

## Three Versions of Universalism

Michael J. Murray

The doctrine of hell is as troubling as any feature of the traditional Christian faith. The notion that God would send some of His creatures, all of whom He loves, to an eternity of suffering in separation from Him seems to many to border on incoherence. As a result, this traditional doctrine has come under increasing critical pressure as many philosophers of religion, even Christian philosophers of religion, argue that such a doctrine is philosophically indefensible.<sup>1</sup> A number of alternative accounts of human eternal destiny have been proposed by these critics,<sup>2</sup> and foremost among these is the doctrine of universalism, i.e., the doctrine that all are ultimately redeemed to enjoy perfect communion with God forever. In this paper I offer some critical philosophical reflections on the doctrine of universalism.

Attempts to defend the traditional conception of hell usually come in one of two forms. The first consists of arguments by way of revealed theology, that is, theological arguments in favor of the view which arise from exposition of the relevant Biblical texts.<sup>3</sup> The second consists of attempts to argue for the view by defending it against charges of internal inconsistency.<sup>4</sup> This second strategy often amounts to more of a theodicy or defense of hell than it does an argument for advantages of the traditional doctrine over its competitors. In this essay however, I will attempt to argue for the traditional view not by arguing for its internal consistency, but by arguing directly against what I take to be its most popular competitor, universalism.

The argument will consist of three parts. I will begin by developing the simplest version of universalism, one which it appears none has endorsed, but one which will allow us to set out some critical apparatus that will be useful later. I will then look at two sophisticated variants of the naive view, variants which are widely endorsed by universalists. I will then show how these sophisticated versions fall prey to difficulties related to those facing the naive view.

## Naive Universalism

As I will use the term here, naive universalism (NU) is the view that upon death all persons are instantly transformed by God in such a way that they fully desire communion with God and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever. With one possible exception, no one has endorsed naive universalism.<sup>5</sup> Yet, by starting with this view, and raising some objections against it, it will be easier to motivate the more sophisticated versions of universalism and the objections these versions face.

### The Gratuitous Earthly Life

The first difficulty facing naive universalism (NU) is, somewhat surprisingly, a problem of gratuitous evil. What is surprising about this is that the universalist position is usually proposed as a way of *solving* at least one problem of gratuitous evil, the one which (supposedly) arises by way of the traditional doctrine of hell.<sup>6</sup> And while universalism would solve such a problem (if there were one), it raises an equally difficult problem with respect to evil *in via.*, i.e., evil experienced by persons (at least) in their earthly life. Most (though not all) theists admit that gratuitous evils, if any there be, would present significant difficulties for traditional theism. Thus, it would be a serious blow to the universalist scheme if one can show that it admits instances of evil which cannot be justified as in some sense a necessary condition for the occurrence of some greater good or prevention of some greater evil.

For my purposes, we can characterize gratuitous and nongratuitous evil more carefully as follows:

(NGE) An evil E is nongratuitous if, and only if, (a) there exists some outweighing intrinsic good G such that it was not within God's power to achieve G without either permitting E or permitting some other evil at least as bad as E and (b) there is not some further intrinsic good G\*, which is both exclusive of G and greater than G, which could have been secured without permitting E or some other evil at least as bad as E.

(GE) An evil E is gratuitous if, and only if, it is not non-gratuitous.<sup>7</sup>

We can begin to frame this first problem for NU as follows. On the NU picture, all human beings end up in perfect communion with God, enjoying the beatific vision forever.

This entails, however, that one's fate in eternity is entirely independent of the individual choices a person makes and the beliefs a person adopts in the earthly phase of their existence. Thus, the evils that one experiences in the earthly life are gratuitous. Why, one is led to wonder, would God put us through such a pointless exercise, an exercise filled with much misery, suffering, and travail, only in the end to invest the experience with no ultimate consequences or significance?

Universalists who reject the traditional view because it seems to include gratuitous suffering on the part of the damned thus seem to exchange this difficulty for the problem of gratuitous evil *in via*. While they can dismiss the (supposed) gratuitous evils of hell, they must now account for evils experienced in the earthly life.

The universalist might respond here that earthly evils are not without purpose since, contrary to first appearances, they *are* necessary conditions for procuring outweighing goods. However, the universalist continues, the outweighing goods in this case are found not in the afterlife, but in the *earthly* life itself. Thus, while evils in this life do not affect my eternal destiny, they do affect the course of the earthly life itself and in this way earthly evils have their purpose in bringing about outweighing earthly goods.

Notice, however, that this response misses the point of the original criticism. While the response offered here shows that the evils in the earthly life might satisfy conjunct (a) in the right half of the biconditional (NGE), it fails to satisfy conjunct (b). The intrinsic good of the earthly life, on the NU scheme, seems outweighed by the good one would have experienced if one has been created enjoying perfect communion with God from the beginning. Why would God prefer to have us spend our first seventy or so years of existence in this earthly phase, enjoying a measure of intrinsic good but with the accompanying evil required to secure it, rather than positioning us in such a way that these years are spent in perfect communion with Him in heaven? After all, any earthly goods obtained would pale in comparison with the goods achieved by spending those years in this way.

Universalists might instead respond to this objection by claiming that their response to the “problem of *in via* evil” need be no different than that of many traditional theists. John Hick, a proponent of universalism, responds in this way, arguing that the purpose of earthly evil is to allow the possibility of “soul-making.”<sup>8</sup> In this life we are exposed to evil as a necessary condition for being able to freely cultivate characters that are either virtuous or vicious. And things are no different on the universalist view: evil allows us to develop characters that are good or evil. How does the fact that all end up in heaven detract from the value of the soul-making experience? The proponent of NU might construct an analogy here between the earthly life and rites of passage for entering into certain clubs or organizations, such as the pledging process for fraternities or two-a-days in the pre-season for college football. In both cases, one might argue, the purpose of the rite is to develop certain traits in the initiate. The fact that no one, in the end, fails to become a member of the group is just irrelevant. Why can’t the earthly life serve a similar function with respect to eternity? That is, the earthly life serves to develop characters, but all are nonetheless admitted into perfect communion with God in the end.

While there are a number of promising features in such an analogy, the disanalogies between these cases and the universalist scheme are telling. No doubt, the function of these rites of passage in fraternities and team sports serve a certain purpose: something analogous to soul-making. It is the qualities developed during the rite that determine the quality of the experiences of future group members. But the outcomes in such cases may vary significantly. One might grow to respect and appreciate the coach, or one might grow to despise him. Even though the initiates might recognize that some of the traits developed are useful for playing the game, they can still love playing the game or hate it. And so, similarly, it seems, if soul-making allows us to develop in an analogous way, similar differences may be found in the quality of the experience of those who later enter heaven. Those who have cultivated well-ordered characters will enjoy the goods afforded in eternity.

But what of those who failed to do so? Either they will be “miraculously transformed” into lovers of God, or they will spend eternity in the presence of God, but be unable to enjoy it. If the former then the evil *in via* is thoroughly gratuitous. But if it is the latter, then there are some for whom existence in heaven will be tantamount to a life in hell. Those who have cultivated self-loving characters will not find happiness in being forced to commune with God and so will despise their existence. This alternative seems even more suspect since on their view, heaven is described as a place where one finds true well-being and fulfillment in the beatific vision. Notice finally that this view backs away from the original position since, according to it, there is no instant transformation of the person which makes them suited for perfect communion with God. Instead, persons come as they are, with the character they have cultivated, and the quality of their experience is determined by the character they bring.

### **The Denial of “Autonomy”**

This leads us to a second closely related argument against NU which has as its focus a certain feature of creaturely freedom. Above I have argued that NU entails that nothing in one’s earthly existence serves as a necessary condition (as described in NGE) for securing perfect communion with God, making it and the evil it contains gratuitous. As I noted, this seems to raise a troubling problem of evil. But such a view also seems to infringe on a certain important feature of creaturely freedom since it entails that one’s choices have no effect on the outworking of one’s destiny.

It is a commonplace among theists responding to the problem of evil that appeal be made to creaturely freedom. Since, creatures are free (in the libertarian sense) they have the power to go wrong, and God cannot de-activate this power without de-activating the creature’s freedom. Furthermore, it is commonly held that the existence of these free creatures justifies the resultant moral evil, since a world with free creatures is on balance better because the existence of such creatures permits the possibility of moral goods.<sup>9</sup> But, as many have noted, it is not mere “freedom of choice” that the theist is after with such

theodicies. What the theist really needs is a freedom of choosing *that is expressed in actions that influence the course of events in the world*. Thus, in addition to the ability to choose in the absence of determinism, the libertarian theist also wants choices that result in significant change in the local environment. Let us call this latter feature “autonomy” to distinguish it from the mere “freedom of choice” often emphasized by libertarians.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a world with “autonomous” creatures is a world where creatures are not only allowed to make evil *choices*, but choices which issue in evil *acts* and have evil *consequences*. A world with agents who can choose freely but are unable to act autonomously would be a world filled with freely choosing brains-in-vats. While free choosing might go on, the choices would never have expression in or impact on the local environment, whether good or evil. There are, of course, different sorts of effects on the local environment that free choices might have. A presupposition of any soul-making style theodicy, is that one of the relevant effects of our actions is the strengthening or weakening of our virtues and/or vices. In fact, as noted earlier, some theists, including some universalists, think that the power to bring about virtues and vices in our character is the very essence of human earthly existence.

George Schlesinger, in his article “The Scope of Human Autonomy”<sup>11</sup> argues that one problem for universalism is that while it allows freedom of choice, it denies autonomy (in the above sense) because eternal outcomes do not vary with earthly choices. That is, while it allows human beings to make choices, including choices that are relevant for soul-making, it does not allow outcomes to vary accordingly, since those who choose to develop characters which are self-directed and not God-directed are summarily transformed. More broadly we might say that one can *choose to cultivate* a morally vicious character, but in the end one cannot *have* such a character. One can choose to act in such a way as to acquire such a character, but in the end one will be unable to effect such a development in character.

Of course, for God to set us up in this fashion is just to take away the autonomy we need for free action to have the significance that makes it worth having. One might think about NU by way of the following analogy. On the picture proposed by the universalist, it

is as if one were to go to the drive-through window at a fast food restaurant, make a selection, and order. But, no matter what is ordered, the attendant hands over the same food. If you order fish, you get a hamburger, if you order ice cream, you get a hamburger, if you order a french fries, you get a hamburger . . . . You are welcome to freely choose whatever menu item you like, but at this restaurant, you have it *their* way. And so it is on the universalist picture. You are welcome to do whatever you like, but with God, you have it *His* way. As a result, while free choosing may go on in the universalist's world, it is a free choosing that is without autonomy, since one is transformed into a lover of God, whether one chooses to be such or not.

One might argue at this point that no one, most of all the one bound for hell, would object were God to take away their autonomy in this fashion. Who would want the drive-through attendant to give them hell, so to speak, even if that is what they ordered? Better to have my autonomy violated than to have that!<sup>12</sup> The universalist might argue that autonomy can never be so great a good that it could counter-balance the evil of eternal hell. But this may be too quick. As I argued above, significant human freedom consists not merely in freedom of choice but also in autonomy. To allow free choice without autonomy would be to fill a world with brains-in-vats, beings capable of choosing but unable to effect good (or evil) in the world. This universalist response seems to admit that there are occasions in which we ought to prefer to *lose* our autonomy rather than experience the consequences of our choices. In fact, universalists seem to hold that God would be doing something morally reprehensible were He not to revoke our autonomy in such cases. But taking this stand leads to a further consequence the universalist should be reluctant to endorse.

To see the difficulty, consider the following. As in the case of autonomy with respect to *eternal* destiny, God could have arranged the world in such a way that autonomy is limited *in via* as well. God could, that is, have arranged the world in such a way that we have *free choice* at all times, but *autonomy* only in those cases in which the choice we make is morally good.<sup>13</sup> Morally evil *choices* would be allowed, but they would never be

permitted to affect the course of events in the world. Let's call such an arrangement "limited earthly autonomy."

For whatever reason, it is clear that God has not set up the world in such a way that creatures have limited earthly autonomy. Human autonomy is important enough that God has chosen not to revoke it, despite the fact that leaving it intact leads to some (significant) measure of moral evil. Since traditionalist and universalist alike must agree on this point, they must further admit that there is some justifiable reason why He has not done so.

Universalists hold that God allows us to make free choices in matters that bear on the outworking of our character, but they also hold that God does not allow such choices to have their natural outcome when that means becoming an enduringly vicious character, i.e., becoming a person who is not fit for perfect communion with God. Thus the "natural" outcome for those who cultivate a character which precludes the desire to be in perfect communion with God, viz., separation from God, is thwarted, with the result that only those choices which contribute towards the having of a God-loving character have any effect on one's eternal state. Let us call this "limited eternal autonomy." The problem for the universalist in all of this is as follows. If God is obliged to give free creatures limited *eternal* autonomy (as most universalists argue), why not limited *earthly* autonomy as well? To put it another way: if, for whatever reason, God deems it unfit to grant limited *earthly* autonomy, why doesn't the same hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for *eternal* autonomy? Any answer which would justify one would seem to justify the other. Thus since limited autonomy is not found in the earthly arena, we have no reason to think that different principles would be at work in the case of eternity.<sup>14</sup>

One disanalogy that the universalist might appeal to is the *gravity* of the evil in the two cases. One might say that the consequences of allowing "unlimited" autonomy in the case of *eternity* are more serious than they are in the case of *earthly* affairs. In this life, one can only bring about a limited quantity of evil, but to allow unlimited autonomy in eternal affairs would be to permit eternal suffering and thus an infinite quantity of suffering!



Wouldn't this disparity justify God's treating these two cases differently? Surely, this is a significant disanalogy between the cases, but not enough to undermine the original argument, since an equally convincing case could be made in the other direction. One could just as easily contend at this point that there is greater justification for limiting *earthly* autonomy since the evils committed *in via* result in significant suffering on *other* (even *innocent*) *people*. Wouldn't the obligation be greater to restrict autonomy in the case where others are (innocently) harmed than in the case where one is allowed only to harm (maybe justly) oneself? How much better then to restrict autonomy in the *earthly* than in the eternal case. And since it is not restricted in the earthly case, couldn't one argue, *a fortiori*, that it would not be in the eternal case?

Thus, the proponent of NU faces two serious difficulties. The first is that such a view seems to undercut the possibility that the earthly life and the evils it contains have any significance, thus making the evils of the earthly life utterly gratuitous. In addition, the fact that NU obliges God to block the consequences, and thus the autonomy, of those who elect to become vicious, NU appears to undercut the very feature of freedom that made it worth having. And even if the advocate of NU is willing to bite the bullet at this point, and deny that autonomy is a good worth preserving at this price, it seems utterly inexplicable why God would deny such autonomy with respect to eternal consequences, but not with respect to earthly ones.

### **Sophisticated Universalism: Part I**

The fact that NU falls prey to such objections might lead one to endorse a more sophisticated version of universalism. This version of universalism has been defended in the recent literature by Marilyn Adams and Thomas Talbott. According to this view, it is simply false that God does or must miraculously and utterly transform the vicious at death in order to secure universal salvation. Instead, God does not "zap" anyone, as NU proposes; God simply permits those who have refused to turn to him by the time of their death to continue to exist in other environments, environments in which God can

progressively strip away their false beliefs or hardness of heart. I will call this first version of sophisticated universalism “SU1”

In discussing SU! I will focus on Talbott.<sup>15</sup> In his view, God can bring about this change by progressively making clear to the person that making evil choices and having a vicious character is ultimately not in the person’s true self interest. Once the person clearly understands this, i.e., once the person is, as Talbott puts it, “fully informed” about what they are choosing, there can be no possible motives for continuing to do evil and for rejecting God. And, since motiveless choices are impossible, the person can thus no longer continue to reject God.<sup>16</sup>

### **A False Presupposition**

One is immediately led to wonder, however, how such a transformation is supposed to be guaranteed. Talbott seems to argue that purging false beliefs will be sufficient. He says:

once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly “free” to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself.<sup>17</sup>

By “bondage to desire” Talbott means having desires which are so overwhelming that they causally necessitate one’s choice of the object of desire. Thus, Talbott wants to claim that if one is “fully informed” about one’s good and furthermore, if one is not causally determined to choose evil by one’s own affective states, then even a libertarian free agent will infallibly choose the good.

Is this claim true? It depends on what Talbott has in mind when he speaks of being “fully informed.” He may mean: that one knows all the relevant facts about the decision being made, and further holds no relevant false beliefs concerning the decision. On the other hand, he may mean: that one knows all the relevant facts and ascribes the proper weight to the things known. The latter entails that one has additionally structured one’s desires so that they properly reflect the importance of what is known. Let’s consider the first alternative.

It seems clear that one can continue to reject God even though one has become “fully informed” in the first sense. In fact, it is just such an ability which allows libertarian agents to exhibit weakness of will. Someone can be fully aware of the fact that smoking or having an unhealthy diet or engaging in promiscuous sex is extremely dangerous, and yet, he or she can still choose to freely engage in the practices.

The problem that weakness of will points us towards is this: the fact that someone holds all and only true beliefs concerning their good, i.e., is “fully informed”, does not entail *ipso facto*, that they will *choose to act* in accord with their true good. As a result, the only way to insure that no will ultimately reject God is to insure that everyone will not only *see* that true human fulfillment consists in perfect communion with God, but will also structure their desires accordingly. That is, the only way to insure this outcome is to insure that people are fully informed in the second sense. The problem is, of course, that there seems to be no way to guarantee that people are “fully informed” in this second sense unless God is willing to transform miraculously those who see the relevant truths but recalcitrantly continue to desire to pursue things incompatible with being in perfect communion with God. As a result, it seems that there is no way to guarantee that SU1 does not collapse into NU.

### **The Oddity of the Earthly Life**

Of course, the above argument does not prove that God must miraculously transform some in the end in order to secure universal salvation, i.e., it is not a proof that SU1 collapses into NU. It seems epistemically possible that all free persons would eventually turn to God in some finite amount of time after becoming fully informed (in the first sense described above) about their true good. It is worth noting, however, that the fact that the Church has affirmed the traditionally doctrine of hell with near unanimity provides no small evidence for the Christian that this epistemic possibility is not in fact a reality.

Leaving this aside, however, there is a second but related difficulty with SU1. The difficulty is by no means a demonstrative refutation, but it raises a question the view should

answer. Since the earthly life appears to yield poor soteriological results, one is led to wonder exactly what purpose it is supposed to serve in the outworking of God's plan for His human creatures? Obviously, the post-mortem state in which most turn to God is vastly better suited for the conversion of the unregenerate. But if so, why not create us all *ab initio*, in this latter state? Of course, the advocate of SU1 may argue that this is mere sophistry. It is not that the post-mortem state is qualitatively better for bringing about the requisite change of heart in the unregenerate, it is simply that the time allotted for making such a change in this state is without limit. But if this is right, one wonders why the earthly life is so short. Certainly God could have made the earthly phase of our existence much longer than it in fact is. After all, there would appear to be significant soteriological benefits to be had by allowing the other earthly creatures to see that, by the end of their earthly lives, most or all human creatures freely embrace a belief in and hope for perfect and eternal communion with God. One would think that such nearly universal recognition on the part of human creatures in this life would establish such a belief as the social norm.

The defender of SU1 may have no answers to these questions. The lack of an answer does not, on its own, serve to undermine the view. But the lack of answers would, I think, imply that the earthly phase of human existence is an enigma for universalists. It points to the fact that part of the philosophical plausibility of this non-traditional view hangs on the advocate of SU1 being able to make sense of the evident truth that God sees fit to start off each human existence with a stint in the earthly phase. This fact is both strange and unexplained on SU1.<sup>18</sup>

### **A Different Denial of “Autonomy”**

But there is a third difficulty for SU1. We saw earlier that one problem for naive universalism is that it undercuts what I there called autonomy. SU1 seems to escape the criticism I offered there because on this view, eternal outcomes really do depend on free choices. No one is able to enjoy perfect communion with God until it is freely embraced. Thus, on this view it appears that autonomy remains fully intact.

But while SU1 does not fall prey to this objection raised against NU, it falls prey to a closely related objection. To see this, consider a revised version of the drive-through analogy I offered earlier. Once again I drive up to the ordering menu and select whatever I please. But in this case, I am not given a hamburger regardless of what I order. Instead I am given a hamburger, if that is what I order, and if I order something other than a hamburger, I am directed to drive back to the menu to order again. This process continues until I choose to order a hamburger. Notice here that outcomes do vary with choices on this account. Hamburger choosers get hamburgers, and non-hamburger choosers get something else. Nonetheless, no one gets the very thing they choose, unless they choose the hamburger. So, while the trouble that arises for autonomy on NU does not arise here, the autonomy that this view offers is still of little, if any, value. While I am able to effect various outcomes, I never acquire the outcome I seek unless it is the one prescribed for me. Thus, it seems that I have very little power to affect certain very significant states in the world by my choices after all, specifically, those which concern the ultimate state of my character.

At least one defender of SU1 has responded to this analogy by arguing that it mischaracterizes the view.<sup>19</sup> SU1 is not committed to the claim that one either chooses to embrace God or is forced to choose again. Instead, the one who fails to choose God is led to see that doing so is harmful and destructive. As this becomes clear, the one who originally elected to deny God is led to accept God freely. Thus, the right way of constructing the analogy according to SU1 is instead this: if you order a hamburger, this is what you get. But if you order a rotten hamburger, you will get it as well. You will then eat it and become sick, and the next time you come up to order, you will think twice about ordering a rotten hamburger. Given enough episodes, you will eventually stop ordering rotten food. Nothing in this analogy points to a diminution of human autonomy. In fact, the view highlights our ability to change our choice patterns (and their outcomes) in light of previous choices (and their outcomes).

But contrary to what the defender of SU1 claims, it is this redescription which mischaracterizes the view. The character of the vicious person who wants no part of communion with God, is one that has been cultivated by a long series of reflectively made choices. This person has chosen to cultivate such a character and as a result has succeeded in acquiring it. To return to the analogy once more, it is as if we have a person who ate rotten hamburgers and has now cultivated a taste for them. We puzzle over the fact that this person can find satisfaction in eating rotten hamburgers. Nonetheless they do, and so they continue to eat them. If all attempts to get the rotten hamburger eaters to see that this practice is destructive for them fails, what options are left for those who wish to reform their behavior? It appears that SU1 opts for putting the person back in the queue and forcing them to order again. And this process continues until the rotten hamburger lovers finally act out of character and order a hamburger that is not rotten. At this point, the disposition begins to be eroded. Here the troubling point about autonomy arises again. In the end, if I choose to cultivate a character which includes the disposition to shun communion with God, I will not be allowed to become that sort of person. While my choice in the matter remains free, my autonomy is ultimately thwarted.

A defender of SU1 might insist, however, that neither of these renderings of the analogy accurately characterizes the view. The above analogy, one might argue, assumes that rotten hamburger loving dispositions must be weakened by forcing the person to choose until he or she contrary to those dispositions (that is, by forcing them eventually to choose a non-rotten hamburger, contrary to their desires). But, the defender of SU1 might continue, this too is a mischaracterization. The most plausible version of SU1 holds that human creatures are allowed to choose either to cultivate characters which include the desire to embrace communion with God or not. Those who do are allowed to enter the beatific vision. Those who do not, are miraculously unburdened of the dispositions which constitute their vicious characters. They are then allowed to begin to cultivate characters again “from scratch.” If they choose to embrace communion with God, they are allowed to

enter the beatific vision; if not, they are again miraculously unburdened of their dispositions and allowed to begin cultivating a new character. This process continues until each person has freely chosen to embrace communion with God. Thus, there is no forcing people to choose against their desires, as the last version of the analogy hypothesizes. Instead, God breaks people of their *bondage* to evil desires, restores them to true freedom, and thereby gives them a new opportunity to pursue their true good.<sup>20</sup>

There are a number of objectionable features in this version of SU1. I will highlight one here.<sup>21</sup> Let us imagine one such person going through this process of character-making and -purging. We might imagine that if this person were allowed to go through the process ten times, she would choose to embrace communion with God on only the sixth and the ninth occasions. According to this version of SU1, however, God allows the process to continue only until the person first chooses to cultivate a character which includes embracing communion with God, after which the process ceases. It is puzzling, however, why the advocate of SU1 finds this view autonomy preserving. It seems merely arbitrary that God stops the process after the sixth cycle rather than the seventh. Why shouldn't we assume, for example, that if the person would choose to become vicious in eight out of ten cycles this militates in favor of stopping the process after a vicious-character generating cycle?

The defender of this version of SU1 might hold, of course, that once one chooses to cultivate a God-embracing character, one would continue to do so in future cycles. But why should one think such a thing? If the dispositions constitutive of one's character are, on this picture, completely purged after each cycle, what provides the guarantee that one will again choose to cultivate a God-embracing character in subsequent cycles?

Thus, it appears that examination of the most obvious variants of SU1 still yield a view which is not ultimately autonomy preserving.

### **Sophisticated Universalism: Part II**

Perhaps, then, the sophisticated universalist ought to abandon the hypothesis that God never miraculously transforms the recalcitrant unbeliever. In one essay, Marilyn Adams entertains the possibility of God miraculously transforming those whom it is clear will never freely choose to embrace communion with God.<sup>22</sup> One might, of course, note that such a view amounts to a slightly modified version of NU, and thus hold that it fails for the same reason that SU does.

In the same article, however, Adams makes some remarks that suggest a way out of the difficulties posed for NU above.<sup>23</sup> Adams argues that it is true that the best outcome for each individual would be to choose to embrace communion with God freely. But in the case of the recalcitrant unbeliever we must ask, what constitutes the second best outcome? The traditionalist holds that what is second best is to allow that person to retain their autonomy by allowing them to be what they have chosen to become, viz., someone who wishes not to be in communion with God. But, a sophisticated universalist might continue, why should we believe this? Why not instead think that second best entails transforming the person, even if against their will? It is, after all, a good thing for there to be persons with good character, even if it might be better to have persons with the same character who have chosen it freely (or who have freely chosen to have it bestowed upon them by the power of grace).

Someone might illustrate this point by asking us to imagine earthly parents who are watching their child making a choice that will have devastating consequences.<sup>24</sup> The parents might allow the child to make the choice if the choice and its bad consequence will end up helping the child in the long run. In such cases, it may be better to allow them to make the bad choice. But if the bad choice will *only* be harmful (not to mention eternally destructive), no good parent would allow such a choice to be carried out, that is, to have its natural consequences. So, some might say, we all agree that it is more loving, in such cases, to permit the child to have freedom of choice but not autonomy. Likewise, when someone chooses to cultivate a vicious character, it would be unloving of God to then permit the person to spend eternity apart from God. Thus, if the person fails to accept God freely,



God miraculously transforms them. Let us call this second version of sophisticated universalism SU2.

Let me first note that SU2 still falls prey to the “limited earthly autonomy objection” posed earlier for NU. But let us leave this aside. The plausibility of SU2 hangs crucially on the parent-child analogy. Is it true that the parent always blocks the autonomy of the child’s choice when the choices will yield devastating consequences? It is true that we rightly block the autonomy of our young children when we see that the choices they make will have such consequences. I don’t allow my child to toddle out into traffic or to drink battery acid.

Yet when our focus shifts to adult children, the picture changes. If my adult son decides to choose a career, a mate, etc. which I believe (or know) will be destructive for him, I may counsel him in the strongest terms not to do so. But if I were to kidnap him and surgically or chemically alter his brain so that he will not choose those things, I would be meddling in a way that displayed disrespect for his autonomy as a person, and thus did not display love for *him* at all.<sup>25</sup> To interfere in this way would remove his autonomy and thus the *meaningfulness* of his freedom, and this would be to undermine both his human dignity and the real purpose of the earthly life: autonomous soul-making. Thus, it seems that, in fact, love does not clearly require miraculous transformation of the recalcitrant unbeliever.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional doctrine of hell introduces a number of philosophical tensions for Christian theism. Universalism is currently one of the more fashionable attempts to defuse these tensions. In this essay I have examined the most widely defended versions of universalism and argued that each of them is open to serious philosophical difficulties which have yet to receive attention in the literature. It may well be that these difficulties can be defused or mitigated. But until they are addressed, the philosophical plausibility of universalism remains wanting.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For example, Marilyn Adams: “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” in *Reasoned Faith*, Eleonore Stump (ed.), Cornell University Press, 1993; “Divine Justice, Divine Love, and the Life to Come,” *Crux* 13 (1976-7), pp. 12-28; and “Hell and the Justice of God,” *Religious Studies* 11 (1975), pp. 433-447, and Thomas Talbott: “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (1990), pp. 19-42, and “Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny,” *Religious Studies*, 26 (1990), pp. 227-245.

<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Kvanvig outlines the three major substitutes: “annihilationism,” “second chance,” and “universalism” in *The Problem of Hell.*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 68, 71, 73.

<sup>3</sup>*Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett (ed.), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992; *Through No Fault of Their Own*, William Crockett and James Sigountos (eds.), Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991; J. Ronald Blue, “Untold Billions: Are They Really Lost?” *The Bib Sac Reader*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (eds.), Chicago: Moody Press, 1983. pp. 233-246.

<sup>4</sup>Examples include: Richard Swinburne, “A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell,” *The Existence and Nature of God*, Alfred Freddoso (ed.), Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, pp. 37-54; and Stephen T. Davis, “Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant,” *Modern Theology*, January 1990, pp. 173-185.

<sup>5</sup>D.P. Walker in *The Decline of Hell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 67) claims that no one has in fact endorsed such a view. Marilyn Adams entertains the possibility that God acts in this way, though it would go too far to say she endorses this view. At most Adams says that it may be better, all things considered, to instantaneously transform some who are unregenerate at death (see her article “Divine Justice, Divine Love, and the Life to Come,” *Crux*, volume 13, 1976-7, esp. pp. 22-26). I will discuss this view of Adams in more detail below.

<sup>6</sup>The argument, of course, is that since hell must perforce involve unmerited suffering (because, for example, the punishment given is incommensurate with the offense, etc.) it involves gratuitous evil.

<sup>7</sup>Below I will speak of evils as being gratuitous if they are not necessary for securing outweighing goods. Of course, this is not an accurate characterization of gratuitousness with respect to evil, but it is a useful shorthand and simpler than rehearsing the characterization captured in (NGE) and (GE).

<sup>8</sup>John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, New York: Harper and Rowe, 1966, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 200-224.

<sup>10</sup>Medieval scholastics had terminology needed to make the distinction between the two components of action that I have in mind here. They called the act of choosing by the will an “elicited free act.” Actions that are a direct consequence of the choosing were called “commanded free acts.”

<sup>11</sup>George Schlesinger, “The Scope of Human Autonomy,” *Our Knowledge of God*, ed. Kelly James Clark. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, pp. 215-223.

<sup>12</sup>This is essentially the move made by Thomas Talbott in “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” pp. 36-7.

<sup>13</sup>David Lewis develops an anti-theistic argument from something like this possibility in a recent essay (“Evil For Freedom’s Sake?” in *Philosophical Papers*, November 1993). Lewis holds that if there were a God he would have created free creatures in such a way that they would be allowed to make libertarian free choices if and only if God foresaw that that choice would be a morally good one. In all other cases God would pre-empt the free choice and make the creature do the morally good action through deterministic processes. In doing so, God allows the existence of morally significant good without allowing moral evil. Here we take it for granted that God’s not granting limited earthly autonomy is a fact and that it is justifiable, something both universalist and traditionalist should be able to agree upon. Of course, this shared claim must also be defended against the critic of theism. But that project goes beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>14</sup>One referee has pointed out that the argument here may be even more forceful than this. If the universalist is forced to admit that the evil *in via* is gratuitous, there is all the more reason to think that earthly autonomy should be limited. But since it is not, what reason is there to think that such limitations would be imposed in the case of eternal autonomy?

<sup>15</sup>I set aside Adams’ view here since it is not clear exactly what that view is in her later writings. Earlier essays (such as “Divine Justice, Divine Love, and the Life to Come,” *op. cit.*) seem to present a view that is similar to Talbott’s. More recent work (such as “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” *op. cit.*) adopt the view that God can necessarily secure a free change of heart by the impenitent

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by bestowing “congruent grace.” Without a more detailed proposal, this is a difficult view to assess. On its face, the view seems inconsistent with the libertarian view of freedom Adams endorses.

<sup>16</sup>Talbott makes this argument in a number of places. See as one example, “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>A universalist might be inclined to respond “tu quoque” at this juncture. But there are numerous accounts of the purpose of the earthly life by those who maintain a traditional view on hell. For example, Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985), pp. 392-418, Richard Swinburne, “A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell”, *op. cit.*, and my own “Heaven and Hell,” in *Reason for the Hope Within Us*,” Michael Murray (editor), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Assessing the plausibility of the traditional view against universalism might provide a comparison of the plausibility of the accounts offered by these figures and whatever account universalists might come to have, a comparison left to the reader.

<sup>19</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for this objection.

<sup>20</sup>This is in fact the conception that Talbott defends in, for example, his “Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny”, p. 231-3.

<sup>21</sup>I address another in my essay “Heaven and Hell,” *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup>See “Divine Justice, Divine Love, and the Life to Come,” *Crux* 13 (1976-7), pp. 24-6.

<sup>23</sup>I thank Robin Collins for bringing this version of universalism to my attention. While Adams hints at it, it was Collins who developed the notion for me in detail in conversation.

<sup>24</sup>This is Talbott’s example, from “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” p. 38.

<sup>25</sup>Unless, of course, he is suffering from a condition that prevents him from making these decisions on his own (that is, free from mental illness, etc.).

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