



## On Motahhari's Theodicy of Hell

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### Abstract

One of the main problems for the doctrine of the traditional view of hell is Proportionality objection. It claims that eternal punishments for finite crimes of human beings cause undue harm and therefore are incompatible with divine justice. The proportionality principle states that the degree of punishment that a person justly merits must be proportionate to the level of his wrongdoing. One of the common ways to respond to this objection is rejecting the retributive nature of hell. Morteza Motahhari denied retributivism by distinguishing between the criminal system of the world and hereafter. He believed punishments in hell are identical to human deeds and they are nothing more than spiritual aspect of them. Regarding this view which is called 'Self-imposed punishments', God is not the punisher of the sinners, and the residents of hell suffer from their sinful actions. This paper begins with examining Motahhari's metaphysical theory of punishment as a theodicy of hell. Then I will discuss a modal argument against his theory. I shall argue there is not a necessary correlation between crimes and punishments. My conclusion is that Motahhari's theodicy would be undermined God's moral perfection either therefore it does not get God off the moral hook.

### Keywords

Hell, Theodicy, Divine justice, Punishment, Motahhari.

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## Introduction

Within the Abrahamic theological traditions, there has always been a variety of perspectives on hell. The prominent view in the early Islamic eschatological thought is 'Traditionalism' which maintains that the suffering of the damned lasts forever. God punishes people who performed sinful actions in their finite earthly life for an infinite amount of time. Hell is described as a very distressing and undesirable state of being. There is no mercy or escape from hell and suffering has no ends nor would it be diminished. This view was derived from the literal interpretation of the Quran. For Example, we read:

*Allah has promised the hypocritical men and the hypocritical women and the unbelievers the fire of hell to abide therein; it is enough for them; and Allah has cursed them and they shall have lasting punishment."*  
(9: 68)

Hell has also been mentioned in numerous verses of the Quran as Fire:

*"Fear the Fire whose fuel is men and stones, which is prepared for those who reject Faith (2: 24).*

The Quran's detailed attention to issues concerning hell strongly reinforces the need for a philosophical inquiry into the issue.

Jonathan Kvanvig lists four features that define what he calls 'the strong view of hell':

1. The Anti-Universalism Thesis: Some persons are consigned to hell.
2. The existence Thesis: Hell is a place where people exist if they are consigned there.
3. The No Escape Thesis: There is no possibility of leaving

hell and nothing can do change, or become in order to get out of hell, once one is consigned there.

4. The Retribution Thesis: The justification for and purpose of hell is retributive in nature, hell being constituted to mete out punishment to those whose earthly lives and behavior warrant it (Kvanvig, 1993, p. 25).

Some philosophers believe that the strong view of hell poses a kind of problem of evil which called 'Soteriological problem of evil'. The main question here is that why an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God permits the eternal suffering of the damned? David Lewis described this problem as "A simpler argument one that has been strongly neglected" (Lewis, 2007, p. 231). Everlasting torment of the conscious creatures is the most intense evil and since God himself perpetrates them, what God does is thus infinitely worse than what the worst of tyrants did (Lewis, 2007, p. 232). It is worth noticing that the eternity of soteriological evils is problematic for the task of developing an acceptable theodicy because unending torment would be pointless which could never lead to anything good beyond it.

A satisfactory answer to this problem must seek to explain the duration, quality, purpose, and finality of hell. Analytic theologians have solved this problem by defending some alternative views of hell. 'Universalism' by denying the first thesis rejects the hell's eternity and believes in God's victory over evils. In this view, hell is temporary and has purgatorial function, therefore redemption and bliss are for all human beings. 'Annihilationism' denies the second thesis of the strong view of hell with rejection of the idea of the inherent immortality of the soul. It states that the final destiny of the wicked is annihilation. 'Escapism' is another view which rejects the third thesis and argues that the ability to leave hell and enter heaven is possible. Rejection of

the fourth thesis implies a theory which is called 'Choice model view'. According to this theory, hell is not a punishment imposed by God but is the natural consequence of the choices of free agents. Besides these non-traditional views, the traditional view also has been remained in the theist's doctrinal thoughts and its rationalization will be discussed in the section below.

### **1. Hell and Justice**

It is reasonable to suppose that for any instance of human suffering allowed or caused by God, there must be some sufficient reason for permitting or causing it failing this, it would appear that traditionalism affirms the eternal existence of gratuitous suffering. Nevertheless, the traditional view is not without any rational justification. It responds that hell is necessary to satisfy the demands of divine justice. Perfect justice cannot be achieved in this world, therefore Post-mortem punishment seems necessary from a justice standpoint. Traditionalism affirms Retributivism, a theory of punishment that asserts that the only justification for punishment is that it serves the cause of justice. According to this theory, the justification for punishment has nothing to do with deterring crime, or with rehabilitating the criminal or protecting society against criminal behavior. As a result, the point of hell seems in no way capable of redresses by future good because it looks backward. The Punishment is imposed for its own sake.

Contemporary philosophers of religion have been pondering this response in a detailed manner. The main objection begins with the claim that punishments should be proportionate to the seriousness of the sin and since all human sins are finite in seriousness, then infinite punishments for finite sins are unjust.

The traditional doctrine of hell clearly requires a retributivist

theory of punishment but it also seems to contradict the retributivist's principle itself. Proportionality is the core principle of retributivism which asserts that punishment must be in proportion to the degree of crime. We must measure the seriousness of a crime according to the degree of harm done. Accordingly, God will be unjust if he treats some persons worse than they deserve; therefore, it would not justify God in making sinners horribly suffered forever.

This understanding of the nature of hell as an eternal torment imposed by God presents tremendous difficulties from the standpoint of justice. The argument from justice has been summarized here:

- A. All human sin is finite in seriousness.
- B. Punishments should be proportionate to the seriousness of the sin.

Therefore, no human being deserves infinite punishment (Seymour, 2000, p. 37).

Such unending punishment is too severe given that the sins of any human being are finite. Since God is perfectly just, we can be confident that he would never punish in this way. Consider Hitler, for example, who killed 20 million innocent people during his life. If he might punish 100 years per person killed, he would justly deserve 2 billion years of punishment which is supposed to be considerably less than eternity (Clark, 2001, p. 22). No matter how many sins an individual committed in his life, it is far out of proportion to punish him for all eternity.

## **2. Motahhari's Theodicy**

It has widely suggested by theologians that the justice of God was represented in the creation of heaven and hell but since hell is

theorized as a place of eternal punishment and none of the humans deserve this, hell would be understood against divine justice. Morteza Motahhari, a contemporary Muslim theologian, addressed this problem in his works and tried to solve it by rejecting the retribution nature of hell. In response to the question of why people go to an everlasting hell, he modified our understanding of hell. He rejects retributivism, the fourth thesis of the strong view, as a divine motivation for hell. His solution entails conceiving hell as a natural consequence of rejecting God rather than a means of retributive punishment for sin and rebellion. Damnation in this sense is chosen by the damned and God's role here is simply to show the true nature of their actions in consigning some to hell.

At the beginning of Motahhari's theodicy, he illustrated the different characterization of this life and the hereafter. According to Motahhari, there are kinds of similarities between earthly life and the life to come. Firstly, both are real and true. Secondly, humans, in both states, have consciousness; therefore, pleasure and pain could be experienced. Thirdly, nature, instincts, and physicality rule over both realms. But the differences should be noticed. Life and death, elderly and youth, work and activity, the existence of unconscious minds, collective destiny, causality laws, motion and evolution, exhaustion and boredom are all the characteristics of the earthy life that the afterlife lacks. In addition, the most important feature of this life is the possibility of changes in one's own destiny. The horrible fate of the evildoer can simply be changed by turning his vices into virtues (Motahhari, 1985, pp. 19-20). Motahhari asserts that this life and the afterlife are related to each other in the manner of continuity. By analogy, this life is like a farm for the afterlife. It is the place of sowing and planting the seeds and the afterlife is the place of reaping them.

Morally right actions are analogous to sowing the seeds hence evil thoughts and deeds have nothing beneficial and will not profit one in the afterlife (Motahhari, 1985, p. 17). He sketched out the afterlife as a time when your results will be achieved just like the day when examination results are announced: 'If the student pleads to be given respite to study at the hour of the examination, or if he asks to be tested at the time that the results are being announced, then the only answer he will hear is that the time for examination has finished and now is the time for awarding grades' (Motahhari, 2004, p. 189). He pointed out the irreversibility of final destination by another analogy: 'If it were possible for a fruit already separated from its tree to return back to the tree and regain its former position to ripen and sweeten as a fruit, then it would have been possible to return to this world, but the law of creation is otherwise' (Motahhari, 2004, p. 190). Consequently, people's destination will be fixed immediately after death. There is no way to punish or reward a person for his afterlife's deeds. These characteristics that were mentioned above are essential and belong to the nature of these two separate realms.

Motahhari's differentiation relates to the nature of punishments as well. He distinguished between three possible types of punishment and noted which one appropriately exists in the afterlife. In this life punishments are conventional and they are legislated in order to deter and prevent crimes or calm the revengeful victims. Conventional punishments must proportionate to the crimes. Such punishments cannot occur in the afterlife because the goal of punishment is not achievable so it will be understood as totally pointless (Motahhari, 2004).

The second criminal option is the natural consequence theory of punishment. In this view, punishments are a direct effect or natural

consequence of crimes rather than being man-made. They governed merely by nature rather than convention. For instance, drinking poison causes death naturally. The proportionality principle here is not required to be observed. Punishments are necessary and natural effects of actions and are unforgivable. Motahhari argued that some of the wrongdoers saw the natural consequence of their actions in this life (Motahhari, 2004, pp. 198-201).

The third theory of punishment which is special for the afterlife is something different in comparison with the previous views by means of its intense connection between punishments and crimes. In this view, Punishment is neither legal nor natural effect of crime but it is crime itself (Motahhari, 2004, p. 201). Every action has had a material aspect which is finite and its physical property appears in this life and a spiritual aspect which is infinite and its non-physical property will be embodied to either suffer or bliss the agent (Motahhari, 2004, p. 205). Motahhari indicates that not only human beings have eternal life but their deeds and acquisitions are eternal either. In this world, man is unable to perceive them until the afterlife. Virtuous deeds will be manifested and make agents happy while evil deeds will be manifested to make agents suffered as a result (Motahhari, 1985, p. 18). His formulation requires that the quality of one's everlasting life will be determined by the value of his moral behaviors (Motahhari, 1985, p. 19). From this point of view, hell, like heaven, is an empty desert. The punishment or reward are the embodiments of the man's own sins which are created by man himself (Motahhari, 2004, p. 195).

According to the two last theories, punishment is self-imposed and there is not meant to be any punisher outside of one's own hand. Hence Punishment will not be inflicted by God therefore there is no concern whether it is unjust or not. If God is not the one inflicting it,



there is no concern that he is being unjust. The solution here is that God's treatment of the damned is not counted as punishment at all. There is nothing outside of themselves that causes the damned to suffer as they do. God's indirect intervention here is simply giving sinners what they have chosen freely for themselves.

This view allegedly presumes the world to be created and formed in this way. The pre-mortem life has fixed metaphysically by these natural causal laws which make every human deed to be punished or rewarded. However, I will show that since God himself creates the world plus laws governed it, the natural or metaphysical theories of punishment as a whole could not persuasively answer the argument from justice.

### **3. God's Responsibility and Possible Worlds**

Reflecting upon the problem of hell leads to a reflection upon God's attributes. God is traditionally understood to be a perfect and powerful being who is the creator and sustainer of all that is. God's creative and sustaining activity is often thought to involve choosing a possible world for actualization. It has been widely accepted that besides the actual world (i.e., the world where we live) there were numerous possible worlds that could have been actualized. A possible world is a way the world could have been or possible state of affairs could have had. By assuming that the actualization of a specific world among others is God's action, the actual world is one of the possible worlds that was actualized by God. The "Possible world" principle plays a vital role here. In the contemporary propositional modal logic, modal propositions like necessity and possibility have depicted in terms of possible worlds semantics. A necessary existent utterly exists in all

possible worlds including the actual world. God, to say, is necessary because He exists in all possible worlds. Numbers, propositions, and pure sets are other examples of the necessary state of affairs and they exist in all possible worlds too. We cannot imagine a world without these mentioned entities, since their nonexistence is logically impossible. Clearly, God's power is constrained by actualizing these states of affairs because all possible worlds include them (Plantinga, 1974, p. 169). In addition, morality also constrains divine power in choosing whatever world he wants. God's moral perfection prevents him to actualize worlds contain instances of gratuitous evils. If a world were more evil than good, then necessarily it is morally (not logically) impermissible for any perfect being to allow it to be actual.

Traditional Abrahamic interpretation has been that God created the universe out of nothing and no other power limited God's freedom in creation. Because of God's free choice prior to this world being actualized, he bears some responsibility due to his world-actualization activity. He is responsible for the actualization of this world rather than a better alternative possible world. This point makes problematic the theodicy that Motahhari proposed. According to his view, God actualized a world where sinful creatures suffer for all eternity and it is unjust and unloving. God ought not to allow it to become actual with respect to moral considerations given the fact that the punishing system is not a necessary state of affair which supposed to be considered as being out of God's creative activity. God's choice of creating this system of punishment seems to be regarded as manifesting a defect of his perfection. I doubt that there would be any justification for God's setting the world up such that some individuals do suffer eternally. There should be further clarifications here: Of course, 'every action has its necessary outcome' but it is different from

'necessarily every action has its outcome'. The former statement is acceptable but the latter one depends on the authorization of necessary causal laws between actions and their consequences. Since God is the only creator of the world and the author of it, the laws within the action-outcome relation is up to him.

There would be another significant challenge in trying to explain why God does not annihilate the damned by putting them out of both mercy and misery once they are punished justly for their evil deeds. It is at least possible for God, as suggested by non-retributive annihilationists, to actualize a world where sinners will completely be destroyed by committing evil and it is purportedly closer to justice than traditionalism. It means that their soul will pass away along with their body after divine justice comes off.

This line of argument was also objected by Stephen Kershnar in "*The Injustice of Hell*". He has argued against the natural consequence view of hell by claiming that God is still responsible for setting up the level of well-being that a person will justly receive. He argues that God indirectly make residents of hell suffer by creating a system whereby the result of rejecting God's grace is ending up in everlasting severe punishment; and since God sets up a system where punishments are far greater than crimes, then he is responsible for this outcome. He draws an analogy between God and a school principal who sets up the punishment for student fighting whereby the janitor forcibly sodomizes fighters. In this analogy, God is responsible for human suffering just like the principal's responsibility for the fighters' suffering even if they have made themselves liable for it (Kershnar, 2005, p. 106). His conclusion incorporates the claim that the resulting condition is unjust and wholly out of proportion and it does not matter

whether the suffering is caused by a morally responsible third party or an impersonal mechanism (Kershnar, 2005, p. 106). If the above objection plus the modal version that I have articulated were true, then natural consequence or choice model views of hell, including Motahhari's theodicy, are not sound theories of punishment to justify everlasting hell.

#### 4. Conclusion

The existence of hell reveals a lot about the divine nature and attributes, specifically God's perfection and goodness. When it comes to punishment, justice requires proportionality between the punishment and the seriousness of the crime. Punishment must fit the crime therefore infinite punishment for finite earthly life is not to be expected. This involves disproportionality between offence and atonement that signals an injustice on God's behalf. In Motahhari's view, God does not consign agents to hell, and the residents of hell are there for eternity because it is the embodiment of their sinful actions, hence hell is the direct object of choice of those who are finally lost. He distinguished between the criminal system of the world and hereafter because of their different natures and describes the latter as a formative system where there are identity and unity between crimes and punishments. This system has held an unchangeable necessary law which makes it impossible for God to choose alternatives. But since actualization of alternative possible worlds with perfect justice is within God's power, therefore God's responsibility for his creatures has been preserved.

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