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IS “CRAIG’S CONTENTIOUS SUGGESTION” REALLY SO IMPLAUSIBLE?

William Lane Craig

Raymond Van Arragon considers my my suggestion that most of those who never have the opportunity to accept Christ during their earthly lives suffer from transworld damnation, and he offers four different interpretations of that notion. He argues that at least three of these interpretations are such that on them the suggestion becomes implausible. I maintain that once my suggestion is properly understood, then, despite Van Arragon’s misgivings, it ought not to be thought implausible even on the first two, boldest interpretations he offers.

In a discussion of my proposed Molinist solution to the soteriological problem of evil, Raymond Van Arragon weighs four different interpretations of so-called transworld damnation and argues that at least three of them are such that on them the proposed solution becomes implausible.¹ I hope to show, on the contrary, that the first two interpretations he assesses ought not to be thought implausible in light of his arguments, so that further refinements become moot.

Van Arragon focuses on what he calls *Craig’s Contentious Suggestion*:

It is plausible to suppose that (a) most of those who do not accept Christ during their earthly lives suffer from transworld damnation, and (b) the fact that a person suffers from transworld damnation ensures that it is fair that he ends up in hell, even if he never hears the Gospel message.

I actually suggested more modestly that it is plausible that (a) most of those who never have the opportunity to accept Christ during their earthly lives suffer from transworld damnation; but I suppose that such a suggestion would strike Van Arragon as scarcely less contentious. I also argued with respect to (b) that the reason the unevangelized are largely justly condemned is not so much because they would freely repudiate God’s salvation no matter which circumstances they were in but because they do reject God’s saving grace in their actual circumstances. Clause (b) of Craig’s Contentious Suggestion does not come into play, however, in the two interpretations we shall consider, so that we may leave it aside and focus our attention on clause (a).



The truth of Craig's Contentious Suggestion, explains Van Arragon, depends upon the interpretation of trans-world damnation. He accordingly distinguishes between

TDF. The property of being such that in every *feasible world* in which one exists, one does not freely accept Christ

and

TDS. The property of being such that, for every *situation* in which one's essence might be instantiated and one left free with respect to accepting Christ, one would in fact freely not accept Christ in that situation.

Van Arragon is correct in distinguishing these two interpretations, and, as I explained in my exchange with David Hunt on this problem, it was TDS which I had intended to suggest.²

Now Van Arragon declines to evaluate Craig's Contentious Suggestion on the TDS interpretation *per se*. Rather he hopes to show that the suggestion is false on the weaker TDF interpretation; *a fortiori* it will also be false on the more radical TDS interpretation. His strategy is to show that clause (a) of Craig's Contentious Suggestion is implausible, so that the Suggestion as a whole is false.

Van Arragon essays to show (1) that a situation can strongly incline a person to accept Christ without compromising his ability to do so freely, and (2) that in the set of feasible worlds, for any person there will likely be many persuasive situations in which that person is free to accept the offer of salvation during his earthly life. We may forego an exposition of Van Arragon's arguments for (1) and (2), since the Molinist has no interest in denying either of these rather obvious truths.

So how is the truth of (1) and (2) supposed to be problematic for clause (a) of Craig's Contentious Suggestion on the TDF interpretation? Van Arragon answers, "It seems clear to me, given these conclusions, that it is *prima facie* plausible to think that TDF is a rare property—it is *prima facie* plausible to think that of the people God created, relatively few suffer from it."³ But this inference is far too hasty. When Van Arragon asserts that TDF is a rare property, one might at first think that he means rare with respect to persons in worlds feasible for God. Given all the persuasive situations in which a person might find himself, there will be far more people whom God could have created who in some world or other freely accept Christ and are saved than who reject Christ in every feasible world in which they exist. But that cannot be Van Arragon's meaning, for given the limitless number of feasible worlds available to God and the limitless number of people in them, it makes no sense to speak of rarity with respect to such people or worlds. Just as there is a one-to-one correspondence between the set of the natural numbers and the proper subset of the prime numbers, so there is a one-to-one correspondence between the set of all persons in feasible worlds and the proper subset of all persons in feasible worlds who are transworldly damned. Moreover, the question would

really concern the compossibility of persons exhibiting TDF, and while feasible worlds in which all or most all of the unevangelized are transworldly damned might be thought to be “rare” (perhaps in the sense that a randomly thrown dart at a logical space of randomly ordered feasible worlds would likely strike a world in which all the unevangelized are not transworldly damned), that does nothing to preclude God from having chosen one of them to be actual—in which case the rarity of TDF does nothing to imply the second part of Van Arragon’s above-cited statement that relatively few people do, in fact, suffer from it.

What Van Arragon means, then, in affirming that it is *prima facie* plausible that TDF is a rare property, is that it is rare *in the actual world*. Thus the second half of his statement quoted above merely reiterates in different words or explicates the initial assertion that TDF is a rare property. But then his initial assertion seems to be a *non-sequitur*. For whether TDF is in fact rare will depend entirely on which world is actual, and, as already suggested, God may have had good reasons to actualize a world which strike us as unusual or exotic. Van Arragon seems to think that on the proposed solution it is just an accident that almost all the unevangelized are transworldly damned, that it just happens to be like that, which is enormously implausible. But on the Molinist view this situation is the result of God’s sovereign choice: He has elected to actualize a world in which the unevangelized who are damned are transworldly damned. The heavy emphasis here falls upon God’s sovereign choice. Granted that people in very persuasive circumstances are extremely likely to freely decide for Christ and that actual persons would find themselves in such circumstances were various other feasible worlds actual; that does nothing to render it implausible that God has chosen a world in which all the unevangelized who are damned would have been damned in every feasible world in which they exist. One cannot assess even the *prima facie* plausibility of clause (a) of Craig’s Contentious Suggestion without taking into account the Creator’s character, motives, and goals that lay behind His creative decree.

Van Arragon proceeds to examine what he calls common sense considerations concerning the world’s unevangelized in order to confirm the implausibility of clause (a). He invites us to consider the case of a Native American Indian living at a time prior to the arrival of European missionaries. Such a person is apt to follow the religions of his community. Is it plausible, asks Van Arragon, to suppose that he would not freely accept Christ in any feasible world? Van Arragon replies that, given that such a person is religious (however misguided), we cannot plausibly suppose that he suffers from TDF. Moreover, it is utterly implausible that most of his peers, along with most other religious people who never hear of Christ, suffer from it. “These considerations reinforce our initial inclination to think that TDF is a rare property—rare among the uninformed, and hence rare among those who fail to accept Christ during their earthly lives—and thus it seems not at all plausible to suppose that most of those who fail to accept Christ suffer from TDF.”⁴

In this appeal to common sense considerations I think we see revealed Van Arragon’s fundamental misunderstanding of my proposal. He seems to imagine that we can assess the plausibility of an unevangelized person’s

or persons' being transworldly damned just by looking at the world, in isolation from any consideration of God's character, motives, and purposes. But given the nature of my proposal, such a procedure is impossible. For the proposal is that God, in His love, is too good to create persons who are lost through the historical accident of not being presented with the Gospel (I Tim. 2.4; II Pet. 3.9); therefore, utilizing His middle knowledge, He has chosen to create a world in which everyone who would respond to the Gospel if he heard it is born at a time and place in history where he does hear it. So whether the suggestion of clause (a) is plausible depends fundamentally upon the character, motives, and purposes of God. The Molinist solution I propose is one which is worthy of God: it is the sort of thing that He both could and would do. So why think that it is implausible that He has created such a world as the solution envisions?

The best face that we can put on Van Arragon's objection is that there is some empirically manifest property, for example, religiosity, which only non-transworldly damned people exhibit and that many of the unevangelized have this property. But this suggestion strikes me as wholly implausible. There is no reason to think that there is such an empirically manifest property, least of all that it is religiosity. For the actual world may be the world in which many of the unevangelized come the closest to embracing general revelation and being saved. Some may come within a hair's breadth of salvation in the actual world. We have no reason to think that in other worlds feasible for God they do accept God's offer of salvation. Furthermore, and more fundamentally, it is precisely the unevangelized's religiosity which prevents their embracing God's revelation and so damns them. The person who is truly open to God will respond to His general revelation in nature and conscience and so be saved through Christ's atoning death, even though he has no explicit knowledge of Christ. The persons with whom we are concerned are those who, however religious and upstanding, have failed to respond to the saving overtures of the true God. Trusting in religion rather than in God to save them, they are of all men most deluded. For such persons their religiosity is a positive impediment to their being saved, a sign not of their openness to God, but of their substituting some surrogate for God; for otherwise they would be saved, which *ex hypothesi* they are not.

Van Arragon offers no independent objection to the plausibility of clause (a) when construed in terms of TDS. Since this is the stronger interpretation, the plausibility of TDF does not go to establish the plausibility of TDS. But given the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God endowed with middle knowledge, I see no reason to think it implausible that He in His providence has elected to create a world such as is described in Craig's Contentious Suggestion.

NOTES

1. Raymond J. Van Arragon, "Transworld Damnation and Craig's Contentious Suggestion," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 241-60, in response to William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 172-88.
2. See my "Middle Knowledge and Christian Exclusivism," *Sophia* 32 (1995): 120-139, in response to David P. Hunt, "Middle Knowledge and the Soteriological Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 3-26.
3. Van Arragon, "Craig's Contentious Suggestion," p. 248.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 249.