

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 25 | Issue 2

Article 1

---

4-1-2008

## Plantinga on "Felix Culpa": Analysis and Critique

Marilyn McCord Adams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Adams, Marilyn McCord (2008) "Plantinga on "Felix Culpa": Analysis and Critique," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200825212

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol25/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# PLANTINGA ON “FELIX CULPA”: ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

Marilyn McCord Adams

In “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” Alvin Plantinga turns from defensive apologetics to the project of Christian explanation and offers a supralapsarian theodicy: the reason God made us in a world like this is that God wanted to create a world including the towering goods of Incarnation and atonement—goods which are appropriate only in worlds containing a sufficient amount of sin, suffering, and evil as well. Plantinga’s approach makes human agents and their sin, suffering and evil, instrumental means to the end of God’s cosmic aims. I press the objection that means/end conceptuality is inadequate to explain how God is loving and merciful (as opposed to abusive) towards human sinners and sufferers. Plantinga’s theodicy remains under-developed without an explanation of how Incarnation and atonement benefit them.

## *I. Free-Will Defender of the Faith*

In his early and middle years, Alvin Plantinga was a vigorous promoter and practitioner of *defensive apologetics*, which assumes the truth of the Christian faith and shoulders a limited burden of proof.<sup>1</sup> On Plantinga’s construal, the task of the defensive apologist is neither to demonstrate the truth of doctrinal tenets with arguments convincing to all reasonable persons, nor to furnish explanations that would help unbelievers understand what Christians really mean in holding them. Rather, the assignment is to rebut unbeliever’s arguments against the reasonableness of Christianity, and to do so with minimal philosophical and theological exposure.

In his book *The Nature of Necessity*<sup>2</sup> and many earlier and later articles, Plantinga’s attention was on the atheological argument from evil, which forwards the following inconsistent triad:

- (I) God exists, and is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good.
- (II) Evil exists.
- (III) If (I), then not-(II).

Many atheologians insisted, (III) is a necessary truth, and concluded that God and evil are logically impossible. Moving at a high level of abstraction, rebuttal takes the form of a credible rejection of (III). Plantinga explains, what the defensive apologist needs to do is to identify an *R* which is logically possible, is logically compossible with (I) and entails



(II). So far as this *logical* problem of evil is concerned, *R* need not be true or even plausible either to believers or to unbelievers, so long as it meets the formal requirements just laid down.

Plantinga himself was especially concerned to revitalize the Free Will Defense, by rebutting an objection to it by J.L. Mackie. If free will defenders in effect proposed

*R1*: God created a world with incompatibilist free creatures and allowed them unfettered exercise of their freedom; and some of them sinned,

Mackie in effect retorted that *R1* is not logically compossible with (I), because a world with sinless free creatures is logically possible. Omnipotence can bring about anything that is logically possible, and perfect goodness would prefer sinless to sinful free creatures. Therefore, if (I), God would bring about a world with sinless free creatures instead.

By way of rebuttal, Plantinga imbedded his distinctive Free Will Defense within a possible worlds framework. God's creative activity is construed in terms of Divine actualization of a possible world. Implicitly assuming that Divine Goodness is to be defended in terms of the quality of the mega-states of affairs God actualizes, Plantinga agrees that Divine omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness entails that any world God actualizes would be a very good world. To rebut Mackie's charge that any world God actualized would have to contain only sinless free creatures, Plantinga draws on a Molinist conception of incompatibilist freedom to argue for the startling conclusion that there are some possible worlds that God can't actualize. The reason is that for every possible incompatibilist free creature *S*, considered as merely possible, there are not only necessary truths about that creature's possible choices—e.g., Adam chooses to eat the apple in *W*, Adam chooses not to eat the apple in *W'*. In addition, for every possible incompatibilist free creature *S*, and for every circumstance *C* in which *S* could be actualized, there are *contingent* truths about what that agent *S* would do if actualized in *C*: e.g., Adam would choose to eat if actual in Eden, Adam would not choose to eat if actual in Shangrila. These "counter-factuals of freedom" are supposed—by Plantinga—to be true not only prior to and independently of the *actual* existence and *actual* choices of the incompatibilist free creatures, but also prior to and independently of Divine choice. As such, they are fates (although Plantinga does not use the term), which—like necessary truths—God has to work with, and they restrict God's options. God consults which choice patterns the fates make available and then actualizes free creatures in the state of affairs that will issue in scenarios congruent with Divine purposes. Where worlds containing incompatibilist free creatures are concerned, which world is actual is a function of the state of affairs God actualizes on God's own (of which state of affairs God *strongly* actualizes) and the fates (which God does not control), and so Plantinga speaks of God's *weakly* actualizing the possible world as a whole.

With this philosophical machinery in hand, Plantinga proposes that it is logically possible that all possible incompatibilist free creatures are transworld depraved: that no matter what circumstance God decided to actualize them in, they would go wrong at least once. Plantinga's candidate for *R* is some version of

R2: God actualizes a very good world containing incompatibilist free creatures each of whom goes wrong at least once—a world that displays the most favorable balance of moral good over moral evil, God can get.

Plantinga insists, R2 is compatible with (I) and entails (II). The Free Will Defense is triumphant after all!

### *II. Felix Culpa! and Christian Understanding*

In his middle and more recent years, Plantinga has made room for the complementary project of Christian understanding; in his "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" (I'll call it "Felix Culpa" for short), he ventures from defense into theodicy.<sup>3</sup> Cast in terms of his older framework, he is now interested in identifying an *R* that not only has the requisite formal properties—of being logically possible, logically compossible with (I), and entailing (II). He wants an *R* that will carry some explanatory weight with Christians, that will help Christians to understand why an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God—Plantinga now interprets, a God Who is loving and merciful<sup>4</sup>—would create us in a world like this. To do this work, Plantinga's new *R* will have to be one that Christians believe to be true, or at least plausible, a coherent and suggestive extension of the beliefs and understandings that they already hold. As a by-product, the new *R* should help non-Christians understand one way that Christians might coherently hold (I) to be logically compossible with (II).

In "Felix Culpa," Plantinga sticks to his possible worlds framework, still characterizes Divine creation in terms of world actualization, still sets Divine evaluative sights on mega states of affairs. As before, Plantinga holds fast to his Molinism, however contestible and widely contested it has proved to be. (Certainly, I would contest it, but—like Plantinga—I forego old and familiar disputes to focus on fresher things.) As before, Plantinga concludes, it follows from (I) Divine omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness that any world God actualizes would be a very good world. Mega states of affairs have many good-making and/or bad-making features (beauty and happiness and justice and performance of duty versus pain and suffering and hatred and wrong-doing) that most people—unbelievers as well as believers—would recognize as such.<sup>5</sup> In "Felix Culpa," however, Plantinga is especially eager to draw attention to some Christian value-commitments that erstwhile (because now deceased and—Christians believe—better informed) atheologists like Mackie did not share: most notably, to the existence of God, to the good that God *is*; and to the fact of the Incarnation and atonement.<sup>6</sup> Focussing first on the good that God *is*, and without putting too fine a point on it, Plantinga speaks of Divine goodness as "unlimited" or "infinite" or "incommensurate," which mean at least that the good that God *is* outweighs any aggregate of merely created goods or evils.<sup>7</sup> Plantinga goes on to infer,

**Corollary 1:** any world in which God exists is *ipso facto* a very good world, whether or not it contains any creatures.<sup>8</sup>

And since, necessarily, if God actualizes a world, God exists in that world,

**Corollary 2:** any possible world that God could create is a very good world.

Further, since—many Christian philosophers would agree—(I) is a necessary truth—God’s existence, omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness are necessary,

**Corollary 3:** any possible world is a very good world.<sup>9</sup>

The problem posed by evil for believing Christians is not that it disproves the existence of God. Rather, given Corollaries 1–3, and given God’s necessary existence, omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness, the problem is to understand *how* this can be a very good world given evils in the amounts and of the kinds and with the distributions that we actually experience. Put otherwise, the swamping effect of infinite Divine goodness on global values, does not make what else the world contains irrelevant for Christian understanding of how God can be good or loving towards His personal creatures. For Plantinga, as for the great medieval theologians, part of the explanation lies in God’s posture towards the evils and God’s posture towards us! In “Felix Culpa,” Plantinga does recognize “imaginable or conceivable worlds” (presumably in the sense of being worlds free from internal contradiction) that are so bad that God *would* not actualize them (e.g., worlds in which all sentient creatures experience continual and unrelieved excruciating pain).<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the “towering” goods of Incarnation and atonement, Plantinga endorses

**The Strong Value Assumption:** there is a level  $L$  of excellence or goodness among possible worlds such that all the worlds at that level or above contain Incarnation and atonement,

which implies that any world at or above  $L$  is a highly eligible world. Plantinga conducts his argument on the basis of the Strong Value assumption, but he thinks it would work as well on

**The Moderate Value Assumption:** for families of possible worlds containing the same free creatures, the worlds in which those creatures sin but are offered redemption through Incarnation and atonement are better than the worlds in which those same free creatures are sinless and need no redemption,

which—he says—does not entail that every world with Incarnation and atonement is better than every world without them, and does not entail that there is a level  $L$  such that every world at or above it contains Incarnation and atonement.<sup>11</sup> Suppose that the worlds in family  $F$  contain  $n$  free creatures, while the worlds in family  $F^*$  contain  $10n$  free creatures. On the Moderate Value Assumption, it is possible that the better  $F^*$  worlds with  $10n$  free creatures but no Incarnation and atonement, exceed the value of any of the  $F$  worlds. Incarnation and atonement might trump within families, without trumping *tout court*.

Plantinga seems to over-reach himself when he suggests that his argument requires only

**The Weak Value Assumption:** some possible worlds of great value include Incarnation and atonement.

One problem is that the Weak Value Assumption not only differs from, but is compatible with the following inversion of the Moderate Value Assumption: viz., that for every world in which creatures sin and are redeemed through Incarnation and atonement, there is another even better world in which those same free creatures exist but never sin at all. And, as we are about to see, the argument that Plantinga actually gives turns on claiming that within the relevant class of world options, sin, Incarnation, and atonement confer greater global value.<sup>12</sup>

If the "very-goodness" contributed by the existence of God is a constant, value comparisons among worlds will focus on the rest of what they include. The Strong Value Assumption says that Incarnation and atonement will get any world up to a level-*L*, which is greater than that of any world that does not contain them, and every possible world that does contain them is at level-*L* or above. So Plantinga's new candidate for *R* is

*R3:* God creates a level-*L* or above world that contains the Incarnation and atonement.<sup>13</sup>

But Atonement is not appropriate apart from a sufficient amount of sin, suffering, and evil. *Felix culpa*, because human sin is a necessary condition for any possible world's being at level *L* or above. Plantinga contends, *R3* is itself logically possible, logically compossible with (I), and entails (II). Moreover, *R3* explains to Christians, in terms of characteristically Christian beliefs and concepts, why God would create us in a world like this. God creates us in a world with sin and suffering and evil, because God wants to create a level-*L* or above world, one that contains Incarnation and atonement! Plantinga concludes that this would constitute a successful theodicy.<sup>14</sup>

### III. *Supra- vs Infralapsarianism*

Historically, the terminology 'supra-' vs 'infralapsarian' (above and below the fall, respectively) gets introduced into a debate about Divine predestination. Which comes first? Does God first foresee Adam's fall (human sin) and then (on the basis of that knowledge) divide Adam's fallen race into those predestined to eternal blessedness in heaven and those reprobated to suffer eternal torments in hell? Or does God first partition the human race into the heaven-bound and the hell-bent, and then furnish and withhold helps of grace so that individual human careers are congruent with their pre-established destinies? Historically, the issue is the ordering of *foreseen sin* and *eternal destiny assignment*. Apparently wishing to finesse the question of double predestination, Plantinga reformulates the contrast as about the ordering of *permission to sin* and *decision to save*:

According to supralapsarianism, the decree to save some of the fallen precedes the decree to permit sin; according to infralapsarianism, it's the other way around.<sup>15</sup>

Plantinga rightly reckons that the kind of priority in question is priority of intention: the contrast is between ultimate ends (what is first intended) and proximate ends or chosen means (what is intended for the sake of the ultimate end). Plantinga concludes, according to *R3*, the *supra*'s have it.<sup>16</sup>

Even if Divine focus is global and what God chooses to actualize is a possible world as a whole, Plantinga recognizes that certain good-making and bad-making features within a world may furnish *the reason* for Divine choice. Thus, in his earlier distinctive Free Will Defense, God's ultimate aim is a very good world whose incompatibilist free creatures compile moral records with the most favorable balance of moral goodness over moral evil that the fates (the counterfactuals of freedom) allow.<sup>17</sup> Incompatibilist free creatures exercising significant freedom to do right, is part of God's ultimate aim. Their each going wrong at least once is a regrettable price God has to pay because of the way the fates fall out. "Felix culpa!" is not God's reaction, because—early and middle Plantinga still concedes to Mackie, at least for the sake of argument—God would actualize a world with sinless free creatures if God could. Plantinga's earlier Free Will Defense does not mention Incarnation and atonement at all, but relies on the "very goodness" conferred on the world by free creatures' moral records; after all, he was doing defensive, minimal-exposure apologetics. Nevertheless, the reader is left to think that the earlier Free Will Defense is *infralapsarian*.

By contrast, Plantinga's analysis in "Felix Culpa" is *supralapsarian*. God's ultimate aim is an *L*-level world, one that contains Incarnation and atonement. Sin, suffering and evil are proximate ends or chosen means. The decree to provide Incarnation and atonement and hence salvation is prior to the decree to permit the fall into sin, not the other way around.<sup>18</sup> Plantinga goes further to explain: if sin, suffering, and evil are necessary for atonement, and Incarnation and atonement are necessary for a level-*L* world, then Christ's suffering will not be sufficient for a level-*L* world; human suffering—he should have added, sin and evil—will be required as well. He commends this as a perfectly good sense in which our sufferings fill up the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24).<sup>19</sup>

This contrast does not mean that Plantinga's two proposals are themselves incompatible. The Free Will Defense is a piece of defensive apologetics, which aims to defend the logical compossibility of (I) and (II). *R2* is advanced, not as true or plausible, but as logically possible. By contrast, "Felix Culpa" aims at theodicy, and its *R3* is proposed as true. Since what is at stake is the contingent ordering of Divine intentions, *Infralapsarianism* could be possible even if *Supralapsarianism* were true, indeed—as Plantinga claims—a true theodicy. What would be incompatible with Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" *Supralapsarianism*, would be to continue to grant—with Mackie—that 'A perfectly good God would create a world with sinless free creatures in preference to a world with sinful ones, if God could' is a necessary truth, or—relative to the actual world—a truth at all.

#### IV. Means and Ends

*Using or Abusing?* Possible worlds are mega states of affairs. Possible worlds approaches to the problem of evil easily slide into a consequentialist assumption: that because agents are to be evaluated in terms of the states of

affairs they bring about, it is enough to defend Divine goodness by pointing to the laudable overall qualities of the possible world God actualizes (e.g., that it is the best of all possible worlds; that it is a world with the most favorable balance of moral good over moral evil the fates allow; that it exhibits maximum variety and maximum unity). Especially from a Christian point of view, however, it is important to distinguish between what I have called God's "global" goodness, or goodness at cosmos production, from God's "person-oriented" goodness—to the individual persons God creates. Certainly, the bible represents God as interested in cosmic excellence (cf. Gen 1), but it also tells of God's love and mercy towards individual created persons. Since positively valued organic wholes (such as many possible worlds arguably are) can contain negatively valued parts that enhance cosmic excellence, going for a high degree of cosmic excellence would not guarantee individual personal well-being. Just as a blob of ugly billious green might be necessary to produce Monet's exquisite design, so horrendous suffering by created persons might be a necessary ingredient in (a constitutive means to) the best of all possible worlds. Already Leibniz was criticized: to represent God as someone Who would accept the Lisbon earthquake as the price of getting the best of all possible worlds, is to portray God as so focussed on maximizing world-excellence as not to care much about the created persons God has made!<sup>20</sup> But Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" theodicy explicitly makes created sin, suffering, and evil to be necessary Divinely chosen means to actualizing a level-L or above world (God's ultimate aim). Plantinga even makes the unKantian observation that "not all rational creatures are equal with respect to value, i.e., to the value of the worlds in which they exist."<sup>21</sup> Isn't Plantinga's God just *using* created persons, treating them to their detriment as *means* to Divine cosmic ends? However Plantinga may commend Divine excellence at world-making, doesn't his theodicy undermine any claim that God is loving or merciful, good-to the persons involved?

Plantinga considers this objection, and has the courage of his convictions. His Moderate Value assumption would have God choosing between two families of worlds that include exactly the same created persons: in one family of worlds, the created persons are all sinless and free from suffering and evil and so need no redemption; while in the other family of worlds, they sin, experience suffering and evil, and are rescued by Incarnation and atonement. God actualizes those free creatures in careers that include sin, suffering, and evil, when God could have spared them such troubles. God doesn't, because God is using them and their suffering—Plantinga should have added, sin and evil—as means to the Divine cosmic end of actualizing a higher quality world.<sup>22</sup>

Confronting the charge that it is morally objectionable (in any event, incompatible with Divine goodness, love, and mercy) for God to use created persons, that this would be to treat them as means rather than ends, Plantinga construes the issue as one of fairness or justice. His bold retort is, "what's wrong with that?"<sup>23</sup> It isn't always wrong for people to treat one another as means: employers treat employees as means to the end of getting the job done, and employees treat employers as means to the end of earning a living. God is the owner of the world's vineyard. Why should God not treat created persons as laborers?<sup>24</sup>



Scanning for disanalogies that would motivate the objection, Plantinga fixes on two. The first is the issue of “free and voluntary consent.” To many, it seems wrong to impose harms on persons without their free and voluntary consent. Employers freely offer; employees freely take the job, thereby “signing a consent form” for any hardships it involves. But

God doesn't ask for our permission before creating us, before actualizing this world in which we are called upon to suffer. We don't accept the suffering voluntarily; we don't get a choice . . . isn't that somehow unfair?<sup>25</sup>

Second, the employees get something out of the arrangement: wages. In the “Felix Culpa” scenario as Plantinga has so far described it, God calls on us to live out careers of sin, suffering, and evil, for the world's sake, for the sake of Divine purposes. Nothing has yet been said about these careers advancing the creatures' good or well-being—which is what person-centered goodness, love or mercy toward individual creatures would require.<sup>26</sup>

*Consent, How Relevant?* Plantinga is clear, God has no *obligation* not to use us. God is entitled to do what God wants with what is God's own. (With this claim, I, for one, would surely agree.) For Plantinga (as for me), the issue is whether God would be unloving or unmerciful in actualizing us in careers in which we live through significantly bad experiences that do not benefit us, without our consent. Plantinga observes that—given his Molinist, possible worlds framework for Divine decision making—it is logically impossible for God to get our consent prior to Divine selection of which world to actualize. In moral reasoning, what we do (e.g., in medical ethics dilemmas) when the agent is *unable* to consent (as with the comatose) is consider whether they would consent if they could. Since God knows all of the counterfactuals of freedom, God would know the answer to such questions. Still, the person's own preferences are not always decisive even with those who love him/her. Sometimes a person is unwilling only because of *ignorance*, but would consent if s/he knew all of the relevant facts. It would not count against our goodness towards such a person to override their refusal and proceed in such a case. Other times a person is unwilling because of *disordered affections*. Plantinga mentions the loving mothers who drag their eight year olds kicking and screaming to piano lessons, because the children (whose agency is still immature) don't know what's good for them. By the time we finish the list, it seems that God is not unloving or unmerciful to act without our consent, because what's relevant is not what *we personally* would agree to, but what “an ideal consentor” with full knowledge and perfectly ordered affections would choose. And God knows what that is, in advance of Divine decisions about which world to actualize.

The question about consent arose from worries about God's person-centered goodness towards us in using us as means to getting a level-*L* world. Plantinga's blunt “what's wrong with that?” response, his insistence that it is not always morally objectionable to use people as means, is probably congruent with Kant's famous formulation of the maxim: “don't treat people as means *only* and not as ends in themselves!” The Kantian

point is that there are moral constraints on how we use each other and for what ends we use each other. It is morally permissible to do so, only in ways that respect the dignity and worth of one another's personhood. Roughly speaking, that means employment, but not slavery; employment, but for fair wages and under decent working conditions; employment that does not set others to tasks that put them at avoidable, unacknowledged, and/or uncompensated risk of great bodily harm, to tasks under conditions almost sure to make them morally worse, mentally deficient, and/or to result in their psycho-spiritual undoing. It means that we are not morally in the clear to hire the "hit" man to do our moral dirty work, nor to put people under pressure to betray their deepest loyalties. In short, it is not morally permissible to use one another in ways that are degrading or depersonalizing.

The further Kantian point is that moral permission is denied for this, *whether or not the person consents to being used in this way*. Harkening back to Plantinga's own criteria, persons who consent to being used in ways very likely to be degrading and depersonalizing, thereby furnish *prima facie* evidence that they do not really know what they are doing (they are ignorant of some choice-relevant factors) and/or that that they are "crazy" (more soberly, that their affections are disordered in some way). Even if we agree that God is not subject to moral obligations not to use us, how could God be loving and merciful towards persons that God uses in such ways?

*Atonement, A Towering Valuable?* Central to Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" theodicy is his contention that Divine Incarnation and atonement are an "unthinkably great," "towering and magnificent" good, an unrivalled display of love.<sup>27</sup> Evidently, Plantinga assumes that this judgment will be uncontroversial among Christians, because he is content to speak of Incarnation and atonement together and to leave the biblical language through which he references them unanalyzed (apart from the Lutheran interpretation that Christ on the cross experienced Himself as abandoned by the Father).<sup>28</sup> Since the very propriety of "Felix Culpa" Supralapsarianism turns on it, we should pause to examine it.

In fact, as the great medieval theologians recognized, Incarnation and atonement are logically independent: all agreed, it would have been metaphysically or logically possible for God to become Incarnate, even if creatures had never sinned; and Incarnation without atonement would still have been cosmic excellence enhancing.<sup>29</sup> Except for some nineteenth century kenotic views, the immeasurable value of the Incarnate One should be easy to grant, because the Divine Word is no less God, despite Incarnation.<sup>30</sup> In the middle ages, hypostatic union was viewed as a further valuable, albeit the finite one of a created relation relating a created nature to the Divine Word.<sup>31</sup>

Atonement is more difficult, and here it helps to distinguish the generic value of the act-type (truth-telling, almsgiving vs stealing, lying, and cheating) from the value of the act-token. Good act tokens require the performance of an action of a generically good act type by the right person at the right time and place and in the right manner. Problems with the act-types Plantinga's traditional language attributes to God the Father—a

father's putting his son in the position of sacrificing his life for less related and undeserving others; a person in authority requiring the innocent to suffer for the guilty—are ancient and honorable and often wrestled with. They need not detain us here except to record that their positive value has not seemed self-evident to Christians, but rather a candidate for theological explanation of the sort that theodicy is supposed to provide. The act-types attributed to the Son—voluntarily sacrificing oneself for the good of others, voluntarily standing up for what is true and right at whatever cost—are generically good. But for the token to be good, there has to be a situation where such sacrifice is appropriate. Otherwise, the deed will be foolish or quixotic. “Felix Culpa” Supralapsarianism adds another act-type to the soteriological drama: deliberately putting some in a position that will require rescue by others. Plantinga admits, this looks like a generically bad, indeed psychologically perverse act type—like the Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy,

too much like a father who throws his children into the river so that he can then heroically rescue them, or a doctor who first spreads a horrifying disease so that he can then display enormous virtue in fighting it in heroic disregard of his own safety and fatigue.<sup>32</sup>

Why is Plantinga's Supralapsarian “Felix Culpa” God not a cosmic child abuser, however within Divine rights an obligationless God necessarily remains?

*Compensating Benefits?* Plantinga is not altogether insensitive to, but clearly remains puzzled by objections to God's choosing us into careers in which we suffer many and great ills for the world's sake, and for the sake of God's cosmic, level-*L* or above, aspirations. Plantinga rejects as too general Eleonore Stump's idea that a loving God (or parent) would impose only those sufferings that were necessary for the sufferer's own good. Perhaps Plantinga is thinking that God is within Divine rights to cause us to suffer for other reasons. Perhaps he also reckons (with Hick) that a little altruism—e.g., suffering skinned knees or mumps or measles or lost soccer matches for the world's sake—might be good for our souls!<sup>33</sup>

Where suffering is concerned, Plantinga does go further. Treading the deep waters of the Pauline epistles, of Calvinist and other spiritual writers, Plantinga brings out their proposals for how suffering can have *instrumental value for the sufferer*. Not only does suffering offer Hicksian opportunities for character development. Not only is some suffering consequent upon the instrumental value to us of natural regularities (as Swinburne and Van Inwagen<sup>34</sup> maintain). St. Paul suggests that our suffering is a solidarity with Christ in His suffering, a way of coming to be more Christlike, a means to attaining the resurrection from the dead (2 Cor 4:10–11, 14; Phil 3:10–11) and to bearing an eternal weight of glory beyond the grave (2 Cor 4:17). Jonathan Edwards suggests that by virtue of our fall and subsequent redemption we can achieve a level of intimacy with God that can't be reached any other way, one that brings us into “the charmed circle” of the Trinity itself. Julian of Norwich predicts that we will experience Divine gratitude for our suffering.<sup>35</sup>

On the strength of these testimonies, Plantinga ventures that such future benefits are so great, that a really mature Christian might welcome the opportunity to suffer in advance (like the keen student who signs up for grueling hours in the lab or library for the sake of intellectual discoveries; or the eager athlete who subjects him/herself to punishing training rigors in order to beat the record or win the race), while the rest of us sufferers might be glad of it in retrospect (like the adult who is after all glad to have had the piano lessons s/he resisted in childhood).<sup>36</sup>

#### V. Wrecked and Ruined Agencies

*Damned or Damnable?* The idea that really mature Christians would be willing to sacrifice their own well-being for God's sake, is ancient and honorable and recurrent. In the midst of the 16th and 17th century pure love controversy, Fénelon argued that if one's love for God were pure—if one loved God with all one's heart, soul, strength, and mind—then one would will only that God's will be done. Fénelon drew the conclusion that one should be willing to be *damned* for the glory of God!

Notable for present purposes is that Fénelon is talking about a special case of agents with high levels of integrity, whose personality is so organized around the love of God above all and for God's own sake, that they would not draw back from any use God wanted to make of them. Fénelon envisions consenting—like early Christian martyrs—to deprivations and torments that do not violate the personal core, but leave loyalties and commitments intact. Likewise notable is the fact that the Roman Catholic church condemned Fénelon's conclusion, partly in the face of arguments by Bossuet that loving God above all and for God's own sake would entail a good and right desire for fellowship with God—which is the opposite of damnation.<sup>37</sup>

Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" is non-committal about double predestination, except to identify it as one of the "sterner" forms of Calvinism.<sup>38</sup> What "Felix Culpa" Supralapsarian does commit him to is something at least as daunting: Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" God calls on individual created persons to be or become agents who are not and cannot be pleasing to God according to the criteria published by the bible and the Christian religion! Remember, this time Plantinga is offering a *theodicy*, which is supposed to explain to Christians, not just some evils or other, some sins or other, but the kinds of evils and sins, the wrecked and ruined agents that we actually find. Look around, read the papers, revisit the history books: Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" God calls on many of us to be or become—whether or not damned—*damnable*, for the sake of an level-L or above world.

Although it is sin that atonement most obviously presupposes, Plantinga gives the category of sinners short shrift, perhaps because he is still thinking that sinning is their own incompatibilist free choice, and created incompatibilist free choices are not something God causes. Thus, he re-emphasizes how it is not the capacity for some incompatibilist free choices or other (e.g., to choose the blue pencil over the red one), but for *morally significant* incompatibilist free choices that is so cosmic-value enhancing. "[C]reatures that have a great deal of power, including power to do both good and evil," to oppose God and obstruct Divine purposes,

“are more valuable than creatures who are free, but whose power is limited or meager.”<sup>39</sup>

This cuts no theodical ice, however, because Plantinga’s “Felix Culpa” Supralapsarianism has God decide on what careers incompatibilist free creatures will have prior in the order of explanation to their existence. Once again, for Plantinga, incompatibilist free creatures, considered as merely possible, are not “truth-makers” for the counter-factuals of freedom about them. On Plantinga’s Strong Value assumption, God is aiming for a level-*L*-or-above world. God consults the fates and identifies states of affairs the strong actualization of which will achieve Divine purposes. That individual created persons are sinners is predestined, because it is settled by the fates and by Divine choice “before the foundation of the earth.” Plantinga’s Moderate Value assumption explicitly has God choosing among alternative careers for the *same* individuals. On Plantinga’s “Felix Culpa” Supralapsarianism, God’s choice of which state of affairs to strongly actualize—without ever having to cause our choices—does us out of sinless lives and chooses us into the agencies that we actually have. Sober confrontation with these evokes the question, whether God has not seriously harmed many of us thereby?

Consider a category that cuts across sin and suffering: the category of wrecked and ruined human agency—agency that is hardened and perverted (Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot are only lurid examples), agency that is biochemically twisted (serial killers, child sex murderers, schizophrenics), agency that is biologically or psychologically too fragmented (whether by autism or the traumas of child abuse and war) to be capable of whole-hearted commitment to anything. Plantinga’s “Felix Culpa” God chose for Pharaoh the career in which repeated heart-hardenings rain ruin on the land of Egypt; for Judas, the career in which he betrays Christ; for the Gospel Pharisees and Sadducees, the careers in which they betray their deepest purpose by killing the Messiah Whose way they worked so scrupulously to prepare. We know, in the bible Pharaoh’s resistance advances the cause of Israel’s exodus and YHWH’s glory; Judas and Jesus’ establishment enemies all forward the ever ironic plot towards crucifixion and resurrection. But how does God, in assigning them such vocations, show Godhead to be loving and merciful to *them*?

If it is mysterious how excruciating back pain might prepare one for an eternal weight of glory or make one better suited for Trinitarian intimacy (I am not denying that it does), it is incredible that such wrecked and ruined agency has *instrumental value* for the created agents themselves. That’s what we mean by ‘wrecked’ and ‘ruined’! These are conditions that do not advance, but drastically retard the soul-making process. Would it be a sign of disordered affections, not to consent to becoming a God-hater, a people-hater, a mass murderer, a Christ-betrayer, a God-killer? a person so shattered as to be incapable of the integrity God commands? What more would a rational agent under the Rawlsian veil of ignorance have to know, to decline the opportunity to be actualized in such a world? Would not even a Christian of Fénelonian maturity balk at the idea of owning such an agency, just so that God could actualize an *L*-level or above world? Would not the double-bind—of God’s commanding us to be the opposite of what God has otherwise commanded—show that God

does, after all, hate some of the people God has made? Nor would these worries be alleviated by appeal to the fates, by the suggestion that maybe the counter-factuals of freedom fall out in such a way that God could not make us in better careers. For Divine love and mercy to created persons is not adequately defended, much less explained, by the observation that God couldn't do better for them. One has to argue in addition that the careers they have are not so bad that—as Matthew says of Judas—it would have been better for them never to have existed at all (Mt 26:24)!

In "Felix Culpa," Plantinga does not make unmistakably clear whether he thinks Divine goodness-to (love and mercy towards) created persons is universal. Certainly, the ends of Incarnation and atonement most easily rationalize a world that includes only sinners who get redeemed; others would be a waste, so far as those ends are concerned, although the fates might make strict economy *de facto* impossible. More to the point, Plantinga's reticence about double predestination suggests that he is still a minimal-exposurist who would like his "Felix Culpa" Supralapsarianism to be compatible with either option—universal salvation, or divided destinies after all. To complete our analysis, we ought briefly to explore (as Plantinga does not) whether what he does say suggests any ways to develop his position to make that neutrality possible.

*Compensating Damages?* Plantinga explained Divine goodness-to sufferers in terms of the *instrumental value* of their suffering in producing some compensating benefit for them. If wreck and ruin have no instrumental value for wrecked and ruined agents, compensating benefit would have to be responsive and corrective and involve healing, a remolding and remaking of agency in radical ways. To be sure, this kind of Divine tampering with created agency is something Free Will Defenders have usually seen as a violation of the created agent's autonomy: God—they say—should not reach in and turn the wills of those who reject God, even if that means annihilation or eternal torment for them. Plantinga's own Free Will Defense made no such protests about Divine interference, but rather spoke abstractly of incompatibilist free creatures exercising significant freedom to compile moral track records. In any event, we have already seen how Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" theodicy does not put a high priority on the actual consent of created persons: what they would personally choose is not decisive, but can be trumped by what an "ideal consentor" would choose instead. Moreover, radical agency-healing would not have to be "twinkling of an eye" instantaneous and hence introduce drastic psychospiritual discontinuities. It could involve a long therapeutic process, with many opportunities for the agent to participate and learn to cooperate along the way.

Divine goodness-to actual wrecked or ruined agents surely will have to involve healing transformation and conversion. But would this be enough to save Divine love and mercy to wrecked and ruined agents, according to Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" Supralapsarian plot? How should we assess the attitude of a God Who predestines us to be *ante-mortem* Hitlers or child sex murderers as *a means to the end* of an L-level world, but tries to make it up to us by turning us into St. Francis or St. Clare in the life to come? Isn't this too much like the wife-beater who jekyl-hydes between Monday-Wednesday-

Friday blows and Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday chocolates and roses? Would Fénelonian heroes and heroines of faith be wrong to refuse such an offer?

### VI. *Neglected Disvalues, Mistaken Connections*

*The Meaning of Horrors.* My worries about Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" theodicy can be focussed in another—coming from me, unsurprising—way: it shows an insufficient appreciation of the category of horrors. In my earlier books and articles,<sup>40</sup> I have defined "horrors" as "evils participating in the doing or suffering of which constitutes *prima facie* reason to believe the participant's life cannot be a great good to him/her on the whole and in the end." Horrors are *prima facie* life ruinous, person destroying, because they threaten to swallow up the positive meaning of the participant's life. Horrendous evils positively litter the actual world. Why God would make us radically vulnerable to horrors in a world such as this, and how God can be good to us even though we participate in them, are questions a credible Christian theodicy must face.

Any solution to the problem of horrors will have to argue that horrors can be rightly recontextualized by relation to a great enough good. But since what is at stake is personal meaning and the personal relationships between God and human beings, not just any sort of connection between the evil and the greater good will serve. Standard moves in formulating and solving the philosophical problem of evil converge on instrumental "means/end" conceptuality: they agree that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God would not cause or permit evils except as a necessary means to some greater good or to avoiding some worse evil. Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" theodicy applies this notion twiceover: human careers of sin, suffering, and evil are instrumentally necessary (necessary means) for God's chosen end; and human suffering is instrumentally necessary for benefits for the sufferer her/himself.

The trouble is that horrors do not have instrumental value for the horror participant. Imposing *prima facie* personal ruin is not a way to be good-to or to benefit anyone. Among human beings, it is morally wrong to perpetrate horrors on one another as a means to the end of some collective good. Even if God has no obligations to be good-to created persons, God would still be unloving and unmerciful to any individuals whose horror participation God embraced merely as a means to some cosmo-enhancing end.

Plantinga's "Felix Culpa" Supralapsarian plot assigns a meaning to our horrors that deepens the horror participant's problem by explaining that God's attitude towards him/her is as bad or worse than s/he feared. Plantinga's supplementary suggestion—that suffering has instrumental value for the sufferer—is intended to meet this anxiety. Eleonore Stump has the same intention when she assures us that God permits only such suffering as is necessary for our own good. This idea brings horror participants to the verge of despair: if I am by nature the kind of person who cannot be benefited without being *prima facie* ruined, then I am a cursed kind of thing indeed. Likewise, if I am the kind of thing that (in the phrase of Dallas Willard) has to be tortured into beatitude. If human beings are the kind of thing that cannot be prepared for glory, who cannot get a good view of the

Trinity or enter into intimate fellowship with the Divine persons without being *prima facie* ruined, then the question becomes urgent: doesn't God prove unloving and unmerciful in creating human beings at all?

My own conclusion is that means/end connections between greater goods and the worst evils (the ones I have identified as horrors) do not help the project of Christian theodicy. There need to be meaning-connections of another kind. Where horrors are concerned, it won't be enough to suggest—as Plantinga does—that the greater good *outweighs* the evil either. For precisely because horrors threaten to take away the possibility of positive personal meaning, they require recontextualizing to confer some positive meaning upon them. Mere balancing off does not do that: the sequencing of the unpleasant hour in the dentist's chair and the ravishing concert in the evening, may add up to a good day; but the goodness of the concert does not rub off on the experience with the dentist to make it somehow good.

Happily, there are other types of relations. In the apocalyptic theology of the bible, the faithful are urged on to endure horrors because heavenly bliss awaits them as a reward. In the book of Maccabees, the seven brothers are publicly butchered and fried for refusing to eat pork, but they remain confident that God will vindicate them in the resurrection. Jesus endures the cross (a ritually cursed death that cuts Him off from the people of God and defeats His Messianic pretensions), despising the shame, and God raises Him up! Here the point is not that humans are the kind of thing that have to be *prima facie* ruined to be fit for heaven, but that hostile conditions may impose horrors as the price of loyalty. The suffering has positive meaning because it proves the martyr's loyalty and is recognized and honored by God.

Elsewhere, I have argued that what gives positive meaning to horror participants' lives is that God's primary aim in creation is Divine solidarity with us in a material world such as this. Divine identification with us in horror participation (most notably, through Incarnation and crucifixion) weaves up our horror participation into our overall—on the whole and in the end—beatific relationship with God. This does not reduce to the abuse of blows alternating with chocolate and roses for two reasons. First, because—if God's creation of us in a world such as this does expose us to horrors—God does not—like the spouse-beater—directly and deliberately perpetrate individual horrors. Second, because God shares the cost by exposing Godself to horrors. God is no White House executive pushing paper and making speeches; God is down in the trenches sharing the horrors with us! This does not make horror participation a necessary means to beatific intimacy with God, because even those who escape individual *ante-mortem* horror participation will likewise enter into a relationship with God that is incommensurately good for them. Rather going to hell and back with God is one shape that an overall beatific intimate relationship with God can take.<sup>41</sup>

For Plantinga to work out his own version of what positive meaning God could confer on human horror participation—whether as victims or perpetrators, as wrecked and ruined agents—he would have to make explicit what is involved in atonement and how it might remedy the horror participants' condition. It would not be enough for him to join Hick



and me in universalism (something he does not do in “Felix Culpa”). A theodicy would need to sketch out *how* horror participants can still be winners. By leaving horrors dangling, Plantinga has not completed the explanatory task.

*Ignorant Refusal, Compelling Consent.* A “Felix Culpa” Supralapsarian might protest that such explanations are unnecessary, because we would consent to whatever God wanted if we were fully informed. What accounts for our refusal, our miscalculations of what might be reasonable to accept, is ignorance of a special kind. Not ignorance of what it would be like to be a wrecked and ruined agent. Some of us experience that from the inside and know it all too well. Not propositional ignorance of what we might read in textbooks. But *experiential* ignorance of the immeasurable good that God *is*, a lack of knowledge of the sort St. Paul had when he was caught up into the seventh heaven, the sort that Polycarp and Perpetua and Felicity had that made it easy for them to consent to horrors in the Roman arenas, all for Christ’s sake. Their reports suggest that the bigness of the Goodness is compelling; in the face of It, one would not be able to, one would not want to deny God any request. (I, for one, do not doubt that this is so.)

From a Christian point of view, however, there could be more than one explanation of this. It could be that vivid encounter with the bigness of the Goodness carries the conviction that Plantinga more than once hints at in his article and that I have urged in my books: that God would not subject us to excruciating suffering, by extension that God would not call on us to be wrecked and ruined agents, without compensating us for it, without guaranteeing us a life that will be a great good to us on the whole and in the end, not least because our horror participation will be defeated by Christ and we will be drawn up into deep and satisfying intimacy with the Trinity Itself. Julian of Norwich seems to take this sensibility away from her “showings.” Julian reckons that sin is the worst scourge with which a soul can be afflicted; that in the life to come, past sins will be publicly regarded as honorable battle scars. Insofar as wrecked and ruined agents paid the biggest price for God’s cosmic projects, God might make it up to them by honoring them in heaven most of all.

Alternatively, it could be that one vivid Judgment Day encounter would be sufficient—despite our wrecked and ruined agencies—to convince us of Divine majesty and authority, enough to make us feel honored to have played any part in God’s project, honored again to have had even a momentary glimpse of Who and what God really is. Such a brief confrontation might be enough to compel our consent, quite apart from any hope of future existence and/or improvement in our concrete well-being. Some Calvinists might deem such a response appropriate. (I, for one, would not wish to dispute it.) But if this were their whole story, it would give us a stern form of Calvinism, indeed!

## NOTES

Vince Vitale first called my attention to Plantinga's paper, in the course of our vigorous and stimulating discussions of his Oxford MPhil project on the problem of evil. Subsequently, versions of this paper were discussed at philosophy colloquia at the Australian National University in Canberra, and at the University of New Zealand, Auckland. Helpful comments came from members of those departments, from Robert Merrihew Adams, and from William Hasker, who also shared with me a portion of his forthcoming book *The Triumph of God Over Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 2008). I am grateful to them all.

1. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *Christian faith and the problem of evil*, ed. by Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 1–25.

2. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1974), chap. IX pp. 164–95; see also "O Felix Culpa," pp. 3–4.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 5.

4. *Ibid.* pp. 8–9.

5. *Ibid.* pp. 5–7.

6. *Ibid.* pp. 7–10.

7. *Ibid.* pp. 8–10.

8. *Ibid.* pp. 8–9.

9. *Ibid.* p. 8.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.* pp. 10–11.

12. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 11. Of course, Plantinga might rework his argument to say that God chooses worlds with enough sin and suffering to warrant Incarnation and atonement just because God wants a world containing Incarnation and Atonement. Corollaries 1–3 and the Weak Value Assumption might then be invoked to insist that God is not only within Divine rights, but living up to Divine reputation as a willing Maker only of very good worlds. This revised argument would be just as vulnerable as that based on Strong or Moderate Value assumptions, to my objections in sections III–VI below.

13. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" pp. 10–11.

14. *Ibid.* p. 11.

15. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 1; cf. note 1. Note Plantinga's retention of the free will defender's language of 'permission'. Perhaps he feels entitled to it, because God does not causally determine the incompatibilist free choices of creatures. The language should not mislead us into forgetting that Molinism was invented as a way to maximize Divine providential control without endorsing Divine determinism. In another sense, Plantinga's Molinist God permits sin because God weakly actualizes a world containing sin.

16. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 12.

17. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, chap. IX, pp. 189–90.

18. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 12.

19. *Ibid.* pp. 13–14.

20. I have argued this point at greater length in my *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 2, pp. 17–31.

21. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 15.

22. *Ibid.* pp. 10–11.

23. *Ibid.* pp. 21–23.

24. *Ibid.* pp. 22–23.

25. Ibid. 23.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. pp. 7–9.
28. Ibid. p. 7.
29. See my “*Cur Deus Homo? Priorities Among the Reasons,*” *Faith and Philosophy* 21.2 (April 2004): pp. 1–18; and *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chap. 7, pp. 174–87.
30. See my *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*, chap. 4, pp. 81–100.
31. Ibid. chap. 5, pp. 123–43.
32. Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” pp. 21–22.
33. Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” p. 23. See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), Part IV, chaps. XII–XV pp. 243–336.
34. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1998), Part III, chaps. 9–10, pp. 160–92; and Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 2006).
35. Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” pp. 17–19, 24.
36. Ibid. p. 19.
37. For a more extensive discussion of Fénelon’s ideas, see Robert Merrihew Adams, “Pure Love,” in *The Virtue of Faith and other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) Part Three, chap. 12, pp. 174–92.
38. Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” p. 1; cf. note 1.
39. Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” p. 15; see also pp. 14–15, 19–20.
40. See especially *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) and *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
41. See my *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*, chaps. 3, 6, 7, 8.