

The Virtues of Superessentialism

[Penultimate Copy. Please Cite Published Version.]

Jeremy W. Skrzypek
Ohio Dominican University

Abstract. Superessentialism is the view that every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to him or her and every decision and action that he or she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. According to superessentialism, it is metaphysically impossible for a person's life to have gone any differently than it in fact did. In this paper, I argue that, despite its initial implausibility, superessentialism opens up new solutions to three well-known problems in the philosophy of religion: the problem of freedom and creation, the grounding problem for Molinism, and the problem of eternal separation. As a result, while superessentialism might strike many of us as implausible, it possesses an impressive amount of utility. And, for that reason, I think that it might be worth a second look.

I. Introduction

Superessentialism is the view that every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to him or her and every decision and action that he or she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. According to superessentialism, it is metaphysically impossible for a person's life to have gone any differently than it in fact did. And this is so because persons are defined by their life histories. For every different way that the person's life could have gone, there is another person (possible or actual) whose life is essentially constituted in precisely that way. Whenever we think about how our lives could have gone differently, then, whenever we imagine ourselves making different choices or taking advantage of different opportunities, we are actually thinking not about our own lives, but the lives of persons who are similar to, but in fact numerically distinct from, ourselves.

Superessentialism strikes many of us as implausible. Surely I could have made slightly different decisions in my life and still have been me! Nevertheless, there are a handful of metaphysical packages that entail superessentialism, such as Spinoza's necessitarianism¹,

¹ See Samuel Newlands, "Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2022 edition (available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza-modal/>).

Leibniz's theory of complete individual concepts², David Lewis's modal realism³, and perdurantism paired with mereological essentialism⁴. In what follows, I will say almost nothing more about how one might arrive at superessentialism. Rather, I would like to consider what might follow from it. In this paper, I will argue that superessentialism opens up new solutions to three well-known problems in the philosophy of religion: the problem of freedom and creation, the grounding problem for Molinism, and the problem of eternal separation. As a result, while superessentialism might strike many of us as implausible, it possesses an impressive amount of utility. And, for that reason, I think that it might be worth a second look.

II. Some Prefatory Remarks

Before moving on to discuss how superessentialism opens up new solutions to the three well-known problems in the philosophy of religion mentioned above, let me first offer some clarificatory remarks.

While superessentialism strikes many of us as implausible, perhaps even unsettling, there are elements of superessentialism that many of us already accept. For example, many philosophers find origins essentialism, the thesis that the circumstances of a person's initial moments of existence are essential to him or her such that he or she could not have originated from different parents or from a different sperm or egg or begun to exist at a different moment in time, to be quite plausible.⁵ And I think that many of us commonly take certain dramatic,

² See Brandon C. Look, "Leibniz's Modal Metaphysics", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2022 edition (available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-modal/>).

³ See David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

⁴ See, for example, Mark Heller, *The Ontology of Physical Objects: Four-Dimensional Hunks of Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). By perdurantism I mean the view that persons are extended across time and possess temporal parts. By mereological essentialism I mean the view that no object can survive any loss in any of its parts.

⁵ For a helpful discussion of origins essentialism, its intuitive pull, and the various arguments that can be offered in its favor, see Ishii Robertson, Teresa Atkins, and Philip Atkins, "Essential vs. Accidental Properties," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition) (available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/essential-accidental/>).

impactful, or defining events in our lives to be part of what makes us the particular persons that we are. We might call the thesis that some subset of the events of a person's life is essential to that person, constitutive of his or her identity, "weak superessentialism". According to weak superessentialism, Person A is essentially, and by definition, the person who experiences x and does y, where x and y are particular dramatic, impactful, or defining events or decisions in his or her life. Strong superessentialism simply expands weak superessentialism to include not only the circumstances of the person's origins, or particular dramatic, impactful, or defining events, but every event and every decision in the person's life. According to strong superessentialism, Person A is essentially, and by definition, the person who does and experiences all and only those things that are constitutive of Person A's life.

I think that some of the immediate concerns that some might have about superessentialism stem from a misunderstanding of what someone who holds this view is or is not committed to. Let me point, then, to three other views which someone who is committed to superessentialism need not also accept.

First, superessentialism does not entail necessitism, according to which everything that exists exists necessarily, that nothing that exists could have failed to exist. Superessentialism claims only that every event that happens to you, and every decision and action that you perform, is essential to you, it is constitutive of your identity. It makes no claim about whether you or any other persons (possible or actual) exist necessarily. It is perfectly consistent with superessentialism to say that every event in your life is essential to your identity and also that you could have easily failed to exist. Indeed, according to superessentialism, your existence is extremely fragile: had things gone any other way, had even the slightest detail about your life

been different, you would not have existed. Some other person strikingly similar to, but numerically distinct from, you would have.

Second, superessentialism also does not entail global superessentialism, or necessitarianism, according to which every event that occurs occurs necessarily, that nothing in the history of the universe could have gone differently than it in fact did. Superessentialism claims only that necessarily, if you exist, then certain events that are constitutive of your life occur. It does not claim that necessarily you exist. And so while the particular events that constitute your life are conditionally necessary, they are not absolutely necessary, since you could have easily failed to exist. Now, if you exist, then it might also follow that necessarily, several other persons exist. For if certain events in your life essentially include certain other persons, and the participation in those events is essential to the lives of those persons, then necessarily, if you exist, then those other people exist too. We might worry that this result will have a cascading effect: if your existence entails the existence of other people as well, does not your existence entail the existence of absolutely everything else? And so would not necessitarianism follow after all? Not necessarily. It might be that you and any other persons who play an essential role in the events of your life come as package deals: none of you can exist without any of the others. But it is perfectly consistent with this claim to say that some other package could have existed instead of this one, or perhaps no package at all. And so, for that reason, superessentialism does not entail necessitarianism.

Third, superessentialism does not entail causal determinism, according to which every decision or action you perform is entirely determined by prior causes. Superessentialism claims only that every decision or action that you perform is essential to you, constitutive of your identity. It makes no claim about how those decisions or actions come about. However it is that

you come to decide or act in the way that you do, that particular way in which you decide or act is essential to you, it is what makes you you rather than some other possible person. And so it is perfectly consistent with superessentialism to say that you and nothing outside of you is the cause of your actions.

Having cleared up some possible confusions surrounding superessentialism, now let us take a look at what it can do for us.

III. The Problem of Freedom and Creation

God is taken by many Christians to be entirely free in His act of creation. God could have freely chosen to create some other world than the world that He did in fact create, or no world at all. But if God is unsurpassably good, and there is some best state of affairs that God could actualize, would not God have to actualize that state of affairs? For if God does not actualize the best state of affairs, or actualizes some state of affairs that is less good than some other state of affairs that He could have actualized, does that not mean that God is not in fact unsurpassably good? Would it not follow that we can think of some being greater than God, namely a being that actualizes that better or best state of affairs? This is the problem of freedom and creation.⁶ But there are actually two problems here. First, there is the general problem of creation, which says that God must create some good world or other, since the state of affairs in which both God and some minimally good world exist is better than the state of affairs in which only God exists.⁷ Second, there is the particular problem of creation, which says that God must not only create some good world, He must create the best possible world, since to create anything less would be to perform some action that is less good than some other action that God could have performed.

⁶ For a helpful overview, see Klaas J. Kraay, Aylish Chantler, and Kirk Lougheed, "God and Possible Worlds", *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (available at <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0249.xml>).

⁷ Norman Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation", in Scott MacDonald (ed.), *Being and Goodness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990): pp. 208-228.

And since God is unsurpassably good, He cannot perform some action that is less good than some other action He could have performed.⁸

Both of these problems of creation rely on the seemingly plausible assumption that there are clear and objective criteria for comparing and ranking possible states of affairs according to their goodness. Some proposed solutions to the problem of freedom and creation call into question this assumption.⁹ According to these proposals, the various states of affairs that God could choose to actualize, or at least all of the minimally good states of affairs, are, in fact, incommensurable, such that no one is any better or any worse than any of the others. Now, there are several ways in which competing goods can turn out to be incommensurable, and so several ways in which certain states of affairs can fail to be better or worse than certain others. One way in which competing goods can turn out to be incommensurable is that they can have entirely different possessors. This sort of incommensurability is supported by an Aristotelian principle, articulated and defended in recent work by Christine Korsgaard, Richard Kraut, and others, according to which “the good-for” is prior to “the good”.¹⁰ According to this principle, there are no states of affairs that are good or bad simpliciter. A state of affairs is only good or bad if it is

⁸ Norman Kretzmann, “A Particular Problem of Creation”, in Scott MacDonald (ed.), *Being and Goodness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990): pp. 228-249.

⁹ See, for example, William E. Mann, “The Best of All Possible Worlds”, in Scott J. MacDonald (ed.), *Being and Goodness: The Concept of God in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991): pp. 250-277; Thomas Senor, “Defending Divine Freedom”, in John Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): pp. 168-195; Alexander R. Pruss, “Divine Creative Freedom”, in Jonathan Kvanvig (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 213-238; Jeremy W. Skrzypek, “A Better Solution to the General Problem of Creation”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2017): pp. 147-162.

¹⁰ See, for example, Christine Korsgaard, “The Relational Nature of the Good”, in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, Vol. 8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): pp. 1-26; Christine Korsgaard, “Interacting with Animals: A Kantian Account”, in Tom Beauchamp and R. G. Frey (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): pp. 91-118; Christine Korsgaard, “On Having a Good”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May 2014): pp. 405-429; Richard Kraut, *Against Absolute Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Philippa Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”, *Mind*, Vol. 84, No. 374 (Apr., 1985): pp. 273-283. For evidence that this sort of view goes all of the way back to Aristotle, see his rejection of the Platonic notion of the good in Chapter Six of Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

good or bad for some particular subject. What follows from this principle is that one state of affairs can only be better or more valuable than some other state of affairs if there is something or someone for whom the one state of affairs is better or valuable than the other. If there is nothing or no one for whom the one state of affairs is better or more valuable than the other, then there is no sense in which the former is better than the latter. In other words, comparable value requires a common subject, and different subjects or different possessors of the relevant goods makes comparison impossible.¹¹

Here is where superessentialism can help with the problem of freedom and creation. If superessentialism is true, then every event that occurs in the life of a person, that is to say, everything that happens to him or her and every decision and action that she performs is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. What this means is that created persons are world-bound. There is no possible world in which you exist but things in your life go differently. And so when God considers which of various possible worlds or states of affairs to actualize, God is not only deciding which possible worlds or states of affairs to actualize, but which creatures to create. For, according to superessentialism, every possible world, every possible state of affairs, contains entirely different creatures from every other. There is no creature that exists in more than one world.

Now, if it is the case that every possible world, every possible state of affairs that God could actualize, contains entirely different creatures from every other, then this opens up the possibility that these worlds might be incommensurable in value. For if commensurability requires a common subject, then there is no commensurability in value between possible worlds that God could actualize. Above a certain threshold of minimal goodness, any possible world or any possible state of affairs that God could actualize turns out not to be any better or worse than

¹¹ This follows most closely the solution proposed in Skrzypek, "Better Solution".

any other. And so God could freely choose to create any of them without performing any action that is less good than any other action that He could have performed.

III. The Grounding Problem for Molinism

If God knows the future, if He knows every choice that I will make for the rest of my life, then in what sense am I free? In what sense are my decisions and actions freely chosen? One of the leading solutions to the problem of freedom and foreknowledge is Molinism. According to Molinism, God knows the future, knows every choice that I will make for the rest of my life, in the following way: God knows what each of us would freely choose to do in every possible set of circumstances (He has complete knowledge of all so-called “counterfactuals of creaturely freedom”), and He knows precisely which set of circumstances He will actualize. By virtue of knowing those two sets of facts, God thereby knows what I will freely choose to do at every moment. But this is no threat to my free will because what God knows is what I will *freely* choose to do. Moreover, God uses the knowledge of what each human person would freely choose to do in every possible set of circumstances in deciding what He will create and when, or, in other words, which of the infinite number of possible worlds He will choose to actualize.¹²

The Molinist solution to the problem of freedom and foreknowledge relies crucially on the existence of so-called “counterfactuals of creaturely freedom”. There must be truths, prior to God’s creation of any universe, about what every one of the free creatures within that universe would freely choose to do in every possible circumstance. But where do these truths come from? In what are they grounded? What makes them true? It does not seem that these truths can be grounded in the actual free choices made by the free creatures themselves, since these truths are supposed to be true prior to God’s creation of any universe. But it also does not seem that these

¹² For a helpful overview of Molinism and its various commitments and virtues, see Thomas P. Flint, “Molinism”, *Oxford Handbooks Online* (available at <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/42642/chapter/358143853>).

truths can be grounded in any arbitrary decision by God, since then every one of our actions would seem to be entirely determined by God's will. The difficulty of grounding or finding truthmakers for counterfactuals of creaturely freedom is known as the grounding problem.¹³

Molinists have tended to go in one of two directions in responding to the grounding problem. Some have called into question the claim that these truths, truths about what any of us would freely do in any given set of circumstances, require truthmakers, that there must exist something which makes them true.¹⁴ Others have tried to provide a ground for these truths in uncreated possible worlds or counterfactual states of affairs.¹⁵ To see how superessentialism offers another possible solution, let us begin by introducing another variant of the view. Earlier I distinguished between weak superessentialism, according to which some subset of the events of a person's life is essential to that person, constitutive of his or her identity, and strong superessentialism, according to which every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to him or her, every decision and action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. Now let us consider a third variant, which we might call Molinist superessentialism. According to Molinist superessentialism, what a person would freely do in any given set of circumstances is essential to that person, constitutive of his or her identity. Person A is essentially, and by definition, the person who does or would do x in circumstances i, y in circumstances ii, and z in circumstances iii. According to Molinist superessentialism, not every event that occurs in the life of a person is essential to him or her. He or she could have experienced different events and made different choices. But, importantly, he or she could only have experienced different events and made different choices in different

¹³ For a helpful overview of this and other problems for Molinism, see Ken Perszyk, "Recent Work on Molinism", *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 8, No. 8 (Aug., 2013): pp. 755-770.

¹⁴ See, for example, Trenton Merricks, *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): pp. 150-151.

¹⁵ See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "Replies to My Colleagues", in James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (eds.), *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985): p. 374 and William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection'", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Jul, 2001): p. 339.

circumstances. On Molinist superessentialism, a person's essence is more expansive than in weak and strong superessentialism: it includes not only the events that actually occur and the decisions that are actually made but also those events that would occur and those decisions that would be made in different circumstances. But every event and every decision is still very much a part of the person's essence.

How does Molinist superessentialism offer a solution to the grounding problem?

According to Molinist superessentialism, what a person would freely do in any given set of circumstances is essential to that person, constitutive of his or her identity. What you would freely do in any given set of circumstances is part of what makes you the person that you are.

According to Molinist superessentialism, then, the exhaustive set of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that describe what you would freely do in any given circumstance comprise your individual essence. Now, plausibly, God has complete knowledge of every possible creature, every unactualized essence, prior to any act of creation. And so the exhaustive set of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that describe what you would freely do in any given circumstance exists in the mind of God prior to any act of creation.¹⁶ Importantly, these are necessary truths.¹⁷ It is a necessary truth that you would freely do x in circumstance i, for your name rigidly designates the particular human person with that individual essence. These truths do not derive from any arbitrary decision by God, they are not grounded in His will. But they also do not derive from your actual free choices, since they are true prior to your creation. What

¹⁶ See Godehard Bruntrup and Ruben Schneider, "How Molinists Can Have Their Cake and Eat It Too", in Christian Kanzian, Winfried Löffler & Josef Quitterer (eds.), *The Ways Things Are: Studies in Ontology* (Ontos Verlag, 2011): pp. 221-240 for a similar Molinist solution along these lines. Something like the solution I offer here is presented as a Leibnizian alternative to Molinism in Kenneth L. Pearce, "Are We Free to Break the Laws of Providence?", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Apr., 2020): pp. 158-180.

¹⁷ I understand that this runs contrary to Molinists' typical assertion that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are contingently true, but I think that Molinists should give up that claim and accept the necessity of these truths. If this is non-negotiable for the Molinist, then I am happy to follow Pearce and recommend the view described here as a viable alternative to Molinism.

serves as their ground then? What makes them true? How one answers this question will depend on one's preferred theory of the divine ideas.¹⁸ What serves as the ground for the truth that $2 + 2 = 4$? What makes that proposition true? One could ground them in Platonic forms outside of God, or one could ground them in the Divine Essence itself. But, in either case, they are grounded in the same way that other necessary truths are. And so there is no special mystery as to what makes these counterfactuals of creaturely freedom true.

IV. The Problem of Eternal Separation

On the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife, heaven and hell are both eternal and occupied: the blessed enjoy unending bliss in heaven while the damned experience unending suffering in hell. But how can the blessed in heaven enjoy perfect bliss knowing that there are at least some who experience unending suffering in hell? To make matters worse, the damned could include individuals whom the blessed loved dearly in this life. It seems possible that an individual could gain entrance into heaven while that person's son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife could fail to do so. But in such case, wouldn't the realization that that person's loved one is not only not with her in heaven enjoying union with God, but also suffering elsewhere, undermine her own perfect bliss? This is the problem of eternal separation.¹⁹

The problem of eternal separation is often understood as pointing to two related problems. First, there is the fact that those in heaven are aware of the suffering of those whom they love. The problem here is that the awareness that one's beloved is suffering would seem to make perfect heavenly bliss impossible. Second, there is the fact that those in heaven are

¹⁸ See Thomas M. Ward, *Divine Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) for a helpful overview of the various options.

¹⁹ See, for example, Eric Reitan, "Eternal Damnation and Blessed Ignorance: Is the Damnation of Some Incompatible with the Salvation of Any?", *Religious Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 2002): pp. 429-450; Nicole Hassoun, "Eternally Separated Lovers: The Argument from Love", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (Jan., 2015): pp. 633-643; Eric Yang, "Heaven and the Problem of Eternal Separation", in Simon Cushing (ed.), *Heaven and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018): pp. 153-170.

separated from those whom they love. The problem here is that the mere fact of separation from one's beloved would seem to make perfect heavenly bliss impossible. Many solutions to these two related problems have been offered. But there is a third layer to the problem that I think has been insufficiently appreciated. Solutions to the first layer of the problem typically propose that perhaps when all is revealed to the blessed in heaven, they come to learn that the suffering experienced by their beloved in hell is actually self-imposed, or a perfectly just punishment for their freely chosen actions, or the very best that can be hoped for given the particular decisions that their loved ones made throughout their lives. But this just pushes the problem back a step. Even if one did believe that the suffering that one's beloved experiences in hell is self-imposed, perfectly just, or the best that can be hoped for, one could still wish that he or she had somehow made different decisions and so become the sort of person that could have been with his or her loved ones in heaven and with whom he or she could have shared unending bliss. I think that this third layer to the problem of eternal separation, what we might call the problem of regret, is the most difficult to address.²⁰

But notice that superessentialism offers a way forward. If every event that occurs in the life of a person, that is to say, everything that happens to him or her and every decision and action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity, then one cannot reasonably wish that things had gone differently for one's beloved, that he or she had made different, better decisions and so ended up in heaven rather than hell. For, if superessentialism is true, then those particular decisions that led one's beloved to reject God and so spend the rest of eternity suffering in hell are essential to that person, are constitutive of that

²⁰ For an excellent discussion of this aspect of the problem of eternal separation, see Donald Bungum, "Theodicy, Regress, and the Problem of Eternal Separation", *Journal of Analytic Theology* (forthcoming). The problem of regret is very similar to, if not a particular instance of, what Eleonore Stump calls the "Problem of Mourning" in her *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). As I highlight below, Stump also offers a very similar solution to this aspect of the problem.

person's identity. And so if one were to think about how things could have gone differently in the life of one's beloved and wish that they had gone that way, what one is actually thinking about is how the life of someone else, very similar to one's beloved, could have gone, and what one is actually wishing for is that one's beloved had never existed and that someone else, very similar to one's beloved had existed instead. And that seems like a mistake. It would seem strange faced with the suffering of one's beloved to respond by wishing that he or she had never existed. For then one would never have had any of the experiences with him or her that would make his or her suffering particularly difficult to reconcile with one's blissful state. And so, if superessentialism is true, then the problem of regret dissolves. One cannot consistently wish that the life of one's beloved who is suffering in hell had gone differently. For when all is revealed to the blessed in heaven, one will come to learn that, necessarily, it could not have been any different.²¹

One author who comes very close to offering this sort of solution to the problem is Eleonore Stump. In the culminating chapter of her *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning*, Stump reflects on the problem of regret (or, as she calls it the problem of mourning) from the perspective of God:

Even if a loving God should not annihilate Jerome but rather keep him in existence, would God not yearn for what Jerome might have been? Would God not wish for the Jerome who could have flourished in his true self if he had surrendered to God's love? And if God did long for the Jerome who might have been, then would God not mourn over what Jerome actually is? But here the objector seems to suppose that a loving God should take as the object of his affections a non-existent person. On the objector's position, a loving God would

²¹ Notice that Molinist superessentialism might be too weak for this solution to work, for on that view one could still consistently wish that circumstances had been different enough for one's beloved to freely make different choices that would lead him or her to heaven. The only way Molinist superessentialism could solve the problem is if it turned out that all who are in hell are transworldly damned: there is no possible set of circumstances that God could have actualized in which he or she freely chooses to love God above all else and so gain entrance to heaven with the rest of his or her loved ones. See William Lane Craig, "No Other Name": A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Apr., 1989): pp. 172-88 for a defense of this proposal.

yearn for a merely possible person and feel disappointed to have gotten Jerome instead. It seems that, on the objector's view, God ought to love more something that is a figment of God's imagination and care less for the actual human being as disappointing. But why think that God would be loving if he acted in this way? The real person is Jerome, not his non-existent imaginary doppelganger. For God to be loving is for God to love Jerome as he is. To love is to desire the good for the beloved and union with the beloved. To wish that Jerome was replaced by the person he might have been is not to desire the good for the actual Jerome; and it is a rejection of the actual Jerome in favor of desire for the non-actual possible person. To turn away from Jerome in disappointment and wish for the non-existent person he might have been is not loving of Jerome.²²

Notice that, according to Stump, in the event that Jerome ends up rejecting God and spending the rest of eternity in hell, for God to wish that Jerome had somehow made different decisions and so become the sort of person that could have been with Him heaven is to wish that Jerome himself had never existed, and that some "non-existent imaginary doppelganger" had existed in his place. The implication here seems to be that those choices and decisions that led Jerome to hell are essential to Jerome, are constitutive of his identity. And that is the superessentialist solution that I have proposed here.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, while superessentialism, the view that every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to him or her every decision and action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity, strikes many of us as implausible, perhaps even unsettling, it also opens up new solutions to three notoriously difficult problems in the philosophy of religion. Do its benefits, then, outweigh its costs? That remains to be determined. But what I hope to have shown is that there are some clear benefits of adopting this counterintuitive thesis. And so perhaps, for that reason, it is worth a second look.

²² Stump, *The Image of God*, pp. 302-303.