

GRACE, CHARACTER FORMATION, AND PREDESTINATION UNTO GLORY

Christians have traditionally held that, because they are saved by grace, they can take no credit for their own salvation or even for a virtuous character (where such exists). All credit of this kind goes to God. As St. Paul himself put it in his letter to the Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this [the faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”¹ Indeed, as I interpret him, Paul taught that God’s grace is utterly irresistible in this sense: However free its recipients might be to resist it in certain contexts, or even to resist it for a substantial period of time, they are not free to resist it forever. For the end, at least, is foreordained. In Paul’s own words, “For those God foreknew [that is, loved from the beginning] he also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”² But if some end, such as a person’s eventually being conformed to the likeness of God’s Son, is predestined or foreordained, then that end cannot be avoided forever; and even if one should insist, as some have, that such a predestined end rests upon God’s foreknowledge of certain human choices (something that, so far as I can tell, Paul himself never claimed³), this would be of no help to the large number of Christians who believe, as I do not, that divine foreknowledge is itself incompatible with human freedom. In Paul’s scheme of things, moreover, acquiring a good moral character just is conforming to the likeness of God’s Son. So it looks as if a good moral character is, according to Paul, wholly a work of God within and not something

¹ Ephesians 2:8-9.

² Romans 8:29—NIV, my emphasis.

³ Observe that, in the text just quoted, it is persons who are foreknown, not their free choices. Elsewhere Paul used the same term when he wrote: “God has not rejected his people [i.e., the people of Israel] whom he foreknew [i.e., whom he has loved from the beginning]” (Rom 11:32). Here those foreknown are all the people of Israel, including those disobedient ones who had rejected Christ, who had been blinded and hardened (11:7), but who had not stumbled so as to fall (11:11) and whose full inclusion (11:12) would eventually result in the salvation of all Israel (11:26). However disobedient they may have been, “as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:28-29).

for which the morally virtuous are entitled to credit themselves. And perhaps that is why Paul consistently praised God, not the individuals themselves, for the faithfulness of his Christian co-workers.

Now the first thing to observe about this Pauline doctrine of grace is how well it accords with the actual attitudes of the morally virtuous themselves. Are not the most virtuous among us typically the last to credit themselves for their own moral virtues? A loving mother, for example, will not credit herself for the love that controls her, however thankful she may be for the opportunity to care for (or even to sacrifice on behalf of) her children, and a faithful husband, who would never dream of a sexual indiscretion, will not credit himself merely because he wants to maintain, without jeopardizing it, his valued relationship with his wife. Such faithfulness, he may feel, is a product of clear vision, not profound moral effort. And if pressed to explain how they came to be the kind of people they are, those who consistently display the highest moral virtues may point to their own parents who brought them up in a certain way, or to plain good fortune, or (if they are religious) to the grace of God. Even where an intense moral struggle leads to a more virtuous character in the end, as it sometimes does, the strengthened character may not seem to be a product of one's own moral effort to overcome temptation. To the contrary, it may seem more like the product of a wholly new perspective, such as we sometimes acquire only after experiencing first hand the disastrous consequences of succumbing to temptation in the first place.

It is hardly false modesty, then, but instead clear moral vision, that prevents the truly virtuous from crediting themselves—that is, from crediting their own free choices and moral efforts—for their own good character. For although the religious expression “There but for the grace of God go I” seems to me quite problematic if taken to imply that some other person is *not*

an object of God's grace, it nonetheless remains a nice way of affirming that one's own free choices do not suffice to make one any better, or any more worthy of God's grace, than anyone else. It is even a way, perhaps, of saying something like the following: "Had I been in Hitler's shoes, facing his demons, my free choices may not have been any better than his were; and had Hitler benefited from the advantages that I have enjoyed, his free choices may not have been any worse than mine have been." I do not claim that I (or anyone else) could give a clear and coherent sense to such a remark. But the point, once again, is merely to acknowledge that a good moral character is something for which one should be thankful, not something for which one should try to take credit. For a good character, like salvation itself, ultimately "depends," according to Paul, "not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy"⁴ and on the clear moral vision he will eventually impart to all.

Accordingly, in this essay I shall challenge the idea, so widely accepted among libertarians, that free agents "make themselves into the kinds of persons they are"⁵ and that they are, for this very reason, morally responsible for their own character. Then, after examining (and criticizing) the idea of a "self-forming action," as Robert Kane calls it, I shall argue that St. Paul's pre-philosophical understanding of God's all-pervasive grace in fact makes far better sense of the role that our free choices, the bad ones no less than the good ones, play in the formation of a good character. It also helps to clarify how libertarian freedom, indeterminism, and even sheer chance, if you will, could fit into a predestinarian scheme in which a glorious end is ultimately inescapable.

⁴ Romans 9:16.

⁵ See Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 72.

Free Choice and Character Formation

Many libertarians now concede to the compatibilists, as I believe they should, that an action can be free even when determined by an appropriately formed character, and their intuition seems to be that an agent's character is appropriately formed only when the agent is at least partly responsible for it. James F. Sennett thus writes as if we sometimes choose our own character: "A character that is libertarian freely chosen is the only kind of character that can determine compatibilist free choices."⁶ Laura Ekstrom likewise suggests that our judgment that an action is praiseworthy "may presuppose the idea that the agent's good character is ultimately of his own making"⁷ And Robert Kane explores the idea of a "self-forming action" in great detail and with considerable insight.⁸

But just what might it *mean*, in the first place, to say that someone has made, or formed, or produced his or her own character? Robert Kane speaks of certain "voluntary 'self-creating' or 'self-forming' actions (including refrainings) in the life histories of agents for which the agents are personally responsible."⁹ These self-forming actions (or SFAs), says Kane, are "both undetermined ... and such that the agents willingly performed them and 'could have voluntarily (or willingly) done otherwise'"¹⁰ Although undetermined—and, as some might say, self-generated or self-originated—they are also *self-forming* in the sense that they help to determine or shape the agent's present motives, purposes, and character traits: "Agents with free will ... must be such that they could have done otherwise on some occasions of their life histories with

⁶James F. Sennett, "Is There Freedom in Heaven?" *Faith and Philosophy*, **16** (1999), p. 74.

⁷Laura Ekstrom, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), p. 165.

⁸See Kane *The Significance of Free Will*, Ch. 5.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

respect to some character- or motive-forming acts by which they make themselves into the kinds of persons they are.”¹¹

Now given my own libertarian proclivities, I have no objection to the idea that a good character is appropriately formed only when an agent’s life history includes some undetermined choices that could have gone the other way. But as soon as we try to puzzle out the precise relationship between these undetermined choices in an agent’s life history and the agent’s present moral character, a host of difficulties begin to emerge. The root idea to which Ekstrom and Kane both appeal is that of a *partial* causal explanation, or a contributing cause—as when, for example, Ekstrom suggests that, if a person S performs a determined action A at a time *t*, then S is morally responsible for doing A at *t* only if S’s present character and resulting inability to act otherwise “is *causally explicable at least in part* [my emphasis] by S’s own act(s) at some time(s) other than *t*, such that S could have done otherwise at that (those) other time(s).”¹² Or, as Kane puts it in one place, a self-forming action must actually make “*a difference in what you are* (or in the character and motives you now have).”¹³

So now we must ask: Just what might count as a *relevant* difference in the present context? Where “UA” is shorthand for “an undetermined action such that the agent who performed it categorically could have done otherwise,” suppose that a woman has only one UA in her life history, namely her decision as a youngster to spend her allowance on swimming lessons rather than on violin lessons. If that single UA partly explains why she later became an expert swimmer, indeed an Olympic champion rather than a concert violinist, and if her swimming expertise partly explains why she found it unthinkable and therefore psychologically impossible to stand by as

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹² Ekstrom, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study*, p. 210. Ekstrom uses the expression “at some time(s) other than *t*” rather than “at some time(s) prior to *t*” so as not to exclude by assumption certain time travel cases involving backwards causation.

¹³ Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, p. 72 (his italics).

a child drowns—why she leapt into a dangerous river in an effort to save the child—then she evidently meets the Ekstrom necessary condition of being morally responsible for a determined action. As we have just described the case, moreover, this single UA buried in the woman's past made a huge difference to the kind of person she now is, that is, to her present character and to the motives she now has. I doubt, however, that many libertarians would see this difference, however significant it may be in the woman's life history, as a *morally relevant* difference. The decision to take swimming lessons presumably had no great moral significance at the time it was made, and, beyond that, it was not the woman's intention as a young girl to make herself into a crack swimmer or to prepare herself for saving the child later in life; she just enjoyed swimming as a recreation. She nonetheless illustrates how easily one can meet the Ekstrom necessary condition of moral responsibility and how little clarity it provides in the present context.

Of course, Ekstrom never intended for anyone to treat her necessary condition as if it were a sufficient condition. But even if we restrict our attention to UAs that express morally significant choices, a serious problem remains. For if we should examine carefully the life history of some virtuous person S, we would likely find, I suspect, that S's immoral choices had an even greater causal impact upon the development of S's virtuous character than S's virtuous choices did. Suppose, by way of illustration, that a young and somewhat irresponsible married man should succumb to temptation and should fall into a rather frivolous affair; suppose also that his wife should subsequently find out about the affair and should seriously consider divorcing him on account of this and other irresponsible actions on his part; and suppose, finally, that the young man should then come to appreciate what he is about to lose and, terrified by the prospect of losing the wife he genuinely loves, should feel utterly compelled to re-establish a relationship of trust. So once his wife finds out about the affair, it is fully determined, let us suppose, that he

will change his wayward ways; never again does he even consider an affair, lest it undermine the very relationship that he now values so highly. If the man's decision to have an affair qualifies as a UA, then this UA may not only have made a difference, but also a morally significant difference, to the kind of person he eventually becomes. It also seems to qualify as a contributing cause. For had he not made his foolish choice at this precise time and in circumstances where he would eventually be caught, perhaps he would have gone through his entire adult life sneaking around and taking his wife for granted.

So do we have here a case where the free decision to act in an unfaithful way and to have an affair helped to shape a more trustworthy and faithful character? And do we also have a case where a man acquires his clear vision and therefore his faithfulness in an appropriate way? I think we do. We are not here talking about a man being "zapped," to borrow an expression from Michael Murray, and simply being reconstituted with a more virtuous character; we are instead talking about a man experiencing the consequences of his own free decision to act unfaithfully and about how he learns an important lesson in the process. The man also acted freely, or at least so I would argue. For not even a libertarian would deny that a determined action can sometimes be *voluntary*; and if an action is both voluntary and determined by one's own fully rational judgment concerning the best thing to do, then it remains a paradigm, so I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ of free action. Its being voluntary rules out what Kane calls "constraining control," such as being held at gunpoint, and its being determined by one's own fully rational judgment concerning the best thing to do rules out what Kane calls "nonconstraining control," such as might be "exemplified by . . . cases of behavioral conditioning and behind the scenes manipulation . . ." ¹⁵

¹⁴ See Thomas Talbott, "God, Freedom, and Human Agency," forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*.

¹⁵ See Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, p. 64.

Now some will no doubt find counter-intuitive the idea that our immoral choices are sometimes more helpful than our morally proper choices are in producing a virtuous character. For libertarians almost always seem to adopt, as a kind of unexamined metaphysical assumption, a picture similar to what Kane sketches in the following passage:

The probabilities for strong- or weak-willed behavior are often the results of agents' own past choices and actions, as Aristotle and other thinkers have insisted. Agents can be responsible for building their moral characters over time by their (moral or prudential) choices or actions, and the character building will be reflected by changes in the probabilities for strong- or weak-willed behavior in future situations. Each time the [alcoholic] engineer resists taking a drink in difficult circumstances, he may strengthen his will to resist in the future; and conversely, when he succumbs, his will to resist may lessen (or crumble altogether, as sometimes happens with alcoholics).¹⁶

But even if such a picture reflects accurately *some* of our experience in *some* contexts—very limited ones, I believe—the way in which UAs in a life history, assuming there are such, affect one's character and motives may be just the opposite of what Kane has imagined; worse yet, the effect is apt to depend upon intervening factors utterly outside the agent's control.

Kane is right, of course, about the alcoholic engineer, at least partly. One biochemical effect of alcohol on the brain, at least in the case of alcoholics, seems to be that it undermines the will to resist another drink.¹⁷ But that is not even close to the whole story. For as an alcoholic friend of mine once pointed out, the longer she stayed off the alcohol, the easier it became during

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁷ Nor should one make the mistake of supposing that the effect of alcohol on the alcoholic lasts only for the duration of the high. There are many long-term effects as well, including an ever-increasing craving for the drug and the gradual destruction of the very anti-anxiety centers of the brain upon which the alcohol works to provide temporary relief.

times of stress to deceive herself into believing that this time a couple of drinks would do no harm; so curiously, the longer she resisted the temptation, the stronger her temptation became. Indeed, it was not until she had succumbed to temptation and had binged terribly on a good many occasions that she finally learned to recognize such deception for what it was. So in that sense, her experience was just the opposite of what Kane describes: the more often she successfully resisted temptation, the harder it became to resist such temptation in the future; and the more often she succumbed to it and experienced the destructive consequences of doing so, the easier it became to resist such temptation in the future.

So here is an obvious case where some bad choices helped to undermine a bad (or at least a weak) character. Experience also provides examples where freely resisting temptation, particularly in difficult situations, seems to weaken the will over time rather than to strengthen it. I daresay that many men—and this would include some Christian ministers I know—have sincerely (even fervently) resisted sexual temptation for many years, only to succumb to it, finally, in middle age. For it may happen that the harder a man tries, for the most earnest of reasons, to suppress his childish yearnings and unrealistic fantasies, the more intense his temptations become and the more likely he is to succumb to them in an explosion of destructive behavior. Perhaps it would be misleading, however, to describe this as a case where good choices help to undermine a good character. For if we suppose that the described behavior really is destructive and really is the product of childish yearnings and unrealistic fantasies, then it is also, perhaps, the product of deeper character flaws of which the agent is unaware—character flaws that first need to be exposed before they can be dealt with effectively.

Is my point, then, merely that the ultimate springs of human action are mysterious and incredibly complex, so that only God could assess moral responsibility with any degree of accura-

cy? Not at all. My point is that no one has yet given a coherent account of what it might even *mean* to say that free agents “make themselves into the kinds of persons they are”; at the very least, we need something more than a requirement for a life history to include some UAs. The relevant UAs must also qualify, in Kane’s own words, as “self-forming actions” (SFAs), and this in turn requires that an agent be personally responsible not only for the relevant UAs themselves, but also for the effect that the UAs have, in conjunction with a complex variety of other circumstances, on the agent’s character. But the problem, as Manuel Vargas has recently noted, is that “even freely chosen features of our lives and ourselves can, because of our epistemic limitations, yield unanticipated consequences.”¹⁸ One person may lie and cheat in pursuit of wealth and fame, only to discover that the result is emptiness and misery; and the circumstances surrounding this discovery may causally determine (even compel) a life transformation. Another may sincerely cultivate moral integrity and inadvertently produce some of the worst character traits: moral rigidity, self-righteousness, and a lack of compassion. As Bernard Williams once observed, “One’s history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not” products of the will.¹⁹ Indeed, the assumption that even God could consider how people exercise their libertarian freedom and, on that basis alone, divide them into the good and the bad, or into those who deserve a reward and those who deserve punishment, now seems to me radically confused.

Grace Verses Works in Pauline Theology

It seems evident that St. Paul was acutely aware of the point just made, which he no doubt believed to have been confirmed in his own experience. For whether or not he actually wrote (in his own hand) the letter known as I Timothy, the self-description attributed to him there—

¹⁸ Manuel Vargas, “The Trouble with Tracing,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* xxix (2005), p. 282.

¹⁹ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.29.

namely, that he had been “the foremost” or “the worst” of sinners²⁰—surely did reflect accurately the converted Paul’s understanding of his former life. He clearly numbered himself, in other words, among those whose sincere efforts at cultivating a more virtuous character had contributed to, or at least had revealed, even deeper character flaws. They had revealed, in particular, the heart of a religious terrorist who was, prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.”²¹ If his actions were less destructive on the whole than were those of a Hitler or a Stalin, this is only because he did not have 20th Century technology or the power of a modern state at his fingertips. So no wonder he opposed so adamantly any hint of salvation by good works, which is essentially the idea that, as Laura Ekstrom put it in the above quotation, “the agent’s good character is ultimately of his own making.” Having discovered in his own life how easily moral seriousness and genuine religious fervor can betray one into a pattern of destructive behavior and even into acts of terror,²² he had no confidence in his own ability either to generate moral virtue in himself or to pull himself up by his own bootstraps, so to speak.

No less important than the New Testament rejection of the libertarian idea that an “agent’s good character is ultimately of his own making” is the implied diagnosis of where Paul had gone wrong in the past. He went wrong, so we read in the text, precisely because he had “acted ignorantly in unbelief,”²³ and this underscores the essential role that ignorance plays in even the worst of sins. Although Christians sometime seem suspicious of the Socratic idea that the essence of virtue is a certain kind of knowledge, insight, and clarity of vision, we find ample sup-

²⁰ I Timothy 1:15 & 17.

²¹ I Timothy 1:13a.

²² In general, we Westerners find it relatively easy to appreciate this point when considering certain aspects of the Muslim culture, but we find it much more difficult, it seems, to appreciate the same point with regard to the history of the Christian Church.

²³ I Timothy 1:13b.

port for such an idea in the Bible itself. Did not Jesus himself declare from the Cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”?²⁴ And we find Peter expressing a similar attitude when he charged an audience with killing “the Author of life”: “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.”²⁵ The clear implication here is that those who crucified the Lord had no idea that they were acting wrongly and may even have presumed that they were doing the right thing; in that respect, they were no different from those who drowned Anabaptists in Zurich, or those who burned Servetus at the stake in Geneva, or those who burned young women as witches in Salem, Massachusetts. I do not mean to minimize the evil implicit in such acts of terror; far from it. But those who commit such acts of terror often count themselves among the righteous doing battle against evil, and they are, more often than not, utterly oblivious of their own self-righteous motives and attitudes. More generally, even our everyday sins and indiscretions may express deeply rooted fears, jealousies, animosities, and feelings of personal inadequacy, of which again we may be less than fully aware. According to Robert Adams,²⁶ therefore, some of our most important and most pervasive sins are involuntary, because “voluntary consent, as ordinarily understood, implies knowledge....”²⁷ With respect to the sin of ingratitude, for example, Adams concludes that “the search for voluntary actions and omissions by which you may have caused your ingratitude keeps leading to other involuntary sins [or moral weaknesses] that lie behind your voluntary behavior.”²⁸

But that is only half the story. For quite apart from involuntary sins of which we may be unaware, Paul held that we are powerless to prevent ourselves from sinning even in cases where

²⁴ Luke 13:34. Even though this well-known prayer from the Cross does not appear in some of the best manuscripts, it does, I presume, represent a reliable tradition.

²⁵ Acts: 3:17.

²⁶ See Robert Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” *Philosophical Review* XCIV (1985), pp. 3-31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

we are able to discern right from wrong. Our earliest moral experience, he contended, arises from an emerging ability to understand the moral law (or moral rules, if you will), and it is from the beginning an experience of the will in bondage to sin. In Paul's own words, "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. . . . But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment . . . deceived me and through it killed me."²⁹ He even went on to write: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me."³⁰ All of which seems to accord better with the idea that sin is something that *happens to us* early in life rather than something we do freely from the beginning of our lives. Like death itself, sin here seems more like an enemy from which we need to be rescued than a perfectly free choice for which we deserve some sort of retributive punishment. It is essentially anything in us that alienates us from others and from God, that is, anything in us that undermines our capacity to love perfectly; as such, it is also, according to the Christian faith, the principal source of human misery. Paul thus exclaimed, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death [or sin]?"³¹

Accordingly, in Pauline theology, so I would argue, salvation from sin is not an escape from *deserved punishment*, nor is it, as some Christians have made it out to be, the removal of an inherited moral taint. It is instead more like being rescued from a kind of slavery or bondage that we are powerless to escape on our own—sort of like being rescued from alcoholism or a drug addiction. For even as an alcoholic might judge it best to refuse another drink and nonetheless find it psychologically impossible to do so, Paul declared himself to be "captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Indeed, for all of his talk about the wrath of God (in the early part

²⁹ Romans 7:7b-8 & 11.

³⁰ Romans 7:15 & 20.

³¹ Romans 7:24.

of Romans, for example³²), Paul did not seem to regard sin as *essentially* a matter of personal guilt at all;³³ instead, he held that we are *already* sinners, *already* “dead” in our “trespasses and sins,”³⁴ even before our moral consciousness fully emerges, before we become rational enough to qualify as free moral agents, and before we are fully aware of our own selfish motives and destructive desires. This is not to say, of course, that the concept of personal guilt had no role at all to play in Paul’s thinking. But so far as I can tell, not one word in his letters implies that we somehow deserve retributive punishment either for our inherited character weaknesses (and imperfections) or for the initial bondage of our will to sin; neither does anything there so much as hint that, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, we “are ten thousand times more abominable in his [God’s] eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.”³⁵ It seems to me, at any rate, that Paul’s own writings were remarkably free from such neurotic appeals to fear and guilt.

Paul nonetheless offered, I believe, a profound insight into the nature of moral corruption and into the way in which a bad moral character differs from a good one. Like alcoholism and drug addiction, a bad moral character will inevitably enslave a person in one of two ways: Either

³² And, of course, as is made abundantly clear in Romans 11 and elsewhere, Paul understood God’s wrath, his severity towards sin, and even his hardening of a heart as itself an expression of his mercy (or compassion) toward sinners. On this point, see Thomas Talbott, “A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment,” in Robin A. Parry & Christopher H. Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), pp. 32-34.

³³ As I have written elsewhere: “Both Jesus and Paul consistently rejected as inappropriate the very reactive attitudes upon which so many rest their understanding of moral guilt. Personally, I doubt that the ideas of intrinsic desert and ‘metaphysical guilt’ played a substantial role, if any at all, in their thinking. Yes, Paul explicitly stated in Romans 1:32 that those who commit certain sins are ‘worthy of death,’ and this may initially appear to imply that death is the intrinsically fitting punishment for sin. But the appearance is in fact misleading. For within the context of Pauline theology as a whole, the relationship between sin and death is clearly non-contingent. First, the relevant death, which Paul elsewhere described as ‘the wages’ (or the price) of sin [Rom. 6:23] and also as ‘the end’ of sin [Rom. 6:21], is spiritual death; it is separation from God and from the ultimate source of human happiness. Nor could it have been otherwise, because in sinning one precisely chooses death over life, separation over reconciliation. In Paul’s own words, ‘To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace’ [Rom. 8:6]. So death, which is the unavoidable consequence of sin, is its intrinsically fitting punishment only in the sense that a painful burn is the intrinsically fitting punishment for intentionally thrusting one’s hand into a fire’ [Thomas Talbott, “Why Christians Should *Not* Be Determinists: Reflections on the Origin of Human Sin,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), pp. 305-306].

³⁴ Ephesians 2:1.

³⁵ See Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” reprinted in Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1966), p. 159.

it will undermine over time one's power to follow one's own judgment concerning the best course of action, or it will eventually undermine altogether one's ability to learn from experience and to make rational judgments concerning the best course of action. I contend that this is just what makes a bad moral character *objectively* bad: it will tend to undermine over time one's rational control over one's own actions. But a good moral character is just the opposite. For whereas a bad character leaves the will in bondage, a good character does not; to the contrary, a good character will expand one's rational control over one's actions and will therefore liberate the will. That, at least, seems to have been Paul's view of the matter, and he therefore spoke of salvation as if it were a release from bondage, a means by which our very *wills* are set "free from the law of sin and death."³⁶

In any event, we have now identified two reasons why, according to Paul, we are powerless to prevent ourselves from sinning and from falling into error and why we are also powerless to save ourselves once we have fallen into error. First, our most sincere efforts at cultivating moral virtue may inadvertently produce some of the worst character traits, as Paul clearly believed was true of himself, and such efforts will inevitably reveal, in any case, even deeper character weaknesses (or imperfections) in ourselves. For the fact is that we come into this earthly life with many flaws, imperfections, and moral weaknesses of which we may be unaware. And second, the context in which our moral consciousness emerges during our early childhood is one in which our wills are *already* in bondage to sin. So even when we know what is right and what is wrong, we too often find ourselves unable to avoid "missing the mark" and doing what we know to be wrong. This does not mean, however, that we never act freely and are never morally responsible for *any* of our actions while the will is still in bondage to sin. An alcoholic, whose will is in bondage to alcohol, may nonetheless make many free choices, such as the decision to seek

³⁶ Romans 8:2.

treatment after a destructive binge, and may be responsible for these choices without being morally responsible for the genetic predisposition to alcoholism. And similarly, those whose wills, according to Christian theology, are in bondage to sin may nonetheless make many free choices (and many good choices born of love for their children, for example) without being morally responsible for having generated their own imperfections and moral weaknesses in the first place. It is just that, without outside help, these imperfections and moral weaknesses will continue to have destructive consequences in their lives.

“Felix Culpa” or Creation in Two Stages

But why, one may wonder at this point, would God start us out with so many imperfections and moral weaknesses and in a context in which our wills are already in bondage to sin? Why bring us into being as sinners and then go to the trouble of saving us from our sin? Why not simply bypass all the misery and suffering along the way and bring us into being as perfected saints in the first place?

The assumption behind such questions is that, if he so desired, God could have created each of us (or perhaps a different set of persons) *instantaneously* as self-aware, language using, fully rational, and morally mature individuals who are from the beginning perfectly fit for intimacy with God. But why suppose that to be metaphysically possible at all? For my own part, I seriously doubt that God could have created any persons at all without satisfying certain metaphysically necessary conditions of their coming into being, and the most important of these would be “an initial separation from God,” which I have elsewhere described in the following way:

By this admittedly vague expression, I mean to imply, among other things, a severance from God’s direct causal control on the metaphysical level and an experi-

ence of frustrated desire and frustrated will—the sort of thing that naturally leads to a sense of estrangement and alienation—on the psychological level. If these should be metaphysically necessary conditions of our creation, then our very creation would *virtually guarantee* the occurrence of error and misguided choices.³⁷

If God had no choice, provided he wanted to create any persons at all, “but to permit their embryonic minds to emerge and to begin functioning on their own in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and indeterminism,”³⁸ then the creation of a person is, of necessity, a much more complicated and time-consuming process, even for an omnipotent being, than one might have imagined. And if the required context is one that virtually guarantees erroneous judgments and misguided choices (perhaps even an initial bondage of the will to sin, as Paul understood it), then God faces the following dilemma in creation: Some of the very conditions essential to our emergence as rational individuals distinct from God are themselves obstacles to perfect fellowship (or union) with him, and these cannot be overcome until after we have already emerged as a center of consciousness distinct from God’s own consciousness.

Of course, I might be mistaken in my conception of what is, and is not, metaphysically possible in the matter of God’s creating persons distinct from himself. But even if I am mistaken, the process by which we humans *in fact* emerge in this earthly life and develop into rational agents is indeed both complicated and time consuming. So if one supposes that God exists at all, then one must also suppose, at the very least, that God had good reasons to permit our embryonic minds to emerge in a context of ambiguity and ignorance. And Paul clearly embraced that idea in any case. For he clearly taught that God employs a two-stage process, or two Adams as he calls them, in creating Sons and Daughters. As I have put it elsewhere:

³⁷ Thomas Talbott, “Why Christians Should *Not* Be Determinists: Reflections on the Origin of Human Sin,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), p. 307. But see the entire section, pp. 306-310.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The first Adam, according to Paul, ‘was from the earth, a man of dust’ and ‘became a living being’; the second was not from the earth, but ‘from heaven’ and ‘became a life-giving spirit’ (I Cor. 15:45 & 47). The first Adam thus represents the first stage in the creation of God’s children: the emergence of individual human consciousness in a context of ambiguity, illusion, sin, and death; the second Adam, or Jesus Christ, represents the second stage: the divine power that successfully overcomes all sin and death and therefore all separation from God, so that the true Sons and Daughters, or the true creations of God, can emerge.³⁹

Paul also wrote: “it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical [i.e., that which pertains to our animalistic and sensuous nature], and then the spiritual.”⁴⁰ And though he nowhere used the language of necessary and sufficient conditions, he seems clearly to have held that the first stage of creation—namely, our emergence from the dust of the earth in a context of ambiguity, illusion, sin, and death—is a necessary condition of the second, wherein God reconciles us to himself and perfects as saints.

So interpreted, Paul’s vision of creation also carries an important implication for Alvin Plantinga’s recently formulated *Felix Culpa* Theodicy.⁴¹ According to Plantinga, human sinfulness is a “fortunate fault” in the sense that it makes possible the great goods of redemption and atonement; so, because God wanted to actualize a world that includes these great goods, he chose to actualize one that includes human sin, indeed lots of it. For sin is obviously a necessary condition of redemption from sin or of an atonement for it. Plantinga also anticipated the objection,

³⁹ Thomas Talbott, “Christ Victorious” in Robin A. Parry & Christopher H. Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 18.

⁴⁰ I Corinthians 15:46.

⁴¹ See Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O *Felix Culpa*,’” in Peter van Inwagen (ed.), *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), pp. 1-25.

which others have subsequently raised,⁴² that such a theodicy makes God seem “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.”⁴³ But if our sinful condition, or even an initial bondage of the will to sin, is an unavoidable consequence of conditions essential to our creation, then our Creator need be nothing like the father or the doctor in the above examples. He is not, first of all, the direct cause of our sin; hence, he is nothing like a father who throws his children into a river or a doctor who spreads a horrifying disease. And if, as I have suggested, conditions that virtually guarantee sin, error, and spiritual death are essential to the emergence of distinct persons, then it seems overwhelmingly probable that *any* worthwhile world within God’s power to actualize will include these great enemies as well as a rescue of God’s loved ones from them.

Beyond that, Paul also insisted upon the glorious truth that *all* of those who participate in the first stage of creation will likewise participate in the second and will thus experience in the end the “towering goods” of redemption and atonement, as Plantinga calls them. Nor do I see how Paul might have expressed himself any more plainly than this: “For God has imprisoned all [humans] in disobedience so that he may be merciful to [them] all.”⁴⁴

Divine Grace: Its Universal Scope and Unconditional Character

All Christians believe in divine grace. Within the Western theological tradition, however, one encounters two “respectably orthodox” traditions that interpret God’s saving grace in two

⁴² See, for example, William Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 167-170 and Marilyn McCord Adams, “Plantinga on ‘Felix Culpa’: Analysis and Critique,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), pp. 123-140.

⁴³ Plantinga, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁴ Romans 11:32. See also I Corinthians 15:22: “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” It is clear that Paul’s vision of creation in two stages lies at the very heart of his theology.

very different ways. According to a long tradition that stretches back through the Protestant Reformers and ultimately has its roots in the thought of St. Augustine—call it the Augustinian tradition—God’s saving grace, though utterly unconditional and irresistible, is nonetheless limited in scope. For although God bestows his grace or special favor on some sinners, he does not bestow it equally upon all of them; in that respect, he is very much, contrary to repeated statements in the New Testament, a “respector of persons.” But according to a competing theological tradition, sometimes called the Arminian tradition,⁴⁵ God’s saving grace, though universal in scope, is nonetheless limited in its power and efficacy. For although God at least *offers* saving grace to all sinners, some will irrationally continue to reject it throughout all of eternity and thereby prevent God from ever achieving a complete victory over sin and death.

But neither the Augustinians nor the Arminians, I shall now argue, have properly understood the Pauline doctrine of grace, and it is ironic, perhaps, that both parties are quite correct in their criticisms of each other. The Augustinians are certainly right about this: Our being the object of God’s grace in no way depends, according to Paul, upon anything we have (or have not) done, freely or otherwise; nor is it something we could ever *purchase* or *earn* by keeping the moral law or by doing good works. But despite Paul’s explicit statement (quoted above) that God is merciful to all, the Augustinians draw the further inference that God’s grace is utterly gratuitous and supererogatory rather than an essential expression of his own justice or righteousness. The assumption here is that, even as our Creator, God has no intrinsic responsibility for our moral and spiritual welfare. Because our first parents somehow polluted the entire human race, God owes us nothing further; in particular, nothing in his nature—neither his justice, nor his love, nor his mercy—constrains him to extend his grace to a single sinner. As Augustine himself put it,

⁴⁵ A tradition named after Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) for his opposition to the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and limited election.

“the whole human race was condemned in its apostate head by a divine judgment so just that even if not a single member of the race were ever saved from it, no one could rail against God’s justice.”⁴⁶

But even if one should accept the dubious supposition here that, as Adam’s descendents, we have all inherited his *guilt*, why make the further assumption that our inherited guilt relieves God of all responsibility for our moral and spiritual welfare? As James B. Gould points out in a recent paper,⁴⁷ this further assumption is simply confused. You might as well argue that a child’s disobedience relieves its parents of all responsibility for the child’s future welfare as well—which is absurd. Just as the decision to have a child creates an obligation to promote the child’s welfare, however disobedient the child might happen to become, so God’s decision to create us entails a freely accepted obligation to promote our welfare, however disobedient we might have become. In fact, this is precisely why, according to Paul, we can do nothing to earn God’s grace (or favor): It is already and always present, whether we know it or not, from the very beginning of our earthly lives. We can hardly earn something through good works that will always be present—albeit in different forms, perhaps—regardless of what we do.

By way of a reply to this, the Augustinians sometimes argue that it is the very nature of mercy that it *must* be supererogatory. Insisting that mercy is simply *undeserved love* (as if it were possible for someone created in God’s image to be undeserving of God’s love), Paul Helm thus writes:

⁴⁶ *Enchiridion*, section 99. For the sake of accuracy, I have altered the position of “not” in Albert C. Outler’s translation, which reads: “not even if a single member of the race were ever saved from it, no one could rail against God’s justice.” See *Augustine and Confessions*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. VII (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), pp. 398-399.

⁴⁷ James B. Gould, “The Grace We Are Owed: Human Rights and Divine Duties,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), pp. 261-275.

What is essential to such love is it could, consistently with all else that God is, be withheld by him. If God cannot but exercise mercy as he cannot but exercise justice then its character *as mercy vanishes*. If God has to exercise mercy as he has to exercise justice then such ‘mercy’ would not be mercy [i.e., would not be undeserved love]. . . . A justice that could be unilaterally waved would not *be* justice, and a mercy which could not be unilaterally waved would not be mercy.⁴⁸

But suppose now that we replace the word “mercy” in this quotation with any one of the following: “beneficence,” “kindness,” “compassion,” or even “pity.” Helm would not, I presume, argue as follows: “If, given his essential attributes, God cannot but exercise beneficence [kindness, compassion, or pity] as he cannot but exercise justice, then its character *as beneficence vanishes*.” Why is this important? Because the central Pauline concept, sometimes translated in our English Bibles with the word “mercy,” is not that of *undeserved love* at all. It is instead that of beneficence, kindness, compassion, or pity. It has in view not the setting aside of a just punishment, as Helm supposes, but the relief of misery or distress. One could therefore accurately translate a text such as Romans 11:32, which I quoted above, as follows: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be *beneficent* to them all.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, Helm’s point about “mercy,” however appropriate it may be in his own context, has no relevance, so far as I can tell, either to Paul’s claim that God is *beneficent* to all or to my own philosophical assumption that this beneficence flows from the inner necessity of God’s own righteousness. Why suppose that a conception of divine mercy, according to which God might not ever be merciful to a single created person, is even relevant to Paul’s own understanding of salvation?

⁴⁸ Paul Helm, “The Logic of Limited Atonement,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3 (1985), p. 50.

⁴⁹ Helm admits that, even on his own view, God *could* be merciful to all. So one wonders why he can’t take seriously Paul’s explicit statement that God *is* merciful (or beneficent) to all?

In fact, although a doctrine of grace may appear to lie at the heart of Augustinian theology, the appearance is quite illusory. For once you try to combine a doctrine of free and irresistible grace with the Augustinian understanding of limited election—the pernicious idea that God, being limited in compassion, restricts his mercy to a limited elect—the very idea of grace evaporates altogether. Is God being gracious to an elect mother when he makes the baby she loves with all her heart an object of his “sovereign hatred”⁵⁰ and supposedly does so, as in the case of Esau, even before the child has done anything good or bad? What really lies at the heart of Augustinian theology, I believe, is a logical impossibility: the idea that God could extend his love and compassion to one person even as he withholds it from some of that person’s loved ones. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that most Christian philosophers writing today—Arminians, Catholics, and other freewill theists—rightly reject any hint of limited election and understandably appeal to libertarian freewill in an effort to explain why God’s perfecting love, which he extends equally to all, successfully transforms some sinners but not others.

It seems to me, however, that Arminian theology ultimately places a burden upon so-called libertarian freedom that it cannot coherently bear. If we all start out in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and illusion, then it stands to reason that our salvation from this condition (and that our eventual perfection) would require, as the Christian faith implies, belief of a certain kind, faith, or (as I like to think of it) clarity of vision. And according to Paul in particular, these are gifts from God, the product of his providential control of our lives, rather than cognitive states that we somehow manufacture in ourselves simply by deciding to do so. But despite Paul’s clear teaching on this point, Arminian theologians typically speak of our *deciding* to believe something, as if our religious beliefs were properly under the control of our wills. In rightly opposing

⁵⁰ According to G. C. Berkouwer, the Dutch Reformed theologian Hermann Hoeksema described God’s attitude towards the non-elect as the ‘sovereign hatred of his good pleasure’. For the quotation from *Het Evangelie*, see Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. 224.

the Reformed understanding of limited election, for example, the Arminian theologian Jack Cottrell insists that “every sinner is able to make his own decision of whether to believe or not.”⁵¹

So just how are we to understand such frequently encountered religious language?

It is utterly non-controversial, I presume, that a very simple empirical belief, such as the belief that fire can burn and cause terrible pain, is not properly a matter of the will at all. Someone might choose to walk near a fire, or to place a hand on a hot coal, or to experiment with fire in some other way, and relevantly similar choices might play an important role in someone’s *discovering* the true nature of fire. But once the consequences of such choices are *experienced*, the resulting belief that fire can burn and cause terrible pain is not itself the product of some further choice, much less of some libertarian free choice. For *discovering* the truth about something is very different from manufacturing a belief in oneself by an act of will—which is not even psychologically possible in many cases.

Certainly religious beliefs are typically more complex than simple empirical beliefs, and some of them could, perhaps, involve the will in a host of subtle ways. As religious people typically understand it, moreover, belief in God goes far beyond a mere *intellectual assent* to the proposition that God exists; it also includes such attitudes as love, trust, and gratitude. So are these *properly* any more the product of choice or will than simple empirical beliefs are? I doubt it. I learned at a very early age to trust my mother implicitly—not because I *decided* to trust her, but because I *discovered* her to be altogether trustworthy. I also learned to love her—not because I decided to love her, but because she first loved me and demonstrated her love in thousands of ways. I have no doubt that certain free choices, if you will, were an important part of the process whereby I discovered my mother’s true character. For I was just as disobedient and

⁵¹ Jack Cottrell, “The Classical Arminian View of Election,” in Chad Owen Brand (ed.), *Perspectives on Election* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), p. 121.

snotty at times as any other child and just as rebellious during my teen years as many others are. But the free choices I made, both the good ones and the bad ones, merely provided my parents with additional opportunities to demonstrate their true character, and at no time in my life could I have freely chosen, so I believe, not to love them and at no time could I have freely chosen to separate myself from them altogether. There was simply never any motive to spurn the love of someone who *always* put my own interests first. And similarly for God, our supremely perfect Mother and Father: We learn to love him because he first loved us and will continue to demonstrate throughout all eternity, if necessary, his faithfulness in meeting our true spiritual needs and in satisfying our heart's desire in the end. Accordingly, our free choices, whichever way they go, merely provide God with additional opportunities to demonstrate his true character and the true nature of his love for us, even as he continues to shatter our illusions and to correct our erroneous ways of thinking.

So perhaps the sum of the matter is this: In view of his explicit statement that God is merciful to all, Paul would have rejected, it seems, the Augustinian understanding of limited election; and in view of his repeated statement that faith itself is a gift from God, Paul would also have rejected, it seems, the Arminian understanding of conditional election. For in Pauline theology, at least, God's saving grace is both universal in scope and unconditional in nature.

Predestination unto Glory

So far, I have challenged the assumption, widely shared by libertarians, that an "agent's good character is ultimately of his own making." I have also noted that the most virtuous among us are typically the last to credit themselves and the first to credit good fortune—or perhaps the grace of God, if they are religious—for their own moral virtues; they are wise enough, in other words, not to attribute their moral virtues, whatever these might be, to the virtuous character of

certain free choices buried in their causal history. For as St. Paul would be the first to acknowledge, the difference between a Hitler or a Mussolini, on the one hand, and himself, on the other, does not lie in the more virtuous character of his own free choices. But having said that, I also hold that free choice, indeterminism, and even sheer chance have an important role to play both in the emergence of independent rational agents and in the process whereby they are finally reconciled to God. So how do I propose to put all of this together? Four observations will have to suffice for the present.

First, a necessary condition of both moral freedom and saving faith is, I presume, a minimal degree of rationality, including an ability to discern reasons for acting, an ability to learn important lessons from experience and from the consequences of one's actions, and a capacity for moral improvement. Not even God, after all, could reveal himself to a stone, and neither could he *both* leave a newborn infant in a state of undeveloped rationality *and*, at the same time, reveal himself to the infant. So in the case of those who fall below the relevant threshold of rationality—small children, the mentally challenged, the severely brain damaged, paranoid schizophrenics, the criminally insane, and the like—the question of how God might honor their free choices or utilize such choices as a means of saving them does not even arise. Neither does the concept of *saving faith* have a relevant application to them. In no way does this imply, of course, that such individuals are not objects of God's grace. It is just that God must first permit the newborn infant to develop into a minimally rational agent, either in this life or the next, and must also restore the paranoid schizophrenic to some semblance of rationality before the concept of *saving faith* can have any relevant application to them.

Second, with respect to those who emerge as independent rational agents in a context of ambiguity and ignorance, God can surely correct them and even foreordain a destiny for them

without directly controlling their individual choices. God had no need, for example, to control individual human choices, not even someone's decision to experiment with fire, in order to guarantee that the human race would eventually discover the power of fire to burn and to cause pain; he needed only to allow minimally rational people to emerge in an environment in which they would encounter fire with some degree of frequency. God can also employ the consequences of our free choices as a means of revelation, that is, as a means of shattering our illusions and of correcting the false assumptions that underlie our bad choices in particular. If I freely act on the illusion that I have the skill to ski down a treacherous slope, a fall and a broken leg may, quite unexpectedly, shatter that illusion to pieces; and if, because I have misconstrued the conditions of my own happiness, I repeatedly pursue my perceived interests at the expense of others, I may eventually discover, again quite unexpectedly, the error of my ways. Indeed, because their consequences can be so effective in correcting our misguided judgments, our immoral and destructive choices may sometimes, as we have already seen, be more useful to God in transforming us than a more virtuous choice might have been. So, just as a grandmaster in chess need not control, or even predict, the moves of a novice in order to checkmate a novice every time, neither would God be required to control a sinner's individual choices in order effectively to checkmate the sinner over time and to eliminate every possible motive the sinner might have for rejecting fellowship with God.

Third, what is essential to the formation of a good character and to the gift of saving faith is not that a rational agent should choose rightly rather than wrongly, but that the agent should choose *freely* one way or the other. For God never simply bypasses our own reasoning processes, however fallible and imperfect they may be; neither does he violate our unique personality through manipulation, or by simply implanting beliefs in us, or by artificially reconstituting us.

Instead, our own reasoning processes and the choices we make help to determine how God can respond most appropriately, given the lessons we still need to learn, in bringing the second stage of our creation to its glorious completion.

Still—and this is my fourth and final point—once we have emerged as individual centers of consciousness and rational agents, God can nonetheless transform our perspective, perhaps even instantaneously, in a perfectly rational way; he need only grant us a direct “face to face” encounter with himself, thereby providing compelling evidence for both his existence and the bliss of union with him. By “compelling evidence” I mean (roughly) evidence that both (a) justifies one in believing a given proposition and (b) renders one powerless in the face of this evidence not to believe it. If an alien spaceship should unexpectedly land in full view on the White House lawn, then this would no doubt alter the perspective of many people almost instantaneously and would do so in a perfectly rational way; and similarly, if Saul of Tarsus (or Paul) really did encounter the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, as Christians believe he did, then it is hardly surprising that such an encounter should likewise have altered his anti-Christian perspective in a perfectly rational way. More generally, for any person *S* who is rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent, if *S* should have a direct encounter of the relevant kind with God, *S* would then possess compelling *experiential* evidence, I suggest, for both the existence and the unsurpassable goodness of God.⁵² And that is why, with respect to anyone who is rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent, God always has a trump card to play, namely the revelation of his own being, that guarantees from the outset his ultimate victory over sin and death.

⁵² As Marilyn Adams points out, “What accounts for our refusal, our miscalculations of what might be reasonable to accept is ignorance of a special kind. ... Not propositional ignorance of what we might read in textbooks. But *experiential* ignorance of the immeasurable goodness that God is...” [“Plantinga on ‘Felix Culpa’: Analysis and Critique,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), p. 138].

Some will no doubt ask at this point: “Well, if God has such a trump card up his sleeve, so to speak, why not play it sooner rather than later?” But I would ask just the opposite question: “If God has a guarantee of ultimate victory, why not play his trump card later—at the moment of each person’s death, if necessary, or even later than that—rather than sooner?” Why not, in other words, allow the drama of human history to play itself out on its own and in a context where parents have the privilege of raising and caring for their children, where one person’s choices can have a direct bearing upon the temporary welfare of others, where real dangers and real threats to one’s temporary happiness exist to struggle against, and where one’s personal failures and sins give real meaning to repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and atonement? Imagine a world without any of this. Imagine first a world with no created order at all, a world consisting of nothing but an eternal Trinity, where the Father’s extravagant artistic skills and creative powers lie eternally dormant and unexercised, where his infinite grace has no role to play, and where his unbounded capacity to perfect the unperfected and to care for the weak and the helpless has no means of expression. Are we to suppose that such a world, even if possible, would be anything like as desirable from God’s perspective as a world like ours in which everyone has a story to tell, indeed lots of stories, but no one is finally excluded from eternal bliss? For my own part, I find such a supposition utterly implausible.⁵³

But now try to imagine a world in which God creates billions upon billions of people over time, not one of whom has a real live story to tell, except this: Once a distinct center of consciousness emerges, it is immediately brought into a mystical union with God where it remains forevermore, sort of like someone experiencing an eternal high, perhaps even quivering forever with intense pleasure, but without anything further to do. In such a static world (without mean-

⁵³ I therefore belong to the camp that thinks it necessarily true that God creates additional persons to love and, for all we know, may never stop creating additional persons to love.

ingful progress) there would be no adventure, no quest for truth, no new discoveries to be made about the wonders of God's creation, no moral struggles of any kind to be won, and no need for God to repair or to cancel out the harm we have done either to others or to ourselves. Such a world would not only be very different from the actual world, but would also be, in my opinion, altogether inferior to it as well. For it is simply a mistake, as I see it, to view the bliss of union with God as if it were logically separable from the things we do in this earthly life, the things that happen either to us or to our loved ones, and the grace imparted to us over time and in many different contexts. It is no less a mistake to view such bliss as logically separable from the tasks we shall continue to perform as God reveals the riches of his grace through us in future ages (see Ephesians 2:7).

Put it this way: As the most creative artist conceivable, God loves a good story, and he has granted each of us the privilege of being a part of many good stories, perhaps even infinitely many of them—stories that will never end but will instead merge gradually into one great ever-expanding story in which, as C.S. Lewis put it at the end of *The Last Battle*, “every chapter is better than the one before.”