

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 18 | Issue 2

Article 5

4-1-2001

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Eric H. Reitan

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Recommended Citation

Reitan, Eric H. (2001) "Universalism and Autonomy: Towards a Comparative Defense of Universalism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 5. Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol18/iss2/5>

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UNIVERSALISM AND AUTONOMY: TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE DEFENSE OF UNIVERSALISM

Eric H. Reitan

In a recent article, Michael Murray critiques several versions of universalism—that is, the doctrine that in the end all persons are saved. Of particular interest to Murray is Thomas Talbott's version of universalism (called SU1 by Murray), which puts forward a strategy for ensuring universal salvation that purports to preserve the autonomy of the creatures saved. Murray argues that, on the contrary, the approach put forward in SU1 is not autonomy-preserving at all. I argue that this approach preserves the autonomy of the creature at least as well as the approach posited by the traditional doctrine of hell. Since SU1 clearly does more to preserve the well-being of the creature, it follows that, on the assumption that God loves all His creatures, SU1 is preferable to the doctrine of hell.

Introduction

In recent years, the traditional Christian doctrine of hell (DH)—that is, the doctrine that some people endure eternal suffering after death—has come under critical philosophical scrutiny, with both philosophical critics and defenders.¹ While the opponents of DH tend to embrace universalism²—that is, the doctrine that in the end all people are saved by God and enjoy eternal communion with Him—this alternative has not received the same level of philosophical attention as has DH. Since universalism is without question the most popular alternative to DH, any complete philosophical investigation of the appropriate Christian stance towards the afterlife would call for sustained critical scrutiny of both DH and universalism.

To this end, a recent article by Michael Murray is an important step forward. In "Three Versions of Universalism," Murray offers a kind of negative support for DH by challenging the acceptability of universalism, thereby turning philosophical attention towards this alternative.³ In what follows, I will argue that, even though Murray's critique is interesting and important, it ultimately fails to undermine universalism, which remains a viable alternative to DH. In fact, on the basis of the two primary challenges Murray levels—respect for autonomy and the oddity of the earthly life—universalism actually fares better than DH. Hence, at least from a purely philosophical standpoint, universalism appears to be preferable to DH.



I: Murray's Understanding of the Doctrine of Hell

Murray does not offer more than a sketchy account of DH in his essay, perhaps because his primary aim is to critique universalism. Nevertheless, having a clear sense of what Murray means by "the doctrine of hell" will be helpful in evaluating the import of Murray's essay for a comparative analysis of the rival doctrines.

Murray indicates that the doctrine of hell involves the view that God will "send some of His creatures, all of whom He loves, to an eternity of suffering in separation from Him."⁴ Insofar as Murray affirms God's universal love, he is not interested in considering what Talbott calls "hard-hearted theism" (the view that God does not love some of His creatures, and these He condemns to hell).⁵ This makes sense, given what strikes me as its obviously unchristian character. Murray's account remains ambiguous, however, for two main reasons. First, he fails to indicate whether the suffering to which God commits some of His creatures is simply the suffering intrinsic to existing in a state of alienation from God, or whether there is some additional suffering superadded to this.⁶ Given the assumption that the suffering in question is eternal, and hence cannot be reasonably interpreted as suffering imposed as part of remedial punishment, the former interpretation is easier to reconcile with the universal love of God. But even if we adopt this former interpretation, it remains unclear whether the condition of eternal alienation is *imposed* by God, in the sense that it results from an eternal rejection of the sinner by God, or whether it is *permitted* by God, in the sense that it results from an eternal rejection of God by the sinner. Put another way, it is initially unclear whether Murray has in mind what Talbott refers to as conservative theism or what he calls moderately conservative theism.⁷

Murray's later discussion of universalism, however, reveals a commitment to a view of hell characterized by the following two important features: first, the eternal destiny of each person is *fixed* at the time of death, so that after death they either enjoy eternal communion with God or eternal alienation from Him (there is no third alternative, such as a period of alienation followed by communion); second, what fixes the eternal destiny of every person is their autonomous choice during their earthly life either to accept communion with God or to reject it.⁸ Given these two commitments, the most plausible assumption is that Murray's view falls somewhere between Talbott's conservative and moderately conservative theism. In effect, Murray's view is that at the time of death, God decides to eternally reject those who have, at that time, autonomously chosen to reject Him. What is distinctive about this version of conservative theism is that, contra Talbott, Murray thinks that God's decision to reject for all eternity those who are unregenerate at death shows greater respect for the autonomy of the unregenerate than does Talbott's version of universalism (outlined below). Hence, there emerges a defense of the coherence of DH of the following sort: A perfectly loving God would, out of love for the unregenerate, respect their autonomous choice to reject God by *confirming* them in that choice for all eternity. In Murray's view, then, God's "rejection" of those who are unregenerate at death should be understood as God's decision to, in effect, leave them to the fruits of their own autonomous choice.

Murray's view of DH, then, has the advantage of being formulated in response to some of the more recent critical challenges leveled against it. It is a version of DH that makes eternal damnation into an *expression of respect* for the damned, and in these terms is taken to be compatible with a God who is perfectly loving towards each of his creatures. Murray's most compelling criticism of universalism is that it fails to respect the creature in the way that DH does, because (he thinks) universalism inevitably undercuts the autonomy of those who, at the end of their earthly lives, have chosen to reject God. If Marilyn Adams is right that there is a "Problem of Hell" analogous to the traditional problem of evil, then Murray's essay can be viewed as offering a solution to the Problem of Hell analogous to the Free Will defense.

II: Murray in Outline

Like Talbott, who identifies three versions of DH and challenges all three, Murray identifies three versions of universalism: the naïve version of universalism (NU)—essentially, the view that all those who do not freely choose communion with God are miraculously transformed by God at the moment of death in such a way that they do will it—and two versions of what he calls sophisticated universalism (SU1 and SU2). While he admits that no one has endorsed NU, he discusses it in order to "set out some critical apparatus" that he will use in his critique of SU1 and SU2.⁹ Of these latter, SU1 is the version that has been most fully and explicitly developed in the literature, and it is towards this version that Murray therefore directs his most sustained critique. My comments will therefore center on SU1.

SU1, in brief, is the view that God achieves universal salvation by permitting "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."¹⁰ Murray attributes this view to both Marilyn Adams and Thomas Talbott, but for an explication of the view relies primarily on Talbott. Whereas NU relies on miraculous intervention to bring about a transformation of the creature's will, and hence can be challenged on the grounds that it violates the creature's autonomy, SU1 holds that God guarantees the salvation of all creatures in a way that does not violate their autonomy: those who do not autonomously will communion by the time of their deaths are allowed to continue to exist in a less-than-ideal state until such a time as they *do* autonomously will communion with God. In the interval, God is not passive, but works diligently to, in effect, *persuade* the creature to freely choose the beatific vision—by, as Murray puts it, "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."¹¹ We may suppose, in the effort to reconcile this view with scriptural passages typically interpreted to support DH, that God's persuasive efforts take the form of remedial punishments whose effect is to remove all inhibitors to salvation.¹² In order for SU1 to be a genuinely *universalist* position, SU1 must include the thesis that *all* persons will ultimately choose the beatific vision under these conditions. Talbott thinks that this latter thesis is true because

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.¹³

Murray offers two main criticisms of SU1. The first, which he refers to as “the oddity of the earthly life,” strikes me as rather unconvincing and will therefore not be the main focus of my attention here. Briefly, Murray thinks that if SU1 is right and we have all eternity after the end of our earthly life to choose God, then it becomes difficult to account for the earthly life. Given that this life has such poor soteriological results, wouldn’t it be better to simply place people immediately into the post-mortem state which, according to SU1, has the best possible soteriological results (universal salvation)?¹⁴ This objection strikes me as unconvincing for two reasons. First, given that this earthly life does have such poor soteriological results, it would be exceedingly odd if a perfectly loving God who sought communion with all his creatures would rely on *nothing but* this earthly life for the conversion of humankind. Hence, however problematic this earthly life may be for the universalist, the problems are magnified if we hold—as Murray and other advocates of DH do—that this life is all the chance we get. From a comparative standpoint, then, the oddity of the earthly life provides little reason to prefer DH to SU1. My second reason for finding this objection unconvincing is that the oddity of the earthly life can be accounted for rather easily within the framework of SU1. After all, it is often an awareness of our own mortality that leads us to seek out God. The inevitability and nearness of death, coupled with its mystery and fearfulness, seem to have the power to inspire some people to seek meaning in that which is eternal. An earthly existence characterized by transiency and mortality may therefore inspire many to seek out the constancy of God *far sooner* than they would have had they been placed *ab initio* in the post-mortem state with its unlimited time frame for choosing. Hence, God may have placed us initially in this short earthly existence in order that many of us would avoid needless suffering by finding communion with Him far sooner than we would have otherwise. However, given the poor soteriological results of this earthly existence (due largely to its brevity), He would not rely on this life *alone* to convert the unregenerate.

Hence, Murray’s first main objection to SU1 is not very convincing. His second line of criticism has greater force. SU1 assumes that God is able to save all without violating anyone’s autonomy. This assumption, Murray thinks, is false. On the contrary, Murray believes that the only way for God to guarantee the salvation of all would be by violating human autonomy. Hence, universalism is incompatible with a view of God in which God always fully respects the autonomy of His creatures.

In order to evaluate this objection fully, we must first consider what Murray means by “autonomy.” Murray makes it clear that, by “autonomy,” he means more than mere freedom of choice. For Murray, autonomy involves “free choosing *that is expressed in actions that influence the course of events in the world.*”¹⁵ Hence, Murray says,

...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 in which agents can choose freely but are unable to act autonomously would be a world filled with freely choosing brains-in-vats.¹⁶

Murray goes on to note that one of the consequences that our actions can have (at least in the real world) is on our states of character: our virtues and our vices. What we do can strengthen or weaken our habituated dispositions.¹⁷ This observation figures prominently in his later discussion, but one comment about it is warranted up front. While our actions do have consequences for our states of character in the real world, such a causal connection between action and character is *not* a prerequisite for autonomy. It is quite possible to have a world where my choices express themselves in actions that have consequences for good or ill—and hence a world in which autonomy exists—without an habituating effect being among those consequences.

In fact, my habits seem to put restrictions on my freedom to choose, insofar as it becomes increasingly difficult to choose against my habits the more firmly entrenched these habits become. While autonomy requires *more* than freedom of choice, it does require freedom of choice as well. As such, it would seem that a world in which my choices generate habits of this sort is a world where autonomy exists in tension with itself: one of the consequences of free choice (one that helps to make it autonomous in the full sense) involves a restriction of my free choice.¹⁸ While there may be reasons why a good God would create human nature with this habit-forming feature, the maximization of autonomy is therefore not one of them. Autonomy can exist without such a feature, and may even be restricted by it.

One last point about autonomy: while Murray rightly notes that autonomy requires not only freedom of choice but free choices that have meaningful consequences, he leaves out a third feature of autonomy. In particular, he leaves out the traditional view (one whose roots extend at least back to Aristotle, and which finds its fullest expression in Kant), that choices made in ignorance of relevant facts are not fully autonomous. If I choose course A over course B based on false beliefs about A and B, I am not really choosing A over B. Rather, I am choosing my mistaken idea of A over my mistaken idea of B. Hence, it is inappropriate to say that I have autonomously chosen A precisely because it is not really A that I have chosen. In evaluating the merits of universalism and DH with respect to their implications for autonomy, it is important to keep all of these features of autonomy in mind.

III: Infallibly but Freely Choosing God

Murray's most important criticisms of SU1 are directed towards one of its most central tenets. In particular, Murray wants to reject the following principle:

(GP) Given unlimited opportunity to work on the unregenerate after their deaths, it is in God's power to save every person *without thereby violating the person's autonomy*.

(GP) might be viewed as a conclusion implied by the following premises:

(P1) If a person is freed from all ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire (hereafter “salvation inhibitors”), the person will infallibly but autonomously choose eternal communion with God.

(P2) Given unlimited opportunity to work on the unregenerate after their deaths, it is in God’s power to free every person from salvation inhibitors using nothing but autonomy-preserving methods.

In effect, Murray challenges (GP) by denying both (P1) and (P2). With respect to (P1) Murray explicitly challenges the following claim, which I will call (FI):

...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.¹⁹

(FI), together with the assumption that communion with God is the greatest possible human good, entails (P1).

Before looking at Murray’s objection to (FI), I should consider a problem that Murray does not explicitly raise, but that may lurk in the background of Murray’s thinking. (FI) holds that it is possible to freely (in a libertarian sense) yet infallibly choose the good. But if the good is truly chosen *infallibly* by someone with full information and no contrary affective states, that means that the good is chosen in all those possible worlds where these conditions hold. In other words, if my choice of the good is to be infallible under the given conditions, it must be that the given conditions are *sufficient* conditions for my choosing the good. But then it seems that the given conditions determine my choice. How, then, can my choice be free in a libertarian sense?

First of all, it should be noted that, within the context of SU1, the unredeemed are afforded *unlimited time* to freely choose God. Hence, the defender of SU1 need not hold that in every possible world, a person freed from all salvation inhibitors will autonomously choose God at *any* time T. Rather, the defender of SU1 needs only to hold that in every possible world, *given an unlimited amount of time*, a person freed from all salvation inhibitors will autonomously choose God at *some* time T. Put another way, the universalist view is that no autonomous agent, freed from all contrary desires, will *for all eternity* choose contrary to what they know to be the supreme good. Even if, by virtue of her libertarian freedom, she is *able* to choose at any time T that which she has absolutely no motive whatever to choose, she will eventually choose that which she has every reason to choose and absolutely no motive to reject, if she is given infinite opportunities to choose.

Put another way, we might say that what is necessary to preserve libertarian freedom is that, at any time T, there is at least one possible world in which the agent chooses contrary to what she has every motive to choose at T. But this is compatible with there being *no* possible world which is such that the agent chooses contrary to what she knows is best at *every* time

T. Hence, given infinite time to choose, it seems that there is no *contradiction* in saying that libertarian free agents freed from all ignorance and bondage to desire will infallibly choose the good (whether it would be *true* to say this is another matter).

At this point, a critic might point out that what is true of choosing the good in general might *not* be true of choosing the ultimate good of communion with God. This choice is unique in that, at least as traditionally understood, the choice once made confirms the agent in that choice for the rest of eternity. Hence, in order for an agent to remain free to choose rejection of God at any time T, there must be a possible world in which the agent has rejected God *up to and including time T*. But this will have to be true of *every* T indefinitely into the future. Hence, the objection concludes, in order for an agent to remain free to reject God at any time T, there must be at least one possible world in which the agent rejects God at *every* time T.

Notice, however, that the supposition of SU1 is that we are dealing with an infinite timeline. The critic may be right that in order to preserve libertarian freedom, for any *actual* time along this infinite timeline there must be at least one possible world (a “God-rejecting world”) in which the agent continues to reject God up to and including that time. But someone who holds that the creature will infallibly but freely choose God given *infinite* time needn’t reject this point. For it is possible to hold that, as the time line moves towards infinity, the *percentage* of God-rejecting worlds *approaches* 0, and that God will simply permit the timeline to continue indefinitely until the creature in fact chooses God—an outcome that is *guaranteed* given the fact that the time frame is infinite and the percentage of God-rejecting worlds approaches 0 as time moves towards infinity.

To understand this point, it is important to recognize that even if there are an infinite number of God-rejecting worlds at any time T, there are *degrees* of infinity such that the totality of God-rejecting worlds will represent only a *percentage* of the totality of possible worlds. By analogy, consider that although there are an infinite number of points in a one-inch line, those points only represent fifty percent of the totality of points in a two-inch line.

If we assume that those who choose God are forever confirmed in their choice, and that at any time T, for any creature who has not yet chosen God, there is at least one possible world in which the creature chooses God for the first time, it follows that the percentage of God-rejecting worlds will decrease as time moves towards infinity. This is so because, given our assumption that those who choose God are forever confirmed in their choice, there is no possible world such that, for any time T, it is a God-choosing world prior to T but a God-rejecting world after T. However, given our assumption that at any time T there is at least one possible world in which the creature chooses God for the first time, it follows that at any time T there is at least one possible world such that it is a God-rejecting world prior to T but a God-choosing world after T. Thus, for any times T and T-1, the number of possible worlds in which the agent continues to reject God is at least one less at T than it was at T-1, and the number of God-choosing worlds is at least one more. This is so because there is at least one possible world that was a God-rejecting world at T-1 that ceases to be a God-rejecting world and becomes a God-choosing world at T, but no possible world in which the reverse is the case.

Hence, as time moves towards infinity, the percentage of God-rejecting worlds is going to decrease, even if the number of God-rejecting worlds remains infinite. Thus, it is possible to maintain that, even if there is no *particular* moment in time where the number of God-rejecting worlds is 0, the *percentage* of such worlds *approaches* 0 as the time line moves towards infinity. And this may be precisely what we mean when we say that, given an *infinite* time frame in which to choose, a libertarian free agent will infallibly choose communion with God: the percentage of worlds in which the agent continues to reject God approaches 0 as the time line moves towards infinity. Understood in these terms, there is nothing contradictory in claiming that a libertarian free agent cannot *eternally* reject God.

Of course, that there is no contradiction in saying this does not mean that it is true. What reason do we have to believe that it truly is impossible for a libertarian free agent to *eternally* reject the good once freed from all ignorance and bondage to desire? Put in the terms laid out above, what reason do we have to think that the percentage of God-rejecting worlds approaches 0 as the timeline moves towards infinity? We might hold, with Aquinas, that the will is naturally ordered towards the good,²⁰ and that this natural ordering manifests itself at all times in a second-order desire for what we know is best: we want to desire the best, even under those circumstances when we don't in fact. If this is the case, then any time I choose contrary to what I know is best I am choosing against the very nature of my will. If contrary desires, proceeding from a state of character formed in the absence of full information, were exerting an external influence on my will, then we might expect this unnatural choice to be made with some consistency. In the absence of such contrary impulses, however, the will remains under the influence of its own nature. In almost every possible world, we would expect the will to follow its own nature immediately. But, assuming libertarian freedom, there is some possible world in which it does not. Even so, it is reasonable to suppose that the percentage of possible worlds in which the will continues to resist its own nature, with neither reason nor motive, approaches 0 as the timeline moves towards infinity. *Eternal* resistance is in this sense impossible, even if resistance is possible for any *finite* time frame. And understood in these terms, the impossibility of such eternal resistance seems not only coherent, but highly plausible.

That our wills do possess such a natural ordering towards the good also seems highly plausible, given the assumption that we were made by a perfectly good God for the end of enjoying eternal communion with Him. To think that God made us for this end, yet gave us wills that were utterly indifferent to the good, even God's perfect goodness, verges on a contradiction.

Someone might argue, of course, that such a natural ordering of the will towards the good is incompatible with libertarian freedom. To this it might be noted that such a natural ordering, because it is an intrinsic feature of the human will itself, is not an efficient cause external to the will. Hence, any time one acts on this natural desire for the good, one's will is solely responsible for the act. If we add the further stipulation that it is possible for the will to act contrary to this desire (even if that possibility is remote), there remains a sense in which such a will has libertarian freedom (unless by "libertarian freedom" we mean a freedom in which the will has no

intrinsic responsiveness to reason, and no propensity to respond to motives outside itself—but freedom in this sense is clearly something that no actual person possesses, nor would it be a boon if someone did).

With these ideas in mind, let us turn to Murray's criticism of (FI). Murray distinguishes between two senses of "fully informed": first, it can mean knowing all the relevant facts and having no relevant false beliefs; second, it can mean knowing all the relevant facts and "ascrib(ing) the proper weight to the things known" by structuring one's desires "so that they properly reflect the importance of what is known."²¹ Hence, there are two versions of (FI), what I will call (FI1) and (FI2), corresponding to the two senses of "fully informed." Essentially, Murray argues that both (FI1) and (FI2) are false. (FI1) is false, he says, because a libertarian free agent can exhibit weakness of will, and can choose to act against what she fully knows is best out of a desire that does not reflect this knowledge (for example, choosing smoking, unhealthy diets, or promiscuous sex even though we know they are bad for us).²² He thinks (FI2) is false because a person can be fully informed in the second sense only if her libertarian freedom is undermined. This is because, according to Murray, in order to guarantee that people are fully informed in the second sense it is necessary not only that people know that communion with God is best, but that they "structure their desires accordingly." But the only way to *insure* that they structure their desires accordingly is for God to miraculously transform their desires to harmonize with what they know is best.²³ Murray takes such transformation of desires to be a violation of autonomy, although he does not explain why. In any event, he concludes that full information in the first sense does not guarantee communion with God, while full information in the second sense does so only at the expense of autonomy.

It seems to me, however, that Murray has failed to make a compelling case for the falsity of FI1. Murray contends that full information in the first sense does not guarantee communion with God because people may act on desires contrary to what they know is best (what he calls "weakness of will"). But this answer assumes the presence of such contrary desires. We can't act on unhealthy desires if we do not have any. But why would we desire what goes against our understanding of what is best? The most obvious answer is that we have developed bad habits prior to receiving the relevant understanding—in other words, because we are under the influence of desires that were formed in the absence of full information, and now that we *do* have full information we can't shake off the bad habit. However, FI1 assumes that the agent has been freed from all such unhealthy affective states. One of Talbott's key theses is that such "stripping away" of unhealthy desires is *not* a violation of our autonomy, since those desires were not freely chosen with full information, and they presently interfere with free choice.²⁴

If we truly have been freed from bad habits that might generate desires contrary to the good, what possible source could there be for such unhealthy desires? Is there any reason to think that a person who sees with perfect and immediate clarity the intrinsic preferability of object A over object B would *freely choose* to desire B more highly than A (given that there is at the time no extant subjective preference)? Of course, if B is a more *immediate* good than

A, someone with a habit of preferring immediate gratification over long term well-being might come to desire B over A even in the full knowledge that A is preferable. But in that case the person's capacity to choose is again being restricted by a bad habit—in this case, the bad habit of preferring immediate rewards above overall well-being. This habit may develop because the more immediate good *seems* like the greater good to many people, especially in their formative years. But according to FI1, any such habit formed on the basis of erroneous information will be eliminated, and in the presence of full information the more immediate good will no longer seem preferable. The same can be said for any other motives associated with weakness of will, such as the habit of choosing the more intensely pleasurable experience, or of choosing out of stubbornness or contrariness. All such choices proceed from states of character properly classified as vices—and these, by our assumption, have been eliminated by God. Of course, sometimes weakness of will manifests itself in our tendency to choose *our own good* over the more altruistic demands of morality. But weakness of will of this sort does not come into play in the present case, since what is at issue is choosing communion with God, which by hypothesis is our own greatest good.

In short, if we have been freed of all those habituated desires which were formed in the absence of full information, then given full information—even in only the first sense—we have every reason to “structure (our) desires so that they properly reflect the importance of what is known.” There is no reason for us to do otherwise—especially given the assumption that our will is naturally ordered to the good, and that we therefore naturally possess a second-order desire for what we know is best.

Of course, Murray could still hold that it is possible (however unlikely) for a libertarian free agent to choose against reason and native desire in such a case. But, as argued above, even if a libertarian free agent who is freed from all ignorance and bondage to contrary desires *can* choose against the good at any given time T, it hardly seems likely, given the natural ordering of the will towards the good, that the agent could do so *for all eternity* (especially an eternity in which God is diligently working to persuade the agent to choose the good). Given an infinite time frame, the agent will inevitably choose the good. Of course, if I choose contrary to the natural ordering of my will enough times (however unlikely it is that I do so), I might manage to form a bad habit that could impel me to continue choosing against the good. But then I would re-acquire a kind of bondage to contrary desire of the sort that, according to our assumption, God would strip away. The possibility of God continually stripping away such states of character without violating autonomy will be discussed below.

What this means is that full information in the first sense, combined with the elimination of autonomy-inhibiting desires (that is, desires external to the natural ordering of our will), leads ultimately to full information in the second sense. And this means that Murray's criticism of FI2 is also in error. It is not necessary that God miraculously implant desires into people in order to guarantee that their desires harmonize with the good. All that is necessary is that He give them full understanding of what is in fact good, and free them of the autonomy-inhibiting habits of desire that keep them from acting on their natural second-order desire for the good.²⁵

IV: "A Different Denial of 'Autonomy'"

Murray's other main criticism of SU1 amounts to a denial of (P2). He wishes to deny that, given unlimited opportunity to work on the unregenerate after their deaths, it is in God's power to free every person of salvation inhibitors *using nothing but autonomy-preserving methods*. Murray thinks, on the contrary, that continuing to offer the opportunity for salvation to those who have rejected it by the end of their lives *amounts to a violation of their autonomy*, because the choice of the unregenerate to reject God is not being accepted. They aren't permitted to have what they have chosen, namely alienation from God.

He argues for this point in terms of an analogy, which he refines in the light of objections. The final version of the analogy involves a fast-food drive-through which, apparently, includes both healthy and rotten hamburgers on the menu (I can only assume it is White Castle). Those who order rotten burgers (presumably supposed to represent those who choose alienation from God) receive what they ordered and get sick. We can expect that this ill experience might lead the rotten burger eaters to reconsider their choice, but Murray asks us to imagine someone who has cultivated a taste for rotten burgers through repeatedly choosing them. They continue to choose rotten burgers every time they get into line, out of a fixed state of character. Murray tells us that SU1 involves, in effect, repeatedly *forcing* these rotten-burger-eaters to order again and again until they start choosing healthy burgers (communion with God) and their former state of character begins to break down. In this sense their preference for rotten burgers isn't being respected. They aren't permitted to be rotten burger lovers, because they are required to keep returning to the queue until they start choosing healthy burgers and their habits start to change.²⁶

Murray is clearly working with a confusing (and confused) analogy here. The choice between the healthy burger and the rotten burger can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, we could have in mind the choice, at any time T, between communion with God and alienation from God. On the other hand, he could have in mind the choice between *eternal* communion with God and *eternal* alienation from God. It seems, in fact, that Murray fails to adequately distinguish between these two alternatives.

Suppose that Murray takes the "healthy burger" to represent *eternal* communion with God, and the "rotten burger" to represent *eternal* alienation. On this view, if at some time, say T₁, a person chooses eternal alienation, God refuses to accept that choice and "sends the person back in line" to choose again. If at time T₂ the choice is still eternal alienation, once again the choice is rejected. This continues until at some time, T_n, the person chooses eternal communion, at which point the choice is accepted, and the person joins God in blissful communion for the rest of eternity.

If this is what the advocate of SU1 is committed to, then SU1 does involve autonomy violation of a sort. Even though the person who ultimately chooses eternal communion with God does so of her own will, it is only because the alternative choice has been consistently denied her each time she *tried* to choose it in the past. She has no real freedom to choose eternal alienation, if that is what she wants.

But notice that this way of setting up the choice is itself an “autonomy minimizing” strategy. According to this approach, at time T1 I am to choose between communion with God at *all* times and alienation from God at *all* times. This means that the choice is set up at T1 so that, if my choice is accepted at T1, I am deprived of all future choice on the matter at all future times. Only if my choice is rejected at T1 (and my autonomy is therefore directly violated) do I still have a choice on the matter at T2. Hence, if the choice is set up in this way, there is an inevitable restriction of autonomy whether my choice is accepted or not.

In other words, if the choice is conceived in this way, the advocate of limited salvation is little better than the universalist when it comes to autonomy violations. In effect, God is saying at T1, “Choose now and forever.” Even if God respects my choice at T1, the way in which the choice is set up places restrictions on my autonomy, by denying me the possibility of ever changing my mind. But it is precisely this “choose now and forever” approach to salvation that the advocate of SU1 wants to deny. The advocate of SU1 holds that there is *no* time at which one can no longer change one’s mind.²⁷

It follows that SU1 is more adequately represented if the choice, at any time T, is between communion with God *at T* and alienation from God *at T*. If the choice is understood in these terms, then the person gets exactly what they choose at any time T. At no point is their choice rejected. Under this understanding, SU1 holds that people always get exactly what they choose with respect to their relationship with God at any time T. The reason why all are ultimately saved is because all eventually come to realize that communion with God is preferable to alienation, and all are eventually stripped of affective states that inhibit their capacity to choose what is preferable. Given sufficient time, SU1 holds that, in effect, everyone will eventually “catch on” and begin consistently choosing healthy burgers over rotten ones.

Murray can respond here by saying that, even if people “get what they order” at any time T, their choice for the “rotten burger” isn’t respected, because they are “forced” to get back in line and order again. In fact, this is ultimately Murray’s reason for holding that SU1 fails to respect autonomy.²⁸ But this answer only reveals a limitation of the analogy. The reason why all are forced to choose again and again at all times is simply because God offers communion with Himself as a kind of “standing offer” which is never withdrawn. Since the offer is never withdrawn, a person faces the choice of accepting or rejecting the offer at *any* time T, and is in this sense “forced” to choose.

A better analogy than Murray’s, which captures this idea of a “standing offer,” would be to imagine that I offer everyone in town the opportunity to come live in my home for as long as they desire. If this offer is never withdrawn, then you are “forced” to choose at any time T whether to accept or reject it. To strengthen the analogy, we can imagine (contrary to fact and the realities of a philosopher’s salary) that my home is such a wonderful place to live that it is intrinsically preferable to any other dwelling in town (and, of course, it is so spacious that it can accommodate the town’s whole population with ease). Anyone who takes me up on my offer, and

moves in, will find it so rewarding that she will choose to stay forever. Anyone who consistently rejects my offer will do so either because she fails to fully appreciate what a great offer it is, or because she is trapped by bad habits that inhibit her capacity to freely choose. SU1 holds that God is able, in time, to strip away both kinds of impediments.

The fact that it is in the nature of standing offers that we are “forced” at all times either to accept or reject them in no way thwarts the autonomy of those towards whom such offers are directed. On the contrary, “limited-time offers” pose a greater threat to autonomy, as can be attested by anyone who has faced high-pressure sales tactics. When a choice must be made *now* or (as Murray seems to hold) *by the moment of death*, one’s choices are *restricted* in a way that they are not if one is free to choose at any time. Hence, contrary to Murray’s claim, the limited salvation of DH places greater restrictions on autonomy than does SU1.

There is, however, a crucial dimension to Murray’s analysis which is not addressed in the above arguments. In particular, Murray considers in his discussion the *character* of the person making the choice. What is denied me under SU1, according to Murray, is the autonomy to choose to be a person with a certain sort of character—namely, a person with a God-rejecting character.²⁹ After all, a person with a God-rejecting character has a fixed disposition to reject God, and will therefore continue to do so *ad infinitum* unless stripped of this disposition.³⁰ Even given a standing offer to choose God, and unlimited time to take God up on that offer, a person with a God-rejecting character, who is habituated to reject God, will remain forever in a state of alienation unless subjected to pressures (such as remedial punishments) that strip away the God-rejecting character. Universalism is guaranteed under SU1, then, only if God is prepared to strip away such a fixed disposition to reject God, allowing the person to “start from scratch” and develop their character anew—and to keep doing so until the person develops a God-choosing character and thereby enters into communion with God.³¹

Talbott believes that such a stripping procedure would liberate us from bondage to desire, and thereby increase our autonomy. Murray believes, on the contrary, that this process of stripping away the fixed dispositions formed through habituation is a violation of autonomy. In a sense, it deprives us of the freedom to become the kind of person we choose to be: under SU1, we are simply not free to become God-rejecting people. I should note that Murray’s point here, in order to be plausible, needs to be modified slightly. Under SU1 we *are* free to become God-rejecting people. If we choose consistently to reject God, we will develop states of character that habituate us to such rejection. What is not possible for us to do is to hold onto such a state of character *for all eternity*. God will eventually strip away such a state of character, if not in this life then in some post-mortem state. It should also be noted that this “stripping-away” process need not be understood as a miraculous transformation, wherein God, so to speak, waves his magic wand and the relevant affective states are removed. One might imagine that God subjects the unregenerate to remedial punishments (the “hell” referred to in scriptures) which are, given sufficient time, always successful in inspiring the unregenerate to shake off their bad habits.³² Even so, it remains the case that, under SU1, God does not permit

anyone to cling to a God-rejecting character for all eternity. And this is what, for Murray, constitutes a violation of autonomy.

To strengthen his case for this view, Murray asks us to consider a hypothetical person who, if allowed to go through the process of forming a fixed character and being stripped of it ten times, would develop a God-embracing character on only the sixth and ninth occasions. If we assume SU1, then, as Murray rightly points out, the process of stripping away character dispositions would be stopped on the sixth occasion, and the person would thereafter enjoy eternal communion with God. But Murray asserts that stopping the process at this point would be "arbitrary."³³ His main reason for thinking so seems to be that if a person would develop a God-rejecting character 80% of the time, then it makes more sense to stop the process on a God-rejecting cycle (or not stop the process at all).

Clearly, however, stopping the process on a God-embracing cycle is not at all arbitrary. After all, it is only if one stops the process on a God-embracing cycle that the person will get to enjoy the beatific vision. One might very well argue that a perfectly loving God would choose to end the process at a point which would be most beneficial to the person—namely, on a God-embracing cycle. Thus, there is good reason to end the process at such a point, and God's decision to do so is not arbitrary at all.

But given the context within which Murray makes his remarks, we might take it that his real objection to ending the process at a God-embracing cycle is not that doing so is arbitrary, but rather that doing so fails to respect the creature's autonomy. Perhaps Murray thinks that since the creature would choose a God-rejecting character 80% of the time, the creature is "voting" in favor of a God-rejecting character by the frequency with which she chooses it, and that by ending the process on a God-embracing cycle, God is failing to respect this "vote."

Murray considers one possible response to this argument, which he finds inadequate. In fact, this response is far more decisive than Murray takes it to be. Additionally, there is at least one other compelling response which an advocate of SU1 can offer. Taken together, these responses decisively undermine Murray's argument based on character-choice.

The response which Murray considers explicitly is the view that once one has cultivated a God-embracing character, one would continue to do so in future cycles. Murray can see no reason why we should think so, however, since "the dispositions constitutive of one's character are, on this picture, completely purged after each cycle." What Murray neglects is that this "purging" is a stripping away only of the *habituated* dispositions, not of dispositions *intrinsic to human nature* (such as the natural ordering of the will towards the good), nor of the knowledge of what it was like to be confirmed in a given character-state. Given the hypothesis that the chief human good is communion with God, there is no surer way to become acquainted with this good than to experience it by developing a God-embracing character. If God should strip away the habit of choosing God from someone who had developed such a character, there is every reason to think that in the absence of any *habituated* disposition, but with a *natural* disposition of the will towards the good and full knowledge that embracing God is the greatest good, the person would immediately choose to

embrace God and quickly develop a God-embracing character anew.

Thus, it seems that there is excellent reason to think that, once one chooses to cultivate a God-embracing character, one would continue to do so in future cycles. Hence, this objection to Murray's argument based on character-choice is far stronger than Murray takes it to be.

A second problem with Murray's argument based on character-choice is his assumption that we *choose* our states of character (and therefore we are being denied the fruits of our choices if God strips us of the dispositions which flow from our character).³⁴ In some cases this may be true. For example, I may decide that I want to become a more patient person, because I respect patience as a virtue. I decide to cultivate a character of patience through, as Aristotle puts it, "like activities." On the other hand, sometimes (as is usually the case with bad habits) my state of character creeps up on me without ever being chosen for itself. Consider my habit of wasting hours playing solitaire on my computer. I did not ever choose to be a solitaire addict. Rather, I chose to play solitaire on numerous successive occasions, and a character disposition to play solitaire emerged as a result. While the bad habit is a consequence of my choices, the *habit* is not what I chose.

Thus, there are both chosen and unchosen states of character. With respect to the former, I presumably choose to cultivate a given state of character because I believe that it is the best character to have. Now this belief that my state of character is the best to have can either be true or false. If false, I am making my choice in ignorance of the truth, and my choice is not truly autonomous. Stripping away a given character state is a violation of autonomy only if the character state is one I autonomously chose. Hence, stripping away unchosen states of character would not be a violation of autonomy, nor would stripping away chosen states of character that were chosen on the basis of ignorance of the truth. In either of these cases, the stripping away process would free the person from the compelling power of habituated desires that the person would choose not to have if able to make a choice in full knowledge of the relevant facts. As such, this stripping-away process would actually contribute to autonomy, as Talbott maintains.

Put more simply, given the assumption that communion with God is our highest good, it is hard to imagine that anyone would *autonomously* choose to develop a God-rejecting character. If someone did develop such a character, it would either be an unchosen consequence of repeated bad choices, or it would be chosen on the basis of misinformation. In either case, no denial of autonomy results from stripping away a God-rejecting character. However, when someone develops a God-embracing character, stripping away such a state of character *would* be autonomy-violating. Consider: either a God-embracing character is directly chosen, in the sense of being consciously cultivated on the basis of the judgment that having such a state of character would be for the best, or it emerges as a result of successively choosing, not the character-state as such, but the activity of embracing God. If it is directly chosen, then it is chosen on the basis of the belief that embracing God is best—in other words, according to our hypothesis, on the basis of accurate information. To strip away a state of character that was chosen on the basis of accurate information *is* autonomy

violating. If the state of character was not directly chosen, but emerged as a result of successively choosing to embrace God, it nevertheless seems the case that any person who had developed such a state of character would *endorse* it, or choose it after the fact, once given full information. After all, such a state of character would inspire them to continually choose their chief good. To strip away a state of character that is endorsed on the basis of accurate information would also seem to be autonomy-violating. Thus, when Murray claims that ending the “process of character-making and -purging” on a God-embracing cycle is arbitrary, and hence autonomy-violating, he is in error. On the contrary, ending the process on a God-embracing cycle is *required* out of respect for autonomy. As such, DH does less to maximize creaturely autonomy than does SU1.

One final point is worth making. Even if we ignore the responses above and accept that SU1 is autonomy violating, by Murray’s reasoning SU1 violates only what might be called “second-order” autonomy, while preserving first-order autonomy. To see what I mean, let us return to Murray’s hypothetical case of the person who is put through a “process of character-making and -purging,” and who would, if allowed to go through the process ten times, embrace God only on cycles six and nine. But God stops the process the very first time the person autonomously chooses communion with God. Hence, the person enjoys, at the end of the sixth cycle, an eternal communion with God that has been autonomously chosen. The autonomy at work in cycle six, when the person is saved, is what I will call the person’s first-order autonomy. Murray does not deny that a God-embracing character was autonomously chosen in cycle six. What he holds is that there remains an autonomy violation of a different sort—presumably because God (rather than the person) decided when to stop the process of character-making and -purging, and because this decision, while in harmony with the person’s first-order autonomy at the time it is made, ignores the person’s *overall pattern of choices*. No matter what the person’s overall pattern of choices, the final outcome will be the same: eternal communion with God. One’s pattern of choice makes no difference to one’s final destiny. It should be noted, however, that one’s autonomous choice still *does* make a difference insofar as the choice to embrace God is required for salvation, and insofar as the choice to reject God is respected—even if the habits of character which result from repeatedly making such a choice are stripped away. And even though the *final* outcome is the same no matter what one’s *pattern* of choices might be, those who persist in rejecting God put off enjoying communion with God longer than those who choose God in earlier cycles (and hence remain in “hell” for a longer period of time). So Murray cannot maintain that the fact that the final result is the same no matter what the choice pattern means that there is *no* autonomy in his sense. Because our choices do have significant consequences even if, in the end, all of us are saved.

Presumably, however, Murray thinks that SU1 involves giving to some persons a final destiny that, even though chosen by them, is out of harmony with their overall pattern of choices. This is what I am calling a violation of second-order autonomy. But surely the violation of such second order-autonomy is not problematic in the way that the violation of first-order

autonomy is problematic. Why should one think so? I certainly am not likely to complain about receiving some good that I have freely chosen on the grounds that it doesn't correspond to some overall choice-pattern of which I cannot be fully aware myself (since it is the counterfactual pattern that *would* result were God to act differently). Furthermore, my choice-patterns, while they result from my choices, are not themselves chosen *as such*. Finally, choice-patterns are not intentionally directed towards specific ends the way that choices are; hence, to say that some good is out of harmony with a choice pattern is harder to make sense of than to say that a good is out of harmony with my choices.

In short, given the dubious value (even coherence) of respecting second-order autonomy, it becomes difficult to see why respect for such autonomy should take precedence over ensuring the creature's eternal happiness. While there may be some reason to allow the creature to forego eternal happiness out of respect for first-order autonomy, there is no similar case to be made for second-order autonomy.³⁵ To the extent that SU1 guarantees eternal happiness for all creatures without any violation of first order-autonomy, it would seem contrary to God's perfect love to deny eternal happiness to some creatures because some counterfactual choice pattern could be interpreted as a vote for damnation.

A committed advocate of DH might, in the light of all these arguments, finally choose to reject my view that the percentage of possible worlds in which an autonomous agent, freed of all salvation inhibitors, rejects God approaches 0 as the timeline moves towards infinity. Despite what strikes me as the strong plausibility of this view, I cannot decisively reject the view that the percentage of such God-rejecting worlds approaches some number greater than 0 as the timeline approaches infinity. But even if this should prove to be the case, the percentage would surely be very low. For in every possible world that God could create, God would be diligently working with all of His formidable power and wisdom to ensure that those of His creatures who were made for communion with Him would realize that end. Even if we suppose that among the possible worlds in which God labors in this way there is some fraction in which not all are saved, it seems to me that we would seriously underestimate God's resourcefulness if we held that this fraction were anything but very small. That one of these remotely possible worlds should turn out to be the *actual* world strikes me as so unlikely as to warrant little serious consideration. In the words of one priest, "Of course I believe in hell. But only a fool would think there was anybody *in* there."

Oklahoma State University

NOTES

1. For significant defenses of DH, see Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell," in Alfred J. Freddoso, *The Existence of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 52; William Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 172-88; and Stephen T. Davis,

"Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology*, January 1990, pp. 172-85. For important criticism of DH, see especially Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians," in Eleonore Stump, *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 301-27; and Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 19-42.

2. Both Adams and Talbott favor universalism over DH, Talbott with fewer reservations than Adams.

3. Michael J. Murray, "Three Versions of Universalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 55-68.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

5. Talbott, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-34.

6. The latter view seems to be the traditional one, although the former has strong contemporary exponents. See especially Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

7. Talbott, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-3.

8. Both assumptions are implicit in Murray's critical discussion of universalism, especially in the section headings "The Gratuitous Earthly Life" and "The Oddity of the Earthly Life." See Murray, *op. cit.* pp. 56-7, 62-3.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Talbott endorses this view in his discussion of Moderately Conservative Theism." *Ibid.*, pp. 34-7.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

14. Murray, *op. cit.* pp. 62-3.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

18. Marilyn Adams makes this observation, and uses it as part of her argument against DH. In brief, her view is that, because we are habit-forming creatures, and because we start to form our habits while immature and ignorant and under the influence of negative environmental forces, "we arrive at adulthood in a state of impaired freedom...." See Adams, p. 313.

19. Murray, p. 61.

20. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q 82, Articles 1 & 2.

21. Murray, p. 62.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Talbott, pp. 36-7.

25. It might be objected that an agent could willfully choose to ignore the "full information" presented by God, and hence remain in ignorance despite God's best efforts. But it seems that if having full information is in one's own best interests (as we must assume in this case), then—given what has already been said—the choice to ignore this information is itself one that could persist indefinitely only if the agent is in the grip of a bad habit or what might be called a *second-order* ignorance (ignorance of the fact that it is best to be fully informed). Hence, by removing *these* salvation inhibitors, God could ensure that the agent would (at least eventually) infallibly choose to receive full information. Of course, the second-order ignorance might be willfully chosen as well; but again, such a choice could persist only out of a bad habit or a *third-order* ignorance (ignorance of the fact that it is best to be fully informed about the value of being fully informed). Either this regress of willfully chosen ignorance is infinite, or it is not. If it is not infinite, then God could eliminate the base ignorance without any autonomy violation, and by a kind of domino

effect eliminate the remaining ignorance. If the regress is infinite, then there is no point in the entire sequence in which any choice to remain ignorant is made with full information; hence, the original choice to be ignorant cannot be conceived of as fully autonomous, and God would not be violating an autonomous choice by overriding it.

26. Murray, pp. 63-4.

27. Of course, there might be a sense in which those who are enjoying the beatific vision are no longer able to reject God. But this is because they have the most intimate and compelling experience of what communion with God entails. They are presently enjoying the very telos of their existence, the end for which they were made. Under such conditions, it might well be that no person could choose to separate themselves from God even if God offered them the opportunity to do so. But to complain that they have at this point lost their libertarian freedom, and embrace God freely only in a compatibilist sense, is to lose sight of the fact that libertarian freedom is valued in the Christian context only as a means to the end of freely chosen communion with God. Once this end is attained, the very nature of the end itself confirms the choice for all eternity, and the purpose of libertarian freedom is realized. Hence, setting up the choice between eternal communion and eternal alienation, rather than between communion and alienation at time T, is autonomy-minimizing even though those who choose communion at time T end up, because of the nature of the choice, choosing communion for all eternity.

28. Murray, p. 64.

29. *Ibid.*

30. This seems to be Swinburne's assumption. See Swinburne, p. 52.

31. I should note, however, that given my argument in section IV, it seems highly unlikely that anyone would need to be stripped of their negative affective states multiple times.

32. Adams remarks on the intrinsic appeal of a doctrine which holds that "God will not give up on the wicked, (but) will eventually somehow be able to turn them to good." Like myself, she finds this doctrine preferable to one which holds that "created persons, finite and dependent though we are, are able ultimately and finally to defeat our Creator's purpose...." She leaves it a mystery as to how God would effect such a transformation, but reconceiving the traditional hell as a remedial "hell" would permit us to reconcile scriptural references to damnation with the doctrine of universalism. See Adams, pp. 323-4.

33. Murray, pp. 64-5.

34. Both Adams and Talbott implicitly deny this assumption. See Adams, p. 313; and Talbott, p. 37.

35. In fact, there is no clear consensus on the issue even with respect to first-order autonomy. Talbott notes that "everlasting separation is the kind of evil that a loving God would prevent even if it meant interfering with human freedom in certain ways." Talbott, p. 38.