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On 'The Vanity of God' A Reply to Taliaferro

Daniel A. Campana

An article entitled 'The Vanity of God' recently appeared in this journal and in it Charles Taliaferro attempted to exonerate the traditional Christian notion of God¹ from an apparent self-contradiction. Briefly put the alleged discrepancy was this:

1. God, according to Christian tradition, can have no vices.
2. Vanity is a vice.
3. God's activity in creating, demanding worship, and redeeming strongly imply that God is vain.

Therefore

4. Since 2 and 3 taken together contradict 1, the Christian concept of God is self-contradictory.

I shall call this central argument (I). Before proceeding with his assault on (I) it will be important to note that Taliaferro intimates that he holds to (II):

5. God, according to Christian tradition, has all virtues.²
6. Humility is a virtue.

Therefore

7. God has the virtue of humility.

And some form of (III):

8. No one who is humble can be vain.
9. God is humble.

Therefore

10. God is not vain.

I intend to show that the traditional Christian doctrine of God is involved in self-contradiction only if one begins with misconceptions about 'vanity', 'humility', and 'God'. In so doing I will demonstrate that the weakness of Taliaferro's argument against (I) is that he perpetuates these misconceptions. I will further show that it is not possible that God have the virtue of humility and that therefore (II) and (III) are unsound.

In the main, Taliaferro presents an argument against (I) by attacking 3. and implying the soundness of (II) and (III). In order to attack 3. he must show that neither a. God's creating man in His³ own image; nor b. God's demanding that His creatures worship Him; nor c. God's ordaining that He alone can be the active agent in the redemption of any of His creatures, entails that God is vain.

In the case of creation (a.) Taliaferro argues that were God cloning His own ego He would indeed be "looking in a mirror"⁴ and thus be guilty of vanity. But on the contrary God created free agents. Thus creation can be seen as an act of "other-regarding." Of course, if God created, or recreated, free agents whose sole purpose was to worship Him then His action again appears to be the height of conceit so Taliaferro argues with respect to b. that in worshipping God attention is not to be placed upon God Himself but upon the *excellences* and *perfections* which He possesses. Redemption can be seen as an act of re-creation. Taliaferro thus dispenses with c. as well by describing redemption as the opening of new freedoms to free agents: an act of other-centeredness.

In the context of redemption in Christ, Taliaferro quotes *Philippians 2:5*⁵ and suggests that in this redeeming activity God shows that He has the virtue of humility. In this way he insinuates (II).

Although Taliaferro is not straightforward about (III) he suggests a form of it. "The God who comes to us as servant does not strike one naturally as the god of Narcissus."⁶ As it stands of course (III) is less than convincing: surely there are moral agents who are at one time humble and at another time vain, so 8. is false. But Taliaferro might revise 8. to read: Humility and vanity are incommensurable in the sense that they cannot be manifest in the same moral agent at the same moment. And revise 9. to read: Since humility is one of God's perfections, it cannot at any time be displaced by its complement. From this 10. would follow.

Taliaferro has thus defended the Christian doctrine of God from the charge of self-contradiction and offered a positive argument for why God, according to Christian doctrine, could not be vain. The problem I wish to raise is that given the customary meanings of the terms 'vanity' and 'humility' it is difficult to see *why* anyone would wish to apply 'vanity', or *how* anyone could apply 'humility' to the God of Christian tradition.

Taliaferro speaks of vanity as an illicit form of pride. Where "proper pride" is an appropriate attitude for a moral agent to have toward her strengths, vanity is "willful, unwarranted self-exaltation" and "disproportionate self-regard" and "self-aggrandizement." Such an explanation of vanity is familiar. Aquinas spoke of this as a desire to excel in which one turns toward oneself and rejects all superiors.⁷

If 'vanity' is to be applied to the God of Christian tradition then we must

delineate the point at which God's "proper pride" becomes vanity. In order to do this we must further delineate the points at which God's warranted self-exaltation becomes "*unwarranted self-exaltation*"; or when God's proportionate self-regard becomes "*disproportionate self-regard*"; or when God is making Himself out to be 'greater than He really is'. When stated so baldly it is clear that these demands assume that there are limits to the grounds for God's self-exaltation and limits to the proportionment of God's self-regard; in short, limits to the greatness of God. But Christian tradition roundly denies just such limits.⁸ If there are no limits to the greatness of God then an unlimited amount of pride will still be "proper pride" and therefore appropriate for God as a moral agent. But if while exhibiting an unlimited amount of pride God does not transgress the bounds of "proper pride" then the term 'vanity' as commonly understood simply does not apply to God as known in the Christian tradition.

A similar problem arises with the term 'humility' when predicated of God. Taliaferro characterizes humility as 'being slow to believe the best about oneself and quick to believe so of others'.⁹ Again this definition is acceptable and so also is Taliaferro's assumption that it is a virtue. We must ask then whether God has this virtue. Taliaferro may hold (as Aquinas argued) that God has all moral perfections¹⁰. But as Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, God's properties have at least logical limits.¹¹ Is it logically possible for God as known in Christian tradition to have the virtue of humility?

Taliaferro alludes to God's redemptive act in the incarnation and quotes *Philippians* 2:5 as evidence that God has humility. Two problems arise here: one exegetical and the other logical. Exegetically it must be noted that the humility referred to in *Philippians* 2:5 is, on the one hand an attitude the Philippians are to have as they attempt to imitate the Jesus of history, and on the other hand it provides the occasion for the exaltation of the Christ of redemptive history: "*Therefore* (on the basis of His incarnation) God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."¹² Seen in its textual context humility is a virtue humans are to exhibit and it can even be used to describe the incarnate Jesus, but humility can hardly describe the God whose redemptive plan, culminating in Christ, was designed to bring about his own unlimited glory.

I suggest that the reason God's redemptive plan does not exhibit humility is that it would be logically impossible for the God of Christian tradition to be humble. Humility as Taliaferro defines it entails recognition of personal limits.¹³ If I am slow to believe the best about myself then it must be because I have some reason for believing that I am not unlimited in my capacities. But if there are no non-logical limits to God's greatness then how could He

recognize the existence of personal limitations? And if no such recognition is logically possible then true humility is not logically possible for Him.

Without engaging in an exegetical study to determine if Judeo-Christian tradition will allow Taliaferro's interpretation of God's activity in creating, demanding worship, and redeeming so that (I) would work, I offer that (I) is irrelevant because vanity could not apply to God. Further, against (II) and (III) I conclude that there is at least one moral perfection which is logically impossible for God to have: the virtue of humility.

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NOTES

1. By 'traditional Christian notion of God' I refer to, and go along with, Taliaferro's adherence to traditional language of God as a personal being and his refusal to evade the question of the applicability of moral categories to God by talking about God as impersonal or impassible in the sense that God lacks feeling. (Charles Taliaferro, "The Vanity of God," *Faith And Philosophy*, vol.6, no.2, April 1989, p. 143.)

2. Taliaferro seems to hold that God has all moral perfections (analogically?). *Ibid*, pp. 146-47.

3. Use of the masculine pronouns is maintained because the subject matter here is the traditional Christian doctrines and these were espoused in this manner.

4. *Ibid*, p. 144.

5. *Ibid*, p. 151.

6. *Ibid*, p. 152. See also p. 142 where the qualities of vain persons seem to exclude the qualities of humble persons, so that one person could not be characterized as having both.

7. *Summa Theologica* II, q.84, art.2.

8. Isaiah 48:11.

9. Taliaferro, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-42.

10. God is "universally perfect because He lacks not any excellence which may be found in any genus." *Summa Theologica* I, q.4, art.2. cf. I, q.13, arts.2&5.

11. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 167.

12. *Philippians* 2:9-11 RSV.

13. Taliaferro, *op. cit.*, p. 142.