Hell and Universalism

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Many religious traditions picture Hell as a place of immense suffering that some people experience after they die. But who might go to Hell, and why, and for how long? And, although many people believe there is a Hell, might they be mistaken? Might it be that a just, good, and loving God could not send people to Hell, especially for eternity?

This essay does not assume that Hell (or God) actually exists, but reviews several prominent philosophical responses to questions like these, as well as critiques and objections to these answers.

1. What is Hell?

In its most simplistic form, Hell is “the Bad Place” where people are punished for sins they’ve committed. Depending on the tradition, “sin” could be anything from disobedient rebellion against a particular deity to the ignorant neglect (or disbelief) of God’s laws, to cruel or otherwise harmful actions, to just simply any immoral act whatsoever.

Hell is sometimes described as a fiery torture chamber filled with all manner of horrors; others picture it as a psychological post-mortem state characterized by hopelessness, suffering, and despair. And these views can be combined in various ways.\(^{[11]}\)

Across traditions, Hell is often described as a place of pain and suffering:

- the New Testament describes Hell as “the unquenchable fire”\(^{[2]}\) where both the soul and the body can be destroyed;\(^{[3]}\) later Christians developed pictures of a multilayered Hell, where each level holds sinners grouped by their crimes;\(^{[4]}\)
- Hell, or “Jahannam,” is repeatedly described in the Qur’an as “an abyss...a Fire, intensely hot”\(^{[5]}\) that has multiple levels;\(^{[6]}\)
- the Hindu scripture Bhagavata Purana describes twenty-eight distinct hells (and “thousands of hellish conditions”), each with their own unique form of agony.\(^{[7]}\)

Whatever the religious tradition, Hell is always understood as an unpleasant place to be.\(^{[8]}\)

2. How Long Does Hell Last?

According to those who believe there is a Hell, how long are its punishments supposed to last? There are two main positions.

2.1 Hell is Eternal

From one perspective, those in Hell (known as “the damned”) are evildoers who have defied or ignored an infinite god and so, as a matter of fairness, their punishment must also be infinite: Hell is eternal.

Accordingly, from this perspective, Hell’s purpose is primarily a matter of justice: the damned receive what they deserve.\(^{[9]}\) And sinners are responsible for earning their treatment, given the infinite purity or holiness of a deity who won’t allow an infinite sin to go unpunished.\(^{[10]}\)

2.2 Hell is Temporary

Others view Hell as a temporary place or state which “burns off” the unclean sinfulness of the damned. So, like incarcerated people at the end of their sentences, people in Hell may eventually be freed from their sufferings.

Annihilationists believe that, upon their release from Hell, the souls of the damned are extinguished into nothingness.\(^{[11]}\) The damned are not allowed to enter Heaven, but they are required to suffer only for an amount of time warranted by their previous sinfulness: Hell is not eternal.

Purgatorial views assert that, after the damned serve their time in Hell, they are either free to enter Heaven or are freed to experience reincarnation: either way, Hell is not eternal.\(^{[12]}\) Some Buddhist traditions suggest that one’s sentence in Naraka (a Sanskrit name for Hell) can last for millions of years unless the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha assists one in escaping more quickly.\(^{[13]}\) Some other faiths also teach that repentance in this life can diminish a purgatorial sentence for oneself or others.\(^{[14]}\)

3. Universalism
Some theistic traditions argue for universalism: the thesis that the ultimate reconciliation of all persons with God in Heaven is not only possible, but likely, given other beliefs about the nature of the divine, such as God being just, loving, or merciful.[15]

3.1 God’s Justice

Some argue that a God of perfect justice would not sentence sinful persons to infinite punishment for finite offenses. At worst, human beings can only sin for a little over a hundred years, so if justice demands that punishments “fit the crime,” it seems unfair to make even totally depraved sinners suffer for thousands of years or, worse, for eternity.

Others argue that divine justice actually requires the forgiveness of sins. If justice is fairness, and an all-powerful God allows sinners to suffer serious harm in life, then fairness might require that God compensate them after death for these harms, regardless of their sinful state. Doing this, however, requires addressing their sins. For each sinner deserving both compensation and reward, God has two options:

- forgive their sins and forego their punishment, or
- allow the person to undergo purgatorial cleansing before granting them their deserved reward.

Without some further sin, the person would, presumably, be allowed to stay in Heaven indefinitely.[16]

3.2 God’s Love

Others have argued that a perfectly loving God would not abandon any person in Hell. If God is omnibenevolent (perfectly good), then God must show goodness and love to every individual. Since this cannot be done by ignoring someone’s suffering or annihilating their consciousness, it would not be possible for any person to either remain in Hell for eternity or to be annihilated upon their exit.[17]

3.3 God’s Mercy

If God, as a perfectly good being, must also be perfectly merciful, then some argue that God must offer forgiveness to all sinners.[18] Although accepting that gift would be the choice of each person, it is assumed that most would want to escape Hell; anyone remaining would be damned by their own choice.[19]

Altogether, these arguments deliver the same conclusion: if God exists as often understood, then God will do everything possible to ensure that Hell is, in the end, unoccupied.

4. Conclusion

A clearer understanding of what we mean by ‘Hell’ illuminates a host of other metaphysical, ethical, and religious concepts—from God, good, and evil to justice, love, and more.

For some, beliefs about Hell provide powerful motivations for religious beliefs. For others, beliefs about an afterlife might justify rejecting religious beliefs. Either way, the discussion here is of interest to theists, atheists, and agnostics alike—especially if they might reconsider their positions.

Notes

[1] Eastern Orthodox Christianity, for example, often understands Hell and Heaven as co-extensive post-mortem locations where an inhabitant’s willful response to freely-available divine love determines their experience; those who choose to receive God’s love experience the divine presence as Heaven, while those who choose to reject it experience God’s presence as Hell. For more on this perspectival model of the afterlife, see Holder (2016).

In general, the positions and arguments which follow treat “sinfulness” as an essential feature of an agent: even if a person generally lives a virtuous life overall, if they commit even one sin (however negligible) during their life, they will be nevertheless categorized as a “sinner” in the postmortem analysis.


[3] Matthew 10:28. It remains an open debate within Christianity whether this is hyperbolic metaphor or a literal prophecy of future judgment. For more, see comments on “annihilationism” in Section 2.2.

[4] See, for example, Dante’s Inferno, the first part of his famous Divine Comedy.


[7] Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 5, Chapter 26

[8] In contrast, Heaven or Paradise are often described by highlighting the pleasurable experiences had by their inhabitants. These pleasures might be a result of escaping the difficulties of the mortal world, or rewards of sensuous gratification (including, but not limited to, being granted access to the divine presence), or some other blissful forms of existence.
[9] Consider St. Augustine’s discussion in Book XXI, Chapter 11 of The City of God regarding the nature of judgment and condemnation righteously lasting longer than the offenses that require them.

[10] See, for example, the Protestant reformer John Calvin’s defense of the eternal election of the damned in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, chapter 21, section 5.

[11] One example would be the Buddhist concept of nirvana, or ‘the quenching,’ which frees one from the cycle of rebirth; for a Christian defense of annihilationism, see Fudge (2011).

[12] For a Roman Catholic explanation of purgatory, see Part I, Sec. 2, Ch. III, Art. 12, Subsection iii of the Catechism. For an example of a Protestant purgatorial view aimed at ultimate reconciliation, see Walls (2016). For one (of many) views of reincarnation, see the Bardo Thodol.

[13] Regarding Hell as Naraka, see the Devaduta Sutta; for a discussion of Ksitigarbha, see The Sutra of the Past Vows of the Earth Store Bodhisattva.

[14] For example, see the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences (which can, in theory, apply to the person earning them or to someone else who the person selects) in Part II, Sec. 2, Ch. II, Art. 4, Subsection x of the Catechism.


[16] As Thomas Talbott (2014:150) explains, divine forgiveness “is one of the essential means by which God protects the innocent from irreparable harm and will eventually vindicate [God’s] righteousness in the face of unjust suffering.” This is a variation of what Crummett (2019) calls the beneficence argument.

[17] In the words of Marilyn McCord Adams (1999: 157), “it would be cruel for God to create (allow to evolve) human beings with such radical vulnerability to horrors, unless Divine power stood able, and Divine love willing, to redeem.” See also, Crummett’s (2019) discussion of the divine love argument.

Many see “the problem of Hell” – how could an all-loving, just, powerful and good God send people to Hell or allow people to be in Hell? – as an instance of the more general problem of evil: how could a good God allow evils, or certain types of evils, to occur, if God could prevent those evils? Since being in Hell would likely be very bad, a great evil, it too is an evil that can give rise to the question of the problem of evil: how could a good God allow the evil of Hell, if God could prevent it? For discussion of the problem of evil, see The Problem of Evil by Thomas Metcalf.

[18] Some contend that the viability of this choice is limited only to our premortem existence – that is, that sinners can only receive God’s forgiveness prior to death. For discussion and critique of this position, see Hall (2003: 7-9).

[19] As C.S. Lewis describes in The Problem of Pain, “The gates of Hell are locked from the inside.” For philosophical defenses of this position, see Buckareff and Plug (2015, 2005).

References


Calvin, John. 1845. The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Henry Beveridge (trans.).


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