

Designs for Hell

1a.

A room with a switch. One side of the switch is labelled "numbness" and the other "pain." It starts on "numbness," which is what you feel.

How long can you hold out before flipping the switch?

How much will you regret it when you do?

1b.

After a while they move you along. This room has no switch, just a window. You can see someone else in a room that looks like the one you were just in. When that person's switch is on "numbness," you feel pain. When the switch is on "pain," numbness. You don't think the person can see you through the window. When you were in that room you didn't see anybody.

1c.

They bring you back into the first room. This time the switch starts on "pain."

How long can you hold out before flipping the switch?

How much will you regret it when you do?

2a.

A room with a switch and a window. On the other side is a person. A woman perhaps. Your room has a switch. The two settings are "yours" and "hers." The switch is on "hers." You see that she is suffering. You see that she cannot see you.

How long before you flip the switch?

How long before you flip it back?

2b.

After a while they take you out of your room and move you into the room she was in. You can tell by the water stains on the wall. As soon as you enter the room you begin suffering. When you look toward the window, all you see is a mirror.

2c.

They bring you to a new room, with no switch, no window, and no mirror. Just two doors. They bring her in through the other one.

What can you say?

2d.

They return you to the first room.

How do you use the switch now?

2e.

They move you back to the second room. There's nothing to do but take the pain or the reprieve from it, to think about what's happening on the other side, and to think about what you'll say.

2f.

They move you again, but it's not to the third room. You're in the room with the switch and the window. Whether you'll ever go back to the third room they won't say. They never speak.

Can you make the pain into a language?

Would there be anything to say?

3a.

While awaiting your next sentence you're picked out of line and brought to a back room. You're being promoted to staff. Your job is to design rooms, invent tortures. You're given pills to suppress your empathy, and your nerves are coated with electrodes that give you perverse reactions to the pain of your subjects. You name the emotions by what you see in your subjects, feel them as the opposite. Their agony is ecstasy, fear is power, turmoil is calm. Sweetest of all is guilt, which makes you feel whole as a person, makes you feel right.

3b.

They stop giving you the pills, the electrodes are removed. You're left out in a field with nobody around.

3c.

They come and get you. It's time to begin work again. This time there will be no pills, no electrodes. You do have the option to refuse your job; if you do, you'll be entered into your own designs as a subject.

4.

A room full of fire. You are suspended in the middle of it with metal chains. They grow red hot but never melt. Your flesh is charred but never falls off, your nerves never die. Nobody ever comes in or out. The smoke exits through a vent in the ceiling.

5.

Your life is replayed before your eyes. It's not how you remembered it. Everything you thought you did right ends up ruining someone's life. Every moment you thought of as a triumph, someone jeers at you. You ask the guard if it's the truth. He doesn't say anything. They never speak.