

The Benevolent Monster

Age of Accountability, Infinite Utility, and the Soteriological Reductio of Infant Salvation

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Central claim

Any theology that guarantees a pre-accountable child's salvation, allows a non-zero risk of irreversible loss after accountability, and treats the afterlife as outweighing finite earthly goods makes early death safer for that child on the system's own soteriological measure. A prohibition on killing blocks an action recommendation but not this welfare comparison. The reductio is conditional: rejecting it requires revising at least one of those premises or withdrawing the afterlife benefit as a sufficient defense of infant death.

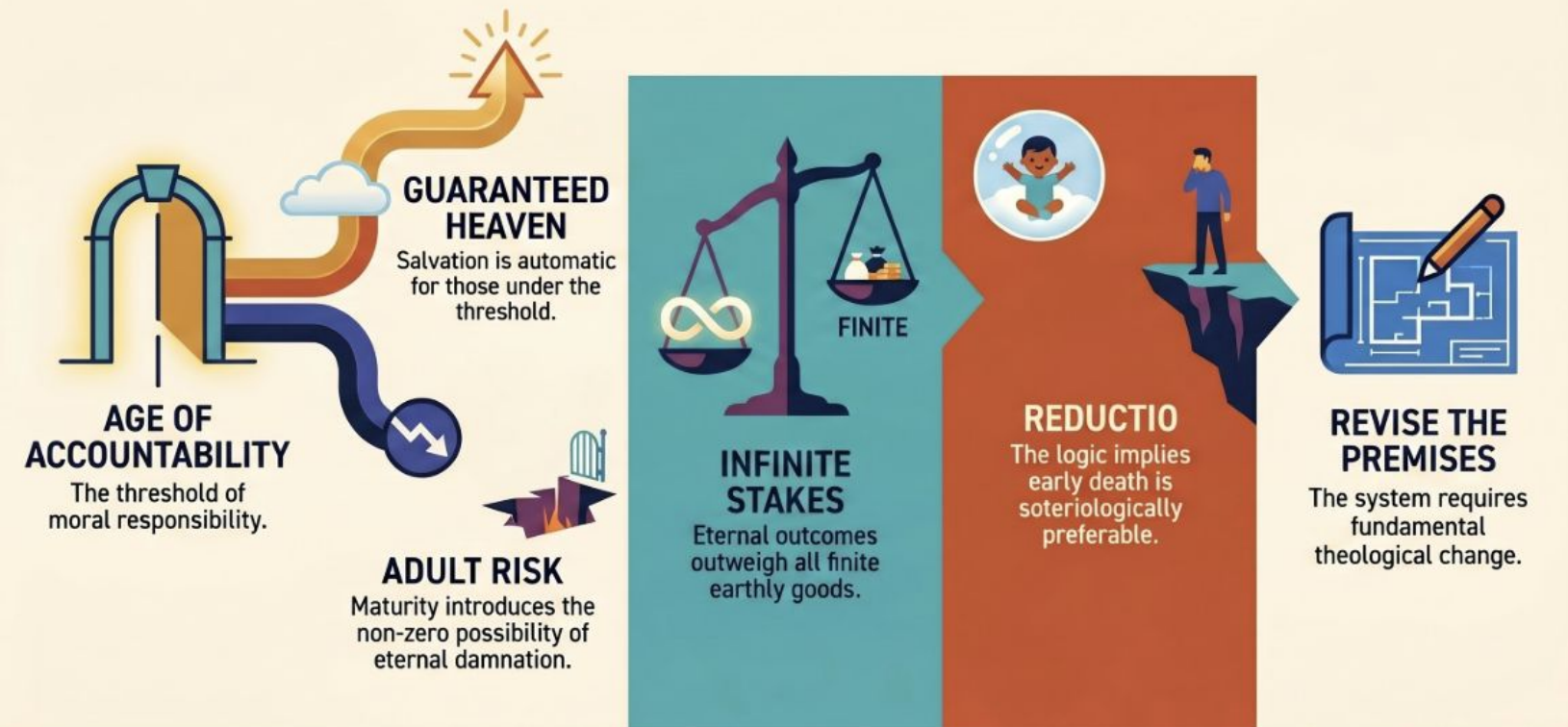
Preview:

Before accountability	After survival	What follows	What does not follow
Salvation is treated as certain.	Continued life introduces some risk of irreversible loss.	Early death is soteriologically safer if the avoided loss outweighs finite-life goods.	No person thereby gains permission, duty, or reason to cause death.

The target is a conjunction of claims, not Christianity as a whole. Traditions that offer only hope for infant salvation, deny irreversible loss, or reject afterlife dominance do not satisfy the argument's premises.

Visual preview:

THE BENEVOLENT MONSTER



The published visual accurately displays the pressure from guaranteed salvation, adult risk, and eternal stakes. Its word “preferable” names a soteriological comparison, not an all-things-considered permission to cause death.

Abstract

An age-of-accountability defense can turn the death of an infant or young child into a consoling claim: the child was not morally responsible and is now guaranteed eternal happiness. Combined with irreversible hell and a non-zero risk of adult damnation, however, that reassurance creates a comparison the defense does not intend. Death before accountability secures the best eternal outcome; survival removes the guarantee. The resulting pressure is sometimes described as a utilitarian recommendation to kill. That description is both morally dangerous and analytically mistaken.

This paper separates three questions: what outcome is better for the child, what an agent is permitted to do, and what a deity would be justified in allowing or commanding. A deontic prohibition can decisively answer the second question without changing the first. A finite expected-value model then shows that literal infinities are unnecessary. If the probability and magnitude of irreversible loss make the expected afterlife disadvantage of survival greater than the value of finite-life goods, early death is soteriologically safer. Treating heaven and hell as infinite makes ordinary expectation calculations unstable; it does not dissolve the underlying contrast between guarantee and risk.

The conclusion is a conditional reductio. It does not apply to every Christian account of children, salvation, or hell, and it provides no permission, recommendation, or practical proposal. It applies to the conjunction of guaranteed pre-accountability salvation, adult risk of irreversible loss, afterlife dominance, and the use of the child's heavenly gain as a moral defense of death. A coherent reply may deny the guarantee, remove the irreversible risk, enlarge the value of earthly life, restrict the defense to permission rather than welfare, or abandon the claim that postmortem benefit answers the original moral objection. None is cost-free, but each identifies the premise that must change.

Keywords: age of accountability; infant salvation; hell; expected utility; soteriology; problem of evil; reductio

1 When Consolation Becomes a Stress Test

The death of a child invites consolation before analysis. Within some Christian settings, one form of consolation says that the child had not reached moral accountability and therefore entered heaven. The claim can also appear in defenses of narrated or alleged divine violence. If a child receives eternal happiness, the thought goes, death did not inflict the ultimate harm. The afterlife gain is made relevant to the moral assessment of the loss.

This move is not a universal Christian doctrine. The Catholic catechism entrusts unbaptized children to divine mercy and permits hope for their salvation; it does not teach an automatic guarantee (Catholic Church 1992). An Orthodox Presbyterian discussion likewise says that its confessional tradition leaves the extent of infant election open (Orthodox Presbyterian Church 2012). Even a Protestant defense sympathetic to infant salvation acknowledges the absence of an explicit biblical age threshold and presents the conclusion as a reasoned hope rather than a clearly stated rule (Wellum 2018). These differences matter because the argument developed here begins only when assurance is upgraded to certainty.

A sharp example appears in William Lane Craig's defense of the killing of Canaanite children. Craig distinguishes the child's good from an agent's permission: he argues that taking the children into heaven may have prevented their damnation, while a divine prohibition still forbids ordinary persons from killing innocents (Craig 2013). That distinction blocks a simple instruction to maximize heavenly admissions. Yet it also states both sides of the problem. Death is said to bring a great good to the child, and survival is said to expose the child to a worse eternal outcome.

The title "benevolent monster" names the resulting structure, not a person. A system becomes monstrous in this limited sense when its benevolent promise makes lethal loss safer for the beneficiary than continued life. The phrase is deliberately arresting, but the argument is not that anyone should act

on the comparison. It is a test of whether a set of claims can jointly support the moral work assigned to them.

The precise target

The reductio concerns a four-part package: guaranteed salvation before accountability; some risk of irreversible loss after it; afterlife outcomes weighty enough to outweigh finite earthly goods; and use of the child's heavenly gain to defend or soften the moral status of death. Remove any one of these and the inference must be recalculated.

This focus avoids two common errors. It does not generalize from one apologetic argument to Christianity as a whole. It also does not treat a welfare comparison as a practical recommendation. The paper asks what follows inside the specified framework and what revisions are needed if its consequence is unacceptable.

2 Four Claims and One Trap

An “age of accountability” can refer loosely to developing moral agency, a pastoral convention, or a precise soteriological boundary. Only the last role creates the strongest problem. Let the threshold divide persons whose final salvation is guaranteed from persons whose final outcome can include irreversible loss. No exact birthday is needed. The crucial claim is a change in risk: before the boundary the worst outcome is unavailable; afterward it is possible.

Table 1 separates the four claims that are often run together.

Claim	Content	Weakest direct revision
Guarantee	Every child who dies before accountability receives the best final state.	Replace certainty with hope, agnosticism, sacramental conditions, or a more complex account.
Adult risk	At least some persons who survive accountability can suffer irreversible final loss.	Adopt universal reconciliation, postmortem opportunity, or a providential guarantee for this child.
Dominance	Eternal goods and losses can outweigh the goods obtained through a finite earthly life.	Treat embodied life as independently weighty enough to defeat the comparison.
Defense	The child's heavenly gain counts substantially toward justifying, excusing, or softening death.	Offer consolation without using the gain as an answer to the moral objection.

Table 1: The premise package and the most direct way to withdraw each component.

The first two claims create a guarantee-to-risk transition. The third says that this transition matters more than the finite goods on the other side. The fourth makes the comparison morally relevant rather than merely descriptive. Together they generate the trap: if heavenly gain can answer an objection to early death, and early death guarantees that gain while survival can forfeit it, the framework has made continued life the spiritually hazardous option.

The result is conditional in two senses. First, it does not establish that any premise is true. Second, even if all are true, it establishes only a soteriological comparison unless additional moral principles are added. The conclusion is that one state is safer for the child's final outcome. Whether anyone may cause that state is a separate question.

This narrower conclusion is still significant. An apologetic defense need not entail a command to be unstable. It is enough that the defense labels the death a benefit under conditions that make survival a risk. The moral objection has not disappeared; it has migrated from a particular death to the architecture of salvation.

3 Welfare, Permission, and Divine Justification

The debate becomes confused when three questions are treated as one.

- **Welfare:** Would dying before accountability leave the child better off, worse off, or incomparable with surviving?
- **Permission:** May a parent, soldier, physician, or other human agent cause the death?
- **Divine justification:** Would the Christian deity under examination be justified in causing, allowing, or commanding it?

A negative answer about permission does not force a negative answer about welfare. Ordinary ethics contains many acts that would benefit one person but that another person lacks the authority to perform. Likewise, an act can be forbidden because of rights, rules, relationships, corruption of character, uncertainty, or effects on others even if the recipient receives a benefit. Craig's reply occupies exactly this space: death is a great good for the child, but humans lack the prerogative to produce it (Craig 2013).

That reply should be granted. It decisively blocks the claim that a welfare advantage by itself licenses killing. It also exposes why calling the problem "utilitarian" is incomplete. A non-consequentialist can accept the outcome comparison while denying that agents must maximize it. The *reductio* therefore should not infer a duty to kill. It asks instead whether a theology can coherently use the child's benefit as a defense while treating the same benefit as morally inert whenever the implication becomes disturbing.

The agent-cost reply is also stronger than a calculation about punishment. If the reason not to kill were merely that the killer would be damned, the framework would preserve the incentive for any agent willing to sacrifice one soul for many. A genuine prohibition says that the act wrongs its victims, violates authority, or corrupts agency independently of the agent's later payoff. That is the right kind of reply to a proposed action. But the reply still leaves the alleged beneficiary better off by the defense's own account.

The divine-only reply adds an asymmetry of authority. A creator or perfectly informed judge may have permissions unavailable to creatures. Even if that claim is granted, it changes the actor, not the child's outcome. The question then becomes why a perfectly good providence exposes surviving children to a terminal risk from which early death would protect them. Appeals to unknown reasons are possible, but they cannot simultaneously function as a transparent explanation that death benefited the child. The more the defense relies on hidden goods, the less the simple heavenly-gain answer explains.

The concession that strengthens the critique

A categorical prohibition on killing is fully compatible with the *reductio*. It prevents the welfare comparison from becoming an action guide. Precisely because the prohibition and comparison can coexist, the defender must answer what the comparison reveals about the salvation system rather than treating prohibition as though it erased the comparison.

This separation also protects the inquiry from dangerous rhetoric. No empirical uncertainty, private conviction, or theological belief could authorize harm. The argument has no operational threshold, no

instruction, and no exception for altruistic motives. Its only practical implication is negative: do not infer permission from welfare, and do not hide a troubling welfare structure behind a valid prohibition.

4 A Finite Model before Infinite Utility

Expected-utility theory represents choices by combining possible outcomes, their values, and probabilities. Its classical forms impose demanding assumptions about coherent preference and probability (Savage 1954; Joyce 1999). The present model is intentionally modest. It is not a complete theory of moral choice and does not assign a market price to heaven. It asks what must be true for the theological comparison already being made.

Let (H) be the positive value of final salvation, (L) the magnitude of irreversible final loss, (p) the probability of salvation conditional on surviving beyond accountability, and (F) the expected net value of finite earthly goods made available by survival. On the stipulated guarantee, death before accountability has value

$$V_D = H.$$

Survival has the schematic value

$$V_S = F + pH - (1 - p)L.$$

The guaranteed outcome is better on this model when

$$V_D > V_S \quad \text{or, equivalently,} \quad (1 - p)(H + L) > F.$$

The inequality makes three points visible. First, a non-zero risk alone is not enough. If (F) is sufficiently large or the risk sufficiently small, survival may remain better. Second, if salvation and loss are extraordinarily weighty relative to finite-life goods, even a small risk can control the comparison. Third, the conclusion depends on the defender's valuations. The model does not import afterlife dominance from outside; it displays what follows when the defense already relies on it.

This is why literal infinity is unnecessary. One can replace heaven and hell with very large finite values and obtain the same conditional pressure. The model is then mathematically ordinary and morally transparent: the expected avoided loss must exceed the goods of continued life. Critics should not claim more than this. There is no unconditional dominance unless (F), (p), and the relevant outcomes are specified.

Literal infinite values make matters harder. Standard expectation arithmetic can yield undefined expressions, fail to compare options, or become sensitive to how an infinite state space is represented. Hájek's critique of Pascalian wagering catalogues several such failures and shows why an infinite payoff does not automatically produce a sound decision rule (Hájek 2003). The appropriate response is not to announce that infinity proves infant death preferable. It is to say that the defender faces a choice: use finite approximations, in which case the inequality is explicit, or invoke a non-numerical priority rule under which eternal loss lexically outweighs every finite good.

The second route preserves the *reductio* in a different form. If avoiding irreversible loss always takes priority over finite earthly goods, guaranteed salvation is safer than any survival path containing that risk. The conclusion is ordinal rather than arithmetic: guarantee ranks above risk on the soteriological dimension. Yet it remains bounded. It does not establish an all-things-considered ranking if rights, agency, relational duties, or incommensurable goods matter.

5 Why Earthly Goods Are the Pivotal Reply

The most promising defense says that continued earthly life is not a disposable preface to eternity. Embodied relationships, agency, love, learning, achievement, suffering overcome, service to others, and participation in a created order may have value that cannot be reduced to postmortem destination. Death deprives a child of these goods and injures families and communities. A framework that takes creation seriously should resist treating them as negligible.

This reply directly increases (F). It may defeat the inequality, make the options incomparable, or reject the additive model altogether. It also explains why ordinary Christian practice prays for recovery, protects children, and regards premature death as tragedy even while hoping for salvation. The reply is not an evasion. It identifies a real good omitted by a one-dimensional calculus.

Its cost is equally clear. If earthly goods are weighty enough to overturn the alleged eternal advantage, then “the child is in heaven” cannot by itself answer the moral objection to death. It may console survivors and describe one good outcome. It does not show that the child was unharmed or that the loss needs no further justification. The defender must hold together two claims: heaven is an immense good, and being deprived of an earthly life can remain a grave wrong even for someone who receives it.

A different version appeals to instrumental earthly goods. Perhaps the child would mature, freely form virtue, love others, or contribute to their salvation. These possibilities strengthen the value of survival, but they also introduce uncertainty. If the child’s own final loss remains possible, the system trades a guaranteed best outcome for a package of finite and relational goods plus risk. The defense succeeds only by showing why that package is worth the risk for the child, not merely useful to others.

The same point applies to soul-making. If earthly development is required for a good unavailable through early salvation, then pre-accountable children cannot simply receive every relevant perfection automatically at death. If it is not required, its value may be real but finite. Either answer is available, but the doctrine of infant salvation must specify which goods are conferred, lost, or transformed rather than treating “heaven” as an unanalyzed maximum.

6 The Nearest Philosophical Debate: Procreation and Hell

The *reductio* has a close relative in arguments about procreation under traditional hell and salvific exclusivism. Himma argues that exposing a future child to a substantial probability of eternal torment can make procreation impermissible (Himma 2010; Himma 2016). Bawulski replies that this conclusion depends on theological assumptions that many traditional Christians reject and that procreation must be assessed within a fuller account of providence, goods, duties, and eschatology (Bawulski 2013).

That exchange improves the present argument in two ways. First, it warns against claiming a contradiction within Christianity in general. The inference reaches only frameworks containing the relevant premises. Second, it shows that the risk of hell generates pressure even without an age threshold. Procreation creates a person who may face irreversible loss; survival across accountability changes the risk profile of an already existing child. The problems are related but not identical.

The present version is narrower than the procreation argument. It does not claim that parents act wrongly by preserving a child’s life or that nonexistence would be better. It begins after the child exists and compares two possible futures assigned by the theology. Nor does it require a high empirical estimate of damnation. The finite model identifies the exact threshold at which the risk matters, while an afterlife-dominance premise may make even a small risk decisive.

The adjacent debate also supplies a methodological lesson. *Reductio* arguments need not prove that every theological repair fails. Their role is to reveal which commitments cannot be retained together without an unwanted consequence. A defender may accept the consequence, reject the moral bridge,

or revise the theology. What is not available is to declare the conclusion absurd while leaving every generating premise untouched.

7 Seven Repair Strategies and Their Prices

The strongest replies are best treated as revisions rather than evasions. Table 2 shows how each changes the argument.

Repair	What it blocks	What it costs or requires
Deny the guarantee	Removes certainty before accountability.	Pastoral assurance becomes hope, agnosticism, election, baptismal condition, or another qualified doctrine.
Universal reconciliation	Sets irreversible final-loss risk to zero.	Revises traditional infernalism and exclusivism; Talbott offers one developed Christian route (Talbott 1999).
Postmortem opportunity	Makes physical death less decisive for final destiny.	Requires an account of continued agency and judgment after death.
Providential guarantee	Claims that a particular surviving child will freely attain salvation.	The relevant (p) becomes one, but the broader claim that adult damnation risk supports the defense must be narrowed.
Earthly-life value	Raises (F), rejects additivity, or treats options as incomparable.	Heavenly gain no longer suffices to show that early death leaves the child unharmed.
Deontic prohibition	Blocks any human permission or duty to cause death.	Leaves the child's alleged welfare advantage and the providential question intact.
Reject benefit as defense	Treats salvation as consolation but not justification.	The original apologetic answer to infant death or divine violence is withdrawn.

Table 2: Coherent repair strategies. A “cost” is a commitment that must be made explicit, not a proof that the repair is false.

7.1 Hope rather than guarantee

This is the cleanest boundary. Catholic and Reformed sources noted earlier refuse to infer universal infant salvation with certainty (Catholic Church 1992; Orthodox Presbyterian Church 2012). Without a guarantee, death may not improve the child's prospects. The *reductio* loses its first premise. The pastoral cost is uncertainty at precisely the moment assurance is desired, but logical discipline cannot turn hope into a theorem.

7.2 Universalism or revisable finality

If every person is ultimately reconciled, survival does not introduce an irreversible loss. Talbott's Christian universalism is a developed example rather than an *ad hoc* patch (Talbott 1999). Postmortem opportunity can have a similar effect if no earthly threshold finally closes salvation. These views face their own theological disputes, but they dissolve the guarantee-to-risk transition.

Annihilationism changes the magnitude and perhaps the nature of loss but does not automatically eliminate the problem. If nonexistence is much worse than salvation and survival introduces that risk, the finite inequality can still favor the guarantee. The values must be argued rather than assumed.

7.3 Freedom and providence

A free-will defense may say that risk is inseparable from morally significant agency. That claim raises (F) by adding the value of free development. It may also explain why a world containing mature persons is better than one in which all are removed before accountability. Yet the reply must address distribution: why is guaranteed salvation compatible with the freedom of children who die, while survival requires exposure to irreversible loss? If postmortem freedom is possible for the former, irreversible earthly finality needs a separate defense.

Providence may instead ensure that each child who survives will freely be saved. For that child, ($p=1$) and the *reductio* fails. But a general doctrine in which many adults are lost cannot assign the guarantee to every surviving child. The defense must say whose risk is real and why an early-death benefit is invoked when the counterfactual outcome is unknown.

7.4 Authority without transparent benefit

The claim that only the Christian deity under examination may give and take life can establish a permission asymmetry. It does not by itself establish perfect goodness, identify the relevant command, or show that death benefits the child. Those require independent arguments. If mysterious purposes do the justificatory work, the defense should say that the reasons are unknown. It should not present guaranteed heaven as though the benefit transparently resolves the case.

8 The Apologetic Dilemma

The paper's central challenge can now be stated without infinite arithmetic. Consider a defense of infant death or commanded violence that appeals to the child's guaranteed heavenly good.

If that good is sufficiently weighty to answer the moral objection, it is sufficiently weighty to matter when comparing guaranteed early salvation with risky survival. The defender must then explain why exposing the child to irreversible loss is better for the child or why welfare is not the relevant standard. If the heavenly good is not sufficiently weighty to drive the comparison, it cannot by itself answer the original moral objection. Either way, the benefit cannot be selectively large only when it excuses death.

This is a consistency test, not a complete moral theory. Rights, permissions, communal effects, and divine authority may differ across cases. But a benefit attributed to the same child cannot change magnitude merely because the conclusion is convenient. What may change is its role: a genuine good can console without justifying, or contribute to a defense without completing it.

Kvanvig's analysis of hell emphasizes that traditional eternal punishment creates distinctive moral and epistemological problems precisely because ordinary future compensation is unavailable (Kvanvig 1993). The age-of-accountability defense reverses that asymmetry for the young: compensation is guaranteed before a boundary and placed at risk after it. The resulting discontinuity demands an account of why moral development makes an infinitely or overwhelmingly worse outcome possible and why the safest soteriological state is attached to premature death.

A responsible defense should therefore answer five questions:

1. Is infant salvation certain, probable, hoped for, or unknown?
2. What event changes the child's risk profile, and why is it morally relevant?
3. Are heaven and hell infinite values, lexically ordered states, or very large finite outcomes?
4. Which earthly goods can offset terminal risk for the child, rather than merely benefit others?
5. Is heavenly gain being offered as consolation, partial justification, or a complete answer to death?

Answers can dissolve the *reductio*. Refusing to distinguish the questions cannot.

9 Conclusion

The age-of-accountability problem is often made sensational by leaping from heavenly benefit to a proposal to kill. That leap is invalid and dangerous. Welfare, permission, and divine justification are distinct. A categorical prohibition can make killing gravely wrong even if a theology says that death benefits the child. No practical exception follows from the argument in this paper.

Once that mistake is removed, the deeper problem remains. A system that guarantees salvation before accountability, introduces irreversible loss afterward, and ranks final destiny above finite earthly goods makes early death soteriologically safer. The result does not require literal infinite utilities. A finite model produces it whenever the expected avoided loss exceeds the value of continued life; a lexical ordering produces it whenever avoiding final loss outranks every finite good. Literal infinities make standard calculation less reliable, not the conceptual contrast less visible.

The *reductio* is deliberately conditional. Christianity contains diverse accounts of infant salvation, baptism, election, freedom, hell, universal reconciliation, and postmortem possibility. Traditions that offer hope rather than guarantee, deny irreversible loss, or give embodied life independent and incomparable value can reject its premises. Those are substantive positions, not loopholes.

What cannot be retained without explanation is the full apologetic package: guaranteed infant heaven, adult risk of irreversible loss, afterlife dominance, and the child's postmortem benefit as an answer to death. If heaven is large enough to excuse the loss, it is large enough to expose the danger of survival. If earthly life is large enough to defeat that danger, heaven alone does not excuse the loss. The benevolent monster disappears only when the premises are revised or the defense becomes more modest.

Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

- P1.** For every child in the target theology who dies before accountability, final salvation is guaranteed.
- P2.** For at least some such children who survive beyond accountability, irreversible final loss has non-zero probability.
- P3.** The expected or priority-weighted disadvantage created by that loss risk can exceed the value of the finite earthly goods made available by survival.
- P4.** If one option guarantees final salvation and another introduces a disadvantage that exceeds its additional goods, the first option is soteriologically safer for the child.
- P5.** Therefore, for any child satisfying Premises 1–3, death before accountability is soteriologically safer than survival beyond it.
- P6.** A soteriologically safer outcome does not by itself give any agent permission, duty, or practical reason to cause death.
- P7.** Therefore, Premise 5 supports no recommendation to kill; it identifies a welfare implication internal to the target theology.
- P8.** If guaranteed heavenly benefit is offered as a sufficient moral defense of early death, its weight must be applied consistently to the survival comparison.
- P9.** Therefore, the target theology must revise at least one of the guarantee, adult-risk, dominance, or defense premises, or accept the unwanted welfare implication.

The inference from Premises 1–4 to Premise 5 is deductively valid. Premise 3 is substantive and defeasible: in the finite model it is true exactly when $(1 - p)(H + L) > F$, while a lexical model builds the priority into its ordering. Premise 6 blocks the invalid transition from comparative welfare to permission. Premises 8–9 formulate the apologetic dilemma as a consistency requirement rather than a claim that every Christian theology shares the target premises.

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