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MODERN OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF HELL

OF the several thousand million persons who have lived on earth, the majority will be cast into hell. Here they must eternally suffer torture. Nothing they do can control their torment; they must be passive like the martyr on the pyre who watches the flames envelop him. Or perhaps this is a figure of speech: lost men will have to introspect, and the more they do it the more their agony of mind will increase. Everlastingly they must think of mis-spent years on earth, everlastingly think of their deeds and vainly wish that they had acted otherwise, yet all to no avail.

These are the conceptions of hell which Christians have held. They are alike in their moral significance: no real difference results if flames of fire are pangs of mental agony. They seem inconsistent with the love of God. Why did He make men if most, or even any, of them must come to such a fate? True that God is not only love—He is a consuming fire, He is just and terrible—but He is not God if He is not moral: and if He is moral how can He also be so immoral as to create men whose latter end will be so fearful? As Baron von Hoensbroech curtly put it: "A man condemned to hell by this 'God' might cry to His face: 'It is You who should be in hell, not I, for you called me into life unasked, although You foresaw that I should end in hell. It is You who refused me Your grace, although this alone would have saved me from hell.'"

These considerations have weighed so heavily upon Christians, especially during the last century, that a large number have abandoned the view that hell is eternal at all. Those who have sought to retain belief in the teaching of the Bible on the subject have sought to interpret it in other ways, though such attempts have not been very satisfying. With others the difficulty of believing in eternal hell has played no small part in turning them from the traditional view of the Scriptures.

There are, however, at least two assumptions which underlie the views of hell which have been presented: namely an assumed contrast between eternity and time, and the idea of passivity. It is the purpose of this article to show that the moral difficulties in the doctrine of eternal hell lie far more in these assumptions

than in the doctrine itself, and further that there is no reason why the doctrine of hell should be associated with them.

The statement that God is almighty is apt to lead to confusion. It means, presumably, that God is capable of creating anything in the world of physics. But there is no reason to suppose that He is almighty in the realm of metaphysics. We may reverently believe that He cannot both create something and not create it, that He cannot make a square circle or make one equal two. These limitations in no way lower our respect for God: they are self-limitations, for in the first case He made the Universe in such a manner that circles and squares were not identical. Creation implies self-limitation, and though we may believe that by destroying and remaking the Universe God could do what are *to us* metaphysical impossibilities, yet the new Universe would involve other self-limitations. God would still be finite in His power.

When once almighty God has shown His power it follows that He is no longer almighty. In other words God is almighty in that He can accomplish any given act whatever, but when once more than one act is specified there may be reasons why He cannot do both. He is Almighty in that He can create, or not create, a Universe, but He is not Almighty in the sense that He cannot both create and not create.

Although it is impossible to prove it, the question of morality may be of the same type. It may be a metaphysical necessity that good cannot exist without the possibility of evil. Certainly such a conclusion is indicated by ordinary human experience: it is meaningless to call a statue moral and temperate since it is by its very nature incapable of being anything else. The moral quality of goodness appears to have no meaning unless badness can also exist, and if this is indeed a metaphysical necessity, the existence of evil can constitute no stain on the moral character of God. A father may trust a boy with money and yet in no way be responsible for its wrong spending, and the analogy at least indicates that the problem of evil, so far as it concerns created minds, need not impugn the Creator.¹

If God is Almighty He was clearly not forced to make the world. If He is moral He must have made it because it was

¹ Compare F. W. Newman, *Thoughts on the Existence of Evil*.

worth making—because He knew that the ultimate good would be greater than the evil. It is just here that the doctrine of hell seems to clash with belief in a moral God. Is it conceivable that it is good that one should live in bliss and five suffer eternal torture? Is it even conceivable that ninety-and-nine should live at the cost of one? Would not the righteous say, “Lord, would that we had never been if we must live at the cost of death to others”?

Considerations such as these force attention on the actual nature of hell. Why is the idea of eternal punishment so revolting? Clearly this is not due to the idea of punishment in itself, for that would simply raise again the problem of suffering in this present world. Yet there are thousands who are able to believe that God made this world and allowed the suffering in it, who steadfastly refuse to believe that He could permit such a state of affairs to exist eternally. To them, the one idea is a sad fact to be accepted; the other an utterly revolting theory.

Is the difference to be found in the idea of eternity? God may allow evil for a time, but since we must believe that the good will finally be greater than the evil, is it not impossible to believe that evil will never cease? This is a common view. It is difficult to answer, but it is also difficult to prove, for the idea that the eventual triumph of good may yet leave some permanent scars cannot be dismissed *a priori*.

The modern mind habitually draws a sharp distinction between sets of terms which distinguish the finite and the infinite, and it assumes that there can be no analogies which enable argument to be carried from the one to the other. This unfortunate habit has probably developed as a result of the teaching of mathematics. In this branch of study it is convenient to use the concept of infinity, a concept for which mathematical rules which apply to finite numbers break down. Thus $\frac{1}{2}$ becomes equal to $\frac{x}{2}$ when x becomes infinite, but for finite numbers *however large* the one function always remains at twice the value of the other.

Now there is not a figment of evidence that anything corresponding to this pure abstraction of mathematicians exists at all in nature. It is impossible, for instance, to imagine that the Hebrew prophets who speak of God as almighty would have defined the term in a way similar to the modern definition of the mathematical notion of infinity! They clearly meant that He was

mightier than all—greater by far than any conception of greatness that the human mind could grasp. To-day we know how right they were: the gigantic dimensions of the Universe give the Theist a staggering idea of God's power, but as the astronomer Seeliger showed it was not possible to have a mathematically *infinite* universe even in Newtonian mechanics.

In the case of time it is even more absurd to talk of infinity. If we may ignore such difficult conceptions as the possibility of the non-existence of any cosmic time—and it is not at all obvious that these modern speculations will affect the problem—it is clear that *during* what we call infinite time, there must always be a *definite* time which has elapsed from some starting period. The phrase “infinite time” can only be intended to denote the whole period of time from its beginning to its end, and since it has no end it follows that “infinite time” has no meaning—though it may be admitted speculatively that if God does not live in time, then the expression *may* have meaning to Him. But such speculations are too far removed from experience to be of any value to the human mind, and therefore so far as the question of time is concerned it may be said that “never-ending” (or “*eternal*” if used to mean “never-ending”) does convey something, while the use of the expression “*infinite time*” is unjustified.

It thus appears that the words *eternal* and *temporal*, though they express the contrast between *ending* and *never-ending*, must both apply to finite time and consequently there is no ground whatever for supposing that laws or events associated with the one will be of a different character if applied to the other. Most unfortunately, modern thought-habits derived from the mathematical concept, often make it very difficult for people to realize the absurdity of talking of infinite time as though it were something real, but when once the fallacy is realized it is seen that there can be no valid reason why considerations relating to temporal things should not also relate to unending things. The question of hell is clearly of this character; whether we understand it or not, God permits evil now, and it is impossible to say that after any finite time, however great, the reasons for permitting it will vanish.

The difficulty of eternal suffering is also connected with quite another matter, namely with the supposed passivity of the

sufferer. Human sympathy goes out to those who suffer while unable to help themselves, that is to say, to those who are victims of their environment. The activities of most societies which seek to minimize cruelty are confined to cases of this character. The awful pictures of a martyr on the rack, a child being brutally treated, or a horse whipped till it can move no more ; these are things which provoke pity and the sense of injustice. It is not the fact of suffering but the passivity of the sufferer which appals us. But as a result of much Christian teaching on hell, the idea of passivity and of suffering have been connected so closely that all the moral objections to passive suffering are used as if they were objections to the idea of hell as such. The following is a sample description of hell :

“Go away from Me. You shall never, never see My face any more. You have chosen during your life-time to obey the devil rather than obey Me. Therefore with the devil you shall be tormented in Hell. The smoke of your torments shall rise up before Me night and day. Your painful cries shall come up to Me for ever and ever. But I will not listen to them. . . . Listen ! do you hear the cry of the unfortunate child ? That cry went from one end of the sky to the other. What is the matter ? The child felt the fire of Hell for the *first time*. The devils have fast hold of it with their fiery claws. . . . Then the child’s brain gets wild and mad with fright ! It shrieks. It cries out. It roars, ‘ Oh, do not throw me into Hell. Let me go back, I will be so good.’ The devils laugh at it, and scoff as devils only can scoff. Again the child cries : ‘ I cannot, I will not.’ The gates of Hell are shut. The child is in the inside, burning.”¹

In this revolting description it is easy to see the blatant way in which the author has associated passivity with punishment, yet it is the passivity alone which makes the spectacle revolting. If the child was choosing its condition *at the time*, the picture would be very different. When a man deliberately courts suffering it is not felt to be revolting that he should suffer, and far less is it so when his act is occasioned by purely selfish motives.

These considerations are largely overlooked by those who cannot conceive of a loving God making men in order to punish them to eternity. If there is a hell, it is surely possible that it is a world of activity rather than passivity, a place where the sufferers

¹ *The Terrible Judgment and the Bad Child*. By J. Furniss, C.S.S.R. Quoted by G. G. Coulton, *Romanism and Truth*, 1930, p. 145.

themselves *choose* to remain where they are, and continue deeds of deliberate sin.

The matter may be put in a different light. Children sometimes ask whether God can sin, since He is almighty. If the foregoing arguments are valid, the answer is clearly that He *is* able to sin, that is to say to reverse His moral character, but that He chooses not to. Indeed, if the case were otherwise, we have seen that there would be no meaning in calling God moral. In like manner those who have eternal life must be theoretically free to sin but actually choose not to. If such considerations are sound, there is no reason why those in hell could not theoretically do right—they may even be conscious of having the will to choose right at any moment—but in practice they may yet choose evil. If this were so, and if evil constantly brought its own punishment, the punishment would be felt to be deserved at the time. Under these circumstances there would be no real sense of injustice involved, and there would certainly be no ground for objecting to the possibility of unending punishment in the life to come by confusing the issue with the emotions which are felt when undeserved punishment in this world is contemplated.

There is one saying of Christ's which strongly bears out such an interpretation—"Guilty of an eternal sin."¹ This seems to imply the very opposite of souls watching angels who never cease torturing them for the sins of a lifetime. It looks much more in the direction of eternal choice to do evil; for unless the sin be chosen there is hardly guilt.

It is not in any way claimed that those considerations solve the problem of evil, or that they remove the whole difficulty about hell, far less do they set such a doctrine on a rational basis. But it can at least be claimed that modern objections to the doctrine of hell are founded mainly on the introduction of an unreal mathematical concept into ordinary parlance, and on the assumption of passivity. Whether hell exists or not is obviously a matter which from its nature could only be settled by revelation, but in view of the strong contemporary reaction to the medieval conception of it, it is important that the assumptions underlying modern objections should be realized, for only so can the question be approached without bias.

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¹ Mark iii. 29, R.V.