

When “Love” Loses Meaning: Semantic Inversion and Divine Claims — 05

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Central claim

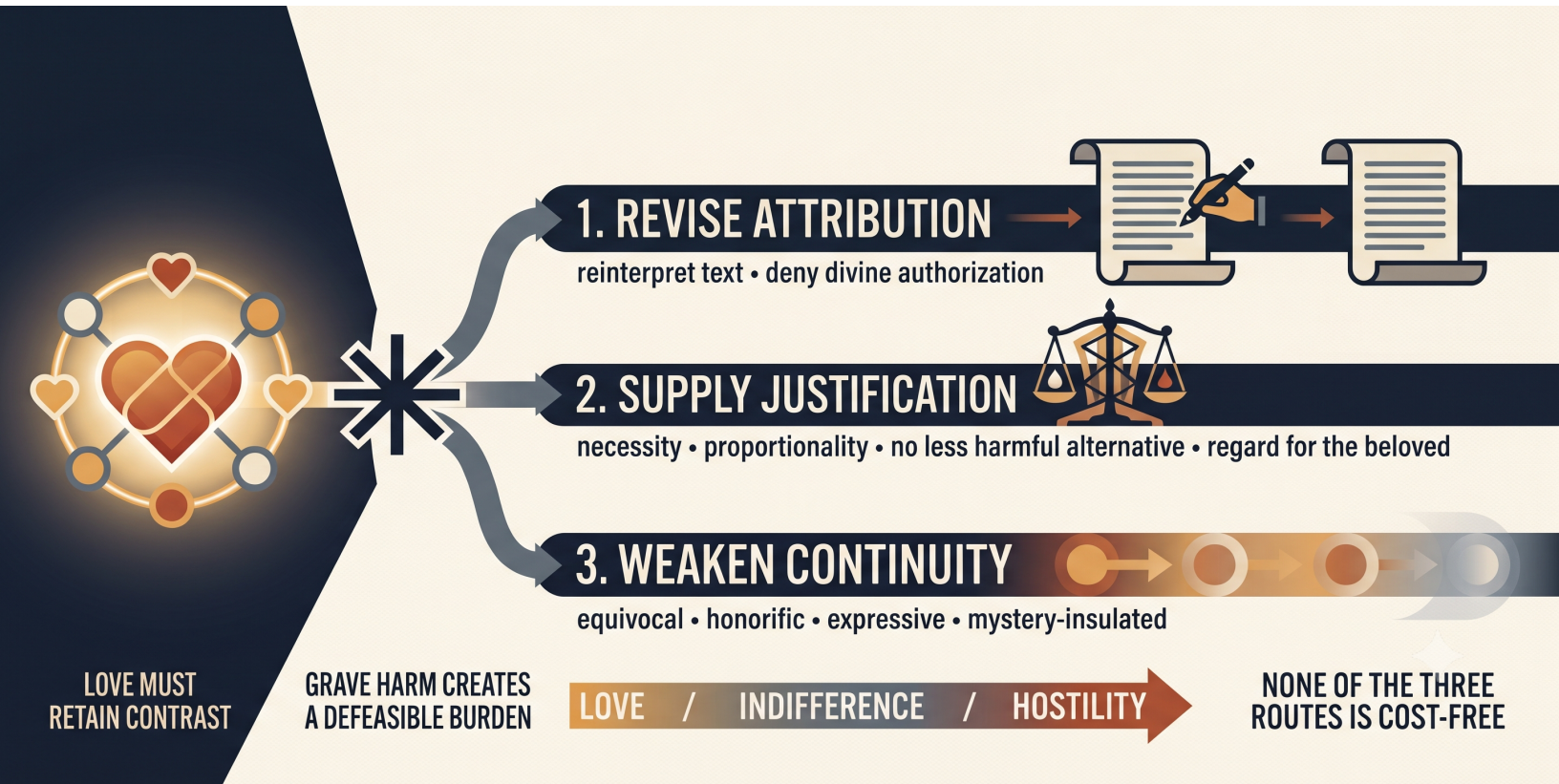
When a specified Christian God-concept includes a deity said both to perfectly love persons and to authorize grave harm, its love-ascription is publicly informative only if it preserves a contrast with indifference and hostility: the beloved must matter non-instrumentally, and unjustified grave harm must count against the ascription. The biblical pressure cases therefore require revising the divine attribution, supplying a constrained love-compatible justification, or weakening continuity with ordinary personal love. This does not disprove theism or, by itself, any particular God-concept; it shows that a use compatible with every possible action cannot retain the familiar predicate’s full descriptive force.

Preview:

Target claim	Expected contrast	Pressure and live routes	Rational conclusion
A specified Christian deity perfectly loves each person yet authorizes grave harm to one of them.	Unjustified grave harm should fit love worse than it fits indifference or hostility.	Revise the attribution, show a constrained justification, or admit weaker semantic continuity.	Preserve evidential contrast or surrender the ordinary predicate’s full public force.

Each route is coherent; none is cost-free. The claim is conditional and defeasible: it neither assumes that every harm defeats love nor turns an unarticulated justification into proof that none exists.

Visual preview:



The image maps the paper’s conditional trilemma: revise the attribution, supply a constrained justification, or accept weakened semantic continuity while preserving evidential contrast among love, indifference, and hostility.

Abstract

Some Christian God-concepts describe a deity as perfectly loving while certain biblical readings attribute grave harm to that same deity, including harm to persons whose own good or responsibility cannot readily explain it. This paper asks what that love-ascription must preserve if it is to remain publicly descriptive rather than merely honorific, expressive, or insulated by mystery. It compares divine-love claims with the contrastive role of ordinary personal love and develops a defeasible semantic-continuity test from contemporary accounts of concern, value, relationship, and agape. The main result is a conditional trilemma: in a pressure case, an account must revise the divine attribution, supply a love-compatible justification constrained by necessity, proportionality, less harmful alternatives, and non-instrumental regard for the affected person, or weaken continuity with ordinary love. Semantic inversion occurs when grave harm that would ordinarily count against love is made evidentially irrelevant or confirmatory solely because it is attributed to the deity under examination. A formal model distinguishes the actual absence of justification from human failure to know one and shows why a fully immunized use loses contrast with indifference and hostility. Greater-good theodicy, skeptical theism, analogy, divine-command identification, and apophaticism can preserve coherence, but only by meeting the justificatory burden or acknowledging a change in the claim’s public content. The conclusion is firm but bounded: the violent texts do not disprove theism or, by themselves, any particular God-concept; establish that no justification exists; or render every religious use of *love* meaningless. They do show that no account may treat every possible action as compatible with perfect love while retaining the familiar predicate’s full descriptive assurances.

Keywords: divine love; religious language; analogical predication; biblical violence; semantic continuity; skeptical theism

1. The Problem Is Not a Dictionary Trick

This paper is addressed especially to Christians who use divine love to assure, guide, and command: the deity they worship cares for persons, can be trusted by sufferers, and supplies a pattern humans should imitate. A *God-concept* here means a specified account of what a deity is like, not whatever theology a reader happens to associate with the bare word *God*. The target is a Christian God-concept that combines perfect personal love with the divine authorization of grave harm under a specified biblical reading; theism as such is not the target. If *love* is asked to cover every possible action of that deity—including grave harm with no love-compatible justification—then the assurance has been purchased by removing the contrast that made it informative. The challenge is direct: preserve a public difference between love, indifference, and hostility, or state candidly that the theological use has a weaker relation to ordinary personal love.

Christian discourse does more than attach an honorific to its deity. It says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), presents divine love as prior to human love (1 John 4:19), and directs believers to imitate it. Within the Christian God-concept under examination, these claims ordinarily support expectations: that persons matter to this deity, that their suffering is not treated with indifference, that divine action is intelligibly directed toward their good, and that human love can in some respect model itself on divine love. Recent work on divine love emphasizes exactly this systematic role. Wessling develops divine love as a central component of a theology of the Christian deity’s relation to humanity; Clark surveys tensions generated by divine transcendence, impassibility, hell, empathy, and the demand to imitate divine love; and Rethlake argues that love should orient, rather than merely decorate, an account of divine nature (Clark, 2023; Rethlake, 2025; Wessling, 2020).

The same canon contains pressure cases. Genesis 6–9 depicts a flood that destroys a populated world. First Samuel 15:3 attributes to the biblical deity a command to kill the Amalekite population, explicitly including infants. Readers dispute the genre, historicity, rhetoric, textual development, moral description, and divine authorization of these passages. The present argument does not settle those disputes. It asks a conditional question: *if* a theological reading attributes grave harm to the perfectly loving deity specified by this Christian God-concept, what semantic and justificatory work is required to keep “loves” continuous with a publicly intelligible predicate?

That question is not identical to the deductive or evidential problem of evil. A successful answer would not establish that every instance of suffering has been explained. A failed answer would not by itself falsify theism.

The target is narrower: the content and warranted use of a divine-love ascription under specified depictions. Nor does the question assume that ordinary English fixes a timeless essence of love. It asks what speakers commit themselves to when they use a familiar term to teach, console, command imitation, and describe an agent.

Four terms fix that target. A predicate is *publicly informative* when its use licenses at least some inferences that speakers can state, contest, and revise when countervailing facts arise; this does not require scientific verification or a complete decision procedure. *Semantic continuity* is the preservation of enough of what a term licenses speakers to expect and infer across human and divine uses to warrant retaining the same predicate, even when the mode of realization differs. *Semantic attenuation* is a weakening of that shared role, not necessarily a collapse into meaninglessness: an attenuated utterance may still express allegiance, hope, or worship. *Semantic inversion* occurs when conduct that ordinarily counts against love—especially gratuitous or avoidable grave harm—is made immune from criticism, or even treated as confirming perfect love, solely because it is attributed to the favored deity and without an independently specified bridge explaining why the term’s ordinary evidential role should change.

The phrase *perfect love* is used conditionally rather than smuggled in as a conclusion. It denotes love without defect according to the theological account under examination. Likewise, *grave harm* means a severe setback to a person’s life, bodily integrity, agency, standing, or basic prospects, not every frustration or pain. The question is whether an account can apply perfect love to such cases while keeping the predicate’s stated content and inferences coherent.

Two opposite errors should be avoided. The first defines love so rigidly that any harm yields a contradiction. Parents authorize painful treatment; friends confront one another; public officials may restrain dangerous agents; and a person may accept risk for someone else’s good. The second error permits “love” to cover whatever the favored agent happens to do. That move secures truth by removing constraint. Between them lies the relevant space: love is compatible with some harm, but not indiscriminately compatible with all harm.

The governing question. What must remain invariant when “love” is extended from familiar human relations to the deity specified by this Christian God-concept, and what would count as a defeater, exception, or revision of that ascription?

2. What Love Minimally Contributes

2.1 Plural theories, overlapping commitments

There is no uncontested philosophical analysis of love. Robust-concern theories emphasize concern for the beloved’s good. Appraisal theories treat love as a response to the person’s value; Velleman, for example, connects love with an appreciative response to the value of persons (Velleman, 1999). Relationship theories place value in a shared history or relation, as in Kolodny’s account (Kolodny, 2003). Agapic theories stress a love extended to all, sometimes adding impartiality, respect, anti-aggregation, and anti-paternalism (White, 2025). Here anti-aggregation resists treating one person’s loss as automatically justified by a larger total benefit, while anti-paternalism resists overriding a person’s agency merely for that person’s alleged good. Theories also differ over emotion, volition, union, attachment, identification, and reciprocity.

The disagreement matters because no single folk formula—“promotes well-being,” for example—can simply be elevated into a necessary and sufficient condition. Love may respect an autonomous refusal rather than maximize welfare. It may remain present when a relationship is damaged or when the lover lacks power to benefit. It can involve partiality without treating every interest of the beloved as overriding. Even benevolent universal love differs from intimate personal love.

Still, the leading accounts overlap in a modest practical commitment: the beloved, the beloved’s good, the beloved’s standing, or the relationship is taken as a *non-instrumental reason*. Here a person’s *standing* is their

status as someone whose claims, dignity, or agency must count in deliberation. The beloved is not merely raw material for unrelated projects. This commitment does not settle every action. It does explain why love has characteristic deliberative consequences. A lover notices some threats, seeks some goods, regrets some failures, offers some explanations, and treats some alternatives as reasons for restraint.

Rethlake’s proposal that love function as an orienting feature of divine nature makes this consequence particularly clear. If love shapes how other divine attributes are exercised, it cannot be behaviorally idle (Rethlake, 2025). Conversely, if every possible exercise of power, justice, sovereignty, or holiness is automatically labeled loving, love does no orienting work. It merely repeats that the action belongs to the deity already favored.

2.2 The anti-harm commitment is defeasible

Ordinary love creates a presumption against grave harm to the beloved, not an exceptionless ban. A presumption is *defeasible*: it supplies a reason unless countervailing facts defeat it, so it differs from a strict implication that admits no exception. A *defeater* is a fact that cancels or weakens that initial reason in a particular case; an *exception* is a recognized kind of case in which such a defeater prevents the usual conclusion. A harmful act can be love-compatible when there is an adequate connection to the beloved’s good or standing and when the agent responds appropriately to necessity, proportionality, consent where relevant, available alternatives, and the distribution of burdens. A *love-compatible justification* is therefore stronger than a reason why the act might be permissible all things considered; it must explain how the agent’s treatment of this beloved still manifests, or at least does not abandon, the regard characteristic of love. These dimensions do not form a complete moral theory. They help speakers distinguish painful care from abuse, rescue from domination, and tragic necessity from indifference.

The availability of alternatives matters more than the slogan. If an equally effective, less harmful option is knowingly available, choosing the graver harm becomes harder to reconcile with love. The pressure increases with the lover’s knowledge and power. Human agents often face uncertainty, scarcity, emergencies, conflicts among dependents, and causal limits. The omniscient and omnipotent deity specified by classical Christian theism is not ignorant of alternatives and is not ordinarily constrained by material scarcity. The move from human to divine love therefore does not automatically relax the alternatives condition; on such theologies it strengthens it.

This point remains compatible with moral anti-realism. One need not posit stance-independent moral facts to describe the inferential practices governing “love,” “care,” “cruelty,” and “justification.” An anti-realist may analyze socially stabilized standards, practical commitments, and internal consistency. The argument requires that love-language be answerable to some recognizable reasons, not that those reasons exist in a mind-independent moral realm.

3. Semantic Continuity Across the Human–Divine Case

3.1 Face-value predication and analogy

Religious language includes description, praise, prayer, metaphor, narrative, and practical orientation. Scott distinguishes face-value descriptive approaches from revisionary and non-cognitivist accounts, some of which treat religious utterances primarily as expressions rather than descriptions, while emphasizing that religious utterances participate in ordinary logical and linguistic practices (Scott, 2022). Alston likewise argues that talk about divine attributes can be meaningful without requiring that divine and creaturely instances be identical in every respect (Alston, 1989).

Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy offers a classical model. In part I, question 13, articles 5–6, terms predicated of the deity Aquinas describes and of creatures are neither wholly univocal nor simply equivocal; their perfections are related while their modes of realization differ (Aquinas, 1947). His treatment of divine love in part I, question 20, characterizes that deity as willing good to creatures. The analogy therefore has structure. Divine love need

not be an episodic emotion, but it is not disconnected from the beloved’s good.

Analogy solves one problem only by accepting another task. The theologian need not claim that the deity loves exactly as humans do, yet must identify the relevant resemblance. Saying “analogical” without a mapping is not an explanation; it is a promissory note. The continuity question becomes: which inferential commitments survive, which are transformed, and why does the retained structure warrant use of the same predicate?

3.2 Three tests

A divine-love ascription continuous enough to support ordinary teaching and inference should pass three tests.

1. **Anchor.** The beloved’s good, standing, or relationship supplies a non-instrumental reason for the divine agent. The exact account may be concern-, value-, or relation-centered.
2. **Defeasible anti-harm inference.** Grave harm to the beloved normally counts against the ascription unless an adequate love-compatible justification is available. The burden may be defeated; it cannot be declared irrelevant in advance.
3. **Contrastive discrimination.** Some possible patterns of action would fit love less well than others. “This deity loves this person” must rule out, disfavor, or make explanation-demanding at least some ways of treating that person.

The third test is crucial. Not every meaningful predicate must predict observable behavior with scientific precision. Yet descriptive predicates distinguish possibilities. If “loving,” “indifferent,” and “hostile” are compatible with exactly the same complete set of actions, ordinary speakers lose the contrasts through which those terms guide belief and action.

Mode	What remains common	How harm bears on the claim	Characteristic risk
Univocal	The predicate has substantially the same sense in human and divine cases	Familiar defeaters and justifications apply, adjusted for divine knowledge and power	Anthropomorphism or an implausibly strict transfer of human conditions
Analogical	A specified perfection or relational structure is preserved under a different divine mode	Harm is assessed through the stated analogue, such as willing the beloved’s good	Empty appeal to “analogy” with no identifiable invariant
Equivocal or purely honorific	Little or no descriptive structure is shared with ordinary love	Ordinary evidence neither supports nor undermines the claim	Illicitly importing comfort, trust, or moral guidance from the ordinary predicate
Expressive or liturgical	The utterance primarily voices allegiance, hope, gratitude, or a form of life	Assessment concerns the practice’s function rather than a descriptive property	Presenting a practical expression as if it independently described divine conduct

None of these modes is automatically illegitimate. The problem is movement between them without notice. A speaker may defend a troubling depiction by retreating to equivocation or mystery, then return to ordinary love-language to infer trustworthiness, care, or imitation. That combination takes insulation from one mode and practical authority from another.

4. A Defeasible Formal Model

4.1 Notation and logical status

The model is a compact map of inferential commitments, not a deductive proof system, a definition of love, or a numerical theory of evidence. Its arrows record what normally counts for or against an ascription while leaving room for specified defeaters.

Variables a , b , and e range respectively over agents, persons affected by them, and possible events or patterns of treatment in a relevant domain $\mathcal{E}$. The core predicates are:

$L(a, b)$	agent a loves person b ;
$V(a, b)$	b 's good, standing, or relationship with a counts for a as a reason in its own right, not merely as a means to someone else's end;
$H(a, b, e)$	in event e , a intentionally inflicts, authorizes, or knowingly permits grave harm to b when intervention lies within a 's agency;
$J(a, b, e)$	there is an actual love-compatible justification for that harm, not merely an imaginable or undisclosed reason.

The connective $\wedge$ means “and,” $\neg$ means “not,” $\forall$ means “for every,” and $\exists$ means “for at least one.” The symbol $\Rightarrow_d$ means “normally supports the inference that.” It is deliberately weaker than material implication: new information can block its conclusion without making the earlier inference irrational.

4.2 The anchor and the harm challenge

The anchor is:

$$L(a, b) \Rightarrow_d V(a, b). \quad (1)$$

Annotation. Read Equation (1) as follows: if a loves b , that ascription normally supports the expectation that b matters to a non-instrumentally. The arrow is one-way. Treating b as a reason is not by itself sufficient for love, and the equation does not reduce love to a single attitude.

The harm challenge is:

$$H(a, b, e) \wedge \neg J(a, b, e) \Rightarrow_d \neg L(a, b). \quad (2)$$

Annotation. Read Equation (2) as an evidential challenge: grave harm for which there is no love-compatible justification normally counts against the claim that a loves b . The conclusion $\neg L(a, b)$ is defeasible, not a contradiction derived by classical logic. A surgical injury may satisfy H under a broad physical description while also satisfying J ; sadistic or knowingly gratuitous injury does not.

Equation (2) uses the actual absence of a justification, $\neg J$, not merely a hearer's failure to identify one. Failure to articulate J leaves a dialectical burden unresolved; it does not by itself establish $\neg J$. This distinction is the point at which skeptical theism enters later.

4.3 What a justification must address

For the present purpose, J is constrained rather than left as a blank variable. A putative justification is more love-compatible to the extent that:

$$J(a, b, e) \Rightarrow_d \text{Nec}(a, b, e) \wedge \text{Prop}(a, b, e) \wedge \text{NoAlt}(a, b, e) \wedge \text{Regard}(a, b, e), \quad (3)$$

Here Nec asks whether some harm is necessary relative to the stated aim; Prop asks whether the kind and degree of harm fit the aim and the affected person's responsibility; NoAlt asks whether this harm could be replaced by a comparably effective and substantially less harmful option; and Regard asks whether the reason bears non-instrumentally on the beloved's own good, standing, or agency. Each names a threshold judgment rather than a precise quantity.

Annotation. Equation (3) runs from J to its normal constraints. It says that calling a reason love-compatible ordinarily commits its defender to addressing all four questions. The converse is not asserted: satisfying the four conditions is not automatically sufficient for J , and conflicts among persons, justice to victims, consent, agency, and tragic choice may alter their application.

Perfect power and knowledge alter the evaluation of NoAlt. If a deity could realize the same good without harming the beloved or an innocent third party, the availability of that alternative weakens J . If the good essentially involves a person’s free response, intervention may carry a cost; but the cost and the distribution of risk still require specification. Omnipotence is not the power to realize contradictions, yet it excludes many constraints that excuse human agents.

4.4 Complete immunization and loss of contrast

Finally, let L_G denote the specifically theological use of “love,” L_H the ordinary human-use family, and $\text{Compat}(e, L_x)$ mean that event e does not count against a love-ascription under use L_x . *Complete immunization* occurs when no relevant possible treatment can count against L_G . The resulting divergence can be displayed as follows:

$$[\forall e \in \mathcal{E} \text{ Compat}(e, L_G)] \quad \text{while} \quad [\exists e \in \mathcal{E} \neg \text{Compat}(e, L_H)]. \quad (4)$$

Annotation. The left side says that every relevant possible treatment remains compatible with L_G ; the right side says that at least one treatment would count against ordinary love. Here “compatible” is semantic and evidential, not merely logically possible. When both clauses hold, the theological use has been insulated from a contrast retained by the human use.

Equation (4) does not prove that L_G is meaningless in every sense. It may express allegiance, locate a speaker within a tradition, or connect with a wider doctrinal theory. It shows instead that L_G no longer inherits this ordinary contrastive, action-guiding role. The conclusion is semantic attenuation, not an automatic collapse into nonsense.

5. Biblical Violence as a Conditional Pressure Test

5.1 The Flood and Amalek

On a straightforward narrative reading, the Flood destroys children along with adults and animals. First Samuel 15:3 places infants among those Saul is commanded not to spare. These texts differ in genre and setting, and the moral status of agents within the narratives is disputed. Nevertheless, infants are paradigmatic cases in which personal culpability cannot plausibly do all the justificatory work. If the deity specified by the target Christian God-concept loves each affected child, the depictions trigger Equation (2): what is the relevant J , and how does it satisfy necessity, proportionality, alternatives, and relation to the child’s good or standing?

The question should not be inflated. A narrative’s attributing a command to its deity is not the same as the event’s having occurred. A reader may argue that totalizing war language is rhetorical rather than exhaustive, that the canon preserves morally contested human representations of the deity rather than verbatim divine directives, or that a difficult text should be read figuratively, progressively, christologically, or as a record of human misapprehension. Each strategy may reduce or deny $H(a, b, e)$, the attribution of grave harm to the deity under examination. That is a genuine response, not an evasion, provided its hermeneutic costs are acknowledged and applied consistently.

The pressure is therefore indexed to a reading. For a specified reading, let G designate the deity defined by the target Christian God-concept and let b designate an affected person. The argument addresses the conjunction:

$$L(G, b) \wedge H(G, b, e) \wedge \neg J(G, b, e). \quad (5)$$

Annotation. This is an instantiated pressure case, not a claim that the biblical text by itself proves all three conjuncts. The first conjunct supplies the love-ascription, the second supplies the harm-attribution, and the third denies an actual love-compatible justification. Rejecting any conjunct blocks the local inference. Retaining all three activates Equation (2) and makes the ordinary significance of “love” difficult to preserve without qualification.

5.2 Relation-specific rather than global

Love claims must be indexed to their objects. Showing that an action benefits a community, advances a covenant, punishes an aggressor, or displays a general good does not yet show love toward the person bearing the cost. Goods to others can matter, but they introduce distributional questions. White’s account of agape is useful here because it combines universal love with anti-aggregation and respect: a person is not merely fungible material for producing a larger sum of welfare (White, 2025).

The point also prevents an invalid global conclusion. One troubling relation does not entail that the agent loves no one, or that every religious use of love is empty. The challenge concerns particular ascriptions and the theological claim of perfect, universal love. A view may preserve divine love toward some persons while conceding that a specific depiction does not portray love toward its victims. Universal-love doctrines, however, cannot settle that relation-specific question by definition.

6. What the Major Replies Accomplish

6.1 Greater goods, soul-making, and union

A *theodicy* offers reasons intended to explain how suffering can coexist with divine goodness or love; a more limited defense may seek only to show that such coexistence is possible. The most direct reply supplies *J*. Suffering may make possible courage, compassion, moral formation, free relationship, knowledge of dependence, or union with the deity specified by the relevant theology. Stump’s narrative theodicy is especially serious because it centers the sufferer’s first-person good and the possibility of loving union rather than treating persons as instruments for an aggregate outcome (Stump, 2010). Adams similarly insists that horrendous evils must be defeated within the sufferer’s life, not merely outweighed on a social ledger (Adams, 2000).

These approaches improve on a generic “greater good” response, but three questions remain. First, is the good linked to this sufferer rather than only to others? Second, could an omnipotent agent secure the relevant good through a less harmful route? Third, does later defeat or redemption explain why the harming or permitting act itself expressed love? Compensation may repair a loss without transforming the earlier agency into loving agency.

Current debate sharpens the last point. Aakko argues that when suffering becomes constitutive of a person’s highest good rather than an instrumentally regrettable condition, a theodicy risks valorizing suffering itself (Aakko, 2026). The criticism does not show that every soul-making account fails. It identifies the semantic danger: a theory meant to preserve love may revise the evaluative role of suffering until what ordinarily counts against love becomes evidence of its deepest form.

6.2 Skeptical theism

Skeptical theism denies that human inability to identify a justifying reason is strong evidence that no such reason exists. Bergmann’s influential formulation targets inferences from apparently gratuitous evil to the absence of divine reasons (Bergmann, 2001). Applied here, the reply warns against the inference

$$\neg \text{Known}[J(a, b, e)] \not\Rightarrow \neg J(a, b, e). \quad (6)$$

Annotation. The symbol $\not\Rightarrow$ means “does not deductively entail,” and Known reports the epistemic position of a human evaluator rather than a new condition on J . Equation (6) says that not knowing a justification is different from there being no justification. This correct caution blocks an easy move to $\neg J$; it does not itself establish J .

The semantic problem nevertheless survives in modified form. If every actual or possible harm is protected by an inscrutable J , then the believer cannot use harm patterns to discriminate love from its contraries. The strategy may rationally undercut a negative inference while also undercutting positive inferences from providence, rescue, commands, or felt care. It can preserve the truth of “this deity loves” only by weakening human access to what that truth licenses.

Lee develops a related practical objection: skeptical theism combined with a divine-command response can displace the beloved’s welfare and standing as direct reasons for action, thereby threatening the structure of personal love itself (Lee, 2025). The present argument need not accept every step of that objection. It draws a narrower lesson. A defense of divine love should not make the reasons constitutive of human love systematically unreliable while continuing to present divine love as the exemplar humans should imitate.

6.3 Analogy and transcendence

The analogical reply says that divine love is perfect but not creaturely. The deity may will a person’s ultimate good without emotion, vulnerability, reciprocity, or temporal change. This is a coherent option. Aquinas supplies a clear invariant—willing good to the beloved—and a metaphysical account of why the divine mode differs (Aquinas, 1947). Alston likewise resists the false choice between crude univocity and total equivocation (Alston, 1989).

The reply succeeds when the analogue constrains interpretation. If willing the beloved’s good is retained, grave harm still calls for an account of how it relates to that good. If no recognizable good, standing, relation, or reason survives, the appeal is no longer merely analogical. It is equivocal. One may choose equivocation, but then ordinary assurances—“you are cared for,” “you may trust this agent,” “imitate this love”—require independent premises.

6.4 Divine-command or identity strategies

Another response defines loving action as whatever accords with the target deity’s nature or will. If the thesis is a substantive metaphysical identity, it needs an account of why the property identified with divine action merits the name *love*. If it is a stipulative linguistic rule, it creates a technical predicate: “divine-love” means “whatever this deity does.” The resulting sentence “this deity is divine-loving” is guaranteed but thin.

The danger is circularity. Actions are called loving because the favored deity performs them, and confidence in that deity’s actions is then supported by the claim that the deity is loving. Nothing independent distinguishes a loving from a nonloving exercise of power. Rethlake’s orienting-trait proposal offers a constructive alternative: love should shape the understanding of divine power and justice, including reflection on divine violence, rather than receive whatever content those attributes leave over (Rethlake, 2025).

6.5 Mystery, apophaticism, and non-description

Religious traditions have principled reasons to resist exhaustive divine description. *Apophatic* speech approaches a deity through negation, conceptual restraint, or refusal to treat creaturely categories as exhaustive. Liturgical speech can express trust or adoration; narratives can transform perception without offering a theory. Scott’s survey

of religious language shows that descriptive, expressive, fictionalist, minimalist, and paradoxical approaches must not be collapsed into one model (Scott, 2022).

Accordingly, the Christian utterance “God is love” may do more than state a property. But a shift in function should be explicit. If the utterance primarily voices commitment, its success is not established by proving a descriptive resemblance. If it describes the Christian deity and grounds claims about divine trustworthiness, it remains answerable to evidence and inferential coherence. Mystery limits precision; it does not automatically authorize the simultaneous assertion of ordinary practical consequences and total semantic incomparability.

7. Objections and Replies

7.1 “You have smuggled morality into semantics”

The account uses evaluative notions—good, harm, justification, proportionality—because love is itself reason-laden. That does not turn every moral disagreement into a semantic contradiction. Equation (2) is defeasible, and *J* remains open to substantive dispute. The modest claim is that no recognizable use of personal love treats the beloved’s severe harm as wholly irrelevant to whether the lover’s agency is loving.

An anti-realist can accept this as an internal analysis of shared linguistic and practical commitments. A realist can add that those commitments answer to objective reasons. The semantic pressure arises on either view.

7.2 “Human standards cannot judge this deity”

If this objection rejects every human concept as a measure of the deity under examination, it also blocks the positive judgment that this deity is loving. If it rejects only some creaturely modes, it is an analogical proposal and must state the preserved perfection. The argument welcomes that specification. It objects only to using human love strongly enough to praise, trust, and command imitation, then declaring it unusable when harm becomes counterevidence.

The objection may instead concern epistemic humility: human beings are badly placed to assess divine reasons. That is the skeptical-theist reply, not a semantic refutation. It lowers confidence in $\neg J$ while incurring the contrastive and practical costs already noted.

7.3 “A community can give the word a distinct theological meaning”

Yes. Linguistic communities can stabilize technical or tradition-internal uses. A theological predicate may be meaningful through its inferential connections to doctrines, stories, practices, and forms of life even if it differs sharply from ordinary English. The relevant requirement is transparency. Speakers should not claim both that the theological term is autonomous from ordinary love and that it carries ordinary love’s assurances without further argument.

Distinct usage also leaves a translation question. What does the theological predicate tell an outsider, a sufferer, or a child about how the agent regards them? If the answer is supplied only by repeating the word *love*, the translation has not yet occurred.

7.4 “The violent texts do not literally depict the deity”

Then the local pressure may be removed. A nonliteral, critical, or developmental reading can deny that the deity authorized the harm. This route preserves semantic continuity by revising the attribution rather than the meaning of love. Its plausibility depends on textual and theological arguments beyond this paper. It also has consequences for accounts of scriptural authority and revelation. Those consequences are real, but they are not worse by definition than the semantic costs of redefining love.

7.5 “Justice can require harm”

Justice can supply part of *J*, especially where an agent protects victims or responds proportionately to culpable wrongdoing. It does not automatically explain harm to infants or indiscriminate groups, and it does not make alternatives irrelevant. If perfect justice and perfect love are mutually conditioning divine attributes, the account must show how the particular action honors both. Merely naming justice relocates the question.

8. A Constructive Standard for Divine-Love Claims

The semantic challenge need not end in silence. A constructive account can make divine love more rather than less intelligible by answering four questions.

1. **Object:** Who is loved—all persons, a covenant community, creatures generally, or persons under a specific relation?
2. **Invariant:** What is preserved from love-language—willing the person’s good, valuing the person, seeking union, respecting agency, sustaining a relation, or some combination?
3. **Defeaters and exceptions:** What kinds of action count against the ascription, and what conditions can justify an apparent counterexample?
4. **Practical entailments:** What may a believer or sufferer infer from the assurance “the deity of this tradition loves you” about trust, hope, protest, imitation, rescue, judgment, or final good?

Answering these questions will not eliminate mystery or settle every theodicy. It will prevent the predicate from doing incompatible jobs. It will also clarify genuine theological disagreement. One view may say that divine love guarantees each person’s eventual flourishing; another that it guarantees only a standing offer of union; another that it is compatible with irreversible loss or punishment. The dispute becomes assessable when the entailments are stated rather than hidden inside a shared word.

The most recent scholarship moves in this direction. Clark treats divine love as generating specific problems across Abrahamic traditions rather than as a generic synonym for goodness (Clark, 2023). Wessling supplies a systematic value-centered account (Wessling, 2020). White articulates respect-sensitive features of universal agape (White, 2025). Rethlake asks what changes when love genuinely orients divine nature and applies the proposal to divine violence (Rethlake, 2025). Aakko and Lee expose costs that arise when suffering or inscrutable reasons displace the beloved’s good from practical deliberation (Aakko, 2026; Lee, 2025). These disagreements show that divine love is neither philosophically empty nor protected from analysis. They also show why a single strict bridge principle is insufficient.

Semantic-continuity trilemma. Faced with a depiction of grave harm to a person said to be perfectly loved, an account must (1) revise or deny the attribution of harm, (2) provide a love-compatible justification that addresses alternatives and the person’s non-instrumental standing, or (3) weaken the continuity between theological and ordinary love. Each route is coherent; none is cost-free.

9. Conclusion

Descriptively informative divine-love claims require a real contrast with indifference and hostility. Love ordinarily gives the beloved’s good or standing a distinctive role in deliberation, generates a defeasible presumption against grave harm, and differentiates some patterns of treatment from others. A divine analogue may transform the mode of love while preserving that structure, but a use that makes every possible action compatible with perfect love surrenders the familiar predicate’s full public force.

Biblical violence becomes a pressure test because some readings attribute severe harm to a perfectly knowledgeable and powerful lover, including harm to persons whose culpability cannot plausibly bear the explanation. A response may contest the reading, supply a justification, or revise the predicate. What it may not do without semantic cost is render every possible action compatible with love and then import the familiar term’s full assurances.

The resulting conclusion is not that divine love is meaningless, that every theodicy fails, or that a violent text disproves theism or, by itself, any particular God-concept. It is that descriptively informative divine-love claims require contrast. If nothing could count against them, they cease to guide inference in the way that makes love recognizable as love. Preserving the word’s public force therefore requires theological candor about its invariants, its defeaters, and the price of mystery. Without that candor, the predicate risks semantic inversion: grave harm is insulated from its ordinary evidential role merely because the favored agent is divine.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central argument is conditional. It does not infer the falsity of theism or, by itself, any particular God-concept from biblical violence, and it does not infer the actual absence of a justification from a reader’s inability to identify one. It concerns whether an immunized divine-love ascription within the target Christian God-concept retains the public contrastive force of ordinary personal love.

A.1 The contrast argument

- P1.** If a use of “love” remains publicly descriptive in the ordinary contrastive sense, then some relevant patterns of treatment must count against that ascription relative to indifference or hostility.
- P2.** Under a fully immunized use of “divine love,” no relevant possible pattern of treatment counts against the ascription solely because the agent is the deity specified by the target God-concept.
- C1.** Therefore a fully immunized use of “divine love” does not retain ordinary love’s full public contrastive force.

The inference is deductively valid by *modus tollens*: the consequent required by ordinary contrast is denied by complete immunization, so the antecedent cannot be retained without qualification. Its premises are conceptual and interpretive rather than empirical measurements. Premise 1 is supported by the ordinary role of love in distinguishing concern from indifference and hostility; Premise 2 applies only to accounts that explicitly or functionally make every possible action compatible with perfect love.

A.2 The pressure-case trilemma

- P1.** In a specified pressure case, either the grave harm is not correctly attributed to the deity under examination, it is correctly attributed and has an actual love-compatible justification, or it is correctly attributed and lacks such a justification.
- P2.** If the harm is not correctly attributed to that deity, revising the reading preserves the love-ascription from this case.
- P3.** If the harm has an actual love-compatible justification, that justification must address the affected person’s standing, necessity, proportionality, and less harmful alternatives closely enough to defeat the anti-harm presumption.
- P4.** If the harm is correctly attributed without such a justification, it counts against perfect love; insulating it from that evidential role weakens continuity with ordinary personal love.

- C2.** Therefore the pressure case requires one of three candid responses: revise the divine attribution, supply a constrained love-compatible justification, or accept weaker semantic continuity.

This second sequence is valid relative to the stated partition: the three routes exhaust the defined combinations of attribution and justification. The difficult premises remain interpretive and evaluative. Textual scholarship bears on attribution; moral and theological argument bears on whether a proposed justification is genuinely love-compatible; and skeptical theism may lower confidence that no justification exists without establishing that one does. The bounded conclusion is thus a trilemma about public meaning and evidential discipline, not a deductive disproof of theism, any particular God-concept, or divine love.

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