

# Hell: On the Absolutization of Suffering

## Introduction

Heaven and hell are the two most vivid and dramatic representations of joy and fear human beings in most cultures have developed regarding life after death. Heaven is the place where human beings attain perfect happiness, whereas hell is where extreme suffering falls on condemned sinners. This chapter examines the representations of heaven and hell in Western and Chinese cultures. Through a hermeneutic interpretation of the theories of heaven and hell, it is suggested that such representations are the result of the absolutization of the ideas of happiness and suffering. As such they are based on a theory of retribution. Whether or not heaven and hell exist is not the main concern for believers. They are only moral ideas.

## I

When I was about nine years old, my Sunday Bible school teacher once threatened me. She said, “If you are that naughty, you will be punished by burning forever in hell; but if you are a good boy doing what God asks you to do, you will be happy everlastingly in heaven.” I was scared because I had done something bad. I was sure that I had to go to hell and would suffer painfully in eternal fire. However, during that frightened and sleepless night, I suddenly said to myself: “If I am burned ceaselessly do I feel any more pain? If I am forever happy, am I really happy?” Since then, I no longer went to Sunday school.

Do we still believe in heaven and hell? Or can we believe in heaven and hell if we are not Christians? Are “heaven” and “hell” universal in all cultures or just in the Christian tradition? What are “heaven” and “hell”? Are they real places located somewhere on earth or in the universe? Is it true that only the dead are in heaven or hell? If they really exist, are they not in this life? Do heaven and hell belong only to the “life after death”? If yes, what then is the meaning of the “life” after “death”? Whether we believe in them or not, the meanings

associated with heaven and hell have immense importance to our life. It is because whenever we think of happiness and long for the possession of happiness forever, we know eternal happiness can only be possible in heaven. At the same time, whenever we are in agony and in misery, we dread that the pain will last forever as eternal suffering in hell. Hence heaven and hell are the two most intensified visions of happiness and suffering. These two metaphors, whether or not they refer to things that really exist, have been the foundation for the question of the meaning and value of life. If there is no existence after this life, then all the innocent suffering and virtuous deeds will not be compensated and rewarded; then all the atrocities and evils will remain unpunished. Morality seems to be meaningless. If there are justice and love, there should be retribution: all the good and innocent people must be given happiness and all the culprits and sinners must be punished. The ultimate answer to a happy or wicked life should lie in the postulation of heaven and hell.

The literature on heaven and hell, as well as on happiness and suffering, is vast. Yet a philosophical discussion on the meaning of happiness and suffering in light of heaven and hell, especially from a comparative perspective, seems lacking. Though the metaphors of heaven and hell are present in both Chinese and Western cultures, the meaning and content are not the same. In general, the Christian heaven and hell are determined by the love and hatred of God. Consequently, the idea of happiness and suffering are derivatives of this religious belief. True happiness exists only in the love and grace of God. In contrast, the Chinese idea of heaven and hell does not come from Confucianism and Daoism, but from India, Buddhism. Hence the Chinese heaven and hell are colored by Buddhist thought as well as by Confucian ethics.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand heaven and hell from the comparative point of view. I would like to show, in the final analysis, that heaven and hell are only projections of human hope, a metaphysical fantasy of imagination, which aspires for the annihilation of all suffering and the attainment of perfect happiness. Dissatisfied with the present life, heaven and hell are the results of our utopian propensity.

## II

Hell is surely not a Christian monopoly.<sup>1</sup> Yet in both classical Greek and Chinese mythologies, hell is not portrayed as the place of severe punishment after death. In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes existence in *Hades* as “a shadow or a dream.”<sup>2</sup> When we come to die, “we no longer have sinews keeping the bones and flesh together, but once the life-force has departed from our white bones, all is consumed by the fierce heat of the blazing fire, and the soul slips away like a dream and flutters on the air.”<sup>3</sup> Even in the *Old Testament*, there is no definite description of a place of torment, and *Sheol*, the equivalence of *Hades*, is but “the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is as darkness.”<sup>4</sup> Yet this kingdom of the dead is not limited to the bad (*Numbers* 16:30) but also to the good.<sup>5</sup> The shadowy and ghostly existence in either *Hades* or *Sheol* is to remove life completely from the rest of all beings. Perhaps the agony of this lifeless “life” is precisely this absolute separation. The longing for a simple existence rather than a heroic life by the dead Achilles illustrates this misery.<sup>6</sup> Or the lament in *Psalms* 88: “For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to *Sheol*. I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom thou remember no more, for they are cut off from thy hand.” The dead souls are abandoned by life and by God. They are worthless existence. But there is no torture, no severe punishment for the evil deeds. Retribution is somewhat foreign to the ancient civilizations.

Much the same is true for ancient Chinese culture. In the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (《山海經》), the underworld of the dead is referred to as *youdou* (幽都), the “Dark Land,” where a cold, wet and misty environment prevails.<sup>7</sup> Another name for the underworld is

<sup>1</sup> See Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993; Bernstein, Alan E., *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1946, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> *Job* 10:21-22.

<sup>5</sup> *Genesis* 37:35.

<sup>6</sup> See Homer, *op.cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> 《山海經·海內經》：「北海之內，名曰幽都，黑水出焉，地下幽冥，故稱幽都。」

wangquan (黃泉), the “Yellow Springs.” Since the Chinese people in the ancient times generally placed great emphasis on this life on earth, little attention was paid to the condition of the underworld. *Wangquan* is indeed the home of the dead but there is nothing fearful in it. As an ode recorded on the death of a Prince goes: “The Yellow Springs below are dark and cryptic. But man being born, so also must he die, Why then be sad and of a mournful heart?”<sup>8</sup>

The horror of hell entered into Western civilization through Christianity, in particular through the messages of Jesus Christ and his disciples in the *New Testament*. Christ has referred to hell a number of times and warns of its miserable condition: “There men will weep and gnash their teeth.”<sup>9</sup> And: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”<sup>10</sup> Such sayings of Christ have great consequences. The logic is simple, since Christ is “the way, and the truth, and the life”;<sup>11</sup> only through him can mankind be saved. Whoever acts against him behaves contrary to God’s will and will be condemned forever. Whoever believes in him is rewarded with eternal life. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”<sup>12</sup> However, apart from speaking of the torment by eternal fire,<sup>13</sup> Christ has given few descriptions of hell in the *Four Gospels*. Only one thing is clear: hell is the place for all condemned sinners in eternal torment of fire. The apocalyptic vision in the Last Judgment reconfirms the message of Christ: “And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”<sup>14</sup>

Vivid and concrete descriptions of hell, though not present in the *New Testament*, are the main themes of the later *Apocalypses of Peter, Paul and Thomas*, the so-called vision literature, which is the prototype of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In *The Apocalypse of Peter*, specific

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1954, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> *Matthew* 10:28, and 5:30, 8:12.

<sup>10</sup> *Matthew* 25:41.

<sup>11</sup> *John* 14:6.

<sup>12</sup> *John* 11:25.

<sup>13</sup> *Luke* 16:24.

<sup>14</sup> *Revelation* 20:10

tortures for certain definite sins are already meticulously described. Here is just one example:

Ezrael the angel of wrath shall bring men and women, with half of their bodies burning, and cast them into a place of darkness, the hell of men; and a spirit of wrath shall chastise them with all manner of torment, and a worm that never sleeps shall devour their entrails; and these are the persecutors and betrayers of my righteous ones. And beside those who are there, shall be other men and women, gnawing their tongues; and they shall torment them with red-hot irons and burn their eyes. These are they who slander and doubt my righteousness.<sup>15</sup>

Since then, numerous paintings and works of literature have furnished details with all possible suffering imaginable in hell. The purpose is obvious: hell is depicted as the most horrible place ever. All negative adjectives seem to be not enough to describe the torment, anguish, pain, sorrow, agony, misery and suffering of the condemned souls in the everlasting fire.

Perhaps the most vivid representation of hell is in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, one of the greatest literary works in the early Renaissance. Dante, through his pilgrimage to the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, succeeded in applying philosophical, theological, mythological and literary knowledge and skill to a personal experience of the journey. Once and for all, Dante demonstrates all the possible scenarios for Christians and pagans, believers and sinners in the three realms of existence beyond terrestrial life. According to Turner, "With Dante, the history of Hell entered a new stage. He killed off vision literature altogether, and in a sense he helped to kill off Hell itself by making it possible to think about it in fictional or allegorical terms. He abandoned the old pretense of 'truth' in vision literature and invited readers to join him and Virgil in a story, an artistic creation by an individual writer looking back with an appreciative and critical eye at the work of other writers."<sup>16</sup> Dante's *Inferno* is in fact not a strict reproduction of Christ's lake of fire. Its geography is like a funnel, divided into layers leading to the center of the earth. There are altogether nine circles separated by three rivers.

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<sup>15</sup> J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in a Translation Based on M.R. James*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 606.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

Dante, guided by the Roman poet Virgil, crossed the river Acheron on the ferry of Charon and entered into the Limbo, where the virtuous unbaptized souls of the pagans, though they had not committed any grievous personal sin, could not enter into eternal happiness because of their original sin. There Dante met Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other Greek philosophers in deep sorrow. In spite of their wisdom and virtues, they were denied to enter the eternal bliss because they had not heard the good news from Christ. After the Limbo, there were the circles for those who had committed the seven deadly sins: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy and Pride, would suffered in various tormenting and painful punishment. They were not just, as Christ had pronounced, burned in eternal fire, but were subjected to all imaginable ways of “tortures,” e.g. they were slaughtered or swallowed by monsters, or dismembered, or broken on the wheel or smothered in fire and brimstone.

Indeed, the suffering and misery in hell is beyond our comprehension. And it is meant to be unbearable by any human being. The impact on the Western world of Dante’s pilgrimage to hell was powerful. Together with all subsequent paintings by Giotto, Michelangelo, Bosch and many other artists from the Renaissance onwards, hell is now a “reality” supported by a dramatic account of a personal journey, where historical personalities and events were encountered and where the details of the appalling scenes were vividly portrayed. Whoever looks up the *Last Judgment* on the interior of the cupola of the Florence Duomo<sup>17</sup> will be reminded of the “reality” of hell and heaven. The sinners’ agonizing weeping and groaning in the horrific torments seem to fill up the immense space below the cupola. In the same way, the bodily pain and physical punishment in the gruesome pictures on the interior of the San Gimignano Duomo present a severe warning to all churchgoers to be aware of their sins. The price for all mortal sins is eternal damnation and suffering. Of all the sins the most serious is of course the disobedience to God. The believers’ eternal abandonment by God as a result of this sin is most painful of all.

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<sup>17</sup> The Florence Duomo, designed by the great architect-sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio (c. 1245-1302), was finished around 1367. The cupola was not completed until 1436. The interior painting, the *Last Judgment*, was done by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and Federico Zuccari (c. 1540-1609).

One of the most famous pilgrimage stories in China is of course *The Journey to the West*, a fiction based on Xuanzang (玄奘 596-664), a monk of the Tang Dynasty who traveled to India in quest of Buddhist scriptures. The fiction was composed by Wu Cheng-en in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, some two hundred years later than Dante's *Divine Comedy*. For our present purpose, the two journeys to Hell by the Monkey-king, Sun Wu-kung (孫悟空), and the Tang Emperor are indeed interesting in contrast to Dante's *Inferno*. The journey of the Wu-kung to Hell is in fact comic, because the Monkey-king, after acquiring immense magic ability, feared nothing, not even death. During a usual sleep, he was dragged by the death soldiers down to the Palace of Darkness to face Yama, King of Death. Wu-kung was defiant and fought everyone in the courts. The Ten Kings of the Underworld finally yielded to Wu-kung's demand. After finding his name on the *Documents of Life and Death*, he realized his destined 342 years of life were not enough though he died with a good end. He just fetched a brush to cross out his name as well as all other monkey friends. From then on, he was immortal since there was no record of his name at all.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the journey of the Tang Emperor was a different story. In Chapter 11, the Emperor was led to the Palace of Darkness for the charge against him by the Dragon King of the Ching River because he did not fulfill his promise to protect the life of the dragon. Once again, he was given twenty more years to live because Judge Tsui, a friend of the Emperor's minister, added two strokes above the supposed age of the Emperor on the *Document of Life and Death* changing it from the thirteenth year of Chen-Kun to the thirty-third. Because he still had time to live, he was asked to travel through the underworld back to the living world. There the Emperor saw all the torments and tortures of all sinners in the ten levels of hell. Upon seeing all the suffering, he vowed to save all those souls. This was the ground for sending Xuanzang to the West for the quest of Buddhist scriptures. Through this heroic quest, if successful, all the crimes and sins which the "good" Tang Emperor committed against his brothers and fellow men would be elevated. On the way through the various levels of hell, the Tang Emperor witnessed all kind of sinners and criminals with their respective sets of tortures before he reached the Sixfold Path of Transmigration (六道輪廻):

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<sup>18</sup> Wu Cheng-en, *The Journey to the West* (吳承恩:《西遊記》), vol. 1, trans. and ed. Anthony C. Yu, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1977, chapter 4.

The Hell of the Rack, The Hell of Gloomy Guilt, The Hell of the Fiery Pit: All such sorrow, all such desolation, are caused by a thousand sins committed in the life before: They all come to suffer after they die. The Hell of Hades, the Hell of Tongue-Pulling, the Hell of Skin-Shredding: All those weeping and wailing, all those pining and mourning, Await the traitors, the rebels, and the Heaven baiters; He of Buddha-mouth and serpent-heart will end up here...But cries to Earth and Heaven find no response. So it is that man should not betray his own conscience, for gods are knowing; whom will they overlook? Vice and virtue will get their due in the end—A matter of payment early or late.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, this picture of hell was a modification of the original Indian Buddhist concept with the infusion of Confucianism. The idea of hell came with Buddhism in the Han Dynasty. Yet it has never been a unitary concept, as there is no agreement on how many levels or hells there are, whether the number is 8, 10, 15, 18, 30, 64 or even infinite.<sup>20</sup> The most popular idea is that there are 10 levels of hell, as depicted in *The Journey to the West* and portrayed in hundreds of Hell Scrolls, pictures, woodcuts and sculptures in many Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples.<sup>21</sup> The idea of ten levels of hell means that there are ten courts, presided by a definite King of the Underworld. All major crimes are “against Confucian ethics, Buddhist dietary restriction and sexual conduct.”<sup>22</sup> The most severe crimes are of course betraying parents and Emperors. Each court is responsible for sinners and criminals, who after being tried by the King, would be condemned to a definite kind of punishment. Wolfram Eberhard’s meticulous description of the Tenth Hell illustrates the fusion of Confucianism into the original Buddhist idea of hell.<sup>23</sup> The most important meaning of hell is retribution according to the moral or immoral deeds done by the person in life. But in the end, the Tenth Hell is the Wheel of Life and Death, where all

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 243-245.

<sup>20</sup> See 蕭登福：《漢魏六朝佛道兩教之天堂地獄說》，台北：學生書局，1989，頁83-100。

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wolfram Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967; Neal Donnelly, *A Journey Through Chinese Hell: “Hell Scrolls” of Taiwan*, Taipei: Artist Publishing Co. 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Donnelly, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Eberhard, *op. cit.*, chapter 2.



punished souls would be assigned to their respective kind of next life. They may become human beings again, good or bad, lucky or unlucky, according to their dues. Or they may become different kinds of animals. One thing is certain: they will forget what they have done in their previous lives after drinking the “Forgetting soup” from Meng-pao (孟婆). In *The Journey to the West*, there is a vivid description on the Sixfold Path of Transmigration, which reads as follows:

Those who perform good works will ascend to the way of the immortals; those who remain patriotic to the end will advance to the way of nobility; those who practice filial piety will be born again into the way of blessing; those who are just and honest will enter once more into the way of humans, those who cherish virtues will proceed to the way of riches; those who are vicious and violent will fall back into the way of demons.<sup>24</sup>

The striking difference between the Chinese and the Christian hell lies in the ultimate nature of torment.<sup>25</sup> The association between hell and suffering is a major theme for both cultures. While the Christian hell stresses the eternity of damnation, the Chinese one is much more lenient. Sinners are given another chance to have life again after the ordeal of trial and punishment in various courts of hell. At the end of the tenth hell, the sinners will be redirected to the gate of rebirth. The idea of reincarnation is clearly contrary to Christian belief. At the same time, instead of suffering forever, the torments are confined within the process of going through different levels of hell, and once sinners are out of hell they will forget all the things of the past. Suffering is only temporary.

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<sup>24</sup> Wu, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

<sup>25</sup> Similar to the Christian hell, the Indian Buddhist idea is also full of eternal punishments, as depicted in the *Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* “Avici Hell.” The eighth hell is called the “Avici Hell” (無間地獄) or the Hell of No Interval, the lowest of the hell realms. There is punishment using such devices as forks, clubs, hawks, serpents, jackals, hounds, mills, grinders, saws, chisels, files, choppers, boiling pots, iron nets and cords, and iron mules and horses. Other hideous tortures and punishments force these miserable beings to cover their heads with their own skin after being flayed alive, after which hot molten iron is poured onto their bodies; and when they are hungry they are forced to swallow chunks of iron and drink molten iron when thirsty. This unimaginably horrible torture and contuse goes on throughout years and kalpas numbering in nayutas. In this manner they suffer incessantly, without remission for even one instant whatsoever. Thus is the meaning of Avici.

### III

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), an important puritan pastor in colonial America, preached in his sermon about hell graphically:

That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. *There* is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is Hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and Hell but the air; 'tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.<sup>26</sup>

Hell is true and real! Hell is constructed according to the principle of retribution. All the pains, torments, tortures, sorrows and horrors serve only one purpose: *Thou shalt not sin!* Otherwise, hell is the price. Evil never wins, as all the evil deeds will be duly eliminated through punishment. Eternal suffering is the result of willful acts of committing crimes, which are wrongly mistaken as beneficial to the actors. All the sins of greed, lust, pride and immorality are fundamentally thought of as good or pleasurable. For those sinners who do not admit the outcome of utter selfishness for momentary gain of pleasure will be suffering forever. At the same time, they refuse to acknowledge that the real meaning of the temporary misfortune of a virtuous, moral and pious life is a reward of eternal happiness in heaven. Death is no escape from evil. There is still an existence after death to pay off all the good and evil in this life. Hell is therefore the absolutization of suffering. It is a place for the utmost unhappiness of the damned.

But what is pain? After going through the horrific descriptions of hell in literature, paintings and church interiors, this question becomes more poignant. Is the pain thus portrayed in these horrific scenes meant to be a deterrent for sinners or a sadistic enjoyment? Indeed, all the meticulous and vivid punishments in hell seem to be the contents of an encyclopedia of torture. All possible bodily pains are displayed: bodies are dismembered, devoured, boiled, grilled, cut into pieces, hanged, strangled, forced to swallow hot mortar or excrement, etc. And the expression of the punished is full of agony, misery, anguish, repentance, remorse and sorrow. Such suffering surely induces fear and anxiety in the observers. Beware of your deeds in this earthly life or else you will be punished forever in hell.

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<sup>26</sup> Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, Southbend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, p. 1.

Yet are all these horrors in hell fictitious, pure invention of the human imagination? Or are they created by the very creator of the universe and of humanity? If this is the case, how can this utmost cruelty be reconciled with the infinite mercy and goodness of God? How can a loving God permit the existence of an eternity of suffering? Why does God not extend salvation to the condemned? Bertrand Russell in *Why I Am Not a Christian* comments: "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."<sup>27</sup> Here I am not going into the hundred years old debate between the apologetics and the disbelievers about the problem of evil in contrast to the eternal goodness of God. Nevertheless, I may concede to Jerry Walls's justification of the existence of hell with the help of Kant's argument that "the traditional doctrine of hell does appeal to our self-interest as a reason to love God and be moral".<sup>28</sup> But I find it extremely difficult to accept that we are to be blamed for the institution of hell as C. S. Lewis said, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened."<sup>29</sup> If such views are accepted unreflectively then all terror and violence are justified, then goodness will be tainted with blood, no matter how sinful this blood may be. If ultimate goodness is gained with the institution of eternal terror in hell, this goodness is never innocent. How can the saints be in joy while there are infinite sinners in everlasting pain?

Once again, here is my question: what, then, is pain? The horror of hell lies in the certainty of pain. A modern definition of pain is: "a disagreeable experience which we originally associate with a bodily lesion, or describe in terms of tissue damage, or both simultaneously."<sup>30</sup> Hence when the body is damaged or hurt, pain is felt. In this sense, pain has a positive aspect. If we do not feel pain, then we do not know when

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<sup>27</sup> Walls, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Cavendish, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, New York: Harmony Books, 1977, p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> Roselyne Rey, *The History of Pain*, trans. Louis Elliott Wallace, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 332.

and how we are hurt. Pain is a warning signal to the consciousness that somewhere in our body something is not in order. Yet what if pain is not felt or is endured? Epicurus has already an answer:

Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh.<sup>31</sup>

This insight of Epicurus in the nature of pain throws light on our understanding of the torment of hell. When we see those pictures of tortures we induce from the facial expressions of the tormented figures that they are in great agony and pain. By sympathetic understanding we would feel the same pain. The pain is thereby transferred from the perceived objects to our own self. If this is the case then we are successfully scared. Precisely here lies the question: what if the tortured do not feel any pain and what if we do not have this sympathy of pain?

The Marquis de Sade and later Sigmund Freud raised even a further question: what if pain is enjoyed? The answer: either we take pleasure in watching people suffer, or the tormented not only does not feel any pain, he/she is enjoying the pain, or both. The dialectics of pain and pleasure can be demonstrated in the history of torture in both Chinese and Western culture. All the tortures described in the literature and paintings of hell are not just pure inventions. They were indeed real events practiced by real people in the past. Torture was regarded as legal practice for “the inquiry of truth.”<sup>32</sup> We are horrified to know that such atrocity has been tolerated and sanctioned until recently in the whole history of humankind.<sup>33</sup> More terribly, we know there is a paradoxical relationship between pain and pleasure. Perhaps the ultimate horror of all is to read the description of Georges Bataille on the photographs of a tortured man in Peking in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The man was undergoing the torture of *lingchi* (凌遲), a death penalty by cutting the body into a thousand pieces. Bataille gives this description:

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<sup>31</sup> Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines,” in Whitney J. Oates ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, New York: Random House, 1940, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Peters, *Torture*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1975, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Article 1 of the *Declaration against Torture* adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1975.

[...] as an example of *horripilation*: when one's hair stands on end! I have been told that in order to prolong the torture, opium is administered to the condemned man. Dumas insists upon the ecstatic appearance of the victim's expression. There is, of course, something undeniable in his expression, no doubt due at least in part to the opium, which augments what is most anguishing about this photograph. [...] This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable. I wonder what the Marquis de Sade would have thought of this image, Sade who dreamed of torture, which was inaccessible to him, but who never witnessed an actual torture session. In one way or another, this image was incessantly before his eyes. But Sade would have wished to see it in solitude, at least in relative solitude, without which the ecstatic and voluptuous effect is inconceivable.<sup>34</sup>

These are indeed terrible photos in the extreme. However, what Bataille seems to miss was the expression of the audience surrounding the torture in close range. These people did not shy away and they watched the torture with intense interest and attention. Undoubtedly, they were enjoying the show! This is exactly what is most horrifying. Yet, both the supposed "ecstasy" of the tortured man and the "pleasure" of the audience point to a paradox: pain is after all not that painful!

If bodily pain can be tolerated what is then the horror of suffering in hell? If bodily pain cannot last, what is then the meaning of eternal pain?

#### IV

I think the horror of suffering does not lie in pain at all. Suffering is the *pathos* of human beings caused not necessarily by bodily pain but by despair—and the most acute form of despair is hopelessness. The inscriptions on the Gate of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* describe precisely this despair:

Through me you pass into the city of woe:  
Through me you pass into eternal pain:  
Through me among the people lost for aye.

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<sup>34</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989, pp. 205-206.

Justice the founder of my fabric moved:  
 To rear me was the task of power divine,  
 Supremest wisdom, and primeval love.  
 Before me things create were none, save things  
 Eternal, and eternal I endure.  
 All hope abandon, ye who enter here.<sup>35</sup>

Eternal hopelessness is the greatest suffering of all. All our regret and repent would be meaningless because there is no hope for any pardon. Near the end of *The Apocalypse of Peter*, the message is clear:

And all those in torment shall say with one voice, "Have mercy upon us, for now we know the judgment of God, which he declared to us beforetime and we did not believe." And the angel Tatirokos shall come and chastise them with even greater torment, and say to them, "Now do you repent, *when it is no longer the time for repentance, and nothing of life remains.*"<sup>36</sup>

Because there is no hope there is also no purpose nor expectation. There is no meaning at all to endure anything. Because there is no hope, there is also no future. There is no time and there is no longer life. But is this another inconceivable paradox? If there is neither time nor life, what is there that remains to suffer? What is, then, the idea of hopelessness? Paradoxically, the anxiety of hopelessness is only applicable to those who are still living; that is, those who still have time can be in suffering for any hope at all. Once he/she is dead, there is no life nor time for hope. Hopelessness means nothing to the dead.

Once again, Epicurus's words remind us of another meaning of death besides the Christian concept: "Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation."<sup>37</sup> If Epicurus is right, then what happens after we die is of no concern to us. There is no life after death, therefore there is no heaven and hell. "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either

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<sup>35</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Francis Cary, London: Bibliophile Books, 1988, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> My emphasis. Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 608.

<sup>37</sup> Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," in Whitney J. Oates ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, New York: Random House, 1940, p. 30.

the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.”<sup>38</sup> By quoting Epicurus, we come to another problem of great philosophical significance: what is death? As I have mentioned in the introduction, the problem of heaven and hell lies in the conception of death. Because happiness in heaven and suffering in hell presuppose there is existence after death. However, this existence after death is extremely difficult to understand. We try to interpret it by analogical thinking that this existence is like “life.” Only by doing so can we project all the possible torments and sufferings onto this life-like existence. Only on the basis of this understanding can we feel the agony of pain in hell as we watch and read anything about heaven and hell. Only through our imagination is suffering enlarged and absolutized to become the sole meaning of hell. Yet this very meaning is only meaningful with reference to this life. There is indeed great suffering in all life on earth. And it is therefore possible to have all kinds of hell. Hell is real because suffering is real. Because there are numerous living hells in our history: in Nazi’s Auschwitz, in the Siberian Gulags, in the labor camps during the Cultural Revolution, in the killing fields of Cambodia, etc. We do not have to be dead to visit hell.

If we truly believe in hell, then terror and violence are justified forever; then love and justice remain only as empty words.

But what, then, is heaven?

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.