

# The Logical Impossibility of Heaven and Hell as Instruments for Moral Reward and Punishment

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*And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:46*

The Buddha was the first to teach the doctrine of *pratitya samutpada*, which holds that the existence of each and every entity is causally conditioned by the existence of other entities. But Aristotle seems to have been the first to realise that sometimes the existence of a type of entities A is a causally necessary condition for the existence of entities of some type B, while the B's, in their turn, are necessary for the A's. In that case we end up in a deadlock that has since become known as *The Problem of the Chicken and the Egg*. Generally regarded by philosophers as a metaphysical puzzle about mutual causal dependency, the problem is taken by the man in the street as exemplary for the futility of philosophical questioning itself.

Recently though, this problem has been solved. It was realised that at some point in the evolution of the chicken, a proto-chicken must have laid an egg from which a chicken appeared. If eggs are to be named after the embryo contained in it, then this egg was a chicken egg, in which case the egg came first. If, on the other hand, eggs derive their name from the animal that produces them, then this egg was a proto-chicken egg and the chicken came first. After this insight, philosophers have spent the last fifteen years debating which of these two options actually apply, thus probably vindicating the opinion of the man in the street concerning the nature of their trade after all. Still, the initial insight is brilliant: rather than offering a straight solution, it transforms the original problem by looking at it from a slightly different angle. Seen from a temporary point of view, that which seemed to be a metaphysical question about causality now turns out to be merely a semantic conundrum about the naming of dairy products.

I would like to apply this same approach to the eschatological doctrine of moral retribution after death. Even though this issue has lost its practical significance for most present day Europeans, fifty years ago it had enough urgency to keep people awake at night and it still is a archetype of Western culture. The standard Christian view is well known. There is a God given moral code, and those who abide by it, the righteous, go to heaven, while the transgressors go to hell. (For the sake of simplicity I leave the role of divine grace out of account). Hell is an intensely disagreeable place, usually associated with fire and demonical torture. Heaven is a place of utmost bliss, somewhat curiously associated with playing on the harp. It is important to realize, firstly, that heaven and hell are a reward and a punishment for *the moral character* of the persons residing there, and, secondly, that we are concerned with *personal survival* after death, which means that the person after death has to be identical with the person that was living.

Let us now try to imagine what it would be like for a morally just man to be rewarded with a place in heaven. Our righteous man will presumably be thoroughly blissful when entering heaven, not in the last place because, according to the standard view, he is being reunited with many deceased loved ones.

But at some point it will dawn on him that many of his former acquaintances, colleagues, friends, family members, and perhaps even some of his children, are absent from the blissful abode. Not being as righteous as himself, those people have been “cast into the pit” where they are for an eternity subjected to unspeakable tortures. Now, when realising this, is the righteous man going to pick up his harp in order to continue being blissful? If he could do that in the knowledge that his loved ones are being subjected to agonizing torments a few floors down, he would certainly be a thoroughly evil person and could not lay any claim to a place in heaven in the first place. If, on the other hand, he were indeed morally righteous, then moved by compassion he would have no other desire but to go to hell in order to comfort his fellow human beings that are held captive there.

Thus, the concept of heaven as a reward for the morally just is deeply paradoxical.

For the reward is such, that one’s *willingness* to accept it, at the same time proves that one is not *worthy* to accept it. While those *worthy* of heaven will not want to reside there, precisely because they *are* worthy.

It has sometimes been suggested to me, that the man in heaven might no longer have any knowledge of his former existence and of the people who featured in it. Well, perhaps undergoing a divine lobotomy is indeed a precondition for a thoroughly gratifying stay in heaven. But most theories of personal identity, be they Lockian, psychological or narrative, agree that in that case the man in heaven would no longer be the same person as the man who lived on earth. This not only contradicts the Christian dogma of *personal* survival after death, but it would also undermine God’s retributive practices. For if the heavenly man is not the same person as the earthly one, then God would be rewarding the heavenly man for the things that someone else has done.

I think this problem cannot be solved, for any attempt at a solution will either detract from the heavenly man’s righteousness, or it will jeopardise his identity with his earthly self. It turns out that both our moral notions and our concept of personal identity are more intimately bound up with the existence of other humans than traditional theology allows for. This is what wreaked havoc with the attempt to spell out the details of a heavenly reward and it perhaps also explains why people, throughout the ages, have always found it much easier to picture hell than to imagine heaven.