

Escaping hell but not heaven

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Abstract Benjamin Matheson (Int J Philos Relig 75:197–206, 2014) has recently critiqued the escapist account of hell that we have defended. In this paper we respond to Matheson. Building on some of our work in defense of escapism that Matheson does not discuss (in particular, Buckareff and Plug, The problem of hell: a philosophical anthology, Ashgate, Burlington, 2010) we show that the threat posed by Matheson's critique is chimerical. We begin by summarizing our escapist theory of hell. Next, we summarize both Matheson's central thesis and the main arguments offered in its defense. We then respond to those arguments.

Keywords Hell · Heaven · Afterlife

Escapism sketched

We have argued that the problem of hell is a problem for traditional theists who affirm that God is an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect being who loves and desires to commune with us. The problem is particularly acute for what we call the traditional retributivist position. According to traditional retributivism, hell is a place of eternal punishment that at least some persons will experience. Against the traditional retributivist view of hell, escapism is committed to the truth of the conjunction of the following two claims (2005, 46).

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- A. Hell exists and might be populated for eternity.
 B. If there are any denizens of hell, then at any time they have the ability to accept God's grace and leave hell and enter heaven.

Regarding (A), we endorsed an issuant view of hell (see [Kvanvig 1993](#)). According to issuantism, hell is a place that God, being motivated by love for persons, has provided for those who do not wish to be in communion with God.

It is the combination of (A) *and* (B) that is distinctive about escapism. The argument¹ for escapism begins with an assumption regarding divine action, namely, that all of God's actions are just and loving. We argued that if that is true, then God's soteriological activity will be motivated by God's desire for the most just and loving outcome. The most just and loving outcome, we argued, is for everyone to have the opportunity to freely choose to be in communion with God. Thus, we argue, we should expect that God would make provisions for people to convert in the eschaton and the opportunities for persons to convert should not be exhausted by a single post-mortem opportunity.

Elsewhere, we have considered objections to this general strategy (in [Buckareff and Plug 2009, 2010, 2013](#)). Matheson presents a new challenge. It is a variant of one we have considered elsewhere (in [Buckareff and Plug 2010](#)). But it is sufficiently original to merit a response of its own and also demands that we clarify some of our thinking about these matters.

Matheson's case against escapism

In brief, Matheson's argument rests on the assumption that if God must have an open-door policy toward those in hell, God should have the same policy towards those in heaven. His argument can be summarized as follows:

1. If, according to escapism, there is no symmetry with respect to God's policies towards those in both heaven and hell, then escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of hell.
2. On escapism, there is no such symmetry.
3. Therefore, escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of hell.

We do not accept premise (1). In the remainder of the paper, we will argue in defense of the assertion that premise (1) is false.

Heaven: no escape?

We accept the claim that, on escapism, there is an asymmetry between heaven and hell. Those in hell are psychologically capable of accepting² God's grace and thus to leave hell. Those in heaven are not psychologically capable of rejecting God's

¹ What follows is a brief summary of our theory of hell as outlined in [Buckareff and Plug \(2005, pp. 42–45\)](#).

² That is they are capable of developing the appropriate desires and attitude that will allow them to enter into communion with God.

grace (after having freely accepted it) and leave heaven. Why aren't those in heaven psychologically capable of leaving heaven?

Matheson suggests that Anselmian assumptions provide the starting point for the argument—in particular the Anselmian notion that God is the greatest conceivable being. According to Matheson it follows that “the greatest conceivable being is going to commune with persons in the *greatest conceivable place*,” namely, heaven. If heaven is the greatest conceivable place, then “once a person has experienced it she is not going to be able to want to leave” (Matheson 2014, p. 201). Since such a person cannot develop the desire to leave, choosing to leave heaven is psychologically impossible. Matheson concludes that the view that it is psychologically possible for persons to choose to leave heaven is “wildly implausible” (Ibid., p. 201).

Matheson may be surprised to learn that we agree that it is not psychologically possible for persons to leave heaven. And so we accept premise (2). But we do not think that we must accept the symmetry he supposes must exist between heaven and hell with respect to openness. In fact, we maintain that the same considerations that may motivate one to endorse escapism do not lead to the position that God maintains an open door policy in heaven.³ Rather, we claim that those considerations in fact lead to the position that the decision to enter into full communion with God means that one can never decide to leave heaven.

The central motivating principle behind escapism is that all of God's soteriological activity is motivated by his desire for the most just and loving outcome—that all created persons freely choose to enter into communion with God. But it is important to note what choosing to enter into communion with God entails. An agent who chooses heaven must knowingly aim at forming the character necessary to execute her intention. Notice that this is not like intending to go on a holiday to the greatest conceivable resort. The assumption in the Abrahamic religions is that one is intending to enter into deep communion with the divine. One must have the sort of character that allows one to identify such a state as heavenly.

The required character change would result in a shift in an agent's motivational states, particularly her preferences, and her emotional life. Such a change is regarded as necessary for human agents to fulfill their purpose. Regarding the purpose of human agents, in our original paper we cited the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism approvingly, which states that our purpose is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” We expressed agreement with Cornelius Plantinga's claim that in order for us to enjoy God forever would require that we share God's intentions and the purposes they represent. Plantinga writes that, “To enjoy God forever is to cultivate a taste for this project, to become more and more the sort of person for whom eternal life with God would be sheer heaven” (1995, 37). The sort of change in an agent that must take effect for her to be one who has cultivated a taste for God's project and for whom heaven would be eternal life with God is radical, to say the least. Nothing short of either an immediate and radical person-transforming change upon entering heaven or a fair amount of time in purgatory developing a taste for the divine project

³ The following line of reasoning is a modified and updated version of an argument we originally presented in Buckareff and Plug (2010, pp. 84–86).

by completing the process of sanctification or *theosis*⁴ can bring about the change needed in an agent to be fit for heaven.

We take it that an agent who has undergone such a transformation would have to be the sort of person for whom any sort of turning from God would be psychologically impossible. Such an agent's moral psychology has undergone the sort of transformation that would, rightly, lead the agent to regard any alleged reasons for intending to leave heaven to be illusory. So, if escapism is true, then the change necessary for an agent to enter into complete communion with God—that is, heaven—would be such that it would result in an agent being the sort of agent who lacks the power to leave heaven. But the lack of this power would be owing to the complete change in the agent's character.

Entering hell does not place the same sort of demands on an agent. An agent need not have a taste for rebellion or intend to develop a character that will be suitable for alienating herself from God. All that is necessary is that the agent lacks the intention to commune with God. And the lack of such an intention is not the same thing as having an intention not to commune with God.

So the motivating principle behind escapism—that all of God's soteriological activity is motivated by his desire for the most just and loving outcome—leads us to deny that heaven and hell are symmetrical. Indeed, it leads to the conclusion that God would act so that those in heaven are not psychologically capable of leaving heaven even though God would act so that those in hell are psychologically capable of leaving hell and entering heaven. Any adequate response to the problem of hell should have this result.

Free agency?

But this is not the end of Matheson's objection to escapism. Matheson also alleges that escapism has problems regarding the free will and agency of both the occupants of heaven and the occupants of hell. We will consider the alleged difficulties with heaven first.

We admit that those in heaven are not free to leave. In particular, they are not psychologically capable of choosing to leave heaven. However, Matheson contends that the loss of freedom in heaven is unacceptable (2014, pp. 202–203).

Our response to this problem is simply an extension of our response to the last worry addressed.⁵ An agent in heaven, in either developing his or her character or submitting to an instant transformation, willingly gives up the ability to choose not to be with God. But such an agent is now an ideally rational agent who performs what Michael Smith calls "orthonomous actions" (Smith 2004). An orthonomous action is one that is performed for good/right reasons—that is, a fully rational action. We take it that an agent in heaven would be an orthonomous agent. The trade off in becoming a citizen of heaven is that one becomes someone who always acts for right reasons. There is still an obvious sense in which such an agent is autonomous. She would be self-governed and

⁴ See Brown (1985) and Walls (2002).

⁵ The next two paragraphs build on some of what we argued in Buckareff and Plug (2010, pp. 84–86).

not a puppet for God to manipulate. But such an agent is now a maximally rational agent whose behavior is entirely aimed at ends that are consistent with God's purposes and continued communion with God. Such an agent is not one who would be able to simply pack up and move to hell (and maybe back to heaven later) nor would she be capable of becoming someone who is able to move to hell—since in becoming such a person she would have needed to act for wrong reasons, which is now impossible for her.

We expect that Matheson would find orthonomous agency to be inadequate for moral agency. He argues that agents in heaven (whom he does not identify as orthonomous) are neither directly free nor derivatively free. We agree that they are neither directly free nor derivatively free. But it does not follow that orthonomy is not consistent with libertarianism. Specifically, orthonomous agency is consistent with wide source incompatibilism.⁶ Wide source incompatibilists endorse an actual-sequence theory of moral responsibility for actions that issue from a character for which an agent has ultimate responsibility. So on wide source incompatibilism, an agent is morally responsible for some action A at some time t_2 that issues from a character formed at some earlier time t_1 as a consequence of performing what Robert Kane (1996) calls a “self-forming action” (SFA) at which time libertarian free agency was exercised. When the agent performed the SFA, she had alternate possibilities and so could have acted otherwise. An action issuing from the character formed by such an SFA is one that an agent can be morally responsible for on this view. If this view is right, orthonomous agency in heaven is consistent with wide source incompatibilism. At the time an agent made the choice to be reconciled with God the agent began forming the character of an orthonomous agent who, when finally in heaven, could never turn from God. Such an agent has chosen to be someone who will eventually act orthonomously. And that the agent now acts orthonomously can be the consequence of having made a decision that satisfied the conditions for free agency stipulated by libertarian theories of free will.

But hell is still a problem. In the same section where he considers the problem of direct versus derived free will in heaven, Matheson offers a more direct critique of escapism about hell. In our original 2005 paper we conceded in an endnote that, “it is possible an agent's character may become settled after a while.” Such an agent may become such that, while it remains metaphysically possible for her to leave hell, it is psychologically impossible for her to leave (Buckareff and Plug 2005, 54, n. 21).⁷

Matheson presents a new challenge. He claims first that if it is psychologically impossible for persons to leave hell but metaphysically possible for them to leave, what we have is hardly something worth calling an open-door policy towards those in hell. Moreover, to make matters worse, Matheson suggests that, “[i]f it is not always true that it is psychologically possible for persons in Hell to leave, then it is possible that a person enters Hell with an already set character—that is, a character that will not be modified by post-mortem experience” (2014, p. 204). This challenge may be even

⁶ For a defense of wide source incompatibilism, see Timpe (2007).

⁷ We have gone further in our 2009 paper to argue that escapism is consistent with the notion that there must be some finality in the eschaton. In particular, we argued that escapism is consistent with the notion that there could come a time when those who are still in hell will remain in hell (Buckareff and Plug 2009, pp. 86–89).

more troubling than any worries about an agent's character becoming settled post-mortem. After all, as Matheson correctly notes, "[i]t only takes one person to never have the option to leave Hell to cast doubt on the claim that God is all-loving and just" (2014, p. 205). While this is troubling, it is not clear that it is the fatal objection that Matheson takes it to be.

Here we need only point out what escapism's central thesis is. The central thesis of escapism is simply that God maintains an open-door policy towards those in hell. While it is consistent with the possibility of universal salvation, it is not universalism. In fact, escapism is consistent with a number of different states of affairs obtaining in the eschaton, including one where no one who initially enters hell ever leaves. That is precisely what we regarded as the strength of the view, namely, its complete lack of any commitment to stating what the final state of affairs must look like in the eschaton in order for it to be consistent with divine love and justice.

What Matheson adds that we do not is that in order for God to have a genuine open-door policy towards those in hell, God must somehow provide such agents with the ability to leave hell (2014, 205). We do not commit ourselves to this position. For this reason, Matheson notes, our claim that God would not give up on offering reconciliation to a person seems illusory. He writes that, "a genuine offer is one that the recipient is actually [psychologically] able to accept" (Ibid., 205).

There are a few things to consider by way of a response. Focusing on humans, human moral psychology is complex. It is difficult to accurately predict how an agent's character might change and how she might act in the future. Thus, it strains credulity to confidently maintain that any human agent can develop the sort of settled character in the span of a normal human lifetime that would make her post-mortem state such that she is permanently psychologically incapable of responding to divine preventent grace and the offer of reconciliation.

Suppose someone has a settled character. The question to ask is would a divine open-door policy towards those in hell be a farce if there be such agents? Not obviously. While God's efforts may not end, it does not seem that God's policy and efforts at reconciliation are pointless. Recall that escapism assumes issuantism. As we noted elsewhere, "escapism's issuant commitments render hell a place provided by God out of love; it is not a place to exact retribution." Those in hell would be choosing separation from God because they do not want communion with God. While the relevant state of affairs they would thus find themselves in is qualitatively inferior to communion with God, it does not follow that they experience negative well-being. Still, it is an inferior state of being. But it is one that an agent prefers, even if the preference is not objectively rational.

Conclusion

Our response to the first objection is sufficient to show that Matheson's central argument is not sound. In particular, premise (1) is false if we are correct about the asymmetry between heaven and hell regarding escape.

We expect that the second half of our response to his second auxiliary objection will not satisfy Matheson or those sympathetic to his general line of reasoning. At

worst, we are stuck with a stalemate. But we think that escapism is still in a better position than other accounts of hell. Matheson's objections to escapism, while posing a significant challenge, fail to show that escapism should not be preferred over any of the alternative approaches to the problem of hell.⁸

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⁸ For a critical survey of approaches to the problem of hell, see [Buckareff and Plug \(2013\)](#).