**Two Atypical Arguments Justifying the Eternity of Punishment in Hell**

The concept of eternal punishment in hell is presented by contemporary philosophers of religion as the most serious individual case of the problem of evil.[[1]](#footnote-1) The central critique of this concept establishes, as a general rule, that no sinner deserves eternal punishment since his or her sins are finite and temporal, and therefore this punishment is morally unjustified and not compatible with God’s absolute goodness, mercy, and justice.[[2]](#footnote-2) In an attempt to preserve the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment, there are those who argue, in various ways, that sinners are, in fact, deserving of eternal punishment and not temporal punishment alone.[[3]](#footnote-3) This position is generally based on various retributivist principles of justice and considerations that lead to the conclusion that the sinner deserves eternal punishment – either because of the infinite severity of his sins according to the status principle, or because the sinner chose this situation for himself knowingly by his own free will. The use of such principles and considerations has characterized the theological and philosophical discourse on this issue from the Middle Ages to the present.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This article seeks to defend the concept of eternal punishment in hell in a different manner. The article will present two arguments justifying the eternity of punishment, but not on the basis of the retributivist theory of punishment – in other words, without arguing that eternal punishment is the sinner’s just deserts for his sins. Instead, these two arguments suggest that eternal punishment is necessitated by the absolute goodness and mercy of God, and a certain utilitarian element will be incorporated in both. These arguments appear in the writings of two medieval Jewish theologians, Daud al-Muqammiṣ and Saadia Gaon. Despite the fact that contemporary philosophical discourse on this topic is conducted almost exclusively on the basis of Christian doctrines and Christian sources, and perhaps even because of this, it seems to me that the writings of Jewish thinkers who share the concept of eternal punishment in hell, as well as the recognition of the problematic moral calculus involved, can also enrich the discussion.

***Daud al-Muqammiṣ***

In his book *Twenty Chapters*, Daud al-Muqammiṣ argues clearly in favor of the concept of eternal punishment (and reward) after death. As support for his claim he presents a long list of considerations and arguments, almost all of which adopt the prevailing retributivist line. However, in one of his arguments he takes an entirely different tack, which is considered below:

[I]f you consider the matter in a logical way, you will realize that whether for preventive purposes or from the point of view of (God’s) justice and compassion, the recompense must not be finite. For […] both from the point of view of (God’s) justice and from the point of view of guiding people to good deeds, it is necessary that the one who warns should repay the observant person for his observance with the utmost benevolence, and punish the transgressor with the utmost severity, thus increasing and intensifying fear and awe. The words of the Lord are all true and trustworthy; His warnings must be of the utmost forcefulness, and they must be carried out as pronounced. [[5]](#footnote-5)

According to this argument, eternal punishment is not necessitated by the severity of a person’s sins, but rather, in a way that seems at first glance paradoxical, from God’s mercy or absolute goodness. The sense of God’s ‘mercy’ and ‘goodness’ here is that God desires the good for human beings, and this desire is expressed in such a way that He helps people choose good deeds (“guiding people to good deeds”). God’s absolute goodness further necessitates that this is the maximum aid that it is in God’s ability to provide to human beings. It appears that, on the basis of al-Muqammiṣ’s statement, one can propose the following, somewhat more detailed, argument:

1. Insofar as He is absolute good, God must offer human beings *the maximum aid* in fulfilling His commandments.
2. The maximum aid that God can provide to human beings in fulfilling his commandments is to provide maximum motivation to fulfill them and *the maximum deterrence* from not fulfilling them.
3. The maximum motivation to fulfill God’s commandments is achieved through the promise of the maximum reward for fulfilling them, and the maximum deterrence from not fulfilling God’s commandments is achieved through *the threat with the maximum punishment* for not fulfilling them.
4. The maximum reward and punishment that can be conceived are eternal reward and punishment.

Therefore:

1. It is appropriate that God promise human beings eternal (and not only temporal) reward in the next world, and threaten them with eternal (and not only temporal) punishment in the next world.
2. God must fulfill his promises.

Therefore:

1. Reward and punishment in the next world are necessarily eternal.

This argument has two stages. The first stage (propositions 1-5) grounds the claim that it is appropriate that the divine *threat* against human beings lest they transgress be eternal punishment; the second stage (propositions 6-7) adds that this threat must be realized, that is, that the punishment the sinner *actually* suffers in the next world must necessarily be eternal.

We will focus on the dimension of the argument related to punishment, and we will begin by considering its first part. Proposition 1 assumes that the fulfillment of God’s commandments (or worship of Him) is a positive action for human beings, and thus God — who wishes the best for human beings —desires that they choose to fulfill them. Insofar as God is good, it follows that He desires to aid human beings in achieving this goal, and insofar as God’s goodness is absolute, this must be the maximum aid that He can give. Proposition 2 defines the maximum aid that God can give to human beings as an action that increases the possibility that they will choose to fulfill the commandments and will refrain from transgressions to the greatest possible degree, but without directly intervening in this choice. The hidden premise in this claim is that the possibility that God would cause a person, in any way, to always choose to fulfill the commandments and refrain from transgressions is not admissible in the present context. In other words, this proposition assumes at the outset that it is impossible, unjustified, or, at least, very difficult to defend the idea that God would force a person to behave in a certain way, and, in practice, to deny him or her free will with respect to this behavior, in order to aid that person in fulfilling the commandments and refraining from transgression.[[6]](#footnote-6) If such direct causation were a relevant possibility, that would be a greater expression of aid than the threat of eternal punishment, and the argument would thus collapse altogether.

At this point, the argument continues and establishes that achieving maximum deterrence requires maximum threat of punishment, which is the most deterring (proposition 3), and that the maximum punishment that can be conceived is eternal punishment (proposition 4). Eternal punishment in the next world is justified in this argument not for its own sake, but rather solely as a means to an end. It is not claimed in this context that the sinner *deserves* unending punishment because the severity of his or her actions justifies it according to various retributivist considerations. Moreover, the category, amount, or severity of his or her sins has no role to play in the argument. Instead, the argument supposes that, given God’s absolute goodness, the threat God directs toward human beings in order to prevent them from sinning must necessarily be as effective as possible, and that the threat of eternal punishment — which is the maximum punishment that can be conceived — is necessarily more effective than the threat of temporal punishment alone, because it can create a greater degree of deterrence; in effect, the maximum degree of deterrence. This can also be presented in terms of negation: If the divine threat against human beings was expressed only in temporal punishment, the highest level of deterrence that it could instill would necessarily be lower than that provided by eternal punishment. Such a situation is not consistent with the moral expectation that God, the absolute good, present human beings with maximum aid in fulfilling His commandments and avoiding transgression, thus negating the possibility that the threat of punishment be merely temporary. Given that punishment after death can be eternal or non-eternal (finite), it stands that the negation of the possibility of temporal punishment leads necessarily to the establishment of its eternity.

The argument before us has a certain utilitarian component that I would like to consider more closely. It should be noted that the argument does not assert that eternal punishment in the next world is necessary because the threat of eternal punishment is *more effective in practice*, on the basis of its greater deterrence, than the threat of temporal punishment in preventing a person from transgression. While this is a reasonable assumption, in the framework of the argument before us it is not sufficient. The goal of the argument, we should recall, is to defend the concept of eternal punishment in hell, whereas the central moral criticism of this concept holds that such punishment contradicts the idea of divine justice. Therefore, even if the threat of eternal punishment could indeed be more effective than the threat of temporal punishment, it could still be claimed that this is an unjust punishment and that the utilitarian advantage alone is not consistent with divine justice. The argument above goes in a different direction: Not only does eternal punishment in the next world not contradict the idea of divine justice, it is even entailed by it. In view of God’s absolute goodness, it is not appropriate that God provide less than the maximum possible degree of aid to human beings so that they achieve their religious perfection, and from the perspective of punishment, the maximum aid is expressed in the threat of eternal punishment because the *potential benefit* it embodies is greater than that embodied in the threat of punishment that is not eternal. In other words, the utilitarian-deterrence component of this argument does not relate to human beings, the object of the deterrence, but rather to God, the generator of the deterrence, and the central point is not whether or not an individual is indeed deterred, but rather whether God will provide the maximum level of deterrence that is expected of him.

From here, we can turn to the second stage. Demonstrating the claim that the threat of eternal punishment is more compatible with God’s absolute goodness than the threat of temporal punishment is not sufficient. The reason is that deterrence is generated (or, at least, is meant to be generated) by the threat of punishment, and not its application in practice; as we know, living people are not aware of the specifics of punishment after death.[[7]](#footnote-7) Therefore, God could, apparently, have been satisfied with the threat of punishment alone, but abstained from its application. In this way, His absolute goodness could have been expressed both in providing maximum aid to prevent the individual from sinning (the most deterring threat of punishment, eternal punishment) and in abstaining from a punishment that is not proportionate to the severity of the acts (not applying eternal punishment, which is unnecessary). However, here another theological premise joins the argument, which holds that God must keep His promises. If He promised eternal reward, He must fulfill this promise, and similarly, if He threatened eternal punishment, He must fulfill His threat. Even though there is no further benefit in carrying out eternal punishment after threatening it, there is no way to avoid carrying it out without damaging God’s moral character.

I will attempt to clarify the rationale of this stage of the argument in another way, by presenting two possible, opposing descriptions of the meaning of the concept of God’s absolute goodness. Both descriptions share a single starting point: God is the absolute good, and as such He threatens sinners with eternal punishment in the next world in order to maximize the chance that they will refrain from sinning, in response to the maximal deterrence that this threat generates for them. Going forward, there are two possibilities:

1. God achieves His goal of deterrence with the aid of the threat, and He does not need to carry it out, and, therefore, as He is absolutely good, He refrains from doing so. Not only does God refrain from carrying out His threat, God’s goodness obligates Him to refrain. Eternal punishment is not commensurate with an individual’s deeds, and given that it provides no benefit, it would be wrong for God to choose the option of carrying out the punishment. This choice is not consistent with God’s absolute goodness.
2. God’s goodness is fully realized in the threat of eternal punishment, and its application is not required. However, he is nevertheless obligated to carry out the threat, because by not doing so he would be reneging on a promise, an act that is inconsistent with the essential truth of all of God’s utterances.

In the second part of the argument above, option B is considered to be more fitting of God’s absolute goodness than option A.

What is the basis for this preference? Al-Muqammiṣ’s answer here is clear: “The words of the Lord are all true and trustworthy.” In other words, all of God’s utterances are necessarily true, and it is impossible that they would contain lies. Elsewhere in his discussion of this issue, he offers another answer that touches directly on our discussion of the concept of deterrence: “If He who guides and warns is not trustworthy in His words, and the person who is guided and warned does not know Him to be trustworthy, then His warning will be without effect, and people will neither base their hopes on it nor be frightened by it.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, the deterrence has effective potential only if a relationship of trust exists between the individual and God, in the framework of which the individual knows that God does not break His promises, for good or ill. One can even say that, given this relationship of trust, the deterrent power of eternal punishment is increased because it moves from being a threat whose actualization is in doubt to an indubitable fact.[[9]](#footnote-9)

***Saadia Gaon***

Like al-Muqammiṣ, Saadia Gaon’s essential position on the issue of reward and punishment in the next world, found in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, is that both reward and punishment are eternal. Saadia presents two structurally identical arguments — one justifying the eternity of reward and the other the eternity of punishment — though he recognizes that the justification of eternal punishment is a more difficult matter. After presenting his argument regarding eternal reward, Saadia turns to the difficulty of harmonizing the concept of eternal punishment with God’s absolute goodness:

“Now someone might perhaps remark, ‘I consider such a policy quite proper in the case of the reward of the righteous, since that consists of well-being and bliss and the bestowal of favors [which are compatible with the nature of God]. However, when it comes to punishment and condemnation to perpetual hell-fire, I see therein a mercilessness and cruelty which do not tally with God’s nature.’”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Against this background, he presents his argument justifying the eternity of punishment:

In reply thereto I say, with equal cogency, that, just as it is necessary for God to use the strongest stimulant to arouse in men the desire to do good, so must He employ the strongest deterrent to keep them from doing evil. For if the deterrent used by Him were to consist of the threat of torments lasting a hundred or two hundred years, and men would not be distrained thereby from sinning, it might be said by someone that, if God had made it last a thousand years, they would have been frightened by it. Similarly, if the punishment were to be fixed for a period of two thousand years, one might say that if God had made it last a myriad, men would have been terrified thereby. That is why God made the torment of the hereafter limitless, employing the strongest possible deterrent, that leaves no loophole for anyone. And once He has thus employed the most forcible means of intimidation and they still do not heed the warning, it would not be proper for Him to go back on His threats against them and belie His own word. On the contrary, in order to prove the truth of His word and His statement, it is necessary for Him to subject them to perpetual torment, for which they have only themselves to blame on account of their rebellion against God and their denial of Him. This threat is, on the other hand, an act of kindness on the part of God, since His aim in warning them against everlasting punishment is to put them in the proper state of mind for serving Him.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As in al-Muqammiṣ, here too the argument is composed of two parts: the establishment of the claim that it is necessary for God to threaten eternal punishment, and the demonstration of the necessity of its eternity in practice. The second part of the argument is identical with the second part of al-Muqammiṣ’s argument — the concept that God must fulfill his promises, and therefore if he threatens eternal punishment he must carry it out — and we will not examine it here.

The difference in content between the two arguments is found in the first part. Unlike al-Muqammiṣ, Saadia establishes the necessity of the threat of eternal punishment negatively: if God were to threaten human beings with temporal punishment alone, the sinner could claim in his defense (in the heavenly court after death) that this punishment was not a sufficient deterrent – if the punishment were more prolonged, he would have been deterred and refrained from sinning. In this way, the sinner could attempt to lessen the degree to which he was held responsible for his sins, and even to pass on part of the blame to the source of the laws and their punishments, that is to say, to God. This defense (weak and perplexing as it might seem) is possible even if a very lengthy punishment is under discussion, so long as the threat is not of eternal punishment. Thus, Saadia concludes that God must threaten human beings with eternal punishment, as this is the only way to prevent such a line of defense from being employed, and undermines its validity at the outset. Hence the threat of eternal punishment is essentially an act that arises from God’s mercy, since his aim was to create so great a deterrence from sin that eternal punishment would remain a theoretical matter only, and there would never be a need to carry out the threat in practice. In other words, the threat of eternal punishment is meant to reduce suffering and not to increase it: instead of people sinning and being punished with weighty temporal punishments in practice, since the threat of temporal punishment does not sufficiently deter them, the threat of eternal punishment is meant to lead to a situation in which no one would choose to sin at all. Now, faced with the threat of eternal punishment, the sinner who sinned nonetheless has no one but himself to blame for his situation. Coupled with the premise that God must keep his promises and carry out his threats, not only is eternal punishment compatible with God’s goodness, it is even derived from it.

***Conclusions***

This article presented two atypical arguments justifying the eternity of punishment in hell that originate among medieval Jewish thinkers. In these arguments, eternal punishment is not justified as a fitting response to an individual’s sins, nor as one that is more fitting than temporal punishment. Instead of the retributivist foundation common in theological and philosophical discussions of the issue of eternal punishment in hell, which places the individual and the severity of his or her sins at the center of the moral justification of this punishment, these arguments focus on two theological claims: (1) God’s absolute goodness, or his mercy, requires that He threaten human beings with eternal punishment, because it has the greatest deterrent potential and can lead to a situation in which no one will sin at all; (2) God must fulfill His promises, and, therefore, this threat must be realized in situations in which a certain person nevertheless chooses to sin.

Another common feature of both arguments is the use of the concept of deterrence. In both, eternal punishment is ascribed a deterrent potential greater than that of temporal punishments, and this feature of eternal punishment is an important component of its justification. Against this background, it is important to underline that, despite the presence of a utilitarian component in the arguments examined in this article, these arguments do not justify eternal punishment on a utilitarian basis. The presumption that the threat of eternal punishment is more of a deterrent than that of temporal punishment does not lead to the conclusion that its utility is necessarily greater and, therefore, that it is more justified to punish sinners in this way than with temporal punishment. This presumption only serves to reinforce the claim that, in light of God’s absolute goodness or mercy, he must threaten eternal, and not temporal, punishment. While the justification of eternal punishment by these arguments is based on utilitarian considerations, it is not derived from them, but rather from the theological claims discussed above.

It seems to me that of the two thinkers, al-Muqammiṣ presents a stronger argument. The central shortcoming of Saadia’s argument is particularly prominent: the threat of eternal punishment provides no significant benefit. Such benefit as there is apparently resides in the fact that it pulls the rug out from under the line of legal defense that a sinner could adopt. However, this line of defense, in which the accused argues for lessening his degree of guilt because of the fact that the (temporal) punishment he was warned of receiving was not a sufficient deterrent, is dubious from the outset. The threat of eternal punishment is not necessary in order to dismiss it. For according to this very same logic, it would be appropriate to remove from every legal system of any type all punishments that are not the most severe imaginable, even for infractions and misdemeanors. This notion is both counterintuitive and violates the most basic concepts of justice. On the other hand, in al-Muqammiṣ’s argument presented above, the benefit derived from the threat of eternal punishment is very significant. As we saw, any threat that is less than the most severe imaginable is inconsistent with God’s absolute goodness and mercy.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the two thinkers whose arguments we have discussed in this article share a concept that we can call “the limited concept of eternal punishment.” The limited concept establishes that only a certain portion of sinners are deserving of eternal punishment for their sins, and not all. Al-Muqammiṣ claims that only those who sin intentionally, scorn God, and are considered apostates deserve eternal punishment.[[12]](#footnote-12) According to Saadia, only apostates, polytheists, and those who commit grave transgressions and did not mend their ways are deserving of eternal punishment.[[13]](#footnote-13) Against this background, it is important to emphasize that these two arguments serve al-Muqammiṣ and Saadia as a foundation for this limited concept, and not for an inclusive conception that relegates all sinners to eternal punishment. It appears that, in their eyes, a world in which eternal punishment in the next world is meant for certain sinners only is preferable, from the perspective of God’s attributes, to a world in which eternal punishment in the next world has no part.[[14]](#footnote-14) And yet, it does not necessarily follow that according to their arguments there is also a similar preference for a reality in which eternal punishment in the next world is inflicted indiscriminately on all sinners.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. See, for example, J. L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, New York and Oxford 1993, pp. 3–4, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a criticism of the concept of eternal punishment see, for example, J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, London 1966, pp. 377–385; M. McCord Adams, “Hell and the God of Justice”, *Religious Studies*, 11 (1975), pp. 433–447; Idem, “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians”, E. Stump (ed.), *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, Ithaca and London 1993, pp. 301–327; T. Talbott, “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment”, *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (1990), pp. 19–42; Idem, “Punishment, Forgiveness, and Divine Justice”, *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 151-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a defense of the concept of eternal punishment, see, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, London 1940, pp. 106–116; P. Helm, “The Logic of Limited Atonement”, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 3 (1985), pp. 47–54; J. L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, Notre Dame 1992; C. Seymour, “Hell, Justice, and Freedom”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 43 (1998), pp. 69–86; O. Crisp, “Divine Retribution: A Defence”, *Sophia*, 42, 2 (2003), pp. 39–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a clear discussion of the various approaches to the matter in Christian theology and in the philosophy of religion, see T. Talbott, “Heaven and Hell in Christian Thought”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/heaven-hell/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammiş’s Twenty Chapters (‛Ishrūn Maqāla)*, S. Stroumsa (ed. and trans.), Leiden 1989, p. 295 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The idea of free will arises in different contexts in the philosophical discourse on the concept of hell, but this discussion is outside the scope of this article. See, for instance, C. Seymour, “On Choosing Hell”, *Religious Studies*, 33 (1997), pp. 249–266. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This perspective is well expressed in the work of Nissim of Gerona, a fourteenth century Jewish thinker: “But regarding punishment in the next world . . . it cannot be that the intent of this punishment is to return others to the straight path, as this punishment is entirely lost from the living in this world, and is utterly unseen by them” (*The Homilies of Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona*, ed. A. L. Feldman [Jerusalem, 1976], homily 10, p. 164). It is interesting to note, on the contrary, that Socrates, who in the *Gorgias* adopts a clearly utilitarian theory of punishment, holds that the eternal punishment after death of incurable criminals who had committed grave injustices serves as a deterrent for others. See Plato, *Gorgias*, W. R. M. Lamb (trans.), The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA and London 1975, p. 525. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Twenty Chapters*, 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Geach similarly claims that Christian faith is grounded on the concept that God is not able to renege on his promises, in particular the promise of the deliverance of the entire human race. See P. T. Geach, “Omnipotence”, *Philosophy*, 48 (1973), p. 8. Nevertheless, he underlines that in his opinion this concept is not obligated by God’s moral perfection or His absolute goodness. See Geach, “Can God Fail to Keep Promises?”, *Philosophy*, 52 (1977), pp. 93–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and opinions*, S. Rosenblatt (trans.), New Haven 1948, pp. 344 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., pp. 344–345 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Twenty Chapters*, p. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a contrasting opinion, that these two worlds have equal value from the perspective of God’s goodness, see P. A. Macdonald, “Hell, the Problem of Evil, and the Perfection of the Universe”, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 89 (2015), pp. 603–628. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. By way of comparison, according to Dante, the conception of the eternity of punishment in hell is ascribed to all sinners, and can be justified on the basis of Thomas Aquinas’s concept of God’s love, which is close to al-Muqqamiṣ’s concept of God’s absolute goodness. See E. Stump, “Dante’s Hell, Aquinas’s Moral Theory, and the Love of God”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986), pp. 181–198. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)