

CRAIG ON THE POSSIBILITY OF ETERNAL DAMNATION

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In two recent papers,¹ one a critique of two papers of mine,² William Lane Craig has sought to put the Free Will Defence in the service of the traditional doctrine of hell; he has sought to establish, in other words, that the following proposition, which I shall call the Damnation Thesis (DT), is at least possibly true:

(DT) There exists at least one sinner *S* such that *S* will never be reconciled to God and thus never be saved.

I believe that Craig's arguments for the possibility of (DT) are important for two reasons: first, because the line he takes, though unsuccessful in my opinion, is the most plausible (or least implausible) line available; and second, because he sets forth with startling clarity some of the propositions that someone who takes this line must be willing to accept. But in the end, I shall argue, he not only fails to *establish* that (DT) is possible; he also fails in the lesser task of trying to undermine my own argument that (DT) is impossible.

Although Craig nowhere gives formal shape it, his argument for the possibility of (DT) seems to run something like this: He first insists that certain propositions other than (DT) are possible in the broadly logical sense, and he then tries to deduce the possibility of (DT) from these other possibilities; that is, he casts about for some proposition *p* - perhaps a conjunction of several propositions - that will enable him to argue as follows:

- (1) *p* entails (DT).
- (2) *p* is possible in the broadly logical sense.
- (3) Therefore, (DT) is also possible in the broadly logical sense.

And, of course, the challenge he faces in defending such an argument is this: If, for some *p*, he

can demonstrate that p entails (DT) and hence that step (1) of the argument is sound, then p will likely be no less controversial than (DT); and if p is just as controversial as (DT), then step (2) of the argument will likely be no easier to establish than the conclusion. In any event, Craig's challenge is to find a substitution instance for p that will enable him to build a plausible defence of *both* premises; and in what follows, I shall argue that he has so far failed to meet the challenge.

I shall divide what follows into four sections. In section i, I shall make some preliminary remarks, comparing two tasks: that of arguing, as Craig does, that some controversial metaphysical proposition is logically possible with that of arguing, as I do, that some such proposition is logically impossible. Then, in sections ii, iii, and iv, I shall examine in turn three different propositions that Craig claims to be logically possible. With respect to each of these propositions, I shall defend one of two claims: Either the proposition does not entail (DT) and therefore cannot be used to establish the possibility of (DT), or we have good reasons to deny that the proposition is itself possible in the broadly logical sense.

i

Ever since Alvin Plantinga published his monumental (and transforming) work on the Free Will Defence, both Plantinga and his many disciples have tended to assign a privileged position to the assumption that certain very intricate propositions are possible in the broadly logical sense. In an effort to prove that God's existence is consistent with the quantity and variety of evil in the world, for example, Plantinga assumes that the following is at least possible:

(41) All the evil in Kronos is broadly moral evil, and it was not within the power of God to create a world containing a better balance of broadly moral good and evil.³

But in fact, it is by no means obvious that Plantinga's (41) *is* possible; and even if it is, Plantinga has nowhere *established* that it is. Indeed, if a single evil in Kronos is not of the broadly moral

variety, then the world indexed proposition: *All the evil in Kronos is broadly moral evil*, is itself necessarily false; and if that proposition is necessarily false, so also is (41). At the very least, therefore, a nontheist could justifiably register the following complaint: If Plantinga's opponents, such as J. L. Mackie, nowhere successfully demonstrate an inconsistency in theism, neither does Plantinga successfully demonstrate the possibility of (41). Of course, (41) clearly *is* possible in this epistemic sense: *For all we know*, (41) is true. But for all we know, (41) may be logically impossible as well.

Or consider the most fundamental assumption of the Free Will Defence: the assumption that libertarian free will is at least logically possible. To demonstrate that assumption, one would have to refute the view, held by such rationalists as Leibniz and Spinoza, that the Principle of Sufficient Reason (in its strongest form) is not only true, but necessarily true. But so far as I know, Plantinga has never even tried to do that and has never even tried, therefore, to *establish* the most fundamental assumption upon which his Free Will Defence rests. And that is hardly surprising. If we cannot settle the question of whether a proposition is possible (in the broadly logical sense) simply by inspecting the proposition and discovering that it is free from any obvious contradiction, then questions about possibility are sometimes exceedingly difficult and, as a practical matter, impossible to answer in a definitive way. As an illustration, we need only remind ourselves of the Anselmian assumption that God's existence is possible; even if that assumption is true, as I believe it is, one wonders what would count as a *proof* that it is true. Accordingly, when Craig writes: 'Talbot has set himself the heavy task of proving that the Molinist position [or at least (DT)] is not even broadly logically possible',⁴ he needs to bear in mind two points: First, though I have indeed set for myself the task of *arguing* that (DT) is logically impossible, and though I believe my arguments are strong as well as sound, I have

never claimed that they amount to a proof in some narrow sense of ‘proof’; I have made no attempt, for example, to restrict myself to premises that most reasonable people, or even most reasonable philosophers, would likely accept. And second, the task that Craig has set for himself—that of proving that (DT) is possible—is no less ‘heavy’ than the one I have set for myself. One could, of course, criticize a specific argument to the effect that (DT) is logically impossible without committing oneself to the modal status of (DT) at all, but that does not seem to be Craig’s strategy. Instead, he tries to counter my argument that (DT) is logically impossible by setting forth his own argument that (DT) is logically possible. And in the case of controversial metaphysical propositions, proofs of possibility are, as a class, no less difficult than proofs of impossibility.

In an effort to demonstrate that (DT) is possible, moreover, Craig sets before the reader a bewildering number of unsupported assertions to the effect that this or that is logically possible.

Here are but a few examples from one of his articles:

. . . it is possible that some persons out of self-will or perversity would freely reject God no matter what circumstances He placed them in.⁵

. . . it is possible that in every world realizable by God in which persons are free with respect to salvation, some persons irrevocably reject God.⁶

. . . It is possible that the very experience itself of being in the immediate presence of Christ (cf. the beatific vision) will simply drive from the minds of his redeemed any awareness of the lost in hell.⁷

. . . it is possible that the reality of lost persons is a fact the pain of which He alone shall endure for eternity.⁸

Because each of these items, which Craig believes to be logically possible, I believe to be logically impossible, I for one would like something more than the bare assertion that they are indeed possible. Take the last item as an example. Quite apart from other difficulties, which I shall explore below, one wonders why Craig thinks it even possible that God would willingly

make himself *eternally* miserable. Does God really have so little regard for *himself* as that? Well, perhaps this is not what Craig has in mind, or perhaps he can answer my questions persuasively in some other way. But in any case, he seems clearly to have confused two things: What it would take, concerning some controversial metaphysical proposition *p*, to demonstrate that, *for all we know*, *p* is true; and what it would take to demonstrate that *p* is possible in the broadly logical sense. Even if, for all we know, the reality of lost persons is a fact the pain of which God alone will endure forever, this may also remain, for all that Craig has demonstrated about the nature of God, a logical impossibility.

The very way in which Craig constructs his arguments indicates that, in many cases, he underestimates the difficulty of demonstrating a logical possibility. He proceeds as if demonstrating the relevant possibilities is relatively easy, requiring little more than an appeal to the *obvious*, whereas building a case for plausibility might be more difficult. Concerning the second item quoted above, he thus writes: ‘Not only is the above view *obviously possible* [my emphasis], but it also seems quite plausible to me as well.’⁹ And a little later, after setting forth some additional ‘possibilities’, he again writes:

This seems to me once more to settle the matter; but in the interest of theodicy I wish to add that such an account strikes me as entirely plausible. Human evil and rebellion are so severe that it seems quite plausible to me that some persons should freely and irrevocably reject God despite His best efforts to save them.¹⁰

Remarks such as these suggest that, as Craig sees it, the matter of plausibility is more difficult to determine than that of mere possibility. Like Plantinga, Craig evidently has in mind a distinction between a *Free Will Defence* and a *Theodicy*; and like Plantinga, he places more weight upon that distinction than he should. As Plantinga himself explained the distinction, ‘the aim [of a Free Will Defence] is not to say what God's reason [for permitting evil] *is*, but at most what God's reason *might possibly be*.’¹¹ But why should anyone suppose, in the present context,

that a possible reason for why God has permitted evil should be any different from, or any easier to establish than, the actual reason? If by ‘a possible reason’ one means ‘a reason that, for all we know, might have been the actual reason’, then of course there are in that epistemic sense many possible reasons why God might have permitted evil. But Plantinga is talking about a reason that is possible in the broadly logical sense; and if God is a necessary being, necessarily omnipotent, necessarily loving, and necessarily wise, then his actual reason for permitting evil may, for all we know, be the only reason possible. Even if it is not the only reason possible, moreover, we could *know* this only if we already knew a good deal about what his actual reason was. And similarly for Craig's apparent assumption that the relevant possibilities are reasonably obvious. With respect to many controversial metaphysical propositions, including most of those that Craig discusses, it is far easier to set forth some plausible reasons for believing such propositions than it would be to *demonstrate* their possibility. For as Craig himself acknowledges, there are many ‘complexities involved in a world’; and there are also, he might have added, many complexities concerning the nature of human freedom and the nature of salvation itself. What Craig fails to acknowledge, however, is that the complexities cut in two directions. Given these complexities, one should be at least as suspicious of Craig's contention, with no supporting argument, that some intricate proposition is just obviously possible as one might be of the contention that it is just obviously impossible.

ii

I now turn to some of the specific propositions that Craig claims to be possible in the broadly logical sense. According to Craig, ‘it is possible that some persons . . . would freely reject God no matter what circumstances He placed them in.’ Just what is Craig claiming here?—and what is its relevance to the possibility of (DT)?

If we take Craig's remark literally, it seems altogether dubious, to say the least. Presumably every human person experiences *some* circumstances—as a two year old child, for example—in which he or she does not freely reject God (or at least has not yet freely rejected God); and furthermore, for any person S (human or otherwise), God surely could, if he so chose, cause it to be the case that S has an overpowering desire to obey God and no desire at all to reject God. Accordingly, for any person S, there surely are possible circumstances in which S would not freely reject God, either because the issue has not yet arisen or because S's decision is causally determined. Perhaps what Craig has in mind, however, is something like this: It is possible that some persons would freely refuse to be reconciled to God in any circumstances in which they remain free in this matter. But now we must clear up an additional ambiguity. Is Craig here affirming the possibility that some *actual* person suffers from what I have called 'transworld reprobation' (and he calls 'transworld damnation')?¹²—or is he merely affirming the possibility that some *possible* person or some creaturely essence suffers from such a malady? Because the latter claim is by far the more plausible, let us consider:

- (a) There exists at least one creaturely essence E such that, for any circumstances C in which the instantiation of E would be free in the matter of being reconciled to God, the instantiation of E would in fact freely refuse to be reconciled to God in C.

And let us ask this question: Are there good reasons to believe, as Craig does, that (a) is possible in the broadly logical sense?

Before we can answer this question, we must first achieve a clearer understanding of what it might mean for someone freely to refuse to be reconciled to God. Just what kind of choice does Craig have in mind here? Religious people sometimes speak of God as if he were just another human magistrate who seeks his own glory and requires obedience for its own sake; they speak as if we might reject the Creator and Father of our souls without rejecting ourselves, op-

pose his will for our lives without opposing, schizophrenically perhaps, our own will for our lives. Craig thus speaks of ‘the stubborn refusal to submit one’s will to that of another’.¹³ But suppose now that the following were necessarily true, as I believe it is: God wills for me exactly what, at the most fundamental level, I want for myself; he wills that I should experience supreme happiness, that my deepest yearnings should be satisfied, and that all of my needs should be met. How *then* might we understand human disobedience and opposition to God?

As a first step towards answering this question, let us distinguish between two senses in which a person might reject God. If a person S refuses to be reconciled to God and S’s refusal does not rest upon ignorance, or misinformation, or deception of any kind, then let us say that S has made a *fully informed* decision to reject God; but if S refuses to be reconciled to God and S’s refusal *does* rest upon ignorance or deception of some kind, then let us say that S has made a *less than fully informed* decision to reject God. Now no one, I take it, would deny the possibility of someone’s making a less than fully informed decision to reject God; it happens all the time. Even the Apostle Paul, before his conversion to Christianity, presumably saw himself as rejecting the Christian God at one time. But what might qualify as a motive for someone’s making a fully informed decision to reject God? Not only does nothing seem to qualify as a relevant motive; if God is the ultimate source of human happiness, as Christians have traditionally believed, then anyone in a position to make a fully informed decision would also seem to have the strongest conceivable motive not to reject God. As a counter to this, Craig quotes the famous passage in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton’s Satan declares that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. But that hardly illustrates a *fully informed* decision to reject God. Even if Milton’s Satan were a believable character—which, in my opinion, he isn’t¹⁴—we have no reason to believe that such a character, with so many illusions yet to be shattered, could hold out for an

eternity against the love of God. Observe the many ways in which Satan comforts himself: with the illusion that he ‘Can make a heaven of Hell’, with the illusion that in hell he is at least free (despite his bondage to destructive desires), and with the illusion that in hell he ‘may reign secure’. He evidently never even considers the outer darkness (where he would have no one to rule and no world to experience); nor has he yet come to terms with the fact that his willful opposition to God, his desire for revenge, is in reality an attack upon himself. It is a tribute to Milton's art, however, that by Book IV Satan has already lost most of the illusions that made the ‘heroic’ speech of Book I possible; and had Milton's art not been the slave of his theology, I have no doubt that the more pitiful (and even human) character of Book IV would have repented.

Now if, as I have suggested, a fully informed person would have the strongest conceivable motive to become reconciled to God and no conceivable motive to reject him, then a fully informed decision to reject God would have to be irrational in a very strong sense. And though Craig seems to concede this, he goes on to ask: ‘Is it not possible that the will to self-autonomy be so strong in some persons that they will act irrationally in preferring self-rule to God's rule?’¹⁵ Is it not possible, he in effect asks, that some persons will irrationally prefer self-rule even after discovering that it is an impossible illusion, the worst sort of bondage? He goes on to ask: ‘Indeed, does there need to be any motivation for such rebellion at all?’¹⁶ Perhaps not. But at this point, Craig ignores an obvious question: How could such irrational rebellion possibly qualify as a *free* decision to reject God? We might imagine that, even as an alcoholic finds it psychologically impossible to refuse another drink (and thus impossible to follow his or her own best judgement in the matter), so a fully informed sinner might find it impossible to act upon his or her own motives. Or we might imagine that a fully informed person makes a decision which is simply inexplicable; like a freak of nature or a purely random event, it can be explained neither

by antecedent causes nor by any discernable purpose or reason for acting. In neither case, however, would such a decision qualify as a *free* decision. Proponents of the Free Will Defence, being incompatibilists, inevitably insist that an action is free only if it is not causally determined by factors outside the agent's control, and they sometimes proceed as if there were no other necessary conditions of a free action. But there surely are other necessary conditions, and one of them is this: Only a rational agent—that is, only someone who meets certain minimal standards of rationality—can act freely. If, without any motive for doing so, S consistently acts contrary to S's own interest as well as contrary to the interest of all others, then S is not a rational agent and is not capable, therefore, of performing free actions.

I see no reason to suppose it even possible, therefore, that some persons would make a fully informed but *free* decision to reject God. But that still might not satisfy Craig, and he still might want to raise an objection of the following kind: Even if a fully informed but free decision to reject God is logically impossible, the perversity of some persons may be such that God cannot actualize a world in which these persons *freely accept* God either. For perhaps no decision of the relevant kind—whether it be to reject God or to accept him—can be *both* free and *fully informed*. That seems to be what Craig has in mind when he writes: ‘It may well be the case that for some people the degree of revelation that would have to be imparted to them in order to secure their salvation would have to be so stunning that their freedom to disobey would be effectively removed...’¹⁷ Now my own view, for what it is worth, is that the very idea of a freedom-removing revelation rests upon a mistake, as does the idea that we are free only for as long as God keeps us in bondage to ignorance and illusion. I fail to see how a knowledge of the truth, even where it renders certain actions psychologically impossible, in any way restricts one's freedom to perform such actions--as if those in possession of the beatific vision are no longer free

agents. But that is a difficult and controversial matter, and fortunately, we need not try to settle it here. For we can in fact state a reply to Craig's objection in a way that begs no questions about the nature of free agency.

The reply is this: When clarity of vision, understanding, or even a stunning revelation of truth removes every reason for rejecting God and provides compelling reasons for becoming reconciled to God, that is either compatible with a person's *freely* becoming reconciled to God or it is not. If it is, then we have no reason to believe that (a) is even possibly true. If it is not, then clarity of vision, understanding, and revelation are far more important than some abstract conception of free agency. As an illustration, suppose that a pair of loving parents instruct their small child not to play in the street; and suppose further that in communicating to the child the real reason for their prohibition, namely the danger of playing in the street, they provide the child with compelling reasons to obey. Would such parents even consider withholding part of the truth from the child for the sake of some abstract conception of free agency? Of course not. If a knowledge of the truth, the ability to see things as they are, is incompatible with free agency, as some conceive of it, then so much the worse for free agency so conceived. Clarity of vision is, after all, a far cry from Craig's caricature about 'recantation under torture'¹⁸—as is the Christian idea that through revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit, God is able to transform from the inside the hearts and wills of those whom he loves into existence.

But do not remarks such as these threaten to undermine the Free Will Defence, as a reply to the argument from evil? I see no reason why they should. The process whereby God first creates rational agents and then reveals himself to them is far more complex, I believe, than we are apt to imagine; and it is to that complexity that proponents of the Free Will Defence ought to appeal in explaining the kinds of evils which, unlike everlasting separation, *are* compatible with the

existence of God. It seems to me utterly doubtful, for example, that even an omnipotent being could create conscious rational agents *ex nihilo* and simply constitute them with perfect understanding and absolute clarity of vision. If, as I have elsewhere remarked, ‘a degree of ambiguity, separation, and blindness is an essential element in the process by which God creates a free, independent, and rational agent’,¹⁹ then we have plenty of room left, particularly in the early stages of creation, for indeterminism and free choices made in relative stages of ignorance. According to the Christian faith, however, the creation of rational agents (and then of sons and daughters of God) is also a process whereby God *overcomes* ambiguity, separation, and blindness and thereby prepares the way for stunning revelations; it is even one in which he uses the consequences of separation and blindness in our lives as a means of revelation. And unless we adopt an utterly contrived and artificial conception of human freedom, our transformation into sons and daughters of God is not a process whereby God gradually restricts and then eliminates altogether our freedom of will.

So perhaps the sum of the matter is this: Given certain (rather artificial) stipulations about the nature of free will, we can concede, at least for the sake of argument, that (a) is possibly true. But it hardly follows that (DT) is likewise possibly true; for (a) does not entail (DT), and it remains open to God not to instantiate creaturely essences of the kind described in (a). And in addition to that rather obvious point, there is also this more subtle point: We can concede even the possibility that God has a morally sufficient reason to instantiate creaturely essences of the kind described in (a)--essences that suffer from transworld reprobation--and still deny that (DT) is logically possible. For we have no reason to believe it even possible that God would withhold a revelation of truth from some persons, or keep them in perpetual bondage to ignorance and illusion, merely to maintain forever the artificial kind of free agency that Craig imagines.

iii

Another claim that Craig makes is this: 'it is possible', he says, 'that in every world realizable by God in which persons are free with respect to salvation, some persons irrevocably reject God.' Is he right about that? I doubt it. But if we are going to concede, for the sake of argument, that (a) is possible, we might as well concede this additional possibility as well. For if it is possible, according to (a), that some creaturely essences suffer from transworld reprobation, then it is also possible, I should think, that all creaturely essences suffer from this malady; and if the latter is possible, then it is possible that, for any combination of persons God might create and any combination of circumstances in which he might leave created persons free with respect to salvation, not only *some* but *all* created persons would irrevocably reject God.

But so what? We must also take into account, at this point, how a loving God would respond in the event that he should encounter such a possibility as a tragic reality. If every creaturely essence suffered from transworld reprobation and God (who has middle knowledge on Craig's conception) knew this, then either he would refuse to instantiate any essences at all or, if he did instantiate some of them, he would have a morally sufficient reason not to leave created persons entirely free with respect to salvation; that is, he would have a morally sufficient reason not to leave them free in the relevant (but artificial) sense that requires bondage to ignorance and illusion.

Craig also insists, however, upon a more subtle point, namely this: Whether or not some creaturely essences suffer from transworld reprobation, it is possible, Craig thinks, that God can actualize a world in which some persons are freely reconciled to him only if he also actualizes one in which some persons irrevocably reject him; it is even possible, Craig insists, that God can increase the number of the saved by permitting a specific number of others to be damned.²⁰ So

where a possible world is *feasible* for God if, and only if, it is within God's power to make it actual, Craig in effect claims that the following is possible in the broadly logical sense:

- (b) There are feasible worlds in which some persons are freely reconciled to God; but for any feasible world w , if in w some persons *are* freely reconciled to God, then in w some persons irrevocably reject God.

Now it is one thing to concede the possibility that every creaturely essence suffers from transworld reprobation; it is another altogether to concede that a proposition such as (b) is possible. It seems to me, at any rate, that (b) is quite impossible. Suppose we say that God's victory over sin is *complete* if, and only if, he manages to repair all of the damage that sinners do (both to themselves and to others). We might then adopt, as an assumption, what I shall call the Victorious God Thesis (VGT):

- (VGT) Necessarily, God would have created persons whom he knew would sin only if he also knew that he could achieve a complete victory over their sin.

But (VGT) is true only if (b) is necessarily false. For if (VGT) is true and God is a necessary being, then there are no *possible* worlds in which some created persons irrevocably reject God; and if there are no such possible worlds, then neither are there any such *feasible* worlds. Given (VGT), therefore, we can draw the following inference: Either there are no feasible worlds in which some persons are freely reconciled to God, in which case the first conjunct of (b) is false; or, if there are such feasible worlds, then the second conjunct of (b) is false. So (b) is necessarily false. We need not settle the question of whether (VGT) is true, moreover, in order to illustrate the point that, for those of us who reject the possibility of (DT), God's essential dispositions are far more important than the matter of which 'counterfactuals of freedom' happen to be true. For God's essential dispositions are what determine how he would respond to the truth or falsity of the relevant subjunctive conditionals and how much value he would place upon the relevant kind of human freedom.

Perhaps, however, Craig would reject (VGT) for this very reason: He believes that (b) is possible. Still, he can hardly claim that (VGT) is just obviously false, and neither, therefore, can he (justifiably) claim that (b) is just obviously possible. And quite apart from (VGT), there are good reasons, I shall now argue, for denying that (b) is possible at all. Consider the following proposition, which I shall call the Glorious Feasibility Thesis (GFT):

(GFT) Necessarily, for any collection C of persons who do *not* suffer from transworld reprobation, there is a feasible world in which every member of C is freely reconciled to God.

Is (GFT) true? I believe it is, and my argument is essentially this: For any two persons, S and S', if there is a feasible set of circumstances in which S is freely reconciled to God and there is a feasible set of circumstances in which S' is freely reconciled to God, then there is also a feasible set of circumstances in which S and S' are both freely reconciled to God.

Now Craig evidently believes that this argument is fallacious. He thus writes:

even if it is possible that for every created person S there is a set of circumstances C in which S affirmatively responds to God's grace and is saved, it does not follow that there is a compossible set of circumstances in which all persons are saved. It may be a tragic fact of the matter, for example, that Joe, Jr. will freely respond to God's grace and be saved only if his father Joe, Sr. failed to do so.²¹

But I find these remarks confusing. On the assumption that transworld reprobation is possible, Craig surely is right about this: From the mere *possibility* that, for every created person S, there is a feasible set of circumstances in which S would freely do A, we cannot infer even that *in fact*, for every S, there is a feasible set of circumstances in which S would freely do A; much less can we infer that the various sets of circumstances are compossible. And Craig would also have been right if he had said this: Even if there is a set of circumstances C₁ in which Joe, Jr. would freely submit his will to God and there is a set of circumstances C₂ in which Joe, Sr. would freely submit his will to God, we cannot infer that C₁ and C₂ are compossible sets of circumstances.

But neither observation has any relevance to the argument I have given, which rests instead upon inferences such as the following: If there is a feasible set of circumstances C_1 in which Joe, Jr. would freely submit his will to God and there is a feasible set of circumstances C_2 in which Joe, Sr. would freely submit his will to God, then there is also a feasible set of circumstances (*either* (C_1 & C_2) *or* some other set of circumstances) in which Joe, Jr. and Joe, Sr. would both freely submit their wills to God.

In support of this inference, I would offer the following consideration. If in C_1 Joe, Jr. would freely submit his will to God, then in C_1 Joe, Jr. would encounter a set of appearances A_1 such that, if God were to provide Joe, Jr. with just these appearances, then Joe, Jr. would freely submit his will to God; and similarly, if in C_2 Joe, Sr. would freely submit his will to God, then in C_2 Joe, Sr. would encounter a set of appearances A_2 such that, if God were to provide Joe, Sr. with just these appearances, then Joe, Sr. would freely submit his will to God as well. Now presumably, the way things appear to Joe, Jr. need not cohere or even be consistent with the way things appear to Joe, Sr., and God can always vary how things appear to Joe, Jr. without varying how things appear to Joe, Sr. (and *vice versa*). So even if C_1 and C_2 are logically inconsistent, there would still be a feasible set of circumstances consisting of God's providing Joe, Jr. with appearances A_1 and his providing Joe, Sr. with appearances A_2 ; and in this feasible set of circumstances, Joe, Jr. and Joe, Sr. would both freely submit their wills to God.

Of course, if C_1 and C_2 *are* inconsistent, then either A_1 or A_2 will be deceptive in some way; and this may lead one to question whether the circumstances I have imagined really are possible and thus really are feasible. Is it genuinely possible, one might ask, that God would engage in deception as a means of redemption? That depends, I presume, upon what the alternatives are--whether, for example, there is some other feasible way to avert disaster—and I'll say

more about this matter in the following section. For now I'll simply leave it at this: God clearly could resort to such deception *if* he had a morally sufficient reason and thus wanted to do so.

What the argument I have given trades upon is the fact that God is in a unique position to work with each of us one on one. If, upon contemplating our essences, God should determine that it would be to our eternal advantage to live in a common universe such as you and I believe we live in, God could always place us in such a universe; but if he should determine that it would be more to our advantage if he should systematically deceive us (for a season and for our own good), he could do that as well. If necessary, he could even provide us with misleading appearances concerning the existence or the fate of other persons. If a Jonathan Edwards, for example, would not freely repent of his sin unless he were to believe that millions of people are writhing in everlasting flames, God could always provide the relevant illusion (perhaps beginning at the time of Edwards' death) until such time as the new Edwards is spiritually mature enough to appreciate the truth of the matter. Indeed, for all we know, there are spiritual realms which have no ordinary physical connection with our universe; and though I think it highly unlikely that it would be necessary, some of these could be specially tailored for those whose cure requires a period of systematic deception.

In general, God's options in dealing with created persons over an infinite stretch of time go far beyond anything we can imagine. I have no doubt that, in the early stages of creation in particular, God must work around a lot of obstacles; that is, he must work around the free choices of created persons. If some creaturely essences suffer from transworld reprobation, for example, then God cannot instantiate these essences, leave them free (in a sense that requires ignorance and illusion), *and* bring it about that the instantiations are freely reconciled to God. But for any person *S* who does not suffer from transworld reprobation, God can think in terms of a billion

lifetimes, a billion different realms and universes and sets of appearances, a billion ways (including a billion different forms of deception) to prevent the choices that other persons make from having the wrong kind of influence upon a given choice that S makes. Given all of these options available to God, (GFT) seems highly plausible; it also seems quite impossible that God could increase the number of the redeemed by instantiating creaturely essences that suffer from trans-world reprobation. I conclude, therefore, that (b) is necessarily false.

iv

In my previous articles, I defended a two-fold thesis: first, that God loves all created persons only if it is his intention to secure blessedness--that is, supremely worthwhile happiness--for each of them, and second, that the eternal misery of a single person would undermine the blessedness of all others. The second part of that thesis depends, of course, upon a particular conception of what blessedness or supremely worthwhile happiness is, and I have identified two conditions of such happiness: First, it is the kind of happiness that could survive a complete disclosure of truth about the universe; and second, it is the kind that one possesses only when one is filled with love for others. Given these two conditions, I have argued, it is logically impossible that God could produce such happiness in some created persons without also producing it in all others.

Now in response to this, Craig contends that God could permit some persons to damn themselves forever and still safeguard the blessedness of those in heaven. He makes two suggestions: first, that God could obliterate from the minds of the redeemed 'any knowledge of lost persons so that they experience no pangs of remorse for them';²² and second, that the glory of God's presence would in any case remove the knowledge of the lost from the consciousness of the redeemed. Concerning the second suggestion, he writes:

It is possible that the very experience itself of being in the presence of Christ (cf. the beatific vision) will simply drive from the minds of His redeemed any awareness of the lost in hell. . . . In such a case, the redeemed would still have such knowledge, but they would never be conscious of it and so never pained by it.²³

Craig thus concludes that the following is at least logically possible:

- (c) God will permit some persons to damn themselves freely, and he alone will endure the pain of knowing that these persons are eternally miserable and lost forever.

Now (c) clearly does entail (DT); so if (c) *is* possible, so also is (DT). But my previous arguments against the possibility of (DT) seem to apply with equal force against the possibility of (c), and neither of Craig's suggestions effectively counters those arguments. Consider his first suggestion more closely. As Craig sees it, the truth about the universe is ultimately tragic; so according to his first suggestion, God conceals the truth from the redeemed, even as a parent might conceal a painful truth from a child. In effect God performs a kind of lobotomy on the redeemed; he simply 'obliterates from their minds any knowledge of those persons who come to be lost. In the case of those whose entire family is lost, this would mean, I presume, that God expunges from their minds every memory of parents and other family members; and I doubt that Craig has any conception of how much of a person's mind that would destroy. He is right, of course, about this:

We can all think of cases in which we shield persons from knowledge which would be painful for them and which they do not need to have, and, far from doing something immoral, we are, in so sparing them, exemplifying the virtue of mercy.

But withholding information is one thing; obliterating part of a mind something else altogether. And in any event, Craig's observation has no obvious relevance to the argument I have given. Would he deny that the happiness of those from whom we appropriately withhold painful information would be more worthwhile if it did not require such deception? Consider the conditions under which it is appropriate to withhold painful information from a loved one. In every case, I

would suggest, this is either a concession to someone's poor physical health—as when a doctor conceals from a woman, critically injured in a traffic accident, that her child was killed—or a concession to someone's psychological or spiritual immaturity. The blissful ignorance that results from such deception is not only not supremely worthwhile; it is even inferior to the experience of misery under certain conditions. For no one who truly loves another would want to remain blissfully ignorant of the other's fate, however painful the knowledge of such a fate might be. No loving father, for example—not even one whose daughter endures a brutal rape and murder and not even one whose son commits suicide—would want to remain blissfully ignorant about what happened. It is far better, he would judge, to know the truth of the matter; he might even take elaborate steps to discover the truth. And the idea that he might prefer to have all memory of a son or a daughter obliterated from his mind—that he might prefer this over his anguish—is simply preposterous.

We must also consider, at this point, the kind of deception that an omnipotent and perfectly loving God might willingly employ in an effort to bring reconciliation to a fallen world. We observed in the previous section that God could, if he so chose, deceive one person concerning the ultimate fate of others, and we now find that Craig countenances just such a deception. But with this difference: According to Craig's first suggestion, God foists upon his 'redeemed' an *eternal* deception. And that, I must insist, is logically impossible. I have no doubt that, in order to meet the needs of his loved ones, God sometimes employs a *temporary* deception as a means of redemption; as the Apostle Paul himself teaches, God sometimes deceives those who are unready for the truth and does so as a means of bringing them ultimately to the truth.²⁴ But here the goal is to prepare people for an ultimate unveiling of truth; as Jesus said, we shall know the truth, and the truth (not an elaborate deception) shall set us free.²⁵ Such liberation is possible,

moreover, only if the truth about the universe is ultimately glorious rather than tragic. For if it were tragic, then God would face the following choice: Either (i) he could reveal to us the true dimensions of the tragedy, in which case we might still find *some* consolation in sharing our eternal grief with others, or (ii) he could conceal the tragedy from us, in which case we might remain blissfully ignorant. Given the necessity of such a choice, the first option strikes me as far superior to the second, but neither option is compatible with the most worthwhile kind of happiness. In the first case, we would be far happier if we could believe that our lost loved ones would eventually be restored to us; in the second, the very fact that our happiness requires a deception proves that it would be more worthwhile if it did not require a deception and was not, in that sense, a sham.

So far as I can tell, therefore, Craig offers nothing of substance in support of his suggestion that a loving God might foist an elaborate deception on his redeemed. But what about Craig's second suggestion? Is it possible that the beatific vision would remove all knowledge of the lost from the consciousness of the redeemed? In order better to assess this matter, let us distinguish between two kinds of ecstatic experiences: those which fill the recipient with love for others and those which do not. The latter might include the kind of ecstasy, such as some drug addicts seem to crave, that fixes one's attention upon oneself and upon the quality of one's own experience, to the exclusion of all else; the former might include the kind of experience that my own mother had when she almost died after giving birth to my twin sisters. As she later described the experience, which she interpreted as an encounter with God, it included an overwhelming sense of well being and of the groundlessness of her fear. Having overheard medical personnel speak matter-of-factly about her imminent death, she feared greatly that her death would have disastrous consequences for her children; and the best part of her experience, as she saw it, was the sense of

assurance that all would be well for her children, regardless of what might happen to her. Now it is simply not possible that such a mystical encounter with God should *both* have enhanced my mother's love for her children *and* have removed the knowledge of her children from her consciousness. If God could somehow have *diminished* her love for her children, perhaps then he could have removed the knowledge of them from her consciousness without obliterating that knowledge altogether; but in that case he would also have removed a necessary condition of supremely worthwhile happiness, as I have defined it. Accordingly, the argument against Craig's second suggestion is essentially the same as the one I have already given against Hard Hearted Theism. It is possible that the beatific vision will drive all knowledge of the lost from the consciousness of the redeemed (without obliterating it altogether) only if it is possible that the beatific vision will make the redeemed less loving and thus more calloused. But it is not possible that the beatific vision should undermine supremely worthwhile happiness, and neither, therefore, is it possible that such a vision should make someone less loving or more calloused. It is not possible, therefore, that the beatific vision will drive all knowledge of the lost from the consciousness of the redeemed.

I conclude that Craig's defence of the Damnation Thesis, as I have called it, is unsuccessful. Though (c) clearly entails (DT) and Craig *asserts* that (c) is possible, he offers nothing substantial in support of that assertion. Indeed, my previous arguments against the possibility of (DT) apply with equal force against the possibility of (c). To refute those arguments, Craig would have to do one of two things: either (i) challenge my analysis of supremely worthwhile happiness, or (ii) challenge my assumption that salvation includes such happiness. It is not enough merely to assert that (c) is possible.

Notes

¹ See William Lane Craig, 'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ', *Faith and Philosophy*, VI (April, 1989), pp. 172-178; *idem*, 'Talbot's Universalism', *Religious Studies*, 27 (Sept., 1991), pp. 297-308.

² See Thomas Talbot, 'The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment', *Faith and Philosophy*, VII (January, 1990), 19-42; and *idem*, 'Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny', *Religious Studies*, XXVI (1990), 227-245.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 59. An evil qualifies as broadly moral evil if it is produced by a free agent, either human or non-human.

⁴ 'Talbot's Universalism', p. 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹¹ Plantinga, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹² 'Talbot's Universalism', p. 301.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

¹⁴ Milton's portrayal of Satan, though enormously insightful in specific contexts, seems to me in the end as unrealistic as his depiction of the war in heaven (in which immortals fight each other with cannons and the like). Milton's artistic challenge was to portray Satan both as the Arch Fiend and as a free and morally responsible agent. That he was unable to unite both portraits into a believable whole in no way diminishes his artistic achievement.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ 'Human Destiny', p. 236.

²⁰ See 'No Other Name', p. 183.

²¹ 'Talbot's Universalism', p. 299.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

²⁴ See the eleventh chapter of Romans. See also the discussion in Thomas Talbot, 'The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation'. *Christian Scholar's Review* (forthcoming).

²⁵ John 8:32.