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Gordon Knight

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## UNIVERSALISM AND THE GREATER GOOD: A RESPONSE TO TALBOTT

Gordon Knight

Thomas Talbott has recently argued in this journal that the three propositions 1) God wills universal salvation 2) God has the power to produce universal salvation and 3) some persons are not saved are inconsistent. I contend that this claim is only true if God has no overriding purposes that would place restrictions on the means God uses to achieve God's ends. One possible example of such an overriding purpose would be God's aim to produce the most good. I end by suggesting that while God's purpose of universal salvation does render the achievement of this end probable, it is by no means necessary.

Thomas Talbott claims that the following propositions are logically inconsistent:

- (1) It is God's redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself.
- (2) It is within God's power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world.
- (3) Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there is no hope of escape, or put them out of existence altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Talbott admits that for these three propositions to be inconsistent, the following must be a necessary truth: "If it is God's redemptive purpose to reconcile all sinners to himself and it is within his power to accomplish that purpose, then he will indeed reconcile all sinners to himself."<sup>2</sup> This, however, does not strike me as a necessary truth. Consider the following analogous proposition:

If it is Mr. Jones' purpose to become president of the United States and it is in Mr. Jones' power to become president of the United States, then Mr. Jones will become president of the United States.

Suppose in this instance that Jones is Vice President, and has it in his



power to assassinate the President. I do not think that the mere fact that Jones has the purpose of becoming president entails that he will assassinate the President in order to do so. This is because the statement "It is Mr. Jones' purpose to become President" does not exclude Jones from having other purposes which may in some way conflict with the means necessary to achieve this end. Similarly, I suggest the statement "It is God's redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself" does not entail that God could not have an overriding purpose that prevents him from using all possible means for achieving this end. If God does have an overriding purpose, then while God may desire the salvation of all, and while it may be in God's power to do so, it may still be that all are not saved.

Perhaps another example familiar to philosophical theology will make this point clearer. Most contemporary theodocies rely in part at least on what is called the "free will defense" against the argument from evil. Interestingly, the argument from evil against God's existence can also be stated in terms of three seemingly inconsistent statements:

- (4) It is God's will to prevent evil from occurring.
- (5) It is in God's power to prevent evil from occurring.
- (6) There is evil in the world.

The claim is then made that the first two propositions are defining features of traditional theism, and that since they are incompatible with the existence of evil in the world, we should conclude that the God of traditional theism does not exist. The standard defense against the argument is to point out that some evil might be necessary for some higher purpose. Perhaps God's desire to produce free beings, itself a great good, logically requires that God allow for the possibility of these free beings producing evil. One might even put the point this way: God aims to create as good a world as possible. While evil considered in itself is of course not good, there are some great goods (such as the existence of free beings) that logically require the possibility of evil. I am not claiming here that the free will defence is, by itself, an adequate theodicy. However, I would claim that if there is any hope for an adequate solution to the problem of evil, the free will defense should at least play a role.

My argument should now be clear. The three propositions Talbott lists are not inconsistent because the logic of desire allows one to desire something and yet not desire to do everything that is in one's power to achieve that end. But perhaps Talbott would reply that I am misreading (1) above. Perhaps he means it to be the claim that God has an overriding desire to save all sinners. By an overriding desire, I mean a desire such that no other desire or collection of desires can be capable of overriding the means that are necessary to achieve the end in question. So we might rephrase (1) as "It is God's redemptive purpose for the world to reconcile all sinners to himself *at all costs.*" But this proposition is only plausible if it is reasonable to assume that God does not have any purpose that could override the goal of universal salvation. What other purpose might God have that would outweigh his desire to save souls?

Here is one suggestion:

- (7) God desires to produce the most good.

Indeed it is plausible to suppose that God's desire to reconcile sinners does logically follow from this one basic desire. For certainly the salvation of each individual is a great good, and insofar as it is true that God desires to produce the most good, God desires to save souls. But the desire to produce the most good is a much broader desire than the desire to save souls. There may be some things that are very good, the desire for which prevents God from using coercive means to save souls. The existence of free beings, and the respect for the autonomy of such beings, might be candidates for such a good.

Talbott could here claim in response that God has a way of insuring that all are saved compatible with respecting the free will of God's creatures. Perhaps God, by revealing his goodness in full to a creature, will be able to insure that the will of that creature be turned to God. Let us suppose that he is right here. But all this would show is that God's will for this particular good does not conflict with his will for salvation. It does not show that there are not any stronger desires that might perform this purpose. As long as it is possible for God to have such a higher desire however, the three propositions are not inconsistent.

Furthermore, I think that there may very well be a good that would lead God *not* to reveal his nature. It may be a great good not only that human beings have free will, but also that human beings grow spiritually and morally as result of their *own* efforts. Indeed this is the insight that lies behind the soul making theodicy of John Hick.<sup>3</sup> If this is true, then God may have a reason never to reveal his nature in such a way that salvation is the only option for a given individual. Perhaps the possibility of human beings achieving salvation without aid of some kind of beatific vision is itself a good that at any given instant overrides God's will to save all souls. Recall again the difficulties that surround the development of a theodicy for *this* world. For if God can save all souls directly, and there is no great intrinsic good in their coming to God via the trials and tribulations of this earthly vale of tears, then God's purpose of salvation would seem to entail that the sufferings of this earthly life are gratuitous, in which case the argument from evil rises like a phoenix with renewed power.

It is interesting to note however that this line of reasoning only works if one accepts certain theological presuppositions. Indeed, if one supposes along with the Augustinian tradition that salvation is ultimately a *gift* that is given by God, then it seems to me that the argument against universalism that I have been proposing falters. For, after all is said and done, the Augustinian picture does not really allow for our achieving salvation as a function of our freely chosen growth and development. Furthermore, if one supposes that God possesses divine foreknowledge, then it seems reasonable to suppose that God, knowing that Albert the sinner will never make it to salvation on his own, may feel justified in nudging him along with a direct experience of the divine. Again, it

seems that the examples I have given of possible overriding purposes for the deity are rendered implausible. If, however, one adopts the view of God as epistemically open to the future, then God would never be in a situation such that God knows that Albert the sinner will not freely come to be saved. Given such a hypothesis, God may reasonably continue to try to get Albert to grow and develop by means of his free choices, rather than induce such a growth by means of some divine illumination. In any case, as long as it is logically possible for there to be a good that overrides God's will for universal salvation, it remains *possible* that all will not be saved. Perhaps Origen was wrong in believing that Satan would be saved.

But, then again, perhaps Origen was right. For it is far from my intent here to deny that all will be saved. If I were to wager a bet, I would wager that all will be saved. Thus, there is a sense in which I agree with Talbott's universalism. However, unlike Talbott, I do not believe that universalism is a truth that follows from God's nature as a loving being who is able to save all and has the power to do so. For if we take libertarian free will seriously, then the possibility that one or more persons will never achieve salvation must be allowed, however unlikely given God's overall aims. If my argument above is correct then God's desire for the greatest good may provide a good reason to limit the means he uses to produce salvation. However, given that God has at his disposal infinite time, and innumerable non-coercive means of nudging recalcitrant sinners towards salvation, the likelihood that any would in the end not be saved strikes me as extremely slim.<sup>4</sup>

This response to Talbott relies on a rejection of divine foreknowledge that Talbott (and others) may find unpalatable. Perhaps Talbott would argue that such a rejection itself involves a rejection of one of the claims of scripture. He might then conclude that it is much better to retain this doctrine than to reject the certainty of universal salvation<sup>5</sup>. But this argument can be challenged on both scriptural and philosophical grounds. On scriptural grounds, it has been pointed out that while some passages of the Bible seem to support divine foreknowledge, others imply a view of God that is open to the future.<sup>6</sup> Philosophically it has been argued, correctly in my view, that such an interpretation of omniscience logically precludes the existence of genuine creaturely freedom.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the belief that God foreknows the future creates even more problems for the theist when she confronts the problem of evil. For on this view while the evil done by human beings may not be directly caused by God, it is nevertheless the case that God knew of and decided to permit evils such as the Holocaust prior to creation. Now *perhaps* God does have a reason for creating a world with a holocaust as opposed to one that does not contain such a great evil. The deductive argument from evil fares no better with foreknowledge than without. However, given the *prima facie* implausibility of the claim that a world with the Holocaust is better than one without, the inductive argument from evil is much stronger when applied to a variety of theism that involves divine foreknowledge.

These views are of course controversial. Let us then suppose that

God does possess foreknowledge. On this assumption God will have a *reason* for not including certain individuals in the world, namely, those that he foreknows would not be saved. In this way God can insure universal salvation without violating the free will of his creatures. Now if this picture were correct, then one particular good, the existence of free creatures, would not get in the way of universalism. However, this response on behalf of Talbott does not show that there are *no goods* such that God's desire to produce them provides God with sufficient reason to produce a person who God foreknows will not be saved. Thus, the logical point that the three propositions listed by Talbott are not inconsistent, remains.

Furthermore, it does not follow from the fact that the salvation of any individual person is a great good that the universe only containing persons who will be saved is the best universe. It may be, in other words, that while it is a great good for each person to be saved nevertheless a universe which contains also some individuals who are not saved is a better universe than one which contains only those individuals that will be saved. This is simply an application of G.E. Moore's principle of organic unities.<sup>8</sup> Thus for the world to be the best possible (or perhaps just better than some other alternative worlds) it may be that God would have to include beings who never will achieve salvation. Indeed on the orthodox view, non-human animals may be examples of such beings. Thus, even if we assume that God does possess foreknowledge, there is no reason for us to suppose that God must have arranged the world so that all will be saved. Again it *may* be the case that all will be saved. Given God's loving nature I believe we have good (but not logically conclusive) reason to believe that this is, in fact, the case. But this conclusion cannot be logically inferred from the conjunction of Talbott's first two propositions.

Central College

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Talbott, "Three Pictures of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995), p.79.

2. *Ibid.*

3. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

4. Indeed one difficulty of making a bet such as the one I suggested is that if one bets on the side of eternal separation from God, there is no time at which one may collect one's bet. For it does seem to me inconsistent with the goodness of God's will for God to put a timetable on salvation.

5. This objection was suggested to me by William Wainwright.

6. See Richard Rice "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in Clark Pinnock, ed., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), pp.11-58.

7. The contemporary debate on this question can be traced to Nelson Pike's "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action" in John Martin Fisher, ed., *God foreknowledge and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1989). A more recent, and thorough defence of the incompatibility of

freedom and foreknowledge can be found in William Hasker's *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

8. See *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp 28-30. The principle states that for any given whole, the value of that whole cannot accurately be determined by determining the sum of the value of its component parts. One cannot, to give Moore's example, arrive at the correct value of whole which consists of a particular consciousness of a beautiful object, by taking whatever value consciousness and the beautiful object have in isolation and adding them together.