

Pragmatism and the Doctrine of Heaven and Hell: A Hermeneutico-Theological Analysis

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Abstract The Catholic theology of eschatology (doctrine of the four last things) identifies the last, post-historic event of the soul in life and after life as death (*morte*), judgement (*judicium*), heaven (*caelum*), and hell (*infernum*). People often conceptualize the last two (heaven and hell) of these four last things (CCC, 1021, 1023, 1033, 1038) as a realm within the physical order, raising questions about the scientific evidence for their specific domicility in space and time, particularly in this verificationistic era of reductive materialism. These scientific attitudes towards religious concepts or doctrinal teachings often lead to atheistic suppositions and, more significantly, detract the Christian community of believers from the numerous practical values inherent in holding such a belief. It also deprives them of the freedom to freely express their religious convictions in faith, which they view as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Under this condition, there is great need to emerge from the conflicting dilemma of belief or disbelief, by proposing a pragmatic dimension which emphasizes practical usefulness or utility of the doctrine of heaven and hell to human life and social order while jettisoning the stern focus on scientific verificationism and evidentialism of their existence in the physical order. To achieve this, we need to ask the question: How can the philosophy of pragmatism help in our understanding and appreciation of the eschatological teaching on heaven and hell? In response, this paper attempts the following undertakings: Firstly, this paper aims to carefully retrieve the fundamentals of pragmatism as a philosophical ideology. Secondly, it delves into the theological and epistemological foundations of heaven and hell. Lastly, it explores the hermeneutic role of pragmatism in understanding the eschatological teaching on heaven and hell.

Keywords: Religion, Science, Heaven, Hell, Eschatology, Pragmatism

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INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of heaven and hell occupies a conspicuous stead among the eschatological teachings of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations (Beasley-Murray, 1948; Bruce, 1958). Traditionally, the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations understand heaven as God's promised reward for all who accept Christ and do His will, and hell as the aBe that as it may, this doctrine and other religious beliefs with metaphysical roots have been severely criticised and even rejected by strict empiricists and logical positivists (such as A. J. Ayer). Their methodological argument has been that since there is no concrete scientific data or evidence to suggest where heaven and hell are physically located, the doctrine has no meaning and the referent does not exist. s meaningless and the referent remains inexistent. The logical positivists only derive meaning

from the scientific method of experimentation and the verifiability principle or criterion (Bube, 1972).

The background to this dispute can be traced to the Modern Period (otherwise known as the age of enlightenment), shortly after the Middle Ages, otherwise known as the age of faith. During this period, there was a clear attack on and rejection of matters of faith, religion, authority, and metaphysics. Reason and science were the two dogmas of this period. David Hume stands out as one of the major figures of this era. Hume argues that we must clear the metaphysical jungle, as it harbors dangerous superstition. If we do not persecute such studies, the theologians will surely take advantage of our ignorance to give metaphysical coverage to their dangerously lethal dogmas. Hume thus argues for the total abandonment of metaphysics. In his words, "there are no ideas which

occur in metaphysics more obscure and uncertain than those of power, force, energy, or necessary connection, of which it is every moment necessary for us to treat in all our disquisitions" (Hume, 1975: section V, part I).

In one of his famous writings, Hume utterly rejects metaphysical statements, religious doctrines, and matters of faith. He asserts, "When we traverse libraries, convinced by these principles, what chaos must we cause?" For example, if we hold a volume of divinity or school metaphysics, can we inquire whether it contains any abstract reasoning related to quantity or number? No! Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence? No! Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion" (Hume, 1975: section VII, part III). It's clear that the way scientists think about religious ideas or metaphysical beliefs makes it hard for Christians to decide whether to believe in heaven and hell or not, because they think the ideas of heaven and hell are false and not based on evidence. However, while critiquing religion and religious beliefs may be beneficial from an academic perspective, focusing solely on the level of reason (*ratio*) without considering faith (*fides*) and neglecting the impact of the final product is akin to overlooking the beauty of the forest while ignoring the trees. The practical values they (heaven and hell) accrue to human life cannot be immediately ignored.

For this reason, there is a need to rearticulate and propose the philosophy of pragmatism as a reasonable attitude in our understanding and appreciation of the eschatological teachings of heaven and hell. The scriptures refer to this mindset when they state, "Always be prepared to give a defence to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you." (1 Peter 3:15). Pragmatism emphasizes practical usefulness, workability, and utility. It may be argued that establishing a physical proof of the existence of heaven and hell is challenging. Contrarily, it's safe to argue that the scientific method's limitations limit its ability to disprove the existence of heaven and hell. Not all realities come within the optics of scientific evaluation. The fact that science cannot access a particular reality does not disprove its existence.

But how then can the philosophy of pragmatism help in our understanding and appreciation of the eschatological teachings on heaven and hell? In answering this question, this paper attempts a hermeneutical and theological analysis of the role of pragmatism in understanding the eschatological teaching on heaven and hell and also proposes the "if attitude" espoused by Blaise Pascal's Wager as a reasonable comparative supposition for holding the belief.

Fundamental Elements of Pragmatism as a Philosophical Ideology

Pragmatism (Gk., *pragma*, "a thing done," "an act," "work," "a thing of consequence," from *prassein*, "to do")

originated in America (Angeles, 1981: 220). In 1878, Charles Sanders Peirce introduced the term pragmatism to refer to principles that are empirical or experimental, as opposed to *a priori*. William James popularized philosophy and expounded it as a theory of truth, action, deed, or practice with applications to psychology, morality, and religion. John Dewey adopted it as a method and developed it further, making it a comprehensive philosophy with implications for our understanding of nature, knowledge, education, values, art, social issues, religion, and just about every area of human concern (Lawhead, 1996: 489). Pragmatism aligns with the spirit of science and technology by emphasizing experience, action, and practical issues. Its focus is not on the origins of our ideas, but rather on the future implications that serve as the "foundations for organizing future observations and experiences" (Dewey, 2011: 24).

Peirce considers almost all propositions of ontological metaphysics to be either meaningless gibberish or else downright absurd (Lindberg, 2000: 19). Peirce's version of pragmatism was born out of his attack on traditional epistemology. For Peirce, beliefs are not just pieces of mental furniture that reside in the mind, nor are they momentary psychological states. Instead, "our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions" (Pierce, 1958: 370). They influence action because beliefs are essentially habits or dispositions to act in specific ways under specific circumstances. The pragmatic goal for Peirce, therefore, is not to have certainty beyond all possible doubt but to have beliefs that are free from all actual doubt. He adds, "Let us not doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts" (Pierce, 1958: 265). Peirce lists four methods to free our beliefs from doubt: the method of tenacity, the method of authority, the *a priori* method, and the method of science. The method of tenacity involves setting rationality aside and clinging to one's opinions with determination and perseverance (Pierce, 1958: 377). A community of believers employs the method of authority, allowing an authority or an institution to dictate their beliefs. Under the *a priori* method, one arrives at beliefs after a process of reflection. Here, we embrace beliefs because they are "agreeable to reason," rather than basing them on logical necessities. Through a broadly considered empirical procedure, the method of science leads to its own confirmation. In other words, science's method reveals errors and self-corrects by testing it against factors that are independent of our cherished beliefs or wishes (Pierce, 1958: 384). Therefore, the pragmatic concern transforms into a belief system that is impervious to doubt (Pierce, 1958: 416).

On his part, William James conceives pragmatism in terms of "what works," what "gives satisfaction," or the "practical consequences" of our belief (James, 2010: 34). James' pragmatism is a commitment to radical empiricism, disdaining utterly all transcendental or metaphysical elements in knowledge (Turner, 1929: 675). John Dewey developed a pragmatic approach to the religious dimension in human experience, arguing for the

importance of the religious quality of experience and asserting its freedom from all "supernaturalistic baggage" (Lawhead, 1996: 489). Peter Angeles sums up some of the main views of pragmatism thus: 1.) Experience, experimental methods, and practical efforts are the sources of knowledge. Pragmatism scrutinizes metaphysical speculation in pursuit of truth.

People often criticize pragmatism for being overly fact-oriented, observation-based, and man-centered, which makes it challenging to truly understand its central and consistent tenets. This difficulty makes pragmatism an ambiguous and amorphous philosophical system, subject to varied and, at times, relatively contradictory interpretations (Ozumba, 2001: 77). This paper will interpret pragmatism as a philosophical system that emphasizes practical usefulness, workability, utility, and valuableness. This aspect of utility or usefulness shall constitute the main thrust of this paper's concern.

Theological and Epistemological Foundations of Heaven and Hell

Religious epistemology encompasses the eschatological theology of heaven and hell. The teaching authority of the church (magisterium) upholds these concepts as true and justifiable, based on revealed truths recorded in the scriptures. They are metaphysical beliefs that are true and justifiable within the sacred precincts of divine revelation (Ukhun, 2015). Their epistemic contents are accessible through faith, for "faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). It would be unkind or hasty to argue for heaven and hell's epistemic indeterminacy because they are not physically created. Although this is usually the common thing to do, there are biblical indications relating heaven as a physical part of the created order (Gen 1:1; Isa 40:22; Ps 104:2). We shall return to this in subsequent discussions. Let us now turn our beam to the conceptualisation of heaven and hell. In religion and theology, heaven designates the "dwelling place of God, the angels, and the blessed—or the condition of final and perfect bliss itself" (Komonchak *et al.*, 1996: 454).

As a physical part of the created order, heaven is the vault of the sky (Gen 1:1; Isa 40:22; Ps. 104:2). People also believe that heaven rests on pillars (Job 26:11), serving as God's resting place (Ps. 11:4; Mic. 1:2; Hab. 2:20; Ps 11:4; Isa. 66:1; Gen. 11:5; Ps 18:10; Dan. 7:7.13). People perceive heaven as the ultimate reward for those who pass away in the state of grace. The New Testament conceptualizes heaven as the full maturity and perfection of human life in God's presence, not as a location. According to Karl Rahner, "at death, each soul, freed from the resistance of its nature, will either ratify or reverse the fundamental option of its life in a single act of total and irreversible self-commitment. The outcome of that total and definitive act of self-commitment is either *salvation* or *damnation*" (McCool, 1975: 352). To live in

heaven is to be with Christ—to see him face-to-face in the holy vision. On this christological basis, it becomes clear that heaven is not primarily a place but a personal relationship. The believer is "in heaven," says Joseph Ratzinger, to the degree that he or she is with Christ; for it is in Christ that one finds an authentic relationship with God (Ratzinger, 1988: 190).

However, 'hell' refers to the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed (CCC, 2000: 1033). Hell is a common name for the dwelling place of the devil and the damned (Date, 2014; Luck, 2016). The literature claims that it is located underground or in the underworld. Related, but not identical, are *Hades* in non-biblical literature and *Gehenna* and *Sheol* in scripture (Lodge, 2017: 301). People perceive Hell as a place of darkness, eternal fire, chains, suffering, and a wide range of fitting punishments (Mt 3:12; 5:22; 5:29ff; 10:28; Mk 9:43ff; Lk 13:28). The teaching of the church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death, the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell—"eternal life." Eternal separation from God, the sole source of man's life and happiness, is the chief punishment of hell (CCC, 2000: 1035).

Scholars, according to C.P. Ragland, hold varying opinions about the nature of hell. The traditional view maintains that hell is characterized by suffering, implying that the damned exist and are conscious, and its purpose is to punish those who have failed to live faithfully in this life. The literal view, on the other hand, asserts that hell encompasses extreme forms of both mental and physical suffering. Psychological views, on the other hand, reject the literal interpretation of hell as a place of physical torment, preferring to see scriptural images of fire, darkness, and so on, as potent symbols or metaphors for the psychological suffering of hell. Therefore, even if the damned experienced physical pleasure, they would still experience psychological suffering, frustration, despair, regret, and self-loathing. Annihilationism teaches that the damned ultimately cease to exist and are therefore not conscious for all eternity. This implies that the fate of the damned does not involve suffering, as it is a non-existent state. Finally, the freewill view teaches that God places the damned in hell not to punish them, but to honor the choices they have freely made. Hell, for them, originates therefore from divine love, not divine justice (*Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2023).

Heaven, Hell, and Pragmatic Reasoning: A Hermeneutico-Theological Analysis

As the title suggests, this section aims to identify the pragmatic reasons—that is, practical usefulness, workability, utility, and valuableness—for firmly adhering to the eschatological belief and teaching on heaven and hell through hermeneutic interpretation. To proceed, it is appropriate to conceptualize hermeneutics as a veritable

philosophical and theological tool for the extraction and dispensation of meaning. One of the most exciting and challenging issues in contemporary philosophical and theological discourses is the problem of meaning or interpretation. Not only has it captured the imagination of scholarship, but it has also led to subjective and objective considerations concerning discussions on hermeneutics. We can understand hermeneutics as a theory, methodology, and praxis of interpretation in its most basic sense (Demeterio, 2001: 1). Hermeneutics, as an art and science of interpretation, aims to "recapture meaning" (Abulad, 2007: 11), which refers to the process of discovering and rediscovering meaning. Hermeneutics initially focused on the interpretation of the Bible, known as biblical exegesis, and the application of the sacred text's claims to believers in later times. Some of the prominent figures of the hermeneutic cycle include Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), and so on.

Our adoption of hermeneutics in this paper is therefore to help us attempt a methodic interpretation of pragmatism and its role in our understanding of the eschatological teaching on heaven and hell. In the thinking of Godfrey Ozumba, "it is really difficult to grasp the central and uniform tenets of pragmatism, because pragmatism is a somewhat ambiguous and amorphous philosophical system, subject to varied and at times contradictory interpretations" (Ozumba, 2000: 77). The pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey, Schiller, and James, for instance, are all different conceptions, making it difficult to arrive at a denotable frame of reference for an organized and uniform systematisation of the tenets of pragmatism. Recognizing this absence of uniformity in thought, this paper views pragmatism in two ways: harsh and mild. Harsh pragmatism is characterized by a strong scientific mindset, method, or attitude toward belief sets. It is a commitment toward fact-oriented, observation-based, and testable consequences. It is antithetical to metaphysical or religious beliefs. Concepts of heaven and hell would be illusory, meaningless, and sheer gibberish in this context, as they lack concrete, scientific proof of their existence in the physical world.

Mild pragmatism, on the other hand, is characterized primarily by usefulness, utility, and value. Here, we conceptualize pragmatism as a form of humanism, recognizing that ideas, beliefs, or statements contribute to the well-being of humans. Mild pragmatism privileges conceptions about God, religion, and morals. This includes theistic pragmatic arguments, as demonstrated in the works of William James, J.S. Mill, Gordon Kaufman, and James Beattie. Theistic pragmatic arguments do not necessarily prove the existence of God, heaven, or hell, but rather they bolster the rational belief in their existence (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2023). It is in this mild sense of usefulness, utility, and value that this paper is sustained and substantiated. Let us now attempt a hermeneutic intervention to understand the role of

pragmatism in the understanding of the eschatological teaching on heaven and hell. Pragmatism places emphasis on usefulness and utility. Given this fact, the concept of heaven and hell becomes useful in shaping our moral life, inclinations, and volitions. It serves as a tool for organizing our lives into meaningful experiences. Our belief in heaven and hell helps guide the direction of our lives as well as formulate our expectations, desires, and objectives. They organize the world in such personal and meaningful conditions, fulfilling human needs and cravings.

Consequently, acting as a necessary guide, the belief in heaven and hell can help to live a morally fine and noble life, because "if we do not have a guide, we stumble" (Aristotle, 1984: Bk VI). The belief in heaven and hell does not only influence the ordering of the means of our moral actions to their proper end; it equally serves as a reasoned plan of doing things. Reasoning itself is a form of deliberation, and if a prudent person deliberates well, it's because they reason well. The depository of unwavering faith, not the presence or absence of scientific evidence, determines the truthfulness or falsity of religious claims about heaven and hell. As such, the only relevant question about the practical usefulness, workability, and utility of heaven and hell that can be directly considered here concerns the intelligible ordering of life and the world that faith alone imposes. Such an ordering is appropriate to the world as we experience it and to the nature of our human existence (Kaufman, 1972: 99).

Hell was mostly developed on retributive justice. People believed that God tries, judges, and punishes the damned, just as he does criminals. God's justice could thus balance out the inequity of his entire historical existence. Another principle that supported the development of the doctrine was that of *deterrence*. At this point, the fear of eternal punishment in hell would serve as motivation for not sinning and for not upsetting the harmony of society through crime (Komonchak, 1996: 458).

Here, we are able to see that pragmatic dimension of usefulness and utility practically at work. It's clear that the fact that religious claims like "heaven and hell" can't be proven doesn't stop us from assuming they are true when we act as moral agents (Kaufman, 1972: 103). Even though we may not immediately understand their truth value, it is right to act in accordance with them. Although scientific verification of heaven and hell is difficult, our belief in them is intelligible, to the extent that they influence or affect our actions, thoughts, and volitions. Pragmatism as a method requires a basis in concrete experience, that is, how ideas or beliefs *function* in our lives. A theological idea has pragmatic truth when it contains value for concrete life (Sium, 1995). Concepts of heaven and hell hold significance for tangible human existence, as their assertions influence our existential, societal, moral, and practical needs. They help check the human natural inclination toward evil, self-centeredness,

and/or mischief by policing, especially, the behavioral excesses of all human agents. Its efficacy lies less in the verification of its epistemic contents as in the actual practical value it portends.

On his part, William James, a theistic pragmatist, introduces his conception of possibilities and applies it to religious claims. William James espouses meliorism, a belief in the world's inherent tendency to improve and the human capacity to contribute to this improvement. Meliorism treats religious claims such as salvation, God, heaven, and hell as possibilities. This possibility becomes more of a probability (James, 2010: 128). James assumes a world/reality that is still evolving. Belief in religious claims like heaven and hell enhances this process more effectively. Under these ideals, our actions contribute to the subject and predicate part of reality. Through actions, guided by our beliefs or ideals, we create a ripple of cultivated agents who in turn shape the social order. It's crucial to understand that the concepts of heaven and hell are not merely theoretical concepts; instead, they find their foundation, continuity, and validation in tangible possibilities. James thus grounds religious claims or beliefs as living possibilities that concretely enhance our lives (James, 2010: 128).

Pragmatism creates a kind of relativism of beliefs because what is true, useful, workable, or practical for one person may not hold sway for another. The method adopted to prove or disprove a position is relative to that employed to achieve the same or different goal with respect to other positions. That is why, as we apply the pragmatic test to concepts of heaven and hell, we ought to stake ourselves and our lives on one position or another in order to act and work in the world as the terms of it specify (Kaufman, 1972: 108). If this fails, we should give these claims our full commitment only to preserve their meaning or function. The belief in heaven and hell carries positive social implications that not only guide human action or moral choices alone but guard against the evils of *nihilism*. To believe in heaven and hell is to act as if a supra-sensible reality exists, to live by this longing, and to make it the force behind our actions.

In his work, *Three Essays on Religion*, John Stuart Mill presents a theistic, pragmatic defense of religion and religious beliefs. Mill argues that where probabilities fail, hope can properly flourish. He writes, "To anyone who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state (of things) as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope" (Mill, 2009: 144). Viewing heaven and hell as superstructures of hope sustains the basis of intelligible concrete experiences, thereby granting the license to hope. If believing in heaven and hell makes one happy or helps others, Mill allows it. The pragmatic implication of a belief in heaven and hell is the assurance of undiluted hope, freed from unwavering doubt. Mill further argued that while one may "hope" for the existence of God, hell, and heaven, they may not "believe" in their existence due to a lack of evidence. If we concur with Mill that faith can

thrive on hope, trust, or any other non-doxastic attitude beyond belief, then hope can also serve as the foundation for a theistic commitment to heaven and hell.

James Beattie, another theistic pragmatist, advocates for the consolation and need-based considerations of religious claims. For him, religious beliefs provide consolation, especially to those suffering or oppressed (Beattie, 1971: part III, ch. III). Therefore, depriving someone of their religious beliefs significantly worsens their situation. Given this, we can say that the concepts of heaven and hell provide pragmatic consolation to those who are suffering, oppressed, and dying. Furthermore, certain human needs are satisfied by religious beliefs. We have existential needs, such as the need for consolation from despair, which are essential to our well-being. A belief in heaven and hell satisfies these existential needs and therefore justifies the pragmatic demands of usefulness, utility, and value.

Lastly, from a pragmatic viewpoint, belief in heaven and hell provides solace in times of grief and loss by giving hope and comfort. It offers a framework for processing life's challenges and injustices, inspiring spiritual and personal growth, understanding cosmic justice and morality, serving to explain human suffering and responsible living, and acting strongly as a coping mechanism for meaningful human existence.

CONCLUSION

This paper primarily aims to explore the question: How can the philosophy of pragmatism aid in our comprehension and appreciation of the eschatological teachings on heaven and hell? This was done in three ways. The first method involved a critical retrieval of the fundamentals of pragmatism as a philosophical ideology. The second method involved a critical unearthing of the theological and epistemological foundations of heaven and hell. The third method involved a thorough examination of the hermeneutic role of pragmatism in our understanding of the eschatological teaching on heaven and hell. The paper understands that while heaven is God's promised reward for all who accept Christ and do His will, hell is the abode for all who denounce him. Regrettably, the agent becomes undecided when faced with numerous compelling options, leading to a complex dilemma. People perceive the concept of heaven and hell as probabilistic, hypothetical, and devoid of concrete evidence, leading to this dilemma. While we cannot scientifically prove or demonstrate heaven and hell, their practical usefulness, utility, and valuableness to human life and well-being surpass the demand for any scientific demonstration. We cannot immediately overlook the existential usefulness, social utility, and moral values they contribute to human life.

In this situation, it is crucial to break free from the conflicting dilemma and develop a new perspective for a more comprehensible understanding. If the doubt

continues, it appears that adopting the "if attitude" from Blaise Pascal's famous theistic pragmatic arguments, also known as Pascal's wager, would be the best course of action. According to this wager, it could be more rational and advantageous to accept the existence of heaven and hell. This way, even if heaven proves to be a hoax, one would still have gained a moral and desirable life on earth. However, if one believes in the existence of heaven and hell and it turns out to be true, this belief could be dangerous. This is because the person would have lost the infinite gains (as represented by eternity in heaven) and fallen into the abyss of infinite loss (as represented by eternity in hell). While it may be beneficial for academic purposes to critically examine religion and religious beliefs, focusing solely on the level of reason (ratio) without considering faith (fides) and overlooking the significance of the end result is akin to ignoring the beauty of the forest for the sake of counting trees. Therefore, believing in heaven and hell is a reasonable supposition that provides a defensible framework for an intelligible social, religious, moral, and human existence.

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