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## THE JUSTICE OF HELL?

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Many atheists (and some Christians) object to the doctrine of hell on the premise that it is inherently unjust. How, they ask, can it be right for a good and just God to impose an eternal punishment for merely temporal sins? How can it be just to impose an infinite punishment for finite sins? It is hard to see how human beings, being temporal and finite creatures, could commit any other kinds of sin than finite ones. But unending conscious punishment is, well, unending. Add infinity to any finite number, and you see the problem.

The atheist who pursues this line of reasoning finds support for his or her suspicion that the Christian concept of a good God is incoherent. The Christian who does so seeks to revise or eliminate altogether the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment. And one must admit that this thinking has a certain surface plausibility. People thus persuaded might well question whether traditional Christian belief really takes the goodness and justice of God with sufficient seriousness.

But what if it is actually the questioners who do not really understand or take seriously the goodness of God? Yes, the *goodness* of God!

What if a maximally and eternally good, wise, powerful, and holy Being who is the Creator and Sustainer of the world actually were to exist? He would, in other words, be more good than Frodo, wiser than Gandalf, stronger than Treebeard, and more faithful than Sam. He would have more integrity than Aragorn and be more committed to all that is good and right than Faramir. He would, in fact, be the inexhaustible well from which characters like those, to the extent that they exist in the real world, draw their goodness, wisdom, power, and righteousness. He would possess such attributes infinitely, that is, perfectly and inexhaustibly, in virtue of being the

eternal and uncreated Standard and Source of goodness, wisdom, power, and righteousness—the One who in the beginning first said, “Let there be light.”<sup>1</sup>

Would such a maximally great Being then not be *worthy* of all our worship, all our obedience, and all our adoration? In fact, such a Being would *deserve* these responses from us, not just be in a position to demand or coerce them. That is, just by His being who and what He is, those responses on our part would be not merely nice or desirable but inherently appropriate to Him, indeed, inherently *owed* to Him. For contingent and morally responsible creatures such as ourselves to fail to see and accept this obligation in the presence of a maximally great Being is to be complicit in a pernicious lie about the real nature of things; to refuse this obligation is to incur guilt.

Furthermore, there would be no conceivable limit to this Being’s worthiness. He would be infinite in the sense that He would possess the greatest possible set of perfections that justify our worship, obedience, and adoration. Thus, He would *infinitely* deserve our worship, obedience, and adoration. And I mean by *infinitely* that there would be no conceivable limit to that worthiness and that deservedness on His part, and hence to that obligation on ours. All of this seems to follow inexorably.

### THE REALITY OF OBJECTIVE VALUE

Modern people may hit a hurdle here, though. They tend to see moral qualities such as *worthiness* and *desert* as subjective phenomena—existing in the eye of the beholder rather than in the nature of the observed object. They have lived in a world where everybody gets a trophy just for showing up. They may think, “Well, if you feel God ‘deserves’ worship because of who He is, that’s fine for you, but what does it mean for me? Why can’t I just shrug my shoulders and move on? Why must I base my whole life on something *external to me*?”

People who think this way usually have never noticed how inconsistently they do so. Some of the things we think are subjective opinions (“vanilla is tastier than chocolate”), and some are objective facts (“Georgia is east of Mississippi”). Modern people tend to treat statements about moral value as belonging to the first category (vanilla vs. chocolate) because people often disagree about them, whereas most people will agree about where Georgia is on the map. But at least some moral values are moral *facts*, not mere feelings. For example, wanton cruelty to innocent children is just wrong. Genocide (as in the Holocaust) is just wrong. It does not really matter how we feel about these moral facts. If we fail to disapprove of such things, it is not a matter of taste; it is precisely a moral *failing* on our part. We have mistaken Georgia for Mississippi, not merely preferred vanilla over chocolate.<sup>2</sup>

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE CREATOR’S GOODNESS

All right, if we must admit that there is such a thing as an objective moral value, one that demands a response from us (approval, say, or condemnation) whether we feel

inclined to make it or not, then surely the one place where we should expect to find such an unyielding moral reality would be in the One who is the very Source and Wellspring of creation, both of its existence and its goodness. If that is the case, we are ready to revisit the point established earlier: would such a maximally great Being then not be *objectively, infinitely worthy* of all our worship, all our obedience, and all our adoration? Would such a Being then not *objectively, infinitely deserve* all our worship, obedience, and adoration? And would we then not be under a perpetual and limitless moral *obligation* to worship, obey, and adore such an all-good and awesome Being?

If all of that is true, then would stubbornly and persistently withholding those responses (indeed, stubbornly and persistently yielding them to something—to *anything*—else) not then make us, in a sense, *infinitely guilty* of rebellion? Would that rebellion not be infinitely inexcusable? For there could be no conceivable limit to how wrong it was. By what possible moral calculus could we then judge hell to be unjust? There is none. From this perspective, God's goodness is not in conflict with the justice of eternal punishment; it is the very consideration that makes its justice and rightness inescapable.

### FULLFILLMENT OR FRUSTRATION

There are further questions that have to be considered. If such a Being existed and we were His creatures, absolutely dependent on Him for our own existence, would worship of, obedience to, and adoration of Him not then be the ultimate fulfillment of our existence? Would refusing to offer them to Him, or giving them to anything else, not be the ultimate frustration of our nature? Would that frustration itself not be the very definition of hell—even if no retributive justice as such were involved? For, having rejected the Standard and Source of all that is good, what could our existence then be? It would be an existence cut off from the Well from which flow the waters of life: goodness, knowledge, wisdom, strength, justice, and love. It would therefore be by its very nature an existence devoid of those things and full of evil, folly, impotence, futility, and every kind of wickedness. What could such an existence be but hell?

If retributive justice *were* involved (it cannot be excluded as part of the picture if we are to be faithful to Scripture), who would be in a position to complain that it was unjust or undeserved? For by refusing worship, obedience, and adoration to God, by giving them to anything else, we would have received precisely what we had chosen: a life in which our aspiration for anything that is good and noble is fully and finally frustrated.

One might well object that hypothetical questions such as these do not prove the existence of such a God. They do not. But they do clarify what the Christian claim about God is, and hence show that the traditional Christian claims about the afterlife are not inconsistent with it—indeed, the Christian confession is wonderfully coherent.

They also can lead to further questions: if this Being does not exist, how does it

come about that anything exists? If naturalism and materialism are true, where did concepts such as goodness and justice (and evil and injustice) come from? For in a naturalistic world, there is no evil and no injustice—merely certain situations we do not happen to like. If naturalism is true, where did the concept of truth come from? If naturalism is true, how could naturalism (or anything else) *be* true? For in such a world all ideas (and their antitheses) would equally be nothing more than chemical reactions in the brains of organisms that evolved to have them by chance. And who (or, more accurately, what) would judge between those ideas and their antitheses? Another set of chemical reactions subject to the same conditions is the only possible answer. As C. S. Lewis realized in *Miracles*, thinking like this leads us nowhere.<sup>3</sup>

### REDEEMED REBELS

Such questions might well lead to the realization that the existence of God is a reasonable hypothesis in trying to account for the fullness of the reality we experience by living in this wondrous world. For it is a world that does contain goodness, justice, and truth, along with evil, injustice, and lies. If the world contains real and not merely imagined goodness and evil, then it makes sense that there should somewhere be ultimate fulfillments of both—that is, heaven and hell. Then the realization that God’s existence actually makes sense of the world (and is the only thing that does) might put us in a position to receive the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in history as a solid basis for faith in the God who, the disciples were convinced, was revealed to them in His Son.

One might also object that we cannot actually imagine such a God. Indeed, we cannot; not fully, if what I have said about Him here is true. In fact, we are warned that it can be dangerous to try. We can safely conceive of God only by sticking to the pictures of Him we are given in Scripture, culminating in the only perfect image, His Son Jesus Christ. If we tried to imagine Him outside of that framework, we would create only false and corrupted images of Him and worship them. They are technically known as *idols*. Because of the rebellion of our first ancestors, we have become constitutional rebels and constitutional manufacturers and worshipers of idols. They do not have to be made of literal wood or stone to be horribly real and destructive—and to render us horribly guilty.

Now, what if this good God loved us so much that He was not content to leave us in such a state of idolatry and rebellion and futility but offered us a way back to Him? What if He had already provided it by the sacrificial and atoning death of His Son, who absorbed in Himself all the consequences due to our guilt? We could never find God on our own; as constitutional rebels, we don’t even want to. But if He cut through all of your resistance and revealed Himself to you in such a way that He opened the eyes of your heart, so that you could get even the vaguest apprehension of what He really is as described above, would you not then *want* to give Him all your

worship, obedience, and adoration?

In other words, the justice of hell is not really our intellectual problem. The very *goodness* of the God whom fallen humans despise, disobey, and ignore demands hell. His goodness—the fact that He is the Wellspring and Source of all that is good, and thus infinitely deserves the worship, obedience, and adoration we have withheld from Him and given to another—demands some such punishment for those who ungratefully reject His mercy and forgiveness in Christ. So, no, the justice of hell is not the real problem. The real mystery, the thing that we can accept but never finally explain, is the grace of heaven.

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#### NOTES

- 1 For further discussion concerning the maximal greatness of God, see Tom Morris and David Baggett, “Greatest Being Theology,” in this issue of the *Journal*, pp. 30–37.
- 2 For further defense of the concept of objective value, see C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1947).
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), esp. chap. 3.