

# THE TOPOGRAPHY OF DIVINE LOVE: A RESPONSE TO JEFF JORDAN

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Jeff Jordan has recently challenged the idea, widely accepted among theistic philosophers, that “God’s love must be maximally extended and equally intense.” By way of a response, I suggest a way to sidestep Jordan’s argument entirely and then try to show that his own argument is multiply flawed. I thus conclude that his challenge is unsuccessful.

In an article that recently appeared in this journal,<sup>1</sup> Jeff Jordan explores the topography of divine love, as he calls it, and does so in an effort to challenge a proposition that he acknowledges to be widely accepted among theistic philosophers, namely:

(L) If God exists and is perfect, then God’s love must be maximally extended and equally intense (p. 53).

If (L) is true, as I and many other non-Calvinists believe it is, then any theology that would restrict God’s love to a limited elect is clearly mistaken. So anyone who believes that God freely confers his saving grace on some even as he freely withholds the same degree of grace from others will no doubt have a strong incentive to reject (L) and thus to agree with Jordan in this matter. In fairness, I should perhaps point out that nowhere in the paper we are currently considering does Jordan explicitly endorse a doctrine of limited election. But he does say this: “If the divine love cannot be maximally extended and equally intense, it may not be surprising, or perhaps as surprising, that God saves a particular sinner but not another who is no less a sinner” (p. 68). Such a statement may seem milder than Calvin’s statement: “For as Jacob, deserving noth-

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeff Jordan, “The Topography of Divine Love,” *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012), 53-69. All future page references in the text will be to this article.

ing by good works, is taken into grace, Esau, as yet undefiled by any crime, is hated.”<sup>2</sup> But Jordan’s statement, no less than Calvin’s, seems to endorse the idea that God loves some people a lot more than he does others.

Such a view carries a heavy theological price. For consider another proposition that Jordan also challenges:

(P) If God exists, then the relation between creator and human is that of loving parent and child.

If we have a “strong reason to deny (L),” Jordan points out, “we also have strong reason to deny (P). And with (P) false, the good parent analogy fails” (p. 68). So it is likely, according to Jordan, that a morally perfect God does not love (or will the very best for) all created persons in the same way that good parents love (or will the very best for) all of their own children. But if that is true, then the following scenario is also possible: Even though good parents desire the very best for all of their own children, God himself does not likewise desire (or will) the best for all of these very same children. And that, I should think, would be too heavy a price for any loving parent to pay.

So why does Jordan nonetheless believe that we have a strong reason to deny (L)? His argument for this conclusion rests upon the following principle:

(TD) For all properties F, if F is a deficiency when had by a human, then F cannot be a great-making property when had by God (p. 58).

And though he makes no claim to have *established* the truth of (TD), he does claim, after discussing some alleged counterexamples, that we have a good reason to think it true. Accordingly, after endorsing this principle, he applies it to the property described in the consequent of (L), namely, the property *having a kind of love that is maximally extended to all people and equally*

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 946.

*intense for each of them* (call it *having maximally extended love* for short). He then argues as follows: The property *having maximally extended love* would constitute a deficiency in any human being who managed to exemplify it; therefore, it should not to be numbered among a perfect God's great-making properties; therefore, we have good reason to believe that (L) is false.

It seems to me, however, that such an argument is as deeply flawed as it is important, and I shall divide what follows into four sections. In section (i) I shall suggest that one can sidestep Jordan's entire argument against (L) by focusing on a property that a human could have, but God could not have, without loving all created persons equally. In section (ii) I shall begin to examine Jordan's own argument against (L) and argue that he needs to close the logical gap between two very different claims: the claim that an absence of deep attachments in a human life would be a deficiency and the claim that maximally extended love, if someone should somehow manage to achieve it, would likewise be a deficiency. In section (iii) I shall argue that Jordan has confused a love that is equally *intense* for all with a love that is equally *flat*. And, finally, in section (iv) I shall try to explain why, in my opinion, there can be no *real* conflicts of interest in a theistic universe, why there can be no exclusiveness and no partiality in love over the long term, and why, as the New Testament states repeatedly, God is no respecter of persons.

(i)

Consider a property that one exemplifies only when one's love extends maximally and with equal intensity to every person that one freely chooses to bring into being, whether it be through procreation or outright creation. It is hard to see why such a property, call it *having maximally extended parental love* (or PL), would constitute a deficiency when exemplified by a human; it is equally hard to see how a Creator that failed to exemplify PL would nonetheless qualify as a morally perfect being. For even as human parents have an obligation, sometimes met and some-

times not met, to love (or will the best for) each of the children whom they freely choose to bring into this earthly life, so a morally perfect God would, of necessity, love (or will the best for) each of those persons whom he freely chooses to create. And even as a child's disobedience in no way abrogates a parents' obligation to act in the child's best interest, neither would our human sinfulness abrogate a morally perfect God's responsibility to act in our best interest as well.

Now given the assumption that no contingently existing person comes into being unless God freely chooses to bring that person into being, the important point about PL is just this: Whereas we humans can exemplify it without loving all people equally, our Creator could not likewise exemplify it without loving all created persons equally. So if having PL would be a moral virtue and in no way a human deficiency, as I presume even Jordan would acknowledge, then a proponent of (L) need not reject Jordan's claim that the property *having maximally extended love* would constitute a relevant deficiency in any human who exemplifies it. For even if that were true, which I seriously doubt, a proponent of (L) could still argue as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, if God exemplifies PL, then his love is maximally extended and equally intense.
- (2) Necessarily, if God exists and is morally perfect, then God exemplifies PL.

Therefore,

- (L) Necessarily, if God exists and is morally perfect, then his love is maximally extended and equally intense.

Given Jordan's own defense of (TD), moreover, the question of whether *having maximally extended love* is a divine perfection or a great-making property has no relevance at all to the above argument for (L). For the centerpiece of Jordan's defense of (TD) is his claim that the property of *being great-making* is not closed under entailment. By way of an illustration, he points out that *being omniscient* entails *having at least five beliefs*. But whereas *being omnisci-*

*ent* is a divine perfection, he claims, *having at least five beliefs* is not. He thus writes: “The moral to draw here is that having a certain property may be a necessary condition of having another property and it may well be that the latter property is great-making. But even so, it does not follow that the former property is great-making” (p. 60). Does this not give away the proverbial farm, however? If, as Jordan insists, great-making properties are not closed under entailment, then a proponent of (L) has no need to claim that *having maximally extended love* is itself a great-making property; they need claim only that the property *being morally perfect* is great making, that God’s moral perfection entails PL, and that he exemplifies PL only if he also exemplifies *having maximally extended love*. It is enough, in other words, for proponents of (L) to insist that, whether or not *having maximally extended love* is itself properly classified as a great-making property, God cannot be morally perfect unless he also exemplifies this property. And for that reason alone, (TD) seems utterly irrelevant to the question of whether (L) is indeed a sound principle.

Many Christians have also believed that reasons for attributing PL to God are implicit in the New Testament teaching about God’s relationship to the entire human race. They are implicit, for example, in St. Paul’s assertion to a pagan audience that we are all, both pagans and Christians alike, the very offspring of God (see Acts 17:28-29); they are also implicit in his further assertion that there is “one God and *father of all*, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6—my italics).<sup>3</sup> And similarly for the following comment: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom *every* family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph. 3:14-15). Christians sometimes suggest that, as the Creator of all humans, God is not the Father of them all in the same sense that he is the Father of all *believers*, and a similar thought may ex-

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations in this essay are from the New Revised Standard Version copyrighted in 1989 by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

plain Jordan's own remark concerning the Lord's Prayer. In response to William Rowe, who in my opinion rightly cites the Lord's Prayer as evidence of the Christian understanding of God's universal Fatherhood, Jordan writes: "Rowe seems not to have noticed that the context of the invocation, 'Our Father which art in heaven,' is instructing disciples (rather than persons generally) on prayer" (p. 68, note 35). It simply does not follow, however, that non-disciples, non-Christians, or even atheists have no right to address God in the same way. An atheist may not *recognize* God's fatherhood and may have little or no inclination, therefore, to address God as Father, but that is another matter altogether.

Here it is important, I believe, to avoid a possible misunderstanding of the parent/child relationship. In no way does the right kind of parental love for a child—or, for that matter, God's love for an unbeliever—require a context of full reconciliation. Good parents do not disown a disobedient child, and neither do they love a rebellious teenager any less than they do a more cooperative one. Full reconciliation between good parents and their wayward children, like full reconciliation between God and his wayward children, no doubt requires a context of repentance and forgiveness. But as the parable of the prodigal son illustrates so forcefully, bad (or even monstrous) behavior on the part of a son or a daughter will in no way diminish a good parent's love for that rebellious son or daughter. I have seen no more poignant illustration of this truth than a television interview, just prior to Ted Bundy's execution in 1989, with his long-suffering mother. When the interviewer asked this dear woman—a committed Christian, by the way—whether she could continue to support a son who had become a monster (as a serial murderer of young women), her response was most telling. She began to shake uncontrollably, her eyes filled with tears, and she could barely be heard to whisper these words: "Of course I support him; he is my son; I love him; I have to support him." She did not, of course, support his mon-

strous crimes or even object to the severity of his punishment. But she still loved him as a mother loves a son, still yearned for his redemption, and was still prepared to do everything within her power to promote his best interest. Such love as she possessed was obviously a source of terrible suffering for her—comparable, perhaps, to the psychological anguish that, according to the New Testament accounts, Jesus experienced on the Cross. But it nonetheless remains the deepest conceivable kind of love for another.

(ii)

Let us now begin to examine more closely Jordan's own argument against (L), and towards that end let us also accept, at least for the sake of argument, his crucial principle:

(TD) For all properties F, if F is a deficiency when had by a human, then F cannot be a great-making property when had by God (p. 58).

Just how, first of all, should we understand the idea of a *deficiency* in the context of this principle? Jordan directs our attention to an extremely important (albeit easily misinterpreted) point when he writes: "Much of the *richness of life* [my emphasis] flows from one's friendships and one's spouse and one's children, and within these attachments there is a love which is neither impartial nor equally shared by all other persons, as one loves her beloved more than she does others" whom she may not even know (pp. 60-61). Within the same context, he also speaks positively of the role that deep attachments play "in making life worth living" and speaks negatively of how "a lack of the deep attachments ... is clearly a defective life." Similar comments in the same context concern conditions under which a human "would have a life significantly impoverished" and under which "one's life would be diminished." These descriptions suggest that we should interpret his expression "F is a deficiency when had by a human" as being roughly equivalent to something like: "F would somehow detract from the richness of life and from what

we find to be most valuable, important, or significant in an earthly life were some human to exemplify it.”

All of which suggests the following argument: A human life without deep attachments would clearly be impoverished and in that sense deficient; given (TD), therefore, the property *having a life without deep attachments* could not be one of God’s perfections or great-making properties. That argument, however, seems almost trivial, and I cannot imagine any Christian who endorses (L) wanting to challenge it. Those of us who endorse (L) should also concede, I believe, the following two-fold claim: first, that our deepest attachments to family and friends contribute greatly to the richness of our lives, and second, that we in fact love (in the sense of being deeply attached to) those within our own circle of intimacy more than we do those outside this circle.

But where does the argument go from there? How do we get from the premise that the absence of deep attachments in a human life would be a deficiency to the conclusion that maximally extended love, if someone should somehow manage to achieve it, would likewise be a deficiency? It is certainly no mystery, after all, why our deep attachments to family and friends typically coincide, as a practical matter, with the absence of similar attachments to strangers we do not even know. For given our normal human limitations and the normal conditions of an earthly life, we are simply in no position to form deep attachments with everyone, including those not yet born or those who lived and died in the distant past. We no more have the capacity to form deep attachments with literally everyone, in other words, than we have to believe all true propositions or to be omniscient. But it no more follows that maximally extended love in a human would qualify as a deficiency than it follows that omniscience in a human would likewise qualify as a deficiency.

Still, if we can set aside any pretense of precision and at least imagine ourselves possessing any one of the divine perfections, it might seem as if any one of them would detract from what we find to be most valuable, important, or significant in our earthly lives *as they actually unfold*. Take omniscience, for example. If we had come into this earthly life omniscient (I make no comment here on the possibility of such a thing), this would have eliminated, for starters, any possibility of a quest for truth and any opportunity to make meaningful discoveries about the nature of our extravagant universe and our place within it. It would even have eliminated, I presume, much of what Jordan finds most important in our deepest attachments, such as our acquiring over time an ever deepening knowledge of a loved one's unique personality and an ever greater appreciation of it. Similarly, if we had come into this earthly life with a fully mature and utterly intense love for everyone (again I make no comment on the possibility of such a thing), we would have no lessons of love to learn, no need for repentance, forgiveness, and atonement, and no reason to make hard moral choices. Mind you, I make no claim, based on such considerations, that we should regard either omniscience or maximally extended love as a deficiency when had by a human;<sup>4</sup> neither do I claim that these considerations suffice to refute (TD).<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, it is enough simply let the chips fall where they may with respect to these issues. I do claim, however, that we have no better reason to believe that maximally extended love would

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<sup>4</sup> For as Tom Flint pointed out in a comment on an earlier version of this paper, a person might very well argue as follows: "There is, to be sure, value in our questing for truth, but ... more value in our possessing it, and being in the latter condition would not necessarily undermine the richness or purpose of earthly human life. Similarly, though repentance and forgiveness are valuable, a life without the need for repentance or forgiveness is not necessarily diminished (e.g., Christ's life wasn't diminished, and Adam's wouldn't have been had he obeyed)."

<sup>5</sup> For as an anonymous referee wrote: "Might it not be that having the divine perfections is what makes for divinity? In short, if [a human subject] S couldn't have the divine perfections and remain human, then having them couldn't be a deficiency when had by a human. The moral of the story is that there seems to be a need for criteria that delimit what can reasonably qualify as a property F in (TD) such that the antecedent of (TD) could be true and the consequent false." Although the first part of this quotation may seem inconsistent with certain understandings of the Incarnation, I tend agree with the final sentence. See also my own remarks on contextual dependence below.

undermine the richness or the purpose of one's earthly life than we have to believe that omniscience would do the same thing.

Not that we should evaluate all of the divine perfections in exactly the same way. With respect to God's omnipotence, it is no doubt metaphysically impossible that any being distinct from God should likewise be omnipotent. But we might think of maximally extended love, by way of contrast, as an ideal that, even though we lack the capacity to satisfy it under the conditions of a normal earthly life, we should nonetheless try to approximate as much as we can, particularly with respect to those people we do know. We might call such an unattainable ideal, then, an Earthly Life Impracticality, a condition that obtains whenever the circumstances of our earthly lives prevent us from achieving some desirable goal or satisfying some worthwhile ideal. Unlike logical impossibilities, many such Earthly Life Impracticalities are contextually dependent; that is, they depend upon circumstances that obtain at a given time, and these can change with the passage of time, especially if we should take into account future ages and other realms of existence.

Illustrations of the point seem readily available. Whereas being sexually intimate with someone might undermine completely the innocence and richness of a normal childhood, it might also enrich the life of an adult; and whereas a stunning beatific vision, one that renders certain moral choices utterly impossible, might seem to undermine the very purpose of an earthly life, given a common Christian understanding of the importance of human freedom, it might nonetheless enrich the lives of the redeemed in heaven. In a similar manner, the institution of marriage, which no doubt enriches the earthly lives of many, might turn out to be utterly inappropriate, as Jesus himself pointed out, in the radically different circumstances of a future age. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus thus remarked: "Those who belong to this age marry and are given

in marriage; but in that age those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.” Why not? Because “they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection” (Lk. 20:34-36). The suggestion here seems to be that partiality in our present love relationships, such as may exist in a good marriage, is only temporarily appropriate as a concession to the conditions of an earthly life.

In fact, if the purpose of an earthly life has anything to do with *soul-making*, as John Hick famously called it, then an opportunity for moral development and spiritual growth is surely an essential part of that purpose. For we all emerge with a first person perspective in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, and it is within such a context that we begin to make choices, begin to experience the consequences of these choices and to learn important lessons from them, and, according to the Christian faith, begin to develop with God’s help the kind of loving character that he intends to bring to fruition in a coming age or in another realm.

I would also point out, finally, that our normal human limitations typically detract from the quality of our deepest attachments. For just as we humans have no capacity during our earthly lives to achieve an equal intimacy with all created persons, neither do we have a capacity to know the heart of even our closest loved ones as intimately as God does. It is nonetheless through our most intimate and special love relationships, I would argue, that God teaches us the true nature—that is, reveals to us the full intimacy and intensity—of his own love for each one of us. For given that we humans have only a limited number with whom we can achieve genuine intimacy during the short period of a normal lifetime on earth, how else could we learn to appreciate the full intensity of God’s love for each of us except by analogy with our own most intimate and special love relationships? And why, if he regarded the Father’s love as limited and partial

as ours, would Jesus have commanded that we love not only our neighbors and closest friends, but even our enemies as well? We are to do this, he declared, so that we too might “be perfect” even as our “heavenly Father is perfect” (see Mt. 5:43-48). Such a love may lie well beyond our power to achieve, particularly at the beginning of our earthly lives. But it nonetheless *is* a perfection of God, Jesus declared, and, as already indicated, an ideal that we should therefore strive to realize in our own lives as much as we can. Striving to realize such an ideal would entail, I presume, never cutting off overtures to friendship arbitrarily, steadily expanding over time and where practically possible our own circle of intimacy, and always being prepared to act like a good Samaritan in our relation to strangers in need.

(iii)

The question that has emerged so far concerns how Jordan proposes to close the logical gap between a proposition that virtually all Christians would accept, namely:

(3) A human life without deep attachments would be seriously deficient,

and a proposition that many Christians would reject, namely:

(4) The life of a human who somehow managed to exemplify *having maximally extended love* (either in this age or in some other) would be seriously deficient.

We can perhaps illustrate the problem inherent in trying to close this logical gap in the following way. Let LC be a property that one exemplifies only if one’s love extends maximally and with equal intensity to every living Christian. The same considerations that lead Jordan to claim that “a human who loved all other humans equally and impartially would have a life significantly impoverished” (p. 60) might lead another to claim that a human who loved all *Christians* “equally and impartially (and who thus exemplified LC) would have a life significantly impoverished.” For according to Jordan, “a person appropriately loves his own children more than other chil-

dren. And without the inequality of love, one's life would be diminished" (p. 61). Here Jordan means to include, I presume, my appropriately loving my own children more than I do the Christian child of some African peasant. So if some human, such as Jesus or a perfected saint in heaven, *should* manage to exemplify LC and should therefore manage to love all Christian children with an equal intensity, would that entail a human deficiency? It is hard to see why it should. A lesser love, or even no love at all, for some unknown child on a far-away continent contributes nothing, so far as I can tell, to the deepest possible love of parents for their own children. To the contrary, insofar as they love their own children as intensely as they should, they no doubt also manifest a *disposition*, despite their many human limitations, to will the best for all other children as well.

Even within the context of our limitations as finite beings, moreover, every addition to our circle of intimacy over time tends to enrich our lives further, and rarely does it diminish the intensity of our love for others within that circle. A woman's intense love for her husband (and the appropriate exclusiveness in her sexual relations with him) need not diminish the intensity of her love for the other men in her life, such as her father, her brother, her son, a close male friend, or even, as in the case of Mary Magdalene, Jesus himself. Similarly, as any good parent knows, being deeply attached to one child need not detract from being equally attached to another, and neither would a supremely perfect God's deep attachment to one created person prevent an equally deep attachment to all other created persons as well. For God has none of the human limitations that make it impossible for us to achieve an equally intimate relationship with all created persons during our earthly lives.

Anticipating a similar objection, Jordan expresses it in a most revealing way when he writes:

The idea here would be that humans have only so much love to go around, or perhaps better, humans can manifest their love only in limited ways. But God faces no limitation, and without limitation God's loving in a maximally wide and flat way would imply no defect. So, the incompatibility of love and flatness is a practical matter afflicting humans, which need not extend to an infinite being. With infinite resources available, does it follow that flatness is implied by infinity? (pp. 65-66).

Perhaps most notable here is the subtle shift of language that has taken place between Jordan's formulation of (L) and what we read in the passage just quoted. When he formulates (L), Jordan describes the relevant love as "maximally extended and *equally intense*"; but when he seeks to argue against (L), he speaks of the supposedly "popular assumption that the topography of the divine love must be as wide *and flat as possible*" (p. 60). And in the above quotation, he thus asks: "With infinite resources available, does it follow that flatness is implied by infinity?" The correct answer, I believe, is: "Of course not!" But why shift from the words "equally intense" to the words "flat as possible," where the latter words seem to imply a less intense love (if any genuine love at all) for its objects? Jordan's answer seems to be that God's loving all created persons equally is incompatible with his being deeply attached to each one of them, as if being deeply attached to one person *logically requires* the existence of someone else to whom one is not so deeply attached. He thus writes: "if God has deep attachments, it follows that God does not love equally" (p. 67). That simply does *not* follow, however. If, as I believe, God is so intimately connected with each of us that he literally experiences our physical environment through our bodies; and if he knows each of us from the inside out far more intimately than even our own parents and spouses do, it seems utterly wrongheaded to describe his love for each of us as somehow being *equally flat* rather than as being *equally intense*. It is not that God loves some people *less* than we manage to love in our deepest attachments; it is instead that he loves all people *far more* than this, especially when our deepest attachments retain a kind of grasping posses-

siveness. A mother who clings to her children in possessive ways as they grow and mature does not love them more than God does; she loves them far less than God does.

In any event, Jordan's remark about a divine love that is as "flat as possible" has no obvious relevance to the truth of (L), which speaks not of a divine love that is *equally flat*, but of one that is *equally intense* for all.

(iv)

So far, then, we have found nothing of substance in Jordan's arguments against (L). But Jordan offers a further line of argument concerning the conflicts of interest that supposedly arise between human beings. He writes: "If God were to love certain humans, and thereby identify with their interests, then God could not identify with incompatible interests. In other words, even God cannot love or befriend every human in the deepest way" (p. 63).

As Jordan would no doubt acknowledge, however, this argument requires some additional premises not made explicit in the above quotation. After all, from the premise:

(5) Not even God can identify with incompatible interests,

it simply does not follow that

(6) "God cannot love or befriend every human in the deepest way."

So here are two additional premises that might support a valid deduction of (6):

(5a) For any person S, God loves S "in the deepest way" possible only if God identifies with S's own interests;

(5b) There exist at least two persons, S and S\*, such that S and S\* have incompatible interests.

Taken individually, each of these additional premises may seem initially plausible, even noncontroversial. But taken together, they in fact conceal a crucial ambiguity with respect to what is to count as a person's interest. Consider Jordan's own understanding of a person's interest "as

[merely] a desire or goal had by that person—something that a person cares about” (p. 62, note 26). Given that understanding, it is quite obvious that people have incompatible interests and quite obvious, therefore, that (5b) is true. But it is equally obvious that (5a) is false. For unless one rejects the idea that God’s perfecting love plays a corrective role in our lives and rejects the clear assertion in Hebrews 12:6 that God “disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts,” it should be utterly obvious that a God who loves us would not identify with, or “take as his own,” all of our present desires, aims, and ambitions. Here I am reminded of my own children squabbling in the back seat of a car when they were young. Although their desires on such an occasion had clearly come into conflict, my equal love for both of them carried no implication that I identified with either set of conflicting desires; and even when I resolved the squabble more to the liking of one child than to that of the other, this carried no implication that I loved the one child more than I did the other. Similarly, for the very reason that he does love us, God does *not* identify with all of our present desires, aims, and ambitions.

At the very least, then, we must distinguish between a person’s *perceived* interests, on the one hand, and a person’s *real* (or *best*) interest, on the other. For whereas we often makes mistakes about our real (or best) interest, merely *believing* that something is in our interest will suffice to make it a perceived interest. Accordingly, with respect to our perceived interests, it is clear that these often do come into conflict and just as clear that God’s love may oppose them on particular occasions. But with respect to a person’s best interest, it is by no means obvious that the best interest of one person could ever conflict with that of another. Neither a Platonist nor a Christian, for example, would hold that an unjust action, even when aimed at promoting some perceived interest, would in fact promote one’s best interest. According to Jordan, however, “it is far from obvious that God could befriend or love all persons even if he takes as his own only

the best interests of persons” (p. 64). He thus adopts the surprising position that even someone’s best interest might come into conflict with that of another. He writes:

It is plausible that never suffering solely for the benefit of another is among the best interests of persons. But suppose God were to allow some to suffer in order to achieve a greater good which could not otherwise be achieved. And suppose further that the suffering, while beneficial to some, is not beneficial to the sufferer. Clearly enough, God could not both identify with the best interests of every person and yet allow some to suffer that way. ... If a great good is obtainable only at the cost of allowing suffering which is not in the interest of the sufferer, God may yet be justified in allowing that suffering (p. 63).

So just what might qualify as a “great good” that would justify (or outweigh) God’s acting contrary to someone’s best interest? Unfortunately, Jordan provides no example of such a great good and not even a hint of what it might be; neither does he explain how one person’s suffering could benefit another without at least indirectly benefitting the sufferer as well. Augustine, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards held that the torments of those writhing in hell would bring great joy to the saints in heaven. So is this the kind of example that Jordan has in mind? Alternatively, I can imagine someone claiming that the suffering of Jesus on the Cross benefitted others without benefitting himself. But the author of Hebrews explicitly rejected such an idea in favor of the following three-fold claim: first, that it was “for the sake of the joy that was set before him” that Jesus “endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2); second, that the source of this joy was that his tasting “death for everyone” enabled him to become “the pioneer [or captain] of their salvation” and thus to bring “many children to glory” (Heb. 2:9-10); and, finally, that even Jesus himself was in some way made “perfect through [these] sufferings” (vs. 10). Behind this three-fold claim lies a remarkable understanding, found throughout the New Testament, of how love (or willing the very best for another) ties people’s real interests together and thus makes it impossible for one person’s best interest to conflict with that of another.

As an illustration of this New Testament understanding, consider first St. Paul's rather off-handed remark concerning his friend and fellow worker Epaphroditus: "He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy upon him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another" (Phil. 2:27). Given Paul's love for his friend, any good that befell his friend would also be a good that befell Paul and any evil that befell his friend would likewise be an evil that befell Paul. Or, as Jesus put it in his parable of the sheep and the goats: "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40—RSV). That is why Jesus' redemptive sufferings, as the New Testament understands them, could not benefit others without also benefitting himself. Similarly, if some unspecified "great good is obtainable only at the cost of allowing" me to suffer, this good will presumably benefit *someone*; and if it benefits some person S whom, in obedience to Christ, I manage to love even as I love myself, then it will also benefit me. And the reverse is true as well: Insofar as my suffering harms me and, in obedience to Christ, S loves me even as S loves S, then my suffering would harm S even as it harms me.<sup>6</sup> In that way, it is the very nature of love (as opposed to that grasping possessiveness so easily confused with love) that it actually *creates* a common set of *real in-*

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<sup>6</sup> As Tom Flint reminded me, some proponents of a freewill theodicy of hell have argued as follows: If "A would in fact be saved only in response to the horrid example given by B's damnation," then A's real interest would indeed conflict with that of B. (For an example of such a view, see William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 172-178.) Setting aside the controversy over middle knowledge, my own reply to such an argument consists essentially of the point just made in the paragraph containing the present note. I also believe that St. Paul in effect rejected such an argument when he wrote: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish [or pray] that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:2-3). Nor is there anything irrational, contrary to what some have suggested, in such a wish or prayer—or at least so I would argue. For given Paul's love for his kindred, their ultimate damnation would be no less a source of unceasing anguish in his heart than his own damnation would be. I develop a more extensive reply to Craig's view in "Craig on the Possibility of Eternal Damnation," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990). See also John Kroen and Eric Reitan, *God's Final Victory: a Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2011), 80-89.

terests,<sup>7</sup> and this is but one reason, I shall now argue, why there can be no exclusiveness in love over the long run.

Even Paul's love for Epaphroditus, by the way, would have degenerated into mere selfishness had he permitted his own desire for continued fellowship in the present to supersede God's judgment concerning what might be best for *both* Paul *and* Epaphroditus over the long run. So even if Epaphroditus had died, this too might have been in accord with a common set of *real* interests (as opposed to a common set of *perceived* interests).

But in any case, the way in which love creates a common set of real interests also helps to explain why genuine love—that is, willing the very best for another—cannot remain fixated forever on a select few, such as one's own children, to the exclusion of others. Suppose that, as might happen in a bad Hollywood movie plot, a woman's possessive attitudes with respect to her only son should induce her to hatch a murderous plot against his fiancée whom she fears has stolen his heart. It is simply obvious, surely, that this woman's murderous jealousy would be just as incompatible with any genuine love for her son as it would be with any genuine love for his fiancée. For if her son genuinely cares for his fiancée and thus wills the very best for her, then the common set of real interests thereby created carries the following implication: Anyone, including the man's own mother, who wills less than the best for his fiancée likewise wills less than the best for the man himself. More generally, for any two persons S and S\*, if S wills the best for S\*, then no one (including God) can will less than the best for S\* without also willing less than the best for S.

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<sup>7</sup> Nor can one block this move by appealing, as Jordan does (see his note 29), to the claim that, if every instance of suffering benefits the sufferer, then we have no incentive to reduce the total amount of suffering in the world. Although this claim, often associated with H. J. McCloskey's widely anthologized article "God and Evil" (first published in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1960)), rests upon a confusion in my opinion, we can let that pass. For I am not here claiming that every instance of suffering benefits the sufferer. I am claiming instead that insofar as my suffering promotes the best interest of my loved ones, it promotes my own best interest as well. And insofar as my suffering is inconsistent with my own best interest, it is also inconsistent with the best interest of those who love me.

So here is why there can be no partiality and no exclusiveness in love over the long run. As our own loved ones—our children, for example—acquire additional loved ones of their own; and as these in turn acquire still more loved ones, a common set of real interests continues to expand. And furthermore, given that everyone is loved by someone or another (by God, if by no one else), we have every reason to believe that this common set of real interests will exclude no one in the end. According to Jordan, “to love Hitler and Bonheoffer the same is a love so indiscriminate as to be unworthy of moral decency, let alone moral perfection” (p. 66). But as I see it, that makes no sense at all. Love in the sense of willing the best for another is never indiscriminate; it is, according to the Christian faith, the very fulfillment of the moral law. Consider Saul of Tarsus, who hated Christians every bit as much as Hitler hated the Jews. According to the self-description attributed to Saul/Paul in 1 Timothy 1:13, he was “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” (in fact the foremost religious terrorist of his day); and if his actions were less destructive than those of Hitler, this is only because he did not have 20<sup>th</sup> Century technology or the power of a modern state at his fingertips. So would Jordan deny that God willed the best for Saul and also willed the best for the martyr Stephen, who was murdered with Saul’s approval? If not, then why doubt that God wills the best for both Hitler and Bonheoffer and thus loves both of them in exactly the same sense?

Certainly Hitler and Bonheoffer had very different spiritual needs, even as one’s own children might have different physical needs. So even as loving parents might treat a “special needs child” differently than they would a healthy athlete, God might likewise treat Hitler differently than he would Bonheoffer. But isn’t that just what love requires? If parents were to respond to a child’s harmful and destructive behavior in the same way they do to more appropriate behavior, would this be a genuine expression of love? The question virtually answers itself. If, over an

extended period of time that includes the afterlife, God were to respond to Hitler's behavior in the same way that he does to Bonhoeffer's behavior, this would most likely indicate indifference rather than perfect love.

I conclude, therefore, that Jordan's arguments against (L) are unsuccessful. Perhaps the best hope for a cogent argument at this point would be for Jordan to spell out a possible case where one person's best interest clearly comes into conflict with that of another. But for the reasons spelled out above, I seriously doubt that there is such a possible case.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I am ever so grateful to Tom Flint and two anonymous referees for comments that saved me from at least one truly unfortunate confusion.