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Escaping hell: divine motivation and the problem of hell

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Abstract: **We argue that it is most rational for God, given God's character and policies, to adopt an open-door policy towards those in hell – making it possible for those in hell to escape. We argue that such a policy towards the residents of hell should issue from God's character and motivational states. In particular, God's parental love ought to motivate God to extend the provision for reconciliation with Him for an infinite amount of time.**

According to the traditional doctrine of hell, hell is supposedly a horrible place – or, at the very least, much worse in comparison to heaven. Furthermore, according to tradition, all persons are either consigned to remain eternally in heaven or consigned to remain eternally in hell. The traditional doctrine doesn't specify the reasons why one person ends up in hell rather than in heaven. But supposedly one is judged either on works, or faith, or else the decision is made by divine decree. In sum, we can state that the following theses are part of the traditional doctrine of hell:

(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.

Some have argued that this conception of hell is inconsistent with certain attributes of God. We shall call this inconsistency the 'problem of hell'.

The problem of hell is a variety of the problem of evil that poses a unique problem for Jews, Christians, and Muslims who (a) believe in an afterlife, and (b) believe that some persons will experience eternal suffering, torment, and separation from God for an infinite period of time. Such theists affirm the following two propositions.[1]

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(i) God exists, and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
(ii) Some created persons will be consigned to hell forever.

Marilyn McCord Adams argues in her essay, 'The problem of hell: a problem of evil for Christians', that (i) and (ii) are logically incompatible in the same way that (i) and

(iii) Evil exists

have been said to be logically incompatible. So she argues as follows:[2]

(iv) If God existed and were omnipotent, He would be able to avoid (ii).
(v) If God existed and were omniscient, He would know how to avoid (ii).
(vi) If God existed and were perfectly good, He would want to avoid (ii).
(vii) Therefore, if (i), then not (ii).

More recently, Theodore Sider has argued that the traditional conception of hell is committed to the existence of arbitrary cut-offs between damnation and salvation.[3] However, the arbitrariness of these cut-offs, argues Sider, is contrary to God's perfect justice.

The traditional doctrine of hell commits one to arbitrary cut-offs because, Sider claims, there needs to be a criterion to judge whether an individual is going to heaven or to hell. However, no matter what the criterion is, borderline cases are possible – cases where one individual just barely misses the cut-off for heaven and is thus consigned to hell, and where another person, who barely rates better on whatever criterion is used, is placed in heaven. But to reward these two individuals so differently is manifestly unjust. Surely such an injustice is incompatible with God's perfect justice, and so the traditional conception of hell is incompatible with God's perfect justice.

Among Christians, various approaches to resolving the problem of hell have been offered. Adams argues for a species of universalism that affirms libertarian free will, but still has God overriding the freedom of recalcitrant agents in saving them from hell.[4] Others have argued for annihilationism.[5] Some have argued that there is no real problem here. They have suggested that, just as free will can be abused to cause evil, so also persons can abuse their freedom on this side of the eschaton, resisting God's grace, thereby making themselves candidates for divine retribution in the afterlife.[6] Still others have argued that persons have the ability to choose to be with God or be annihilated but remain in a permanent state of indecision forever, the state of indecision being hell.[7] And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

We shall offer yet another means of approaching this problem in this essay. The view we will defend approximates to the picture of hell sketched by C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*.[8] What we shall argue for is the possibility of post-mortem conversion. Specifically, we shall argue that, if we accept that God's being

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just and loving follows from His moral perfection, then we should expect that God would make provisions for people to convert in the eschaton.[9] Moreover, the opportunities for people to convert should not be exhausted by one post-mortem opportunity. We will call this view of hell 'escapism'. Escapism is compatible with the hope that the vast majority of, and perhaps all, created persons will finally be saved. On the other hand, escapism does not commit us to holding that anyone who does or will inhabit hell will ever be reconciled with God. So escapism is compatible with a species of hopeful or weak universalism, and it is compatible with the view that no one in hell will be saved. But we will only argue for there being a divine *provision* for post-mortem conversion and that persons will have the ability to convert in the afterlife and remain quiet on whether or not anyone actually does accept the offer of salvation after death.[10]

It is worth noting that we shall be assuming an issuant view of hell throughout this paper. According to the issuant view, the provision of hell issues from God's love for His creatures. God has provided hell as a place for those persons who do not wish to be in communion with Him.[11] So hell is not a place where divine retribution is exacted against obdurate creatures that refuse to offer obeisance to God. Rather, hell issues from God's love for creatures in much the same way as the offer of communion in heaven with God issues from God's love. Jonathan Kvanvig writes that, 'an adequate conception of hell must be an issuant conception of it, one that portrays hell as flowing from the same divine character from which heaven flows. Any other view wreaks havoc on the integrity of God's character'.[12] God does not want to coerce creatures, and so offers them an alternative, the provision made being another manifestation of the good of exercising free will in response to God's loving initiatives in the world. The alternative to the issuant view is the more traditional view of hell, viz. the retributivist view of hell. Retributivism holds that the primary purpose of hell is to serve as a place of punishment for the unrepentant. While we reject this view of hell, what we have to say in this paper may be applied to a retributivist conception of hell as well – though with some important caveats that we shall mention.

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.

In what follows we will first show that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are committed to a certain understanding of God's character and what it implies

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for divine action. Specifically, all of God's actions are motivated by reasons that reflect His loving and just character. We shall then move on to consider the doctrine of hell. We will focus on the Christian tradition, arguing that Christians ought to modify their understanding of hell and be escapists. While we shall focus on Christian theism in discussing hell, we believe that the Jewish, and perhaps the Muslim theist would reach the same conclusions.

God's character and actions

In the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, God is taken to be morally perfect. One look at the scriptural traditions of each of the great theistic traditions provides some testimony to the fact that God is taken to be holy and, thus morally perfect.[13] As a consequence, God is taken to be just and loving, God's every action being motivated by a desire for the most just and loving outcome to occur.

The scriptural traditions of the great monotheistic religions say little about how we should address the modal issues raised by questions regarding whether God's goodness is an essential or non-essential property of His. Moreover, the authors were, no doubt, not working with the sophisticated modal notions we associate with discussions about essential and accidental properties of persons and things. So, in light of the ambiguities, the sense of 'perfect' is a point of dispute among many theistic philosophers and theologians, especially when it comes to questions regarding God's moral character.[14]

What does seem indisputable, however, at least in light of the scriptural tradition inherited by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is that in the actual world God has never failed to perform whatever action is morally just and most loving. That is, God is morally perfect in the actual world. We leave it open whether or not moral perfection is an essential property of God. But, at the very least, the following is true:

(1) All of God's actions are just and loving.

Given (1), we can infer that certain things are true of God's desires and other pro-attitudes in acting as God does.[15] In the etiology of action, some kind of belief–desire complex typically constitutes the reason for acting as one does. Given that God's character is such that He is just and loving, and given that God's actions are motivated by His desires and other pro-attitudes that follow from His character, then we can conclude the following about the pro-attitudes of God in acting.[16]

(2) If all of God's actions are just and loving, then no action of God's is motivated by an unjust or unloving pro-attitude.

So, thus far we've shown that if God is just and loving, then His actions are just and loving and that none of God's actions are motivated by any unjust

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or unloving desires or other pro-attitudes. This is a conclusion with which we believe all Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theists should agree. Next, we shall consider the soteriological implications of this claim for Christians and what that implies for the doctrine of hell.

Motivation and divine soteriological activity

In light of what we concluded regarding God's activity in the world, we can safely infer that God's actions associated with His soteriological goals in the world are such that they are like God's other actions. So we get:

(3) If no action of God's is motivated by an unjust or unloving pro-attitude, then God's soteriological activity is motivated by His just and loving pro-attitudes.

So far what we have said is not very controversial. We believe that most Christians would agree with what we have claimed thus far. What we believe follows, however, is perhaps more controversial. It seems that if God's soteriological activity is motivated by His just and loving pro-attitudes, then God must provide for the most just and loving state of affairs to be realized not only on this side of the eschaton, but also in the actual eschaton. So we get:

(4) If God's soteriological activity is motivated by His just and loving pro-attitudes, then 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.

Perhaps (4), like (3), is not so problematic. After all, even if one accepts a retributive doctrine of hell, one may still say that God's love for His creatures plays some role in providing a place of separation. So suppose, as we do not, that God's provision for hell is retributive, there does not seem to be any reason we can think of why such a state of affairs would have to be everlasting. It would be out of God's character to create a place for Him to punish persons forever.[17] That is, it is contrary to the evidence regarding God's character that He would punish persons forever. Moreover, if the doctrine of the atonement has taught us anything it is that God takes sin seriously and loves humankind enough to suffer and die in its stead.

And the primary concern on God's part that motivates such actions is His concern as a parent that God's estranged children would be reconciled to God. It is not so much a legal motive on God's part. The justice in question is the sort of concern for justice a parent has for children who refuse to be reconciled with her. She may punish them, but such punishment is out of concern that her children learn from their mistakes and ultimately desire to restore the fractured relationship. So it seems that, even if retributivism is true, the negative choices

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made by creatures to God's offer of 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. If anything, those who persist in their defiance have made a decision to remain in their state of separation. The most just and loving thing for God *qua* Parent to do, then, would be to honour such a decision – similarly for those who recognize their need for divine grace.

The foregoing should not seem strange to the Christian. Most Christians hold that, this side of the eschaton, God is open to forgive the penitent as a parent is open to forgive her child who has wronged her. As J. R. Lucas has noted, the relationship is not as between a judge and accused criminal. It is like the parent–child relationship mentioned in the foregoing paragraph. It is also like that between someone who has been unfaithful in a marriage, where the wronged party longs for a reunion with her unfaithful spouse, but is under no obligation to renew the relationship. But given the nature of the relationship, not being like a legal relationship, God's forgiveness and gift of salvation is not something that those separated from God can assert as a right. It is something that they request as a gift of divine grace – i.e. as a gift bestowed upon one not worthy of receiving it, owing to the ways in which the guilty party has sinned against the offended party.

And, as Lucas notes, God is eager to bestow this gift because, '[t]here is an antecedent desire on God's part to identify and be identified with us, which leads him to seek both to establish and restore his relationship with us. All that is required for it actually to come about, is that we should desire it too'.[18] Karl Barth writes of God that 'in his freedom he actually does not desire to be without humanity, but *with* us, and in the same freedom to be not against us but, regardless and contrary to our desert, to be *for* us – he desires in fact to be humanity's partner and our omnipotent pitying Saviour'.[19] God's desire for a restored relationship with us, His estranged children, should lead God to adopt policies in the eschaton that would reflect such a desire and other pro-attitudes. God's soteriological policies would be entirely disharmonious with what appear to be God's policies this side of the eschaton if God's policies change in the afterlife to include a 'closed-door' policy towards His creatures that bear God's image.

So if God longs for reunion with us this side of the eschaton, then it would be arbitrary and out of character for God to cut off any opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness at the time of death. Moreover, if God's policies remain constant towards us, and if we are the object of God's parental love, then God must be like any other parent, who never ceases to desire to have her estranged child return, be forgiven, and enjoy the blessings of communion with the parent. This requires that the opportunities for receiving the gift of salvation must extend beyond a single post-mortem opportunity. Rather, the possibility of escape from hell must always be there for the residents of hell. So escapism must be true. And, if

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escapism is true, then God never gives up on the unsaved after death. The only thing that would block their access to communion with God would be their failure to make the right decision in response to the Holy Spirit's prevenient grace. So we should not expect God to give up on the unsaved and block the door to reconciliation.

So, we believe that we can say that the following two premises, while controversial, can be reasonably inferred from all that has been said so far.

(5) If 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, then God will provide opportunities for people in hell to receive the gift of salvation and such persons can decide to receive the gift.

And we can conclude the following from (1)–(5).

(6) Therefore, God will provide opportunities for people in hell to receive the gift of salvation and such persons can decide to receive the gift.

We have made a *de re* modal claim in (6) that needs a little explaining. What we are claiming is not that it is merely *logically* possible that the denizens of hell can decide to receive the gift of salvation – concluding that none actually do.[20] Rather, we are claiming that it is *psychologically* possible. That is, it is actually the case – in the actual world – that those who will be separated from God in the eschaton can, and perhaps some will, exercise their free will and respond affirmatively to God's gift of grace and be reconciled to Him.[21]

We need to be more specific about the nature of the ability to respond to God's grace and thus escape hell. We are not claiming that people will actually make such a decision. We are quiet on that issue. We don't know whether or not people will make such a decision. What we are claiming is that people actually have that ability. A comparison might help here: consider Joe, an overweight smoker. Could Joe run a three-minute mile? Well, yes, if the sort of possibility is broad enough. The ability we are talking about is stronger than Joe's ability to run a three-minute mile. Rather, it is closer to the following case: Joe is in his upstairs office. Downstairs are all of the necessary ingredients to make iced tea. Joe knows this and he knows how to make iced tea from these ingredients. Joe thinks about making iced tea but decides against. Could Joe have made iced tea? Of course he can, no matter how narrowly we defined possibility. We are claiming that people have a similar level of ability with respect to accepting God's grace.

The foregoing argument that we have provided against the traditional doctrine of hell and in favour of escapism is valid, and we believe that we have offered good reasons to believe that it is sound. At the very least, such an argument should cause Christian theists to pause and reconsider what

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their view of hell should be. People have genuine, heartfelt problems with worshipping a being who consigns persons to an everlasting state of damnation yet claims to be a loving parent who desires nothing more than to commune with them. Leaving an opening for the recalcitrant to turn to and enjoy communion with God seems like a reasonable policy for a just and loving Creator and parent to adopt. So escapism should be the view of hell adopted by Christians.

Escapism and consequences for how to think about the purpose of hell

The escapist view of hell can be captured in the following two theses:

(E1) Hell exists and might be populated for eternity;

and

(E2) If there are any denizens of hell, then they, at any time, have the ability to accept God's grace and leave hell and enter heaven.[22]

The conjunction of (E1) and (E2) is incompatible with retributivism. (E2) is straightforwardly inconsistent with retributivism, while (E1) can be accepted by the retributivist. But (E1) can be accepted by the retributivist only if she accepts that the retributive purpose of hell goes beyond just punishing agents for their sins before death. Some explanation is in order. Retributivism, recall, claims that the purpose of hell is to punish individuals for their sins. The retributivist who wants to retain the possibility that hell is populated for eternity faces the problem that such a state of affairs would be one that God would not will since it is inconsistent with His motivational states.

If retributivism is right and some people are consigned to hell forever, then those who are consigned to hell forever are so consigned because of the heinous nature of the sins that they have committed. Since hell would be retributive, the denizens of hell would be eligible to leave and enter heaven only when their punishment was exhausted. Those who are consigned to remain in hell for eternity, however, would never exhaust their punishment, and so could never enter heaven and be in communion with God. But, if the above arguments are sound, then this state of affairs would be one that God would not will since it would be inconsistent with His motivational states – in particular His desire for all persons to be reconciled with Him. So if retributivism is true, and some of those in hell remain there forever, then there must be some reason why they remain in hell, otherwise God's policy would seem inconsistent – specifically, God would desire reconciliation, but after serving their time, some or all remain in hell.

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There is a further difficulty for the retributivist who wants to endorse (E1), namely, Sider's objection to the traditional doctrine of hell. Assuming a retributivist conception of hell where some persons might remain in hell forever, then there must be some cut-off point on whatever metric to differentiate between those damned for eternity and those who are only consigned to hell for a limited period of time. But such a cut-off point would be arbitrary and unjust. Two very similar people who fall on opposite sides of the cut-off point would be treated very differently. But such a situation would be unjust and so run counter to God's perfect justice. So, the retributivist who endorses our argument cannot allow for the possibility that some persons will remain in hell forever.

The retributivist may be able to avoid the foregoing problems if she also endorses the following claim: that it is possible to continue to sin in hell (and to do so for eternity), and one's punishment (i.e. the time one would reside in hell) is lengthened by continuing to sin in hell.[23] If the retributivist endorses this position then she can claim that those who remain in hell for eternity are those who continue to sin in hell and do so for eternity. It is always possible for those individuals eventually to be reconciled with God, but, owing to their continued sinfulness, they are never able to be reconciled with God. So it appears that the retributivist can, if she endorses the additional claim, avoid the first problem.

The same is true of Sider's objection. Sider's objection highlights the following problem. No matter where the line between the eternally damned and the non-eternally damned lies, that line will be arbitrary. But if the retributivist endorses the additional claim, then the difference between the eternally damned and the non-eternally damned is that the eternally damned continued sinning for eternity while the non-eternally damned do not. But that is surely a sufficiently significant difference to warrant the disparity of treatment between the two groups. So the retributivist's endorsement of (E1) is reasonable only if she also endorses the possibility that some individuals may never stop sinning and thus their punishment will never end.

(E2) is straightforwardly inconsistent with retributivism. According to (E2), a denizen of hell may be able to leave hell *at any time* and enter heaven. However, if hell is retributive then it is not the case that a resident of hell could leave hell at any time. Rather, he could leave hell only when his punishment was exhausted. So (E2) is inconsistent with retributivism.

The retributivist cannot endorse (E1) and (E2). Notice, however, that if the retributivist does not endorse the possibility that some individuals could continue to sin for eternity, then retributivism will collapse into a version of universalism. Since hell is open, if it is not possible to sin for eternity, then there are no grounds to hold an individual in hell for eternity. So every individual in hell will, at some point, be allowed to go to heaven.

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To recapitulate what has been accomplished up to this point: (1) we have argued that the traditional doctrine of hell is inconsistent with what tradition, scriptures, and reason tell us about God's motivational states; (2) this argument suggests a different conception of hell, escapism; (3) we have argued that retributivism is incompatible with escapism. We shall now consider some objections to our argument against the traditional doctrine of hell as well as some objections against the escapist conception of hell.

Some objections

Objection 1

Our more traditionalist opponents may object to the claim that it is out of character and arbitrary for God not to allow any opportunity for post-mortem reconciliation. The most common objection to such reasoning involves claims about human fallibility, divine ineffability, and God's being above reproach – no matter what God does and no matter how bad it may seem to us. In effect, proponents of such views claim that our limited, mortal perspective does not allow us to make judgements about what God can or should do. Call this the 'Job objection'.

What the Job objection fails to be sensitive to is the nature of practical rationality and the norms that govern rational action. We are claiming, in effect, that God's practical reasons for acting, that motivate Him to act as He does, are also normative reasons. They do not merely explain why God acts as He does. Reasons for acting, as Stephen Darwall notes, 'rationally *ought* to have force for a person and … [they] do for a person who considers them as he rationally ought'.[24] So God ought to act in certain ways if God is rational and has the sort of just and loving character we are claiming that He has; and in cases of morally significant actions this requires considering what moral obligations God has to which His actions ought to conform.

So, the simplest direct answer to the Job objection, and we believe the best available answer, is that God's moral obligations that provide Him with moral reasons for acting do not differ from ours. Given that we do not have any other standards of moral goodness apart from those we apply in human situations, we should apply those standards to God.[25] So we follow David Basinger in shifting the onus on to our detractors and asking them, 'Why should anyone desire to worship or expect non-theists to respect the concept of a being who appears not to be obligated to act as morally as some humans?'[26] And if we believe that a parent is morally obligated always to be willing to receive her estranged child, and forgive him if he asks for forgiveness, then why shouldn't we expect the same from God? God has moral reasons for adopting policies consistent with escapism and therefore ought to adopt such policies in acting. To do otherwise would be irrational, given God's character and reasons for acting.

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Objection 2

It may be objected that what we are defending in this paper is hardly worth labelling a modified doctrine of hell. Rather, it may be argued that we have just defended purgatory and eliminated hell altogether.

It may be true that the doctrine of hell being defended is purgatorial in a very loose sense. This is so, given that we are claiming that it is possible that, for at least some in hell, hell will be an intermediate state before they go to heaven. But escapism is a far cry from the traditional doctrine of purgatory. David Brown takes there to be two essential features of the traditional doctrine of purgatory. First, it is taken to be 'a place of moral preparation (not trial) for those whose lives and decisions had already destined them for heaven'. Second, the moral preparation involves 'some kind of purgatorial (i.e. purifying) pain that was seen as a necessary consequence of the rectification of moral wrongdoing'.[27]

Escapism has neither of the essential features of the traditional doctrine of purgatory. Perhaps what we are defending should be called a 'quasi-purgatorial' doctrine of hell, given that, if everyone is finally saved, all of those who do not go directly to heaven would have to pass through hell before being admitted into heaven. But passing through hell would not have a retributive purpose (or at least not a merely retributive purpose), nor would it serve to fulfil the purposes that purgatory has traditionally been taken to serve. Thus, what we have defended here is hardly worth calling purgatory.

Objection 3

It may also be argued that all that we have done is defended little more than a thinly disguised version of universalism. We will not deny that it is our hope that all persons will be reconciled with God. Such a state of affairs is one that all Christians should desire. But we asserted in the first section of this paper that escapism is consistent with either everyone being saved, or no-one in hell ever deciding to be reconciled with God. Our opponent may reply by asserting that anyone arriving in hell, being aware of the offer of reconciliation with God, and the benefits one could procure as a resident of heaven, would immediately decide to be reconciled with God. It would be irrational, it seems, to arrive in hell and fail to desire to be in a recognizably better place, and fail to decide to do what it takes to go there. So, our opponent will argue, all that we have offered is a defence of some species of universalism and not an alternative at all to the existing options.

Such an objection fails to be sensitive to the fact that not all persons are ready for heaven at death, or ever will be ready for heaven. Admittedly, it may be true that not all who have decided to receive the gift of salvation before death are ready for heaven. But such persons desire to be reconciled with God, and have at least begun the process of sanctification or *theosis*, or whatever is necessary for them to do to have the character of Christ and become righteous. Perhaps

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this could be a reason for having purgatory as an intermediate state – viz. to prepare those on the path to heaven for heaven. Nevertheless, some persons are not ready for heaven in a more radical sense than those who have either decided to receive God's gift or were wavering and perhaps decide very soon in the afterlife.

Some persons have ill-feeling towards God, desire not to be with God, are not prepared to let go of whatever may be impeding their ability to make the right decision, etc. A change within such persons should perhaps not be expected in the afterlife. To be reconciled with God is to fulfil the goal of human life, which the Westminster shorter catechism says is 'to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever'.[28] To glorify God, Cornelius Plantinga notes, is to share God's intentions and the purposes God has that His intentions represent. He 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.'[29] Some do not acknowledge their end and have no desire to share God's intentions in the world. They may never acquire such a taste for God's project, given their unwillingness to pursue and fulfil their primary purpose. And if they do acquire a desire to fulfil their end as persons who bear the *imago dei*, it may take them some time to acquire the desire and associated set of pro-attitudes and emotions that motivate them to pursue reconciliation with God and the conjoining of their purposes with God's. Again, such a change in their motivational states and emotional life may never take effect.

Given our commitment to the issuant view of hell, we believe that God will not coerce persons, given that this would be less loving than respecting their autonomy.[30] So, it seems that any objection that either those who go to hell immediately leave, or that all will eventually leave – rendering escapism just a version of universalism – seems unwarranted. But we happily echo the words of Karl Barth who wrote that 'there is no theological justification for setting any limits on our side to the friendliness of God towards humanity which appeared in Jesus Christ'.[31] If all are finally saved, we do not see that to be a weakness in God's policy, if escapism is true. If anything, a strength of escapism is that universal reconciliation without divine coercion is not merely a logical possibility but may be a likely state of affairs in the eschaton.

Objection 4

The next two objections are not so much objections to escapism as much as they are objections to the traditional view of hell. Specifically, it is important to ask whether escapism is immune from the objections raised against the traditional version of hell.

Let's consider Sider's objection first. Remember that Sider claims that the traditional conception of hell is committed to arbitrary cut-offs between the unsaved and the saved, and that the arbitrariness of this cut-off is incompatible

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with God's perfect justice. It is incompatible due to the discrepancy in treatment between two extremely similar persons who happen to fall on either side of the cut-off.

Escapism is immune from this objection. It is not the case that two very similar persons will be treated very differently. According to escapism, persons remain in hell only if they do not desire to be with God. So, if two individuals are not both in heaven nor both consigned to hell, this is because one desires to be with God and the other does not so desire. Surely, this is sufficient grounds for treating two individuals differently. Indeed, we might hold God to be unjust if He overrode the desires of those who do not want to be with Him. Furthermore, since escapism holds that a person may at any time leave hell and enter communion with God, the rewards for two people need not be so drastically different.

Objection 5

Now consider Adams's argument. Adams's case against the traditional doctrine of hell exposes the inconsistency of holding that some persons will be consigned to hell forever with the traditional attributes of God, specifically, God's being omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. We take it that escapism is immune from the objection against the traditional doctrine of hell. On escapism, God's provision of hell is just that, a provision for those who do not desire to be in God's presence. We have explicitly endorsed an issuant view of hell, which takes the provision of hell as issuing from God's love for those who desire not to commune with God – with God not desiring to coerce anyone to receive the gift of salvation.

But we have even argued that, the problems with retributivism mentioned above notwithstanding, if escapism is coupled with retributivism, then the retributive function of separation from God would have to be exhausted after a finite period of time. After that time, those who are punished are able to be reconciled with God, as a disobedient child may choose to be reconciled with her parent who punishes her. So, those in hell are not consigned there by anyone but themselves; and they need not be there for eternity, if they so choose. This allows us to avoid the problem posed for the traditionalist while still preserving the autonomy of those agents who reside in hell.

Objection 6

Finally, some may suggest that because escapism leaves it open to those who defy God and resist His grace in their earthly existence to be reconciled to God in the eschaton, we are 'cheapening' grace, or something to that effect. But we do not see why such a conclusion follows. On the contrary, the benefits to be procured in this life from being in loving communion with God should provide the impetus for the unrepentant to turn to God. They should not turn

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to God simply because they fear that He will subject them to torture for all time. But making the right choices this side of death and the resurrection may prepare us to be the kind of persons prepared to enter into everlasting communion with God. Waiting only postpones the process in question, making it more difficult for us to be fit for communion with God due to persistent recalcitrance and obduracy.

Conclusion

We have argued that the traditional doctrine of hell is inconsistent with what the scriptures, tradition, and reason seem to teach us about God's character and pro-attitudes. In light of this, we ought to rethink our understanding of hell. Moreover, the choices seem broader than the traditional choices of hell being either a place that will always be populated (whether understood from an issuant or retributivist standpoint), annihilationism, or some version of universalism. In particular, we have argued that escapism ought to be one of the options to the traditional doctrine. Escapism avoids the arguments against the traditional doctrine that we have offered. Furthermore, we have also argued that escapism avoids other standard objections that are levelled against the traditional doctrine of hell. Finally, escapism is not as radical a departure from the traditional doctrine as are universalism and annihilationism. Unlike either the universalist or the annihilationist, the escapist can claim that there is a hell and that it might be populated for eternity. Therefore, escapism should be considered a viable alternative to the traditional doctrine of hell for those dissatisfied with the other available options.[32]

Notes

1. See Marilyn McCord Adams 'The problem of hell: a problem of evil for Christians', in E. Stump (ed.) *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 301–302.
2. *Ibid*. 302–303.
3. Theodore Sider 'Hell and vagueness', *Faith and Philosophy*, **19** (2002), 58–68.
4. Thomas Talbott defends similar views in, among other places, the following articles: 'The doctrine of everlasting punishment', *Faith and Philosophy*, **7** (1990), 19–42; 'The New Testament and universal reconciliation', *Christian Scholar's Review*, **21** (1992), 376–394; and 'The love of God and the heresy of exclusivism', *Christian Scholar's Review*, **27** (1997), 99–112.
5. See Richard Swinburne *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 180–184. Two theologians that defend such a view include John W. Wenham 'The case for conditional immortality', in N. Cameron (ed.) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 161–191, and Clark Pinnock, 'The conditional view', in W. Crockett (ed.) *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992), 135–166. For a biblical study in defence of annihilationism, see Edward William Fudge *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, rev. edn (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994).
6. See Jerry Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). While Walls comes the closest to endorsing the view characterized. His view is really much more

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complex. Given that God desires that all will be saved, Walls contends that a decisive negative response is possible 'only if one persists in rejecting God in the most favourable circumstances' (90). This requires optimal grace both before the eschaton and even in the afterlife, if necessary. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for bringing this feature of Walls's account of hell to our attention.) Despite this feature of his account, Walls takes his task to be to defend a version of the traditional Christian doctrine of hell (14–15).

7. See Jonathan Kvanvig *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
8. C. S. Lewis *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946). In his book, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, Jerry Walls calls a view close to the one we endorse 'the modified orthodox view'. Walls writes that, 'On this view, our eternal destiny is not sealed at death; rather, God continues to offer grace after death, so there is no end to the opportunity to receive salvation. Nevertheless, some will forever reject God's grace and experience the corresponding pain of being forever separated from God' (13). But what we do here that we are not aware of having been done before is, first, offer an argument from God's character and motivational states to such a view of hell. Moreover, we explicitly articulate an issuant version of this view – arguing that it is more consistent with such a view of hell. Also, we argue that it is possible that hell will eventually be emptied of its denizens.
9. What we shall not argue for here, but is also plausible, is that God allows them to choose annihilation. That is, God allows created persons to choose either to spend their post-mortem existence in the fullness of the divine presence, or in a perpetual state of indecision, or they may choose to cease to exist. In any case, the provisions made would allow creatures to exercise their free will.
10. We shall largely ignore the biblical case that may be made for escapism as that is the task of the biblical and systematic theologian. This essay is an exercise in philosophical theology that is sensitive to the constraints of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is our hope, however, that some biblical theologians and systematic theologians will take up the project of seriously considering (and defending) the merits of escapism.
11. See Kvanvig *The Problem of Hell*.
12. *Ibid.*, 136.
13. In the Old Testament, see, for example, Psalm 145.6–9 and Isaiah 30.18. In the New Testament, John 3.16 and Romans 5.8 are often cited as texts in support of our claim. Finally see the Qu'ran 1.1 and 42.26.
14. For variants on the argument to the effect that goodness cannot be an essential property of God's due to considerations regarding free action and moral agency, see Theodore Guleserian 'Can moral perfection be an essential attribute?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **46** (1985), 219–242, and *idem* 'Divine freedom and the problem of evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, **17** (2000), 348–366; Wesley Morriston 'Is God "significantly free?"', *Faith and Philosophy*, **2** (1985), 257–266, and Bruce Reichenbach *Evil and A Good God* (New York NY: Fordham University Press, 1982), ch. 7. See also Keith Yandell's 'Divine necessity and divine goodness', in T. Morris (ed.) *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 313–344, for an argument for the contingency of God's existence based on God's essential goodness and God's ability to sin.
15. Donald Davidson's offers a list of possible pro-attitudes that are partially constitutive of reasons for action in his seminal essay, 'Actions, reasons, and causes', in *idem Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 3–19. His list includes 'desires, wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values in so far as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent directed toward actions of a certain kind' (4). Jing Zhu and Paul Thagard 'Emotion and action', *Philosophical Psychology*, **15** (2002), 19–36, afford emotions a more prominent place alongside the traditional list of pro-attitudes as a further source of motivation and to explain action.
16. See William Alston's 'Divine and human action', in Morris (ed.) *Divine and Human Action*, 257–280 for a defence of the propriety of applying action-predicates to God.
17. In Micah 7.18–19 the author writes, 'Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea' (NRSV).
18. J. R. Lucas 'Forgiveness', in his *Freedom and Grace* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 84.
19. Karl Barth 'The humanity of God', reprinted in C. Green (ed.) *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (London: Collins, 1989), 56.

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20. This is what Kvanvig argues for in *The Problem of Hell*.
21. 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.
22. See n. 21 for a possible exception.
23. Michael J. Murray considers such a response to the objection to retributive punishment in hell lasting forever in his 'Heaven and hell', in *idem* (ed.) *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 287–317, especially 292–293.
24. Stephen Darwall *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 201. See Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (eds) *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Jonathan Dancy (ed.) *Normativity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) for two recent collections of essays that address the normativity of practical reason.
25. See George Schlesinger 'The problem of evil and the problem of suffering', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **1** (1964), 244; *idem* 'Omnipotence and evil: an incoherent problem', *Sophia*, **4** (1965), 21; and David Basinger *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 80.
26. Basinger *The Case for Freewill Theism*, 80.
27. David Brown 'No heaven without purgatory', *Religious Studies*, **21** (1985), 16.
28. The answer to Question 1 of the Westminster shorter catechism.
29. Cornelius Plantinga *Not The Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 37. Cf. Lewis *The Great Divorce*.
30. For an argument in defence of the claim that coercive behaviour is not loving, especially when what is desired on the part of the one coercing the other is that a person reciprocates love, see Andrei A. Buckareff 'Divine freedom and creaturely suffering in process theology: a critical appraisal', *Sophia*, **39** (2000), 56–69, especially 61–66.
31. Barth 'The humanity of God', 64.
32. Earlier drafts of this paper were presented to audiences at the 2002 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers at Messiah College and at a Nazareth College Philosophy Colloquium. We thank all those present on both occasions for their helpful comments. In composing and revising this paper, we have also benefited from comments from David Basinger, Stewart Goetz, William Hasker, Jonathan Kvanvig, Daniel Mittag, Hugh McCann, Phil Ruetz, Christopher Tillman, and three anonymous referees for this journal (one of whom we subsequently learned was Thomas Talbott). We are grateful to them for their help. None of the persons mentioned are responsible for the views defended or any mistakes made in this paper.

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