

The Divine Judgment Evasion

Love, Judgment, and Semantic Collapse in Apologetic Defenses of Sacred Violence

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: 0009-0009-3725-8682

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Central claim

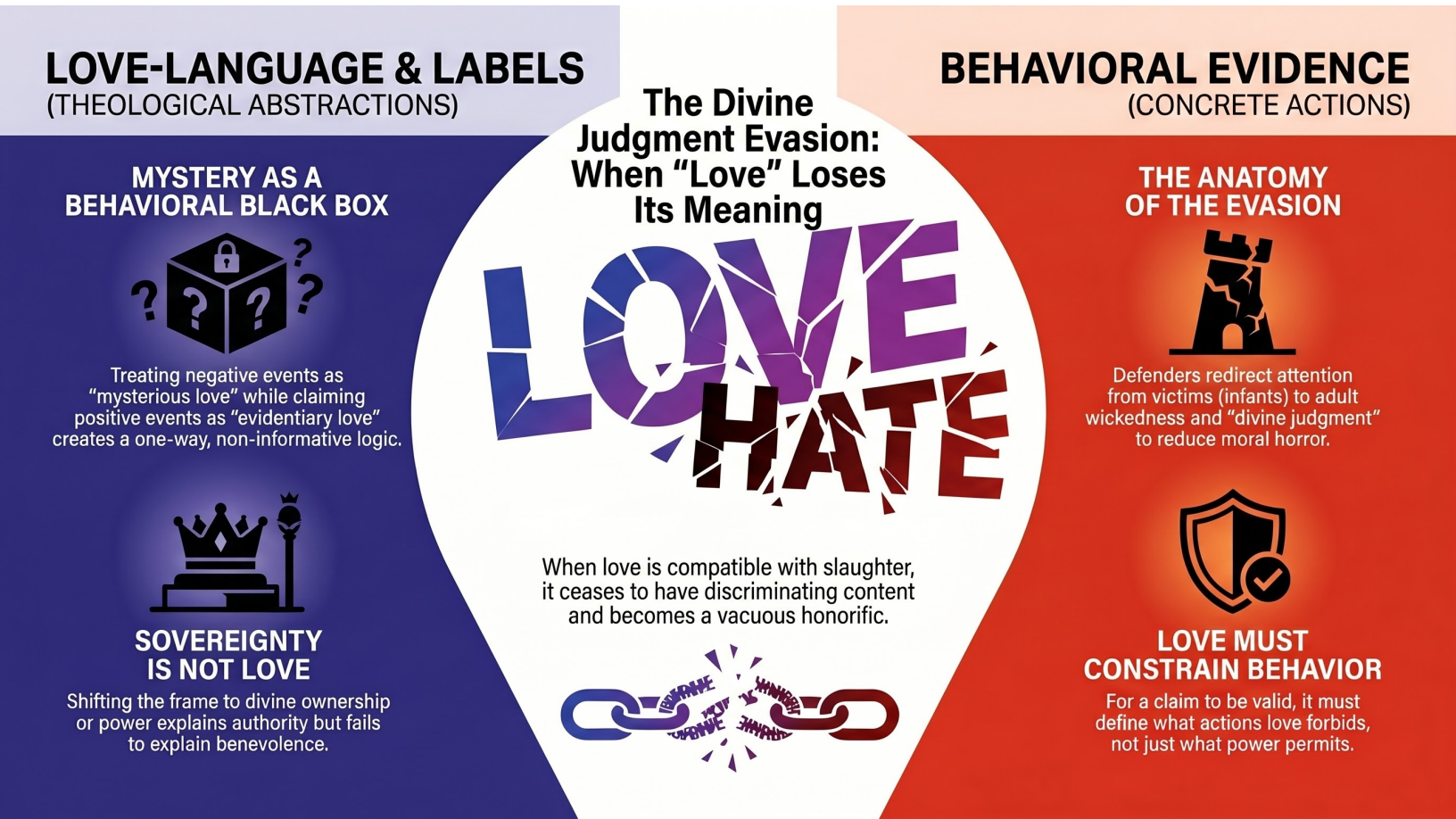
When perfect divine love is offered as a public description of character, it must constrain what conduct is expected and what evidence counts against the description. Appeals to judgment, sovereignty, mystery, or later compensation may answer narrower questions, but none by itself shows that devastating treatment of non-agents is loving. If every apparently hostile or indifferent pattern remains equally compatible with perfect love, the word retains devotional force while losing public discriminating content.

Preview:

Public claim	Defensive move	Missing bridge	Needed repair
A perfectly loving Christian deity is said to command or permit sacred violence.	Judgment, ownership, inscrutable reasons, or afterlife restoration is invoked.	Authority, possibility, or compensation does not yet establish loving regard for each victim.	State what love rules out, keep the vulnerable subject in view, and apply the same evidence standard to favorable and adverse cases.

The argument is conditional and semantic. It does not prove that every violent text is literal, that every judgment is unloving, or that the Christian deity lacks sufficient reasons inaccessible to finite agents.

Visual preview:



The inherited map contrasts love-language with behavioral evidence. Its governing question is not whether power permits the action, but whether perfect love supplies an intelligible constraint on it.

Abstract

Defenses of sacred violence often redirect attention from vulnerable victims to the wrongdoing of adults and then redescribe the event as divine judgment. The local replies vary: conquest language may be hyperbolic, a creator may have special authority over life, finite agents may not grasp sufficient reasons, or victims may receive compensating goods after death. Each reply can matter. Yet each answers a different question from the public claim that the conduct displays or remains evidence-neutral with respect to perfect love.

This paper develops a Public Character Constraint: a moral predicate used in public argument must make some difference to reasonable expectations and must render some possible patterns counterevidence, even if not decisive disproof. Applied to sacred violence, the constraint separates five issues that apologetic discussion often blends—textual attribution, judicial warrant, authority, epistemic access, and loving concern for each victim. A defense ledger shows what recurrent replies may establish and which bridge to love remains missing.

The main result is conditional. If every pattern that ordinarily indicates hostility or indifference remains equally compatible with perfect divine love because an unknown justification is always available, then love no longer discriminates among public character hypotheses. It may remain a devotional commitment, but favorable events cannot coherently count as public evidence while devastating events are denied any adverse weight. The argument does not require sentimental love, human and divine parity, or confidence that finite agents know every relevant good. It requires enough continuity for the word *love* to identify a morally significant relation rather than function as an honorific for sovereign power.

Keywords: divine love; sacred violence; judgment; skeptical theism; divine command theory; semantic collapse

1 The Question Hidden by the Judgment Frame

Consider a familiar argumentative sequence. A critic asks how a perfectly loving Christian deity could command the killing of infants in a conquest narrative. The reply describes the adult culture as violent, idolatrous, or persistently corrupt; emphasizes long-delayed punishment; calls the event judgment; and, under pressure, invokes sovereign prerogative or reasons beyond human understanding. Each step moves farther from the child whose treatment generated the question.

Call this sequence the *Divine Judgment Evasion* when the change of frame substitutes for an account of the victim. The label concerns an argumentative move, not every use of judicial language and not the motives of people who use it. Cultures can commit grave wrongs. Judgment can be legitimate. A creator, if one exists, may have authority human agents lack. Finite understanding is limited. The failure occurs when these points are allowed to answer a question they do not yet address: how does the treatment of this non-agent express, instantiate, or remain evidentially neutral toward perfect love?

The distinction matters because several disputes are easily conflated. One concerns what an ancient text asserts. Another concerns whether the event occurred. A third concerns whether a command would be just. A fourth concerns whether the commander had authority. A fifth concerns what the conduct indicates about character. Copan and Flannagan offer historical, literary, and philosophical defenses that engage more than one of these levels (Copan and Flannagan 2014); Morriston presses the moral problem for biblical inerrantists (Morriston 2009). Success at one level can change the target at another. If the language is nonliteral and no killing of children is asserted, the central case is removed rather than morally justified. If the event is affirmed and defended, the character question remains.

The thesis of this paper is therefore narrower than a general argument from evil. A public claim of perfect love must retain contrastive and evidential content. It must tell us something about how a beloved subject may be treated, and it must make at least some possible patterns less expected under love than under hostility or indifference. When every contrary-looking pattern is insulated by a different auxiliary defense, “perfect love” can remain verbally secure while ceasing to guide judgment.

2 Love as a Public Character Predicate

By a *public character predicate* I mean a description used to invite people who do not already accept a tradition's authority to infer something about an agent's morally relevant dispositions. The claim "God is love" may perform several roles. In worship it can express allegiance, trust, or an identity-forming confession. In pastoral speech it can reassure. In apologetic argument it is offered as a true description of the Christian deity and often as a reason that this deity is worthy of trust. The last use invites public assessment.

Love does not imply uninterrupted comfort. A loving person may refuse a request, expose wrongdoing, accept short-term pain for a beneficiary's good, or impose a proportionate consequence. Robert Merrihew Adams grounds an influential divine-command account in the nature of a loving deity rather than in arbitrary will (R. M. Adams 1999); Quinn analyzes how divine commands might generate requirements without eliminating logical and moral structure (Quinn 1978). These approaches treat loving character as a constraint on command, not as a decorative label added after power has settled the matter.

The relevant minimum is relational. Love involves regarding the beloved's good as a reason, recognizing the beloved as a subject rather than merely an instrument, and limiting harm accordingly. Perfect love may satisfy those conditions in ways humans only partly understand. But *exceeding* human love differs from reversing every recognizable implication of love. An analogical predicate needs continuity as well as difference. If *love* when applied to a deity borrows the word's reassuring force but none of its concern for a beloved's good, the analogy communicates by one meaning and survives criticism by another.

This yields the Public Character Constraint.

The Public Character Constraint

When a moral predicate is used as public evidence about an agent's character, it must (1) support some expectations about the agent's treatment of relevant subjects, (2) identify some possible patterns as evidence against the attribution, and (3) preserve enough continuity with its ordinary relational role to distinguish that character from live contrasts. The evidence can be defeasible; it cannot be one-way.

The constraint is not verificationism. It does not say that a meaningful statement must be conclusively testable, or that one adverse event disproves love. Character attributions are usually holistic. New context can reverse an initial judgment. The point is modest: a description that gains support from apparent care must accept some risk from apparent disregard. Otherwise observations do not discriminate the description from its rivals.

3 The Anatomy of the Evasion

The evasion normally unfolds through four shifts.

1. **Victim to collective.** Attention moves from children and other noncombatants to the wrongdoing attributed to a people or its adult institutions.
2. **Action to category.** Killing becomes *judgment*, and the positive moral associations of a courtroom are imported before agency and proportionality are established.
3. **Concern to jurisdiction.** The question whether the treatment is loving becomes the question whether a creator has the right to give and take life.
4. **Evidence to possibility.** The demand for a reason to regard the act as loving becomes the possibility that an unknown sufficient reason exists.

None of the second questions is meaningless. The error is treating an answer to it as an answer to the first. A government may have jurisdiction yet act without benevolence. A punishment may be authorized yet disproportionate. An unknown justification may be possible yet unsupported. A later benefit may compensate a loss without making the original imposition loving.

The initial attention shift is especially consequential. Moral evaluation begins from the subject to whom the act is done. Descriptions of a corrupt society can be relevant to the culpability of its responsible agents, but infants are not responsible agents in that sense. Naming adult wrongdoing does not transfer agency to children. If collective identity or inherited liability is supposed to do that work, the defender must state and defend that premise rather than let the word *judgment* carry it silently.

Historical study can explain why this language has rhetorical force. Niditch locates biblical war traditions within several ancient ideologies of violence, sacrifice, purity, and victory (Niditch 1993). Explanation of a text's symbolic world is indispensable, but genealogy is not moral vindication. A modern defender still must say which claims are historical, which are literary, and which are normative.

4 What the Recurrent Defenses Establish

The following ledger keeps the issues separate. Its charitable column matters: the objection is not that recurrent defenses say nothing. It is that they often establish less than the conclusion for which they are used.

Table 1: A defense ledger for sacred-violence arguments.

Defense	What it may establish	What it does not establish by itself	Needed repair
Genre or hyperbole	The text may not assert total civilian destruction, reducing or removing the target act.	That a literal command would be loving, or that every troubling detail is figurative.	Give text-specific evidence and state precisely which action is still attributed.
Judgment	Responsible wrongdoers may deserve proportionate restraint or punishment.	Agency of infants, transferred guilt, proportionality, or loving regard for each victim.	Identify the liable subject, the wrong, the standard, and victim-directed justification.
Creator authority	A creator may possess permissions unavailable to creatures.	Benevolence; having a right to act is not acting from concern for the one affected.	Explain why love, not ownership alone, favors this exercise of authority.
Mystery or skeptical theism	Finite agents may fail to detect every justifying reason.	A positive reason to call the act loving, or an asymmetrical rule that counts only favorable evidence.	Limit the skepticism and explain which observations could still count against love.
Afterlife restoration	A victim's life may ultimately contain goods that defeat or outweigh temporal harm.	Consent, non-instrumental regard, necessity, or why the harm was lovingly imposed.	Connect the original act to the victim's good without treating compensation as permission.

The repairs share one discipline: return to the person affected. System-level goods, judicial categories, and divine attributes matter only through a bridge explaining why the treatment of that subject is compatible with perfect concern for that subject.

5 Judgment and the Missing Conditions of Liability

Judgment language can clarify moral structure when it names a responsible agent, a violated norm, reliable grounds, a proportionate response, and protection against arbitrary power. Without those conditions it can sanitize rather than explain. "A people was judged" sounds morally ordered even when the described operation kills individuals who neither performed nor could understand the alleged wrong.

Three bridges are commonly proposed. The first is corporate liability: members share the moral identity of their people. But social membership does not make every member equally responsible for institutional crimes, and involuntary membership is weakest in infants. The second is inherited guilt. That is a substantive theological account, not an implication of ordinary judgment; its moral plausibility cannot be assumed in a public defense. The third is universal sinfulness. Even if every human falls short of a divine standard, a penalty's availability does not explain its selective timing, form, or relation to the wrong for which it is imposed.

These difficulties do not prove that collective consequences are always unjust. Actions have intergenerational effects, governments act on behalf of citizens, and rescue can require burdens on people who caused no threat. But unavoidable consequence differs from deliberate targeting, and tragic necessity differs from retributive desert. A defense should say which relation is claimed rather than sliding among them.

Seibert offers one theological response: resist identifying every disturbing biblical portrayal with the actual character of the Christian deity (Seibert 2009). An inerrantist may reject that hermeneutic. The important point is structural. The interpreter who permits moral criticism preserves behavioral content by accepting that some portrayals should not be affirmed straightforwardly. The interpreter who preserves every attribution must provide the missing moral bridges; the word *judgment* cannot provide them by itself.

6 Authority Is Not Benevolence

Creator authority is a stronger reply than a mere change of vocabulary. If all creaturely life depends continuously on a creator, perhaps ending a life is not theft from an owner and perhaps the creator's jurisdiction differs categorically from ours. Grant that for the sake of argument. The difference establishes a possible permission. It does not establish love.

The distinction is familiar outside theology. A physician may be authorized to perform an intervention that a stranger may not perform. The authorization does not show that a particular intervention served the patient. A state may lawfully impose a burden; legality does not demonstrate benevolence. Rights answer *who may act*; love answers, among other things, *how the good of this subject figures in the reason for acting*.

Calling persons property sharpens rather than closes the problem. Ownership normally reduces the owner's need to consult an object's interests because objects have none. Love is directed toward subjects whose good matters. If creator language makes a person more like an owned object precisely when the person's treatment is challenged, it removes the relational feature needed to defend love.

The same point constrains divine-command theory. A sophisticated theory need not identify goodness with unconditioned will. Adams's account connects obligation to commands issued by a loving deity (R. M. Adams 1999); Quinn's account analyzes moral requirements rather than licensing contradiction at will (Quinn 1978). When loving character helps explain why commands are morally authoritative, the content of love cannot then be derived solely from whatever is commanded. That would reverse the explanatory order and make the appeal circular: the command is good because the commander is loving, while the commander counts as loving because any command issued is good.

7 Mystery, Skeptical Theism, and One-Way Evidence

Skeptical theism urges caution about moving from "I see no sufficient reason" to "there is no sufficient reason". The caution responds to the disparity between finite cognitive access and the goods, evils, and entailment relations that might be available to an omniscient agent (Bergmann 2009). It has real force against confident claims that our inventory of possible reasons is complete.

Yet a possibility-blocker is not positive character evidence. Suppose a terrible act appears inconsistent with love, and the reply is that an unknown loving reason may exist. That reply may prevent a conclusive inference. It does not show that the unknown reason exists, that love predicts the act, or that the evidence is equally likely under love and under morally opaque power. The move changes “apparently adverse evidence” into “not a proof.” It does not change it into support.

The danger becomes visible when evidence is handled asymmetrically. Rescue, beauty, comfort, and answered prayer are treated as manifestations of love. Slaughter, hiddenness, and prolonged suffering are said to reveal nothing adverse because unknown reasons may explain them. The same cognitive distance that blocks negative inference should then weaken favorable inference. A defense may instead identify a principled asymmetry, but it cannot merely award love every success and immunize it from every failure.

Lee argues that combining skeptical theism with a divine-command response can undermine loving deliberation because the beloved’s welfare loses its role as a reason available to the agent (Lee 2025). The present argument is related but semantic. If human value judgments are too unreliable to register any tension between conduct and love, then public claims about loving character also lose the humanly accessible contrast on which their reassuring content depends.

Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument intensifies this issue by asking what relationship-seeking love would make reasonable to expect (Schellenberg 1993). One need not accept his full argument to see the methodological point: a love claim normally carries relational expectations. Mystery can qualify those expectations. If it cancels all of them, it preserves doctrinal certainty at the price of public content.

8 Afterlife Goods and the Compensation Gap

A different defense keeps the victim in view. Perhaps children killed in a temporal event receive immediate, unsurpassable goods after death. Marilyn McCord Adams’s treatment of horrendous evils develops a richer idea: a person’s life can be integrated into relation with the divine so that the horror is defeated within that person’s own good, not merely outweighed by unrelated benefits elsewhere (M. M. Adams 1999). This is substantially more victim-centered than a simple appeal to collective judgment.

Even so, four distinctions remain. First, compensation differs from justification. Replacing a loss can repair what happened without making its imposition permissible. Second, benefit differs from consent. A later good does not automatically authorize using a person as a means. Third, outcome differs from agency. The possibility that death leads to flourishing does not license human killing, so an additional premise must explain why divine agency changes the moral relation. Fourth, defeat differs from necessity. Showing that a horror is ultimately integrated into a good life does not show that this route was required or selected from loving concern.

Eleonore Stump directly considers whether the Amalek narrative could be literally true in a possible world containing central Christian claims and offers a detailed defense rather than a slogan (Stump 2010). Such a proposal is dialectically valuable because it exposes its background commitments and identifies a possible moral story. Its success as a public character defense still depends on comparative support: why regard that elaborated world as the appropriate account of the act rather than as one logically possible reconciliation among many?

The compensation reply therefore may reduce one kind of harm and may block a claim that the victim’s life is ruined overall. It does not by itself show that the original treatment expresses love. For that conclusion, the defender needs a victim-directed reason connecting the act, the available alternatives, and the beloved’s good.

9 Contrast Classes and Semantic Collapse

Character descriptions discriminate by contrast. Love differs from hostility because the beloved's good counts positively rather than negatively; it differs from indifference because the beloved matters rather than merely happening to benefit. Observable conduct underdetermines inner character, but patterns across context alter reasonable confidence. That is why apologies, explanations, and histories matter: they connect action to disposition without declaring every action irrelevant.

Now compare three hypotheses about a powerful agent: perfect love, indifference, and hostility. Under perfect love, devastating treatment of non-agents should require an unusually strong victim-regarding explanation. Under indifference, their good need not constrain action. Under hostility, their suffering may itself be favored. If an apologetic system says that every possible pattern—protection or abandonment, disclosure or silence, rescue or destruction—is equally expected under perfect love, observations cannot distinguish the first hypothesis from the others.

Semantic collapse does not mean that the three words become dictionary synonyms. It means that the public use of one no longer excludes the evidential profile associated with the others. The term can continue to organize insider trust, but it cannot also function as independent public reassurance.

The collapse is especially clear in a double standard:

1. apparent care raises confidence in perfect love;
2. apparent disregard never lowers confidence in perfect love;
3. no independent rule explains the asymmetry; and
4. the underlying doctrine fixes perfect love in advance.

Here evidence is not assessing the claim; the claim is sorting evidence into confirmation and mystery. The phrase “God is love” may remain sincere, profound, and personally meaningful. What it cannot do under that rule is tell an uncommitted reader why one divine character hypothesis fits the public record better than another.

10 Strong Objections

10.1 Divine love is analogical, not merely human love enlarged

The objection is correct that a creator-creature relation is not one human relationship at greater scale. The Public Character Constraint does not require parity. It requires continuity sufficient for public predication. If divine love can reverse rather than deepen every relational implication of love, then ordinary language supplies no reason to use that word instead of *sovereignty*, *purpose*, or *approval*. Analogy permits difference; it does not permit a speaker to retain all favorable associations while withdrawing every constraint.

10.2 Perfect goodness is essential, so adverse evidence is impossible

Within a theological system, perfect goodness may be built into the identity of the Christian deity. Then a troubling narrative creates pressure on interpretation, not on the attribute. This is coherent as conditional theology. In public argument, however, the identity claim is itself under assessment. Treating it as indefeasible prevents conduct from confirming it as well as disconfirming it. The result can be a stable doctrine, but not an evidence-based character inference.

10.3 Human moral judgment is too limited to constrain a creator

Limited judgment warrants humility, not complete moral silence. Apologetics already relies on human judgments that mercy, rescue, fidelity, and self-giving display love. A global defeater for adverse moral

judgment threatens those favorable judgments too. A local defeater must specify why this case is unreliable without making all divine-character attribution opaque.

10.4 Justice and love can require severe judgment

Yes. Love need not be indulgence, and protection of victims may require force against responsible aggressors. The challenge is not severity alone. It is the application of lethal treatment to non-agents, the proportionality and necessity of the means, and the relation between the action and each affected subject's good. Showing that some judgment can be loving does not establish that any event labeled judgment is loving.

10.5 A logically possible reconciliation is enough to defeat the objection

It may be enough against a strict allegation of contradiction. This paper's central claim is different. Public character attribution is comparative and evidential. Logical possibility can show that love and an act might coexist; it does not show that love predicts the act, that the reconciliation is probable, or that the act carries no adverse weight. A defense succeeds only relative to the conclusion it seeks.

11 A Constraint-Preserving Defense

A defense that preserves the public meaning of love can proceed in five steps.

1. **Fix the attribution.** State what the text is claimed to assert and what conduct is actually being defended. If genre or hyperbole removes a victim category, say so plainly.
2. **Keep subjects distinct.** Identify whose wrongdoing, liability, suffering, and good are in question. Do not transfer adult agency to children by a collective noun.
3. **Name the moral bridge.** Explain whether the rationale is protection, desert, necessity, consent, restoration, or some other relation. Authority alone is not the bridge.
4. **State love's constraint.** Identify conduct that perfect love would rule out or make less expected. The constraint may be qualified, but it must expose the attribution to evidential risk.
5. **Apply symmetrical standards.** Use the same account of cognitive limitation for favorable and adverse cases, and compare love with indifference and morally opaque power.

This protocol does not guarantee agreement. It improves the disagreement by preventing one defense from silently changing the question. A textual mitigation can be judged as textual evidence. A theodicy can be judged as a proposed victim-directed reason. A mystery defense can be judged by its scope. A character claim can be judged by the contrasts it excludes.

The constructive implication is theological as well as critical. A tradition can protect semantic content by allowing some interpretations to be morally resisted, by treating loving character as a real constraint on command, by offering detailed reasons centered on the affected subject, or by presenting perfect love as a confession that is not independent public evidence. Each option has costs. What fails is taking the devotional certainty of love, the public credit of favorable evidence, and unlimited immunity from adverse evidence all at once.

12 Conclusion

The Divine Judgment Evasion occurs when adult wrongdoing, judicial vocabulary, creator authority, mystery, or later compensation displaces the question of how vulnerable subjects are treated. Those moves may establish textual, legal, modal, or eschatological claims. None alone establishes loving concern.

The main result follows from the Public Character Constraint. If perfect love is used as a public description, it must shape expectations, preserve a recognizable concern for the beloved's good, and allow some possible conduct to count against the attribution. When every hostile- or indifferent-looking pattern is compatible with perfect love and only favorable patterns count as evidence, love ceases to discriminate among public character hypotheses. It becomes an honorific attached to sovereignty.

The conclusion is conditional, not a verdict on every sacred text or every theology of judgment. A defender may deny that the narrative asserts the target conduct, develop a victim-centered justification, limit skeptical principles, or treat the love claim as devotional rather than evidential. What cannot reasonably settle the public question is the unsupported repetition that "God is love". The action under dispute must be connected to the beloved's good, and the connection must remain open to the same moral and evidential scrutiny that gave the word *love* its force.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Let a *publicly discriminating character predicate* be one that supports different reasonable expectations under at least some possible evidence. The paper's central inference can then be reconstructed without claiming that meaning depends on conclusive falsifiability.

- P1.** If perfect love is offered as public evidence about an agent's character, some possible treatment of relevant subjects must be less expected under perfect love than under at least one live contrast such as indifference or hostility.
- P2.** If no possible treatment is less expected under perfect love, observed treatment cannot discriminate perfect love from those contrasts.
- P3.** The target apologetic strategy treats every apparently contrary treatment as fully compatible with perfect love by appealing, as needed, to judgment, authority, mystery, or later compensation, without an independently supported victim-directed bridge.
- P4.** The same strategy commonly treats favorable treatment as evidence for perfect love.
- P5.** Without a principled asymmetry, a hypothesis cannot receive public confirmation from favorable treatment while being insulated from every adverse treatment.
- P6.** Therefore, the target strategy does not support perfect love as a publicly discriminating description; it must add behavioral constraints and an evidentially responsible bridge or treat the claim as devotional rather than as independent public evidence.

The inference is valid as a conditional application of the Public Character Constraint. Premises P1 and P2 state the semantic-evidential rule; P3 and P4 are claims about the identified defensive pattern and must be assessed case by case; P5 rejects unexplained one-way confirmation. The conclusion does not show that the Christian deity is unloving, that no sufficient reason exists, or that every theology uses the target strategy. It shows why the strategy, when used without the missing bridge, cannot publicly distinguish love from its contrast classes.

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