

Finite Offenses and Infinite Penalties — 36

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Central claim

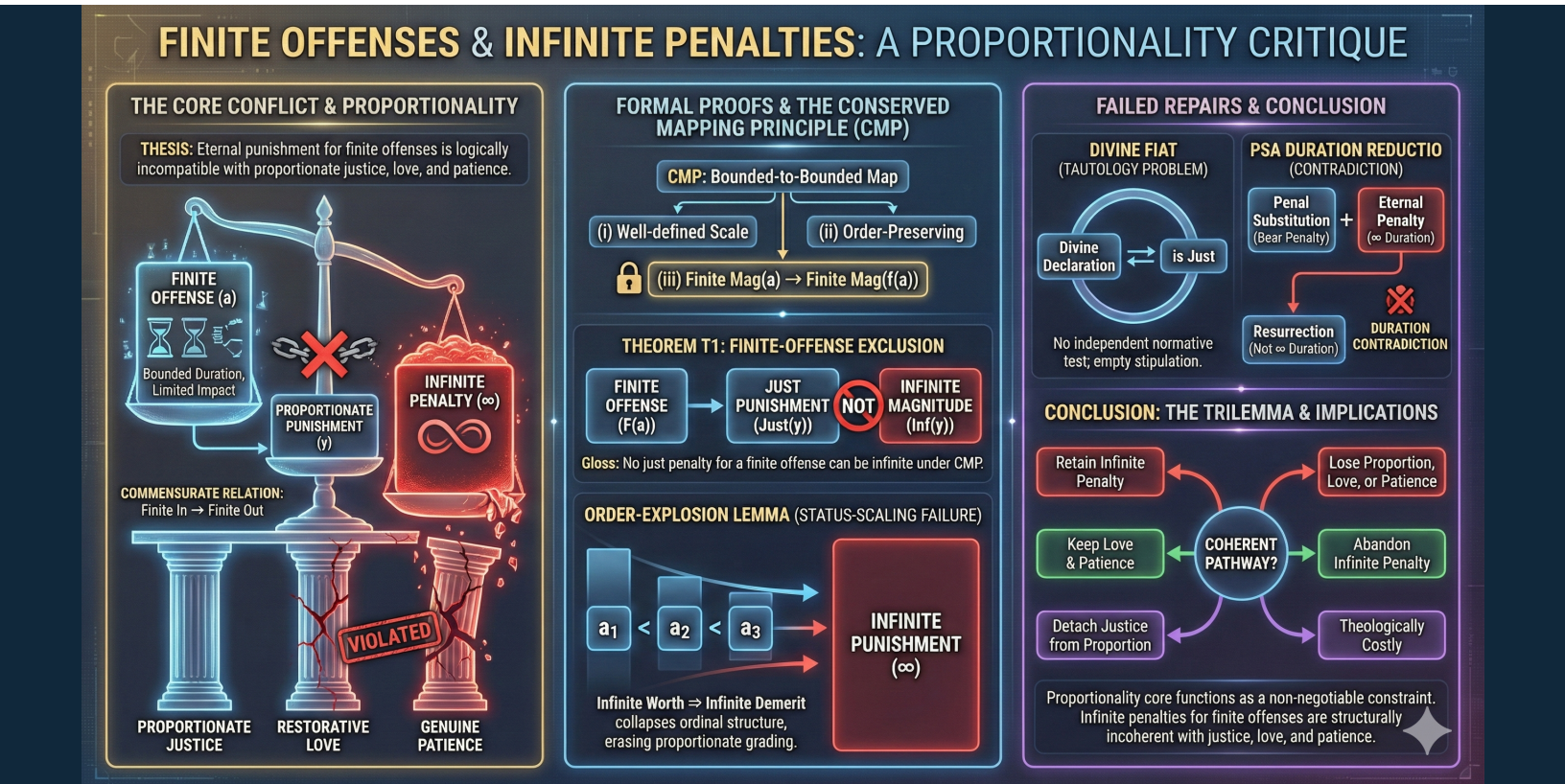
Traditional eternal retributive punishment—a final, grave, unbounded burden imposed for culpable wrongdoing within a finite mortal life—is not shown proportionate merely by calling the offended deity infinitely worthy. Compared with finite or genuinely remedial penalties, the defense still needs a culpability-sensitive bridge from finite wrongdoing to an unbounded burden; penal substitution does not supply that bridge by itself, because strict temporal identity conflicts with resurrection while non-identical equivalence needs its own metric. This conclusion targets that retributive inference, not every doctrine of hell, atonement, or theism.

Preview: The missing bridge

Starting claim	Bridge required	Audit result	Reader conclusion
Finite-life culpability merits a grave burden with no upper limit	Link act, intention, knowledge, freedom, harm, and victim standing to total punishment	Infinite worth supplies no rule; fiat drops the test; new sin or open restoration changes the target	Do not accept the unbounded conclusion until the bridge is explicit and defended

Finite and genuinely remedial penalties remain available; the target is a grave unbounded retributive burden, not endless duration by itself.

Visual preview:



The map contrasts finite culpability with unbounded punishment and displays status, fiat, and strict-duration penal substitution as attempted bridges. Its boundedness rule is the paper's normative proportionality premise, not a theorem of logic; its atonement panel addresses only strict temporal identity.

Abstract

Traditional eternal retributive punishment is not shown proportionate merely by joining finite-life wrongdoing to the infinite worth of the offended deity. The defense still needs a culpability-sensitive bridge from finite culpability to a final, grave burden with no terminal upper bound; finite or genuinely remedial punishment is the relevant comparator, not impunity. The paper makes that result explicit by separating comparative ranking from fit, specifying total burden across duration and intensity, and applying one bridge test throughout: the proposed rule must track culpability, justify the absence of any upper limit, preserve grading, and retain the target rather than change it. Victim-status arguments, divine declaration, continuing sin, free self-exclusion, deterrence, and appeals to inscrutability do not meet all four conditions as stated. Penal substitution does not close the gap by itself: strict temporal identity conflicts with resurrection, while non-identical equivalence requires its own metric. The conclusion targets this finite-life retributive inference, not every doctrine of hell, atonement, or theism; accounts that add new wrongdoing, keep restoration open, limit the burden, or abandon retribution require separate assessment.

Keywords: hell; eternal punishment; proportionality; retribution; infinite offense; penal substitution; atonement

1. The Claim Under Pressure

The central problem is easy to state and surprisingly hard to solve. A human life is finite. Its agents have limited knowledge, limited power, mixed motives, and unequal opportunities. Yet some Christian accounts hold that culpable wrongdoing within that life can merit a grave punitive burden that never reaches an end. Calling the offense serious, or the offended deity infinitely worthy, does not by itself close the gap between those descriptions. This paper argues that a proportionality defense must identify the missing bridge: a rule that explains why finite culpability removes every upper limit while still respecting differences in intention, knowledge, freedom, and harm.

The target must be precise. This paper examines *traditional eternal retributive punishment*: a postmortem condition that is (i) imposed or maintained as punishment, (ii) gravely harmful through suffering or permanent deprivation, (iii) final after death, and (iv) without a terminal upper bound. A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including the character, purposes, and relations attributed to that deity. *Theism* is the more general view that at least one deity exists. The argument concerns a God-concept said to be perfectly just, loving, and patient while authorizing the stipulated punishment. It does not infer that no deity exists.

This target belongs to a diverse literature. Classic objections focus on justice, love, and finality, while defenders appeal to freedom, desert, divine holiness, or a revised understanding of hell (Adams, 1975; Kvanvig, 1993; Talbott, 2025; Walls, 1992). Recent models range from an eternal experience of divine presence to explicitly Anselmian retribution (Haratine & Smith, 2024; Manis, 2019). The diversity matters. An open remedial condition, annihilation, a mild everlasting state, nonpunitive self-separation, and an irrevocable grave penalty are not interchangeable descriptions.

The comparison is equally important. Rejecting an infinite penalty does not entail impunity. Finite retribution, restitution, incapacitation, remedial discipline, forgiveness with consequences, and other bounded responses remain available. The real dispute is not whether wrongdoing may matter forever in memory, relationship, or character. It is whether a grave punitive burden without an upper limit is proportionate to culpability acquired within a finite history.

The governing burden

If a defender calls eternal punishment proportionate, the defender must explain how features that determine culpability—act, intention, knowledge, freedom, harm, and relevant standing—justify the punishment’s total burden. Merely placing “infinite” on the victim side of the description does not yet supply that bridge.

This burden is conceptual and argumentative. It does not assume a complete human theory of justice or that every divine reason must be transparent. It asks for enough stable content to distinguish *proportionate justice* from unconstrained will. Without that distinction, the word *just* praises the outcome but does not explain it. The same bridge question governs every section that follows: does the proposed reply connect culpability to an unbounded burden, or does it instead abandon proportionality or change the target?

2. What Proportionality Requires—and What It Does Not

The missing bridge cannot be evaluated until *proportionate* has enough content to constrain the result. Proportionality is not one universally accepted formula. Penal theory disputes what justifies punishment, how offense seriousness should be measured, how sanctions should be compared, and whether retribution is a general aim or only a limit (Hart, 2008; von Hirsch, 1996; Walen, 2020). A sound criticism of eternal punishment should therefore avoid pretending that one numerical scale settles every theory.

No complete formula is needed. Four requirements are enough to test any proposed finite-to-infinite bridge.

- C1. Culpability tracking.** Intention, knowledge, capacity, coercion, harm, and available alternatives must make some difference to deserved punishment.
- C2. Upper-limit explanation.** A defender must explain why these finite features justify no terminal upper bound, rather than a very severe but bounded punishment.
- C3. Grading.** Relevant differences among offenses and offenders must survive in the account rather than disappear behind one undifferentiated infinite label.
- C4. Target stability.** To defend the stipulated inference, a reply must retain the punishment's finite-life basis, retributive purpose, grave severity, and finality. Changing one of these features may be coherent, but it changes the target.

The second and third requirements are easily confused. A ranking can preserve order without establishing fit. Suppose punishment A is milder than punishment B, and B is milder than C. That shows a comparative ordering. It does not show that any of them is deserved, much less that each may continue without limit. A set of punishments can be ranked internally while every member is excessive.

The boundedness claim must therefore be stated honestly. Logic alone does not prove that every finite offense has a finite deserved upper bound. That is a normative premise about proportionality under finite agency. It is supported by the role culpability and mitigation play in morally tolerable punishment, but it remains open to challenge. Treating boundedness as an axiom and then announcing a theorem would merely restate the conclusion. The stronger method is to expose the choice: retain a culpability-sensitive upper bound and reject unbounded punishment for finite-life wrongdoing, or reject that proportionality constraint and defend the alternative openly.

This qualification strengthens rather than weakens the challenge. The dispute can no longer hide inside notation. A defender must say which feature of a finite agent's act removes every terminal limit and why that rule remains responsive to intention, understanding, freedom, and harm. C1–C4 form the bridge test used throughout the rest of the paper. A response may be coherent yet fail that test because it supplies no culpability-to-burden rule or because it changes the target; keeping those outcomes distinct prevents a verbal reply from passing as the missing bridge.

3. The Missing Finite-to-Infinite Bridge

The bridge test first applies to proposals that aim to preserve the stipulated target: grave, final, retributive punishment for culpability acquired within a finite life. Victim status, the mathematical structure of infinity, and divine declaration each preserve an important insight. The question is whether any of them satisfies all four requirements.

3.1 Victim status does not complete the inference

The most familiar bridge says that an offense against an infinitely worthy deity has infinite seriousness. Victim status can matter. Betraying a dependent person may be worse than breaking an impersonal rule, and attacking a public institution may add harms beyond those caused to one individual. It does not follow that any offense against a being of unsurpassable worth carries literally unbounded desert.

The move needs a linking principle. One possibility multiplies act seriousness by victim worth. But why multiplication rather than addition, a threshold, a capped function, or a relation sensitive to the offender's understanding? Even a linear relation requires defense. Effingham's analysis is useful precisely because it distinguishes logical consistency from evidential support: increasing victim worth need not produce an infinite deserved punishment, and a limiting relation can preserve greater seriousness while remaining capped (Effingham, 2024).

What the offender could reasonably understand also matters. If infinite victim worth drives the result, the theory must explain what happens when the offender lacks clear knowledge of the deity, misunderstands the norm, acts under severe constraint, or causes only limited harm. A rule that overwhelms all such differences does not preserve ordinary culpability structure. It substitutes the rank of the offended party for a full account of what the agent culpably did.

An Anselmian defense can reject this individualistic framing and treat punishment as restoring a violated moral order (Haratine & Smith, 2024). That is a serious alternative, not a verbal mistake. It still owes two explanations: why restoration requires an unbounded grave burden, and why the imposed burden is fitting for this offender rather than simply useful to a cosmic pattern. Moving from interpersonal injury to objective order changes the bridge; it does not remove the need for one.

3.2 Infinity can preserve order and still fail to establish fit

A crude status rule maps every nonzero offense to the same infinite magnitude. That collapses grading: petty and atrocious wrongdoing receive the same total category. More sophisticated proposals can avoid this simple collapse. They may vary intensity forever, appeal to different infinite order types, or preserve finite differences within an everlasting condition.

Those refinements deserve acknowledgment. They show why it is too quick to declare every infinite mapping mathematically incoherent. Yet they do not answer the normative question. Saying that one infinite burden is less severe than another preserves an ordering; it does not explain why the lesser infinite burden is proportionate to finite culpability. The bridge from ranking to fit remains missing.

The same point applies when intensity varies. A defender may assign a lesser intensity to a lesser offense for every moment of an endless duration. The punishment is graded, but its cumulative grave burden remains unbounded if the intensity never falls below a positive floor. Internal differentiation is not a substitute for an upper-bound account.

3.3 Divine declaration changes the theory

Another response says that whatever the deity declares just is just. This position may be a coherent voluntarism: moral facts depend on divine will or nature. It cannot at the same time use proportionality as an independent explanation. If the declaration settles the issue regardless of culpability, magnitude, or comparison, then the doctrine has abandoned the proportionality test it appeared to satisfy.

That result is not a formal contradiction. It is a cost in explanatory content. The defender may say that human moral concepts are radically inapplicable to divine judgment. But then words such as *proportionate*, *patient*, and *loving* no longer support the doctrine in their ordinary action-guiding sense. One cannot suspend the inferential content of those virtues when they create pressure and then appeal to the same virtues as evidence of perfect character.

Table 1: Bridge ledger: what each repair preserves and what it still owes

Proposed bridge	Coherent insight	Remaining burden	Effect on the target
Infinite victim worth	Victim standing may affect seriousness.	Defend the function from standing to unbounded desert while retaining culpability differences.	Keeps the target; bridge remains disputed.
Divine declaration	A voluntarist theory can ground norms in divine will or nature.	Explain how proportionality independently constrains the declared outcome.	Rejects an independent proportionality test if declaration is sufficient.
Continuing postmortem sin	New culpable acts may ground new consequences.	Show renewed culpability, proportionality at each stage, and why exit or reform is closed.	Changes finite-life punishment into an ongoing case.
Self-chosen separation	Agency can make separation partly attributable to the chooser.	Establish informed capacity, continuing voluntariness, and a genuine reason for irreversibility.	An open door removes finality; a locked door restores the burden.
Penal substitution	Representation may satisfy liability without duplicating every experience.	State whether satisfaction requires temporal identity or non-identical equivalence, and justify that standard.	Identity faces resurrection; equivalence needs a metric.

Table 1 applies the same bridge test to each proposal: does it explain the finite-to-infinite step, or does it alter the claim under assessment? The table is not a scoreboard. It shows that prominent replies can be coherent, but none supplies the missing bridge merely by being named.

4. Duration, Intensity, and Total Punitive Burden

The bridge must connect culpability to the punishment's *total burden*, so that burden must be stated clearly. Duration alone is not a complete measure of punishment. A short catastrophic harm can be worse than a long mild inconvenience. Conversely, an everlasting condition need not have an infinite cumulative burden if its harmful intensity declines quickly enough. The point can be expressed with one simple model. Let $r(t)$ represent punitive burden per unit time. Then total burden over duration T is

$$B(T) = \int_0^T r(t) dt. \quad (1)$$

If T grows without limit and $r(t)$ remains above some positive floor, then $B(T)$ has no finite upper bound. If $r(t)$ falls toward zero fast enough, the total may converge to a finite value even across endless time. This is not a complete moral metric and does not decide whether any burden is deserved. It serves the upper-limit part of the bridge test by blocking two shortcuts: infinite duration does not automatically entail infinite total burden, and a harmful burden maintained indefinitely at positive intensity cannot be made finite merely by varying that intensity.

Traditional eternal retributive punishment, as defined here, includes grave harm or deprivation with no terminal relief. When suffering is maintained at a positive intensity, its cumulative burden is unbounded. A genuinely mild everlasting state may evade the conclusion. So may a condition whose painful aspect diminishes and whose total burden is capped. But those models leave the stipulated grave punishment behind and require a separate account of why their remaining deprivation is punitive.

Permanent loss also raises a measure problem that the integral image cannot settle. A defender may say that exclusion from the highest good is a status rather than a sequence of harms. Even then, the irreversibility of that loss needs fitting justification. Reclassifying the burden does not show that finite-life culpability warrants its permanence.

5. Love, Patience, and the Possibility of Restoration

Love and patience do not themselves supply the finite-to-infinite bridge. They constrain any proposed bridge when the God-concept under examination is also described as perfectly loving and patient. A restorative love seeks the person's good and remains responsive to repentance, moral growth, and repaired relationship. Patience allows time for that change. A final punitive system in which no transformation can alter the grave outcome makes those virtues idle with respect to the condemned.

The conclusion must be proportionate too. It does not follow that love forbids every painful consequence or that patience guarantees immediate release. A loving response may confront, restrain, discipline, or require restitution. The sharper claim is that a defender who calls the divine love restorative must explain why restoration becomes unavailable forever, even if the person could become responsive to reasons.

Open-door accounts take that problem seriously. Buckareff and Plug argue that divine motivation supports continuing opportunities for reconciliation (Buckareff & Plug, 2005). Hartman argues that a free-will account of finality is unstable if the deity can restore a person's capacity to recognize reasons without eliminating freedom (Hartman, 2023). These arguments do not prove universalism. They show that love, power, freedom, and irreversible closure form another bridge problem: why must a perfectly resourceful loving agent treat a finite and changeable history as eternally decisive?

A defender can answer by denying that love is restorative toward every person, denying that postmortem agency can change, or subordinating restoration to retribution. Each answer may be coherent. Each also states the theological price clearly. The claim is not that every exit is impossible, but that the target account cannot retain all its attractive descriptions without explaining how they fit.

6. Common Replies Under the Bridge Test

The same test clarifies four common replies. Some supply a different basis or purpose for postmortem consequences; others decline to provide an intelligible bridge. Either move may be coherent, but neither establishes that finite-life culpability is proportionate to the stipulated unbounded retributive burden.

6.1 Continuing sin

The continuing-sin response says that persons in hell keep sinning, so punishment is continually renewed. This reply directly recognizes the proportionality problem: finite premortem wrongdoing is not enough, and new wrongdoing must do additional work (Himma, 2003). It therefore changes what must be explained, from one infinite penalty for a finite history to a sequence of penalties for an ongoing history.

The change may avoid the first argument, but three questions remain. Are the postmortem acts culpable under the imposed conditions? Is each renewed response proportionate? Why is the environment closed to reform or exit? If severe deprivation predictably damages deliberation, the penal order may partly maintain the behavior cited to renew the penalty. If deliberative capacity remains adequate, a genuine opportunity to repent weakens finality. Continuing sin can explain recurrence only after these issues are answered.

6.2 Freely chosen separation

A choice account says that hell is not imposed retribution but the result of refusing relationship. This may leave the paper's punitive target altogether. If the door remains open, the condition is not final in the stipulated sense. If the door is permanently locked, the account must explain whether the choice was informed, made with adequate decision-making capacity, and genuinely irrevocable. Finite agents regularly reconsider identity-shaping choices when evidence, maturity, or circumstances change.

Respect for agency does not require preserving every catastrophic choice forever. Intervention can sometimes restore the ability to choose rather than replace choice. The more the view stresses ongoing free self-exclusion, the more it should permit an ongoing free return. The more it stresses fixed character, the more it owes an account of why a loving and powerful agent cannot heal the capacity to respond.

6.3 Deterrence and moral education

Deterrence can explain why consequences are announced and why some penalties are made salient. It does not independently explain an unbounded grave burden. A finite warning can deter, and a truthful description can educate, without treating one person's endless suffering as a means to influence others. If eternal severity is claimed to be necessary for deterrence, necessity must be shown rather than assumed.

Moral education faces a parallel problem. Discipline can be severe yet remain ordered to learning. An irrevocable punishment that does not change when learning occurs is no longer justified by the learner's improvement. Some other rationale must explain its continuation.

6.4 Inscrutability

Epistemic humility is appropriate. Human beings may fail to grasp every relevant reason. But an unknown reason cannot serve as the offered proportionality defense. If the doctrine is defended as proportionate, the relation must be intelligible enough to distinguish justice from arbitrary power. Inscrutability can limit confidence; it cannot do the positive explanatory work of the missing bridge.

7. Penal Substitution Without a Straw Man

Penal substitution enters the argument because it is often presented as the means by which an otherwise unpayable liability is satisfied. Applied to that proposal, the bridge test asks what makes the substitute's burden answer to the same unbounded liability attributed to finite-life wrongdoing. Penal substitution claims, in broad form, that Christ bears a penal liability on behalf of others and that this act contributes to reconciliation. Sophisticated defenses do not necessarily claim that the substitute must undergo every experienced detail or the same temporal duration as the condemned. Craig, for example, develops penal substitution through legal and philosophical distinctions rather than a bare identity of suffering episodes (Craig, 2020). Any fair critique must begin there.

The result is a dilemma rather than a quick contradiction.

The substitution dilemma

If satisfying the liability requires strict identity in the relevant temporal burden, an eternal penalty cannot be fully borne in a finite historical episode followed by resurrection. If satisfaction requires only a non-identical equivalent or sufficient substitute, then duration need not match—but an account of equivalence is required. That account must explain how finite suffering, personal worth, representation, or another factor satisfies an unbounded liability without merely declaring the values equal.

The first horn produces the familiar resurrection pressure. A substitute who returns from death and does not remain in everlasting punitive suffering has not undergone the same duration as eternal conscious punishment. A defender can reject strict identity, and many do. The second horn then becomes decisive: what makes the substitute's burden equivalent? Greater intensity, the status of the person, representative authority, and divine acceptance are possible answers. None is self-interpreting.

If infinite personal worth compresses an eternal penalty into a finite interval, the theory uses a status-to-magnitude bridge resembling the one invoked to magnify human wrongdoing. The two uses must be consistent. If status can turn finite suffering into an infinite satisfaction but victim status turns finite wrongdoing into infinite demerit, the theory owes a common rule and an explanation of why it preserves proportionality rather than adjusting magnitudes whenever the doctrine requires it.

This dilemma does not disprove penal substitution. It shows why the doctrine cannot be invoked as though it automatically supplies the missing bridge. A strict temporal-identity view faces resurrection; a non-identical equivalence view faces the metric. Alternative accounts of atonement may make healing, union, forgiveness, or reconciliation central rather than treating an infinite penal quantity as transferred. Stump's reconstruction is one philosophically developed example (Stump, 2018). The existence of alternatives shows that rejecting the strict package need not reject the Christian claim that Christ's life and death are salvific.

8. Coherent Routes Forward

The bridge test yields three basic routes: supply the missing rule, reject proportionality as an independent constraint, or change the target. More specifically, a defender may:

- provide a new culpability-sensitive bridge that explains unbounded desert without erasing graded differences;
- supply a substantive voluntarist theory and stop presenting proportionality as an independent reason;
- defend a finite and graded retributive sentence;
- make postmortem consequences genuinely remedial and open to restoration;
- adopt annihilation, while separately defending the proportionality of irreversible extinction;
- treat hell as nonpunitive separation and preserve meaningful continuing choice;
- defend a mild or convergent everlasting condition whose total punitive burden is bounded; or
- ground renewed punishment in new postmortem wrongdoing while defending culpability, proportionality, and a genuine possibility of reform at each stage.

These are not rhetorical concessions. They mark the boundary of the conclusion. The problem of hell has generated many distinct models because no single description exhausts the field (Kvanvig, 1993; Manis, 2019; Talbott, 2025; Walls, 1992). A model that escapes the present argument may encounter other difficulties, but it should not be counted as the same target after changing punishment into remedy, finite-life desert into continuing culpability, finality into openness, or grave burden into mild loss.

The practical implication is a demand for even standards. If proportionality, love, and patience count as evidence for the God-concept when a doctrine appears humane, they must remain constraints when a doctrine becomes severe. A label should not be allowed to do what an argument has not done. The decisive question for defenders is simple: what exact feature of finite culpability removes every upper limit, and would the same principle be accepted outside the conclusion it was designed to protect?

9. Conclusion

Traditional eternal retributive punishment has not been shown proportionate merely by joining finite-life wrongdoing to infinite divine worth. A successful defense must supply a bridge that tracks culpability, explains why

no upper limit remains, preserves grading, and keeps the stipulated target fixed. Victim status may increase seriousness, but it does not by itself provide that rule. Rankings among infinite burdens preserve order without establishing fit, and divine declaration settles the issue only by abandoning proportionality as an independent test. Continuing sin, free self-exclusion, mild eternity, and open restoration change the case rather than vindicate the finite-life inference under examination.

Penal substitution does not erase the difficulty. Strict temporal identity faces the contrast between eternal duration and resurrection; non-identical equivalence requires a metric that explains how the substitute's burden satisfies the liability. The same missing-bridge question therefore governs both the punishment and atonement arguments. That is pressure on one doctrinal package, not a disproof of every atonement theory or theism.

The cumulative result is exact. A defender can retain eternal retributive punishment by supplying the bridge, rejecting bounded proportionality, or changing the model and accepting the resulting theological cost. What cannot be done is to treat the words *infinite worth*, *just by definition*, or *the penalty was paid* as though they already provide that explanation. Until the bridge is explicit and defended, finite or genuinely remedial alternatives better preserve culpability-sensitive justice and action-guiding love. The requested intellectual change is therefore simple: do not accept an unbounded conclusion on the strength of an undefined transition.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central inference is best stated as a bounded premise–conclusion sequence. The labels distinguish premises from the two conclusions:

- P1.** A proportionality defense succeeds only if it explains why the punishment's total grave burden fits culpability, rather than merely ranking punishments.
- P2.** The target assigns an unbounded grave burden for culpability acquired within a finite mortal life; finite or genuinely remedial punishment, not impunity, is the comparator.
- P3.** Infinite victim worth does not by itself map intention, knowledge, freedom, harm, and standing to an unbounded burden; an independent linking principle is still required.
- P4.** Infinite rankings preserve order without fit; divine declaration abandons an independent proportionality test when sufficient by itself.
- P5.** Continuing sin, open restoration, mild loss, nonpunitive separation, deterrence, and inscrutability either change the stipulated punishment or fail to supply P1's rule.
- C1.** Therefore these defenses do not establish the target as proportionate to finite-life culpability; a defender must supply a bridge, reject the constraint, or change the target.
- P6.** If penal substitution is offered as discharging the same unbounded liability, satisfaction must involve either strict identity in the relevant temporal burden or a non-identical equivalence or sufficiency relation.
- P7.** Strict temporal identity conflicts with a finite historical episode followed by resurrection, while non-identical equivalence or sufficiency requires an independently defended metric.
- C2.** Therefore penal substitution, without that further account, does not supply the missing bridge identified in C1.

C1 follows for the defenses evaluated in P3–P5: none supplies P1's rule while preserving P2's target. C2 follows from P6's identity-or-nonidentity fork and P7's burdens. These conditionals are valid without exhausting every possible bridge. P1 is normative; P2 stipulative; P3–P4 conceptual; P5 classificatory; and P6–P7 interpretive. A defender may deny a premise, supply the bridge or metric, or change the model. The result is an internal burden, not a disproof of every hell doctrine, atonement account, or form of theism.

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