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Escapism, religious luck, and divine reasons for action

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Abstract: **In our paper, 'Escaping hell: divine motivation and the problem of hell', we defended a theory of hell that we called 'escapism'. We argued that, given God's just and loving character, it would be most rational for Him to maintain an open-door policy to those who are in hell, allowing them an unlimited number of chances to be reconciled with God and enjoy communion with Him. In this paper we reply to two recent objections to our original paper. The first is an argument from religious luck offered by Russell Jones. The second is an argument from Kyle Swan that alleges that our commitments about the nature of reasons for action still leaves escapism vulnerable to an objection we labelled the 'Job objection' in our original paper. In this paper we argue that escapism has the resources built into it needed to withstand the objections from Jones and Swan.**

In our paper, 'Escaping hell: divine motivation and the problem of hell',[1] we focused on the problem of hell from the perspective of Christian theism. We argued for a theory of hell we christened 'escapism'. Escapism can be characterized by the following two claims:

(A) Hell exists and might be populated for eternity.
(B) If there are any denizens of hell, then at any time they have the ability to accept God's grace and leave hell and enter heaven.[2]

We argued[3] that if God's being just and loving follows from His moral perfection, then we should expect that God would make provisions for people to convert in the eschaton, and that these provisions should not be exhausted by a single opportunity. We assumed an issuant view of hell, according to which the

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provision of hell issues from God's love for His creatures that do not wish to be in communion with Him. Thus hell, on our view, is not a place where divine retribution is exacted against reprobate persons who despise God and deserve punishment.[4]

In this essay we reply to two recent objections that have appeared in this journal. First, Russell E. Jones argues that escapism, like other views of hell, falls prey to a version of the problem of religious luck.[5] Jones argues that the problem of religious luck requires a modification to escapism. We will argue that escapism has all of the resources to account for religious luck and, thus, the modification is not needed. Second, Kyle Swan has attempted to revive an objection to escapism we entertain in our original paper that we dubbed the 'Job objection'.[6] He argues that the account of reasons for action we assume in our paper is not adequate to justify our reply to the Job objection. *Contra* Swan, we argue that the Job objection cannot be sustained if we make certain reasonable assumptions about God's moral character and the reasons for action that issue from it.

Escapism and luck

In 'Escapism and luck' Russell E. Jones argues that escapism suffers from the problem of religious luck. While a simplification, the problem of religious luck is like the standard problem of moral luck, only with a theological twist. The problem of moral luck can be stated as follows: the extent to which an agent is held morally responsible for her actions or her character goes beyond the degree to which the agent controls her actions or her character.[7]

In traditional Christianity, whether one is saved from hell and enjoys the reward of heaven is a function of the grace one receives and how one responds to grace.[8] The ensuing problem of religious luck can be roughly stated as follows: the extent to which an agent is a fit candidate for either damnation or salvation goes beyond the agent's control. Whether one responds appropriately to grace will depend upon the shape of one's character and the shape of one's character will depend upon circumstances that are outside of one's control. Jones claims that the problem of luck is pushed into the afterlife by escapism.[9] According to escapism, even in the afterlife one has the ability to respond appropriately to grace. But whether one is in a position to respond positively will be due, in part, to luck. Jones's proposed solution is to extend escapism by postulating that in the afterlife God grants extra grace to those who experienced bad luck during their earthly existence to cancel out any bad luck.[10] We grant, (1) that if a person is initially in hell, this may be in part due to luck, and (2) that if two individuals are treated differently with respect to the allocation of goods in the afterlife and that difference is due solely to luck, then that is unjust.[11] However, *contra* Jones, we argue that unmodified escapism has the means to avoid the problem of religious luck.

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Jones discusses two types of cases in making his case against unmodified escapism based on the problem of religious luck. In the first case,[12] a person's initial rejection of God is based partly on luck and that person continues to reject God for all eternity. In the second case, the person's initial rejection of God is also based partly on luck but in this case the person eventually accepts God's offer of reconciliation. We shall argue that in neither case is the person's treatment unjust. Thus, unmodified escapism avoids the problem of religious luck.

In the first case the fact that the person has not developed the right sort of character to accept God's offer of reconciliation is partly due to luck. *Contra* Jones, if a person chooses to remain in hell, and continually affirms this choice for eternity, then, at some point, that continued affirmation would in no way be due to luck at all but due to that person's refusal to develop the appropriate character. We can add that the character of the agent is such that the continued reaffirmation of the original choice makes it difficult, if not nearly impossible, ever to respond affirmatively to God's offer. However, the agent fully endorses her repeated choice and so is fully autonomous in choosing as she does. Consider the following example. Suppose that Sam – at age thirteen – is exceedingly materialistic due to parental influences and other factors that are outside his control. His value system, then, is due in part to luck. However, suppose that over the course of his life Sam continues to make choices that reinforce this value system. Over time, the fact that Sam is exceedingly materialistic would be due less and less to luck and increasingly due to his choices and behaviour.

We suggest that something similar would take place in hell. Perhaps a person might have certain character traits partly due to luck that make that person incapable of accepting God's offer of salvation. However, in hell the unlucky environmental circumstances would presumably be absent. So, if a person continues possessing the same character traits it would be entirely due to that person cultivating those particular traits. And, since we are dealing with eternity, the amount of luck involved would slowly decrease towards 0. So if a person is in hell for eternity, that continued choice would not be due to luck.[13]

It may be argued that time does not eliminate luck as the foregoing suggests.[14] That is, making choices for even an infinite amount of time does not entail that one will escape the problem of luck. But we take it to be a reasonable assumption on escapism that a person in hell is in an environment where she has full knowledge of the means to reconciliation with God, can become more adept at practical reasoning, and has the time to deliberate carefully about how to choose. It seems reasonable to assume that over time the effects of luck are sufficiently mitigated to make the choice of separation from (or reconciliation with) God one that the agent, given her preferences, rationally and wholeheartedly endorses.

In the second type of case Jones discusses, an individual is in hell for a limited period of time before going to heaven.[15] That such a person spends any time at all in hell will be due, in part, to luck. However, *contra* Jones, we do not think this is a

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problem.[16] Luck is only a problem if two individuals are treated differently (in terms of benefits received) due to luck. So, luck is a problem for escapism only if the person who is in hell for a finite period of time (due to luck) receives fewer and lower quality benefits overall than a person who does not spend any time in hell. However, the benefits of being in communion with God and of being in heaven for eternity are immeasurable. To put it in terms of utility, each person would ultimately receive an infinite quantity of the same quality of utility. So the benefits received would be equal.[17] Jones expresses misgivings about such a response. Jones contends that in a situation where one is allowed to choose between either entering heaven immediately upon death or bad luck initially resulting in one's going to hell, only for one later to be converted and reconciled with God, the former is obviously preferable in spite of the foregoing utility calculation we mentioned.[18]

While there may be a sense in which going to heaven directly is somehow preferable, the scenario Jones describes strikes us as psychologically unrealistic. It assumes that a person who is not interested in being reconciled with God would actually recognize the infinite utility of being in heaven, enjoying communion with someone with whom the agent does not presently desire to commune. Jones ignores the ways in which an agent's preferences affect his or her well-being. Those in hell prefer to be in hell rather than heaven. Of course, the agent's character from which the preferences arise is shaped in part by luck. But it is not an obviously more valuable state of affairs to have one's character unwillingly changed. This suggests that the sort of counterfactual scenario Jones describes fails to capture just how valuable God's autonomy-affirming policies are that allow agents to choose contrary to God's wishes. Perhaps we are being unfair to Jones. Our problems with how Jones addresses this case stem from what strike us as some misunderstandings that Jones has of escapism as we articulate and defend it. The first has to do with the value of hell and the second has to do with how God relates to us.

First, Jones describes hell as bad.[19] We assume that some state of affairs is unequivocally bad in the relevant sense in which hell may be bad only if the aggregate and qualitative well-being of persons in that state of affairs is negative. But we are sceptical that the well-being of any denizens of hell is negative. This is because we have endorsed an issuant view of hell. On such a view, hell is not retributive in nature but rather it is a place God has provided for those who do not wish to be with Him. Such persons are where they prefer to be and it is also a place they have the option of leaving. On escapism, one enjoys some positive well-being in hell. There is one set of goods that a denizen of hell lacks, and it is of infinite value, viz. full-communion with God and the attendant benefits that it affords an agent. Jones, however, assumes that hell is bad on an issuant view, or at least that one receives negative utility in hell, but never explains why. No such assumption seems justified, given issuantism.

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We expect, however, that Jones and those sympathetic to his criticism of our formulation of escapism will probably still have the intuition that it is better if one enters heaven first. This may be due to the second misunderstanding of escapism displayed in Jones's paper. Jones suggests that we consider the case of two possible futures another way. In this case, you are a parent and you are choosing possible futures for your child. We will modify Jones's case somewhat. Rather than you, *qua* parent, recognizing the *good* of heaven and the *bad* of hell, you recognize the *greater goodness* of heaven compared to the *inferior good* of hell. Jones assumes that the rational, loving parent will choose the state of affairs in which her child goes straight to heaven rather than spending some time in hell first. God, of course, is a morally impeccable and maximally loving and just parent in the Christian tradition. We should expect God to pick heaven immediately over some time in hell. This is the case because even if the two states of affairs are equal if we quantify the well-being an agent enjoys, they are qualitatively different and this explains Jones's intuition. It is practically irrational for one to choose the route to heaven via hell over heaven directly, either for oneself or for one's child.[20]

The problem with Jones's example is that it fails to be sensitive to the fact that although God relates to us as a parent, He does not relate to us as a human parent does a very young child. In traditional theistic religion, agents are taken to be accountable and suitable objects of certain reactive attitudes at a point when they are effectively autonomous agents (reflected in the various rites of initiation into full participation in the life of a religious community). So while God may desire a certain type of relationship with agents that will maximize their utility, it does not follow that God does not have other competing desires, for instance that He respect our autonomy in the hope that His activities will result in an autonomous decision on the part of creatures to enter into communion with Him.

So God's *preference* is that we respond autonomously to Him. God's preference would be that we prefer to be with Him and not merely avoid hell. This is all to say that God's situation is not like the situation of the human parent making a choice for her child who is not autonomous, and we are certainly not in a situation where our own preferences do not make a difference with respect to the value of a state of affairs for us. So choosing hell is not obviously the irrational choice. Certain agents would not be practically rational to choose heaven straightaway, given that such a choice at that point in their lives would not be consonant with their narrative and character (including their preferences) up to that point. Such agents would benefit from first being separated from God and then enjoying communion with Him after developing the character necessary to make such a choice. Neither the quality nor the quantity of the well-being of such agents is diminished as a consequence of taking the long path to heaven. Allowing agents to take such a route to heaven is compatible with God's policies and actions taken to persuade us to commune with Him.

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Escapism and reasons for action

In 'Hell and divine reasons for action',[21] Kyle Swan aims at reviving an objection we labelled the 'Job objection' in our paper. Swan notes that, apart from an apparent commitment to a species of reasons internalism (according to which an agent S has a reason to A only if S has a pro-attitude towards A-ing or some end that will be realized only by A-ing), we say very little about reasons for action that would serve to justify our reply to the Job objection.[22] According to the defender of the Job objection 'our limited, mortal perspective does not allow us to make judgements about what God can or should do'.[23] We claimed that Job objectors are not being sensitive to the 'nature of practical rationality and the norms that govern rational action', and 'God ought to act in certain ways if God is rational and has the sort of just and loving character' we claim God has.[24] We argued that the simplest and best answer to the Job objection is that 'God's moral obligations that provide Him with moral reasons for acting do not differ from ours'.[25]

Swan correctly notes that we do not believe that God is subject to the types of mistakes that may cause an agent's normative and motivating reasons to come apart.[26] Swan claims, however, that this fact about God's motivating and normative reasons does nothing to show that the Job objector is not being sensitive to the nature of practical rationality. The Job objector simply refuses to accept premise (5) of our original argument for escapism.

> (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.[27]

The problem with (5) is not that it relies on a version of reasons internalism. Reasons internalism, according to Swan, is consistent with both the truth and falsity of (5). The problem is that (5) is undermotivated. The consequent of the material conditional can be false if the antecedent is true. This is the case because, Swan notes, 'doing otherwise [than adopt escapist policies] could be responsive to other normative reasons that God has, but which are anything but obvious to us'.[28] According to Swan, what we have not shown is that this is wrong or that the Job objector is somehow failing to understand practical rationality and normative reasons for action.

Swan claims that the Job objector is justified in rejecting the truth of premise (5) of our argument for escapism since reasons internalism alone is not enough to deliver the truth of (5). He writes that 'whether God's desires or other pro-attitudes make it true that He has the reasons he has, or track the reasons He has, our genuine reasons for acting will conform to God's, or alternatively they will

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conform to those of the ideal servant of God'.[29] The upshot is that Job objectors can agree that God and humans have the same moral reasons for action,

> … but in our earthly existence we only have an imperfect grasp of what our true moral reasons are … . Therefore, the fact that they do not differ from God's does not tell us much about what God's moral reasons for action are, and it does seem presumptuous boldly to make claims about what God should do with respect to His hell policies.[30]

So if the Job objector is right, premise (5) of our argument is false.

Not surprisingly, we are still convinced that the Job objector is not justified in rejecting premise (5). While God may have normative reasons that are not apparent to us, it would be odd indeed if His policies for the eschaton are motivated by divine love and justice and that they require that persons cannot escape whenever they want. The Job objector appears to be appealing to our epistemically disadvantaged position vis-à-vis God's reasons in making her case. We grant that we are not in an epistemically privileged position with respect to the reasons God may have for whether or not He executes a particular policy. Since we lack such an epistemic position with respect to other human agents we should not be surprised if we are not privy to all of God's reasons. Be that as it may, this does not give God *carte blanche* to fail to adopt and execute certain policies.

If we assume that God has a certain character and He fails to adopt and execute policies that reflect on that character, or are contrary to such a character, then, any claims about our epistemic disadvantage with respect to all of God's reasons for acting notwithstanding, we would have good reason to believe that God does not have the character we originally ascribed to Him. It would be strange, to say the least, that God desires full communion with us and is motivated by a further desire for the most just and loving state of affairs to be realized and that God closes the door on His estranged children being reconciled with Him in the eschaton.

Swan and the Job objector will no doubt fail to be satisfied with such a reply. They may insist that such a reply amounts to so much question-begging. But, once again, we shift the onus back on to the Job objector. As we noted in our paper,

> 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 … . 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?[31]

We are hard-pressed to think of any normative reasons God could have for closing the door on the possibility for persons to leave hell besides ones that are in direct conflict with His normative reasons for adopting and executing escapist policies. Appeals to ignorance of the sort offered by the Job objector do not

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move us. They suggest that an agent could be morally justified in adopting and executing morally repugnant policies because there are reasons to which we are not privy. Closing the door on persons to be reconciled with oneself when one has explicitly expressed love for them and a desire to be reconciled with them would be quite odd, to say the least. If love coupled with justice implies a concern for the well-being of another person and one desires to be reconciled with those one loves, it seems the agent in question would need to have a good reason for adopting a policy that is not conducive to maximizing the well-being of the other and will not allow for reconciliation. We are sceptical that there could be such a reason, for if there is such a reason it is not evident that it would be morally better.

Swan is not without a response. He notes that something like the foregoing reply is 'the obvious fall-back position for escapists' since a human parent would be flouting her moral obligations if she failed to adopt policies that would allow for reconciliation with her child.[32] But Swan insists that the 'parental analogy is limited'.[33] We agree, of course. But not for the reasons Swan suggests. We believe that God, as characterized in the Hebrew-Christian scriptures, is someone who is capable of a rich array of relations with creatures, but divine love and justice are characteristic of all of these relations. The parent–child relation is just one way of characterizing how God's love is manifested. But Swan's problems with the parental analogy come from the direction of the Job objection. While Swan has a sense of what a human parent's moral reasons are, he claims to have

> … a less clear idea of what moral reasons a pan-omni being with responsibility for the trillions of people who have and will exist would have … . God's moral reasons that affect His hell policies could also depend on facts about other of His intentions, purposes and projects that He has but which we either are ignorant of or need … to cultivate a taste for, and can only whole-heartedly endorse in glory. So there are relevant disanalogies. What the most just and loving state of affairs looks like in the eschaton could look a lot different … than what the most just and loving state of affairs looks like in my household.[34]

We recognize the disanalogies, but we are not convinced that the Job objector has triumphed or that (5) is undermotivated. This is so for the following reason.

We agree that the most just and loving state of affairs in the eschaton would be quite different from what obtains in Swan's household, or any human household for that matter. In fact, the most just and loving state of affairs would be vastly superior to what obtains this side of the eschaton. And if it is not just and loving for human parents, lovers, and friends to remove any opportunities for those estranged from them to be reconciled to them – i.e. if it is a morally inferior state of affairs compared to one where the opportunity for reconciliation is always open – then we should expect that things are no different with God. In fact, we should expect God to do more than make the opportunity available, but actually to reach out to those who are estranged from Him.

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The Job objector seems to be insisting that it is either presumptuous for us to expect that God would be more loving and just than a human or that it is presumptuous for us to think that we have a reliable conception of what it means to be more loving and just than a human. We expect that Job objectors will avoid the first horn of the dilemma by agreeing that we should expect God to be more just and loving than us. But the Job objector is impaled on the second horn. This is so because we can say with confidence that if someone fails to implement a policy that it would be unjust and unloving for a human to implement that agent is less loving and just than the human. So any policy that would be regarded as morally good and obligatory for a human to adopt and execute would be just as good for a non-human agent, especially a morally perfect agent, to adopt and execute.

Conclusion

Jones and Swan present two very different types of objections to our original formulation of escapism. Jones suggests a modification that pulls escapism further away from tradition while Swan offers a defence of an objection that buttresses traditional theories of hell. But both challenges suggest that more work needs to be done on divine moral psychology. At the heart of the problem of hell is the concept of moral agency, both divine and human. Moral philosophers and philosophers of mind have done much to help us understand humans. But in the philosophy of religion, the nature of God *qua* moral agent is a topic that is desperately in need of further research if we expect to see any progress in the many relevant debates in philosophical theology.[35]

Notes

1. Andrei A. Buckareff and Allen Plug 'Escaping hell: divine motivation and the problem of hell', *Religious Studies*, **41** (2005), 39–54.
2. An additional note on B: we allow that it might be psychologically challenging for some agents to accept God's offer if their characters have settled into a position where they will not accept God's grace. However, according to escapism, God never gives up on any individual. See n. 21 in 'Escaping hell' for further clarification on this point.
3. What follows is a brief summary of our theory of hell as outlined on 40–42 of 'Escaping hell'.
4. For a compelling recent argument against a retributive view of hell on which God eternally punishes persons for their sins, see Stephen Kershnar 'The injustice of hell', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **58** (2005), 103–123.
5. Russell E. Jones 'Escapism and luck', *Religious Studies*, **43** (2007), 206–216.
6. Kyle Swan 'Hell and divine reasons for action', *Religious Studies*, **45** (2009), 51–61.
7. See Linda Zagzebski 'Religious luck', *Faith and Philosophy*, **11** (1994), 397–413, especially 397. See also Bernard Williams 'Moral luck', *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **50** (1976), 115–135; Thomas Nagel 'Moral luck', *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **50** (1976), 137–151; and Joel Feinberg 'Problematic responsibility in law and morals', *The Philosophical Review*, **71** (1962), 340–351.
8. By 'grace' we mean the unmerited favour of God.
9. Jones 'Escapism and luck', 209.

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10. *Ibid*., 212.
11. Stephen Kershnar helped us clarify what may be unjust about such a luck scenario.
12. See Jones 'Escapism and luck', 210–211. Jones introduces two types of accounts. It seems to us, however, that the cases introduce a distinction without a real difference between types of cases.
13. Second-chance views that only allow for a limited period of time for those in hell to accept the gift of salvation will, however, have a problem here.
14. We owe this objection to Stephen Kershnar.
15. Jones 'Escapism and luck', 211–212.
16. It is worth noting that if it is a problem for our version of escapism, it seems to be no less of a problem for sophisticated universalism.
17. An analogy to set theory might help here. Two infinite sets may be of the same size even when one is a proper subset of the other. For example, the set of all natural numbers and the set of all even numbers are the same size (cardinality) even though the second set is a proper subset of the first. Here the benefits received by the two individuals are both infinite and both appear to be of the same cardinality and so of the same size. Perhaps the main lesson here is that infinity is odd and counter-intuitive.
18. Jones 'Escapism and luck', 211.
19. In the section of the paper where he addresses the second scenario, Jones refers to the 'bad of hell' twice (see *ibid*.).
20. Jones 'Escapism and luck', 211–212.
21. Swan 'Hell and divine reasons for action', 51.
22. Swan also objects to our characterization of the commitments entailed by retributivism. We will not be taking up his remarks, however interesting they are, due to time and space constraints. Suffice it to say that Swan's remarks on retributivism are quite provocative and, if he is right, could be a proper part of a project of offering a defence of a more tenable version of retributivism than has been offered to date.
23. Buckareff and Plug 'Escaping hell', 48.
24. *Ibid*.
25. *Ibid*.
26. Swan 'Hell and divine reasons for action', 55.
27. Buckareff and Plug 'Escaping hell', 45.
28. Swan 'Hell and divine reasons for action', 57.
29. *Ibid*., 59.
30. *Ibid*.
31. Buckareff and Plug 'Escaping hell', 48.
32. Swan 'Hell and divine reasons for action', 60.
33. *Ibid*.
34. *Ibid*.
35. The order of the authors' names does not imply priority of authorship. We wish to thank the Editor, Russell Jones, Stephen Kershnar, Kyle Swan, and Michael Murray for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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