

The sacrifice of Jesus is an interesting way to keep the bookkeeping of justice balanced, but it leaves some people feeling that true justice hasn't been done. For example, if Stalin accepted Jesus just before he died, then his sins would be balanced by Jesus and he could go to Heaven. Alternately, if Einstein never accepted Jesus, justice would be served by sending him to Hell.

The concept of Hell itself creates a number of questions related to justice. Is any crime truly deserving of eternal punishment without opportunity of repentance? Some would say that rejecting God is a sin large enough to merit eternal torment, but many of these people would also say that not being convinced that God is real is equivalent to rejecting God, and, to an atheist, being punished eternally because you don't find an argument compelling doesn't sound just at all.

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HOW CAN THERE BE JUSTICE WITHOUT GOD?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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There are a number of ways that religions claim justice is brought to the world. Some religions say that after death you are reborn, and that your new life will be a reward or punishment for your acts in the previous life. This is philosophically consistent, but it can also lead to the assumption that anyone who is in a bad situation deserves what they get because they are being repaid for a past life's evils. That's not much of an incentive to help people in need.

Some religions claim that karma exists to enforce justice. If you do bad things, bad things come to you, and if you do good things, good things come to you. This is a nice idea, but it isn't evident in every-day life. Christianity holds that those who sin will be eternally punished in Hell. Depending on the type of Christianity, Christians may believe that you can get into Heaven by repenting for the bad you've done and doing good. Alternately, they may believe that good works are meaningless and everyone deserves to go to Hell, but that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was just punishment for everyone's sins, and anyone who accepts him can go to Heaven.

JUSTICE IS, IN A NUTSHELL, fair punishment for doing wrong, and fair rewards for doing right. In life, it may be impossible to find just solutions in all situations — for example, it is not just for someone who kills five people to receive the same penalty as someone who kills fifty people, but it's the best we can do. For true justice to be guaranteed, there must be some kind of reward or punishment after life ends. But, a theist might ask an atheist, if there is no God and no afterlife, how can there be justice?

The atheist's answer? There can't. There is no guarantee of justice in the universe.

To some people, this is inconceivable. What if a murderer is never caught? What if someone becomes a success by being a bully? If such a person isn't punished in the afterlife, that isn't fair!

And that's true — it isn't fair. But there is no law of physics or philosophy that says that things must be fair or that justice must be served. We might like it to be that way, but that does not make it so.

Now let's look at theistic justice for a moment.

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QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

We appreciate your interest in helping us spread information about moral atheism! To make copies of this pamphlet for your own use or to share with friends, follow these simple steps:

1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on blog.iamanatheist.org. Thanks!
