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ESCHATOLOGICAL CUTOFFS

Joseph Corabi

Recently, there have been a number of responses to Ted Sider's argument in "Hell and Vagueness," which challenges the consistency of a popular view of hell with God's justice. After presenting an interpretation of the original argument, I critically examine the reply to it by Trent Dougherty and Ted Poston. I conclude that we should be suspicious of the success of their overall approach, both because it requires the truth of controversial metaphysical theses and because it does not ultimately address the heart of the worry that Sider's argument is built on. Ultimately, I present and offer a limited defense of a new response to Sider, built on a picture of consignment to hell based on having committed mortal sins that are unforgiven by God.

Introduction

Ted Sider's much discussed paper "Hell and Vagueness" presents a challenging objection to a popular Christian view of consignment to hell, based on its alleged inconsistency with divine justice.¹ There have been several attempts to answer Sider's objection, none of them meeting with any consensus of approval. In this paper, I will begin by formulating Sider's main argument. Subsequently, I will critically examine one of the most prominent responses to it—Trent Dougherty and Ted Poston's "Hell, Vagueness, and Justice: A Reply to Sider"—arguing that there is strong reason to be suspicious of the success of Dougherty and Poston's approach, at least against a charitable proposal in the spirit of Sider's.²

¹Theodore Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002): 58–68. Also, Sider intends the argument to apply more broadly than just a Christian context. Nothing about my eventual response depends on commitments that could not in principle be embraced by those in other religious traditions, nor does the reply from Dougherty and Poston that I will criticize.

²Dougherty and Poston, "Hell, Vagueness, and Justice: A Reply to Sider," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): 322–328. Dougherty and Poston's article is one of the two most prominent recent responses to Sider, the other being M. J. Almeida's "On Vague Eschatology," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): 359–375. Almeida argues that there is a principled way for God to give people who are similar in their level of badness drastically different afterlife outcomes. In basic outline, his central claim is that God violates no moral requirements if he sends only people who are fully determinately irredeemably evil (i.e., determinately irredeemably evil as well as determinately determinately irredeemably evil, etc.) to hell, and everyone else ultimately to heaven. I do not address Almeida's argument in detail here for two related reasons. First, there are hints that he and Sider are talking past one another. Although Sider says that the criteria for hell need not assume that "God is vindictive" (58), all of his examples suggest a retributive or at least quasi-retributive framework for understanding



Finally, I will give my own reply to Sider, which makes use of the classical concept of “mortal sin,” and which argues that traditional views that employ this notion, while perhaps problematic in other ways, can offer a principled answer to Sider’s worries.

Sider’s Argument

Sider’s conclusion is that a traditional view of eschatology, where in the end everyone either winds up in heaven or in hell, is manifestly inconsistent with God’s justice. Although there is much subtlety to his argument, we can represent the overall main thrust of his *reductio* reasoning as follows.³ First, the four central assumptions that together comprise the view of consignment to hell that Sider is attacking:

(DICHOTOMY) Every actual human being will ultimately wind up determinately in either heaven or hell (but not both).

(BADNESS) Everyone in heaven is much, much better off than everyone in hell.

(NON-UNIVERSALITY) Some actual people ultimately go to heaven and some actual people ultimately go to hell.

(DIVINE CONTROL) God is in control of the mechanism or criteria by which eschatological outcomes are decided.

Next, the additional major assumptions that Sider makes:

(JUSTICE) God is perfectly just, and part of that perfect justice is not allowing things to go much better ultimately for one person than another when these two people are quite similar in the relevant respects.⁴

consignment to hell; the only relevant concern God has in apportioning afterlife outcomes (or at least setting up the rules) is desert, or something closely analogous to desert like the individual’s history of free acceptance or rejection of grace. (For instance, Sider says, “The criterion [for damnation] must . . . cohere with [God’s] perfect justice” (59). “Justice”—in the sense of “justice” Sider is speaking of—is a retributive notion, or at least closely related to a retributive notion.) Almeida, on the other hand, envisions a God who apportions outcomes based on forward-looking criteria, rather than the backward-looking considerations of desert or previous track record of responding to grace—specifically, based on whether it is possible for an individual to be redeemed in the future given her state of character in the present. Second, given that the relevant property for consignment to hell in Almeida’s account is irredeemable evil—a property of an individual’s character implying stable and settled badness—his view is vulnerable to criticisms I make in “Hell and Character,” *Religious Studies*, forthcoming. It would be excessively time consuming for me to repeat those criticisms here.

³Following the tone and spirit of much of his own presentation (and Dougherty and Poston’s), my interpretation of Sider focuses on the issue as it applies to the actual world. One could worry (as Sider does in a modest way on 65, and at other places throughout) that even if the problems could be solved in the actual world, they would persist in other possible worlds, and hence God would be stuck with an inelegant solution (perhaps even resulting in incoherence, where God’s justice—an essential characteristic of God—is violated in other allegedly possible worlds). As we go along, I will have a bit more to say about how these modal issues might be handled.

⁴JUSTICE is really primarily a principle of fairness, which is meant to constrain the appropriate treatment of individuals given how other individuals are treated.

(STRUCTURE) The performance of individuals with respect to matters relevant for damnation is measured against a metric that is either continuous or composed of discrete notches.⁵

(NON-GAPPINESS) If there is a continuum, then when we place the performance of all actual individuals on it, there will be no large gaps. If there is instead a metric with discrete notches, then there will be no unfilled notches at any point between the positions of the individuals at the most extreme occupied places.⁶

And finally, the argument itself:

- (1) If the criteria for damnation admit of degree, then if STRUCTURE and NON-UNIVERSALITY, there is a place on the continuum or discretely notched metric *S* such that anyone who achieves *S* or worse will go to hell and anyone who achieves better than *S* will not go to hell.
- (2) If there is a place on the continuum or metric *S* such that anyone who achieves *S* or worse will go to hell and anyone who achieves better than *S* will not go to hell, then if DICHOTOMY, anyone who achieves better than *S* will go to heaven.

By DICHOTOMY, NON-UNIVERSALITY, STRUCTURE, (1), and (2):

- (3) If the criteria for damnation admit of degree, then anyone who achieves better than *S* will go to heaven.

⁵Although this assumption is not explicit in Sider's argument, it is clearly there implicitly. He begins by considering cases where the metric is composed of discrete notches (as represented by his toy case about the profanities on 59–60 of Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," and by his nod in the direction of more realistic "notchy" proposals just after). He then moves on to consider cases where the metric is continuous (as with, e.g., degree of belief in a particular proposition being the central criterion, a toy proposal discussed on 60). Since these are the only sorts of cases he considers, and he intends his argument to apply very generally, it seems quite reasonable to interpret him as supposing that every metric would fall in one of the two categories. (I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for spurring me to explain the inclusion of this premise and several others, as well as to justify their formulations.)

⁶One might object here to the language of "large gaps." Sider never uses this wording, instead typically preferring to speak of gaps *simpliciter*. When dealing with continuous metrics, though, the language of large gaps is faithful to Sider's intentions. If we were to take too seriously the idea that there were no gaps *at all*, the first half of this premise would be blatantly false in the actual world (assuming that the actual world has only finitely many individuals who will receive an eschatological fate). Regardless of how we work out the technical details of what will count as a gap in a continuous metric, there plainly will be *some* gaps. For, if we have only finitely many individuals, it will be impossible to arrange them in such a way that every possible place (between the most extreme occupied places) is occupied, because there will be infinitely many possible places and only finitely many individuals to occupy them (with each individual occupying exactly one place). And the presence of unoccupied places between the most extreme occupied places plainly seems to amount to something that could be intuitively described as a gap. (In correspondence, Sider has made clear that he never intended to claim that, if the metric is in fact continuous, there would be no gaps *at all* in the actual distribution, for just the reasons described above.)

- (4) If anyone who achieves better than *S* will go to heaven, then if BADNESS and NON-GAPPINESS, then some people who are quite similar in relevant respects will have ultimate outcomes that differ markedly: some people's will be much, much better than others'. [The relevant individuals are the ones just on the opposite sides of the cutoff at *S*.]
- (5) If some people who are quite similar in relevant respects will have ultimate outcomes that differ markedly, then if DIVINE CONTROL, then not JUSTICE.

By BADNESS, DIVINE CONTROL, NON-GAPPINESS, and (3)–(5):

- (6) If the criteria for damnation admit of degree, then not JUSTICE.
- (7) If the criteria for damnation do not admit of degree, then they admit of vague cases.⁷
- (8) If the criteria for damnation admit of vague cases, then not JUSTICE. (By a similar pattern of reasoning to what we saw for the degree horn, plus some added material to deal with objections from higher-order vagueness and epistemicism.)

So, from (7) and (8):

- (9) If the criteria for damnation do not admit of degree, then not JUSTICE.

From (6) and (9) we get the negation of JUSTICE, and JUSTICE was one of our initial central assumptions. Hence, the set of assumptions that make up the view of damnation that Sider is considering cannot all be correct.

Dougherty and Poston's Criticism

In their recent paper, Dougherty and Poston attack NON-GAPPINESS in the above reconstruction. They believe that in fact there are significant gaps in how people fare with respect to the relevant factors, or at least that there is good reason to suspect as much. (And these gaps straddle the cutoff for consignment to hell.) The reason is precisely that, if the world were *not* gappy in this way, it would cause the sorts of conflicts with God's justice that Sider points out. But God, being omniscient and omnipotent, can plan things out and ensure that he actualizes a world that has the appropriate gaps, so that the problems Sider envisions will not actually arise.

It is fine to speculate on how God might set up His creation, but one might think that we have ample evidence against Dougherty and Poston's

⁷My formulation of (7) takes its cue from Sider's discussion of faith at the bottom of 60 and top of 61. There, in the context of considering whether the presence of faith can provide his opponent with a useful criterion, he grants that faith does not come in degrees, but then states that it "has borderline cases." (I am treating "borderline" and "vague" here as synonyms.) His overall point, as he goes on to explain in subsequent discussion, is that all criteria (or at least all minimally plausible criteria) that do not admit of degree will have vague cases. The presence of these vague cases will lead to the familiar conflicts with divine justice that form the heart of his case against traditional eschatological views.

conjecture that the world is gappy; if we look around, we seem to see such a subtle continuum of good and bad actions with an even subtler range of motives and mitigating circumstances. Given the huge quantity of people who have lived, are living, and presumably will live in the future, all of them performing mixtures of actions differing in these subtle ways, it might seem hard to reconcile these observations with the claim that there are genuine gaps. Dougherty and Poston anticipate this worry, though, placing their therapeutic response in the mouth of the Archangel Michael in an amusing parable where the angels plead with God prior to the divine act of creation. "You . . . don't want to actualize a world in which the gaps are discernable to [humans]," Michael propounds, "The last thing you want is for it to be clear to all who's got an advantage on whom. They'll no doubt argue about such things anyway, but as long as it's hard to tell no one will have the upper hand. Not to mention the disasters that could occur from people trying to consign the Hell-bound to their fate prematurely."⁸

Thus, Dougherty and Poston offer what they believe is a principled reason for God to make a gappy world that looks non-gappy to us, moving their proposal out of the realm of evidentially irresponsible speculation.⁹ Their proposal is principled, they think, because they are able to identify a good rationale God would have for hiding the gaps from us. And the proposal allegedly solves Sider's problem because God will choose a cutoff "below the point where people determinately deserve hell," and then send everyone above that cutoff to heaven. None of the blessed "will have anything to complain about, because they'll all get more than they deserve."¹⁰

The Issues with Dougherty and Poston's Gappiness Speculation

While clever and interesting, there are at least two reasons to be suspicious of the overall success of Dougherty and Poston's proposal. The first is a fairly straightforward issue. In order for God to ensure that he actualizes a world that is gappy, it seems that he will need to make use of what is typically called "middle knowledge" as part of his creative decision—roughly, prevolitional knowledge of what creatures would freely do if placed in specified hypothetical situations. Without this knowledge, how will God ensure—at the explanatory moment of his decision about what to create—that the world will have the appropriate gaps?¹¹ If God does not

⁸Dougherty and Poston, "Hell, Vagueness, and Justice," 324.

⁹They also point to a paradigmatic scriptural passage, 1 Samuel 16:7, where God cautions people to beware of judging others by appearances, reassuring us that He "looks at the heart."

¹⁰Dougherty and Poston, "Hell, Vagueness, and Justice," 324.

¹¹Middle knowledge alone, of course, will not be enough to ensure that God can establish the kind of gappiness that Dougherty and Poston propose. According to standard versions of Molinism, when God makes His creative decisions, He is constrained by which creaturely world-type happens to be true. (i.e., which set of conditionals about the free choices of all possible free creatures in all possible hypothetical circumstances where such choices arise—typically called "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom"—happens to be

have middle knowledge and humans do have libertarian free will (as is typically assumed in these debates, and which many of Dougherty and Poston's examples seem to suggest), how can God be confident (let alone certain) that humans will cooperate and preserve the requisite gaps? There are many, many human beings, after all, and there appears to be only a fixed range on the continuum or notched metric for them to occupy. Perhaps God could create the gaps by a strategic miraculous intervention here or there if things started to go awry, but it's not clear how this kind of story would go, even in outline.¹²

So, it seems likely that God will need to employ middle knowledge if Dougherty and Poston's proposal is correct. But Molinism—the thesis that God has middle knowledge and employs it in his creative decision-making—is a notoriously controversial view, even among Christians.¹³ It would be nice to have a solution to Sider's problem that did not rely on such a contentious metaphysical commitment. Plus, if God employs middle knowledge to ensure that he actualizes a gappy world of the sort envisioned by Dougherty and Poston, it appears that God may be planning for certain people to wind up consigned to hell, creating them and placing them in specific circumstances to ensure that it happens. While this may not be a crushing blow to their proposal (and may in fact be a required aspect of any version of Molinism that embraces all or most of the characteristics of Sider's traditional view of eschatology), it nevertheless represents a theoretical liability, and is worth noting.¹⁴

The other issue for Dougherty and Poston is perhaps more worrisome—that although their proposal might work against Sider's argument

true.) As a matter of contingent fact, it could be the case that the true creaturely world-type does not allow God to actualize a gappy world (at least if God wishes to actualize a world with other desirable characteristics). Hence, if Dougherty and Poston wish to make use of middle knowledge (as it seems they must), they are all but forced to the claim that God was lucky enough that the true creaturely world-type cooperated with His desire to create a gappy world. (I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the need to make this qualification explicit.)

¹²Dougherty and Poston's implicit reliance on middle knowledge is probably the reason why they are unbothered by Sider's worries about the inelegance of God employing criteria that produce gappiness in the actual world but not in other allegedly possible worlds. (See Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," 65.) Sider most likely thinks it is inelegant for God to take risks that could result in an unpalatable situation. Dougherty and Poston, on the other hand, do not conceive of God as taking any risks. (Though this still does leave the issue looming of whether alleviation of the problem in the actual world is enough to rescue God from the heart of the worry. It is clear that Dougherty and Poston intend to address the problem of God's justice in other possible worlds by moving to the general claim that non-gappiness is metaphysically impossible—see Dougherty and Poston, "Hell, Vagueness, and Justice," 327. I will set aside the issue of whether their suggestion is coherent and, if so, solves the modal problem, mostly because it is irrelevant to the evaluation of my central criticisms of their arguments, criticisms which have to do only with their handling of the actual case. When I sketch a positive view later on, I will handle the modal problem in a different way.)

¹³For a classic argument against Molinism, see Robert M. Adams's "An Anti-Molinist Argument," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 343–353. For a thorough defense, see Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁴I am grateful once again to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this issue.

as stated, it would not be difficult for Sider to make plausible amendments that would be immune to their criticism. Dougherty and Poston aim to respect the proportionality of God's justice by claiming that people who are very similar morally do not receive very different ultimate outcomes.¹⁵ They do so basically by speculating that all people who are very similar morally receive *exactly* the same outcomes; the gaps they posit ensure that there is a significant moral difference between the heaven and hell-bound.

While this might satisfy the letter of Sider's justice requirement on God (the prohibition on "*very* unequal treatment of persons who are *very* similar in relevant respects"),¹⁶ is it really in keeping with the spirit of that requirement? Although Sider is cautious in formulating his claims about the relative attractiveness of heaven and hell (claiming only that heaven is much, much better than hell), he could easily strengthen this claim without losing plausibility in a typical Christian context.¹⁷ According to standard forms of Christianity, heaven is not merely much, much better than hell; it is infinitely better! But it seems that if justice prohibits the very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in the relevant respects, it will also prohibit very different (and certainly infinitely different) treatment of persons who are only *somewhat* different in the relevant respects. And it seems that, at best, the gaps Dougherty and Poston posit will secure moderate differences in the relevant respects; the people on opposite sides of the crucial gap will be only somewhat morally different. (To use one of Dougherty and Poston's examples, if one person culpably believes a false and dangerous proposition to a greater degree than another—.8 rather than .6, say—this makes the two only somewhat different in the relevant respect.)¹⁸ If heaven is infinitely better than hell, then it seems that God will still be violating the proportionality of justice

¹⁵Here I use the term 'morally' as a blanket term for covering whatever is eschatologically relevant, as Dougherty and Poston often do. This is just for convenience's sake; it could be that the relevant property is not intimately connected with morality or moral worth. (Response to grace might not be, for instance.) The proportionality requirement (i.e., JUSTICE or a strengthened variant of JUSTICE) is itself only a formal requirement, of course, and does not take a stand on what the relevant property is; the requirement is even compatible with the property being something like "being chosen by God as the recipient of an automatic gift, completely irrespective of one's actions." (See, for example, an analogous proposal about the distribution of goods in Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* [New York: Basic Books, 1977].) All parties in the debate, though, at least implicitly assume that whatever is relevant would have something to do with the actions or character of the individuals whose fate is in question, and I will follow them in this assumption. After all, if we allowed something like "being slated to receive a gift, irrespective of action" as a relevant property, Sider's argument would lose its interest anyway, because God could simply create salient differences between persons by fiat. (I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising the need for this clarification about the proportionality requirement, and for pointing me toward the Nozick example.)

¹⁶Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," 59.

¹⁷The same goes for strengthening the claim in the context of other religious traditions as well. Standard Islamic pictures of eschatology would be similarly accommodating, for instance.

¹⁸I am assuming, of course, that the added strength of the one's belief is due to a bit of added culpability on his part.

(i.e., the general intuition undergirding JUSTICE or some strengthened version of JUSTICE) if he sends people on the opposite sides of the gap to different ultimate eschatological fates.¹⁹

While there may be ways for Dougherty and Poston to escape from problems raised by this and the previous issue—perhaps by engaging in systematic defenses of controversial metaphysical theses (like Molinism) or ethical ones (like rejecting a generalized proportionality principle)—the trouble spots should, at the very least, motivate us to search for alternative solutions to Sider's challenge. In the next and final section, I present such an alternative proposal and offer a limited defense of it.

The Usefulness of the Concept of "Mortal Sin"

The concept of "mortal sin" is an ancient one in Christianity, particularly prevalent in its Western branches.²⁰ According to standard Catholic views on the subject, all and only individuals who die in the state of mortal sin (i.e., having committed a mortal sin unforgiven by God) are bound for hell.²¹ So how can such a view be put to use in solving Sider's problem?

Imagine we introduce a metric with discrete notches (of the sort discussed above) corresponding to the number of unforgiven mortal sins on the record of an individual at death. We will thus wind up with a metric with a notch at 0 on one extreme and a notch at some arbitrarily large natural number n at the opposite extreme.²² Suppose now that God draws his cutoff S at notch 1: anyone with one or more unforgiven mortal sins goes to hell, and everyone with zero unforgiven mortal sins goes to heaven. And suppose—so as not to beg the question against Sider—that every notch is occupied by an actual person (thus ensuring the truth of NON-GAPPINESS).

Now the crucial question arises: how does this proposal help? Consider Manny, Moe, and Jack; Manny dies with no unforgiven mortal sins, Moe

¹⁹Dougherty and Poston might respond by pointing out that, since their proposed cutoff for hell is below the point where "individuals determinately deserve hell" (324), no one is being treated unjustly because no one is receiving less than she deserves. But of course the proportionality requirement, as formulated, leaves no room for exceptions associated with unmerited gifts of better-than-deserved treatment. Incidentally, in an endnote early in their paper, Dougherty and Poston do insinuate that there may be problems with the proportionality requirement. But they never develop these worries, perhaps because they see them as unrelated to their main response strategy.

²⁰It also arguably has scriptural roots. Take, for instance, 1 John 5: 16–17: "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death." (From the New International Version).

²¹See, e.g., *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1035: "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," and also 1037: "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary." I will leave it to church historians to settle the issue of just how influential in tradition this now popular view has been.

²²This is a more realistic analogue of Sider's toy case where the metric measures the number of profanities uttered in a lifetime. See Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," 59–60.

with one, and Jack with 127. According to this view, Manny alone will go to heaven, while Moe and Jack both go to hell.²³ But if anything, this seems like a more egregious violation of justice than before; Manny and Moe differ by only a single unforgiven mortal sin, while Moe and Jack differ by 126!

The trouble here is that we are tempted to think of moral similarity too much in *additive* terms. We are measuring the moral difference between any two individuals by subtracting the notch number of the one from the notch number of the other. If we instead think of moral similarity in *multiplicative* terms (by considering the ratio of the notch number of the one to the notch number of the other), things change drastically. Moe is in an infinitely worse state than Manny (having one unforgiven mortal sin to Manny's zero), while Moe and Jack differ by only finite degree.²⁴ Looking at it in this way, it does not seem unjust to give the same infinite punishment to two individuals differing only finitely in the relevant respect, nor to give an infinitely beneficial outcome to an individual with an infinitely better record. But once we go down this path, we are in position to deny (4) in the reconstruction of Sider's argument above: "If anyone who achieves better than *S* will go to heaven, then if BADNESS and NON-GAPPINESS, some people who are quite similar in relevant respects will have ultimate outcomes that differ markedly: some people's will be much, much better than others."²⁵ Similarity in the relevant respects will be measured

²³It is, of course, not guaranteed that Manny will go directly to heaven—he may need to undergo a transformative sanctification process (perhaps in purgatory). But, as Sider makes clear, the view that some people go to purgatory is not a violation of DICHOTOMY, provided that all individuals in purgatory eventually wind up in heaven—a claim most people who believe in purgatory endorse. (I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the need for this clarification.)

²⁴When I talk of "multiplication," "ratios," and "infinite differences" here, I am of course speaking loosely. In literal mathematical terms, 1 is not infinitely greater than 0 (i.e., there is no infinite number that we can multiply 0 by to get 1—nor, for that matter, is there a finite one—and no principled way we can craft definitions in a normal mathematical framework to secure the conclusion that 1 is infinitely many times greater than 0). My language is just meant to metaphorically gesture at the intuitive principle that, for some morally unattractive quality that can be measured in discrete units, if some arbitrary person *X* possesses 1 unit of that quality and some other arbitrary person *Y* possesses 0 units of it, it would not surprise us if the just treatment of *X* were monumentally different from the just treatment of *Y*. And this would seem to be unique to the 1/0 case, because other finite additive differences (e.g., the difference between 2 and 3, or between 5 and 1,278) represent mere differences of degree in the moral standing of the individuals involved, not of kind. (I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.)

²⁵We are also in a position to address the worry that the problem still creeps up in other possible worlds. Nowhere does Sider claim that his opponent is required to hold that all of the claims in the traditional view of eschatology he criticizes are necessary truths, nor is it plausible to hold that they all are. Consider NON-UNIVERSALITY, for instance. A thesis like this might easily be false in other PWs (some Christians even think it's false in the actual world!)—in worlds where no one dies in the state of mortal sin, it could be that everyone ultimately goes to heaven. While issues of the trans-world comparison of individuals might linger, it is far from obvious that these can form the basis of a compelling Sider-style argument. (Although they prefer a different route for dealing with these modal problems, Dougherty and Poston could even make use of a similar proposal—they could claim that, in worlds where gappiness is absent, something like NON-UNIVERSALITY is false.)

multiplicatively, and no one who is similar to anyone else (i.e., differing by only a finite degree) will receive a different outcome.²⁶

A straightforward but important issue comes up at this point. Why should we prefer the ratio outlook here? I'm afraid I cannot give a demonstrative argument, but the multiplicative approach offends no well-considered intuitions and does justice to others (while at the same time offering us the prospects of successfully answering Sider's worry). Manny and Moe's records, after all, differ not just in the quantity of offenses but in kind. Moe has a kind of offense on his record which is unlike anything that Manny has on his. The same cannot be said for Moe and Jack; their records differ only in the quantity of relevant offenses, and only in finite degree.

There are questions that must be answered for this approach to succeed, of course. A first issue that must be tackled is what makes for a mortal sin: what distinguishes a mortal sin from other sins, typically called "venial sins"? While there are certainly rough guidelines that have already been proposed (having to do with the gravity of the issues involved and the unmitigatedly evil nature of the willing), these could certainly be spelled out in more detail and perhaps revised or sharpened.

One issue that clearly must be confronted head-on is the danger of reintroducing Sider's worries in another spot. Although the proposal I articulated above does answer Sider's challenge to the criteria being a matter of degree, Sider could reintroduce his objection at a second level; he could claim that what notch one occupies is itself vague. The notch occupied could be vague for two different reasons—either because divine forgiveness of mortal sins or the mortal sins themselves admit of vagueness.²⁷ (If divine forgiveness of mortal sins admits of vagueness, it is presumably because God would only forgive a mortal sin if the sinner were in an appropriate state of repentance, and whether the sinner is in that state could be a vague matter.)

Explaining how vagueness does not illicitly creep in and ruin my proposal when these sorts of situations arise is a complicated task requiring systematic discussion; I cannot hope to undertake it in a short paper. A

²⁶Note that this proposal will also apply to any amendments to Sider's proportionality requirement of the sort discussed above (in the direction of generalization), unlike the proposal of Dougherty and Poston. Incidentally, Sider considers an approach which is vaguely related to my suggestion here. He seems to insinuate that God could avoid violating JUSTICE by admitting only the "perfectly good" into heaven (see *ibid.*, 64), but he goes on to say that he assumes that "as a matter of contingent fact, no one is . . . wholly good." Since believers in mortal sin typically hold that there are individuals who die in the state of having no unforgiven mortal sins, though, it is clear that this state is importantly different from Sider's state of being "perfectly" or "wholly" good, presuming Sider's assumption about the lack of perfectly good people is correct.

²⁷It is noteworthy, though, that Sider's obscenity case is structurally like the proposal I have made, so if nothing else my proposal shows that Sider should probably press worries about vagueness, because there are serious problems with worries merely about criteria that admit of discrete, determinate values arranged along a metric—like the toy example where one's eternal fate depends on the number of obscenities uttered. He does not acknowledge this.

couple of brief suggestions, though: first, a major potential contributor to vagueness of mortal sin is the severity of the harm the sinner intends (or actually inflicts, on some views). As soon as one begins to introduce this sort of gradation into one's account, objectionable vagueness is almost certain to emerge, since gravity of situation and severity of harm intended admit of immeasurably subtle variety. Thus, contrary to many traditional accounts that have made severity of intended harm or importance (gravity) of the matter involved significant factors in drawing the distinction between mortal and venial sins, an account that aspires to answer Sider must eschew these kinds of criteria. Instead, it will need to make sense of mortal sin solely in terms of malicious intent, where the measure of this malicious intent does not appeal to the severity of intended harm or gravity of the situation. Fortunately, there are potentially acceptable ways of making sense of malicious intent, such as appealing only to the kinds of motives that served as the agent's reason for the action, and these ways show some promise.²⁸ Second, in dealing with the matter of God's forgiveness of mortal sins (and the associated issue of the state of repentance of the sinner), there is a crucial disanalogy which might be of use—whereas whether a mortal sin has occurred is presumably a matter fixed at the moment the action occurs, a sinner might have an opportunity to repent for a long time thereafter. If so, then it could be that God solicits from the sinner (perhaps at the moment of death) some resolution or clarification of her will to repent, should the individual be tottering on the edge and her state in need of precisification.²⁹

²⁸One possibility: our account of mortal sin could claim that an act of wrongdoing is a mortal sin if and only if the motives are purely desires (perhaps bad desires), and there is no respect whatsoever for any normative beliefs. This would allow even slight differences in motivation (between lacking all respect for normative beliefs and having a tiny little bit of respect for them) to be treated as morally significant by God in a principled way. Attempting to make this proposal thorough and systematic raises complicated issues that unfortunately I cannot tackle here, however. For instance, if we insist that mortal sin is a matter of *bad* desires serving as our only motives, we face the psychologically realistic possibility that all of our actions have someone's happiness as at least a partial motive, and this doesn't seem to qualify as a bad desire. Or, if we jettison the insistence that bad desire be the motive and claim that having desires *simpliciter* as our sole motives is all that is required for mortal sin, we face the possibility that some incredibly evil individuals will always manage to make some normative belief or other a partial motive of their actions. Imagine a professional "hit man," for example, who always manages to be conscientious enough to respect his moral belief that needless suffering be prevented, and so always shoots his victims right between the eyes rather than strangling them! Do we really want to say that such an individual has avoided mortal sin for this reason? I conjecture that a solution to these problems may lie in a deeper understanding of the way in which the presence of some potential motives strengthens or weakens the attractiveness of others in human decision-making (as well as a greater appreciation for how self-deception works). A full account here will require comprehensive theorizing about action, though, of a sort that has seldom been undertaken in either historical or contemporary philosophical discussion. (Thanks to Tom Flint both for encouraging me to discuss these issues and for providing the examples.)

²⁹It will also be important that venial sins not themselves differ only in degree from mortal sins, in such a way that some finite number of venial sins could be as bad as a mortal sin or together make something equivalent to a mortal sin. The Catholic Catechism comes dangerously close to affirming such a problematic view when it states (in paragraph 1863)

These are not the only matters that must be addressed, of course. As part of an overall account, it would be important to address what it is about a mortal sin that makes it appropriate for a mortal sinner to receive hell as punishment.³⁰ Presumably the answer will have to do with the malicious character of the intentions formed, but obviously there are questions to pursue here.

I don't intend to convey the impression that I have offered a decisive refutation of Sider's argument and answered all possible objections. Now is not the time to undertake a full explication of the notion of "mortal sin" nor a systematic defense of the claim that there are mortal sins and that they can do the work envisioned; these are matters for a much more comprehensive project. For now, I must rest content in having shown that there is motivation to pursue fresh options in answering Sider (considering the issues that plague proposals like Dougherty and Poston's), and also that there is reason to be optimistic about the role that the concept of "mortal sin" can play in crafting a new response.³¹

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that "[d]eliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin." And of course, something must also be said about the justice of the fate of those who, through moral luck, never have the opportunity to sin mortally, or who at least seem to have fewer opportunities than other people.

³⁰Such an account will have to address other kinds of challenges to traditional eschatological accounts, such as the one in Stephen Kershner, "The Injustice of Hell," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 103–123.

³¹I am very grateful to Jamie Hebbeler, Audre Brokes, Tom Flint, Ted Poston, and two anonymous reviewers from *Faith and Philosophy* for reading an earlier draft of this paper and making numerous helpful suggestions.