

The Puzzle of Prayers of Thanksgiving and Praise

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Abstract. The fact that God is worthy of thanks and praise for his good acts underwrites the rationality of our practice of offering prayers of thanksgiving and praise for those acts. Here, however, a puzzle arises: If God is essentially unsurpassably good, then he is unable to do something worse in place of his good acts, and if God is unable to do something worse in place of them, then he is not worthy of thanks and praise for performing them. So, if God is essentially unsurpassably good, then he is not worthy of praise and thanks for his good acts. In this paper, I argue that, given mundane incompatibilist assumptions, there is no solution to this puzzle. Thus, on those assumptions, our practice of offering prayers of thanksgiving and praise is rational only if God is not essentially unsurpassably good.

Celebrant	The Lord be with you.
People	And also with you.
Celebrant	Lift up your hearts.
People	We lift them to the Lord.
Celebrant	Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
People	It is right to give him thanks and praise.
Celebrant	It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. ¹

Thank you God for me, my mom and dad, and William, and my friends, and for this food, and my toys, and for chess, and for...everything else. You are very nice and you do a great job. Amen.²

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us.³

One of the things we do when we pray is to thank and praise God for what he has done. By so doing, we demonstrate our gratitude to him for his gifts and we express our wonder and admiration for the great things he has done. It is right to give God thanks and praise. Chiefly it is right in that it is a fitting response on our part; if we have no tendency whatsoever to thank and praise God for what he has done, we are broken. Indeed, it has been suggested that if we but for a moment forget what God has done for us, if our whole comportment and whole activity have not their root in gratitude, we are out of kilter.⁴ We might also think that it is right to thank and praise God in that it is wrong not to do so. This seems clearer in the case of thanks than praise.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, The Holy Eucharist, Rite Two, Eucharistic Prayer A.

² Peter Edward Howard-Snyder, age 6, prayer before dinner, October 26, 2006.

³ *The Book of Common Prayer*, General Thanksgivings.

⁴ Baillie 1962, 237.

Just as children owe their parents a debt of gratitude for the benefits that they have bestowed on them, so we owe God a debt of gratitude for the benefits he has bestowed on us. It would be wrong not to demonstrate our gratitude. So then: it is right to give God thanks and praise for what he has done.

On occasion it is right to thank and praise others for what they've done even though they are not worthy of it.⁵ I take it, however, that it is right to thank and praise God for what he has done because he is worthy of our thanks and praise. Indeed, other reasons for thanks and praise either don't apply to God (e.g. his feelings would be hurt if we didn't thank and praise him) or, if they do apply to him, they apply at least in part because he is worthy of our thanks and praise (e.g. thanking and praising promotes and preserves our relationship with him). So: it is right to thank and praise God for what he has done because he is worthy of our thanks and praise.

Here a puzzle begins to emerge. For how is it possible for God—an essentially unsurpassably good person⁶—to be worthy of our thanks and praise for his good actions? After all, one might think at first blush that if God is essentially unsurpassably good, he is unable to do something worse in place of what he does, in which case he is not worthy of our thanks and praise for doing it. We have here a proposition—that it is impossible for God to be essentially unsurpassably good and yet worthy of thanks and praise for what he does, the *Incompatibility Claim*, let's call it—and we have a formally valid argument for it, the *Incompatibility Argument* (add the relevant modal operators here and throughout):

1. If God is essentially unsurpassably good, then he is unable to do something worse in place of what he does.
2. If God is unable to do something worse in place of what he does, then he is not worthy of thanks or praise for what he does.

Why should we think these premises are true?

Here's an argument for the contrapositive of premise 1:

- A. If God is able to do something worse in place of what he does, then it is possible for there to be a person who is morally better than God.
- B. If it is possible for there to be a person who is morally better than God, then God is not essentially unsurpassably good.

B is analytically true, but what about A? One might argue for it as follows:

- A1. If God is able to do something worse in place of what he does, then it is possible for him to do something worse in place of what he does.
- A2. If it is possible for God do something worse in place of what he does, then it is possible for there to be a person whose degree of moral goodness is such that he is not prepared to settle for a state of affairs that God is prepared to settle for.

⁵ In Fitzgerald 1998, we find six reasons to express gratitude to our benefactors, only one of which is that they are worthy of it. The other five are: if we don't express gratitude they will be hurt, if we express gratitude they will be pleased, and expressing gratitude promotes communal bonds, personal virtue, and friendship.

⁶ To say that an individual is *essentially* F, for some property F, is just to say that it is not metaphysically possible for that individual to exist without having F. To say that an individual is *contingently* F, for some property F, is just to say that it is metaphysically possible for that individual to exist without having F. In what follows, the traditional theistic God is my focus, whose other essential properties include unsurpassable power and cognitive excellence.

- A3. If it is possible for there to be a person whose degree of moral goodness is such that he is not prepared to settle for a state of affairs that God is prepared to settle for, then it is possible for there to be a person who is morally better than God.⁷

As for premise 2, we have this argument for its contrapositive:

- C. If God is worthy of thanks and praise for what he does, then it redounds to his credit that he does it.
D. If it redounds to God's credit that he does something, then he is able to do something worse in place of it.

C is analytically true, but why affirm D? Well, because if D is false, then one of two options is possible—but neither option is possible. Argument: Suppose D is false. Then either

- (I) An act of God's redounds to his credit, he was unable to do something worse, but he was *able* to do something better instead,

or

- (II) An act of God's redounds to his credit, he was unable to do something worse, and he was *unable* to do something better instead

are possible. But (i) is impossible. If God's act is such that he was unable to do something worse but he was able to do something better, then his act is the worst he was able to do and he knows he was able to do better. But if one does the worst one is able to do when one knows one was able to do better, it does not redound to one's credit that one did it. There's no credit to be had in maximal underachievement, at least not when there's something better to be done. Likewise, (ii) is impossible. One might think this is so because, necessarily, for each act God performs, there is a better act that he was able to perform in its place. Alternatively, consider the following dilemma: either for each act God performs there was a better act that he was able to perform in its place, or there was not. If there was, (ii) is impossible. If there was not, then, since on (ii) God was unable to do worse, his act was either the best act he was able to perform or tied for best. If his act was the best, then it does not redound to his credit since he was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed his performing that act. If his act was tied for best, then it

⁷ William Rowe, in his defense of the principle that if an omniscient person creates a world when it could have created a better world, then it is possible for there to be a person morally better than it, writes:

[I]f an omniscient being creates a world when it could have created a better world, then that being has done something less good than it could do (create a better world). But any being that knowingly does something (all things considered) less good than it could do falls short of being the best possible being. (Rowe 2004, 89; cp. 100).

More frequently, Rowe argues in a way indistinguishable from this: If an omniscient person creates a world when it could have created a better world, then it would be possible for there to be another person who creates a world but whose degree of moral goodness was such that it judged as unacceptable for creation what the first judged as acceptable. The second person was not prepared to settle for a world that the first was prepared to settle for. In that case, the second person's degree of moral goodness would be greater than the first person's degree of moral goodness. But then it would be possible for there to be a person morally better than the first. See Rowe 1993, 1994, 2002, and 2004, 92-98, and repeatedly thereafter; cp. Quinn 1982 and Grover 1988.

does not redound to his credit since he was never able to do anything about the factors that entailed his being in circumstances where he'd have to choose between equally good acts.

The foregoing arguments would benefit from development. In what follows, I will try to do that while responding to several objections. But first, some preliminary remarks are in order.

Note that I run God's being worthy of thanks and his being worthy of praise in the same harness. I do that because God's being *worthy* of praise for what he does and God's being *worthy* of thanks for what he does both lexically depend on the same fact: that it *redounds to God's credit* that he does what he does. It is this fact that is in tension with the doctrine of God's essential unsurpassable goodness. Some people will disagree. They will say: although one might see some tension between God's being worthy of thanks for what he does and his essential unsurpassable goodness, there isn't a whiff of tension between his being worthy of praise for what he does and his essential unsurpassable goodness. Or, they will say: although one might see some tension between God's being worthy of praise for what he does and his essential unsurpassable goodness, there isn't a whiff of tension between his being worthy of thanks for what he does and his essential unsurpassable goodness.⁸ I think these folks are mistaken, but I am willing to accommodate them. If you belong to one of these two groups, simply read the arguments above and the discussion to follow while running your favored horse. If, however, you think that God is both worthy of praise and thanks for what he does even though it does not redound to his credit that he does what he does, then I have no way to accommodate you.⁹

Note that the schema "S is able to do A" and its syntactic variants appear above. I do not know of any definition in simpler words. Still, it might help to locate the concept I mean to express if I briefly distinguish it from other concepts that are expressed with the same words. For starters, I do not mean to express the concepts of moral or legal permissibility, nor those of logical, metaphysical, physical, or epistemic possibility. Nor do I mean to express the concept of power or strength or the concept of a general skill. A comatose woman might well have the power or strength and skill to climb Mount Shuksan even though she is unable to do so. Moreover, I do not mean to express the concepts of opportunity or practical know-how. A man who is pathologically averse to snakes might well have the power to handle one, as well as the skill (he's a former snake handler) and the opportunity (he's at the Washington Serpentarium); and he might have practical knowledge of his situation—of his power, skill, and opportunity, and how they might come together for the performance of such an act. Still, he is unable to do it. Strength, skill, opportunity, and know-how are neither individually nor jointly sufficient for ability, even if each is necessary. This is the concept expressed in our puzzle and in what follows, the concept of what this man lacks when we say, correctly, "He has the requisite strength, skill, opportunity, and know-how; nevertheless, he is unable to handle a snake".¹⁰

Determinism is the thesis that the past and the laws of nature together entail a unique future. *The ability thesis* is the thesis that we sometimes simultaneously have both of the following abilities: the ability to perform an act and the ability to refrain from performing that act. *The credit thesis* is the thesis that sometimes we perform an act and it redounds to our credit that we performed it. In what follows, I presuppose that determinism is *incompatible* with both

⁸ Bergmann and Cover 2006, 404, n1, instantiate the first type. Frances Howard-Snyder instantiates the second.

⁹ Neal Tognazzini notes another reason to think they hang together: praise and blame are often connected with P.F. Strawson's "reactive attitudes", and the second-personal positive reactive attitude is often taken to be *gratitude*. So, on this view, one way to be worthy of praise is to be worthy of gratitude.

¹⁰ If you think this discussion is too brief, see van Inwagen 1983, 8-13, and Morris 1991, 69-73. I do not commend everything said on those pages, however. Note that "can," "control," and their cognates do not appear in this paper. I get by with "able," following the advice of van Inwagen forthcoming.

the ability thesis and the credit thesis. I also presuppose that we are not able to alter the distant past and the laws of nature, nor ever did we have that ability nor ever will we have it.

The discussion to follow will in no small part be about whether God was able to do better or worse than he did. Note that I am speaking of God's actions, whether he was able to perform a better or worse act in place of the one that he in fact performed. Two points here. First, sometimes people conflate the goodness of God's acts with the goodness of the states of affairs that result from them or with the goodness of God himself. To be sure, there are important relations between these things. Even so, we must not conflate them or suppose, without argument, that a judgment about one entails the same judgment about the other. Second, to say that God was able to perform a better act in place of the one that he performed does not imply that the act he performed was morally impermissible. It is possible for one act to be better than another even though both are morally permissible.

Finally, readers will have noticed that from the outset I have presupposed that they pray: "One of the things *we* do when *we* pray...." I hope I don't put off anyone by writing in the first-person plural. Like many people, I pray, and many of us who pray seek to understand the rationality of our behavior by examining its implications. Of course, I might adopt the third-person: "One of the things *people* do when *they* pray...." But I take it that the day is long gone when we needed to distance ourselves from our interest in what we write about by writing in the disinterested third-person. I invite those who do not pray to engage my reflections by asking what implications about the nature of God they would be committed to *if* they were to pray.

I now turn to the objections.

1 The First Objection

Even if it is metaphysically impossible for God to do something worse in place of what he does, he was able to do so. That is, A1 is false, as are A and premise 1. To begin to see why, let's distinguish being morally incapable of performing a bad act from being unable to perform it.

Let's say that a person is *morally incapable*, or *incapable* for short, of performing a bad act just when doing such a thing would be contrary to a firmly entrenched character that she has, that the desire or inclination to perform that action is not within the range of her current desires and inclinations, or that a serious intention to engage in the action is prohibited by a stable moral stance characteristic of her. This is a very different matter from anything having to do with strength, skill, opportunity, or practical knowledge. Now consider Jones, a healthy middle-aged former Special Forces operative. Suppose that a young boy with a precociously obnoxious personality and a proclivity to mischief lives next door to Jones. He bothers Jones daily in extremely irritating ways. A neighbor who witnesses this regular harassment comments to a mutual friend, 'If I were Jones, I'd throttle the kid. Why doesn't he just catch him, wrap his hands around that loud, whiny windpipe, and give it a good long squeeze?' The friend might reply, 'It's not possible for Jones to do anything like that.' The friend need not be attributing to Jones any lack of power, skill, opportunity, or practical knowledge. In fact, he's probably not. It's just that he is incapable of doing it. Despite his strength, skill, opportunity, and know-how, Jones is a big softy, as gentle as a lamb, so much so that hurting the boy is prevented by his character. But that doesn't mean that he is *unable* to hurt him. Hardly!

Now, just as Jones has the ability to throttle the kid even though he's *incapable* of doing it, so God has the ability to do something worse than he does even though it is *impossible* that he do it. To be sure, incapacity is not impossibility. However, the difference between God and Jones on this score is merely a matter of degree. Jones's firmly entrenched character prevents him from harming the boy. There is no possible world in which he has *exactly* that character, entrenched in *exactly* that way, and he hurts the boy in these circumstances. Nevertheless, he is able to hurt him. But in that case, it doesn't matter for what he is able to do if those traits were not just contingently firmly entrenched but necessarily firmly entrenched. Thus, it does not matter in God's case. Even if God's essential unsurpassable goodness makes it impossible for him to do something worse instead of what he does, he is able to do worse. Ability does not imply possibility.¹¹ (Here ends the objection.)

What should we make of this objection?

It seems to me to be confused. According to the analogy, Jones was able to strangle the kid even though his character ruled out the possibility of his doing so in the circumstances. But that isn't correct. Consider a different case. Suppose Jones's character does not prevent him but steel cords do. In that case, is Jones able to strangle the boy? I think not. While he is bound by steel cords, the ability is eradicated. But there is no relevant difference between cords of steel that bind Jones's body to render him unable to hurt the boy and cords of character that bind his will to the same end. Both render him unable. To suppose otherwise is to conflate the ability to perform an act and the strength needed to perform it.

What goes for Jones goes for God. Suppose, as the view in question maintains, that God's essential unsurpassable goodness makes it impossible that he do something worse in place of what he does. In that case, just as Jones's firmly entrenched gentleness renders him unable to harm the boy, so God's essential unsurpassable goodness renders him unable to do something worse in place of what he does. Moreover, in that case, just as Jones has the strength to harm the boy despite the fact that his firmly entrenched gentleness renders him unable to do so, so it is that God has the strength to do something worse in place of what he does despite the fact that his essential unsurpassable goodness renders him unable to do so.¹²

2 The Second Objection

The argument for premise 2 appeals to principle D which is defended with an argument according to which it is impossible that

- (ii) An act of God's redounds to his credit, he was unable to do something worse, and he was *unable* to do something better instead.

¹¹ The First Objection is inspired by Morris 1991, 71-72; in fact, it contains several sentences quoted verbatim but for minor tweaking. I do not attribute it to him, however; nor should anyone else.

¹² In thinking about the First Objection, I was helped by Senor 2006, 428-29. Cp. the First Objection with Talbott 1988, 22: "[God] has the power to perform malicious and cruel acts.... He has this power even though it is logically impossible that he would want to exercise it". By "power" here Talbott means what I mean by "ability," I think. Note that his example of the man who loves his wife so dearly that it is psychologically impossible for him to torture her, even though he is (allegedly) able to do so (17-18), is just our Special Forces operative in the relevant respect. Note also how Talbott flip-flops between causal power or strength, on the one hand, and ability, on the other hand, in his discussion of the three cases on pages 10-11.

But (ii) *is* possible. Indeed, even if the only act that God is able to perform is the uniquely best act he is able to perform, it redounds to his credit that he does it, despite the fact that he was unable to do something else in its place.

To see how this is possible, suppose that

1. In circumstances C, A is the single best action for God to do.

Now, given God's nature, and contrary to Adams 1972, it follows that

2. In C, God knows that A is the best action, wants (all things considered) to do A, and has the strength to do A.

But it is a necessary truth that

3. If in C, God knows that A is the best action, wants (all things considered) to do A, and has the strength to do A, then God does A in C.

Thus, given (1), it follows that, in C, God does A; indeed, it follows that, in C, he *must* do A. His nature *entails* it. Therefore, in C, he is unable to do anything else in place of A. Nevertheless, his doing A redounds to his credit.

Perhaps you will agree with me. Perhaps you think I have in mind a case in which God was able to do something about whether he was in C, in which case you might think his doing A redounds to his credit even if his nature entails that he do A in C. If that's what you're thinking, then you do *not* have in mind the case I have in mind. I have in mind a case in which *God was never able to do anything about whether he was in C*. Even in that case, I say, his doing A redounds to his credit, despite the fact that he was unable to do something else in its place.

To begin to see how this is possible, we might lean on the insight of some of our compatibilist friends, namely those who hold that it is possible for an action to redound to one's credit even though antecedent causal conditions sufficient for its performance exist. Of course, not just any antecedent causal conditions are so compatible—they have to be the right ones, arising in the right way. The right ones, they tell us, are a person's beliefs and desires, and the right way is the customary way in which people come to have beliefs and desires, not through drugs or hypnosis or nefarious neurosurgeons manipulating their brains. They then defend the claim that an action caused by a person's beliefs and desires arising in the customary way redounds to that person's credit by emphasizing that the beliefs and desires are the person's *own*, that they are internal to him or her. Many of us are unpersuaded by this account. We note that a person's beliefs and desires have antecedent causes stretching back to before the person ever existed if determinism is true. The relevant causal conditions are thus not really internal to the person in the right way. The insight, to repeat, of these compatibilists is that the right antecedent causal conditions, internal to a person in the right way, are compatible with it redounding to his or her credit to perform a certain action. They are mistaken, however, in thinking our beliefs and desires, formed in the customary fashion in a deterministic world, are internal in the right way.

What would the right antecedent causal conditions, internal to a person in the right way, be like? It would be exactly like the antecedent causal conditions present in God's case envisioned above. Even if in some circumstances C, God's knowing that A is the best action, his wanting to do A, and his having the strength to do A is a logically sufficient condition of his doing A in C, and even if he was never able to do anything about being in C, it is nevertheless in virtue of *his own nature* that he knows that A is the best action, wants to do A, and has the strength to do A. There is no long chain stretching back to things separate from him that give him this particular constellation of knowledge, desire, and strength; it is due to his *own* knowledge and goodness and strength. Thus, the causal story is this: God's nature causes him, in C, to have this particular constellation of knowledge, desire, and strength which, in turn, causes him to do A. The ultimate cause of God's doing A in C is God's nature. I see no reason not to say that, in that case, it redounds to God's credit when he does A in C—even though he was unable to do anything else in place of A and even though he was never able to do anything about being in C. (Here ends the objection.)¹³

What should we make of this line of thought?

Note that, according to it, what's wrong with our compatibilists' contention that it is possible for a human person's act to redound to her credit despite being causally determined by the distant past and the laws of nature is that the relevant antecedent causal conditions are not internal to her in the right way. But that's not what's wrong with their contention at all. What's wrong is that *she was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed her act*. That's why her act does not redound to her credit. The deterministic push and shove of the distant past and the causal laws merely provide the occasion for what robs her of credit: her never ever having been able to do anything about those factors that entailed her act.

Now recall the position before us: even though God's nature causes him to perform the uniquely best act A that he is able to perform in circumstances C, his performing A in C redounds to his credit because it is the causal upshot of his own nature, which is internal to him in the right way. But, in light of what's *really* wrong with our compatibilists' contention, we must ask: was there ever a time when God was able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed his doing A in C? Was there ever a time when God was able to alter his nature or do something about being in C? No.¹⁴ So the solution before us fails to account for why God's doing A redounds to his credit.

3 The Third Objection

Let's take a look at the issues from a slightly different angle. Suppose that, as in the second objection, God must do A in C, given his nature. Furthermore, suppose that, as in the second objection, God was never able to do anything about being in C. I say that, nevertheless, God's doing A redounds to his credit. The proponent of the Incompatibility Argument disagrees. According to her, an act redounds to a person's credit only if she

¹³ The objection here is inspired by several paragraphs of Wierenga 2002, 433-34; in fact, it contains several sentences quoted verbatim but for minor tweaking. I do not attribute it to him, however; nor should anyone else.

¹⁴ Not even the theistic activist, according to whom God creates those properties in which his nature consists and eternally and necessarily causes himself to exemplify them, thinks that God was able to make himself have a different nature. See Morris 1987, 170-71: causing something does not imply being able to alter or change it.

was able to refrain from what she did in C or she was able to do something about being in C. I disagree. A little reflection on the reasons for this condition will help us understand why God's failing to satisfy it is compatible with his good acts redounding to his credit.

There are three kinds of cases that primarily motivate it. They are: (a) the problem of past causally sufficient conditions for the action that predate the existence of the actor, (b) concerns about manipulation by other agents, and (c) worries about internal compulsions.

Regarding (a): If events that occurred billions of years before I was born, together with the laws of nature that were in place then, set in motion a sequence of events that are causally sufficient for my performing a good act A, it seems far-fetched that, nevertheless, it redounds to my credit that I did A. Why? Because I did not exist when the matter of my doing A was causally settled. Notice, however, that there are no conditions or events spatially or temporally prior to God's existence which causally determine God's actions. Yes, God was unable to refrain from performing A in C; yes, he was never able to do anything about being in C. But there is no set of past series of events and causal laws that is responsible for this.

Regarding (b): If my performing a good action is the result of my being manipulated by a nefarious neurosurgeon, devious hypnotist, or controlling creator, then the ultimate cause of my action is the intentional state of the agent who programmed me. My action does not redound to my credit because another agent is its ultimate source. Needless to say, this credit-compromising condition isn't relevant to the volitions and actions of the omnipotent Source of Being.

Regarding (c): If my performing a good action is the result of a cognitive malfunction (e.g. a serendipitous brain lesion), then it is the result of non-rational internal forces. My action does not redound to my credit because it is a result of cognitive dysfunction, despite its fortunate outcome. Since God is perfectly rational and his volitions and actions are produced by his recognition of the best course of action and his desire to do the best, God's good actions are not the result of analogues of human cognitive malfunction brought on by serendipitous psychological disorder.

So the three primary motivations for insisting that an act of ours redounds to our credit only if we were able to refrain from what we did or we were able to do something about being in the circumstances we are in are simply out of place where God is concerned.

Let's go further. Let's say that one has effective choice over A if and only if one is able to do A *if one so wills* and able to refrain from doing A *if one wills*. While this isn't sufficient for doing A to redound to one's credit, it is necessary (otherwise, doing A won't reflect one's volitions). Now, even if God's doing A in C is necessary given God's nature, and even if God never was able to do anything about being in C, God's doing A still satisfies these three conditions:

- (i) God has effective choice over doing A.
- (ii) Neither God's volition to A nor God's doing A itself is the result of an antecedent causal condition that predates God's existence.
- (iii) God's doing A is not the result of the intentional state of another agent or a non-rational internal force.

But in that case, why should God's inability to refrain from A in C and his never having been able to do anything about being in C imply that his doing A does not redound to his credit? For what do these conditions come to here other than God's inability to act against what he has the best reason to do? Do we really want to say it would redound to God's credit in this context only if he were able to act against what he sees as the clearly best thing to do, the thing that he has every reason to do and no good reason not to do? That is, that an act of God redounds to his credit only if it is possible for him to be irrational?" (Here ends the objection.)¹⁵

What should we make of these words?

The basic claim is that the three cases that motivate the condition in question do not apply to God. I agree that they do not apply to God. However—and this is crucial—we need to ask what it is about these cases in virtue of which our acts do not redound to our credit. Why is it that an act of mine does not redound to my credit if it is a result of antecedent causal conditions that predate my existence, or if another agent is its ultimate source, or if it is the result of a serendipitous psychological disorder? The reason is this: in each case, *I never was able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed my act*. I never was able to do anything about events that occurred billions of years before I was born, or the laws of nature that are in place. I never was able to do anything about the neurosurgeon's implanting the device in my head or the serendipitous lesion growing in my brain. If we modify the cases so that I had hired a neurosurgeon or taken drugs, with the aim of producing conditions that would entail my act, and if I had been able to do something about the hiring and the taking, the conviction that my good acts do not redound to my credit evaporates.

So there is a common explanation for why our acts do not redound to our credit in the three cases: we were never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed those acts.

This explanation permits cases that motivate the condition in question but which, unlike the three cases above, are *not* out of place where God is concerned. Consider a person very much like a human being except for three things: (i) she comes into existence purely by chance and without any cause whatever; (ii) her nature entails that she will perform whatever act she sees to be uniquely best, and (iii) she is in circumstances C where she sees that act A is uniquely best and she never was able to do anything about being in C. She performs A. Let's call her *Bonnie Chance*, or *Bonnie* for short. In Bonnie's case, no set of past series of events and causal laws entails that she does A in C, no other agent is the ultimate source of her doing it, and her doing it is not the result of malfunction. Nevertheless, her doing A in C does *not* redound to her credit. Why? For the same reason that *our* acts do not redound to our credit in the three cases above: she was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed her doing A in C.¹⁶

However, even if we reject Bonnie, the main point remains: the common explanation for the three cases applies directly to God. If, as Objection 3 has it, God's doing A redounds to his credit despite the fact that, due to his nature he is unable to refrain from doing A in C, and he was never able to do anything about being in C, then he was never able to do anything about any

¹⁵ The Third Objection is inspired by several paragraphs in Senor 2007, 182-84; in fact, it contains several sentences quoted verbatim but for minor tweaking. I do not attribute it to him, however; nor should anyone else.

¹⁶ This is Wes Morriston's case, altered for my purposes; Morriston 2006, 95ff. Even though Bonnie is impossible, it is non-trivially true that if she were to exist, it would not redound to her credit that she did A. I see no relevant intelligible dissimilarity between God and Bonnie.

of the factors that entail his doing A. Thus, that in virtue of which the three cases motivate the condition in question applies to God after all, contrary to the objection.

But what about the claim at the end of the objection, namely that if it redounds to God's credit that he does A in C only if he was able to refrain from doing A in C or he was able to do something about being in C, then it is possible for God to perform an act that redounds to his credit only if it is possible for him to act irrationally? This implication seems implausible in the extreme, one might think.

Here we need to note two things. First, the claim in question—that is, the complex conditional in the last paragraph—is false. What follows from the fact that it redounds to God's credit that he does A in C only if he was able to refrain from doing A in C or he was able to do something about being in C, is that it is possible for God to perform an act that redounds to his credit only if it is possible for him to act irrationally *or his unsurpassable goodness is contingent*. Second, suppose we stipulate that God, come what may, is essentially unsurpassably good. In that case, the claim in question is true. But, in that case, what's the objection? Something has to give in God's nature in order to provide him with the ability to refrain from doing A in C or the past ability to have done something about being in C in the first place. Otherwise his good acts won't redound to his credit. Thus, if we insist that it is not his essential unsurpassable goodness that takes the hit, then what's left to target but his essential unsurpassable cognitive excellence? If, by stipulation, that's all that we are left with, it does not seem implausible at all that it is possible for God to perform an act that redounds to his credit only if it is possible for him to act irrationally. What's the alternative? Saying that his good acts redound to his credit even though he was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed those acts? That way lies *madness* (read: compatibilism).

4 The Fourth Objection

Imagine someone putting forward the Second Objection with this twist at the end:
...Thus, the causal story is this: God's nature causes him, in C, to have this particular constellation of knowledge, desire, and strength...[and now comes the twist]...but neither his nature nor that constellation cause him to do A in C. The cause of God's doing A is *God*, the agent. God is the *agent-cause* of A, or a volition to A, or some other more suitable effect of an agent-cause. But whatever the effect, God agent-causes it and there is no possible world in which he doesn't agent-cause it in C. I see no reason not to say that, in that case, it redounds to God's credit when he agent-causes A—even though he was unable to agent-cause anything else in its place and even though he was never able to do anything about being in C.

To develop this objection, consider the following account of agent-causation:

- AC. X is the agent-cause of event E if and only if each of the following three conditions is satisfied: (1) x is a substance that had the causal power or strength to bring about E, (2) x exerted its power to bring about E, (3) nothing distinct from x (not even x's nature or beliefs or desires or any other psychological state or activity) caused x to exert its causal power to bring about E.

Notice that, unlike standard libertarian agency theories, AC does not rule out the possibility that *x* is the agent-cause of *E* even if *x* is unable to do otherwise than agent-cause *E*.¹⁷ Moreover, notice that AC does not rule out the possibility that *x* is the agent-cause of *E* even though *x*'s character or nature *entails* *E*. Furthermore, AC sheds light on why it redounds to God's credit that he does *A* when his nature entails that he do it. It is because his nature entails his doing *A* without causing him to do *A*; he agent-causes his doing *A*, and *nothing distinct from him causes him to agent-cause it*, not even his own nature. The causal buck stops with God, the agent. Thus, provided that God agent-causes his doing *A* for the right reasons, it redounds to his credit that he did it, and he is thus worthy of thanks and praise—never mind that he lacked the ability to do anything else instead.

Once it is granted that God agent-causes an act, without being forced to do so by something other than himself, it is difficult to see why one would resist the suggestion that it redounds to his credit that he did it. So he does as much at every possible world: why should that matter? Suppose God was unable to do anything else than raise this woman's child from the dead. And suppose *this good action flows from God himself*—God agent-caused it, nothing distinct from him caused him to perform it. And suppose God performed it for good reasons. (It is possible for agent-caused acts to be performed for reasons without being caused by those reasons. In such a case, the act is performed in light of reasons that incline the person to perform the act without causing the person to perform it.) If the mother recognized these facts, couldn't she tell God, without betraying confusion, that (i) she acknowledges this as indeed a good act, (ii) she realizes that he is its agent-cause, (iii) she is glad and greatly relieved that he performed it, and (iv) she considers herself to be in his debt (not someone else's or no-one's) since he and nothing else agent-caused her son to be raised from the dead? It seems so. But then there is no incoherence in saying that it redounds to God's credit that he raised her son from the dead, and hence there is no incoherence in saying that he is worthy of her gratitude and the praise of all for doing so—despite the fact that he was unable to do anything else instead. (Here ends the objection.)¹⁸

What should we make of the position put forward here?

Well, it exhibits the usual obscurity that attends agent-causal stories, but let that pass.¹⁹ My main objection is that it sheds no light at all on how it redounds to God's credit that he did *A* in *C* when he was unable to do anything but *A* in *C* and he was never able to do anything about being in *C* in the first place. It would do that only if there was a time when God was able to do something about whether he agent-caused *A* in *C*. But there was no such time. His nature entailed that he agent-cause *A* in *C*, and he never was able to do anything about whether he would have that nature or whether he would be in *C*. So the causal buck stops with God, alright: but why should *that* matter? There is no honor in being the cause of something if one was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed one's causing it.

¹⁷ In this respect, AC is like Markosian 1999.

¹⁸ The Fourth Objection is inspired by Bergmann and Cover 2007, 392-93 and 399-400; in fact, it contains several sentences quoted verbatim but for minor tweaking. I do not attribute it to them, however; nor should anyone else.

¹⁹ Chapters 5 and 6 of Kane 2005 nicely display the obscurity of several agent-causal approaches. For a more general expression of bafflement, see van Inwagen 2000.

But what about the case of the mother whose son God raised from the dead? Isn't it *just obvious* that since this good action flows from God himself, it redounds to his credit that he did it? The case is moving, of course. After all, if *I* were the mother, I would be glad and greatly relieved and thank God. But our question is not whether the mother would be glad and greatly relieved and thank God. Rather, our question is whether there would be any confusion on her part if she were to consider herself in God's debt—say, regard herself as owing God a debt of gratitude—given that he and nothing else agent-caused her son to be raised from the dead. I think the answer is 'yes'. Her confusion would consist in her failure to recognize four facts. First, she owes God a debt of gratitude for his agent-causing her son's rising from the dead only if God is worthy of such gratitude. Second, God is worthy of gratitude for agent-causing her son's rising from the dead only if it redounds to God's credit that he agent-caused it. Third, it redounds to God's credit that he agent-caused her son's rising from the dead only if there was a time when he was able to do something about some of the factors that entailed his agent-causing it. Fourth, God was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed his agent-causing it.²⁰

We began with a puzzle: how is it metaphysically possible for God to be essentially unsurpassably good and yet worthy of thanks and praise for his good acts? Although our solutions disagree over how, exactly, this is possible, they each imply that God's good acts would redound to his credit and that he would be worthy of thanks and praise for performing them even if it is impossible that God to do anything in their stead. This implication has a repugnant consequence.

Let's say that *Spinozism* is the thesis that every truth is a necessary truth. In the vernacular of possible worlds, there is exactly one possible world. Notice that, on each of our solutions, it would redound to God's credit that he did A even if Spinozism were true. According to the first solution, although there is no possible world in which God refrains from doing A, he was able to refrain from doing A. Thus, there need be no possible world in which God refrains from doing A in order for him to be able to refrain. Thus, God would be able to refrain from doing A even if there were exactly one possible world. Since no other condition laid down by the first solution entails that if God's doing A redounds to his credit, then there is more than one possible world, it follows on the first solution that it would redound to God's credit that he did A even if Spinozism were true. According to the second solution, God was unable to refrain from doing A but, since the cause of his doing A, i.e. his nature, is internal to him in the right way, it redounds to his credit that he did it. Since God's nature would be internal to him in the right way even if there were exactly one possible world, it follows from the second solution that it would redound to God's credit that he did A even if Spinozism were true. According to the third solution, God was unable to refrain from doing A but, since he has effective choice over doing A, and his doing A is not the result of antecedent causal conditions that predate his existence, the intentional state of another agent, or a nonrational internal force, it redounds to his credit that he did it. Since these conditions would be satisfied even if there were exactly one possible world, it follows that, given the third solution, it would redound to God's credit that he did A even if Spinozism were true. According to the fourth solution, God was unable to refrain from doing A but, since the cause of his doing A was God himself, not his own nature or his reasons for doing A, it redounds to his credit that he did it. Since God would be the agent-cause of A even if there were exactly one possible world, it follows from the fourth solution that it would redound to God's credit that he did A even if Spinozism were true.

²⁰ The same goes for Senor's beneficent aunt and self-serving uncle. See Senor 2007, 186.

Therefore, on each of our solutions, God's good acts would redound to his credit and he would be worthy of thanks and praise for performing them, even if there were exactly one possible world. I do not know what to say to an *incompatibilist* who affirms a view that has this consequence. I don't know what to say to a *compatibilist* either, but at least such things are not unexpected from her. So, given my *incompatibilist* presuppositions, I have nothing more to say—except that *modus tollens* is a valid argument form.²¹

5 The Fifth Objection

Suppose that for some good act A that God performs, he is not able to do better or worse in its place but he is able to do something equally good, in the circumstances C he is in. There are ties for the best act he is able to perform. Since God aims to perform one of the best acts available to him, and since there is no morally relevant reason for him to prefer one from among the others, he randomly selects A and performs it. That's not to say the he doesn't perform it for the right reason. On the contrary, he performs A for *exactly* the right reason, given C: A is one of the best acts available to him. (If you like, you may add that he agent-causes A, or the volition to A, or whatever.) I say that, in that case, it redounds to his credit that he performs A, in C, never mind that he was unable to do worse than A and he never was able to do anything about being in C. (Here ends the objection.)

Does this objection succeed where the others have failed?

I don't think so. For consider what it is about an act that redounds to our credit even if it was randomly selected from among equally good acts and we were never able to do anything about what good acts would be available to us. Suppose that, in my present circumstances, I am unable to do anything but one of these three equally good acts next Saturday morning: stack furniture at the Lighthouse Mission, sort second-hand clothes at Hope House, and wash dishes at Interfaith Kitchen. I am able to perform each of these acts but I am unable to perform any other, even refrain. Since there is no reason to favor one over the others, suppose I randomly select the second and perform it (or, if it helps, suppose I non-randomly select the second for a non-moral reason—say, I'm especially fond of the smell of used clothes). Does it redound to my credit that I sort clothes at Hope House, in that case? Of course, if there was a time when I was able to do something about whether I would be presented with just these three alternatives, it would be relevant. But, by hypothesis, there never was such a time. Thus, whether it redounds to my credit when I sort clothes hangs on why I am unable to do anything but one of these three good acts, in the circumstances.

Suppose that I am unable for the following reason. There was a time when I was both able to do various things and able to refrain from doing those things; by doing them, repeatedly, over many years, I developed and confirmed a firmly entrenched character trait that rendered me unable to do anything but one of these three good acts, in the circumstances. In that case, it redounds to my credit that I sort clothes, even though I am unable to do anything worse and I was never able to do anything about being in the circumstances I am in. For by developing and

²¹ Neal Tognazzini notes that if there is some necessary condition on one's being worthy of praise and thanks for doing something other than its redounding to one's credit and satisfying it is incompatible with Spinozism, then the argument here fails. I agree. But if there is such a condition, it must not be *ad hoc*. Moreover, if it is to have any bearing on my argument, it must be at home with the *incompatibilist* presuppositions I have made explicit.

confirming a firmly entrenched character trait that rendered me unable to do anything but one of these three good acts in the circumstances, I did something about some of the factors that entailed that I would perform one of the equally good acts available to me in my present circumstances, and I was able not to do it. That's why it redounds to my credit when I perform one of those acts.

Of course, this explanation does not apply to God. It is impossible for an essentially unsurpassably good being to engage in the sort of soul-making I just described. So this explanation does not apply to God. Perhaps there is some other explanation in God's case. Unfortunately, the ones I am familiar with run afoul of the same fact: they imply that God was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entailed his being in circumstances where he'd have to choose between equally good acts.

6 The Sixth Objection

There is considerable pressure to endorse the Incompatibility Argument. At any rate, incompatibilists who think that no act of ours redounds to our credit in a deterministic world because we would never be able to do anything about the factors that entail our actions will feel the pressure. For that thought applies directly to God if he is essentially unsurpassably good—even if nothing independent of him or his nature is the ultimate cause of his good acts. If God is essentially unsurpassably good, his nature entails that he must perform the best act or one of the best acts he is able to perform in the circumstances; thus, he was never able to do anything about any of the factors that entail his actions, for he was never able to do anything about his nature or the circumstances he is in.

But what if there is no such a thing as the best act or one of the best acts God is able to perform in the circumstances he is in? Indeed, what if there is no such thing as the worst?²² In that case, God's good acts redound to his credit, and he is worthy of thanks and praise for them. For in that case, no matter what good act God performs, he will be able to perform a worse act in its place. The way is then clear for his good acts to redound to his credit and for him to be worthy of thanks and praise for performing them.

We might develop this line of thought as follows. Imagine a morally good person who is essentially unsurpassable in power and cognitive excellence named *Jove*, and who, out of his goodness, aims on some occasion to perform the best act that he has the strength to perform. Unfortunately, as he holds the acts he has the strength to perform before his mind, he sees that for each there is a better; indeed, for each there is a worse. So *Jove* is unable to achieve his aim. Faced with this predicament, *Jove* sets about the task of deciding which act to perform. He decides to write up two lists, one of acceptable acts and the other of unacceptable acts. To do this, he uses certain criteria to sort the acts he has the strength to perform into those whose degree of goodness renders them acceptable and those whose degree of goodness renders them unacceptable. For example, acts that are impermissible go onto the unacceptable list, as do acts that are permissible but unloving. (I encourage the reader to use her own criteria.) Then he orders the infinitely many acceptable acts that remain according to their degree of goodness, randomly assigns '0' to one of them, '1' to its better neighbor, '2' to its better neighbor's

²² Thanks to Peter van Inwagen for making this suggestion to me in 1992. Cp. Wierenga 2002, 432.

neighbor, etc., and ‘-1’ to its worse neighbor, ‘-2’ to its worse neighbor’s neighbor, etc. Finally, he randomly selects one and performs it, say act no. 777.

This story seems possible.²³ But now consider the proposition that Jove is not only good but essentially unsurpassably good. Suppose we add it to our story. Does some glaring *impossibility* reveal itself? I don’t see one. If there isn’t one, then it is possible that an essentially unsurpassably good person who is essentially unsurpassable in power and cognitive excellence is able to do something worse in place of what he does.

One might beg to differ: Jove *is* morally surpassable, contrary to what I say. To see who’s right, let’s consider various ways in which a person who is relevantly like Jove might behave differently. (By “a person who is relevantly like Jove” I mean a morally good person who is essentially unsurpassable in power and cognitive excellence and who is faced with Jove’s predicament.)

Consider Juno. Juno sorts the acts in exactly the same way Jove does and uses exactly the same random selection procedure that Jove does, but she performs a different act, say no. 999, since it is randomly selected. In that case, Juno performs a better act than Jove. But it does not follow that, all else being equal, Juno is morally better than Jove. For given their resolve to perform whatever act is randomly selected, they are not able to perform any act but the one they perform. Thus, even though a better act results from Juno’s selection procedure, it does not imply that she is morally better than Jove. Indeed, all else being equal, they are morally equivalent.

Now consider Thor. Suppose Thor is relevantly like Jove but he does not use Jove’s sorting criteria and he does not use a random selection procedure. Instead, Jove non-randomly selects act no. 888 from Jove’s list of acceptable acts because he sees that *it* is better than any lesser act and prefers performing *it* to performing any lesser act.²⁴ In that case, Thor performs a better act than Jove. But does it follow that Thor is morally better than Jove?

Well, if Thor is morally better than Jove, it’s not simply because Thor performed a better act than him. For Jove and Juno are moral equals. Thus, if Thor is better than Jove, then he’s better than Juno; but the act Thor performs is worse than the act Juno performs. So if Thor is better than Jove, it is in virtue of some other difference, presumably a difference in attitude.

And here there is a difference. Thor selects no. 888 *because he sees that it is better than any lesser act and prefers performing it to performing any lesser act*. Jove lacks the analogous preference. Perhaps this is the difference that makes Thor morally better than Jove.

If so, it’s not simply because Thor preferred a better act than Jove. Thor’s preference for act no. 888 must not be morally defective or wholly frivolous. For

²³ Of course, I have represented Jove as being spatially located and as being both unsurpassable in cognitive excellence and coming to learn things. Moreover, I have assumed that all of the acts that Jove has the strength to perform are feasible for him to perform. Furthermore, I have assumed that the ranking Jove gives to the items on the list of acceptable acts do not admit of ties and that there wouldn’t be so many acts on the list that it is impossible for them to be mapped one-to-one to the positive and negative natural numbers. And I haven’t said anything about the workings of the random selection procedure. I invite the fastidious reader to retell the story so as to avoid these and other mundane infelicities.

²⁴ Cp Rowe 1994, 270: “Thor doesn’t use a randomizing machine but selects world no. 888 over Jove’s world no. 777 *because he sees that it is better and prefers creating no. 888 to creating any lesser world*” (emphasis added); quoted in Rowe 2004, 93.

example, if he prefers it because he is vain or fond of that number, then the fact that he prefers it does not imply that he is better than Jove. Moreover, Thor's preference must be rational, as befits his unsurpassable cognitive excellence, in which case he must have a reason to prefer it and that reason must be a reason for him to select no. 888 non-randomly (since he non-randomly selected no. 888 on the basis of that reason).

Unfortunately, Thor's reason is not a reason for him to select no. 888 non-randomly. For recall that the reason Thor has to prefer act no. 888 is that it is better than any lesser act. This means that Thor's reason to prefer act no. 888 is that it has the property of *being better than any lesser act than no. 888*. But every act that is *better* than no. 888 has that property. Thus, as Thor begins to perform act no. 888, he'll pull up short, for he will notice act no. 889 out of the corner of his eye and reason as follows: "Like act no. 888, act no. 889 is better than any lesser act too; indeed, act no. 890 is better than any lesser act than no. 888 as well; and act no. 891... Hold on! If I keep up this line of reasoning, I won't do *anything*. I had better randomly select..." The upshot is that Thor's reason is not a reason to select no. 888 *non-randomly*; it's a reason to select randomly from no. 888 and above. Thus, the case of Thor is incoherent.

Now consider Minerva. Minerva, who is relevantly like Jove, does not use Jove's sorting criteria. Rather, she uses the following two principles to separate acceptable from unacceptable acts:

- P1. Do not perform any act that is not a good act.
- P2. Do not perform any good act whose degree of goodness is less than what one judges as acceptable, given that one is able to perform a better act.²⁵

As a result, no. 888 from Jove's list of acceptable acts is the worst act she is prepared to perform. Next, she uses the same random selection procedure that Jove used, and performs no. 888 since it was randomly selected. Note that Jove is prepared to settle for acts Minerva is not prepared to settle for.²⁶ Perhaps this difference makes Minerva better than Jove.

If so, it's not simply because Minerva is not prepared to settle for acts that Jove is prepared to settle for. Her not being prepared to settle for any act worse than no. 888 must not be grounded in moral defect or frivolousness, and it must be rational, as required by her cognitive excellence, in which case she must have a reason to draw the line at no. 888 and it must be rational for her to act on that reason as she separates the acceptable from the unacceptable.

Unfortunately, it is not rational for Minerva to draw the line at act no. 888 on the basis of P1 and P2. Imagine her mulling over good act A. Is it good enough to be placed on the list of acceptable acts? P2 offers Minerva this advice to decide the matter: do not perform A if its degree of goodness is less than what you judge to be acceptable. But she has yet to judge whether A's degree of goodness is less than acceptable. That's what she is trying to judge. Principle P2 presupposes that she has already made that judgment when she has not. Thus, it is not possible for Minerva to *act on* P2 as she separates the

²⁵ Cp. Rowe 2002, 414, and 2004, 95. Note: *my* Jove does *not* act on P2, even if he acts *in accordance* with P2. Failure to tend carefully to the difference between acting on a principle and acting in accordance with a principle has led some people in this debate into error.

²⁶ Provided she is able to perform a better act. Keep this proviso in mind here and throughout.

acceptable good acts from the unacceptable good acts. Thus, her drawing the line at act no. 888 is not rational. Like the case of Thor, the case of Minerva is incoherent.

Much more might be said about the line of thought here. For example, there are other ways in which a person relevantly like Jove might behave in Jove's predicament.²⁷ But, if we apply a little ingenuity to the points above, we will see, I think, that they too are incoherent. So then: Jove is unsurpassably good, even though he is able to do something worse in place of what he does. Thus, premise 1 of the Incompatibility Argument is false, as are A and A3. And this fact about Jove is unaffected even if he is essentially unsurpassably good. The way is clear, then, to view God's good acts as redounding to his credit, and to view him as worthy of thanks and praise for performing them, even if he is essentially unsurpassably good. (Here, at long last, ends the objection.)²⁸

What should we make of this line of reasoning?

I suspect that, if any philosophical story exhibits a possibility, the story of Jove exhibits how it is possible for a person who is essentially unsurpassable in power, cognitive excellence, and moral goodness to perform a good act even though he is able to do something worse in place of what he does—in which case premise 1 of the Incompatibility Argument is false, as are A and A3. Unfortunately, it does not exhibit how it is possible for the good acts of such a person to redound to his credit and for him to be worthy of thanks and praise for performing them. Indeed, it does quite the opposite. Let me explain.

Jove randomly selected the good act he performed from a set of acts he judged to be acceptable, and he selected the members of that set on the basis of certain criteria. Now, *if* Jove was *essentially* unsurpassably good, then his nature entailed that he use those criteria and that he judge those acts to be acceptable. Thus, since he was never able to do anything about his nature, he was never able to do anything but select those acts on the basis of those criteria. Furthermore, since Jove is, by hypothesis, *essentially* unsurpassable in cognitive excellence and power, given the predicament he was in, he was never able to do anything but resolve to randomly select from the set of acceptable acts, in which case he was unable to do anything but perform whatever act that was randomly selected from among the acceptable acts. In sum, he was never able to do anything about those factors that entailed his performance of whatever act was randomly selected, and so it did not redound to his credit that he performed act no. 777. Thus, he is not worthy of thanks or praise for performing it.

The application to God is clear. We have, then, a new argument for the Incompatibility Claim, one that is not subject to the Sixth Objection:

1. If God is essentially unsurpassably good, then *either* (a) he is unable to do anything worse in place of the actions he performs *or* (b) he was never able to do anything about those factors that entailed his performance of whatever actions he randomly selected.
2. If God is unable to do anything worse in place of the actions he performs, he is not worthy of thanks or praise for performing them.

²⁷ See, for example, Kraay 2005 and 2006, Steinberg 2005, and Grover 2003.

²⁸ The Sixth Objection is inspired by Howard-Snyders 1994; in fact, it contains several sentences quoted verbatim but for minor tweaking. I do not attribute it to them, however; nor should anyone else.

3. If God was never able to do anything about those factors that entailed his performance of whatever actions he randomly selected, then he is not worthy of thanks and praise for performing them.
4. So, it is impossible for God to be essentially unsurpassably good and yet worthy of thanks and praise for what he does.

One might try to blunt the force of the preceding lines of thought as follows:

Even if the Incompatibility Argument is sound, it hardly follows that God is not worthy of praise for something other than his actions. Indeed, it is something else for which God is worthy of praise that is paramount in the theist tradition. When theists claim that God is to be praised, they mean that God is to be praised for *who God is*, not for *what God does*. Now what makes God praiseworthy includes his awesome power—the fact that not only is there no being as powerful as God but that it is not possible since God is the source of all power. But while sheer power might make a being literally awesome, it wouldn't make it praiseworthy. What makes God praiseworthy is his power together with his nature as fair, merciful, and loving—his embodying all that is valuable. God's nature as both the source of all that is and as a benevolent Creator is what makes him worthy of our praise. Even if God's good acts do not redound to his credit, and even if he is not worthy of praise for those good acts, God *himself* is nevertheless worthy of praise; for he is the ground of all being and power and yet treats such finite, flawed beings as ourselves with love, kindness, and mercy. I submit that when theists offer their praise to God in worship, they intend to praise God as the loving, benevolent source of all being and power. Offering praise to the paraplegic who climbs Mount Everest, and offering praise to God for being the loving Creator of the Heavens and Earth is not to offer the same thing to different individuals. The paraplegic has done something for which she is worthy of praise; God is worthy of praise for being Who God is.²⁹

What should we make of this effort to blunt the force of the Incompatibility Claim, or that part of it that involves God's being worthy of praise for what he does? (The part that involves God's being worthy of thanks will have to be dealt with in another fashion since it makes no sense whatsoever to suppose that God is worthy of thanks for who he is but not for what he does.)

I find it unconvincing for two reasons.

First, when theists claim that God is to be praised, they do *not* mean that God is to be praised for who he is *but not* for what he does. They mean that he is to be praised for *both*, as illustrated by the Song of Moses, the Song of Daniel, the first Song of Isaiah, Mary's Song, the Psalms of praise, the thunderous hallelujahs of John's vision, and scores of liturgies and hymns. Theists are prone to say things that aren't much different in content from "Wow! Did you see *that*? Amazing! Way to go, God!", where 'that' denotes something they think God *did*, like create the Heavens and the Earth, change a jerk into a gentleman, or cure your friend's cancer.³⁰

²⁹ This speech is inspired by Senor 2007, 185-86; in fact, it contains several sentences quoted verbatim but for minor tweaking. I do not attribute it to him, however; nor should anyone else.

³⁰ And let's not have any silliness like this: "What's *really* going on in these cases is that we are praising God for who he is, not for what he does, since, after all, we are offering praise to God for *being* the Creator of the Heavens and Earth, *being* the changer of a jerk into a gentleman, or *being* the curer of a friend's cancer."

Second, the basic line of thought given in the preceding sections for the conclusion that it is impossible that God is essentially unsurpassably good and yet worthy of praise for *what he does* applies with equal force to the claim that it is impossible that God is essentially unsurpassably good and yet worthy of praise for *who he is*. Roughly, if God is worthy of praise for who he is, he is worthy of praise for his goodness, in which case it redounds to his credit that he is good, which implies that there was a time when he was able to do something about whether he is good. But, if God is essentially unsurpassable in goodness, there never was such a time. Thus, if God is essentially unsurpassable in goodness, he is not worthy of praise for who he is.

I began with a puzzle, the puzzle of prayers of thanksgiving and praise. I also began with the intention of solving it. I now see no solution. To be sure, I have not assessed every attempt at a solution. Notably, I have not mentioned the role that the doctrines of divine simplicity or aseity might be called upon to play here.³¹ For my own part, I find these doctrines either unintelligible or unhelpful in providing a solution. Thus, by my lights, there are only three reasonable alternatives: give up the practice of thanking and praising God, give up the incompatibilist presuppositions that drive the puzzle, or give up the doctrine of God's essential unsurpassable goodness. Speaking only for myself, as Jerry Fodor once said in a different connection, if compatibilism is literally true, everything I believe about virtually anything is false and it's the end of the world. Therefore I must concede that the practice of thanking and praising God, the practice in which I have raised my children and live and move and have my being, is irrational—unless I reject the doctrine of God's essential unsurpassable goodness.

Perhaps I might find succor in the fact that the Incompatibility Argument, suitably revised, leaves untouched great swaths of what goes under the rubric of prayer, e.g. petition, intercession, adoration, contrition, oblation, and contemplation. Still, I find the results of my investigation disturbing and saddening, for it is praise and especially thanksgiving that resonates most deeply with me in my participation in the practice of prayer. I might find a way out of my dilemma if there were little cost to jettisoning the doctrine of God's *essential* unsurpassable goodness. Is there? To my mind, that is the question to which my reflections in this paper naturally lead.³²

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³¹ On the relevance of simplicity, see Morrision 2006, 98. On the relevance of aseity, the suggestion is that, unlike us, God does not depend for his nature, existence, and actions on anything else and so, unlike us, there is no need for him to be able to do something in place of what he does in order for his good acts to be his own and for them thus to redound to his credit. Thanks to Tom Senor and Michael Murray for calling my attention to this line of thought.

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