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The Roots of Morality From Classical to Christian Eschatology

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***Abstract:** The possibility of life after death has captured the imagination of different cultures and religions around the world, resulting in a wide variety of afterlife myths. Modern Western cultures tend to believe that an individual's experience in the afterlife relies heavily upon the ethical behavior of an individual during their lifetime. This morality-based eschatology has roots in early Judeo-Christian thought – although Classical authors also placed an emphasis on ethical behavior in their understandings of the afterlife. This paper examines how the writings of Homer, Hesiod, Plato, and Virgil blended together with Biblical teachings from the Old and New Testament over the centuries. Thanks in part to later authors, such as Dante Alighieri, these differing worldviews came together to create the widespread modern belief that the virtuous go to heaven, and the wicked go to hell.*

The possibility of life after death has captured the imagination of people all around the world for centuries. Different cultures and religions have hypothesized a wide variety of afterlife myths, each containing different settings, characters, and structures. Modern Western cultures tend to believe that an individual's experience in the afterlife relies heavily upon the ethical behavior of an individual during their lifetime. This focus on morality can be tied back to the Judeo-Christian roots of the Western world, but a moralistic view of the afterlife is not unique to Judaism or Christianity. Ethics and justice also played a role in the religious thought of Classical Greece and Rome, but in different ways and to varying degrees. Through a study of both early Christian and Classical ideology, one can identify when and how morality became so vital to an individual's life after death.

The earliest literary record of Greek religion comes from the 8th century epic poem, the *Odyssey* by Homer. In Book XI, the leading hero Odysseus must travel to the Underworld to speak with the prophet Tiresias. In this chapter, we receive the best glimpse of how the ancient Greeks imagined the afterlife. First of all, the realm of the dead does not actually exist underground; Odysseus simply sails to the edge of the world until he comes upon a strange land covered in mist and clouds. The souls of the deceased exist as “shambling, shiftless dead” with no obvious purpose.¹ They are simply shades, phantoms, ghosts. There is no place of punishment, and there is no place of pleasure. Geographical boundaries, such as Tartarus or Elysium, do not exist and the only hint of godly administration comes from brief mentions of Minos and Persephone. Only a few especially vile people, such as Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, are given special torments. Conversely, even great heroes like Achilles seem to suffer in this boring plane of existence. While they, like all the other ghosts, are not explicitly punished, they are not rewarded for their great actions either. Achilles explains to Odysseus how simply being bereft of life is enough to make him “rather slave on earth for another man...than rule down here over all the breathless dead.”² Harsh words such as these indicate that good actions do not necessarily lead to reward in the Greek afterlife. Ethical, or non-ethical, behavior does not influence one's experience after death. The only people being punished in the afterlife are those who have committed crimes specifically against the gods. Average, everyday sins seem to go

¹Homer, *The Odyssey*. In 55, pg. 251

² Homer, *The Odyssey*. In 556-558, pg. 265

unnoticed and unpunished. At the same time, good deeds go unrewarded. One's actions in life have no bearing on one's experience in the afterlife.

To give a slightly different perspective, one can look to Hesiod's description of the "islands of the blessed" in *Works and Days*. Roughly contemporary to Homer, Hesiod wrote about a somewhat different afterlife structure. In it, the heroes of the fourth race of humankind "dwell with carefree hearts in the Isles of the Blessed Ones, beside deep-swirling Ocean."³ Here, demigods are free from the toils of agriculture and sickness and live a life of perfect contentment at the edge of the known world. Hesiod, however, offers no description of what happens to other humans after death, so it is difficult to determine if a good, but non-godly person would also be allowed to live on the islands of the blessed. It is impossible to know if the preferential treatment shown toward the fourth race is tied to their divine ancestry, or to their morality. Based upon the descriptions put forth by Homer and Hesiod, it is likely that ancient Greeks did not believe any kind of moral or immoral actions could affect one's treatment in the afterlife. As Alan Segal proclaims in *Life After Death*, "retributive justice was not the real function of Hades." Rather, Hades was simply the land of the dead, "the final destination for all."⁴ This is slightly nuanced by the fate of the friends and enemies of the gods, but in general, the average person had nothing to look forward to and nothing to fear in the afterlife.

While still being an accepted part of ancient Greek religious life, mystery cult Initiates stand out as special cases in the Greek afterlife tradition. Literary works and fragments tend to indicate that Initiates experience a life after death that is much improved from the one described by Homer. For instance, in Aristophanes' play *The Frogs*, Heracles describes the Initiates as a "happy band of revelers, men and women, tripping around and clapping their hands."⁵ This is a far cry from the miserable, tedious existence of the ghost of Achilles. While Achilles must face an eternity of doing nothing, the Initiates spend eternity singing, dancing, and being merry. Since the details of these initiation rituals remain a secret, there is no clear understanding of why these people enjoyed such a blessed afterlife. However, as Walter Burkert explains in *Ancient Mystery Cults*, mystery cults were a kind of personal, "votive" religion which aimed at "some form of salvation through closeness to the divine."⁶ Through pledging oneself to Demeter, Orpheus, Dionysus, or some other god, an Initiate hoped to receive godly favor, and by extension, a better existence in the afterlife. It is possible that this process was tied to morality – that intense devotion to a specific god implied pious and just behavior. However, given the dark commentary of the Bacchic mystery religion in Euripides's play *The Bacchae*, this is somewhat doubtful. After all, any rituals that entailed tearing apart small animals and eating raw flesh were probably not considered ethical by contemporary Greeks. The Eleusian and Orphic mysteries may have been different, but the surviving evidence is too limited to draw any definite conclusions. Given this general structure, it appears that preferential treatment in the afterlife was not defined by an individual's morality, but simply by whether or not they had devoted themselves to a god and performed particular acts of worship. Most likely, morality was not considered a factor in these cult worships – initiation and knowledge of certain secrets was enough to guarantee a happier afterlife.

The first Greek literary instance in which morality played a strong role in one's fate after death is in the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Although each dialogue contains a slightly different

³ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ln. 170, pg. 42

⁴ Segal, Alan. *Life After Death*. pg. 211

⁵ Aristophanes, *The Frogs*. Act I, scene I, pg. 161

⁶ Burkert, Walter, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, pg. 12

afterlife myth, each one places a great importance on how one's behavior in life can have serious ramifications after death. In the myth of Er, as recounted in Book X of *The Republic*, souls are judged to be either "just" or "unjust." The just are sent to the heavens to experience one thousand years of "wonderful things" and "indescribably beautiful sights."⁷ The unjust, on the other hand, must spend a thousand years beneath the earth paying for their sins. Those who are unjust, but "curable," will be purified by this punishment and receive a second chance at life. However, the unjust and incurable will continue to be punished for eternity in Tartarus.

While Plato's organization of the afterlife is quite different from previous Greek eschatologies, it is his focus on morality that is most inventive. According to Plato, any unjust action leaves the soul scarred and imperfect. These imperfections are placed on display after death, as the body is stripped away to reveal the soul. An individual is then judged to be "just" or "unjust" based on the appearance of their soul, and awarded whatever tortures or honors are deemed fitting. Unlike in previous afterlife myths, no one is safe from judgment after death. Even those of divine ancestry or cultic initiation are not guaranteed admittance to paradise. Rather, all people must be tormented for their sins – and sin is not only defined as committing an outrage against the gods. The average person does not wander around the underworld as a listless ghost; they are either rewarded or punished. Similarly, the great heroes of the past are not free from judgment either. Their actions in life are scrutinized just as closely as everyone else's. Even Odysseus, a typically heroic figure in Greek myth, was made to serve a thousand years of torment before being reincarnated. This coercive, morality-based eschatology made quite an impact on the mindset of later Greeks and Romans, and even on the rest of the Western world.

An example of this effect is the Roman poet Virgil's description of the afterlife in *The Aeneid*. Written during the first century BCE, Book VI describes the Trojan hero Aeneas's descent into the underworld in search of the ghost of his father. The Sibyl, a priestess of Apollo with acute knowledge of the underworld and how it functions, guides Aeneas on this dangerous journey. First, they must avoid a plethora of monsters and death gods in order to take Charon's ferry across the river Acheron. On the opposite bank, they come across the field of those who died an untimely death. Here the souls of infants, falsely accused people, and victims of suicide wander about wailing in regret for their lost lives. Just beyond this lies the Fields of Mourning. This is the residence of "those souls consumed by the harsh, wasting sickness, cruel love."⁸ These souls are not punished, but they are forever trapped in their own misery, for "not even in death do their torments leave them."⁹ From there, the road fork sat the very edge of the underworld. One path leads to Tartarus, while the other heads toward Elysium.

While observing from a distance, the Sibyl explains to Aeneas that Tartarus consists of "an enormous fortress ringed with triple walls" and "a blazing flood of lava" called the Phlegathon, or the "river of fire."¹⁰ Here, Rhadamanthus rules by "censuring men, exposing fraud, [and] forcing confessions" out of those who never atoned for their crimes in life.¹¹ These souls are then tormented by the goddess Tisiphone and the demonic Furies. They punish famous wrong doers such as Tityus, Salmoneus, and Ixion, but also anyone who commits crimes such as adultery, greed, patricide, and treason. Tartarus itself is described as the deepest, darkest abyss

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 615a, pg. 338

⁸ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln. 513, pg. 197

⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln. 515, pg. 197

¹⁰ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln. 639-641, pg. 200

¹¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln. 659, pg. 201

within this section of the underworld where the Titans and giants of the mythical age are imprisoned.

After witnessing all the terrors of Tartarus, Aeneas and the Sibyl are greeted by the heavenly sight of Elysium. This is “the land of joy, the fresh green fields, the Fortunate Groves where the blessed make their homes.”¹² Patriotic warriors, pure priests, faithful poets, and all those who are “remembered well for the good they did mankind” take up residence here and spend their days singing, dancing, and feasting.¹³ However, almost everyone must be purified by being “drilled in punishments” to “pay for their old offenses” before they can reach Elysium.¹⁴ Once this is completed, the souls may drink from the river Lethe in order to forget their past lives and be reincarnated.

Compared to previous Classical eschatologies, Virgil’s afterlife contains much more detail. Aeneas and the Sibyl traverse an entire kingdom of the dead, with different geographical areas designated for different souls. The dead no longer exist in a single communal space, as in Homer, nor in two separate places, as in Plato. Instead, they are divided up based on their actions in life. Virgil’s eschatology also possesses greater “granulation,” or diversity of experience, for souls in the underworld. Beyond simply existing in different geographical locations, souls experience varying degrees of happiness, sadness, or torture depending on their actions in life. For instance, the untimely dead and those who inhabit the Fields of Mourning may not have done anything wrong in life, but they are still miserable and mourn their own deaths. Meanwhile, those in the outermost parts of Tartarus experience terrible punishments because of their sins, but they are still not as terrible as those suffered by the Titans and giants within the abyss of Tartarus itself. Likewise, in a very Platonic fashion, some souls enjoy peace and relaxation in Elysium, but most do so only after being purified of their sins through disciplinary punishment.

As in *The Republic*, it is not only a few souls which receive specialized punishment in *The Aeneid*. Rather, every soul is judged and allotted a punishment appropriate to the crimes it committed in life. For instance, crimes such as adultery, greed, patricide, and treason are terrible enough to lead to punishment in outer Tartarus, but still not as egregious as crimes against the gods, which are punished in the abyss of inner Tartarus. Oppositely, souls are also rewarded for all the good they do. Warfare, religion, and poetry were considered some of the most just and worthy pursuits, therefore practitioners of these arts reside in Elysium. However, despite being more focused on morality than the early Greeks, innocence of wrongdoing did not seem to guarantee happiness or pleasant experiences in the afterlife. This is best exemplified by the field of the untimely dead. It seems unlikely that the souls of children, suicide victims, or those who were falsely accused would be considered unjust or unethical. Yet they still wail and scream and exist in misery in the afterlife. The same situation applies for those in the Fields of Mourning. These souls died because of love, and yet they are not any happier in death than they were in life. Even in the absence of punishment, being without life is still torturous in and of itself, in the Classical mindset.

The Judeo-Christian view of the afterlife departs sharply from that of its Classical contemporaries. Surprisingly, Biblical eschatology is limited. Many modern Westerners would likely claim that Judeo-Christian thought posits a geographically distinct, sky-based, heaven for the faithful and an underground hell for the wicked. Yet there is no definitive textual source to support this assumption. Rather, there are brief mentions of the afterlife scattered throughout the

¹²Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln. 741-742, pg. 203

¹³ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln 769, pg. 204

¹⁴Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ln. 855, pg. 207

Bible, usually appearing as a place of torment for the wicked known as “Gehenna,” or the “valley of Hinnom.” Historically, this was a valley where followers of the pagan god Moloch were thought to have sacrificed their children by burning them alive. As such, it remained in the Judeo-Christian collective memory as a place of sin and fire, such as when Jesus states “it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to Gehenna, to the unquenchable fire.”¹⁵ There are also several mentions throughout the Bible of “Hades,” or what appears to be a neutral land of the dead, as it was portrayed in early Classical texts. Taken together, it is still unclear if Gehenna and Hades were thought of as distinct geographical regions or what other characteristics separated them, beyond Gehenna being reserved for the wicked and Hades being the home of all.

The book of Daniel from the Old Testament offers some insight into how early Jews and Christians cognized divine retribution. Instead of manifesting as some kind of undead realm of punishment or reward, fair treatment by the divine came during the period of the Last Judgment. This is a time described as occurring at the end of history, when “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”¹⁶ Meaning that God will raise the dead and judge all souls on their spiritual purity. “Many shall be purified, cleansed, and refined, but the wicked shall continue to act wickedly.”¹⁷ According to these passages, there is no heaven or hell, only the kingdom of God on earth, where souls either live in glory or disgrace. Morality plays a major role in determining how each soul is classified.

National identity also appears to be of great importance in the Last Judgment, given that the messenger of God specifically tells David “your people shall be delivered.”¹⁸ By “delivered,” the angel means “rescued” from the oppression of the Gentiles, or pagans. Given this passage, one can infer that Israelites possessed some kind of special status or consideration when being judged. At first glance, it appears that being an Israelite in Judeo-Christian religion is similar to being an Initiate in Greek mystery cult. Both were given better treatment after death due to association with a particular god. But to claim that an Israelite could be a follower of Yahweh and still be wicked – or at least neutral to morality, as with Greek mystery cults – would be impossible. This is due to the nature of the religions themselves. In polytheistic Ancient Greece, each god had its own powers, personalities, and problems. They were not perfect beings and they often made mistakes. Therefore a follower of Demeter was not necessarily a follower of all that is good and just, but simply a follower of everything Demeter represented as a harvest god. Judaism and Christianity, on the other hand, are monotheistic religions in which God is omnipotent and omniscient. God embodies moral and ethical behavior, so logically to follow God would be the moral and ethical thing to do. Therefore the Israelites were obviously virtuous people, and their rescue from oppression during the Last Judgment is due equally to their national identity and to their morality.

Later Christians offered slightly different apocalyptic writings from their Jewish predecessors in the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The scripture explains in much greater detail how the Last Judgment also entails a tremendous battle between God’s forces of good and Satan’s minions of evil. In the end, Satan is overthrown and “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur” where he will be “tormented day and

¹⁵ Mark 9.43

¹⁶ Daniel 12.2

¹⁷ Daniel 12.10

¹⁸ Daniel 12.1

night forever and ever.”¹⁹ Like Gehenna, the place of divine punishment is characterized by fire and burning. The same imagery appears again when it is said:

And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown in the lake of fire.²⁰

Here, the “lake of fire” appears to be a separate entity from the sea, Hades, or Death, which seem to be neutral areas of undead habitation before the Last Judgment. This “lake of fire” is quite similar to the Classical “river of fire,” the Phlegathon. Yet it exists separate of Hades and even appears to consume Hades. According to the passage, anyone whose name is not written in the “book of life” is doomed to suffer eternal damnation alongside Satan in the “lake of fire.” This eschatology is similar to that in the book of Daniel. They share the belief that people will be judged for their actions in life once, at the end of history, and granted either eternal pleasure or eternal pain based on those actions. Until judgment day, the dead are kept in a liminal space, often called Hades, where there is no ongoing punishment or reward. Instead, divine retribution only occurs at a specific point in time and forever after.

However, another passage in the New Testament complicates this afterlife structure. The tale of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” found in Luke 16 tells how a rich, but cruel, man died and went to Hades and was tormented in a land of flames. When the rich man looked up, he was able to see the poor, but virtuous, Lazarus sitting with Abraham in the distance. The man begged Lazarus to alleviate his suffering, but Abraham interjected that this was impossible because a great chasm stretched between them, preventing anyone from switching sides. Abraham reminds the rich man that his fate was brought on by his own greed and lack of generosity, whereas Lazarus suffered in life and is now being comforted. This parable contradicts the entire afterlife structure set forth in Daniel and Revelation. It appears that souls are indeed judged immediately after death and separated geographically in order to be tortured or compensated for their actions in life. It is unclear where exactly each one of these two places is located. If the rich man is looking up at Abraham, does that mean Abraham is in the sky, in some kind of heaven? Is the rich man below the earth – in hell or Gehenna? What is the chasm that separates them? Are they on Earth or in a different dimension entirely? These questions are never answered, but, taken as a whole, these stories imply that there are two judgments – one at the moment of death and one during the end times. The idea of a second judgment, followed by a second death for the wicked, is perplexing, but it may have served to reinforce the Christian emphasis on morality. Given this worldview, the risks involved in doing wrong and the need to purify one’s soul are compounded, since divine retribution comes not only in the distant future, but also immediately after death. Despite all contradictions, the Judeo-Christian belief in the afterlife is clearly deeply concerned for the moral fiber of the soul.

Based solely on scriptural texts, the Judeo-Christian eschatology is very black and white. When a soul is judged, it is found good or bad, virtuous or wicked, just or unjust. Souls are either given eternal life in the glorious kingdom of God, or shamed and tortured in the lake of fire. There is no middle ground – no gradation of sins or respective punishments. This is drastically

¹⁹ Revelation 20.10

²⁰ Revelation 20.13-15

changed in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Writing in the early 14th century, Dante reimagined the Christian afterlife. Borrowing heavily from Classical mythology, Dante went to great lengths to give a detailed look at what a more hierarchical Christian afterlife could be. In his first book, *Inferno*, Dante is guided on a mystical journey through hell by none other than the Roman poet Virgil himself. While in hell, Virgil explains how souls are judged by the Greek mythological figure Minos. The souls are then sent off to different levels or circles of Hell depending on the nature and severity of their sins. The deeper the level, the worse the crimes, and the more terrible the punishments. For instance, lower hell contains the souls of individuals who were thieves, hypocrites, liars, and traitors. Satan, the embodiment of evil is imprisoned at the very center, in the deepest part of the abyss. The entire structure of hell is very similar to the way Virgil describes Tartarus in *The Aeneid*. They both contain different regions for people who commit various sins, and the deeper one travels, the more sinister the inhabitants.

Dante also describes the fate of those who are not deserving of the severe punishment found in hell, but also not pure enough to reach heaven. These souls reside either in purgatory or limbo. Purgatory is described as a mountain that souls must climb to ascend into heaven. It is divided up into different terraces representing the seven deadly sins, and on each level the soul is purged of these ailments. The important difference between these souls and the souls that reside in hell is that the inhabitants of purgatory are penitent. They are Christians who regret their unjust actions and wish to purify themselves in order to reach paradise. By contrast, the occupants of limbo are virtuous pagans and unbaptized Christians. These people never committed any crimes or sins, but they also never had a chance to worship God. Limbo is located within the first circle of hell, implying that even a virtuous or innocent life is still miserable without God. They live in relative comfort, but unlike those in purgatory, they have no hope of ever reaching paradise. Although these souls are not tortured, their existence is mundane and empty – in many ways quite similar to the early Greek idea of the afterlife.

Although not strictly part of the Christian religious doctrine, Dante's description of the afterlife is worth mentioning, because it shaped Western thought about life after death for years to come. His work is the culmination of centuries of philosophical and religious thought on the part of the Greeks, Romans, and Israelites. By combining Plato's emphasis on justice and the Bible's focus on spiritual purity with Virgil's graduated system of punishment and reward, Dante synthesized an eschatology that resonated with the Christians of his time. Even more amazing, his work has lived on in the popular mindset of Christians and non-Christians alike as the standard view of what to expect in the afterlife.

Although early Greeks did not consider morality an important factor in one's experience in the afterlife, later Greek and Roman authors placed great importance on one's ethical behavior. Starting with Plato, Greeks became increasingly conscious of how their behavior on earth might affect their existence in Hades. This carried on into the Roman tradition, which, while being in many ways similar to the Greek's, was immensely more detailed and specialized. Early Judeo-Christian thought follows a similar pattern of simplicity to complexity. However, because the Bible is not a single narrative like *The Aeneid*, its afterlife myths are not as consistent or cohesive. Despite this, it is clear that Christians and Jews also believe that salvation and damnation are determined solely by an individual's righteousness. Thanks to writers such as Dante, and the combined influences of Classics and Christianity on the Western world, these eschatologies have coalesced into our modern view of the importance of morality in life after death.

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