hear about it, the life-threatening event is past. Our loved one is either dead or alive.

We learn about the event after the fact. We see it on the news. Or receive a frantic phone call.

What do we do? We pray for him. We pray that God spared him. We do so even though, at the time we pray, the outcome is a *fait accompli*. And we do so knowing that, at the time we pray, the outcome is a *fait accompli*.

But we also know that God's answer to prayer isn't always constrained by our timing. For God doesn't have to wait until we pray for something to know what we're going to pray for. And although the result of answered prayer is ordinarily subsequent to the prayer, the answer isn't subsequent to the prayer. Rather, God answered our prayer from all eternity.

Offhand, I don't think it's wrong to pray for the fate of a loved-one in case his fate is unknown to us—even if his fate is sealed. Of course, that would need to be a qualified prayer. We're not asking God to change the postmortem status of our loved one. That's irrevocable.

But we're timebound creatures praying to a timeless God. And there are some situations where time is not a barrier to prayer. Our ignorance of the outcome is not, of itself, a reason to refrain from praying for a particular outcome, even though the outcome is a done deal by the time we pray.

## God's time-travelers

Time-travel is favorite convention of the SF genre. This is in part because it appeals to our sense of adventure. Our unrequited desire to visit periods before (or after) we lived.

But it also appeals to our sense of regret. Our inability of go back and make things right. One of the ironies of life is that we only gain insight through hindsight. But, of course, hindsight lacks the advantages of foresight. We can't apply our newfound wisdom to the past.

So we content ourselves with the vicarious experience of imaginary characters who travel back in time and get it right things right.

Yet there's something ultimately unsatisfying about that experience. It just isn't real. After we finish the bucket of popcorn, see the closing credits, and watch the lights come on, we have to re-enter a world of linear time and irreversible succession. A world conditioned by the accidental necessity of the past—where what's behind us is over and done with.

Yet there's a sense in which a Christian on his knees is a bona fide time-traveler. Not that he is actually moving through time. But a Christian prays to a timeless God. Since time is no barrier to God, time is not necessarily a barrier to prayer.

We understand this when we pray for the future. Yet there are situations in which we can also pray for the past. Our prayers can affect the past (without changing the past) inasmuch as God has written that into his plan for the world. He decreed our prayer, and he decreed the result of our prayer (assuming he chooses to answer our prayer). Since God foreknew our prayer, he can answer a future request about a past event.

So there's a sense in which we can travel back into the past through the time-machine of prayer and thereby affect the outcome after it occurs.

That only works in those cases where we don't know the outcome. And, of course, it all depends on God answering our prayers. But it's possible. And it nicely avoids the paradoxes of time-travel.

## Falling on a grenade

An observation I made today on Facebook:

Calvinism doesn't teach that God created the reprobate for the purpose of their going to hell.

It's true that God intends the reprobate to end up in hell, but that doesn't mean hell is the goal of reprobation.

To take a comparison: consider a soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save the lives of his comrades. That kills him. That's the last thing he did. That's the end-result. But that wasn't the goal of his action—"Yea, I wanna get my guts blown out!". Rather, the aim was to shield his comrades by absorbing the explosion. Dying was a side-effect of his intentions. A means to an end.

God can create the reprobate in large part for what they do in this life. As agents, they make certain things happen. They help to drive the plot of world history.



## Damnation in the multiverse

1. An issue in Christian theodicy is whether a majority of the human race will be damned. An argument for that proposition combines inclusivism with the demographics of church history up to the present. Perhaps future church history demographics will offset the current tally.

2. A more specific issue concerns the ethnic demographics of salvation. As of now, some people-groups are overrepresented while other people-groups are underrepresented. Put another way, salvation is overrepresented in the northern hemisphere compared to the southern hemisphere. Or overrepresented in the west compared to the east. Is geography destiny?

Many Christians believe that some or all who die before the age of reason are saved. But even if that's the case, is it enough to offset the ethnic disparity?

But perhaps that's just the way it is. There's a sense in which grace is arbitrary, since no one deserves it.

3. Suppose, for argument's sake (which may in fact be true), that most folks on planet earth will be damned. Does that mean a majority of the human race will be damned? And does that mean more Caucasians are saved than other ethnic groups? Not necessarily. An unspoken assumption behind that inference is that humans only exist on planet earth, in our universe. But is that a secure assumption? What if there's a multiverse? Before addressing that question directly, I need to lay some groundwork.

4. Let's turn to modal metaphysics. There are at least two reasons to believe in possible worlds:

i) A capacity for hypothetical reasoning is a feature of human intelligence. That's one of the things which sets us apart from animals. A lot of our decision-making involves hypothetical reasoning. We mentally compare and contrast alternate courses of action. If I do this, what are the likely consequences? If, instead, I do that, what are the likely consequences?

In addition, many counterfactual scenarios seem to be undeniably true. It's just unavoidable. For instance: If JFK hadn't been assassinated on November 22, 1963, LBJ would not have assumed the presidency on the same day. How can that be reasonably disputed?

ii) Furthermore, the Bible contains many hypothetical or counterfactual statements. So the Bible appeals to that human faculty.

But what makes counterfactuals true? They don't correspond to what happens in our world. So counterfactuals are standardly cashed out in terms of possible worlds. Borrowing from time-travel scenarios, we could also recast the idea in terms of alternate timelines.

**5.** But that pushes the question back a step: what are possible worlds? What's the ontology of possible worlds? There are different paradigms. David Lewis had a position similar to the multiverse. A different paradigm views possible worlds as abstract objects.

However, I view possible worlds as alternate plots in God's imagination. Like a screenwriter or novelist, God is able to imagine infinitely many different world histories.

**6.** So I think Christians have good reason to believe in a plurality of possible worlds. But that raises another question: what's the relationship between possible worlds and actual worlds? Out of all the possible worlds at God's disposal, does he pick just one to instantiate? Or did God create a multiverse?

**i)** I can't think of any reason why God is unable to create a multiverse. I don't know of any metaphysical impediment that prevents him from instantiating multiple alternate timelines. Of course it's impossible for one and the same timeline to combine or contain two or more alternate timelines, but if these are separated, I don't see that it's impossible for them to coexist.

**ii)** Assuming that God is unable to create a multiverse, is God unwilling to create a multiverse? We can't say for sure. However, it seems arbitrary to suppose God only instantiates one world history. There are so many interesting plotlines in the divine imagination. So many rich alternatives. World histories just as worthwhile as our own. So I incline to the view that God probably made a multiverse rather than a universe.

**7.** Here I need to evoke a distinction, drawn by Robin Collins, between a physical multiverse and a metaphysical multiverse. The point of contrast is not that one is material while the other is immaterial. Rather, "physical" in this context means a multiverse based on physics. There are competing interpretations of quantum mechanics. One solution to superposition is the many-worlds interpretation. On that view, Schrödinger's cat is both dead and alive. Each outcome is represented in a parallel universe. In the multiverse, Schrödinger's cat has nine lives! And there are Christian physicists like Don Page and Jeff Zweerink who endorse a physical multiverse.

However, I'm dubious about a physical multiverse. For one thing, but there are competing interpretations, and we don't have enough evidence to verify or falsify the many-worlds interpretation.

I also have a theological objection: A physical multiverse is rather mechanical. All physically feasible alternatives must be realized. That doesn't give God any discretion. And it generates a theodical problem since some possible worlds are irremediably evil. That's unworthy of God's wisdom and benevolence.

Instead of that, I'm partial to a metaphysical multiverse. That's independent of physics. On that model, not all possible timelines are represented. Only the better possible worlds make the cut.

**8.** On that view, human history on planet earth is just one slice of human history overall. Human history isn't confined to planet earth in our universe. There's a parallel universe where Adam never fell. Likewise, there are fallen worlds where redemptive history originates in China, or Japan, or North America, or South America, &c. Some of these have a plot similar to Bible history, but with different geographical points of origin. Where Eden exists in a different part of the world. Where there's a counterpart to Abraham in a different part of the world. Where the Son became Incarnate as a Chinese, Vietnamese, Aztec, East Indian, or Iroquois male, &c. The human race is scattered across the multiverse, where alternate timelines play out.

Even assuming most humans on our planet are hellbound, yet if you total the heavenbound humans in the multiverse, the cumulative tally for the saints might vastly outnumber the damned. Every people-group will be well-represented. To use our planetary history as the final frame of reference is a cosmically provincial basis of comparison.

**9.** It might be objected that my position is too speculative. And this is certainly an exercise in philosophical theology. That said:

**i)** While it's speculative to postulate a multiverse, it's no less speculative to deny a multiverse. You can't avoid conjecture one way or the other.

**ii)** Christianity theism has metaphysical resources lacking in naturalism. And we shouldn't hesitate to take advantage of the extra resources at our disposal.

**iii)** If the universe is a tribute to God's greatness, how much more so a multiverse.

**iv)** Although it's speculative, it's not sheer speculation. As I said, I think Scripture already bears witness to possible worlds. And from there it's a short step to a metaphysical multiverse.

**v)** There is, moreover, the burden of proof. I don't even have to affirm it. It's enough that I can't rule it out. It's a reasonable conjecture. Even if I suspend judgment, it disables the theodical objection, for the theodical objection relies the ambitious assumption that human history is confined to our planet. To question that objection, I don't have to disprove the underlying assumption. Rather, it's up to the critic to prove his own assumption or disprove the multiverse scenario. The onus is on a critic to justify his operating assumptions.

**vi)** Moreover, this isn't just an apologetic tactic on my part. I have no good reason to think God suffer from our limitations. When we come to a fork in the road, that's a binary choice between turning left or right. Yet that's because, at that stage, the fork in the road is a given. But it's not a given for God.

**10.** BTW, I don't put this forward because I think the traditional position is indefensible. But the objection to the traditional position relies on a gratuitous assumption that I just don't grant or even find plausible.

## Into the cave

Religious pluralists and universalists (the distinction is cosmetic) think all roads lead to God—whatever "God" is. Is there a face behind the mask, or is it nothing but masks?

Perhaps the standard metaphor is mountain trails. Different trails on different sides of the mountain all converge on the summit. A winsome if rather banal metaphor.

By contrast, here's a different metaphor. There's only one tunnel out of the cave. There are ever so many tunnels that entice you further into the cave. Tunnels with no outlet. Or branching tunnels. One wrong turn takes you to the next wrong turn. A network of tunnels leading nowhere. Well, not exactly nowhere. Rather, penetrating ever deeper into the cave. Putting the outside world further behind with every fateful step. A trap.

## Why is postmortem salvation false?

Why doesn't God save anyone after they die? Isn't death an arbitrary cuff-off point? No second chance just because you're dead?

The answer depends on unspoken assumptions behind the question. In the case of Calvinism, the traditional position isn't based, in the first instance, on starting with a theological principle, then drawing an inference. Rather, it's based on what Scripture indicates about the fate of the dead. In many places, Scripture indicates that at the moment of death, the dying individual is either heavenbound or hellbound, and the trajectory they were already on at the moment of death continues in the same direction into the afterlife. Calvinism simply accepts that revelation.

However, another way of viewing the issue is the point at which a person's salvation or damnation is settled. From a Reformed standpoint, one reason there's no postmortem salvation is because their eternal destiny was never unsettled. It's not as if their eternal destiny was unsettled during their lifetime, while the moment of locks in a particular outcome. Rather, there's a sense in which that was settled before they ever existed. It's not as if their ultimate fate is still indeterminate after they die, so that the final outcome remains open-ended. Rather, the plot was written ahead of time.

If God intends to save someone, he can save them before they die. He can save everyone he intends to save prior to death. There's no logjam at the moment of death, that must be broken after death. That was all sorted out in advance.

In freewill theism, by contrast, the problem is the opposite. Why is their destined ever settled, once and for all time? According to inclusivism, you're not necessarily heavenbound or hellbound at the moment of death. Even if you die an unbeliever, you weren't on one pathway or the other at the moment of death. You had no set direction in this life. You had no set direction at the time of death. It was open-ended heading into death.

But that presents a dilemma for freewill theism. Even if God can save you in the afterlife, what makes that stick? Why can't you lose your salvation in the afterlife?

Sophisticated freewill theists allow for will-setting, where prior libertarian choices in the past may fix the direction of our future choices. But that means your damnation may already be cemented well before you die rather than when you die—much less after you die.

## God will wipe away every tear

*JUGULUM SAID:*

*“Hmm... This doesn't address the objection if it goes like this: How could we be happy in heaven knowing that our loved ones are experiencing hell?\_\_ Is that not part of the objection that you've been encountering?”*

---

What our lost loved ones would experience in hell is divine justice. I don't think that, of itself, is a reason for consternation.

Now, there's a pop tradition which equates hell with a torture chamber. If that's what's bothering them, I think the source of the problem is their preconception of hell—which owes more to watching one too many slasher films than what you can responsibly exegete from Scripture.

Put another way, we have to distinguish between two different objections:

- i) I can't be happy in heaven knowing what they're missing out on.
- ii) I can't be happy in heaven because I miss them so much.

Your formulation is closer to (i). My post is addressing (ii).

I think that (i) without (ii) doesn't have as much emotional purchase.

If the objection takes the form of: “I'm pained by how much pain they're in,” then I think that loses a lot of its traction if we discount the pop tradition of hell as a torture chamber.

We also need to distinguish between how the afterlife looks to us from the perspective of this life—which, at present, is our only point of reference—and how it will look when we get there.

To go back to the illustration in my original post, when I'm 16, and my brother is 14, he and I may be so tight that I can't imagine life without him.

Yet, 20 years down the line, when I'm married, with my own growing family, days may pass when I don't even think about my brother. I've put him out of my mind, not deliberately, but due to intervening circumstances. The physical distance between us. The fact that my wife and kids consume most of my time and attention.

People can change how they feel about each. Drastically. Romantic love is a case in point. A guy may be madly in love with a woman (or vice versa), but feel completely different about her five years later.

At the time, she occupies his every waking thought. But now he's "gotten over her." He may still have fond memories of what they had together, but he no longer feels that insatiable need to spend every minute of the day in her company. He's moved on to other things and other people. He's found a new love in his life.

This can also hold true among blood relatives. Brothers who used to love each other may come to hate each other. Brothers who used to hate each other may come to love each other.

The attitude of a parent towards a child can also change. How would you feel to be the proud parents of Ted Bundy?

So even if you use this life as a frame of reference, it's quite conceivable that we might feel very differently about someone in the world to come. I think we tend to resist this possibility, not because it's inconceivable, but for two other reasons:

**i)** It's not that we can't imagine it, but we don't want to, or we don't think we ought to feel that way. We don't want to let go. And we don't feel that we should.

And there's some truth to that. In this life, there are some people we should never give up on.

But, of course, that's one of the differences between this life and the afterlife. We don't have all the same duties in this life and the next.

**ii)** The other thing is that, for many people, family is the bedrock of their emotional security. That's the one thing they can always count on. Or so they hope. When all else fails, they have family to fall back on, for love and support.

Therefore, the idea that some of these relationships are temporary is very unsettling. It strikes us where we feel most vulnerable.

But, of course, heaven is stable in a way that life in a fallen world is not.

**iii)** I'd add that (ii) is somewhat idealized. Many people did not come from stable homes. That's something they long for. Something they miss. But they miss it because they never had it, and not because they lost it.



## Inclusivism

### I. “The Paradox of Exclusivism”

*Herein lies the paradox that the Augustinians would do well to ponder. If two persons are bound together in love, their purposes and interests, even the conditions of their happiness, are so logically intertwined as to be inseparable T. Talbott, The Inescapable Love of God, 137*

---

This is Talbott’s silver bullet argument for universalism.

### II. The Inclusivist/Exclusivist Continuum

#### 1. UNIVERSALISM

Everyone sine qua non will be saved in this life or the afterlife.

#### 2. INCLUSIVISM

Everyone who’s heavenbound will be saved through the atonement of Christ, but not through faith in Christ.

#### 3. Evangelical Exclusivism

Everyone who’s heavenbound will be saved through faith in Christ.

#### 4. Reformed Exclusivism

Everyone who’s heavenbound will be saved through regeneration.

(4) intersects with (3). In Reformed theology, regeneration is the source of saving faith. Regeneration is geared towards faith in Christ. Regeneration is the seed of faith. Regeneration is the seed while faith is the flower.

But, in principle, there can be a gestation period. Regeneration creates a predisposition to exercise faith in Christ, but other conditions must also be met. These are ordinarily coordinated, but there can be exceptions. In principle the regenerate might die before hearing the gospel. Or the regenerate might die before arriving at the age of discretion. Things like that.

BTW, here’s an exegetical argument for the priority of regeneration:

<http://blogmatics.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/does-regeneration-precede-faith-in-1-john-by-matthew-barrett-ets-paper-nov-2010.pdf>

### **III. The Social Continuum**

At the risk of stating the obvious, we're closer to some people than others. That's how God made us. And that's a matter of degree.

#### **1. A LOVED ONE**

Those who make our lives happy, worthwhile, meaningful, fulfilling. If we lose them, the joy goes out of our lives. We may lose the will to live.

At this same time, relationships can be fickle. Take a young couple where one spouse dies two years into the marriage. The widow or widower may stay in love with the late spouse until death.

If, however, the spouse hadn't die, they might have divorced ten years into the marriage. Two years into the marriage they're passionately in love. Inseparable. Ten years into the marriage they can't stand each other. So what seems to be an indispensable relationship in this life may not necessarily be indispensable.

#### **2. A PAL OR CLOSE ACQUAINTANCE**

People we're fond of. We care about them. We'd be saddened if they come to a bad end. Yet we can go on without them. We can be happy without them. It's just that when we think about their situation, it saddens us. But that's just in passing.

#### **3. STRANGERS**

We have empathy, compassion, or pity for them. We can imagine ourselves in their situation. We share a fellow feeling for their plight.

But we don't affection for them. They don't mean anything to us at a deeply personal level. It's not a loss to us. It's just a sense of what the loss would mean to them.

#### **4. ENEMIES**

Those we dislike, but treat better than they deserve out of Christian duty. We act in their best interest despite what we may feel.

### **IV. Different Social Bonds**

Loved ones are subdivisible into three basic groups:

#### **1. FELLOW BELIEVERS**

#### **2. BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS**

#### **3. FELLOW UNBELIEVERS**

### **V. Evaluation**

Talbot's argument only applies to a subset of a subset of humanity. It only applies to a subset of loved ones—where one (or more) of a believer's loved ones are unbelievers.

For instance, it may well be the case that Bonnie can't be happy if she is saved while Clyde is damned, or vice versa. But it doesn't follow from their pairing that a Christian can't be happy unless Bonnie and Clyde are saved, for they are not his loved ones.

An argument for universalism must be universal in scope. Talbot's argument falls far short. He needs an argument in which all parties are some believer's loved ones.

### **VI. Coda**

In principle, an exclusivist could concede that there are some relationships in this life without which Christians can't be happy in the next life. And if that's the case, God will save whoever we (as Christians) need to be eternally happy.

That, however, is not an argument for universalism. And it's not an argument for postmortem conversion.

## Krishna, Christ, and Manitou

Recently, J. P. Moreland did a whirlwind presentation on near-death experiences:

<https://www.facebook.com/BiolaApologetics/videos/504055120062148/>

Unfortunately, the video froze up near the end. But it was an interesting overview.

A common Christian objection to NDEs is the oft-repeated claim that non-Christian NDErs interpret their purported encounter in non-Christian terms. If we think NDEs are real, that seems to be an argument for religious pluralism.

In this course of his presentation, Moreland recommended this book:

John Burke, *Heaven: Near-Death Experiences, God's Promises, and the Exhilarating Future that Awaits You* (Baker Books, 2015). And Moreland quoted this passage:

*Osis and Haraldsson, two researchers, studied five hundred Americans and five hundred Indians to determine how much religious or cultural conditioning shaped one's near-death experience. They noted, "If the patient sees a radiant man clad in white who induces in him an inexplicable experience of harmony and peace, he might interpret the apparition in various ways: as an angel, Jesus, or God; or if he is a Hindu, Krishna, Shiva, or Deva."*

*Though I have heard researchers state conclusions like this, i have never read of NDErs describing anything like Krishna (who has blue skin), Siva (who has three eyes)... (pp141-42).*

---

I haven't read Burke's book, and I'm dubious about using NDEs to detail heaven and hell. But it does draw an important distinction. Hindus use the names of their gods to denote what they saw, but what they (say they) saw doesn't match Hindu iconography. They're just using the religious designations culturally available to them. But to say they saw a being by that name doesn't mean they saw an individual who corresponds to the Hindu god—because the visual impression is different from the conventional designation.

To take a comparison, suppose Jesus appeared to an Iroquois brave in the 15C. Suppose the Christophany looks like an ancient Palestinian Jew with a robe, beard, and sandals. The Iroquois brave has no word for "Jesus" or "Christ". So he might call

him Manitou. That would be the only designation available to him to denote a numinous, humanoid being.

That might convey the impression of religious pluralism if we fail to make allowance for the fact that he can only use the vocabulary and categories his culture provides.

If, however, he provided a visual description that didn't match the traditional Iroquois iconography for Manitou, then it would be invalid to infer that he saw Manitou. Rather, he saw a being whom he calls Manitou because that's the only name he has at his disposal to denote a numinous, humanoid being. It doesn't mean his experience actually refers to Manitou.

Perhaps, then, NDEs have less religious diversity than meets the eye. In principle, non-Christian NDEers might report meeting a heathen deity because that's their only frame of reference. But they didn't actually see a pagan god. They simply use the name of a pagan god as a placeholder.

I'm insufficiently well-read on NDEs to know how non-Christian NDEers describe their encounters, so I don't know how applicable that distinction is. But it's something to make allowance for when assessing their reports.

## What is faith?

In Christian theology, faith is normally considered to be a necessary condition of salvation. I've discussed how, in Reformed theology, regeneration is more fundamental than faith. Regeneration is the source of faith (although faith also requires a mental object).

One component of faith is belief. But that's ambiguous. Epistemologists distinguish between occurrent belief and dispositional belief. We aren't conscious of everything we know or believe. In that respect, belief is very similar to memory. It's available. On tap. Occurrent beliefs come and go but dispositional belief is relatively constant—although some beliefs undergo change. Even at a dispositional level, you don't believe all the same things throughout life.

In that respect, belief has a hypothetical dimension. In part a matter of how you'd think and respond in case you found yourself in a particular situation. The situation brings outlook out to the fore.

So, for instance, does a Christian cease to be a believer when he sleeps? He may have some occurrent beliefs in his dreams, but generally, his beliefs, including his Christian beliefs, are unconscious or subconscious when he sleeps.

And even when he's awake, he isn't continuously aware of his Christian beliefs. More often, his Christian beliefs lie behind some of his choices and actions rather than in the forefront. They exert a subconscious influence.

This distinctions have some possible bearing on the nature of exclusivism. Insofar as salvation is contingent on orthodox beliefs, that generally operates at the dispositional level rather than occurrently.

## What is faith?

In Christian theology, faith is normally considered to be a necessary condition of salvation. I've discussed how, in Reformed theology, regeneration is more fundamental than faith. Regeneration is the source of faith (although faith also requires a mental object).

One component of faith is belief. But that's ambiguous. Epistemologists distinguish between occurrent belief and dispositional belief. We aren't conscious of everything we know or believe. In that respect, belief is very similar to memory. It's available. On tap. Occurrent beliefs come and go but dispositional belief is relatively constant—although some beliefs undergo change. Even at a dispositional level, you don't believe all the same things throughout life.

In that respect, belief has a hypothetical dimension. In part a matter of how you'd think and respond in case you found yourself in a particular situation. The situation brings outlook out to the fore.

So, for instance, does a Christian cease to be a believer when he sleeps? He may have some occurrent beliefs in his dreams, but generally, his beliefs, including his Christian beliefs, are unconscious or subconscious when he sleeps.

And even when he's awake, he isn't continuously aware of his Christian beliefs. More often, his Christian beliefs lie behind some of his choices and actions rather than in the forefront. They exert a subconscious influence.

This distinctions have some possible bearing on the nature of exclusivism. Insofar as salvation is contingent on orthodox beliefs, that generally operates at the dispositional level rather than occurrently.



## Will few be saved?

*13 Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Mt 7:13-14).*

*22 He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. 23 And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' 26 Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' 27 But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. 29 And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. 30 And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Lk 13:23-30).*

**1.** Will the majority of the human race be saved or damned?

**i)** The two passages I quoted are standard prooftexts for belief that the majority of the human race is doomed to hell. That's what I'll be discussing in this post.

**ii)** There is another argument for the same position. If you combine exclusivism (i.e. one must believe in Jesus before death to be saved) with church history up until the present, then that's another argument for the proposition that the majority of the race will be damned.

There are, however, some potential complications. There's the question of whether those who die before the age of reason are heavenbound or hellbound. There's the question of how much longer the churn age will last, and the success or failure of evangelism worldwide.

You also have progressives who subscribe to inclusivism and/or postmortem evangelism. That's becoming more popular.

Even if we conclude that (i) fails to establish the claim, the claim may still be true, given (ii). But this post is about the first line of argument.

**2.** In addition, the traditional interpretation is a fixture of the anti-Calvinist polemic. Freewill theists routinely allege that according to Calvinism, the elect are a "chosen few". However, that's not based on Calvinism, per se. Rather, that's based in part on a freewill theist's interpretation of Mt 7:13-14—which he combines with the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation. And to that extent it reflects a failure to distinguish between his own position and the opposing position. The critic is imputing one of his own assumptions to Calvinism.

**3.** We might begin by filling in the implicit imagery in Christ's two sayings. Try to visualize the whole picturesque metaphor.

**i)** Jesus seems to be using mixed metaphors, although these are closely related metaphors. The basic picture appears to be a fortified city. The city has a defensive wall with one (or more) gates. The main gate is wide. Wide enough so that several people can leave or enter simultaneously. It can accommodate several people (some mounted on horses or mules) abreast.

**ii)** Matching the main gate is the broad road. The basic idea is that the broad road is the default thoroughfare. The path of least resistance. Most folks unthinkingly go with the flow. To vary the metaphor, Christians must swim against the tide.

**iii)** In contrast to the main gate is the side gate. Because it's narrow, people only enter single file rather than side-by-side.

The imagery of gates and roads trades on spatial metaphors. Two divergent paths. One leads to heaven while the other leads to hell.

However, the narrow gate may also trade on a temporal metaphor. The main gate closes at sunset. To enjoy the protection of the fortified city, you generally had to get there before sundown. If you got there after dark, you were out of luck. Had to sleep outside. Exposed to the dangers of bandits and nocturnal predators.

But a function of the side gate was to admit some parties who arrived after dark. Yet that wouldn't be just anyone. That would be reserved for dignitaries or friends of the sentinel.

So an additional lesson might be not to procrastinate. If you try the main gate, but it's locked, and there's a line at the side gate, it may close before your turn comes. A lost opportunity. This is similar to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. It was too late for the foolish virgins to make up for lost time.

If the spatial dimension of the metaphor illustrates the need to resist conformity, the temporal dimension illustrates the need for urgency.

Furthermore, the narrow gate may be inconspicuous compared to the main gate, so you have to be observant or well-informed to find it, compared to the indifferent, inattentive masses.

It's possible that I'm pressing the imagery beyond what Jesus intended. However, the reason imagery is sketchy is probably because the scene was so familiar to his audience that he didn't need to draw a detailed word-picture. His thumbnail sketch would conjure a fuller picture in the minds of the listener. So I think it's safe to pencil in the implied details.

**4.** This also raises the question of whether his admonition is predictive or hortatory. Is he saying for a fact that when the roll call is recited, most humans will be damned? Or is he using contrastive imagery to shake people out of their complacency? Put another way, is it like some prophetic oracles of doom which are implicitly conditional or counterfactual? The purpose of the dire warning isn't to say their fate is sealed, but to give them an opportunity to avert disaster by changing course before the clock runs out.

**5.** The version in Luke might suggest that the comparison is more specific. The point of contrast is not about the ratio lost and saved humanity in general, but the difference between the few Jews who respond to Jesus compared to many gentiles who respond to Jesus. On that view, perhaps the majority of the human race will be saved, but mostly drawn from gentile people-groups.

## Jewish evangelism

One of the sore points in Jewish evangelism is the position that Jews are damned unless they believe in Jesus (i.e. the messiahship, deity, and Incarnation of Jesus). Of course, that's not unique to Judaism. That's standard exclusivism, which applies to non-Christians generally. And there wouldn't be much point evangelizing Jews if it didn't matter what you believe about Jesus.

Many people naturally resent being told they're hellbound unless they become Christian. Suppose, though, we turn this around. Imagine if Christianity said all Jews are going to heaven. Would Jews be impressed?

Religiously conservative Jews think Christianity is an idolatrous, polytheistic heresy. So why would they care if a false religion gives their own religion the thumbs up? Isn't a Christian endorsement of rabbinic Judaism worthless from their standpoint?

## Reformed exclusivism

Critics of Calvinism regard Calvinism as an especially harsh version of exclusivism. They castigate unconditional election and they criticize the Reformed position that regeneration is causally prior to faith. The point of this post is not to defend those tenets directly, but to consider a potential fringe benefit.

**i)** In traditional evangelical exclusivism, premortem faith in Christ is a *prima facie* prerequisite of salvation. But there are caveats. That's usually confined to mentally competent individuals. Exceptions are often made for those who lack the cognitive faculties to exercise Christian faith. People below a certain age. People with severe congenital brain damage.

Christians who become senile. Christians with brain cancer. The latter two lose their faith, but they don't lose their salvation. Rather, they lose the cognitive faculties to believe.

That's not necessarily the same thing as declaring all those groups to be heavenbound. Because Scripture doesn't give definitive answers to the salvific status of special cases, some evangelical theologians suspend judgment while others stake out the universal salvation of all who die before the age of reason (to take one example).

**ii)** Although Scripture attributes salvation to faith in Christ, Scripture also attributes salvation to regeneration. It's lopsided to focus on saving faith to the exclusion of saving regeneration.

**iii)** According to evangelical freewill theism, faith causes regeneration. According to Calvinism, regeneration (in tandem with the Gospel) causes faith. In Calvinism, regeneration is causally and sometimes temporally prior to saving faith. There can be a chronological gap between regeneration and saving faith. For instance, God can regenerate someone as a young child or even in the womb, but they may not come to faith until they reach the age of reason or later. Likewise, in Calvinism, election is logically/teleologically prior to conception (indeed, prior to time).

**iv)** Suppose (ex hypothesi) that God regenerates a Muslim with a view to the Muslim coming to Christian faith, only God regenerates the Muslim several years before he comes to faith in Christ. At that stage in the process, the Muslim hasn't been exposed to the Gospel. But suppose the effect of regeneration is to make him doubt or lose faith in Islam. At that stage he lacks an alternative. But regeneration broke through the social conditioning which made Islam unquestionable prior to regeneration. And suppose that prompts him to search for religious alternatives—until he discovers a Bible. Regeneration planted a seed that eventually germinated in faith. But there was some delay.

v) In principle, God might elect or regenerate someone who's killed in a traffic accident before coming to faith in Christ. I wouldn't press that. In general, God coordinates election and regeneration with the Gospel.

That said, I'm not sure how we can rule out the possibility that God elects and regenerates some people who die before coming to Christ. Their faith will be postponed to the afterlife. Indeed, many Calvinists already believe that happens in special cases (see above). Is salvation a matter of lucky timing? If you die a minute before, you're damned?

Ironically, something freewill theists find so objectionable in Calvinism has the potential to make it more magnanimous than traditional evangelical freewill theism. Not something to bank on, but an open question in Reformed theology. By contrast, faith and regeneration are chronologically inseparable in traditional evangelical freewill theism, resulting in a harsher version of exclusivism.

## "The paradoxes of hell"

Bill Dembski has written a very long essay in defense of inclusivism:

<https://billdembski.com/theology-and-religion/the-paradoxes-of-hell/#more-53452>

This post will be long, not because my responses to Dembski are all that lengthy, but due to my quoting him before responding.

Dembski's a Roman Catholic convert to evangelicalism. Had a layover in Eastern Orthodoxy. All these experiences provide him with a comparative frame of reference. I think he took heat from progressive Christians at Princeton, he's been the target of ruthless and relentless attack from the secular scientific establishment, he's been under fire from young-earth creationists, then he was knifed in the back at SWBTS. So many enemies both inside and outside the church. It has a cumulative effect. Finally, he has an autistic son. So all these factors condition his outlook. He's a heroic figure, but there's an understandably reactionary element to his position. It's to his credit that he can muster so much grace under pressure.

His essay is very intelligent. He's a brilliant thinker. He gives some bad answers to some good questions. His position is confused or downright pernicious. And he doesn't seem to consult commentaries to familiarize himself with the range of interpretations.

*But why then is Lazarus in Abraham's bosom (heaven?) and the rich man in hell? Lazarus presumably predated Christ and so didn't trust him to be his savior. Certainly there's no evidence that Lazarus consciously received Jesus as his personal savior...How then did Lazarus make it to heaven? Is Lazarus in heaven because he was poor and begging in front of the rich man's house — does being poor and oppressed guarantee a ticket to heaven (as in liberation theology's preferential option for the poor and oppressed)?*

*Where am I going with this? Among my very conservative Christian colleagues, the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is a factual story — it really happened. But even among my conservative (but not very conservative) Christian colleagues, it is regarded as a story that could nonetheless have happened (the names, but not the story, have been changed to protect the innocent/guilty).*

---

Well-taken.

*[Quoting Edwards] The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince.*

---

I think we should leave ourselves open to that viewpoint, to give it a fair hearing. In general, though, that melodramatic rhetoric is counterproductive. It makes it harder for people to take the Gospel seriously when it's presented in such historic terms.

*[Quoting Aquinas] In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned. [PIII/suppl-Q94-A1]*

---

That claim has no basis in divine revelation. A tradition long overdue for retirement.

*Does anyone really believe such teachings, namely, that hell at its mildest is more painful than earth at its worst? Sure, many Christians pretend to believe that the answer to this question is Yes. But pretending to believe is different from actually believing. Actual belief means acting on the belief, and with hell no one acts as though it's really that bad.*

*Why do I say we merely pretend to believe in hell's exceeding horribleness? Consider these words of 1 John 3:17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" If hell is really as bad as Edwards and Thomas make out, then the avoidance of hell is people's most urgent need, bar none. Starvation, disease, war, natural disaster, and torture all would in that case pale compared to what awaits people in hell.*

*But consider again 1 John 3:17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" And what greater need is there but to escape hell? So, if we're not doing everything in our power to prevent people from going to hell, and if hell is as bad as all that, then this verse teaches that God's love is not in us.*

---



1 Jn 3:17 is referring to the needs of fellow Christians rather than the plight of the lost. "Brother" is a Johannine synonym for Christian. So that text fails to prove Dembski's point. The general context of 1 John is about Christian community and heretical schismatics who disfellowship the faithful.

*Peter Singer, an atheist and villain for many Christians, spends 25 percent of his income to help the poor. By contrast, U.S. Christians give about 4 percent of their incomes to charities. According to Singer, if we see someone in dire need, we are morally obliged, even at grave cost to ourselves, to try to meet that need.*

---

*That's a dubious standard of comparison. Peter Singer probably has far more disposable income than the average Christian. Moreover, I believe his children are grown, so he doesn't have that expense. In addition, his charity is arguably a form of virtue-signaling to compensate for his heinous reputation on abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, &c.*

*But why, then, are Christians doing so little to keep people from going to hell? Why do we give so little to missions or charities? Why don't we make soul winning our number one priority? Why do we waste so much time watching and playing sports? Why do we put such a premium on leisure activities, such as hunting and fishing, or quilting and scrapbooking? Why do we spend so much money on vanities such as cosmetic surgery, designer clothes, and expensive jewelry? Why do we fast and pray so little? Why do we spend so much time and energy on theological squabbling (cf. 2 Timothy 2:23-24)?*

*If hell is as bad as Edwards and Thomas make out, then there is no respite, no break, no relief for the inhabitants of hell. Prayers won't help them. Care packages won't get delivered. Well wishes will be in vain. Accordingly, there is nothing — absolutely nothing — to be done to lighten the load of someone in hell. So any good we can do for people, we must do NOW. And the ultimate good then becomes keeping people from going to hell; after all, heaven will take care of itself — once you're there, you've got it made.*

*If hell is as urgent and dire a peril as claimed by Edwards and Thomas, then I submit that the overwhelming majority of Christians think that Singer and James may safely be ignored. In fact, I'd go further and say I'm unfamiliar with any Christians who demonstrate this belief by their actions (myself included). But how*

*else do we know what people actually believe except by their actions? Indeed, we can pretend to believe anything we like. Only action demonstrates belief.*

*Consider next what happens to our use of money on the extreme view of hell. By the extreme view of hell I mean a view that, as much as possible, tries to maintain the formula “only conscious explicit faith in Jesus can prevent conscious eternal torment in hell,” allowing no more exceptions than absolutely necessary (such as infants and the unaccountable). Practically speaking, this view makes hell’s avoidance the ultimate good (sure, we can talk about heaven, with its beatific vision and divine union, as the ultimate good, but on the extreme view of hell, that’s merely the flip side of the same truth).*

*So, let’s ask the following question: On the extreme view of hell, how should we spend our money and resources?...I expect that with the funds spent trying to recover my son’s health many people would have converted to Christ who now, because that money was never given, will never hear the Gospel and thus go to hell (if the extreme view of hell is true)...But again, who in one’s right mind thinks this way? And if we don’t think this way, why do we push the extreme view of hell?*

*Digression: I personally take a hard line against abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. But the extreme view of hell raises the interesting prospect of “Christian euthanasia.” If the sick, the disabled, the weak, the criminal are sucking away resources that could be used to keep other people out of hell, might it not be better simply to kill off the former for the benefit of the latter, especially if the latter substantially outnumber the former?*

*But the logic of the extreme view of hell, in which only conscious explicit faith in Jesus avoids hell (minus a few minimal exceptions), should lead those holding this view to silently cheer whenever the death of certain resource-consuming people (the Nazis called them “useless eaters”) frees up funds that leads to a greater number of people avoiding hell and going to heaven. In this way, Christians would embrace a weird consequentialist ethics identical to the worst eugenicists of the past. Just to be clear, I regard any such “Christian euthanasia” as a monstrous perversion.*

---

There's some truth to Dembski's indictment. A sobering truth. Many professing Christians need to reexamine their priorities.

**i)** That said, it's unclear whether he's targeting inclusivism or the torture chamber view of hell. He's trading on a traditional Dantean view of hell as a wedge tactic, but inclusivism doesn't require that. What hell is like and who goes there are separable issues.

**ii)** The Bible says it's okay for Christians to have a normal family life. We're not supposed to sacrifice everything for the sake of Christian missions. It's permissible to concentrate your financial resources on the needs of your own family.

**iii)** Moreover, we didn't create the plight of the lost. We're not directly responsible for their situation. What we can do is limited, and much of that is at a local rather than global level (e.g. friendship evangelism).

God has not put us in a position to effectively witness to most of the lost. And it's not just a matter of limited resources, but opposition to the Gospel at official and personal levels.

**iv)** To take a comparison, many children suffer horrendously around the world. Orphans, street kids, child abuse, child prostitution, malnutrition. But the scale of the problem is way beyond our ability to address except in piecemeal fashion. We don't have direct control over most moral evils in the world. It's not our responsibility to fix what we lack the power to fix. God could eliminate poverty, but he doesn't. That's not his priority. We can believe the suffering of children is really that bad, but still be resigned to our relative impotence in the face of their inevitable suffering around the world or behind closed doors.

**v)** The world isn't so badly designed that some people will go to hell if we have a normal family life. God saves whomever he wills consistent with our having a normal family life.

Comment: Given that Christians don't do nearly enough to keep people from going to hell if they really think hell is so bad, the question arises what they should be doing to keep people from going to hell. I hinted at Christian missions and alleviation of poverty, but these are non-coercive. If hell is really all that bad and Christians have the energy and will to prevent people from going there, coercion becomes readily justifiable, especially if those on their way to hell are seen as being so wicked and misguided that they are leading others to hell. The Spanish Inquisition and the Taliban readily come to mind.

*Imagine someone to whom the Gospel is preached and who receives Christian charity, but still does not explicitly acknowledge faith in Jesus. Why not torture*

*such a person into accepting Jesus, perhaps even killing him or her right after giving evidence of faith lest the person recant once the torture is removed? Alternatively, if they still resist under torture, give them a slow and painful public death to deter others from their example...Of course, I regard this entire line of reasoning as obscene.*

---

The argument is intellectually frivolous. Torture can't make anyone have faith in Jesus. Most folk will say anything under torture to make the pain stop. But there's no conviction to what they say. In fact, they may lie. You can force people to say things they don't believe.

*As good theology professors required to sign statements of faith at conservative theological institutions and denominations, my colleagues and I had to exhibit due deference to Edwards, Aquinas, and others who write such things. We go through the motions of pretending that we take these sorts of pronouncements seriously. Yet no one does, as I'll attempt to show shortly.*

---

There's a spiritual danger when statements of faith function simply as sociological boundary markers to differentiate the in-group from the out-group and keep the donors happy. That can be a cynical facade, and the hollowness of that profession makes Christian institutions vulnerable to sudden collapse. They seem sturdy on the outside, but that's deceptive due to the amount of spiritual dry rot within. They may crumble overnight because invisible termites were eating away at the walls and foundations for years. The implosion is less sudden than it looks.

*Let's therefore ask if there are any clear criteria for who's in hell and who isn't — in other words, is there some clear way of deciding whether someone is going to hell? When I used to teach at conservative theological seminaries, the safest course for keeping one's job was for faculty to take the hardest line possible on hell: only those with a conscious explicit faith in Jesus are exempted from hell; the rest face unending conscious torment. Amazingly, this line was often taken without any qualification whatsoever. Take any less extreme view of hell, and you were in danger of losing your job.*

---

Ultimately, we're saved by grace, not by faith. Grace is to the headwaters as faith is to the mouth of the steam. In Calvinism, faith is a result of grace, and they normally go together, so we speak of saving faith, but to be more accurate, saving grace, or its absence, determines who is heavenbound or hellbound.

*How can I say that no one believes this? Well, what do you do with infants who die before they have language and can learn and believe the Gospel, thereby precluding that they have conscious explicit faith in Jesus as their savior? Okay, so here's one exception. Or perhaps not.*

*Augustine, for instance, held that infants who die unbaptized go straight to hell. And yet, baptized infants for Augustine did go to heaven. How convenient — the church, as the agent of baptism, thereby guaranteed its necessity in the economy of salvation!*

*Since Augustine's day, and especially in our own, Catholic theology has gotten softer on the topic of hell. When I was learning the catechism for my first holy communion in the Catholic church 50 years ago, my teacher assured me that infants that died unbaptized didn't in fact go to hell (what a relief!). Instead, they went to Limbo, a place of natural happiness, but not the supernatural happiness of heaven where the baptized believers enjoy the beatific vision and union with God. (I actually remember as a seven-year old being quite troubled by the teacher's cavalier dismissal of the fate of these unbaptized infants and the evident unfairness, to my mind, of it all.)*

---

Another example of how the church of Rome has backpedaled on an issue of capital importance.

*In any case, even the hyper-conservatives with whom I used to teach and who claim that conscious explicit faith in Jesus is required to avoid conscious eternal torment admit this one exception. But once there's an exception, there's a slippery slope, leading to more exceptions. What do you do with my autistic son, who's a teenager, but is nonverbal and incapable of understanding the Gospel in any "conscious explicit" sense (he functions at about the level of a 2-year old)?*

---

**i)** That's another wedge tactic. But is it the case that once we make allowance for one exception, we can't draw any lines as a matter of principle? That's the sorites paradox. But the fact that there may be exceptions or borderline cases doesn't mean we can't draw any valid distinctions.

For instance, the criminal justice system distinguishes between majority and minority age offenders. A 2-year-old isn't a moral agent to the same degree as a 20-year-old. Now that ranges along a continuum, so where the line is drawn is somewhat arbitrary. The line between 17 and 18 is somewhat arbitrary, which is why some minors are tried as adults. But the fact that the line between 17-18 is stipulative doesn't mean the line between 2 and 20 is arbitrary.

Likewise, sometimes there's a morally salient distinction between killing someone and letting them die, but sometimes they're morally equivalent. In one case a boy falls into a lake. He can't swim. I could save him but I let him drown. In another case, I push him into the lake. Those are morally equivalent.

If he accidentally falls into a lake infested with crocodiles, I might not try to save him because it's too risky for me. That's not courageous but it's not murder, either.

Suppose I push him into the lake, let him drown, then excuse myself on the grounds that everyone is bound to die sooner or later. It's a continuum. Where do you draw the line?

And it's true that from the moment of conception we are bound to die. But something's radically amiss when you use the sorites paradox to say nothing counts as murder. Same applies to Dembski's wedge tactic.

**ii)** In addition, the NT constantly links salvation to faith in Christ. Although I think some exceptions are reasonable, those are theological conjectures, which shouldn't erase the biblical norm. The biblical presumption is that sinners are born lost, and salvation is theirs to gain. They don't first have it, then lose it. Rather, they were born in a lost condition. Even in the case of the elect, they still need to be regenerated.

**iii)** Exceptions only apply in exceptional situations. You can't extrapolate from exceptional situations to normal situations since the conditions that warrant exceptions are lacking in normal situations. For instance, in criminal justice there are extenuating circumstance that mitigate guilt. It hardly follows that guilt is mitigated when the mitigating factors are absent.

Suppose a family member loses their key and has to break into the house at night. If you shoot them because you can't see them in the dark and have reason to believe it's

a house-burglar, that hardly justifies shooting them in broad daylight. Mitigation or exculpation only obtains if the mitigating or exculpatory factors obtain.

*It was always interesting to me that many of the authors whose books I used approvingly and taught from at conservative seminaries would never have been allowed to teach or come on faculty at those institutions because their views on everything from alcohol to the Bible and salvation would have been unacceptable to the powers that be (examples of such authors would include C. S. Lewis, William Lane Craig, and Alvin Plantinga).*

---

But they're not the benchmark. Revelation is.

*Usually, conservative theologians who want to take a hard line on hell (and thus ensure the safety of their jobs and standing among fellow hyper-conservatives) but who don't want to seem unreasonable in sending infants to hell introduce a convenient theological construct known as "the age of accountability." To justify this construct, Isaiah 7:16 is often cited, where we read about the time in a child's life before he/she knows to choose good and refuse evil. Presumably, before that time, the child is safe from hell — how can a child (or adult for that matter) who doesn't know the difference between good and evil be held accountable for moral fault and thus be consigned to the punishment of hell?*

*But the age of accountability is a curious thing when examined closely. When exactly does it begin? Does it happen gradually? If so, when is there enough accountability so that without conscious explicit faith in Jesus, one goes to hell? Or does it happen all at once, in a threshold effect, so that one day one wakes up, finds oneself to have reached the age of accountability, and thus, if not a Christian, is in danger of hell?*

*Imagine Alice and Bob. Alice and Bob live in a region of the world where no one is a Christian (i.e., no one there has conscious explicit faith in Jesus). Alice, had she lived another day, would have reached the age of accountability. But she happens to die just before she would have reached the age of accountability, and so goes straight to heaven. Bob, on the other hand, is less fortunate. He wakes up one morning to find that he's reached the age of accountability, but that very day he dies. Sadly, he goes straight to hell. Again, who really believes this?*

---

*Observation: It seems to me that age of accountability should play some role in our deliberations about who goes and doesn't go to hell. That said, I'm not entirely comfortable with the concept. Certainly, I would regard newborns as unaccountable, and thus as not properly punished for any sins that they presumably could not, because of their immaturity, have committed or be predisposed to commit. I would add here severely mentally disabled individuals. But it seems that even young children quickly engage in selfish and even cruel actions, such as stealing from, bullying, and ostracizing their peers. Moreover, guilt is readily read off their faces. Is age of accountability a legitimate theological construct with a true point of reference in reality or is it more a convenient fiction? Depending on mood and day of the week I could go either way on this question.*

---

i) That's another example of the sorites paradox. There are limitations to the principle (see above).

ii) I prefer the age of reason to the age of accountability. Yes, there's no exact cutoff, but it's still the case that humans undergo a process of cognitive development as they mature. We draw roughhewn distinctions in terms of what's age-appropriate. Although that's inexact, it's reasonable and necessary.

iii) The age of reason is person-variable. Some kids are precocious.

iv) I agree with him that it's ad hoc to make salvation contingent on lucky or unlucky timing. However, I draw a different conclusion from that. Although I think some people who die young are heavenbound, I don't assume that all who die young are heavenbound. It's not simply a question of when they die, but the counterfactual consideration of how they'd turn out if they hadn't died prematurely. In the intermediate state they continue to mature—for better or worse.

*As another exception to the claim that only conscious explicit faith in Jesus can prevent conscious eternal torment in hell, consider all those who lived before Jesus' cross and resurrection. Obviously, they couldn't have had conscious explicit faith in Jesus because, before God took human form in the person of Jesus, there was no Jesus to serve as the object of conscious explicit faith. So what happened to all those people?*

---



*The usual response of theologians is that there were true worshippers of the one true God before Jesus, who worshipped God with what light they had — and that this was therefore good enough to get them into heaven. That seems reasonable enough. All the same, when the fullness of God's light came to earth in Christ Jesus, then people were obliged to believe explicitly in him. Before that, God cut them slack.*

---

But it's more pointed than that. Not just the light they had, but whether they had the light of revelation given to Moses (or Abraham). Not pagans, but Jews—or gentiles who came to faith in the God of Judaism.

*There's also a tradition, adverted to in the Apostle's Creed, of Jesus having descended into hell (Hades) and preaching to its inhabitants.*

---

That's a fallible creed. Not my authority source.

*This is consistent with 1 Peter 3:18–19: “Christ was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits.”*

*This passage raises lots of questions, not least why Jesus needed to preach to the dead in Hades, what was the efficacy of this preaching, and whether any of those imprisoned spirits found liberation as a consequence of that preaching, thus ending up in heaven rather than hell (in this case, Gehenna — the final hell).*

---

Because that's an enigmatic passage, we should put too much weight on it. My own view is that it's in the tradition of biblical taunt songs (e.g. Isa 14; 18), probably directed at fallen angels. Satan tried to defeat Jesus. Jesus won, Satan lost.

*It's a common Christian view that we have only this life to make our peace with God and that after the moment of death, we've exceeded the statute of limitations on God's mercy. A common proof text in this regard is Hebrews 9:27: "It is the destiny of people to die once and after that to face judgment."*

*Putting all these disparate pieces together, however, seems anything but straightforward. It's evident from the Old Testament that people could be saved apart from the covenant of Abraham. Take Melchizedek, for instance, mentioned in Genesis 14, who is called a priest of the most high God and who, in Hebrews 5–7, is taken as emblematic of the priesthood of Jesus.*

---

- i)** El Elyon seems to have its origins as a pagan designation. It can be applied to the one true God, but the title itself is neutral. The referent depends on the intent of the speaker. What kind of deity the speaker had in mind.
- ii)** Melchizedek's theological function is symbolic. He probably spoke better than he knew, from the viewpoint of Hebrews.

*Or consider Job, who, despite his travails and not being an Israelite, was obviously in right relationship with God and on his way to heaven.*

---

- i)** That's complicated. Did Job live in the patriarchal period? Or did he live during the Israelite theocracy? He could become a believer in Yahweh through contact with the Jewish people.
- ii)** In addition, even though it's probably based on a true story, it takes great literary license, so , we need to distinguish between the historical Job and how he functions as a character in the narrative.

*Okay, so you can get to heaven before New Testament times if you're righteous and worshipping the one true God...Come again? Really? Let's bring back Alice and Bob, only this time Alice and Bob are righteous worshippers of the one true God who are contemporaries of Jesus but live so far from the land of Israel that they never heard of him. Alice has the good fortune of dying before Jesus' cross and resurrection, and so goes straight to heaven. Bob, sadly, dies right after Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection. Given that Jesus' cross and*

*resurrection are now a fait accompli, and given that God henceforward demands conscious explicit faith in Jesus for salvation, Bob goes straight to hell. Again, this just seems crazy.*

*But if Bob's death immediately after Jesus' cross and resurrection is not enough to consign him to hell provided he is a righteous worshipper of the true God, albeit without conscious explicit faith in Jesus, then why should it matter if Bob dies a week, a month, a year, a decade, a century, or a millennium after Jesus' cross and resurrection? Why should time, or for that matter distance, from Jesus' cross and resurrection matter?*

---

I agree with Dembski that there's a parallel between distance in time and distance in space. Again, though, consider how the OT generally depicts the spiritual condition of the heathen. Or Paul's depiction (Eph 2:1-3; 4:17-18; Tit 3:3-4). The biblical view is that humans are hopelessly lost unless God intervenes through redemption, revelation, and renewal. Pagans aren't regarded as innocently ignorant unbelievers just waiting for Christian missionaries.

*Scripture itself suggests that spatiotemporal limitations that keep people from conscious explicit faith in Jesus cannot keep them from heaven or force them into hell. Consider Paul in Romans 2:14–16...This is a remarkable passage, and it's evident that Paul holds that there really are righteous gentiles such as he describes since in context he's contrasting such gentiles with Jews who have the law but are not living it...*

---

Dembski seems unaware that some commentators identify that group as Christian gentiles or God-fearers.

*...But we need look no further than the book of Acts for an example of such a righteous gentile, namely Cornelius, about whom and his family Peter has this to say (Acts 10:34–35): "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."*

---

Dembski overlooks the fact that Cornelius was an intellectual convert to Judaism. He's not a pagan. He explicitly worships the God of Israel.

*As still another class of exceptions to the rule that conscious explicit faith in Jesus is required to escape conscious eternal torment in hell, consider two types of amnesiacs, the retrograde and the anterograde. There are people with retrograde amnesia who cannot remember who they were and what they've done before an injury or illness. Life, in a sense, begins for them anew. We can assume they are old enough and have sufficient cognitive and moral faculties to have reached the age of accountability. Moreover, before their amnesia, let's assume they were sinners and on their way to hell. But now they have no recollection of their past sins.*

*Is the slate now clear for them? Do they get to start life afresh? What if they die right after suffering their amnesia but before committing any new sins? Do they now go to heaven? What if they had accepted Jesus in their old life, but now can't remember doing so and henceforth remain unresponsive to the Gospel? I'm happy to let God sort this one out, but in any case it's clear that demanding conscious explicit faith of retrograde amnesiacs would need some qualification.*

*In such ruminations about hell, even more interesting is anterograde amnesia, which usually is associated with certain brain lesions resulting from an accident. The victim, in this case, is able to recall his or her life perfectly up to the point of the accident, but thereafter only form memories of about a fifteen-minute duration (think Dory the fish in Finding Nemo). In other words, the person has short-term memory, but is unable to form new long-term memories. Let's imagine therefore someone who suffered such an accident, reached the age of accountability, and was sufficiently sinful as to be on his/her way to hell before suffering amnesia.*

*The problem now, however, is that this person, without being able to remember anything long-term, is essentially living in the past. In the past, that person had no conscious explicit faith in Jesus. In the present, unfortunately, any conscious explicit faith in Jesus will be lost in fifteen minutes. Thus, day after day, you keep sharing the Gospel with this person. Some days he/she accepts the Gospel in one fifteen-minute time block, only promptly to forget having accepted it, and thereafter for the rest of the day refuses to accept it.*

---

*Is a person with anterograde amnesia going to heaven or hell? What if this person died right before the end of a fifteen-minute time block during which he/she accepted Jesus, thus still having conscious explicit faith in Jesus? Would that ensure heaven? What if the person died only a moment later, having entirely forgotten the Gospel and his/her acceptance of it?*

---

- i)** Ignorance of the Gospel isn't exculpatory. Sinners aren't damned because they reject the Gospel. It's like saying, if you're bitten by a black mamba, you will die without antivenom. However, it's not the absence antivenom that kills you but the presence of venom.
- ii)** True, a Christian doesn't lose his salvation if he loses his mind due to brain cancer, senile dementia.

*Leaving aside God-fearers and amnesiacs, let's return to the very young and/or unaccountable (i.e., those who have yet to reach or are incapable of reaching the age of accountability). Once these are automatically admitted to heaven (or at least excluded from hell), another strange thing happens, which was hinted at in the first of our Alice and Bob examples.*

*Normally, we regard it as tragic when a young child dies — so much unfulfilled potential, so many unmet dreams, so many songs that will never be sung. On the other hand, when someone dies in old age after a full, rich life, we don't regard it as tragic. Instead, even if there are tears and loss, we also celebrate the life. And sometimes we even celebrate the life when the person isn't that old but has left a positive mark on the world. Consider, for instance, the following memorial service for the Hawaiian singer IZ:*

*But if those under the age of accountability automatically go to heaven, then really we should be celebrating their deaths. After all, they're now enjoying themselves with the delights of heaven. Conversely, if those over the age of accountability don't automatically go to heaven, then we should approach their deaths with misgivings. Thus, when older people die who have not made explicit profession of faith in Jesus, we should lament their deaths as a tragedy in which hell has (or may have) just acquired new inhabitants. Again, who believes this?*

*In Pascal's famous wager, you're better off betting on God and heaven being real because if they are, then you'll be more likely to get there; but if you think that they are unreal, then if they are in fact real, you'll end up in hell. The risk of being*

*wrong about hell thus totally outweighs the risk of being wrong about heaven. So a risk analysis suggests you should believe or pretend to believe that heaven is real.*

*But in that case, a parallel risk analysis should get us to prefer that the young die and not go on to maturity so that they don't risk the very possibility of hell. Accordingly, we should wish for and applaud the dying of the very young. Similarly, we should prefer that the unaccountable stay unaccountable.*

*If we think that conscious explicit faith is necessary for those capable of it in order to avoid hell, then we should be overjoyed at all these (naturally) aborted embryos and (artificially) aborted fetuses. All of them are then on their way to heaven. In fact, abortion could then be seen as an industry for populating heaven. Abortion, if you will, turns maternity wards into eternity wards! (I owe this turn of phrase to the cartoonist Wayne Stayskal.)*

*But such conclusions are monstrous. Isn't it better in the grand scheme of things if humans come to maturity and live a full life — mistakes, vices, warts and all? Doesn't that make for a more interesting, more purposeful, more meaningful universe? What sort of worldview regards it as a net benefit to keep humans in a state of immaturity in order to forestall hell? What nonsense.*

*Perverse incentives: If we knew for certain that fetuses and infants that die (with or without being baptized) all end up in heaven, it could provide an incentive to kill them — after all, we would thus ensure their eternal happiness since otherwise they risk the hell of Edwards and Thomas.*

---

True, I don't believe that, but not because I think those who die before the age of reason automatically go to heaven. I don't presume that's the case. It wouldn't surprise me if some who die before the age of reason land in hell. So I'm not impaled on the horns of his dilemma.

*Consider again my autistic son. Whatever one means by the age of accountability, he hasn't reached it...But if my autistic son did come out of his autism and start to communicate verbally, with sufficient comprehension so that he could have conscious explicit faith in Jesus, he would also have the option of rejecting the Gospel and thus ending up in hell. So, which should I prefer, my son to stay autistic and be guaranteed a place in heaven, or for him to come out of his autism*

*and risk hell, the sort of hell that Edwards and Thomas are convinced would await him if he rejected Christ?*

---

I think that's ultimately a question of election and reprobation.

*Reformed theology (i.e., the theology of John Calvin and his successors), it turns out, has a convenient way around such perverse incentives. Within that theology, only the elect go to heaven...So, are all who die in infancy elect? The Westminster Confession conveniently sidesteps that question, neither affirming nor denying that infants and the unaccountable who die in that state are elect. The Westminster Confession thus blocks perverse incentives that would make abortion salvific. But in leaving open the possibility that some infants who die in infancy may be non-elect, it betrays the harshness and austerity with which reformed theology is widely credited.*

---

I think it's reasonable to infer that some who die before the age of reason are elect. But I think we lack biblical information to regard that as universally true. The Westminster Divines are to be commended for resisting the temptation to codify wishful thinking. We lack a clear answer in revelation. How else could we know the answer to a question like that?

*But is it really wrong to say that a Muslim (or anyone from a non-Christian or insufficiently orthodox religious group) might go to heaven?...Presumably, God could impart the essence of the Gospel to the person who is microseconds from death, elicit faith in those few microseconds, and thereby save the person.*

---

That's a travesty of conversion. The whirlwind altar call. Make a snap decision for Jesus. I reject that paradigm.

*Increasingly in our day one reads of people unreached by the Gospel who have had visitations by Jesus and who thereupon become Christians. So what's to*

*prevent that from happening at the moment of death? In fact, we have no idea to what extent this may be happening. But it's certainly a possibility on even the most conservative understanding of Christianity and hell.*

---

Visions of Jesus are a catalyst for Christian conversion, but that in itself doesn't make them Christian. Christian faith requires some knowledge about the life of Christ. Who he is. His mission.

*So, in response to the question "Can a Muslim be saved," I would say "Sure."*

---

Islam is a religion that developed in conscious opposition to Christianity. Islam is anti-Christian. A deliberate repudiation of the Christian faith.

*As a Christian, I would add that ultimately it is only through Christ that one is saved, and thus that a Muslim, if saved, is saved in spite of rather than because of his/her religion. But the same could be said for any religion, even Christianity. It's not religion that saves, not even Christianity, but the living Christ who rose from the dead and relates directly to our inner being. How this Christ chooses to save is not for us to specify.*

---

That's the position of C. S. Lewis. You can be saved by Christ without believing in Christ. But the NT systematically links the two.

*The thought of someone being saved at the moment of death raises an interesting inverse possibility, namely, someone remaining a Christian up to the moment of death and thereupon renouncing the faith and going to hell (in those microseconds from fall to death). Some Christians hold to the perseverance of the saints or a once-saved-always-saved theology in which something like this could not happen — once you're saved you stay saved.*

---



The microseconds view is a reductio ad absurdum.

*The Protestant preoccupation with certainty or assurance of salvation, which is very much in evidence among present-day Evangelicals, goes right back to the start of Protestantism, beginning with Martin Luther's scrupulosity about his own sin, always second-guessing himself, and never finding solace in the Catholic rites of confession and penance. His breakthrough came in reading the Apostle Paul and his teachings about being saved by faith through grace. Ah, here was the release Luther was looking for. Because he had faith, he could be assured that he was saved and on his way to heaven.*

*But is anyone really warranted in having such total assurance of going to heaven? Is it even a good thing to have such assurance? It's interesting to me, as a philosopher, to see, around the time of the Reformation, philosophy taking an epistemological turn that emphasized how we come to know and how we can have knowledge that is sure and certain (Descartes, who came a few generations after Luther exemplified this approach to philosophy—cf. his cogito ergo sum, in which he found total certainty in his existence based on his capacity to think).*

---

In Calvinism, salvation doesn't require the assurance of salvation.

*If we assume that universalism, the view that everyone goes to heaven and that hell is therefore empty, is false, then something has to be the difference maker in getting people to heaven and helping them avoid hell.*

---

Saving grace.

So, what separates the two?

Saving grace.

*In the story, the sheep are those who acted compassionately, helping people in need (such as visiting the sick and imprisoned). On the other hand, the goats are those who failed to act compassionately, refusing to help people in need (such as*

*leaving the sick and imprisoned unvisited)...Nothing in this parable suggests the need for conscious explicit faith in Christ. Quite the contrary. It's only in eternity that the significance and consequences of their actions become explicit.*

---

That's a popular misinterpretation by failing to notice that the passage has reference to needy Christians, not needy people in general.

*But having forgiven others ("Father," says Jesus on the cross, "forgive them for they know not what they do").*

---

The textual authenticity of that statement is insecure.

*Nowhere does Jesus suggest that unforgiveness can somehow be compensated for or offset by something else, such as faith...We are called to forgive, and only by forgiving can we ourselves be forgiven — that seems the clear teaching of Jesus in the New Testament.*

---

That's simplistic. Scripture often speaks in generalities. But these aren't absolute claims. Unqualified statements in one place may be qualified in another place. There's a duty to forgive a penitent Christian who wronged you.

*Throughout this section I've focused on Jesus and his teaching about the importance of works to salvation (getting to heaven and avoiding hell). But one can find the same teaching in Paul. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Romans 2:6-11.*

---

That's a tricky passage because it seems to contradict Paul's typical position. One explanation, defended by scholars and commentators like Longenecker, McFadden, and Thielman, is that it's hypothetical. That interpretation is consistent with Paul's emphatic, repeated position.

*Let's now shift gears and consider another strand of New Testament teaching in which faith alone seems adequate to get us to heaven and avoid hell. Probably the best known verse in the Bible is John 3:16.*

---

That's part of the same conversation stressing the necessity of regeneration.

*But certain teachings of Paul, when added to this discussion, suggest that faith to the exclusion of works is what saves and leads us to heaven...Repeatedly in Romans Paul stresses that we are saved not by works but by faith. Perhaps the clearest statement of this view, however, occurs by Paul in Ephesians 2:8–9, which reads: "By grace you are saved through faith. This is not of yourselves, but the gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast." ...In Galatians 2:16 Paul elaborates on how the "works of the law" fail to save us and that faith alone suffices.*

---

Paul's standard formula is that we're justified by faith alone, not that we're saved by faith alone. And Eph 2:8-9 indicates that salvation is ultimately due to grace alone. Saving grace includes regeneration and sanctification.

*Paul's theology teaches that good works don't save us — for that we need faith. But, Paul's theology also teaches that bad works can sink us — regardless of the faith we claim.*

---

Yes, they're asymmetrical.

*This, then, is my problem with casting hell as the place where God forever vents his anger...So here's another paradox. On the one hand, God wants to get beyond his anger, and indeed wants to deal with his anger by saving the very people who have made him angry. On the other hand, hell is an expression of God's anger, a way of dealing with his anger, even a monument to his anger.*

---

I don't think God literally gets mad at sinners. I don't think we have the ability to make him mad. Imagine how much power we'd have over God if we could push his buttons. That's too Homeric. Open theist hermeneutics. The tail wagging the God.

I think divine "wrath" is a colorful synonym for divine justice. An anthropomorphic metaphor for God's retributive justice or eschatological justice.

*The decision of eternal destinies is in God's hands. If anyone lands in hell, it's because God has sent them there. At no point in Scripture do we get the sense that God is wringing his hands, second-guessing himself, desperately trying to find a loophole to avoid sending people to hell. When God sends people to hell, it's because they deserve to go there, and it's in anger that he sends them there.*

---

Nice to see him reject Lewis's oft-quoted sentiment that the gates of hell are locked from the inside.

## Infinite loss, infinite comeuppance

A staple objection to everlasting punishment is the claim that the everlasting punishment is disproportionate to the crime. How can a “finite” deed merit an “infinite” punishment?

I think the “finite/infinite” terminology is equivocal. However, since that’s how the objection is framed, I’m going to play along with the ambiguities for the sake of argument.

I’m now going to propose a few counterexamples. These don’t need to be realistic hypotheticals. Any exception is sufficient to overturn the intuitive principle which underlies the objection viz. a finite deed never merits an infinite punishment.

### Thought experiment #1

Suppose (ex hypothesi) that human beings are naturally immortal. Suppose they can only lose their life if they are murdered or they die in an accident. Suppose (ex hypothesi) that there is no afterlife. If they die they pass into oblivion.

Suppose a murderer kills a human being. That finite deed deprives the victim of an infinite good (immortality).

### Thought experiment #2

Suppose Cal and Christie were made for each other. A matching pair. She is everything he is not. She is everything he wants in a woman, while he is everything she wants in a man. They will never tire of each other. They will be together forever.

But Bill is envious of Cal. He seduces Christie. Cal and Christie break up. That finite deed deprives them of an infinite good.

### Thought experiment #3

Suppose Jim and Bryan are brothers. Jim is Christian, but Bryan is not. Not now. But he might become a Christian. Jim wants his brother to be a part of his life forever. Jim does whatever he can to influence Bryan for Christ.

Jake is a bitter atheist. Jake does whatever he can to turn Bryan against his brother. To turn Bryan against the Christian faith. Jake succeeds. Bryan dies an atheist. Jim loses his brother forever. That finite deed deprives Jim (as well as Bryan) of an infinite good.

In each case, there is infinite loss. The perpetrator maliciously causes someone to suffer an infinite loss. Hence, the perpetrator merits an infinite loss in return. That's proportional punishment. And that's despite the fact that his misdeed was finite.

## So many Christians—so few lions!

A standard objection to Christianity is whether inclusivism is fair. Is it fair that so many never had a chance to hear the Gospel? This is an issue in freewill theism as well as Calvinism.

There are familiar strategies in fielding this objection. But I'd like to remark on a neglected consideration. It's striking how frequently unbelievers respond to the Gospel with seething antipathy. It's not as if they exclaim, "That's just what I was always waiting for! Where have you been all my life!"

I'm not saying nobody responds that way. But notice how many people, when exposed to the Gospel, how many people, when given the opportunity, far from welcoming the message, greet the message with implacable enmity, to the point of persecuting or martyring Christians. Silencing them. Torturing them to death. "So many Christians—so few lions!"

It's not as if many people go to hell simply because they never had a chance to hear the Gospel. As though, had they only been given the opportunity, they'd be overjoyed and feel privileged. So often unbelievers react like drowning swimmers who fight the lifeguard: "How dare you save my life!"

I'm not saying this covers every case, but it's worth pondering. How frequently those who need it the most are the most antagonistic. Violently belligerent.

## Stockholm syndrome

As most of you know, Stockholm syndrome is a psychological condition in which captives or abductees come to form emotional bonds with their captors. I believe it's more common among women. Atheism is the theological version of Stockholm syndrome.

In the gulag of our fallen world, you have two types of prisoners. On the one hand, you have the assimilators and collaborators who've made peace with life in the death camp. They are content to stay in the death camp. To sicken, starve, age, and die in the death camp.

Having resigned themselves to their lot, they make a virtue of their self-imposed necessity. They come to love the death camp. Embrace the death camp. They come to love the commandant. They come to love the prison guards.

They festoon the razor wire with wildflowers. They take pride in painting their rat-infested barracks. They take pride in scrubbing the floors. They take joy in farming the sweltering malarial swamps. They compose patriotic work songs in honor of the commandant. As one of them put it:

*We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. After sleeping through a hundred million centuries we have finally opened our eyes on a sumptuous gulag, fragrant with open sewers, bountiful with snakes, scorpions, and mosquitoes. Within decades we must close our eyes again. Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the gulag and how we have come to wake up in it? This is how I answer when I am asked—as I am surprisingly often—why I bother to get up in the mornings. To put it the other way round, isn't it sad to go to your grave without ever wondering why you were born? Who, with such a thought, would not spring from bed, eager to resume discovering the death camp and rejoicing to be a part of it?*

---

On the other hand, you have the malcontents and irreconcilables. They never feel at home in the death camp. They are constantly plotting how to escape. They are always on the lookout for chinks in the security system. They nurse the unquenchable hope for something greater beyond the barbed wire. As one of them put it:



*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.*

---

They don't simply want it for themselves. They try to befriend prison guards, so that some of the guards can also make a better life for themselves. Find happiness outside the death camp.

The captives who love the death camp don't simply disagree with the captives who hate the death camp. They resent them. They can't stand the fact that some prisoners don't share their wistful view of the death camp. They try to shame them into loving the death camp.

When they discover an underground tunnel, they sabotage it. When they find a hole in the fence, they repair it. When they find out a prison guard is collaborating with the escapees, they rat him out to the commandant.

## Shades of faith

In Reformed soteriology, there are some clearcut groups of people. The primary distinction is between elect and reprobate. That's fixed.

An overlapping distinction is between regenerate and unregenerate. It's overlapping because election and regeneration go back to God's timeless choice, whereas regeneration occurs in time. The elect can be regenerated at different stages of life. Unlike election and reprobation, regeneration is fluid in that respect.

There are other related, generally clearcut distinctions. You have a group of people who live and die outside the pale of the Gospel. You have another group who are devoted to atheism. Likewise, you have a group who consciously repudiate the Christian faith.

There is, though, an in-between group, or type of group. For instance:

*Since Christian faith is primarily trust rather than intellectual mastery, even a young child can give a credible profession. In judging what is credible leaders must take into account the capacities of the one who is expressing faith.*

*For very young children, the children's response to their parents is the primary avenue for expressing their relation to God. Parents represent God to their children, by virtue of their authority, their responsibilities, and their role as a channel for God's blessings. Children first learn what God is like primarily through their parents' love and discipline. The Fatherhood of God is represented through a good human father. God's forgiveness of sins is represented primarily through the parents' forgiveness and patience towards their children.*

---

<http://frame-poythress.org/linking-small-children-with-infants-in-the-theology-of-baptizing/>

Although Poythress is referring to young children, the principle raises questions about analogous situations. If a parent, especially a Christian parent, can be a temporary stand-in for God or Christ, and if trusting a parent is implicit faith or vicarious faith, then can some adults, who are not professing Christians, be saved indirectly because a Christian friend or family member subliminally represents Christ to them and for them?

They are the closest that some people come to Jesus. Insofar as that they love, trust, and admire their Christian friend or family member, and do so in part for his Christian virtues and graces, are they believing in Jesus via a Christian representative? Does he stand for Christ in their affections, even if they don't consciously make that connection?

There are certain passages where believing in or acting on behalf of a Christian representative is equivalent to believing in or acting for Jesus:

*The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).*

*The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Lk 10:16).*

*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me (Jn 13:20).*

Unlike inclusivism, which cuts the nerve of evangelism, this still depends on a Christian witness and Christian presence.

Some people, due to social conditioning, have a tremendous impediment to Christian faith. An impediment they never entirely overcome. Are there situations where a Christian friend or relative forms the bridge? What I've discussed is too speculative to furnish a firm answer. It may be enough to give reason for hope, but not enough for confidence.

## The wider hope

1. Let's define exclusivism as the view that to be saved during the Christian era a mentally competent person must exercise explicit faith in Jesus prior to death. That's controversial, but it's the bedrock of Christian evangelism.

2. According to one version of inclusivism, a person can be saved through a receptive response to general revelation. According to a related version, a person can be saved through implicit faith.

3. Then you have mediating positions that are technically exclusivistic, but are really face-saving versions of inclusivism. For instance, the theory of postmortem salvation, where people can be saved by exercising faith in Jesus after they die. Technically, that might be classified as exclusivism, but it's functionally equivalent to inclusivism. Put another way, it's a radical modification of what exclusivism traditionally meant. In that attenuated sense, even universalism is exclusivistic. At which point the contrast between exclusivism and inclusivism becomes moot.

4. You also have William Lane Craig's conjecture that God has arranged history so that no unreached person would be receptive to the Gospel if given the opportunity. That suffers from several problems:

i) THERE'S NO EVIDENCE THAT IT'S TRUE.

ii) IT DEPENDS ON THE DUBIOUS THEORY OF MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE.

iii) IT CONFLICTS WITH CRAIG'S BELIEF THAT:

*The hypothesis is that God has done the very best He can, given the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which confront Him...God doesn't create such a choice for Himself. The counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which confront Him are outside His control. He has to play with the hand He has been dealt.*

---

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/molinism-and-the-soteriological-problem-of-evil-once-more#ixzz4ahX0FLaH>

But in that event, there's no justification for assuming that the card deck God has to work with includes a hand containing a feasible world in which no unreached person would be receptive to the Gospel if given the opportunity.

IV) BY THE SAME TOKEN, THAT'S IN COMPETITION WITH ANOTHER ONE OF CRAIG'S CONJECTURES:

*Maybe His desire to achieve an optimal balance between saved and lost overrides the benefits of a world with less natural and moral evil.*

---

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/molism-and-the-soteriological-problem-of-evil-once-more#ixzz4ahY17lxy>

But that means God must be dealt two royal flushes in a row. He must be lucky enough to have a feasible world which combines both an optimal balance between the saved and the lost as well as where no unreached person would be receptive to the Gospel if given the opportunity. But on his own grounds, Craig has no warrant for believing that the card deck includes a feasible hand where both rosy scenarios coincide.

5. C. S. Lewis famously said: "But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other [unreached] people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.

That, of course, is very different from saying no one can be saved except through *faith* in Christ.

6. There's internal pressure in freewill theism towards inclusivism because freewill theists typically subscribe to universal atonement and God's ardent desire to save everyone. But that's in tension with belief that salvation is contingent on a condition which is unavailable to many people: knowledge of the Gospel.

Like it or not, Calvinism doesn't suffer from that internal pressure. Its commitment to exclusivism is internally consistent, given reprobation and limited atonement.

Offhand, the only Reformed theologian I'm aware of who embraced a "wider hope" is William Shedd. He's fairly idiosyncratic. His position is likely colored by his Christian platonism.

Let's consider some wedge issues:

## 7. OT saints

**i)** OT Jews didn't need to exercise explicit faith in Jesus to be saved.

True, but that means the content of saving faith is indexed to progressive revelation. To whom much is given, much is required.

**ii)** From the standpoint of pre-Christian Jews, there's a distinction between believing in the *Messiah* and believing in *Jesus*. They didn't know who the Messiah would be, but they knew what the Messiah would be. From our retrospective standpoint, we know that Jesus and the Messiah are one in the same person. From their prospective standpoint, they couldn't know that Jesus would be the Messiah. They didn't know about the life of Jesus. But they could still believe in the Messiah.

It's like saying you can believe in Superman without believing in Clark Kent. If you don't know that Clark Kent is Superman, that doesn't prevent you from believing in Superman.

To draw another distinction, you can know a role or know a character without knowing the actor who will play the role or play the character.

**iii)** According to the NT, and Hebrews in particular, there was a transitional phase where, once you know who the Messiah is (Jesus), it's no longer enough just to believe in the Messiah: you must believe that Jesus is the Messiah. At that point, rejecting Jesus is tantamount to rejecting the Messiah, since Jesus is the Messiah. You can no longer separate the two.

**iv)** An inclusivist might object that while there's a chronological distinction between Jews who lived before Jesus and Jews who lived after Jesus, that's analogous to a geographical distinction for gentiles who live outside the pale of the Gospel. They are in a position comparable to pre-Christian Jews. Even though they live after Jesus, they might as well be living before Jesus, because their geographical barrier is equivalent to a chronological barrier. Time and place are both buffers.

But a problem with that comparison is that you had the same geographical distinction in OT times. Yahweh revealed himself to Israel in a way that he didn't generally reveal himself to pagan nations. And to the extent that he made himself known to pagan nations, it was in connection with Israel. Post-Christian pagans are not in a situation analogous to pre-Christian Jews. Rather, they're in the same situation as pre-Christian pagans. God generally distinguished between Jews and Gentiles, except where their lives intersected.

## 8. Pagan saints

Some inclusivists classify some Biblical figures as "pagan saints": Enoch, Job, Noah, Melchizedek, Abimelech, Jethro, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba, Nebuchadnezzar, Ninevites, and Cornelius. But there are serious problems with that category:

- i) Except for Cornelius, the Bible doesn't say they were saved.
- ii) To the extent that some of them were saved, they came to saving knowledge through contact with the chosen people.
- iii) Some of them were recipients of special revelation.
- iv) Cornelius was a Godfearer. An intellectual convert to Judaism (although he eschewed circumcision). He's in the position of an OT saint.
- v) How many inclusivists regard Job as a historical rather than fictional character?
- vi) It's possible that Melchizedek was pagan. That doesn't make him a "pagan saint". That doesn't mean he was saved. His function is essentially symbolic. His typological role is separable from his person. What matters is what he represents, not his character.

## 9. Babies

Even Calvinists believe that "elect" infants dying in infancy are saved. So faith in Jesus is not a sine qua non for salvation. But there are serious problems with that comparison:

- i) The argument either proves too much or too little. It's not just that babies lack faith in Jesus. They lack implicit faith. They lack faith in general revelation.
- ii) Children below the age of reason lack the cognitive development to form propositional beliefs. That's not analogous to mentally competent agents. Rather, that's analogous to the developmentally disabled, or the senile.
- iii) Although "elect" infants dying in infancy aren't saved by faith, they are saved by grace. They are saved by regeneration.
- iv) But it might be objected that if that's the case, why can't other people be saved by grace or by regeneration rather than faith?

No doubt God could do so if he chose to. But mercy is discretionary rather than obligatory. Fact is, the Bible stresses the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation when addressing adults. Whether or not we find it arbitrary, that's our frame of reference.

Even if there are exceptions, that is only known to God. We must operate by his revealed will, not his secret will—assuming God makes exceptions.

## **10. Christophanies**

The OT records divine disclosure by theophanies and angelophanies, as well as dreams and visions. In the Bible, pagans are sometimes recipients of revelatory dreams. Some Christians identify certain OT angelophanies as Christophanies. Likewise, you have modern-day reports of Jesus appearing to Muslims in dreams, which are instrumental in their conversion.

If so, then in principle, why couldn't there be Christophanies to the unevangelized? To take one hypothetical scenario why couldn't Manitou sometimes be a Christophany to heathen Indians who had no access to the Gospel?

Several issues:

**i)** Even if that's hypothetically possible, unless we have evidence that it ever happens, so what?

**ii)** According to the Christian paradigm, faith in Jesus involves believing the gist of a biographical narrative about who Jesus is and what he did. By itself, a Christophany is not an object of faith. Even in the OT, event-media and word-media work in tandem.

**iii)** The OT presents the situation of the heathen as morally and spiritually dire. So does the NT (e.g. Rom 1:21-32; Eph 2:1-3,12; 4:17-19; Tit 3:3). Likewise, when Christian missionaries push into unevangelized lands, they encounter animism, paganism, and depravity. They don't encounter people-groups to whom God appeared in disguised Christophanies.

**iv)** If, moreover, God were to instigate a religious movement through a Christophany, without biblical revelation, that would rapidly degenerate into a pagan cult.

**v)** Now, for all we know, it's possible that God has appeared to select individuals throughout history, across the globe. But certainly not enough to establish a religious movement that allegorizes Christianity. At best, it could only be in reference to isolated cases.



## Reprobation, damnation, and anarchy

A number of Arminians object to reprobation on the grounds that if the atonement of Christ satisfied God's justice, then there's no need for God to manifest retributive justice by consigning anyone to eternal punishment. However, that argument has far-reaching implications for Arminianism:

**i)** The same logic would eliminate the justification for hell. Even if an Arminian switches to annihilationism, that's still punitive.

**ii)** The same logic would lead to pacifism/anarchy. Punishing criminals would be inconsistent with the atonement of Christ.

**iii)** An Arminian might try to extricate himself from these implications by denying penal substitution. In that event, he'd be critiquing Calvinism on its own terms.

However, an Arminian pays a price for that move. It will alienate other Arminians who are committed to penal substitution. In modern times, I think most evangelical Arminians subscribe to penal substitution because they are Baptists/fundamentalists for whom that's an article of faith.

There are modern-day Arminians like Joel Green and Randal Rauser who deny penal substitution. That, however, would ignite a civil war among Arminians.

## Gouging his eyes out

I'm going to comment on this:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/why-calvinism-makes-me-want-to-gouge-my-eyes-out/>

*Out of all of the theologies in the world, I find Calvinism among the most offensive. And frustrating. And irritating.*

---

I see. More offensive than militant Islam or the Aztec religion. Nice to see he has priorities.

*One of the key aspects of Calvinism is a concept called "predestination" which essentially means, God picked the people who are going to heaven. Where it gets sick is on the flip side of that same coin (a position held by Calvin), that God also picks the people who go to hell. There are no choices involved— before God even created us, he hand picked who would go to heaven and who he would burn in hell for all of eternity.*

---

Sick like this?

*For those whom he chose beforehand he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom 8:29).*

*4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,...11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1:4-5,11).*

*who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began (2 Tim 1:9).*

*The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come (Rev 17:8).*

Why is it "sick" that God decides what to do with us before he made us? Would it be preferable for God to make us before he had any idea what to do with us? Make us first, then decide after the fact what will become of us?

*Now, we know from the teachings of Jesus that the group of people in history who embrace God is smaller than the group who do not (broad vs. narrow road).*

---

Even Arminians like Joel Green, in his commentary on Luke, disagree with that interpretation.

*If both Calvinists and Jesus are equally correct, the result is purely evil. This would mean that God created a MAJORITY of humanity for the sole purpose of torturing them in hell for all of eternity, and that they never had a choice. God would have created them for the sole purpose of torturing them. I just don't think I can worship a god who would do something like that.*

---

**i)** That's confused on many levels. What exactly is his objection? If God only predestined a minority of humanity to go to hell, would he withdraw his objection? Is his objection about the ratio?

**ii)** What makes him think that according to Calvinism, God creates the reprobate for the sole purpose of punishing them in hell? Can he quote any Reformed creeds or representative Reformed theologians who say that?

The reprobate serve a purpose in history. For instance, there are reprobate fathers of elect sons or daughters.

**iii)** Why does he assume hell is equivalent to "torture"?

*Case in point: if I get to heaven and find out that my beautiful daughter Johanna is in hell and that she's in hell because God chose her before the foundations of the world to burn for all eternity, I won't be able to worship him in good conscience. Perhaps I would bow down out of total fear, but I would NOT worship him because he was holy, beautiful, and "all together wonderful" as Boyd often describes him. Instead, I would bow down because he would be a sick and twisted god who scared the crap out of me.*

---

Is his objection to reprobation, or to damnation?

*Hang around the average Calvinist very long...*

---

How much experience does he have hanging around the average Calvinist?

*...and there's a good chance you're going to get a mental picture of God that is largely defined by anger and wrath. While I do believe that God gets angry, and do believe there are times he has acted on that anger throughout scripture, this is not what Jesus majors on when he taught people what God was like. Calvinists often build a worldview on anger, while Jesus built one on love.*

---

What does he think Jesus saves people from? According to Scripture, Jesus saves us from...the wrath of God.

*When Jesus tried to explain what God is like, he simply told people "look at me- if you've seen me, you've seen him" (John 14:9). In Jesus, we don't see a God who is dominated by wrath, but a God who is consumed with nonviolent love. Calvinism makes me want to gouge my eyes out because it's a belief system that keeps showing me a God who doesn't look like the Jesus I see in the New Testament.*

---

You mean like this:

*41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...45 Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25:41,46).*

*Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind" (Jn 9:39).*

*6 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from[b] the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thes 1:6-9).*

*15 Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev 6:15-17).*

Back to Corey:

*For the vast majority of my life I have felt like I was one of those "not good enoughs" who doesn't get picked and doesn't get included.*

*The message of Calvinism could have an encouraging message for me: you got picked! However, knowing that most people do not get picked for the team but instead, get picked for destruction and torture, a guy like me will probably always be convinced that I was picked for the latter— because that's been my experience in life.*

---

Actually, the message of Calvinism is that God generally picks the losers:

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:26-30).

Back to Corey:

*I have rejected Calvinism in favor of Arminianism, because in the later, we are able to proclaim the truth that God has picked everyone! If you want to be on the team- you're welcome; the choice is yours. We don't need a belief system that leaves us wondering as to whether or not we got picked; we need a belief system that assures us we were already picked and that we're free to enjoy the benefits of being picked.*

---

Yet he says Jesus taught us that most folks are hellbound. So even though they were all picked, the team has a terribly attrition rate. Most of them wash out and wind up in hell. So I guess that most of the recruits were "not good enoughs."

*Jesus' favorite people were the outsiders [sic] and misfits.*

---

I thought we were all picked. But now he's telling us Jesus plays favorites.

*As a Jesus follower, I think the cross is the central point of all of human history. The cross was God's ultimate act of nonviolent enemy love, the act that that demonstrated God's love for the whole world (John 3:16), the act that drew all people to God (John 12:32), and the act that reconciled all of creation to God (Col 1:20).*

---

How did the cross draw all people to God and reconcile all creation to God if, by his own admission, we know from the teachings of Jesus that most folks are going to hell?

*From a Calvinist paradigm, the cross is quite different. The cross isn't the moment where Jesus died to reconcile all of creation– the whole world– but the moment where Jesus died simply for the few people God picked. This is a concept they call "limited atonement" that reduces the cross to being an act for the "elect" (those God picked) instead of an act for the world (John 3:16) and all of creation (Col. 1:20).*

---

It "reduces" the cross to actually saving those he died for, rather than an empty gesture of ineffectual love.

*As such, instead of the Gospel being Good News for the world, it becomes good news for the few people God picked for his team and becomes absolutely horrible news for everyone else in history.*

---

Yet he says that according to Jesus, only a few will be saved. Isn't that absolutely horrible news for everyone else?

*I feel somewhat bad saying this, but I think I can honestly admit that there are only 3 Calvinists I've met in my life who I actually like– two are friends in my "real" life and one is a Christian blogger whom I really like and respect.*

---

Does that mean he wouldn't pick us for his team?

Bracketing the question of whether Ben Corey is a likable person, for a missiologist he's pretty irritable, easily-offended, and finicky about who he likes. How would he ever evangelize militant atheists, radical feminists, hardcore Muslims, or Hindu nationalists (to name a few)? Are they likable?

## From Krishna to Christ

Basil Mitchell was a distinguished Christian philosopher who went in the opposite direction of Michael Sudduth. Mitchell was originally a Hindu adherent, via Sufi religious pluralism, but that changed:

*In early 1940, still very uncertain of my attitude toward fighting, I was registered as a conscientious objector and waited to be called up for ambulance service...In May of that year, as the German tanks rolled through the Low Countries and then through France, the question became ever more insistent. In that crisis it would need a very sure conviction to justify my refraining from doing what I could toward stopping this palpable evil...I turned to the Gita and searched it earnestly for guidance...but found to my distress that it had no message for me—or rather than it had a message, but none that I could not accept...What, then, was Arjuna to do? How was he to find the duty appropriate to himself? The answer was that he was a Kshatriya, a member of the warrior caste, and the duty of such a man is to fight...I found that I just could not view the matter in these terms. Not only was the concept of duty deriving from one's social status totally irrelevant to my situation, but the underlying philosophy was one I could not accept. I felt profoundly that what was at stake in Europe was (when all the necessary qualification had been made) a fight of good against evil and that the outcome was of momentous importance.*

*From that time on, although I did not clearly perceive it, the Sufi influence began to lose its hold on me. I had been compelled to deny, under the pressure of a practical decision, that the same truth was to be found in all religions. The Gita, impressive though it was, represented a view of the world and of our place in it that was not only different from but incompatible with any that I could bring myself to believe or live by.*

*What had increasingly led me to be dissatisfied with the essentially monistic philosophy of my Sufi mentors was its failure, as I now saw it, to attach enduring importance to individual persons...My native cast of thought was idealistic, and left to myself, I was liable to rest satisfied with abstractions. But I had been compelled by circumstances to attend to particulars—in the Navy to the needs of particular individuals acting out a particular role in a particular historical situation through the involvement of a particular institution; and, in my personal life, in responding to the demands of a person of very acute observation who had a sharp sense of truth in respect of feelings and their expression. Hence what initially, in my Sufi days, repelled me in Christianity—its insistence upon the*



*embodiment of the divine in a particular figure who had entered the world at a particular time and place—now seemed to me congruous with what I had learned about the nature and development of human beings. Basil Mitchell, "War and Friendship," K. Clark, ed. Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers (IVP, 1993), 29-30, 36-37.*

---

## II. Infant salvation

---

### Are there babies in hell?

In a debate with James White, atheist David Silverman posed the question, "Are there babies in hell"? Silverman is using that as a wedge issue to show that when you take Christian theology to a logical extreme, many Christians will blink. When push comes to shove, they don't really believe what they say they believe, because they balk at the awful consequences. So I'd like to take a shot at the question.

1. The question is speculative, so any answers will be speculative. If an atheist is going to pose a question like that, he can't turn around and complain that my answers are speculative. If that's his reaction, then don't ask the question in the first place.
2. You can have sincere belief in something without having to have unflinching belief in something. We live in a world that routinely confronts us with hard truths. Even if an atheist succeeds in making a Christian squirm, that doesn't falsify Christian beliefs. Lots of things make us wince, but they can still be true—and often are.

Moreover, it's counterproductive. After all, many people naturally recoil at the grim worldview of atheism, yet atheists don't think that's a reason to reject it.

3. The question is deceptively simple, with hidden assumptions lurking in the underbrush. Before we can answer the question, we must interpret the question. What do the key terms mean? How do we visualize the damned? How do we visualize hell?
4. The short answer is that I don't know the answer. I don't have an informed answer to give.

What could be my source of information? The only reliable source would be divine revelation. But the question is too specialized for Scripture to address. Scripture customarily deals with typical cases. Regarding damnation, Scripture says the damned will be judged by their works. That envisions agents above a certain age.

I don't think Scripture speaks to the fate of those who die before the age of reason. It doesn't address cases of diminished responsibility.

An atheist might complain that I'm ducking the question. Not so. I didn't choose my epistemology to evade this particular question. As matter of principle, there are some things we're in no position to know apart from revelation.

**5.** Still, my ignorance doesn't rule out the possibility in question. So let's examine that. What is meant by "babies"?

Presumably, that's a synecdoche for children below the age of reason. Children in a condition of diminished responsibility.

In general, what happens to people who die at that age? After they pass into the afterlife, do they stay that age? Do they remain psychologically immature?

I surmise that they continue their cognitive development until they have adult intelligence. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that some people who die at that age go to hell, they don't suffer as children. Rather, they suffer as adults. Give them sufficient time.

**6.** Since the intermediate state is a discarnate state, it's inaccurate to visualize the afterlife containing physical babies, much less naked babies writhing in fire. When a child dies, the child's soul passes into the afterlife.

I view the intermediate state as analogous to a stable dream or collective dream. A state of mind—or minds.

**7.** Let's take some paradigm cases of evil men, viz. Ted Bundy, Joseph Mengele, Charles Manson, Stalin, Tamerlane, Genghis Khan. I'm citing extreme examples to establish a point of principle.

Suppose one of them died at five. Would he go to hell? The answer may depend on how we answer another question. What made him so sadistic or heartless?

Suppose he turned out so badly due to crucial experiences during his formative years. If so, then his premature death will interrupt that baleful trajectory. His untimely demise may mean he will turn out quite differently in the afterlife. If he's not evil in the afterlife, then I don't assume he'd go to hell when he died.

**8.** But suppose he was always twisted. It may not have been evident at first, but even as a young child it began to manifest itself in ominous ways.

In that event, he will mature into the same evil person in the afterlife that he became in this life, had he not died so young. If so, then I'd expect him to go to hell when he dies.

**9.** What do we mean by hell? Suppose, the moment after Hugh Hefner dies, he awakens in a harem. And he's young again. Paradise!

Only there's a catch: when he looks down he sees to his chagrin that he's missing the one organ he needs to take advantage of his newfound opportunities. For Hefner, that would be hell.

Yet that doesn't require demons with pitchforks plunging him into vats of boiling oil. What makes it hellish is deprivation combined with desire.

A state of mind can be hellish. Take inconsolable loneliness.

From what I can tell, psychopaths and sociopaths are miserable. Their sadistic mindset makes them miserable.

Hell can be continuous existence in mental torment. And that needn't be caused by the surroundings of the damned. Even if the surroundings were idyllic, the damned would still be miserable because it's in their character, in their attitude. And I don't think it's unjust for a person in that condition to remain in that condition.

Abortion, election, and apostasy

Abortionists sometimes cite popular belief in universal infant salvation as a wedge tactic to taunt Christians: If you believe all babies are heavenbound, why do you oppose abortion? This is meant to generate a dilemma: logically, you should either support both or oppose both.

John Piper recently posted on this subject:

<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/if-babies-go-to-heaven-why-oppose-abortion>

Given the cards he dealt himself, I think he played his hand fairly well. That said:

**i)** Speaking for myself, I'm dubious about universal infant salvation. All the world's worst people used to be cute little kids. I can't help mentally rewinding the clock. Go back in time from what they are to what they were.

Seems arbitrary to say that if you die at seven you fly to heaven, but if you die at nine you fry.

We see children as they are, not as they will be. At least initially. Sometimes we live long enough to see how they turn out—for better or worse.

So I doubt a key premise of the argument. But even if I didn't, I don't think the argument goes through.

**ii)** If this poses a dilemma at all, it only poses a dilemma for freewill theists rather than Calvinists. The unstated premise of the argument is that people can lose their salvation. Hence, if somebody is now saved, killing him now is the way to seal his salvation. If salvation can be lost, it is risky to live another day. To play it safe, die when you are saved. The longer you wait, the greater the risk that you will die unsaved.

Incidentally, the logic of that argument is hardly confined to infants. It would apply just as well to born-again adults.

**iii)** But, of course, Calvinism rejects the operating premise. What ensures your salvation is not when you die, but election—which is unalterable. Not, in the first instance, what happened in time, but what happened in eternity. The elect can't lose their salvation. You either have it or you don't.

From a Reformed standpoint, nothing you do can change the number of the elect. In the classic formulation of the Westminster Confession: "These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished" (WCF 3:4).

**iv)** But it might be argued that this misses the point. The claim is not that we retroactively cause God to elect more people if more babies die in the womb. The claim, rather, is that if more (elect) babies die in the womb, then that's how God predestined the end-result all along. Our alternate course of action (i.e. aborting elect babies) is the consequence of God's foreordination, rather than God's foreordination as the consequence of our alternate course of action.

**v)** There is, however, a basic problem with that argument. It's a counterfactual scenario. As such, it doesn't refer to the world in which you and I actually live, but to an alternate timeline.

But even if you believe in universal infant salvation vis-a-vis the actual world, you can't just switch to an alternate timeline, yet assume everything else remains the same. Even if your thought-experiment only changes on variable, that's just a thought-experiment. You can conjecture that God might do it that way, but it's not as if you have given God a blueprint which he must follow.

Suppose there's a possible world in which some people kill their children in the superstitious belief that doing so will ensure their salvation. It doesn't follow that in fact raises the number of the elect. For in that alternate timeline, God may not elect all dying infants, even if he does so in this world.

**vi)** Furthermore, even if you subscribe to predestinarian universal infant salvation, that doesn't imply that more people are ultimately elect. It may simply mean a greater percentage of the elect die in infancy, and fewer in adulthood—even though the overall number is exactly the same. The sum is the same. All that's different is how the elect are distributed by time of death. Whether more die younger or older.

## Elect infants

i) The eternal fate of those who die before they can exercise saving faith isn't an issue unique to Calvinism. For instance, John Wesley, in his Treatise on Baptism, says:

As to the grounds of it: If infants are guilty of original sin, then they are proper subjects of baptism; seeing, in the ordinary way, they cannot be saved, unless this be washed away by baptism. It has been already proved, that this original stain cleaves to every child of man; and that hereby they are children of wrath, and liable to eternal damnation. It is true, the Second Adam has found a remedy for the disease which came upon all by the offense of the first. But the benefit of this is to be received through the means which he hath appointed; through baptism in particular, which is the ordinary means he hath appointed for that purpose; and to which God hath tied us, though he may not have tied himself. Indeed, where it cannot be had, the case is different, but extraordinary cases do not make void a standing rule. This therefore is our First ground. Infants need to be washed from original sin; therefore they are proper subjects of baptism.

ii) For his part, Warfield summarizes no fewer than five different positions in Reformed historical theology, of which I'll comment on two:

*Many held that faith and the promise are sure signs of election, and accordingly all believers and their children are certainly saved ; but that the lack of faith and the promise is an equally sure sign of reprobation, so that all the children of unbelievers, dying such, are equally certainly lost.*

*More held that faith and the promise are certain signs of election, so that the salvation of believers' children is certain, while the lack of the promise only leaves us in ignorance of God's purpose; nevertheless that there is good ground for asserting that both election and reprobation have place in this unknown sphere. Accordingly they held that all the infants of believers, dying such, are saved, but that some of the infants of unbelievers, dying such, are lost. Warfield, Studies in Theology, 9:432-33.*

---

i) It's not clear from this why some Reformed theologians tie the fate of dying infants to their parentage. This may be related to the argument for infant baptism, where parents sponsor their children. Or the notion that children of believing parents are in the covenant by virtue of their parentage—and thereby suitable baptismal candidates. In both cases we have a representative principle at work.

There are, however, problems with tying the fate of dying infants to their parentage:

**ii)** What if one parent is elect, but the other is reprobate? How to split the difference?

**iii)** Election can, and sometimes does, cut across family lines. The following combinations are possible, and actually play out in various cases:

- a)** Elect children of elect parents
- b)** Elect children of reprobate parents
- c)** Reprobate children of elect parents
- d)** Reprobate children of reprobate parents

Given that fact, it's unclear why some would argue that the eternal fate of dying infants is tied to the spiritual status of their parents.

**iv)** It might be argued that God is more likely to save the children of believers.

*Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word (WCF 10.3).*

---

**i)** I don't know for a fact why the Westminster Divines settled on this ambiguous formulation. Perhaps that's covered in the minutes of the Westminster Assembly. The historical question doesn't interest me that much. I'm guessing there were two reasons for the studied ambiguity.

**a)** Since Scripture doesn't specifically address this issue, the Westminster Divines thought it best to be circumspect in how much they said on the subject.

**b)** As a consensus document, the Westminster Confession must sometimes finesse disagreements among different parties or individuals at the Westminster Assembly.

**ii)** The formulation is committed to the existence of heavenbound dying infants. And the formulation is amendable to two additional, but opposing views:

- a)** All dying infants are elect
- b)** Some dying infants are reprobate

Both (a) and (b) are logically consistent with the Confessional wording. Neither (a) or (b) is logically entailed by the Confessional wording. Beyond a certain point, the Confession



is noncommittal. It doesn't imply the salvation of all dying infants or the damnation of some dying infants. Rather, it leaves that an open question.

Many professing Christians, as well as many opponents of the Christian faith, find the whole subject of infant damnation morally appalling. This is sometimes caricatured as babies roasting in hell. I'll just make a few brief points:

**i)** It seems a bit ad hoc to claim that if Attila the Hun died at 5, he'd go to heaven—but if he died at 25, he'd go to hell. That makes damnation a misfortune of timing.

**ii)** As I've discussed on several occasions, there's no reason to think hell is the same for all the damned. Dante popularized the notion of hell as physical torture, but that's a literary tradition.

**iii)** Assuming (*ex hypothesi*) that some who die before the age of discretion are damned, that doesn't mean they remain in the psychological condition in which they died. There's no reason to think death freezes the decedent in the physical or mental condition he was in at the time of death. To take a comparison, if a Christian dies in a state of advanced senile dementia, that hardly means he will be senile for all eternity. Heaven is restorative.

By the same token, if Attila the Hun died at 5 and went to hell, I take that to mean that he'd mature psychologically. But he'd mature without common grace or special grace. His eternal condition would be characterized by the absence of grace. There'd be nothing to mitigate his sinful predisposition. It doesn't require any external punitive environment. Rather, it's a deprivation.

# III. Annihilationism

---

## Valley of Hinnom

I reader drew my attention to this post:

<https://michaelpahl.com/2017/10/02/jesus-and-hell/>

Several fallacies in his argument:

**i)** Metaphors originate in a particular concrete phenomena, but acquire an abstract, analogical significance. The significance of the metaphor is not identical to the natural or historical exemplar. It develops a significance that goes beyond the exemplar, even in contrast to the exemplar.

Take Edenic motifs or Mt. Zion. These take on symbolic connotations that are no longer conterminous with a specific address and/or the geography of that particular locale. Or, in modern usage, take metaphors like "salt mines" or "Siberian exile". These originate at a particular time or place, but they develop an emblematic significance that's independent of the historical exemplar.

**ii)** Although the original context has interpretive resonance, the normative context for NT occurrences is how that's used in the NT. What the metaphor means at that stage of theological elaboration.

**iii)** Moreover, it's not confined to the meaning of a particular word, but how that's combined with larger descriptions.

**iv)** Furthermore, Scripture uses a variety of metaphors to depict eschatological judgment. The concept of damnation isn't confined to the figurative range of one particular metaphor, but how that's built up on the basis of many figurative as well as literal descriptions.

## The general resurrection

Chris Date is a propagandist for annihilationism. Jonathan McLatchie recently did a webinar in which Date was the speaker. I'll make some brief comments about Date's presentation.

**1.** One of Date's basic arguments is that in the NT, "eternal life" is a gift to/for the saved. By implication, the damned will not enjoy eternal life. Relatedly, the saved will be resurrected. By implication, the damned will not be resurrected.

**i)** This raises a question of systematic theology. On the one hand are passages about the resurrection of the just. On the other hand are passages about the general resurrection. How should these be harmonized? Date only quotes one side of the evidence. If there's a point of tension in the "traditionalist" position, it doesn't originate with "traditionalism", but goes back to the witness of Scripture.

Someone who denies the inerrancy of Scripture would say the Bible itself has divergent theological traditions regarding the fate of the damned. Date doesn't take that route, but in that event, the onus is on "traditionalists" and annihilationists alike to explain, if they can, how these two sets of passages can be integrated. Date acts as if that's a problem unique to "traditionalists".

**ii)** In addition, passages for the general resurrection create a point of tension for the annihilationists. In that case, the resurrection of the body isn't confined to the saved. Yet Date wants to argue that resurrection entails immortality in the case of the saved.

Moreover, what's the point of restoring the damned to life if God destroys them all over again?

**iii)** One possible explanation, from a "traditionalist" perspective, is that "life" and "death" in some eschatological passages have a figurative significance that goes beyond biological life and death. So even though both the saved and the damned will be resurrected and exist forever, there will be a drastic difference in their respective quality of life.

**2.** Another issue is Date's flat reading of Scripture, where he assumes that when the NT uses imagery from the OT, that must retain the same meaning, as if NT usage can't be metaphorical. To take a comparison, consider statements about Jesus: Jesus is the paschal lamb, Jesus is manna, Jesus is the light of the world, Jesus is the vine. The imagery has OT antecedents, which are literal in the original context, but figurative in the NT context.

**3.** He deploys a self-defeating argument about how death and hades are thrown into the lake of fire, which he takes to mean nobody will ever die again. Yet that's an argument for everlasting conscious punishment rather than annihilationism.

**4.** Date uses an odd argument regarding vicarious atonement. Problem is, Jesus didn't die for sinners in the sense of dying our death, as if he died so that we won't. Each of us dies his own death. Jesus didn't die in place of my own death. It's not vicarious in terms of death, but punishment. His death doesn't take the place of my death, but the place of my punishment. (I'd say he died for the elect, but that's secondary to the immediate point at issue.)

Date misrepresents Beale's stated position (in the quote from his commentary):

**i)** Date defines "death" as biological death. But it doesn't follow that Beale defines "death" as biological death in terms of what "death" means in Revelation. There's an equivocation here, on whether "death" in Revelation is a metaphor for damnation.

**ii)** Moreover, Beale says the redeemed won't have to suffer in the age to come. But Date turns that upside down, as if Beale says the damned won't have to suffer in the age to come.

**5.** One point of clarification: the orthodox position doesn't entail eternal "torment". Punishment is not synonymous with torment. There can be degrees of punishment. Different kinds of punishment. "Torment" has a narrow connotation (i.e. torture). Eternal "misery" would be more accurate.

To use the word "torment" as a synonym for everlasting punishment implies that all the damned suffer torment. But while some of the damned may well suffer torment, and deservedly so, is that a universal feature of damnation?

## "An everlasting Auschwitz"

I had a brief exchange with Christian apologist and annihilationist Matt Flanagan on Facebook:

BTW, [John] Wenham double-edged sword. For instance, he says:

*Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice. It is a doctrine which I do not know how to preach without negating the loveliness and glory of God. From the days of Tertullian it has frequently been the emphasis of fanatics. It is a doctrine which makes the Inquisition look reasonable.*

---

That is, of course, the classic moralistic objection to eternal punishment. In my experience, annihilationists of the Rethinking Hell stripe avoid that argument because it divulges the essentially sentimental motivation for annihilationism, which is bad PR if you're endeavoring to make an intellectually respectable case for annihilationism.

In addition, Wenham was consistent enough to take his position to a logical extreme:

*When I analyze my own thoughts, I find that (rightly or wrongly) everlastingness has virtually no place in my concept of eternal life. Everlasting harp playing or hymn singing or even contemplation is not attractive.*

---

So he's prepared to sacrifice eternal heaven to eliminate eternal hell. Both the saints and the damned face eventual oblivion.

"The Case For Conditional Immortality" *Facing Hell: The Story of a Nobody, An Autobiography 1913 - 1996* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), chap. 27.

I originally said:

*We need to draw an elementary distinction between informed biblical scholars who happen to espouse annihilationism, and informed biblical scholars who endeavor to make a detailed case for annihilationism. Mere name-dropping is a fallacious argument from authority. So, for instance, Wenham did attempt to make a detailed case for his positions.*

---

Matt counters by saying:

*The comment is a few sentences of an article which contains 20 pages of argument which is entirely devoted to exegetical argument...So Steve its rather misleading to take that one paragraph out of context and suggest Wenham based his conclusion on sentimental emotion.*

---

Notice Matt acts as if he's correcting my characterization, when in fact his observation is entirely consistent with my original statement that Wenham makes a detailed case for his position.

*To ignore a person's actual arguments, and dismiss it on alleged motives is the ad hominin circumstantial argument, and basing this fallacy on the reading a few lines omitted from there context suggests something of a straw man is being attacked.*

---

**i)** It was never my aim in a Facebook discussion to present a systematic refutation of Wenham's arguments. Facebook is not an efficient medium for that kind of analysis. I have in fact engaged the exegetical arguments for annihilationism on other occasions.

**ii)** As far as that goes, there's nothing inherently fallacious about ad hominin circumstantial argument. When, say, we're assessing the credibility of an expert witness or putative eyewitness, it is not invalid to take into consideration a vested interest or conflict of interest.

**iii)** In addition, Wenham is not the only annihilationist who tips his hand in that regard. Take Clark Pinnock's statement that everlasting punishment

*...pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die.*

---

Or John Stott's statement that

*I want to repudiate with all the vehemence of which I am capable the glibness, what almost appears to be the glee, the Schadenfreude, with which some Evangelicals speak about hell. It is a horrible sickness of mind or spirit...Well, emotionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain.*

---

Does that disprove annihilationism? No. But I notice that proponents at Rethinking Hell are less candid than Stott, Wenham, and Pinnock.

iv) Moreover, it's entirely consonant with motivated reasoning to make a detailed case for your position. For instance, Dale Tuggy rejects the Trinity and Incarnation because by his lights that's incompatible with the law of identity. He then proceeds to reinterpret all the prooftexts for the deity of Christ.

Or take people who reject or reinterpret Bible passages condemning homosexuality because that offends their moral sensibilities.

Or, to take an issue dear to Matt's heart, consider critics who reject the historicity and/or inerrancy of OT holy war commands and war narratives because that conflicts with their preconception of divine benevolence.

*In the previous sentence Wenham shows he is using the word 'everlastingness' in contrast to eternity understood as timelessness, This is confirmed by the very next sentence, omitted from your quote, where he describes eternity as involving 'deliverance from sin and the bliss of being with God in heaven, knowing that the inexorable march of death has been abolished for ever ' So, its simply misleading to suggest that Wenham here is suggesting heaven is finite in duration. You have to snip the quote carefully so the previous sentence and proceeding sentence are omitted to give that impression. What Wenham says is that, as opposed to being an existence that is everlasting in duration. Heaven is a timeless existence in which there is no death.*

---

i) Biological immortality doesn't entail a timeless mode of subsistence. What does that even mean? Biological life necessitates biological \*processes\*. If the final state involves the resurrection of the body, then that can't be timeless. Processes are inherently temporal.

ii) If by "heaven", Matt means the intermediate state, then there's no death in heaven because the saints are already dead. Death is a prerequisite to enter the intermediate state.

Put another way, the intermediate state is a discarnate state. In that condition, they can't die again because they no longer have a body. Biological death presumes biological life which presumes a physical body.

I don't know if Matt is a physicalist or substance dualist, but his claims make no sense on either position.

**iii)** Moreover, this fails to address the underlying issue. Annihilationists need to offer a consistent meaning for aionios. A meaning that applies equally to promises of eschatological reward as well as threats of eschatological just desert. The dilemma is how to finesse the asymmetry in the respective fates of the saints and the damned if aionios has a consistent sense.



## Some objections to annihilationism

1. For physicalist annihilationists, the death of Christ dissolved the hypostatic union. Jesus passed into oblivion at the moment of death. Not that the Son ceased to exist, but Jesus is a composite being.

This requires the Resurrection not merely to be the restoration of a body, but a second Incarnation.

2. Some lines of ostensible evidence for the afterlife are near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and apparitions of the dead. How do physicalist annihilationists deal with those lines of evidence?

3. Some people commit suicide to elude justice. Take top Nazis like Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Göring, and Rommel. If, according to physicalist annihilationists, you cease to exist at the moment of death, didn't they succeed in cheating justice?

4. Physicalist annihilationists might counter that the damned will suffer temporary postmortem punishment. But that raises the question of where Scripture teaches that the damned pass into oblivion when they die, are later resurrected on the day of judgment, after which they are punished, after which they are annihilated?

For dualist annihilationists, where does Scripture teach a two-stage postmortem punishment? Where does Scripture teach that after the lost die, they first suffer temporary punishment, after which they are then annihilated? Where do we find that sequence in Scripture?

5. In Mt 26:24, Jesus said Judas would be better off had he never been born. But how does that follow if postmortem punishment is temporary?

6. Some annihilationists say *aionios* has a qualitative rather than quantitative/temporal meaning. It refers to a kind of life, and not everlasting duration. Other annihilationists say *aionios* denotes a never-ending outcome rather than a never-ending process.

So what does *aionios* mean in reference to passages about eschatological salvation and judgment? If *aionios* doesn't mean the damned will suffer forever, does it still mean the saints will enjoy eternal happiness? Can you give "eternal" a consistent sense that makes promises of eternal life meaningful? Are there any Bible texts that promise of eternal life for Christians, given the annihilationist interpretations of *aionios*?

7. Many prooftexts for annihilationism employ destructive abstract words as well as destructive concrete images.

i) The stock example is destruction by fire. Characteristics of destruction by fire are visibility and physicality. Fire consumes a physical object. While it's burning, you can see it. Fire reduces the object to ashes. It generates temporary smoke.

**ii)** There is, though, an obvious limitation to the scope of this metaphor. What is destroyed? The body? A body is physical and visible. At death, a body undergoes destruction. That can be a natural process, or that can be expedited by cremation. In addition, fire is sometimes the agent of death. Take a city that's torched by the enemy. Or fire as a method of execution.

**iii)** A problem with using these passages to demonstrate annihilationism is that the scope of the metaphor doesn't address something that's invisible, immaterial, or incorporeal. You can't burn a soul. You can't see a soul burn. A soul can't undergo a process of physical destruction. That doesn't mean a soul is intrinsically indestructible, but the imagery of eschatological destruction involves physical destruction. Burning cities and burning bodies.

**iv)** The imagery doesn't address the status of the soul. An annihilationist might contend that the imagery is a figurative illustration for the destruction of the soul. But that's not an implication of the imagery. At best, that's consistent with the imagery. Yet that's equally consistent with restricting the imagery to bodies. The observable death and destruction of the body.

**v)** Of course, many annihilationists are physicalists. For them, that's all there is and ever was to the human constitution.

But on that view, the imagery is not essentially metaphorical. It really does describe physical destruction. Not necessarily death or destruction by fire, but fire as a graphic metaphor for physical destruction. Specifically, destruction of the body. Bodies are all there is.

So there's a tension between the hermeneutic of dualist and physicalist annihilationism. Physicalists take the imagery more literally.

**vi)** In addition, physicalist annihilationists must provide a separate argument for physicalism. If humans have an incorporeal soul, then prooftexts picturing physical destruction fall short of what is needed to establish the claim.

## Kill the body, not the soul

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt 10:28).*

This is a prooftext for "traditionalists" and annihilationists alike. It poses prima facie problems for both. But it's more problematic for annihilationism.

**i)** This is a prooftext for substance dualism. By itself, the Greek word for "soul" (psyche) doesn't mean an immortal, immaterial soul. But here you have a contrastive relation. In the context of martyrdom, executioners can harm the body, but they can't harm the soul. That's out of their reach.

**ii)** Implied in the passage is the postmortem persistence of consciousness. The body without the soul is dead, but the soul without the body survives. Persecutors can't touch the real inner you. That contrast is essential to the thought. And that contradicts physicalist annihilationism.

**iii)** This, in turn, involves a second contrast: humans can only harm a part of the person whereas God can harm the whole person. Persecutors only have power to harm the body, but God has the power to harm the entire individual. Hence, we should fear divine judgment more than martyrdom.

**iv)** Annihilationists lay great stress on the "destroy" part. But why does Jesus begin with "kill," then switch to "destroy"?

**a)** Because the second sentence envisions a postmortem situation after the body was killed. That's what makes it a postmortem situation. So it would be incongruous to use the same verb ("kill") in both situations. You can't kill a body that's already dead.

But that means Jesus replaces "kill" with "destroy" to avoid superficial incoherence. The shift in verbs isn't meant to convey a major conceptual distinction. Rather, he changes the verb to make it more consistent with a postmortem situation, as well as divine judgment of the entire individual.

**b)** Likewise, you can kill a body, because it's a physical organism. But you can't kill a soul, because it's not physical, and it's not "alive" in the biological sense of the word.

**c)** Moreover, the image of destroying a dead body in hades is figurative. It's not as if dead bodies are teleported to hades. In reality, bodies are buried, and undergo progressive disintegration. In reality, it's the separation of body and soul, when the soul finally "leaves" the body, that causes or results in death. So we're dealing with picture language, as if the embodied decedent passes into the netherworld.

(Although it's possible that this alludes to the general resurrection. But the passage is too terse to confirm that.)

**v)** Furthermore, the body/soul language is a merism to express the fact that God punishes the entire individual.

**vi)** Hence, the passage is consonant with the traditional view of eternal punishment.

**vii)** Taken by itself, the passage is consonant with dualist annihilationism. That, however, requires the cumbersome idea that God recreates the bodies of the damned in order to destroy their bodies (along with their souls) all over again.

## Is annihilation objectively worse?

One argument I've seen deployed in defense of annihilationism is that annihilation is an objectively worse punishment than everlasting misery. I believe Chris Date uses this argument. I think the argument goes something like this: according to annihilationism, the damned have more to lose since the damned lose their very existence. They have everything to lose, in contrast to everlasting misery. And that's an objective difference. Assuming that's the gist of the argument, it suffers from several problems:

**i)** The general principle seems to be a quantitative difference: more of something or less of something. In particular, something bad. Quantitatively worse.

But by that same metric, everlasting punishment is objectively more of something (bad) than temporary punishment (annihilationism). In that respect, the damned have more to lose if they face everlasting punishment rather than temporary punishment. Everlasting punishment is longer, indeed, infinitely longer, than temporary punishment. So the quantitative comparison cuts both ways.

**ii)** In addition, it's nonsensical to act as though the subjective effect of punishment is secondary to the nature of punishment. Take Islam. On the one hand it has a fiery hell. On the other hand, a suicide bomber is instantly transported to the heavenly whorehouse. But if subjective experience is inessential to what makes an experience punitive, then what makes hell hellish and paradise paradisiacal? Why couldn't you trade places?

Suppose you say what's pleasant or unpleasant is subjective. But if you decouple punishment from pain (whether physical or psychological), then what makes punishment punitive? What makes suffering qualitatively worse than pleasure? If pain and punishment are separable, then punishment could be pleasant. Sensual enjoyment could be punitive. But isn't that absurd?

## Body and soul in hell

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt 10:28).*

For some odd reason, annihilationists treat this as a proof-text for their position. Let's briefly consider it.

**i)** The Greek verb (*apollumi*) can mean "ruin, lose, destroy."

**ii)** On a traditionalist interpretation, the meaning of the threat is straightforward. There's a fate worse than death. Once you're dead, there's nothing more that a persecutor can do to you. Even if he tortures you to death, once you die, your suffering at his hands abruptly ends. You can suffer no further harm.

By contrast, infernal suffering never ends. Moreover, damnation can magnify mortal suffering.

Conversely, martyrdom is not to be feared because there's life after death (pace annihilationism).

To my knowledge, Mt 10:28 could just as well be rendered:

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can bring both soul and body to ruin in hell.*

Or:

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can cause both soul and body to be lost in hell.*

Or:

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can cause both soul and body to suffer loss in hell.*

BTW, I'm not suggesting that it's valid to pick any meaning from the lexicon and plug that into a verse. But contextually, these are all suitable meanings. They all make sense in that text and context.

**i)** What about annihilationism? To begin with, some (many?) annihilationists are physicalists. They don't think there is a soul distinct from the body. So there's the

question of what they imagine the term denotes in this passage. Perhaps a "vital principle" which expires with the body? Man as an animated body rather than an embodied soul. But even the language of "animation" has residual dualistic overtones.

Then there's the question of what dualist annihilationists think the soul is. Since they say the soul is naturally mortal, do they think it's like subtle matter? Does it have a half life? Is it composed of thermodynamically unstable constituents which undergo spontaneous decay unless God preserves it?

**ii)** If annihilation simply is death, then a human assailant does have the power to destroy both body and soul. That's not a uniquely divine prerogative. Any human assailant has that godlike power over a fellow human being.

So, according to annihilationism, the threat is not that an assailant can't annihilate you. Rather, the threat is that God will leave you in oblivion. God won't recreate you. Of course, that's not what the text either says or implies.

**iii)** The text poses yet another problem for annihilationism. If annihilationism is true, then the threat should simply read:

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body.*

"In hell" is superfluous. In what respect does God annihilate the damned in hell? Annihilation is really the alternative to hell.

God doesn't annihilate the damned by putting them in hell. Rather, if, according to annihilationism, the body and/or soul is naturally mortal, then God doesn't have to do anything for the damned to pass out of existence. It's not a question of what he does, but what he refrains from doing. He simply lets nature to take its course. The damned will cease to exist unless God preserves them or recreates them. But in that event, God doesn't destroy the damned "in hell."

By contrast, "in hell" makes perfect sense given conscious everlasting punishment. They are forever lost in hell. Hell is where they experience utter ruin. They lose everything by going to hell.

**iv)** Finally, the parallel passage in Luke 12:4-5 has no prima facie trace of annihilationism. To the contrary, it supports the traditional position.

## Hell under fire

I'm going to comment on some arguments by Glenn Peoples:

<http://www.rightreason.org/article/theology/annihilationist.pdf>

For purposes of this post, I'll use "traditionalist" as a label for Christians (like myself) who uphold the Biblical doctrine of conscious everlasting punishment. Keep in mind that I recently did two posts on annihilationism:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/01/a-fudgesicles-chance-in-hell.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/01/the-hermeneutics-of-annihilationism.html>

So I'm going to skip over a lot of Glenn's arguments. I already covered much of the same ground, so I won't repeat myself here.

*The real issue, which is obscured in this reply, is not whether or not the soul is "inherently" or independently immortal, but whether it is immortal at all.*

---

Yet Fudge says:

*Conditionalists begin with the premise that only God is inherently immortal.*

*First Timothy 6:16 says that only God has immortality in himself. Humans are not naturally immortal.*

---

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-conditionalist-response>

I guess Glenn and Fudge need to have a little powwow to decide what's the real issue:

*The consequences are literally unspeakable. Man is not permitted to have access to immortality in his fallen state, and God will not even speak of such a thing. Human death entered the world.*

*But if this is so, then the lost cannot live forever, and if they cannot live forever, then the doctrine of eternal torment is false, because if it were true, then the lost would live forever.*

---



*But since the immortality of the soul is a claim that the lost either do or will have immortality, it must be rejected for reasons just outlined.*

---

That's confused in several respects:

**i)** One of Glenn's tactics (unless he's just confused) is to frame the issue in terms of "immortality," by which he means deathless existence. If, however, the Bible teaches postmortem survival (i.e. the intermediate state and/or the general resurrection), then that implies immortality, even though biological life was interrupted by physical death. Physicalists like Glenn must resort to the ad hoc expedient of saying the damned are annihilated the moment they die (indeed, everyone is annihilated at the moment of death), then temporarily resurrected, only to be annihilated all over again.

Instead of framing the issue in terms of immortality (as he defines it), it would be more accurate to frame the issue in terms of postmortem survival. Life after death.

**ii)** Glenn confuses immortality per se with biological immortality in particular. But biological life (and death) is a separate issue from the immortality of the soul.

**iii)** Biological mortality and immortality are not contradictory, for it's possible to die, then resume living. As of the general resurrection, the lost will live again—forever—in hell.

The lost never go out of existence. They live and die, pass into the intermediate state, and participate in the general resurrection.

That people are mortal in a fallen world is a given for traditionalism. Death is undeniable. That's beside the point. The question at issue is what happens to you after you die. Glenn's framework is an exercise in misdirection.

*Unfortunately, traditionalists have little to say about the direct Scriptural statements about immortality.*

---

**i)** That's based on OT and NT prooftexts for the intermediate state, resurrection of the just, and/or general resurrection.

**ii)** Incidentally, although Glenn glancingly interacts with Daniel Block, he ignores his case for the intermediate state of the lost in the OT.

*There is no getting away from the fact that traditionalism teaches that the lost will be made immortal.*

---

That's equivocal. The lost are already immortal vis-a-vis the soul. They will be made immortal vis-a-vis the body at the general resurrection.

*Scripture tells us that a time will come when evil will be no more.*

---

Begs the question.

*There is literally nothing that is not under Christ. The picture is one of perfect unity and peace everywhere. But given such a perfect picture, what room is left for evil?*

---

i) Scripture uses the imagery of military subjugation—putting his enemies under his feet. That's "peaceful" in the sense that God's enemies will forcibly subdued.

ii) And other Scriptures speak of how they will be quarantined. It will be peaceful everywhere on earth.

*Perversely, defenders of the doctrine of eternal torment have taught the opposite of Scripture here, and even worse: That not only will creation be forever divided into a stark dualism of glory and anguish, heaven and hell...*

---

A biblical dualism.

*...but that this will actually be something that we take great pleasure in.*

---

i) A few traditionalist authors say that. It's not essential to traditionalism.

ii) But as far as that goes, Rev 18 is a classic taunt-song. The saints celebrate the fall of Babylon.

*In Matthew 10:28, Jesus tells his disciples that rather than fearing men who can kill the body, they should "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." We know what Jesus meant with His reference to men who can kill the body. Here, the ultimate power to kill the whole person in Gehenna (unhelpfully translated "hell") is affirmed by Jesus.*

---

That text poses a dilemma for a physicalist like Glenn. He doesn't believe humans are embodied souls—a composite of an incorporeal soul united to a physical body. From his perspective, everyone is destroyed when they die.

*The gist of the response I would make here is that what is qualified as “eternal” is not any duration of suffering, or the people who are subject to eternal fire, but only the fire itself.*

---

i) That poses another dilemma for annihilationists. Given the symmetry of Mt 25:46, by denying the eternal existence of the damned, they thereby deny the eternal existence of the saints.

ii) We must also take into account how Mt 25:41,46 would be heard by a Jewish audience, accustomed to debates between Pharisees and Sadducees. It's not just a question of what the words mean, but their literary and cultural connotations.

*When Edward Fudge, for example, makes the observation that the worm in this picture “is a devouring worm, and what it eats – in Isaiah’s picture here quoted without amendment – is already dead,”*

*If the unsaved really are the “fuel” that sustains the fire then in order for them to provide a perpetually undepleted source of fuel they would quite simply have to keep producing more material to be burned or they would need to have infinite mass.*

---

Traditionalists don't think God is punishing corpses. That confuses a symbol with what it stands for. Same thing with the objects of fire.

*Perhaps the traditionalist might want to insist that in order for a person's shame and/or contempt to go on existing, it must be the case that the person in question is still alive. But what good reason is there to think that this is true? In fact, there's a biblical example that shows that this is not true.*

*Isaiah 66:24 – in this context God has just victoriously slain his enemies, in vv 15ff*

*What has happened to the wicked? Simple: They are dead. But notice the word “abhorrence” here in the ESV. It varies from one translation to another, “they shall be loathsome” or “they shall be an abhorrence” are common. But here's the*

*thing: It's the same word translated "contempt" in Daniel 12:2, dara'ōn. Here in Isaiah, the contempt is held by the people of God, for the slain enemies of God. Likewise in Daniel 12:2, it's the contempt, not of the wicked, but of the people of God, or perhaps even of God Himself, that is eternal.*

---

That disregards a key difference between Isa 66:24 and Dan 12:2. A traditional way of dishonoring the enemy is to refuse them burial. Their corpse suffers the ignominious fate of being scavenged. Isa 66:24 trades on that imagery.

In Dan 12:2, by contrast, the lost are restored to physical life to experience reproach. The imagery is not about dead bodies, but about the living. Slain enemies have been raised from the dust in order to be shamed. I'd add that Dan 12:2 has NT counterparts (e.g. Jn 5:28-29; Acts 24:15).

*A fire that is not "quenched" is one that is allowed to burn unrestrained (i.e. "unquenched") until it has consumed the object being burnt. This is exactly how such language is used, for example, in Ezekiel 20:47-48.*

*The language used here of the followers of the beast is almost exactly like that used in the prophecy against Edom in Isaiah 34:9-10*

*No exegete has ever suggested that Isaiah 34:9-10 is a reference to the eternal torment of the inhabitants of Edom.*

---

Glenn commits several basic hermeneutical gaffes:

**i)** He begins with a NT text which echoes an OT text, he puts the NT text on hold while he decides what he thinks the OT text really means, then he transfers that interpretation to the NT text. But that, itself, is hermeneutically fallacious:

**a)** When a NT text echoes an OT text, the primary question we need to ask is how the OT text now functions in its NT setting. How does the NT author appropriate that passage? What role does it perform in the flow of argument or narrative strategy?

**b)** Oftentimes, a NT author will use stock imagery from the OT for its precedential resonance. That isn't a prediction/fulfillment relation. Rather, that's based on broad analogies or theological motifs. It doesn't have the same frame of reference. It needn't "mean" the same thing.

**ii)** In the nature of the case, historical judgments in the OT are localized in time and space. But eschatology typically intensifies the scope of judgment. You can't simply

collapse NT eschatological imagery back into historical OT judgments, as if these share the same restrictions.

**iii)** Likewise, I think Isaiah's imagery is hyperbolic. But there's an escalation as we move from historical OT judgments to eschatological judgment. What is hyperbolic in reference to ancient Israel's historic enemies isn't hyperbolic in reference to the final judgment, which is sweeping in scope.

*If the traditionalist were to apply the same method of interpretation to both Revelation and Daniel, we would end up with a glaring contradiction, because if one is slain then one cannot also be kept alive and tormented day and night forever and ever (quite apart from the fact that the beast is not a "someone" who can suffer such a fate).*

---

That's quite nearsighted. Someone can be slain, then resurrected to face never-ending punishment. It's not a "glaring contradiction" at all. It's a simple matter of distinguishing between earlier and later stages of judgment.

Glenn makes a big deal about 2 Thes 1:9, as if that somehow favors annihilationism. However, as Abraham Malherbe observes:

*Paul uses olethros ("ruin") only in eschatological contexts (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Thes 5:3; 2 Thes 1:9). It is related to apoleia ("destruction"; 1 Tim 6:9), but rather than imply annihilation "it carries with it the thought of utter and hopeless ruin, the loss of all that gives worth to existence" (Milligan, 65).*

*The translation "eternal ruin" renders olethron aionion...it does not mean annihilation, but everlasting ruin. The Letters to the Thessalonians (Yale 2000), 292,402.*

---

As a member of the Yale Divinity School, one can't seriously contend that his interpretation is driven by traditional dogma. In his new commentary, Jeffrey Weima observes:

*The word olethron occurs three other times in Paul's letters (1 Thes 5:3; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 6:9), where it appears to have both the literal meaning of physical destruction and the metaphorical sense of disaster or ruin...Here the apostle calls it "eternal" that is, "a period of unending duration, without end" (BDAG 33.3).*

*That Paul does not have in view a destruction of the person that lasts forever (i.e., their annihilation) but rather their unending ruin (e.g., their continuing punishment) seems clear from three factors. First, this is the teaching of Jesus (Mt 5:29-30; 12:32; 18:8-9; 25:41,46; Lk 16:23-25), with which Paul would have been familiar. Second the eternal punishment of the wicked was a common conviction in the apostle's Jewish heritage (e.g. 1QS 2.15; 5:13; Pss. Sol. 2:35; 15:11; 4 Macc 10:15). Third, the following parallel phrases ("from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might") presuppose the ongoing existence of the wicked rather than their annihilation. 1-2 Thessalonians (Baker 2014), 474.*

---

Given how liberal Calvin Seminary is, I seriously doubt Weima's interpretation is dictated by traditional orthodoxy. Back to Glenn:

*When Death is thrown into the lake of fire, it is "killed." This raises questions over the meaning of the lake of fire. If an entity like death can be thrown into it, then does this not make it difficult to conceive of it as a place or state of conscious suffering? It seems clear, as Roloff notes, that the point of depicting Death being cast into the lake of fire is to show that death itself will one day be done away with altogether. This in itself seems to suggest that the lake of fire itself signifies an end, a "death." Mounce affirms this understanding, connecting death's fate in the lake of fire with Isaiah 25:8, which declares that our God will "swallow up death forever."*

---

**i)** To destroy death is like a double negation which results in something positive. If death is the loss of life, then "destroying" death entails immortality—for better or worse. The wicked lose the escape route of death. In fact we have an explicit example of this in Revelation:

*And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them (9:6).*

**ii)** Another problem with Glenn's position is the use of psychological terms like "torment" and having no "rest" in Rev 14:10-11. In the nature of the case, that's only applicable to conscious agents. Nonentities can't experience torment or lack of rest.

**iii)** Although Glenn glancingly interacts with Beale, he ignores Beale's analysis of the second death. Taking their cue from Kline, commentators like Poythress and Beale relate the categories in terms of antithetical parallelism:

**First death** is physical—**second death** is spiritual (i.e. misery)

**First resurrection** is spiritual (i.e. intermediate state)—**second resurrection** is physical (i.e. resurrection of the just)

The second death is not a synonym for oblivion, but misery.

**iv)** Finally, Glenn constantly treats fire as a destructive element. But in Scripture, the symbolic significance of fire is variable. Sometimes it symbolizes a purifying process, sometimes a destructive process, and sometimes punitive pain and suffering (i.e. blistering heat, thirst). The parable of Lazarus and Dives is a classic example of fire as a symbol, not of destruction, but punitive pain.

And in Revelation, fire can signify pain rather than destruction. For instance:

*8 The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. 9 They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues (16:8-9).*

Notice in this passage that purpose of the fire is not to destroy the wicked, but to inflict pain.

## The hermeneutics of annihilationism

A friend and I were discussing annihilationism recently. I'm going to post my email statements:

In large part, the exegetical case for annihilationism is predicated on a fallacy.

The Bible often depicts eschatological punishment in terms of physical destruction or even total destruction. Why is that?

That's because it's using physical metaphors. Metaphors of physical objects undergoing a physical process. Like burning a city to the ground, or burning corpses on the battlefield.

Burning is a reductive process. That, however, doesn't mean damnation is a reductive process. Rather, that's an incidental feature of a picturesque metaphor. The choice of metaphor dictates what's consistent with the metaphor.

But that's an artifact of the chosen metaphor. And you can go very wrong if you overextend a theological metaphor.

Some depictions of eschatological punishment aren't reductive because that's the inherent nature of the damned or the inherent nature of damnation, but because that's the nature of the metaphor.

It doesn't mean human nature is analogous to a burning building. It doesn't mean human nature is analogous to a physical composite like firewood. That confuses the figurative imagery with what it was meant to illustrate.

Annihilationists naively draw metaphysical inferences from picture language.

**i)** Obviously, a lot of what's driving annihilationism is reaction to the torture chamber model of hell. There's the intuition that never-ending torture is a fate worse than oblivion. And that intuition certainly has some appeal.

Mind you, it's striking how many people will endure years of torture, when they're in a position to kill themselves or provoke their summary execution, in the sometimes vain hope of liberation. The will to live is very strong.

And even those who are liberated after years of torture live with nightmares and chronic pain. Yet they still choose that over death.

**ii)** I myself doubt that hell is any one thing. I doubt it's a torture chamber. Some of the damned may well suffer torture. And some of them richly deserve to be on the receiving end of what they inflicted on others.



One ethical/philosophical problem I have is that I don't share annihilationist intuitions. I mean, I can see why annihilation might seem to be more humane than everlasting torture—if that's the comparison.

Yet considered on its own terms, why does everlasting punishment reflect badly on God's character, but God zapping his enemies out of existence does not reflect badly on God's character?

What about Damien (a la the Omen) zapping people out of existence, with a snap of his fingers.

Another thing: it's just a historical accident that most folks don't commit atrocities. Consider German guards at concentration camps or Japanese guards at POW camps who take sadistic delight in torturing defenseless inmates. If the same guards were born a generation earlier or a generation later, they might never hurt a fly. They just happen to find themselves in a situation which smokes out their true character.

A lot of people are closet sociopaths. It's just fear of reprisal that restrains them. So even though they never did anything horrendous in this life, that's quite deceptive. It doesn't tell you anything about their capacity for evil, which can emerge with terrifying ease if the conditions are right.

I'd like to make a few comments on the finite crime/infinite punishment objection:

**i)** As I've said before, that's equivocal. It compares a qualitative property (culpability, demerit) with a quantitative property (duration).

**ii)** Moreover, it backfires. If everlasting misery is an infinite penalty for finite sin, then everlasting oblivion is an infinite penalty for finite sin.

**iii)** Furthermore, what makes the transgressions finite? Let's revert to my illustration. Why did German/Japanese guards stop torturing inmates. Not because they got tired of torturing inmates. Not because they repented of their evil ways.

Rather, in some cases they stopped because they killed the inmate. If they could resuscitate him, they continue to torture him. Twice the fun for half the supply.

More generally, they had to stop because they lost the war. They no longer had that power over other human beings.

Ultimately, they stopped because they died. So they commit finite atrocities because they have finite opportunities, not because they have a finite inclination to do so. They may have an insatiable inclination. They simply run out of time.

Suppose you had an immortal serial killer. Suppose he's never caught. Or he pays off the authorities.

He never stops torturing victims to death. It's one after another after another. A potential infinite.

**iv)** Finally, there's another exegetical challenge for annihilationism:

**a)** In crude annihilationism, oblivion itself is the punishment. Death is the ultimate punishment. God punishes them by never restoring them to life.

A stock objection to that sanction is that the penalty doesn't fit the crime. Attila the Hun and the small-time crook suffer the identical fate. And that's an ironic objection for a position that levels the same objection to everlasting punishment.

**b)** Hence, sophisticated annihilationism says God resurrects some (all?) of the wicked to make they suffer their finite just deserts before annihilating them.

However, that scenario requires a double oblivion:

Oblivion when you die.

Temporary resurrection.

A return to oblivion when God zaps them out of existence after they suffered enough retribution.

But where does Scripture teach post-mortem oblivion?

Postmortem oblivion followed by temporary resurrection followed by a second, permanent oblivion?

I don't think it even teaches postmortem oblivion, much less post-mortem oblivion?

## A Fudgesicle's chance in hell

I'm going to comment on an interview with Edward Fudge, the influential annihilationist:

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-conditionalist-response>

*Conditionalists begin with the premise that only God is inherently immortal. First Timothy 6:16 says that only God has immortality in himself. Humans are not naturally immortal. Every moment of our existence is a gift from God.*

---

How is that a conditionalist distinctive? How does that stand in contrast to what proponents of everlasting punishment believe? Everlasting punishment isn't predicated on the inherent immortality of the soul, as if the soul is indestructible even for God. All creaturely existence is contingent on divine conservation.

*The notion of immortal souls is a pagan Greek myth, brought by converted philosophers into the early Christian church.*

---

- i) Even if that's true of the church fathers, modern proponents of everlasting punishment don't have the same background.
- ii) Many Christians espouse the immortality of the soul based on biblical prooftexts for the intermediate state.
- iii) We could just as well say that the notion of a mortalism was brought in by pagan philosophy, viz. atomism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism.
- iv) I'd add that unitarians accuse Trinitarians of being overly influence by pagan Greek philosophy, too.

*If by "strongest" you mean the argument from whose clutches those bound by it find it most difficult to escape, it is not a scriptural argument at all. It is the argument that says: "The church has always taught unending conscious torment and therefore it must be right." Aside from the fact that the assertion itself is false, the sweeping change of mind on this subject is driven most of all by a close reading and examination of the Bible. If someone puts ecclesiastical tradition ahead of biblical teaching, that person is rarely motivated to consider change.*

---

That's scurrilous hasty generalization. It's true that some Christians simply default to ecclesiastical tradition. But what about Adventists who espouse annihilationism because

that's what their church has always taught? Likewise, Fudge is a Churches of God minister. But that's a denomination with its own entrenched doctrinal traditions.

*When John 3:16 says the options are eternal life or perish, conditionalists say that means just what it seems to say.*

---

And when Jn 3:36 says "Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him," is that synonymous with annihilation?

*Even if we knew none of the above, it would not be proper to interpret dozens of clear statements throughout the Bible to fit one or two symbolic passages in the Book of Revelation. It is a well-established rule of interpretation that one should read symbolic or unclear texts in the light of texts that are non-symbolic and clear, not the other way around. Nor is it appropriate to choose an opinion supported by a handful of texts at best and to discard an alternate view that has the support of many multiples more of scripture passages from Genesis to Revelation. The preponderance of evidence favors the latter, and this principle justifies our accepting the conditionalist case even if we have a few unanswered questions remaining.*

---

**i)** That's methodologically fallacious. If his prooftexts all say the same kind of thing, if they all use the same type of imagery, then it comes down to one interpretation. These aren't different ways of expressing the same ideas, as if each passages makes an independent contribution to the cumulative evidence. Rather, if most of them are all of a kind, then it's a question of how you interpret that kind of imagery. Take fiery images. In each instance, you will offer the same interpretation. You think they mean the same thing. So the strength of the claim is contingent, not on how many prooftexts you can marshal, but on a common interpretation. It's only as good as your singular interpretation of multiple texts.

**ii)** Moreover, Fudge says:

*The Old Testament uses at least fifty verbs and seventy metaphors or similes to picture the final end of sinners. They will be like: chaff blown away, a snail that melts, grass cut down, wax that melts, and smoke that vanishes.*

---

But in that event, it's false to contrast "dozens of clear statements" which allegedly support annihilationism with a few "symbolic" passages. For by his own admission, his

prooftexts employ metaphor and similes. But in that case, we're comparing and contrasting different symbolic representations. It's not dozens of literal statements compared to a few figurative statements. For he concedes that his own prooftexts are figurative as well.

Suppose you have a 100 Bible passages that describe eschatological "destruction" in terms of burning. But unless you think God literally annihilates the damned by incinerating them, the reductive process is a reductive metaphor. Figurative destruction.

Likewise, unless you think maggots literally consume the damned, then that's picture language. Are the souls of the damned are edible?

What makes it "destructive" is the chosen metaphor. But unless you think the souls of the damned are made of wood, burning them isn't an indication that they are literally destroyed.

*When the Old Testament talks about the final end of the wicked, it uses language that sounds like total extinction.*

---

Does this sound like total extinction?

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:2).*

Is shame and everlasting contempt conceptually equivalent to oblivion?

*Sodom was reduced to ashes and became an example of what awaits the wicked. Jude says that Sodom (which was destroyed forever) provides an example of eternal fire.*

*The book of Isaiah closes with a scene of the redeemed in the New Jerusalem. God has killed the wicked, whose corpses are being consumed by gnawing maggots and smoldering fire (Isa. 66:24). Malachi foretells a time when the wicked will be set ablaze and burn until nothing is left except ashes under the soles of the feet of the righteous (Mal. 4:1-3). John the Baptist -- He introduces Jesus as the End Time judge who will separate between "wheat" and "chaff," and who will "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12).*

---

Does he think the fiery imagery is literal or figurative? Does he think God annihilates the damned by setting them on fire?

*There are two eternal destinies according to Jesus: eternal life and eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). Both are eternal because they belong to the Age to Come, and also because they do not have an end.*

---

**i)** That's a fence-straddling interpretation. Does the adjective really mean both "the age to come" and "never-ending"?

In principle, if it just means belonging to the age to come, what if the age to come is temporary? Just another epoch?

**ii)** Additionally, if the damned cease to exist, then their punishment comes to an end.

**iii)** And how, moreover, can nonentities weep and grind their teeth?

*We know what "life" means, but what is the form of this "punishment"? It is the destruction of both soul and body (Matt. 10:28), a destruction that is eternal (2 Thes. 1:9). It is eternal, total, capital punishment that will never be reversed.*

---

**i)** Does this mean Fudge is a dualist? Does he affirm an immaterial soul? If so, how does physical fire consume an immaterial soul?

**ii)** If the soul doesn't survive the death of the body, then by killing a man you zap him out of existence. A human assailant has the power to destroy both body and soul by murdering the victim. But that weakens or erases the contrast between human persecutors and the divine judge.

**iii)** How, moreover, does fire literally annihilate evil spirits?

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt 25:41).

Does Fudge think angels are combustible? Are angels composed of flammable material? If not, then this is figurative imagery.

**iv)** Furthermore, how is annihilationism consistent with passages which say eschatological punishment is worse than oblivion?

*The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born (Mt 26:24).*

*28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God,*

*and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:28-29).*

---

If the damned pass out of existence, then it's as if they never existed in the first place.

*The wicked city "Babylon," is pictured as a woman. In Chapter 18, her judgment is "torment and grief," which turns out to be death, mourning, and famine, and she is consumed by fire. It is not unthinkable, therefore, to understand "torment" of the devil, beast and false prophet as death and consumption by fire which is never reversed. Interestingly, there are no people in this verse--only the devil, beast and false prophet. The latter two are symbolic personifications of anti-Christian institutions: ungodly government (the Roman state) and antichrist religion (the emperor cult).*

---

**i)** To begin with, many Christians think the Bible teaches a personal Antichrist.

**ii)** In addition, assuming that the beast and the false prophet are personifications, the "whore of Babylon" is undoubtedly a personification. How can Fudge say, on the one hand, that the fate of the beast and the false prophet don't indicate the fate of the damned inasmuch as these are personifications, but on the other hand, the fate of the whore of Babylon does indicate the fate of the damned, even though that's surely a personification?

*By the time the vision reaches the point described in Revelation 20:10, all human followers of the beast and false prophet already have been killed, either by sword in the first diabolical mustering of troops against the Rider on the White Horse (Rev. 19:21), or by fire from heaven in the second such adventure a thousand years later (Rev. 20:9).*

---

**i)** How is that inconsistent with the opposing position? Proponents of everlasting punishment don't deny that God's enemies sometimes suffer physical death. So that observation misses the point.

**ii)** Moreover, what about statements in Revelation which indicate the continued existence of the damned after the dust settles:

*27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 21:27).*

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood (Rev 22:14).

You have two groups: the saints who dwell in the New Jerusalem, and the damned who are barred from the New Jerusalem.

*The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus says nothing about the nature of hell or what happens to those who finally go there. ..At most, this story might say something about an intermediate state for unfaithful Jews at some time before Jesus died and rose from the dead. However, neither the context nor the punch-line is about any intermediate state of the dead, so we need not think that this parable teaches even that.*

---

**i)** It's more accurate to say the parable doesn't bother to distinguish between the intermediate state and the final state.

**ii)** The parable classically illustrates the reversal of fortunes. The righteous who suffer in this life will prosper in the afterlife while the wicked who prosper in this life will suffer in the afterlife. But annihilationism destroys the antithetical parallelism.

**iii)** Notice that in this parable, fire represents punitive pain and suffering (e.g. thirst) rather than destruction. Fudge constantly assumes that fire signifies destruction. He ignores the symbolic range of fire.

Take a passage that's quite similar to annihilationist prooftexts: Mt 7:24-27. The theme of total loss. Total destruction.

Yet it would be silly to say that describes the annihilation of the lost. Rather, it describes the total destruction or total loss of everything they live for, everything they acquire. Even though this passage ultimately refers to the eschatological judgment that awaits those who build on a sandy foundation, it doesn't imply the total destruction of the unbeliever, but rather, the total loss of his cumulative achievements, of everything he aspired to. At the end, he is bereft.

A contemporary analogue would be a shady business man (e.g. Bernie Madoff) who suffers utter ruin when he's caught and convicted.

What makes it punitive is that he exists to experience the consequences of his folly.



## Bedlam

i) I'd like to briefly compare the orthodox position on the Christian afterlife with physicalist annihilationism. I'm going to focus on the afterlife of the saints rather than the damned.

ii) On the orthodox position, humans have immortal souls which survive the death of the body. On this view, the postmortem state has both a vertical and horizontal dimension. Vertically, the human race dies in stages. The older generation dies, then the younger generation dies. Great-grandparents die, then grandparents die, then parents die, then children die, then grandchildren die, then great-grandchildren die, and so on and so forth.

This means that, to a great extent, the intermediate state mirrors a historical sequence. The first human generation died first, then the next human generation, and so on. From the earliest to the latest.

In that respect, the intermediate state preserves the cultural memories of every time and place. Each period and culture and is represented in the memories of particular saints. And that's laid down in a natural sequence, based on their arrival date. In that respect, dying is a bit like stepping into a time machine.

That also raises the question of whether the intermediate state has a blended culture, as saints from different times and places socialize.

Related to the vertical dimension is a horizontal dimension. We don't simply die as discrete individuals. Rather, we die with our contemporaries. Death is roughly grouped according to age-mates. People of the same generation tend to die within the same basic time span. That's a part of what defines a generation. They were born around the same time and they die around the same time.

Of course, there are partial exceptions. Sometimes a member of the younger generation predeceases a member of the older generation. Yet they are still contemporaries. It's just a distinction between younger and older contemporaries.

On this view, when you die, there are members of your own generation waiting to receive you. Likewise, there are members from the generation before you. And in this life, you knew members of the generation before you. There are roughly three generations alive at any particular time in the here and now—sometimes more.

When you die, the greeting party includes, or consists of, your contemporaries. You and they speak the same language. Not merely the same language, but the same period language. You and they have the same cultural background.

In addition, the intermediate state contains people from different periods. But because new arrivals disembark in a historical sequences, and because they disembark

incrementally, rather than all at once, new arrivals are gradually acculturated to the intermediate state. There are people there whom they can instantly relate to on their own level. And that eases the transition as they get acquainted with saints from different times and places.

**iii)** Now let's compare that to physicalist annihilationism. On that view, the brain generates the mind. When your body dies, when you undergo brain death, that erases your personality. You cease to exist. The mind is gone.

Then, at the resurrection of the just, God recreates your body and uploads your mind (consciousness, memories) into the new brain. God had a copy of your mind, which he transfers to the new brain.

Millennia may separate your death from your resurrection, but you're oblivious to the interval, long or short. There's no you to be aware of the gap. There's the moment of death, when you pass into oblivion, for however long, then the next thing you know, you're alive in your new body.

There is no intermediate state, just the final state on the new earth. Because the resurrection of the just is simultaneous, all the saints who died at different times and places are suddenly restored to consciousness at the same time. There's no transitional stage. No phasing one generation of decedents into the company of former generations. It happens all at once.

On the face of it, that would be extremely disorienting. OT saints, medieval saints, saints from the 18C, 19C, 20C and so on, all thrown together. Bedlam.

I'm not saying this is a deal-breaker for physicalist annihilationism. But it's a jarring scenario compared to the orthodox position.

## IV. Concepts of hell

---

### Hell is what you live for

Some years ago I did a post on biblical metaphors for hell:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/10/images-of-hell.html>

The point of the post is that conventional views of hell generally neglect the range of metaphors used to illustrate the condition of the damned.

Recently I did a short story on hell ("Journey out of hell"). As fiction, it wasn't necessarily meant to be theologically accurate. The hell which the characters experienced was a hell of their own imagination.

That, however, raises an interesting question which I've touched on in the past. There may well be a sense in which hell is a theme park furnished by the imagination of the damned—like the Dark Island in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

If so, hell is self-inflicted punishment because the source of suffering is the externalized imagination of the damned. The more evil the damned, the darker their minds.

The damned can't reasonably complain about their punishment because they are being punished by their own wicked imagination. This may mean hell is worse for some of the damned than others, because the imagination of some unbelievers is soaked in evil. Hell is only as bad as you are. The worse you are, the worse hell will be because it mirrors your heart.

This might also mean that for some of the damned, hell is like a horror flick or gangster flick, because that's the mental world they inhabit even before they die. Hell is what you live for—even before you get there. Some moviegoers revel in vicarious sadism.

Ironically, while progressive theologians eliminate hell, secular directors reintroduce hell. For some of the damned, hell might be forever warring crime families. For some of the damned, hell might contain monsters like werewolves, zombies, vampires, Terminators, Xenomorphs, &c. Monsters animated by the lurid minds of the damned. In that respect, hell may be compartmentalized.

By the same token, we might describe heaven (or the world to come) as what you live for. The difference is that the saints live for something different than the damned.

I'm not suggesting that horror flicks are necessarily evil or evil to watch. Monsters in horror flicks can be powerful personified emblems of archetypal dread, malevolence, and retribution. Paradoxically, showing evil can be good. But it's a question of balance. The Bible sometimes describes evil in shockingly graphic terms (e.g. Judges, Lamentations, Revelation, Ezk 18 & 23). But that provides a contrastive background for good.

## Life in the compound

A stock objection to Christianity is that it's unreasonable for God to punish people simply because they refuse to believe in him. Indeed, the accusation is often harsher: God must be an emotionally insecure, egotistical bully if he cares that much what human think of him.

As a matter of fact, I don't think God's self-esteem is indexed to what humans think of him—although freewill theists often act like that's the case. Rather, the problem is what it says about us.

The problem runs much deeper than belief. To revisit an illustration I've used in the past, it's like people are born in a concentration camp. It's not a question of losing their freedom. Rather, captivity is their situation from the outset. The question is what, if anything, they will do to get out.

The camp is rumored to have a hidden tunnel which some prisoners use as an escape route. However, most prisoners make no effort to confirm the existence of the tunnel. They are content to live out their days in the concentration camp.

Indeed, they are very protective about their captivity. If they overhear a prisoner plotting to escape, they rat him out to the prison guards. They cheer when he's shot.

Many unbelievers don't make any serious effort to find out if Christianity is true. They know that death is inevitable. Although they may not believe in the afterlife, they haven't seriously investigated the question. Instead, they piss away their life in utter indifference. There might be a tunnel right under their feet, but they don't bother to look for the entrance. They plant flowers in the graveyard. Decorate the barracks. Compose patriotic songs about the concentration camp. Snitch on disloyal prisoners.

## Virtual hell

Hell has fallen on hard times. There are "evangelical universalists" and "evangelical annihilationists".

As interactive video games and virtual reality become increasingly sophisticated, it will be possible to be the "god" of your own virtual world. Design a virtual world that mirrors your values. You devise the plot, setting, and characters. Unlike the real world, where you're subject to legal and social restrictions, in the virtual world you can be totally uninhibited. You can act with absolute impunity. You can do whatever you wish to your virtual characters, without fear of consequences. The perfect double life.

How many of these customized virtual worlds will be psychopathic utopias? A bacchanalian orgy of exploitation and unbridled cruelty? A sociopathic dream come true?

Hell doesn't brutalize the damned. Rather, hell exposes the unrepressed brutality of the damned.

Heaven and hell are reciprocal conditions. There's a sense in which hell is what makes heaven heavenly and heaven is what makes hell hellish. Which is not to deny that heaven has a positive identity, but in a moral universe there are two divergent paths. Evil reveals what goodness is not while goodness reveals what evil is not. Although good would still be good without evil, good and evil are mutually interpretive conditions.

In principle, each human life might have the same starting-point, but fork off in opposite directions. Heaven and hell represent divergent paths taken to consistent extremes. The saints in glory can look back and say, "That's why I might have been!" Every saint had an alter-ego.

## The dark island

In *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the narrator describes the dark island. Although it wasn't Lewis's intention, I think this is a good model of hell. What makes it hellish is the lurid imagination of the stranded inhabitants. The dark island is a projection of their minds. Their imagination is the source of the unending nightmare. They don't suffer as a result of something superimposed from the outside. Rather, their dark imagination creates the dark island. Their nemesis is their own imagination. That's poetic justice.

*Suddenly, from somewhere—no one's sense of direction was very clear by now—there came a cry, either of some inhuman voice or else a voice of one in such extremity of terror that he had almost lost his humanity.*

*Caspian was still trying to speak—his mouth was too dry—when the shrill voice of Reepicheep, which sounded louder than usual in that silence, was heard.*

*"Who calls?" it piped. "If you are a foe we do not fear you, and if you are a friend your enemies shall be taught the fear of us."*

*"Mercy!" cried the voice. "Mercy! Even if you are only one more dream, have mercy. Take me on board. Take me, even if you strike me dead. But in the name of all mercies do not fade away and leave me in this horrible land."*

*"Where are you?" shouted Caspian. "Come aboard and welcome."*

*There came another cry, whether of joy or terror, and then they knew that someone was swimming towards them.*

*"Stand by to heave him up, men," said Caspian.*

*"Aye, aye, your Majesty," said the sailors. Several crowded to the port bulwark with ropes and one, leaning far out over the side, held the torch. A wild, white face appeared in the blackness of the water, and then, after some scrambling and pulling, a dozen friendly hands had heaved the stranger on board.*

*Edmund thought he had never seen a wilder-looking man. Though he did not otherwise look very old, his hair was an untidy mop of white, his face was thin and drawn, and, for clothing, only a few wet rags hung about him. But what one mainly noticed were his eyes, which were so widely opened that he seemed to have no eyelids at all, and stared as if in an agony of pure fear. The moment his feet reached the deck he said:*

---

*“Fly! Fly! About with your ship and fly! Row, row, row for your lives away from this accursed shore.”*

*“Compose yourself,” said Reepicheep, “and tell us what the danger is. We are not used to flying.”*

*The stranger started horribly at the voice of the Mouse, which he had not noticed before.*

*“Nevertheless you will fly from here,” he gasped. “This is the Island where Dreams come true.”*

*“That’s the island I’ve been looking for this long time,” said one of the sailors. “I reckoned I’d find I was married to Nancy if we landed here.”*

*“And I’d find Tom alive again,” said another.*

*“Fools!” said the man, stamping his foot with rage. “That is the sort of talk that brought me here, and I’d better have been drowned or never born. Do you hear what I say? This is where dreams—dreams, do you understand, come to life, come real. Not daydreams: dreams.”*

*There was about half a minute’s silence and then, with a great clatter of armour, the whole crew were tumbling down the main hatch as quick as they could and flinging themselves on the oars to row as they had never rowed before; and Drinian was swinging round the tiller, and the boatswain was giving out the quickest stroke that had ever been heard at sea. For it had taken everyone just that halfminute to remember certain dreams they had had—dreams that make you afraid of going to sleep again—and to realize what it would mean to land on a country where dreams come true.*

---



## Film noir hell

Dante's detailed, claustrophobic depiction of hell captured popular imagination, although I'm not sure how many people have actually read *The Inferno*. For many believers and unbelievers alike, I think their mental image of hell is influenced, at least indirectly, by Dante. That includes comic books and video games.

From a different angle, secular totalitarianism is hellish. Kafka's tormented mind provides a precursor in *The Trial*, followed by *1984* and *Darkness at Noon*.

If I were making a movie about hell, film noir would be an apt genre. Classic examples include *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep*. But due to the Production Code, these are more like black comedies.

Because neo-noir films don't labor under the same inhibitions, they're more realistic. Examples include *Chinatown*; *Farewell, My Lovely* (both of which I saw as a teenager), and *L.A. Confidential*. When I saw it for the first and only time, I hated *Chinatown*, not because it was a bad film—it's a great film of its kind—but because I was repelled by the wanton amorality of its characters. A world where you can't trust anyone. Everybody cheats. Everybody betrays everyone else.

In the noir genre, the detective functions as the eyes of the audience. We see the world through the resignation of the detective. In a better world he might be a better man, but the noirish world is engulfed in suffocating mediocrity. There's nothing to believe in. No one to admire. No one to look up to. Everyone is trapped on the inside—not because they can't get out, but because there's no outside. They drink, philander, and gamble away their abject lives in desperate resignation, interspersed with studied cruelty to break the pitiless monotony. Sadistic comic relief. That's a hellish existence.

## Posthumous punishment

*@RandalRauser*

*Historically, the most widely held theory of posthumous punishment within Christianity has been eternal conscious torment (ECT), the doctrine that people will be resurrected to face a punishment of unimaginable anguish that will never end. When assessing this idea, we must be accurate with our descriptions. And the first thing to recognize is that this is properly described as torture. After all, torture is, by definition, the infliction of severe mental and/or physical torment as a form of punishment. That's ECT. Thus, when a person says that ECT involves God torturing people forever, they are not indulging in a rhetorical uncharity. Rather, they are accurately describing the view. So the question is whether one ought to think that God would torture people forever. Is that the best view of posthumous punishment?*

---

That's a slipshod characterization:

1. You can believe the damned experience unending punishment without supposing all the damned experience "torture". There can be gradations of misery or punitive suffering.

2. For argument's sake, let's play along with "torment". Rauser fails to distinguish between three different propositions:

- i) God torments the damned
- ii) The damned torment each other
- iii) The damned torment themselves

Suppose God puts all the brutal dictators on an island. They might well torture each other. That's different from God torturing them.

Or, to take a less extreme example, suppose God puts mean people on an island. They will be mean to each other. But that's different from an external agent imposing misery on them. Rather, he simply puts some nasty people in a group, and they do the rest. That's collective self-inflicted misery.

In addition, we all know individuals who make themselves miserable. Hateful people are miserable. They aren't miserable because of how they are treated by others. Rather, their hateful disposition makes them miserable. That's individual self-inflicted misery.

## Circumstantial luck

On a number of occasions I've proposed counterfactual guilt as a justification for eternal punishment. Here's a striking illustration:

*What we do is also limited by the opportunities and choices with which we are faced, and these are largely determined by factors beyond our control. Someone who was an officer in a concentration camp might have led a quiet and harmless life if the Nazis had never come to power in Germany. And someone who led a quiet and harmless life in Argentina might have become an officer in a concentration camp if he had not left Germany for business reasons in 1930.*

*The third category to consider is luck in one's circumstances. I shall mention it briefly. The things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face, are importantly determined by factors beyond our control. It may be true of someone that in a dangerous situation he would behave in a cowardly or heroic fashion, but if the situation never arises, he will never have the chance to distinguish or disgrace himself in this way, and his moral record will be different.*

*A conspicuous example of this is political. Ordinary citizens of Nazi Germany had an opportunity to behave heroically by opposing the regime. They also had an opportunity to behave badly, and most of them are culpable for having failed this test. But it is a test to which the citizens of other countries were not subjected, with the result that even if they, or some of them, would have behaved as badly as the Germans in like circumstances, they simply did not and therefore are not similarly culpable. Here again one is morally at the mercy of fate, and it may seem irrational upon reflection, but our ordinary moral attitudes would be unrecognizable without it. We judge people for what they actually do or fail to do, not just for what they would have done if circumstances had been different. Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," *Moral Questions* (Cambridge 1991). chap. 3.*

---

**i)** It's a matter of "circumstantial luck" that some people commit atrocities while others lead decent lives. If their situations were reversed, their conduct would be reversed.

**ii)** In addition, this often involves circumstances beyond their control. The situation in which they find themselves. They didn't create the situation.

**iii)** I don't quite agree with Nagel's conclusion. As a matter of penology, we punish people for what they actually do or fail to do, not for what they would have done if circumstances had been different. That's in part because, unlike God, we lack counterfactual knowledge. In addition, penology is largely practical. About social incentives and disincentives rather than ultimate justice.

**iv)** But from the standpoint of eschatological justice, which concerns itself with meting out what people deserve, the considerations are different. It's not so much that they are directly judged by what they might have done or failed to do, but what counterfactual scenarios expose about their character defects.

## Scandinavian hell

I'd like to make a brief observation about hell. There are Christians, apostates, and atheists who get carried away with the poetic imagery.

If, however, the Bible was originally revealed in, say, Iceland, the Yukon, or Scandinavia, rather than a hot dry climate like Palestine, the hellish imagery might instead draw on snow and ice, arctic temperatures, a polar vortex, and a continuous polar night.

The "geography" of hell is based on the Middle East. The "geography" of hell would vary if originally revealed in regions with different landscape and climate. The metaphors are to some degree culturebound. A tropical depiction of hell might be characterized by an abundance of nasty reptiles and stinging insects.

## Postmortem stages

The Bible distinguishes between this life and the afterlife. It subdivides the afterlife into the intermediate state and the final state. And it subdivides the final state into heaven and hell. The question is how to sequence these stages.

### I. TRADITIONAL PROTESTANT ESCHATOLOGY

Every man has one of two eternal destinies. Every man is either heavenbound or hellbound. Those run on parallel tracks.

In addition, the traditional view has a two-stage postmortem eschatology: when a man dies, his soul passes into the intermediate state. Then, on the day of judgement, the dead will be resurrected. The saints will spend eternity on the new earth while the damned will presumably spend eternity at some alternative physical location.

The parallel tracks temporarily converge at the Parousia, where you have a common event (the general resurrection), then they diverge after that event.

There's a simple logic to the traditional position. On the one hand, men die at different times. On the other hand, the day of judgment is a one-time event which all men will experience at the same time. The intermediate state is sequenced successively and individualistically while the final state is simultaneous and corporate.

The only folks who don't experience the intermediate state are people alive at the time of the Parousia.

### II. CATHOLICISM

In traditional Catholicism, those who die in a state of grace pass into Purgatory before they go to heaven, while those who die in a state of mortal sin are inexorably hellbound.

### III. UNIVERSALISM

A universalist must do something with all the passages regarding eschatological judgment. In universalism, heaven and hell aren't parallel tracks, but successive stages: many decedents must go through hell to get to heaven. They first go to hell when they die: a purgatorial hell. Then they graduate to heaven.

### IV. ANNIHILATIONISM

Annihilationists subdivide into dualist and physicalist annihilationists. They must do something with the passages regarding eschatological judgment.

According to physicalist annihilationism, the damned pass into oblivion at the moment of death. They are resurrected at the day of judgment, suffer a period of temporary punishment, and are then annihilated.

According to dualist annihilationism, the damned pass into the intermediate state at the moment of death, in which they suffer psychological punishment. They are resurrected on the day of judgment, and then annihilated.

Each position only has so many possible combinations, given the variables. There are only so many ways in which the variables can be serially arranged. So the variables fall into place, depending on the commitments of the adherent.

The traditional Protestant position is the most straightforward reading of Scripture. That's how Scripture lays things out. After you die, you either pass into a heavenly or hellish intermediate state. And the final state is a physical extension of one of those two conditions.

A challenge facing annihilationists and universalists is how to show that Scripture selects for their particular series of postmortem events. Universalists have a different sequence from annihilationists. Dualist annihilationists have a different sequence from physicality annihilationists. Does the Bible specifically outline one sequence of postmortem stages over another? Or is it the position in itself that dictates a specific sequence of postmortem stages?

## Lost

I think it's very hard for moderns to appreciate the fear of being lost. In the age of maps and street signs and GPS and smartphones, it's well-nigh impossible to be really and truly lost. You have to go hiking in a remote wilderness or travel to a Third World backwater. Nowadays it takes a real effort to be utterly lost. You can almost always get directions or call for help.

But in the ancient world, it was terrifyingly easy to be utterly lost. Have no clue how to get back to where you were before you lost your way or how to find your destination from where you now are.

And that's a problem because lostness is a major theological metaphor (e.g. Ps 119:176; Jer 50:6; Ezk 34:4; Zech 11:16; Mt 10:6; Lk 15:4; 19:10). Modernday Christian readers need to exercise their imagination to feel those passages.

i) A person can be physically lost or psychologically lost. In his autobiography, Mark Twain recounts a personal anecdote of the former:

*A bat is beautifully soft and silky; I do not know any creature that is pleasanter to the touch or is more grateful for caressings, if offered in the right spirit. I know all about these coleoptera, because our great cave, three miles below Hannibal, was multitudinously stocked with them...I think she [his mother] was never in the cave in her life; but everybody else went there. Many excursion parties came from considerable distances up and down the river to visit the cave. It was miles in extent and was a tangled wilderness of narrow and lofty clefts and passages. It was an easy place to get lost in; anybody could do it--including the bats. I got lost in it myself, along with a lady, and our last candle burned down to almost nothing before we glimpsed the search party's lights winding about in the distance.*

---

ii) Perhaps more terrifying than physical lostness is psychological lostness. In some cases that has both a physical and psychological dimension. Take someone scooped off the street and carted off to a KGB prison. The prisoner knows where he is. So he's not lost in that sense.

But he's out of contact with his friends and family. No one knows where to find him. No one knows if he's dead or alive. He may spend the rest of his life in the claustrophobic recesses of a KGB prison. No one on the outside will ever hear from him again.

He may never go home. Or he may be released so many years later that there's no home to go back to.



**iii)** Or take a war orphan. He knows where he is. But he's lost in the sense that he's cut off from his relatives. He's no longer a part of anyone. He no longer has a sense of belonging. He's socially and emotionally adrift. Without relatives to love and protect him, the world suddenly becomes a very indifferent, uncaring place.

**iv)** From there we shift to examples of sheer psychological lostness. Take someone who's mind is slipping away due to dementia or mental illness. A temporary example is drug-induced psychosis. Losing your mind is more terrifying than physical lostness. That's not about your surroundings; not about being in the wrong place. Rather, that's you. That's the essence of who you are. You are disappearing. You are ceasing to be, bit by bit. Or so it seems.

Virginia Woolf was prone to bouts of insanity. During a lucid period she committed suicide because she couldn't face the prospect of being sucked into yet another bout of insanity.

**v)** Or take a bad dream in which you're trying to get home. But you take the wrong bus. You keep going in the wrong direction. The distance between you and home increases. You keep moving ever further from your desired destination. You become more and more lost as the dream takes you down strange streets and alleyways into a heart of darkness. Inescapably lost—until you awaken. But the damned never wake up. Circling forever deeper into the infinite labyrinth of hell.

When we read about the lost condition of unbelievers, we should visualize examples like these, to help regain the elemental fear that gripped our forebears.

## "The damnable thing about damnation"

Apostate atheist-cum-philosophy prof Keith Parsons attempted to respond to an Amazon reviewer:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/10/04/the-damnable-thing-about-damnation/>

As it turns out, the reviewer copy/pasted some criticisms that I raised in chap. 10 of:

<https://calvindude.org/ebooks/stevehays/The-End-of-Infidelity.pdf>

As a result, Parsons is actually responding to me. Not that his replies are very responsive.

*In chapter ten, Parsons assails the traditional doctrine of hell. One basic problem is that he quotes a few passages of Scripture, which he doesn't bother to exegete. He simply takes his interpretation for granted, then builds on that presumptive interpretation. His entire objection to hell is predicated on the torture chamber model of hell. Without that presupposition, his case collapses. Yet he fails to defend his key interpretation.*

*I address my critique to the concept of hell as it was defended by some of the most influential and orthodox of Christian theologians and church "fathers," such as Tertullian, Aquinas, Jerome, Augustine, Peter Lombard, and Jonathan Edwards. The "torture chamber" model of hell, as featured prominently in Dante's Inferno and innumerable depictions of the last judgment by Christian artists, was, and remains, a prominent element of Christian eschatology.*

---

The problem is if he equates attacking their concept of hell with the Biblical concept of hell.

*What about my interpretation of scripture? I cannot be guilty of giving an erroneous interpretation since I give none at all. I quote some of the more lurid NT passages about postmortem punishment (Mark 9: 47-48; Rev. 20:10; Rev. 20:15; and Luke 16: 22-24) and note that, though the images of an eternal punitive hell might look like "sick men's dreams," as Hume put it, these doctrines were "...thought out with careful deliberation and based upon scriptural authority. (p. 237)"*

---

Either the "lurid" passages are literal or figurative. If figurative, the next question is what the imagery stands for.

*In other words, the theorists of hell could and did appeal to scriptural authority in support of their claims. Therefore, it is their interpretations of those scriptures that I took for granted, not my own (which, again, I never offered).*

---

Which is the problem. Parsons fails to distinguish the history of reception from what the text meant. Imagine if I critique Hume's argument against miracles based on Doug Geivett's interpretation of Hume. Suppose it's a solid critique given that interpretation. But unless my critique is based on an accurate interpretation of Hume, I have failed to critique Hume's position. Why is it so hard for a philosopher prof. like Parsons to grasp that elementary distinction?

Sure, Parsons can "take their interpretation for granted," but then, if you disagree with their interpretation, his case against hell collapses since he never bothered to show that their interpretation matches the meaning of Scripture. Was it his intention to let Scripture off the hook? His real target was subsequent theological developments and ecclesiastical traditions?

BTW, I've discussed the Biblical imagery of hell in more detail here:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/10/images-of-hell.html>

*For that matter, consider all the things we would have done wrong if we thought we could get away with it. That's culpable, too...*

---

*So, you are subject to punishment not just for the sins you actually do commit but for the ones you would have committed had you been given the opportunity. In other words, you are punished for the sins you commit not just in the actual world but in other possible worlds as well. So, if there is a possible world in which you fornicate with [insert favorite sex symbol here] then that is punishable too. Wow. It seems a bit unfair though that you have to suffer the punishment without getting the fun.*

---

His response is to ridicule the notion of counterfactual punishment rather than refute the notion of counterfactual punishment. So his response is intellectually frivolous. What makes him think that's a ridiculous notion?

Suppose a dyslexic suicide bomber intends to murder as many Jewish kids as he can at the local yeshiva grade school. Only he mentally reverses the numbers on the address

and ends up walking into a police station instead. He's shot dead before he can denote his Shaheed jacket. Although he failed to achieve his mission, is he not culpable for planning and attempting to implement his plot to murder Jewish kids? Isn't criminal intent culpable in itself? Isn't conspiracy to commit murder blameworthy? The fact that he accidentally bungled his homicidal mission isn't exculpatory, is it? Is Parsons so ethically and intellectually shallow that he doesn't think there's a serious issue at stake?

Take another example: there are people who never commit atrocities, but if they happened to be alive at a time and place where they could get away with it, they'd commit atrocities. There are many historical examples in which the breakdown in civil order gives some people license or cover to commit heinous acts they would not commit if that was punishable. The only thing that deters them is fear of reprisal. They are psychos just spoiling for an opportunity. Shouldn't divine justice take that into account?

*He objects to the duration of hell for "finite" sins. But it's not as if sinners are merely punished for discrete sins. A sinner does what a sinner is. Sins are just the expression of the sinner's underlying character. Passage of time doesn't make the guilty guiltless. Once you do something wrong, it will always be the case that you did something wrong. Your culpability doesn't have an automatic expiration date. You're just as guilty a year later as you were a moment later. Only redemption can atone for sin. Sinners don't cease to be sinners when they go to hell. To the contrary, they become even more sinful in hell, since they lose all self-restraint in hell.*

---

*At any rate, if it is fair to punish you for your character, then your character must have been freely chosen, right? I mean, if your character is determined by events beyond your control, such as genes and environment, then punishing you for your character would be like punishing you for having gallstones. But if we choose our characters, are we not back with being punished for our "discrete sins," choosing our bad characters in this case? If it takes bad character to choose to have a bad character, then we seem to be headed for an infinite regress. Or is it enough if there is some possible world where we do have the freedom to choose our characters, and in that world we choose bad ones? As does William Lane Craig, Alex C. affirms that sinners continue to sin after being condemned to hell. This supposedly justifies the continuing punishment of the damned. But do the damned have free will? Alex C. seems to indicate that they do not since he says that they lose all self-restraint. If the damned have no free will, then in what sense can they sin? If they are being punished for the bad characters they developed in life, then we are right back with the question of the fairness of continuing punishment for past sins, not current ones. Or maybe the damned are being punished for the sins they would commit if, counterfactually, they had free will. On the other hand, if the damned do have freedom of will, cannot they*

*exercise that freedom to curtail or greatly reduce their sinfulness, and so no longer deserve the punishments of hell? Alas, Alex C. gives us no grounds for deciding these questions.*

---

i) Notice, first of all, that Parsons fails to even address the fact that mere lapse of time is not exculpatory.

ii) Apparently, Parsons believes libertarian freedom is a necessary condition of moral responsibility. But, of course, that's hotly contested in philosophy, so why is the onus on me to disprove his operating assumption? Indeed, many of his fellow atheists subscribe to physical determinism.

iii) Moreover, counterfactual culpability would still be possible on freewill theism.

*Parsons objects to credal requirement. However, no one goes to hell for disbelieving in Jesus. Disbelief is an aggravating factor. But the hellbound are already lost. Refusing the gospel isn't what renders them damnable. In Christian theology, nobody can be saved unless he knows and accepts the gospel. This doesn't mean nobody can be damned unless he knows and rejects the gospel. Rather, to be lost is the default condition of sinners. To be lost is not a result of spurning the gospel. To the contrary, it's because sinners are lost in the first place that they desperately need to be saved. If a drowning swimmer refuses the lifeline, that's not why he drowns. He's already drowning. The lifeline was his opportunity to avoid drowning.*

---

*Alex C. says that "Refusing the Gospel is not what renders them [the hellbound] damnable." This seems to say that refusing the Gospel is not sufficient for damnation. But further down he says, "In Christian theology, nobody can be saved unless he knows and accepts the gospel." The way to symbolize "Nobody can be saved unless he knows and accepts the Gospel" would be  $\sim(\exists x) [\emptyset Sx \ \& \ \sim(Kxg \ \& \ A xg)]$  which is equivalent to  $(x) [\sim(Kxg \ \& \ A xg) \rightarrow \sim\emptyset Sx]$ . But salvation and damnation are the only two possibilities, so  $\sim\emptyset Sx \rightarrow Dx$ , where  $Dx$  is "x is damned." So,  $(x) [\sim(Kxg \ \& \ A xg) \rightarrow Dx]$  by hypothetical syllogism, so not knowing and accepting the gospel is sufficient for being damned. Hence, Alex C. seems to contradict himself.*

---

It's odd that Parsons is unable to draw a rudimentary distinction. To say no one can be saved apart from faith in Christ doesn't entail that someone is damned because they fail to believe in Christ. Those are not convertible propositions. That oversimplifies the comparison. Suppose a convicted murder is offered a stay of execution, but refuses the

offer. Is he put to death because he refused the stay of execution? That's a misleading way of putting it. It's not as if refusing a stay of execution is, in itself, a capital offense. Rather, the capital offense was the underlying murder. He is punished for committing murder, not for refusing a stay of execution.

*Perhaps, though, he would admit that nonbelief is sufficient for damnation, but his point is that other things are also sufficient, and that, in fact, sinners are already damned by those other things before they decide not to accept the Gospel. But I never denied that other things might be sufficient for damnation. My complaint rather was that belief is necessary for salvation.*

---

But if they are already damnable for other things before they refuse the Gospel, then they are not entitled to forgiveness in the first place. It is hardly unjust if they suffer damnation for things they did apart from that additional consideration. Moreover, their very refusal is insolent.

*Salvation is denied those who do not accept certain propositions. For this condition to be fair and reasonable it must be the case that those required propositions are so obviously and undeniably true that no rational person can fail to believe them when they are given a fair and unbiased hearing.*

---

As an atheist, Parsons will naturally deny Christianity is "so obviously and undeniably true that no rational person can fail to believe them when they are given a fair and unbiased hearing." That just means he's judging Christianity from the viewpoint of an atheist. But that involves a much larger debate.

## Punitive "torture"

I've going to briefly discuss two related issues. One objection to coercive interrogation is that "torture" not only dehumanizes the informant, but dehumanizes the interrogator. "Torture" is morally corrupting. It makes the interrogator callous.

Likewise, some calumniators say eternal punishment makes God a cosmic torturer. That comparison is used by atheists, annihilationists, and universalists alike. For instance, Clark Pinnock says:

*God is not a cruel and sadistic torturer as the traditional view of hell would suggest...It pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die. Four Views of Hell, W. Crockett, ed. (Zondervan 1997), 149.*

**i)** For starters, "torture" ranges along a wide physical and psychological continuum. The term is frequently misused and trivialized.

**ii)** As I've often explained, I don't think hell is a torture chamber. I doubt that hell is a one-size-fits-all experience. I expect eschatological punishment is customized.

There are certainly people who richly deserved to be tortured. To be on the receiving end of what they inflicted on others. That's poetic justice.

**iii)** In Dante's *Inferno* (Cantos 21-23), the damned are tormented by demons (the Malebranche) with pitchforks. The scene is redolent with black comedy.

Of course, that's fictional. But in principle, that isn't corrupting or dehumanizing to the demonic tormenters, since they aren't human to begin with. Moreover, they are already thoroughly evil.

**iv)** It's true that as a rule, we should avoid activities that make us morally or emotionally jaded. However, there are exceptions. Agents sometimes have a duty to do things that may be psychologically harmful to the agent. Soldiers may be obliged to do things, to protect the innocent, that are psychologically damaging to the soldiers. Likewise, field medics may become fairly hardened to scenes of agony. Ironically, compassionate action requires them to become more emotionally detached.

To be the caregiver for a family member who is senile, has a degenerative condition, is dying of cancer, &c., is emotionally wrenching. The survivor is wounded by that searing experience. Yet it's morally incumbent to face that situation.

**v)** Lack of human empathy is a moral defect in psychopath or sociopath because humans are supposed to exemplify human social virtues. But an inhuman attitude is not necessarily a moral defect if the agent isn't human to begin with.

The acid-drooling extraterrestrials in the Alien franchise may seem malevolent from the standpoint of their human victims, but from their own standpoint, their actions have no more malice than a parasitoid wasp implanting a caterpillar. They don't relate to humans on a human level. They aren't the same species. There's no natural rapport.

**vi)** If an angel "tortured" Hitler in hell, would that be morally corrupting? To begin with, this is punitive "torture," not sadistic "torture".

In addition, since an angel isn't human, it may have no more natural sympathy for a human being than a lion has for a gazelle. Angels are so different from humans that they may have precious little frame of reference.

Not to mention that the damned aren't innocent victims.

**vii)** God isn't human. God is like us in some ways, but unlike us in other ways. In some respects, God is the template for humanity, but in other respects, God is a radically different kind of being.



## Hell is bad...except when it's good

I generally agree with his critique of universalism. However, his position is ironic inasmuch as Parsons contributed a chapter to a book in which he attacked the Christian God for damning people to hell:

*Keith Parsons*

*Universalism sounds appealing at first, but then you have to take a deep breath and consider what it really means. Does it really mean that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, and a motley crew of nondescript slave traders, pedophiles, sadists, drug cartel bosses, serial killers, terrorists, fanatics, etc. will all (eventually) make it to heaven? Hmmmm. I wonder what a Holocaust victim would think rubbing shoulders with Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann, and that whole crew. Will parents embrace the fiend that kidnapped, tortured, mutilated, raped, and murdered their child?*

*I imagine that the Talbott-esque universalist will answer: "Yes, the infinite love of God will someday bring about universal reconciliation. The tortured will embrace the torturer and the murdered will rejoice with their murderers. All evil and suffering will be redeemed by the bottomless, inexhaustible love of God."*

*My first response would be a subjective one: To me such an answer seems shallow, facile, and (I cannot help but suspect), at bottom insincere. To me, it simply fails to take seriously the depth and seriousness of evil and suffering.*

*Further, I have to ask the question posed by the pathetic Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "Is everything forgivable? Is intentional cruelty forgivable?" Is it? Why should it be? Why is it a good thing to forgive the worst, most deliberate and despicable evils? On the contrary, should not some moral principles be so basic and so important that their blatant disregard is not considered pardonable? Why not recognize some stains as permanent?*

*Finally, it is not clear what universalists propose to do with those who refuse to be reconciled. What if someone refuses, ever, to forgive, say, the murderer of her child? Will God not allow her into heaven until she does? In that case, salvation will not be universal. Will the universalist say that eventually, she will give in to God's love and forgive the murderer? But if she has free will, it has to be at least in principle possible that she will never forgive. God, of course, could just override her free will, but is salvation a good thing if it is forced?*

---

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2015/02/03/heaven-would-be-boring-as-hell/>

## The futility of atheist outrage

Keith Parsons is mad:

*I am angry. Very angry. We know that Islamic fanatics are mad dogs whose very humanity has been consumed by their devotion to a rabid religion. We have seen them massacre whole communities of innocent people for no reason other than religious bigotry. We have seen them kidnap hundreds of girls and young women then sneeringly taunt the loved ones of their victims. We have seen them murder and mutilate other girls for the crime of seeking an education.*

---

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2015/01/07/terrorist-outrage-in-paris/>

Now, I happen to agree with him. But Parsons has a problem. He's a militant atheist. There is no eschatological judgment. Terrorists never get their comeuppance. Death is the great leveler. Both good guys and bad guys share a common oblivion. Irreparable harms or wrongs in this life are never rectified, for there is no afterlife, no heaven or hell.

Even for the handful of terrorists who are captured and punished, their crimes are so far in excess of what human justice can requite that it's pitiful.

## Dogs and wolves

This post isn't really about dogs and wolves. That's just an illustration. But I need to develop the illustration a bit before I apply it.

Dogs are wildly popular pets. There are two reasons that dogs "bond" with humans (and vice versa):

**i)** Dogs are descended from social animals (wolves). So they have an innate capacity to form social bonds—unlike cats (except for lions).

**ii)** Dog breeders enhance that capacity by suppressing certain traits while cultivating other traits that make them friendlier around humans.

Of course, different dog breeds are bred for different physical and temperamental traits. You have guard dogs, hunting dogs, sled dogs, sheep dogs, &c. Not all dogs are bred for friendliness, and dogs used in dogfights are bred to be vicious.

But pet dogs are bred to have great rapport with humans. This is based on their innate capacity as social animals, enhanced by domestication and selective breeding.

To my knowledge, dogs are much better at reading human body language than wolves or chimpanzees. At a certain level, they understand us.

On the other hand, wolves are reputedly much smarter than dogs at problem-solving skills. That makes sense.

It might be that a dog breed like a sheep dog would be closer to a wolf in its problem-solving abilities. I don't know what dog breeds have been tested against wolves in that respect.

Speaking for myself, looking into the eyes of a wolf is a unique experience compared to other wild animals.

For one thing, they instantly take us back to the experience for our Ice Age forebears. That's the world in which our distant ancestors had to survive.

In addition, you do a double take. It's kind of jarring.

On the one hand, wolves remind us of dogs. And some dog breeds retain a lupine appearance. So wolves remind us of dogs. There's that family resemblance.

They trigger similar associations. We're conditioned to subconsciously associate wolves with what we expect from dogs. If I make eye contact with a dog, what is the dog's expression? When does a dog register when it sees a human? But wolves are another story.

i) One difference is automatic hostility. Wolves are not our friends. In the wild, they view humans as potential prey. When hunted, they learn to fear humans.

ii) But there's something even deeper: the complete absence of rapport. Wolves are not simpatico with humans. When you look into the glinty amber eyes of a wolf, that animal doesn't connect with you. It's like an alien life-form. There's no psychological affinity. The look of recognition is gone.

To my knowledge, even "tame" wolves are dangerous. They inhabit in a world of invisible lines. If you inadvertently step on the invisible line of a "tame" wolf, it will attack you.

A wolf is a reminder of what your lovable pet dog would be like without selective breeding.

And in that respect, wolves are like dogs without common grace or special grace. Wolves are the canine analogue to the damned.

Some unbelievers are already quite lupine in this life. Other unbelievers can be brave, decent, kind, loyal, and honest. They exhibit common grace virtues. But when they go to hell, the dog reverts to a wolf. Centuries of selective breeding undone. It flips back to its wild ancestors. Deevolves—in the microevolutionary sense.

Both like and unlike the person you knew. Recognizable, but something essential is now missing. Something crucial is lost. All that's left is savage. Inhuman. Sociopathic.

Dante was half right

Unbelievers typically rail against hell as a "torture chamber." That, in turn, makes God a "cosmic sadist" and "worse than Hitler." And so on.

I've argued that this greatly oversimplifies the Biblical view of damnation. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/10/images-of-hell.html>

That said, I think some people richly merit eternal punishment by "torture." Take this example, recounting the policies of the Bolsheviks:

*At Odessa the Cheka tied White officers to planks and slowly fed them into furnaces or tanks of boiling water; In Kharkiv, scalpings and hand-flayings were commonplace: the skin was peeled off victims' hands to produce "gloves"; The Voronezh Cheka rolled naked people around in barrels studded internally with nails; victims were crucified...at Dnipropetrovsk; the Cheka at Kremenchuk impaled members of the clergy and buried alive rebelling peasants; in Orel, water was poured on naked prisoners bound in the winter streets until they became living ice statues; in Kiev, Chinese Cheka detachments placed rats in iron tubes sealed at one end with wire netting and the other placed against the body of a prisoner, with the tubes being heated until the rats gnawed through the victim's body in an effort to escape.*

---

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red\\_Terror#Atrocities](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Terror#Atrocities)

Admittedly, this is Wikipedia, but my argument doesn't depend on the accuracy of this particular claim. I'm using it to illustrate a principle. As long as things like that happen, my argument goes through.

As far as I'm concerned, people who do that to others richly deserve to have that done to them. If they did it repeatedly to others, they deserve to have that done repeatedly to them. That doesn't offend my moral intuitions in the slightest. If anything, I'd be offended if they got off easier.

(Mind you, I'm referring to sadistic cruelty. Inflicting pain for the sake of pain.)

There are, of course, annihilationists and universalists who'd disapprove of my attitude. Of course, they say that at a safe distance—not having experienced what victims of the Red Terror endured. I'm not interested in persuading them.

My point is that even though the "torture chamber" model of hell is greatly overused, I still think that has a morally viable place within the spectrum of eschatological

punishments. Not for all the damned. Maybe not for most of the damned. But this would be just deserts for some of the damned.

### Outer darkness

Jesus uses "outer darkness" (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) as one of the images for hell. What is that image supposed to conjure in the minds of readers?

The light/darkness, inside/outside contrast may trade on the metaphor of a fortified city. If you arrive after the city gates close at night, you will be stuck outside. You will be exposed to the elements as well as the dangers associated with the night (e.g. nocturnal predators).

## Hellfire

*Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Mt 25:41).*

Traditionally, the fiery imagery for hell is regarded as a metaphor for the punitive psychological pain and suffering which the damned experience. And that may be correct.

Insofar as the damned are raised to life, it might possibly include punitive physical pain as well.

However, fire, and other synonyms, can have a different figurative meaning. For instance:

*But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn (1 Cor 7:9).*

There it denotes sexual passion. "To burn" can mean "to yearn ardently" for something. So the imagery of hellfire might symbolize punitive frustrated longing.



## Hellfire

Traditionally, fire is the element most commonly associated with hell—especially in the popular imagination. Fire is such a memorable metaphor. But what does hellfire signify?

Universalists think it stands for purification while annihilationists think it stands for destruction. Of course, these two interpretations tend to cancel each other out.

I think it's safe to say that traditionally, hellfire is associated with pain. Fire burns. And it's quite possible hellfire in the Bible plays on that connotation.

However, there's another possibility which I haven't seen explored. Those of us who live in the Frost Belt associate fire with warmth. Nothing like curling up beside a crackling fireplace on a chilly night.

But, of course, the Bible is set in a hot, arid part of the world. A place where drought and wildfire results in famine. Hunger and thirst. Starvation and dehydration.

It's not coincidental that figures of eschatological judgment depict God drying up rivers and streams. Especially in the Mideast, these were sources of freshwater and drinking water. Or take the famous lake of fire in Revelation. A lake is normally a freshwater body. Consider the "Sea" of Galilee, the Nile, and the Jordan River.

Fish, game, livestock, and vegetation were dependent on lakes, rivers and streams. Conversely, figures of eschatological salvation depict God turning the desert into an oasis.

The relationship between fire and water is paradoxical. We normally think of water dousing fire. But fire is a drying agent. Eschatological fire can evaporate bodies of water. Fire represents searing heat (among other things).

So it's possible that the metaphor of fire is associated with the related metaphors of hunger and especially thirst. Unquenchable fire signifies unquenchable hunger and thirst. And these, in turn, are figures of yearning. The damned forever long for what they shall never have. Dying of thirst, but cursed with immortality.

## Lazarus and Dives

Because the parable of Lazarus and Dives (Lk 16:19-31) contains one of the more detailed depictions of the afterlife that you find in Scripture, it's been strip-mined by some Christian theologians to reconstruct the nature of the afterlife.

Some people think this is an account of an actual event. Lazarus and Dives were real people. And this is what happened to them, in life and death. If, however, you take the story at face value, then this is what it teaches:

- Abraham is God's spokesman in the afterlife, assuming a role like Charon
- When poor Jews die, angels taxi them to the waiting arms of Abraham
- When rich Jews die, they suffer punishment
- The saints and the damned can see and hear each other—they have conversations with each other
- The intermediate state has a geological barrier ("chasm") separating the two groups
- The chasm is wide enough so that denizens can't leap across it, but narrow enough so that denizens can see and hear people on the other side
- The "heavenly" side has water while the "hellish" side has fire. Both groups have bodies with fingers, tongues, &c.

To me, this is picture language. I think it's a fictional story combining elements of popular folklore to make one or more points.

Some people think its about rich and poor. But that's simplistic. On the one hand, merely being poor isn't a ticket to heaven. On the other hand, Abraham was rich by the standards of the day.

It's tricky to isolate the point of the story is, because it doesn't have much context. We don't know much about what Jesus was responding to. But the moral of the story would fall apart unless certain things were true:

- Departed souls are self-aware, conscious of their surroundings, and remember their former life.

- Some people are punished when they die while others are rewarded.
- The afterlife rights the scales of justice.
- Death sometimes results in a reversal of fortunes
- There is no postmortem second chance. Death seals your fate.
- You can't escape eschatological judgment. Once you're sentenced, that's that.
- Your postmortem status is forever fixed. You can't be promoted from "hades" to "heaven" or demoted from "heaven" to "hades."
- What we do in this life queues us up for the afterlife.
- People will be held accountable for how they respond to God's revelatory words and deeds (i.e. Scripture, the Resurrection).

## No Exit

*Three damned souls, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle are brought to the same room in hell by a mysterious Valet. They had all expected medieval torture devices to punish them for eternity, but instead find a plain room furnished in Second Empire style. None of them will admit the reason for their damnation: Garcin says that he was executed for being a pacifist, while Estelle insists that a mistake has been made.*

*Inez however, demands that they all stop lying to themselves and confess to their crimes. She refuses to believe that they all ended up in the room by accident and soon realizes that they have been placed together to make each other miserable. Garcin suggests that they try to leave each other alone, but Inez starts to sing about an execution and Estelle wants to find a mirror. Inez tries to seduce Estelle by offering to be her "mirror" and tell her everything she sees, but ends up frightening her instead.*

*After arguing they decide to confess to their crimes so they know what to expect from each other. Garcin cheated and mistreated his wife; Inez seduced her cousin's wife while living with them; and Estelle cheated on her husband and drowned her illegitimate baby. Despite their revelations they continue to get on each other's nerves. Garcin finally gives in to Estelle's attempts to seduce him, driving Inez crazy. He begs Estelle to tell him he is not a coward for attempting to flee his country during wartime. When Inez tells him that Estelle is just agreeing with him so she can be with a man, Garcin tries to escape. The door suddenly opens, but he is unable to leave. He says that he will not be saved until Inez has faith in him. She refuses, promising to make him miserable forever. Forgetting that they are all dead, Estelle unsuccessfully tries to kill Inez, stabbing her repeatedly. Shocked at the absurdity of his fate, Garcin concludes, "hell is other people."*

---

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/noexit/summary.html>

## When heaven is hell

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/02/hellish-ndes.html>

A friend of mine wondered if, when some unbelievers reportedly experience positive NDEs, that isn't hell in disguise. Let's consider how that might work.

i) As I've remarked on another occasion, one way of punishing a villain is to make him think he won. There's the initial elation before he discovers that he was tricked. This is a common plot motif. Screenwriters love to tell stories about the villain who gets his comeuppance by seeming to succeed, only to have that snatched away. This often involves a the apparent prize being swapped out for something worthless or worse. Poetic justice.

There are many examples. Off the top of my head, here are three. In *The Book of Eli*, the villain (Carnegie) is hellbent on obtaining the last extant copy of the Bible. He thinks he can use the Bible as a talisman to expand his power. He will stop at nothing to get it. He murders without compunction.

He finally obtains the prize, only to find, to his consternation, that it's a Braille Bible, which he can't read. His wife can read Braille, but because he abused his wife and daughter, she refuses to do him any favors.

Another example is *The Ninth Gate*, in which the villain (Boris) is determined to obtain a book of spells, which reputedly confers immortality on whoever can decrypt the message. His operatives leave a trail of bodies in pursuit of the prize. He finally gets hold of it. He imagines that he is now fireproof, which he puts to the test. Unfortunately for him, he misinterpreted the cryptic message.

Finally, I remember an episode ("The Caterpillar") of Rod Serling's *The Night Gallery* which I saw as a kid. It trades on the urban legend of the earwig. Back in the days when the sun never set on the British Empire, a civil servant (Macy) is stationed in Borneo. He resides with a couple. The husband is getting up in years. But he's married to a gorgeous young wife. Macy is smitten by her, but he must eliminate the husband to have a clear shot at the wife.

He arranges with a local assassin to have an earwig planted in the husband's ear when he's sleeping. Once inside, there's not enough space for the earwig to turn around. It can only exit by eating its way through the brain of the host until it reaches the other ear.

Next morning, the three are having breakfast when Macy feels stabbing pain in his head. He puts a napkin to his ear. The napkin is bloody. To his horror, it dawns on him that the assassin got the bedrooms mixed up. He's the victim of his own murder plot. Accidents will happen.

He's tied to his bed (to prevent him from clawing his face off) until the earwig emerges—no doubt causing brain damage. The worst is behind him. Or so he thinks. But the doctor informs him that the earwig was pregnant, so she probably laid eggs in his brain during her journey. Eggs ready to hatch.

**ii)** There's another common plot motif. Horror stories don't always begin horrifically. Indeed, they often begin idyllically. According to one trope, teenagers spend spring break at a tourist resort. At first, it's a paradise. Natural beauty. A lavish hotel. Sunshine and sandy beaches.

But then things begin to go down hill. There's a storm. They lose power. They are cut off from the mainland. The ski boat is sabotaged. There's a psychopath on the rampage. Maybe one of their own party.

These are fictional examples. Yet fiction sometimes illustrates our intimations of hell and just desert.

## A fate worse than death

*9 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. 2 He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. 4 They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. 6 And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them (Rev 9:1-6).*

In what sense did death elude the unbelievers?

**i)** Beale thinks they wanted to die, but lacked the willpower to commit suicide. That's possible. Someone may flirt with a death wish, yet he can't screw up the courage to go through with it.

One reason for the psychological tension is that a sufferer doesn't really want to end his life. Rather, he wants to end the pain (be it physical or psychological), and ending his life is the only way of ending the pain. So there's a conflict between unbearable pain and the fear of death.

On this interpretation, the sufferer is able, but unwilling to die. The decision lies with him.

**ii)** But in context, that's not the most likely interpretation. Seems more like they are willing, but unable to die. They were tormented just short of death. If they were free to kill themselves, that would defeat the purpose of the torment. That would be their out.

They'd be able to shorten the torment on their own terms. But the context speaks against that.

In this case, they won't die, not because they exercise self-restraint, but because something or someone restrains them. They won't die, not because they can't bring themselves to end their life, but because they can't bring it about. What they lack is not the resolve, but the ability.

We can speculate on what that scenario envisions. Captives can be under physical restraints. Chained. Strapped to a table or chair. Or their quarters may have nothing they can use to commit suicide. The proverbial padded cell.

**iii)** Another even grimmer possibility is that they can kill themselves, but they can't stay dead. They are revived against their will. A partial parallel would be the Beast, who dies, but returns to life.

On that scenario, even death is no escape, for even if they succeed in ending their life, they will be brought back to life to suffer again. A vicious cycle.

**iv)** This invites a comparison with the "second death," which is John's paradoxical description for eternal punishment. There is a fate worse than death: where life is unbearable, but you just go on existing. If this historical, but temporary punishment (vv5-6), is worse than death, then unending eschatological punishment will exacerbate rather than ameliorate that condition. (BTW, that's a problem for annihilationism.)

**v)** Finally, what kind of event does this foresee? It's easy to think of examples in which the faithful are tormented by their persecutors. But examples in which the persecutors experience the torment they usually exact on the faithful don't come as readily to mind.

Moreover, this isn't just a case of turning the tables. For the persecutors don't merely suffer—they are impotent to end their pain through suicide.

The fall of Rome led to some Romans dying at the hands of the invaders. But that was a quick, violent death. Of course, we must make allowance for the symbolic and hyperbolic nature of apocalyptic language.

In terms of modern analogues, secular regimes begin by rounding up the faithful. Consigning them to gulags. Or resorting mass extermination.

However, having eliminated the faithful (or at least driven the church underground), secular regimes turn on their own. Secular regimes become increasingly oppressive, capricious, and sadistic. In a Kafkaesque scenario which often plays out in real life, no citizen, even a loyal party member, is ever safe.

But it's also possible that John envisions some as-yet future calamity. Something for which there is no historical precedent.



## The lost

Traditionally, fire is the metaphor most often associated with hell. By contrast, another–neglected–metaphor is the “lost” condition of the damned.

A classic example is the lost child. He’s separated from his parents in a department store or something like that. Children have an instinctive fear of being lost. Nothing short of abject terror.

Usually these stories have a happy ending, when friendly strangers reunite the lost child with its parents.

However, these stories don’t always have a happy ending. You have children orphaned by war or natural disaster.

The same thing happens at the other end of life. You have old folks who outlive friends, spouses, or even children. Many of them are abandoned in nursing homes.

Or you have old folks who become feebleminded. Forget their loved ones. Forget where they are.

Sometimes we’re lost in a strange city. Sometimes we’re lost in the parking lot. We forgot where we parked our car. This is one of the comic foibles of our finitude.

Hikers sometimes lose their way in the woods. It’s easy to feel lost in vast expanses. A desert. A wilderness. The scale and the emptiness of the place can make us feel lost in space.

Some people can feel lost in time. Get to the point in life where they feel that they have outlived their time here. They feel like a time-traveler who is trapped in the wrong century. Who’s cut off from his own time.

The Bible uses the lost sheep motif. This forms the basis of lost-and-found stories.

On a related note is the homeless motif. Cain was condemned to be a vagabond. Adam and Eve were homeless. Abraham was homeless. The Jews in Egypt were homeless. The Jews in the wilderness were homeless. The Jews in Babylon were homeless. To be an exile or fugitive from justice is a kind of homelessness. And that, in turn, is a kind of lostness.

The homing instinct is strong. Returning home feels different from leaving home. Salvation is a homecoming story.

What if eternal punishment is eternal homelessness? What if the damned wander eternity, surrounded by strangers? What if, like a dream, the scene keeps shifting? What if they spend eternity trying to get back home, but can never find the way home?

# Inclusivism/pluralism

---

## Dembski on Eben Alexander's "heavenly" NDE

I'm going to discuss Dembski's analysis of Eben Alexander's reported NDE:

<https://billdembski.com/theology-and-religion/faces-of-miracles-chapter-4/>

This is one of the most interesting cases for all the reasons detailed in Dembski's chapter. I'll begin by laying my cards on the table, although I'm not saying anything I haven't said before:

1. I think some people encounter God, heaven, or hell during NDEs. It's the real thing.
2. I use the Bible as a benchmark to interpret and assess NDEs.
3. Another consideration is what they come back as. Does an unbeliever prior to the NDE come back a Christian or a New Ager? That affects whether I think this is from God.
4. I think it's undoubtedly the case that at least some children have heavenly NDEs. That's not based on any particular report, but the fact that children have immortal souls. Their minds don't pass into temporarily oblivion during brain death.
5. That said, I put no stock in reported NDEs about kids. If it was my own kid, then depending on the details, I might find his report convincing—because I'm getting it in his own words. And he's telling me what he remembers right after the event. But when it comes to books by parents, I'm highly skeptical.
6. Some NDEs reportedly penetrate much deeper into the beyond than others. In many cases it's the tunnel of light, meeting a luminous being, and not much more. In other cases the patient claims to have seen far more.
7. Some Christians chalk it up to the demonic. That's worthy exploring, but I'm going to pursue a different approach.
8. From what I've read, there seems to be a false dichotomy in the explanatory options. According to physicalism, NDEs are hallucinations. Figments of a delirious brain.

It is, of course, true, that people hallucinate under certain circumstances, but that typically involves an intact, functioning brain, not a brain with no higher cortical functions or no neurological activity at all.

Veridical NDEs pose another problem for a physicalist explanation. According to physicalism, the only sources of knowledge are instinct or sensory perception. But some NDEs report seeing or overhearing things in the ER, or other rooms of the hospital, or miles away at home. But that requires ESP, which physicalism disavows. Another cliché line of evidence is the patient discovering a relative in the afterlife they didn't know existed.

**9.** As a result, Christian apologists argue that these experiences can't be subjective or merely psychological. They can't originate in the brain. So they must reflect objective encounters.

And I think that's true in however many cases. But it overlooks a third explanation. Either memory and imagination are located in the brain or else they are located in the soul. If we have an immortal, immaterial mind, then in some cases the NDE could still be "imaginary".

That would explain the cartoonish or unorthodox "heaven" that some patients report. When higher cortical functions shut down or when there's a complete cessation of neurological activity, the mind may remain active, and what they perceive is like a dream.

Many unbelievers have a preconception of heaven. They don't believe in heaven, but they think that's what heaven is supposed to be like if only it was real. That's "heaven" in their imagination. In this case, the "heavenly" NDE doesn't originate in the brain but the mind. Their mind already has stock imagery and characters about heaven. A generic, pop cultural notion of heaven.