

# The Afterlife Dilemma

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The Christian “pro-life” or anti-abortion movement has a serious, though largely unappreciated, problem. This particular problem is not about the challenges involved in trying to stop abortions from occurring. Rather, it has to do with the coherence or intelligibility of what pro-life Christians believe. It appears that some popular pro-life Christian beliefs, when viewed in combination, don’t make sense and cannot be reasonably endorsed.

Let’s consider what many pro-life Christians believe about God, the afterlife, and abortion.

- ◆ As part of their Christian faith, they believe that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect creator of our universe.
- ◆ They believe there are two afterlife destinations for human souls: some enjoy eternal happiness and rewards in heaven, and others face intense, inescapable, eternal suffering in hell. They assume that the unborn humans who die at the embryonic or fetal stage, whether by abortion or miscarriage, spend eternity in heaven or else they all go to hell. (Some Christians have a firm conviction about whether embryos and fetuses are heaven-bound or hell-bound, while others are uncertain about this.)
- ◆ As pro-life advocates, these Christians are deeply opposed to the practice of abortion and believe that preventing abortions should be a top priority on Christians’ social and political agenda.

This popular Christian pro-life view appears to be undermined by a simple but powerful line of argument. I call it the *Afterlife Dilemma*. The argument implies that many pro-life Christians need to abandon or modify their theological commitments or their pro-life commitments.

To set the stage for the Afterlife Dilemma, let’s imagine the following hypothetical scenario. You are a Christian in a lifeboat. To the east of you is one drowning person; to the west is another. You only have time to paddle over and rescue one of these people. Let’s suppose that, as far as you know, there is only one noteworthy difference between them. You have good reason to believe that one of them is “saved,” and will thereby go to heaven if they die now. And you have equally good evidence that the other person is “unsaved” and will go to hell if they die now. Faced with this tragic choice, whom should you rescue?

The answer: you ought to rescue the unsaved person. This resembles the sort of triage used in medical emergencies, where priority is given to treating those in need of immediate critical care over those with less severe medical issues. The lifeboat scenario calls for a kind of *spiritual triage*, where – in addition to medical matters of life, death, and health – one takes into consideration people’s afterlife prospects. While both of the potential rescuees are at risk of dying, the unsaved

person faces an imminent risk of eternal damnation and so has far more at stake. Additionally, Christians recognize that they have an obligation to promote the salvation of the unsaved. Rescuing an unsaved individual is no guarantee that they will ever become saved, but it at least opens up space for that possibility. There will be no possibility of salvation if the person dies now. So, the unsaved person should be rescued. The more general lesson: rescuing those who are currently hell-bound should be prioritized over rescuing those who are heaven-bound.

Now onto the Afterlife Dilemma. When an unborn human being dies, does it go to hell or heaven?

First let's suppose that the millions of embryos and fetuses that die every year go to hell. This would assuredly justify treating abortion, embryo destruction, and miscarriage as matters of extreme moral and spiritual urgency. However, this possibility raises serious doubts about God's alleged moral goodness. How could an all-powerful, all-knowing being who is loving, merciful, and perfectly good allow some souls to be subjected to eternal suffering when they had no opportunity to be saved, given that they died before ever acquiring the capacity to think or make choices? Some might claim that God allows embryos and fetuses to be sent to hell in order to achieve some greater good. But it's hard to believe that, over the course of human history, many billions of souls could be justifiably subjected to eternal torment for the sake of some greater good that only benefits other beings. Nor does it seem reasonable to believe that embryos and fetuses that die in the womb could deserve everlasting suffering. In any event, how could a morally good being purposefully choose to create a universe where the eternal damnation of billions of unborn humans was foreseen as a possible, if not certain, outcome? Surely a morally perfect being would never create such a universe. So, if all embryos and fetuses that die go to hell, Christian pro-life advocates need to abandon their belief in the morally perfect god of traditional Christianity. For some, this will prompt a move to agnosticism or atheism, which very well might undermine their reasons for opposing abortion in the first place.

Next let's suppose that aborted or miscarried embryos and fetuses go to heaven. This possibility doesn't raise doubts about the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect God, but it does introduce a different problem. If embryos and fetuses go to heaven, the above conclusion about spiritual triage suggests that preventing the deaths of embryos and fetuses should *not* be a top priority on Christians' agenda. When forced to choose between rescuing heaven-bound or currently hell-bound individuals, Christians should prioritize saving those who are hell-bound. Rather than focusing on abortion, Christians should be putting their scarce resources – their time, money, talents, political capital, etc. – toward the goal of preventing the deaths of unsaved humans.

On this heaven option, it seems rather perverse that Christians would fixate on the goal of preventing abortions. Imagine a doctor in the aftermath of a natural disaster running around treating people with minor injuries, all the while neglecting the many who have fatal but perfectly treatable injuries whose deaths could be prevented. If embryos and fetuses go to heaven, the Christian pro-life movement has been much like that doctor. (Or, perhaps the situation is even

worse. On the current picture, it appears that embryos and fetuses actually *benefit* from dying in the womb since this gives them guaranteed entry to heaven and helps them avoid the risk of eternal damnation. If that's right, the Christian pro-life movement could be actively harming the very souls it is attempting to help.)

What does all of this imply about the Christian pro-life movement? Most obviously, it means that the movement as it exists today – primarily as an *anti-abortion* movement – needs to dissolve, or else it needs to reinvent itself by developing new goals and priorities. There are plenty of causes that serve to prevent the deaths of unsaved people: ensuring universal access to reliable and affordable healthcare, global poverty reduction, suicide prevention, gun control, domestic violence prevention, disease prevention, disaster relief, peace-keeping, climate change initiatives, and so forth. If the embryos and fetuses that die are heaven-bound, Christians should care much more about promoting these public health initiatives, and they should put their collective and individual support behind politicians and political parties that prioritize these sorts of issues over attempts to restrict abortion access.

So, to review, the Afterlife Dilemma starts from the claim that embryos and fetuses that die all go to hell or they all go to heaven. It is then argued that if embryos and fetuses are condemned to a hell involving eternal suffering, there cannot be a morally perfect god like the one posited by traditional Christianity. If fetuses and embryos that die go to a heaven involving eternal bliss, then restricting abortion should not be a top social and political priority. Either way, the popular Christian pro-life position sketched above is problematic.

In conclusion, it appears that many people who identify as both Christian and pro-life have indefensible beliefs. Unless they can identify reasonable grounds for rejecting the Afterlife Dilemma argument, they must abandon some aspect of their current worldview – whether it is their beliefs about God, the nature of heaven and hell, the eternal fate of embryos and fetuses, or the comparative moral importance of preventing abortions.

*Marlowe Kerring, October 2022*

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This article is meant to provide a brief, accessible introduction to the Afterlife Dilemma. A more in-depth and nuanced treatment of the argument can be found in “The Afterlife Dilemma: A Problem for the Christian Pro-Life Movement,” published in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2(2) (2022), available online at <https://journalofcontroversialideas.org/article/2/2/210>.