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Escaping Heaven and Hell

MORGAN LUCK

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Centre for Applied Ethics and Public Philosophy, Charles Sturt University, NSW, 2678, Australia
e-mail: moluck@csu.edu.au

Abstract: **Adams (1993) argues that the traditional view that no one in Hell can leave, poses a problem for the theist. This is because, she argues, such a bad state of affairs should be prevented by God. In response, Buckareff and Plug (2005) argue that everyone in Hell can leave. More recently, Matheson (2014) argues that if everyone in Hell can leave, then everyone in Heaven can also leave. However, Matheson provides reason to think that it is impossible for anyone in Heaven to leave. In which case, he argues, no one in Hell can leave either. In this article, I extend this debate, and offer reason to think Matheson's argument is unsound.**

Introduction

Adams (1993) asserts that the traditional doctrine of Hell, which holds that no one in Hell can leave, poses a problem for the theist. This is because, Adams argues, such a bad state of affairs should be prevented by God. This problem, referred to here as *the problem of an inescapable Hell*, is an instance of the more general problem of evil.

Buckareff and Plug (2005) offer a solution to the problem of an inescapable Hell. They argue that everyone in Hell can leave.

More recently, Matheson (2014) offers an argument against Buckareff and Plug's solution. Matheson argues that if everyone in Hell can leave, then everyone in Heaven can also leave. However, he argues, it is impossible for anyone in Heaven to leave. So, it follows that no one in Hell can leave either.

In this article I do two things. First, formulate the debate; and second, extent the debate by offering reason to think Matheson's argument is unsound.

I shall begin by examining the problem of an inescapable Hell as introduced by Adams. After this, I shall examine Buckareff and Plug's solution to the problem.

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Next, I shall examine Matheson's argument against Buckareff and Plug's solution. Finally, I shall present reason to think Matheson's argument is unsound.

The problem of an inescapable Hell

The problem of an inescapable Hell is a variant of the problem of evil. The problem, as discussed by Adams, holds for theists who assert that:

1. God exists.
2. Someone in Hell cannot leave.

Why is this a problem? Because Adams holds that, as God is (by definition) omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, He would make it the case that everyone in Hell can leave, or put another way, God would prevent it from being the case that someone in Hell cannot leave. In other words, Adams asserts 3:

3. If God exists then it is not the case that someone in Hell cannot leave.

Propositions 1, 2, and 3 represent a trilemma – they cannot all be true. Therefore, at least one of these propositions must be rejected.

Buckareff and Plug attempt to solve this problem by arguing that proposition 2 is false.

Buckareff and Plug's solution to the problem of an inescapable Hell

Reconsider proposition 2 of the problem of an inescapable Hell,

2. Someone in Hell cannot leave.

Buckareff and Plug reject 2. A simplified version of their argument against 2 can be expressed as follows:

> God is, by definition, omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good. A being with such properties would want everyone in Hell to be able to leave, and has the power and the know-how to make it the case that everyone in Hell can leave. So, were God to exist, it must be the case that He would make it that everyone in Hell has the opportunity to receive the gift of salvation, and leave. So, it is not the case that there is someone in Hell that cannot leave.

This argument can be formulated as follows,

1. God exists.
4. If God exists then everyone in Hell can leave.

So,

5. Everyone in Hell can leave.

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So,

6. 2 is false.

Next we shall examine Matheson contribution to this debate. Matheson argues that Buckareff and Plug's solution is unsound, as proposition 4 is false.

Matheson's rejection of Buckareff and Plug's solution to the problem of an inescapable Hell

Reconsider proposition 4 of Buckareff and Plug's argument,

4. If God exists then everyone in Hell can leave.

Matheson's rejects 4. His argument against 4 can be expressed as follows,

> As God is like a loving and just parent, he will ensure the escapability of Heaven and Hell is the same. For example, if everyone in Hell is able to leave then he will ensure everyone in Heaven can leave also, and vice versa. However, as God is the greatest possible being, it stands to reason that he will only commune with people in the greatest possible place; so, as he communes with people in Heaven, Heaven must be the greatest possible place. And it is because Heaven is such a great place that leaving it is impossible. For you can only intentionally leave somewhere if you want to, and no one can want to leave a place as great as Heaven; nor can anyone unintentionally leave. So, if no one can leave Heaven, and God will ensure the same escapability of Heaven and Hell, then God will also ensure no one can leave Hell. Consequently, it is not the case everyone in Hell can leave.

This argument can be formulated as follows,

7. God is the greatest possible being.
8. If God is the greatest possible being then God communes with people in the greatest possible place.
9. God communes with people in Heaven.

So,

10. Heaven is the greatest possible place.
11. If Heaven is the greatest possible place, then no one in Heaven can want to leave.
12. If no one in Heaven can want to leave, then no one in Heaven can leave.

So,

13. No one in Heaven can leave.
14. If no one in Heaven can leave, then God (being just and loving) will make it the case that no one in Hell can leave (in order to keep the escapability of Heaven and Hell the same).

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15. If God will make it the case that no one in Hell can leave, then no one in Hell can leave.

So,

16. No one in Hell can leave.
1. God exists.

So,

17. God exists and no one in Hell can leave

So,

18. 4 is false.

This concludes my formulation of Matheson's argument against Buckareff and Plug's solution to the problem of an inescapable Hell. What follows now is reason to think Matheson's argument is unsound.

Reason to think Matheson's argument against proposition 4 unsound

In this section I will present reason to think that Matheson's argument against proposition 4 is unsound. I shall be presenting reason to think propositions 10 and 14 are false. We shall begin with the argument against the truth of 10.

Against proposition 10

Reconsider Matheson's argument for 10,

7. God is the greatest possible being.
8. If God is the greatest possible being then God communes with people in the greatest possible place.
9. God communes with people in Heaven.

So,

10. Heaven is the greatest possible place.

Proposition 8 seem false – it seems entirely possible for an agent to commune in a location that is less great than itself. Also there are biblical reports of God communing with people in places other than Heaven, such as Eden, or Mount Sinai; in which case, if 8 were true, such places would be as great as Heaven (or the biblical reports are false). In addition to these points, we shall now consider an argument against the truth of proposition 10.

Reconsider proposition 5 and 10:

5. Everyone in Hell can leave
10. Heaven is the greatest possible place.

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Matheson's central assertion is that propositions 5 and 10 cannot both be true. Why? Because, according to Matheson, if 5 is true and everyone in Hell can leave, then everyone in Heaven can also leave; in which case Heaven is not the greatest possible place, and so 10 is false. Likewise, if 10 is true and Heaven is the greatest possible place, then no one in Heaven can leave; in which case no one in Hell can leave, and so 5 is false. So, according to Matheson, there is no possible world where both 5 and 10 are true.

So, assuming that God must choose between bringing about a world where either 5 is true or 10 is true, which would he choose?

Before attempting to answer this question it should be noted that if Heaven were not the greatest possible place, it might still be so great that no one will actually leave, or indeed actually want to leave. Only it can't be so great that it will be impossible for people to want to leave. So which is better? That all the people in Hell be consigned to suffer there forever, or that all the people in Heaven remain there because it's such a great place that they all want to stay, but it isn't so great that it's impossible they might want to leave?

If one thinks that it would be better that no one be consigned to Hell forever (i.e. 5 is true) and that Heaven wasn't so good that no one could leave (but still be so good that no one would leave) (i.e. that 10 is false), the following argument for the falsity of 10 can be mounted,

> 7. God is the greatest possible being.
> 19. If God is the greatest possible being and world A is better than world B, then God does not actualize world B.
> 20. A world where 5 is true is better than a world where 10 is true.
>
> So,
>
> 23. God does not actualize a world where 10 is true.
> 24. If God does not actualize a world where 10 is true then 10 is false.
>
> So,
>
> 25. 10 is false.

We proceed now to an argument against proposition 14.

Against proposition 14

Reconsider proposition 14,

> 14. If no one in Heaven can leave, then God (being just and loving) will stop everyone in Hell from leaving (in order to keep the escapability of Heaven and Hell the same).

What reason do we have to think God will ensure Heaven and Hell are the same in respect to escapability? Matheson offers us the analogy of a loving and just parent who treats her children with an even hand; allowing her bad children to

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leave the wilderness and return home, and her good children to leave home and enter the wilderness. Matheson argues that God will treat the residents of Heaven and Hell in a similar fashion – that is, if everyone in Hell can leave, then everyone in Heaven can also leave. However, it is not evident that a just and loving parent would make Heaven and Hell similarly escapable. To make this point, consider the case of the family trip to Ikea,

> A just and loving parent gives her two children the following choice before entering Ikea. Either they can stay in Småland (a supervised and inescapable play area next to Ikea for children) whilst she browses the store, or they can come into the store with her. However, she reminds her children that if they come with her into Ikea and get bored, they can always just let her know and she can ask a store assistant to escort them to Småland (note that although an assistant may deposit children into Småland she may not sign them out). Both children understand that, once signed into Småland, their mother will be unable to sign them out before the end of her shop. One child chooses to go to Småland and the other to go to Ikea. The child that chose to go to Ikea quickly gets bored, and as a result gets escorted to Småland by a store assistant.

The purpose of this case is to suggest that a just and loving parent need not impose the same escapability policy upon her children – for in this case it is not clear that the parent is doing anything unjust by allowing one child to swap locations, whilst knowing the other cannot. What is more, as we shall now see, this case is intended to be relevantly similar to that of God, Heaven, and Hell.

Småland and Ikea are relevantly similar to Heaven and Hell in the following respects: just as Heaven is greater than Hell, so too is Småland greater (for children) than Ikea; just as God cannot make Heaven escapable (because of its greatness, according to Matheson), so too the parent cannot make Småland escapable (because children cannot get out without the parent, and the parent cannot get to her children before the end of her shop); just as one might leave Hell and enter Heaven, so too is a child able to leave Ikea and enter Småland (with the help of the store assistant).

If the cases are relevantly similar then Matheson would seem to be committed to the idea that the just and loving thing for the parent to do in the family trip to Ikea case is to keep the bored child with her for the whole time in Ikea, simply because the child having fun in Småland is unable to switch locations. However, such a stance does not seem like one of a just and loving parent.

This case is designed to put pressure on the notion that God must impose the same escapability policy upon the residents of Heaven and Hell. It is intended to illustrate the possibility that a just and loving parent would not impose the same escapability policy if the locations of her children are relevantly different. And it does seem that, according to Matheson, there is a relevant difference between Heaven and Hell; namely that, although the greatness of Heaven

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(according to Matheson) may be such that no person can leave, it is not necessarily the case that the badness of Hell is such that no person can leave. This seems like a relevant difference – a difference that might allow a loving parent to treat her differently located children in different ways. In other words, I am presenting the following argument by analogy,

> 26. If none of her children in Småland can leave, then the parent (being just and loving) would not stop her children in Ikea from leaving (in order to keep the escapability of Småland and Ikea the same).
> 27. Ikea, Småland, and the loving and just parent are relevantly similar to Hell, Heaven, and God.
>
> So,
>
> 28. If no one in Heaven can leave, then God (being just and loving) would not stop everyone in Hell from leaving (in order to keep the escapability of Heaven and Hell the same).
>
> So,
>
> 29. 14 is false.

An objection to 27

One might object to the above argument on the grounds that the cases are not relevantly similar. God and the parent might fail to be relevantly similar on the following grounds: God is the creator and sustainer of Heaven and Hell, but the parent is not the creator and sustainer of Ikea and Småland. And because of this 27 is false.

To help determine whether this is a relevant difference, let us imagine that the parent is also the founder (or creator) and CEO (or sustainer) of Ikea and Småland. As Matheson argues that it is impossible for people to leave Heaven, then we can assume that God cannot make it the case that people can leave Heaven (perhaps this is a logical constraint on God). Likewise, let us imagine that the founder and CEO of Småland cannot make it the case that children can leave Småland unaccompanied by their guardian (perhaps this is the legal constraint). With these new conditions in place, we can now consider whether the parent must act differently. That is, assuming the parent is just and loving should she now keep her bored child with her in Ikea, just because she is the founder and CEO of Ikea and Småland? It is still not at all clear, even under these new conditions, that the parent would be doing anything wrong if she allowed her bored child to relocate to Småland. In other words, the analogy stands.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to formulate the debate between Adams, Buckareff and Plug, and Matheson on the escapability of Heaven and Hell; and to extend this debate by presenting two arguments for why Matheson's argument

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against Buckareff and Plug's solution to the problem of an inescapable Hell is unsound. This was done by providing arguments against two of its premises – propositions 10 and 14.

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