CHAPTER 20

Purpose and Punishment

Two children grow up in religious households. In the first, God means warmth, security and community. In the second, God means fear, punishment and control. Both decide, each in her own way, to accept God or to refuse him. Neither chose the feelings she decided from.

The chapter takes up two claims that have shaped the lives of billions. Purpose requires God, and God may justly punish those who choose wrongly. It argues that both fail, and that purpose and punishment belong together.

They are “two faces of one coin”. Chapter 19 argued that purpose is made by the evaluative modality, which is emotion working as an evaluator, the part of you that feels things as better or worse. Chapter 18 argued that this evaluator is handed to you without your consent. The first makes meaning possible without the universe signing off. The second makes ultimate accountability impossible.

Purpose without a God to endorse it

William Lane Craig, who argues that life without God is absurd, says a meaningful life needs three things: lasting consequences, cosmic endorsement and personal survival. The chapter meets each in turn.

Start with lasting consequences. Without God, Craig says, every human achievement will be erased, by death, by extinction, by the cooling of the cosmos. The buried assumption is that significance requires permanence. Most of what matters to most people matters now. And “a sunset’s beauty is not diminished by its ending”.

Then cosmic endorsement. Without a God who shares human values, Craig says, values are preferences painted onto an indifferent universe. The chapter answers from Chapter 14, where evaluative differences depend on a response and are no more unreal than colours. Asking the cosmos to confirm them adds a condition purpose never needed.

Richard Swinburne, who holds that God gives a life its point by calling a person to grow, is answered at two levels. A calling constitutes purpose through the response it draws, whatever its source. The chapter grants that a calling from God may be worth more in total. Its basic worth survives without him.

The trouble with living forever

Craig’s third strand, personal annihilation, assumes that purpose needs endless duration.

Bernard Williams, who argued that boredom is built into immortality itself, told the story of Elina Makropulos. She is granted endless life at forty-two. Three

hundred years later she is bored past bearing and feels almost nothing. Chapter 15 supplies the mechanism. A pleasure fades with repetition, because each repeat stands out less sharply against what came before. Associations get used up. Stated at full strength, the conclusion is that total value falls towards zero.

The chapter does not keep the full-strength version. A drift to zero would need a memory that never fills, and a bounded mind cannot have one. A forgotten pleasure can land afresh. So the chapter takes a weaker claim and marks it as weaker. Within any span a memory can hold, novelty is spent. Across spans the immortal repeats, so total value cycles, and the tedium is the noticing of the cycle. Even the weaker claim rests on a bet about physics. It needs the supply of real novelty to be finite, and the chapter leaves that question open.

A related belief, that without God there can be no true happiness, is traced to a confusion between Chapter 8’s two infinities.

A punishment nobody could have earned

Return to the two children. Divine retribution presupposes absolute moral responsibility. That means complete control over the ranking of what you care about, and not only over the thinking you do with it. Chapter 18 argued that no conscious agent has it, with a soul or without one.

No secular philosopher holds that presupposition. Against the live theological defences, the chapter delivers the luck objection in Derk Pereboom’s form, which says the factors settling a choice are matters of luck, together with the value route below.

It is often said that God leaves people free to accept or refuse him. A freedom whose every exercise meets judgement, the chapter replies, is “freedom only in name”. The deeper point is that the sanction had no warrant to begin with. The wrong of eternal damnation is therefore, in the first instance, that it is punishment at all.

Swinburne’s self-separation defence is the strongest available, the chapter says. Hell is the state of a soul that has definitively turned from the source of all good, and God sends nobody there. The defence needs two premises. The rejection must be free in the full sense, and the consequences must be in proportion. Chapter 18’s two perspectives pull these apart. The rejection is free as it is lived, and determined as it is seen afterwards. Swinburne finds his freedom at the first level and draws his eternal consequences at the second.

Alvin Plantinga’s free will defence says that a world of creatures who freely choose good beats a world of automata. The chapter accepts that choosing is real and denies that it is the freedom which justifies the cost.

Religious obedience, the chapter adds, comes in four shapes. Obedience from fear or for a reward leaves the taste for cruelty in place. Only obedience that grasps why cruelty hurts is moral goodness in its own right.

Two routes, and a teacher in place of a judge

The case against retributive justice stands on two legs that do not lean on each other.

The first is the authorship route, already given. Deserving to suffer for its own sake needs you to be the ultimate source of your own self. This leg uses a premise Chapter 18 marks as contested.

The second is the value route. Of the claim that a wrongdoer's suffering is good in itself, it asks: good for whom? Read as good apart from every response, Chapter 14 calls the claim vacant, because it marks no difference between worlds. Read as good to someone, the claim changes hands. The satisfaction a person takes in another's suffering is real, and the chapter weighs it. It cannot make the suffering owed, because the moral fact about the sufferer is anchored in her own response.

Everyday responsibility survives untouched, and it still lies on a curve, separating the coerced from the willing. Several accounts of punishment are untouched too. Antony Duff, who treats punishment as the community telling an offender that her conduct was wrong, describes deep persuasion by another name. Victor Tadros grounds punishment in the duty a wrongdoer takes on, to protect her victim from further harm. Blame survives as well, on accounts that read it as answering to the ill will the conduct expressed. Blame is address. It is done with the person and succeeds only if she understands it, while retributive suffering is imposed whether or not anything is understood.

Restorative justice aims at repair between wrongdoer, victim and community. It tries to change the taste for the wrong instead of overriding it.

The divine case goes further. Human courts cannot reach inside a person and remake what she cares about. An omnipotent God is under no such limit, and could make that change directly, without suffering. Overwriting a soul from outside would be brainwashing, and is ruled out. A divine judge who understood the architecture would educate, and would have no reason to punish.

The reconciliation of every soul is offered for a different figure: the companion God of Chapter 24, who cannot remake anyone at will and can only persuade across time.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection is that local purpose is not cosmic significance. The chapter calls the desire for it real. Significance comes from engagement with real differences, so endorsement is an extra condition.

The second objection comes from John Martin Fischer, who argues that an immortal who keeps developing new interests need not go flat. If novelty is finite, even a flexible immortal exhausts it. If it is endless, the chapter concedes

that Fischer wins on duration. One conditional survives either way. Purpose needs engagement, and no length of life supplies that.

The third objection is that proportion can be restored. Finite punishment for finitely free choices might still be just. The chapter replies that this confuses backward-looking desert with forward-looking sanction. The desert basis itself has gone, so finite retribution is no better grounded than infinite, only smaller.

What the chapter claims

Three of the chapter's results are graded *constructed*. That is the book's mark for the best account available, with live rivals still standing.

The first is that purpose requires neither God nor immortality. The saturation argument used there is an empirical wager on physics. The second is the failure of divine retribution's desert basis. It stands on the two routes above, each sufficient by itself, and Chapter 14 also blocks the retreat to what desert-talk means. One step inside the value route carries an empirical stake. It asks whether satisfaction at suffering survives acquaintance with the sufferer. The evidence comes from trials in which victims met their offenders. The third is the case for restorative justice over retributive justice.

The fourth result sits lower. Autonomy-preserving universalism, the educative reconciliation of every soul, is graded *proposed*, which is an explicitly revisable suggestion. It is offered for the companion God alone. It carries two conditions. Persons must survive death. And it is an aim pursued by persuasion across time, and never a guaranteed outcome. The omnipotent educator described earlier proposes nothing, and works only as a reductio, turning the retributive theist's own assumption against him.

Chapter 21 asks what follows for politics, developing three modes of conflict resolution and arguing that only deep persuasion produces a lasting peace.