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Does Eternal Punishment Mean Eternal Torment?

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Introduction

The traditional usage of the term *hell* refers to a place of eternal separation from God, a place of everlasting conscious torment and punishment for the wicked. This usage is today part of Western Culture and Christian orthodoxy. To evangelical Christians, the wicked assigned to hell are unbelievers without the salvation that comes through Christ. However, a respected minority of evangelical theologians do not find this concept of hell in the Scriptures.¹ They hold that the human soul is not immortal for those who die without Christ. The irrevocable death and destruction of body and soul, the final state, occurs after the resurrection of the dead and is a consequence of the final judgment. In this context, eternal punishment implies an eternal death where consciousness ceases. Thereafter human immortality, or eternal consciousness, is reserved for those saved through Christ.

In this paper I present a biblical foundation for the nontraditional view of eternal punishment, the final state of the lost, as destruction of the soul and ceasing of consciousness, contrasting it with the Biblical basis for the traditional doctrine. Since this nontraditional view is associated with conditional immortality (conditionalism) and

¹ Included would be noted and respected evangelical theologians such as John Stott, Philip E. Hughes, Edward William Fudge, Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, and Stephen Travis. In their writings, "...it is clear that they believe the Bible is on their side. We are not dealing with liberal critics" (Gomes, 1994).

annihilationism,² I refer to those who hold the nontraditional view as *conditionalists* and the opposing camp as *traditionalists*.³ The scope of this paper is limited to examining the Biblical record with respect to the final state. Other issues of evangelical Christian orthodoxy are not discussed since they are held without contradiction by theologians on both sides of the debate on conditionalism.⁴ Philosophical and moral arguments for and against the two views are also beyond the paper's scope.⁵

Each side of the controversy uses different concepts to understand the same words. We need to be constantly on our guard against the tendency to confuse different meanings of a word within the contexts of the two positions. A key to understanding the conditionalist case in particular is to avoid imposing on the interpretation of Scripture traditionalist presuppositions; presuppositions we all were taught and now tend to take for

² These are related but distinct concepts. Johnson (1984, 261) defines conditional immortality as "The doctrine that immortality was not a natural endowment of man at creation, but is a gift from God to the redeemed who believe in Christ. Those who do not receive Christ ultimately lose all consciousness or existence." Annihilationism, according to Nicole (1984, 50) "...expresses the position of those who hold that some, if not all human souls will cease to exist after death." This viewpoint may take various forms: (1) all human beings cease to exist altogether at death; (2) human beings are mortal but God imparts immortality to the redeemed; (3) man is created immortal but the unredeemed fall into nonexistence and are annihilated. (A fourth form is associated with universalism.) Conditional immortality, as used in the current work, conforms to the second form listed above. However, distinctions among different forms of annihilationism are often not made. Conditionalism and annihilationism "are commonly used as practical synonyms" (*ibid.*).

³ Use of the term *traditionalist*, signifying the accepted status quo, to describe this position gives it a rhetorical advantage in any discussion by implicitly shifting the burden of proof to the *conditionalist* position. Traditionalist Peterson seems to exploit this privilege of the status quo when critiquing the work of conditionalist Fudge, claiming that "...Fudge must make a case that the New Testament vocabulary of destruction signifies annihilationism (Fudge and Peterson, 2000, 94)." No such burden is suggested for the traditionalist use of the same vocabulary.

⁴ Conditionalism and annihilationism are often associated with Jehovah Witnesses, Mormonism, the Worldwide Church of God, and other cults. Peterson (2000) in his *Christianity Today* review of the Evangelical Alliance's report, *The Nature of Hell*, agrees with the report's conclusions that those who hold to conditionalism can still hold orthodox evangelical beliefs in other areas of doctrine.

⁵ The approach of the current work is to accept the truth as revealed by God's Word rather than using arguments based on human values and reasoning (Col. 2:8). For summaries of such philosophical arguments, both for and against conditional immortality, see Grudem (1994, 1150-1152). They include for example: a) the apparent inconsistency of eternal conscious punishment with God's love; b) the seeming injustice involved with the disproportion between limited earthly sins and unlimited eternal punishment; c) the continuing presence of tormented souls possibly marring the perfection of God's universe.

granted.⁶ When discussing either position we need to heed Paul's warning in Colossians 2:8 and separate Bible-based doctrine from human philosophy and traditions.

The Biblical Record⁷

Johnson (1984, 261) notes that conditionalists and traditionalists can agree that only God is inherently immortal (1 Ti. 6:16) and eternal life is God's gift to believers only (Jn. 10:27-28; 17:3; Ro. 2:7; 6:22-23; Ga. 6:8). However the two sides differ in that traditionalists believe God has given all men a *derivative immortality*, a continued existence, that is not necessarily the same as eternal life, which speaks of a special existence in fellowship with God (Johnson, 1986, 261). This section explores differing interpretations of Biblical terms such as hell, death, destruction, perishing, unquenchable, undying, and eternal punishment, which can lead to quite divergent doctrinal conclusions about the final state of the lost.. A key to understanding these differences is maintaining the distinction between conditional and derivative immortality.

Hell. Analyzing usage of term hell seems appropriate given most people view hell as the final destination for the unredeemed. Confusion can arise since hell is used to describe not only the final state but also the intermediate state, the time after death but before the resurrection of the dead. There are many references to hell in the AV Bible in both New and Old Testaments, translated from three different words: *Sheol*, *Hades*, and *Gehenna*. However, usage of Sheol and Hades appears to deal with the intermediate state⁸. My focus

⁶ For an example of imposing preconceptions, think about the interpretation of 2 Samuel 12:23, King David's reaction to the death of the son who was the fruit of his adultery with Bathsheba, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me." Someone who took for granted the belief in an afterlife would think it obvious David meant he would join his son in another world. Someone without this mindset could think David was merely recognizing his own mortality and that someday he too would go to the grave like his son.

⁷ All Biblical references are to the NASB version unless noted otherwise.

⁸ Most modern versions translate the Hebrew word Sheol as the grave as it is the abode of all of the dead. Hades, the abode of the dead in Greek mythology, is a seemingly strange term to import into Scripture let alone find it 11 times in the NT. However, well before the NT, when Sheol was translated for the Septuagint,

on the final state means that whether human souls are alive, dead or asleep, tormented or not, during the intermediate state is beyond the scope of this paper.⁹

Our third term, Gehenna, appears 12 times in the NT and is translated as hell in the AV.¹⁰ Unlike Sheol and Hades, with Gehenna there is agreement that it does represent the final destination of the unsaved. According to Strong (1067 Greek), “This was originally the Valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned; a fit symbol of the wicked and their future destruction.”¹¹ While both conditionalists and traditionalists would agree with Strong’s assessment, there still are doctrinal disagreements. To understand these disagreements we must first define some other words and concepts.

Death and Destruction. Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ro. 6:23) and Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). These are just two of several scriptures that speak of God’s judgment of the wicked. If you take the Scripture at face value -- the Greek word translated as “death” literally means death; the Greek word translated as “kill” literally means kill; the Greek word translated as “destroy” literally means destroy; and the Greek

the Greek word Hades was used. Use of this Greek term continued much later in the NT. Hades in the NT should have the same scope and significance as Sheol in the OT (Easton, 1897). The AV translates the 65 instances of Sheol in the OT as hell 31 times, another 31 times as the grave, and three times as pit, while the 11 times Hades appears in the NT, the AV translates it as hell 10 times and one time as the grave. See Bauckham (1997) for a discussion of Hades and Sheol as well as his history of the development of concepts of the underworld.

⁹ Many other Bible passages referring to weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 24:51; 25:30 22:13; Lk. 13:8), as well as Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom (Lk. 16:22), also deal with the intermediate state if they are to be taken literally.

¹⁰ Gehenna is combined with fire for three of the 12 times used in the NT and is translated in the AV as “hell fire.”

¹¹ The Valley of Hinnom also has OT references as a place of idol worship, particularly involving child sacrifice as worship of Molech (2 Ki. 23:10; 2 Ch. 28:3; 33:6; Je. 7:31; 32:35). Jeremiah prophesied it would be called the Valley of Slaughter (Je. 7:29-34; 19:1-15) because of the large numbers of Judeans killed and left there by the Babylonians (Watson, 1984). Strong’s description of Gehenna as a garbage dump is also an apt future use of where altars to Molech once stood.

word translated as “hell” is Gehenna¹² -- then you can easily see the literal Biblical basis for conditional immortality. Death is the reward of the wicked. Jesus said the wicked will be destroyed like refuse thrown in Gehenna, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem that continually burned and smoldered (Pinnock, 1996, 146).

Pinnock (*ibid.*) also lists a number of other NT Scriptures that speak of the death and destruction of the wicked.¹³ Jesus said the wicked will be burned up like weeds after the harvest (Mt. 13:30; 49-50). Paul not only wrote of death (Ro. 6:23) but everlasting destruction for the unsaved (2 Th. 1:9; I Co. 3:17; Ph. 3:19; Ga. 6:8¹⁴). In Hebrews 10:39, those who shrink back will face destruction. Peter wrote of the destruction of ungodly men (2 Pe. 3:7), comparing their fate to Sodom and Gomorrah (2:6). Jude 7 speaks of destruction of the wicked by eternal fire, as exemplified by Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁵

The traditionalist response is that death means a permanent separation from God after the Day of Judgment. Destruction signifies a loss of well-being and deprivation as opposed to eternal life, a blessed, abundant existence with God. Thus, neither death nor destruction can be assumed to mean nonexistence but are metaphors that quite nicely reconcile the immortality of all men with the above scriptures.¹⁶

I have not found, however, a good explanation for how these traditionalists derive these metaphors from Scripture. The next section continues with a related discussion of

¹² The references in Strong for these verses are death (2288 Greek), kill (615 Greek), destroy (622 Greek), and hell (1067 Greek).

¹³ Pinnock (1996) notes that OT scriptures also speak of destruction of the wicked. While he admits these scriptures were primarily warnings for this world rather than the hereafter, he maintains, “...the basic imagery overwhelmingly denotes destruction and perishing and sets the tone for New Testament doctrine” (p.145). Peterson refutes this type of reasoning and holds that the warnings are of premature death and do not foreshadow annihilation (Fudge and Peterson, 2000, 90-93).

¹⁴ In Galatians 6:8 Paul writes of the unsaved “reaping corruption.” Corruption, according to Strong (5356 Greek), also means destruction or perishing.

¹⁵ Both conditionalists and traditionalists agree the Bible uses the destruction of these cities with fire and brimstone to foreshadow the final state. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was both complete and eternal. However, while the destruction was everlasting, the everlasting, conscious suffering of the inhabitants is never implied in Scripture.

¹⁶ See Davids (1984) for more on death in Christian thought.

death and destruction, dealing more specifically with the context of the resurrection of the dead and final judgment.

*The Undying Worm, the Unquenchable Fire.*¹⁷ Using imagery is quite similar to that of Gehenna's forever-burning fire in the NT, Isaiah prophesizes,

For the LORD will execute judgment by fire And by His sword on all flesh, And those slain by the LORD will be many...Then they will go forth and look On the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched; And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind (Is. 66:17, 24).

Jesus also used similar terms,

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell [Gehenna], into the unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mk. 9:43-44; see Mt. 18:9).

A conditionalist reading of these scriptures is relatively uncomplicated: corpses of those slain by the Lord are clearly dead, devoid of animation, and presumably lacking consciousness. The shame of the wicked, their punishment, is having their dead bodies left exposed and rotting, left as refuse to be eaten by worms and maggots in a smoldering garbage pile.¹⁸ The undying worm and unquenchable fire depicts this shame as an everlasting, unending, and permanent final state.¹⁹

A traditionalist view of the above scriptures seems to require a bigger metaphorical leap. The corpses are not literally dead bodies but represent unsaved human beings. The undying worm and unquenchable fire indicate the destruction of these human beings is

¹⁷ The current and following paragraphs in this subsection follow closely the scriptures and arguments put forth by Peterson (Fudge and Peterson (2000, 129-169) in a defense of traditionalism against conditionalism.

¹⁸ In OT times, victorious armies sometimes left the bodies of their defeated foes exposed as a sign of contempt. To have one's corpse end up this way was a great shame and disgrace. The great efforts to recover the dead bodies of Saul and his sons (1 Sa. 31:11-13) and Rizpah's defending the bodies of her dead sons (2 Sa. 21:10) are examples of this belief (Fudge and Peterson, 2000, 132).

¹⁹ Daniel 2:1-2 similarly speaks of those written in the book of life and the resurrection of all, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt” (v.2).

never complete, with consciousness presumed so the unsaved suffer eternally with an ongoing awareness of their shameful and contemptible final state.²⁰

The Lake of Fire. Judgment by fire is also described in what traditionalist theologian Peterson (Fudge and Peterson, 2000, p.110) contends are the most important Biblical passages on the doctrine of hell, Matthew 25:41, 46:

“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels....’...“These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

and Revelation 20:10-15:

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Both Jesus and the revelator agree that the lost will be thrown into the eternal (lake of) fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels, where the devil and his spiritual cohorts will suffer torment forever. Traditionalists hold that since the lost of mankind share the same destination, it is rather straightforward that they share the same fate. That is, if spiritual beings suffer torment forever in the fire, then Scripture implies the unredeemed people do as well (*ibid.*).

This traditionalist implication of a shared fate requires the assumption of derivative immortality. That is, it requires God gave all humans immortality. I know of no Bible verse

²⁰ According to Strong, the worm (4663 Greek) of Mark 9:43 is the kind that preys on dead bodies. Traditionalist imagery may therefore require the incongruent: a corpse with consciousness.

that indicates derivative immortality.²¹ Revelation 20:10 clearly states everlasting torment for the devil and his angels, but several verses later there is no mention of eternal torment of the lost when they are thrown into the fire (v.15). Note that death and Hades are also thrown into the lake of fire (v.14). Death and Hades seem to be distinct from those not written in the book of life. Unless blinded by presuppositions of the traditionalist view, an obvious implication of this imagery is that “the second death” includes the permanent (eternal) destruction or cessation of death and the grave. In fact, following the logic of traditionalists above, since its mention (v.15) is in closer proximity to the verse on the destruction of death and Hades (v.14), a more straightforward implication of the unsaved being thrown into the fire is their final destruction (annihilation).

Eternal Punishment. Conditionalists and traditionalists acknowledge the fact of the final state of the unsaved being eternal punishment and the punishment being eternal death. There is not a single Bible verse “...which speaks plainly of an end to punishment” (Morris, 1984, 369-370).

A traditionalists objection to the annihilation is that it would allow the wicked to escape eternal punishment. That is, with a literal death the wicked would suffer in conscious torment only a limited time if at all (Grudem, 1994, 1150-1152). That is, traditionalists assume punishment means eternal torment and suffering.

Conditionalists respond that eternal punishment does not require eternal consciousness. The knowledge and realization of one’s sin that is given on the day of

²¹ The doctrine of derivative immortality is required for the cohesion of the traditionalist doctrine of hell. That is, unless God granted immortality to all humans there can be no eternal torment for the lost. The reasoning behind these two doctrines appears to be somewhat circular: derivative mortality is justified by scriptures interpreted in the light of the traditionalist doctrine of eternal torment (punishment), which in turn is explained by derivative immortality.

judgment, as well as the process of being destroyed, yields conscious torment.²² Even if the consciousness of the wicked ends, a) the eternal, irrevocable loss of existence (death) and b) the eternal shame and contempt that will never be removed (Is. 66:24; Da. 2:2), constitute irrevocable punishment and thus eternal, lasting forever.²³

One verse that Pinnock (1996, 157), a prominent conditionalist, admits a promising proof text for the traditionalist position is Revelation 14:9-11:

Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb" (v.9-10).

"And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name" (v.11).

All but the last verse can be reconciled with the conditionalist position but verse 11 clearly speaks of eternity ("forever and ever") and the wicked have no relief from their torment ("no rest day and night"). Parsing these statements and viewing them in isolation from one another, may result in an interpretation more friendly to conditionalism. However, as Peterson correctly notes, "...this is no way to interpret the Bible" (Fudge and Peterson, 2000, 163).

After stating that the passage "...comes closest...to confirming the traditional viewpoint," conditionalist Pinnock (1996, 157) was dismissive,

It would be ironical if the issue came down to the interpretation of a single verse in Revelation, given its uniqueness as a piece of literature. But it may do so because the traditionalists, deprived of their substandard proof texts...will always resort to this passage, even though in view of the difficult genre of Revelation it does not put them in a very strong position.

²² Among annihilationists there is debate about the extent of conscious suffering (Grudem, 1994, 1150).

²³ At least with respect to a) above, the conditionalist case can be analogous to capital punishment. For those guilty of a capital crime, the punishment is death by execution. The time spent waiting for the execution, although unpleasant, is not considered the punishment. The punishment is the loss of life.

Pinnock then offers what I believe he realizes is a weak conditionalist rationalization with regard to verse 11. That is, while the smoke (the reminder of torment?) goes up forever, the verse does not actually say the wicked are forever tormented. Given this, the wicked have no respite from suffering as long as it lasts; but there is no statement about how long it lasts. Maybe suffering occurs before oblivion but the smoke of the torment, of the fire and brimstone, continues afterward? With an interpretation like this, I must admit that Revelation 14: 9-11 does weaken the conditionalist position.

The Tree of Life. I offer one last item from the Biblical record, Genesis 3:22, 24:

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever...So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

After the fall, why was it so important for God to keep man out of the garden? God wanted to prevent man from eating of the tree of life and "live forever" (i.e., become immortal). This portrays that man in his fallen state was *not* intended to live forever. Adam and his descendents were destined to die a literal death unless given the gift of eternal life. Could it be that immortality, the ability to live forever, obtained outside of God's provision of Christ's imputed righteousness would lead to the same fate as the devil and his angels in Matthew 25:41? Were the cherubim stationed to keep mankind from suffering a fate of everlasting fiery torment?

This interpretation of Genesis 3:22 seriously calls into question the validity of derivative immortality. As noted earlier (see fn. 20), an assumption of derivative immortality is required for the cohesion of the traditionalist doctrine of hell. That is, unless God grants immortality to all humans there can be no eternal torment for the lost. If this interpretation is correct, then eternal punishment does not mean eternal torment.

Summary and Conclusion

A Summary Evaluation of the Biblical Record. This paper contrasts Biblical evidence for the conditional immortality with the Biblical record for the traditionalist

Table 1: Alternative Interpretations of Scripture.

Term	Conditionalist Usage	Traditionalist Usage
Death	Death/absence of life (literally)	Separation from God (metaphorically)
Destruction of the wicked	Destruction/annihilation (literally)	Loss of well-being and deprivation (metaphorically)
Unquenchable/eternal/everlasting fire	Fire that never goes out (literally)	Eternal fire which torments but does not consume the wicked (metaphorically)
Eternal punishment/death	Everlasting/irrevocable death/absence of life; shameful/contemptible loss of existence	Everlasting conscious torment/suffering

doctrine of hell. Explanations of the Biblical record offered by conditionalists and traditionalists differ primarily because each side uses certain key words in quite different ways. Table 1 above summarizes a few of these differences.

If permitted to generalize, I find the summary in Table 1 indicates the traditionalist argument requires us to discard the literal for the metaphorical or figurative. These metaphors hinge on the assumption of derivative immortality, that God gave eternal existence to all men.

The conditionalist case appears stronger because, unlike the traditionalist case, it does not require us to bring in metaphors that not implied in Scripture, or rather, it does not

impose the assumption of derivative immortality upon Scripture.²⁴ There appears to be a bit of circular reasoning employed by traditionalists. Derivative immortality is not implied anywhere in the Bible except in certain passages where derivative immortality is necessary for the traditionalist interpretation! It is indeed ironic that conservative, Bible-believing evangelical theologians in this case prefer less literal and more metaphorical interpretations in order to make their traditionalist case cohesive.

The weight of Biblical evidence seems to be on the conditionalist side, with the exception of a single verse, Revelation 14:11. My literal interpretation of Genesis 3:22 supports conditional immortality and clearly calls into question the validity of derivative mortality. Without the keystone of derivative mortality, the traditionalist case collapses.

Questions for Further Research. Conditionalism seems to present a stronger Biblical case than the traditionalist doctrine of hell. However, one should be humble with results, especially someone with no special expertise in the area. Besides further inquiry into the Biblical record, including more sophisticated analysis in the original languages, there are three obvious topics for further research that entail going beyond Scripture.

First, if immortality of all men is not originally in the Scripture, how did it become doctrine? The traditional doctrine of hell as the dominate belief can be traced back to the second century. Constable (1871) holds that some Greek early church fathers (*e.g.*, Tertullian) were scholars trained in Greek philosophy and therefore had a presupposition to the Greek idea of the inherent immortality of all men. Since people tend to be unaware of

²⁴ My conclusion that there is a stronger case for conditionalism is admittedly influenced by my training as an economist to apply the principle of Occam's Razor. That is, other things being equal, the simpler of two theories is preferred.

their own biases, it was quite natural for these scholars to read this presupposition into the Biblical texts.²⁵

Crockett (1996, 172) raises a somewhat-related second question. Why did Christians in the first half of the second century consistently teach the eternal suffering of the wicked rather than annihilation? What needs to be explained “...is why generations immediately after the New Testament period were silent about annihilation” (*ibid.*). If conditionalism is a correct doctrine, why did it so quickly disappear?

A third question, also raised by Crockett (*ibid.*) is how should NT contexts and historical settings for Scripture influence our interpretations? An example he presents is when Jesus preached, the Pharisees were a prominent Jewish sect who taught eternal conscious suffering of the soul. Why did Jesus clearly fail to address the issue that punishment was annihilation? After all, the Pharisaic crowds would have understood the preaching of Jesus concerning eternal death, destruction of the wicked, and weeping and gnashing of teeth to mean endless suffering.

Does Eternal Punishment Mean Eternal Torment? I present a Biblical case for answering no. However, we need a great deal of humility when challenging an important Biblical doctrine, especially one so widely held since at least the second century. There are important related questions, questions that go beyond the Biblical record, that need to be addressed to strengthen case for the doctrine of conditional immortality. If the Bible were abundantly clear on this subject then there would be much more agreement among evangelical scholars.

²⁵ The late English economist Joan Robinson once said something to the effect that we cannot detect our own biases any more than we can detect our own halitosis.

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