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MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE AND THE DAMNATION OF THE HEATHEN: A RESPONSE TO WILLIAM CRAIG

William Hasker

William Craig has proposed the view that all those persons who are in fact lost suffer from “transworld damnation”—the property of being such that, in every world actualizable by God in which one exists, one “freely does not respond to God’s grace and so is lost.” I show that Craig’s proposal implies a conclusion he cannot possibly accept—namely, that no one is ever saved as a result of the preaching of the Gospel who would not have been saved otherwise.

In a recent article,¹ William Craig has provided a solution for what he calls the “soteriological problem of evil,” the problem of why it is, given the goodness and love of God, that many persons, and in particular almost all of those who have never heard the Gospel, are eternally damned.² I believe this attempted solution must be characterized as courageous: Craig is well aware that, even among other orthodox Christians,³ not many will welcome his resolution of the problem. I propose to show, however, that the proposal is fatally flawed, that Craig’s solution resolves the problem only given an additional assumption which Craig cannot possibly accept.

Craig begins with what might be termed a Free Will Defense against the soteriological problem of evil. Modeled closely on Plantinga’s Free Will Defense, Craig’s objective is to show that

1. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent
- is logically consistent with
2. Some persons do not receive Christ and are damned.

The method, as with Plantinga, is to adduce a third proposition which is consistent with (1) and which, when conjoined with (1), entails (2). Craig’s candidate for this third proposition is

9. God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation.

“Transworld damnation” is a property modeled on Plantinga’s “transworld depravity,” which is the property of being such that, in every world God could



have actualized (every “feasible” world⁴) in which one exists, one freely performs a morally wrong action on at least one occasion. Similarly, trans-world damnation is the property of being such that in every feasible world in which one exists one “freely does not respond to God’s grace and so is lost.”⁵

Is Craig’s defense successful? Note that, as it stands, (9) does *not* entail (2), either singly or in conjunction with (1). For all (9) says, the “optimal balance” could be one in which *all* free creatures in need of salvation are in fact saved; the final quantification in (9) could be vacuous. What we need, then, is

- 9'. God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved in which not all are saved, and those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation.

Clearly, (9') entails (2), but is it consistent with (1)? It seems likely that it is. It seems plausible (indeed, I believe it to be true) that a loving God might prefer a world in which some creatures freely accept salvation while others freely reject it, to a world in which neither of these occurs. And I see no way to rule out as logically impossible the supposition that the “balance between saved and unsaved” in the actual world is optimal. And the final clause, which was introduced to avoid the complaint that the lost are treated unjustly by being placed in circumstances under which they would reject salvation, also seems to be logically possible.⁶ So far, then, Craig’s defense appears to succeed.

But Craig aspires to more than this; he says:

I find the above account of the matter to be quite plausible not only as a defense, but also as a soteriological theodicy. Indeed, I think that it helps to put the proper perspective on Christian missions: it is our duty to proclaim the gospel to the whole world, trusting that God has so providentially ordered things that through us the good news will be brought to persons who God knew would respond if they heard it.⁷

Craig holds, in other words, that (9) gives a *true account* of God’s reasons for actualizing a world in which many are lost.

Now this move from defense to theodicy creates a number of difficulties. There is, for one thing, the question of why anyone would suppose (9') to be *true*. Craig himself says nothing in its favor except that it helps to resolve certain theological difficulties. And some of the implications of (9') may well give us pause.⁸ But rather than pursue these matters, let us examine a pair of cases showing the application of (9'). Consider Pastor Paul, a veteran missionary approaching the end of a life of faithful service. He has devoted himself in ministry to a group of previously unevangelized tribesmen, with generally gratifying results. There have been a number of baptisms, and there are several small but vigorous village churches as a result of his mission. But one regret clouds Paul’s reflections. On two occasions he passed up oppor-

tunities to cross the nearby mountain range and preach to another tribe which has still not been reached with the Gospel. At the time there seemed to be good practical reasons for passing up these opportunities, but now he wonders whether simple fear for his own life may not have been the true motive. And he is deeply troubled lest he bear responsibility for the fate of the souls which may have been lost in consequence of his failure.

Fortunately, it is just at this juncture that the mail arrives, and included in it is Pastor Paul's copy of the April, 1989, *Faith and Philosophy*. He immediately sees the relevance of William Craig's article to his perplexity, and soon, his dogeared copy of *The Nature of Necessity* by his side for easy reference, he is deeply enmeshed in the complexities of counterfactual logic. The question he has in mind, let us remember, is

- (A) Are there persons to whom I failed to preach who are going to be lost, and who would have been saved had I gone to them with the Gospel?

After a thoughtful perusal of Craig's article, it becomes apparent to Pastor Paul that in all probability the answer is No. For from (9') we learn that those among the unreached tribe who will be lost suffer from *transworld damnation*, meaning that *in no circumstances in God's power to actualize* would those persons have accepted God's offer of salvation. Even if, for example, God were to take Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II, or all three together, send them to the unreached tribe with an exhaustive knowledge of its language and customs, and leave them there as long as you please, it would be unavailing. And if on those occasions when Pastor Paul declined the opportunity to go to them, God had made his will so clear that Paul would have gone in spite of his fears, that also would have resulted in no conversions.⁹ Paul shakes his head sadly at the tragic obduracy of the unsaved. Clearly, though, it is not his fault.

At this point another shadow crosses Paul's mind. It seems that, even if he had gone to the unreached tribe, little or no good would have resulted. But has he really accomplished much through the course he has in fact taken? Now Paul's question is

- (B) Are there persons who have been saved as a result of my preaching, who would not have been saved had they never heard the Gospel?

A little reflection, however, encourages him with the realization that in all likelihood the answer to (B) is Yes. As we have seen, there have in fact been a good number of conversions through Paul's preaching, and the likelihood that any of these persons would have been saved without hearing the Gospel, through their response to general revelation, is extremely small.¹⁰ There is no reason to doubt that, in the vast majority of instances, those who respond to the Gospel in faith are saved specifically because they have been evangelized and would not have been saved otherwise. As Craig says (and Pastor

Paul makes these words his own): "My compassion towards those in other...religions is...expressed...by my...making every effort myself to communicate to them the life-giving message of salvation through Christ."¹¹

Pastor Paul, then, seems to have reached a stable resting point in his reflections. On the one hand, he can be thankful to God for the fruitfulness of his mission, resulting in the conversion of many who would otherwise have been lost. On the other hand, he need not torment himself over his possible failure to be still more aggressive in his evangelistic efforts, for those whom he might have reached are victims of transworld damnation and almost certainly would not have responded to the Gospel in any case. To be sure, some of us may experience discomfort at the thought that Pastor Paul could similarly console himself *no matter what* his actual record of service might have been, *no matter how badly* he might have failed in the responsibility assigned to him. But let us trouble Pastor Paul no more; he deserves his rest.

Consider now Parson Peter. Peter is the minister of a thriving congregation which, to all appearances, is responding very favorably to his efforts. Yet he wonders, as many others have before him, whether his gifts might not be better employed in taking the Gospel to those who have never heard. His parishioners and their townsmen have had many, many opportunities to hear the Gospel, in contrast to the unevangelized masses of the world. Yet, he wonders, would he really make a difference by going? He is asking himself, in other words,

- (C) If I were to go to the mission field and preach to those who otherwise would never hear the Gospel,¹² are there persons who would be saved as a result of my preaching, who would otherwise be lost?

Fortunately, Peter also is a subscriber to *Faith and Philosophy*, and soon he, too, is immersed in William Craig's article. And with this help he quickly arrives at an affirmative answer to his question (C). Very few of the heathen, he realizes, would ever find God apart from the preaching of the Gospel, and as he anticipates his mission he draws deep inspiration from Craig's dictum that "it is our duty to proclaim the gospel to the whole world, trusting that God has so providentially ordered things that through us the good news will be brought to persons who God knew would respond if they heard it."¹³

In order to check his answer, however, Parson Peter now decides to put the question another way: he asks, not about the consequences if he goes to the mission field, but about the consequences if he remains where he is. His question, then, is

- (D) If I were to fail to go to the mission field, are there persons to whom I would in consequence not preach who would then be lost, and who would have been saved had I gone to them with the Gospel?

But now his thinking takes a surprising twist. For, following the same rea-

soning used by Paul to answer (A), Peter concludes that in all likelihood there is *no one* who would be saved as a result of his preaching who would not be saved otherwise. Any who are lost would, by (9'), be sufferers from transworld damnation—and as we have already seen, it is unlikely in the extreme that anything Peter might do would soften the heart of such a one.

And now Peter finds himself in a state of deep perplexity. He redoubles his concentration and checks his answers to both (C) and (D) several times over. But always he reaches the same answers: to (C), the answer is “in all probability Yes,” while to (D) the answer is, “in all probability No.” And yet, Peter reflects, (C) and (D) are to all intents and purposes *the same question*; they both ask concerning that group of persons who would be saved if Peter goes to preach to them and would be lost otherwise. And his reasoning concerning (C) seems to show clearly that there are likely to be many such persons, while his reasoning about (D) indicates there are probably none at all. Finally Peter’s copy of *Faith and Philosophy* slips through his dispirited fingers and falls to the floor. After some time, Peter picks up his pen and begins to write steadily: he will appeal to Pastor Paul for advice.

At this point we take leave of these two servants of the Lord, with good hope that between them they will find a solution to Peter’s spiritual dilemma. We, on the other hand, need to address the logical aspects of the problem—what we may term Peter’s Paradox. A first observation is that the paradox fails to appear in Paul’s *retrospective* reflections; it is only when Peter applies Craig’s position *prospectively*, looking forward to his own *future* mission, that it becomes apparent. And the reason for this is that in Paul’s case we were dealing with two *different* groups of people, one of which (the unreached tribe) suffered from transworld damnation, while the other (Paul’s converts) did not. In Peter’s case, on the other hand, it is *the same individuals* who (it seems) both are and are not damned transworldly.

Nevertheless, we have here only a paradox and not a contradiction. For we do not have the result that these persons both do and do not suffer from transworld damnation. What we have arrived at, rather, is that they *would* suffer from it if the Gospel were never preached to them, whereas they would *not* so suffer if the Gospel *were* preached to them. We have, in other words, the following proposition:

10. There exists some person such that (a) Peter will freely choose whether or not to preach the Gospel to this person, and (b) if Peter were to preach the Gospel to her, it would be the case that, if Peter were to preach to her, she would freely accept salvation, whereas (c) if Peter were not to preach the Gospel to her, she would suffer from transworld damnation and it would not be the case that, if Peter to preach to her, she would freely accept salvation.

It is evident that (10) is *extremely probable*, given Craig’s position, even

though it is not strictly *entailed* by it. Clearly, if the answer to (C) is Yes and to (D) No, then (10) follows. But the correct answer to (D) is “*in all probability* No,”¹⁴ and the correct answer to (C) is “*in all probability* Yes”;¹⁵ these answers, taken together, do not *entail* (10) but they do suffice to render (10) *extremely probable*. And so we come to the following important question: *Can (10) be true?* If it cannot, then Craig’s position, though perhaps not formally inconsistent, is surely untenable.¹⁶

It seems that (10) cannot possibly be true. It is clear that (10) amounts to saying that the transworld damnation of the persons in question, and therefore the counterfactuals of freedom true of these persons, *depend on Peter’s actions*. But how could *this* be true? One possibility which may occur to us is, that if *God knew* that Peter would not take the Gospel to the unevangelized tribe, he would see to it that the members of that tribe suffer from transworld damnation, but if he knew that Peter would go to them, he would insure that they are *not* afflicted with transworld damnation. But it is an absolutely essential feature of the theory of middle knowledge that *the counterfactuals of freedom are not under God’s control*. Nor is there any other intelligible way in which the tribesmen’s counterfactuals could depend on Peter’s action. I think it is reasonable to conclude that (10) is necessarily false, and Craig’s position is indeed untenable.¹⁷

Indeed, it is possible to show formally that (10) involves a contradiction. If we let “P” = the proposition that Peter preaches to the person in question, and “A” = the proposition that she accepts salvation, the two counterfactuals in (10) can be symbolized as follows:

- i. $P \Box \rightarrow (P \Box \rightarrow A)$
- ii. $\sim P \Box \rightarrow \sim (P \Box \rightarrow A)$

Now (a) says that Peter will *freely choose* whether or not to preach to her, and if this is so it must be possible that he will choose *not* to do so. In order to test this possibility, we add the assumption that Peter does *not* preach to her:

- iii. $\sim P$

Now we can derive:

- iv. $\sim(P \Box \rightarrow A)$ (from ii, iii)
- v. $(P \Box \rightarrow A)$ (equivalent to i)
- vi. $(P \Box \rightarrow A) \ \& \ \sim(P \Box \rightarrow A)$ (from iv, v)

We see, then, that adding “ $\sim P$ ” as an assumption generates a contradiction. It follows that either Peter’s not preaching is *not* a genuine possibility, which contradicts clause (a) from (10), or else one of the two counterfactuals, formulating clauses (b) and (c), must be false. We may conclude, then, that (10) is indeed self-contradictory, and Craig’s position is untenable.

How then do we account for the paradox? Is (9') inconsistent with (1) after all? I don't think so; the reasons given above for their consistency still strike me as correct. The difficulty arises, rather, from another assumption, independent of (9'), which Craig introduces into his discussion—an assumption which may be formulated as follows:

11. Most of those who accept the Gospel and are saved would not have been saved had the Gospel not been preached to them.¹⁸

It is this assumption which enables Paul to give an affirmative answer to (B), and which also supports Peter's affirmative answer to (C), which, together with the negative answer to (D), generates Peter's Paradox. In order to eliminate the paradox, (11) must be rejected.

Indeed, Craig's statements suggest that he is committed to a proposition which is considerably stronger than the denial of (11). Consider, once again, those persons who, in fact, accept the Gospel and so are saved. Would those persons have been saved if they had never heard the Gospel? It follows from (9') that they would have been saved under those conditions, *unless they would suffer from transworld damnation*. In the actual world, of course, they do *not* suffer from it, but it is possible that *these persons, who are in fact saved, would have suffered from transworld damnation if no one had preached the Gospel to them?* I have already suggested that there is no intelligible basis, in the theory of middle knowledge, for the suggestion that the counterfactuals of freedom true of a person depend on the actions of some other human being. But now there is another point which must be added to that one: *To assume that these persons would be damned transworldly if no one preached the Gospel to them undercuts the very reason for the introduction of transworld damnation*. That reason, it will be recalled, was to deprive the unevangelized heathen of grounds for complaint: there is no injustice in their never having heard the Gospel because, as God knew, even if they *had* been evangelized they would have rejected Christ. But it now turns out that *the property of transworld damnation is itself the product of the failure of evangelism!* It is clear that this assumption conflicts with Craig's position and must be rejected by him.

It seems clear, then, that we must reject the suggestion that those who are in fact saved would be damned transworldly if they had never heard the Gospel. But in that case, it follows from (9') that

12. All those who accept the Gospel and are saved would have been saved even if the Gospel had never been preached to them.

This avoids the paradox, but it is evident that Craig could not accept it, concerned as he is with the urgency of the task of world evangelism. Indeed, it is hard to see how any orthodox Christian could accept (12). But *if we*

accept (9'), it is inescapable that (12) must be true and (11) false. In view of this, the prospects for (9') as a "soteriological theodicy" are dim indeed.

Craig's defense (as opposed to theodicy) for the soteriological problem of evil remains, in a sense, unaffected by this. That is to say, it remains true that (9') is consistent with (1) and entails (2), thus showing that (1) and (2) are consistent. But in view of what we now know, this is likely to strike us as a Pyrrhic victory. For what we have shown is that *the price of (9') is the acceptance of (12) and the rejection of (11)*. But the claim of (11) to be part of orthodox Christianity is just about as strong as that of (2), and I would think there are in fact rather few Christians who affirm (2) and reject (11). If however we *add* (11) to the triad consisting of (1), (2), and (9'), the resulting set of propositions is inconsistent.¹⁹ The task of showing the consistency of (1), (2), and (11) still remains.²⁰

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NOTES

1. "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 6 (1989), pp. 172-88.

2. Craig allows that some who have never heard the Gospel might be saved through their response to the light of general revelation, but he believes that this would be true of at most a very small proportion of such persons (*ibid.*, p. 176).

3. Craig might prefer to say, "otherwise orthodox Christians."

4. The central idea of the Free Will Defense is that there are some logically possible worlds which God could not actualize, because the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that, if placed in the appropriate choice situations, one or more free creatures would not respond in the way they would need to respond for those particular worlds to become actual.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

6. Of course, (9') is logically possible only if there are true counterfactuals of freedom and middle knowledge is possible. These assumptions will not be contested here, although I believe them to be false.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

8. For one thing, we may be perplexed by the apparent *geographical and racial bias* in the incidence of transworld damnation. On Craig's account, transworld damnation must have affected very nearly the entire human race, aside from Jews, at the time of Christ; since then its incidence has gradually decreased as the Gospel has been spread throughout the world. It would be interesting, to say the least, to know Craig's explanation for this phenomenon.

9. We must be careful here. We might be inclined to think that it follows immediately from (9') that, had Paul on those past occasions freely decided to go to the unreached tribe,

there would have been no conversions. But since Paul in fact freely chose on those occasions *not* to go, it follows that Paul's counterfactuals are such that the world in which, *under exactly those same conditions*, Paul decides to go *is not a feasible world*. And because of this, it does not follow logically from the transworld damnation of the tribesmen that they would reject salvation in *that* world; transworld damnation tells us only what happens to its victims in *feasible* worlds. (That is why the answer to (A) is, "in all probability, No," and not "No" *simpliciter*.) But the practical importance of this point is slight, since we know that even under circumstances which are considerably more favorable than those which obtain in that particular world (*viz.*, those in which they were evangelized by some combination of Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, and the Pope), these tribesmen still would have rejected salvation.

This point can perhaps be made more persuasive by treating it in a general way. What I claim is this: If a person suffers from transworld damnation, and so would reject salvation in all feasible worlds, then it is most unlikely that this person would accept salvation in any of the unfeasible worlds which are fairly close to the actual world with respect to what happens in that person's life. For the feasible worlds presumably include some which are extremely favorable with respect to the person's opportunities to find salvation—favorable with respect both to the "means of grace" (*i.e.*, the forceful and appealing presentation of the Gospel, the witness of the lives of Christian persons, miraculous demonstrations of divine power, and so on) and with respect to the direct influence of the Holy Spirit in the life of that person. And if the person would still reject God under *those* circumstances, then that person is most unlikely to accept salvation in any of the unfeasible worlds where the person's life goes much as it does in the actual world.

10. "If we take Scripture seriously, we must admit that *the vast majority* of persons in the world are condemned and will be forever lost, even if *in some relatively rare cases* a person might be saved through his response to the light that he has apart from special revelation" (Craig, p. 176, emphasis added).

11. *Ibid.*, p. 186-87.

12. Peter here makes the assumption that there are persons to whom he might preach who otherwise would never hear the Gospel at all. We, also, will make this assumption, and will carry it throughout the subsequent reasoning. Clearly, in the vast history of missionary endeavor there must have been many missionaries and evangelists concerning whom such an assumption would be correct, even though it may be difficult to be absolutely certain of it in a particular case such as Peter's.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 186. Note that, unlike Paul's case, there is another way in which the answer to (C) could turn out to be No: It is conceivable that *no one* will be converted in response to Peter's preaching. This however is unlikely, given that God has so ordered things that "*through us the good news will be brought to persons who God knew would respond if they heard it.*" Peter applies this to himself, and rightly so—yet it by no means provides an absolute guarantee. I do not think Craig's dictum rules out the possibility that, in a few instances, God for his own good reasons might send his servants to spend their lives witnessing in situations where there is no one who will respond in faith. But, these cases, if they exist, must be quite rare, and there is no reason to expect that Peter's mission will be like this.

14. See the reasoning in Note 9 above.

15. See the reasoning in Note 13 above.
16. Note that there will be analogues of (10) concerning very many other persons who have faced decisions similar to Peter's; even if, contrary to the probabilities, (10) itself should turn out to be false, the probability that *all* propositions of this type would be false is vanishingly small.
17. No adherent of middle knowledge, so far as I know, has ever suggested that the truth of counterfactuals of freedom concerning a person depends on the actions of *some other human being*. Plantinga has suggested that these counterfactuals, in some cases, depend on *the agent herself*; I have argued against this in "A Refutation of Middle Knowledge" (*Noûs*, vol. 20 (1986), pp. 545-57).
18. That this is Craig's position is clear from the reasons given above in support of an affirmative answer to Paul's question (B).
19. This claim of inconsistency depends on the point, argued in the previous two paragraphs, that those who are in fact saved would not suffer from transworld damnation *in consequence of* never having been evangelized.
20. I do not mean to imply that I think these three propositions really are inconsistent. The bad apple in the barrel, in my opinion, is (9'), and in particular the notion of transworld damnation. In this case, it is the solution which is the problem.