

Sider's Puzzle and the Mormon Afterlife

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“Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views,
and boundless in His mercies and blessings,
than we are ready to believe or receive...”

“...there is never a time, when the spirit is too old
to approach God. All are within the reach of
pardoning mercy, who have not
committed the unpardonable sin”
-Joseph Smith

Abstract: There is a puzzle about divine justice stemming from the fact that God seems required to judge on the basis of criteria that are vague. Justice is proportional, however, it seems God violates proportionality by sending those on the borderline of heaven to an eternity in hell. This is Ted Sider's problem of Hell and Vagueness. On the face of things, this poses a challenge only to a narrow class of classical Christians, those that hold a retributive theory of divine punishment. We show that this puzzle can be extended to the picture of divine judgement and the afterlife found in Mormon theology. This is significant because at first glance, the Mormon picture of the afterlife looks like it fails to co-operate with Sider's puzzle. In Mormon theology, there are not two afterlife states, but three: a low, a middle, and a high kingdom. There is no afterlife state quite like Hell, and the states that function similarly to Hell aren't places of eternal suffering. We argue that appearances are misleading. While it may be true that no place in the Mormon afterlife is bad in the sense that its inhabitants suffer eternal bodily harm, it is true that many of the places in the Mormon afterlife are bad in the sense that their inhabitants lack access to significant goods. This allows Sider's puzzle to re-engage as a puzzle

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about distributive Justice. After setting out this alternative version of the puzzle, we argue that Mormon theology has sufficient resources to reject proportionality as a constraint on divine judgment by adopting a nuanced version of universalism called escapism.

1. Introduction

Divine judgment is supposed to be just. However, there appears to be a serious tension between this constraint and certain traditional conceptions of the Christian afterlife. If, as traditional Christianity maintains, hell awaits some non-trivial portion of humanity, then in order to be just in sentencing some to hell, God must judge on the basis of some just criterion. The trouble is that any plausible criterion of judgment looks like it admits of borderline cases. God, it appears, will need to introduce some cut-off to finely separate the heaven from the hell-bound. But in so cutting off the wicked from the righteous, the worry goes, there will be someone who just barely makes the heaven cut and someone else who just barely won't. This runs sharply against our intuitions that justice is proportional. God, if just, simply shouldn't treat relevantly similar people *very* dissimilarly. And what could amount to a more dissimilar treatment than eternal reward for one and eternal punishment for the other? This is the problem Ted Sider popularized as the problem of hell and vagueness (hereafter Sider's puzzle).¹

Many have thought that this puzzle has very limited scope, viz traditional Christian conceptions of the afterlife taken together with a crude retributive theory of divine punishment. Our aim in this paper is to show that this is not the case. In particular, we will argue that Sider's puzzle can be extended in a way that presents a substantive challenge to the picture of divine judgement and the afterlife found in Mormon theology.² This is significant because on first glance, the Mormon picture of the afterlife looks like it fails to co-operate with Sider's puzzle. There is strong *prima facie* evidence that the central puzzle-generating premises simply shouldn't be endorsed. In Mormon theology, there are not two afterlife states, but three: the Telestial, Terrestrial, and Celestial Kingdoms. There is no afterlife state quite like Hell, and the states that function similarly to Hell (the Telestial and Terrestrial kingdoms) have very different features. They aren't places of eternal suffering. If there is no state so bad as hell and the badness of hell plays a central role in getting the puzzle off the ground, then why think this is a puzzle Mormon theology need confront? This is the focus of the first three sections of the paper.

¹ (Sider, 2002)

² It is important to point out that "Mormon" and its cognates are simply nicknames or informal ways of referring to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which is the official name of the religious sect. But in the interest of readability and economy we will use the expression "Mormon" and its cognates throughout to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In section 1, we set out Sider's puzzle in detail, articulating the particular commitments that generate the problem. In section 2, we present the standard conception of the afterlife found in Mormon theology and show that appearances suggest that Sider's puzzle fails to be a problem for it. And in section 3, we argue that appearances are misleading. While it may be true that no place in the Mormon afterlife is bad in the sense that its inhabitants suffer eternal bodily harm, it is true that many of the places in the Mormon afterlife are bad in the sense that their inhabitants lack access to significant goods. We argue that understanding badness in this sense allows Sider's puzzle to present a substantive challenge for the standard Mormon conception of the afterlife.

After setting out the puzzle, in section 4 we argue for a solution. We do so by appealing to a non-standard version of universalism (which is unfortunately) called escapism. On a standard universalist view hell is actually empty. Everyone goes to heaven and there is no interesting sorting challenge for God to confront in judgment. The corresponding view on the Mormon theological picture would be that that Telestial and Terrestrial Kingdoms are actually empty. Everyone goes to the Celestial Kingdom and God confronts no interesting sorting challenge. On our escapist view, while the Telestial and Terrestrial kingdoms are *actually* non-empty, they *possibly* aren't. Now this isn't to say that given the facts about human agents at the day of judgment, there is a way God could judge that would result in an empty Telestial and Terrestrial kingdom. Rather the view has it that for every human agent in these kingdoms, it is an open possibility for them to go to Celestial Kingdom. We argue that adopting escapism offers a way to principally retain God's justice but reject Sider's proportionality constraint. As such it constitutes a satisfying solution to Sider's puzzle. We also raise and respond to some objections against the proposal along the way.

In section 5, we discuss whether there is adequate basis in Mormon theology to motivate the kind of philosophical proposal we endorse. And ultimately, we conclude that there is.

2. Sider's Puzzle

Sider's aim is to show that several propositions describing the requirements of justice and a traditional conception of Hell are jointly inconsistent. They are as follows:

1. **Dichotomy:** There are exactly two states in the afterlife, heaven and hell.
2. **Badness:** People in hell are much worse off than people in heaven.
3. **Non-Empty:** Both heaven and hell are populated.
4. **Divine Control:** God decides who goes where.
5. **Justice:** God's judgement is just.

6. **Proportionality:** Justice is proportional, in the sense that it “prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects.”³
7. **Borderline:** Any application of a just criterion must judge created beings according to a standard that comes in degrees or admits of borderline cases.
8. **Existence:** There are borderline cases.⁴

Here's how the inconsistency is derived. By Non-empty and Divine control, it follows that God decides that some people go to heaven (call them group S) and that some other people (call them group H) go to hell. By Badness, it follows that group S is much better off than group H. By Dichotomy, it follows that every human being is either in group S or group H. By Proportionality and Justice, it follows that there must be some way of dividing people into groups S and H which does not place people who are relevantly very similar into different groups. However, by Borderline and Existence, we will get cases where relevantly similar people (those near the cutoff) are treated *very* differently—some sent eternally to heaven and some sent eternally to hell. Thus, we have an inconsistency

It's worth calling attention to two of the primary worrying features driving the paradoxical result. The first is a worry about *intensity*. Hell is just awful. It's just as awful (perhaps) as heaven is good. The other is a suppressed worry about the duration of the effects of judgment. Judgment is *final*. God serves an *eternal reward*. And it's clear that these two features play the central role in generating tension with **justice** via **proportionality**. If the punishment and reward were not so intense or not so final then we (perhaps) wouldn't run into a worry about God treating relevant persons *very* dissimilarly. This allows us to introduce criteria of acceptability on a solution to the problem of hell and vagueness. It is a minimal constraint on an acceptable solution to this puzzle that it squares the intensity and duration of the afterlife with the purported justice of God.

The failure to adequately address these pressures reveal the unsatisfactoriness of a variety of solutions. Take for instance gappy and glutty solutions.⁵ Responses of this sort aim to reject dichotomy by introducing a third state that takes in the troubling borderline cases. On the gappy account, people either go to heaven or hell, or to *neither*. On the glutty account, people either go to heaven or hell, or *both*.⁶ One can see at once why the glutty solution promises little. If those near the borderline go to a place that is both heavenly and hellish, they still go to a place that is hellish for all eternity, and so nothing has been done to alleviate the conflict with

³ (Sider, 2002)

⁴ This nor the premise preceding it appears explicitly in Sider's paper but is so featured in (Dougherty & Poston, 2008) reconstruction of Sider.

⁵ See e.g., Jeremiah Joaquin's solution along these lines in (Joaquin, 2018).

⁶ The disjunction here should be interpreted in the strong, exclusive sense, and this ternary afterlife view is akin to the semantic account of gappy and glutty logics for vague sentences. For these logics, a vague sentence would not be true or false; it would be neither true nor false for a gappy logic, both true and false for a glutty one.

proportionality.⁷ A different worry arises for the gappy account. If we grant that there is a third state, something between heaven and hell, a natural thought would be to characterize it as worse than heaven but not nearly so bad as hell. While this might help ease our minds about those near the cutoff for heaven, it raises a new kind of distress, distress for those at the borderline of hell and our gappy state. All we need to do is modify two of the original principles: dichotomy and badness to say instead:

- 1*. **Trichotomy:** there are exactly three states in the afterlife: heaven, hell, or the gappy state.
- 2*. **Comparative Badness:** people in hell are much worse off than people in the gappy state, who are much worse off than those in heaven.

This is the analog of the familiar problem of higher-order vagueness. All we have done is introduce more borderlines, but we haven't addressed the deep issue facing us at the initial borderline. As a result, the conflict with **justice** persists. Nothing was done to square the conflict between intensity, finality, and proportionality.

It is for similar reasons that approaches like Dougherty and Poston's are also unsatisfactory. On their proposed solution, no attempt to square the relevant principles in tension is made; rather it is sidestepped altogether. They grant that God judges in a way that places individuals in a position on a divine scale. They simply deny that there are any borderline cases.⁸ Suppose that the divine cutoff point on the scale of judgment from 0-100 is 50. They hold that God creates the world in such a way that individuals are always either definitely heaven or definitely hell-bound. So, God creates the world in such a way that the only individuals there are say higher than 80 or less than 20 on the divine scale. On this view, God might have had a judgment problem but actually doesn't. The principles on the basis of which God judges have all the features giving rise to the puzzle, but God gets lucky. He never actually has to confront a tough case in judgment.⁹ On this account, God is directly involved in making people *definitely hell-deserving*. Given this, God can't afford in the case of whoever is sent to hell, to make them much more heavenly. They would then be borderline heavenly and so undermine God's justice. Thus, God cannot allow it. By not addressing the tension between **badness** and **proportionality**, Dougherty and Poston make God's justice crucially at odds with human improvement. And one might think that this just trades one problem of justice for another. So, if a proposal is to constitute a genuinely satisfying solution to Sider's puzzle it will need to deal directly

⁷ Now there are some maneuvers that the gluttony afterlife theorist can make here, perhaps by arguing that in the gluttony state things aren't as bad as hell or as good as heaven, but it is hard to see how they can make this work. How could there be a coherent state where its inhabitants enjoy both total union with and separation from God? But for a suggestive strategy for how to embrace a contradictory theology, see (Beall, 2019).

⁸ (Dougherty & Poston, 2008)

⁹ (Dougherty & Poston, 2008)

with the core of the puzzle and square **badness** (and by extension intensity and finality), with **proportionality**.

3. A First Pass at the Mormon Afterlife

According to Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith, the traditional conception of the afterlife is mistaken. This is because, on the Mormon view, there is really no equivalent to the Christian hell. Simply put, God is not in the business of condemning individuals to endless suffering. As Smith taught, "The Lord deals with this people as a tender parent with a child."¹⁰ With this as a guiding metaphor, it is easy to see why Mormons reject the view that God submits his children to endless suffering and torture. That is out of character for a God who is a "tender parent". Instead, Mormons hold that there are *three* "kingdoms of glory."¹¹ Each being a kind of subdomain of heaven. This follows on a reading of the Apostle Paul: "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory" (1 Cor. 15: 40-41). Mormonism thus rejects **dichotomy**.

In a sense, Mormons dispense with hell and make finer-grained distinctions among heaven itself. The kingdoms are tiered, in the sense that there are different goods available in each kingdom. The highest kingdom, the celestial kingdom, is reserved for those who believe in Christ, receive baptism, and are faithful.¹² They are the recipients of numerous blessings, many of which are specifically listed in the Mormon canon.¹³ Notably, they are resurrected into a "celestial body", they enjoy

¹⁰ (Smith, 1976) p. 305

¹¹ (Smith, 2015)76. Although it is important to mention here that strictly speaking there are broadly 4 afterlife states. The one that we did not include above is referred to in the Mormon scriptural canon as Outer Darkness. The scriptural corpus is basically silent on the features of outer darkness. In fact, Joseph Smith speaking of the fate of those who belong to this category reports God as having stated to him in a vision, "Neither was it revealed, neither is, neither will be revealed unto man, except to them who are made partakers thereof" ((Smith, 2015) 76:44-46). He then reiterates on another occasion "[those in outer darkness] have a destiny that was not revealed to man, is not revealed, nor ever shall be revealed, save to those who are made partakers thereof" (TPJS p.24). We take this as strong evidence that we should withhold judgment about the nature of this state. If it turns out that this place is bad in something like the sense of hell on the traditional Christian picture then Sider's puzzle emerges immediately (and so supports the conclusion we wish to draw) or it doesn't in which case (as we will see in the later sections) there is a puzzle about justice that just emerges with respect to the three kingdoms of glory. And it is striking that there might be a puzzle about God's justice arising solely from restricting one's attention to the heavenly afterlife states in Mormon theology.

¹² (Smith, 2015) 76:51-52

¹³ What we are calling the "Mormon Scriptural Canon" includes The (Protestant) Bible, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. The Bible is familiar to most readers. *The Book of Mormon* is a scriptural record, much like the Bible, of people that lived in the Americas from circa 600 B.C. to circa 400 A.D., which Joseph Smith claimed to have translated from documents recorded on metal plates. *The Doctrine and Covenants* is a collection of revelations recorded by Joseph Smith. They mainly consist of revelations on doctrinal and institutional questions. *The Pearl of Great*

communion with God the Father, and their familial relationships endure. The middle kingdom, the terrestrial kingdom, is reserved for those who “received the testimony of Jesus” at some point but were “not valiant in the testimony of Jesus”.¹⁴ In other words, those who were not fully faithful or righteous, but were pretty good nonetheless. They “differ in glory [from those in the celestial kingdom] as the moon differs from the sun.”¹⁵ They enjoy communion with Jesus Christ but not God the Father.¹⁶ Their familial relationships do not endure. And they are resurrected into a “terrestrial” body. The remaining kingdom, the telestial or low kingdom, is reserved for those “who are thrust down to hell, who shall not be redeemed from the devil until the last resurrection, until the Lord . . . shall have finished his work.”¹⁷ In other words, those who go to the low kingdom are those who fit the traditional description of those who go to hell. Where those in the high kingdom enjoy the communion of the Father, and those in the middle kingdom enjoy the communion of Jesus, those in the low kingdom only enjoy the communion of the Holy Ghost. Familial relationships also do not endure in the low kingdom. Importantly, each kingdom is a kingdom of glory, which is to say that each kingdom is by human standards pretty good. In fact, it is stated that those who inhabit the low kingdom are “heirs of salvation.”¹⁸ Further, Smith taught, “the glory of the telestial [kingdom] surpasses all understanding. . . .”¹⁹ And it only gets better from there: “the glory of the terrestrial . . . excels in all things the glory of the telestial, even in glory, and in power, and in might, and in dominion. And . . . the glory of the celestial, which excels in all things—where God, even the Father, reigns upon his throne forever and ever”²⁰ In other words, things get better without loss as you move from the low kingdom to the high kingdom.

So, on the face of it, Mormonism rejects **badness**. For no one is *bad off*. On the Mormon view, God liberally dispenses blessings to those in each kingdom. The puzzle doesn't arise because **badness** turns out to be false on the Mormon view. But does this violate **proportionality**?

That there are tiers in heaven provides some support for a commonsense understanding of **proportionality**. For while **proportionality** is explicitly formulated as a thesis prohibiting unequal treatment for persons who are very similar in relevant respects, it seems intuitive that proportionality should also

Price is primarily a record of Abraham, which Joseph Smith claimed to have translated from ancient papyri.

¹⁴ (Smith, 2015) 76: 74, 79

¹⁵ (Smith, 2015)78.

¹⁶ Mormons hold a social trinitarian view on which God the Father is fully distinct from Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost. Their unity or one-ness is achieved only in a social sense—they are unified in intentions and desires. Moreover, Mormons hold that they are distinct bodily. As such it is possible to be in the bodily presence of one without being in the bodily presence of the other. (see (Smith, 2015)130).

¹⁷ (Smith, 2015)76:84-86.

¹⁸ (Smith, 2015)76:88.

¹⁹ (Smith, 2015)76:89

²⁰ (Smith, 2015)91-92.

prohibit equal treatment for persons who are very dissimilar in the relevant respects. Thus, it appears Mormons can endorse the independently plausible **proportionality** thesis so that **justice** is not violated, as it might be by an unqualified universalism.

So, *prima facie*, what emerges on the Mormon picture is a view where Sider's puzzle doesn't even get off the ground, given that it rejects **badness**. As we said, there are two animating assumptions about **badness**. The first is that *hell is awful, perhaps as awful as heaven is good*. This is true on the Traditional Christian view, but on the Mormon view there is simply no analogue. For, it's not correct to say that the low kingdom is awful, it's not even bad. It's great! The second assumption is that judgement is final. That is, the duration of the effects of the judgment are eternal. But, on the Mormon view, even if judgment is final and one is in the low kingdom for the rest of eternity, that person will still enjoy the blessings of heaven. So, again, it's great, and great forever.

One might think that insofar as the spirit of Sider's puzzle is to raise a worry that impugns God's character, Mormonism presents a view that vindicates the character of God. God is not a God of retribution on the Mormon picture, he is a God of profound beneficence. Sider's challenge, simply stated, is the question of how a just and loving God could condemn any of his children to endless suffering when he created them and decided on the rules that condemn them? The picture offered here suggests that there is no condemnation being offered by God. The afterlife is just not bad, not for anyone. So, it seems, the puzzle is a non-starter.

4. Sider's Revenge

As we've just seen, in relation to the Mormon afterlife, it appears that Sider's puzzle fails even to get off the ground. **Badness** is a crucial premise and it seems to be one that a Mormon can flatly reject. But appearances here are misleading. In order to see why, it will be useful to put **badness** back in the forefront of our minds. In Sider's formulation of the problem, the principle of badness is stated as follows.

Badness (traditional): People in hell are much worse off than people in heaven.

On the Mormon formulation we should represent badness thus:

Badness (Mormon): People in the low kingdom are much worse off than people in the middle kingdom, and people in the middle kingdom are much worse off than people in the high kingdom.

And as we saw in the last section, no one seems bad off in any of these afterlife states. In fact, they all seem to be better off than anyone presently living. However, it's crucial to this rejection of badness that we take a certain view of what the badness consists in. Hell is bad in the retributive sense. It's a place where God punishes

sinners, and the punishment is severe. But on the standard Mormon picture, no place (high, middle, or low) it seems, is a place where its inhabitants are the objects of divine retribution. Rather, everyone is the recipient of some divine reward or blessing. It is in reflecting on this important feature of the states in the Mormon afterlife that we see a serious version of the puzzle begin to emerge. As we saw in the last section, the distinction between afterlife states in Mormon theology tracks importantly the extent to which individuals receive divine reward. Recall that those in the high kingdom enjoy the full presence of God the Father, maintain significant familial relationships, and have celestial bodies.²¹ In contrast, those who inherit the middle kingdom have bodies with diminished capacities, are unable to remain in earthly familial relationships, and enjoy less than perfect union with God (they can only enjoy the presence of God the Son).²² Finally, those in the low kingdom have bodies with even further diminished capacity, likewise retain no earthly filial relationship, and enjoy even less of the presence of God. They fail to even be able to stand in the presence of God the Son and have access only to the presence of the Holy Spirit.²³

Now imagine the following case. George is a really great guy. He holds the door open for the elderly in his building. He gives significant time and funds to charitable organizations. He is a patient and loving husband and father, but he really struggles in his commitment to Jesus. In fact, let's say that George is sometimes disposed to deny that he believes that Jesus is the Son of God when pressured by skeptics and that this genuinely reflects his somewhat unstable credence in that proposition. Now suppose further that George has a brother, call him Michael. Michael is just like George, only he has a much more stable credence. Let's suppose further that God judges on the basis of one's good character and actions taken together with one's credence in propositions such as "Jesus is the Son of God." Thankfully for Michael, he makes the cut off for the high kingdom. He's credal stability carries him over the cut-off to an eternity of maximal union with God and familial union with his wife and children. Unfortunately for George, his credal states were just not quite stable enough to count as "valiant in the testimony of Jesus," and he comes up short. An eternity in the middle kingdom awaits along with imperfect union with God and familial separation from his wife and children.

In cases like these our proportionality intuitions strongly re-engage, but they re-engage in a way that reveals a different issue of justice. The natural reaction to have is that there is something problematic about individuals who are so relevantly similar receiving vastly different goods. In other words, cases like the one above show that what becomes at issue is a question of the distribution of eternal goods, not the severity of divine punishment. Thus, we shift from a puzzle about *retributive* justice to a puzzle about *distributive* justice.

²¹ (Smith, 2015): 76

²² (Smith, 2015)

²³ (Smith, 2015)

Let's put the puzzle explicitly in Mormon terms and against the backdrop of a distributive conception of justice. Here are our main claims:

1. **Trichotomy:** There are three states in the afterlife, the high, middle, and low kingdoms.
2. **Badness (Mormon):** People in the low kingdom are much worse off than people in the middle kingdom, and people in the middle kingdom are much worse off than people in the high kingdom.
3. **Non-Empty:** All three kingdoms are populated.
4. **Divine Control:** God decides who goes where.
5. **Justice:** God's judgement is just.
6. **Proportionality:** Justice is proportional, in the sense that it "prohibits very unequal distribution of goods to persons who are very similar in relevant respects."
7. **Borderline:** Any application of a just criterion must judge created beings according to a standard that comes in degrees or admits of borderline cases.
8. **Existence:** There are borderline cases.

With this in place, the crucial question that we must confront is whether it is now plausible to endorse **badness**. We think so. There are lots of ways one person might be worse off than another, but one very important sense of "worse off" tracks accessibility to goods. Imagine two individuals, Sarah and Steve who are both content with their life circumstances. Now suppose that Sarah has access to terrific health care, educational institutions, is able to participate in the political institutions in which she lives. Suppose Steve has access to none of these. Steve lives as a peasant in a feudal system. As a result, he only has access to bloodletters when he falls ill, has no real political agency, as well as no access to institutions of higher education. It is natural, despite both of the sincere contentedness reports of Sarah and Steve to judge Steve to be much worse off than Sarah. We might say the same about any pairwise comparison of individuals in different kingdoms of glory. Let Sarah reside in the middle kingdom and Steve reside in the low kingdom. Steve might be very happy to be there. But nevertheless, there is a very real sense in which he is *much* worse off than Sarah. The goods he enjoys stand to Sarah's as the brightness of a distant star stands to the brightness of the full moon on a clear night.²⁴ Sider's principle of badness thus rears its ugly head again and thereby generates a substantive problem that Mormon theology needs to grapple with.

The upshot of the previous reflection is two-fold. The first is that Mormon's can't get out of the grip of Sider's puzzle just by arguing that no afterlife state is retributive. There are other dimensions of justice that must be accommodated, and

²⁴ (Smith, 2015)76:97-98

the puzzle arises from tensions regarding intuitively plausible principles concerning distributive justice (viz. proportionality) and the allotment of divine goods on the standard Mormon framework. The second is that this isn't tied in any particular way to the Mormon account. Any broadly traditional theistic framework that characterizes the states of the afterlife in non-retributive terms can plausibly be brought within the scope of Sider's argument if there are substantive differences in the goods that inhabitants of those states enjoy. In other words, there is nothing distinctively *retributive* about Sider's puzzle. Sider's puzzle is a fully *general* puzzle about justice, not just a puzzle about certain narrow aspects of it. We think that there has been a strong tendency in the literature surrounding Sider's puzzle to take a very narrow view of the scope of this problem. This is natural in part because Sider introduces the puzzle explicitly in retributive terms, but what we hope to have shown is that it is a deeper and much more interesting puzzle than many in the literature have understood it to be. In the next section we work towards a solution.

5. Escapism as a Solution to Sider's Puzzle

Recall from the first section that if we are to solve Sider's puzzle adequately our attention needs to be firmly fixed on squaring badness and proportionality. Remember, it won't do to multiply afterlife states, nor will it do to hope that there won't be any borderline cases. Recall as well that there were two features of badness generating the tension with proportionality: one explicit and one suppressed. The explicit feature of badness involves the intensity of the goods enjoyed by the inhabitants of each afterlife state. The suppressed feature involves the duration of time spent in each afterlife state by the individuals sent there. Each individual finds themselves in the relevant afterlife state *for eternity*. Our aim in this section is to offer a principled way of giving up this suppressed feature. The result will be a conception of the afterlife and judgment that still satisfies the principle of badness but permits rejecting proportionality.

Broadly, we claim that Mormonism can endorse a form of escapism. It is useful then to start with an account of escapism that is fitted for the traditional Christian account of the afterlife and then extend it into the Mormon framework. Buckareff and Plug characterize escapism as the following pair of claims²⁵:

Escapism: (1) Hell exists and might be populated for eternity

(2) If there are any inhabitants of hell, then at every time it is possible for them to accept God's reconciliatory efforts, leave hell, and enter heaven

²⁵ (Buckareff & Plug, 2014) p. 46

They motivate the position in the following way. Most Christians hold that, on this side of judgment anyway, God is open to forgive the penitent much like a parent is open to forgive her child who has wronged her.²⁶ The divine-human relationship is like that between someone who has been unfaithful in a marriage and a wronged party who longs for a reunion with her unfaithful spouse, but is under no obligation to renew the relationship.²⁷ What is special about the case with God is that God is eager to renew the relationship because, “[t]here is an antecedent desire on God’s part to identify and be identified with us, which leads God 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.”²⁸ Since we grant God these attitudes and motivations on this side of judgment, why think things change afterwards?

Buckareff and Plug put it like this. If God longs for reunion with us now, then it would be arbitrary and crucially out of character for God to refuse any opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness only until the time of death. And, if God’s policies, in virtue of his unchanging nature, remain constant towards us, and if we are the object of God’s parental love, then we should take God to be like any other parent, who never ceases to desire to have her alienated children reunited with her. Thus, we should expect that the opportunities for receiving the gift of salvation extend beyond death.²⁹

With this motivation in place, let’s take a closer look at what is meant by “possible” in the characterization of escapism.³⁰ On this view, it is a genuine metaphysical possibility that psychological change can occur in the after-life such that people will positively respond to God’s grace while in hell.³¹ It is important to understand that escapism does not claim that any agents *in fact* make such a decision. Perhaps it is actually the case that despite the open psychological possibility for each inhabitant of hell to accept God’s grace, none do. Escapism takes no stand on this question. The view only asserts that people actually have the ability, and that God makes some attempt post-judgment at reconciliation with the inhabitants of hell whether successful or not.

If we take the escapist view and import it into our present Mormon theological context, we get the following pair of claims:

Escapism: (1) The lower kingdoms (terrestrial and telestial) exist and might be populated for eternity.

²⁶ See e.g., (Lewis, 2001)], (Lucas, 1976), (Barth, 1998), and recently (Kvanvig, 1993) and (Kvanvig, 2013).

²⁷ (Buckareff & Plug, 2005)p. 46–47

²⁸ (Lucas, 1976)p. 84

²⁹ (Buckareff & Plug, 2005)p. 47–48

³⁰ (Buckareff & Plug, 2005)p. 44–45

³¹ (Buckareff & Plug, 2005)p 44

(2) If there are any inhabitants of the lower kingdoms, then at every time it is possible for them to accept God's reconciliatory efforts, leave a lower kingdom, and enter a higher kingdom.

In the next section we will discuss what the Mormon theological underpinnings of such a view could be. But for now, let's see how it interacts with Sider's puzzle. It can clearly endorse **trichotomy, divine control, non-empty, borderline, and existence**. If it can manage to endorse both **badness** and **justice**, then we will have a very conservative solution to Sider's puzzle. So, can escapism deal with the tension between badness and proportionality?

Rejection of the finality of afterlife states falls out immediately from escapism, but on its own it seems insufficient to resolve the puzzle. The puzzle is rightly understood as a puzzle about an initial distribution of divine goods. It does seem somewhat helpful if someone on the wrong side of the borderline can later come to acquire the vastly superior goods enjoyed by those on the other side of the borderline. But what about the initial distribution of goods? Isn't there something problematic (given the violation of proportionality) about the initial distribution? Recall our case of Sarah and Steve. Isn't there something off-putting about depriving Steve of goods like access to medical care, and access to education even for a little while? It seems like making access available in the future is a way of making up for the fact that the distribution is problematic rather than preventing problems from arising. The worry here is that escapism in some sense presupposes the victory of Sider's puzzle. On the escapist view, it seems, God judges unjustly, but he immediately makes up for his mistakes by giving you the opportunity to obtain the withheld goods at some future time and subject to certain conditions. This, however, won't do. We need a solution that attributes to God no mistakes in judgment. Thus, as it stands escapism is incomplete.

What's missing? What do we need to add to escapism to vindicate the justice of divine judgment? The answer is a preferentialist conception of the afterlife.³² On the preferentialist view, the sub-optimal states in the afterlife are provided by God for those who do not wish to be with Him. Such persons are where they prefer to be.³³ This is an idea hinted at by C.S. Lewis in his claim that the doors of hell are locked from the inside, and that the residents of hell are "successful rebels to the end."³⁴ Other preferentialists such as Stephen Davis write, "Having lived their lives apart from God, they will choose—eternally—to go on doing so."³⁵ So, in a Mormon context we can say that in the preferentialist picture, those who inhabit the three kingdoms are where they prefer to be.

³² In fact, Buckareff and Plug, the foremost advocates of escapism argue from a preferentialist view of hell to the truth of escapism.

³³ See (Baker, 2014) for a detailed presentation of preferentialist conceptions of hell.

³⁴ (Lewis, 2009)p. 127

³⁵ (Davis, 2004)p.87

Supposing that this view is correct, how does it help complete the escapist solution? On the preferentialist conception, what's relevant to the divine distribution of goods are your preferences (as say revealed by the plans you adopted, actions you performed, and desires you held). If the facts about distribution along the divine scale in some important respects track differences in preferences, then borderline cases will represent weak preferences for the corresponding state. Someone on the telestial side of the terrestrial/telestial borderline will be so located in virtue of having a weak preference for taking up residence there. Sure, agents near the borderline ultimately have vastly different access to goods, but their diverging preferences reflect desires for different sets of goods. In other words, they have access to the very goods they desire.

With the preferentialist conception of the afterlife in place we can now see how escapism resolves Sider's puzzle. For we can now straightforwardly reject

Proportionality: justice is proportional, in the sense that it "prohibits very unequal distribution of goods to persons who are very similar in relevant respects."

Sure, agents near the borderline will ultimately have vastly different access to goods, but God is justified in the differential treatment given their diverging preferences. What is unjust about not giving someone something that they don't presently want? So, it seems the puzzle is resolved.

However, we must note that this solution is only as stable as the relevant agent's preferences. Suppose it were the case that the agent's preferences shifted after some time in the low kingdom. Suppose it's the case that the agent comes to believe she was wrong in her preferences and instead should have preferred union rather than separation from God. We would have a problem. But since escapism holds that God never fails to try bringing about preference change in the inhabitants of the lower kingdoms and offers the goods of higher kingdoms to all those who will accept, we preserve the justice of divine judgment through accommodation of post-judgment preference change. So, not only does preferentialism complete escapism, but escapism stabilizes preferentialism.

In fact, one might think that sending those with a weak preference for a lower kingdom to a lower kingdom could serve a valuable epistemic role. In giving them what they weakly prefer, God might thereby succeed in bringing about the kind of preference shift needed for the borderline cases to become high-kingdom worthy.

It may also serve a valuable therapeutic role. Take for instance cases involving victims of religious trauma. It is natural for such people to hold resentment towards God as a result of actions taken by those who stand in positions of power in the institutions that bear his name. For God to save that individual is for God to bring that individual back into perfect union with him, but that can't happen so long as one of the parties resents the other. It seems to us that what God can do to help the individual come to see God as good (and thereby desire union with him) rather than an

appropriate object of resentment is to not force that individual into his presence. God, in sending that individual to a lower kingdom may thereby demonstrate his goodness to them (it is a great place after all!) and so set the stage for a rehabilitation of their faith.

In sum, the picture presented here views judgment as crucially in the service of God's purposes rather than as undermining them. For, if it is the case that God desires for everyone to ultimately end up in the celestial kingdom, where they can enjoy full fellowship with him, then he promotes his aims by providing a means whereby non-ideal preferences can be changed. And it's only given the package of preferentialism and escapism that such a picture emerges. Each view in isolation is insufficient.

With the foregoing considerations in place, we can see now how escapism satisfactorily deals with Sider's puzzle. By adopting a preferentialist conception of the three kingdoms, escapism can endorse **badness** and **justice** while rejecting **proportionality**; thus, giving an appropriately satisfying solution to Sider's puzzle. All that remains to be seen is whether there is theological room in Mormonism to take on escapism and a preferentialist conception of the afterlife. This is the topic of the next section.

6. Endorsing the Solution.

We have offered a philosophical solution to the puzzle, from a distinctly Mormon perspective. The solution is philosophically attractive. But, does Mormon theology vindicate the philosophical solution we have offered? In other words, does Mormon scripture and teachings have the theological resources to support the philosophical claims we have made? Yes. In fact, the theological picture that underwrites the philosophical account we've given is, in our minds, one of the more attractive features of the religion. In this section we will briefly sketch the theological picture that we think motivates the philosophical account we've offered, and then we will show how it can explicitly endorse escapism and preferentialism.

Mormonism is a relatively young religion, by comparison. It wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that Joseph Smith claimed to have received visions and revelations that motivated a need to "restore" Christ's church. Because the religion is so young, it hasn't had much time for theological questions to be addressed in any systematic way. But, pinning the theology down is made even more difficult because of the church's reliance on "continuing revelation." As Terryl Givens, one of the most prominent scholars of Mormonism, has said, "the dominant mode is restraint from affirming or rejecting theologizing." He continues, "this makes the unfolding of Mormon thought a difficult process to track."³⁶

³⁶ (Givens, 2014) p. 7

Nevertheless, there are sources that are considered authoritative. The Mormon scriptural canon is the most authoritative. Prophets and apostles are also especially authoritative, and regularly give sermons in worldwide conferences that are hosted twice a year. The proceedings of the conferences are then published and disseminated widely amongst members of the church. There is also a sense in which Joseph Smith, as the founder, has special authority, and the records of his teaching and writing are often referred to for help in scriptural interpretation and theological discussions. So, given these sources, what can be understood as pointing towards escapism and preferentialism?

6.1 Theological Motivations for Escapism

In 1832, Joseph claimed to have received a revelation, that was later referred to as “the vision,” and which is now included in the Doctrine and Covenants as section 76. In this vision, Joseph claimed to have beheld the kingdoms of glory. Already, the vision hinted at escapist, or more broadly universalist, themes. “It was a great trial to many,’ Brigham Young, an early leader in the church, remembered. ‘Some apostatized because God...had a place of salvation, in due time, for all.’ Young himself found the idea challenging to accept: ‘My traditions were such, that when the Vision came first to me, it was directly contrary and opposed to my former education. I said, Wait a little. I did not reject it, but I could not understand it.’ Brigham’s brother Joseph Young also confessed, ‘I could not believe it at first. Why the Lord was going to save everybody.’”³⁷ Despite this, it wasn’t until 1836 that a radical new doctrine under the name “salvation for the dead” was revealed.

Joseph Smith had been concerned about the fate of his brother Alvin who had died before receiving baptism. Baptism is essential for salvation, so says Jesus.³⁸ In an 1836 vision, Joseph claimed to have been informed that his brother would be in the celestial kingdom post-judgment. How was this possible? Joseph Smith claimed the answer came in an 1841 revelation. In recording the revelation, Joseph Smith is exuberant: “Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the king Immanuel, who hath ordain’d, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prisons; for the prisoner shall go free.”³⁹ The upshot of all of these revelations was that salvation would be available to all, whether they had accepted Christ, repented, and been baptized in this life or not. It was at this point that the radical new doctrine of “baptism for the dead” was introduced. If baptism was essential for salvation, then, said the revelation, every person who lived on the earth would be given the chance to receive it, whether in the flesh or by proxy. This is good theological support for one of the core features of escapism. Namely, that offers of divine grace extend beyond death or are given even after death.

³⁷ Quoted in (McBride, 2017).

³⁸ (Robert Carroll, 2008) John 3:5.

³⁹ (Smith, 2015)128:22.

There is also reason to think that the Mormon afterlife is profoundly dynamic. As Hyrum Smith, Joseph Smith's brother and assistant president of the church at the time said, "Those of the [middle] glory either advance to the [high] or recede to the [low], or else the moon would not be a type, because it waxes and wanes."⁴⁰ Additionally, Orson F. Whitney, an apostle early in Mormonism, said:

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that . . . [t]hough some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel... Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God.⁴¹

There is contemporary support for this sort of thinking as well. James Faust, a recent member of the first-presidency (sitting in the third highest position of the church), said of Orson's claim, "I believe and accept [that] comforting statement."⁴² Robert Hales and Boyd Packer, both late apostles, also affirmed this teaching.⁴³ This doctrine was summarized nicely by James Talmage, perhaps the foremost theological mind of the early 20th century in Mormonism, "Advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom, will be provided for. Eternity is progressive."⁴⁴

Recall that the second core feature of escapism was the claim that: "If there are any inhabitants of the lower kingdoms, then at every time it is possible for them to accept God's reconciliatory efforts, leave a lower kingdom, and enter a higher kingdom." All the above remarks stand in direct support of this claim. Thus, it has become familiar in Mormon circles to call this the doctrine of eternal progression. So, it appears that escapism is well motivated by Mormon theology.

⁴⁰ (Richards, 1943), p. 24 ("Scriptural Items"; a small booklet of the statements made by Joseph and Hyrum Smith kept by Franklin D. Richards.). The provenance of this quote is difficult to verify. We keep it in the paper for two reasons. First, because it is reflective of the universalist attitudes and theology of the time. Second, because it raises the question of whether accessibility between the kingdoms is symmetric. On Hyrum Smith's view, as reported in the quote, it seems possible for one's preferences to become less ideal and thereby justify a regression to a lower kingdom. This is an issue that hasn't been taken up in Mormon theology, although we think there is reason to believe that movement between kingdoms is asymmetric and progressive. For a discussion of this issue in the Classical Christian theological context see (Buckareff & Plug, 2014).

⁴¹ (Whitney, 1929), 110.

⁴² (Faust, 2003) James E. Faust, "Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered" April 2003 General Conference.

⁴³ (Hales, 2004). (Packer, 1995), p. 18.

⁴⁴ (Talmage, 1988).

6.2 Theological Motivations for Preferentialism

The core feature of preferentialism is that God provides states in the afterlife for those who would prefer not to be in full communion with him. We presented C.S. Lewis as a figurehead for preferentialism, and Mormons have favored the preferentialism of C. S. Lewis. For example, we find people saying in church publications, "As C. S. Lewis wisely observed, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, '*Thy* will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened" (The Great Divorce [1946], 72)."⁴⁵ This is an outright endorsement of Lewis's preferentialism: "All that are in Hell, choose it," but it is also an endorsement of escapism, "To those who knock it is opened."

Further support for this preferentialist reading comes from a revelation of Smith's which is largely about the kingdoms of glory. In this revelation, after discussing the celestial kingdom, Smith reports God as saying, "For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift? Behold, he rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither rejoices in him who is the giver of the gift."⁴⁶ The natural thought here is that it would not benefit an individual to be in the celestial kingdom when they would prefer a lower kingdom. They will not "receive" the gift. And further, they will not be in the right relationship with the giver (God) to rejoice over the gift or the giver. So, it appears that both core features of preferentialism are well motivated from the perspective of Mormon theology.

Of course, while we take escapism and preferentialism to be well motivated, there is some controversy here. On the Mormon picture, neither escapism nor preferentialism has gone uncontested. One Mormon apostle went so far as to call a nearby view a "deadly heresy."⁴⁷ The view he claimed to be a heresy was this, that "the doctrine of salvation for the dead offers men a second chance for salvation." Of course, on the account we've offered, it's not as if there is a second chance for salvation so much as a denial that there are "chances" at all. On the account we've offered, there are no time limits or borders to salvation. Rather, God is engaged in a continuous process of salvation. As the second Mormon prophet Brigham Young said, "He is compassionate to all the works of His hands, the plan of His redemption, and salvation, and mercy, is stretched out over all; and His plans are to gather up, and bring together, and save all the inhabitants of the earth . . . *Is not this Universalism? It borders very close upon it.*"⁴⁸ Insofar as there are "chances", then we'd argue that the first chance is always available.

⁴⁵ (Marsh, n.d.).

⁴⁶ (Smith, 2015) 88:33

⁴⁷ (McConkie, 1980).

⁴⁸ (Young, 1856) 3:92

So, while there is some controversy amongst Mormons about how to understand the doctrine of eternal progression (i.e., escapism conjoined with preferentialism), we believe that there is firm scriptural, historical, and overall theological ground to stand on.⁴⁹ The view we have offered is genuinely Mormon.

7. Conclusion

Sider's puzzle challenges divine justice. It challenges how God can still be just while punishing some and rewarding relevantly similar persons. By considering one *prima facie* attempt to dissolve the puzzle from the Mormon perspective, we've shown that we need not think of Sider's puzzle in terms of retribution at all. Plausibly, the puzzle rearises as a puzzle concerning divine distribution of goods.

Given the new puzzle of divine distributive justice and vagueness, we show that Mormonism can offer a solution by appealing to two plausible theses. The first is escapism, which holds that while there may be people in each suboptimal state of the afterlife, it is always possible for them to "progress" to a better state. The second is preferentialism, which holds that God has prepared the sub-optimal states for those who would prefer *not* to be in the optimal state with God. Both of these claims, we argue, are philosophically and theologically well motivated within a Mormon framework. Thus, we conclude, Sider's problem of hell and vagueness is no problem for the Mormons.

But we think that interestingly it's not just no problem for the Mormons. We can see in the account sketched here a general strategy for resisting Sider's puzzle, a strategy that seems available also to the traditional Christian. If they can muster the theological resources to endorse both preferentialism and escapism, then they too can escape Sider's puzzle. We hope also to have shown the fruitfulness of a philosophical and theological dialogue across the divide of Christian Orthodoxy. By engaging with philosophical and theological issues confronted by Orthodox Christians, Mormons may discover reasons to reflect critically on features of their own theological landscape previously ignored. And by engaging with philosophical and theological issues confronted by Mormons, Orthodox Christians just might find some helpful tools for addressing their own philosophical troubles.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ It's also worth noting that there has been a standing puzzle in Mormon theology regarding how exactly one ought to characterize *eternal progression*. One upshot of our work is that escapism taken together with preferentialism falls out naturally as a characterization of what the view consists in.

⁵⁰ Thanks to Aaron Cotnoir, Jonathan Rutledge, Daniel Bonevac, Robert Koons, Casey Jones, and an audience at St. Louis University for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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