


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Considering escaping hell

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Abstract

Adams argues that the traditional doctrine of eternal hellish experience stretches the Problem of Evil beyond any reasonable solution, as hell is stubbornly incompatible with God's omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. Buckareff and Plug argue that people could leave hell. Matheson responds that if people could leave hell, people could leave heaven. But Matheson provides reasons to think that this is not possible. Luck attempts to refute Matheson's argument. I show that Luck's attempt contains analogies that lack features that crucially depict the asymmetrical relationship between heaven and hell. I advance some other analogies that I think contain such features.

Keywords: Abrahamic Religions; God; Philosophy of Religion; Problem of Evil; Problem of Hell

Introduction

The traditional doctrine of eternal hellish experience (or permanent hell residency) has been under criticism for the past two decades. Like the Problem of Evil, the Problem of an Inescapable and Permanent Hell is considered incompatible with God's attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. Marilyn McCord Adams notes that Christian theologians have been able to explain the presence of a wide range of evils as fitting into God's overall benevolent plan, but the Problem of an Inescapable Hell sticks out as an evil so horrendous that it stretches the Problem of Evil beyond any reasonable attempt at a solution. Andrei Buckareff and Alen Plug respond by arguing that the only way we can reconcile what we know about God's loving character and consistent policies as a parent is that He is permanently open to reconciling with His children in infinite time, and this implies He would maintain an open-door policy in hell, making it possible for those there to escape. Benjamin Matheson responds by arguing that we should treat heaven and hell symmetrically, and if it is possible to leave hell, it should also be possible to leave heaven. Matheson argues that considering the nature of heaven (as the best possible place) there is no reason to think that anyone would want to leave heaven. Matheson, therefore, deploys what I would call the Equality of Escapability principle: if it is not possible to leave heaven, then it is not possible to leave hell. Morgan Luck responds to Matheson's argument by, first, attempting to reduce the status of heaven and arguing that heaven may not be the best possible place. This is to pave the way for the theoretical possibility of leaving heaven, in order to allow also the possibility of leaving hell. Luck also tries to destabilize the Equality of Escapability principle.

I show in this article that there are fundamental problems with Luck's attempt to reduce the status of heaven and his attempt to reject the Equality of Escapability principle. In particular I think the analogy he used against the Equality of Escapability principle contains too many disanalogies, and is worth replacing with other analogies containing features that crucially depict the asymmetrical relationship between heaven and hell. Note that this article only aims to show a better way to reject Matheson's argument compared to Luck's attempt.

This article has five main sections. In the first section I trace the history of the debate up to Luck's rejection of Matheson's argument, specifically Luck's attempt to reduce the status of heaven. In the next section I show that Luck's argument that heaven is not the best possible place is at best an attempt to exploit a weakness in Matheson's argument, and it is easy to show that Luck's position about heaven has no merit by simply correcting Matheson's weakness. In the subsequent section I outline Luck's attempt to reject the Equality of Escapability principle by providing an example in which a parent permits her children to escape from one activity to the other but not vice versa, and Luck's conclusion that there is no reason why a loving God, being a parent, would impose equal escapability conditions on His children. In the penultimate section I show that Luck's analogy is inappropriate because it needs certain crucial features that are missing. In the final section I present analogies containing features that evince the asymmetrical relationship between heaven and hell, as a refutation of the Equality of Escapability principle.

The Problem of an Inescapable Hell and the Problem of Evil

Philosophers in the Christian tradition have tackled the Problem of Evil. According to this problem:

- (1) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and perfectly good.
- (2) Evil exists.

The traditional argument is that if (1) then not (2). If God is omnipotent, He should be able to prevent the existence of evil. If God were omniscient, He would *know* how to prevent evil. If God were perfectly good, He would *want* to prevent evil. This argument can be used as a bulwark for arguing against the existence of God. According to Marilyn McCord Adams, Christian theologians have generally responded to the scrutiny of atheists by arguing that some evils indeed fit into the overall rationality of God's scheme, or, as she puts it, 'into an overall beatific relation of loving intimacy with God' (Adams (1993), 302). According to her, proposition (2) 'gets its bite from the fact that most people agree on a wide range of actually extant evils' (*ibid.*, 303). But for precisely the same reason, it is more difficult to explain the compatibility of God with more horrendous kinds of evils, and the most horrendous of all evils is the punishment of a permanent hellish experience. Adams notes biblical descriptions of souls bound for hell, such as being 'cast into outer darkness', where there is 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'; being 'thrown into unquenchable fire'; 'prepared for the devil and all his angels'. She notes Matthew as saying of Judas that it would be 'better for him never to have been born', and also notes Duns Scotus' argument that sinners will be 'deprived of their natural and supernatural happiness, and made to suffer perpetual fiery torture, which distracts their intellects so much that they can think of nothing else' (*ibid.*).

Adams rejects any proposition that some creatures of God will be consigned to hell forever. Adams argues that the Problem of an Inescapable Hell¹ would exacerbate the

Problem of Evil beyond any reasonable possibility of a solution. To add the Problem of Hell:

- (1) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and perfectly good.
- (2) Evil exists.
- (3) Some in hell cannot leave, or some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.

At face value, the three propositions appear incompatible (with the incompatibility being between proposition (1) on the one hand and (2) and (3) on the other hand). Since the existence of evil is not in doubt, most philosophers who are not sympathetic to Christian beliefs would accept propositions (2) and (3) and reject (1). Atheists (believing in neither God nor hell) would simply accept proposition (2). Most Christians accept all three propositions, but as Adams points out, find it difficult to explain the compatibility of all three. Adams points out that those theologians who accept all three propositions have been carrying too much argumentative weight and selecting more than they can prove. She argues that (3) 'enjoys no straightforward empirical support but rests on and must be in the first instance interpreted by the authorities that tell us so' (*ibid.*). She argues that (3) makes life a bad bet because nobody behind Rawls's veil of ignorance would choose a world or life whose afterlife includes hell (with its permanence) as a form of punishment. In addition, an eternal hellish experience 'would make pragmatically inconsistent any worship behavior that presupposes that God is good to the worshipper or to created persons generally', for given the inability of anyone to distinguish between who will be saved and who will be damned, 'actual created persons are left to worry about whether this fate-worse-than-death is theirs' (*ibid.*, 305). So she argues that we should accept propositions (1) and (2) as compatible since certain evils fit into God's overall plan, but reject (3) since an eternal punishment for a temporary offense does not describe God's all-goodness and is completely disproportionate to human wrongdoing (*ibid.*, 309–310).

The Problem of an Inescapable and Permanent Hell (henceforth PIPH) therefore arises because eternal punishment comes across as *undeserved* punishment. Human beings are finite beings, and punishment for sins committed in finite time would be exhausted at some point. From such a point into eternity, a continuation of such punishment is undeserved. Restating the Problem of Evil as PIPH, Adams adds the following propositions and a conclusion:

- (4) If God existed and were omnipotent, He would be able to avoid (3).
- (5) If God existed and were omniscient, He would know how to avoid (3).
- (6) If God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid (3).
- (7) Therefore, If (1) then not (3).

Some other theologians have also rejected (3). One of them is Theodore Sider, who argues against the notion of an eternal hellish experience. Sider uses the notion of arbitrary cut-offs between damnation and salvation. By arbitrary cut-offs, he means that however it is decided who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, borderline cases are possible where someone just misses heaven by a tiny margin and is placed in hell, while another just barely misses hell and is placed in heaven. The difference between the merits of these two cases (in which one is barely better than the other) does not appear to warrant eternity in either damnation or salvation, and is incompatible with any understanding of God's perfect justice (Sider (2002), 58–68).

There have been other suggestions about disposing of proposition (3) by resolving PIPH (in terms of avoiding the permanent pain of hell), ranging from the argument that God can override the free will of recalcitrant people and save them from hell (Talbot (1990), (1992), (1997); Adams (1993)); to annihilationism (Swinburne (1989); Pinnock (1992); Wenham (1992); Fudge (1994)); to the argument that people may choose either to be with God or to remain in a state of permanent indecision, the permanent state of indecision being hell (Kvanvig (1993)); and yet others. But these arguments are not of interest to me in this article.

My interest is the direction of the debate that continues from the contributions of Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug. These scholars restate the Problem of Hell as follows:

- (A) Some persons are (or will be) in hell – that is, hell is (or will be) populated.
- (B) Those persons who are consigned to go to hell will remain in hell forever.
- (C) Heaven is a far superior place to be than is hell.

Adams (1975) rejects (A). Swinburne (1989) rejects (C). Adams (1993) and Buckareff and Plug (2005) reject (B). Buckareff and Plug (2005) argue that God would maintain an open-door policy in hell in the sense that (a) those who repent could leave even before their punishment is exhausted (45–46), and (b) all souls in hell would, at some point, leave because they have exhausted the punishment for their sins (47). Their doctrine of escapism is as follows:

- (E1) Hell exists and might be populated for eternity.
- (E2) If there are any denizens in hell, then they, at any time, have the ability to accept God's grace and leave hell and enter heaven.

Buckareff and Plug reject the retributive notion of hell in favour of an issuant view, which holds that hell issues from God's love for his creatures just as heaven does. They appeal to the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, which see God as holy (especially in being morally perfect), just, and loving. In these traditions, God's actions are motivated by the desire for the most just and loving outcomes. On the strength of this assumption about the nature of God, Buckareff and Plug (2005, 42) argue that anything God does, including his soteriological (or salvation) activities, is motivated by his just and loving pro-attitudes. This means that God's provision for *separation* from Him is motivated by God's desire for the most just and loving state of affairs to be realized in the eschaton. Bukareff and Plug remark that Christian and Muslim traditions would agree with these propositions, but they provide the rationale for the proposition that hellish experience cannot last forever, for, according to them, 'It would be out of God's character to create a place for Him to punish persons forever' (*ibid.*, 43). They argue that a permanent hellish experience is incompatible with God's desire to suffer and die instead of mankind, and that the primary purpose of God's punishment as a parent is to reconcile His children to him by teaching them to learn from their mistakes and ultimately restore the fractured relationship. Under these circumstances, the authors argue that negative choices made by creatures in response to God's salvation 'cannot be such that they are met with divine wrath for an everlasting period of time, no provision being made for creatures to be freed of their situation' (*ibid.*, 44). So God would not keep a closed-door policy on the other side of the eschaton, in the form of a permanent hellish punishment. This is especially the case when those condemned in such a closed-door policy are bearing God's image (*ibid.*). This in turn means that escapism from hell is a possibility, and therefore, escapism is true (*ibid.*). It would mean that God never gives up the unsaved after death, and the only thing preventing anyone from enjoying reunion with God would be the

person's own wrong decisions. The authors then conclude that God will provide opportunities for people in hell to receive the gift of salvation and such persons can decide to receive the gift.

Buckareff and Plug clarify that escaping hell is not just logically but also psychologically possible, and that residents of hell who desire to reunite with God could actually be able to do so. The authors also clarify that they are not saying that people in hell will actually take the decision to reunite with God and escape hell, but that residents of hell will have the *ability* to do so.

Matheson (2014) has objected to the escapist conception of hell. He argues that we should treat heaven and hell symmetrically, and must therefore assume that God would maintain an open-door policy for heaven if He maintains an open-door policy for hell. But, according to Matheson, a coherent conception of heaven is not consistent with such a policy. So Matheson concludes that escapism is not an adequate solution to PIPH.

Matheson defends his position by premising that heaven is *the greatest conceivable place* (since God is the greatest conceivable being). Matheson reminds us that to leave heaven is not just to leave temporarily but to sever one's relationship with God (the greatest possible being) and Matheson wonders why anyone would want to do that (Matheson (2014), 201). Matheson cites the argument of Buckareff and Plug that it is psychologically possible for residents of hell to leave, but Matheson argues that it does not seem psychologically possible for anyone to want to leave heaven, therefore escapism does not apply to heaven (*ibid.*). He notes that it is possible for people to enter hell with a character set so that they would 'never be open to God's grace after they die' (*ibid.*, 204). And if it is possible that a character cannot be modified by post-mortem experience, then it may not be psychologically possible for some people to leave hell. If it is not psychologically possible for some people to leave hell, then there is no open-door policy.

Matheson argues that if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good, then He should maintain an open-door policy for all persons, not just a few, and it takes one person never wanting to leave hell to cast doubt on these attributes of God. Matheson argues that if God has not provided each person in hell with the ability to leave *while in hell*, then He has effectively given up on him or her. Matheson remarks that God might provide grace to those in hell, but according to Matheson, 'I take it that a genuine offer is one that the recipient is actually able to accept' (*ibid.*). Offering those in hell graces they reject would be problematic for the attributes of God. The resolution is that escapism is not an adequate response to PIPH, just as it is not a coherent notion about heaven.

Recall the arguments so far, as begun by Adams:

- (1) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and perfectly good.
- (2) Evil exists.
- (3) Some in hell cannot leave, or some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.
- (4) If God existed and were omnipotent, He would be able to avoid (3).
- (5) If God existed and were omniscient, He would know how to avoid (3).
- (6) If God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid (3).
- (7) Therefore, if (1) then not (3).

Buckareff and Plug (2005) have provided the following proposition:

- (8) Everyone in hell can leave.

But Matheson has opposed (8) by adding the following propositions:

- (9) If God is a loving parent, He would ensure that the escapability of hell and heaven are the same.
- (10) If hell is escapable, then heaven should also be escapable.
- (11) God is the greatest possible being, and heaven (where God communes with His children) should be the greatest possible place.
- (12) Heaven is the greatest possible place.
- (13) No one would possibly wish to leave the greatest possible place: it is not psychologically possible to leave heaven.
- (14) Therefore, heaven is not escapable.
- (15) If heaven is not escapable, then hell is also not escapable (for escapability must apply equally to both heaven and hell).
- (16) If God made it psychologically impossible to leave heaven, then He also makes it psychologically impossible to leave hell.

The summary of Matheson's argument is a simple combination of propositions (1) and (3):

- (1) God exists.
- (3) Some in hell cannot leave, or some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.

Morgan Luck argues that Matheson's argument is unsound. Luck does this by arguing that Matheson's propositions (11) and (15) are false. Recall that according to proposition (11):

- (11) God is the greatest possible being, and heaven (where God communes with His children) should be the greatest possible place.

Luck rejects this proposition by arguing that it is possible for an agent to commune in a place that is less great than itself. Luck reminds us that there are biblical references of God communing with people at Eden and Mount Sinai. So it is either that the biblical reports are false or that, per Matheson's argument, these places are as great as heaven (Luck (2016), 398). Luck then presents propositions (8) and (12), and reminds us that Matheson considered the two propositions as incompatible. According to Matheson:

- (8) Everyone in hell can leave.
- (12) Heaven is the greatest possible place.

Matheson had argued that if (8) is true, then everyone in heaven can also leave. But this would mean that heaven is not the greatest possible place. But heaven is the greatest possible place. So (8) and (12) are incompatible. Luck asks us which of these propositions God would choose if He cannot choose both. Luck responds by saying that God would choose a situation where heaven is not the greatest possible place (thereby displacing proposition (12)) but heaven will be *just slightly* less than the greatest possible place. According to Luck, the difference between heaven and the greatest possible place would be so slight that heaven would still be a place which no one would actually want to leave, only that it would still be psychologically theoretically possible to leave. So heaven would be a place where it is *psychologically* possible to leave, but heaven would still be so great that no one *actually* wants to leave (and no one might actually leave). This

argument enables Luck to reject proposition (12) by denying that heaven is the greatest possible place, so that proposition (8) (everyone in hell can leave) would survive.

In other words, Luck adds propositions (17), (18), and (19) to the debate:

- (17) Heaven is not exactly the greatest possible place.
- (18) So it is psychologically possible to leave heaven.
- (19) If it is psychologically possible to leave heaven, then it is psychologically possible to leave hell.

Problems with Luck's reduction of the status of heaven

I find Matheson's Equality of Escapability principle objectionable for a host of reasons. And I am happy that Luck decided to object to that principle. But I am ultimately disappointed in the way Luck went about it. To begin with, I notice two little imprecisions in Luck's attempt to reject Matheson's argument that heaven is the greatest place. Taken together, these two imprecisions invalidate Luck's rejection of Matheson's argument. The first has to do with Luck's argument that it is possible for an agent to commune in a place that is less great than the agent. The argument that heaven is the greatest possible place, simply because God is the greatest possible being and *wherever* God communes must be the greatest possible place, is an obvious weakness in Matheson's position. Luck exploits this weakness by simply pointing out that God has communed with His children on earth (which we do not understand as the greatest possible place). This said, I think Matheson and Luck have different understandings of the word 'commune', and it seems to me that Matheson's meaning of 'commune' goes beyond that of Luck. When we understand heaven (per the three religions and their scriptures) as a place where God communes with his people, we mean something deeper, more engaging, and longer-lasting than the few-sentences, few-minutes messages God passed to Adam in Eden and Moses at Mount Sinai. The two 'communes' are not in the same category. I am more inclined to believe that the greater kind of commune attributed to heaven is what Matheson meant. But Matheson's use of the word 'commune' was vague enough to attract Luck's response. To repel this response, it is pertinent to be more precise and just point out that God's communing with His children in heaven would be deeper, more engaging, longer lasting, and much more enjoyable than the mere instruction-giving we saw at Eden and Sinai.

Luck then argues that a world in which heaven is not exactly the greatest possible place (making it possible for people to leave both heaven and hell) is better than a world in which heaven is the greatest possible place (in which case it is impossible to leave heaven, and consequently hell). This leads to Luck's conclusion that God must prefer a world in which heaven is not exactly the greatest possible place, a conclusion Luck uses as a premise to conclude ultimately that people can leave hell. So Luck reduced the status of heaven in his bid to permit escape from hell. But his reduction of heaven is so slight that souls would still normally like to stay in heaven. To begin to destabilize this whole argument about whether heaven is the greatest possible place or not, I must first reject Matheson's argument that heaven is the greatest possible place simply because God communes with His children there. Instead, I would aver that heaven is the greatest possible place, *simpliciter*. The reason is that heaven is supposed to be the greatest possible place, both in and out of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures. Indeed, heaven *loses its very meaning* if it is even remotely suspected not to be the greatest possible place. Second, Luck finds it necessary to reduce the status of heaven (to make heaven and hell equally escapable) because Luck is (at that point) assuming Matheson's Equality of Escapability principle. My refutation of this principle will render Luck's attempt to reduce the status of heaven unnecessary.

If we accept, per the scriptures of the three religions, that heaven is the greatest possible place, we also accept Matheson's argument that it is psychologically impossible to leave heaven. This leads us to accept (per Matheson's Equality of Escapability principle) that it is psychologically impossible to leave hell. Matheson's whole argument is that once we understand that heaven is the greatest possible place, and that it is psychologically impossible to leave heaven, the Equality of Escapability principle kicks in for hell. Since Luck does not question the idea that it is psychologically impossible to leave the greatest possible place, the idea remains, and, together with the Equality of Escapability principle, leads us to the conclusion that hell is not escapable. Proponents of the escapability of hell would, at the very least, need to do something else about either:

- (a) The very idea that heaven is the greatest possible place,
- (b) The inference from the idea that heaven is the greatest possible place to the conclusion that it is psychologically impossible to leave heaven, or
- (c) The inference from the idea that it is psychologically impossible to leave heaven to the conclusion that it is psychologically impossible to leave hell.

Only then could proponents of the possibility of escapability from eschatological abodes do any harm to Matheson's argument. As we will see, I will advance arguments to refute (c).

For the time being, however, I would need to add the following propositions to the debate:

- (20) Arguments that heaven is not the greatest possible place are, so far, unconvincing.
- (21) Heaven is the greatest possible place.
- (22) It is psychologically impossible to leave heaven.
- (23) Therefore, it is psychologically impossible to leave hell.

Luck's rejection of Matheson's proposition (15)

Luck next aims to shoot down Matheson's proposition (15): the Equality of Escapability principle itself. According to this proposition:

- (15) If heaven is not escapable, then hell is also not escapable (for escapability must apply equally to both heaven and hell).

Luck rejects this proposition, and argues that he sees no reason why a loving God would make heaven and hell equally escapable. Luck gives an example with a just and loving parent who takes her two children with her on her way to a store (Luck (2016), 400). She gives her children the options of either staying with her in the store or playing in a playing ground next to her store. The difference between the two choices is that any child who gets bored of being in the store can be escorted to the playground, but once in the playground, none of the children can leave until mummy leaves the store and goes to the playground to sign them out and pick them. Luck gives this example to show that a loving parent would decide which place is escapable or which is not, and that there is no reason why a just and loving parent would impose the same escapability conditions (*ibid.*).

In the example, one child elected to go to the playground, the other decided to go to the store. The one at the store soon got bored and was escorted to the playground, never to leave until mummy went to fetch them. This helps Luck to argue that there is no reason to think the parent is unjust to decide that one child can swap locations while another cannot. Luck

then compares the store to hell and the playground to heaven, and argues that just as heaven is greater than hell, the playground is greater (for children) than the store (*ibid.*).

Proceeding from his example, Luck rejects (Matheson's) proposition (15). Recall this proposition:

(15) If heaven is not escapable, then hell is also not escapable (for escapability must apply equally to both heaven and hell).

To reject proposition (15), Luck marshals the argument to the effect that children can leave the store but not the playground, therefore God's children can leave hell but not heaven. Luck, therefore, adds the following propositions:

(24) If none of her children in the playground can leave, then the parent (being just and loving) would not stop her children in the store from leaving (in order to keep the escapability of the playground and the store the same).

(25) The store, the playground, and the loving and just parent are relevantly similar to hell, heaven, and God.

So (according to Luck),

(26) If no one in heaven can leave, then God (being just and loving) would not stop everyone in hell from leaving (in order to keep the escapability of heaven and hell the same).

So,

(27) (15) is false.

Problems with Luck's store and playground example

Before I present my problem with Luck's store and playground example, let me concede that all analogies may contain disanalogies of varying degrees. The major issue is whether the analogies contain certain features that are crucial. Of course, we use ante-mortem examples in our discussions of post-mortem life, which by itself suggests there may be disanalogies of some degree. But the rationale for ante-mortem projections into the post-mortem is our belief that the latter is an arrangement based largely on the former. My problem, therefore, with Luck's playground example would not be that it contains any features that are disanalogous with heaven and hell, but that the crucial features defining our conception of those two post-mortem abodes are missing (or that the disanalogies are just too much).

It seems to me that the example Luck uses to dismantle Matheson's argument about the equality in the inescapability of heaven and hell is missing an important feature of those two abodes. The problem lies in Luck's supposition that the children consider the playground a greater location than the store. This supposition is problematic in the particular case where the mother of the children spent more of her time in the store. For if the children stay for a long period in the playground, they may begin to desire to be in the presence of their mother, which might contribute to getting them bored with play. One would suppose that it seems natural for children to want to alternate between play and being with their mother. If possible, it seems natural for one to suppose that if children could help it, they would desire to both play and be in their mother's presence at the same time. This obviously explains why the children may want, at a particular point in time, to escape the playground.

The example also poses problems because God is supposed to commune in heaven with his children, but the mother of these children is not at the playground (compared to

heaven) but at the store (which Luck compared to hell). So, the message of this example is that God's children are in heaven while God is in hell, and because God knows His children may desire to see Him (even if it means escaping heaven for hell), God makes heaven inescapable to keep His children enjoying heaven until He comes over to heaven from hell. But the whole idea leading to the debate is that hell is not a place where God normally stays; those in hell are there *because* they are separated from God, and God communes with His children in heaven. If those in hell are separated from God, it means either that God is not in hell or that God is in hell but in an area of hell different from where His children in hell are residing. And if He is in hell, God does not commune with His children there. One could imagine that, for this to work, God would need to be in a different part of hell cut off from where His children reside. But this is not the idea we get from the scriptures. Besides, Lucifer (who quarrelled with God and was banished from heaven) is supposed to reside in hell as well, and one wonders why God would go to reside in a place where He has banished Lucifer and all those He similarly banished for being recalcitrant.

Contrary to Luck's argument, the example more reasonably suggests that both the playground and the store should be equally escapable, for the reason that the children might get bored in the store or miss their mummy in the playground. If mummy were in the playground rather than the store, the children would enjoy the double advantage of being in the playground and playing in the presence of their parent. But this would destroy both the rationale and the structure of Luck's example by removing the store from the picture. If the children's mother is in the store rather than the playground, then both the playground and the store should be escapable (just like imagining that if God were residing in hell, even temporarily, both heaven and hell should be escapable).

There is yet a third problem with Luck's example. We understand from the scriptures that the primary source of enjoyment in heaven is precisely being in God's presence and communing with Him. Likewise, the primary source of punishment in hell is being separated from God. This introduces an additional difficulty to Luck's example. For by this paradigm, the playground would be comparable to hell, not heaven as Luck argues. The children are separated from their parent in the playground. This separation means they are technically in hell by analogy. The aim of Luck's argument is to show that hell is escapable, but in Luck's example, the playground (where God's children are technically separated from God) is not escapable.

It may be objected that Luck's analogy seems only to be designed to show that the mother can put her children in two different places, each with different escapability conditions, and still be a just and loving parent, and that the location of the mother does not seem to play a major role in this analogy. To illustrate this objection, imagine the mother does stay in the playground and the kids' uncle goes shopping at the store instead. The mother might still give her kids the choice, with the same kind of rules (no one will leave the playground until the uncle returns from shopping, but any child can leave the store to come to the playground at any time). And one child might choose to stay in the playground (with their mother), while the other goes with the uncle. It still doesn't seem obvious that the mother, by allowing her children to go to different places with different escapability conditions, is not a just and loving parent. Therefore, according to this objection, the location of the mother was not an issue.

I appreciate this objection. I sincerely believe that Luck's intention was to only demonstrate that a loving parent can impose different escapability conditions, and that Luck did not intend the location of the mother to play a role. But this means he did not have any plans for the location of the mother. The problem with this lack of plan is that it did a lot of violence to the very rationale of being in heaven (to be in God's presence) and hell (being separated from God's presence). To illustrate this, consider the example in this objection, of the mother being in the playground and asking an uncle

to do the shopping at the store instead. The problem with this example is that no child would think of going with the uncle to the store if by doing so she were going away from God in heaven.

Proceeding from my observation of the quantity of disanalogies that combine to invalidate Luck's example, I would add the following propositions to the debate:

- (28) A just and loving parent would want to enable her children to escape to where the parent is not from where the parent is.
- (29) The children may miss their parent at the playground.
- (30) If the parent were in the store rather than the playground, she would want to make the playground equally escapable.
- (31) Since Luck sees the playground as greater than the store for the children, the scriptures tell us that the parent (by analogy) should be at the playground rather than the store.
- (32) By making the playground a place where the children are separated from their parent, the playground is technically comparable to hell rather than heaven.
- (33) The example about the parent, the children, the playground and the store, is inappropriate for describing God, His children, heaven and hell.
- (34) Therefore, proposition (15) has not been falsified.

I propose what I consider five more effective ways of refuting Matheson's Equality of Escapability Principle. Some of these arguments are analogies that I consider to contain features that are crucial to our understanding of heaven and hell. And the most crucial feature in these analogies is that of *asymmetry* between heaven and hell. These arguments are, therefore, refutations of Matheson's argument that we should treat heaven and hell symmetrically. To these five ways I now turn.

Five ways of refuting the Equality of Escapability principle

Matheson's reason for advancing the Equality of Escapability principle is an appeal to the idea of symmetry. According to him, 'we ought to treat Heaven and Hell *symmetrically*; so if there's an open-door policy on Hell, then there should also be an open-door policy on Heaven' (Matheson (2014), 200). Matheson then assumes that the value of symmetry is so self-evident that there is no need for him to justify it in regard to leaving heaven and hell. Indeed, Matheson argues that the only way to refute a symmetrical approach is to justify an *asymmetrical* approach. According to him, 'To block this move, Buckareff and Plug owe us an argument for treating hell and heaven asymmetrically. As they offer no such argument, they (currently) have no grounds for resisting my critique' (*ibid.*).

In any case, a principle is not irrefutable just because someone has not refuted it. Matheson does not offer any reason why he thinks that we should look at heaven and hell symmetrically. His presumption of symmetry, therefore, cries out for an argument, and the only arguments I see are those in support of asymmetry between heaven and hell. I will outline five of those arguments to refute Matheson's Equality of Escapability principle.

My central thesis is that we (and God) treat heaven and hell asymmetrically. My summary premise is that we are *normally* asymmetrical in our treatment of those existential abodes that, in comparison to each other, are unequal in their capacities to bring about human welfare. To justify this summary premise, I will highlight three analogies and two clarifications.

First, I will employ the scenario of the asymmetry of a certain category of visa-free international travel. Citizens of some countries are free to enter some other countries

without visas. There are, to my knowledge, two categories of visa free cross-border movements. The first is that between sovereign nations that share various forms of regional trade (and sometimes political) agreements. The most successful is the European Union (EU), whose citizens cross the borders of member countries without visas. The unprecedented free movement of members of EU countries has inspired other regional initiatives, which are aiming (with varying degrees of success) at free movement across the borders of their member countries. Those other regional initiatives include MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Arab Maghreb Union (involving Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), and other such regional initiatives developing around the world (see Nita et al. (2017), xix).

However, this category of free movements is not my focus for this discussion. My interest is in another category of visa-free movements, in which citizens of countries with well-performing economies (or countries that possess some other favourable factors) could travel to countries that are less economically powerful (or less fortunate in some other respects) without any visa requirements, but this does not apply vice versa for citizens of the second category of countries to the first category of countries. The number of countries a particular country's passport-holder could enter without a visa determines the 'power' of the passport, and the countries with the most powerful passports include Japan, Singapore, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and others (Henley and Partners (2021)). The power of each country's passport is determined by factors that increase the desire of other nations to want their citizens to visit such a country. For instance, Japan is currently the country with the most powerful passport not just because its economy is one of the largest in the world, but it managed to retain this position because it is currently hosting the 2020/21 Olympics. The power of the passports of the UK and the USA decreased in part because of the coronavirus, but their passports are still very powerful because of the sizes and conditions of their economies. So we could say that the most stable determinant of a country's passport power is its socio-economic well-being. All the countries with poorly performing economies are on the lower rungs of the list and there is no country at the upper stretches with a terribly distraught economy. Let me therefore focus on economy as an exemplary factor.

How do we explain the asymmetry in cross-border movements between countries of unequal economic power? It is by looking at what each country thinks it stands to gain or lose in the context of international relationships of economic inequality. Citizens from vastly economically superior countries (with invariably superior incomes), have much more money to spend in their travels. The vast number of tourists with more cash to spend on tourist destinations comes from this category of people, and governments of economically struggling countries desire these kinds of visitors. If such visitors are entering such countries to invest, the host governments consider it even better. But countries with more powerful economies do not face the same set of questions when considering whether to allow travellers from economically less fortunate countries to enter their borders without visas. Opening the borders could mean flooding their infrastructure and public facilities with an overwhelming number of immigrants needing food, healthcare, clothing, education, money, and jobs. Exhorting the authorities of these countries to a reciprocal and symmetrical approach to visa-less entry does not make this challenge go away.

This asymmetry in international travel can help us in thinking about heaven and hell. There is a fundamentally asymmetric condition governing the decision to open up heaven and the other decision to open up hell. The asymmetry emanates from an inequality of the experience of souls in heaven and souls in hell: souls go to heaven to find the

most profound joy and go to hell to find the most profound grief, just as migrants encounter better chances of economic progress in more fortunate economies and fewer such chances in less fortunate economies. As such, the asymmetric conditions governing entry requirements between countries of disparate economic power also govern the entries into heaven and hell. To my knowledge, the only destination of desire for everyone is heaven. Even Lucifer was recorded as *thrown out* of heaven (he was not recorded as leaving heaven willingly). If Lucifer did not go to hell willingly, it is difficult for me to understand why any soul no matter how evil will desire to go to hell. For the same reason, I do not see why anyone would desire to escape heaven, even though I see why everyone would like to escape hell. I therefore hold it that inequality in conditions generates asymmetry in entry requirements, and asymmetry in entry requirements teaches us a few crucial things about inequality of escapability. Ordinarily there is no relationship between entering a place and leaving another. But heaven and hell are presented as the only two major post-mortem abodes: leaving one seems tantamount to entering the other. So, the analogy between entry and escapability here is that if a soul were to escape hell, we normally consider such a soul as entering heaven (not purgatory or life before death).

The only disanalogy I see in this example is that there is still movement between rich and poor countries, but no movement between heaven and hell. My response to this potential objection is that visas to richer countries are granted to those in economically less fortunate countries who (1) show evidence that they are able to sustain themselves during their stay in richer countries, (2) have been granted admission into an academic institution and are able to pay their school fees or have a scholarship, (3) were given employment in the richer countries, and other reasons that amount to demonstrating that authorities in the richer countries would not be saddled with the need to feed, clothe, and provide them with shelter on a purely humanitarian basis and at the expense of the public purse. But this disanalogy does not do any harm to the central question of asymmetry. As I mentioned, all analogies contain some disanalogies, but what matters is that the disanalogies do not do a lot of violence to the main objective of the analogies.

My second analogy is a thought experiment of imagining career mobility between two professional occupations if we considered the two occupations in an eschatological context (occurring after life and involving something analogous to divine judgement). To begin, high-skilled occupations demand a greater amount of time, energy, resources, training, and experience. Because of this, we normally say that high-skilled professions have higher entry points. If someone decided to become a waitress, the majority of eateries do not require any formal education at the base level. In most cases, all that is required for entry is short-term on-the-job training. But it requires approximately 35 years of formal education, on-the-job training, and quite a mountain of publications (6 years primary education, 6 years secondary, 4 years for 1st degree, approximately 2 years for 2nd degree, average of 4 years for the terminal degree, average of 11 years of experience as a university faculty member, and probably up to 35 publications depending on the university) to become a full university professor. So an immigrant with her eyes on being a university professor, but having no resources, could first opt to become a waitress (since she can immediately satisfy the entry requirements) and work her way slowly to becoming a university professor. This is quite a long way to go, but so is the earthly project of going to heaven.

Now let us imagine that these two professions are transported to function after life, which closes the door of preparation for any profession at all including a professorship, and there is no more opportunity for waitresses to work their way towards ending up as professors. Would I (as the designer of these two professions) open the occupational gates to waitresses to become professors without any training, just as professors who

get tired of being professors may go over to become waiters? It does not seem I would like to invoke such a principle of equal escapability, because it destroys the relevance of university professorship by populating it with those who cannot perform the assigned tasks. Of course, on earth, people are free to leave their jobs as professors and become waiters, just as waiters are free to leave their jobs to become professors. But there is the question of the inequality in *ability* to be in any of the professions in question. I do not see why I would want waiters to become professors unprepared (although I will have no problems with professors leaving to become waiters). If we were to assume these to be the only occupations to choose from, at the time of divine judgement and after the eschaton, I would make professorship but not waitressing escapable. It means that I will not invoke a principle of the Equality of Escapability between those occupations in an eschatological context that closes the gates for evaluating requirements. And since those who are in hell have lost the opportunity to prepare to be *able* to be in heaven, I do not see any rationale behind a principle of Equal Escapability for heaven and hell.

My first analogy was of visa-free international travel and my second was of career mobility *across* occupations. For my third analogy, I will appeal to mobility *within* an occupation. The normal direction of career mobility (whether across or within occupations) is from lower to higher levels of responsibility (which is rewarded with higher socio-economic status). Progress can, therefore, be interpreted as *elevation*. Striving towards heaven bears the same characteristic (except that the elevation is not socio-economic). For all these instances (worldly and heavenly), elevation is reward for hard work and demotion is punitive. Most of us would agree that a promotion is an elevation and a sacking and imprisonment are demotions. So the terms elevation and demotion here depict those actions that typically reward and punish the good and bad conduct of institutional role-occupants.

In an employment, elevations are escapable but demotions are not. For example, John is an employee. For certain actions, John could be elevated (via promotion) to being the CEO of his organization. For certain other actions, John could not only be sacked but even land in jail. If John were elevated, he could decide to resign the elevated position, and we are *obliged* to respect his decision. We might not say the same if John were sacked or sent to jail, and simply wished to go back from jail and the sack to his job. In other words, John has the ability to quit (or reverse) an elevation but not a demotion. Being sent to heaven or hell bears the same resemblance to the analogy of elevation and demotion. It is the reason why some parts of scriptures portray heaven as being above and hell below, and why the movement of ascension is used to describe the movement of souls to heaven and descent for those going to hell.

Even were we to set aside the idea of elevation as reward for vertical progress, there is also reward for horizontal progress. The chief example is making money in self-employment (even though a certain level of accumulation will vertically elevate the person socio-economically). In the context of horizontal progress, people can be punished for offences by depleting their financial accumulation through fines. In line with my argument about escaping heaven and hell, people are free to 'escape' their financial accumulation by giving out part of their accumulation, but not free to 'escape' their poverty by taking what is not theirs (in an eschatological context that has closed the curtains on making more money through genuine work). The central idea is that relinquishing an achievement is permitted, but there is no such thing as relinquishing a punishment while the punishment is still in force.

There is, however, the question *why* someone would wish to resign or reverse a worldly career elevation. This question is especially important because the worldly elevations appear to be different from the heavenly elevations, in the sense that someone could resign a worldly elevation because of her unwillingness to carry out the responsibilities

of the elevation, but it seems unreasonable to resign a heavenly elevation on this basis. Therefore, it would seem that there is no logical reason to resign from heaven or relinquish one's heavenly entitlement. This observation in fact strengthens my argument. Worldly elevations present both responsibilities and rewards. We respect the humility of a person who rejects such an elevation because of the responsibilities *in spite* of the rewards, because there are too many people who would willingly enjoy the rewards without living up to the responsibilities. We would respect even more a person who rejects an elevation that comes with only rewards without responsibilities (if such elevations are possible). None of this respect is available for someone who wishes to reject a duly allocated demotion or some other form of punishment. In fine, relinquishing a deserving reward attracts more respect compared to escaping a deserving punishment. I, therefore, think that God would permit people to leave heaven in principle (even though I do not see anyone leaving heaven) but would not permit people to leave hell. I think there would be unequal levels of permissibility regarding the idea of people leaving the two abodes.

Indeed, there seems a principle of justice that makes it permissible (if not praiseworthy) for people to reject compensations offered to them for contributing to society or behaving well, but makes it impermissible for people to reject negative sorts of compensations allocated to them for harming society, disobeying authority, and misbehaving. The obvious justification for such a principle would be that were people to be free to reject the second category of compensations, society would quickly degenerate. For the purpose of this discussion, I would call it a principle of compensatory justice. Whatever name we may give it, such a principle directly contradicts the Equality of Escapability principle.

My depiction of these worldly scenarios about the binding nature of punishment and the non-binding nature of reward does not mean that I reject the issuant view of Buckareff and Plug, for they accept that people could be punished in hell, even though temporarily, as part of God's overall love for a just and loving state of affairs. So the issuant view does not deny punishment or its binding nature. In addition, notice that my argument about the binding nature of punishment does not necessarily mean that punishment is permanent, only simply that it has to be served. John's jail time need not be permanent.

My fourth contribution is that God's own attitudes to our differing decisions and actions are incompatible with a symmetric view of heaven and hell. It is obvious that our decisions and actions elicit differing reactions from God: certain of them please Him and certain others displease Him. Our decision and actions, therefore, do not have equal effects on God, and it is this asymmetry that gives rise to the existence of heaven and hell. Quite obviously, the asymmetry in God's reactions to differing human behaviour has led to the establishment of two post-mortem abodes of very different treatments. How, then, could such an asymmetric arrangement be treated symmetrically? Again, the fact that God could be pleased and displeased with our differing decisions and actions does not negate the issuant view of God's attitude to us.

This leads us to question why we should use the word *escapable* in describing the ability or feasibility of resigning or reversing an elevation. Discussing this question in fact leads me to my fifth objection to the Equality of Escapability principle, which is that the meaning of the concept *to escape* is to *free oneself from something unpleasant*. So it seems a *conceptual* mistake, from the onset, to apply the concept of escape equally to heaven and hell.

The above point made, let me make a few remarks about the *possibility* of leaving heaven and hell. Since heaven is the greatest possible place, we can accept Matheson's argument that it is psychologically impossible to leave heaven. But since the Equality of Escapability principle is unsound, such an agreement with Matheson does not bind us to the claim that it is also psychologically impossible to leave hell. There is, therefore,

no need to show (as Luck tried to do) that it is psychologically possible to leave heaven in order to prove that it is psychologically possible to leave hell.

I therefore need to reformulate the overall argument to reject the Equality of Escapability Principle. Matheson had elongated the argument from proposition (9) with this principle. According to proposition (9):

- (9) If God is a loving parent, He would ensure that the escapability of hell and heaven are the same.

I now reject this proposition by adding the following propositions to the argument:

- (35) The idea of escaping hell contradicts the very idea of demotion behind creating hell.
 (36) People may leave heaven because it is an elevation but people cannot leave hell because it is a demotion.
 (37) The Equality of Escapability principle is false, and a loving God would not make heaven and hell equally escapable.
 (38) Therefore, proposition (9) is unjustified.

Conclusion

I have contributed to the debate regarding the Problem of an Inescapable Hell, which has so far involved Adams, Buckareff and Plug, Matheson, and Luck. My contribution has been to show that Luck's attempts to dismiss Matheson's theses about the unsurpassed status of heaven and the Equality of Escapability principle (by which escapability must apply equally to heaven and hell) lack features that crucially depict heaven and hell in the context of the discussion. I advanced analogies that I think capture those crucial features, and provided supporting arguments.

Note

1. The Problem of an Inescapable Hell is a phrase coined by Luck (2016, 395). Buckareff and Plug (2005) simply refer to it as the Problem of Hell. In this article, I call it the Problem of an Inescapable and Permanent Hell, because I use analogies that show cases of temporal but inescapable punishment (depriving inescapability and permanence of the capacity to be interchangeable for this debate).

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