

PARADOXES OF SALVATION

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1 Introduction

Can God create a man so evil that He cannot offer him grace? Whether He can or cannot, the answer contradicts the doctrine of divine omnipotence, for in either case He is not all-powerful. This version of the paradox of omnipotence is representative of theological paradoxes: such paradoxes differ from philosophical paradoxes insofar as they depend on mystical experience, scripture or orthodox systems of belief (on theological paradoxes in general, see CALHOUN, 1955; RAMSEY, 1969; STENGER, 1983; YUSA, 1987). The present article is a review of literature of a certain class of theological paradoxes, namely, those concerning the Christian doctrine of salvation.

The theology of salvation is elaborated in six pairs of paradoxes. First, the paradoxes of Eden and of the fortunate fall treat, respectively, of the justice of the fall of man and of its role in setting the stage for grace. Second, "the sorites of salvation" is an argument for the doctrine that faith alone saves, when, according to received doctrine, nothing is sufficient for salvation, because it derives from divine grace alone; while "the paradox of the Holy Ghost" in the thought of John Donne is that, if only grace saves, the ministration of the Holy Word should not, against appearances, be necessary. Third, in contrast to "the paradox of Socratic optimism," namely, that to know the good is to do the good; "the antinomian paradox" claims moral license for the faithful, on the

grounds that sin allows the abundance of God's grace, basically, that is to say, that to know the (revealed) good is to do evil.

Fourth, "Pascal's wager" and "the Devil's offer" are both based on the playing the statistical odds in the game of salvation. Fifth, the problem of evil and the problem of good treat of the character of a being capable of creating the kind of world in which salvation is needful. Sixth and last, the seeker paradox and the paradoxes of nirvana each concern the special difficulties of spiritual transcendence.

The paradoxes treated here are based on heterogeneous conceptions of salvation, notions that have developed in disparate religious traditions. The question of whether there is an underlying and unifying idea of salvation cannot be adequately treated in this space. Let us only say that, on the whole and for the most part, notions of salvation, whatever their theological elaboration, seem to respond to a sense of lack, which is perhaps characteristic of the human estate (given the circumstances of death, finitude and the threat of meaninglessness) and which becomes especially acute under certain cultural conditions.

2 The paradoxes of Eden and of the fortunate fall

The paradox of Eden, which concerns the fall of man, was argued by Richard R. LA CROIX (1984).

Before eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve either knew that obedience to God is good and disobedience is evil or they did not know. If they did not know, they cannot be blamed for disobeying God by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God should not have punished them by casting them out of Eden. If they knew, then they already possessed knowledge of good and evil, and there would have been no temptation for them to eat the forbidden fruit. Furthermore, God would have known they possessed knowledge of good and evil, and He should not have made not eating the fruit and gaining what they already possessed a test of their righteousness. It was, in fact, unjust for him to put them under such an idle prohibition. Therefore, whether or not Adam and Eve knew that obeying him was good and disobeying was bad, God acted unjustly in the episode.

In short, by applying legal standards to the first two chapters of Genesis, it is argued that justice is not a necessary attribute of God.

In response to La Croix, Allen Howard PODET (1985) makes three main points. First, the interpretation assumes that the expulsion from Eden was a punishment for disobedience, but the language of the text does not allow us this presupposition. Second, it assumes that knowing that it is good to obey God and evil to disobey Him is all that there is to know about good and evil, but there is much else that a knowledge of good and evil might involve. Third, the interpretation assumes that God was testing Adam and Eve's righteousness, but He might have been testing something else, such as their obedience, or even nothing at all.

Named by Arthur O. LOVEJOY (1955), the paradox of the fortunate fall (*felix culpa*) has been traced by Lovejoy, as well as by Herbert WEISINGER (1953), from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* back to ancient times. The paradox is that if Adam had not fallen and been expelled from Eden, there would not have been the good fortune of the redemption story with its conclusion in the coming of the New Jerusalem. In other words, without man's failure the world would not be saved. As W. B. Yeats puts it in *Leda and the Swan*, "Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent." Although the skeptic may scoff that had man not stumbled the world would not need salvation, from the standpoint of Judeo-Christian faith, the fortunate fall is one of the most fundamental and veridical paradoxes and is clearly related to man's finitude and fallibility, as well as God's infinite mercy.

3 The sorites of salvation and the paradox of the Holy Ghost

Also known as the heap, the sorites ("bald man") argument was introduced by Eubulides. The sorites is an argument in which a series of incomplete syllogisms is arranged so that the predicate of each premise forms the subject of the subsequent one, until the subject of the first is joined with the predicate of the last in the conclusion. Here is an old example, the sorites of salvation.

- (1) All men who believe shall be saved.
- (2) All who are saved must be free of sin.
- (3) All who are free of sin must be innocent in the eyes of God.

- (4) All who are innocent in the sight of God are suitable for heaven.
- (5) All who are suitable for heaven will be admitted into heaven.
- (6) Therefore, all who believe will be admitted into heaven.

The paradoxicality of the conclusion of this kind of sorites is that a seemingly insignificant cause has enormous effects (another kind of sorites make one class a subclass of another in contrast to our expectations). Here the cause is mere faith, and the effect is eternal salvation. Faith saves. But faith without works is a pale fire; and, on the main view, it is grace, not faith, that saves.

The scholarship that takes John Donne's paradoxical thinking about religion as a theme is that extremely rare sort of literary study that uses paradox as a key word and actually identifies something like a paradox in it. In his study of paradox in Donne's thought, Jerome S. DEES (1987) cites four paradoxical formulations that together constitute the paradox of the Holy Ghost.

- (1) "There is no salvation but by faith, nor faith but by hearing, nor hearing but by preaching" (DONNE, 1953-62, VII 320).
- (2) "Here was a true Transubstantiation, and a new Sacrament. These few words, *Saul, Saul*, why persecutest thou me, are words of Consecration; After these words, *Saul* was no longer Saul but her was Christ" (DONNE, 1953-62, VI 209).
- (3) "Knowledge cannot save us, but we cannot be saved without Knowledge" (DONNE, 1953-62, III, 359).
- (4) "The Holy Ghost falls, through us, upon you also, so, as that you may, so, as that you must find it in your selves" (DONNE, 1953-62, VIII 267).

The paradox in the statement (1) lies in the circumstance that the preacher is necessary for salvation because the word can only be heard through preaching. Central to the reformed Protestant doctrine expounded by Donne (as well as other creeds), however, is the idea that sal-

vation is effected by the unmediated gift of grace given directly to the individual.

According to Dees, the preacher is absolutely necessary for salvation, while being utterly useless as a causal agent in attaining that salvation. With regard to the statement (2), Dees remarks: "What exercises Donne's imagination, thematically and structurally, is the paradox that the accusation is itself the transubstantiation, that the language of condemnation is itself the very means and seal of acceptance and union" (DEES, 1987, p.81). Donne resolves the paradox in statement (3) by following Augustine's postulate of natural reason and regenerate reason. Finally, the statement (4), whose paradoxicality subsumes that of statements (1-3), asserts that although the Holy Ghost is present in each Christian by virtue of the sacrament of baptism, it is only through the ministrations of the preacher that the Holy Ghost's presence can be recalled by the faithful.

From the standpoint of faith, this is a veridical paradox. The preacher, as bearer or vehicle of the Spirit, does not merely provide doctrine to be understood by reason but engages in a dialogue with his parishioners by which the memory of Holy Ghost residing in them since baptism is activated.

4 The paradox of Socrates and the antinomian paradox

The paradox of Socrates is expressed in a set of ethically optimistic doctrines espoused by Plato's Socrates:

- (1) No one does evil willingly.
- (2) Evil is the result of ignorance.
- (3) To know the good is to do the good.

Statements (1) and (2) are closely related: no one does evil of one's own free will, but rather evil is done by those who lack knowledge of the good. If one knows the good, one will not do evil. Something of this sort is connected with Socrates' demon, which warned him to desist when he was on the verge of doing something wrong. Statement (3) is a somewhat stronger claim: he who knows the good would not only avoid evil but would moreover do the good unhesitatingly. Statements

(1-3) fly in the face of our everyday experiences of people doing evil of their own free will, and of knowing what is right but doing what is wrong.

There are two basic ways to respond to these fundamental Socratic paradoxes. On the one hand, Socrates' claims can be reconciled with our intuitions by seeing them as an attempt to specify a very strong sense of the word "knowledge," one in which acting from one's knowledge is a criterion of having the knowledge in the first place. On the other hand, one can attribute his claims to his pre-Christian intuitions which did not envision the possibility of demonic despair, or of knowingly and willingly contradicting the will of God. For this second alternative, the paradoxical character of Socrates' claims is the result of the natural man's relatively impoverished understanding of the concept of evil.

The antinomian paradox is based on the richer Christian understanding of evil as sin, which understanding derives not from natural reason but from divine revelation. The doctrine of antinomianism holds that Christians are not bound to obey the law of God, especially as represented in the Old Testament legal system, but may continue in sin so that divine grace, that is, God's forgiveness of sin, may abound. The term was first applied by Martin Luther to John Agricola, and given to a Christian sect that appeared in Germany about 1535, but the argument was put forward as a rationale for moral licence since early Christian times.

The colonial American writer Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) emigrated from England to colonial Massachusetts in 1634, where she advocated a "covenant of grace" in opposition to the orthodox Puritan "covenant of works." In 1638, Governor John Winthrop banished her from the colony for antinomianism; she and her family went to Rhode Island, then to New York where they were massacred by native Americans in 1642.

Antinomian doctrine has been seen in the sixteenth-century legend of the minnesinger Tannhauser, which Richard Wagner made into an opera. Tannhauser spent a voluptuous year with Lady Venus at Venusburg, a magical land of sensuous delight accessible through a subterranean passage. Once he obtained permission to leave, he went straight to Pope Urban for absolution; but the Pope refused, "No, you can no more

hope for atonement than this dry staff here can be expected to bud again." Tannhauser left, but three days later the staff burst into full bloom. Urban sent in every direction to call Tannhauser back, but by that time the poet had returned to spend his remaining days with Lady Venus. The miracle reminds the Pope that God's grace is not limited by the constraints of moral law.

5 Pascal's wager and the Devil's offer

Invented by the eighteenth-century mathematician Blaise PASCAL (1910), Pascal's wager assumes the form of a dilemma for non-believers.

If God exists and one believes in Him, He will reward one's faith with eternal happiness, and if He exists and one does not believe in Him, He will consign one's soul to eternal damnation. If God does not exist and one believes in Him, one loses limited means invested in an erroneous belief, and if He does not exist and one does not believe, one has not lost these limited means. In other words, the risk of finite means allows one to win an infinite reward and the failure to invest these finite means makes one liable to an infinite loss. Therefore, it is rational to believe in God even if the chances of His existence are very, very small; and only if it is absolutely certain that He does not exist is it rational not to believe in Him. Yet since there is no such absolute certainty, one ought to believe in God.

Pascal constructs a simple decision matrix. One can believe or not. If God exists, believers win an infinite reward and nonbelievers receive an infinite punishment. These payoffs are such that reason obliges one to risk the finite investment of belief, even if there is no evidence for God's existence, so long as there is at least a minimal (finite) chance for God to exist.

Three main objections are raised to the wager. First, even if God exists He might believe that rational disbelief is more to be rewarded than blind faith, on the grounds that the principled atheist better employed the divine gift of reason. Second, even if God exists He might reward the person whose life was more virtuous and benevolent than the person who merely believed. Third, and this is the central objection from a spiritual point of view, if one believes in God on the basis of the logic of Pascal's wager, one has diminished the value of one's belief so

much that it is unlikely that it is worth anything. For to believe in God in order to be rewarded is to treat God in a calculating, even mercenary manner; the rewards of belief derive from loving and respecting God, not from treating Him as a mere instrument for one's own advantage. According to Moses A. MAKINDE (1985), for example, Pascal himself did not intend the wager to be an argument for mercenary belief, but an incentive for the nonbeliever to begin to seek for God.

Proposed by Edward J. GRACEY (1988), the Devil's offer is a clever, otherworldly sequel to Pascal's wager. Ms. C dies and unfortunately goes to hell, but a devil approaches her with the opportunity to play a game of chance. If she wins the game she can go to heaven and if she loses she must stay forever in hell, but she can only play the game once. If she plays on the first day, she has one half chance of winning, if she plays on the second day she has two thirds chance of winning, on the third day three quarters chance, and so on. The question is: When is it most rational for her to play?

If she waits for a year before playing, her chances of winning are .997268, but if she waits for a year and a day her chances will increase by .000007. Although waiting this extra day increases the likelihood of winning very little, the reward of winning is thought to be infinite. Indeed, a finitely large extra chance of winning something infinite is worth more than the presumably finite suffering of Ms. C's spending one more day in hell. (More technically, the utility of waiting one more day--the extra chance of winning times the infinite payoff--will always be infinite.) Yet if it is always worthwhile waiting one more day, then there would be no limit to how long she should wait and Ms. C would end up remaining in hell forever in order to increase her chances of leaving it!

If hope of heaven lessens the suffering in hell, then whatever the odds it might be foolish to play the game and risk losing that hope and heaven too. Compared to waiting in hell forever without hope of escape, deferring the playing of the game forever might be the wisest course. Heaven itself may have no pleasure comparable to that of anticipating leaving hell for heaven. Given the enormous probability of winning that is eventually built up, however, such a solution seems like a perverse form of self-torment. The root of the problem is that we are unable to discriminate among the chances of winning because the infinite payoff makes each increase in our chances infinitely desirable.

6 The problems of evil and of goodness

The following paradox has always played the devil with Christian theology: If God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, why is there evil in the world? If God knows all, can do all, and still lets evil exist, then in what sense may he be characterized as having good will toward men?

There are several traditional responses to this paradox. That which enters into the mind of those who take the unnecessary suffering of the world to heart is often that there is no God. Another answer is that evil is the result of man's fall from grace. He could have withstood temptation and maintained himself in an Edenic state, but he exercised his free will and is reaping the consequences. If it is asked further why God gave man free will, thus allowing his fall, the answer is that God made the world as perfect, that is, complete, as possible, and the world is more complete for having a being with free will such as man in it. This answer is inadequate because it only explains the kinds of evil that are a direct result of man's fall. Yet, if all evil is explained in this manner, that is to say if the world's evil comes to us by way of punishment or test, then God does not seem particularly good after all, because either way, the torment is excessive. Besides it is the good rather than the deserving wicked who seem to suffer most in this life.

A more mystical answer to the question is to deny that evil exists. It is mere privation, or distance from the fullness of God's being, and we suffer it because we are, or became, distant from the divine wholeness. The problem with this response is that it is wholly counter-intuitive that the pain and anguish we suffer is, from the divine standpoint, nothing at all. Either He is constitutionally blind to our dolorous reality and hence not omniscient or else His point of view is so detached that there is little of what we might recognize as "goodness" in it.

More satisfactory, perhaps, is the Manichean, and ultimately Zoroastrian, solution to the effect that God is not all-powerful after all, but competes with another God, one of darkness, whose presence explains the world's evil. This view, banished in the West more by the sword than by argument, plays a significant but surreptitious role in those forms of vulgar Christianity in which the Devil is a powerful rival to God. The weight of occidental theological opinion, however, seems to be that a dualism of Jehovah and Satan is too high a price to pay for resolving the

problem of evil. (For a further, more forceful formulation of the problem of evil, see FLEW, 1969; and for a classic response, SMART, 1961).

Steven M. CAHN (1977, p.69) poses the following problem of goodness: "could a world containing goodness have been created by an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being?" The problem, exactly paralleling the problem of evil, purports to show that the Demon does not exist. Cahn, like Edward MADDEN and Peter HARE (1966) before him, concludes that the conjunction of these two problems makes both demonism and theism highly improbable. One of the basic elements in Cahn's argument is that there is a strict isomorphism between theodicy and cacodaemony (the demonic analogue to theodicy). John KING-FARLOW (1978), however, contends that Cahn has merely demonstrated the isomorphism for one theodicy and one cacodaemony; but since there are many variations of theodicies, however, Cahn's case is not complete. King-Farlowe also appeals to Páscal's wager and to the fact that there has been a long history of profound numinous experiences, whereas there has not been a similarly strong history of diabolical experiences.

7 The seeker paradox and paradoxes of nirvana

The seeker paradox is a central theme in the fiction of Patrick White, winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize in Literature (BLISS, 1986, p.8).

One of White's most baffling and important paradoxes [is] that the self must be sought and found only to be relinquished, that the individuality so powerfully expressed by his major characters paradoxically enables them to seek a state of understanding in which selfhood is finally subsumed. In a further permutation of the paradox, the surrender of the self which this understanding demands somehow functions to permit the character's fullest realization of the essential self; that is, he becomes most himself when he least seeks to be. In terms of the related Christian paradox, he finds his life by losing it, or as Emerson put it, "The man who renounces himself comes to himself".

White has been greatly influenced by the Judeo-Christian concept of the religious quest and its inevitable failure due to man's inability to comprehend the infinite. In particular, man's search for an understanding of his own nature cannot be successful by an investigation of himself.

True understanding of human nature cannot be obtained from self-examination because it entails man's relation to the Absolute. This observation does not, perhaps, resolve the paradox; rather, the paradox reveals the ineffable nature of the Judeo-Christian belief that "the center of gravity of existence is outside existence" (Adin Steinsaltz, cited in BLISS, 1986, p.206).

Buddhism is the source of more than one paradox thematically and structurally related to the seeker paradox. Consider, for example, the bodhisattva paradox, adduced by Arthur DANTO (1973, p.82; compare his 1976, p.166).

The *bodhisattva* cannot pass over into Nirvana. He cannot because, were he to do so he would exhibit a selfishness that a *bodhisattva* cannot have. If he has the selfishness, he is not a *bodhisattva*, and so cannot enter into Nirvana. If he lacks the selfishness, again, he cannot enter Nirvana, for that would be a selfish act. So either way, the *bodhisattva* is impotent to enter Nirvana. Like God who, in the Christian teaching, cannot do evil because it is inconsistent with his nature, the *bodhisattva* cannot perform the ultimately selfish act. So no one can reach Nirvana: *we* cannot because we are not *bodhisattvas* and the *bodhisattva* cannot because he is a *bodhisattva*.

According to Danto, the bodhisattva is generally conceived of as someone who has attained enlightenment and can thus pass over into Nirvana; he nevertheless postpones doing so until all mankind can be brought to the same point so that everyone will pass over together.

Danto's description of the bodhisattva, however, does not square with all interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. According to one main conception, the bodhisattva does not delay entering Nirvana until all mankind (better, all sentient creatures) enter with him, but forebears

only until they are secure in this prospect. Granting Danto his interpretation of the doctrine, the paradox would be that the bodhisattva cannot enter Nirvana until all mankind enters with him because, if he tried entering before them, his selfishness would prevent him from entering Nirvana and, hence, he would not be a bodhisattva after all. If, however, he were indeed a bodhisattva, his lack of selfishness would prevent him from entering Nirvana ahead of everyone else. Thus, whether the bodhisattva is selfish or not, he is unable to pass over into Nirvana. But this result contradicts the conventional view that the bodhisattva's delay is a postponement.

Perhaps Danto's (and our conventional) idea of what constitutes selfishness is not applicable at the point at which one is poised to enter Nirvana, because from that standpoint, even the distinction selfish/unselfish is irredeemably fraught with egoistic identifications. It is even unclear whether the bodhisattva can be credited with a voluntary act of postponing his entry into bliss, because he would have had to have passed beyond any sort of willfulness to be a bodhisattva. Thus the decision to delay entering Nirvana is not made once the bodhisattva is a bodhisattva, but when the one who might be a bodhisattva enters into the path of the bodhisattva.

This possibility, however, only resolves Danto's paradox by putting another paradox in its place--namely, that of how an act of will can place a being beyond willfulness and its opposite altogether. Robert Slater adduces another paradox of nirvana in just this line of thinking, namely, that "[t]hose who pursue or desire nirvana, or desirelessness, will never (logically), or are least likely to (practically), get it" (HERMAN, 1981, p.5).

Nirvana is not the kind of thing that one just happens upon or which just happens to one, but rather a state that requires quite a bit of effort on the part of anyone who is to achieve it and, thus, we must want to achieve it in order to do those things necessary for its acquisition. Hence, we can never achieve nirvana, a state of complete desirelessness, because in order to obtain it we must desire to do so. Stated differently, we cannot make nirvana the end of our actions because that would defeat the very purpose of our undertaking; but without making nirvana the end of our actions, we cannot do what is necessary to achieve it.

The paradox of nirvana is related to the hedonistic paradox, which is that a person who insistently seeks pleasure for himself will not find it, but that the person who helps others find pleasure will in the end

find pleasure himself, or at least has a greater chance of finding it.. The upshot is that pleasure is not to be sought for itself, that it is not an end in itself separate from the activity or experience of which it is an aspect. Pleasure is attainable only as an attitude or feeling accompanying other things.

The Buddhist solution to the paradox of nirvana is to recognize that there is nothing that one can do in order to escape the paradox and thus the devotee "lets go" of the desired goal. Upon doing so, nirvana is obtained. Observe, however, that nirvana is not just a "laid back" attitude in the face of a practical conundrum: it is founded in some sense on the insight gained from the struggle to come to terms with the paradox. As Arthur L. HERMAN (1981, p.7) expresses it, "the philosophic argument was necessary before the rational insight was possible, and that rational insight, namely, that there is no way out, was necessary before 'letting go' could occur, and 'letting go' was necessary before nirvana was possible."

Perhaps the most important use of paradoxes in Buddhism (and Taoism) is to reveal the inherent inability of language to express ultimate reality (on various aspects of paradox in Buddhism, see SUZUKI, 1951, 1968; CHANG, 1973; SIDERITS and O'BRIEN, 1976; HERZBERGER and HERZBERGER, 1981; NISHITANI, 1982; KING-FARLOW, 1983; MABBETT, 1984; CH'IEN, 1984; ANDERSON, 1985; SELLMAN, 1985; TUCKER, 1985; and FOSSA, 1989). Paradoxes are not there to be resolved, but to be used as stepping stones to a fuller comprehension of the character of mindfulness and of reality. Once this better appreciation is attained, the paradoxes are no longer needed and may be discarded.¹

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