

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 33 | Issue 1

Article 6

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1-1-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Himma, Kenneth Einar (2016) "The Ethics Of Subjecting a Child to the Risk of Eternal Torment: A Reply to Shawn Bawulski," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol33/iss1/6>

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# THE ETHICS OF SUBJECTING A CHILD TO THE RISK OF ETERNAL TORMENT: A REPLY TO SHAWN BAWULSKI

Kenneth Einar Himma

In “Birth as a Grave Misfortune,” I argue that it is morally wrong, given ordinary moral intuitions about child-bearing decisions together with the traditional Christian doctrines of hell and salvific exclusivism, to bring a child into the world when the probability that she will spend an eternal afterlife suffering the torments of hell is as high as it would be if these two doctrines are true. In a paper published by this journal, Shawn Bawulski responds to my arguments, offering a number of philosophical and theological objections to my arguments. In this essay, I reply to those objections and counter-arguments.

## *Introduction*

Although it is typically thought that, as a general matter, it is morally permissible for married couples to have children, I argue in “Birth as a Grave Misfortune”<sup>1</sup> that this view is mistaken if two traditional doctrines of Christianity are true. The first of these views, Christian salvific exclusivism (*CSE*), holds that it is a necessary condition for being spared divine punishment that one instantiate a genuinely saving Christian faith before one’s death. The second is the traditional doctrine of hell (*TDH*), which holds that (1) there are people consigned to hell; (2) hell is divine punishment of unforgiven sin; and (3) hell is a state of eternal torment unmatched in severity by anything one can experience in this world.

My argument is grounded in a moral intuition I think most people share, namely, that it is wrong for would-be parents to bring a child into the world if they rationally believe there is a sufficiently high probability that the child will experience severe harm after birth that will endure throughout the child’s lifetime, which I call the New Life Principle (hereinafter *NLP*). Suppose, for example, 99 percent of the reliable evidence available to would-be parents indicates that the child they contemplate conceiving would be born with a terminal illness causing constant pain so severe it cannot be alleviated by any known narcotics or even the comfort

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<sup>1</sup>Himma, “Birth as a Grave Misfortune,” 179–198.



of her would-be parents' love.<sup>2</sup> It seems wrong for the would-be parents to conceive at that point in time under these circumstances.

*NLP* seems to have some important implications with respect to whether it is, as a general matter, permissible to bring a new child into the world. Assuming *TDH* and *CSE* are true, the odds that any new child—bracketing any information about the conditions into which she will be born—will spend an eternal afterlife suffering the torments of hell are disturbingly high. Indeed, only one-third of the world's nearly seven billion people claim to be Christians, effectively consigning the other two-thirds immediately to hell for eternity, under *CSE*. But the intuition underlying *NLP* suggests it would also be wrong to bring a child into the world given the risk that she will be consigned to hell for not having the right beliefs. Thus, assuming *TDH* and *CSE* are true, it seems impermissible for would-be parents to bring a child into the world when the odds she will experience the torments of hell are as high as they would be if these two doctrines are true. This, of course, is inconsistent with the view, shared by Christians and non-Christians alike, that it is *prima facie* (or presumptively) permissible to bring a child into the world (hereinafter, the "Having Kids is Good Principle" or *HKG*).<sup>3</sup>

It is important to be clear on what the conclusion is exactly. The conclusion is not that it is morally wrong to have children. Rather, insofar as *TDH*, *CSE*, *NLP*, and *HKG* purport to be necessary truths (as truths about God and ethics) the conclusion is that the set containing these claims is logically inconsistent.<sup>4</sup> The argument I gave, if sound, entails the rejection of *NLP*, *TDH*, *CSE*, or *HKG*. Although one can reject any of these claims, I think the most likely response discards *CSE* or *TDH*, and retains *NLP* and *HKG*, since the underlying intuitions for these latter principles will likely seem obvious and hence be held resolutely.

### *I. Objections and Replies: Theological Objections*

Shawn Bawulski begins with a series of theologically grounded objections.<sup>5</sup> His first objection challenges the intuitively grounded principle on which the argument rests—namely, *NLP*. As Bawulski puts the objection:

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<sup>2</sup>This principle is intended to apply only to harms that are likely to persist throughout the child's lifetime. If a predicted harm can be treated and healed through medical science, then the calculus—and relevant principle—changes.

<sup>3</sup>*HKG* should be construed as being rebuttable. Apart from the exceptions I discuss in this essay, I am agnostic with respect to what ordinary, earthly circumstances might rebut the presumption. One might think the impact on the environment of bringing a child into the world is relevant with respect to the application of *HKG*. I leave these matters to the intuitions of the reader.

<sup>4</sup>Assuming the relevant claims are contingent claims about *this world*, the fact that it is true in this world that there is a grave risk of damnation is enough to show that the relevant set of claims cannot all be true together.

<sup>5</sup>Bawulski, "Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible?" 330–344.

Crucially lacking is any consideration for God's activity; it seems that Himma's concept of procreation is theologically impoverished. From Ps. 127:3—children are a gift from the Lord, and he is the giver of life. Himma states this initially in his essay, but it is strangely absent when he moves to discuss the morality of the decision to procreate, leaving his essay liable to the impression that only human agency is relevant. The view taken up in this objection says that God's activity in procreation is paramount and is significant for the procreation decision. I do not autonomously create a new person; rather, God creates a new person in a way that involves my actions (reproduction).<sup>6</sup>

The claim here is that my analysis ignores a theologically grounded conception of procreation as involving both human and divine agency.

There are a couple of preliminary observations that should be made in response to Bawulski's remarks quoted above. First, although Bawulski begins the objection with a citation to Biblical verses implying *HKG*, there is no logical inconsistency between those claims and *NLP*, since *NLP*, by its own terms, precludes bringing a child into the world only under certain specified conditions. It might be true that bringing a child into the world is a gift from God, but it does not follow that it is *absolutely* permissible for two people to bring a child into the world. From the standpoint of ordinary intuitions, it can be permissible to decline a gift that is morally good to offer. If, for example, Bill Gates kindly offers me a gift of \$1,000,000, I have a moral permission to respectfully decline the gift (perhaps I feel uncomfortable accepting such a large sum of money). Intuitively, I do no wrong by declining Gates's gift, but Gates does no wrong by offering it.

Indeed, the idea that there is an absolute prohibition on declining gifts is false on mainstream Christian views—even when the relevant gift is from God! First, Christianity puts a constraint on the gift of procreation: it is morally impermissible, according to mainstream Christianity, for unmarried people to procreate; the theology of Christianity pretty clearly implies that the creation of a new child by God through the parents' procreative act is not necessarily a gift that is permissible to accept. This means, as an interpretative matter, either children conceived out of wedlock are not gifts from God or they are gifts that are permissible to decline. Either way, there is no inconsistency between the claim that children are a gift from God and *NLP*'s more general presupposition that bringing a child into the world is wrong *under certain specified conditions*.

Second, it is reasonable to hypothesize that most Christians, including more conservative Christians who accept *TDH* and *CSE*, would, and with some validity, criticize two people who have children knowing they cannot support them financially and emotionally—even if those children are still plausibly regarded as "blessings" or "gifts." It is both Biblical and intuitive that having children comes with certain obligations of support. It simply seems wrong for would-be parents to bring a child into the world when they know they *cannot* meet these support obligations. If this

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 336.

is correct, then Bawulski hasn't given any plausible reason to think that *NLP* conflicts, in any way fatal to my argument, with the idea that having children is a moral good or its implication, *HKG*.<sup>7</sup>

But Bawulski's argument against *NLP*, despite citing a Biblical verse indicating that children are a gift from God, does not really rely on that claim, as far as I can see. The gravamen of Bawulski's argument is, ultimately, that *NLP* is problematic because it implies the doctrine of salvific universalism. Although there are Biblical verses supporting universalism,<sup>8</sup> many Christians likely reject universalism on the strength of an intuition that it is unfair to treat, under the guise of divine *justice*, those who repent of their sins and follow the will of God in the same way as those who have done neither.

The reason that Bawulski believes that *NLP* implies salvific universalism is that he believes *NLP* must apply to God as well, since God's agency is also necessary to bring children into the world. For if *NLP* applies to God, then it seems God is obligated not to bring any children into the world that he knows will go to hell; this assumes, of course, that God knows both which children would be brought into the world and how they would act.<sup>9</sup> If the doctrine of divine foreknowledge is true (and includes knowing both who will be born and what choices they will make in life), then there will be no one in hell, since God will abstain from bringing anyone into the world who would wind up there. And this, of course, implies salvific universalism.

Bawulski's view that *NLP* must apply to God is vulnerable to objection—and one that, I believe, can be grounded in theologically informed intuitions widely shared among ordinary Christians. One common response—at least among philosophical laypersons—to the theological problem of evil, which, by its own terms, poses a problem internal to Christianity requiring a reconciliation of suffering with mainstream Christian theology, is simply to take the position that “God works in mysterious ways.” This can be interpreted in two ways equally plausible from the standpoint of mainstream Christianity: (1) we are not in a position to understand how moral principles apply to God; or (2) a different set of moral principles from those applying to human beings apply to God.

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<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that the moral value of having children is distinct from the moral value of a child's life. The value of the latter would be regarded as intrinsic and sacred by traditional views, whereas the value of having children might also be intrinsic, but is more likely instrumental. In any event, *HKG* is concerned with the moral value of having children—i.e., under what circumstances having children is morally permissible. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making me aware of this concern.

<sup>8</sup>For example, I. Corinthians 15:22 states, “As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” Similarly, according to Romans 5:18, “God has imprisoned all in disobedience, that He may be merciful to all.” Even more explicitly, I Timothy 2:4 teaches that “[i]t is the will of God our Savior that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”

<sup>9</sup>On an open theist view, God would presumably have sufficient empirical information to make highly reliable predictions about both, falling short of knowledge, but consistently accurate enough to justify not bringing doomed children into the world.

Either way, Bawulski's view that my argument presupposes that *NLP* applies to God is problematic. There is nothing in my argument that suggests that the moral principles that apply to human beings necessarily apply to God—even if we assume that Bawulski has provided sufficient support for his views concerning God's active role in procreation. I do not have to take that position any more than Bawulski must as a Christian; I could take the position, as many mainstream Christians do, that if God exists, then a different set of moral principles govern his agency. Further, if, as is generally assumed by mainstream Christians, human beings are not in a sufficiently reliable epistemic position to assess God's behavior under moral standards, Bawulski cannot claim that *NLP*, even assuming it applies to God, implies either salvific universalism or the claim that God cannot bring into the world people he knows will go to hell.

Even so, Bawulski is correct in targeting *NLP* as the first line of attack, as the argument clearly rests on an empirical prediction that the reader will share my reaction to the possible fact-patterns I consider. In this connection, it is crucial to note that the claim that *NLP* expresses or conforms to an ordinary intuition is an empirical claim that requires sociological support of some kind; the claim that an intuition is "ordinary" simply expresses the claim that most people share it.

Despite this fact, no empirical support was provided in the form of reliable sociological data—either by Bawulski or by me. Instead, I did what is customary for philosophers in defending claims that a particular view conforms to ordinary intuitions. I gave an argument contrived to elicit a certain intuitive reaction from the reader:

There are a number of situations in which we may judge the act of bringing a new life in the world, or specifically, the procreative act itself, as being wrong. Consider, for starters, a couple who decides to conceive a child knowing there is a high probability that the child will be born with a terrible condition that will result in a short and terribly painful life—pain that is so bad that the child cannot even be picked up without exacerbating it. Assume also that this same couple would face a morally insignificant risk of giving birth to a child with this condition if the couple simply delays conception by a few years. Whether or not the child is born with the condition (but especially if he or she is), it is quite plausible to think (and nearly everyone I asked about this case took this position even while exhibiting sympathy for the parents) the parents committed a moral wrong—and one against the child—if they elected not to delay conception.<sup>10</sup>

If the reader rejects this argument because she has a different intuition about the relevant moral issue presented by the case, then she will not be persuaded by my argument. If, however, the reader shares my intuition that conceiving a child under those circumstances is wrong, then she seems committed to some kind of principle that constrains the circumstances in which people can permissibly bring a new human life into the

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<sup>10</sup>"Birth as a Grave Misfortune," 188–189.

world. Further, that principle will clearly take into account the severity of suffering to the child that will result if she is conceived and born.

Bawulski offers no serious challenge to my assumption that the intuition underlying *NLP* is one shared by ordinary mainstream Christians—despite the fact that, at the end of the day, this is the element of the argument most vulnerable to objection. He challenges *NLP* by claiming it has certain implications that Christians should reject but, apart from the fact that his reasoning is problematic, that does not, by itself, show Christians would reject those implications, as they might have intuitions different from those of Bawulski. What Bawulski does say about my claim that readers will share certain intuitions is overly brief; he simply opines that “Himma seems to regard *NLP* as representative of many if not most people’s moral intuitions.”<sup>11</sup> He questions what he incorrectly thinks are implications of *NLP* but really never grapples with the cases that suggest some principle like *NLP* is true.

Of course, it is up to the reader to decide whether she has the same reaction I do to the principal case on which I relied in *BGM*; however, I have not relied on just this case in this reply. Earlier in this essay, I gave a couple of other examples (and will give a few more below) in which I am, again, hypothesizing or predicting that the reader will share my reaction to at least one of them. These cases had to do with would-be parents who are not married bringing children into the world and with would-be parents bringing children into the world they know they cannot support—either financially or emotionally.

It is true, of course, that only one of these challenges is directly relevant. The first challenge to *HKG* was grounded in considerations of sexual morality, rather than considerations having to do with a child’s quality of life; accordingly, this challenge is not directly on point here—but it should weaken any presumptive resistance to some of my claims about *HKG* because it shows that *HKG* is not absolute. But the second challenge rested on an implicit principle that constrains the circumstances in which it is permissible to bring a child into the world on the basis of quality-of-life considerations. If the reader shares my reaction to *either* challenge, then she is committed to some principle that constrains the circumstances in which it is legitimate to bring a child into the world. But if the reader shares my reaction to the *second*—and more relevant—challenge, then she is committed to a principle, like *NLP*, that makes quality of life considerations relevant in determining whether it is permissible to bring a child into the world. And I suspect any potential principle that rules out bringing a child into the world on the basis of quality-of-life considerations—and I cannot ferret out and evaluate all the possibilities in a reply piece—will give me the result I think I have successfully established with my analysis.

Bawulski offers a second objection to *NLP*; as he elegantly expresses it,

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<sup>11</sup>“Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible?,” 334.

The second theological objection, perhaps the stronger, contends that Himma's application of *NLP* to hell is misguided. It rejects a notion inherent in Himma's argument—that eternal punishment is for innocent victims who had the misfortune of having existence thrust upon them by their parents. With *NLP*, the suffering in view comes “as a direct consequence of being born.” No respectable account of *TDH* posits reprobation as a direct result of being born. Being born does not decide the probability or actuality of one's eternal destiny: some other factor does. . . . For defenders of *TDH* it is sin, not being born, that explains the suffering in hell. Also, for most defenders of *TDH*, the suffering in hell is linked to the agent's liability for punishment (although the details of this linkage and liability vary).<sup>12</sup>

Bawulski argues that sinners have eternal suffering as their ultimate fate as a direct result of their free choices to transgress against God—and *not* as a direct result of birth: “Himma assumes that the suffering in eternal punishment is rightly analogous to the suffering and harm from things like a genetic disease, an environment horribly hostile to human flourishing with no likelihood of that changing (say, nuclear holocaust), or even the suffering that most people encounter in this life.”<sup>13</sup> That is to say, Bawulski argues that *NLP*, if a valid moral principle, would not apply to birth because sin, and not birth, is the direct *cause* of the agent being consigned to hell upon death.

As it turns out, my statement of *NLP* lends itself naturally to such an interpretation because I used the term “consequence,” expressing *NLP* in terms of harms that will result as a *consequence* of being born. “Consequence” is frequently used to pick out causal results, but I did not intend to express that idea for two good reasons: (1) it is clear that being born, by itself, does not *cause* consignment to hell; and (2) I do not think that *NLP* is limited in application to only direct causal results of being born. Indeed, I scrupulously avoided using the word “cause” to describe the relationship between being born and being consigned to hell; the only time I used it was in connection with acts creating risks, a causal claim that is compatible with there being other external factors contributing as well.

Accordingly, a less misleading formulation of *NLP*—and one that captures only what I intended to capture by it—would be as follows:

*NLP*: It is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world when would-be parents rationally believe there is a sufficiently high probability that their child would suffer some severe harm after birth that will endure for as long as she lives.

This principle should be understood as holding that if a significant risk of severe harm can knowingly be avoided only by abstinence or contraception, two would-be parents would be committing a moral wrong by conceiving and having a child.

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*



Here's an example to make the idea intuitively plausible. Suppose, for whatever reason (perhaps God thunders it from the sky), that my wife and I *know* that if we conceive a child in the next two weeks, he or she will be kidnapped shortly after birth and tortured for three weeks and then killed painfully. It seems clear that we should refrain from conceiving for that two-week period—even if it means that the particular child who would have been born is never born because some other child is conceived instead because conception occurs at a later time. The infant's life in this case resembles the life of one born with a very painful terminal illness in all relevant respects. In both cases, the child's life is short and untreatably painful.

Another example, if the reader is not convinced, might involve a situation where the probability of getting a highly infectious, painful, terminal virus is very high. If, for example, two people were spending a year in an area in which there was an epidemic of a deadly virus, it is clearly permissible for that couple to abstain from conception for as long as they are in the area. Indeed, I suspect most of us would have some kind of negative moral reaction to a decision to conceive and give birth to a child in such a situation—especially if the child would surely die a painful death from the virus. But it is crucial to note that the child's becoming infected with the virus is not the direct causal result of being born; it is the foreseeable result of being contingently brought into other circumstances that exposed her to the virus. If the reader shares my intuition that it would be morally problematic to conceive under these circumstances, then she is committed to something like *NLP*.

Bawulski would reply that my argument overlooks that hell is a *just* consequence of unrepentant sinning. As he puts the point, "Questions about seemingly undeserved suffering are to be answered in a response to the problem of evil, not here. Himma's argument flounders in that it fails to recognize this important feature of *TDH* as most defend it: it is just."<sup>14</sup> On this view, then, *NLP* might sometimes apply to situations involving a substantial risk of *undeserved* harm or suffering, but not to a situation where the harm is deserved, such as occurs when people are justly consigned to hell.

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to think that *NLP* would apply to situations presumably involving deserved suffering. Suppose, for example, that my wife and I *know* that any child we conceive within a specified two-week period will have a set of experiences that will culminate in the child's committing acts, starting before he becomes an adult, that lead him to spend most of his life incarcerated under the worst conditions consistent with moral principles governing the conditions and terms of punishment—and these acts need not necessarily involve acts that harm other people, as there are plenty of laws criminalizing acts that harm only

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 338.

the agent. My intuition is that it would be wrong for us to conceive a child during that two-week period.

One might think that my response to the case falsely assumes that the agent is not accountable for these acts, but this is mistaken. The concern would be that the example assumes that environment and genetics determine certain anti-social traits that condition the performance of anti-social acts for which the agent cannot be justly held accountable. But this is incorrect. Everyone assumes that a child's environment has an effect on how the child's character develops. This is why we take seriously the job of parenting: what we do as parents has a profound effect on what kind of persons our children become. But we nonetheless assume that persons freely choose when acting on the basis of these character traits that profoundly influence them in deciding what to do. Although we believe environment can influence character and even decisions, we do not take this to imply we lack free will and are hence not accountable for our acts. Thus, the example and argument above assume nothing inconsistent with the idea that persons are morally accountable for their acts or with the idea that sometimes suffering is deserved.

## *II. Philosophical Objections*

Bawulski also offers a number of insightful "philosophical" objections to my argument that birth is a grave misfortune from the standpoint of the fetus. My argument is grounded in a strategy for assessing and weighing certain risks and benefits associated with a person being born into this world. In particular, I argue that we lack adequate reason to believe that the probable benefits of being born outweigh the probable costs (i.e., consignment to hell) to justify subjecting a child to that risk by bringing her into the world.

One way to see the problem is to notice that, assuming an exclusivist doctrine from any tradition and *TDH*, simply being born subjects a person to the most hazardous test imaginable. If one of these traditional exclusivist religions is correct, then a person must choose the right views about God, religion and ethics, as well as appropriately act on them. The problem is that none of the arguments for God's existence or for the unique truth of some particular religious tradition is so persuasive that a person who does not accept these arguments is fairly characterized as being epistemically or morally culpable. From a purely prudential standpoint, I would prefer not to have been born if *CSE* and *TDH* are both true *without* my having some pretty clearly persuasive reason to think that (1) Christianity is true; (2) I will come to accept Christianity; *and* (3) I will do what is really necessary to be saved according to Christian doctrine. Indeed, I would regard having been born *as harmful* if any of the exclusivist classical theistic religions subscribing to *TDH* is true—and a wrong committed against me if my parents understood the gravity of the risk to which I was being subjected. Insofar as my reasoning conforms to standards of practical

rationality applicable to all human beings, would-be parents should refrain from bringing children into the world.<sup>15</sup>

### *II.A. Does My Analysis Overstate the Probabilities?*

The first, and most important, of the objections challenges my evaluation of the relevant probabilities in deciding whether to bring a child into the world. As Bawulski puts it:

Himma's probability assignments are dubitable. . . . In Himma's scheme, regarding the birth of a child, globally the probability of the "substantial harm" of hell is at best 2 in 3, probably higher; *in geographic regions where Christianity is strong, it is perhaps 1 in 2. Yet certainly one can and should consider more factors, especially localized factors. The background information relevant to the probability of genuine Christian faith is vastly more extensive than the global or even regional believer/non-believer ratio: in fact, that ratio is virtually irrelevant.*<sup>16</sup>

Bawulski's concern here is that my reasoning is grounded in global probabilities that do not apply to committed Christians and hence cannot support any conclusions about whether it is permissible for committed Christians to bring new children into the world.

Bawulski argues that my reasoning overstates the probability of consignment to hell for children born to parents who are committed Christians:

What is the probability of reprobation for the potential child of would-be parents who are deeply committed Christians, actively involved in a thriving local church, who have a stable and functional marriage and home life as well as a healthy spiritual life, and who fully intend to raise their child in the way that best encourages and facilitates both assent to the truth of the core doctrines of Christianity *and* the lifelong exercising of genuinely saving faith? . . . I should think that in this type of situation the probability would be quite low, *even if we have uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes genuinely saving Christian faith.*<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of problems here. To begin, it is not clear, assuming the truth of other premises in his argument, that consideration of the local probabilities would justify bringing a child into the world. When catastrophic outcomes are involved in a choice-situation, they are not always weighed against desirable outcomes in the way costs and benefits are weighed in more typical decisions involving ordinary harms and benefits. Consider, for example, a game of Russian Roulette in which the magnitude of what is won or lost is much greater than ordinary harms and ordinary benefits. The cost of losing is, of course, death—the end of life. Suppose the prize for winning amounts to all the things you want most

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<sup>15</sup>These propositions also have important implications for the question of whether abortion should, from the standpoint of Christianity, be *legally* permitted—even if abortion is murder. On this question, see Himma, "No Harm, No Foul," 172–194.

<sup>16</sup>"Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible?," 339 (emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

for yourself; depending on your values the prizes might include money, fame, happiness, achievement, etc. My intuition is that, no matter how good the prize might be, a five-in-six chance of avoiding the catastrophic outcome of death is not large enough to warrant my playing. Further, I think that it would be morally wrong to try to persuade another person to play Russian Roulette under those conditions. If the odds of winning were 5,999,999,999 to 1, then I would play—and might even make some kind of argument that someone else should play, although I could not do even that without some moral reservations.<sup>18</sup>

The problem here is that consignment to eternal torment is as catastrophic an outcome as is possible for any person from the standpoint of prudential rationality. If I were temporarily given rationality while in the womb and were informed of the relevant epistemic probabilities of the potential risks and rewards of being born, I would choose not to be born even if the chances of eternal bliss are 5 out of 6 and eternal torment just 1 out of 6. While it might be true that eternal bliss is as positive an outcome as is possible from the standpoint of prudential rationality, I would be no more willing to play Heavenly Roulette with a 5 in 6 chance of winning than I would be to play Russian Roulette with those odds—no matter how desirable the prize is.

The specific probability I chose for the example was not a matter of happenstance; 5 in 6 odds of winning translate into a .83 probability of winning or an 83.3 percent chance of winning. In this connection, it is especially worth noting that a recent study in the sociology of religion shows that approximately 82 percent of adolescents with religious parents tend to be as active and committed as their parents to the relevant religious views; in other words, the probability that two Christian parents raise a child to have—*during the period of her adolescence and continuing well into her twenties*—the same beliefs and commitments that a parent has is about 82 percent.<sup>19</sup> But if it is prudentially irrational to choose to play either game of roulette described above with a .82 probability of winning, it would be prudentially irrational to choose to be brought into the world even if one knows—for the purpose of making the decision only—that one will be born to Christian parents and that there is an 82 percent chance of winning and for the same reason: the cost of a loss is so catastrophic that it warrants giving up a significantly greater chance of winning the best possible prize. And insofar as it is prudentially irrational for a person to choose birth in this choice-situation, it seems morally wrong to bring that person into the world (thereby inflicting on him what is irrational for him

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<sup>18</sup>One runs a bigger risk of death simply by going to work—whether by car, bicycle or foot. It would, of course, be silly to avoid that risk by staying home because the probable costs of losing one's job would vastly exceed the probable benefits of the reduced death risk. If so, the same reasoning would apply to Russian roulette once the odds of losing became small enough.

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., Briggs, "Parents No. 1 Influence Helping Teens Remain Religiously Active as Young Adults."

to choose for himself). After all, children are being brought into a difficult world without their consent.

It might be true that many Christians would not share my precise intuitions on these cases, but that does not matter. First, I doubt there is a persuasive argument that my reactions to the two cases above are prudentially *irrational*; surely, it is not prudentially irrational to choose non-existence with no rewards or punishment over an option that has a theoretically significant probability of producing a catastrophically bad outcome. Second, it is one thing *not to share* my strong intuition that non-existence is the more prudentially rational choice; but it is another entirely *to have* a strong intuition that existence is the more prudentially rational option. This is also an empirical issue, but I would be surprised if many people had a strong intuition that existence is the better choice here.

Further, Bawulski overestimates the ability of Christian parents to minimize the risk that the children they bring into the world will be consigned to eternal torment. Bawulski's view is strikingly optimistic with respect to the permissibility of Christians bringing new children into the world. He argues that "*legions*" of highly devout Christians can justifiably bring a child into the world because they, "by even a more strict account of salvation requirements, would almost universally be recognized as among those who ought to be regarded as having genuinely saving Christian faith."<sup>20</sup> Such highly devout Christians are justified in bringing a child into the world, on this reasoning, because they would impart to their child the "even more strict account of salvation," ensuring that they, too, "would . . . be recognized as among those who ought to be regarded as having genuinely saving Christian faith." At bottom, the argument here is that devout Christians can circumvent what epistemic uncertainty there is about what is needed for salvation by adopting—and imparting to their children—a sufficiently strict account of the requirements for being spared an eternity of torments.

To begin, it is worth noting that this is an argument that will work only on the assumption that Christianity is the correct religion. In the absence of that assumption, there is no reason whatsoever to think that legions of Christians can feel confident that they will produce children who will be saved; if exclusivist Islam is true, those children will be consigned to hell. Of course, one of the features of the world that makes birth so hazardous is that we lack persuasive reason to think either that an all-perfect God exists or that Christianity (or any religion) is uniquely true—which means that Bawulski's argument is very limited with respect to what work it can do, if any.

In addition, what a sufficiently "strict" account of salvation would require as a prerequisite for salvation is not clear. Loving Jesus is clearly a prerequisite for salvation on any mainstream view, but Jesus is clear that keeping his commandments is part of what it takes to "love" Jesus (John

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<sup>20</sup>"Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible?," 339.

14:15)—and one of his commandments is, of course, the command to love one’s neighbor as one loves oneself. Although it is not clear how this commandment is correctly interpreted, one might interpret it, as a means of teaching a more strict account of salvation, as requiring much greater sacrifices than most traditional Christians believe is necessary or even doable. One reason to think it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven is that the rich man has discretionary income that was not used to relieve suffering to the extent required by the command to love one’s neighbor as one loves oneself. If so, teaching a more strict account of salvation—and the danger here is especially tragic if it is not the correct account—could actually discourage faith by demoralizing the child to whom this is taught. There are, thus, two problems with Bawulski’s argument that Christians who satisfy a more strict account of salvation and hence have genuine saving Christian faith could lower the probability of a child’s being consigned to hell by teaching her that account of salvation: (1) we do not really have any idea of what a sufficiently strict account of salvation might require; and (2) teaching an account that is stricter than the correct account of salvation might make it less likely that she accept Christianity if it seems implausibly or demoralizingly strict to her.

### *II.B. Counterexamples to NLP?*

Bawulski argues, further, that *NLP* cuts too broadly, prohibiting procreation in situations in which it is intuitively permissible, and offers what he takes to be counterexamples to *NLP*:

Consider cases of potential parents in areas of the world where war, starvation, disease, etc. are prevalent, or any situation where there is a high epistemic probability of a child suffering in this life. *NLP* would seemingly rule out procreation in these cases (again, apart from TDH, exclusivism, or any consideration beyond just this life). On Himma’s account, procreation would be morally impermissible for poor married couples, for anyone living in impoverished communities, and even for some entire nations (indeed, as noted above, Himma says as much). I suspect many would share my discomfort with this implication.<sup>21</sup>

The claim here seems to be that *NLP* rules out procreation in cases where, according to ordinary intuitions (Bawulski talks in terms of “discomfort”), it is permissible.

Assuming that Bawulski is correct in suggesting that *NLP* should not apply in such cases to prohibit procreation, the problem he points to can be avoided simply by reformulating the notion of “severe harm” in *NLP* so that it does not apply to such cases. One plausible way to do this is to define the harm that triggers application of *NLP* as one no practically rational person would be willing to risk for herself. The torments of hell are so severe that one has to question the rationality of someone who would

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 340–341.

willingly do something that she *believes* incurs a substantial risk—one that cannot be counterbalanced by some good the act produces—of the kind of suffering involved in eternal torment. It is one thing for a person not to believe that hell exists as a punishment or to have significant doubts about its existence. It is another thing entirely for that person to believe that hell exists as a divine punishment but not deploy that belief to constrain what she does in this world; someone who simply does not care at all whether hell exists or whether she might go there is *practically* irrational. This is not true of any of the examples that Bawulski cites in his counterargument above.

Nevertheless, it is not as clear as Bawulski believes that *NLP* should not apply to these cases. Do we *really* think it is *not* morally wrong to bring a child into the middle of a war zone when the parents have no reason to think the war will come to a timely end and have good reason to think that the child might be killed or maimed for life? Do we *really* think it is *not* morally wrong for people who cannot feed their children because they live in absolute poverty to bring a child into the world when that child faces a high probability of a painful death from malnutrition? One can certainly bite the bullet and take that position for theoretical purposes, but that accomplishes nothing. If one *really* believes, as I do intuitively, that it is wrong to bring a child into the world under those circumstances, then one is *really* committed, assuming the rest of the argument holds up to scrutiny, to rejecting either *TDH* or Christian exclusivism—both of which, as far as I am concerned, paint God as arbitrary, cruel, and barbaric.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusions

I do not believe, and have not argued, that it is morally wrong, as a general matter, for anyone to bring children in the world—unless we are in danger of overpopulation or the mother is young and cannot provide for the child or the child has a substantial risk of some severe disease or disability. But I have argued that the conjunction of *NLP*, *CSE*, and *TDH* entail it is morally wrong for anyone to have children—and that either *CSE* or *TDH* should be rejected. Of course, one can always bite the bullet and give up the ordinary moral intuitions that I think are expressed by *NLP*; however, the more reasonable response is to give up one of the other views, which cause so many philosophical problems that they seem far less reliable than

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<sup>22</sup>Bawulski believes that my argument presupposes that consequentialism is true (“Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible?” 342). It is true that I weigh costs and benefits, but that is not inconsistent with *NLP* being grounded in a deontological moral theory. It might help to note here that *NLP* does not say it is wrong to bring a child into the world if it does not maximize utility; it says it is wrong to bring a child into the world if the disutilities reach a very high threshold. That is not consistent with act-utilitarianism; and it is no more consistent with a rule-utilitarian theory (which strikes me as not really being consequentialist in character) than with a deontological theory.

the intuitions expressed in *NLP*. But I cannot even begin to defend that point here.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>I am grateful to Keith DeRose, Shawn Bawulski, Maria Elias Sotirhos, Thomas Flint, and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments, questions, and suggestions.