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TONER ON JUDGMENT AND ETERNALISM

Alexander R. Pruss

Patrick Toner has argued that eternalism, the doctrine that all times are ontologically on par, conflicts with the Catholic view of judgment as based on the state of the soul at death. For, he holds, it is arbitrary that judgment should be based on what happened at some particular time, unless, as presentism holds, that time is the only that really exists. I shall argue that his argument fails because the eternalist can say that judgment is simultaneous with the state of soul that is being judged, and there is nothing arbitrary about judging something at t on the basis of its state at the same time t .

1. Introduction

In a provocative recent paper,¹ Patrick Toner has argued that eternalism, the doctrine that all times are ontologically on par, conflicts with the doctrine of judgment as understood by Catholics, whereas presentism, the doctrine that only present things and events are real, leads to no such difficulty. In his argument, Toner distinguishes perdurantism on which substances like human persons have temporal parts and are four-dimensional worms, from endurantism on which a substance is fully present at whatever time it exists in.² Toner's argument is initially formulated against perdurantist eternalism, and then proceeds to be an argument against endurantist eternalism. I shall in the end argue that the argument fails because Toner fails to consider a plausible account of judgment, the simultaneous punishment account, an account that his own argument appears to commit him to. But I shall first consider another objection.

2. The State of Soul Assumption

Toner assumes that God judges people not for what they have done, but for their state of soul at the time of judgment. Call this the "state of soul assumption." The doctrinal basis for this assumption seems to be that, in Catholic doctrine, one is damned if and only if one dies in a state of mortal sin. However, the state of soul assumption does not follow from the claim that judgment is based on whether one dies in mortal sin. For here is a model compatible with the claim that God judges us based on whether we die in mortal sin but not compatible with the "state of soul assumption": God judges people for what they have done and not been forgiven for, and damns a person to hell if and only if there is a mortal sin among the unforgiven sins.



Now, someone is in a state of mortal sin if and only if she has culpably done a mortal sin and not been forgiven for it. This might be taken as an analysis of what it *is* to be in a state of mortal sin, in which case it turns out that the being in a state of mortal sin is not a state of soul, but a historical property, and the argument for the state of soul assumption is blocked. Alternately, one might simply say that in God's plan of salvation, there is a perfect correlation between having one's soul in a state of mortal sin and having culpably done an unforgiven mortal sin. If this is true, then a person goes to hell if and only if she dies in a particular state of soul, but she does not go to hell *because* of that state of soul. Instead, she goes to hell because of the correlate of that state of soul, namely the historical fact of having culpably done an unforgiven mortal sin. On such accounts, God judges people on the basis of historical facts, and the argument for the state of soul assumption is blocked. Moreover, if this is correct, then presentism becomes less plausible than eternalism, because if presentism holds, then on this view God judges people for *non-existent* (because past) sins.

3. Simultaneous Punishment

Toner rejects such historical views of the basis of judgment in favor of the state of soul assumption. Nonetheless, even so his argument fails. To see that it does, consider the following account of divine punishment. After a person dies, God punishes a person at t because the person at t has a soul in a state of mortal sin. I will call this the "simultaneous punishment" account, in that the punishment is simultaneous with that for which the person is being punished.

Now Toner's main argument against eternalism is that "the fact that God just picks one moment of [the judged person's] life as his standard of judgment seems disturbingly arbitrary" (p. 321). There were infinitely many other moments to pick from, and the person may well have done things of a radically different sort at them.

But on the simultaneous punishment account, arbitrariness disappears. For there is nothing arbitrary about punishing someone at t for her state at t . In fact, this is exactly what we would expect if perdurantism were to hold: each temporal stage is punished precisely for that temporal stage's moral shortfall. But even if endurantism holds, there is no objectionable arbitrariness. The fact that all persons are ontologically on par does not prohibit me from treating a person differently on account of her relation to me, say because she is my wife, as long as that relation is a morally relevant one. The relation between the person treated and the person treating is clearly important for many ethical questions. Likewise, that all times are ontologically on par does not prohibit one from differentially treating events at different times depending on the relation that these times have to the time of treatment, as long as that relation is morally significant. And identity *does* seem to be morally significant—it makes sense to treat at t events at a time t_1 differently when in fact t_1 is identical with t . There need be nothing objectionably arbitrary about complaining at t about the pain one has at t even though one does not in the same way complain at t about pains at other times, just as there need be nothing objectionably *arbitrary* about x 's complaining about the pain that x has in a way different from x 's

complaint about the pains of other persons (there may be other reasons to criticize someone who does not care about the pains of others on par with her own).

I do not know whether the simultaneous punishment account is correct. But I think Toner is committed to it. For it would clearly be problematic on Toner's grounds for a person at t_1 to be punished for the state of soul she had at an earlier time t_0 . After all, given presentism, the past is unreal, and punishing someone for unreal states of soul is surely unjust. Moreover, the same arbitrariness objection that is raised by Toner against the eternalist could be raised here against the presentist if the simultaneous punishment thesis were denied.

On the simultaneous punishment account, then, there is nothing arbitrary for a person at a given time to be punished for her state of soul at the same time. This is particularly clear given perdurantism, but is also a defensible claim given endurantism. If this is correct, then Toner's argument fails because there is a model that makes Catholic eschatology cohere with eternalism, and it is a model that he himself seems to be committed to.

4. Judgment

However, one may object that Toner is talking of a doctrine of *judgment*, not of punishment. And judgment is once and for all. Judgment happens at some specific time t_0 , and the punishment is done later, not on account of the state of soul at that later time, but on account of the judgment's having been passed. Now, while it would not be arbitrary to punish someone at t_0 for her state at t_0 , it might be argued that given eternalism it is arbitrary to *sentence* someone at t_0 for her whole future based merely on her state at t_0 .

Several responses are possible. The first is to say that in fact judgment by God can be taken as simultaneous with punishment. It is also Catholic teaching, for instance, that the souls of the damned are punished right after death and even before the universal "Last Judgment," in virtue of their "particular judgment." There would be nothing absurd about supposing this particular judgment to be simultaneous with the punishment, and to continue while the punishment continues, i.e., forever. The Last Judgment, then, is the time of a public judgment, where the things hidden are made manifest, and where all receive their bodies, ultimately for a life of beatitude or a life of suffering. The Last Judgment is then a *public* judgment made in virtue of the state of soul at that time, but the proximate cause of the person's punishment at any given time *after* the Last Judgment might be seen as a judgment simultaneous with the punishment.

Furthermore, the simultaneous punishment account allowed one to say that *what* one is punished at t for is one's state of soul at t , a view to which a presentist should be attracted, or maybe even one to which a presentist is committed. But one can only be punished for something when one has been judged for it (this is a conceptual truth about "punishment"), and since it seems inappropriate to judge people for their future states, it follows that there must be judgment simultaneous with the on-going punishment. Hence the simultaneous punishment account implies a simultaneous judgment account.

Finally one might note that even if we reject the simultaneous judgment account, the eternalist is not in any worse shape than the presentist. It may seem unfair to sentence at t someone to hell for her entire future in virtue of her state at t . But the apparent unfairness of this seems little different from the apparent unfairness of someone now and for the rest of her future being in hell in virtue of her *having been* judged once based on what she was like *then*. The presentist and the perdurantist eternalist have the worst of it here. Given presentism, someone suffers for a state that is not really her state and due to a non-existent past judgment, while the perdurantist eternalist has one temporal slice suffer for the misdeeds of another, misdeeds of which that other was judged guilty. The endurantist eternalist is a bit better off here, in that she holds that the person suffers for *her own* real misdeeds, but has to explain why it was appropriate for an eternal judgment to be made based on a state at a particular time.

I should note that the simultaneous judgment account is quite compatible with a view on which further repentance is not possible after one dies, say because God allows one to make one's soul to "snap" into a permanent shape.

5. *Chronos Ouketi Estai*

Let me end by considering one objection. I have assumed that the suffering of hell and the joy of heaven are temporal states. Toner's talking of judgment being based on "the last temporal part" (p. 319) suggests that he may believe that being in hell or heaven are timeless states, so that we somehow get taken up into God's timelessness. I am aware that a number of Christians believe this, perhaps on the basis of Rev. 10:6 which ends: "*chronos ouketi estai*" ("there will be no more *chronos*"). However, the Revised Standard Version translates this as "there should be no more delay," and the New International Version, New American Bible and New Revised Standard Version all concur in translating *chronos* as "delay."

Translating *chronos* as either "delay" or "time" can be made to fit with the context: the "delay" reading implies the hastening of events at the time of the seventh trumpet call (Rev. 10:7), while the assertion of atemporality would fit with verse 7's talk of the "mystery of God" (*mysterion tou theou*), though actually I suspect that the "mystery" is not of the Godhead but of what God has done for us, hence the reference to the prophets in that verse. However, the "delay" reading avoids the apparent self-contradiction of saying that "there *will* be no more time," which would seem to imply a *temporal* relation between a state outside time and a state in time. And would we really want to say of ourselves once we are in the afterlife that *now* we are timeless but we *were* in time? The problem is intuitively exacerbated for the presentist.

Perhaps, though, the timelessness of the afterlife would consist in the last moment of existence being somehow "frozen" into eternity. But it is not clear what sense could be made of such "freezing" without committing oneself to some version of the "river of time" subject to the classic criticisms of Donald Williams.³

Furthermore, a view of the afterlife as essentially timeless seems to make the idea of the resurrection of the *body* largely pointless, since all the

functions of a body as such seem to be temporal in nature. Moreover, even a reading of Rev. 10:6 as saying that “time will be no more” can be understood non-literally (and who doubts that the Book of Revelation should be understood non-literally at least in part?), as meaning that salvation history will be completed, with the succession of significant cataclysmic events—creation, flood, choice of Abraham, exodus, exile, return, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, sending of the Holy Spirit, and Last Judgment—coming to a close.

That said, even if one sees heaven and hell as timeless states, my arguments seem to work. Judgment and punishment or reward can likewise be timeless states, “co-eternal” with the state of soul on whose basis they are made. It may be a problem if one thinks that judgment is in time, and “then” comes the timeless punishment or reward, but it is not at all clear that this is a bigger problem for the eternalist than for the presentist. For in the timeless state of being punished, the person is then punished for the state she “had” in time. It does not seem that the presentist can allow that last temporal state to continue to be real from the point of view of a person “now” outside of time (the quotation marks I am occasionally using underscore the metaphysical difficulties of this view). After all, according to the presentist, the only time that exists is the present. The person is not in time, and hence it seems that no time is *present* to her, and hence no time exists to her.⁴

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NOTES

1. “Divine Judgment and the Nature of Time,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), pp. 316–27.

2. There is a third view possible, which is that we are four-dimensional worms, but we do not have temporal parts—not every way of slicing a substance is a part, after all. It seems to me, however, that this view does not add anything interesting to the discussion.

3. “The Myth of Passage,” *Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1951), pp. 457–72.

4. This paper was written while the author was at Georgetown University.