

CHAPTER 25

UNIVERSALISM

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UNIVERSALISM, as I shall here define it, is the religious doctrine that every created person will sooner or later be reconciled to God, the loving source of all that is, and will in the process be reconciled to all other persons as well. There will thus be, according to this doctrine, a final restitution of all things in which all of the harm that people have done to themselves and to others will be canceled out, and all broken relationships will be healed. But *Christian universalism*,¹ as I shall here define it, is more specific than that; it is the Christian doctrine that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the divinely appointed means whereby God destroys sin and death in the end and thus brings eternal life to all. As St. Paul himself put it, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Paul also insisted that, apart from the resurrection of Christ, our faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:17). So insofar as Christianity is a historical religion and includes substantive beliefs about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians are indeed committed to the view that anyone who denies this historical event is mistaken and anyone who does not understand its theological significance has not yet grasped the full truth of the matter. All of which raises the issue of religious diversity and our proper attitude toward it. John Hick, the best-known proponent of universalism among twentieth-century philosophers of religion, has also been one of the most outspoken defenders of religious pluralism: the idea, which has received so much contemporary attention, that all (or many) of the great religions are not only genuine repositories of divine revelation, but possible instruments of redemption and reconciliation as well. In the end, Hick rejects the idea that, as the savior of all, Jesus Christ was unique in this sense: “only those who have been saved through him are really saved.”² But just what does it mean to be *really saved*? If we think of salvation as an ongoing process, one that continues throughout our earthly lives and beyond, a slightly more conservative view would be something like the

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following: all who are being saved, regardless of the religious tradition in which their salvation is now taking place, are in the process of achieving a proper relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship that may not become fully manifest in some cases until the kingdom of God is fully realized.

Two additional points about religious diversity are perhaps worth mentioning. First, there is no reason that a religious pluralist, as defined above, need suppose that each of the great religions captures every aspect of the truth equally. Even as a Hindu pluralist can coherently believe that many Christians have failed to grasp the important role of reincarnation in the process of redemption, so a Christian pluralist can coherently believe that many Hindus, no less than Abraham, Isaac, and other exemplars of saving faith (see Heb. 11), have never fully understood, at least not during their earthly lives, the essential role of the cross in their own redemption and eventual perfection. Second, the degree of diversity within any of the great religious traditions is so extensive that the question of diversity between religious traditions as a whole may have little or no coherent meaning. As a Christian universalist, for example, I reject the understanding of hell that many Muslims share with many Christians. Does this mean that I reject either religion as false? As it stands, the question has no clear meaning. But so long as we do not confuse religious pluralism with the sophomoric idea that all theological opinions are equal (whether equally true, equally false, or neither true nor false), we can expect that fallible human beings will continue to disagree and to make mistakes as they encounter “moments of divine revelation”³ in their unique religious and cultural traditions.

In any event, Christian universalists, who believe that supreme power is at the service of supreme love and supreme wisdom, are in a unique position, among Christians, to put religious diversity into its proper perspective. They will no longer fear, for example, that an honest mistake in abstract theology might be eternally disastrous. They will simply proceed in the confidence that our Creator knows us from the inside out far better than we know ourselves; that he appreciates the ambiguities, the confusions, and the perplexities we face far better than we do; and that he understands the historical and cultural factors that shape our beliefs far better than any historian does. Such a Creator—loving, intimate, and wise—would know how to work with each of us in infinitely complex ways, how to shatter our illusions and transform our thinking when necessary, and how best to reveal himself to us in the end.

UNIVERSALISM AND OTHER CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

Because universalism in its Christian form is a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Christ’s eschatological victory over sin and death, one must distinguish this doctrine carefully from any number of unrelated doctrines that a given

universalist might hold in addition to it. As an illustration, some universalists (though not the earliest ones) have also been unitarians (or Arians) even as some trinitarians have also been premillennialists. But universalism no more requires the Arian view than a belief in the Trinity requires the premillennial view of Christ's return. Nor does the Arian denial of the Son being coeternal with the Father in turn require universalism; indeed, many Arians—John Milton, for example—have rejected universalism altogether. Among Christian universalists, then, some are trinitarians; others are not. Some accept the substitution theory of atonement; others do not. Some believe in biblical inerrancy; others do not. And that is, of course, just what one would expect; many different doctrines are logically compatible with universalism, just as many are also logically compatible with a belief in the Trinity.

But that having been said, I would also point out that universalism (or at least the salvation of the entire human race) follows as a deductive consequence from the conjunction of two respectably orthodox ideas. The first, fully embraced by the Arminians, the Wesleyans, various Pentecostal and charismatic groups, and a majority of Catholics, concerns the loving nature of God. Because God not only loves, but is love (1 John 4:8, 16), he at least wills or desires the salvation of all humans (1 Tim. 2:4) and is not willing that any of them should perish (2 Pet. 3:9); and because he wills or desires the salvation of all, he sent his Son into the world to be “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the entire world” (1 John 2:2). The second idea, fully embraced by the Augustinians, the Protestant Reformers, and the Jansenists in the Catholic tradition, concerns the triumph of God's salvific will. Because God is *almighty*, not to mention infinitely wise and resourceful, his grace is irresistible in the end; our salvation therefore “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:16). When Jesus declared: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:25), he was speaking of salvation in a context where a person's own choices and moral character had made it seem utterly impossible, like a camel passing through the eye of a needle. And his meaning was clear: there are no obstacles to salvation in anyone, not even in the most recalcitrant will or the hardest of hearts, that God cannot eventually overcome if he so chooses.

Now these two respectably orthodox ideas provide the premises for a powerful argument for universalism:

1. God sincerely wills or desires the salvation of each and every sinful human being.
2. God will eventually achieve a complete victory over sin and death and will therefore accomplish the salvation of everyone whose salvation he sincerely wills or desires.

From these two premises, it clearly follows:

3. God will eventually accomplish the salvation of each and every sinful human being.

Of course, this argument, like almost any short, snappy deductive argument, is easily reversed. A proponent of the traditional understanding of hell can simply deny the conclusion and deduce that one of the premises, either 1 or 2, is false. The Augustinians, who restrict God's love and mercy to a limited elect, will thus reject premise 1, whereas the Arminians, who limit the scope of God's ultimate victory over sin and death, will thus reject premise 2. But here I would also point to a remarkable fact: if you reject universalism, you must also reject at least one proposition, either 1 or 2, that other theologians and New Testament scholars in the Western tradition will tell you is a *clear* and *obvious* teaching of scripture.⁴ So why the unified opposition to universalism in the West (though not in the East)? Why should an assumption about eternal punishment be the only sacred assumption in a context where some are restricting God's love and others are limiting the scope of his ultimate victory over sin and death?⁵ My own reflection upon such questions has led me to conclude that something other than biblical exegesis lies behind the fierce opposition to universalism that we find in the Western theological tradition.⁶

FREE WILL AND THE PROBLEM OF HELL

Since the late 1980s, several Christian philosophers have defended at least the logical possibility of an everlasting separation between God and some sinners.⁷ But few have wanted to challenge the first premise of our argument for universalism, above;⁸ most would agree wholeheartedly with the conservative New Testament scholar Howard Marshall, who writes: "The question is not really one of the extent of God's love; that he loves all and is not willing that any should perish is clear biblical teaching."⁹ But if God at least wills or desires the salvation of all, why suppose that he will never accomplish his will or satisfy his own desire in this matter?

Consider how tragic it would be, not only for the rest of us but for God himself, if God should fail to satisfy his own desire that all be saved. A hiking acquaintance of mine, who endured the murder of his daughter some twenty years ago, now claims that, for as long as one lives, one never truly gets over a tragedy such as that. Yes, he learned to cope over time, and I have seen him experience moments of genuine joy, especially out in the wilderness. Memories also tend to fade over time, sometimes mercifully and sometimes against one's will. For who would want the memory of a loved one to fade altogether? As a religious man, my acquaintance also retains the glorious hope of a future reunion with his daughter. But what if the truth of the matter were unremittingly tragic? What if this man's expected reunion with his daughter were nothing but a false hope? In that event, regret and sorrow would surely have the final victory in this man's relationship with his daughter.

The murdered daughter was, of course, an innocent victim. But when Ted Bundy's mother declared, so agonizingly and yet so appropriately, her continuing

love for a son who had become a monster (as a serial murderer of young women), she illustrated the true nature of a mother's love and the true nature of God's love as well. Her obvious suffering over what her son had become and her all-consuming desire that he should achieve redemption of some kind is reminiscent of Paul's "unceasing anguish" over the spiritual health of his beloved kin: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish [or pray] that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people" (Rom. 9:2–3). So how, I ask, could God possibly impart blessedness to the anguished Paul and to the suffering mother of Ted Bundy, unless his forgiveness should find a way to reclaim their lost loved ones as well? It will not do, at this point, to invoke the possibility of blissful ignorance. I have no doubt that God could, as some might suggest he should, perform a kind of lobotomy on the redeemed, obliterating from their minds all knowledge of their lost loved ones. But blissful ignorance is hardly blessedness and may not even be a worthwhile form of happiness in many cases. Would not love judge it far better to know the truth about a loved one's fate, however tragic it might be, than to remain blissfully ignorant of it? And even if God should conceal the depth of some tragedy from us, he could hardly conceal it from himself. So if God's love for even the most corrupt among us is infinitely greater than our own, as it surely is, then his own suffering over the loss of a single loved one would be infinitely greater as well.

So it all boils down, I believe, to something very simple: if the truth about the universe is ultimately glorious, as the universalists believe it to be, then Jesus was quite right to declare: "you shall know the truth, and the truth [not blissful ignorance and not an elaborate deception] shall make you free" (John 8:32; NKJV). But if the truth is ultimately tragic, or even includes an element of unmitigated tragedy, then it will also, by its very nature, include grounds for a kind of eternal sorrow and regret. Many Christians—Kenneth Kantzer, for example—appear to accept the second alternative, contending that human history does indeed include an element of unmitigated tragedy. Kantzer thus writes: "the biblical answer [to the question of human destiny] does not satisfy our wishful sentiments. It is a hard and crushing word, devastating to human hope and pride."¹⁰ What solace there might be in a religious view that devastates human *hope* as well as human pride, Kantzer does not say. Nor does he explain why anyone should embrace a so-called biblical answer that devastates the loftiest hopes of people like Ted Bundy's mother, St. Paul, or even Kantzer himself. Why suppose that a loving God with the power to prevent it would permit anyone to come to a tragic end?

Perhaps the best (or least implausible) answer to this question involves an appeal to so-called libertarian free will—which is, by definition, incompatible with determinism. The hard truth, some would say, is that the creation of free moral agents carries an inherent risk of ultimate tragedy and does so because not even omnipotence can causally determine our free choices. Whether essential to our personhood or not, free will is a precious gift, an expression of God's love for us; and because the very love that seeks our salvation also respects our freedom, God will not prevent us from separating ourselves from him, even forever, if that is what

we freely choose to do. Accordingly, those who accept a free-will theodicy of hell—call them free-will theists—reject the second premise of the above argument for universalism; they reject, that is, the idea that God will successfully save all of those whose salvation he sincerely wills or desires. For the following rejection hypothesis, they contend, is at least possibly true:

- (RH) Some persons will, despite God's best efforts to save them, freely and irrevocably reject God and thus separate themselves from God forever.

As the popular writer and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis once put it, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*."¹¹ So even though God himself never rejects any of his loved ones, he does respect their freedom, as his love requires him to do, and he will continue to respect it even in the tragic case where someone freely chooses to reject him forever.

The difficulties with such a view begin to emerge, however, as soon as one examines the choice (or choices) specified in RH more carefully. For these imagined choices are utterly different from any other choice of which we might have had some experience. Suppose that God really is, as Christians have traditionally believed, the ultimate source of every good in life and, in particular, the ultimate source of human happiness; suppose that, in the words of Lewis himself, "union with" the divine "[n]ature is bliss and separation from it horror."¹² If that is an objective truth, even as it is an objective truth that a hand placed upon a hot stove will burn badly, then an obvious question arises: why suppose it even possible that someone might freely choose to endure an objective horror and then, after experiencing it, continue to embrace it freely for all of eternity?¹³ Why suppose this as logically possible when the alternative is eternal bliss?

Even if we should grant the bare logical possibility of RH, moreover, this would not amount to very much. For such a possibility would be quite compatible, first of all, with a *hopeful universalism*, as it is sometimes called: the very real possibility that the infinitely resourceful God will successfully win over all sinners in the end. It would also be compatible with the *epistemic certainty*—based upon revelation, for example—that no one will successfully resist God's salvific will forever. It would even be compatible with something very much like irresistible grace. For consider this: although it is logically possible, given the normal philosophical view of the matter, that a fair coin would never land heads up, not even once, in a trillion tosses, such an eventuality is so incredibly improbable that no one need fear it actually happening. Nor is RH any less improbable, even if it should be logically possible. In working with a sinner S (shattering S's illusions and correcting S's ignorance), God could presumably bring S to a point, just short of actually determining S's choice, where S would see the choice between horror and bliss with such clarity that the probability of S repenting and submitting to God would be extremely high. Or, if you prefer, drop the probability to .5. Over an indefinitely long period of time, S would still have an indefinitely large number of opportunities to repent; and so, as Eric Reitan

has argued (successfully, in my opinion),¹⁴ the assumption that sinners retain their libertarian freedom together with the Christian doctrine of the preservation of the saints yields the following result: we can be just as confident that God will eventually win over all sinners (and do so without causally determining their choices) as we can be that a fair coin will land heads up at least once in a trillion tosses.

But the New Testament picture nonetheless warrants, I believe, a stronger view, sometimes called *necessary universalism*: the view that in no possible world containing created persons does God's grace fail to reconcile all of them to himself. In what follows, therefore, I shall argue that RH is logically impossible, not just incredibly improbable.

LIBERTARIAN FREE WILL

Let us first consider the concept of free will with a bit more care. Free-will theists have too often allowed free choice to figure into their abstract calculations no differently than an utterly random event or chance occurrence would. Relying upon a seriously incomplete analysis of freedom, they have typically proceeded as if there are no limits of any kind to the range of *possible* free choices. They have typically specified a single necessary condition of moral freedom, namely, that a choice is free in the libertarian sense only if it is not causally determined, and they have then seemed content to leave it at that—as if there were no other necessary conditions of free choice, which there surely are. For not just any uncaused event, or just any agent-caused choice, or just any randomly generated selection between alternatives will qualify as a *free* choice of the relevant kind. At the very least, moral freedom also requires a minimal degree of rationality on the part of the choosing agent, including an ability to learn from experience, an ability to discern reasons for acting, and a capacity for moral improvement. With good reason, therefore, do we exclude small children, the severely brain damaged, paranoid schizophrenics, and even dogs from the class of free moral agents. For, however causally undetermined some of their behaviors might be, they all lack some part of the rationality required to qualify as free moral agents.

The obvious question, of course, is where to draw the line, and that question may have no clear answer, because both moral freedom and moral responsibility probably come in degrees, even as rationality does. All that is required for our present purposes, however, is some idea of when an action falls well below the relevant threshold. If someone does something without any intelligible motive for doing it and in the presence of the strongest possible motive for not doing it, then this person, whether acting compulsively or simply irrationally, has not acted *freely*. As an illustration, we might suppose that a young boy should irrationally and inexplicably thrust his hand into a fire and hold it there, all the while screaming

his lungs out. Would we regard such an irrational and inexplicable act as free? Clearly not. The rationality condition thus limits the range of *possible* free choices, and one must at least raise the question, therefore, of where the choice or choices specified in RH fall. Do they fall inside or outside the range of possible free choices?

Remarkably, a number of free-will theists, such as William Craig, have felt no necessity to provide a relatively complete analysis of freedom *before* making pronouncements concerning the supposed logical possibilities.¹⁵ They therefore fail to appreciate the following point: to argue *against* the possibility of RH, as I do, one need only identify a single necessary condition of freedom, such as the above rationality condition, and then argue that the choice or choices specified in RH could not possibly satisfy this condition. But to argue *for* the possibility of RH, it is hardly enough to identify a single necessary condition of freedom, such as that of being causally undetermined, and then to argue that the choice or choices specified in RH are consistent with this single condition. To the contrary, one must consider all of the necessary conditions of freedom, or at least specify some nontrivial sufficient condition. An argument for the possibility of RH, therefore, requires a much more complete analysis of freedom than does an argument against its possibility, and it requires a much more complete analysis, I might add, than any defender of RH has given to date.

Observe also that, however vague it may be, the rationality condition that I have specified is one that libertarians and compatibilists can both accept; it is utterly neutral with regard to the dispute between these two warring camps. For even libertarians want to distinguish a free choice from pure chance, randomness, or caprice, and the rationality condition is an attempted step in this direction. I now believe, however, that indeterminism of any kind in the process of deliberating and choosing introduces a degree of randomness, even irrationality, into it, and I also believe that we libertarians should simply bite the proverbial bullet and concede this point to the compatibilists.¹⁶ Am I recommending, then, that we give away the proverbial farm and concede that the concept of free will is itself incoherent? Not quite. If free will should be incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, as more than a few have argued it is,¹⁷ then the concept of free will would indeed be incoherent. But I think there is a way out of the quagmire, a way to resolve the logical tension between indeterminism and the requirement for rationality. It requires, first, that we think of freedom as a matter of degree, and second, that we come to appreciate the following all-important point: some of the very conditions essential to our *emergence* as free moral agents are themselves obstacles to full freedom and moral responsibility, obstacles that can be gradually overcome only *after* we have emerged as embryonic moral agents and have begun to interact with the world on our own, so to speak.

As an illustration, consider simple ignorance. If we were created with a full and complete knowledge of God, that knowledge would not be a personal discovery at all. It would not be acquired through a complex learning process in which we formulate hypotheses, test them in our own experience, and then learn for ourselves over time why union with God is bliss and separation from him an

objective horror; nor would it require a complex process in which we choose freely, experience the consequences of our choices, and then learn from these consequences why love and forgiveness are likewise better than selfishness and estrangement. Herein lies the truth, I believe, behind the free-will theist's contention that our freedom in relation to God requires that we start out in a context where God remains hidden from us, at least for a season. But consider also how relative degrees of ignorance can severely restrict our freedom and, in that sense, can become an obstacle to a fully realized freedom. If I am ignorant of the fact that someone has laced the local water supply with LSD, then I have not freely chosen to ingest the LSD, however freely I may have chosen to drink the water. And similarly for the free-will theist's understanding of divine hiddenness: insofar as the ambiguities, the ignorance, and the misperceptions in a given set of circumstances conceal God from us, or at least make unbelief a reasonable option, they also make committing ourselves to God in these circumstances more like a blind leap in the dark than a free choice for which we are morally responsible. So if anything, God's hiddenness can render us *less* rather than more responsible for our failure to love the one whose true nature and very existence remain hidden from us.¹⁸

Now, even as ignorance is both a condition of and an obstacle to our freedom in relation to God, so also is indeterminism. As free moral agents, assuming we are such, we are not mere extensions of the physical universe, nor are our free actions the product of sufficient causes that lie either in the distant past before we were born or in eternity itself. That is the correct libertarian insight, and it seems to me utterly unlikely that any of our present actions are so determined, however determined some of them might be by more immediate beliefs and desires. For we all emerge and start making choices in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, where indeterminism could easily play a huge role in the choices (or quasi choices) we make, in providing the necessary break from the past, and in allowing us to emerge as independent agents who interact with our environment, learn from experience, and make discoveries on our own. In a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and illusion, moreover, people inevitably miss the mark, the theological name for which is sin, and fall into error; nor is it surprising that in such a context people will sometimes cling to their illusions or suffer from self-imposed delusions of various kinds. But the self-imposed delusions that arise in such a context no more render someone competent to choose an eternal destiny than the self-imposed delusions of an eight-year-old render the child competent to choose a future career.¹⁹

So the trick is to distinguish between the role that indeterminism plays in our *emergence* as free moral agents and the role it continues to play *after* we have become sufficiently rational to learn moral lessons from the consequences of our undetermined choices. Put it this way: it is essential to our moral freedom that we begin making moral choices in a context where those choices are not fully determined by sufficient causes; for, if they were so determined, they would most likely be determined by conditions external to the emerging agent. But it is also essential to our moral freedom that we should be rational enough to learn from our mistakes. So

once we begin learning some relevant moral lessons—from our bad choices, in particular—some of our freest choices may be those voluntary choices where, given our own rational judgment concerning the best course of action, the alternative is no longer even psychologically possible.

In what follows, however, I shall continue to use the term “freedom” in the standard libertarian way as we consider the essential role of our *undetermined* choices in the complex process whereby God reconciles the entire world to himself.

THE ROLE OF HUMAN FREEDOM IN UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION

Consider now a dilemma argument against the very possibility of RH. Either a person S is fully informed about who God is and what both union with him and separation from him entail, or S is not so informed. If S *is* fully informed and should choose a life apart from God nonetheless, then S’s choice, like that of the young boy who, against all reason, shoves his hand into a fire, is utterly and almost inconceivably irrational; such a choice would fall well below the threshold required for moral freedom. And if S is not fully informed, then neither is S in a position to reject the true God; S may reject a caricature of God, perhaps even a caricature of S’s own devising, but S is in no position to reject the true God himself. Therefore, in either case, whether S is fully informed or less than fully informed, it is simply not possible that S should reject the true God *freely*.

Stated so briefly, the above argument, though pretty decisive in my opinion, is unlikely to persuade those already committed to a free-will theodicy of hell. But even many free-will theists seem committed to at least half of the argument, for many would accept the premise that a *free and fully informed* decision to reject God is logically impossible. We see this, for example, in their talk about God’s hiddenness: how, in a context of full clarity, we would lose our power to reject God and would therefore be in no position to respond to him freely. In a similar vein, William Craig remarks that “for some people the degree of revelation that would have to be imparted to them in order to secure their salvation would have to be so stunning that their freedom to disobey would be effectively removed.”²⁰ If by a “stunning” revelation, he means a full disclosure of a kind that removes all of a person’s relevant ignorance and corrects the person’s mistaken judgments about God, then Craig in effect concedes that those who disobey God freely are never *fully informed*; their disobedience always occurs in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, or illusion, where mistaken judgments and errors are real possibilities. And Jerry Walls, to his credit, is quite explicit about the matter when he writes: “I want to agree that those who choose evil, and ultimately hell, are indeed deceived.”²¹ Or again: “We can grant that Talbott is correct in holding that the choice of evil is

impossible for anyone who has a *fully formed* awareness that God is the source of happiness and sin the cause of misery.”²² But Walls goes on to make a twofold claim: first, that the deceptions of the damned are *self-imposed*, a form of self-deception, and second, that our freedom to reject God forever includes the freedom to cling to our illusions and to our self-imposed deceptions forever. For if God were to shatter *all* of our illusions, remove *all* of our ignorance, and resolve *all* of the ambiguities that make a decision to reject God possible, then we would no longer be free in our relation to him.

So herein lies the focal point of the debate over universal reconciliation, as that debate appears in the current philosophical literature. Almost all Christian philosophers who defend the possibility of everlasting separation appeal to a free-will defense or theodicy of some kind. Because many of them also appear to concede that a free and fully informed decision to reject God forever is logically impossible, the live issue in the current debate concerns the status of our *less Than fully informed* decisions or those decisions made in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and illusion. Are these decisions truly free? And if so, to what extent are we morally responsible for their unforeseen consequences?

As a first step toward answering such questions, consider Robert Kane’s illuminating discussion of what he calls a “self-forming willing” (SFW). It is as if an SFW, as Kane understands it, involves an undetermined leap of the imagination not unlike the leap of imagination that might occur when a scientist formulates a new hypothesis for testing. There are relevant reasons for the undetermined leap and also relevant reasons for a similar leap in some other direction, but there is no sufficient causal explanation of why the leap goes in one direction rather than in the other. Kane puts it this way:

Every free choice (which is an SFW) is the initiation of a “value experiment” whose justification lies in the future and is not fully explained by the past. It says, in effect, “Let’s try this. It is not required by my past, but it is consistent with my past and is one branching pathway my life could now meaningfully take. . . . [In performing such an experiment, I am] guided by my past, but not determined by it.”²³

I find this most illuminating. Elsewhere, Kane writes: “To initiate and take responsibility for such value experiments whose justification lies in the future, is to ‘take chances’ without prior guarantees of success. Genuine self-formation requires this sort of risk-taking and indeterminism is part of it.”²⁴ But such quotations also illustrate how indeterminism can be an obstacle to full freedom and moral responsibility. For in what sense is one morally responsible for the outcome of a value experiment conducted in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, or misperception, a context in which there is, according to Kane, no certainty concerning the best thing to do and no “prior guarantee of success”? Suppose that I am trapped in a burning building with two apparent escape routes, and suppose further that, although only one of these apparent escape routes will enable me to escape, I have reasons with respect to each of them for thinking that it might be the best route out. Here, then, is a situation that involves risk without any certainty concerning the best escape

route or any guarantee of success. And though the presence of such risk may indeed add an element of drama to life, perhaps even something of great value, it may also seem incompatible with any personal responsibility for the outcome. So if risk taking, indeterminism, and a host of unexpected consequences are part of the process whereby we become the kind of person we are, as I agree they are, then we must also confront the question: in what sense are we morally responsible for the kind of person we finally come to be?

No answer to this question seems possible within the context of the traditional libertarian understanding of intrinsic desert: the unintelligible idea, as I see it, that certain punishments (or certain rewards, as the case may be) are *intrinsically fitting* responses to certain actions. But if we cast aside this unintelligible idea, we might observe that a value experiment of the kind that Kane describes requires a context in which hypotheses concerning the best course of action, or the best way to live, can be put to the test, so to speak; it requires, that is, a context in which one can learn from mistakes and correct moral failures. In the case of a bad character trait, in particular, being morally responsible for it depends not on its genesis but on an agent's present ability to learn moral lessons and thus to do something about it.

So here, then, is the essential role that our undetermined choices play in the complex process whereby God eventually perfects us: they enable us to make discoveries on our own and to learn important lessons from the consequences of our own personal choices. We may not all make the relevant discoveries at the same pace; but so long as we remain rational enough to qualify as free moral agents, we will all make the required discoveries in the end. For just as primitive humans may have been free on a given occasion to experiment with fire, so we are all free during our earthly lives (and beyond) to experiment with God; we are free, that is, either to separate ourselves from him further or finally to submit ourselves to him. But just as primitive humans were never free *both* to experiment with fire *and* to remain forever ignorant of its power to burn or to cause pain, neither are we free *both* to continue along the path of separation (the logical end of which is the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness) *and* to escape the bitter consequences of doing so. These bitter consequences, moreover, will eventually shatter the very illusions that made it possible to opt for separation in the first place, and they will finally elicit a cry for help of the kind that, however faint, is just what God needs in order to begin and eventually to complete the process of reconciliation.

A CONCLUDING COMMENT

Our free choices do not determine our eternal destiny, which, according to Paul, is wholly a matter of grace; instead, they determine the lessons we still need to learn in the present as we travel our own unique path in life. The woman caught in an act

of adultery, for example, and the moralists who would cast stones at her (see John 8:4–11) no doubt had very different lessons to learn. But because God has infinite love, infinite wisdom, and the very nature of reality on his side, he can so providentially control our lives that in the end we will inevitably learn for ourselves every lesson that, on account of our free choices, we need to learn. In that respect, God is a teacher than whom none greater can be conceived. For even as the proverbial grandmaster in chess can permit a novice to move freely, perhaps even allow the novice to “get away with” some ill-advised moves, and still manage to check-mate the novice in the end, so the hound of heaven can permit his loved ones to choose freely, perhaps even shield them from painful truths for a while, and still undermine over time every possible motive for disobedience.

NOTES

1. I would list John Hick among the Christian universalists (despite his religious pluralism). Others within the philosophical community who have openly identified themselves as Christian universalists include Marilyn McCord Adams, Eric Reitan, John D. Kronen, Keith DeRose, and myself.

2. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), 177.

3. The expression is John Hick's. See Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 136.

4. Even as the Augustinians and the Arminians both reject a proposition, either 1 or 2 above, that other New Testament scholars in the Western tradition claim to be a clear and obvious teaching of scripture, so the universalists also reject a proposition that others would claim to be a clear and obvious teaching of scripture. For the universalists reject the idea of eternal separation altogether. The Augustinians, the Arminians, and the universalists are all, therefore, in the same “exegetical boat,” at least in this sense. They all reject a proposition that other Bible scholars accept as a clear and obvious teaching of scripture. For more on the theological significance of this point and its relevance to any interpretation of the Bible as a whole, see Thomas Talbott, “Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism,” in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (eds.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 3–14.

5. Though many theologians assume that universalism is utterly inconsistent with the Christian scriptures, sustained exegetical arguments for that conclusion are hard to find and, for the most part, disappointing. For an exegetical defense of hell that restricts God's love and mercy to a limited elect, see J. I. Packer, “The Problem of Universalism Today,” in Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 169–178), and Packer, “The Love of God: Universal and Particular,” in T. Schreiner and B. Ware (eds.), *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will: Historical and Theological Perspectives of Calvinism*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 413–428. For an exegetical defense that does not restrict God's love and mercy to a limited elect, but instead limits the scope of God's ultimate victory over sin and death, see I. Howard Marshall, “Does the New Testament Teach Universal Salvation?” in J. Colwell (ed.), *Called to One Hope: Perspectives on the Life to Come* (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 2000), and Marshall, “The New Testament

Does Not Teach Universal Salvation,” in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?* 55–76; and for an exegetical defense that, either intentionally or unintentionally, leaves the whole matter confused, see John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1993).

6. For why I believe universalism to be an inescapable consequence of Pauline theology, especially as encountered in such texts as Romans 5:12–21, Romans 11, and 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, and for why I believe universalism to provide the best interpretation of the Bible as a whole, see my discussion in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?* chs. 2, 3, and 12; for a similar view, see Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); for a powerful defense of universalism from a Christological perspective, see Jürgen Moltmann, “The Restoration of All Things,” in Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 235–255; and for a movement toward universalism within the Catholic tradition, see Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), part 6, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Dare We Hope ‘That All Men Be Saved?’” with “A Short Discourse on Hell” and “Apokatastasis: Universal Reconciliation” (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988). See also Richard Bell, “Rom. 5:18–19 and Universal Salvation,” *New Testament Studies* 48, 417–432, and H. Berkhof, *Well-Founded Hope* (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1969).

7. See, for example, William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 172–188; Craig, “Talbot’s Universalism,” *Religious Studies* 27 (1991), 297–308; Craig, “Talbot’s Universalism Once More,” *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), 497–518; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Charles Seymour, *A Theodicy of Hell* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000); Eleonore Stump, “Dante’s Hell, Aquinas’ Moral Theory, and the Love of God,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16, 181–196; Richard Swinburne, “A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell,” in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Walls, “A Hell of a Choice: Reply to Talbot,” *Religious Studies* 40 (2004), 203–216.

8. An exception is Paul Helm. See his “The Logic of Limited Atonement,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3, no. 2

9. I. Howard Marshall, *Does the New Testament Teach Universal Salvation?* (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 2000), 19.

10. Kenneth S. Kantzer, “Troublesome Questions,” *Christianity Today*, March 20, 1987.

11. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 115.

12. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 232.

13. As John R. Sachs points out in an excellent discussion of freedom from a theological perspective, one’s “persistence in a stance of rejection would have to be something which at every moment was an active ‘effort’ against the power of God’s inviting, forgiving love, something quite different from the final ‘rest’ of human freedom which freely and finally surrenders to the power of that love” (“Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,” *Theological Studies* 52, 248). This article also contains an excellent discussion of Rahner and Balthasar.

14. For the full argument, see Eric Reitan, “Human Freedom and the Impossibility of Damnation,” in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?* 136–141.

15. For a host of such pronouncements, see Craig, “Talbot’s Universalism.”

16. For an excellent argument to this effect, see Peter van Inwagen, “Free Will Remains a Mystery,” in Robert Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 158–177.

17. See, for example, Richard Double, *The Non-reality of Free Will* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
18. For an excellent discussion of divine hiddenness and its implications, see the exchange between J. L. Schellenberg and Paul K. Moser in chapter 2 of Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 30–58.
19. For a further defense of this sort of point, see Marilyn McCord Adams, “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” in Eleonore Stump (ed.), *A Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 301–327.
20. Craig, “Talbot’s Universalism,” 300.
21. Walls, 129.
22. *Ibid.*, 133.
23. Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 145.
24. Robert Kane, “Responsibility, Luck and Chance,” in Laura Waddell Ekstrom (ed.), *Agency and Responsibility* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 176.

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