

Heaven &
hell

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. **He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead** and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Our topic today is the Last Judgement: the claim, made in the Creed, that Christ will come again to judge all of us.

Here is how the Catechism describes the Last Judgement:

1038. The resurrection of all the dead, "of both the just and the unjust," will precede the Last Judgment. This will be "the hour when all who are in the tombs will hear [the Son of man's] voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment." Then Christ will come "in his glory, and all the angels with him Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.... and they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This certainly seems like a picture according to which, after death, God passes judgement on all of us, and on the basis of our life, decides that some of us will go to heaven forever, and some others to hell forever. (If not 'forever', then the talk of the **last** judgement wouldn't make much sense.)

Most philosophical objections to this picture have focused on the question of whether a just God could ever send people to hell. We'll talk about one objection of this sort, and then discuss an objection to the picture of heaven that we get in the Catechism.

The teaching about hell in the Catechism is pretty straightforward:

1035 The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.

In the Catholic view, God does not pre-ordain that certain people go to hell:

1037 God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want "any to perish, but all to come to repentance"...

The Catechism is also rather clear about what it takes to go to hell:

1033 To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice.

Mortal sin is defined as follows:

1857 For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."

In the reading for today, Sider's aim is to present a paradox involving a series of claims which, from the point of view of standard views about judgement and the afterlife, seem quite plausible. These are:

Dichotomy: there are exactly two states in the afterlife, heaven and hell.

Badness: people in hell are very, very much worse off than people in heaven.

Non-universality: some people go to heaven, and some to hell.

Divine control: it is up to God who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.

Proportionality: justice is proportional, in the sense that it "prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects."

Justice: God's judgement about who goes to heaven & hell is just.

By Non-universality and Divine control, it follows that God decides that some people - call them group A - go to heaven and that some other people - group B - go to hell. By Badness, it follows that group A is much better off than group B. By Dichotomy, it follows that every human being is either in group A or group B. By Proportionality (given that the people in group A are much, much better off than the ones in group B), it follows that if God is just, there must be some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups. So by Justice, it follows that there must be some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups.

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The problem, Sider thinks, is that there is no such way of dividing up the population of people; however we decide to divide up people into Groups A and B, we’re going to end up putting relevantly very similar people into different groups. If Sider is right, and if the informal argument just given is valid, it follows that one of the six theses with which we began must be false. But it is very hard to see, from the point of view of standard forms of Christianity, at least, how any of these theses **could** be false.

To respond to Sider’s paradox, it suffices to find **some way of dividing people into groups A and B which does not place relevantly similar people into different groups**. Let’s consider some candidates.

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Let’s consider first the view we seem to get from the Catechism: someone goes to hell just in case they die having committed at least one mortal sin for which they have not repented.

How would Sider argue against this view?

We can consider various ways in which people who are quite similar will, on this view, meet maximally different fates. Consider: (a) two people alike except that one dies just before repenting; (b) two people alike except that one committed a slightly graver sin than the other; (c) two people alike except that one is just slightly more deliberate than the other in committing some sin.



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Here’s a second possibility: God decides on the basis of the person’s **faith**; whether or not they believe in God (or believe some collection of things about God). Does this avoid the problems with the reliance on mortal sin?

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There are two worries about the use of purgatory to solve the problem, which correspond to two different conceptions of purgatory. First, suppose that everyone in purgatory eventually goes to heaven (this is the standard Catholic view):

1030 All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

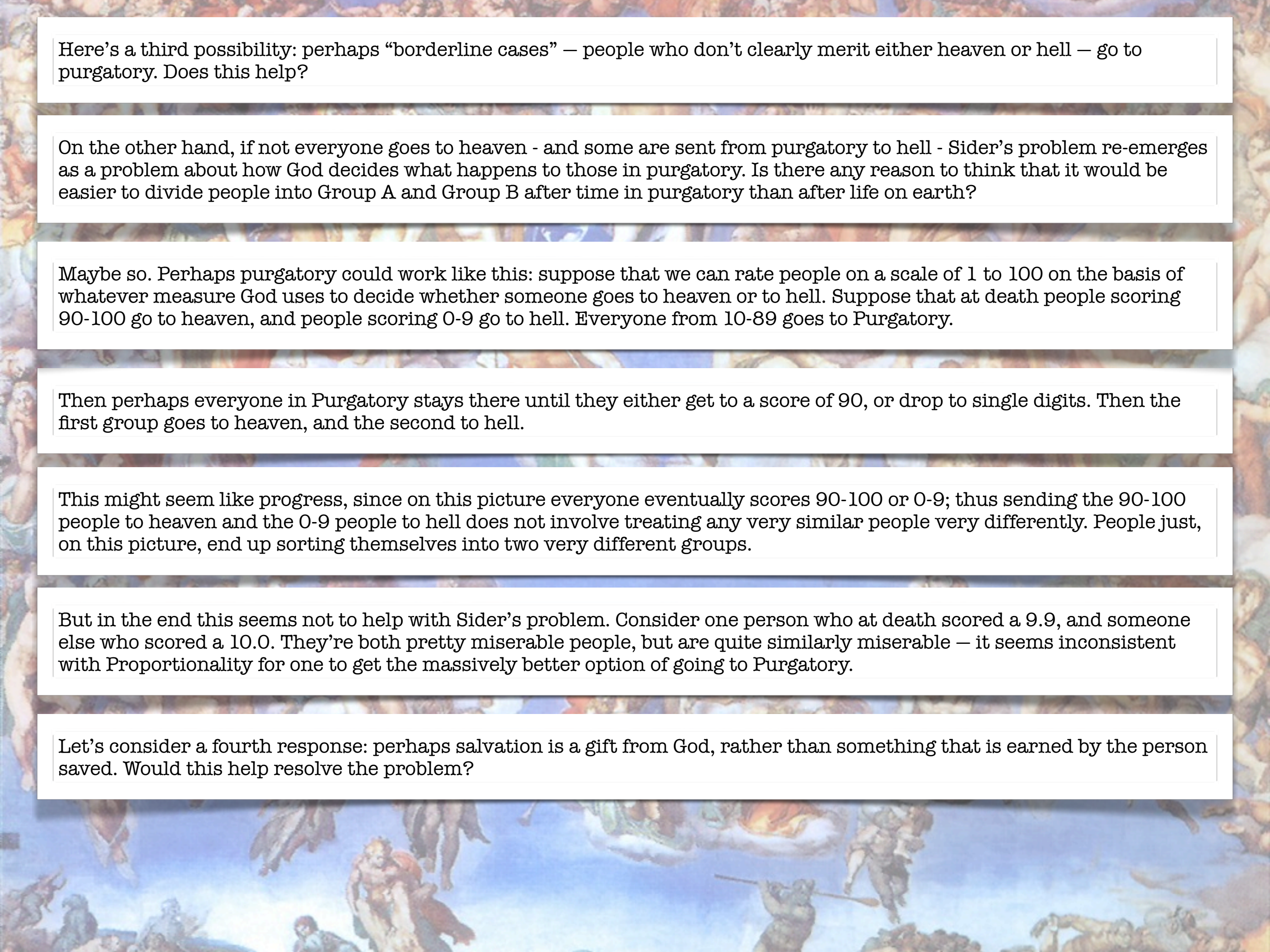
1031 The Church gives the name 'Purgatory' to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.

Then in deciding who goes to heaven, who to hell, and who to purgatory, God is deciding who eventually goes to heaven and who eventually goes to hell — which means that again we need some way of dividing the "borderline cases" from those who go to hell, and the problem is unsolved.

On the other hand, if not everyone goes to heaven - and some are sent from purgatory to hell - Sider's problem re-emerges as a problem about how God decides what happens to those in purgatory. Is there any reason to think that it would be easier to divide people into Group A and Group B after time in purgatory than after life on earth?

Maybe so. Perhaps purgatory could work like this: suppose that we can rate people on a scale of 1 to 100 on the basis of whatever measure God uses to decide whether someone goes to heaven or to hell. Suppose that at death people scoring 90-100 go to heaven, and people scoring 0-9 go to hell. Everyone from 10-89 goes to Purgatory.

Then perhaps everyone in Purgatory stays there until they either get to a score of 90, or drop to single digits. Then the first group goes to heaven, and the second to hell.



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Then perhaps everyone in Purgatory stays there until they either get to a score of 90, or drop to single digits. Then the first group goes to heaven, and the second to hell.

This might seem like progress, since on this picture everyone eventually scores 90-100 or 0-9; thus sending the 90-100 people to heaven and the 0-9 people to hell does not involve treating any very similar people very differently. People just, on this picture, end up sorting themselves into two very different groups.

But in the end this seems not to help with Sider's problem. Consider one person who at death scored a 9.9, and someone else who scored a 10.0. They're both pretty miserable people, but are quite similarly miserable – it seems inconsistent with Proportionality for one to get the massively better option of going to Purgatory.

Let's consider a fourth response: perhaps salvation is a gift from God, rather than something that is earned by the person saved. Would this help resolve the problem?

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One way in which this might help is that it might give us reason to deny Proportionality.

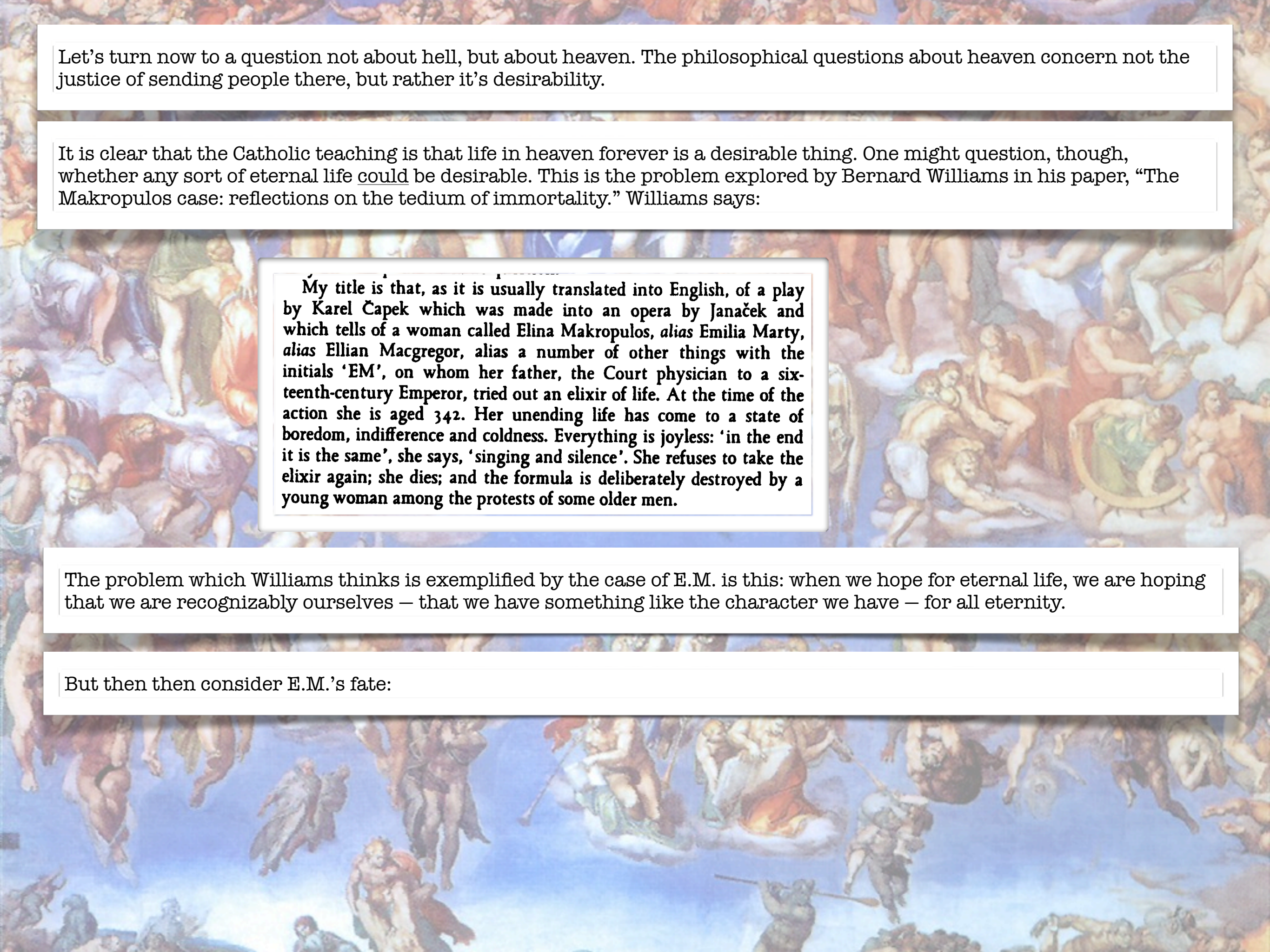
Sider considers this idea, and suggests that one might find some support for this idea in Matthew’s parable of the workers in the vineyard:

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 market-place 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)).

Is the landowner in the parable unjust for giving those who worked much less the same reward as those who worked much more?

The landowner seems to defend his action by saying that he was not unjust to the people who worked all day - for they got what they were promised - and was simply generous to those who worked less. But, the landowner seems to think, being generous to some but not all is not the same as being unjust to some; generosity to A but not B need not imply injustice done to B.

Is the landowner right about this? How might the landowner’s view be adopted to the case of heaven & hell? Would it change the story if the people to whom the landowner was **not** selectively generous were suffering, rather than simply recipients of a promised wage? And would it matter if there was no bound on the amount of money which the landowner had to disburse to workers?



Let's turn now to a question not about hell, but about heaven. The philosophical questions about heaven concern not the justice of sending people there, but rather it's desirability.

It is clear that the Catholic teaching is that life in heaven forever is a desirable thing. One might question, though, whether any sort of eternal life could be desirable. This is the problem explored by Bernard Williams in his paper, "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality." Williams says:

My title is that, as it is usually translated into English, of a play by Karel Čapek which was made into an opera by Janáček and which tells of a woman called Elina Makropulos, *alias* Emilia Marty, *alias* Ellian Macgregor, *alias* a number of other things with the initials 'EM', on whom her father, the Court physician to a sixteenth-century Emperor, tried out an elixir of life. At the time of the action she is aged 342. Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: 'in the end it is the same', she says, 'singing and silence'. She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies; and the formula is deliberately destroyed by a young woman among the protests of some older men.

The problem which Williams thinks is exemplified by the case of E.M. is this: when we hope for eternal life, we are hoping that we are recognizably ourselves — that we have something like the character we have — for all eternity.

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Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

If we really think about what it would be like to live forever, this leads to difficult questions:

How is this accumulation of memories related to this character which she eternally has, and to the character of her existence? Are they much the same kind of events repeated? Then it is itself strange that she allows them to be repeated, accepting the same repetitions, the same limitations – indeed, *accepting* is what it later becomes, when earlier it would not, or even could not, have been that. The repeated patterns of personal relations, for instance, must take on a character of being inescapable.

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This, of course, depends on what heaven is like. And that is something about which even the Catechism makes few claims, saying only that it “is beyond all understanding and description.”

One might, then, simply make the following somewhat complacent response to the case of E.M.: ‘Her problems would not arise in heaven; why they would not arise is not something that we, who have no grip on what heaven is like, can’t say.’

But simply stopping here misses what is challenging about the case of E.M. What her case seems to show is that at least many of the things we enjoy and take to be valuable in this life would not sustain us in an eternal life. Does that mean that those of us who hope for an eternal life should re-evaluate what we value now?

