

## On Eternal Punishment: A Brief Dialogue

Richard Oxenberg

**Josh:** So, let's try to think this through. You say you believe in eternal punishment. So whom would you like to see tortured forever? I mean, don't just restrict yourself to people you know, but feel free to range over the whole of human history. Who would deserve to be tortured forever?

**Evan:** Well, I suppose the person most would regard as the paradigm of human evil is Adolph Hitler.

**Josh:** So you would like to see Hitler tortured forever?

**Evan:** Well, I...he certainly deserves some very severe punishment.

**Josh:** Yes, but forever?

**Evan:** For a long time.

**Josh:** But forever? Forever and ever and ever? Don't you think that after watching him tortured day and night for, say, a hundred years, a thousand years, you might be inclined to say 'Enough already! Leave him alone.'?

**Evan:** After a hundred years?

**Josh:** Or a thousand years, or a million years. Don't you think there would come a time when you would say, "Enough"?

**Evan:** Yes, I suppose.

**Josh:** So you wouldn't really want to see him tortured *forever*, would you?

**Evan:** No, I . . . not when I really think about it.

**Josh:** In the heat of rage you might say something like 'torture him forever!', but you wouldn't really want it carried out would you?

**Evan:** No, I wouldn't.

**Josh:** And then after torturing him for a hundred years or for however long, what then? What would you want done with him?

**Evan:** I don't know. I don't think I'd want to embrace him.

**Josh:** But what if, along with this torture, he had undergone something of a reformatory process? What if part of his torture were to force him to see all the horror and pain and anguish he had caused? What if part of his torture were to force him to confront the horror within himself that produced all this violence? What if he came to see this and truly repented? And what if this repentance itself were part of his torture – because can you imagine how he would feel if he actually came to see the horror of what he had caused? That might be the worst torture of all. What then?

**Evan:** That's hard. I don't know. I don't think I could embrace him.

**Josh:** But can you imagine that if you yourself were different, if you yourself were healed of your many pains and angers, if you yourself were in a place of more abundant love and peace, that you might be willing to consider forgiving him? Not all at once, of course. But in time. After many, many exchanges. After you were able to truly convince yourself that his core had changed. Can you imagine it?

**Evan:** I can...imagine it. But he would have to have truly, deeply, changed. He would have to have deeply come to understand the hurt he caused and the wrong he did. And even then it would be very difficult, it would not come quickly.

**Josh:** But eventually? I mean, we have forever. A hundred years? Two hundred years? A thousand?

**Evan:** Yes, I can imagine it. But only if he truly repented. Not otherwise.

**Josh:** And what if he didn't repent, even after a hundred years of torture. What if it became clear that he wouldn't, couldn't repent? Just keep torturing him?

**Evan:** No. Enough already with the torture! Just...get rid of him, so he couldn't do any more harm.

**Josh:** Annihilation?

**Evan:** Yes.

**Josh:** Do you think you'd feel any sadness?

**Evan:** Over annihilating Hitler?

**Josh:** But remember that even Hitler was once made in the image of God. Somewhere under all that horror and evil is that image, that horribly distorted image. Don't you think you'd feel any sadness at the loss of that? Suppose, God forbid, but suppose it were your own son who had gone so terribly wrong. Don't you think you'd feel sad? After all, he was God's child.

**Evan:** I see. Yes, it is very sad.

**Josh:** Perhaps the whole of heaven would have to mourn at the loss of this child of God. Do you suppose?

**Evan:** Yes, I can see that. It would be very sad to have lost even one.

**Josh:** But then he would be gone. And after mourning there is recovery. After grief there is healing. Heaven would recover once he was gone, would it not?.

**Evan:** Yes.

**Josh:** But not if he remained forever alive in punishment. Then there could be no recovery, could there? Then there could be only ongoing anger, and mourning and grief. Could there be true joy in heaven under such circumstances?

**Evan:** No, you're right. The punishment must come to an end, one way or the other. Otherwise, joy itself would be defeated. Otherwise evil would triumph in its very defeat.