

“It Would Have Been Good for That Man if He Had Not Been Born”

Human Sinfulness and Hell as a Horrendous Evil

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Some versions of the so-called evidential problem of evil appeal to the existence of apparent gratuitous or pointless evils in order to argue for the nonexistence of God. A pointless evil is one that God could not or does not utilize to bring about a greater good—it is an evil that would be literally gratuitous to the plans and purposes for which an omnibenevolent being allows evil. Theists typically respond to such arguments from pointless evil by arguing that the grounds for believing in the existence of pointless evil are inadequate.

However, some versions of the evidential argument from evil cannot be dismissed in this way. These versions appeal to a subspecies of pointless evil called *horrendous evil*. These are evils that, if they existed, would be so heinous that those who experience them would have lives that are not worth living. A possible example of a horrendous evil might be the life of a young Jewish child born just before World War II who winds up in a Nazi concentration camp and is malnourished, neglected, beaten, and tortured until finally committed to the ovens. The only conscious experiences this child has are ones filled with misery. The life of this child and that of others who experience this kind of suffering seem to be such that, in the words of Jesus, “it would have been better for [them] if [they] had never been born” (cf. Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21). Christian philosopher Keith Yandell thus defines such evils more precisely as “lives on this earth so nasty, brutish, and short that, were the persons who lived them given sufficiently keen objective rationality

ABSTRACT: Critics of the doctrine of eternal punishment may charge that this doctrine constitutes a horrendous evil unworthy of a perfectly good and loving God in that those experiencing eternal torment have lives not worth living. I respond to the problem of hell as a horrendous evil by arguing, first, that it is not clear that eternal torment constitutes a horrendous evil; and, second, that by adding to the traditional doctrine of hell the Christian belief in human sinfulness and our just desert of eternal punishment, God’s existence is compatible with the existence of persons who have lives not worth living.

and sufficient information to make an informed judgment, they would correctly judge that their lives had not been worth living.”¹ Given the apparent existence of such horrendous evils, the atheist may present the following argument:

- (1) If God exists, there would be no horrendous evils.
- (2) There are horrendous evils.
- (3) Therefore, God does not exist.

Theists have rightly responded to the argument from horrendous evils by pointing out that the argument’s second premise assumes that *this earthly life is all there is*.² But most theists, and all Christians, believe that this life is merely a small slice of our total existence. We believe in a life after death that will last for eternity. More than that, we believe that life after death (at least for Christian believers) will be wondrously blissful and glorious—so much so that the Apostle Paul said, “[T]he sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). In light of this, we cannot determine whether the life of the child in the concentration camp was worth living merely by looking at the tiny slice of her life while on this earth. There is nothing in our beliefs about God that would lead us to expect that God must insure that a person’s experience *in this life* be worthwhile for that person. We must look instead at the totality of her life that extends far beyond her mortal experience. It may turn out that, on the (eternal) whole, the child’s life is worth living after all.

However, this response, as good as it is, does not totally eliminate the challenge posed by horrendous evil to theistic belief. For theists who believe in the traditional doctrine of hell, the problem of horrendous evil resurfaces at a different level. In this article, I will briefly explain the argument from hell as a horrendous evil and show two ways that the theist may meet this challenge.

Hell as a Horrendous Evil

For our purposes here, we may define the traditional doctrine of hell this way:

- (TDH) Those adult³ human beings who do not exercise explicit faith in Jesus Christ in this life will, after this life, experience conscious torment forever in a place called hell.

1. Keith Yandell, “Theology, Philosophy, and Evil,” in *For Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Theology*, ed. James Beilby (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 231.

2. See Yandell, “Theology, Philosophy, and Evil,” 231–9; and Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 63 (1989): 297–310.

3. I leave it an open question here as to whether or not nonadults and the mentally impaired may be consigned to hell. My own view, for what it is worth, is that those without the mental ca-

Of course, not all Christians will accept TDH. Annihilationists and universalists, for example, are among those who reject TDH. Also, those who believe in hell, but who do not believe that hell is necessarily a place of punishment or torment (perhaps it is only a place where God sends those who choose not to enjoy his presence) can set TDH aside. Nevertheless, many, if not most, Christians do believe in hell as a place of eternal punishment. To this majority of Christians, the atheist may say, “You cannot appeal to an afterlife to escape the problem of horrendous evils. Since you believe in hell, you also believe that there are people (that is, non-Christians) who will *not* have a blissful afterlife. Instead, they will suffer conscious torment for all eternity. Therefore, some people will truly and eternally have lives that are not worth living.” The upshot of this is that hell, if experienced by a person, would constitute a horrendous evil, which means, given premise (1) of the argument from horrendous evil, that God does not exist.

I propose that the Christian who believes in TDH may challenge either premise of the argument from hell as a horrendous evil. In what follows I will outline both responses.

Are There Lives Not Worth Living?

The second premise of the argument from horrendous evil asserts that there likely are horrendous evils. And the atheist who pushes hell as a horrendous evil will insist that the Christian who accepts TDH *must* admit that there are horrendous evils because those in hell obviously experience a life not worth living.

In response the advocate of TDH may argue that, despite appearances, those in hell do *not* experience a life not worth living. The atheist judges that the person in hell’s life is a life not worth living because he views that person’s life in isolation from other people and circumstances. That is, in judging whether or not such a person has a life worth living, the atheist considers only the suffering experienced by that person. But it may be that, when not viewed in isolation, one may reasonably judge that that person’s life was worth living after all—in fact, that person himself may judge that his life was worth living after all.

Consider the following scenario. Smitty has led a pretty miserable life in this present world. He grew up in poverty, was physically and mentally abused, and early on became a drug dealer. He dies in his midtwenties after living a vicious life and consciously rejecting the offer of God’s grace in Christ. He awakes from the sleep of death to find himself suffering in hell, something he knows will last forever. But, Smitty knows something else,

capacity for moral knowledge are not consigned to hell even if they do not exercise explicit faith in Christ. This does not mean, however, that they escape the culpability of original sin, but simply that they are given a special dispensation of God’s grace due, in part, to their lack of actual sin.

too (perhaps because God reveals it to him). There was a teenage boy, Jim, that he seduced into becoming a drug addict who depended on Smitty for his regular drug fixes.

After two years as an addict, however, Jim encountered a Christian evangelist who shared with him the love of Christ and offered him a better way of life. Jim came to believe in Christ and after struggling for several months he beat his drug habit. Jim then became an evangelist himself, specializing in reaching out to addicts and dealers in the city. He led at least fifty of them to faith in Christ. One of these, Ann, joined a missions organization that helped people in third-world countries combat AIDS and improve their agricultural and sanitation practices. As a result of her efforts, tens of thousands of lives were saved from disease and starvation.

Smitty knows all this. He knows as well that *his* life contributed to this good outcome. Specifically, he knows that if he had not seduced Jim into drug addiction, none of these things would have happened. He knows that *he* “meant it for evil, but *God* meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). It seems plausible that Smitty could look at the circumstances of his life both prior to his death and subsequent to his entrance into hell and reasonably judge that his life had been worth it. Recall the definition of a horrendous evil noted above. It involved a person who experiences a life of suffering that is such that, “given sufficiently keen objective rationality and sufficient information to make an informed judgment, [he] would correctly judge that [his life] had not been worth living.” It is not at all clear that Smitty fits this definition of a horrendous evil. It seems rather that Smitty, given sufficiently keen rationality and sufficient information about the wider impact of his life in the world, could (perhaps *should*) judge that his life was worth it.

The scenario involving Smitty admittedly depends on the consideration of Smitty’s *extrinsic* properties—that is, his relations to other people and their circumstances. The atheist could respond to this argument by modifying the definition of “a life not worth living” to limit our (and Smitty’s) judgment to properties intrinsic to Smitty’s life experiences. In this way, the determination as to whether or not Smitty has a life not worth living could take into account only Smitty’s suffering in hell. Yet it is not clear why an objectively rational and informed person should limit his evaluation to only the intrinsic properties of his experience.

Is God’s Existence Incompatible with Horrendous Evil?

There is another response that the advocate of TDH can make even granted the truth of premise (2) of the argument from horrendous evil. Let us suppose that hell does indeed entail the existence of horrendous evil as defined above. That is, given TDH, there will indeed be some persons who, considering the (eternal) whole of their lives, will have lives not worth liv-

ing. The believer in TDH may nevertheless escape the conclusion of the argument by rejecting premise (1) instead. That premise asserts that God's existence is incompatible with the existence of human beings whose lives are (ultimately) not worth living. In other words, premise (1) assumes that the following two statements are logically inconsistent:

- (A) God exists.
- (B) Horrendous evil exists.

But, is it really the case that the existence of God is incompatible with horrendous evil? For what it is worth, *Jesus* did not think so. Speaking of Judas, he said, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21). The implication here seems to be that Judas was going to suffer drastic consequences that entail what we have called horrendous evil⁴—a life not worth living—as a result of his sinful betrayal of Jesus.

What I propose is that (A) and (B), conjoined with other propositions that Christians typically believe, can be shown to be logically consistent. That being the case, premise (1) of the argument from horrendous evil is false (or at least not known to be true). The additional propositions that we may add come from two other traditional Christian doctrines. First, there is *the doctrine of the universality of human sin*. Christians believe that *all* adult human beings,⁵ not just Judas, are sinners and lawbreakers (Rom. 3:10–12, 23; Ps. 51:5). There is no one who is free from the taint of sin, no one who is truly innocent before God's bar of justice. So crucial and central to Christian theology is this doctrine that a denial of sin's universality involves the heresy of Pelagianism.

Second is the doctrine that *sinners positively deserve the wrath of God* (Rom. 6:23a; Eph. 2:1–3). More specifically, the believer in TDH may say that what we all deserve is eternal punishment in hell. There are some theists, perhaps even Christian theists, who may reject this second doctrine seeing as how it requires not only a commitment to the existence of hell, but also a punishment model of hell. Be that as it may, the point is that believers in TDH hold that this second additional doctrine is true. It is a vital part of their

4. The word "evil" may be misleading here if the reader is not careful to keep in mind the definition of "horrendous evil" as used in this article. It might be thought that saying God's existence is compatible with horrendous evil implies that God is responsible for something morally bad. But the argument that I am defending in this section suggests that horrendous "evils" *are not morally evil*. The confusion can be taken away by recalling that "horrendous evil" simply refers to a particular kind of suffering that the atheist alleges God would be unjustified in permitting, but which I argue he *is* justified in permitting.

5. Of course, many Christians understand this universality of sin to include young children and the mentally impaired. On this view, all humans are sinners in virtue of inheriting the sin of Adam and are thus guilty of *original sin* even apart from having committed any actual sins of their own (which young children and the mentally impaired are supposedly incapable of committing). While I am strongly sympathetic to this view, it is not necessary for the thesis of this paper.

belief that sinners *deserve* eternal punishment in hell. Hell is not a place where God sends people who are innocent of evil; it is a place where God pours out his just wrath on those who have earned his wrath and have not availed themselves of the mercy God provides in Christ.

Since, then, eternal punishment is what we deserve, the atheist cannot say to the believer in TDH that a good God would be unjustified in allowing any of us to experience horrendous evil. The problem for the critic of theism is that he assumes that people are basically good and that the “horrendous” suffering that some people endure in hell is undeserved. But, the TDH advocate need not concede that this suffering is (ultimately) undeserved. Hence, he may respond to the problem of horrendous evil by adding to (A) and (B) the following:

- (C) Every adult human being is a sinner.
- (D) Sinners deserve eternal punishment in hell.
- (E) The experience of eternal punishment in hell constitutes a life not worth living (that is, a horrendous evil).

From (C) and (D) it follows that

- (F) Every adult human being deserves eternal punishment in hell.

And from (E) and (F) it follows that

- (G) Every adult human being deserves a life not worth living.

(C)–(G) conjoined with (A) and (B) comprise a consistent set of propositions.

Therefore, it is not necessarily the case that, if God exists, there would be no horrendous evil. Given the sinfulness of mankind and their desert of hell, the existence of God is actually *compatible* with the existence of at least some horrendous evil. Indeed, given (A)–(G) it probably ought to surprise us if it turned out that there was no horrendous evil! This is one reason no doubt that the salvation Christians claim to have found in Jesus Christ is referred to as “amazing grace.”

Of course, the proponent of the argument from horrendous evil will likely balk at (C) and (D). He may deny that every human being is as sinner or at least deny that we can know this with certainty. And it is controversial that sin deserves eternal punishment. Defending the truth of (C) and (D) lies outside the scope of this paper and is, I believe, irrelevant to its thesis. It is important to emphasize that premise (1) of the argument from horrendous evil assumes a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of horrendous evil. An adequate response to the premise requires only that a consistent set of logically possible and non-*ad hoc* propositions be added to (A) and (B) such that the antecedent of (1) is clearly true and its consequent is false. None of the set (C)–(G) can be charged with being *ad hoc*. (E) is uncontroversial in this context, being the actual foil for the argument from horrendous evil. (F) and (G) are natural deductions from the other propositions. And (C) and (D) are aspects of traditional Christian belief

formulated and held by Christians throughout the ages apart from any consideration of the problem of horrendous evil.

And surely (C) and (D)—the most controversial of the set—are at least logically possible. Concerning (C), it may be impossible to know with certainty by any empirical means that all adult human beings are evildoers. Perhaps, for all we know, there is one sinless saint hiding out right now in a cave in the Sinai desert. Nevertheless, it is certainly logically possible that all adult human beings are sinners. No contradiction or absurdity is involved in the idea that all adult human beings have done wicked things. The only apparent refutation the atheist could make to (C) is to actually produce an example of a sinless saint. I do not think the Christian should hold his breath.

But what about (D), the claim that sinners deserve eternal torment? Many skeptics within and without the Church have challenged this doctrine. How, they ask, can a person deserve an endless punishment for the finite number of sins committed in an earthly lifetime? This question poses a serious challenge to TDH. Nevertheless, this challenge, as serious as it is, does not undermine the logical possibility of (D). Christian philosophers have offered answers to this question that make it plausible to think that (D) is at least logically possible. Michael Murray, for example, outlines two different strategies that may be taken to support the coherence of eternal punishment.⁶ One of these I call the “Dignity of the One Offended Argument” or simply the “Dignity Argument” for short. Just as we justly require a more severe punishment for a crime against a human being than we do for a crime against an animal, so it makes sense to think that a crime against an absolutely perfect being requires the most severe punishment. Eternal punishment in hell is a plausible candidate for the most severe punishment.

The other strategy may be called the “No Repentance Argument.” The question about the justice of an eternal punishment for finite sins presupposes that the sinner will not continue to sin in hell. But, it may be (and it is consistent with Christian belief) that sinners in hell never repent of their sins but continue for all eternity in rebellion against God. If so, then God’s punishing sinners in hell for eternity is not an eternal punishment for finite sins, but an eternal punishment for *eternal sins*. What’s more, this “horrendous evil” would in fact, on this view, be *self-inflicted*! How, then, could it be unjust?

I conclude, therefore, that (C) and (D) are at least logically possible. And since they are also not *ad hoc*, there is no reason why the Christian theist cannot add them to (A), (B), and (E), draw the inferences (F) and (G) and thereby reject premise (1) of the argument from horrendous evil. The Christian theist may consistently and plausibly deny that if God exists, there

6. Michael J. Murray, “Heaven and Hell,” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 287–317.

would be no horrendous evil (on the assumption that the person in hell suffers a horrendous evil).

Before resting easy with this conclusion, however, there is another rejoinder the critic might make. He may concede that I have shown that the existence of horrendous evil in hell is consistent with the *justice* of God, but not with the *love* of God. My argument is tantamount to claiming that, since sinners deserve to be punished in hell forever, God would be perfectly just in consigning them to hell. Be that as it may, it could be claimed that the argument does not take account of the Christian belief that God is loving. A *loving* God, it may be said, could never allow (or cause) his creatures to suffer horrendous evil.⁷

In response, it appears to me that the claim that a loving God could not or would not punish sinners in hell presupposes a rather sentimental and (on reflection) counterintuitive view of love and its relationship to justice.⁸ Specifically, the objection presupposes that one cannot both love a sinner and give him his just deserts at the same time, and that when a choice has to be made between love and justice, love necessarily overrides justice. In other words, the objection presupposes something along the lines of

(H) If a person *S* loves another person *S**, then *S* cannot will that *S** suffer the just penalty of his evil acts.

But there are strong reasons to doubt the truth of (H). Consider the case of a king (call him Roy) who also functions, as most traditional monarchs do, as a judge. The prosecuting attorney for the kingdom informs Roy of a pending case involving a particularly heinous crime. The accused is responsible, he says, for a vicious, hate-motivated, premeditated murder. Moreover, the accused is a career criminal who has thumbed his nose at the law many times, who has been in and out of jail many times. What's more, the evidence against the accused is overwhelming. Indeed, he was caught in the act. There is no doubt of his guilt. Worst of all, the accused shows no sign of repentance or a desire to reform, no remorse for his crime at all. In fact, he expects to be let off scot-free!

"What arrogance!" Roy exclaims. He commands the bailiffs, "Bring the accused before me now!"

When the accused is brought before the bar, it immediately becomes evident to Roy why he expected to be set free rather than punished. The ac-

7. I owe this possible rejoinder to my argument to an anonymous referee for this journal.

8. In this connection, I should also call attention to the fact that Scripture clearly portrays God as both a God of love and a God of just wrath. The Bible that says "God so loved the world" (John 3:16) also says, "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11) and "I have hated Esau" (Mal. 1:3). Jesus, the friend of sinners, is also the one who warned the most often in Scripture about hell, and at his Second Coming will, according to the Apocalypse, cast the beast and the false prophet into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20). The Bible does not appear to put God's wrath and love at loggerheads, but rather seeks to reconcile them. Paul, for one, found such reconciliation in the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ (Rom. 3:26).

cused is Roy's estranged son! He stands before his father, his king and judge, with a smirk. He knows that his father loves him dearly, and believes that his father could never sentence him harshly.

After several agonizing moments, with tears in his eyes, Roy raises his scepter and says, "I hereby sentence you to death for the crime of first degree murder." A few days later, Roy's son is executed for his crime.

Such a response of a loving father to his wayward son seems eminently plausible to me. In fact, it seems *right!* Does this mean, contrary to the objection, that justice trumps love in such cases rather than vice versa? Not necessarily. Rather, what it seems we should say is that *it would not be loving* to let one's loved one persist in thinking that he is immune from the demands of justice. In other words, love sometimes requires justice. And in such cases, a truly loving person will see that justice is done even at the cost of great pain to himself and his loved one. Or so it seems to me.

So, would a loving God not consign sinners to eternal punishment? On the assumption that the sinners deserve hell, and given that they (like Roy's son) are unrepentant in their sin (and perhaps God has even given many opportunities to repent and escape sin's consequences), it would appear that a loving God *could* (probably *would*) consign some sinners to hell. To not do so would be *unloving*.

I conclude, therefore, that the existence of a just and loving God is consistent with the existence of horrendous evils. Our Lord knew what he was talking about when he said that there are at least some individuals for whom it may truly be said, "It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."

Conclusion

We have seen that the theist who endorses TDH faces a unique problem of horrendous evil. We have also seen, however, that the theist may plausibly deny either or both the claim that hell is a horrendous evil or that God's existence is incompatible with horrendous evil. TDH may be subject to a variety of criticisms (exegetical, theological, philosophical, and so forth), but it is not obvious that it poses an insuperable version of the problem of evil.⁹

9. I would like to thank Steve Clinton, Donald Williams, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.