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More than Mere Theism:

The explanatory power of Christian theism for the intrinsic value of children

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by

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Basic moral sensibilities on children.....	1-3
Prevailing Greco-Roman notions on the intrinsic value of children.....	3-9
<i>Plato and children</i>	3-6
<i>Aristotle and children</i>	6-9
Jesus and children.....	9-22
<i>The kingdom of God</i>	9-14
<i>Gravity of child harm</i>	14-18
<i>Incarnation: The death of egoism</i>	18-22
Bibliography.....	23-27

INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects on the explanatory power of Christian theism for the intrinsic value of children. We will see how Jesus' teachings clashed with the prevailing Greco-Roman notions and established a view of children that better reflect our basic moral intuitions. I will address *why* Christian theism makes such a difference and *how* Christianity provides the rational foundation for treating children as people. The intrinsic value of children should serve as evidence for theism generally and Christianity in particular. Why Christianity in particular? Our basic moral sensibilities are so real and substantive that they call for a robust exposition, which Christianity plentifully supplies. Christianity exquisitely personifies our commonsensical moral notions on why we intuitively consider children to have a high intrinsic value and should be treated accordingly.

My suggestions flow from the following three claims: First, Jesus uniquely exalts a child as the prime example of the ideal citizen in the kingdom of God. Second, Jesus emphasizes the gravity of child harm in a context where children were often systematically subjected to a variety of abuses. Third, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation communicates substantive worth to children. In this way, Christianity can receive some corroboration from our best considered judgments about the value of children, and we can identify the resources we need to battle troubling contemporary trends of child mistreatment.

Basic moral sensibilities on children

So, what are these alleged basic moral sensibilities on children? Children's inability to make fully informed moral decisions is a start as they lack the moral faculties to formulate the

necessary *mens rea*¹ for a crime. So, we can say children are, in a certain sense, innocent.

Whether age appropriate ratings for television or family themed events, the belief that children should be shielded from the fallout of inappropriate and downright dangerous adult behavior has been a major segment of Western values. Children are not held to the same behavioral standard as adults and therefore have a protected status.

On a far broader scale, instances of children being targeted in war bring about the properly basic feelings of horror and moral revulsion. Accounts of Tamerlane's pyramids built with human skulls, many of whom children,² and Josef Mengele's experiments on children at Auschwitz³ go beyond mere nationalist conquest or traditional warfare. I dare say we find them so morally atrocious they simply defy explanation. In 2012, the plight of African child soldiers garnered international attention in the social media movement "Kony 2012." Reports of ISIS killing children or even training them to kill shock our sensibilities.⁴ In 1994 Kevin Carter, a South African photographer, won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for his gripping photo of an emaciated little girl being watched by a vulture in the Sudanese bush. Tortured by this memory and the unanswered question of what happened to the child combined with the collective weight

¹ *Mens Rea* refers to criminal intent. Moreover, it is the state of mind indicating culpability, which is required by statute as an element of a crime. "Mens Rea," *Legal Information Institute: Cornell University Law School*, accessed December 16, 2016, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/mens_rea.

² Josephus Nelson Lamed, *The Rise and Fall of Nations*, Vol. 1 (Springfield, MA: C. A. Nichols Co., 1907), 404.

³ Andy Walker, "The Twins of Auschwitz," *BBC News*, January 28, 2015, accessed September 10, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30933718>. Walker records, "For Menachem Bodner who arrived at the camp with his brother as a three-year-old, this number became his identity. When he left the camp in 1945, he had no idea who he was."

⁴ Corky Siemaszko, "Video allegedly shows ISIS murdering 200 Syrian children," *New York Daily News*, November 9, 2015, accessed September 14, 2016, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/video-allegedly-shows-isis-murdering-200-syrian-children-article-1.2428322>.

of the carnage he experienced, he committed suicide several months later.⁵ Morally conscious persons can identify with Carter's internal torment over the unknown fate of the gaunt child.

I'm fairly confident accounts of such travesties deeply trouble us not because they are ethically unfashionable but because they are deeply morally problematic. Tragedy is perplexing enough but calamity in the nursery adds another dimension to grief. Why do these things bother us so? My contention is that these sentiments go far deeper than merely protecting one's offspring or propagating one's species. Evil intellectually and emotionally grates against the way we know things should be and I believe Christian theism presents a splendid account of why.

Prevailing Greco-Roman notions on the intrinsic value of children

Plato and children

Before assessing a Christian case for children, I will survey prevailing views about children in the larger Gentile world around the time of Christ. Plato's emphasis on a cognitive strength sort of reason as the foundational principle of value provides an insight into the vortex of his worldview, one that lacks a category for the intrinsic value of children. So, if reason is the apex of the ultimate value rubric then where does that leave children? Norwegian scholar O. M. Bakke, in his moving work, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, observes, "These manifestations of children's lack of logos led the classical philosophers to find a comparison with animals appropriate; indeed, Plato asserts that of all

⁵ Bill Keller, "Kevin Carter, a Pulitzer Winner for Sudan Photo, is Dead at 33," *New York Times*, July 29, 1994, accessed September 14, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/29/world/kevin-carter-a-pulitzer-winner-for-sudan-photo-is-dead-at-33.html>. Carter's father reported his son "always carried around the horror of the work he did. In the end it was too much." Eamonn McCabe, "From the archive, 30 July 1994: Photojournalist Kevin Carter dies: Obituary: Award-winning photographer kills himself, haunted by the horrors he witnessed during his short and brilliant career," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2014, accessed September 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/30/kevin-carter-photojournalist-obituary-archive-1994>.

animals, it is the child who is ‘the most intractable; for in so far as it, above all others, possesses a fount of reason that is as yet uncurbed, it is a treacherous, sly and most insolent creature.’”⁶ Children, women, slaves, and animals all lie in the same classification in contrast to free male citizens⁷ who were thought to exclusively possess the *logos*.⁸

Both adults and children found their value in what they had to offer the *polis*. Visions of an ideal society paved the way for Plato’s insistence on “pure” versus “defective” children. He argues the best warriors are to be motivated with “Heroism earns sex” but the offspring of those unions must still pass inspection or be exposed.⁹ Children born to women over 40 (considered to be the latest age for optimal childbearing) should be killed.¹⁰ He goes on to illustrate how producing the best hunting dogs and fighting birds requires breeding only the most robust specimens as an introduction to his endorsement of bald eugenics.¹¹

⁶ Plato, *Leg.* 7.808D. In Bakke, 258.

⁷ Elise P. Garrison, “Ancient Greece and Rome,” *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, Vol. 1, ed. Paula S. Fass (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 54.

⁸ O. M. Bakke masterfully illustrates this principle: “It was the free male citizens who possessed the *logos* that was the presupposition for rational thought. Women and older men possessed it to some extent, or more correctly, they had the potential for *logos*, while slaves and barbarians definitely lacked it. Not surprisingly, children were classified along with this last group.⁸ The child symbolized the absence of *logos*, something reflected in the etymology of the word that designated children: *nepioi* in Greek and *infantes* in Latin, that is, “not speaking.” Children’s lack of the ability to communicate in an adult manner meant that they were defined as standing outside the rational world of adults.” O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 250. Also see Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1989), 21.

⁹ “Permission to have sex with the women more often, since this will be a good pretext for having them father as many of the children as possible . . . I think they’ll take the children of good parents to the nurses in charge of the rearing pen situated in a separate part of the city, but the children of inferior parents, or any child of the others that is born defective, they’ll hide in a secret and unknown place, as is appropriate. It is, if indeed the guardian breed is to remain pure.” Plato, *The Republic*, 134, Book V, 459e, 460c.

¹⁰ Plato recommends, “they should be very careful not to let a single fetus see the light of day, but if one is conceived and forces its way to the light, they must deal with it in the knowledge that no nurture is available for it. That’s certainly sensible.” *Ibid.*, 461c-d.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 459a-b.

Other Greeks, specifically the Spartans, practiced the same.¹² The film *300* depicts (with a rare historical accuracy) an elderly Spartan inspecting a newborn as one would a product in the quality control section of an assembly line as the camera spans to a valley riddled with the skeletons of exposed infants.¹³ In Plato's *Theaetetus*, a normalized case for *expositio* (infanticide)¹⁴ was part and parcel of a titanic attempt to establish the ideal society. The laws of classical Athens lacked basic safeguards for children because there was not a categorical belief for the intrinsic value of children.¹⁵

This attitude was not limited to political philosophy. Second century AD Greek physician Soranus's work *Gynecology* contains a haunting chapter titled "How to recognize the newborn that is worth rearing."¹⁶ After outlining positive indications of health the chapter concludes "And

¹² "To train men to an ideal so unwelcome to the flesh it was necessary to take them at birth and form them by the most rigorous discipline. The first step was a ruthless eugenics: not only must every child face the father's right to infanticide, but it must also be brought before a state council of inspectors; and any child that appears defective was thrown from a cliff of Mt. Taygetus, to die on the jagged rocks below." Durant, *The Life of Greece*, 81.

¹³ *300*, DVD, directed by Zack Snyder (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007). The British Medical Journal concurs, "The child was inspected after birth by the elders among his kindred, and if they found him deformed, misshapen, or lean, or pale, they sent him to be thrown in a deep pit of water which they commonly called Apothetas, and as a man would say the common house of office; holding opinion it was neither good for the child nor yet for the common weal that it should live, considering from his birth he was not well made nor given to be strong, healthful, nor lusty of body all his life long." "Eugenics in Ancient Greece," *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 2762 (December 6, 1913): 1503. Rather than strengthening the Spartan military establishment, sustained infanticide eventually led to a strategic deficit of military manpower severely weakening the entire societal structure. See David J. Galton, "Greek theories on eugenics," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 24 (1998): 266.

¹⁴ "Then this is the child, however he may turn out, which you and I have with difficulty brought into the world. And now that he is born, we must run round the hearth with him, and see whether he is worth rearing, or is only a wind-egg and a sham. Is he to be reared in any case, and not exposed? Or will you bear to see him rejected, and not get into a passion if I take away your first-born?" Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2012), locations 1682-1685.

¹⁵ As Douglas MacDowell comments on the laws of classical Athens, parents were under no legal obligation to rear a child. See Douglas MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 91. In Cynthia Patterson, "'Not Worth the Rearing': The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 115 (1985): 105. Patterson sees a distinction in the mindset of the Greeks between *expositio* and child murder, "'child murder' can be legally prohibited and morally abhorrent but 'exposure' a commonly recognized act—as Plato's metaphor suggests—unaffected by laws on homicide." *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁶ For a modern treatment, see Shannon Icton, William A. Whitelaw, and Arty R Coppes-Zantinga, "How to Recognize the Newborn That Is Worth Rearing," *The American Pediatric Society and The Society for Pediatric*

by conditions contrary to those mentioned, the infant is not worth rearing is recognized.”¹⁷

Without a transcendent anthropology the slide towards a utilitarian valuation of persons, especially children, becomes much harder to resist.¹⁸ If we find these descriptors abrasive, it is likely because we believe that children do not have moral value because of what they can produce or understand, but because of what they *are*.

Aristotle and children

Though Aristotle rightly, in my estimation, rejects Plato’s communization of the family, his thoughts lack the necessary transcendent revelation that I believe Christian theism provides. Aristotle’s prevailing principle was that man is a rational animal.¹⁹ His support of slavery and dehumanizing children are closely related. The argument goes something like this: Reason is what makes man fully human. If a person’s ability to reason is impaired it corresponds to a lower moral and functional worth. As a result, children should not be considered fully human because

Research, Vol. 45 (1999): 126A.

¹⁷ Soranus, *Gynecology*, trans. Nicholson J. Eastman, Ludwig Edelstein, and Alan F. Guttmacher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), Book II.VI [XXVI] 10 [79]. Hitler repeatedly echoed this sentiment in *Mein Kampf* with warnings against a humanity that “ceases to be true to its pedigree and intermingles with the mongrels.” Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (Stockholm, Sweden: White Wolf Publishing, 2014), 174. Let me be clear: I am not saying Plato was a Nazi nor am I plying the trade of parallelomania.

¹⁸ British cleric Thomas Malthus’s (1766-1834) portrayal of certain persons as “useless eaters” illustrates this point well: “[Persons] should consider the general welfare of the human race, of the society in which they lived, and of their own families, and so not cumber the earth with useless and miserable people.” Hence, the phrase, “useless eaters” stems from Malthus’ fear that overpopulation would destroy the human race. Patricia James, *Population Malthus: His life and times* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1979), 61. It was likely the Nazi’s pursuit of eugenics to its logical extreme that caused Westerners to become disenchanted with the concept. H. G. Wells writes over a century ago, “I believe that if a canvass of the entire civilized world were put to the vote in this matter, the proposition that it is desirable that the better sort of people should intermarry and have plentiful children, and that the inferior sort of people should abstain from multiplication, would be carried by an overwhelming majority. They might disagree with Plato’s methods, but they would certainly agree to his principle.” H. G. Wells, *Mankind in the Making*, 38-39, accessed December 29, 2016, <http://www.freeclassicebooks.com/H.G.%20Wells/Mankind%20in%20the%20Making.pdf>.

¹⁹ Frank A. Lewis, *Substance and Predication in Aristotle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.

they lack a fully functioning intellectual capability. He compares children to irrational animals²⁰ and “brutes” because they lack reason.²¹ Children are also associated with the drunk, the insane, and the wicked.²² Aristotle associates children with weakness and thus not a standard of emulation contrary to what Jesus would later establish. Even physically immaculate children are still “the most imperfect of all such animals.”²³ Aristotle calls children dwarfs as and less than the ideal human specimen.²⁴ Any form of humanity that lacked strength or reason was categorically devalued. Infantile neediness and defenselessness included children in the same category as the physically deformed.²⁵

Unlike Plato, for Aristotle, children serve as relational glue between the father and mother.²⁶ Yet this common good is not tied to intrinsic value. Family is a means to the end of the security and longevity of the *polis*.²⁷ Family units are good because they provided a stable environment for producing children who would serve and defend the *polis*. For Aristotle, the

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III.2, trans. W. D. Ross (Kitchiner, Ontario: Batoche Books, 1999), 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Book VI.13, 104.

²² Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, 1.728a17, in Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, 2nd ed., 5. See http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/gener_corr.html.

²³ Aristotle, *ibid.*, 5.779a25, in Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, 13.

²⁴ Aristotle, “De Partibus Animalium,” William Ogle trans. *The Works of Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 4.686b10.

²⁵ On *expositio*, Aristotle advocated, “As to exposing or rearing the children born, let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared; but on the ground of number of children, if the regular customs hinder any of those born being exposed, there must be a limit fixed to the procreation of offspring, and if any people have a child as a result of intercourse in contravention of these regulations, abortion must be practiced on it before it has developed sensation and life; for the line between lawful and unlawful abortion will be marked by the fact of having sensation and being alive.” Aristotle, *Politics*, 1335b.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1162a16-19, *ibid.* Aristotle writes, “But this friendship may be based also on virtue, if the parties are good; for each has its own virtue and they will delight in the fact. And children seem to be a bond of union (which is the reason why childless people part more easily); for children are a good common to both and what is common holds them together.” *Ibid.*, 1162a26-28.

²⁷ “The superiority and sovereignty of the political regime overshadow the family.” John Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 8. No. 2 (Spring 2013): 2.

family preceded the *polis* and for Plato, family was an impractical entity to be dissolved into the society. Horizontal utility was the driving factor for both. Neither Plato nor Aristotle believed that individual rights were inalienable. Persons, especially children, existed for the state not vice versa.²⁸ On this view, children simply lacked intrinsic value.

What is their collective flaw? I think it is a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature.²⁹ But how could Aristotle, whose virtue ethics speak so strongly even in the contemporary world, miss so greatly these basic moral sentiments towards the most vulnerable among us? How could Plato, whose four cardinal virtues (courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom) bear such semblance with the Apostle Paul's theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, be guilty of endorsing child killing and the practical eradication of the family unit? How could such men known for eschewing vice and lauding virtue err in such a significant way regarding children? I believe it was primarily because their worldview lacked the *imago dei* and the example of the incarnated Messiah (both of which Christian theism models), thus providing limited buffer against human depravity. Worldview may either inhibit or promote immoral practices and behavior.

Let us review the following ways in which children were treated and categorized in the

²⁸ “Each held a utilitarian view of the individual, born or unborn, seeing that individual as existing for the state. No rights granted to the individual were absolute. All rights—even the right to life—were subordinate to the welfare of the state (or the family, the religion or the race) and had to be sacrificed if the best interests of the state demanded it . . . this concern at least partially explains the philosophers’ application of their utilitarian and subordinate view of the individual to the newborn or unborn, issuing in admonitions to expose or abort those that might be useless or damaging to the state.” Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1982), 22-23.

²⁹ Pascal’s commentary in his famous *Pensée* on Plato and Aristotle is less than complimentary. “If they [Plato and Aristotle] wrote about politics it was as if to lay down rules for a madhouse. And if they pretended to treat it as something really important it was because they knew that the madmen they were talking to believed themselves to be kings and emperors. They humored these beliefs in order to calm down their madness with as little harm as possible.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 112. See Hittinger, 16.

Greco-Roman world. First, children's value was largely viewed in terms of utility.³⁰ Second, the idea that children were in fact people and so bearers of inestimable intrinsic value was foreign. Third, Christian theism provided an incarnation to a radical concept found in the Mosaic Law, namely, that children were fully human and worthy of our protection and love. Not only does Christian theism best explain our basic moral sensibilities on children, but if a case is to be made for the plight of children, it is best predicated on a Christian premise.

Jesus and children

Viewed from a 21st century Western perspective, Jesus' sentiments on children do not appear unique because the Western view on children is largely based on Jesus' view on children. With the exception of abortion, our beliefs on children have been codified in law. In this section, we will see how Jesus' teachings clashed with the existing Greco-Roman notions and established a view of children that can be traced to how we see them today. We are addressing *why* Christian theism makes such a difference and *how* Christianity provides the rational foundation for treating children as people. We will touch on three specific areas of Jesus' doctrine: the kingdom of God, the gravity of child harm, and the incarnation.

The Kingdom of God

C. S. Lewis remarks, "Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of

³⁰ The Greco-Roman world saw children's worth largely in terms of what they could contribute to the polis or empire. On an individual scale, parents valued children based on the level of honor they brought the family and for their assistance to the parents in their dotage. Bakke records a stark evidence of this utilitarian grind where he notes how boys were reckoned to have a far higher value than girls: "The words of an Egyptian man in the first century B.C.E., in a letter to his wife who was soon to bear a child, have become well-known: 'If you chance to bear a child, and it is a boy, let it be; if it is a girl, expose it.'" Papyrus Oxyrhynchus, 744. In Bakke, 489.

becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”³¹ One of the ways we see the distinctiveness of Jesus of Nazareth is in his vision of the ideal citizen in the unrivaled kingdom of God:

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them (Mk. 10:13-16).³²

There are several significant points here: First, the disciples appear to reflect at least something of the attitudes of Greco-Roman thought where children were not considered to be worth the time of a famous man. Second, Jesus considered children worthy of his time. Third, Jesus uses a child as the prime example of the ideal citizen in the ultimate kingdom.

It seems the disciples had absorbed a bit of practical paganism by their curt dismissal of children. In fact, this is one of the few times where Mark records Jesus as *indignant* (ἡγανάκτησεν).³³ Based on Jesus’ response, strongly advocates for children’s inclusion within the category of value. A change was needed in the disciples’ thinking. Instead of looking out for number one they were to look out for those who didn’t register on the scale of prestige. Regarding and serving such ones imitates Jesus’ example as he consistently looked out for the overlooked.

The Gospel writers reveal internal power struggles among the disciples as to who was going to hold the greatest authority in Jesus’ kingdom (Mk. 10:35-42; Matt. 20:20-28). Ironically, the disciples’ thinking reflects a misdirected quest for greatness. Childish egoism sees self-

³¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, HarperCollins: 2000), 177.

³² Similar accounts are found Matt. 19:13-15 and Lk. 18:15-17.

³³ Peter H. Davids, “Mark,” *New Bible Commentary*, 4th ed., eds. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 966.

generated power as the pathway to notoriety rather than childlike faith that trusts in character of the heavenly Father. Jesus tells them how to be the greatest:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25b-28).

Humility is a steppingstone not a stumbling block in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus also states "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10). Whether or not this means a popularized notion of a personal guardian angel, a general protectorate, or something else altogether, the point suggests a prioritization of children in God's economy to the extent that their value warrants angelic assignment.

Second, the fact that Jesus cleared a spot in his schedule for children speaks volumes. Apparently, Jesus considered children worthy of his time. Jesus, the rabbi quickly rising in popularity, was willing to spend time with children rather than just preach another sermon, heal another person, or intellectually decimate a pack of Pharisees.

Third, and most remarkably, Jesus elevates children as the ideal of citizenship in the ultimate kingdom: the kingdom of God.³⁴ We must remember Jesus was addressing a primarily Palestinian Jewish audience in the first-century Greco-Roman world. One may expect a better showing from the disciples given their familiarity with the high value of children as found in the Hebrew Scriptures but, then as now, there was no shortage of conveniently ignored ideals.

The ripple effects of Jesus' elevation of children are a major theme in the writings of the early church fathers. Augustine later wrote, "It was, then, the stature of childhood that Thou, O

³⁴ "Jesus used children as positive examples for the appropriate attitude of the members of the kingdom. In the Synoptic Gospels children are presented as paradigms of the proper response to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of heaven." Bakke, 173.

our King, didst approve of as an emblem of humility when Thou saidst: ‘Of such is the kingdom of heaven.’”³⁵ St. Ambrose identifies Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as “children.”³⁶

Unless intended as an insult, one will likely search in vain for a Greco-Roman writer referring to one of their cultural heroes as a child. Pagan leaders identify as strong and powerful as opposed to Jesus who dared associate a child with greatness.

Why did Jesus use children as the exemplars of kingdom virtue? Clement thinks it is their simplicity, truthfulness, indifference towards status and wealth, moral innocence, and purity.³⁷ Jesus set forth a child as the ideal because he was “the type of character he had come to create.”³⁸ Eusebius applies Jesus’ mercy towards children to the childless: “Surely those whose bodily infirmity destroys their hopes of offspring are worthy of pity, not of punishment: and he who devotes himself to a higher object falls not for chastisement, but especial admiration.”³⁹ Peter Fuller notes the uniqueness of Jesus’ view: “[Christianity] exalted childhood and held it up as an exemplar for living . . . that a child should be put forward as an example is something quite new in the history of religions, and equally new in the history of cultures.”⁴⁰ Where Aristotle declared,

³⁵ Augustine, “Confessions,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 54.

³⁶ St. Ambrose, “On the Christian Faith,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 10, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 206.

³⁷ Bakke, 884, 900, 972, 1586. Clement also excoriates weak men who try to “escape from partnership in life with wife and children.” He also makes an etymological argument associating education and culture with the root word for child. 928.

³⁸ Charles Richmond Henderson, “Christianity and Children,” *The Biblical World* 8, no. 6 (December 1896): 475.

³⁹ Eusebius, “The Life of Constantine,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol.1, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 546.

⁴⁰ Peter Fuller, “Uncovering Childhood,” ed. Martin Hoyles, *Changing Childhood* (London: Writers and Publishers Cooperative, 1979), 85. In David Kennedy, *In the Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 10.

“Let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared,”⁴¹ Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me” (Mk. 10:14).

Poets and historians have routinely disparaged Christianity for robbing the ancient world of its luster as in the words of Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath.”⁴² Such a view is historically naïve. Rather than restrictive, the teachings of Jesus led to societal and eventually legal pressures against discarding live infants to the elements or child traffickers. Anthony B. Bradley notes, “Respecting the dignity of a child in antiquity was socially counter-cultural.”⁴³ Jesus instantiated our most treasured moral sensibilities on children in a world that had little place for mercy. Church history abounds with accounts of Christians applying his tender teachings to the least of these.⁴⁴ Jesus woke the human consciousness to the unique dignity of all children by holding them up as “positive paradigms” for adults.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 7, 1335b. Nicholas Wolterstorff sees a stark difference on suffering between Jesus and the rest of the Greco-Roman world: “The Stoics of antiquity said: Be calm. Disengage yourself. Neither laugh nor weep. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity’s weeping, be wounded by humanity’s wounds, be in agony over humanity’s agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 86.

⁴² Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Hymn to Proserpine,” *Complete Poetical Works* (Hastings, East Sussex, UK: Delphi Classics, 2013), ebook.

⁴³ Bradley, “Contemporary Culture,” *Something Seems Strange*, 262.

⁴⁴ Christian Laes highlights a significant redefinition of Christian philanthropy that is worth citing at length here: “In Christian sources, we encounter greater empathy with the psychological welfare of the underprivileged, an observation which is entirely in line with the difference between the ancient notion of *philanthropia* and the Christian principle of *caritas*. While Christians refer to a religious command to show charity, pagan *philanthropia* was motivated more by considerations such as the honour of the city or personal glory. *Philanthropia* was preferentially directed at poor citizens. As in Christian charity, this redistribution of wealth was well organized. However, the generous benefactors would give, not so much according to the need of the beneficiary, but on the basis of his or her social status. In other words, they reaffirmed the class system (for example, in the case of free meals, the prominent members of society would be served first). Christian charity, by contrast, worked according to need: the poorest within the religious community would receive the most generous assistance. This principle would prove to be one of Christianity’s great strengths as a religion.” Laes, *Children in the Roman Empire*, 206.

⁴⁵ Consider how the men in Jesus audience could have felt insulted, especially the disciples. In a time steeped in Roman conquest and Jewish hopes for a deliverer, Jesus declares to everyone present that they will have no part in the greatest kingdom if they do not receive the already challenging teachings like a little child. Attitude

Gravity of child harm

Jesus declared, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire” (Mk. 9:42-43). In a time where child abuse was common, Jesus’ heavy penalty was a bit out of fashion.⁴⁶ Death by millstone-induced drowning is deeply suggestive of the value of little boys and girls.

Ancient writers were well aware of children’s impressionability.⁴⁷ Perhaps this is why Jesus leveled such invectives towards those who harm or mislead them. Yet in this we see the degree to which Jesus valued children’s innocence and wellbeing. Historically, we see this in the early church fathers’ abhorrence towards abortion and infanticide.⁴⁸ Aristides of Athens points

matters. Patrick M. Fleming, “Birth of Childhood,” *Humanum: Issues in Family, Culture, & Science*, Fall 2011, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://humanumreview.com/articles/birth-of-childhood>.

⁴⁶ While we do not wish to read into the text something that isn’t there, the Greco-Roman world *was* steeped in all manner of deviant sexual practices. Nevertheless, Margaret Y. MacDonald raises an intriguing textual possibility on this text, “With respect to the Jesus tradition, for example, it has recently been argued that the reference to ‘cause to stumble’ (*skandalizo*) of the little ones in Mark 9:42 followed by mention of body parts in 9:43-48 (which in some contexts carry sexual connotations) actually refers to pederasty.” Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 22.

⁴⁷ “For just as seals leave their impression in soft wax, so are lessons impressed upon the minds of children while they are young.” Bakke, 317-321. “Jerome believes in the possibility of changing and molding children. ‘One of soft and tender years is pliable for good or evil; she can be drawn in whatever direction you choose to guide her’” (Ep. 128.3a), in Bakke, 1328.

⁴⁸ Bakke, 1706, 1740, 1750, 1768. Even the pseudepigraphal *Apocalypse of Peter* pictures women who have had abortions swallowed up to their necks with every foul thing. See *Apocalypse of Peter*, 8, Ethiopic text, in Bakke, 1769.

out how Greco-Roman pagans who harm their children are merely mirroring the behavior of their own gods.⁴⁹

On the contrary, Christians have extensive explanatory power for why it's right to prize their children: they are precious gifts from the one true God, bearers of moral significance, beings of infinite worth, persons of unspeakable dignity.⁵⁰ Justin Martyr condemns *expositio* on the very real possibility of having intercourse with one's "own child, or relative, or brother" as exposed infants were routinely nabbed by traffickers and raised as sex slaves.⁵¹ Jesus' long-ranging influence significantly pushed back culturally accepted depravity, thereby considerably lessening the harm perpetrated on children.⁵²

At this point I would ask the reader to consider the extent to which Jesus' view on children dovetails with our normative beliefs. He denounces all forms of child harm. Compromising their innocence in any way warrants stringent penalty. Regardless of any present or future pragmatic value they may hold, children are indelibly valuable.⁵³ Christians followed

⁴⁹ "Herakles next they bring forward and say that he is a god, who hates detestable things, a tyrant, and warrior and a destroyer of plagues. And of him also they say that at length he became mad and killed his own children, and east himself into a fire and died. If then Herakles is a god, and in all these calamities was unable to rescue himself, how should others ask help from him? But it is impossible that a god should be mad, or drunken or a slayer of his children, or consumed by fire." *The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher*, trans. D. M. Kay, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html>.

⁵⁰ "Among other things he notes that Heracles became mad and killed his own children and that the worshipers of Chinn (Saturn) practice the sacrificing of children and that 'they burn some of them alive in his honour.'" Bakke, 1027.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1839. Even with animals, humane shelters do not simply give them away. There is also a grassroots movement to discourage the giving away of pets on websites like Craigslist because they're often adopted to be used as cannon fodder in the world of underground dog fighting.

⁵² Bakke notes, "Another change that came in the wake of Christianity was a great reduction in the number of children (especially boys) who were involved in sexual acts with adult men. A long tradition of pederasty, that is, intercourse between boys and men, existed in Greco-Roman antiquity, where this was seen as normal or natural sex, since the fundamental dichotomy in people's understanding of human sexuality was not heterosexual/homosexual, but active/passive. It was also relatively common for boys and girls to be put to work as prostitutes." *Ibid.*, 4276.

⁵³ "Even the weakest son of Adam has in him the possibilities of full citizenship in the kingdom of God." Henderson, "Christianity and Children," 474.

Jesus' example in considering children complete human beings unlike their fellow Greco-Roman citizens.⁵⁴ Jesus drew clear lines buttressed with guarantees of divine retribution in a time where children were largely defenseless.⁵⁵ According to Jesus, child abusers and killers are ultimately guilty of violating divine moral law that calls for sheltering the innocent.

We also see how Jesus' robust defense of natural marriage⁵⁶ and criticism of divorce, considered restrictive by many in the West, provided unprecedented protection for children. Before kicking against the goads of Jesus' allegedly archaic doctrine on divorce, we would do well to remember that children are the ones who have the most to lose in family dissolution. Parents would do well to place the interests of their children before their own. Yet often we see the opposite in our present renaissance of pagan ideals.

Despite the consternation some may feel over Jesus' alleged sexually restrictive injunctions for adults, reason and experience lead us to see natural marriage as a robust safeguard for healthy emotional and mental development, especially for small children. In one study of the effects of divorce, Judith S. Wallerstein laments, "At the time of divorce . . . the preschoolers were the most devastated. They regressed and were profoundly upset about the very logical possibility that both parents would abandon them."⁵⁷ Jesus called out those seeking loopholes for divorce as having "hardness of heart" (Mk. 10:5). Christian theism makes exception for divorce on the grounds of abandonment or adultery but not for adult convenience or because they found a

⁵⁴ Bakke, 4271.

⁵⁵ The Romans did require sexually pure children for certain religious roles. In I. C. Mantle, "The Roles of Children in Roman Religion," *Greece & Rome* 49, no. 1 (April 2002): 101.

⁵⁶ Mk. 10:2-12; Mt. 19:1-9. For an engaging defense of natural marriage see, Ryan T. Anderson, *Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2015).

⁵⁷ Sandra Blakeslee, "Major Study Assesses the Children of Divorce," *The New York Times*, April 10, 1984, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/10/science/major-study-assesses-the-children-of-divorce-by-sandra-blakeslee.html>.

mythical “soulmate” who seemingly fulfills their emotional needs better than their current spouse (Matt. 5:32, 19:1-9; 1 Cor. 7:14).

For Jesus, Genesis was the starting point for all discussions pertaining to marriage (Mk. 10:6-9). The creation narrative was foundational for understanding the family unit and thus the value of children. Rather than hardline legalism, the Christian concept of marriage is expressive of Christ’s voluntary submission to the Father and sacrificial love for the church (Phil. 2:4-9; Eph. 5:25-26). Protection of children is a natural byproduct of the staying power of parental sacrificial love. Christian marriage, grounded on this theologically fueled love, erects a showcase of divine love and domestic security for children.

On the other hand, exposing children to the ravages of the wild, child traffickers, and crushingly oppressive family structures more than likely activates a sense of moral outrage deep in our hearts. What best explains why such thoughts so deeply trouble us? That epistemic question is closely connected to an ontological one: What best explains why such hideous behavior is wrong? To reduce or quantify a child’s life in terms of dollars and figures is callously cheapening. Biological or financial disappointment falls short. Certainly, child abuse or even murder means squelched potential or unrealized future productivity, but these are not why we find them so egregious. There is something *else* altogether that goes beyond the bounds of statistical losses spelled out in Excel spreadsheets. Sure, many moral realist non-Christian theists, atheists, and naturalists would agree, but I suggest the incarnational strength of Christian theism gives our moral outrage the most traction. It is quite simply the innate sense we carry that every child has intrinsic value because each one of them is a fearfully and wonderfully made creation

of God.⁵⁸ Because their precious trust in their parents mirrors how we should respond to God, Jesus upheld children as exemplars of the kingdom of God.

The theology to which this dimension of morality points has powerful societal implications. History bears testimony to the fact that a culture's respect for the intrinsic value of human life has a direct correlation to its record on human rights. Robert Merrihew Adams writes, "I think the moral horror or abomination there (Nazis making lampshades out of human skin) is not to be found in the blurring of a socially recognized boundary but in what is done to images of God."⁵⁹ A respect for inalienable rights, an overflow of reverence for the *imago dei*, creates the potential for a free and virtuous society while simultaneously restraining vice. As we've mentioned before, ideas take on a life of their own as they trickle down from the ivory tower into popular culture and policy. Marx's dialectical materialism exacerbated already nightmarish human suffering from the borders of Eastern Europe to the frigid shores of North Korea. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer's ethics and Wilberforce's social compassion, rooted in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, still attract young Christ-followers to give their finest years to orphanages and inner-city outreaches.

Incarnation: The death of egoism

⁵⁸ Consider the following thoughts: 1) Humans have value because all humans are created in the image of God – Gen. 1:27-28; 9:1-7, 2) Human value does not depend on mental or physical functionality – Gen. 9:5-6, 3) Human value can only be devalued through a hardened heart in rebellion to God's moral commands – Gen. 6:5, 11-13. For those considering taking their belief in human value from the theoretical to the practical, the following points may be helpful: 1) Consider volunteering at a crisis pregnancy center or financially supporting such ministries, 2) Consider becoming involved in the Pro-Life movement, 3) Refuse to support politicians or political groups that advocate abortion or euthanasia, 4) Look for ways to show grace of Jesus Christ to women who have had abortions, 5) Look for ways to encourage the ill, aging, or unemployed who feel their value is diminished.

⁵⁹ Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 126.

The incarnation provides a fuller picture of the filial and familial relationship between God and persons He has created. Several inferences from the incarnation are relevant here: First, Jesus chose to identify with a race of beings unable to deliver themselves. Second, children are valuable because of what they are, not just because of their potential. Third, Jesus identified with and experienced human suffering.

In the gospel narratives the incarnation was ground zero in a life destined for death. Even outside of the crucifixion, Jesus was not unaccustomed to suffering. A brief reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus' actions toward human suffering were anything but indifferent. He showed mercy to a woman accused of adultery, ministered to the physically handicapped, welcomed societal outcasts, ministered to the ill, wept over his friend's death, was rejected by his own family, falsely accused, betrayed by a close friend, and suffered a tortuous death.⁶⁰ In Jesus we see crass egoism conquered by compassion.

If Jesus had an experiential knowledge of human suffering, rather than a merely cognitive one, then the gravity of his words about these realities deepens tremendously.⁶¹ He did not speak of suffering from an Athenian ivory tower but from under the iron heel of Roman oppression and intolerance from an entrenched religious establishment that fanatically sought his death. Even the agnostic Albert Camus notes the extraordinary implications of Jesus' death concerning the enigma of evil and suffering:

His solution consisted, first, in experiencing them. The god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity, ostensibly abandoning its traditional privileges, lived through to

⁶⁰ Matt. 12:46-50; Mk. 7:32-34, 14:56; Lk. 7:34, 18:39, 22:47-48, 23:1-49; Jn. 8:1-11, 11:35.

⁶¹ "Loving us, God does not give us something, but Himself; and giving us Himself, giving us His only Son, He gives us everything." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, Vol. II, Part 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 276.

the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the *Lama sabachthani* and the frightful doubt of Christ in agony.⁶²

Solidarity with humanity by entering the totality of the human experience is a crucial feature of the incarnation. Jesus entered the fray in human flesh, not in a quasi-angelic form immune to human frailty and experienced the full range of human temptations while retaining his moral purity.⁶³ Keith Ward notes, “Perhaps the central distinctive teaching of Christianity is that the Divine shares in creaturely suffering, in order that the material order may be liberated from bondage to selfish desire, and transfigured to share in the life of eternity.”⁶⁴ This is the death of egoism. It was the proverbial actor coming out of the director’s chair and playing the lead part in the drama that led to the director’s own ultimate sacrifice.⁶⁵ Therefore, the claim that God set the parameters of universal operations does not detract from the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pain endured by Jesus.⁶⁶

For Christians, the incarnation and passion of Jesus provides an even deeper consolation in the face of evil. Jesus’ hard-hitting sermons on children and the penalties for those who harm

⁶² *Essais* [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 144. Bruce A. Ward, “Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus’s Account of the Western Quest for Justice,” *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1991): 213. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 487-488.

⁶³ “For certainly no seed ever fell from so fair a tree into so dark and cold a soil.” C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 149. This is one of the main points of the letter to the Hebrews and is eloquently expressed by William L. Lane in his commentary, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

⁶⁴ Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, 5.

⁶⁵ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 150-174. N. T. Wright writes, “What the Gospels offer is not a philosophical explanation of evil, what it is or why it’s there, nor a set of suggestions for how we might adjust our lifestyles so that evil will mysteriously disappear from the world, but the story of an event in which the living God *deals with it*.” N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 93. Baggett and Walls describe the incarnation as “a picture of the divine condescending to take human flesh, one person both wholly divine and wholly human. No greater portrait of integration and rapprochement of the natural and supernatural, God and cosmos, is easy to envision.” David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *God & Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 52-53.

⁶⁶ See William A. Dembski’s treatment on the extent of the cross. William A. Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 16-22.

them are not one-dimensional. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” is a merciful act of pointing to the way of deliverance in lieu of the coming judgment (Lk. 13:1-9). Obedience to Jesus’ commands is holistic. Mere verbal confession to a collection of theological abstractions is foreign to the New Testament.⁶⁷ In addition to fulfilling the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus’ uniqueness can be seen in his prescribed ethical norms that, in the words of L. Rush Bush, “will improve our life if followed, but that will crush us if they are rejected and ignored.”⁶⁸ Jesus’ regard for the weak and mercy to the downcast provided a new paradigm of human-to-human relationships, especially how we view the vulnerable, where egoism is overcome by love.⁶⁹

At the cross we see God’s wrath against sin not poured out against the wicked but on an innocent, voluntary substitute. “Or, as the old evangelistic tract put it, the nations of the world got together to pronounce judgment on God for all the evils of the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence.”⁷⁰ Christians believe the resurrection was necessary for salvation but incarnation and death are required ingredients in the economy of resurrection. J. R. R. Tolkien puts it this way, “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins

⁶⁷ In the words of Gordon Kaufman, “Believing in God is not simply a matter of the confession of a few words: It involves a reordering of our whole existence in its socio-cultural as well as its individual and personal dimensions.” Gordon Kaufman, “What Shall We Do with the Bible?” *Interpretation* 25, no. 95 (1971): 112.

⁶⁸ L. Rush Bush, *The Advancement: Keeping the Faith in an Evolutionary Age* (Nashville, B&H, 2003), 105.

⁶⁹ Jesus went where others would not and associated with forgotten as Gerald L. Borchert comments, “When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he did not spend his time in elite hostels; nor did he concentrate his ministry merely in the temple or give attention to the rich and famous who could help him politically and financially with his ministry. He concentrated on people in need, which for the elite of society was part of his problem. In this story [John 5] he visited the pool below the temple where the helpless dregs of society lay in a pathetic state.” Gerald L. Borchert, *The New American Commentary: John 1-11*, Vol. 25A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 231.

⁷⁰ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 94.

and ends in joy.”⁷¹ According to Christian theism, the incarnation to the resurrection of Christ is not just a source of revelation by which we can know God but a medium through which we can understand our own humanity and find hope for overcoming the destructive pull of our lower desires.⁷² To paraphrase Baggett and Walls, the force of the claim that Christian theism best explains our basic moral sensibilities on children “is no more outlandish or outrageous than many of our most cherished moral convictions.”⁷³

⁷¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 24. In Schuman, “J. R. R. Tolkien and the Significance of Fairy-Story,” *Apologia*, 21, <http://www.dartmouthapologia.org/articles/show/81>. Alvin Plantinga paints the beautiful brokenness of the passion as follows, “He was subjected to ridicule, rejection, and finally the cruel and humiliating death of the cross. Horrifying as that is, Jesus, the Word, the son of God, suffered something vastly more horrifying: abandonment by God, exclusion from his love and affection: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” All this to enable human beings to be reconciled to God, and to achieve eternal life. This overwhelming display of love and mercy is not merely the greatest story ever told; it is the greatest story that could be told. No other great-making property of a world can match this one.” Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 975.

⁷² Kierkegaard somberly pleads, “But even if it is very pleasant for flesh and blood to avoid opposition, I wonder if it is a comfort also in the hour of death. In the hour of death, surely the only comfort is that one has not avoided opposition but has suffered it.” Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1995), 84.

⁷³ David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28.

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