

Abrahamic Theism, Free Will, and Eternal Torment

*By Stephen J. Sullivan**

Atheist philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Kurt Baier, though from different philosophical traditions, shared a common concern about the traditional Judeo-Christian-Muslim doctrine that human beings are the creations of a Supreme Being. For Sartre, in “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946), a God who designed us would thereby detract from our freedom and dignity. For Baier, in “The Meaning of Life” (1957), the idea that God designs us to serve his own purposes was deeply offensive in treating us as artifacts, domestic animals, or slaves. Indeed, Baier said explicitly what was implicit in Sartre: that the divine creation of humans as would violate Immanuel Kant’s respect for persons principle. But this Kantian objection is badly flawed in ignoring the crucial role of human free will in traditional Abrahamic theism. Still, if we focus not on the divine-creation doctrine but on the doctrine of eternal torment for non-worshippers of God, then traditional Abrahamic theism does arguably undermine human freedom and dignity. For the threat of eternal torment is extraordinarily coercive.

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As one of the pre-eminent philosophers of the existentialist/phenomenological tradition, Jean-Paul Sartre needs no introduction even to professional philosophers outside that tradition. Though less distinguished, Kurt Baier is well-known and respected in the analytic tradition. Sartre published very little in ethics, while Baier’s writing is confined largely to moral philosophy. One would not expect these two thinkers to have much in common in their philosophical work, and indeed they don’t. But in this paper I will show that in their work there is a surprising convergence on a Kantian objection to traditional Christian theism, in particular to the traditional Christian account of God’s creation of humankind.

Before I go any further I should note two limitations of this essay. First, the traditional account is probably better described as Abrahamic than as Christian, since it is also found in some forms of Judaism and (especially) in Islam. But I will set this point aside despite incorporating it in my title, for Baier focuses explicitly on Christian theism and Sartre may well have it implicitly in mind. Second, I will rely on two main primary sources: Sartre’s famous 1946 essay “Existentialism is a Humanism” and Baier’s somewhat neglected 1957 essay “The Meaning of Life.” So far as I know, Baier never retracted the Kantian objection in his essay (which he reprinted in a later collection (Baier 1997)). But Sartre’s essay occupies an uneasy place in his voluminous writings, and given my linguistic limitations I cannot rule out the possibility that he did later abandon the objection in work still unavailable in English translation.

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In Section One, using the two primary sources I have mentioned, I will explain Sartre and Baier's Kantian argument against traditional Christian theism. In Section Two I will offer a refutation of the argument, including a Sartrean reply to Sartre. Finally, in Section Three I will defend a related argument against traditional Christian theism that I think would be acceptable to both Sartre and Baier.

Section One: The Sartre/Baier Convergence

In broad outline, the traditional Christian doctrine of God's creation of human beings is familiar: as Creator and Intelligent Designer of the universe, God creates human beings in accordance with a plan or purpose. Both Old and New Testaments compare God to a potter and humans to the clay he molds (Isaiah 45: 9, Romans 9: 20-22). Likewise, Sartre focused on God's activity as an "artisan" who creates humans to have a certain nature:

...[T]he conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan: God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding....Man possesses a human nature. (Sartre 1975, p. 348)

Like Sartre, Baier emphasized the point that in the traditional Christian doctrine of divine creation, human beings are "divine artifacts", so they were zeroing in on the same target. But Baier did note that there is a bigger picture: a cosmic plan that includes the Fall, the Atonement, Judgment Day, and the afterlife (Baier 2008, pp. 101, 103).

Why did they reject the traditional Christian account of God's creation of humankind? Sartre put the point this way:

...[T]here is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it....Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity," using the word as a reproach against us. *But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table?....*Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower....Man is responsible for what he is. (Sartre 1975, p. 349, emphasis added; see also pp. 357-358)

It is clear that in Sartre's view, a divinely created human nature is incompatible with human freedom and thus with human dignity. Tables (and stones and plants) possess neither freedom nor dignity: in the language of Immanuel Kant, they are mere means, instruments, things, or objects. In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre never explicitly mentioned Kant's famous respect-for-persons version of the Categorical Imperative: human beings are to be treated not as mere means, but as

ends in themselves (Kant 1969, pp. 52–54, Kant 1983, pp. 127–128). But he was surely invoking it nevertheless, just as—elsewhere in the essay—he made open use of the universal-law formulation of the same fundamental moral principle (Sartre 1975, pp. 350–351).

As for Baier, having told us that on the traditional Christian account human beings are artifacts, he expressed his strong disapproval in the following way:

Man is in a different category...[from things that have purposes, such as gadgets and windbreaks]. To attribute to a human being a purpose in that sense...is offensive. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If, at a garden party, I ask a man in livery, “What is your purpose?” I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, “What are you *for*?” Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave. I imply that *we* allot to *him* the tasks, the goals, the aims that he is to pursue; that *his* wishes and desires and aspirations and purposes are to count for little or nothing. *We are treating him, in Kant’s phrase, merely as a means to our ends, not as an end in itself.* (Baier 2008, pp. 100–101, emphasis added to final sentence)

It is clear not only that Baier was appealing to Kant’s respect-for-persons principle but also, I think, that human freedom and dignity were important to Baier, as they were to Sartre.

Section Two: The Glaring Flaw in the Kantian Objection

There is a fairly straightforward refutation of Sartre and Baier’s Kantian argument against the traditional Christian account of the divine creation of humankind, and it is surprising that neither philosopher acknowledged it. *Human free will* is central to traditional Christian thought: God gives us the ability to decide freely whether or not to worship him and to accept his plan for us. So in creating us he is not treating us as artifacts (or stones, plants, or domestic animals), which lack free will. Nor need he be treating us as slaves, since he grants us considerably more control over our lives than human slaveowners normally grant slaves. Sartre seems to have overlooked this last point when he asked in his ethics notebooks of 1947-1948, “How can there be freedom in a religion whose principle is the master (Lord)?” (Sartre 1992, p. 18) (See Sullivan 2008 for extended discussion of the “divine-ownership thesis”—accepted by Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and Kant himself, among other Christian philosophers—that God literally owns human beings.)

I don’t mean to deny that some important Christian thinkers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, have rejected human free will by upholding the view that every event—including human choices—has been predetermined or predestined by God from all eternity. Nor do I mean to deny that there may be traces of this fatalistic sounding view in both the Old and the New Testaments (e.g., Proverbs 16: 9; 19: 21; 20: 24, Ephesians 2: 8-10). But predestination is extraordinarily difficult to reconcile with the central Christian doctrine of Judgment Day, at least

if God is supposed to be morally perfect: how can God hold us morally responsible for choices and actions he necessitates that we make? (Sullivan 2008, p. 192 n. 53) Perhaps that is one reason that human free will appears to be more central than predestination to the history of Christian thought.

Oddly enough, early in “The Meaning of Life” Baier explicitly indicated his own awareness of the role of free will in traditional Christian theism (Baier 2008, p. 83; see also 104 on predestination); yet he apparently forgot it when he endorsed the Kantian objection. Sartre too should have known better: in his play *The Flies* he had Orestes proclaim to his creator Zeus, “I *am* my freedom. No sooner had you created me then I ceased to be yours” (Sartre 1989, p. 117). If Zeus creates humans to be free, then why not the Christian God? (Interestingly enough, Albert Camus seems to make the same mistake in *The Rebel* (Camus 2008, p. 108).)

Given the all too humanlike behavior of the Greek gods, Orestes’ proclamation points the way to a human/parent analogy that further undermines Sartre and Baier’s Kantian objection to the divine creation of humankind. When a human couple (or for that matter an individual) decides to have a child, they typically have a plan or set of purposes in mind with at least some of the following elements, among others: (a) living a more fulfilling life through childrearing; (b) loving and caring for the child for its own sake; (c) bringing greater satisfaction to the grandparents; and (d) carrying on the family line. Though some cultures place greater weight on filial duty than others, in no modern culture (so far as I know) is it customary for parents to attempt to prevent their adult children from substantially exercising their free will in living their own lives. Even if such interference were customary in some modern cultures, the traditional Christian God—so often conceived as Divine Parent—could still be modeled on parenthood in cultures that respect the autonomy of adult children. So far I can see, not even Sartre’s interesting, difficult discussion of the parent/child relationship in his ethics notebooks (Sartre 1992, pp. 189–195, especially 192 on the God/human-parent analogy) enables him to meet this point.

Section Three: A Stronger Objection

Despite the failure of Sartre and Baier’s Kantian argument, there is a related objection that seems much more promising (though far from conclusive). This new objection, which takes human free will for granted, focuses not on the traditional Christian doctrine of human creation but on the doctrine of eternal damnation—indeed eternal torment—for those who fail to worship God properly through Jesus Christ (Mark 9: 45; Matthew 25: 41, which even damns believers who fail to love their neighbor sufficiently; Revelation 20: 14–15). Baier mentioned this doctrine in passing and apparently found it morally absurd (Baier 2008, pp. 103, 105); he even noted its role in the traditional Christian account of God’s cosmic plan for human beings (103). But he evidently overlooked its relevance to his Kantian objection and to the reality of free will. Let me indicate that relevance now. (I have benefited in what follows from helpful discussion with students in my Fall 2015 Edinboro University course Introduction to Philosophy and Values.)

Note first that eternal torment is not merely divine *punishment* for human beings who fail to worship God properly or at all (for short: non-worshippers). It is also an explicit *threat* of grievous harm (to put it mildly!), and a *highly credible* one at that: there is no escape from an all-powerful, all-knowing God. As such the threat of eternal torment is inherently *coercive*. And that raises the question of whether human beings granted free will by their Creator are genuinely and fully *free to choose whether or not to worship God*, free to follow or not follow his plan for them.

Take a simple and painfully realistic example. You are an aging, unarmed, slow-moving philosopher, and one night a desperate-looking armed robber points a gun at you and says, “your money or your life.” In understandable fear for your life, you quickly oblige him. Surely it is a truism that in doing so you do not genuinely and fully act of your own free will: the robber’s coercion nullifies it (or at least reduces it so much that you are not responsible for handing the money over). There is a vast philosophical literature on the complex nature of and relationships between free will, responsibility, and coercion, but any theory that denies this truism is quite implausible on its face.

Now consider a more complicated and more artificial case. You have been raised by seemingly loving but fanatically religious parents in a cult community cut off from the rest of civilization; they have your future in the community mapped out for you. When you reach the age of reason your parents inform you that you were conceived and raised to serve their glorious cultish purposes and that if you refuse to cooperate fully then you will be tortured continually until you change your mind or die, whichever comes first. In understandable fear of these consequences, and with nowhere to turn, you pledge your complete cooperation. Again, it is a truism that due to coercion you are not acting of your own free will (or at least are not responsible) in cooperating.

Let’s turn at last to the case of divine threats of eternal torment. Here, I suggest, it is clear, partly on the basis of the foregoing examples, both that God is coercing human beings into complying with his plan for them and that he is thereby undermining their free will. (More precisely, he is doing this to those who are aware of his existence, nature, and expectations; his damning of others to eternal torment who lack this awareness raises familiar and powerful moral criticism that deserves separate discussion on another occasion.) Note too that in all three cases we may well want to appeal to Kant’s respect-for-persons principle and accuse the coercers—the armed robber, the fanatical parents, and God himself--of treating human beings as mere means to their own ends or goals.

The coercion objection to the traditional Christian doctrine of eternal torment for non-worshippers may engender some uneasiness. For one thing, the criminal-justice system threatens serious harm to prospective criminals, but does that really mean that they fail to act freely in obeying the law, or that the system is treating them as mere means? For another, the threat of eternal torment goes into effect only posthumously, so that individuals may delay until late in life their decision to commit themselves to God.

Regarding the criminal-justice system, I would make three points. First, as implied earlier, the credibility of human threats of legal punishment cannot

compare to that of divine threats of eternal hellfire: the latter involve certainty, while the former are uneven at best given the vagaries of law enforcement, prosecution, imprisonment, etc. This means that that the divine threats are overwhelmingly more coercive than the human threats, other things being equal. Second, eternal torment is far harsher than any human punishment, and so its threat is once again much more coercive, other things being equal. Third, the imposition of legal punishment on criminals is generally a matter of holding them accountable for their harming or violating the rights of other human beings who are ends in themselves. God's imposition of eternal torment for non-worshippers does no such thing. (Does God himself have rights that we violate by refusing to worship him? If we do then it is still hard to see how eternal torment is a just punishment. But that is another topic for another paper, perhaps one stressing that deliberate infliction of intense suffering as punishment is torture, indeed a blatant violation of human dignity, and as such is inherently wrong (Luban 2012, pp. 242–243)).

As for the disanalogy between delayed enforcement of the divine threat against non-worshippers and immediate enforcement of legal threats against prospective criminals, I would offer three more comments. First, surely any such delay is more than offset by the increased coerciveness mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Second, the divine threat applies even to individuals, such as very elderly ones, who don't have long to live. Finally, God's giving us the possibility of a near lifetime of non-Christian living prior to (say) deathbed repentance may seem generous, but that's only because we're thinking of earthly lifetimes. Eighty years or so of non-Christian living are an infinitesimally small period of time compared to an eternity of torment.

This coercion objection to the traditional Christian doctrine of eternal torment not only shares Sartre and Baier's focus—explained in Section One—on human freedom and dignity, but also takes very much into account (as they do not) the traditional Christian defense of human free will. Moreover, the objection commits no obvious errors, and so may well undermine traditional Christian theism despite the failure of the Kantian argument. I conclude that Sartre and Baier, had they but known of it, would have been well-advised to take it very seriously.

In fairness, however, let me add that the coercion argument against traditional Christian theism has one significant disadvantage compared to Sartre and Baier's Kantian argument. The latter, but not the former, applies just as much to *moderate* versions of Christianity. What I mean is this. Virtually all contemporary Christians still accept the doctrine that God made human beings in God's own image; but many have serious doubts about eternal damnation—and all the more about eternal torment—for non-worshippers. So although all Christians who uphold human freedom and dignity should find the Kantian objection troubling if sound, nontraditional Christians need not be troubled by the coercion objection. Indeed they may already have given up—for independent moral reasons—on eternal damnation for non-worshippers. (For helpful survey data of Americans, including American Christians, see Pew Research Center 2021. For important scholarly work on diverse Christian perspectives on the afterlife, see Ehrman 2020.)

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