



W. But are now enveloped in skepticism. Who wants to believe we might actually have to spend eternity somewhere? Odd and overly extreme, I think.

M. The idea of eternity does seem somewhat excessive. But as for skepticism, not much new there. There has always been skepticism. Matthew Arnold was eloquent on the subject in the mid-19th century. Remember his famous poem *Dover Beach*?

“The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar....”

So, yes, of course, we live in a cynical and spiritually vacuous age. In more pious, less egoistic, times, heaven and hell were considered serious matters. They continue to be for some. But for individuals who regard themselves as urbane and sophisticated, heaven and hell are reduced to jokes about St. Peter.

W. A pity, actually. People used to think that if they lived a virtuous life, if they behaved themselves, they would be rewarded, their soul would wind up in the proper place. They refused to concede that they had landed on this earth for no reason, that life was without purpose.

M. No surprise, then, that there is unease. There is something else as well. People are reluctant to believe that all their worldly experiences will just evaporate: their achievements, the insights and wisdom they have accumulated, the loves, the concerns, the memories. The many things that can fairly - and I hope without irony - be said to compose their humanity. They want these to survive, to keep them.

W. Just like when they are moving to another house. They want to cart along a lot of the stuff in the cupboard: old letters, faded photographs, favorite symphonies.

M. The elites of ancient cultures desired the same thing. Their favorite treasures were entombed with them so that they could be carried along to the next world. Who can possibly forget Howard Carter’s words on first peering into Tutankhamon’s tomb. “Can you see anything?” his colleague (Lord Carnarvon) asked. “Yes, wonderful things!” came the famous reply. Those wonderful things are now safeguarded in museums.

W. Tut, assuming that he made it to another world, is likely quite irritated that his treasures were diverted. Of course all those wonderful things may actually accompany him, but only as shadowy Platonic forms.

M.. Conversely, all those treasures locked in museum showcases could actually be Platonic shadows while Tut holds the real stuff in his arms. Or both his treasures and those in museums are only illusions.

W. Or both are tangible. The latter view seems the more realistic. But here's the down side: by simply looking around, by knocking on wood or kicking a rock, people are alerted to the fact that there actually is something rather than nothing. The prospect that this knowledge will soon come to an end can bring forth despondency or anguish.

M. That is true even for the many who have never read the metaphysical writings of Gottfried Leibniz or Martin Heidegger. It's not easy to slide from something to nothing, from somewhere to nowhere, from known to unknown. So there is good reason to view spiritual continuity with nostalgia. It had a beneficial core.

W. Voltaire said that "If there were no God, it would have been necessary to invent Him". Can't the same be said for heaven and hell? They are needed, if they didn't exist, they would have had to be invented.

M. Not a bad analogy. In any event, heaven and hell haven't withered away entirely. They remain a vivid part of our literary and theological traditions. We can't easily erase them from our collective consciousness.

W. Particularly that of hell. Its nightmarish landscape is a consequential aspect of the history of Western art. Think of the medieval paintings, the hallucinatory renditions by Breugel or Bosch: monstrous animals with beaks, scales and teeth; fish with legs and wings, birds with grotesquely distorted human faces. And, of course, demons whipping the unfortunate transgressors into the flames.

M. Hell was always viewed as ghoulish, at least until some iconoclastic thinkers came along in the 20th century. But the qualities attributed to both heaven or hell naturally altered with different eras and interpreters.

W. But they go back a very long way.

M. Over 4000 years. The Mesopotamian civilizations of around 2000 B.C. already recorded a Kingdom of the Dead with such by now familiar features as a river, a boatman, gates and guardians. The Zoroastrians of that period were the first to distinguish clearly between good and evil. They believed in an Evil Spirit, a devil who ruled an underworld.

The Greek gods were characteristically more temperamental and erratic. But they, too, had an underworld, presided over by the god Hades and guarded by a terrifying hound. Several rivers flowed there, notably the river Styx. To get across you had to tip the ferryman.

W. What about the Bible?

M. Heaven doesn't make it into the Old Testament. Hell pops up occasionally, in both the Old and New Testaments, but not in any detail, except in the Book of

Revelation which refers to “a fiery lake of burning sulfur”. Actually, St. Augustine uses almost identical language in *The City of God*, which he wrote in the early 5th century. “Hell”, he said, “is also called a lake of fire and brimstone ...[which] will torment the bodies of the damned”. Augustine also stressed that man was free to

choose his own destiny. “God's precepts”, he wrote, “would be of no use to a man unless he had free choice of will, so that by performing them he might obtain the promised rewards.”

W. So things were already heating up in the 5th century, which is interesting, because Dante didn't arrive until the 13th.

M. Dante Alighieri is the one everyone knows about. Mention hell and people still think of Dante, which is remarkable since he wrote *The Divine Comedy* 700 years ago. He melded the classical Greek underworld, including rivers like the Styx and a boatman, with Christian moral dogma, and did it all in beautiful poetry. Dante is guided through hell by the Roman poet Virgil, prompted to do so by Beatrice. As a writer, Dante's most significant achievement was structural and architectural. His hell moves downward in nine concentric layers toward the center of the earth where Satan abides, a remarkable feat of engineering.

W. Each layer represents punishment for a different type of wickedness. The sins get worse as you descend but the punishments vary. Each punishment represents poetic justice for the sin committed. There is surprisingly little fire in Dante's hell. Not all miscreants are roasting in flames. Traitors are frozen in a lake of ice. Profligates are perpetually mauled and chased by ferocious dogs.

M. The third circle makes me nervous. That is for gluttons. I have always enjoyed eating well and overindulged on more than one occasion. *Peccavi*. [pe - kah - vi]

W. What does that mean?

M. Latin. I have sinned.

W. Those who have sinned by gluttony are forced to lie in a vile, smelly garbage heap where they are pelted with icy rain.

M. An abhorrent fate, certainly. However, Dante's design seems overly elaborate and ornate. There are too many layers, too many sins, too great a variety of punishments. Yet Dante had an astonishing influence, not just on subsequent Western literature but, more broadly, on Western humanism itself. For Dante, punishments represent divine revenge; they are the fulfillment of a destiny chosen during life. When God gave human beings free will He gave them choices with eternal consequences.

Anthony Esolen, the translator of the 2001 edition of *The Inferno* put it this

way: "The use of one man's free will, at one moment, can mean life or death ... salvation or damnation." This is a matter worth stressing. Free will and its consequences, as Dante conceived them, have had a copious intellectual after life, one not yet extinguished.

W. Dante's emphasis on free will affected John Milton, for example.

M. Milton came along 400 years later, but held equally emphatic ideas about self determination. Milton's Satan is a beautiful angel who winds up in hell after leading a misguided rebellion against God. He rationalizes his fall by saying that it is "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven".

W. Milton has been ridiculed because, among other things, his Satan is expelled from heaven with cannons and gunpowder.

M. Correct. *Paradise Lost* has fantasies and oddities that may seem ludicrous to contemporary readers. But Milton's poetry remains astonishingly beautiful. It is arguably unrivaled as English verse. Samuel Johnson called *Paradise Lost* "a poem which ... with respect to design, may claim first place ... among the productions of the human mind." As to hell, *Paradise Lost* describes it as "A Dungeon horrible" [with] "Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace And rest can never dwell, hope never comes that comes to all; but torture without end."

W. The phrase "regions of sorrow" brings to mind another poem, written earlier and farther to the East by the first Mughal emperor, Zahir Babur. (He lived from 1483 to 1530). It has a line that, though simpler and softer, is equally disquieting. He wrote that the "troops of sadness are countless". He depicted whole armies - entire corps, regiments, brigades and platoons - of grieving and weeping men. "The only way to deal with them", Babur suggests, "is bringing thicker wine and keeping a cup as a shield". The way to keep the countless troops of sadness from storming heaven, it seems, is with thicker wine and a cup as a shield.

M. Heaven in literature is usually more of a metaphor than a delineable place. Even so, there exist some poignant "intimations of immortality", to borrow Wordsworth's phrase. I recall, for example, a line in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. The story concerns K's effort to reach an obstructed, seemingly unattainable goal, namely the castle. The castle is usually regarded as an allegorical reference to heaven. K never reaches it, except on one occasion by phone. "The receiver" Kafka writes, "gave out a buzz that was like the hum of countless children's voices; but yet not a hum, the echo, rather, of a thousand voices singing at an infinite distance". The echo of a thousand children's voices!

W. Seductive phrasing, but one-dimensional. We need a visual equivalent. The painters of the high baroque labored at it in the seventeenth century. They contributed the winged putti and angels floating on clouds strumming lyres and

mandolins.

M. A century later, the Swedish scientist Emanuel Swedenborg provided a more graphic description, one based, he insisted, on mystic revelations. God told him that heaven has neither time nor space, though it has a landscape filled with mountains, plains, and rivers. The most intriguing part of his vision was that angels are married.

W I thought angels were androgynous.

M Not in the Bible. All the angels mentioned there are masculine. The idea that angels were asexual came about later.

W Gay?

M Much later. But there is a figure relevant to this narrative who was definitely not gay.

W. Faust? Definitely heterosexual. A major seducer even before he made a bargain with the devil.

M. Faust is certainly relevant. He seduced an innocent girl and made an ill-advised pact with the Devil. It's a celebrated story which a lot of writers and composers have adopted, most famously Goethe, but Christopher Marlow and Thomas Mann as well. Hector Berlioz's oratorio, *The Damnation of Faust*, was based on Goethe's poem. The ending is always the same: the Devil carries Faust off to hell. Actually, though, I wasn't thinking of Faust but of another, parallel figure.

W. Who would that be?

M. Don Juan. An equally legendary character who has also inspired plays, novels and poems. A Spanish playwright called Tirso de Molina wrote *The Seducer of Seville* (*El burlador de Sevilla*) in the 17th century. Mozart added music and called him *Don Giovanni*. Molière wrote a play and Byron an epic poem. In 1844 José Zorrilla came up with *Don Juan Tenorio*, which is still the most regularly performed play in Spain.

There are variations in the story, but the central narrative is always roughly the same. Don Juan's major goal in life is seducing women. He takes great pride in his conquests, one of which is a girl from a noble family called Doña Ana. When her father, known as the Commander, turns up to avenge her, Don Juan kills him. Later, Don Juan comes upon a stone statue of the Commander atop his tomb and flippantly invites him to dinner. He is shocked when the statue nods and is even more aghast when the statue actually shows up. This he interprets as a sign of heaven's wrath and a harbinger of his own death. The endings vary somewhat, but Don Juan is inevitably led off to hell, which is where we shall now catch up with him.

W. What do you mean, catch up with him?

M. We shall see what he is up to in hell and how he likes it there.

W. How?

M. With the assistance of George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman*. I must proudly assert at this point that I saw the third act, which is entitled *Don Juan in Hell*, when it appeared on Broadway in 1956. It made an enormous impression on me, as it did on just about everyone fortunate enough to see it. It was an extraordinary theatrical event. The critic John Mason Brown wrote at the time that "in a season up to now cursed and largely overrun by the efforts of pygmies [Shaw] has stood out like a colossus, an intellect among the thoughtless, a genius among hacks, and a seer among the blind".

*Don Juan in Hell*, though technically the third act of *Man and Superman*, is, at an hour and a half, a play in its own right and almost always performed separately. The version I saw was done as a concert reading, with lecterns. The cast, attired in black tie, was unbeatable: Charles Boyer was Don Juan, Charles Laughton played the Devil, Cedric Hardwicke, the Commander and Agnes Moorehead, Doña Ana. There was no scenery, which was appropriate, because Shaw describes hell this way: "There is nothing; omnipresent nothing. No sky, no peaks, no light, no sound, no time nor space, utter void". What fills the otherwise empty stage is Shaw's sparkling prose.

*Man and Superman* has a plot. It is a light and witty account of Ann Whitfield's successful amatory pursuit of the reluctant John Tanner. *Don Juan in Hell*, on the other hand, is devoid of plot or action. Its sole activity (if it can be called that) is a debate as to the advantages of heaven and hell. Shaw's hell stands traditional versions on their head. It offers sensual and aesthetic delights: art, beauty, love, pleasure. Heaven, on the other hand, is an austere, intellectual place.

The hedonistic attractions of hell lure individuals who find the endless discourse in heaven tiresome. Among these is the Commander, who, describing heaven as "the most angelically dull place in all creation" decides to travel downwards. The Devil, a far more civil and amiable character than Don Juan, naturally defends the hedonistic advantages of his realm. He tells Don Juan that hell provides everything that he has "sought without anything that you shrank from." Don Juan, however, is not content. "Here", he claims. "I have everything that disappointed me without anything that I have not already tried and found wanting".

W. An adroit phrase.

M. Masterful language is what drives the play. I hope I may be forgiven if I read one particularly colorful passage. I still remember being impressed by it half a

century ago. Don Juan is telling the Devil in what contempt he holds his associates:

“Your friends are all the dullest dogs I know. They are not beautiful: they are only decorated. They are not clean: they are only shaved and starched. They are not dignified: they are only fashionably dressed. They are not educated: they are only college passmen. They are not religious: they are only pew renters. They are not moral: they are only conventional. They are not virtuous: they are only cowardly. They are not even vicious: they are only "frail." They are not artistic: they are only lascivious. They are not prosperous: they are only rich. They are not loyal, they are only servile; not dutiful, only sheepish; not public spirited, only patriotic; not courageous, only quarrelsome; not determined, only obstinate; not masterful, only domineering; not self-controlled, only obtuse; not self-respecting, only vain; not kind, only sentimental; not social, only gregarious; not considerate, only polite; not intelligent, only opinionated; not progressive, only factious; not imaginative, only superstitious; not just, only vindictive; not generous, only propitiatory; not disciplined, only cowed; and not truthful at all: liars every one of them, to the very backbone of their souls.”

W. Impressive! That is Don Juan chewing out the Devil. And equally, it is Shaw using Don Juan as a vehicle to express his own disdain for the bourgeoisie.

M. Exactly. In his introduction to the play (in the form of a letter to Arthur Bingham Walkley) Shaw complains that “middle class opinion ... are now triumphant everywhere. Civilized society”, he frets, “is one huge bourgeoisie: no nobleman dares now shock his greengrocer.” Shaw’s views were heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche. In fact, Shaw names Nietzsche as “among the writers whose peculiar sense of the world I recognize as more or less akin to my own”.

*Man and Superman* was written in 1903, only three years after Nietzsche’s death, when Shaw was 47. The title itself is Nietzschean, derived from Nietzsche’s concept of an *Übermensch*, a Superman endowed with a superior moral temperament; he has the strength and will to resist mundane conformity. These attributes constitute the Nietzschean “life force”.

W. We should interject here that Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* has nothing to do with the Superman of Marvel Comics or with Teutonic illusions about being a master race.

M. Correct. Those came later. Blaming Nietzsche for them would be like blaming Florence Nightingale for high Medicare costs. But as to Don Juan, he is dissatisfied with the conventional sensual delights of hell and becomes converted into a champion of the “life force”. “I tell you that in the pursuit of my own pleasure ... I have never known happiness”, he announces, and departs for heaven. The latter is a cerebral place, whose residents spend their time contemplating ideas, among them how life on earth might be improved.

W. How odd! Totally topsy turvy.

M. There is something of a paradox involved. Denizens of heaven are assumed to be happy and content. But if they are considering all the wretched problems that exist on earth, how can they help but be troubled? Unless they are totally insulated from these, there is no way that they can be content. In any event, Don Juan's choice of the ascetic almost certainly represents Shaw's own, and most likely would have been Nietzsche's as well.

W. Whenever I think of Nietzsche I remember all that "God is dead" humbuggery. The idea seems ridiculous. How can God die? Who killed him? Am I supposed to see him lying there on a granite slab, all pale, his white hair and beard gone limp, with a bunch of mourners standing around, women in long skirts and men in top hats and fur collars?

M. God died, according to Nietzsche because people no longer took him seriously. They shrugged him off. Nietzsche questioned whether the values religion instilled are able to survive in a post-faith world. When religion is emptied of faith, Nietzsche thought, the foundations of morality disintegrate.

W. Without a spiritual dimension, there is no longer a way to tell what is right from what is wrong?

M. Or what is heaven and what is hell. But back in the 18th century the aforementioned Voltaire, as well as Rousseau and other Enlightenment intellectuals wrestled with the issue. They concocted the idea that man is gifted with an inherent moral sense. It was a solution that filled the ethical vacuum for a time, though not seamlessly.

W. Yes, who stuck this moral sense into us? When did it arrive?

M. At some point in the evolutionary process. It helped to preserve the solidity of the family, the coherence of the tribe, that sort of thing. Evolutionary biologists theorize that as tribal groups competed for scarce resources, those whose members cooperated most effectively advanced. In the Darwinian wars, the survival of the group mattered more than the survival of the individual. That is why, at least according to this theory, altruism, selflessness, or what we would call morality, emerged. It attached itself to our DNA. The evolutionary biologists refer to "modules". These modules became a part of the molecular structure, an item in the double helix.

W. A bit shaky there, aren't they?

M. Definitely subject to instability. There is even a school of thought now called Moral Particularism which claims that there is no such thing as a moral principle. Moral judgments can be made only on a case by case basis. And then, of course, we have postmodernism, deconstructionism and other such contemporary intellectual

fads in which nothing is absolute. (These, too, by the way arrived here by way of French philosophers, in this case Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.) All language is prone to interpretation, everything is suspected of cultural or political bias. Objectivity is impugned and belittled. So we are left without a trustworthy anchor or moral lifeline.

W. Might this be the work of the devil?

M. Quite possibly.

W. Has anyone attempted to deconstruct heaven or hell?

M. Jean-Paul Sartre did, in a fashion. Remember his play, *No Exit*? We saw it here in San Francisco at A.C.T. in April of last year.

W. It was a Canadian production with all sorts of special effects: television, strobe lights, smoke, banging noises.

M. Sartre would have hated it. He actually wrote that he feared his plays would be Bowdlerized when put on in the United States. He abhorred what he called “le rewriting”.

W. The razzmatazz effects were not just distracting, they totally contradicted Sartre’s conception of hell.

M. His hell was cheerless, claustrophobic, conventional, boring. Sartre wanted his set to look “rather like a dentist’s waiting room”. It consists of a drawing room with Second Empire (Victorian era) furniture. There are no windows, no mirrors, the lights are never turned off, and, most strikingly, there are no exits.

W. Just as in Shaw’s play, only four characters take part. There is no devil, just a valet who ushers in the other three: Carcin, a journalist, Inez, a postal clerk, and Estelle, a wealthy housewife. The three soon learn to distrust and despise each other. But there are no doors and no means of escape. They are locked in for eternity. Their torture is that they are forced to be together.

M. Carcin speaks the play’s most famous lines near the end: “So this is Hell”, he exclaims. “I never would have thought - You remember: being roasted on the spit, sulfur and brimstone. What a laugh! As if they needed it! Hell is just - other people.”

W. The play is linked to Sartre’s existentialism. Existentialism actually began with Heidegger, but is mostly associated with postwar French intellectuals.

M. It was a cultural phenomenon rather than a lucid and coherent philosophy. It resists easy definition and is somewhat obscurantist. That is not to say that *No Exit* is devoid of powerful existentialist themes.

W. Carcin, Inez and Estelle are locked in a dreary room without an escape hatch, but not by chance or accident. Rather, it's a result of their own behavior, because of the rotten choices they made while on earth. Even now, in hell, they continue to act in bad faith.

M. Existentialism emphasized free will. For Sartre, free will was obvious, intuitive and axiomatic. Human consciousness, he contended, not only exists but is free to determine its own character and essence. Individuals cannot avoid being held responsible for their acts.

W. Interesting. I seem to detect a little beam of light shining through this meandering narrative: Augustine, Dante, Milton, Shaw, Sartre, a more disparate group would be hard to find, yet they all believed in free will. They all relied on it. They all emphasized it. It lay at the core of their convictions.

M. Absolutely. But free will's significance is hardly restricted to literature. It is inherent in our civilization. Our mores, laws and institutions all depend on it. Another point: for Sartre, as well as others, free will is linked to consciousness. But as both are nonphysical, they remain the subject of ceaseless debate. As early as 1904 William James wrote that "The hour is ripe for [consciousness] to be...discarded" (though he limited the erasure to consciousness as an "entity", not as a "function").

Consciousness is elusive, so it flusters our friends the neuroscientists and psychologists. You can't weigh it or calculate it. You don't see it on an X-ray. It doesn't show up in an MRI. It even implies some sort of antiquated Cartesian mind-body duality. Scientists want choices to result from observable biological processes. They look to activity in brain waves and measure neurotransmitters.

W. Their investigations can't explain how consciousness is able to stem from material that lacks it. That's an impossibility, a *non sequitor*, is it not?

M. The effort to reduce consciousness to a materialistic, mechanistic process has an ironic side effect. It makes it deterministic. And that takes us right back to the old Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

W. Predestination means that since God is all-knowing and all-powerful his grace is bestowed, not earned. It is He who determines in advance who will do what and when and who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. The future is thus as immutable as the past.

M. A few theorists have recently suggested that the probabilistic character of quantum mechanics offers a way to bridge the gap between free will and neurotransmitters. If they are on to something, then God is playing dice with our neurons. He may even be playing dice with the entire universe after all.

