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[www.sciphijournal.com](http://www.sciphijournal.com)  
[editor@sciphijournal.com](mailto:editor@sciphijournal.com)

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## *Irwin Goes to Hell By Jason Pomerantz*

“Oh, Irwin,” Eileen said, “I’d like to marry you, but I can’t. You see, you’re much too contrary.”

“What? I am not contrary!”

“Yes, you really are.”

“I am not!”

“You are.”

“I’m not!”

This went on for quite some time. All through the main course and desert in fact. Finally, after Irwin had handed his VISA card to the waiter, he gave in. “All right, all right! Maybe I am a little contrary. But I promise to change. Then will you marry me?”

Eileen considered. “Well... I guess so. But you’ll have to prove it to me.” She let out a loud burp while she considered how he could so do. “Oh, pardon me. Say, I know! Here’s how you’ll show me you’re no longer contrary. The next thing anyone tells you, you’ll agree to, no matter what it is.”

“That’s just silly! What an absurd suggestion.” “Irwin!” Eileen’s look carried a stern warning, and he quickly backed down.

“Okay, okay! I don’t know if this is such a good idea, but, to prove my love to you, I’ll do it. The next thing anyone tells me, I’ll agree to, no matter what, starting right now.”

Eileen took both his hands in her’s. “Oh, Irwin, that’s wonderful. If you truly do as you say, I’ll marry you right away!”

They both smiled with joy as the waiter rested the credit card slip and a pen on the table.

Now, Irwin’s worst flaw, by far, was his contraryness, but he did have one other. He was a generous man in most things, but for some reason, he had always been a terrible tipper.

So, when the waiter picked up the completed slip and examined it, his eyes opened wide and he scowled. Then he said to Irwin, in a low voice, but one loud enough for Eileen to hear clearly, “A dollar-fifty tip on a fifty-five dollar meal? Go to hell!” Then he turned in a dignified huff and walked away.

Irwin shrugged, and helped Eileen on with her coat. “Well,” she said, as they left the restaurant, “I guess you know what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You heard the waiter. Go to hell. That was the first thing anyone said to you,

since our agreement began. You agreed to do exactly as you were told.” Irwin was flabbergasted. “But... but Eileen! I can’t!” “Now, now, dear, don’t go back to your old ways! You made a promise, now you’ve got to keep it.” “But Eileen! I can’t go to hell!”

Eileen stopped in her tracks, and put her hands on her hips. “Irwin, I don’t want to hear it. You said you’d prove your love for me, and I intend to hold you to it. Now you go straight to hell, or you’ll never see me again!”

“How, how do I get to hell?” Irwin wondered. It distracted him all the next day as he was working at his job at a paper factory. (He had worked there for many years now, and he had risen to foreman. His job was to supervise a crew that controlled the giant rollers that smoothed the pulp before compression into slices. He enjoyed his job, particularly since his promotion: Being boss gave him many opportunities to be contrary.) So, after the shift ended, he went to the only place he could think of where he might get some advice – a church.

Father Baskin sat him down in his office, and tried to make him comfortable. He knew that many were intimidated by his cloth, particularly those who weren’t as religious as they might be, so he tried his best to set him at ease. “Now then, son,” he said, “we haven’t seen you here in quite some time. What is it I can help you with? I understand you have a theological question?”

“Yes, father.” Irwin nodded. “It’s true, I don’t come here as often as I should. And, I guess I should admit it, I didn’t pay much attention in Sunday school. So... I hope you don’t think what I’m about to ask is too ignorant?”

Father Baskin shook his head gently. “Oh no, son. It is far better to seek knowledge late than never. There is no shame in being ignorant. Only in choosing to remain so.”

“Well then... I would very much like to know... How does one get to hell?” For just a split second Father Baskin felt disappointed. He had hoped for a unique question, something to stimulate him. This one he had heard a million times before. But he quickly regained control and felt glad that a lost soul was seeking to come home. “Why Irwin,” he answered, “it’s quite easy to get to hell. The road is wide and short. All one needs do is sin.” “Sin, father? If I sin, I go to hell?” “That’s right.”

“Well... How do I know what is and is not a sin?” The priest frowned. “Hmm... Some people try to make the answer to that question long and complicated. But it really doesn’t need to be. I’ll put it as succinctly as I can. If one breaks the Ten Commandments, one is sinning.” Irwin nodded. This was quite helpful. “I see... If I break the Ten Commandments, I’ll be sinning.” He looked at father Baskin. “And then I’ll go to hell?” “That’s right son, then you’ll go to hell.” Irwin stood up and shook the priest’s hand. “Thank you father, thank you. I understand. I’m sure I’ll be all right now!” He left, and Father Baskin smiled to himself. He felt the man’s sincerity. Irwin would be fine.

Irwin was a very determined man. Once he made up his mind to do something, there was no stopping him. It wasn’t easy, but he finally located a bible, and eventually, though it involved an awful lot of squinting, he found the Ten Commandments. Just to be absolutely sure, he decided, he would break all of them.

He checked out the first two.

One – Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Two – Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images.

He pondered for a bit what those might mean. Then he realized that he could take care of both of them at once.

So, the next afternoon, he walked to the studio of a sculptor who lived nearby, whose name he had gotten from a local crafts store. He commissioned her to make for him a large head of a bull. It was ready in three days, and he mounted it in the middle of his living room.

The sculptor had done a wonderful job, and the head was truly impressive. The flaring nostrils. The intricately carved creases in the terrifying forehead. The smooth, sharp horns. Irwin stood back and admired the craftsmanship.

Then, after a few minutes, he stepped back and said "Well, time to get to work." He got down on his knees, and bowed forward, toward the head. "Oh Great..., uh, Great... Head of Bull!" he proclaimed. "I hereby worship you!" He stayed bowed for about twenty seconds. Then his back began to ache, so he straightened out and stood up.

He looked around, and shrugged. "I guess that ought to do it," he said. Then he dragged the bull's head into a closet and forgot about it.

Irwin turned to his bible and read the list of commandments. Two down, eight to go. He decided to tackle the easy ones first.

Three – Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

Hmm... did that mean his usual god or the head of the bull? Probably the regular one.

He stood up and looked out the window. It was a beautiful day.

"Uh," he said tentatively, "Uh... *God damn*, it's nice out!" Irwin smiled. "I'm on a roll!"

He squinted at the bible and scanned the list. Then he had a truly terrific idea to take care of three in one shot.

He waited a few days till it was Sunday and then called his mother.

"Hi mom, it's me... Fine, fine... Listen, I just wanted to tell you that I really hate that sweater you gave me for my birthday last month... No, no, I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I think it's only right you should know... No, no, don't worry... Okay, bye."

Irwin hung up the phone and laughed. What wonderful progress! Five – Honor thy mother and father. Complaining about a gift must violate that one.

Nine – Thou shalt not lie. Easy! He actually loved that sweater.

Four – Honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Lying and dishonoring on Sunday were certainly unholy!

Irwin looked at the list and frowned. Most of the remaining commandments seemed a bit more difficult. But the last one didn't look that hard.

Ten – Thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to thy neighbor.

Art Lang lived next store. Irwin liked him, since he always cheerfully put up with endless contrariness. No matter how many times you disagreed with him there was never any hard feelings.

Art was also really handy. A few summers back he had installed an automatic sprinkler system, complete with pre-set timers and rust-resistant spray caps. It kept his lawn looking remarkably green with practically no effort. Irwin, on the other hand, constantly found himself lugging hoses all around his backyard, missing the hard to reach patch of grass behind the den, and forgetting to turn off the water and letting it run all night. And his lawn still turned out brown and sad!

Irwin thought of Art's simple, effortless system.

He cleared his throat. "Boy," he declared, "I wish I had one of those!" So much for

number ten.

Eight – Thou shalt not steal.

The next afternoon, on the floor of the paper factory, Irwin carefully looked back and forth. No one was watching. Very, very casually, he walked up to the supply cabinet, very, very casually, he reached for a small box of paperclips, and very, very casually, he stuck them in his trouser pocket.

That night, he shoved the clips into a drawer in his living-room and looked at the bible.

Seven – Thou shalt not commit adultery.

He thought about it for a few moments, and then picked up the phone.

“Hi Joan, it’s Irwin... Fine, fine, how’s Bob and the kids? Great... Listen, I was wondering, did Bob end up going on that business trip this week? He did? Great! Can you get a sitter tomorrow night? You can? Great! How’d you like to come by after dinner and commit adultery? You would? Great! All right, I’ll see you tomorrow, around... I don’t know, seven-thirty or so? Okay? Great! Bye.”

The next evening, after Irwin had seen Joan to the door, he buttoned up his shirt and turned to his bible. Only one left... the toughest of all.

Six – Thou shalt not kill.

In the darkest hour of the night two masked figures, dressed in black, crept silently through the intensive care ward. The sound of footsteps alerted them to the imminent approach of a nurse. Just moments before she rounded the corner they ducked into a supply closet, only to emerge when they were sure she was gone.

Softly, lightly, they continued, till they reached the room of Mrs. Maureen Silverberg, 86 years old, brain dead, near total coronary collapse. They entered and looked at her, prostrate and comatose on the bed. Three different tubes brought fluids to and from her body and a mask covered her mouth and nose. A row of large machines and monitors beeped by her side.

The taller figure spat in disgust. Then he gathered all three tubes in his hand. “In the name of the R. S. P. L. O., I release you from the torture to which you have been condemned!” he declared. (Authors note: R. S. P. L. O. = Really Sick People Liberation Organization.)

Just as he was about to pull the tubes from the poor woman’s body, the shorter figure raised up his palm. “No, Commander K... Let me.” The taller figure looked at the shorter and nodded. “I understand,” he said. Then he handed him the tubes.

The shorter figure hesitated for one moment and looked at the woman. Then he clenched his fist around the tubes and pulled, tearing them away from her body. The machines exploded in a orgy of beeping and then slowly calmed down and fell silent. The lines on the monitors went flat.

The two figures turned away and ran from the room, out of the hospital, and into a waiting van.

As they were speeding away, the shorter figure pulled off his mask and smiled with satisfaction. It was Irwin, and his job was done.

The next morning, Irwin awoke feeling wonderful. He had broken all ten commandments. Surely it would be a simple matter to get to hell now. Then Eileen would marry him and they would be happy as can be.

He walked a few blocks until he came to a busy avenue. Then he patiently waited at the curb till the light turned red. As soon as the traffic started speeding to and

fro, Irwin rushed into the middle of the street and was promptly hit by an oncoming bus. Someone called an ambulance and he was rushed to a hospital, but it was too late. The doctor in the emergency room shook his head sadly and pulled a sheet over Irwin's head.

Irwin's soul began to ascend up to the pearly gates of heaven. As soon as he arrived, he was greeted by Saint Peter, who sat behind a desk in front of a small computer terminal. Behind him, Irwin could barely make out the skyline of the holy city shimmering in the distance.

"Hello there," said the saint. "Welcome to the afterlife. Name?" Irwin told him. "May I see some I. D. please?"

Irwin handed Saint Peter his driver's license and his credit card, and Peter nodded.

"All right, Irwin," he said, "let me just look over your records..." He made a few taps on the keyboard, and waited for the computer to check its database.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he asked.

Irwin nodded and Peter smiled. Irwin couldn't help but notice that several of Peter's teeth were missing and the rest were brown and rotten.

"Excuse me," he asked, "I don't mean to be rude, but, shouldn't you have your teeth checked?"

Saint Peter sighed. "I'd like to," he said, "but I'm afraid there are no dentists in Heaven..."

The computer beeped, and Peter looked at the monitor. Then he frowned.

"Oh my, this doesn't look good at all..." He read some more and gasped.

"Coveting?!? Oh dear, oh dear... Dishonoring?" He shook his head. "Tsk, tsk, I'm afraid sir, that you're one of the worst sinners we've had up here in some time. I'm sorry but you're clearly damned..."

"That's all right," Irwin said.

"You understand that it's nothing personal? I'm just doing my job?" "Sure... No hard feelings..."

The saint nodded. "I appreciate that sir. Anyway, if you'll step to this hole here..." He led Irwin to a large circular gap in the clouds a few feet away.

"Very good. Now if you'll just step over?" Irwin placed first one foot and then the other over the edge, and he went tumbling down at a ferocious velocity.

Saint Peter looked down after him. "Have a nice day!" he shouted.

Irwin cowered against a molten hot rock as a ferocious demon viciously poked him with a pitchfork. The air echoed with agonized screams and the sky glowed blood red.

"Arugh!" Irwin shouted as the pitchfork jabbed into his leg. "Oh boy, oh boy, it worked! I did it! I'm in hell! Eileen will be so happy." He looked at the demon.

"Umm... excuse me?"

The demon snorted and a red hot flame shot out from its nostrils to Irwin's face.

"Gahyarugh!" Irwin screamed. "Excuse me?" The demon paused and looked at him curiously. "Yes?" it asked.

"I was wondering, how do I go about getting back to earth?" "Back to earth?"

"Yes."

The demon threw back its head and laughed hysterically. Irwin waited patiently till the fit subsided.

"The only one who can send you back to earth," said the demon, "is Lord Satan himself. You'd have to talk to him... But are you sure you want to do that?"

"Oh yes," said Irwin, "if it wouldn't be too much trouble." And so Irwin was

escorted to the deepest, blackest circle of hell. Past the pit of agony, he was led, across the sea of torments, through the desert of pain, until he was taken to a small waiting room and handed a magazine. A receptionist sat behind a desk and polished her nails.

After a few moments the phone rang and the receptionist answered. "Umm hmm," she said, "all right..." She hung up, looked at Irwin and smiled. "The devil will see you now," she said.

Irwin stepped into a pleasant, simply furnished office. A handsome, middle aged man, dressed in a causal business suit, stood up at his desk and offered his hand.

"Irwin," he said, "glad to meet you. How are you? Are you enjoying hell?"

"Oh yes," Irwin said, "it's quite nice..." They shook hands and both sat down.

"Wonderful, wonderful," the man said. "Can I get you anything? Some coffee maybe?"

"No thank you..." Irwin looked at him suspiciously. "Say, are you really the devil?" The man laughed softly. "Oh yes, certainly. You were expecting something a bit more fearsome I suppose?"

"I guess..."

Satan chuckled. "Over the millenniums, I've found it's much easier to accomplish my diabolical ends when I equip myself with a pleasant demeanor. You'd be surprised how much an appearance like this throws people off guard. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

Irwin explained his situation. "So you see," he said, "I've just got to get back to earth so I can marry Eileen."

The devil leaned back in his chair and considered.

"Well," he finally said, "it's a bit unusual, but... I like you... I'll tell you what... I'll send you back to earth if you'd like. All you have to do is agree to become one of my agents."

Irwin frowned. "What exactly would that entail?" "Well, basically, you'd have to agree to advance the cause of human misery."

"How would I do that?"

"Well... Say, by being contrary all the time. If someone says yes, you say no. If someone says up, you say down... you get the idea. You'd be amazed how much that can aggravate people."

"I... I think I could handle that..."

"All right then, we've got a deal!"

Suddenly everything went dark and Irwin felt himself choking. Instinctively, he pulled the sheet off his head and found himself sitting up on a table in the hospital emergency room. The doctors crowded around him, stunned. None of them had ever seen anything like it before in their lives.

The next evening Irwin had dinner with Eileen and told her the good news.

She looked at him skeptically. "Oh, Irwin," she said, "how do I know you're telling the truth?"

"What?!?"

"Sure, anyone can say they've gone to hell. But that's quite different from actually going. I'm sorry, dear, but I need some proof."

Irwin was flabbergasted. "Boy, some women are not easy to please!" But he had no choice. The next morning he went to a toy store, bought a chemistry set, and set up an elaborate lab on his kitchen table. Then he poured several test tubes full of chemicals into a cup of table salt and extracted the component sodium and

chloride into two separate little beakers. He drank first one, and then the other. Then he promptly died.

His soul zipped up to heaven's gate and, once again he found himself face to face with Saint Peter.

"Name?" asked the saint, absent-mindedly.

Irwin told him and Peter peered at him closely.

"Why I remember you, you're that terrible sinner! This is highly unusual..." He punched Irwin's information into the computer.

"Well, look at that," Peter said. "Your first death wiped the slate clean. This life you've been innocent as a lamb."

"What?!?" exclaimed Irwin.

Saint Peter reached under his desk and pulled up a halo and a pair of wings. He waved vaguely toward a dressing room a few yards away. "If you'll just duck behind that curtain and put these on, you can step into heaven right away."

Irwin was terrified. All his work ruined! But he had always been quick-witted and he feverishly scoured his brain for a plan.

"I've got it!" he thought. "I'll speak blasphemy." He looked straight at the saint and cleared his throat.

"God," Irwin declared, "is arbitrary: He allows the existence of conflicting systems of belief, gives humanity no mechanism with which to judge between them, and then punishes all who don't somehow choose the correct one."

Peter gasped and his face filled with terror.

"You... you... you heretic! For uttering such profane thoughts, you're damned to hell!"

He pushed him over the precipice and Irwin breathed a sigh of relief as he tumbled into the darkness.

Back in the devil's office, the King of Evil was annoyed.

"Irwin," he said quietly, "you are really pushing your luck." Irwin looked at him sheepishly.

The devil sighed. "Oh, all right. You need proof? I'll give you proof. This time I'll send you back with some friends of mine."

The next day, back on earth again, Irwin invited Eileen for dinner at his place. He hung her coat up and led her to the dining room. Three men were sitting at the table, eating salad.

"Eileen," Irwin said, "I'd like to introduce you to some people I met in hell. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse Tung."

Eileen shook hands with each of them.

"Am sorry to start without you," said Stalin as he munched on a piece of onion.

"Was hungry."

"Ja," said Hitler, and Mao Tse Tung nodded.

"See, Eileen," said Irwin, "this proves I've been to hell." "No it doesn't," answered the stubborn lady.

"What do you mean?!? These are three of the most evil dictators of all time. Where else could I have found them?"

"Oh I agree that they're usually thought of as evil. But folks can be so cruel.

Maybe they were just misunderstood..."

"Misunderstood? Misunderstood? They killed millions!" "Oh, I know," said Eileen, "but maybe they had to. Maybe it was self-defense." "Self-defense! How could it be self-defense?" Eileen shook her head. "I'm sorry, Irwin, but I'm still not convinced.

You'll have to do better than this." "Pass the blue cheese..." said Mao. Later that night Irwin walked into his kitchen with a pair of pliers and a screwdriver.

"Frikken brakken frazzerhauser..." he mumbled to himself.

He took the screwdriver to his microwave oven and began to dismantle it. Then he adjusted something inside with the pliers.

After about a half-hour his modifications were done. The safety was removed.

He set the microwave to full power and stuck his head inside.

Then he pressed start and the oven whirred to life. His face melted and moments later he was dead.

Saint Peter looked at the monitor. "I don't like it," he said, "but I don't make the rules... the slate is clean again... You can proceed into heaven."

This time Irwin was ready.

"God is unfair!" he shouted. "He endows humanity with reason, and then punishes us for using that faculty and coming to conclusions which conflict with His irrational, inconsistent books of myth and legend!"

Saint Peter stared at him in horror. Then he pointed to the precipice.

Irwin stepped over and tumbled back to hell.

Now the devil was mad.

"I'm a busy demon, Irwin," he shouted. "Do you think I've got nothing better to do than to help you work out the problems in your love life?"

"I'm sorry," Irwin said, "but you know how woman are..." The Prince of Lies looked weary.

"Oh, fine, fine... I'll send you back with more proof." "I really appreciate it..."

"But I'm warning you..." The devil looked at Irwin ominously. "This is your last chance."

In Eileen's apartment the next day, Irwin was yelling in frustration.

"What do you mean this isn't good enough?" he cried. "Look, I have a tail! I have horns! I have red skin!"

"Oh, Irwin", said Eileen, "I'd like to believe you, I really would. But you were in an accident involving a microwave oven! Who knows what that might do to your genetic thingamobobs? This could all be the result of that. I still want more proof."

Irwin shook his head in resignation and went home.

Then he knelt down by a wall, licked his lips, and stuck his tongue into an electric socket.

Brrzzzt!!! His soul popped out of his body, up to heaven's gate.

Saint Peter took one look at him and immediately covered his ears.

"God," Irwin said "is cruel. Despite omnipotent power, He allows the existence of untold misery and grief."

"I'm not listening!" yelled the saint. "I'm not listening!" "The universe," Irwin continued, "is filled with toil and strife. If only the deity was more benevolent, and less petty, it could just as easily be filled with joy and love." Saint Peter stared at him for a few moments. Then he uncovered his ears.

"You know..." he said slowly, "you just might be right."

"What?!?" yelled Irwin.

"Come with me..."

Peter opened the gates and grabbed Irwin's arm. He dragged him, protesting all the way, into the heavenly city.

Past the Mountain of Joy, he was led, across the Sea of Bliss, through the Valley of Delight, until they arrived at the foot of the throne of the Lord.

"Sir," Saint Peter said, "I think you should listen to what this guy has to say. It really does make a lot of sense."

"All right," said God and He looked down at Irwin. "What is it?" "Well," Irwin said, reluctantly, "I was only saying that the universe would be a happier place if you would just use your infinite power to make things a bit easier for people once in a while..." "Hmm..." said God. "That never occurred to me. Let me think about it a bit." Irwin waited impatiently while God pondered.

"You know," God said, after a while, "I think you might be on to something there! From now on, I'm going to be much more generous to everybody."

Irwin looked at Him, aghast.

"And, while I'm at it," God continued, "I won't hide myself anymore. I'll talk directly to humanity, so that there's no longer any confusion."

"But, but..." Irwin protested, "what about me? Aren't you going to damn me to hell?"

"Hell?" laughed God. "Quite the contrary. From now on, you will dwell here in paradise, and enjoy a life of eternal bliss."

"But, but, but..." said Irwin.

But it was too late.

The next day, God's face appeared in the clouds above all the continents of the earth. "From now on," His booming voice declared, "the universe will be much kinder to everyone." All over the planet, five billion faces looked up and heard the joyful message. "There will be no more starvation or want," the Voice continued.

"There will be no need to labor for gain. Tasty food will no longer make you fat. Sex will never lead to disease, and will only cause pregnancy when it is so desired... And only those who cause harm to others will be damned!"

As humanity heard the glorious words a mighty cheer rose from five billion mouths.

Ghetto shacks everywhere transformed themselves to mansions. The ugly became immediately beautiful. The sick became instantly well.

"And one last thing," God continued. "I want you to know that you owe it all to Irwin here. From now he will dwell with Me in heaven, at the side of my throne, in eternal paradise!"

Eileen admired the cut of her new emerald studded dress and surveyed the opulent furniture in her palatial apartment.

"I knew Irwin was lying," she said. "You never can trust men!"

## **Questions for Reflection**

- I. Is it possible to sin without doing harm to others?
- II. How far would you go for true love?
- III. Does human suffering serve a purpose, or is God arbitrary and cruel?
- IV. Many religions claim a monopoly on truth. How are we to judge between them?
- V. Are there dentists in heaven?