

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 10, The Doctrine of Hell

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 10, The Doctrine of Hell.

Okay, so we've talked about a number of dimensions of the rationality of religious belief. We've looked at theistic arguments and some objections to those, and we've considered the problem of evil as the most significant objection to theistic belief.

Now, we're going to talk about a doctrine that, in itself, is considered by many to be a major problem with theistic religions, and that is the doctrine of hell. Some of the questions that we'll consider are whether the doctrine of hell is morally problematic, what the different views of hell are that are affirmed specifically by Christian theologians and biblical scholars, and what the problems and strengths of the various views are.

So, we'll begin with an objection just to the very concept of hell by David Lewis, who is one of the most prominent metaphysicians of the late 20th century. And it's interesting to see the nature of his criticisms. He claims that, given the orthodox Christian doctrine of hell, God is guilty of perpetrating evil by torturing people in hell forever and with utmost intensity.

Lewis claims that, given the orthodox Christian doctrine of hell, God is guilty of perpetrating evil by torturing people in hell forever, as I noted, with utmost intensity, and that even the most evil human commits finite sins. So, the punishment of the damned is infinitely disproportionate to their crimes, he claims. So, he says, what God does is thus infinitely worse than what the worst of tyrants has done.

This problem, says Lewis, has been a neglected aspect of the problem of evil, though it's far worse than the standard versions, which only focus on evil that God permits rather than on this problem of divinely perpetrated evil. At least, as Lewis sees it, this is something that God is doing to human beings, as opposed to something that we bring upon ourselves. So, the traditional view of hell, of course, is that people land there because they have lived a certain kind of life, a wicked life, and this is the ultimate punishment for their wickedness, or that even if they've had a fairly normal life, that still involves a certain amount of sin, and so if they're not forgiven, then hell is ultimately the punishment for their sins.

But Lewis says even given this idea that human beings often act immorally, it's still inappropriate for God to make people suffer in hell, especially if this goes on forever

and ever. So, he discusses a number of potential responses to the problem, beginning with the appeal to libertarian free will, which attempts to diminish the problem by appealing to incompatibilist or libertarian freedom. God allows people ultimately to choose salvation or hell.

So, the idea again is that hell is a choice ultimately that people make, not to be blamed on God. He's simply giving to us what our actions, our free actions, deserve. His response to this is that it's still horribly unjust for God to, as he puts it, place people in a situation in which they must make a judgment that binds them for all eternity.

He compares this to a parent who equips a nursery with sharp objects and explosive devices, which is quite a vivid and disturbing image. But why would God even create people to put them into a situation where they might end up in a situation where they are suffering for all eternity? Lewis sees that as irresponsible. Furthermore, he says that it's questionable whether incompatibilist or libertarian freedom is a supreme value, right? The point is often made that God considered human freedom to be so important because he wanted a relationship with people and that it would be worth the risk of people ultimately landing in hell.

Just to obtain a world in which you have that kind of freedom and that kind of possibility for a relationship, Lewis says no, it's not worth it. That kind of freedom should not be seen as the supreme value because of the dangers it would represent. Anyway, he says God could leave incompatibilist freedom intact while doing far more luring and urging than he does.

Another approach is to appeal to different interpretations of hell. Specifically, for example, the idea that damnation actually consists in the state of being insubordinate to God as opposed to, say, extremely painful or excruciating torture or burning, as many of the biblical images would have it. Maybe it's just a state of being out of sync with or insubordinate to or rejecting God.

It is an unpleasant state but not absolute torment. Lewis's reply to that is that that's not a fair understanding of the torments of hell as they are portrayed in scripture. Even if this were the nature of hell, a state of insubordination, the fact that that situation, that condition, could never be rectified is itself a problem.

Another approach is the finite punishment view. Some maintain that hell's punishments are either finite or non-existent. For example, the idea that God eventually prompts repentance from everyone in hell is the restorationist view.

It's a form of universalism, which we'll talk about later. Lewis replies that given a compatibilist view of freedom, which is the view that human freedom is consistent with a kind of determinism, God could have avoided even limited punishment by

guaranteeing that people don't reject him. Secondly, even granting that everyone in hell eventually comes around, on this view, God is still prepared to continue torment for all eternity, and this in itself is an extreme evil.

And then you have the standard universalist view, which says that God doesn't punish anyone in hell, nor is it his disposition to do so, right? Everybody is saved; you don't have any kind of horrific afterlife possibility. Lewis's reply to that is that the nature of the horrible. So, the doctrine of hell must be affirmed by Christians.

The fact that the Bible does refer to hell a lot is undeniable, and that's the point he's making here. Moreover, he says that if everyone will be saved, whether believers or not, then what's the use of Christian redemption? And isn't it unjust that both the faithful and the wicked alike will have the same eternal heavenly destiny? Which is an interesting concession on his part. Here he has complained and critiqued the view because this is such a dark and apparently unjust idea that people would be suffering in hell for their sins.

But now he's insisting that people who are virtuous, as well as people who are vicious, would end up with the same fate. That that's somehow unjust and not an appropriate view of the afterlife. So, it looks like he wants it both ways.

Anyway, those are some of the criticisms of David Lewis, and I think it makes for good food for thought for those of us who are Christians or other theists who affirm the reality of hell. Here are the standard views before we talk about each of them specifically and then the arguments for and against each view. There is the traditional view, which is the view that Lewis rails against the most.

That is the idea that the damned suffer eternal conscious torment. I'll be using that phrase repeatedly—eternal conscious torment.

That has been affirmed by the great majority of Christian theologians and philosophers from St. Augustine up to the present day, as well as people like Eleanor Stump, and we'll talk about it. And then there's the view known as conditional immortalism. Sometimes, it's called annihilationism, which is the view that those who go to hell suffer there for a finite period.

Maybe it's thousands of years. Maybe it's just a few months or weeks. Maybe it differs depending on the extent of a person's wickedness in this life.

But at some point, the suffering in hell stops, and the damned are annihilated, obliterated. They return to the nothingness from which they came. That's conditional immortalism.

Edward Fudge was a well-known proponent of this view. He wrote a book called *The Fire That Consumes*, and I hold this view. And my book that I published in 2019 called *Hell and Divine Goodness* is the only, to this point, the only purely or mostly philosophical defense of conditional immortality.

I do talk about biblical arguments, pros and cons in the opening chapter, but the rest of the book is a philosophical defense of the conditionalist view. And then there is universalism, which says that in the end, everyone will be saved. People like Thomas Talbot, Eric Wrighton, and others defend this view, as well as theologians like Robin Perry, who wrote a book called *The Evangelical Universalist* under the name Gregory MacDonald.

He took those two names from Gregory of Nyssa and George MacDonald, used them as pseudonyms, and eventually came out of the closet as a universalist. But that is probably the best theological defense of universalism that I've seen. These are the three views, and each of them had significant proponents in the early church.

The early church fathers were divided on this issue. You had what became the traditionalist view, the view of eternal conscious torment, as well as conditionalist and universalist represented among the patristics. But then, with St. Augustine and his affirming eternal conscious torment, that hardened into a kind of default position in the Christian church and has been so ever since, even though there have been plenty of outliers throughout the centuries in the form of conditionalist and universalist.

There's a really interesting and informative website called RethinkingHell.com that I would recommend. It is run by some conditionalists, including Christopher Date; I think Glenn Peoples helps with that. And there's a very helpful and informative infographic called the Hell Triangle that you can check out there which shows the differences and some of the points of connection of the three views. It's very helpful to see how each of these views is explained and distinguished in a single graphic.

So, let's first talk about the traditional view of eternal conscious torment. How might one defend this view? Again, Eleanor Stump is one of the more prominent recent defenders of this view among philosophers. She asked how can we reconcile the tortures of hell with the love of God. She takes a Thomistic view on the matter and talks about Thomas Aquinas' account of love and how it's connected with God's goodness.

According to Stump, it is Aquinas' view that to love someone is to will their good, which is to desire the fulfillment of their nature. When you're willing the good of a person or a thing, you are desiring the fulfillment of their nature. For humans, this is to fulfill their capacity for reason.

So, to love a human being is to promote their doing of moral actions and acquiring a virtuous character. But now the doctrine of everlasting hell seems at odds with this, doesn't it? So, how does Aquinas make sense of it? Stump notes that we first need to get clear on what heaven and hell are for Aquinas. Heaven is, as Aquinas puts it, or this might be Stump, a spiritual state of union with God, the state of freely willing only what is in accord with the will of God.

And that implies that hell is the free rejection of this union, which is also the ultimate act of irrationality. We are rational beings made in the image of God in this regard. We're made for union with God.

That is the most rational thing. So, to reject that union with God is the very height of irrationality. She says that, quote, as a result of recurrently willing to act in a way contrary to their nature, the damned, while alive, acquire staple dispositions, end quote, to irrational action.

That is, as they acquire vices and a cast of character through free immoral choices over time, this produces a sort of second nature that is inconsistent with union with God. So, consequently, God treats the damned, quote, according to their second nature, the acquired nature that they have chosen for themselves. So the idea is that as you live your life in this world, you are choosing every day, the choices you make, hell or heaven.

Maybe, to some degree, a mix, right? If you live a mainly virtuous life but slip up from time to time, as we all do, in those moments where you sin, that is a hellish choice. And those, on the other hand, who are mainly living a wicked life occasionally act virtuously; that's a gesture in the heavenly direction. But in the end, the idea is that you are predominantly going one way or the other, towards heaven or towards hell.

The consequence of a life lived in either a heavenly or hellish way is a sort of nature that is fitting for one of those two destinies in the afterlife. So, why couldn't God just annihilate people rather than send them to hell for all eternity? This is kind of the conditionalist or annihilationist question. Stump notes that Aquinas says that this is not an option because that would be to eradicate being, which is always an evil.

Quote, in the absence of such an overriding good, the annihilation of the damned is not morally justified and thus not an option for a good God. Also, by isolating the damned, God prevents them from doing further evil and further disintegration of their being. So, in this sense, this is the ironic conclusion that Stump is coming to here.

In this sense, God promotes the good of the damned and loves them by isolating them and preventing their complete obliteration, preserving them in being but then keeping them from doing more evil in whatever their hellish environment is. So, it is

even an expression of the love of God, which again is ironic. So, this leaves us with a few questions.

One is, how can avoiding infinite evil, perpetual suffering, and vice not be an overriding good? Why would it not be good to prevent that through annihilation or by ultimately changing the damned's second nature, the second nature of the damned, and hell that they've acquired? That would be the universalist question. And if God loves everyone, then he seeks the fulfillment of everyone's nature. So, being omnipotent, why can't he achieve that again? Why couldn't he transform everyone in hell to restore them all and ultimately save everybody? So, let's turn now to conditional immortalism or annihilationism.

The view is that human beings are not naturally immortal but are only granted immortality by God as part of our salvation. This idea is that eternal life is a gift from God, and you don't have it automatically, just by virtue of being human. But, if you are saved, then you're granted everlasting life.

Otherwise, your life will come to an end in the form of annihilation. My book, *Hell and Divine Goodness* is a philosophical, theological inquiry, mainly philosophical. It's a philosophical defense of the conditional immortalist view.

Here are some of my arguments along the way. What is conditional immortalism? Again, it's the view that human beings are not naturally immortal, but are only granted immortality or eternal life by God as part of our salvation. Immortality is conditional upon divine grace.

Those who are saved in Christ live forever with Christ, while those who are damned suffer in hell for a finite period and are eventually annihilated. So, here are some arguments for conditional immortalism. Some of the biblical and philosophical considerations support this view.

One is the extensive biblical language of destruction. There are a number of biblical passages that refer to the damned being destroyed or perishing. But, if they live forever, then they are not really destroyed.

Also, the biblical imagery of fire suggests obliteration of the wicked since fire consumes when it burns. Secondly, there are these opposing concepts of damnation and eternal life in the scriptures. Eternal life is promised to Christians as opposed to the damnation of the wicked.

But, if the damned live eternally in hell, then their fate also is eternal life. It's a painful eternal life, but it's still an eternal life. Thirdly, the reconciliation of all things to God is a very prominent biblical theme.

The Bible says that God will reconcile all things to himself in Colossians 1. If the damned live forever in hell, then they are not reconciled to God. This is also an argument for universalism. But, the conditionalists can say that, at least on the conditionalist view, when people are annihilated, there's no one left there to be unreconciled to God.

Everyone who remains alive is reconciled to God. Fourthly, the Matthew 10.28 passage, where Jesus says that God can destroy both body and soul in hell. He says, don't fear humans who can only destroy the body.

Fear God, who can destroy both body and soul in hell. That suggests that hell is indeed a place where souls are destroyed. Then you have the concept of the second death that's referenced in Revelation 20 and 21.

Theologians and biblical scholars debate what that means on the conditionalist view. Second death refers to the death of the soul in hell—finally, the argument from justice.

If all of the damned suffer in hell eternally, then this constitutes an infinite penalty for finite sins, which is profoundly unjust. An unending suffering for sins that are discrete and finite. That justice argument is really a purely philosophical argument, but it's one of the most influential arguments in defense of the conditionalist view.

Here are some counters to the conditionalist view. Objections that have been made by, especially, traditionalists. One appeals to the so-called status principle.

The idea is that the moral and metaphysical status of the person who's offended by our sins, namely God, properly determines the appropriate punishment in this case, according to the traditionalist, which is infinite or unending suffering. If God is infinite and holy, then sins against God warrant infinite punishment. As a response to that, conditionalists have often observed that eternal conscious torment doesn't actually achieve infinite punishment, since the sins of the damned are never completely punished.

If it really is infinite offense that we're guilty of in this world and sinning against God, we can't really suffer infinitely at any point in hell in the duration of one's career in hell. They have only suffered finitely and infinite suffering is never reached. So, no one can really suffer infinite punishment if that punishment is understood principally as suffering.

So there always, it would seem, on this view, there always remains an outstanding moral evil, some sin left to be punished that hasn't been adequately punished. And if it's sin against an infinite God, a perfectly moral and holy God, that makes us infinitely guilty and therefore guilty of infinite evil, then whatever is left unpunished

throughout all eternity is an infinite amount of evil. So, there's a problem on the traditional view accounting for God's final triumph over evil on this view.

Another view, which tries to justify the unending punishment of the damned, appeals to the whole idea of continuing sin in hell. According to the continuing sin thesis, the damned perpetually sin in hell, thus warranting more and more punishment. They're being punished for certain past sins at a particular time; all the while, they continue to sin and then subsequently need to be punished for those sins, and that goes on indefinitely, eternally.

Now, the problems with this view include the following: One given a libertarian view of freedom, it seems that it would still be possible for at least some of the damned to stop sinning so that their punishment could be completed. In this case, then, God should let them out of hell, and some should be restored.

Secondly, this view, too, the continuing sin thesis, also implies everlasting moral evil. As people sin forever in hell, there's always more sin for God to deal with. He never completely conquers evil on this view.

There's always outstanding moral evil to be punished. So, both conceptions here, based on the status principle as well as the continuing sin thesis, face the problem of everlasting moral evil. Okay, so now let's turn to the third view, the universalist view, and talk about some of the ideas of Thomas Talbot, who authored a book called *The Inescapable Love of God*.

According to Talbot, when combined with other Christian doctrines, the doctrine of everlasting punishment creates contradictions. He distinguishes several different forms of theism, and he defends what he calls biblical theism, which affirms a kind of universalism. So, he begins by talking about what he calls conservative theism, the idea that God loves every created person.

As it's often said, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, as an old evangelistic tract put it, the assumption being that whoever you are, God loves you. If that's the case, then God must love every person. It's a standard view in Christian circles.

Secondly, this conservative theist view holds that God will irrevocably reject some persons in spite of this fact and subject them to everlasting torment. So, some of the people that God loves very dearly will be tormented forever. This is problematic, according to Talbot.

He says to love someone is to be devoted to their long-term best interest. But if God refuses to reconcile some people to himself, then he's not acting in their long-term best interest. How can you be acting in someone's best interest if you're torturing

them for all eternity or allowing them to suffer endlessly when you could put an end to it? So, to allow endless torment in hell is not to love someone but to hate them.

And God can't stop loving someone because agape love is changeless. Next, there is what he calls hard-hearted theism, which rejects the idea that God loves everyone and affirms that God loves some created people but not all created people. God will irrevocably reject some persons and subject them to everlasting torment, specifically those that he hated.

A problem with this view is that if loving kindness is an essential property of God, then the notion that God does not love all created persons is necessarily false. It's impossible for God to act in an unloving way, and that's why, according to Talbot, he must ultimately save everyone. Now if loving kindness is an accidental property of God, one wants to say that it's not really essential to God, but it's more of an accidental or non-essential property of God, then there are some other problems here.

One is that God's love for one person requires that he love all persons because he can't love a given person without also loving all those that that person loves. If God turned my love for a certain person into hate, then God would be acting unlovingly towards me. So, you have a number of tensions, he would say contradictions, within this view.

Also, God has commanded that we love others, even our enemies. If God acts unlovingly toward the damned, then that contradicts this command. He's been asking us to love people that he hates.

Another view is what he calls moderately conservative theism. According to the moderately conservative view, as Talbot has it, God does love every created person, but some persons will, despite God's best efforts to save them, they will finally reject God and separate themselves from God forever. So, he's done everything he could to save the damned, but he just was not able to save certain people.

They reject him in spite of God's efforts. But Talbot asks this question. Why would anyone in hell with libertarian freedom continue to reject God? And how could this be guaranteed for all eternity in every case? Maybe we could grant that certain people, the most wicked people, because of this Thomistic second nature that they've created in themselves, get so hardened that they don't even have a chance at even considering repenting.

But would that apply to everyone in hell? Because there's libertarian freedom, if one believes in that, wouldn't that open up the possibility of at least some people in hell saying, I'm sorry, please forgive me, and ultimately repenting? Also, the reality of the torment of the damned would undermine the happiness of those in heaven. This is

kind of a separate problem. Actually, I devote the better part of the final chapter of my book on hell to this problem of heavenly grief.

If someone that you love is in hell, how will you be able to have real peace and unsullied joy in heaven, knowing that that brother or sister, mother, father, son or daughter, or good friend is in hell? Wouldn't that undermine one's happiness? Peter Geach, among others, has addressed this problem. He says that God will enable us to see the justice of such infinite punishment because of the moral corruption of the damned. And so, we will appreciate the justice of this, even when it comes to our loved ones who are in hell, according to Geach.

Others have made a similar argument, including William Lane Craig and others. Talbot's reply to this is that seeing the justice of the punishment does not negate the sadness that that person has remained so corrupt. Just because you know that, say, your daughter or your son is in prison for good reason, if they've been dealing drugs, for example, you don't rejoice at the justice of it.

In fact, you're still bothered, deeply disturbed that they are in prison, even though they deserve it. So, just because there's justice here doesn't make the fact of a condemnation. Any less sad.

So, Talbot concludes that the only way out of these problems with everlasting punishment is to affirm either annihilation of the damned or universal redemption of humanity. He recognizes that annihilationism or conditionalism does solve these problems, or at least most of them. He opts for the latter view, the universalist view, noting that the Apostle Paul's promise that God will reconcile all things to himself in Christ points in this direction.

So, his view is biblical theism. That's his term for it. The conditionalists and the traditionalists will beg to differ with regard to that terminology and insist that their views are biblical theism when it comes to the doctrine of hell.

But his view is that God loves every created person and that all persons will eventually be reconciled to God and, therefore, experience everlasting happiness. Universalism is the view that, eventually, all human beings will be saved and enjoy everlasting life with Christ. He says this is compatible with the view that God will punish many people after death.

It just won't last forever. So, he's not denying the reality of hell. That's something that all three of these views affirm.

The question is how long does it last? And does anyone remain in hell for all eternity? Does hell remain populated? And how many people are ultimately saved? Is it everyone or just some? Universalism can also be applied to fallen angels or even

Satan himself. Many universalists would maintain that even the devil is ultimately saved. Let's conclude just by noting some universalist passages that are often cited by universalists.

For those who wonder why we are even talking about universalism as a biblical option, how could any of the patristics have affirmed this view? A lot of traditionalists, especially, are curious or skeptical that any kind of biblical argument could be made in defense of this view. What sorts of passages do a universalist appeal to? Well, here are some of them. 1 Corinthians 15:22 says that as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Colossians 1:20 says that in Christ, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. Keith DeRose, who is a philosopher at Yale and a Christian philosopher, says that if anyone suffers in hell forever or is annihilated, then they are not reconciled to God. This is a point of emphasis for DeRose as well as other universalists.

Romans 5 Paul says that as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, one man's act of righteousness led to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. Note the parallel in both verses between those who fall and those who are redeemed.

It's all and all, and then it's many and many. Romans 11:32 says for God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. F.F. Bruce says that the all, in this case, means all without distinction, not all without exception.

This is an important distinction that critics of universalism often make. DeRose says we have no reason to interpret everything in this fashion. Then, a counter reply that the traditionalists or other non-universalists would make is that no, we do have a lot of other biblical evidence suggesting the ultimate destruction of the wicked, which would reinforce a different interpretation of all than what the universalists are using there.

Romans 10:9 says if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. And then, in Philippians 2:11 and elsewhere, we're told that every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord and presumably confess that God raised him from the dead. This creates a syllogism that favors universalism, the conclusion being that God will save everyone since every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord.

The standard objection here, though, is that for those who confess Christ after they die, it will be too late. It's a kind of assumption that traditionalists, as well as

conditionals, usually make that you're given opportunities in this life, and then after death comes judgment. Hebrews 9:27 it's too late.

It also seems to be communicated, at least through standard interpretations, regarding the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. It's too late. You've made your decision.

DeRose asks what reason we have to believe that. Why should my own confession in this life be seen as any more meritorious than that? He says it is a dangerous line of thought since it implies that we somehow merit salvation because we confess in this life. So, arguments pro and con there but those are some of the major pro-universalist passages or ones that are often taken with a universalist sense by certain biblical scholars. But here's the lingering problem or one lingering problem for universalism, and that is the many biblical passages that emphasize the destruction of the wicked.

By comparison, there are very few passages that suggest ultimate universal redemption. So, on balance, it seems to me and other conditionalists and traditionalists that the Bible is communicating ultimately that some don't make it in the end. Not everybody is saved.

However, passages that seem to point in a universalist direction should be taken seriously and not just easily and casually dismissed. So, it's a complex debate. There are arguments, pros, and cons on all sides.

We can see why, in the early church, the patristic era, there was so much disagreement among Christian theologians. And I think that should give us pause today. Whatever view we land on, not to be dogmatic on it, though one thing we can be confident of, speaking biblically, is that hell is real.

It's a horrible fate. So, let's do all that we can to avoid that fate—and turn to God in Christ and live a faithful life as much as we can.

So that's our discussion of the doctrine of hell.

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