

Hell: Definition vs Description

I've been prompted by a recurring experience to write a very boring post about a basic distinction. Here it is: Definitions are not exactly the same thing as descriptions.

At first glance that sounds pretty simple, and brief reflection shows that it's obviously correct. Why am I pointing out such a trivial thing? Here's why: I hold to a view of eternal punishment called annihilationism. That's the view that instead of being tormented forever, those who do not find favour with God will die finally and forever. They will, in simple terms, permanently cease to exist one day. I have a friend who holds to a more traditional view of hell, in which eternal punishment consists of eternal torment. This friend – and this person is not alone, there are many sincere (but mistaken) people who make this same error – has claimed several times that not only do I hold a different view of hell, but I actually do not believe in hell *at all*. When I explain that in fact I do believe in hell, but I do not believe that it consists of eternal torment, here is (my paraphrase of) the reply I got:

“Well, I *define* hell as something involving eternal torment, therefore you're radically re-*defining* hell, which is the same as denying its existence altogether, because you might say that hell exists, but that word carries a different definition when you're using it than when I'm using it.”

What has happened here is that people who think this are confusing descriptions with definitions. Perhaps a few hypothetical examples of this exact same tactic in other situations will make it clear why this is a confused way to reason:

Jim: There's a mustang convertible in that closed garage over there.

Bob: No, actually there's a Volkswagen Beetle in that closed garage over there.

Jim: Oh, so you don't believe there's a car in that garage, huh?

Bob: Of course I do. I just think the car is a Volkswagen Beetle and not a Mustang Convertible.

Jim: Oh Bob, don't be so slippery. I *define* a car as a Mustang convertible! Therefore you're radically re-*defining* the car, which is the same as denying its existence altogether, because you might say that a car exists in the garage, but the word "car" carries a different definition when you're using it than when I'm using it.

Is Jim correct? Of course not! Jim is mistaking his description of the car (a Mustang convertible) for the very definition of a car. In a way, he's screening out any possibility of debate over what *type* of car might be in the garage, because he will assume that "car" in and of itself just *means* what he thinks the car is like. Here's another example of two people from different periods of history who just entered a time warp and ended up together:

Herb: I think the President of the USA is John Adams

Fossy: No, I think the President of the USA is Teddy Roosevelt

Herb: Oh? So you think there's no President of the USA?

Fossy: What? I just said there was a President of the USA, namely Teddy Roosevelt!

Herb: But Fossy, I *define* the President of the USA as a John Adams! Therefore you're radically re-*defining* the President of the USA, which is the same as denying its existence altogether, because you might say that a President of the USA exists, but that term carries a different definition when you're using it than when I'm using it.

Is Herb right? Of course not! Both of these absurd arguments – about cars and Presidents – have one mistake in common. They are confusing specific possible manifestations of a thing with what that thing is by definition. The car in the garage *might* be a number of things – a Dodge, a Ford, a Toyota etc. But it is not *defined* in terms of any one of those particular things. It is defined much more basically than that, otherwise there could literally not even *be* a disagreement about what type of car is in the garage, unless at least one of the participants is hopelessly ignorant and has never heard of a car at all. Likewise, the President of the USA *could* be any number of people. But it is not any one person *by definition*, otherwise there could not be a succession of presidents, since the next person to come into office would be a different person and hence not the actual president!

In short, the people who make the glaringly obvious errors in the above hypothetical scenarios do so because they confuse a particular description of what something might be like with the very *definition* of that thing. The exact same error occurs when somebody says that an annihilationist doesn't believe in hell. "Hell" here just means the afterlife – the postmortem fate – of those who ultimately do not find favour with God. There is, and has been for some time now, a debate raging over the nature of hell. A book featuring several views on what hell is like was called *[Four Views on Hell](#)*. One of those views was that hell will consist of eternal torment for those people (actually two of the views both expressed slightly different versions of that view). But just imagine how absurd it would have been if the book began by saying "Hell means a place of eternal torment. Now here are four view on hell, some of which deny eternal torment." Eternal torment is, as in the arguments about cars and presidents, *a candidate* among views of what hell is like. To say that hell just *means* "eternal torment" is to brush away all possibility of debate about "hell" by saying "The word hell means eternal torment. The word hell is in the Bible. Therefore eternal torment is in the Bible. Game over."

This lesson in linguistic basics 101 was brought to you by your friendly neighbourhood annihilationist.

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