

Escapism and Luck

Abstract: I argue that the problem of religious luck posed by Zagzebski poses a problem for the theory of hell proposed by Buckareff and Plug, according to which God adopts an open-door policy toward those in hell. Though escapism is not open to many of the criticisms Zagzebski raises against potential solutions to the problem of luck, escapism fails to solve the problem: It merely pushes luck forward into the afterlife. I suggest a hybrid solution to the problem which combines escapism and the claim that God gives enough grace to those in hell to cancel out any bad moral luck.

Linda Zagzebski¹ has posed a problem of religious luck which parallels the problem of moral luck posed by Joel Feinberg, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams.² Though Christian theology with its doctrine of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God has greater resources to deal with the problem of luck than are available to a non-theistic moral theory, there are elements of Christian theology such as the doctrines of grace and of heaven and hell which greatly magnify the problem. The traditional doctrine of hell is especially problematic. Zagzebski considers five possible solutions to the problem of religious luck, each one of which involves various philosophical difficulties or significant departures from the Christian tradition. In section I of this paper, I sketch the problem of religious luck as it is posed by Zagzebski and briefly consider her treatment of possible solutions. In section II, I consider a theory of hell proposed by Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug³ called escapism, which differs in important ways from most traditional theories of hell. I show that escapism avoids the problems that plague the five solutions Zagzebski considers. In section III, I raise a

¹ "Religious Luck," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), 397-413.

² See, e.g., Feinberg, "Problematic Responsibility in Law and Morals," *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1962), 340-351; Williams, "Moral Luck," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplemental Vol. 50 (1976), 115-135; Nagel, "Moral Luck," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplemental Vol. 50 (1976), 137-151.

³ "Escaping Hell: Divine motivation and the problem of hell," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 39-54.

different objection to escapism which arises from the problem of religious luck.

Escapism, though less so than most traditional theories of hell, still allows for significant inequalities among people in the eschaton that result from differences in luck. Rather than solve the problem of religious luck, escapism pushes the problem forward into the afterlife. In section IV, I suggest a solution to the problem that is a hybrid of escapism and one of the solutions Zagzebski considers, namely, that God gives enough grace to each person to cancel out any bad moral luck she has. This hybrid solution goes some way toward solving the problem of religious luck, but it leaves a number of difficulties which the escapist must solve to show that escapism is both a viable solution and the best solution.

I.

Linda Zagzebski has argued that the general problem of moral luck exists for Christian moral theory as well. Further, the problem is magnified by the doctrines of grace and of an eternal heaven and hell. Moral luck occurs when people are properly held to be praiseworthy or blameworthy or are rewarded or punished because of something that is partly due to luck, i.e., something that is not entirely within their control. The traditional doctrine of grace suggests that whether we receive grace is not entirely within our control. The problem of moral luck is exacerbated when the rewards or punishments involve an eternal heaven or hell. Given infinite reward or punishment, the effects of moral luck are multiplied to infinity. As Zagzebski puts it, “A person controls her individual choices and acts and the series of choices and acts which make up her life only up to a point, yet her reward or punishment is infinite. . . [T]he effects of

even a small degree of luck become infinite.”⁴ Further, the fundamental problem of religious luck⁵ is not that some persons are treated differently than others with respect to the giving out of punishments and rewards. Rather, the inequality that is really troublesome is that inequality between one person and himself in a different set of possible circumstances. Jim would have behaved differently in a certain set of counterfactual circumstances than he does in the actual circumstances in which he finds himself, but which set of circumstances Jim is actually in is beyond his control.⁶

Zagzebski considers five ways to deal with the problem of religious luck, each of which either has serious philosophical difficulties or departs from the Christian tradition in significant ways. I briefly mention each of the five solutions and the difficulties that attend them.⁷ The first solution is that, given that there are true counterfactuals of freedom and that God has middle knowledge, God would be able to judge each person based on the sum total of his virtues, vices, actions, and/or the consequences of his actions in every possible world. The bad luck and good luck of different possible circumstances would cancel out one another. This is a fairly radical solution, however, because it makes the actual world no more meaningful for moral evaluation than any possible but non-actual world.

A second solution is to suppose that a person is morally evaluated only for what is under her control. The objection to this is that it is highly doubtful whether there is any

⁴ Zagzebski (1994), 402-3.

⁵ By 'the problem of religious luck' I mean to refer to the special problem of luck that arises for Christian moral theory and soteriology. This special problem of luck is the problem at issue throughout this paper.

⁶ Zagzebski (1994), particularly 407. In her paper, Zagzebski argued that religious luck seems like a problem to us for the same reasons moral luck seems like a problem, namely, that it is unfair. She has recently suggested to me in correspondence that religious luck seems like a problem for another reason as well: It is contrary to our notion of a loving God. If God loves each person individually, we would not expect Him to treat some persons in ways that make it likely that they will spend eternity in hell.

⁷ What follows can be found in more detail in Zagzebski (1994), 407-11.

such thing as a determinate degree of control that a person has. For this solution to work, there would have to be a determinate degree of causal control that a person has over (a) her choice, (b) the circumstances in which she finds herself, and (c) the character traits she has.⁸

A third solution is to admit that it is easier for some to be saved than for others because of circumstances outside of their control, but to suppose that this difference is compensated for by a difference in rewards. The harder it is for a person to attain salvation, the greater his reward if he does. Zagzebski has two objections to this. One is much like the objection to the second solution: It is unlikely that there is a determinate degree of how hard or easy it is for a person to attain salvation. The other is that people don't have a choice whether they take a big risk for big rewards or a smaller risk for smaller rewards, so there is still a significant degree of inequality due to luck.

A fourth solution is to say that God gives enough extra grace to each person to cancel out any bad moral luck she has. Zagzebski has two objections to this, as well. First, based on our experience it certainly does not seem to be the case that those with the most bad moral luck receive the most grace. Second, this solution might have bad practical effects by causing us to assess others more harshly; after all, they have failed morally despite the fact that they must have received much grace that we cannot perceive.

A fifth solution is to say that there is moral luck, but it is innocuous with respect to salvation because all are saved. The trouble with this solution is not so much philosophical as traditional. Universalism is contrary to the most dominant views in the

⁸ See Zagzebski's (1994, 399-401) discussion of Feinberg's (1962) argument that moral responsibility is in principle undecidable.

Christian tradition⁹ and involves severing salvation entirely from the moral realm. So all five solutions face either philosophical difficulties or involve significant breaks with Christian tradition.

II.

Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug offer a theory of hell which they call *escapism*. According to this theory, God adopts a policy of extending to all persons in hell the opportunity of reconciliation with him. This offer of reconciliation is not a one-time offer; God extends the offer for an infinite amount of time. Buckareff and Plug offer the following argument for escapism¹⁰:

- (1) None of God's actions toward persons is unjust or unloving.
- (2) If God does not provide opportunities for salvation to people in hell, then his actions toward those in hell are unjust or unloving.
- (3) Therefore, God provides opportunities for salvation to people in hell.

No doubt there are those who would quibble with the argument, particularly with premise (2). I will leave that task to others, however, and turn to the question of how escapism fares with respect to the problem of religious luck. I argue that escapism avoids the problems which plague the solutions to the problem of religious luck considered in section I.

Unlike the first solution, escapism does not base moral or religious evaluation on possible but non-actual worlds, but only on the actual world. So, escapism fits our moral intuitions better than the radical first solution. Unlike the second solution, escapism does

⁹ This is not to say that universalism has not had able defenders among Christians. Among contemporary philosophers who defend universalism, Marilyn McCord Adams stands out. See, e.g., her "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians," in Eleonore Stump (ed.), *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 301-327.

¹⁰ This is an abbreviated and paraphrased version of the argument offered in Buckareff and Plug (2005), esp. 42-5.

not restrict the basis of religious evaluation to what is under a person's control. So, escapism is not committed to the questionable claim that there is a determinate degree of control that a person has. Nor is escapism committed to the questionable claim that there is a determinate degree of how hard or easy it is for a person to attain salvation. Since the escapist also makes no claim that the degree of reward a person receives is tied to the degree of difficulty for them to attain salvation, escapism avoids the objections to the third solution.

Escapism does not, like the fourth solution, commit one to the claim that God gives enough extra grace to each person to cancel out any bad moral luck she has. So it is not subject to the objection that this claim is not supported by our experience.

Furthermore, escapism will not lead to the undesirable practical effect of causing us to assess others more harshly because we think any bad luck they have had has been cancelled out. Escapism might have an undesirable side effect of its own, however.

Some might think that they do not need to be moral and/or cultivate a relationship with God right now; not only will they have opportunities to be reconciled to God in this life, but they will have an unending opportunity to be reconciled to God in the afterlife. This might lead people to be less moral than they would be if they thought that their moral or religious state at death determined their fate for eternity. I don't take the possibility of this sort of undesirable practical effect to be a serious theoretical objection to escapism.

It is, however, a problem to which the proponents of escapism should give some attention.¹¹

¹¹ Buckareff and Plug consider an objection on p. 51-2 that is related to the problem I raise here. The objection they consider is that escapism 'cheapens' God's grace, because those who resist His grace during their lives can then receive it in the afterlife, and so avoid the undesirable consequences of rejecting grace. Buckareff and Plug respond by arguing that, "On the contrary, the benefits to be procured in this life from

Escapism is subject to the criticism of universalism as a solution to the problem of religious luck, but it is not subject to it in the same degree. Universalism is problematic because it is a significant departure from the dominant views in the Christian tradition. Escapism, too, is a departure, but not as radical a departure. Escapism, like the traditional doctrine of hell, is compatible both with the existence of hell and with the possibility that it will be populated for eternity. It differs from the traditional doctrine by allowing the possibility of some people escaping hell. So, while escapism is a departure from the traditional doctrine, it is a less radical departure than universalism. Escapism is not seriously challenged by any of the objections to the five solutions to the problem of religious luck.

III.

Escapism is not seriously threatened by the objections raised against the proposed solutions to the problem of religious luck discussed in section I. If escapism proves to be a sixth solution to the problem that is less objectionable than the other solutions, this will support the claim that escapism is a viable and plausible theory of hell. Unfortunately, escapism fails to escape the problem of religious luck. Even though it avoids the objections to the five solutions, escapism itself hardly counts as a solution to the problem of religious luck. Instead, it simply pushes the problem forward into the afterlife.

being in loving communion with God should provide the impetus for the unrepentant to turn to God. They should not turn 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."

Consider the motivation for thinking there is a problem of religious luck. It seems obvious that some people have a harder time attaining salvation than others, assuming salvation is something like the traditional Christian view of salvation. Many factors which a person does not control may influence her chances¹² of attaining salvation: natural temperament, family, religious background, culture and geography, important events or circumstances, etc. A person who has a natural temperament conducive to spiritual development, who is born into a warm and loving Christian family, in a cultural environment friendly to Christianity, whose path to salvation is not sidetracked by various circumstances outside of her control, will be much more likely to attain salvation than a person for whom none of these is true. It is a small step to salvation for the first person, but may be a very large step to salvation for the second. It is also worth noting that many of the factors that influence the likelihood of someone's attaining salvation are very central to who that person is.

Now, whatever it takes for salvation before death – faith, a relationship with God, the performance of certain actions – is presumably what it takes for salvation after death, assuming escapism is correct about the possibility of attaining salvation after death. And given how central to oneself are many of the factors that influence the likelihood of someone's attaining salvation before death, it seems that many of these same factors will influence the likelihood of someone's attaining salvation after death. In other words, much of the luck that factors into one's decisions about salvation in this life will factor into one's decisions in the next. If luck influences the decisions of those in hell concerning reconciliation with God, then luck influences whether one remains in hell or

¹² I do not mean to suggest by this discussion that there is a determinate probability that constitutes a person's 'chances' for salvation, but I do mean to suggest that it is harder or perhaps less likely for some than others.

goes to heaven. If luck influences whether one remains in hell or goes to heaven, then the problem of religious luck looms large for escapism. The problem of religious luck for escapism can be summed up by the following argument.

- (1) The inhabitants of hell are persons.
- (2) Every person has a distinct personality.
- (3) The particular personality one has is to some extent due to luck.
- (4) The personality of an inhabitant of hell influences her decision to accept or reject the offer of reconciliation to God.
- (5) So, whether or not a person accepts the offer of reconciliation to God (and so escapes hell) is to some extent due to luck.¹³

The problem for escapism is not quite as serious as the problem formulated by Zagzebski, but it is nearly so. Zagzebski argues that, given eternal rewards and punishments (or, on an issuant view of hell, given eternal very good and very bad states for persons), small amounts of luck are multiplied to an infinite degree. The escapist, though, is not committed to the claim that small amounts of luck are multiplied to an infinite degree, for there is no point at which a person is doomed to hell for eternity. The problem for the escapist is almost as bad, though, for luck may play a role in some people being in hell rather than heaven for a short time, and this is surely a significant consequence. Furthermore, luck may play a role in some people in hell rejecting the offer of reconciliation to God for a very long time before they finally accept it. This is a very serious consequence. Finally, and worst of all, luck may play a role in some inhabitants of hell never accepting the offer of God. This possibility comes very close to being as serious as the problem Zagzebski formulates, though it is less serious in that

¹³ Nagel (1976) distinguishes between luck in constitution, circumstances, and consequences. My discussion of escapism has focused on the problems of luck in constitution. It is not clear to me whether on Buckareff's and Plug's account there is also luck in circumstances or consequences, for they have not described the condition of those in hell in much detail. If the condition of the inhabitants of hell does allow for luck in circumstances or consequences, this further compounds the problem.

there is no point at which the person who never accepts God's offer is doomed never to accept it.

IV.

There is, perhaps, one way to blunt the force of the problem of religious luck by creating a hybrid solution. Suppose we combine escapism with a variant of the fourth solution discussed above, that God gives enough extra grace to each person to cancel out any bad moral luck she has had. Zagzebski has two objections to the fourth solution. First, it is contrary to our experience, for it does not seem like those with the most bad luck receive the most grace. Second, it may lead us to evaluate people too harshly, for since they have received enough grace to cancel out their bad moral luck, our evaluations of them will not be tempered by a recognition of the role luck plays in their moral failings.

Suppose we alter the fourth solution slightly, so that God gives enough grace to each person to cancel out any bad luck she has had, but He does so after the person's death. If we combine this altered fourth solution with escapism, we now have the position that, after death, God gives enough grace to each person to cancel out any bad luck she has had, and each person has an open-ended opportunity to be reconciled to God at any time. Since grace and luck¹⁴ are both outside of a person's control, to avoid the charge of inequities we should further assume that the balance of grace and luck (good and bad) for each person is the same. The charge that the fourth solution is contrary to our experience is avoided by this hybrid solution, for the hybrid solution makes no claims

¹⁴ Of course, if luck is understood simply as any factor outside of a person's control which has a good or bad effect on that person, then grace is just a special kind of luck. I use both terms here to distinguish the ordinary sorts of luck from the special (good) luck that God gives to aid a person in attaining salvation.

about this life and we have no experience of the afterlife. The practical problem may be avoided as well, for one might argue that the problems of moral evaluation that arise in this life will not be at issue in the next.

There are still difficulties with the hybrid solution. If God waits until the unrepentant are in hell to give enough grace to cancel out bad luck, there is still the problem that they have experienced some of the bad of hell and missed out on some of the good of heaven, due in part to bad luck before death. Perhaps the escapist could argue both that God grants this grace in full and that the person is given an opportunity to be reconciled to God, after death but before being consigned to hell. Here, however, escapism may run into a milder form of the objection raised against the first solution to the problem discussed in section I, for important decisions in this life may be easily and immediately reversed in the next. This appears to lessen the importance of this life, making it seem like only a prelude to the main event to come. The escapist should also make some effort to explain whether and how the balance of grace and luck for all persons can be equal or fair. It also remains to be seen whether those who argue for escapism will be willing to accept the hybrid solution. Buckareff and Plug have not argued for anything like the fourth solution; they argue only for each person in hell having at least a minimal psychological capacity to accept the offer of reconciliation extended by God. The hybrid solution may be viewed as one more step away from the dominant Christian tradition in a theory that is already sensitive to how much it has departed from that tradition. Buckareff and Plug go to some effort to show that escapism, while a departure from the tradition, should still be more acceptable than theories like

universalism, because escapism is not as significant a departure. There is little in the tradition to suggest that God gives second chances or extra grace to those in hell.

I conclude that escapism, particularly in its hybrid form when combined with the fourth solution, should be given a seat at the table as a sixth potential solution to the problem of religious luck posed by Zagzebski. The escapist, however, has some work to show that escapism is not only a viable solution to the problem, but the best of the alternatives. To show that it is viable, the escapist should give answers to the difficulties I have raised in section IV. To show that it is best, the escapist must show two things: (a) that it solves philosophical problems, including the problem of religious luck, as well as universalism does; and (b) that it involves a much less significant departure from the Christian tradition than universalism. In this paper I have attempted to clarify some of the work involved in showing (a). Escapists have much more work to show (a) than (b), but it is important that they not neglect (b), for escapism is already open to charges of departing from the tradition and should not open itself up to further charges unless they are unavoidable.¹⁵

¹⁵ [Acknowledgments suppressed for blind review.]

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