

# *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*



*Let us imagine that in order to realize their dream of having healthy, happy children, prospective parents not only had to create many more embryos than they would actually end up caring for, but that even those embryos which were not destined to be cared for would still have to be brought to term. Let us imagine, further, that these latter embryos (now infant human beings) – far from being raised and cared for as children – are, instead, necessarily condemned by their parents to be tortured for the same period of time that their more fortunate counterparts live out their happy, healthy lives. How would we feel about a couple who chose this course of action in pursuit of their dream? Would we really consider them to be good and loving parents?*

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The (somewhat disputed) quotation from Epicurus is from *Wikiquote*:  
<https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Epicurus>

The excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov* was translated from the Russian of Fyodor Dostoyevsky by Constance Garnett. The Macmillan Co., New York, 1922

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## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

Christian apologists, by and large, continue to deny the logical and moral implications of the doctrine that unbelievers will suffer eternal conscious torment in hell. In an effort to meet such apologists halfway, I am more than willing to acknowledge the symbolic truth of the teaching (e.g. that it points to the tragic suffering and ultimate despair that tends to permeate the lives and relationships of those who neglect the grace of God and persist in self-absorbed, self-destructive patterns of thought and behavior). I am also willing to consider the possibility that this teaching may have had (and may possibly still have, on balance) a positive function as a kind of “noble lie”, *a la* Plato (perhaps it functions like a hormone released during gestation— or at puberty —and can have a positive impact on our development as children and young adults). I am even willing to consider the possibility that it may actually be *true* on some level, but in a way that we cannot really grasp and which, as such, suggests that it does not really mean what it appears to mean when taken at face value (in which case, when it is called into question by sincere skeptics and honest critics, we should just acknowledge that we affirm it as an essential element of the tradition, but that when push comes to shove it is simply beyond our comprehension).

Those possibilities notwithstanding, however, it remains incredible to my mind and heart— incredible and unconscionable —that so many Christian apologists deny that there is any real problem with this doctrine in the first place and refuse to address the topic in an honest, straight-forward manner. In a recent online discussion, for example— when I suggested that this doctrine contradicts our understanding of the attributes of God, makes God seem like a moral monster, and constitutes a moral hazard for those believers who dogmatically accept it —my interlocutors not only disagreed, but pretended that I was simply making all this up without offering any

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

reasoned argument in support of my position. Somewhat flabbergasted, I began looking once again— as I had already looked, in the past —for some kind of an analogy that would throw into bold relief those elements of the question that seem so obvious to me, but which (taking their words at face value) seemed to escape their notice entirely!

At first, I was thinking of asking them to imagine themselves choosing to raise a batch of baby chicks while knowing in advance that half of them would have to be tortured death— slowly, one by one, over an open flame —in order for the other half to grow to maturity. Who would choose to raise baby chicks if that were required?

Later, however, a much better analogy occurred to me involving *in vitro* fertilization. For just as most human beings want to have children, the scriptures suggest that God, too, wants to have children (at least by analogy) and that, like any pregnancy, the fulfillment of God’s desire (at least from our standpoint), appears to take a certain amount of time and also appears to involve a certain amount of suffering:

Hebrews 2:10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom *are* all things and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified *are* all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren...

Romans 8:15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” 16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together. 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; 21 because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

So far, so good, but in addition to *Christ*, in addition to us as *adopted children*, and in addition to *the creation itself*— all of which are, in the end, *delivered*—we are also told that there are certain *vessels of wrath* which are somehow necessary to the process, but which, in the end, must be destroyed:

Romans 9:<sup>21</sup> Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?  
<sup>22</sup> *What* if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, <sup>23</sup> and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, <sup>24</sup> even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

While the necessity of these “vessels of wrath” and the questionable justice of using them in this way might give us pause, it should be noted that there is no explicit mention of eternal conscious torment in this passage—nor, for that matter, in the entire Pauline corpus. As for the suffering of the saved, it’s no big deal, right?

Well, not exactly... While the suffering of the saved (together with the existence of these so-called “vessels of wrath”) may not be *as problematic* as the idea that unbelievers must suffer eternal conscious torment in hell, to say it is “no big deal” would, nevertheless, be a BIG exaggeration.

“The problem of evil”, traditionally, *has* been a big deal! In fact, it is one of the most common and most difficult objections to the belief in the existence of God ever put forward. Moreover, the scope of this problem is commonly extended to include “natural evil” as well as “moral evil”. Thus, it encompasses not only our suffering as adult human beings at hands of one another during the course of our earthly sojourn, but our suffering from disease and natural disasters, as well—including the apparently innocent suffering of children and animals.

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

The claim is very simple, actually: *If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all loving, there should be no suffering at all—period!* Perhaps the most famous example of this objection is the one attributed to Epicurus:

*Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?  
Then he is not omnipotent.  
Is he able, but not willing?  
Then he is malevolent.  
Is he both able and willing?  
Then whence cometh evil?  
Is he neither able nor willing?  
Then why call him God?*

~ Epicurus, BC 341-270

Another famous example is that of the Dostoevsky character, *Ivan Karamazov*, who famously says that he wants no part of God's eternal kingdom if it requires the suffering of even one little child:

“I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: ‘Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.’ When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’ then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can't accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures. You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child's torturer, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’ but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to ‘dear, kind God!’ It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for” (Dostoyevsky, “The Brothers Karamazov”).

But let me be clear, I am not arguing from the standpoint of Epicurus or Ivan Karamazov. As far as I'm concerned, we can (in this case) conclude that the end justifies the means since it is understood, 1) that God in some

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

sense participates in the suffering of his creatures, and 2) that we, along with the rest of creation, in some sense participate (or have opportunity to participate) in God's eternal life—i.e. in the boundless, eternal life and love of the Holy Trinity!

As long as this is acknowledged, I'll not be the dog in the manger. Indeed, insofar as I am able— by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit —*I will continue to take up my cross* and I will invite others to do so, as well. To repeat, my objection is quite different than that of either Epicurus or Ivan Karamazov.

What I object to is the logical and moral implications of a teaching that insists that God is all powerful, all knowing, and all loving, on the one hand, but which, on the other hand, suggests that it has pleased God, from the beginning, to create in such a way that the eternal, conscious suffering of a significant percentage of human and celestial creatures is unavoidable (usually affirming, simultaneously, that creation was optional—that he need not have created at all).

Appeals to human freedom fall flat at this point—especially given the weight of original sin and the necessity of God's grace for our salvation. Who brings us into existence in the first place? Who decides that we must unavoidably suffer from the sin of our first parents? And since our salvation depends upon the grace of God, who is it that decides who will receive sufficient grace to be saved and who will not? It is usually explained, on the basis of Romans 1:20, that all of us receive enough light to be justly condemned, but we seem to read in Romans 9 that not all receive enough grace to be saved. Is it any wonder that young people are leaving the church in droves? Does this scheme of things really seem plausible?

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

Make no mistake, I think the concepts of sin and separation in conjunction with those of Divine love and sovereign grace— *rightly understood*—express very profound truths about the human condition. But superficially understood— in light of a very literal reading of Genesis combined with the doctrine of eternal conscious torment —such teachings are both logically contradictory and morally hazardous. If you still do not understand why, please consider the following analogy:

*A loving couple desires to have children—to be no longer just a couple, but to be a family! They desire to relate not just to one another, but to children for whom they will provide and care, whose education they will oversee, and who they look forward to watching grow and mature into healthy, loving adults with children of their own.*

A beautiful picture, is it not? Indeed—who can blame them!? But suppose this couple is unable to conceive, what are their options? Let us, as a way of illustrating our problem, consider only two—the second of which, I am happy to say, is totally fanciful:

### **Option 1) *in vitro* fertilization:**

While some Christians object to this procedure on moral grounds (because more embryos are created than will ultimately be used—which means, as a result, that most of them will inevitably be destroyed at some point), that makes this option all the more suitable as a way of illustrating our problem (keeping in mind *the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction* described in Romans 9:22, together with Matthew 7:13 which informs us that *the way is broad that leads to destruction and many go in by it*). Most of us, I suspect, would be sympathetic with the desire of such would-be parents to have a family and would not think them evil for pursuing this course of action (even if some of us might deem the action itself to be abhorrent and the couple misguided).

**Option 2) *in vitro* fertilization for sadists and sociopaths:**

In contrast to *option one*, however, let us imagine alternatively that in order to realize their dream of having healthy, happy children, our hypothetical couple not only would have to create many more embryos than they would actually end up caring for, but that even those embryos which were not destined to be cared for would still have to be brought to term. Let us imagine, further, that these latter embryos (now infant human beings) — far from being raised and cared for as children — will instead be condemned by their parents to be tortured for the same period of time that their more fortunate counterparts will live out their happy, healthy lives. How would we feel about a couple who chose this course of action in pursuit of their dream? Would we still consider them to be good and loving parents?

Keeping this analogy in mind, then, does anyone really think that God is so impotent that the best he can do is to create in a way that is more or less analogous to *option one*? Does anyone really think that God is so evil that he would choose to create in a way that is in any way analogous to *option two*? And yet this is what is implied in the apparently contradictory teachings that we commonly hear in church:

- **God is all powerful, but he is unable to create a free human being that is not free to rebel against his creator...** (fair enough—the prodigal son leaves his father’s house, but he is always free to return to his father’s open arms, is he not?).
- **God is all good and all powerful, but he is also just and his justice requires that those who rebel be punished...** (well, maybe—but is not the prodigal son’s experience away from his father’s house sufficient punishment? And why punish people endlessly for sins committed during their relatively brief sojourn on planet earth—

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

especially when we are said to be suffering throughout our lives from the effects of original sin inherited from our first parents!?).

- **God is all knowing, all good, and all powerful, but he prefers a creation which entails the suffering of the damned to one that does not...** (i.e. he prefers *option two* to *option one* in the analogy, discussed above; and since he need not have created in the first place, he obviously prefers this to the option of “not having children” at all).
- **God is all knowing, all good, and all powerful, but if something about this scheme of things seems grossly unjust (if not outright insane), we would do well to ignore our misgivings...** (lest we, too, incur the wrath of almighty God—to say nothing of the ire of those Christian apologists who we are attempting to engage).

Have I made myself clear? The doctrine of “eternal conscious torment” and the inability of Christian apologists to both fully acknowledge it and to speak to it directly is one of the reasons that so many nominal Christians can be reasoned out of their faith—especially when they consider the less than universal reach of the Christian gospel (historically and geographically) in conjunction with the putative exclusivity of the Christian faith (as taught by many Christians).

Struggling once again to meet the defenders of this doctrine halfway, we might agree that such a teaching is a necessary element of some stage (or stages) of our Christian education—something that it is good for us to be exposed to for a time, but which is meant to be outgrown and which should not be taken literally by adults. It is at least not inconceivable that this is so. Apart from some such compromise, however, we can hardly avoid concluding that this teaching is primarily a tool of indoctrination employed

## *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?*

by Christian parents and religious authorities to facilitate and reinforce their control over their families and religious communities, respectively.

However that may be (and whatever positive function such teachings may have had historically—and might conceivably still have as one element of an integral, religious education), it seems to me that to believe such things as adults and to insist that other adults should believe them, too, is to put ourselves at risk both rationally and morally. For once we accept this doctrine at face value, not only are we forced to live in denial about the goodness of God and the logical consistency of our own beliefs, we will also find it much easier to judge those whom we deem to be outside the Christian faith to be intrinsically evil and worthy of the most severe condemnation. As such, whenever there is a conflict between “us” and “them”, “their” actions will always be suspect and we will be more apt, as a community (with a clear but erroneous conscience), to subordinate “their” interests to our own.



# ***Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?***

**What do you think?** Have you considered all the implications that follow from the apparently contradictory teachings that we commonly hear in church? Do you think your Pastor or Sunday School teacher has considered them? For example:

- **God is all powerful, but he is unable to create a free human being that is not free to rebel against his creator...** (fair enough—the prodigal son leaves his father’s house, but he is always free to return to his father’s open arms, is he not?).
- **God is all good and all powerful, but he is also just and his justice requires that those who rebel be punished...** (perhaps—but is not the prodigal son’s experience away from his father’s house sufficient punishment? And why punish people endlessly for sins committed during their relatively brief sojourn on planet earth—especially when we are said to be suffering throughout our lives from the effects of *original sin* inherited from our first parents!?).
- **God is all knowing, all good, and all powerful, but he prefers a creation which entails the suffering of the damned to one that does not...** (i.e. he prefers *option two* to *option one* in the analogy discussed on pages 6 and 7; and since he need not have created in the first place, he obviously prefers this to the option of “not having children” at all).
- **God is all knowing, all good, and all powerful, but if something about this scheme of things seems grossly unjust, we would do well to ignore our misgivings...** (lest we, too, incur the wrath of almighty God—to say nothing of the ire of those Christian apologists who we are attempting to engage).

**So, what do you think? *Is the Doctrine of Hell Defensible?* If you think this is a legitimate question, you will definitely want to read this booklet and share it with your friends.**