

*THE PROBLEM  
OF HELL*

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# *Introduction*

One of the most intractable difficulties facing traditional theism is the problem of evil, according to which the belief that God is all-powerful and perfectly good is problematic, given the kinds of evil found in our world. Within those versions of theism of a Judaic heritage—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is an especially compelling version of the problem of evil. In addition to the evils that are commonly experienced, in many such traditions a different kind of evil is said to be true of our world. That special kind of evil regards the afterlife, in which some humans are with God forever and some are in hell, which is an excruciatingly bad thing; according to the standard traditions, being in hell is the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone. As with less horrendous evils, the first question is how such an evil is, or could be, justified. The theological portrayals of hell make this question the most difficult for the theist to address. Ordinary pain and evil, it may be thought, can be accounted for if events in the future “make up for” what leads to them, but the evil of hell leads nowhere; at no point in the future will something of value make up for the evil of hell or will some reward be granted to those who endure the suffering of hell. Hell is apparently paradigmatic as an example of truly pointless, gratuitous evil. Thus arises the problem of hell.

This description of the problem of hell and its genesis should make clear that the problem of hell is not limited to any particular religious tradition. As I use the term ‘hell’, a religious tradition incorporates a doctrine of hell when it affirms an eschatological dimension to reality, that is, when it claims some afterlife conception involving a completion of the point of earthly existence, includes some diagnosis of the ills of the human condition, and offers a course

of treatment for these ills. My portrayal of the concept of an afterlife in this work includes any view that maintains that existence continues in some fashion beyond one's earthly death or deaths. These remarks on the scope of my use of the term 'hell' are meant as cautionary, to prevent the misconception that the problem to which this work is devoted is tied in any way to the connotations in contemporary Western culture of the word 'hell', tied as it is to the imaginative language of fire and brimstone and of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Such views fall within the scope of this work, but my investigation is in no way limited to them. Instead, my goal is to treat the problem of hell by paying attention to the philosophical core of such imaginative conceptions, a core that arises in any tradition that claims life beyond death and a future life that can involve the completion, fulfillment, or salvation of a person who will but follow the dictates of a particular religious tradition.

So the problem of hell is a quite general problem for a variety of religious perspectives, and it arises as an instance of the general problem of evil, arguably the worst sort of instance. Moreover, not only is the problem of hell the worst instance of the problem of evil but also there is reason to think the force of this problem for theism is not the same as that of the usual versions of the problem of evil. The following approach to the usual versions of the problem of evil leaves the problem of hell untouched.

The usual versions of the problem of evil come in two varieties, logical and epistemic. A logical version of the problem of evil claims some logical inconsistency between the claim that God is perfectly good and all-powerful and the claim that evil exists. An epistemic version of the problem of evil claims only that the existence of evil provides sufficient reason or evidence to undermine the rationality of believing that a perfectly good and all-powerful God exists. One fruitful approach to the logical problem of evil is Plantingian: Find a sentence that might be true that is obviously compatible with both the omnibenevolence and omnipotence of God and the existence of evil.<sup>1</sup> One such sentence would be 'an omnipotent and perfectly good God created free individuals who make wrong choices, the disvalue of which is overridden by the fact that they are free.' Such a sentence might be true, and it implies both the existence of evil and the existence of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God.

In the face of this reply, the atheologist has two responses that in the end collapse into one. The first is to abandon the logical problem of evil and focus on the epistemic problem. The other approach is to buttress the claim to logical inconsistency. Instead of

claiming that there is an inconsistency between the existence of God, as traditionally conceived, and evil, the atheologist might instead claim that there is an inconsistency between the existence of God and the *kinds of evil* that exist. The atheologist can grant that some kinds of evil—namely, evil that is overridden by some further good—are unproblematic for a traditional conception of God, but not all evils are evidently of this type; some are not obviously overridden by any good.

The theologian can respond to this challenge in one of two ways. The heroic route involves attempting to show that all evils are overridden by some further good. That is, such an approach attempts to say exactly what God has in mind in allowing the evils that exist. Such an approach, I suggest, is not likely to succeed. The other approach is more indirect, attempting to show that this last atheologist response turns the logical problem into an epistemic one. The atheologist claims that not all evil is *evidently* overridden by some further good. Because of the epistemic term used here, this claim is more properly thought of as a version of the epistemic problem of evil. If the epistemic term is dropped, the atheologist is merely claiming that some evils are not overridden by further good, and this claim is not one to which the theologian is committed, nor is it an obvious claim. So, in the face of Plantingian responses to the logical problem of evil, the focus of the debate must turn to the epistemic sphere.

In the epistemic realm, the claim is that the existence of evil provides evidence that there is no God. I suggest that we can best understand the form such an argument takes by considering the claim that some evil appears pointless.<sup>2</sup> If the argument centers on the claim that some evil is in fact pointless, no progress can be made, for the atheologist will claim that some evil is pointless and the theologian will deny this claim. The strategy of the atheologist, however, is to begin with the more circumspect claim that some evil appears to have no point, and here there is some possibility of agreement with the theologian. From this starting point, the atheologist attempts to conclude that it is reasonable to think that God, as traditionally conceived, does not exist. The argument, of course, needs a connecting premise, but the following principle comes to mind to any who are familiar with the epistemological literature of the last few decades: If it appears to person *S* that sentence *p* is true, and *S* has no grounds for doubting the accuracy of this appearance, then it is reasonable for *S* to believe that *p* is true. Employing this principle and the circumspect starting point noted previously, the

atheologian might seem to have an argument for the disputed claim that some evil is in fact pointless. In the absence of the capacity to say what the point of every evil is, the theologian ought to admit that there are no grounds for doubting the accuracy of any appearance that some evil is pointless.<sup>3</sup> The argument does not demonstrate conclusively that some evil is pointless, but, if it is a good argument, it shows that a reasonable person can believe that some evil is pointless. This latter claim is all the atheologian needs, for if it is reasonable to believe that some evil is pointless, then it is reasonable to believe that there is some evil that God does not care enough to prevent or is not able to prevent. In either case, the traditional conception of God ought to be abandoned.

This epistemic version of the problem of evil can be answered if we pay close attention to the appearance statement involved in the argument. The theologian should distinguish between two claims:

(A1) It appears to *S* that *not-p*, where *p* = *Every evil has a point*, i.e., it appears to *S* that some evil is pointless,

and

(A2) It does not appear to *S* that *p*, where *p* = *Every evil has a point*.

The theologian should readily grant the truth of (A2), in the face of the difficulty of saying what the point of every evil is. However, the theologian should not grant the truth of (A1); instead, the theologian should insist that some argument be given for the truth of (A1) by the atheologian.

The distinction between (A1) and (A2) is crucial to the epistemic version of the problem of evil, for the epistemic principle cited previously—if it appears, without grounds for doubt, that *p*, then it is reasonable to believe that *p*—requires the truth of (A1) rather than merely (A2). Furthermore, substituting for the epistemic principle in question a different principle that would allow (A2) in place of (A1) results in a false epistemic principle. The new principle would read, “If it does not appear to you that *p*, and you have no grounds for doubting the accuracy of your perceptual state, then it is reasonable for you to believe *not-p*.” Such a principle underlies arguments from ignorance. To me it does not appear that there is life elsewhere in the universe, and I have no reason to doubt the adequacy of my perceptions here (I have no reason to think I am suffering from a delusion, self-deception, or the like in this matter), but that does not make it

reasonable for me to believe that there is no life elsewhere in the universe.

I want to pursue the nature of arguments from ignorance, but first I want to argue that nothing short of this principle will result in a successful attack on theism. In particular, one might try to avoid either (A1) or (A2) by insisting that, on methodological grounds, the theist shoulders some burden of proof that requires having good reason for thinking that every evil has a point. Of course, theists might claim that they do have such a reason, for they have reason to think God exists. But the challenge is meant to be deeper than this response allows, for the challenge attempts to maintain that one needs a reason for thinking that every evil has a point in order for belief in the existence of God to be rational. On such a view, no appeal to the principle that underlies arguments from ignorance is made. In fact, on this challenge, it makes no difference whether either (A1) or (A2) is true. Instead, the challenge arises prior to the precise way in which we encounter the apparent pointlessness of evil, for it maintains that, on methodological grounds alone, theism must find a point for every evil.

The argument is unsuccessful, however, for it insists on a pattern of inference that the theist need not grant. The normal pattern of inference for theists is not from the claim that every evil has a point to the claim that God exists, but rather the opposite. The existence of God, as traditionally conceived, entails, we can grant, that every evil has a point. So the theist can infer that every evil has a point in the same way ordinary folk reject the Cartesian demon hypothesis. In the case of Descartes's evil demon, the usual grounds for inferring that such a hypothesis is false are from the fact that it is obvious that ordinary plants, animals, and other people exist. One does not have to show first that it is reasonable to believe that no Cartesian demon exists in order for the more ordinary claims to be reasonable; the order of inquiry can be, and ordinarily is, opposite while still being fully rational.

So we are left with the version of the epistemic argument from evil that appeals to an epistemic principle underlying arguments from ignorance. I want to explore such arguments further to convey exactly what goes wrong with such arguments and how this failure infects epistemic versions of the problem of evil. First, note that many good arguments bear a superficial resemblance to arguments from ignorance. For example, if I want to know if my children are home, I go into the house and look for them. When I do not see them, I conclude they are not there. At first glance, the argument underly-

ing this inference looks like the argument from ignorance made for the conclusion that there is no life elsewhere in the universe. But there is a crucial and subtle difference between the two, a difference concerning what reasonable attitudes we take toward our perceptual capacities. In the case of knowing that my children are not home, the reasonable attitude is that my perceptual equipment is such, and the environment in which it is operating is such, that if my children were home, they would appear to me to be home, given the actions I have taken. In the case of life elsewhere in the universe, this attitude is not reasonable. That is, it is not (yet) reasonable to think that if there were life elsewhere in the universe, it would appear to us that there is, given our perceptual equipment and the actions we have taken.

So the crucial issue for the epistemic problem of evil concerns the following counterfactual: If every evil had a point, then each evil would appear to us to have a point, given our cognitive capacities and the actions we have taken. I submit that it is not reasonable to believe this claim or to believe that there are any actions we might take that, given our cognitive capacities, would reveal to us the point of every evil, assuming there is one. I submit that believing such claims is no more reasonable than believing the analogous claim about the fundamental physical structure of the universe. We *might* be successful in finding out the ultimate physical structure of the universe; then again, we *might not*. The proper interpretation of these "mights" is denial of the relevant counterfactuals: To say we might and we might not be successful is to say that it is false that we would be successful and false that we would not be successful. This attitude toward our ability to find out the physical structure of the universe is proper because it is reasonable to think that the physical structure of the universe is very difficult for us to ascertain if it can be ascertained at all. The difficulty is apparent from the amount of time and effort that has been expended in the task, with no definitive answers yet found. The same attitude is proper regarding moral matters. The difficulty in the moral realm is apparent from the amount of time and effort expended in the task of developing a full and comprehensive moral theory, with no definitive answers found. I do not say that none of the answers proposed is correct, although I believe that is so; my argument hinges only on the complexity of the task.

In the face of this argument, the crucial premise needed by the atheologist in order to sustain the epistemic argument from evil against the existence of God is the claim that if every evil had a

point, thought and effort on our part would reveal to us what that point is. Denying this claim is plausible, but I do not pretend that this discussion settles the issue. My reason for the discussion is to show that a general line can be taken on the problem of evil that fails to address the problem of hell. The problem of hell differs from the general problem of evil in the following way: On the majority of important evils, most theological traditions are silent; they do not say why the evils occur or how such evils fit into the divine scheme. Theologies rarely say why natural disasters occur or what purpose they serve, for example. Such is not the case, however, with the doctrine of hell. The point of hell is fully explicit in the theological traditions in question, and the explicitness of this point gives rise to the problem of hell. Whereas with most evils, the appropriate theological response I favor merely points out that the human condition is one of limited understanding, such a response is of no use when we are told the point of a particular evil. There is no issue regarding hell as to whether it has a legitimate point; the theological traditions that include such a doctrine explicitly state what the point is. Moreover, the problem of hell arises precisely because the point of hell brings about evil that seems in no way capable of being redressed by further good, at any rate, not by *future* good. So even if the general approach I have outlined to the problem of evil is successful, that approach is incapable of providing a solution to the problem of hell, which does not hinge on what we do not understand.

Thus, the problem of hell is severe to the point that a solution to the general problem of evil may provide no help at all in solving the problem of hell. Yet, if the problem of hell is ignored or fails to be solved in some other way, religious traditions that include such a doctrine face a serious dilemma. One of the most forceful presentations of the problem of hell and the reasons for abandoning the doctrine is given by the British metaphysician John McTaggart. He argued<sup>4</sup> that if there is a hell, we could have no good reason to believe it. He reasoned that there is no good empirical evidence to believe in hell, so that if there is a good reason to believe in it, revelation must provide it. Yet, McTaggart continued, the infliction of hell is very wicked, and anyone who would send someone to hell must be vile indeed. In such a case, we could have no good reason to trust such an individual concerning anything of importance to our well-being, for as anyone familiar with the games played by schoolyard bullies knows, there is no telling why a vile person would say that something is good or bad for us. The reason may be amusement, to see someone suffer, or for any of a host of other reasons that

are compatible with the falsity of what is being said. So if anyone, including God, tells us that there is a hell to shun, McTaggart claims that we could have no good reason to believe that such an individual is telling us the truth. To put the point succinctly, what such a person says undercuts the reliability of the testimony.

We can put this argument in the form of a dilemma that, in honor of its source, I will call "McTaggart's Dilemma." Either there is good reason to believe in hell or there is not. If there is no good reason for belief in hell, no one should believe in it. After all, without some good reason to believe in hell, the option of believing in hell is no better than any other merely possible catastrophe (such as accepting the view that committing suicide immediately is the only way to escape an eternal medieval torture chamber). The point is that there are too many mere possibilities that our lives end in ruin and too many merely possible routes to avoid these possibilities to base any belief on such a mere possibility. So, for the doctrine of hell to be respectable, there must be good reason to believe in it. The difficulty for this option, however, is that the only possible kinds of reasons are self-defeating. The only evidence there might be for hell is based on revelation from the one who can consign us to hell, and yet no one who claims that hell exists and outlines conditions for avoiding hell can be trusted. So, on either horn of the dilemma, the conclusion to be drawn, according to McTaggart, is that belief in hell is not intellectually respectable.

The point of this work is to investigate the problem of hell in order to determine whether a solution to the problem of hell can be provided. In spite of the generality of this problem for a variety of religious perspectives and traditions, I investigate the problem of hell primarily from the standpoint of Christianity and return to a more general perspective only in the last chapter. Such an approach, although perhaps provincial in one sense, will prove beneficial for several reasons. First, the rich variety of alternatives regarding the nature of hell, within the Christian religion does considerable justice to the possibilities any theistic tradition might have in dealing with the problem of hell. Furthermore, the provinciality of approaching the problem from the perspective of one religion is a benefit rather than a cost because, within Christianity, an ongoing dialogue exists between adherents of different positions on the various aspects of an acceptable theology. This intratraditional dialogue has no intertraditional analogue within theistic traditions in general, and any investigation of a theological problem is well served by building on a history of discussion of the problem. Moreover, the

worry that provinciality may have its price can be dispelled. Focusing on only one particular tradition would be troublesome if the problem of hell were addressed by paying attention to the connotations that the word 'hell' has in that particular tradition, but this study is not interested in such connotations, except when they shed light on the underlying philosophical account of hell within that tradition. Instead of focusing on imaginative details concerning hell (such as whether it involves fire, gnashing of teeth, and the like), the focus here is on the more abstract theoretical structure any imaginative presentation of the doctrine of hell presupposes. As we shall see, the history of discussion of the problem of hell within Christianity does considerable justice to the variety of abstract theoretical structures to which any approach to the problem of hell might appeal. So the approach to the problem of hell undertaken here from the perspective of Christianity will only benefit from our focused attention and suffer no loss of generality because of it. The results achieved here are easily generalizable to other theistic traditions as well, and in the final chapter I show that our results are generalizable to a more global perspective on the problem of hell.

So, where does the doctrine of hell fit into the scheme of things, according to Christianity? The story of Christianity is portrayed by its adherents as good news. It is the *gospel* of Jesus the Christ. It is good news because, as one follower puts it, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Good news is only one side of the story, however, for Christians have proclaimed not only the benefits brought by the person and work of Jesus the Christ but also the immense costs of failing to declare allegiance to this message. Just as a compliment can also be a threat (think, for example, of a husband, already under investigation for violence due to jealousy, who says to his wife, "You were so beautiful tonight, every guy in the room wanted to dance with you"), the benefits of Christianity are, from a different perspective, the immense costs of hell. Christianity paints a picture of life that enchants many with the splendor of heaven but revolts some of the same and many others with what is at best the squalor of hell and at worst horror beyond description.

The doctrine of hell is no mere addendum to the primary claims of the Christian faith. Instead, the sacred scriptures of the Christian faith found the doctrine in the eschatological nature of Christianity. In this view, the history of the universe is not a pointless wandering in the wilderness of time, but a history with direction to it. Specifically, Christian scriptures maintain that the goal of history is a final consummation of all things in Christ. This consummation, how-

ever, involves a judgment, and a final one at that. It separates once and for all the sheep and the goats, the first receiving eternal life and the second going away into eternal punishment.

So at first glance the doctrine of hell is central in the Christian understanding of the universe and the place of human beings in it. Yet, the doctrine is controversial, both to those who claim to be Christians and to those who do not. First, Christians who agree that there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun disagree about what hell is like. Moreover, some who are willing to accept many of the claims of Christianity are not willing to accept what they perceive to be the biblical doctrine of hell; they prefer a version of Christianity lacking this doctrine (if there is such a version). It is also controversial because the purportedly biblical doctrine of hell presents, to many, the most intractable version of the problem of evil, as we have seen. Ordinary pain and evil, it may be thought, can in principle be accounted for if events in the future make up for the pain that leads to them. But the evil of hell leads nowhere; at no point in the future will something of value make up for the evil of hell or will some reward be granted to those who endure the suffering of hell. To many—even to many who would declare their allegiance to the revelation of God in Christ—hell is the paradigm of truly pointless, gratuitous suffering.

In the face of these controversies, capitulation might seem attractive; that is, the most defensible versions of Christianity jettison the biblical doctrine of hell. Although some Christians view this strategy as fawning at the altar of popular opinion, a growing number favor abandoning the doctrine both within and without Christendom. For example, consider E. S. Chesen's attitude toward hell: "The concept of hell is also useless and harmful. I suspect that those evangelists who continue to peddle this asinine idea are beyond redemption. Inculcation with such a negative entity as hell makes for intriguing books and horror movies, but does little to promote a healthy attitude toward religion."<sup>5</sup> Here is expressed a deeply felt and widespread contemporary attitude toward the topic of this work: Thinking about hell may be useful if one's imagination tends toward the horrific, but for more serious interests (such as truth or the well-being of humanity) religion would be much better off ignoring the topic.

Not only are there popular sentiments such as Chesen's to the effect that the doctrine of hell is bad for our health, but also there are theoretical arguments against the doctrine, one of the most interesting being McTaggart's Dilemma, with its recommendation that any

decent religion should abandon the doctrine of hell. These recommendations tell the story of Protestantism in America in the last two centuries. Even the popular press has taken notice of the phenomenon:

Meantime, observes church historian Martin Marty, "Hell disappeared. And no one noticed." For liberal protestants, hell began to fade in the 19th century along with Calvinism's stern and predestining God. In once Puritan New England, the Universalists decided that God is much too good to condemn anyone to hell, while the Unitarians concluded that humanity is much too good for God to punish—if, indeed, there is a God. Today, hell is theology's H-word, a subject too trite for serious scholarship. When he prepared a Harvard lecture on the disappearance of hell, Marty consulted the indices of several scholarly journals, including one dating back to 1889, and failed to find a single entry.<sup>6</sup>

There is even evidence that the doctrine of hell is losing its force in the last remnants of conservative Protestantism:

But now, says University of Virginia sociologist James Hunter, author of two books on contemporary evangelicalism, "many evangelicals have a difficult time conceiving of people, especially virtuous non-believers, going to hell." In one of his studies, for example, Hunter asked evangelical students if they thought Gandhi was in hell. "They recognized that by their own theology Gandhi should be in hell, but the idea made them extremely nervous. . . ." He concludes that evangelicals are tempering their images of hell: "People say now, 'I think there is a hell but I hope it will be a soul-sleep.'"<sup>7</sup>

The lesson here is clear: The theological trend of the last few centuries strays dramatically from a central feature of historical Christianity. Even those whose theological outlooks require the doctrine find it disquieting, and alternative outlooks not requiring the doctrine find ready acceptance among a population whose conception of God leaves little room for the language of fire and brimstone.

The motivation for abandoning hell is easily understood, given the controversial nature of the doctrine and the millstone it can be around the neck of any serious attempt to assuage intellectual concerns over the truth of Christianity. Regardless of the attractiveness of abjuration, however, this approach is not promising. Innovation in matters religious has its price. For one thing, originality has usually been seen as a vice rather than a virtue in the theological traditions in question, and whether abandoning the doctrine of hell would amount to merely altering the tradition or forsaking it altogether is

far from clear. For another, when religious traditions become too malleable, the labels attached to them—'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Judaism'—come to be more akin to the labels for political parties, where the goal is often only to preserve the title, without much substantive intellectual commitment attached to what is labeled. Developments of this sort within a tradition, religious or not, are often best seen as degenerative in that they signal a way of conceptualizing the theoretical landscape that is not very useful. Just as a classification of animals into terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial gives way to the more fecund biological classification schemes that put some of each of these categories in the same group, theological innovation may result in a situation where the terms for various traditions do not classify in a way that provides the deepest and most useful understanding of the variety of options a person can take toward matters of spirituality. Yet, if anything is central to a religious perspective, it is that the core of that perspective is crucial to a proper conception of spirituality; that is, any proper way of conceiving of the theoretical alternatives must include it as one of the fundamental alternatives.

More important, abandonment of the doctrine is not promising because some such doctrine is central to the point of the major theistic traditions. In this instance, it is central to Christianity that the person and work of Jesus have a point; humanity is in need of something that Christians maintain God has provided in Christ. The traditional conception of hell that has been deemed problematic—and correctly so, as we shall see—is but one way of preserving these central points of Christianity, and we fail to appreciate the problem of hell if we do not first understand the necessity for Christianity to offer some account of the destiny of humanity apart from salvation through Christ. In sum, a Christian account of hell describes our destiny beyond this life apart from the work of God in Christ, and any approach that makes that work significant beyond the grave cannot help presupposing some account of hell.

Of course, inferring the traditional doctrine of hell from the need for some such account would be an extraordinarily bad argument, for many alternatives have been and might be proposed. One such option dismisses any notion of an afterlife altogether. Perhaps our destiny apart from Christ is an earthly life missing an important dimension. Perhaps, for example, the story of Christ and the intrusion of the divine into human history is a mythical call on behalf of the liberation of the human spirit from capitalist, racist, or sexist oppression. More metaphysically, perhaps the point of the story of

Jesus is to be explained in terms of the eternal incarnation of the divine Idea in the human species as a whole and in its historically developing general consciousness, or perhaps the story points to the possibility of this incarnation and the call to all of us to aid in the realization of this possibility.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the details of the alternative, however, the outline is the same. Even if all there is to life is our three score and ten, one might hold—and some do—that such a life lived in response to the call of God in Christ is a life eternal in its character as compared with its alternatives.

For many others, however, such an emaciated eschatology is hardly deserving of the label 'Christian'. First, some of these approaches require such a radical revision of our ordinary metaphysical conception of the importance of the individual and what sorts of things can legitimately count as spiritual entities that they have little persuasive appeal to most. Consider, for example, the Hegelian view that the point of the story of Jesus has to do with the eternal incarnation of the divine Idea in the human species as a whole. What I have written is not an argument against such accounts, of course, but an explanation of why such versions of Christianity are not likely to be serious competitors in the marketplace of ideas; they will not be, as William James puts it, "live options" for most individuals.

Second, those options that sit better with our ordinary metaphysical conception of the universe still tend to be unsatisfying when they limit their eschatology to this life. Two lines of thought lead to this conclusion. The first is moral in character, and the second has to do with the nature of God's love. Regarding the first point, most of us feel deeply that wrongdoing should be rectified in some way and that those who have suffered need to be recompensed. Even if, as Christians maintain, God's goodness causes him to wait patiently in the hope that forgiveness and reconciliation can fulfill the demands of justice, there is still a story to be told of what justice demands, should such reconciliation fail. The other side of this coin concerns the large percentage of the world's population who are harried and hapless. For Christianity to forget in its eschatology the plight of the majority of the world's population and the demands of fairness that their suffering be redressed would be gross cultural bigotry. These insights form a core component of an adequate Christian understanding of the human condition, and in historical Christianity these insights have been given a distinctly eschatological flavor: God's purposes in allowing the wrongdoing, pain, and suffering of this vale must at some point have been achieved, and at that

point, at the end of "this age," recompense is due. Any version of Christianity limited in significance to the present earthly life fails to address the demands of our sense of justice and fairness, for obviously, evildoers sometimes evade punishment in this life and those who suffer often do not deserve it.

Of course, that much of the pain and suffering in the world goes unrequited may be just a regrettable fact about life. My point is not so much to argue that, if there is a God, he ultimately must balance the scales of justice, but rather to explain why many individuals attracted to Christianity are attracted only to a version with significance beyond the grave. That is, I make no claims here regarding the truth of the sentiments that give rise to allegiance to Christianity in traditional garb, but instead seek only to make understandable the attractiveness of versions of Christianity requiring a doctrine of hell.

As noted previously, the second reason some find attractive only a version of Christianity with postmortem significance concerns the Christian view of God as a loving God. The work of God in Christ is rooted, Christianity claims, in his love for human beings; and as Aquinas claimed, love involves not only willing good for the one loved but also desire for union with the beloved. Whatever the blessings of the Christian life, the earthly experience of the believer rarely if ever conveys a sense of complete union with the divine. What Christians believe *will be* is still *not-yet*, even at the moment of death. Even those moments of highest fulfillment in the Christian experience of God often do not satisfy completely, and even if they do, those moments are still just moments. They pass away into the reality of other moments in which the character of one's experience is that of absence, that of something missing; and even when one is not immediately aware of this quality, it is nonetheless there to be discovered by the simplest reflection. So any account of Christianity that addresses the deepest longings of the human breast has to posit an afterlife in which we no longer see, as St. Paul put it, "through a glass darkly, but face to face."

Against the backdrop of these hopes, desires, and longings the Christian doctrine of the incarnation is set in relief. The consensus among Christians throughout history has been that the deepest desires and longings of the human heart have been addressed by the creator of the universe in Jesus the Christ. The significance of the work of God in Christ is not limited to our earthly existence, but encompasses all eternity, for only such an action befits the incomprehensible love of God and only such an initiative on the part of the divine could meet the longings present in the soul of humanity. Even

in this incomplete skeletal outline of some of the features of historical Christianity, however, the problem of hell emerges. Even if God's redemptive purposes extend to all humankind and even if his purposes were sure to be achieved, Christianity still must include an account of *what would have happened to humanity* apart from God's intervention in Christ if Christianity is to explain adequately the point of that intervention. Any such account of what would have happened had God not intervened in Christ involves the topic of hell in some way, even if the view of hell that results is far from traditional.

In this regard one other point is worth making. In an age of compromise between various religious traditions, some find attractive a merging of Eastern thought with Christian thought. One such eclectic approach introduces the cycle of rebirth into Christianity by maintaining that those not yet fit for heaven are reincarnated again into the earthly realm to try again. This approach fails to introduce anything new of philosophical substance pertaining to the problem of hell. On this supposedly synergistic approach, two options are open regarding the doctrine of hell. In the first, hell is identified with the cycle of rebirth, in that human destiny beyond this present earthly life apart from the work of God in Christ is to be trapped in this cycle. This account of hell is quite unorthodox, and we shall investigate it in Chapter 2. The present point is just that this view does not circumvent the problem of hell; instead, it only offers an unorthodox account of hell. In the second option, the cycle of rebirth is a precursor to the final alternatives of heaven and hell. This view holds that the cycle of rebirth provides for numerous second chances at redemption. Such a view does not escape the problem of hell, however, for it must say what would happen if an individual were to reject the entire multitude of chances comprised by the cycle of rebirth. This account does not escape the problem of hell either, but rather only postpones it. Instead of being confronted with hell after death, one is confronted with it only after the cycle of rebirth is complete (whenever that might be). In any case, the problem of hell cannot be avoided merely by altering or supplementing the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife. Instead, the only way to avoid the problem of hell is to limit the significance of Christianity to earthly life, which is, to many, too high a price to pay for solving the problem of hell.

So, to a very large portion of Christendom, if there is to be a satisfying and complete explanation of what, according to Christianity, God did for humanity in Christ, there is no escape from the

problem of hell. I am not arguing, of course, that traditional Christianity is correct and all other conceptions of Christianity are mistaken. My aim at this point, to repeat, is explanatory, not polemical. I have tried to make clear what the idea of abandoning the doctrine of hell comes to, and why compromising with nontraditional conceptions of Christianity by abandoning the doctrine of hell can be undesirable. I have also wanted to make clear that the motivations for such a noncompromising attitude do not arise because such individuals are unduly fastidious; the attitudes, desires, and longings I have cited are common to the human experience. For such individuals, Christianity is attractive only in its traditional garb, with an eschatology positing a point to the life and work of God in Christ that extends beyond the grave. For such individuals, whether the doctrine of hell is given its traditional rendition or some other formulation, no emancipation from that doctrine is possible without abandoning Christianity itself or succumbing to the viewpoint that the deepest longings of their hearts will go unsatisfied.

The course I counsel begins by accepting that there is no satisfactory Christian alternative to the difficult theological and philosophical task of formulating and defending a conception of hell. This book is dedicated to just this task. For those convinced that Christianity needs no such doctrine, take this work solely in terms of the historical point that the doctrine of hell has been a central component in traditional Christianity. My view of the matter, which I have not defended here, is that the doctrine has more than historical significance; but for those of a different persuasion, the historical significance of the doctrine is reason enough to raise the question of whether a philosophically and theologically acceptable formulation of the doctrine can be given, and thus whether a philosophically and theologically defensible version of historical Christianity can be found.

For the most part, the constraints that govern this work are philosophical in character, but a word about the theological constraints is in order. One such constraint undergirds the project: I assume for discussion of the problem of hell that God exists and that existence is not bounded by the grave. In the context of considering the doctrine of hell in historical Christianity, however, another theological issue arises. This book is part of a growing body of literature that investigates the theoretical power of historical Christianity,<sup>9</sup> and the results here and elsewhere show a philosophical richness to this tradition that is masked by a cultural drift away from it. Yet, no focus on the adequacy of historical Christianity can suc-

ceed if it ignores the theological constraints arising from the scriptures of the Christian religion. This issue is addressed at the end of chapter 4, where I consider to what extent the philosophical investigation of the problem of hell fit the scriptures of the Christian religion. Because this work aims not only to consider whether there is a solution to the problem of hell but also to be sensitive to the theological and religious contexts in which the doctrine of hell lives, this issue is important. A philosophical solution to the problem of hell that did violence, of necessity, to theological and religious sensibilities would be unfortunate. The section addressing this issue can be seen as a case study of whether the philosophical account can be reconciled with the lived experience of a particular religion. Even if such a reconciliation is possible—and I argue it is—that provides no guarantee that, in any other religious context, such a reconciliation is possible. Investigating the issues further would require more space than we have here, however, and a positive result in the case of Christianity at least provides hope for positive results for other religions as well.

In order to raise this issue in a fashion that is fair to the philosophical analysis that follows, I must caution against identifying the biblical conception of hell with the traditional theology concerning hell. First, I consider the traditional doctrine of hell, perhaps the most common one in the history of Christian thought on hell. In summary form, it maintains that hell is a place where some people are punished eternally with no possibility of escape. We can analyze this doctrine, which I call here the strong view of hell, into four separate components:

- (H1) The Anti-Universalism Thesis: some persons are consigned to hell;
- (H2) The Existence Thesis: hell is a place where people exist, if they are consigned there;
- (H3) The No Escape Thesis: there is no possibility of leaving hell, and nothing one can do, change, or become in order to get out of hell, once one is consigned there; and
- (H4) The Retribution Thesis: The justification for and purpose of hell is retributive in nature, hell being constituted so as to mete out punishment to those whose earthly lives and behavior warrant it.

I begin with this doctrine primarily because the pragmatics of intellectual effort counsel against reinventing the wheel. The strong view

of hell is a biblical conception of hell in that this view implies a finality to the separation of those who receive eternal life from those who receive eternal punishment. If we are to be justified in pursuing a theological and philosophical alternative to this view, we need first to find some reason to be dissatisfied with this traditional understanding of hell.

A different reason for starting with the strong view might be that one is convinced that this view of hell is taught in scripture, that it is *the* biblical conception of hell. This reason is not mine; moreover, the strong view is but one of several accounts of hell that are, arguably, compatible with the claims of scripture. Instead of addressing the matter here, I take it up at the end of chapter 4. I mention it here only to avoid the misunderstanding that in criticizing the strong view of hell I am criticizing the only conception of hell compatible with a traditional view of scriptural authority within Christianity. A piece of theology may have many virtues including the virtue of being true, but separating good and adequate theology from that which is explicitly and directly taught in scripture, is crucially important. A theology is, fundamentally, a theory developed by human beings about the divine. Historically, the task of constructing an adequate Christian theology has been the task of accounting for the data of scripture and Christian experience. As with all cases of theory construction, our understanding of the data is sometimes altered by our theoretical investigations, and the case is no different in theology. Often theologies have led to a dismissal of some type of purportedly Christian experience, and, more so in recent centuries than in those more removed in time, the theological task has led many to an altered understanding of which portions of the Bible constitute data for which a theology must account. The important point, though, is not the particular relationship between data and theory or the more critical attitude toward scripture and the data to be elicited from it that contemporary theology takes, but rather that theologies are theories. They are an attempt to explain certain data, and any such accounting results in a theory that goes beyond the data it is constructed to explain. In classic scientific examples, theories go beyond the data they are to explain by positing the existence of unobserved and perhaps unobservable entities, such as atoms, electrons, quarks, and the like. In Christian theology, even for conservative Christians, theological theories go beyond the statements of scripture and the record of Christian experience. Such a theology formulates systematically certain claims not (always) themselves

found in scripture but thought to be the best explanation of the insights in scripture and the pith of Christian experience.

It would be surprising if nothing in scripture supported the traditional conception of hell; indeed, as shown in chapter 4 much is to be found on its behalf. Nonetheless, thinking that scripture is compatible only with that view would be a mistake. In any nonconservative view about the authority of scripture, decisions need to be made about what parts of scripture are more theologically significant than others; indeed, even assuming the most conservative Christian position on the authority of scripture, other decisions still would have to be made. These decisions include which passages to treat as primary and which to interpret in light of the primary passages, and which passages to take figuratively and which to take nonfiguratively. Even from the most conservative viewpoint concerning the authority and reliability of the Bible, there can be no immediate and direct scriptural grounds for making such decisions. To attempt to find such a reason is by its very nature circular. Our canons of interpretation are necessarily our own canons, and any attempt to relieve ourselves of the weighty philosophical obligation to develop and defend such canons by appeal to "the text" is obscurantist. Once we recognize the theoretical status of these decisions, seeing that a theology of hell cannot be read off from the scriptural record is no longer difficult.

My point is not that any interpretation of scripture is arbitrary, for what I have claimed is compatible with there being a truth to the matter of what authority scripture should have for the Christian. My point is rather that scripture alone cannot settle these issues. We do great injustice to the discipline of theology if we pretend that it is anything but a fully theoretical enterprise, and we would show disdain for the seriousness of the theoretical task if we were to pretend that appeal to the text can replace hard thinking.

So, I begin with the strong view for pragmatic reasons and not because I think it is the scriptural view of hell. I assume in what follows that the strong view is not explicitly endorsed anywhere in scripture. For those inclined toward conservative positions on the authority of scripture, this fact is serendipitous, for I argue in chapter 1 that the strong view of hell is objectionable. In particular, I argue that it is subject to McTaggart's Dilemma, that the only possible reasons for believing the strong view are undercut by the strong view itself. In spite of its defects, however, the strong view is superior to the standard alternatives to it, a point I argue at length in chapter 2.

This conclusion then points the way toward an account of hell that is theologically and philosophically adequate. The strong view cannot be accepted as it stands, but the ultimate conclusion I wish to draw is that the best piece of theology about hell is much closer to the strong view than to any of its extant competitors.

Regardless of the particular strategy one takes in addressing the problem of hell, I hope I have made clear here why the problem of hell cannot be ignored. Contrary to the claim of an earlier quote, that "hell is theology's H-word, a subject too trite for serious scholarship," there is good reason, even overwhelming reason, for a careful and scholarly consideration of the doctrine of hell, for most theistic traditions imply that existence is not bounded by the grave and thus require such a doctrine. Yet, such a doctrine raises immediately the problem of evil, a version that stands untouched by some perhaps plausible responses to the more general problem of evil. My strategy is to investigate the problem of hell as it arises in Christianity, and the structure of this work is as follows. It begins by eliciting and considering objections, both theological and philosophical, to the strong view of hell. In large part, these objections summarize the critical discussion of the doctrine of hell within Western Christianity in the past centuries. The aim of chapter 1 is to present the variety of complaints against the strong view in a dialectical structure that allows the reader to grasp the significance of a bewilderingly complex history of criticism and response. These objections are severe enough that some changes are required in the doctrine, and the second chapter considers some simple alternatives to the strong view of hell. These alternatives are heterodox in nature and include the standard views of hell that appear more favorable to our contemporary culture: universalism, second chance doctrines, annihilationism, and the like. The discussion shows that these views cannot survive theological and philosophical scrutiny, not even scrutiny that employs no claims peculiar to the Christian community. Thus difficulties plague not only the orthodox view of hell but standard heterodox views as well. This situation calls for a deeper investigation of the need for the doctrine of hell and its place in relation to the Christian account of the nature of God and to the Christian view of the sinfulness of humanity. I undertake this investigation in the final chapters, where I present an account of the nature of hell adequate to the demands of Christianity. I argue that this account is firmly grounded in Christian claims concerning the nature of God (although these claims are not unique to Christianity). It is fully compatible with the biblical portrayal of God as a God of

love, and it also remains faithful to the biblical record about the seriousness of sin and the reality of hell. Moreover, I argue that the existence of hell is fully compatible with the perfect goodness of God as well as his unbounded love toward all humanity. In sum, the account here has these virtues precisely because it explains the nature of both heaven and hell in terms of God's love for the entire created order. The conclusion I draw is that the Christian doctrine of hell is subject to no compelling difficulty and thus that the problem of hell is not unresolvable.

### Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga has pursued this strategy over several decades. The most developed version appears in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

2. In what follows, I borrow heavily from a growing literature on the subject. See, e.g., M. B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971); William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion*, James E. Tomberlin, ed. (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991); F.J. Fitzpatrick, "The Onus of Proof in Arguments about the Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 21–35; Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982); and Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73–93.

3. There are questions surrounding this claim having to do with whether God must create the best. I bypass these questions here, granting the claim in the text, for I believe the problem of evil can be answered even when this claim is granted.

4. In *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London, 1906), section 177.

5. E. S. Chesen, *Religion May Be Hazardous to Your Health* (New York, 1972), p. 93.

6. Kenneth L. Woodward, "Heaven," *Newsweek*, March 29, 1989, p. 54.

7. *Ibid.*

8. See, for example, the Hegelian-infected concluding apologetic sections of D. F. Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*, first published in 1835.

9. Among these works one should include Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, 1977); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York, 1974); Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986); Thomas V. Morris, ed., *The Concept of God* (New York, 1987) and *Divine and Human Action* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988); and Thomas P. Flint, ed., *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame, 1990).