

# Hell and Vagueness\*

THEODORE SIDER

*Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002): 58–68

---

A certain conception of Hell is inconsistent with God’s traditional attributes, or so I will argue. My argument is novel in focusing on considerations involving vagueness.

The target doctrine of Hell is part of a “binary” conception of the afterlife, by which I mean one with the properties of *dichotomy*, *badness*, *non-universality*, and *divine control*. *Dichotomy*: there are exactly two states in the afterlife, Heaven and Hell. After death each person will come to be, determinately, in exactly one of these states. (The doctrine of Purgatory does not violate dichotomy provided everyone in Purgatory eventually ends up in Heaven.) My argument does not apply to a continuous conception of the afterlife, which to my mind is more defensible than the usual binary doctrine. *Badness*: Hell is very, very bad. Or at least, Hell is much worse than Heaven; for most of the argument this weaker premise will suffice. More carefully, the premise is that everyone in Heaven is much, much better off than everyone in Hell. *Non-universality*: some people go to Heaven, and some people go to Hell. I have no objection to Universalists, according to whom everyone goes to Heaven. Nor does my argument apply to those who uphold universal damnation. *Divine control*: God is in control of the institution of divine judgment, in control of the mechanism or *criterion* that determines who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. This is not to say that God is solely responsible for the fate of created beings, for the divinely mandated criterion might contain a role for free choices. Nor is it to say that God is vindictive. The requirement makes no assumptions about the nature of the criterion, beyond that it is in God’s control.

The argument proceeds as follows. Given dichotomy, the only possibilities in the afterlife are determinate membership in either Heaven or Hell; given badness, the second is far worse the first; and given non-universality, each is populated. Divine control requires that God be in control of the criterion determining these populations, and thus that God’s choice of a criterion be consistent with his attributes. The criterion of judgment must therefore cohere with his perfect justice. This much is straightforward; the rest of the paper will be devoted to filling in the rest. Here is a sketch: any just criterion must

---

\*Thanks to Bill Alston, Keith DeRose, John Draeger, William Hasker, Hud Hudson, Europa Malynicz, Ned Markosian, Trenton Merricks, Jeremy Pierce, Ron Sider, Walter Soyka, Michael Stocker, Brian Weatherston, Dean Zimmerman and referees for helpful comments.

judge created beings according to a standard that comes in degrees, or admits of borderline cases; but no such criterion can remain simultaneously just — or at least non-arbitrary — and consistent with the nature of the afterlife just described.

First, however, I should set aside the Calvinist doctrine of the elect, just as I have set aside Universalism. But I set aside Calvinism in a different sense, for unlike Universalism, the conclusion of my argument is inconsistent with Calvinism. I set it aside for dialectical reasons, for my argument fairly directly begs the question against Calvinism. I assume throughout that God's justice is not utterly divorced from our human notion of justice, and I will assume that any human notion of justice precludes the criterion of selection being pre-natal divine decree. Calvinists will disagree, and I have nothing further to say against their position.

What might the criterion for the afterlife look like? Any just criterion of selection, whether for the afterlife or pay raises in the workplace, must make its selection depending on certain factors. Moreover, justice requires its judgments to be proportional to the factors. If Sally's performance is better than Jimmy's then, other things being equal, it would of course be unjust to pay Jimmy more; but if Sally's performance is only minutely better than Jimmy's, it would be unjust to pay Sally *far* more. Of course, human criteria usually fall short of complete justice. College admissions offices must sometimes make arbitrary decisions ("the cutoff must fall somewhere"), for admissions officers lack complete information and colleges have a limited number of available slots. But God is omniscient, and the holding capacities of Heaven and Hell are presumably boundless.

What I am calling the proportionality of justice prohibits *very* unequal treatment of persons who are *very* similar in relevant respects. Whatever one thinks generally about the nature of justice, its proportionality should be acknowledged.

Given the proportionality of justice and the binary conception of the afterlife, it can be argued that the divine criterion cannot be based on a *moral matter of degree*. By this I mean some factor that comes in degrees, and whose significance in the divine judgment is proportional to its presence. Suppose, for example, that the divine criterion is based on how many obscenities one utters (the more the worse). Suppose further that there are no "gaps" in realized obscenity levels, in that for no  $n$  is it the case that someone utters  $n$  obscenities, someone utters some greater number of obscenities, but no one utters  $n+1$  obscenities. (This assumption is arguably harmless, for we may focus our

attention on some possible world in which it holds. More on this below.) Now choose some arbitrary damned person, who on Earth uttered some number  $n$  of obscenities, and begin going through the afterlife, finding persons who were less and less obscene. Initially these persons will all be in Hell, but eventually we will arrive at one in Heaven. In fact, there must be a sharp cutoff in this procedure: i.e., some particular  $N$  such that someone with  $N$  obscenities is in Hell, and someone with  $N-1$  obscenities is in Heaven. This is a necessary consequence of i) the lack of gaps in realized obscenity levels, ii) the binary conception of the afterlife, and iii) the current assumption that obscenity is a moral matter of degree that is the sole criterion of divine judgment. But such a cutoff would be monstrous, for it would blatantly violate the proportional nature of justice. If obscenity really were the sole criterion of the afterlife, and its divine significance really were proportional to the amount of obscenity present, no just God could give radically different treatment to a pair of persons who differed only by a single obscenity.

No one would seriously propose obscenity as the divine criterion, but the argument generalizes to apply to more realistic proposals. Choose any moral matter of degree you like: number of charitable donations made, number of hungry fed, naked clothed or feet washed, number of random acts of kindness performed, or even some amalgam of several factors. Given a binary afterlife, there will be someone who just barely made it, and someone else who just barely missed out. This is impossible, given the proportionality of justice.

My opponent may grant the argument to this point, but yet be unmoved. “Your argument is misplaced, for you have focused on works to the exclusion of faith. Many think that salvation is given as a gift, not earned by accumulating marks on a chit sheet. One can accept this gift by *believing* in Jesus, by *asking* forgiveness for one’s sins, and *committing* one’s life to Christ. Thus the argument does not apply, for believing, asking, and committing are not matters of degree, nor are they ‘good works’ by which one accumulates merit and deserves to go to heaven.”

Whether faith is a “good work” on the basis of which persons *deserve* to go to heaven is irrelevant since my argument does not assume that persons “earn” their salvation. It only assumes that God’s criterion,  $C$ , for determining status in the afterlife must not violate proportional justice, i.e., that God must not treat extremely  $C$ -similar persons extremely differently. The important part of the objection is the claim that the proposed criterion, faith, would not be a matter of degree, since believing, asking, and committing are not matters of degree.

This last claim is not clearly correct. Much current thinking about rationality and mind has it that belief is indeed a matter of degree. There is a continuum of degrees of belief, or subjective probabilities, one can have in a proposition, and there is no distinguished subjective probability marking the propositions *believed* from the rest. Other propositional attitudes come in degrees as well. It may be objected that the kind of “belief” required for salvation is some state other than the ordinary propositional attitudes; however, the reasons for taking belief to come in degrees will presumably apply to this other state as well.

But no matter. Let us grant the objector that her proposed psychological state<sup>1</sup>, call it *faith*, does not come in degrees. This still cannot form the basis of a just divine criterion. The problem is that faith, like all psychological states, has borderline cases. We are all familiar with this. There are clear cases of insincere proclamations of faith, for example those of politicians who proclaim religion on the campaign trail but leave it behind thereafter. And there are clear cases of sincere faith. But what of the endlessly relapsing drunkard, who genuinely repents each Sunday only to backslide again on Monday? What of the television evangelist who begins with good intentions but is eventually corrupted by the temptations of power? If you reject any connection between faith and lifestyle, simply vary the example. Perhaps you think the faithful are those who make, at some moment in their lives, some confession of faith. But what of the person who confesses at age 10, when it is unclear whether he knows what he is doing, and who subsequently leads a faithless life? Or a mostly faithless life? Or one who confesses at age 9? 8? If on the other hand you deny that any single confession is critical, consider someone who has a series of borderline sincere moments (or days, or weeks, or...) of apparent faith, but who is otherwise faithless. Or someone on her way to becoming faithful but not determinately faithful yet, who is struck by a bolt of lightning while in this indeterminate state. Borderline cases might arise in yet another way. Many theologies contain exceptions for those who, through no fault of their own,

---

<sup>1</sup>It might be objected that faith is a relationship between a person and God, not a mental state of the person taken in isolation. But God only enters into that relationship with some. Unless God is arbitrary (and hence unjust), there must be some feature of the faithful human in virtue of which God enters into this relation. We can distinguish “thin faith”, which is just this feature, from “thick faith”, which is this feature plus God’s contribution to the relationship. By ‘faith’ I intend thin faith.

For an interesting discussion of the nature of faith, see Alston (1996). Among other things Alston argues that faith should be construed as involving “acceptance” rather than belief since the former but not the latter is under one’s voluntary control. Like belief, acceptance surely has degrees or borderline cases.

never heard the Gospel, and consequently lack faith. But surely the exceptions will admit of borderline cases: those who heard the Gospel only once, or only from corrupt missionaries, or only when very young... There is no avoiding borderline cases for a faith-based criterion of divine judgment.

On the faith-based criterion the definitely faithless go to Hell, and the definitely faithful to Heaven. But what of those who are not determinately either? There is no sharp line to be drawn between the faithful and the faithless, and yet a sharp line is demanded by a binary afterlife, for each person must be sent determinately to either Heaven or Hell. The only possibility would seem to be to draw an arbitrary sharp line somewhere within the region of indeterminacy. But now consider two extremely similar persons near the line, one on either side. (Assume, as before, that there are no “gaps” in states of faithfulness.) One endures the torments of Hell, but is only minutely, insignificantly different from the other who stands in the presence of the creator in Heaven. This again violates the proportional nature of justice.

Might God avoid the problem by letting the criterion admit the borderline faithful as well as the definitely faithful? No, for this ignores higher order vagueness. Just as there is no sharp line to be drawn between the faithful and the faithless, there is no sharp line to be drawn between the definitely faithless and the indeterminately faithful. An arbitrary choice would still need to be made, and the criterion would then fail to be just.

The objectionable sharp cutoffs any such faith-based criterion must make can be brought out in a different way. Many will believe that faith, like any mental state, supervenes on the physical makeup of the brain. So consider any of the faithful in Heaven, and consider the results of minute perturbations of this supervenience basis in ways that pushes that person closer to being faithless. Remove an electron here, disrupt a neuron there, and eventually the person will be definitely faithless. In between there will be a very long string of mental states,  $M_1, \dots, M_n$ :  $M_1$  the state of someone faithful,  $M_n$  the state of someone faithless, and a vast number of intermediate states in addition, each extremely similar to the immediately adjacent states. Some, for example certain dualists, will object to the assumption that the mental supervenes. But even the dualist is familiar with the depth and complexity of the human soul, and should accept something like my sequence  $M_1, \dots, M_n$ , though it will not be based on variation of physical realizations. Either way, the sequence may be constructed. Consider, then, a possible world containing  $n$  persons, one in each of these mental states. The first goes to Heaven, the last to Hell. Begin with the first and move down the list, one by one. Since membership in Heaven and Hell is

determinate, and everyone goes to exactly one, it follows that there must be a first member of this sequence who goes to Hell. Goofus, who has mental state  $M_i$ , goes to Hell, whereas Gallant, with mental state  $M_{i-1}$ , goes to Heaven. But provided we choose  $n$  large enough, Goofus and Gallant will be *extremely* similar. It is impossible to believe that a just God would treat such a pair so differently.<sup>2</sup>

There is no “slippery slope fallacy” being committed here, for it is built into the binary conception of the afterlife that Heaven and Hell have no borderline cases. Thus the argument succeeds where familiar *sorites* arguments (somehow!) fail. Begin with a heap, and begin removing grains of sand. Surely there is no one grain whose removal destroys the heap, and yet eventually (for example when there is only one grain left) there is no heap. How can this be? I have no answer; but it surely turns, somehow, on the fact that there are borderline cases of heaps.

Not everyone accepts this. There is a view about the nature of vagueness called *epistemicism*, which currently enjoys remarkable popularity, according to which no meaningful predicate has borderline cases.<sup>3</sup> There really is a single grain that destroys the heap, though we cannot know which. Epistemicism challenges my argument’s assumption of borderline cases of faith. It might also be thought to rescue the binary conception of the afterlife. The epistemicist’s sharp boundaries may be hidden from *us*, but God sees all. Thus God could use a faith-based criterion of salvation, sending people to Heaven or Hell depending on where they fall with respect to the humanly inaccessible but divinely known precise standard.

This response inherits the intrinsic implausibility of epistemicism, which I take to be considerable. No one, not even God, could know the cutoff point for having faith, for no such cutoff exists. But this point need not be pressed, for even the epistemicist’s sharp cutoffs would not provide a *just* criterion. Consider again our sequence  $M_1, \dots, M_n$  of mental states. The epistemicist postulates a sharp cutoff in the extension of ‘faith’:  $M_{i-1}$  is in while  $M_i$  is out. Thus the epistemicist grants *semantic* significance to the difference between  $M_{i-1}$  and  $M_i$ . It would be quite another thing to grant important *moral* significance to this distinction. Nothing in epistemicism implies that the proposed semantic

---

<sup>2</sup>This and other parts of the argument are similar to an argument for temporal parts in my Sider (1997). In assuming the existence of the series  $M_1, \dots, M_n$  it is not assumed that belief has a linear underlying basis, only that there is *some* linear way of proceeding (in small steps) from  $M_1$  to  $M_n$ .

<sup>3</sup>See Sorensen (1988); Williamson (1994).

cutoffs are due to unknown factors that have special significance of any kind, whether ontological or moral. Nor should it. There is no hidden ontological halo that a collection of grains of sand suddenly loses when it ceases to be a heap. Nor do the epistemicist's cutoffs correspond to moral halos. The epistemicist postulates a kind of semantic halo by distinguishing  $M_i$  from  $M_{i-1}$ , and it is a great mystery just how this is to be secured<sup>4</sup>, but however it is secured it surely is not by granting ontological or moral significance to the cutoff. Thus, even if epistemicism is true, God could not justly send Gallant to Heaven and Goofus to Hell. Granted, Gallant is faithful where Goofus is not; but in this case this distinction is one without great moral significance. One cannot both uphold epistemicism and continue to believe that differences in vague predicates always retain the significance we previously took them to have.<sup>5</sup> Suppose a single hair falls out one morning in the shower. If epistemicism is true, this loss may place me for the first time in the ranks of the bald; but even so, were I to be informed of this fact, I would have no more reason to lament that hair than the one the previous morning.

Delicate issues lurk. I say that the epistemicist's cutoffs for predicates like 'faith' and 'bald' lack rational and moral significance; but for the epistemicist, terms expressing rational and moral significance have sharp cutoffs as well. Just as there is a sharp cutoff for 'bald', so there is a sharp cutoff for 'state of hairlessness for which I have reason to lament'. Perhaps the epistemicist must admit the significance of the cutoffs after all! The question here is one of importance for epistemicists generally, not just those defending Hell: does epistemicism entail implausible distinctions of moral significance?

It is true that epistemicism implies a first state of hairlessness I have reason to lament. But this need not be objectionable (or at any rate, any more objectionable than epistemicism itself). For it may yet be that this first lamentable state is not *much more* lamentable than adjacent states. That is, it would be consistent for the epistemicist to deny the inference from 'state  $H_i$  is not lamentable but state  $H_{i+1}$  is lamentable' to 'state  $H_{i+1}$  is much more lamentable than

---

<sup>4</sup>See Williamson (1994, §7.5).

<sup>5</sup>Thus I "argue from below", in Mark Johnston's sense: I note the underlying nature of faith according to epistemicism, and argue for a deflationary conclusion about its significance. (More carefully, I argue that the cutoff point is not especially significant; I do not argue that faith has no significance at all.) Mark Johnston objects to similar arguments from below in Johnston (1997). I reject any general prohibition of argument from below (not that Johnston advocates such a prohibition). Our values should be open to criticism, and what better basis for criticism than exploration of the underlying nature of their objects?

state  $H_i$ '. This connection between the binary predicate 'lamentable' and the comparative predicate 'much more lamentable than' can be denied. Likewise, the epistemicist may accept a precise cutoff point for the predicate 'has merit for the afterlife' without admitting the justice of treating Goofus and Gallant differently, for even if only Gallant has merit for the afterlife, it does not follow that Gallant has much more merit. Proportional justice still prohibits treating Goofus and Gallant drastically differently.

But now what of the predicate 'can be sent to Hell without violating proportional justice, given who has been sent to Heaven'? I cannot consistently admit a precise cutoff in *this* predicate. So has the epistemicist got an answer to my argument after all? I think not. Even for the epistemicist, not *all* predicates have precise cutoffs, for some predicates are meaningless. Nonsense predicates, such as 'slithy tove' are an instance of this. Meaninglessness might also result from under-specification. Suppose I introduce the term 'small' by stipulating that integers below 17 are small and integers above 198 are not small. Rather than admitting that my usage of 'small' has an unknown precise cutoff, the epistemicist may want to deny that I have introduced a meaningful predicate.<sup>6</sup> A third source of meaninglessness (or incoherence) would be over-specification: either internal incompatibility of stipulations, or, more to the point, incompatibility of the stipulations with epistemicism itself. Imagine giving an otherwise acceptable introduction of some predicate, but then adding a "meaning postulate" to the effect that the predicate has no sharp cutoff. The epistemicist cannot admit that the term is both meaningful and obeys the stipulation. But this is just what is going on with the predicate 'can be sent to Hell without violating proportional justice'. Given the binary afterlife, it is built into the meaning of this term that it cannot have sharp cutoffs; epistemicists must presumably deny it is meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Thus, this epistemicist objection to my argument cannot be sustained.

(One might worry that my argument could then no longer be offered by an epistemicist, for the argument employs a term that is arguably meaningless: 'it would be (proportionally) just to do X'. But the argument may be recast using the comparative term 'more-just-than'. Consider a judge who would

---

<sup>6</sup>Some other responses to this sort of argument are discussed in Williamson (1997).

<sup>7</sup>Some might claim that even non-evaluative predicates, such as 'heap', have the lack of sharp cutoffs built into their meaning, and thus epistemicism has the untoward consequence that all such predicates are meaningless or incoherent. But whether there is any such thing built in to the meaning of 'heap' is surely a matter for theory — epistemicists can reasonably deny that there is.



send Goofus to Hell and Gallant to Heaven. All the argument needs is the plausible premise that God is more just than *that*.)

We have seen that faith cannot be a just criterion for a binary afterlife, because of its vagueness. This generalizes. Any proposed criterion that admits borderline cases will need to draw an arbitrary sharp line, which leads to injustice. Neither can the divine criterion be based on factors that come in degrees, as was argued earlier. But what else is left? There are no other plausible factors that could be used in the divine criterion. Once vague factors and factors that come in degrees are set aside, only precise factors that do not come in degrees remain. But the only such factors of this sort that come to mind are those that are derived, via arbitrary choices, from other factors that come in degrees or have borderline cases. There is, for example, the factor of uttering no more than 1,000,006 obscenities in one's lifetime (and even that is imprecise given the vagueness in 'obscenity', 'utter', and so on). And there are "precisifications" of 'faith': precise properties whose extensions include the definitely faithful, but also some arbitrary subset of the indeterminately faithful.<sup>8</sup> Any criterion based on such factors clearly suffers the same fate as those considered above, for it would treat persons who are significantly similar in radically different ways.

Precision could be attained if God were a perfectionist, allowing only the *perfectly* good (or faithful, or whatever) into Heaven. It could perhaps also be attained if God were completely indiscriminate, banning only the perfectly depraved (if such a state exists). But assuming that, as a matter of contingent fact, no one is either wholly good or wholly bad, this would violate the assumption of non-universality: either universal salvation or universal damnation would follow.

This completes my argument against the binary conception of the afterlife. Can the argument be resisted? My argument invokes two persons that are extremely morally similar, one in Heaven, the other in Hell. But if there are "gaps" in the distribution of morally relevant qualities, we cannot be sure that there is any such pair of persons. I ruled this out by stipulating that we are to consider a possible world in which gaps are absent, but it might be objected that God insures that there are no persons near the cutoff point of the divine criterion. One then wonders what happens in the possible worlds in which gaps

---

<sup>8</sup>It should not be pretended that there is a linear arrangement of the borderline faithful. The notion of a precisification is that of the supervaluationists. See Williamson (1994, chapter 5).

are absent. My opponent might claim that gaps are metaphysically necessary, or, more plausibly, claim that in worlds without gaps some component of the binary conception of hell would need to be abandoned. I am somewhat inclined to object that it would be unbecoming for God to use a criterion that would allow for *possible* cases of injustice if applied in every possible world, even if those cases do not actually arise. But the more important objection to the assumption of gaps is that it is manifestly false. Every morally or spiritually relevant factor we encounter in our lives is quite clearly a smear. The reply claims that the world has precise moral or spiritual joints, but as a matter of contingent fact these simply do not exist.

A more powerful objection to my argument would challenge the assumption of the proportionality of justice. Consider the following parable:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first." The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These men who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." But he answered one of them, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20: 1-15 (NIV)).

The parable seems most directly a reply to a challenge to Heaven rather than Hell. If Heaven contains both the solidly faithful and those that "just scraped

by”, cannot the solidly faithful complain that their reward should be greater? Note the difference in form from my challenge. The workers claim that it is unjust to reward equally those with very different merit, whereas I claim that it is unjust to “reward” very differently those with (nearly) equal merit. Nevertheless, the parable can be turned into a defense of Hell. Its general moral seems to be this: so long as one violates no “intrinsic” or “absolute” obligations, it is not unjust to be generous to some but not all. Given this moral, one might go on to deny that justice is “proportional” in the sense introduced above: it is not unjust to treat very similar people very differently, provided one respects all one’s intrinsic or absolute obligations.

This could be turned into a defense of Hell as follows. For simplicity, imagine that the divine criterion is based on some linear factor *F*, and imagine some degree *D* of *F* that in some intrinsic or absolute sense clearly does *not* merit entry into Heaven: setting aside any comparisons with how God treats others, it would be just for God to send someone with degree *D* of *F* to Hell. (That there is some such degree is presupposed by this objection. One version of this would be to claim that we *all* deserve Hell, no matter how virtuous or faithful we are, that God would be within his rights sending us all to Hell.) God would violate no direct obligation if he (somewhat arbitrarily) set the cutoff point at level *D* of *F*, or even lower. To be sure, there will be persons just barely worse than *D* in Hell and persons just barely better than *D* in Heaven. Goofus in Hell would protest that Gallant’s earthly *F*-efforts were only slightly better than his, and yet Gallant has been admitted into Heaven. God’s reply: “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Don’t you agree that your degree of *F* merits Hell? I want to be generous to Gallant, and I choose not to be to you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own creation?”

This “absolutist” conception of justice is supposed to be supported by the claim that the landowner in the parable is not being unjust. In fact it is unclear to me whether even that is true, whether the landowner is being unjust, but set that aside. A more critical problem is that the imagined words of God to Goofus are far worse than those of the landowner — the two cases are not parallel. Human landowners have limited funds, and so must limit their generosity. Moreover, we rarely hold humans to standards of perfection, and hence might not criticize the landowner, who after all is being more generous than ordinary morality demands. Thus, our reactions to the landowner parable are an unreliable guide to perfect justice.

There is a further asymmetry between the cases. Perhaps it is not unjust to be arbitrarily generous when this involves bestowing some benefit on an

otherwise happy person; it is harder to admit the justice of arbitrarily rescuing some from horrible agony while abandoning relevantly similar others to their fate. This final asymmetry depends on Hell being very bad, rather than being merely much worse than Heaven. That would be rejected by some thinkers, for example C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, who conceives of Hell as separation from God rather than torment.<sup>9</sup> But even if Hell is not so bad, if it is much worse than Heaven God would be *whimsically generous* in granting the gift of Heaven to Gallant but not Goofus. I say that whimsical generosity is unjust; or, more cautiously, that it falls short of God's perfect justice. Some may disagree. But even they face a hard question. Set aside justice: would God be whimsically generous? My guess is that most Christians would reject the idea that God would behave in such a seemingly arbitrary fashion.

There can be no such place as Hell, under its usual conception as part of a binary afterlife, for there is no criterion for judgment that God could employ. The continuity of morally significant factors is flatly in contradiction with God's justice (or at least God's non-arbitrariness) and a binary afterlife. Christians should either reject the notion of divine judgment altogether, or claim that in the afterlife, as in life, there is no black and white, only shades of grey.

*Syracuse University*

## References

Alston, William (1996). "Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith." In Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Haslanger, Sally and Roxanne Marie Kurtz (eds.) (2006). *Persistence: Contemporary Readings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

---

<sup>9</sup>Lewis's conception of Hell potentially raises another challenge, to the inclusion of divine control as one of the defining factors of the binary conception of the afterlife. It might be argued that God does not control the criterion of selection, for *we* separate ourselves from God. But taken at face value this would violate the principle of dichotomy as well, and would thus depart from the core of the binary conception of the afterlife which is my target. If status in the afterlife is purely a function of the degree to which one has separated oneself from God, then since there is a continuum of states of separation, there would need to be a continuum of states in the afterlife.

- Johnston, Mark (1997). "Human Concerns without Superlative Selves." In Jonathan Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit*, 149–79. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lewis, C. S. (1946). *The Great Divorce*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sider, Theodore (1997). "Four-Dimensionalism." *Philosophical Review* 106: 197–231. Reprinted in Haslanger and Kurtz 2006: 55–87.
- Sorensen, Roy (1988). *Blindspots*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy (1994). *Vagueness*. London: Routledge.
- (1997). "Imagination, Stipulation and Vagueness." In Enrique Villanueva (ed.), *Philosophical Issues 8: Truth*. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview.