

UNIVERSALISM AND THE GREATER GOOD: REPLY TO GORDON KNIGHT

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Abstract

Gordon Knight recently challenged my assumption, which I made for the purpose of organizing and classifying certain theological disputes, that a specific set of three propositions is logically inconsistent (or necessarily false). In this brief rejoinder, I explain Knight's objection and show why it rests upon a misunderstanding.

In a previous article I assumed, for the purpose of organizing and classifying certain theological disputes, that the following set of propositions, call it set A, is logically inconsistent:

- (1) It is God's redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself;
- (2) It is within God's power to achieve his redemptive purpose for the world;
- (2) Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there will be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence altogether.¹

In calling set A logically inconsistent, I did not mean to imply, of course, that it contains a *formal* contradiction; I meant to imply only that the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) is necessarily false, or metaphysically impossible, or not possible in Plantinga's broadly logical sense. If that is true, then at least one of these propositions is false and we can therefore classify theologians according to which of the three propositions they finally reject. Nor is it usually very difficult, I suggested, to identify which proposition a given theologian rejects.

According to Gordon Knight, however, it is a mistake to regard set A as necessarily false.

In a recent response to my article, Knight makes two assumptions for which he provides no argument: first, that something like a conflict of desires is possible for God, and second, that God's redemptive purpose for the world (logically) could come into conflict with some other

overriding purpose. From the perspective of these assumptions, he then diagnoses my *Aerror* as follows:

Suppose . . . that Jones is Vice President, and has it in his power to assassinate the President. I do not think that the mere fact that Jones has the purpose of becoming president entails that he will assassinate the President in order to do so. This is because the statement *It is Mr. Jones's purpose to become President* does not exclude Jones from having other purposes which may in some way conflict with the means necessary to achieve this end. Similarly, I suggest the statement *It is God's redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself* does not entail that God could not have an overriding purpose that prevents him from using all possible means for achieving this end. If God does have an overriding purpose, then while God may desire the salvation of all, and while it may be in God's power to do so, it may still be that all are not saved.²

I am grateful to Knight for expressing in print a reservation about my article that others have also expressed to me in private. But the reservation that Knight and others have expressed does rest, I think it fair to say, upon a misunderstanding. For as Knight himself points out,³ I would reject his interpretation of proposition (1). Indeed, I would simply stipulate that God's redemptive purpose for the world includes everything that he regards as *most* important; hence, it is by definition a purpose that overrides all others.⁴ If God regards it to be of utmost importance that he achieve justice in the end, for example, then that is part of his redemptive purpose for the world; and if he also regards it to be of utmost importance that he preserve human freedom, then that too is part of his redemptive purpose for the world. In the latter case, we might describe his redemptive purpose this way: It is his overriding purpose (and therefore his will) to achieve a state of affairs in which all sinners *freely* repent of their sins. Whether God has the power to achieve this purpose is, of course, a further question. But if God desires the salvation of all in *any* intelligible sense and also desires to preserve human freedom in this matter, then his redemptive purpose for the world is simply a combination of the two: It is his overriding purpose of bringing it about (in Plantinga's weak sense) that all are reconciled to him freely.

Accordingly, as I understand (and use) the expression, "God's redemptive purpose for the world," (1) above entails

(1*) It is God's *overriding* purpose for the world to reconcile all sinners to himself.

And though Knight seems to anticipate this move, his response is perplexing, to say the least. He writes: "But this proposition is only plausible if it is reasonable to assume that God does not have any purpose that could override the goal of universal salvation,"⁵ and he then goes on to suggest that God's purpose of producing a greater good *could* conflict with his desire to save all.⁶ In what way is this response even relevant, however, to the question of whether set A is, as I have claimed, logically inconsistent (or necessarily false)? If the set *is* logically inconsistent, then at least one proposition in the set is false. So how can Knight, or anyone else, contest my claim of logical inconsistency by arguing that one of the propositions in A--namely, proposition (1) when construed so as to entail (1*)--is implausible (or even false)? Certainly Knight is right about this: It is God's overriding purpose to accomplish a given end, whatever the end might be, only if he has no other overriding purpose that is incompatible with this one. But a tautology such as that provides no grounds for challenging my assumption that set A is logically inconsistent.

Given Knight's own apparent theology and his attraction to the Free Will Defense, moreover, I see no reason why he should regard (1*) as false or implausible. Indeed, his stated reasons for challenging (1*) are not reasons for challenging (1*) at all; they are instead reasons, grounded in a libertarian conception of free will, for challenging proposition (2). His trouble begins, as I see it, when he interprets (1*) as if it were saying that God's redemptive purpose is "to reconcile all sinners to himself *at all costs*."⁷ How are we to understand the "at all costs" in the present context? If a free decision of some kind is an essential part of the reconciliation that God seeks to achieve, as Knight and other Arminians believe, then there can be no question of

God reconciling someone against the person's own will and no question of God achieving reconciliation by overriding the relevant freedom; the very idea would be incoherent and therefore logically impossible. True reconciliation, so the Arminian will insist, cannot coincide with either enslavement or any form of determinism that overwhelms human free will. Given Knight's own understanding of reconciliation, therefore, it would seem that (1*) is at least roughly equivalent to

(1**) It is God's overriding purpose for the world to bring it about (weakly) that all sinners freely repent of their sin and are thus freely reconciled to God.

And I seriously doubt, based upon what I have read in his article, that Knight really wants to reject (1**). His quarrel, as I have said, seems to be with proposition (2). Because he regards free will and determinism as incompatible, it is possible, he believes, that God does not have the power to bring it about (weakly) that all sinners freely repent of their sins.

In any event, perhaps Knight will agree with me that the conjunction of (1**) with (2) and (3), call it set B, is indeed necessarily false. But then, if set B *is* necessarily false and (1) entails (1**), then set A (the conjunction of (1) with (2) and (3)) is necessarily false as well. I conclude, therefore, that Knight has failed to mount a successful challenge to my assumption that set A is necessarily false.

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1. Thomas Talbott, "Three Pictures of God in Western Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995), p. 79.
 2. Gordon Knight, "Universalism and the Greater Good: A Response to Talbott," *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997), pp. 98-99. (Note: Page 98 seems mistakenly to have been printed as page 100.)
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
 4. Elsewhere I have indicated that, although I do not accept a doctrine of divine simplicity, I do accept the simplicity of God's *moral* nature: the idea that God's holiness, justice, mercy, etc. are in fact one and the same attribute. Because God's mercy requires everything that his justice requires, for example, and his justice permits everything that his mercy permits, it is logically impossible that his desire to be merciful should ever come into conflict with his desire to be just (see "Punishment, Forgiveness, and Divine Justice," *Religious Studies* (September, 1993). But since that is a controversial view concerning the nature of God, I shall not insist upon it here. For here it is enough merely to point out how I am using the expression, "God's redemptive purpose for the world."
 5. *Op. cit.*, p. 99.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
 7. *Ibid.* Italics are Knight's own.