

# Are Plantinga's Theodicy and Defense Incompatible?

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**Abstract.** Plantinga's free will defense is sometimes regarded as a successful response to the logical problem of evil. Still, a recent objection concludes Plantinga's defense and theodicy are incompatible. According to this objection, in Plantinga's defense, Jesus' having a creaturely essence entails that Jesus suffers from transworld depravity and sins in the actual world, but this result conflicts with Plantinga's theodicy and with Christian theism, where Jesus is sinless. In this paper, I argue that this objection is unsound, because creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity only contingently, so it is not necessarily true that their instantiations go wrong in the actual world. Hence, Plantinga's defense and theodicy are not incompatible, so both answers to the problem of evil can be endorsed in conjunction.

**Keywords:** free will defense, *felix culpa* theodicy, the problem of evil, Christian belief, Alvin Plantinga.

## Introduction

The problem of evil is the traditional claim that God's existence is in some sense incompatible with that of evil.<sup>1</sup> This problem can be framed in two important ways: first, God (an omnipotent and morally perfect being) could have created free creatures that only do what is good, but since there is evil in the world, evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God; and second, it seems that God has no reason to allow evil. Plantinga provides a separate

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<sup>1</sup> See Da Silva & Bertato (2020).

response to each claim. His first response is a free will defense, where he argues that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically consistent, based on the claim that it is possible that every creaturely essence suffers from *transworld depravity* – a property that would entail that any instantiation of the essence goes wrong if significantly free (1974b, 1974a). This response addresses the first question by saying it is possible that God could not create a world with free beings but without evil. Plantinga's second response is a *felix culpa* theodicy (i.e., an attempt to provide the reasons why God allows evil in the world), where he claims that the existence of evil and sin in the actual world was required for the incarnation and atonement of Jesus and the revelation of God's unsurpassable love, and thus, God has good reasons for allowing evil (Plantinga, 2004).

A recent objection (Davis & Franks, 2018) aims to show that Plantinga's responses are incompatible. According to the objection, Plantinga's free will defense would imply that Jesus' having a creaturely essence entails that he suffers from transworld depravity, and this would entail his sinning in the actual world – but Jesus' sinning in the actual world conflicts with Plantinga's theodicy, which assumes that Jesus is sinless. As I argue in this paper, however, this objection is unsound because, in Plantinga's defense, creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity only contingently. Thus, even if Jesus has a creaturely essence, it is not necessarily true that he goes wrong, and this is all that Plantinga's theodicy requires. The upshot is that Plantinga's defense is compatible with Plantinga's theodicy.

Section 1 provides a brief overview of Plantinga's defense and theodicy, and section 2 presents the objection. Sections 3 and 4 are devoted to my response.

## 1. Plantinga's defense and theodicy: an overview

The logical problem of evil is the claim that the existence of God is inconsistent with the existence of evil in the actual world and therefore God doesn't exist (Mackie, 1955, p. 209). Alvin Plantinga proposes a response to this problem known as the *free will defense*, where he argues that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically consistent (Plantinga, 1974a, 1974b). In his defense, Plantinga aims to show that it is possible that God could not have

created a world with free creatures that only do what is morally good (and refrain from doing what is morally wrong).

Plantinga's defense is well known. Still, I will introduce some terminology and explain his main strategy for those who are not familiar with it. First, Plantinga simply defines *creaturely essence* as an essence that entails the property *is created by God* (Plantinga, 1974b, p. 188).<sup>2</sup> Second, Plantinga (1985, p. 49) distinguishes two kinds of actualization. One of them is *strong actualization*: God "*strongly actualizes* a state of affairs *S* if and only if he causally determines *S* to be actual and causes to be actual every contingent state of affairs *S\** such that *S* includes *S\**"; that is, God actualizes *S* by actualizing every *S\** that helps to compose *S*. The other is *weak actualization*: according to Plantinga, God *weakly actualizes* a state of affairs *S* if and only if he strongly actualizes a state of affairs *S\** that counterfactually implies *S*. In the context of the free will defense, whenever Plantinga simply says that God actualizes a state of affairs, he is referring to weak actualization. Third, Plantinga stipulates that there are *morally significant actions* that a free agent can perform – actions that are right or wrong. Finally, an *initial segment*  $T[W(t)]$  of a world *W* up to some time *t* is simply the state of affairs identical to *W* up to *t* (Otte, 2009; Plantinga, 2009).<sup>3</sup>

Central to the defense is the claim that, possibly, every creaturely essence suffers from *transworld depravity*, a property defined as follows:

**(TWD)** An essence *E* suffers from *transworld depravity* if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* entails the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, there is a time *t* and action *A* at *t* such that

- (1) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in *W* at *t*, and
- (2) if God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[W(t)]$  of *W* up to *t*, *E*'s instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, creaturely essences are not merely logically possible creatures, but individual essences. In Plantinga's ontology, a property *E* is an individual essence of an individual *x* if and only if (i) *E* is essential to *x* and (ii) necessarily, for all individuals *y*, *y* exemplifies *E* if and only if *y* = *x* (Menzel, 2022). His reasons for such are connected to his views on actualism and haecceitism, and are outside of this paper's scope.

<sup>3</sup> Notice that the segment  $T[W(t)]$  is not a maximal state of affairs, and hence, it is not a possible world.

<sup>4</sup> The property of "transworld depravity" was first presented by Plantinga (1974a, p. 52–53, 1974b, p. 188), but later, Richard Otte (2009) showed that Plantinga's definition of TWD is untenable. Instead, Otte proposes the definition presented here (2009, p. 172) which is also accepted by Plantinga (2009).

The central claim in Plantinga's defense is that, possibly, God couldn't have actualized a world with free creatures but with no evil. Suppose for the sake of the argument that there are creatures with significant moral freedom in a possible world  $W$  that suffer from transworld depravity, but nevertheless, every creature only does what is right in  $W$ . In this case, there is a state of affairs  $T[W(t)]$  up to  $t$  such that, if God were to actualize the segment  $T[W(t)]$ , every creature that suffers from transworld depravity would have gone wrong with respect to some action. But if so, then possibly there is a possible world such that everybody goes wrong and that, were God to weakly actualize  $T[W(t)]$  for an arbitrary  $t$ , every creature that suffers from transworld depravity would go wrong. However, it is possible that every free creature suffers from transworld depravity<sup>5</sup>. If so, then the following is possible: the worlds where every free creature only does what is good (the worlds that, in Mackie's view, God could have actualized if he existed) and suffer from transworld depravity cannot be actualized, for when God actualizes the state of affairs up to the point where the free creatures choose to do a morally significant action, they choose to do what is wrong. Thus, it is possible that every free creature would go wrong with respect to a particular action even if every free creature is such that there are possible worlds where they are significantly free and only do what is right.<sup>6</sup> In this case, it is possible that there is a reason for God to create a world with moral evil; hence, the existence of God is not inconsistent with that of evil.

Despite controversies, many came to recognize Plantinga's free will defense as a plausible response to the logical problem of evil, leading philosophers to focus on probabilistic or evidential formulations of the problem (Adams, 1985; Alston, 1991; Howard-Snyder & O'Leary-Hawthorne, 1998; Mackie, 1982; Rowe, 1979, 1996, 1998). Others<sup>7</sup> insisted that Plantinga should have moved from a defense, an attempt to show at most what God's reason might be, to a theodicy, an argument that aims at showing what God's reason is for allowing evil (for more on this distinction, see Plantinga, 1974a, p. 28). In principle, Plantinga claimed

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<sup>5</sup> One may claim that, in a world with infinitely many free creatures in an infinite future, there would be no such time. But not only it is contentious that there is such an infinite future; it is also difficult to see how that would significantly affect Plantinga's defense.

<sup>6</sup> Notice that such worlds are not within God's power to actualize since the weak actualization of  $W$  would require  $T[W(t)]$  to be actualized altogether, in which case free creatures would go wrong (which is not the case in  $W$ ). Also, notice that the defense does not require transworld depravity to be necessarily or even actually true of every creaturely essence; it requires this property to be only *possibly true* of them.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Walls (1991).

a theodicy would not be needed,<sup>8</sup> but later, he provided a *felix culpa* theodicy (Plantinga, 2004). In this argument, he takes for granted traditional Christian claims, such as that God is Triune, that God became a sinless human in the person of Jesus Christ (often referred to as the doctrine of incarnation), and that God sacrificially dies for humans' sins (i.e., the doctrine of atonement), to argue that, in this framework, there is a plausible reason to think God would allow evil in the world. Plantinga considers that possible worlds can be ranked in terms of the good present in them. Among all these worlds, the ones where God exists (if he does not exist necessarily) whose value is *highly eligible*, given God is the ultimate source of good. However, a subset of worlds contains a state of affairs that is *unsurpassably good*, that is, a state of affairs that has a value that cannot be compared to any other states of affairs, including the highly eligible ones. Those worlds are the ones where God incarnates and dies to restore humanity and His creation.

Thus, Plantinga claims, if Christianity is true, then the worlds containing the incarnation and atonement of Jesus are highly good ones because, through the incarnation and atonement, God reveals his unsurpassable love for humanity. However, in this account, evil and sin are necessary for Christ's incarnation and atonement, for without evil and sin, God would not need to incarnate and atone for humans' sins and evil in general, so incarnation and atonement would not follow. But this entails God can only actualize the highly eligible worlds where incarnation and atonement are actual if he also weakly actualizes states of affairs in which sin and evil occur, and so, sin and evil are necessary conditions for Christ's incarnation and atonement. This argument, Plantinga holds, answers why God would allow evil and sin to exist, at least for those who accept the hypothesis that Christianity is true: without evil and sin, Christ's incarnation and atonement wouldn't be possible, and those "highly eligible" worlds where God's unsurpassable love is demonstrated could not be actualized.

## 2. An objection to Plantinga's defense & theodicy

However, Richard Davis and W. Paul Franks (2018) argue that Plantinga's responses are incompatible with one another. Their argument runs as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, if the defense succeeds, one does not need a theodicy to see the logical problem of evil fails; see Plantinga (1974a, p. 23, 1985, p. 35).

- 1) Plantinga's defense (**D**) entails that, if Jesus has a creaturely essence, then there's some action *A* such that Jesus goes wrong with respect to *A* in the actual world.
- 2) If there's some action *A* such that Jesus goes wrong with respect to *A* in the actual world, then Jesus is not sinless in the actual world.
- 3) Plantinga's theodicy (**T**) includes Jesus having a creaturely essence and Jesus being sinless in  $\alpha$ .
- 4) **D&T** entails that Jesus is both sinless and not sinless in  $\alpha$ .

C) Plantinga's defense and Plantinga's theodicy are (logically) incompatible and cannot be accepted in conjunction, on pain of contradiction.

Davis and Franks consider premises 2 and 3 of the argument to be relatively uncontroversial,<sup>9</sup> but think premise 1 disputable. So, they include a sub-argument for this premise. Here's my reconstruction of this argument:

- 1) Jesus has a creaturely essence *J*. [Assumption.]
- 2) If Jesus has a creaturely essence *J*, then *J* suffers from TWD in a possible world *W*. [Assumption.]
- 3) *J* suffers from TWD in a possible world *W*. [From 1, 2]
- 4) If *J* suffers from TWD in a possible world *W*, then *J* suffers from TWD in every possible world, including the actual world  $\alpha$ . [Assumption.]
- 5) *J* suffers from TWD in every possible world, including the actual world  $\alpha$ . [From 3, 4.]
- 6) *J* suffers from TWD in  $\alpha$  iff, in  $\alpha$ , *J* entails *is significantly free in  $\alpha$*  and *always does what is right in  $\alpha$* , and there's a time *t* and action *A* at *t* such that (i) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in  $\alpha$  at *t*, and (ii) if God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[\alpha(t)]$  of  $\alpha$  up to *t*, Jesus would have gone wrong with respect to *A* in  $\alpha$ . [By the definition of TWD and substitution of *W* for  $\alpha$ .]<sup>10</sup>
- 7) *J* entails *is significantly free in  $\alpha$*  and *always does what is right in  $\alpha$* , and there's a time *t* and action *A* at *t* such that (i) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in

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<sup>9</sup> Though premise 3 asserts that Jesus has a creaturely essence, which is, as we'll see, very controversial, and particularly false in Plantinga's abstractist view.

<sup>10</sup> The reader may notice that this premise is false. As it will become clear in section 3, the problem is that replacing of *W* for  $\alpha$  is not allowed (*W* is not a free variable but is included in a class of worlds that does not include  $\alpha$ ).

- $\alpha$  at  $t$ , and (ii) if God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[\alpha(t)]$  of  $\alpha$  up to  $t$ , Jesus would have gone wrong with respect to A in  $\alpha$ . [From 5, 6]
- 8)  $J$  entails *is significantly free in  $\alpha$  and always does what is right in  $\alpha$* . [From 7.]
- 9) If God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[\alpha(t)]$  of  $\alpha$  up to  $t$ , Jesus would have gone wrong with respect to A in  $\alpha$ . [From 7 (ii)]
- 10) God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[\alpha(t)]$  of  $\alpha$  up to  $t$ . [Assumption.]
- 11) Jesus goes wrong with respect to some morally significant action A at a time  $t$  in  $\alpha$ .
- C) If Jesus has a creaturely essence, then Jesus goes wrong with respect to some morally significant action A at a time  $t$  in  $\alpha$ .

Davis and Franks argue that, since Jesus incarnated (i.e., Jesus “became flesh”), as Plantinga’s theodicy assumes, he has a creaturely essence. They also assume that, if this is true, then Jesus suffers from transworld depravity in some possible world. But Davis and Franks also hold that Jesus’ suffering from transworld depravity in a possible world entails that Jesus suffers from transworld depravity in every possible world, including the actual world.<sup>11</sup> They take for granted that these assumptions can be accepted by one who endorses both Plantinga’s theodicy and defense and that, since transworld depravity is a property had by essences, their instantiations have that property in any possible world, including the actual.

According to Davis and Franks, several consequences follow therefrom. In their account of Plantinga’s defense, for a segment  $T[\alpha(t)]$  of the actual world up to a certain time  $t$ ,  $T[\alpha(t)]$  is such that (i) it includes Jesus being significantly free in  $\alpha$ , (ii) it includes the instantiation of Jesus’ essence doing only what is right in  $\alpha$ , and (iii) had God actualized such segment, then Jesus would have gone wrong with respect to a certain action A in  $\alpha$ . Since  $T[\alpha(t)]$  is a segment of the world  $\alpha$ , it includes neither Jesus performing A nor Jesus refraining from performing A; and had  $T[\alpha(t)]$  been actual, then Jesus would have gone wrong. But since  $\alpha$  is the actual world, God actualizes  $T[\alpha(t)]$ ; hence, Jesus would have gone wrong in the actual world. This entails that Jesus sins in  $\alpha$ , contradicting Plantinga’s theodicy where Jesus does not sin in  $\alpha$ . Notice that Plantinga’s theodicy assumes Christian belief, which includes belief in Jesus’ atonement. According to Christianity, Jesus’ atonement is only possible if Jesus is a human and is sinless

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<sup>11</sup> Davis and Franks (p. 209) justify this assumption with a version of axiom 5 of modal system S5, which says that  $\Diamond \Box p \supset \Box p$ ; in line with this formula, they hold that Jesus’ possibly necessarily suffering from TWD entails he suffers from it essentially, i.e., in every possible world. But S5 is not required for the defense and, as we’ll see later, premise 4 of their argument is problematic regardless of this issue.

in the actual world (which includes, presumably, never going wrong). Therefore, if Davis and Franks' objection is sound, then not only Plantinga's theodicy and defense are inconsistent, but also, Christian theists could not consistently accept the defense, one of the main answers available to deal with the logical problem of evil.

### 3. On Davis and Franks' Objection

However, I argue in this section that Davis and Franks' objection is unsound in several ways. Creaturely essences, in Plantinga's defense, possibly suffer from transworld depravity. Their possibly suffering from it (i.e., their possibly having it) means that in every world  $W$  such that the instantiations of the essences are significantly free in  $W$  and always do what is right in  $W$ , if God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[W(t)]$  of  $W$  up to an arbitrary time  $t$ , the instantiations of the essences would have gone wrong with respect to some action  $A$ . Notice that the essences don't suffer from transworld depravity in every possible world. According to the definition, one of the conditions necessary for an essence  $E$  to suffer from transworld depravity is the following counterfactual:

(C) if God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment  $T[W^*(t^*)]$  of  $W^*$  up to a time  $t^*$ ,  $E$ 's instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to  $A^*$ ,

where the conditions of the antecedent of **C** are met for a world  $W^*$ , an action  $A^*$ , and a time  $t^*$ . Hence, an essence suffering from transworld depravity depends on the truth of this counterfactual of freedom.

But **C** is not true in every possible world. Possible worlds are maximally complete states of affairs, and as such, for any proposition  $p$ , either  $p$  is true in a world  $W$  or its negation is true in  $W$ . The only propositions that are true in every possible world are the necessary ones, and **C** is not one of them. For instance, **C** is *false* in a world  $W^*$  such that  $E$ 's instantiation is free and only does what is right, for in it, it is false that, if God had actualized  $T[W^*(t)]$ , then  $E$ 's instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to  $A$  (since  $E$ 's instantiation going wrong in  $W^*$  contradicts  $E$ 's instantiation only doing what is right in  $W^*$ ).  $W^*$ , following Otte's terminology, is *unobtainable*, i.e., God cannot actualize  $W^*$  (Otte, 2009); and for all

unobtainable worlds, it is impossible that, had they been actualized, any creature would have gone wrong (and this is the reason why God cannot actualize them).

Given **C** is not necessarily true, creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity only contingently. But if creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity only contingently, then we cannot say of any creaturely essence that, if such essence suffers from transworld depravity in some possible world, then it suffers from it in any possible world, including the actual. Indeed, nothing in Plantinga's defense requires or entails that creaturely essences necessarily suffer from transworld depravity, or that they suffer from transworld depravity in the actual world. The defense simply requires that they *possibly* suffer from it.<sup>12</sup>

Things would be different if the defense required transworld depravity to be a property *included* in every creaturely essence. A property is *included* in a creaturely essence when it is essential to any instantiation of that property. One of the properties included in a creaturely essence is *being created by God* since any being with a creaturely essence has this property essentially. However, this is different from a property that is *had* by a creaturely essence. Creaturely essences have properties that are not had by their instantiations, such as *being essence* and *being abstract* (but include the property of *being concrete* if their instantiations are essentially concrete). Thus, it would be one thing for an essence to *include* some property such as transworld depravity, and another would be for an essence to *have* transworld depravity and have it contingently. In the context of the free will defense, essences do not include transworld depravity, despite the fact that they possibly have it. If an essence has transworld depravity, the instantiation of it would have gone wrong with respect to some action, had God actualized a particular state of affairs; if an essence does not have that property, then the essence is not transworld depraved.<sup>13</sup>

Davis and Franks claim that, if an essence suffers from transworld depravity in a possible world *W*, then such essence suffers from transworld depravity in every possible world, including the actual world  $\alpha$ . This can be seen in premise 4 of their argument:

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<sup>12</sup> Similarly, "universal transworld sanctity" (Howard-Snyder, & O'Leary-Hawthorne, 1998) might be possible, which does not entail that it is actual. (I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this.)

<sup>13</sup> I thank Kenny Boyce for several and significant elucidations on this matter.

- (4) If *J* suffers from TWD in a possible world *W*, then *J* suffers from TWD in every possible world, including the actual world  $\alpha$ .

This claim, however, is simply false. Even if we grant for the sake of the argument that Jesus has a creaturely essence – a claim discussed in the next section –, and even if it is possible that all creaturely essences have transworld depravity, then Jesus' essence suffers from transworld depravity only in some worlds, for creaturely essences suffer from transworld depravity only contingently. So, nothing guarantees his essence suffers from transworld depravity in the actual world; in fact, maybe no creaturely essence suffers from it in  $\alpha$ .<sup>14</sup> Therefore, premise 4 of the argument is false.

#### 4. Plantinga's defense and theodicy are not incompatible

In light of this analysis, it is hard to understand why Plantinga's defense and the claim that Jesus is sinless could not be compatible. In Christianity, Jesus does not go morally wrong with respect to any action in  $\alpha$ . Many hold that Jesus is simply impeccable, i.e., he could not have sinned. But even if we assume Jesus could have gone wrong with respect to some action (and even if we ignore, for the sake of the argument, that Jesus' not having creaturely essence implies he does not have transworld depravity), there is some time *t* in the past such that Jesus could have gone wrong with respect to any action but could not go wrong thereafter (for instance, when he dies or resurrects or any other time after that). Now, if Christian belief is true, we can say that we now know Jesus did not sin; he could have, but he didn't. In this case, it is obvious that Jesus does not suffer from transworld depravity, for it is impossible that both *Jesus goes wrong with respect to some action up to t* and *Jesus does only what is right* be true in  $\alpha$ .<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps Davies and Franks could argue here that this only implies that the free will defense fails, since it would entail at least one creaturely essence does not suffer from transworld depravity. But as I show above, this claim does not follow: it is not inconsistent with Plantinga's defense that one creature does not suffer from transworld depravity. And yet, it could still be the case that all creatures are transworldly deprived if Jesus does not sin in  $\alpha$ , for

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<sup>14</sup> The fact that essences have properties may be confusing: some may think that such properties are essential to their instantiations and necessarily true of them. This, however, is just a confusion: not only essences may have properties that their instantiations do not possess essentially (e.g., *transworld depravity*), but they also have properties that don't entail any property their instantiations possess (e.g., *being abstract*).

<sup>15</sup> This case is similar to one presented by Otte (2009).

Jesus has no creaturely essence. In any case, the dialectics here only point to one direction: if it's impossible that both *Jesus goes wrong with respect to some action up to t* and *Jesus does only what is right* be true in  $\alpha$ , then Jesus does not suffer from transworld depravity. The only way to avoid this result is to hold both claims together, assuming a contradiction to prove Plantinga's answers are inconsistent. The upshot, then, is that Plantinga's theodicy and defense are compatible. One can show they are not compatible by supposing that every essence suffers from transworld depravity essentially, or that Jesus has a creaturely essence, or yet, by endorsing contradictory claims. All of these strategies, however, are unsuccessful. Therefore, those who endorse Plantinga's theodicy or, at any rate, Christian theism in general, do not have to reject Plantinga's free will defense on the basis of Davis and Franks' objection.

## Final remarks

I argued in this paper that the claim that Plantinga's defense is incompatible with Plantinga's *felix culpa* theodicy fails, because it is simply false that, if Jesus has a creaturely essence, then he goes wrong with respect to some action in the actual world since essences only suffer from transworld depravity contingently. It's impossible that both Jesus goes wrong with respect to some action up to t and Jesus does only what is right be true in  $\alpha$ . This entails that Jesus does not suffer from transworld depravity in the actual world.

As a closing remark, it should be noted that, from a Plantingian perspective, Jesus has no creaturely essence (Plantinga, 1999). This is a contentious claim that touches on traditional disputes about the nature of Jesus as human and divine, and perhaps one can criticize Plantinga for not having the right Christology. Nevertheless, given this claim, Plantinga's defense and theodicy would be compatible even if we conceded that all creaturely essences suffered from transworld depravity. If Jesus has no creaturely essence, he has a human essence but has it contingently, and the fact that he is (essentially) divine entails he cannot be a creature. This point alone would be enough to reject premises 1 and 2 of the objection discussed. Nevertheless, the solution presented in this paper is simpler because it clarifies the central framework of

Plantinga's defense and does not need to take a stance on particular discussions about the nature of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

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