

Eternal Hell

1. Universalism: Universalism is the view that hell does not last forever. Defenders of this view admit that hell exists, and some people go there after death—however, God works very hard to get them to repent of their sins and eventually accept the invitation to come to heaven, so that no one stays in hell forever. In defense of this view, Biblical texts are sometimes cited, but the primary reason for accepting Universalism is that it seems like the sort of thing a morally perfect, all-powerful God would do. For instance:

1. An eternal hell does not seem just: Say that even the worst, most horrific crimes deserve no more than one thousand years of horrible punishment. The maximum sentence that we would expect for even the most wicked human beings would be no more than millions or billions of years. But, INFINITY years? This seems like overkill. Not to mention the fact that, on the traditional Christian view, even very GOOD, KIND people (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi) go to hell for infinity years just for not being Christian; or those who have never even HEARD of Christianity, because they lived so long ago, or in such remote regions of the world. Sentencing these people to agony and suffering that lasts FOREVER AND EVER does not seem compatible with God's perfect moral goodness.
2. An eternal hell thwarts God's desires: God is supposedly "sovereign." This means that his will can never be thwarted or overturned. Whatever he wills, necessarily HAPPENS. The accusation is that, surely a good God WANTS us all to go to heaven—and, if hell is eternal, then God doesn't get what he wants.
3. An eternal hell prevents happiness in heaven: Heaven is supposed to be this really awesome, totally happy place. The accusation is that, if there are people suffering for eternity in hell, this will cause distress to the people in heaven, and they won't be able to enjoy themselves. In short, heaven won't really be a place of total happiness in that case.

2. Separationism: Davis rejects universalism in favor of that view called "separationism." This is the view that there will ALWAYS be at least SOME people in hell, separated from God, forever and ever. In order to support this claim, Davis points out several things:

1. The nature of hell: First, Davis notes that hell is not really the fiery place of torture that is often depicted in popular culture. That sort of imagery is figurative. Literally, hell is merely a place of separation from God. Furthermore, since God is the source of all goodness. And, that in itself is a bad sort of place to be in. For,

as Davis notes, "To be apart from the source of love, joy, peace, and light is to live miserably."

2. Hell is a choice: Next, Davis points out that the only people who are in hell are those who CHOOSE to be there. Some will "harden their hearts" to God during this life. Many will continue to do this after death, perhaps forever, viewing life in the absence of God as a better option than a life in the presence of God.
3. It is the only way to preserve God's mercifulness and graciousness: Davis points out that, if hell is unjust, then God is OBLIGATED to rescue everyone from hell eventually. But, the entire Christian doctrine is founded upon the ideas of MERCY and GRACE. God is merciful and gracious. But, in order for one to be those things, the punishment must be DESERVED—but God, in an act of mercy/grace, offers us forgiveness anyway. The problem is that it is ONLY an offer; but, not everyone will accept it. Therefore, there will always be some people in hell.
4. This is compatible with God's perfect goodness: God, a morally perfect being, cannot violate our free will and force us to choose to love him. Coerced love in that way would be sort of like divine rape. Therefore, God grants us our choice to either be in his presence or not. The sad fact is that many will choose to remain separated from God's presence for all eternity. But, this is wholly compatible with God's goodness. As Davis writes, "Allowing them to live forever in hell is simply God's continuing to grant them the freedom that they enjoyed in this life to say yes or no to God."
5. This is compatible with God's sovereignty: Davis notes that the correct view is not that "God's will is ALWAYS done." Rather, the correct view is, "Everything that occurs is something that God could change, if He wanted to." The fact is that, when God made humans FREE (i.e., with free will), He foresaw in advance that some would abuse this freedom and eternally choose to reject God. But, God chose to create us anyway. Thus, we might say that people in hell is in SOME sense undesirable, but it is not something God wishes he could change, but cannot. If God wanted to, He could easily bring everyone into heaven.
6. Response to people being sad in heaven: Here, Davis just bites the bullet and says that he has no idea how God makes sure that everyone in heaven is happy, even if their loved ones are in hell. He just says, surely an all-powerful being such as God could ensure this.

3. The Fate of the Ignorant: The universalist also brought up one other worry: What about the people who have never heard of Jesus or God, etc? Surely a just and loving God does not send those people to hell for eternity.

Reply: Davis agrees that, whatever God does, it is just and loving. He may, therefore, offer a chance of repentance to those people who have never heard of God. Perhaps He offers this chance at the moment of their death. So, Davis is open to the idea that perhaps SOME people get to leave hell and go to heaven. However, surely those who have heard God's message and decisively chosen to not believe in God are not given this extra chance. So, hell will always have some people in it.