

The Christian Theodicist's Appeal to Love
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Many Christian theodicists believe that God's creating us with the capacity to love Him and each other justifies, in large part, God's permitting evil. For example, after reminding us that, according to Christian doctrine, the supreme good for human beings is to enter into a reciprocal love relationship with God, Vincent Brummer recently wrote:

In creating human persons in order to love them, God necessarily assumes vulnerability in relation to them. In fact, in this relation, he becomes even more vulnerable than we do, since he cannot count on the steadfastness of our love the way we can count on his steadfastness.... If God did not grant us the ability to sin and cause affliction to him and to one another, we would not have the kind of free and autonomous existence necessary to enter into a relation of love with God and with one another.... Far from contradicting the value which the free will defence places upon the freedom and responsibility of human persons, the idea of a loving God necessarily entails it. In this way we can see that the free will defence is based on the love of God rather than on the supposed intrinsic value of human freedom and responsibility.¹

And Peter van Inwagen recently put the same point this way:

God made the world and it was very good. An important part of its goodness was that it contained creatures made in His own image -- ...[creatures] that were fit to be loved by God and to love Him in return and to love one another. But love implies freedom: for A to love B is for A freely to choose to be united to B in a certain way. Now even an omnipotent being cannot insure that some other being freely choose x over y. For God to create beings capable of loving Him, therefore, it was necessary for Him to take a risk: to risk the possibility that the beings He created would freely choose to withhold their love from Him.²

Christians also believe, in the words of St. John, that "God *is* love." St. John's confession is a consequence of the conviction that

all good things in creation are, in some way or other, copies or images of the uncreated. God Himself, Christian theology teaches, could not invent the idea of a good that was not prefigured in His own nature, for in the radiant plenitude of that Nature, all possible goods are comprehended. And this holds for the supreme good, love. All forms of human love are (we believe) copies of the love that is internal to God.³

¹ "Moral Sensitivity and the Free Will," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 29 (1987), pp. 86-100, especially p. 96ff.

² "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* (Fall 1988), p. 163. Van Inwagen and Brummer are not alone among recent Christian theodicists in drawing our attention to this connection between love and morally significant freedom. Richard Swinburne cites Brummer approvingly in "The Free Will Defence," *Archivio Di filosofia* 56 (1988), pp. 585-96, especially pp. 592-93. See also W.S. Anglin's recent *Free Will and the Christian Faith* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1990).

³ "And yet they are not three gods but one god," in (ed.) T.V. Morris, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. .

Thus, "the love of one person for another is an essential part of the internal life of God."

Furthermore, Christians believe that God is essentially perfectly good. To adopt the modal semantics of Leibniz and, in our own day, David Lewis,⁴ that is to say that there is no possible world in which the individual who is God does what is wrong or possesses a defect in character. That the individual we worship and serve just happens to be perfectly good or that it takes some effort on His part has struck most classical theists as completely absurd.

So Christians, or, at any rate, classical Christians, believe these three things:

(1) God's creating beings with the capacity to love in large part justifies His permitting evil.

(2) Love is an essential part of the internal life of God.

(3) God is essentially perfectly good.

Unfortunately, these three propositions seem incompatible.

Here is why. Indispensable to any theodicy that appeals to the nature of love is the claim that the best sort of love is the love of one person for another and that this love implies freedom. If God could have created beings capable of the best sort of love without creating them so they could refrain from loving Him and other creatures, then He could have created beings fit to love Him and others without giving them the power to bring about such things as the American slave trade, the horrors of the killing fields in Cambodia and the Final Solution. Thus (1) is true only if the best love implies freedom, freedom of the sort that we have. Given (2), it follows that God must have *that sort* of freedom as well. For if the love of one person for another is essential to the inner life of God, and our having the capacity for it means we are free to do such horrible things, then God must be free to do the same. However, someone is free with respect to some action only if it is within her power to do it and it is within her power to refrain from it. And these things are within someone's power only if there is a possible world in which she does it and there is a possible world in which she refrains from doing it. Given (1) and (2), then, there is a world in which God is not perfectly good. Therefore, (3) is false: God is not essentially perfectly good.

Responding to a variety of replies to our argument will elucidate the seriousness of the difficulty it poses.

Reply 1

"The best love does not require freedom. Indeed, why suppose that any sort of love requires freedom? Surely the love of 'love at first sight' is not free. Nor is the sort of love typified by the great passionate romances. And the love of parents for their own children is rarely if ever freely given."

We agree that these forms of love do not involve freedom. But there are cases of love which clearly require free choice. Recall the familiar story of Ruth and Naomi and the Anglican Wedding Vows. They clearly express instances of such love.⁵ More

⁴ See his *Counterfactuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).

⁵ Ruth 1:16-17 reads:

And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.

The Anglican Wedding Vow reads:

importantly, this sort of love seems superior precisely because it is freely given. Consider the love exemplified by, say, Anna Karenina or Heathcliff. Their love is compelled by the sheer attractiveness of their beloved. As such, it is a flimsy thing, easily distracted by other instances of those same attractive properties and incapable of withstanding deep changes in the beloved. Theirs is love which is altered when it alteration finds. Surely it won't do as a model of God's love. Only if it were informed by the sort of loyalty and fidelity expressed by Ruth could Anna's love be transformed into the best sort of love. However, where Anna's love fails, parental love soars. It is marked by the sort of faithfulness lacking in the love of a passionate romance. And the New Testament tells us that God's love for us is like parental love in this respect. But unlike the love of Ruth for Naomi or the love of a man taking a woman to be his wife in the vows of marriage, a parent's love for her own child is compelled by biological instincts over which she has no control. Most of us, at any rate, do not have it in our power to refrain from caring and providing for our children. We are driven to it by nature. We are, as it were, victims of deeply entrenched and unshakable familial impulses. It is plausible that this sort of love is inferior to the love which is just as loyal but which is within the lover's power to give and to withhold and which he freely gives.

So, even though some forms of love do not require freedom, the Christian theodicist who makes the appeal to love should claim that the *best* love does require freedom. In making us fit for the best love, God must make us free.

However, suppose we are wrong. Suppose that the love that requires freedom is not the best love. This would allow the Christian theodicist consistently to hold that it is part of God's nature to love and that He is essentially perfectly good. However, if the best love does not require freedom, we cannot argue that God is justified in allowing evil on the grounds that, if He prevented it, He would thereby render us incapable of loving Him and others in the best sort of way. So this way out of the difficulty impales us on the denial of (1).

Reply 2

"We only analogically predicate of God that He loves. This means that the entailments of 'love' predicated of us and 'love' predicated of God are different. So even if 'love' truly predicated of us entails that we are free to do evil, one might correctly say 'the love of one person for another is an essential part of the internal life of God' without implying that He is free to do evil. So we can consistently assert both that we can't love unless we are free to do considerable evil and that God can love even though He cannot do evil."

If this line of thought is correct, we can distinguish two properties: one *literally* denoted by "love" (call it "C-love," short for "creaturely love"), the other *analogically* denoted by "love" (call it "G-love," short for "God's love"). The difference between them is that while a consequence of C-love is that one is free to do evil, one is not free to do evil if she has G-love. Creatures fit to C-love are, no doubt, better than creatures unfit to love at all. But C-love is inferior to G-love for at least two reasons. Since any difference between ourselves and God is a lack in us, we would be better were we capable of G-love. Furthermore, C-love allows for vicious evils whereas G-love does not. In that case, the question arises, if God aimed to create beings fit to love Him and each other, and they

I *M.* take thee *N.* to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.

would have been at least as well off with a capacity for G-love rather than C-love, why didn't He create them with the capacity for G-love? God is justified in permitting evil on the grounds that it is necessary for us to be fit to C-love only if what's good about C-love could not have been ours without His permitting us to do evil. But, as we've argued, G-love, that is the love that God has, is not lacking in any respect. If God had made us capable of G-love instead of C-love, He would have lost nothing. It seems, therefore, that the evil which He allows for the sake of C-love is gratuitous.

To see this point more clearly, consider an analogy. Suppose I spend \$2000 on a computer. Suppose further that this expense has put a severe strain on the family budget. With a bit of luck, and some skimpy meals, we will make it to the next paycheck. If my spouse asks me to justify my action, I can point out that a computer is a very good thing, and that we would be better off having one than not, even if we have to tighten our belts. Suppose he then reminds me that we talked to a reliable dealer who would have sold us a computer that can do everything that the one I bought can do and more, at only \$1000. Even if the \$2000 computer is very good, and I could not have bought it for less than \$2000, I was not justified in spending the extra \$1000 since I could have acquired something which wasn't worse in any respect at a considerably smaller cost to our budget and eating habits.

Perhaps there is an important respect in which the two cases differ. Perhaps there is nothing that stands to C-love in the way the \$1,000 computer stands to the \$2,000 computer. If it is in the nature of things that creatures are unable to G-love, then God's failure to create us with a capacity for it hardly renders Him unjustified in creating us for C-love instead.

Granted. But the only relevant difference between C-love and G-love is that the one requires freedom to do evil and the other doesn't. And we are capable of loves that do not imply freedom. So why suppose our nature rules out the capacity for us to G-love? Trying to evade the force of the incompatibility argument by finding comfort in analogical predication is at best explaining the obscure by the even more obscure.

Reply 3

"You have assumed that a person is free with respect to an action only if he has the power to do it and he has the power to refrain from it. Moreover, you have assumed that one has the power to perform an action (refrain from it) only if there is a possible world at which one exercises that power.⁶ If this assumption is false, your argument from (1) and (2) to the denial of (3) is invalid. Unfortunately (for you), it is false."

This objection might well be voiced by Thomas Talbott.⁷ He argues that God, unlike us, can have it in His power to perform an action that it is not possible for Him to do. Talbott starts out by observing that "what libertarians want to deny is simply that our free actions are causally determined." He continues:

If it is causally determined that I will perform an action A, then it is causally impossible for me to refrain from A; and if it is causally impossible for me to refrain from A, then I am in fact powerless to refrain from A. But my doing A is a free act only if it is both within my power to do A and within my power to refrain

⁶ Compatibilists and incompatibilists can agree on this point.

⁷ "On the Divine Nature and the Nature of Divine Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* (January 1988), pp. 1-24.

from A; so if my doing A is causally determined, it is not a free act. Now consider the following definitions:

(D1) An event E is causally impossible at a time T if, and only if, there exist at T conditions that are causally sufficient for the non-occurrence of E.

(D2) An event is causally possible at a time T if, and only if, E is not causally impossible at T.

...[G]iven these definitions, one cannot regard that which is causally possible as simply a sub-class of that which is logically possible. For consider an action A, perhaps a very malicious act, that God can never perform in any possible world. Even if God does A in no world whatsoever and his doing A is therefore logically impossible, his doing A remains causally possible in the sense specified by (D2); nothing God does, after all, not even that which flows from the necessity of his own nature, is causally determined, and there are no causal conditions that prevent him from doing anything he chooses not to do.... [The] one who creates every causal law is not himself causally determined in any of his actions. He is, in fact, the freest of all agents.⁸

To be sure, if Talbott is right, we have a straightforward solution to the problem our incompatibility argument poses. However, we believe that, for two reasons, Talbott is seriously wrong.

First, contrary to what he asserts, neither (D1) nor (D2) nor their conjunction entail that "one cannot regard that which is causally possible as simply a sub-class of that which is logically possible." For the best way to understand (D1) and (D2) renders causal possibility a sub-class of (broadly) logical possibility. The crux of the matter is a proper understanding of causal sufficiency. It is commonly understood in this way: There exists at time t a set of conditions that is *causally sufficient* for the non-occurrence of E if, and only if, a complete account of the state of the world up to t-1 (S) and a complete account of the actual laws of nature (L) *entail* that E will not occur at t. But S and L entail that E will not occur at t if, and only if, there is no possible world such that, were it realized, the conjunction of S and L and the proposition that E will occur at t would be true. If there is no such world, then it is causally impossible that E occur given the state of the world at t-1. So, on this account of causal sufficiency, Talbott is wrong to think that something can be logically impossible without being causally impossible. So if God's doing evil is logically impossible, then it's causally impossible. God cannot be both essentially perfectly good and free to do evil.

Secondly, Talbott apparently does not understand the basis of libertarian intuitions. He asserts that the fundamental idea underlying the notion of libertarian freedom is that our free actions are not causally determined. This is demonstrably false. For, first of all, it is not merely *our* free actions but *any agent's* free action that must not be causally determined. Moreover, it is not merely any agent's action that is *causally* determined that is not free; rather, it is any agent's action that is *determined in any way whatsoever* that is not free. Talbott's expression of the basic libertarian intuition emphasizes, no doubt, what we tend to focus on in thinking about constraints on free action. But to suggest that the content of that fundamental insight is merely that *our* free actions are unconstrained by *causal* laws is ludicrous. If it is determined *simpliciter* that one shall perform A, then it is impossible for one to refrain from A; and if it is impossible for one to refrain from A,

⁸ Talbott, pp. 9-10.

then one is in fact powerless to refrain from A. But one's doing A is a free act only if it is both within one's power to do A and it is within one's power to refrain from A; so if one's doing A is determined *at all*, it is not a free act. It matters not whether that act is constrained by things other than the laws of nature and the past. This point is evident if we consider the fact that the laws of nature do not entail moral truths. Nothing in a full account of the state of the physical world at any time plus the laws of nature entails that gratuitous and vicious cruelty is not right. And yet it's clearly not within my power to be gratuitously and viciously cruel while doing what's right. The nature of things (morality, in this case) precludes it. Necessary truths -- whether those of morality or logic, or those expressing one's nature -- constrain what we are able to do no less than causal laws. Given the correct libertarian intuition, Talbott's argument that God has it in His power to do what is (broadly) logically impossible is a nonstarter.

Reply 4

"You have misrepresented the appeal to love. You have represented the Christian theodocist as asserting that, in order to have the best sort of love, we must have the freedom to murder, torture and so on. But this is inaccurate. Freedom to do these things should be seen as a *by-product* of the freedom *to withhold our love* from God. The freedom which makes a love the best sort of love is the freedom to refrain from that love. Love is most valuable when it is freely given, when the lover is not simply a victim of his biological impulses or of the beloved's attractiveness. *Our* having this freedom, however, results in our having the power to do evil. For a creature who turns away from God turns himself into something unnatural and harmful. Now in God's case, as in ours, love requires the freedom to withhold love. But whereas our withholding our love from God is harmful to us and results in our having the power to do evil, God's withholding His love from us is neither harmful to Him nor results in His having the power to do evil. Therefore, it can be true both that God loves even though it is impossible for Him to do evil, and yet our capacity to love entails the power to do horrible things."⁹

Whatever the merits of this reply, it is obviously incomplete. Exactly what is it that accounts for this putative difference between God and us? Why is it that our withholding our love from God results in our harming ourselves and our having the ability to do evil, whereas God's withholding His love from us fails to have the corresponding effect?

Here's a suggestion. Withholding one's love from God is tantamount to an intrinsic evil. One would have to be defective not to be delighted by and attracted to so perfect a being; one would have to be defective not to recognize their debt to Him for creating them; one would have to be defective in order to fail to see the appropriateness of submitting to His will. In that case, the only way God could give His creatures the capacity to refrain from loving Him was to give them the capacity to be defective. And this capacity makes it possible for them to do evil. But there is no corresponding difficulty in God's having the capacity to refrain from loving His creatures. We are not so overwhelmingly attractive that only a defective being could refrain from loving us. It is thus that our capacity for the best love necessarily involves a capacity for evil, while God's capacity for the same sort of love does not.

While this suggestion might be a solution to our problem that will satisfy most monotheists, the Christian theodocist must reject it. For it relies on the universal claim

⁹ We have gleaned this reply from van Inwagen, "Theodicy," p. 163.

that a person must be defective in order to possess the capacity to withhold love from God. Thus someone cannot be essentially perfectly good if she is to be able to refrain from loving Him. But Christians are notorious for believing "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God." And there seems to be no *ad hoc* way to restrict the justmentioned universal claim so that it holds for us but not the members of the Trinity. The difficulty is clear: if persons must be defective in order to have the capacity to withhold love from a perfectly good being, then God the Father has the power to withhold His love from God the Son only if He is not essentially perfectly good. On the other hand, if the Father is essentially perfectly good, then He doesn't have what it takes to withhold His love from the Son. So the Christian theodicist who appeals to love is forced to choose between the proposition that the Father, who is essentially perfectly good, does not have the best sort of love for the Son, which is tantamount to rejecting (2), and the proposition that the Father is not essentially perfectly good, which is tantamount to rejecting (3). Hence, Reply 4 does not readily lend itself to a solution to our incompatibility argument that will meet the theological commitments of the classical Christian.

We conclude that this air of incompatibility permeating the Christian theodicist's appeal to love has yet to be dispelled.¹⁰

¹⁰ We are grateful to our friends John O'Leary-Hawthorne and Peter van Inwagen for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.