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# DO HELL AND EXCLUSIVISM MAKE PROCREATION MORALLY IMPERMISSIBLE?

## A REPLY TO KENNETH HIMMA

Shawn Bawulski

In a recent work, Kenneth Himma argues that the doctrines of exclusivism and hell in Christian theology lead to a *reductio* when combined with certain ethical principles about reproduction; he concludes that if both doctrines are true, then it is morally impermissible to procreate. Since the Christian tradition holds that procreation is at least morally permissible, if the argument is valid, then one or more of its premises should be abandoned. In response to this argument, I will present several theological and philosophical objections, showing that no inconsistency has been demonstrated in holding Christian exclusivism, a traditional doctrine of hell, and the moral permissibility of procreation.

Suppose you knew the following: the odds are good that, if you procreate, your child's life will be characterized by intense suffering.<sup>1</sup> In such circumstances, would it be wrong for you to procreate? Do you have an obligation (to prevent suffering) that prohibits having children? If you think so, then you share the intuition that drives Kenneth Himma's recent essay "Birth as a Grave Misfortune."<sup>2</sup> There, he contends that this intuition creates a serious problem for traditional Christianity's doctrine of hell. My aim in this paper is to show that Himma's argument suffers at least three major flaws. First, it ignores the theological context within which the doctrine is situated; hence, it makes a number of assumptions that many traditional Christians do not endorse. In other words, if Himma has shown anything, it's that there is a problem for the doctrine of hell *in some theological frameworks*. But since Himma has not demonstrated that Christians are obligated to accept any framework containing the features in question, it's hard to see how the problem could be as general as he suggests. Second,

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<sup>1</sup>I am thankful to many who commented on earlier drafts of this article, including Stephen R. Holmes, those at the St Mary's Theology Research Seminar (especially Ryan Mullins), Thomas P. Flint, and three anonymous reviewers. Bob Fischer deserves special thanks for providing detailed interaction: his comments and insights were extremely helpful. Of course, any mistakes or flaws are entirely my own.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Himma, "Birth as a Grave Misfortune," in *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Joel Buenting (Farnham, Surrey, GB: Ashgate, 2010), 179–198.



putting aside the theological issues, the argument is simply too strong, since by the principles utilized procreation is always morally prohibited, regardless of the truth of the traditional doctrine of hell or exclusivism. This is because (a) there are several other substantial harms apart from hell that might befall a child in the future and (b) these other potential harms would do nearly the same work as the doctrine of hell in Himma's argument; thus (c) on his account procreation would be a bad idea *tout court*. Third, the argument crucially depends on a consequentialist moral theory which, if rejected, renders it irrelevant to the moral permissibility of procreating.

I will begin with some terminology. For my purposes, *the traditional doctrine of hell* (TDH) is the view that (a) hell is populated, (b) hell is inescapable for those consigned there, and (c) those consigned to hell consciously experience everlasting and severe suffering.<sup>3</sup> *Exclusivism* is the view that conscious assent to the Christian gospel (in this life) is necessary for salvation—e.g., for being spared consignment to hell.<sup>4</sup> Also, let's articulate (in Himma's own words) the intuition with which this essay began as *The New Life Principle* (NLP):

It is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world when there is a sufficiently high probability [that] doing so will create a substantial risk that the child will invariably suffer severe harm as a direct consequence of being born.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Himma's Argument*

Himma's argument, then, is as follows:

- (H1) Suppose that TDH and exclusivism are true.
- (H2) By TDH, hell is a severe harm.
- (H3) By exclusivism and the observable and presumably sustained paucity of those who embrace the Christian gospel within the world population, there is a sufficiently high probability that any given child will be consigned to hell as a direct consequence of being born.
- (H4) So if NLP is true, then it is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world.

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<sup>3</sup>Himma's definitions are similar, see *ibid.*, 194. I note that many who hold both Christian exclusivism and some version of the traditional doctrine of hell would likely resist his characterization of their views, but this need not detain us now.

<sup>4</sup>Certainly this definition is incomplete, not least because qualifications would need to be added about the severely mentally disabled, babies and children who die before realizing the possibility of exercising saving faith, and the redeemed who lived before the Cross. However, this definition of exclusivism will suffice for present purposes as long as it is remembered that it applies to those living in the present age who have capacities and faculties such that things like assent and faith might be applicable.

<sup>5</sup>Himma, "Birth as a Grave Misfortune," 192.

(H5) NLP is true.

(H6) Therefore it is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world.

(H1) means that those who lack genuinely saving Christian faith will experience eternal torment in hell.<sup>6</sup> Himma deems existence in hell a *severe harm* (“the most severe any human being can face”)—hence (H2).<sup>7</sup>

(H3) attempts to establish that the probability conditions of NLP are met. Himma says that the probability of *not* going to hell—that someone will have genuinely saving Christian faith—is, globally, at best 1 in 3 and is likely even lower (since only about 2 billion of the 6+ billion people alive today even *profess* to be Christian, and it is unlikely that all or even most of those 2 billion have genuinely saving Christian faith, however we might define that).<sup>8</sup> He argues that although it is hard to define the threshold of risk creation where NLP applies, most of us would consider 2 in 3 odds to be sufficiently high. Considered globally, Himma concludes that the probability conditions of NLP are met.

Himma does recognize that the probability of having saving Christian faith is not evenly distributed across the globe—certain regions have a much lower probability than 1 in 3, others have a much higher. Since both parents and society play major roles in what a child will believe, he suggests that we should think regionally when calculating probabilities for NLP.<sup>9</sup> However, even when considered in areas of highest probability for a child to have saving Christian faith, the probability conditions of NLP are met.

This is because of epistemic problems that arise in applying NLP, even for Christians. Himma says that, on exclusivism, belief in the truth of the core doctrines of the Christian faith is necessary but not sufficient for authentic Christian faith (and thus salvation).<sup>10</sup> The first problem: of the roughly 2 billion professing Christians, it is not at all clear how many actually have genuinely saving faith. He regards as optimistic the supposition that even half of professing Christians are genuinely saved, meaning that even in the best of regions in the world the odds of a Christian couple having a child eventually condemned to hell is 1 in 2. He then invokes David Benatar’s principle as applied to a yet non-existent child: the avoidance of suffering in hell—even when avoided because the person remains non-existent—is a moral good, whereas the lack of pleasure because of non-existence is not

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 195–196. He also notes the implication that parents in regions where Christian belief is unlikely have a moral duty not to procreate, even if they do not realize it—an implication he finds uncomfortable. Yet from the standpoint of Christian theism, perhaps any potential moral duty not to procreate would be eclipsed by a bigger issue: the obligation all people have to repent and turn to Jesus Christ, the Savior, in faith.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 196.

a moral bad.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the threshold may be, certainly 1 in 2 odds is not good enough to avoid the force of NLP. The second problem: he says that we cannot have epistemic justification about any theory of what constitutes genuinely saving Christian faith. The lack of agreement on the issue shows “that we do not have enough information on the question that would clearly show which view is correct, and hence that no one is epistemically justified in whatever view they take on the issue.”<sup>12</sup>

His argument then addresses what one must do in such a situation. He says,

The problem here is that we lack sufficient information to determine what counts as authentic saving faith and so we cannot even begin to estimate the most relevant probability in applying NLP. Moral concern dictates that, under conditions where we lack such important information, we guard against the most catastrophic of outcomes—which, of course, would be eternal torment in hell. Even where nominal Christians are concerned, it appears that it is morally wrong to have children not because the conditions of NLP are clearly satisfied, but because we are not in any epistemic position to determine whether they are—and are morally required to adopt a more conservative strategy in protecting the interests of potential future beings.<sup>13</sup>

In other words: since, for all we know, NLP *might* apply, we thus must act as if it does—it is morally impermissible to procreate. Hence (H4).

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<sup>11</sup>Benatar’s principle seems to have significant influence on Himma’s thinking and arguments and thus a bit of explanation is in order. Himma restates Benatar’s principle as “the absence of a benefit is not a moral evil, but the absence of harm is always a moral good.” *Ibid.*, 183. This is relevant to the current discussion in that we are considering harms and benefits regarding “non-existent but possible individuals,” which is a markedly different matter than with the already existent. *Ibid.*, 184. Himma says, “For an existent individual  $x$ , pleasure is always a moral good, while suffering is always a moral bad. If  $x$  does not exist, then the absence of suffering  $x$  would have experienced is always a moral good, but the absence of pleasure  $x$  would have experienced is not a moral bad.” *Ibid.*, 184. Following Benatar, he notes that this principle has intuitive support: (1) people rarely have children for the intended purpose of benefiting the yet-conceived child; (2) failing to bring a person into existence cannot be regretted *for the sake of that person* but only because of some unsatisfied interest in the parent; and (3) many people regard the absence of pain to have more moral weight than the presence of pleasure. *Ibid.*, 184–185. See David Benatar, “Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence,” in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, ed. David Benatar (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 157–164. Ultimately Benatar argues that it is always better not to have been brought into existence, a conclusion that Himma does not share, but since we know that any child will experience at least one harm in her life, it is unclear how Himma resists this implication of Benatar’s principle. See also David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28ff. Throughout this book, he considers only the possibility of valuing goods from a purely “human subjective” standpoint. He decidedly avoids the possibility of objective goods as understood in a theistic framework (except in a very unsatisfying and unfair three-page treatment in his conclusion, 221–223). Essentially, he assumes atheistic naturalism and argues that human existence always involves an unacceptable harm (see 81–86). He provides no reason to accept such an important assumption, one that would fundamentally alter the entirety of his argument.

<sup>12</sup>Himma, “Birth as a Grave Misfortune,” 197.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 197–198.

In defending (H5), Himma advances some cases in which he believes it is clearly morally impermissible to decide to bring a child into the world.<sup>14</sup> He first gives the example where reproducing carries a high probability of resulting in a child whose life is short and terribly painful, but postponing conception for a few years would pose no elevated risk of such a condition. If the couple is aware of all this, the intuition is that they are morally obligated to delay and intentionally proceeding with conception in this high-risk period is morally wrong *even if the child is not born with the condition*.<sup>15</sup> He then extends this intuition to cases where the high-risk is permanent. Any right to have children would be outweighed when there is a high probability of this sort of terrible condition befalling the child. Again, even if the child beats the odds and is not born with the predicted condition, the parents have still committed a wrong against the child. “Reckless or negligent risk-creation is itself considered a wrong,” as illustrated by our criminalization and moral condemnation of driving while intoxicated.<sup>16</sup> Himma also suggests that such a principle would apply to a young, unwed, irresponsible mother who lacks the means and ability to provide for her child, and to parents in countries where the child is likely to face serious malnutrition.<sup>17</sup>

From these sorts of instances Himma derives NLP. He notes three points of vagueness in the principle: 1) “sufficiently” — it is hard to draw the line as to when risk-creation has become sufficiently high; 2) “substantial” — it is probably impossible to quantify a probability threshold for a risk being substantial; 3) “severe” — it is unclear what counts as severe harm.<sup>18</sup> However, Himma does not regard this vagueness as a fatal problem for the principle—at least as it applies to procreation and hell. Himma says that NLP captures “widely shared views” regarding cases like those he provides as examples: cases about medical conditions, the risk-creation in driving while intoxicated, young unmarried mothers, and situations with a high likelihood of malnutrition.<sup>19</sup> Himma seems to regard NLP as representative of many if not most people’s moral intuitions.

(H6) is a claim that many—perhaps even most—Christians would reject. From Ps. 127:3, “children are a gift of the Lord”; certainly a gift from the Lord is a moral good.<sup>20</sup> Since Himma seems to think that everyone

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<sup>14</sup>Himma toys with the notion that the potentiality of commonplace difficulties and suffering in this life may or may not be enough to render having children morally impermissible for everyone; he is ultimately unsure about this.

<sup>15</sup>Himma, “Birth as a Grave Misfortune,” 188.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 192.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 193.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 192.

<sup>20</sup>Himma asks whether having children is a moral good, noting that typically many benefits come to both the parents and the child and usually these benefits would (at least seemingly) outweigh any accompanying suffering that might befall the parents or the child. He also recognizes that this perspective has Scriptural support—having children is plausibly

should be committed to (H2)–(H5), the falsehood of (H6) entails the falsehood of (H1): either exclusivism or TDH (or both) are false.

*By Way of Response*

Before offering some critiques and criticisms of Himma's argument, I should first state that we are in substantial agreement that children are a moral good, indeed, a blessing from the Lord. I affirm the biblical picture of procreation as a good. I also appreciate his concern to take seriously the moral implications of procreation vis-à-vis the problem of hell. However, doing philosophical theology carries the liability of analyzing a doctrine in isolation of the relevant aspects of the broader theological picture, and Himma appears in danger of falling into this trap. We cannot rightly think about eschatology in absence of consideration of the doctrine of God. Christian doctrines are all interconnected; there is a "holism" to Christian theology.

As I have indicated, I think that there are several deep flaws with his argument; I suspect that no argument along these lines will be successful. However, whether or not that suspicion is correct, if it turns out that even one of the objections below is on target, that is enough to refute Himma's accusation of logical inconsistency among Christian exclusivism, TDH, and the moral permissibility of procreation. While admittedly the issues raised in these objections have varying degrees of agreement by Christians, by offering them I provide theological concepts and views that are justifiably affirmed by many Christians. By providing some possible ways in which a Christian can consistently hold exclusivism, TDH, and the moral permissibility of procreation, I show that Himma's argument—which contends that these are logically incompatible and thus there is *no way* to hold them consistently—can be justifiably rejected. I will organize my objections under two headings: theological and philosophical.

*Theological Objections*

The first theological objection relies on a certain theology of procreation, which I will discuss briefly before directly raising the objection. Throughout his essay Himma uses phrases like "bring a child into the world," "bringing a child into existence," "bring a new human life into existence," and "procreate" seemingly interchangeably. I will not quibble with these phrases themselves, which are largely commonplace, but rather I will raise an

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a moral good. He next considers if having children is a moral duty. Recognizing the "be fruitful and multiply" imperatives in Genesis (1:28 and 9:7, given both before and after the fall) and mentioning 1 Tim. 5:14, he observes that from these and other factors many Christians regard procreation to be a moral duty in marriage (whenever possible). For many, this duty may not entail a large family, but some procreation is obligatory. Exceptions to this rule might be granted when the parents have reasonable expectation the child will be unhealthy in some significant way, but otherwise the duty applies. After some discussion on the matter, Himma states that whether merely a moral good or also a moral duty, the conclusion from Christian ethics is that having children is a blessing and is at least morally permissible (if not obligatory).

objection to their underlying concept as he uses them. Crucially lacking is any consideration for God's activity; it seems that Himma's concept of procreation is theologically impoverished. From Ps. 127:3—children are a gift *from the Lord*, and he is the giver of life.<sup>21</sup> Himma states this initially in his essay, but it is strangely absent when he moves to discuss the morality of the decision to procreate, leaving his essay liable to the impression that only human agency is relevant. The view taken up in this objection says that God's activity in procreation is paramount and is significant for the procreation decision. I do not autonomously create a new person; rather, God creates a new person in a way that involves my actions (reproduction). Humans of course have more than a trivial role, but it is a serious mistake to treat biological reproduction as a complete account of *procreation*. Equally problematic is discussing moral issues surrounding the decision to procreate in isolation of this theological truth.

Given a view of procreation of this sort, I can now state the first theological objection: NLP entails (or at least strongly suggests) hard dogmatic universalism (HDU), which defenders of TDH find very problematic; because of this entailment, they are justified in rejecting NLP. This objection warrants explanation.

Initially, assume that God is active in procreation in a way similar to that which was just described: God in a very meaningful sense "brings a new child into the world." It seems plausible on the face of it, then, that NLP should also apply to God. Nowhere does Himma state this, although nowhere does he deny it. However, the broad scope and force of Himma's NLP, taken together with no indication as to why God should be excepted from it, justifies this consideration of the possibility. Let us start with the assumption, then, that God is somehow bound by NLP, and see what comes of it.

Attempting to apply NLP to God demonstrates some substantial problems which suggest that, in fact, NLP does not apply to God. Remember that NLP says it is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world when certain conditions are met; one of those conditions is that a sufficiently high probability is realized. In applying NLP to God's actions, the epistemic considerations regarding probability are presumably much different than ours. Let us assume that the doctrine of divine foreknowledge is true, as the preponderance of Christian theists have believed (and as most defenders of TDH would believe, I suspect). For any given person  $x$ , God always knows the truth value of " $x$  will refuse to repent and will eventually be among the reprobate" for every possible world, including the actual one. Every person's eternal fate is known by God with complete certainty (either by divine determination, by his certain knowledge of their future libertarianly free decisions, or by something like these). Given this, the concepts of "probability" and "risk" fade from NLP when

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<sup>21</sup>Ps. 139:13 is another relevant verse.



applied to God. In the case of God, NLP would then need to be modified so as to read something like:

NLP(God): It is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world when doing so will make it the case that the child will invariably suffer severe harm as a direct consequence of being born.

If God is obligated by NLP(God) as this view of procreation would suggest, then it is morally impermissible for God to bring a person into the world who will suffer hell. The moral principles that give NLP traction regarding us would presumably apply to God as well, stripped of our epistemic limitations. When NLP is applied to us, there are epistemic concerns that involve a threshold of probability and risk. It seems that for God, the epistemic probability of a proposition is just that proposition's objective probability; hence, the epistemic probability of a person's suffering hell is either 0 or 1. Assuming that God could do something such as prevent the conception of every person who would unrepentantly reject him and be condemned, he would be morally permitted to bring a new child into the world only if that child will experience salvation.

Given the very reasonable assumptions made throughout this objection, unless some very good reason to except God from NLP (or NLP(God)) is provided, NLP (or NLP(God)) seems to entail that hard dogmatic universalism (HDU) is true. By HDU I mean that universalism is necessarily true ("hard") and that we have sufficient reason to hold it dogmatically.<sup>22</sup> HDU will obviously be rejected by defenders of TDH, most of whom contend that God has a morally sufficient reason for a populated hell (to pursue this any further we would enter the realm of the defenses against problem of evil, far beyond my current scope). If NLP entails HDU, then very compelling arguments for HDU will need to be provided. Absent such arguments, the defender of TDH is justified in resisting NLP.

The second theological objection, perhaps the stronger, contends that Himma's application of NLP to hell is misguided. It rejects a notion inherent in Himma's argument—that eternal punishment is for innocent victims who had the misfortune of having existence thrust upon them by their parents. With NLP, the suffering in view comes "as a direct consequence of being born." No respectable account of TDH posits reprobation as a direct result of being born. Being born does not decide the probability or actuality of one's eternal destiny: some other factor does.

For defenders of TDH it is sin, not being born, that explains the suffering in hell. Also, for most defenders of TDH, the suffering in hell is linked to the agent's liability for punishment (although the details of this linkage and liability vary).<sup>23</sup> There are several different accounts in Christian

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<sup>22</sup>For more on necessary universalism and some of its problems, see Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 77–96.

<sup>23</sup>There is a theological tradition that says an individual's liability for punishment includes both actual sins committed and guilt that comes from some solidarity between Adam's first act of sin and his progeny, as discussed in Romans 5:12–21. In fact, for this view, the former

theology as to why some people end up in hell, but the defender of TDH will insist the decisive factor(s) has more to do with sin than with conditions entirely outside of her (such as her existing). Usually hell is depicted as the result of the individual moral agent's sin and lack of repentance, never something that "happens to them" in a way an illness does.<sup>24</sup> Himma assumes that the suffering in eternal punishment is rightly analogous to the suffering and harm from things like a genetic disease, an environment horribly hostile to human flourishing with no likelihood of that changing (say, nuclear holocaust), or even the suffering that most people encounter in this life. However, the difference is very important—these types of sufferings are not directly linked to the sufferer's moral accountability.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the defender of TDH insists that whether or not the suffering is justly deserved is a major factor. Suppose a parent somehow had good reason to suspect a .25 probability that her child would suffer just punishment in life (say, imprisonment and paying restitution for arson); that is very different than a comparably certain suspicion of a .25 probability that her child will suffer from painful arthritis in life. Questions about seemingly undeserved suffering are to be answered in a response to the problem of evil, not here. Himma's argument founders in that it fails to recognize this important feature of TDH as most defend it: it is just. Himma has not provided the defender of TDH enough reason to think that the two supposedly analogous situations (risk of a genetic disease and procreating in a fallen world) are sufficiently similar for the intuitions to transfer.<sup>26</sup>

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comes because of the latter. Even a theological tradition that sees original guilt in this way still holds that the individual is guilty and thus liable for punishment. As long as a compatible account of justice is provided (many are available), there is no internal contradiction, and the difference between just suffering and suffering from the likes of a genetic disorder can be maintained.

<sup>24</sup>At this point a brief word on the problem of the unevangelized seems in order. Working in the background of Himma's argument is this assumption: given exclusivism, a person cannot be justly condemned to hell unless she has opportunity to hear and properly respond to the Christian gospel (a response which on the exclusivist's account is required for salvation). In situations in which there is never any opportunity to hear the Christian gospel (i.e., the unevangelized), reprobation is still the inevitable result of being born, albeit not the *direct* consequence (as was stated in NLP). Himma says similarly with situations where high probability but not quite inevitability obtains, situations which are largely his focus. In this way the unevangelized are the limit case of a principle behind Himma's objection to TDH and exclusivism. However, he provides no reason to accept this assumption, one that much of the Christian tradition does not hold, and several plausible alternative accounts from defenders of TDH and exclusivism are available. For an example of just one—although not my own—see William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 172–188.

<sup>25</sup>Interestingly, see John 9:1–12.

<sup>26</sup>A brief word here on the matters of original sin and original guilt. Between a genetic disease and punishment in hell, Himma's argument seems to assume a major point of similarity that legitimizes the analogy: the *inevitability* or *near inevitability* of risk of harm (even harm that justly comes from punishment). While he does not specify it, in attacking the traditional view I take it Himma assumes that the doctrines of original sin and/or original guilt establish this inevitability of a liability to punishment (given TDH and exclusivism). Even with qualifications to the traditional view that provide exception for a person who

*Philosophical Objections*

The first philosophical objection is that Himma's probability assignments are dubitable: even if we grant (H5) (the truth of NLP) and some of his other questionable assumptions, still his method of risk calculation seems deeply flawed—particularly on the matter of localization. He discusses global probabilities and then narrows down to regional probabilities, but he never considers things at the most relevant level for the procreation decision: the details of the immediate situation for the specific parents and child. In Himma's scheme, regarding the birth of a child, globally the probability of the "substantial harm" of hell is at best 2 in 3, probably higher; in geographic regions where Christianity is strong, it is perhaps 1 in 2. Yet certainly one can and should consider more factors, especially localized factors. The background information relevant to the probability of genuine Christian faith is vastly more extensive than the global or even regional believer/non-believer ratio: in fact, that ratio is virtually irrelevant. An example will be illustrative.

What is the probability of reprobation for the potential child of would-be parents who are deeply committed Christians, actively involved in a thriving local church, who have a stable and functional marriage and home life as well as a healthy spiritual life, and who fully intend to raise their child in the way that best encourages and facilitates both assent to the truth of the core doctrines of Christianity *and* the lifelong exercising of genuinely saving faith? While it might vary somewhat among different times and cultures, I should think that in this type of situation the probability would be quite low, *even if we have uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes genuinely saving Christian faith*. While we might lack absolute epistemic certainty about anyone's salvation, legions of Christians could be produced who, by even a more strict account of salvation requirements, would almost universally be recognized as among those who ought to be regarded as having genuinely saving Christian faith. For any potential parents who have the properties listed above—properties that strongly tend to result in children who by most everyone's account very likely have real saving Christian faith—what probability of reprobation would be low enough so that NLP does not apply? .2? .1? .05? While Himma has (rightly) stated that it can be difficult to specify thresholds, he also recognizes that that vagueness need not be fatal when the situation would be in a particular category on any reasonable placement of the threshold. It seems to me that just this has happened with the above example: the

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never reached the developmental stage where personal moral accountability/sin become possible (in other words, having committed actual sin is in fact a feature all the reprobate will possess), Himma's likely complaint would be that apart from these exceptions, there is an inevitability of committing actual sin (assuming Pelagianism is false). However, Christian theology posits at least one human being who, in fact, never committed actual sin, despite being fully human: Jesus Christ. Again I insist that on this point the analogy breaks down—even if in fact nearly no one avoids sin, still, no one sins innocently or without culpability. The analogy is invalid regardless of questions of original sin and guilt because the suffering is so fundamentally different.

couple who fits that description would not be prevented from procreating by NLP and they would be in an adequate epistemic position to make that determination. The epistemic probability of this couple's child avoiding eternal punishment is quite high, certainly high enough to make procreation morally permissible.

This example demonstrates that even if we grant that probability is the right approach to this issue, many of the statistically relevant factors are usually within the parents' control—how they raise their kids and what they teach and demonstrate to them about Christian faith. Even on Himma's account, many Christian couples could procreate without violating moral principles while still consistently holding TDH and Christian exclusivism.

Himma would likely reply that the horrors of hell swamp even very low probabilities like those in this example. In a utilitarian calculus such as Himma's, as potential costs go up, the probabilities become excessive, leading to lower and lower thresholds. Yet there is an overlooked factor: the potential good of gaining great eternal benefit for a person may well offset the potential costs. A cost-benefit approach cannot emphasize radical costs while also ignoring radical benefits, and in the example of these Christian parents, radical benefits seem highly probable. Even if we share his moral intuitions about risk, it is not clear that avoiding the risk of hell is preferable to the possibility of salvation and eternal bliss. Benatar's principle is not nearly as obvious as Himma presents it to be, and this is especially so when the potential goods in question involve the everlasting happiness of eternal life in fellowship with the Lord.

The second philosophical objection is that NLP runs the risk of cutting too deeply. Given NLP and the way Himma handles epistemic issues surrounding it, it seems his argument has the liability of prohibiting procreation even without assuming TDH and exclusivism. Himma briefly wrestles with the possibility that the world is not the sort of place one ought to bring a child into (although it is tangential to his main point), seemingly uncertain about his own conclusion.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, if our epistemic access to the eternal fate of a potential child is limited such that we are morally required to take up the more conservative strategy of refraining because we cannot determine if NLP applies or not, then how are we not likewise required to take the same strategy with most any potentially severe suffering our children might face?

Consider cases of potential parents in areas of the world where war, starvation, disease, etc. are prevalent, or any situation where there is a high epistemic probability of a child suffering in this life. NLP would seemingly rule out procreation in these cases (again, apart from TDH, exclusivism, or any consideration beyond just this life). On Himma's account, procreation would be morally impermissible for poor married couples, for anyone living in impoverished communities, and even for some entire nations

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<sup>27</sup>Himma, "Birth as a Grave Misfortune," 187–188.

(indeed, as noted above, Himma says as much). I suspect many would share my discomfort with this implication.

Yet these problems with NLP are not limited merely to cases such as these. NLP would seem to put unreasonable burdens on *anyone* considering procreation. Let's consider genetic disorders: would NLP apply to the couple who had a statistical risk for a serious genetic disorder but did not know this fact and had no reason to suspect it? As NLP is stated, it seems it would. Must every couple undergo every genetic test or pre-screening available before they have actionable certainty that NLP does not apply to their situation? Even if they did, it is not clear that they would have enough certainty—what about the genetic disorders for which there is currently no test, or the ones we have yet to discover? If this paralyzing burden is imposed by NLP regarding genetic disorders, how much more fatal is it to procreation when we add considerations about other forms of potential suffering in this life? Cancer, depression, severe arthritis, drug addiction, frequent migraines, and a long list of other conditions that make a person's life deeply marked by suffering are not rare, and we have no substantial epistemic certainty that our children will be likely to avoid these. Moving beyond the level of the individual, we seem to have a lack of certainty in assessing the probability of an outbreak of worldwide hunger, nuclear attack, an epidemic of disease, or any number of similar things. The possibility of any of these would seemingly prohibit procreation for everyone.

It seems (granting the contentious: that goods and harms sum) that unless one takes up HDU (in which *we are quite certain* that any potential suffering in life is outweighed by the *certainty* of salvation and eternal happiness—and we have very little doubt about the truth of this doctrine), we are probably never in an adequate epistemic position to know if NLP applies or not. Himma's account seems to limit the morally acceptable options to two: procreate only if both would-be parents are strongly convinced of the truth of HDU, or refrain from procreation altogether. TDH or not, exclusivism or no exclusivism, without HDU (which Himma himself does not hold) it is hard to see how NLP does not prohibit any and all procreation in a world with suffering and evil in it.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Himma's own position is one of salvific pluralism, where "all the major religious traditions are [viable] paths to salvation." See Kenneth Einar Himma, "Finding a High Road: The Moral Case for Salvific Pluralism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 52 (2002): 1. However, I suggest that even pluralism is not enough to avoid the force of NLP: what if in this life my child refuses to sincerely take up *any* faith? What if she embraces and pursues immorality and evil? Both of these are real possibilities, and then, on non-universalist pluralism, she will still incur the harm of hell. Since I am not in an adequate epistemic position to know with sufficient certainty that my child will refrain from reveling in wickedness and immorality, "the most catastrophic of outcomes" must be guarded against and the more conservative strategy is required, according to Himma. Even on pluralism, NLP prohibits procreation. Thus, the severe restrictions imposed by NLP can be avoided only with HDU (or something very, very near it), or by rejecting NLP.

It seems that NLP can be redeemed only by HDU. HDU's power to save NLP lies in the role it plays in a universalist response to the problem of evil (i.e., the evil and suffering

The third philosophical objection is to reject the consequentialist moral theory upon which Himma's argument so crucially depends. He weighs the costs and benefits of deciding to procreate and concludes that, under exclusivism and TDH, the probabilities are such that the possible costs clearly outweigh the possible benefits. In fact, the costs more or less outweigh any conceivable benefits, since these will either be too insignificant to offset hell or too uncertain to justify the "gamble" on them. No arguments for his moral theory are provided, and consequentialism is hardly the dominant view amongst Christian theists (and I suspect even less so among Christian theists who defend TDH). If some other moral theory were held, Himma's argument—even if it were transparently valid—would be simply beside the point regarding the moral permissibility of procreating, and the defender of TDH and exclusivism would be justified in rejecting it.

*Conclusion: Better Not to Have Been Born?*

I have provided a few arguments to show that Himma's arguments fall short.<sup>29</sup> He ignores the theological context in which the doctrine of hell is

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a potential child will likely experience is counterbalanced or overbalanced by the specific good of everyone experiencing salvation). However, if a response to the problem of evil that involves HDU is acceptable and does not prohibit procreation, why should we think that a response to the problem of evil that does not involve HDU cannot also succeed? Thomas Talbott argues that HDU is required for the problem of evil, but many find his case far from compelling. See, for example, Talbott's chapters in *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate*, ed. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) and the criticisms in the subsequent chapters. If a plausible response to the problem of evil can be compatible with TDH, as defenders of TDH will hold, then the possibility of eternal punishment does not make the decision to procreate a non-starter.

<sup>29</sup>The language of it being better not to have been born is one that Himma uses and one that appears in Scripture, so it warrants some treatment here. Himma admits that sometimes when reflecting on the difficulties of life, he is tempted with the thought that "I might have been better off never having been born" (Himma, "Birth as a Grave Misfortune," 187). I have great sympathy for Himma and for anyone who is suffering from living in this broken world. I do not wish to dismiss the suffering, but my aim is to clarify the idea of "better not to have been born." In Matt. 26:24 (cf. Mark 14:21) Jesus says of Judas, "It would be better for him if he had not been born," which on the surface may appear to be asserting that Judas's forever remaining non-existent is a better state of affairs to bring about than one where his existence eventuates in hell. However, Jesus is speaking of a person's birth, not of his origination, original creation, or his existence vs. non-existence. There is a crucial difference between the way Scripture uses this concept and the way Himma does. In Scripture, the language is that of life terminating at or before birth, never non-existence or never-existence (see Ecc. 4:3; 6:3ff., and Job 3). The problem with Himma's use is this: it could not have been better for *him* if he had never existed, for there would have been no *him* to have been better off. Non-existent persons cannot receive benefits. Frankly, it is a mistake to say that person *x* would have been better off if they never existed: there would then be no one to be benefited, and to speak as if there were is a confusion.

A different interpretation of the *it would be better if he never had been born* intuition is possible and is commonly leveled against the traditional view of hell: *the world* would have been better if a particular reprobate person never existed, because there would be one less person in hell. Briefly, in response, I point out that it seems to assume there is a best of all possible worlds, or at least denies the possibility of two fundamentally good but incommensurately good possible worlds (one with certain otherwise unattainable goods that justify the existence of a populated hell). Both of these assumptions strike me as dubious: we need only

situated, imposing without argumentation a number of important assumptions the defender of the doctrine does not share. Further, his own principles rule out procreation *tout court*, unless a contentious view (hard dogmatic universalism) is true. For those of us who find HDU a difficult pill to swallow,<sup>30</sup> Himma's argument and those like it will prove unpersuasive.

I recognize that in order to mitigate some of the objections I have offered, perhaps Himma's basic argument could be reconstructed along these lines: with a traditional doctrine of hell and Christian exclusivism, it might seem natural to have considerations of eternal suffering outweigh most all other factors, even if said eternal suffering is justly deserved. For on the traditional view the suffering and torment in hell is everlasting and severe.<sup>31</sup> Whatever good things might come from the person's existence—good and pleasurable experiences in life, benefits to the person's parents, the goodness of her mere existence, the possibility of using creaturely freedom to love God and experience eternal happiness—these all seem to pale in comparison to the badness of eternal suffering in hell. However, it is not at all clear that goods and harms sum on a quantitative scale, as Himma's argument suggests. The effort to do this seems doomed by tremendous difficulties. Even more importantly: we are certainly not in the best position to assess such matters. Many of the goods in this life and certainly in eternal life are unknown to us, and we have limited knowledge of what existence in hell is like. Epistemic ignorance works both ways. Perhaps the goods that might come from a person's existence in this world and in the next do in fact have critical mass, especially when we remember that most of them have a strong theological orientation. God matters most. While not suggesting that we entirely dismiss the emotional and psychological weight of the problem of hell, I suspect some of our intuitions here might be influenced by too low of a view of God's holiness and too downplayed a regard for the severe heinousness of sin.

When it comes to complex ethical decisions regarding procreation, we should proceed not by whittling down a short and general principle but rather by exercising a wisdom that draws from the breadth and depth of the Christian faith. Decisions about things like the risk of a genetic disease will be messy and involve vagueness—no simple rule will satisfactorily

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have a commitment that God must actualize a good world. (See Robert Adams, "Must God Create the Best?," *The Philosophical Review* 81:3 [1972], 317–332.)

One final interpretation is that a person could wish that some other possible world were the actual one—she could have a preference for the actualization of some other possible world in which she does not exist. While admitting that *she* would not be benefitted from the realization of this wish, she could conceivably state that, *as far as she is concerned*, from her perspective one of those other possible worlds would have been better. While a somewhat interesting desire, it is ultimately unimportant, as God is the actualizer of possible worlds, not any human.

<sup>30</sup>Even if Himma's own view—salvific pluralism—rather than HDU can somehow be shown to redeem NLP, many defenders of TDH will find it unacceptably problematic for a variety of other reasons.

<sup>31</sup>For a mere sampling, see Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 25:46; 2 Thes. 1:5–10; Rev. 14:9–10; 20:14, 15.

apply in each and every situation (even with acknowledgements of vagueness built in to it). Such is the nature of complicated matters like this. When it comes to the Christian's procreation decision and the possibility of one's child finally rejecting God and facing the consequences, I suggest that—again drawing from the full wealth of the Christian worldview—risk calculation gives way to faith, for the parents must trust that God will lead their child to repentance, and in cases where that does not happen, the parents trust that God is nonetheless good and wise in all things. Christian faith, it seems, includes trusting in the goodness of God, trusting that God himself has a theodicy able to cover even the reprobate, even if *we* are able only to gesture at defenses. Here I readily acknowledge that much more would need to be said to fill out this picture, but such a detailed constructive task must be left for another occasion.

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