

Escaping Heaven

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Abstract In response to the problem of Hell, Buckareff and Plug (Relig Stud 41:39–54, 2005; Relig Stud 45:63–72, 2009) have recently proposed and defended an ‘escapist’ conception of Hell. In short, they propose that the problem of Hell does not arise because God places an open-door policy on Hell. In this paper, I expose a fundamental problem with this conception of Hell—namely, that if there’s an open door policy on Hell, then there should be one on Heaven too. I argue that a coherent conception of Heaven cannot have such a policy. Hence, escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of Hell.

Keywords Problem of Hell · Escapism · Buckareff and Plug · Heaven

Introduction

In response to the problem of Hell, [Buckareff and Plug \(2005, 2009\)](#) have recently proposed and defended an ‘escapist’ conception of Hell. In short, they propose that the problem of Hell does not arise because God places an open-door policy on Hell. In this paper, I expose a fundamental problem with this conception of Hell—namely, that if there’s an open door policy on Hell, then there should be one on Heaven too. I argue that a coherent conception of Heaven cannot have such a policy. Hence, escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of Hell.

In “The problem of Hell” section I sketch preliminary issues in order to set up the subsequent discussion. In “Escapism” section I outline [Buckareff and Plug \(2005\)](#) escapist proposal. In “Escaping Heaven” section I present my objection. In “Direct

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and derivative freedom” section, I consider a possible response to my objection, and in “Conclusion” section I conclude.

The problem of Hell

The problem of Hell arises because of the tension between the following two propositions:

- (1) God (an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being) exists.
- (2) Hell (a place where the wicked suffer for all eternity) exists.

The worry is that if God is morally perfect, and therefore all-loving, he would not create a place that was dedicated to causing those he apparently loves to suffer until the end of time. Of course, the problem of Hell only arises if there is *undeserved* suffering in Hell. Given that the traditional conception of Hell is that it is a place where the wicked go to suffer for their sins for *eternity*, it certainly seems that there is going to be undeserved suffering in Hell. Humans, after all, are finite beings and it seems unlikely that any finite transgression is going to warrant eternal suffering. Any such undeserved suffering, however, is incompatible with the existence of God.

Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 39) specify the problem of Hell as follows. They claim that (1) is incompatible with the following three theses:

- (T1) Some persons are (or will be) in Hell—that is, Hell is (or will be) populated.
- (T2) Those persons who are consigned to go to Hell will remain in Hell forever.
- (T3) Heaven is a far superior place to be than is Hell.

(Buckareff and Plug 2005, p. 40)

As they frame it, responses to the problem of Hell reject one of these three theses. Adams (1975) rejects T1; Swinburne (1989) rejects T3; whilst Buckareff and Plug (2005) wish to reject T2. Thus, they claim that persons are not consigned to Hell forever. Escapism, then, is the thesis that those in Hell are free to leave whenever they want.

Escapism

Buckareff and Plug (2005) support their view appealing to what God’s *motivations* are. They claim that it follows from God’s moral perfection that he would place an open-door policy on Hell. They write:

if we accept that God’s being just and loving follows from His moral perfection, then we should expect God would make provisions for people to convert in the eschaton. Moreover, the opportunities for people to convert should not be exhausted by one post-mortem opportunity.

(Buckareff and Plug 2005, pp. 40–41)

This means that after death persons will not just get once chance at redemption or one offer of God’s grace. As God is like a loving parent he will always keep the door open for his children.

If we continue to think of Hell as a place where the wicked go to suffer for their sins, it might seem that everyone in Hell (bar masochists) will leave if they are free to do so. Buckareff and Plug (2005), however, endorse a Kvanvig (1993) style ‘issuant’ conception of Hell, rather than the traditional retributive one. Instead of Hell being a place where the wicked go to suffer for their sins, it is a place created by God for persons who do not want to live forever in communion with him. Despite an issuant Hell not being as bad as a retributive Hell, Buckareff and Plug go on to say:

While we have endorsed an issuant view of Hell, it is not our purpose in this essay to specify what, if any, pain those in Hell suffer. We take it that, on an issuant view, any misery those in Hell experience is self-inflicted. But to specify what kind and quality of misery is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that Hell is a qualitatively worse place to be in than Heaven. However, some may choose to go to Hell and remain there because of a failure to recognize that the benefits of leaving infinitely outweigh any putative costs incurred by leaving.

(Buckareff and Plug 2005, p. 41)

In short, Hell is still a worse place to be than Heaven, though it is not God’s fault that anyone suffers Hell.

But what does it mean to say that God places an open-door policy on Hell? It means that persons in Hell are *free* (or able) to leave and go to Heaven to enjoy an eternity in communion with God. But, then, what does it mean to say that persons are free to leave Hell? Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 45) contend that the sense of freedom (or ability) at issue here entails that is *psychologically* possible for persons to leave Hell. An example of theirs illuminates this. Suppose that Joe is fat and unfit. It is logically possible that Joe could run a marathon—that is, there is no contradiction between the following propositions:

- (A) Joe is fat and unfit.
- (B) Joe could run a marathon.

But, although it is logically possible for Joe to run marathon, Joe is unable to run a marathon because it is not psychologically possible that he run a marathon. Psychological possibility, according to Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 45), is described in the following example. Suppose Joe is upstairs in his house and downstairs in his house are all the ingredients to make iced tea. Suppose further that Joe knows how to make iced tea. It follows that Joe is able to make iced tea—that is, it is psychologically possible that Joe make iced tea. Since making iced tea is psychologically possible for Joe, according to Buckareff and Plug, he is able to either make iced tea or not make iced tea. We might say, then, that Joe is free to make iced tea.

This last part is important, because Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 45) claim that the residents of Hell are in an analogous situation to Joe: they know how to leave Hell, they are free do so, and so they can choose to leave Hell whenever they like.¹ The

¹ In a footnote, Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 54, n. 21) claim that a person’s will may become ‘settled’ so that it is only ‘metaphysically possible’ that they leave Hell. Given that their argument gains plausibility on the claim it is psychologically possible that persons in Hell can leave, this footnote seems like a problematic concession for reasons I discuss in “Direct and derivative freedom” section.

level of freedom that the residents of Hell have is supposed to be just as much as Joe has when it comes to making iced tea, and not the level of freedom he has (if it even accurate to describe this as freedom) when it comes to running a marathon. Of course, just because Joe is free to make an iced tea, it doesn't mean he ever will. Likewise, Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 41) only commit themselves to the claim that God has an open-door policy on Hell, and not that anyone actually leaves Hell.

Escaping Heaven

Throughout making their case for escapism, Buckareff and Plug (2005, 2009) stay quiet on the concept of Heaven. Of course, when responding the problem of *Hell*, there isn't an obvious need to mention Heaven as it isn't the source of the problem. However, I will now argue that 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. But I will then argue that this conception of Heaven is incoherent, and therefore escapism is not a plausible response to the problem of Hell.

Central to my critique of escapism is that we ought to treat Heaven and Hell symmetrically. I will establish this claim by showing that an analogous version of Buckareff and Plug's argument for escapism about Hell can be used to establish escapism about Heaven. The idea is that if the argument for escapism about Hell is successful, then the argument for escapism about Heaven will also be successful. To block this move, Buckareff and Plug owe us an argument for treating Heaven and Hell asymmetrically. As they offer no such argument, they (currently) have no grounds for resisting my critique.

Buckareff and Plug's argument for escapism about Hell is as follows: God is morally perfect, and so all-loving and just. As God is all-loving and just, he will always be open to persons *accepting* his gracious offer of life-everlasting in communion with him in Heaven. Hence, God will ensure that those in Hell are always free to leave. The analogous argument for escapism about Heaven is as follows: God is morally perfect, and so all-loving and just. As God is all-loving and just, he will always be open to persons *rejecting* his gracious offer of life-everlasting in communion with him in Heaven. Hence, God will ensure that those in Heaven are always free to leave. This argument can be further reinforced by appealing the parent analogy that Buckareff and Plug use to support their argument for escapism. They claim that God is like a loving parent who is always open to her children returning, even if they had a falling out. In the same way, a loving parent will not force her children to stay at home (if they are capable of looking after themselves, of course)—that it is to say, a loving parent will allow her children the freedom to leave home whenever they choose. Thus, God should also keep the doors of Heaven open.

At this point, the implications for escapism might not seem that bad. Buckareff and Plug might be willing to accept that there is an open-door policy on both Heaven and Hell. To see the problems with this, we must first get clear on what this open-door policy entails. Consider persons in Hell first. These persons have lived ante- and post-mortem lives such that they have chosen to live out eternity without God. Since they know *how* to leave, they must also know what they are missing out on: communion

with God. As God is all-loving he wants all his children back. Thus, God does not close the doors of Hell; he leaves them open in the hope that some, but presumably hopefully all, the persons in Hell will decide that they have had enough of their God-less existence and then freely decide to accept his grace and leave Hell to enter into communion with God in Heaven. Persons in Hell are therefore able to leave whenever they like.

Consider now persons in Heaven. These agents have lived ante- and post-mortem lives such that they have chosen to live in communion with God in Heaven. As I've argued, if persons are free to leave Hell, then it seems they must also be free to leave Heaven. But to say that a person is free to leave Heaven does not mean that a person is free to leave temporarily; rather, it means that she is *severing* her relationship with God. So, at one time this person freely decided that a relationship with God is what she wanted. But now she has freely decided that it is no longer what she wants; she has freely decided to leave Heaven. I will now argue that this conception of Heaven is incoherent.

Remember that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, among other things. He has these attributes because he is the *greatest conceivable being*—that is, we cannot imagine a being that is greater than God. It follows from this, I contend, that the greatest conceivable being is going to commune with persons in the *greatest conceivable place*—that is, Heaven is greatest place that we can imagine. But if Heaven is the greatest conceivable place, then how can anyone leave it? It seems that if Heaven is that great, then once a person has experienced it she is not going to be able to want to leave.

One response might be that, although persons are free to leave Heaven, no one actually does so. Further, this might even reinforce how great Heaven is as people are free to leave, but no one actually does. But this response is unpersuasive. Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 45) claim that persons in Hell have the same sort of freedom that Joe does to make an iced tea—that is, it is psychologically possible for persons in Hell to leave. Likewise, it must be psychologically possible for persons in Heaven to leave. But let's recall what Buckareff and Plug claim that psychological possibility amounts to. Joe both knows how to make iced tea and he is able to make iced tea. It is therefore presumably open to Joe to have an iced or not to have iced tea.

The problem is that it seems wildly implausible to suppose that it is psychologically possible for persons to leave Heaven. This place, after all, is where persons commune with God. As such, persons in Heaven have found themselves in the greatest possible place in commune with the greatest possible being. How could anyone ever imagine, let alone consider, leaving such a place? It seems that if the persons in Heaven cannot imagine leaving, then it is not a psychological possibility that they do so. To compare, if Joe hated iced tea and perhaps had even tried it on several occasions to see if his tastes had changed but invariably they never did, then it hardly seems plausible to say that it is psychologically possible that Joe make iced tea for himself to drink. Joe would never entertain such an idea because he knows he hates iced tea and wants nothing to do with it. Persons in Heaven are presumably in an analogous situation: they love God and being in commune with him, and they want this state of affairs to continue. Thus, it is not psychologically possible for persons to leave Heaven. But if it is not psychologically possible to leave Heaven, then Heaven is not escapable. Since I have argued that if Hell is escapable then so is Heaven, it seems that escapism is entails two

contradictory claims. Thus, the conception of Heaven that is implied by escapism is incoherent. Hence, escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of Hell.

Direct and derivative freedom

Buckareff and Plug might respond to my argument so far as follows. They might claim that they were wrong to tie free will (or ability) with psychological possibility as they originally did.² Instead, they might argue that we ought to distinguish free will and psychological possibility. So, a person can act freely even if alternative possibilities are not psychologically available to her. Thus, a person in a Heaven freely stays in Heaven, even though it is not psychologically possible for her to leave. They could appeal to a common distinction in the free will and moral responsibility literature between *direct* and *derivative* free will and morally responsible.³ To say that a person can directly freely *A* is to say that an agent *could have done otherwise* than *A*—in other words, it is psychologically possible that the person *A* or refrain from *A*-ing.⁴ But to say that a person is derivatively free to *B* does not entail that the agent could have done otherwise than *B*. The person's freedom *derives* from earlier directly free actions of hers. In short, earlier free actions 'set' the person's character to be a particular way, and then the person is then morally responsible for acting from her character.⁵ So, Buckareff and Plug could say that persons in Heaven freely stay there, though this exercise of freedom derives from earlier directly free actions. If successful, this response would allow escapism to avoid the objection I have pressed.⁶

This response, however, is unsuccessful as it requires that there is a plausible distinction to be made between direct and derivative *free will*. Note that the distinction between direct and derivative free will gains its plausibility from cases which support the distinction between direct and derivative *moral responsibility*, such as so-called 'tracing' cases.⁷ The classic case involves a drunk driver. Suppose that a person, Barry, freely gets drunk at t_1 . By t_2 he is blind drunk. He then gets into his car and drunkenly drives over a child. Is Barry morally responsible for hitting the child? Intuitively, it seems that he is. Of course, given that Barry is blind drunk, he plausibly does not sat-

² Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 54, n. 21) hint towards endorsing such a distinction in their original presentation of their view. Indeed, Bucakreff and Plug (2009, p. 65) seem to make make such a move in response to the problem of religious luck posed to them by Jones (2007). The terms I use to spell out the move they make will make this move a little clearer. Note, also, that my argument against this move also cast doubt on their response to problem of religious luck.

³ See, for example, Kane (1996), Fischer and Ravizza (1998), and Fischer and Tognazzini (2009).

⁴ I assume that the dialectic context in which the problem of Hell arises is one in which theists must endorse such a libertarian conception of free will to avoid the problem of evil (that is, the apparent incompatibility between God and the existence of evil).

⁵ Kane's (1996) account of free will and moral responsibility, for example, requires that a person undergo one (or more) 'self-forming actions' in order to be morally responsible for her actions. An agent is thus directly free and responsible for the outcome of her self-forming action and then derivatively free and responsible for actions from stem from that self-forming action.

⁶ Nagasawa et al. (2004, pp. 108–113) also consider this sort of objection in response to their argument that persons in Heaven lack free will, though they respond to it in a different way than I have.

⁷ Cf. Fischer and Ravizza (1998, pp. 49–50).

isfy the conditions on moral responsibility (a free will and an epistemic condition)⁸ at the time of action. This, therefore, seems to be a counter-example to the conditions on moral responsibility. As a consequence, the distinction between direct and derivative is invoked: Barry is *derivatively* morally responsible for drunkenly hitting the child; his moral responsibility derives from (or traces back to) an earlier free action for which he was morally responsible. This allows us to avoid the apparent counter-examples to the conditions on moral responsibility.

Notice that the question is not: does Barry act freely in hitting the child? The clear answer to this question is that he does not; if it seemed that Barry *did* act freely in hitting the child, then there wouldn't be even an apparent counter-example to the conditions on moral responsibility.⁹ Hence, there is intuitive sense in which an agent who is derivatively morally responsible for *A* does not *A* freely. Thus, whilst it makes sense to say that agents can be derivatively morally responsible for their actions, it makes no sense to say that they have derivative free will. To act freely is to directly exercise one's agency, and this requires that agent is both able to (say) *A* and refrain from *A*-ing at the time of action.

Buckareff and Plug (and anyone else, for that matter) cannot claim that persons in Heaven act freely when they decide to stay in Heaven. It might be that persons in Heaven are derivatively morally responsible for their actions in Heaven (and this, presumably, amounts to praiseworthiness for their Heavenly actions). But they are not derivatively free in performing those actions; that just doesn't seem to make sense. So, persons are not free to leave (but they may be praised for not doing so). Thus, it remains that Heaven is not escapable and that escapism entails an incoherent conception of Heaven.

But even if we could make sense of the distinction between direct and derivate free will, there are further reasons to think that this distinction won't help. We need only point out that if persons in Hell are free (or able) to leave, then our intuitive sense of what this means is that they have choice between leaving and not leaving. Now, if it turns out that what it means to say that persons are free to leave Hell is that they are *derivatively* free to leave, then it no longer seems that it is psychologically possible for them to leave. Remember that if it is psychologically possible for a person to *A*, then the agent both knows how to *A* and is free to *A*. Clearly, though, the sense of 'free' at play here is *direct* free will—that it is psychologically possible for a person to *A* is to say that she knows how to *A* and she can directly freely *A*. To compare, an agent who is derivatively free (if any sense can be made of that, of course) is unable to consider other possibilities—that is, it is not psychologically possible for her to do other than she does. This is clear in drunk driving cases, but it also clear in 'character setting' tracing cases. Consider Joe and his iced tea again. Suppose that Joe hates iced, he has tried it many times before, and now he's resolute that he will never make or

⁸ This is a common distinction in the free will and moral responsibility literature, which has its roots in the work of Aristotle. See, for example, Fischer and Ravizza (1998).

⁹ Fischer and Ravizza (1998) hold that an agent can act freely without satisfying the epistemic condition on moral responsibility. Mele (2011), however, argues that this is false: there is no sense to be made of an agent acting freely and not satisfying the epistemic condition on moral responsibility. In effect, Mele argues that the epistemic condition is built into the free will condition. I follow Mele here. So, if Barry does not act freely then he also does not satisfy the epistemic condition.

drink iced tea again. Now, some might say that if Joe (in the scenario where he has all the ingredients and knowledge to make iced tea) chooses freely not to drink iced. His choice is derivatively free as it derives from (or traces to) his (we can suppose) earlier free choices. However, it is implausible to say that it is psychologically possible for Joe to make iced tea. This is just not an option to him, because of his earlier free choices.

Buckareff and Plug seem to admit this as much when say that:

Admittedly, it is possible that an agent's character may become settled after a while. If so, the agent may find it psychologically impossible properly to respond to God's prevenient grace. Even so, we take it that it would have been psychologically possible for the agent at some time to exercise her free will and decide to receive God's gift. But even supposing someone's character becomes settled, it does not follow that God ever gives up on her. We believe that the most consistent policy for God to maintain would be to continue to offer reconciliation to such a person. In such an instance, it at least remains metaphysically possible for such an agent to repent and leave Hell.

(Buckareff and Plug 2005, p. 54, n. 21)

But this seems problematic for escapism. Their argument gains purchase as a result of the claim that it is psychologically possible for persons in Hell to leave. I take it that the open-door policy that God places on Hell is open in the sense that it is psychologically possible for persons in Hell to leave. It would hardly seem that there is an open-door policy on Hell if it were only ever metaphysically possible for persons in Hell to leave, and this is for the same sort of reasons that it wouldn't seem there is was an open-door policy on Hell if it were only ever logically possible for persons to leave. Once Buckareff and Plug admit that it is not always psychologically possible for persons to leave at all points, escapism is a lot less plausible than it initially seems. But we can push things ever further.

If 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. So, it is never psychologically possible for this person to leave Hell. And this means that there is *not* a general open-door policy on Hell; certain persons *never* have the option to leave. An assumption that Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 54, n. 21; my italics) make in the above quotation is that 'we take it that it would have been psychologically possible for the agent at *some time* to exercise her free will and decide to receive God's gift'. It seems they think that no one's character is set before they enter Hell. But they provide no reason for accepting this claim. Moreover, it seems straightforwardly false. Take Joe, for example. It is eminently plausible that he sets his character so that he never even considers making or drinking iced after a certain time. In the same way, it is plausible that a person could set their character such that they will never be open to God's grace after they die. And there seem to be a lot of persons who fall into such a category. For such persons, there is no open-door policy in Hell. Hence, if Buckareff and Plug endorse the distinction between direct and derivative freedom—that is, by claiming that it is not always psychologically possible for persons to leave Hell—then persons may enter Hell already impervious to God's grace; hence, Hell is effectively closed to them.

This is troublesome because the motivation for escapism is that as God is all-loving and just he would leave the doors of Hell open for *all* persons, not just a select few. It 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. After all, the escapist's thesis is motivated by the claim that because of God's loving nature he wants all persons to join him in Heaven. But if the open-door policy is restricted, then God would not be all-loving, as this would entail that he's given up on certain persons. Buckareff and Plug (2005, p. 54, n. 21) also claim that 'even supposing someone's character becomes settled, it does not follow that God ever gives up on her. We believe that the most consistent policy for God to maintain would be to continue to offer reconciliation to such a person.' However, if God has not provided each person in Hell with the freedom (or ability) to leave Hell *whilst in Hell*, then he has effectively given up on them. God might offer grace to such persons in Hell in the same way that someone endlessly offers Joe an iced tea. If the person knows that Joe hates iced tea and that he'll never actually accept this 'offer', then this person isn't really offering Joe an iced. I take it that a genuine offer is one that the recipient is actually able to accept. Since God is all-loving, the open-door policy cannot be restricted. This means that God should ensure everyone in Hell has the freedom or ability to leave. Hence, if Buckareff and Plug wish to maintain escapism, they must reject the distinction between direct and derivative free will.¹⁰

To sum up, Buckareff and Plug claim that God ensures all persons in Hell are free (or able) to leave; in other words, it is psychologically possible for all the residents of Hell to leave *all of the time*. However, this leads them straight to problem of escaping Heaven; in short, escapism entails an incoherent conception of Heaven. Thus, escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of Hell.

Conclusion

The argument in this paper is that escapism is not an adequate response to the problem of Hell. I have not argued against other responses; it might still be there is another adequate response to this problem. All I have shown is that escapism is off the table. Thus, theists will have to find a different way to respond the problem of Hell.

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¹⁰ This might cause further problems for escapism, of course. However, it certainly seems within God's power to ensure that all persons have access to robust alternative possibilities for every decision they make.

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