

The Existence and Nature of God

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A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell*

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Most theistic religions have a doctrine of the afterlife in which the eternal fate of a man depends on how he has led his life on earth. A doctrine of traditional Christianity, as of some other theistic religions, is that the good go to heaven and the bad are permanently barred from heaven. Christians dispute about whether there are intermediate groups who have intermediate fates (e.g., whether unbaptized babies go to limbo or the imperfectly good have to go to purgatory before they get to heaven). But I shall avoid these issues in order to consider only the ultimate fate of the clearly good and the clearly bad. I wish to investigate whether the permanent separation of the good and bad is consonant with the supposed goodness of God. Philosophers have devoted a lot of attention to considering whether it is coherent to suppose that there can be an afterlife, but very little to considering the morality of the supposed division between the sheep and the goats.

In traditional Catholic orthodoxy heaven is for those who have faith formed by love (*caritas*). Faith was understood in the Catholic tradition between Aquinas and the First Vatican Council as “belief.” Aquinas echoed Hugh of St. Victor’s definition of faith as something midway between knowledge (*scientia*)

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and conjecture (*opinio*)¹—i.e., belief. To have love it is normally necessary to do works of love—though a man totally ready to do such works but dying before having an opportunity to do them also would seem to have charity. One obvious work to which faith would give rise would be to seek from God the forgiveness of sins and baptism, and thereafter to live the Christian way within the church. Despite much sound and fury during the Reformation about men being saved “by faith alone,” I do not think that Protestant doctrine on this matter was in any significant way different from the official Catholic doctrine (though it was different from popular misrepresentations of Catholic doctrine).² For the Protestants understood “faith” as more than mere belief, as involving also trust in God and giving rise in appropriate circumstances to good works. So on both views you need belief and a readiness to act in the right way (good will) in order to go to heaven.

Yet why should God insist either on right belief or on good will as an entry condition for heaven? To start with, what is the justice in someone losing his eternal salvation merely for having the wrong beliefs? After all, he may never have heard of the Christian Gospel, or if he has, he may never have heard of good reason for believing it. In my view belief is passive. We cannot choose our beliefs; we can only force a change over time by nonrational means or pursue honest investigation and allow ourselves to conform to the beliefs which that investigation suggests. Even if you hold, as Aquinas did, that a man can to some extent choose his beliefs, the only honest thing to do is to hold those beliefs which the evidence best supports, as Aquinas also held.³ So what is the justice in punishing the man who disbelieves, despite sincere inquiry into the relative merits of such religions as he is acquainted with? Surely all honest inquirers with sufficient love ought to go to heaven.

Most Christians today, I think, hold that God takes such honest inquirers to heaven. That he would do so was proclaimed as official Catholic doctrine by the Second Vatican Council. The latter declared that all men who strive to live a good life and who through no fault of their own “do not know the Gospel of Christ and his Church . . . can attain to everlasting salvation.” This possibility is open not only to theists but even to those who, through no fault of their own, “have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God.”⁴ This was, I believe,

a claim made in effect also by many earlier theologians and implicit in the gospel itself.⁵ What matters is that people shall honestly seek after the truth, but if they do not find the truth (i.e., the Christian faith) in this life, that shall not debar them from heaven. However, if you can get to heaven without having true religious beliefs, why does it matter so much that people shall honestly seek after such beliefs? And the question remains: Why are the men of bad will excluded from heaven? Would not a generous God give the joys of heaven to good and bad alike? Or at any rate mold the bad to become good so as to gain heaven? Or at least give them a second chance? What is the justice of a man’s fate being sealed at death?

There have been in our century many Christians worried by this latest difficulty who have adopted a universalist account of the afterlife: all men go to heaven sooner or later.⁶ However it seems to me that such a doctrine is not that of the New Testament, and that those who espouse it have not taken into account some important points about the nature of human happiness and human choice which support a more traditional doctrine.

Before we can ask why certain people should not go to heaven and why true belief matters, we need to ask what heaven is and why certain people should go to heaven.

II

Heaven is a place where people enjoy eternally a supremely worthwhile happiness. But what is that, and why are the traditional occupations of heaven likely to provide it?

Happiness is not basically a matter of having pleasant sensations. Certainly it involves the absence of unpleasant sensations and may be found in having pleasant sensations, but this is not its essence. There are no pleasant sensations had by the man who is happy in reading a good book or playing a round of golf with a friend, or by a man who is happy because his son is making a success of the business which the father founded. Basically a man’s happiness consists in doing what he wants to be doing and having happen what he wants to have happen. The man who is happy playing golf is happy because he is doing what he wants to be doing. Someone who is having pleasant sensations

may indeed be happy for that reason, but he will not be happy if he does not want to have these sensations, e.g., if he wants to try and do without such things for a period.

Unfortunately men so often have conflicting wants, e.g., wants to have the pleasurable sensations caused by heroin and wants to avoid heroin addiction. Sometimes these conflicts are explicitly acknowledged; sometimes they are ones of which we are only half-conscious; and sometimes they are suppressed from consciousness altogether. A man will only be fully happy if he has no conflicting wants; if he is doing what he wants to be doing and wants in no way to be doing anything else. A man who does have conflicting wants may nevertheless still be on balance happy—especially if he is doing what he really thinks to be most worthwhile.

However, although someone may be fully happy doing some action or having something happen, this happiness may arise from a false factual belief or from doing an action or being in a situation which, objectively, is not really a very good one. Happiness is surely more to be prized according as the happy man has true beliefs about what is happening and according as what is happening is in fact of great value or only of little value. A man who is happy because he believes that his son is making a success of the business, when in fact he is not, has a happiness which is not as worth having as the happiness of the man who has a true belief that his son is making a success of the business. We can see this by asking ourselves which we would choose if faced with a choice of much happiness with a false belief that something marvellous was so, or small happiness with a true belief that some small good thing was so. Further, a man who is happy because he is watching a pornographic film by himself, or because he has made men sneer at some companion, has a happiness which is less to be prized than the happiness of a man enjoying a drink in company or watching the performance of a great work of art. That this is so can be seen by those of us capable of enjoying all such pleasures, comparing them for their worth. Insofar as happiness is to be prized, I shall call it deep, and I shall contrast deep happiness with shallow happiness which is to be prized less.

It follows that a man's deepest happiness is to be found in pursuing successfully a task of supreme value and being in a situation of supreme value, when he has true beliefs about this

and wants to be only in that situation doing those actions. What are the most worthwhile actions, the most worthwhile tasks to pursue? I suggest that they are developing our understanding of the world and beautifying it, developing our friendship with others, and helping others toward a deeply happy life. And what are the most worthwhile situations? The having of pleasurable sensations is desirable, but they are the better for coming from the doing of worthwhile actions. People want the sensations of sexual pleasure through the development of a personal relationship, not by themselves. It is better to drink alcohol in company than alone. And so on. And a worthwhile situation will be one in which the good triumphs in the world, and one's own contribution toward this is recognized.

If all this is correct, the occupations of the inhabitants of the heaven depicted by traditional Christian theologians would be supremely worthwhile, and so would their situation be. If the world depends for its being on God, a personal ground of being, the fullest development of understanding will be growth in the understanding of the nature of God himself. Friendship is of great value to a man when his friends are good people, who take an interest in him and are enjoyable company in virtue of their kindness and ability to keep him interested. Friendship with God would be of supreme value, for he is (by definition) perfectly good and, being (by definition) omnipotent and omniscient, will ever be able to hold our interest by showing us new facets of reality and above all his own nature. According to Christian theology God takes an interest in his creatures and exercises that ability to show us ever-new facets of reality. The principal occupation of heaven is the enjoyment of the friendship of God. This has been traditionally described as the "Beatific Vision" of God. Aquinas stresses that this "vision" is an act of ours, not merely something that happens to us.⁷ Knowledge in heaven will be more sure than on earth. On earth people depend on sense organs and nervous systems that may lead them astray or let them down. Christian theology assures people of a more direct grasp on reality in the hereafter. God will be present to the inhabitants of heaven as intimately as their own thoughts. Friendship with persons involves acknowledgment of their worth. So friendship with God, the supremely good source of being, involves adoration and worship.⁸ According to Christian tradition heaven will also

comprise friendship with good finite beings,⁹ including those who have been our companions on earth. The task of comprehending and worshipping God will be a cooperative one, one in cooperation with those who have shared a man's lesser tasks on earth. Christian theology has always stressed both that heaven will include a renewal of earthly acquaintance and also that the enjoyment of such acquaintance will not be its main point. And, of course, one always enjoys acquaintance the better if it serves some further point, if one and one's fellows are working together to attain a goal. Even friendship with God would involve his helping us toward understanding himself and fulfilling other heavenly tasks. The main other such task, according to traditional theology, is helping others toward their deepest happiness (and perhaps also beautifying the world). According to Christian tradition the saints have work to do (by intercession or other means¹⁰) in bringing others into the sphere of God's love. These others may be like many on earth, half-developed beings ignorant of their capacities for these tasks, with wounds of body and soul to be healed. But the relation of those in heaven to those others will be of a different kind from the bodily relation which we have to our fellows on earth. A man seeks friendship with others not only for his own sake but for theirs, as part of helping others toward a deeply happy life. The most worthwhile such helping would be helping others toward their own deepest happiness, and thus seeking this sort of friendship also indirectly contributes to the seeker's own happiness.

I suspect that only that sort of life would be worth living forever. Only a task which made continued progress valuable for its own sake but which would take an infinite time to finish would be worth doing forever; only a situation which would be evermore worth having would be worth living in for ever. The growing development of a friendship with God who (if he is the sort of God pictured by Christian theology) has ever-new aspects of himself to reveal, and the bringing of others into an ever-developing relationship with God, would provide a life worth living for ever. A man who desired only to do the good (and had a right idea of what was good) would want that sort of life for ever. Most earthly occupations indeed pall after a time, but the reason why they pall is that there are no new facets to them which a man wants to have. And also most

earthly occupations are rightly judged only to be worth a finite amount of interest, because there are not ever-new facets to them which are greatly worthwhile having. A man who has molded his desires so as to seek only the good and its continuation would not, given the Christian doctrine of God, be bored in eternity.¹¹

A man in heaven would be in a situation of supreme value, for his own worth (such as it is) will be acknowledged, and the good there will be triumphing. Further, traditionally, people will get bodily pleasure out of being in heaven. Aquinas¹² quotes Augustine¹³ as saying that blessedness involves "joy in the truth" and that the happiness of heaven will involve the body.¹⁴ Aquinas taught that man's ultimate goal is *beatitudo*, literally "blessedness" but often translated "happiness." This translation is a bad one. The English word "happiness" denotes a subjective state, a man doing and having done to him what he wants—even if what he is doing is not of great worth and he has false beliefs about what is going on. I argued that happiness is most worth having when the agent has true beliefs about his condition and gets his happiness from doing what is worthwhile. It is such worthwhile happiness which is *beatitudo*.¹⁵ The inhabitants of a Christian heaven will be performing actions of supreme worth and be in a situation of supreme worth, and they will know that they are doing such actions and in such a situation. Hence they will have this worthwhile happiness—so long as they want to be in that situation, doing those actions, and do not want in any way to be anywhere else or doing anything else. That is, the only people who will be happy in heaven will be people with a certain character.

The Christian doctrine—Catholic and Protestant—is that heaven is not a reward for good action (for, as we have seen, even on the Catholic view a man can go there without having done any); rather, it is a home for good people. This view receives abundant biblical support in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Entry to the kingdom of heaven is compared to a situation where the same reward is given to those who have worked the whole day and to those who have worked only one hour. What determines whether they get their reward is their status as workers, that they are developing the vineyard (having accepted the challenge to work when it came), not how many hours work they have done.

The character needed for the inhabitants of heaven is that of perfect goodness. To have a worthwhile happiness in the situation and occupations of heaven a man needs to want to be there doing those things and also to hold true beliefs that that situation and those actions are of supreme value. He must, that is, both desire the good and also have a true belief about where it is to be found.

III

This point enables us to answer the question about why true religious belief matters for getting to heaven. People who come to have different beliefs about whether there is a God, what he is like, and what he has done, will, if they are pursuing the good, do different actions. If they come to believe that there is a God, they will worship God and will seek to make others worshipping people; if they come not to believe, they will not do these things. Someone with a theistic creed different from the Christian one will have a different view about the kind of reverence to be paid to God. If you think that God walked on earth, you are likely to have a different kind of reverence for him than if you think of him merely as a philosopher's first principle, and also a different kind of reverence for men, of whom God became one. A man with a different creed will meditate on different things and practice different kinds of human relationship (e.g., Islam commends a different pattern of family life from that of Christianity.) Thereby, even if both are basically seeking the good, the character of a non-Christian will be different from that of a Christian. If the Christian creed is the true one and so the Christian way to behave the right one, the non-Christian would have to acquire true beliefs and practice different actions before he could enjoy the worthwhile happiness of the Christian heaven. (And, of course, if the Islamic creed is the true one, the reverse change would be required.)

So you need true beliefs simply in order to know which actions are most worth doing—which is necessary before you start doing those actions, and so start on the road to doing them naturally and spontaneously (and so desiring to do them). And you need true beliefs about your situation (e.g., of being re-

deemed, etc.) if you are to be truly blessed, for then you know wherein to rejoice.

So it is important that we acquire true beliefs, and so we ought to set about so doing. A man who seeks the good will seek to discover what is most worthwhile. Such an honest inquirer may discover the answer on earth. But he may not. Yet since such a person is seeking the good, he has embarked on the way to heaven and would enjoy heaven when he is given information on how to do so. As he will need to make no further choice, God may well give him the information when this earthly life is over. But a man not seeking true beliefs about what is worth doing is not a man of good will.

Once a seeker of the good has been given a true belief about what is good, clearly he will pursue it. But there is and must be a certain stickiness about character, for character is a matter of what you do naturally. If someone has made himself the sort of person who does something naturally, to do anything else is going to be unnatural—to start with. A change will need time and energy.¹⁶

An extreme example of a man of good will who had made himself thoroughly unfitted for the Christian heaven would be a conscientious Buddhist. If Buddhism really involves the killing of all desire,¹⁷ then clearly the Buddhist is not going to fit into the Christian heaven. For he will not be happy in the activities of knowledge acquisition, worship, and service which are the occupations of the inhabitants of heaven. For happiness involves being glad that you are doing what you are doing, i.e., doing what you want to be doing; and the Buddhist does not want to be doing anything. For a man to come to see that it was good that he should get himself to want things, and then to get himself to want them, might be very hard.

So the answer to my original question is that right religious belief matters because only with it will a man know how he should live, and only if he does live in the right way can he attain the happiness of heaven. For heaven is the community of those who live in the right way and get happiness out of it because they want to live in the right way. By pursuit of the good they have so molded themselves that they desire to do the good. So the answer why God would send the men of natural good will and true belief to heaven is that they are fitted for it.

They would enjoy there a supremely worthwhile happiness,

and God being perfectly good seeks that for them. But what of those who do not seek the good, who choose to do what is morally bad, and not through a false belief that it is really good but because their will is bad? (I assume in my subsequent discussion that the bad do not have false beliefs about what is good. It will appear that it could easily be made more complicated to deal with the possibility of false belief.)

Clearly there is no point in God sending the bad to heaven as they are, for they would not be happy there. The man who wants to be applauded for what he has not done, who wishes to see the good humiliated and to get pleasure out of the company of similarly malevolent persons, would not be happy pursuing the occupations of heaven.

IV

But cannot the bad be made good in order that they may enjoy heaven? The answer to that question depends on an understanding of the nature and desirability of human choice.

Although young children have often not reached this situation, and (as we shall see later) the old may sometimes have passed beyond this situation, there is a stage in a normal man's life at which he reaches what I may call the normal situation of choice. In this situation he has moral perceptions—he sees some actions as morally good (and some of those as obligatory), other actions as morally bad (and some of those as obligatory not to do). By the morally good action I mean the one which overall is better than alternative actions good to some degree which a man could do instead. Of course a man's judgments may not always be the right ones—he may fail to see of some morally worthwhile acts that they are morally worthwhile. But nevertheless he does have moral perceptions. If a man really believes that some action is a good action (and does not simply think that it is good by normally accepted criteria), he will to some extent desire to do it. He may on balance prefer to be doing something else, but he will in a wide sense desire to some degree to be doing it. For its goodness gives him reason for doing it, and in recognizing its goodness he recognizes that he has such a reason.

A man, however, will also have other desires for lesser goods.

Insofar as a man desires to do some action he will believe that it is in some way a good thing that he do it. For if he desires to do the action, he will desire it because (he believes) there is something good about it. The man who desires to steal a car (rightly) regards it as in some way a good thing that he possess the car. For possession of what gives pleasure is good. The trouble is, of course, that it is more good for other reasons that he refrain from stealing.

A man has to choose between what he sees as overall the best action to do and what he regards as lesser goods. In this situation, it is often said, the strongest desire wins. But if one calls a desire strongest if it is the one on which the man eventually acts, that is a very uninformative tautology; and on any other criterion of "strongest desire" it is often false. A natural way of measuring strength of desires is that a desire is strong insofar as it needs much effort to act against it. Sexual desires are often strong, whether or not men often act on them, because men have to struggle hard not to act on them. In this latter sense of strength of desire the man's situation is indeed one in which there are desires of different strengths to do actions, and also one where he sees the actions as having different degrees of worth. The ordering by strength and the ordering by perceived worth may not be the same. The man has to choose whether to resist strong desires in order to do the morally good action, or to yield to them.

Now people come into existence with a limited range of choice—a limited set of good and evil actions which are for them live possibilities. By our choices (encouraged or frustrated by our bodily condition, mental state, environment, upbringing, friends and enemies)¹⁸ we shift the range of possible choice. By good choices this time there come within our range possibilities for greater good next time, and some evil choices are no longer a possibility. Conversely, by bad choices this time there come within our range possibilities for greater evil next time, and some good choices are no longer a possibility. Further, many of men's strongest desires are for lesser goods, i.e., for the bad. (This is part of what is involved in original sin.) Without effort man will slide toward the bad.

So someone who chooses the good may not do the good action naturally; he may have struggled against his strongest desire in order to do it. But we are so made that what we have to strug-

gle to do to start with will tend eventually to become natural. That is, the desire to do it will become the strongest desire (as measured by the strength of resisting it). Among our good actions will be taking measures to control our passions. These are not under our immediate control—what we are pleased at is something we cannot immediately help. But we can through a process of reflecting on what seems to us good often get ourselves to be pleased at its occurrence. The determined pursuit of the good tends to make a man a man who naturally seeks the good. Someone will be a good man if he has also a right view of what the good consists in. If he does he will do naturally, not merely the actions which he believes good, but actions which are good, and so he will be fitted for heaven.¹⁹

However, a man may yield to bad desires against his better judgment. Now those who (by yielding to such a bad desire) resist a good desire will have such good desires again. But if they systematically resist desires of a certain kind, they will gradually become the kind of person to whom such desires do not occur with any force. Those who refuse to give to charity once may have a fit of conscience and give more next time. But those who systematically refuse to give come no longer to regard it seriously as a good thing to give. Giving passes out of the range of their possible choice. A man who never resists his desires, trying to do the action which he perceives overall to be the best, gradually allows what he does to be determined entirely by the strength of his desires (as measured by the difficulty of resisting them). That is, he eliminates himself (as an agent doing the action of greatest perceived worth or allowing himself to be overcome by strong desire to do an action of lesser worth, or simply choosing between actions of equal perceived worth). There is no longer a “he”; having immunized himself against the nagging of conscience, the agent has turned into a mere theatre of conflicting desires of which the strongest automatically dictates “his” action.

Now far be it from me to say that that has happened to any man whom I have ever met; there is a lot more latent capacity for good in most people than appears on the surface. Nevertheless it is a possibility that a man will let himself be so mastered by his desires that he will lose all ability to resist them. It is the extreme case of what we have all too often seen: people increasingly mastered by desires, so that they lose some of their ability

to resist them. The less we impose our order on our desires, the more they impose their order on us.

We may describe a man in this situation of having lost his capacity to overrule his desires as having “lost his soul.” Such a man is a prisoner of bad desires. He can no longer choose to resist them by doing the action which he judges to be overall the best thing to do. He has no natural desires to do the actions of heaven, and he cannot choose to do them because he sees them to be of supreme worth. There is no “he” left to make that choice. Perhaps God could make the choice for him, give him a strong desire to do the good, and annihilate all other desires in him. But that would be imposing on an agent something which, while he was still capable of choosing between actions in virtue of their worth, he had in effect chosen not to do—by yielding so continually to temptation. Free will is a good thing, and for God to override it for whatever cause is to all appearances a bad thing.

It might be urged that no man would ever be allowed by God to reach such a state of depravity that he was no longer capable of choosing to do an action because of its overall worth. But in that case God would have prevented people from opting for a certain alternative; however hard a man tried to damn himself, God would stop him. It is good that God should not let a man damn himself without much urging and giving him many opportunities to change his mind, but it is bad that someone should not in the all-important matter of the destiny of his soul be allowed finally to destroy it. Otherwise the situation would be like that of a society which always successfully prevented people who would otherwise live forever from committing suicide. A society certainly has no right to do that, and plausibly even God has no analogous right to prevent people from destroying their own souls.

It may be said that God should not allow someone to damn himself without showing him clearly what he was doing. But a man who simply ignored considerations of worth and gave in continually to his strongest desire could hardly fail to realize that he was becoming a theatre of conflicting desires. He might not know the depth of the happiness which he was losing, nor that it would be prolonged forever in Heaven. He would however know that he was choosing not to be a worthwhile kind of person.

Strangely, it would not necessarily help someone attain the happiness of heaven if God did make it crystal clear to him that heaven existed and provided happiness for the good. For Christian theology emphasizes that the happiness of heaven is something which begins on earth for the man who pursues the Christian way. This is because the pursuit of that way on earth involves starting to do the tasks of heaven—for a short time with limited tools and understanding, with many obstacles including the desires for other things. The Christian on earth has begun to understand the divine nature (by Bible reading, receiving religious instruction, etc.), to worship (in the Eucharist with music, poetry, art, etc.), and to show the divine love to others. But his tools are poor—his mind and his instructors provide weak understanding of the divine nature; his organs and choirs are poor things; and he has many desires to do other things, which need to be eradicated before the Christian way can be enjoyed. Now, given all that, if a man did not seek such a life on earth, why should he seek it if he comes to learn that it can go on forever and provide deep happiness? Either because he wants to live forever or because he wants the happiness. But while someone is seeking to live the good life for those reasons, he will not find the happiness of heaven. For the happiness of heaven is not simply happiness. It is, as we have seen, a special kind of happiness. It is a happiness which comes from doing actions which you know to be supremely good because you want to be doing those supremely good actions. A man who sought the happiness of heaven for *its* own sake could not find it while that was his goal, for it is the happiness which comes from doing certain actions for *their* own sake. The happiness of heaven is a happiness which comes to those who are not seeking it.²⁰

True, the news of heaven might provide an initial incentive for a bad man to pursue the good way, which he might later come to pursue for better reasons. (Heaven and hell have often been preached for this purpose.) But clearly, if you encourage a man to pursue happiness (or everlasting life), he is likely to continue to do so. In this way, by pursuing happiness (or everlasting life) rather than goodness, he might fail to find the happiness which he might otherwise have got.²¹

There are good reasons other than to provide an incentive for the bad why God should tell men about heaven. The news of heaven would, for example, show people that God was good

and so provide further reason for giving particular content to the good life—that is, for worshipping God. It would also provide encouragement for those who sought to live the good life anyway to know that they could go on doing so forever under circumstances where the obstacles to living that life had been removed.

Perhaps the best compromise would be for God to let people know that there is *some chance* of their going to heaven if they lead a good life [and of “losing their soul” in some sense if they lead a bad life], but only some chance—to avoid to some extent the danger of men pursuing heaven for the wrong reasons and so losing it. And indeed the knowledge situation of most people in most societies has been just this. True, in our secular society someone might not know even that. Yet, as we have already seen, that is not necessarily a bad thing; and also there is the most important point that if one insists that agents had to know that there were such chances before they could be deprived of heaven, this would have the consequence that God would have to promulgate the Gospel independently of the activities of men. If men, in a particular church, are to make known the possibility of heaven, there must be those who otherwise would live in total ignorance of that possibility. It is good that the fate of men should depend in small part on the activity of other men—that men should carry the enormous responsibility of the care of the souls of others.²²

I conclude that a good God might well allow a man to put himself beyond the possibility of salvation, even without revealing to him the depth of eternal happiness which he was losing. The doctrine of the majority of Christian theologians down the centuries is not, however, merely this, but that such persons suffer eternal physical pain in hell as a punishment for their sins. Now certainly such persons may deserve much punishment. For God gave them life and the opportunity of salvation, but they ignored their creator, hurt his creatures, damaged his creation, and spent their lives seeking trivial pleasures for themselves. But for God to subject them to literally *endless* physical pain (*poena sensus* in medieval terminology) does seem to me to be incompatible with the goodness of God. It seems to have the character of a barbarous vengeance; whatever the evil, a finite number of years of evildoing does not deserve an infinite number of years of physical pain as punishment. The

all-important punishment is to be deprived of eternal happiness (this is the *poena damni* in medieval terminology)—a fact which Augustine, a firm proponent of the doctrine of endless physical pain, himself pointed out.²³ This deprivation, I have suggested, is plausibly an inevitable fate of those who have finally rejected the good.²⁴ It seems to me that the central point of New Testament teaching is that an eternal fate is sealed, at any rate for many, at death, a good fate for the good and a bad fate for the bad. This appears to be the main point of such parables as the sheep and the goats.²⁵ It is always dangerous to take literally too many minor details of parables (such as the punishment being *aiώνιος*, about which theologians dispute whether it is properly translated “everlasting”). Given the main point, there seem to be various possible fates for those who have finally rejected the good. They might cease to exist after death. They might cease to exist after suffering some limited physical pain as part of the punishment of their wickedness. Or they might continue to exist forever pursuing trivial pursuits (as amusingly depicted in Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*), perhaps not even realizing that the pursuits were trivial. However, the crucial point is that it is compatible with the goodness of God that he should allow a man to put himself beyond possibility of salvation, because it is indeed compatible with the goodness of God that he should allow a man to choose the sort of person he will be.

NOTES

1. *Summa theologiae*, 2a, 2ae, 1.2.

2. For quotations to substantiate this see *Faith and Reason*, ch. 4.

3. *Summa theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, 19.5.

4. *Lumen gentium*, 16.

5. See the saying of Jesus in Luke 12:48 that the servant who did not know his master’s will and did things worthy of a beating “shall be beaten with few stripes,” in contrast with the servant who knew the master’s will and still did not do it who “shall be beaten with many stripes.” The point of the saying must lie in the contrast, not in the fact that the ignorant servant would have a small beating. The teaching

of the parable of the talents (e.g., Matthew 25:14-30) seems also to be that what is required of man is to make what he can from what has been given to him, and it is natural to interpret it so as to include in what has been given to a man his religious knowledge.

6. See, e.g., John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976).

7. “By a single, uninterrupted and continuous act our minds will be united with God” (*Summa theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, 3.2, ad 4).

8. On the importance of such worship see Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), ch. 15.

9. Aquinas claims that in the blessedness of Heaven “the society of friends adds a well-being to blessedness” (*Summa theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, 4.8).

10. And see also Christ’s words to his disciples: “Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). “Judging” may mean here “ruling over.”

11. Bernard Williams affirms the necessary undesirability of eternal life in “The Makropoulos Case” (in his *Problems of the Self* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], ch. 6). But those whom he pictures as necessarily bored in eternity seem to me persons of limited idealism.

12. *Summa theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, 4.1.

13. *Confessions*, 10.23.

14. *Summa theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, 4.5.

15. See *Summa theologiae*, 1a, 2ae, 1-5. Aquinas argues that full *beatitudo* consists in the “activity” (3.2) of “laying hold of our ultimate end,” which is, he claims, God, the supreme Good. He has arguments to show that it does not consist in riches, honor, fame, power, bodily well-being, and such. It is necessary for *beatitudo* that one should seek to get the right thing—God—although the attainment of that thing depends on God himself giving it to us. Aquinas holds (1.7) that all men desire *beatitudo*, but some men have false ideas about where it is to be found.

16. Aquinas writes that no one can attain to the vision of God “except by being a learner with God as his teacher” and that “a person becomes a sharer in this learning not all at once but step-by-step in keeping with human nature” (*Summa theologiae*, 2a, 2ae, 2.3; Blackfriars edition [London, 1974], vol. 31, trans. T.C. O’Brien).

17. And I may have misunderstood it here.

18. Christianity has usually insisted on the doctrine that no man can attain salvation without the help of God’s grace. Clearly a man needs the help of his fellow Christians both to know about the Chris-

tian way and to begin to follow it, and the help of the church in order to continue to follow it (since following it involves practicing it within the church). Christianity can therefore give content to this doctrine by holding that other Christians and the church are the channels of grace.

19. I have written that "determined pursuit of the good *tends* to make a man a man who naturally seeks the good." And often such determined pursuit achieves its goal with respect to an aspect of a man's life or the whole of that life. Determined pursuit of the good makes people naturally good. Yet such determined pursuit does not always achieve its goal in this life. Some men are so beset by certain tempting desires that, however hard they try, they cannot eradicate them in this life. However, by their efforts such men will have made those desires "extrinsic" to themselves, unwelcome forces impinging from without, no part of their adopted character. God could easily in an afterlife remove such desires without changing the formed characters of men of good will, and he would be expected to allow men's choice to reject such desires finally to have the effect that the desires no longer impinge on men's consciousness.

20. See Christ's saying: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39).

21. Recall the concluding verses of Christ's parable of Dives and Lazarus. Dives, in hell, asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers to change their life-style lest they go to hell. He says to Abraham, "If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." But Abraham replies: "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:29f).

22. On this see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 187-96.

23. St. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 102.

24. John 3:19 suggests that sin by itself is its own punishment.

25. Matthew 25:31-46. There are some sayings of Christ's which carry a suggestion that any punishment will be limited. For example, there is the warning to men to be reconciled quickly with their adversaries lest they be thrown into prison: "You shall by no means come out from there until you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:26). As John Hick comments (*Death and Eternal Life*, p. 244), "Since only a finite number of pennies can have a last one we seem to be in the realm of graded debts and payments rather than of absolute guilt and infinite penalty."