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“Could Everyone Eventually Be Saved?”

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**Abstract**

I consider whether a perfect being may be able to ensure that every personal being enjoys union with God. I begin by displaying a range of options which God has, or likely has, if God exists. Then I set out an argument for the conclusion that certain of these options are categorically better than any of the options in which not every person enjoys union with God. In the final section, I consider whether one may infer from the above result that everyone will enjoy union with God.

## “Could Everyone Eventually Be Saved?”

“Verily I say to you, that all the sins shall be forgiven” – Jesus of Nazareth<sup>i</sup>

### Introduction

A common picture of God’s relationship to the world goes like this. Many people, perhaps even a majority of them, are on a wide path leading to everlasting ruin and destruction. People can get off that track if they repent. But most won’t. They are on track for either permanent annihilation or unceasing torment. Such is a consequence of granting creatures the freedom to choose.

What if the above picture didn’t have to be the whole of the story? What if instead we could see, by the light of reason, that there is greater hope for the ultimate restoration of all people. What if God has so much power and wisdom that he could put right any wrong and heal any broken relationship in time. What if there were a way for all persons to be saved, ultimately?

My purpose in this chapter is to see whether believers in God may have good reason to at least hope that everyone will eventually enjoy union with God. We may distinguish three possible scenarios. First, it could be that no one will enjoy union with God—perhaps because God doesn’t exist, or because we are all doomed to hell. Second, it could be that some, but not all, persons will enjoy union with God. Third, it could be that all persons will (at some point) enjoy union with God. I’ll call these options “Universal Doom,” “Limited Salvation,” and “Universalism,” respectively.<sup>ii</sup>

Exactly one of the above options is correct. Which one? To answer that, we have no better tools than the tools of reason and revelation. In this chapter, I shall make use of *reason*, which I believe can help guide one’s interpretation and assessment of candidate revelations.

My strategy will be to develop an argument for the conclusion that a perfect being would have both the power and a very good reason to create a universe in which all persons will enjoy union with God forever. I will begin by showing that there are “universalist” scenarios that God probably would have the power to bring about, assuming God exists and is omnipotent. Then I will argue that some of these scenarios are superior, categorically, to any possible scenario in which some people fail to ever enjoy union with God. I will close by considering whether one might infer from the above results that all of *us* have a bright future.

### **What *Could* God Do?**

To set the stage for my arguments, I will lay out a few assumptions. First, for ease of presentation, I will assume that God exists. Second, I will assume that God is the greatest thinkable Being, or something near enough. Third, sometimes I will talk about *possible worlds* as a way of drawing attention to scenarios that God *could have* brought about. You can think of a possible world as a complete map of all events throughout all time and space. The map is *possible* if God could have brought about the things the map describes. Finally, I use the term “person” in a broad sense to refer to any *sentient* being—i.e., a being who can engage in such activities as thinking, feeling, and choosing.

Let us now consider the question of what God has the *power* to do: does God have the power to bring about a world in which Universalism is true? To help us think about that question, let us consider methods God might use. The simplest method is to simply *do nothing*. Suppose God refrains from creating any persons. Then it is “trivially” true that all persons who *exist* enjoy union with God, for there would be no existing persons beyond God.

Here is a different method to consider: God could create persons who are necessarily morally perfect. In that case, all persons would love that which is perfect, assuming they are also granted the power to do so. It would then follow that all persons would love God, who is perfect, and vice versa. This two-sided loving relationship is itself a kind of union with God. And surely God could establish further dimensions of union as well.

Although these methods may deliver universalist worlds (i.e., worlds in which all persons enjoy union with God), they result in worlds which lack many of the events we find most interesting in life. They lack, for example, risky adventures, conflict-resolution, happy surprises, relational vulnerability, personal growth, societal development, the display of such virtues as mercy, compassion, and heroism, the experience of receiving grace, the experience of relationships built through effort and struggle, and so on. Is there a method by which God could bring about universalist worlds with these bonus features?

To help us focus on the most relevant worlds, let us divide universalist worlds into two classes:

Class A: Universalist worlds where some created persons have *moral freedom*, where I define “moral freedom” as the freedom to choose between good and evil.

Class B: Universalist worlds where no created persons have moral freedom.

I distinguish the classes in terms of moral freedom because moral freedom seems to be a foundational condition for many of the most interesting events in our world, including unforced love,<sup>iii</sup> relational vulnerability, and the display of certain freely chosen virtues and moral progress. Moreover, moral freedom is often thought to pose the largest obstacle to Universalism. Thus, universalist worlds with moral freedom seem to be both the most interesting and the most likely to be the kind of world that is also impossible for God to bring about.

Let us now consider what it might take for God to bring about a universalist world in either class. Start with worlds that are devoid of moral freedom. How might God bring about a world like that? We already considered two candidate methods: (i) do nothing, or (ii) create morally perfect beings. There is a third method which may deliver more of the bonus goods mentioned above. God might create limited beings who can enjoy such activities as growth, surprises, and adventures, but who cannot choose to perform any unethical actions. Maybe these beings could still perform bad actions, like drop a hammer on one's foot, so long as no bad actions involve a genuine moral choice. This third method is to create *free beings* without creating *morally free beings*.

Does God have the power to execute any of these methods? To answer that question, it is helpful to distinguish between what God could do *if God had sufficient reason* from what God *could have sufficient reason to do*. For example, you might think that *if* God had sufficient reason to destroy all human life this afternoon, then God would be *able* to do so. Yet you might not be so sure that God could in fact have *sufficient reason* to do that. Perhaps God's goodness and goals would prevent God from destroying all human life this afternoon. In order to narrow our focus, I will first consider whether God could bring about a universalist scenario *if* God had sufficient reason to do so. In the next section, we will address whether God could have sufficient reason to bring about a universalist world.

Consider again universalist worlds *without* moral freedom to do evil. Could anything (aside from God's reasons or wishes) prevent God from being able to bring about such a world? It is hard to see how. According to the classical conception of God, God is completely self-sufficient and free to refrain from creating anything. Thus, God could live in a world in which only God exists.

And then Universalism would be trivially true. So, we have at least this modest result: classical theism implies that universalism is metaphysically possible.

What about the universalist worlds which contain morally free creatures? Could God bring about any of them? That depends upon how God “controls” a world with free creatures. I will now survey each of the major theories of God’s “control”. They are as follows:

- *Calvinism*: God controls the world by determining all truths about the world and its inhabitants, including truths about freely chosen actions.<sup>iv</sup>
- *Simple Foreknowledge*: God controls the world by determining all truths about the world *other than* truths that depend upon about what creatures will freely do, which God knows prior to creation.
- *Molinism*: God controls the world by determining all truths about the world other than truths that depend upon about what *possible* creatures would freely do in *possible* circumstances.
- *Open Theism*: God controls the world by determining all truths about the world other than truths that depend upon about what creatures in fact freely do, where God doesn’t know what a creature in fact freely does prior to when the creature’s free act is performed.

Start with Calvinism, which allows us to suppose that moral freedom is compatible with divine determination. On Calvinism, the way to bring about a universalist world is straightforward: God simply *determines* that all persons make whatever moral choices are necessary for union with God. Although God could arrange for some people to “freely” fall into various traps and troubles for a time, God could just as easily arrange for everyone to “freely” receive the gift of *irresistible grace*, eventually.

We should be cautious, however. Maybe we do not see well enough into the space of possibilities. A Calvinist could hold that for all we know, there is a necessary aspect of God's nature which prevents God from decreeing that everyone receives mercy. Or perhaps for all we know, it is metaphysically impossible for God to arrange for the salvation of all persons in any highly populated world. Suppose, for instance, it is metaphysically necessary that some persons must fail to enjoy union with God as a means for others to enter union with God. Then the only way for God to enjoy union with some created beings is for God to create a world in which some persons fail to ever enjoy union with God. (Another idea is that God has a *good reason* for permitting some people to be permanently separated from a bright future. We'll consider this prospect in the next section. Again, I am focused here on the narrower question of what God *could* do, putting aside what God might have reason to do.)

On the other hand, it is far from easy to see why God couldn't decree that everyone freely enjoy salvation if freedom is indeed compatible with divine determination. On the usual Calvinist theology, God's mercy, which leads to everlasting union with God, doesn't ultimately depend upon anyone's efforts or desires. It depends, rather, upon God's decision. God decrees both the ends and the means by which those ends are achieved. So, it seems that God *could* execute a decision to have mercy on everyone, assuming of course that God could have sufficient reason to do so. Nothing on our side, anyway, prevents that. Therefore, my sense is that most Calvinists would happily accept the conditional: God *could* decree a universalist world were God to have sufficient reasons to do so.

The more challenging cases are the ones where moral freedom is incompatible with determinism. How could God guarantee that everyone has a bright future while also granting people the power to ruin their future? Let us consider some possible methods. Perhaps the easiest

method would be to *restrict* moral freedom in certain ways. In particular, God might grant creatures the freedom to choose at various times whether to pursue union with God at those times, but not grant any creature the freedom to choose to *never* have union with God. God could thus prevent any choices that would risk *permanent* loss. (Again, whether God would have sufficient reason to execute this method is a separate matter.)

To make the project maximally difficult for God, let us consider worlds where people can make a choice which would cause permanent, irrevocable lack of union with God, where such a choice is *not* compatible with God's determining the outcome. We have the remaining three main theories of divine providence to consider: Molinism, Simple Foreknowledge, and Open Theism. Start with Molinism. On this theory, God knows, prior to his decision to create anything, what all possible creatures would freely do in any circumstance they could be in. I have argued elsewhere that given this knowledge, it is *highly likely* that God could find any number of people who would freely perform only morally right actions.<sup>v</sup> The gist of the argument is this: there is plausibly no limit to the number of persons God could create, and so, given a *countless number* of possible persons, it is highly likely that God could find any finite number of creatures who would freely choose any of the right choices available to them. In fact, if my argument is sound, then the probability is 100%, or infinitesimally close to 100%, that God could pull off a universalist world, *even if* everyone has the undetermined choice to permanently reject God.

Things become more complicated if God wishes to bring about a world with an *infinite* number of undetermined choices (perhaps across endless time). Suppose God wishes to grant each person infinitely many morally significant choice points. Then there would be infinitely many opportunities for things to go wrong. Could God bring about a universalist world where there are infinitely many opportunities for badness?



Even here, I see two possibilities. First, God might grant infinitely many opportunities for bad without also granting infinitely many opportunities to be *permanently* separated from God relationally. Perhaps God gives a finite number of people a finite number of genuine opportunities to choose to be permanently separated from God. God could then use His knowledge of what possible creatures would freely do to see who—among the infinite pool of possible persons—*would* choose to live a life leading to irrevocable ruin. Given the infinity of possible persons, the probability is high (100%) that God could find a finite subset who would freely avoid permanent ruin. Armed with this knowledge, God would have the power to bring about a world in which everyone eventually enters a bright future, including union with God, freely.

There may be a second method available to God if the *size* of the set of possible persons is greater than the *size* of the set of natural numbers. Some infinite sets are, in some sense, “bigger” than others (as Cantor famously showed): for example, the size of the set of decimal numbers is greater than the size of the set of whole numbers. Now suppose that for each decimal number, there is a certain possible person whom God could make. Then, it would follow that the size of the set of possible persons would be greater than the size of the set of whole numbers. In that case, the infinity of possible persons would be categorically larger than the infinity of choices in a world where people indefinitely make discrete choices at discrete times. Perhaps God could then identify infinitely many possible people who would freely avoid permanent loss on infinitely many distinct occasions. It would be *highly probable* that God could do that, since the number of possible people would be infinitely larger than the number of actual choices in any given world.

Of course, God wouldn't *have to* give people an infinity of choices. A classic theological view is that people who become citizens of heaven eventually become fixed in their good moral character.<sup>vi</sup> The reason I considered worlds with infinitely many choices is to showcase the great

resources God would have on Molinism. Armed with knowledge of what possible creatures would freely do, it is highly probable that God could bring about a universalist world in which beings can make undetermined choices to be permanently separated from God.

God's resources are more limited if either Open Theism or Simple Foreknowledge are true. Even still, I will propose one method God might use to achieve a universalist world on either of these theories. Suppose God invokes a "never give up" policy to increase the chances that each created person eventually chooses the narrow path. Imagine, for example, that after a stage of judgment, a person is brought to their moral senses (either by direct intervention or by the nature of the circumstances), and they are able to freely choose whether or not to genuinely repent. Repeat this scenario enough times, and it can become increasingly likely that the person would eventually repent. In fact, if there is a non-zero probability  $p$  such that at each decision point, the person has at least  $p$  probability of making the right choice, then the probability that the person will eventually repent approaches 1 as the opportunities increase. Note that although no *individual* choice would have a probability of 0 or 1, the cumulative effect of *infinitely* many choices approaches a yields a probability of 1 that the agent eventually repents freely and genuinely.

*Could* God invoke a "never give up" policy (given sufficient reasons)? I see a few reasons one might hesitate to nod affirmatively. First, one might think that a person could harden themselves so much that it becomes metaphysically impossible to restore that person. In that case, God *must* give up. Second, even if God could keep giving more chances, one might think that such a policy removes genuine free will. The thought here is that genuine freedom to resist God requires that at some point God allows one to have what one chooses—permanent lack of union with God. To elaborate, suppose Jean is dead set against marrying Harper. Harper says to Jean, "Look, I'm going to ask you to marry me an infinite number of times. You may be dead set against marrying

me now. But eventually I'll wear you down. It is certain to happen." You might think that in this situation either (i) there is something freedom canceling about getting someone to do as you wish when they are set against it by simply presenting them with the choice an infinite number of times, or (ii) even if it isn't freedom canceling, the "never give up" strategy reduces to a morally flawed stalker strategy.

The above concerns are valuable because they invite greater clarity about what it would take to implement a "never give up" policy. Two clarifications are relevant. First, having a probability of 100% of doing something does not entail having *no possibility* of not doing it. Even if God never gives up, it would still be metaphysically possible for a person to persist in resisting God's love forever and ever. There are two main conditions which libertarians say are central to freedom: (i) that the choice is up to the agent, and (ii) that the agent could have done otherwise. Both conditions are met in the scenario where God never gives up. Condition (i) is met because permanent rejection of God is up to the agent. And (ii) is met because even if the agent doesn't persistently reject God infinitely many times, she *could* reject each and every time. Now you might think the resulting freedom is less robust, or less momentous,<sup>vii</sup> if the probability of getting what one chooses (permanent loss) is so low. Perhaps so. My point here is just that the core components of libertarian freedom would seem to still be intact.

A second clarification is about the worry that it might be impossible for God to restore people who are too hardened. Here we need to distinguish between two related claims. One claim is that it is metaphysically *possible* that someone with libertarian freedom becomes too hardened in their character for God to give them a fresh choice to repent. Suppose that's true. It doesn't immediately follow that it is metaphysically *impossible* for God to prevent people from becoming irredeemable. To illustrate the difference, imagine that God creates a free being named Adam. God

sees that some libertarian choices would permanently and irrevocably ruin Adam. Thus, God never grants Adam an opportunity to make *those* choices. They are far too risky. Instead, God grants Adam libertarian choices that can lead to temporary, revocable inner ruin. In this way, God is able to uphold a “never give up” policy while still granting Adam indefinitely many morally significant choices. The point here is that even if it is possible for someone to be unredeemable, it wouldn’t thereby follow that it is impossible for God to create a world where everyone is always redeemable.

Is it genuinely *possible* for God to create a world where everyone always *could* have another chance to repent? I think reasonable people can reasonably disagree here. That said, I’ll offer one reason one might think that God could uphold a never give up policy (assuming God has sufficient reason to do so). The reason is based upon the psychology of motivation. Consider first that people are motivated to perform an action, good or bad, if they see some *value* in doing so. After all, when a person does something bad, there is something *appealing* about the bad action. A person experiences a dilemma when they see that there is both something appealing about doing good *and* something appealing about doing bad. It seems, therefore, that God could enable a person to face a moral dilemma by granting them the ability to see, or feel, the appeal of both good and bad. Imagine, for example, that Adam has fallen into a state of ruin from his own bad choices. He is so hardened that the good of others has no appeal to him anymore. But God has a plan. In the night, God gives Adam a dream of heaven and hell. In heaven, God causes Adam to feel the thrill of bringing benefit to other people. In hell, God permits Adam to feel the anxiety of despair and ruin. These feelings cause Adam to experience the appeal of doing good. Although Adam is bent on evil, he now experiences a real dilemma again. He is thus empowered to make a genuine choice. Now suppose Adam still chooses wrongly. Even then, God can bring Adam back to a fresh dilemma later on by causing him to experience the appeal of good again—perhaps through another

dream, or a vision, or life experience, or hell itself. In this way, God would never be forced to give up on a person. Rather, God could continue to restore any person to a place of being able to make a genuine moral decision.

In response, someone might wonder whether a person could become so hardened that there is nothing God could do to cause that person to *be able* to experience the appeal of good. To such a darkened soul, light only appears as darkness. Thus, even if God causes a person to experience the thrill of making others happy, that very thrill feeling may be interpreted as torture. In that case, a person could become unredeemable. And God would *have to* give up on them.

Although I don't have a knockdown objection to the above possibility, I have two gentle pushbacks. First, remember that even if it is possible for someone to become irredeemable, it doesn't follow that it is impossible for God to protect people from becoming irredeemable. Maybe God could prevent anyone from having a choice to become irredeemable. Perhaps people could choose to reject God, but they couldn't choose to reject God in such a way that they could never be granted the same choice again. God may be able to protect people from ever having such a choice, just as I might protect my own kids from having a choice that could cause them irrevocable ruin.

Second, it is far from clear how God *could* be blocked from causing someone to experience the appeal of good. Suppose there is something appealing to Adam about hurting someone. (If there were nothing appealing about hurting someone, then we may wonder how Adam could be motivated to seek to hurt someone in the first place.) Adam is able to do evil because he associates something positive (a feeling of pleasure or a hope of a feeling of pleasure, perhaps) with something negative (hurting someone). Thus, Adam is able to experience, or be aware of, something positive (such as a feeling of pleasure or hope of pleasure). Adam connects that positive

something with something negative. But is that connection *necessary*? Suppose God causes Adam to have a vivid dream of helping someone *while* feeling that same tinge of pleasure or hope of pleasure. God makes it clear to Adam that the positive experience would be caused by the benevolent action. Is that not possible? If not, it is hard to see why not.

We are in deep waters, and it is right to be cautious in our judgments here. For my part, I find it quite plausible that God could reveal to Adam the appeal of good regardless of Adam's prior experiences. In my own life, I have experienced highly dynamic psychological states: one day my choices are constrained by frustration, yet after a good meal and some sleep, more peaceful solutions have greater appeal. Although it may be *conceptually possible* for someone to become irredeemable, I find it difficult to believe that there actually can be moral senses which God could not restore. Those who share this sentiment have reason to think that God could invoke a never give up method to bring about a universalist world.<sup>viii</sup>

In summary, there is reason to think God is capable of bringing about a variety of universalist worlds. The most challenging of the universalist worlds to bring about are ones where persons have moral freedom to permanently reject God. Yet, we have seen ways God might be able to bring about these worlds, too, on any of the major theories of providence. On Calvinism, God might decree that everyone freely make the choices necessary for union with God. On Molinism, God has infinitely many possible persons to choose from, and therefore, it is *highly probable* that God could find a subset of persons who would freely meet the conditions for a bright future. Finally, on Simple Foreknowledge and Open Theism, there is some reason to think that God could invoke a never give up policy, thereby reducing the probability of permanent ruin to nil.

The next task is to consider whether God might have a good reason to bring about any of these universalist worlds.

### What *Might* God Do?

Some worlds seem better than others. For example, a world where every person enjoys complete bliss forever seems better than one in which everyone suffers forever, other things being equal. My goal in this section is to get on the table an argument for the thesis that there are conceivable universalist worlds which are better, categorically, than any conceivable non-universalist world. For the sake of focus, I will bracket the question of whether these, or any, universalist worlds are feasible for God to bring about. The task of this section is merely to rank worlds.

Here is an outline of my argument:

- (1) There are no great-making states of affairs that can only occur in a non-universalist world.<sup>ix</sup>
- (2) There is a great-making state of affairs that only occurs in universalist worlds.
- (3) If (i) there are no great-making states of affairs that can only occur in a non-universalist world, and if (ii) there is a great-making state of affairs only occurs universalist worlds, then there are conceivable universalist worlds which are better, categorically, than any non-universalist world.
- (3) Therefore, there are conceivable universalist worlds which are better, categorically, than any non-universalist world.

Although the premises are far from unassailable, there is a way to find each one plausible. Start with premise (1): there are no great-making states of affairs that can only occur in a non-

universalist world. By ‘great-making state of affairs’ I mean a state of affairs that contributes to the greatness of a world. The world, in total, is better off with that state of affairs than without it. To help us assess this premise, let us consider the best great-making states of affairs that might obtain in a non-universalist world. There are, for example, unending relationships, eternal happiness, the display of virtues, growth and development, surprises, discoveries, freely chosen moral development, and every other pleasure under the sun. So what could be missing? Imagine you are in a universalist world. You, and everyone you know, will eventually enjoy happy, unceasing union with a perfect being. Imagine, also, that the world includes all the bonus features I mentioned earlier (growth, adventure, risk, moral freedom, and so on). Now ask yourself: what advantage could there be if instead someone will fail to enter the state of eternal bliss. What would such permanent loss *add* to your world?

I have heard it suggested that perhaps people who suffer in hell serve the purpose of allowing God’s justice to be revealed. On this view, God *could have* caused everyone to freely repent and so avoid everlasting hell, but God’s glory is more greatly revealed if some people experience what they deserve. The idea here is that what is missing in every universalist world is a certain display of God’s justice. Some people deserve to be permanently barred from God, and it is intrinsically good for people to receive the punishment they deserve.

Note, however, that even if there is value in the display of justice, this value only counts as *great-making* if it makes the world better off *in total*. Is it better overall for there to be people who deserve *unending* separation from God? Consider instead a world where everyone freely receives God’s gift of mercy and reconciliation. In this world, there are still displays of God’s justice. There just isn’t *unending* judgment. If there is value in unending judgment, it must be weighed against two sources of unending bad: (i) the bad experienced by the person experiencing



ceaseless judgment, and (ii) the bad of relational separation and rejection experienced by the highest of all possible beings. In view of these extreme negatives, you might think ultimate reconciliation would be better, overall, if it can be achieved. If that is what you think, then you and I think similarly.

Moreover, we need not suppose that God's justice cannot be displayed in a universalist world. For instance, perhaps God could display justice by "atoning for sins". According to some theories of the atonement in Christian theology, justice is displayed by Jesus' suffering on the cross. One might think that having God's justice displayed through the cross is much more excellent than having God's justice displayed by leaving people unforgiven and separated from God. After all, displaying justice through the cross also allows for a display of God's mercy. The universalist can, through the cross, get maximum justice and maximum reconciliation to God.<sup>x</sup>

So far I have suggested that any world-improving goods *we can think of* can be found in a universalist world. It doesn't strictly follow, however, that any and all world improving goods can be found in a universalist world. For there might be world-improving goods which *we can't think of*. Perhaps there are goods which we do not presently have the conceptual resources to grasp. Can we be sure that none of these unknown goods are world-improvers found only in non-universalist worlds? This question invites caution.

Nevertheless, there may be a way to build boundary conditions around the unknown goods. Consider the premise that relational and/or personal well-being is among the highest kind of good. I propose that we are not merely incapable of seeing kinds of goods which are greater than personal or relational well-being. Rather, we can see, clearly enough, that relational and/or personal well-being are the highest *end* goods; all other goods serve relational and/or personal well-being in some way (leaving open whether there is a priority between relational and personal well-being).

This proposal may explain why we cringe at the thought of sacrificing well-being (personal or relational) for some other project which in no way connects back to relational or personal well-being. It also seems to fit well with classical theology, where relational union is an end which all God's projects revolve around. We can put this idea in terms of God's glory: God is best known and most glorified in the context of relationship.<sup>xi</sup> If the premise is correct, then there are no categorically higher goods. One might infer, then, that there are no goods, seen or unseen, which could be worth the cost of permanent loss of personal and relational well-being. So although these are deep and difficult waters, it seems to me that one could find it quite plausible that a universalist world can include the highest kind of goods. No categorically greater good must be missing.

Let us turn to premise (2): there is a great-making state of affairs that only obtains in universalist worlds. Why think that? We may find intuitive support for this premise when we consider the great goods that universalist worlds enjoy. In particular, there is the good of eventual, permanent relational union with God *for everyone*. That seems to be a great good, and only universalist worlds include it.

Does the good of universal salvation necessarily carry with it any outweighing bad? Three candidate bad states of affairs have been proposed to me. First, perhaps beings who enjoy union with God, and others, cannot fully *appreciate* their relationships unless some beings permanently fail to experience happy relationships. Second, universal salvation implies a lack of genuine (robust or momentous) free will to permanently reject God. Third, God's justice cannot be fully revealed unless some people are permanently cut off from a bright future.

One may find reason to reject each of the above proposals. I already considered the second and third proposals regarding the values of moral freedom and justice: I argued that moral freedom is possible in universalist worlds where God never gives up; and I suggested that whatever

advantages may arise from having there be some persons who experience the judgment of permanent loss, they aren't worth the cost of permanent relational brokenness.<sup>xiii</sup> Regarding appreciation, I offer this: God could cause a person to appreciate their happy state by showing them the consequences of the alternative. For example, God could show me a movie of people falling into eternal hell. Must there actually be people who are unhappy for me to appreciate my own happy state? I cannot see how that could be so. In fact, the opposite seems so: I cannot fully appreciate my happy state knowing that others are permanently cut off—unless, perhaps, I put them out of my mind.

It is difficult to see how there could, in principle, be any outweighing downside to the good of permanent relational union for everyone, especially if such a state is compatible with moral freedom. Recall the premise that the highest kinds of good are personal and/or relational wellbeing. If that premise is true, then there are no higher kinds of goods that must be absent in a universalist world. It follows, then, that the good of secure relational union and personal well-being need not carry with it an outweighing cost. Therefore, one who accepts the premise that the highest kind of goods are personal and/or relational wellbeing has reason to accept premise 2.

The next premise is a bridge from the previous premises to the conclusion that there are universalist worlds which are categorically better than any non-universalist world. So let us recap the previous results. We argued that there is a great-making state of affairs that can only obtain in a universalist world—and that it obtains in all universalist worlds. Moreover, for any great-making goods that appear in a non-universalist world, there is a universalist world which has that good. From these premises, we may infer that for any non-universalist world, there is a *better* universalist world. If that is right, and if there are *best* non-universalist worlds, then we reach this conclusion: there are universalist worlds that are better than any non-universalist world.

The matter becomes somewhat more complicated, however, if there is no *best* non-universalist world. Suppose that for any world, there is a better world containing a greater quantity of valuable things. You might think, for example, that people are valuable, and that for any number of people God creates, God could have created a greater number of them; or, if God can create infinitely many people, then God could still add value by creating additional persons. In that case, there is no best world. Moreover, even if every non-universalist world is superseded by some universalist world, it may be that every universalist world is also superseded by some non-universalist world.

However, even if there is no best world, there is still a way to reach a significant conclusion about the categorical superiority of universalist worlds. Consider that the salient advantage of a universalist world is not that it carries a greater *quantity* of good things. There is a *categorical* advantage. Universalist worlds lack permanent loss. And that gives them a categorical benefit over every single non-universalist world, each of which suffer from permanent loss. Therefore, universalist worlds have a category of good which no non-universalist world enjoys. The universalist worlds are in a superior league.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that a categorical advantage automatically trumps any quantitative increase. My point is just that every universalist world has a kind of good that no non-universalist world has. To illustrate this point further, imagine there are two staircases. Both are infinite, and both have equally sized steps. But one of them is made of gold, while the other is made of bronze. As a matter of quantity, both staircases have the same infinite value. But if gold is worth more than bronze, then the gold staircase has greater worth, categorically. Similarly, if permanent union with God for all is worth more than permanent loss, as it clearly seems to be, then the universalist worlds have greater worth, categorically. Even if we compare an infinitely

populated universalist world with an infinitely populated non-universalist world, the universalist world is better, categorically, other things being equal.<sup>xiii</sup>

### What *Will* God Do?

Let us recap. I argued that God has the power to bring about a universalist world, which is a world in which all persons enjoy union with God. I then suggested that there may be some goods that depend upon there being persons who are limited in various ways. For example, there may be goods only available in a world in which union with God follows a stage of risk, adventure, and moral freedom. I argued that all these bonus goods are also available in universalist worlds, and that, given certain plausible assumptions, it is highly likely that God has the power to bring about a universalist world with the bonus goods on any of the standard theories of divine providence. Finally, I argued that the best of the worlds, at least categorically, are universalist worlds. The result is this: from the standpoint of reason, it is likely that the best worlds God can bring about are universalist ones.

What follows? Can we conclude that *our* world is probably a universalist world (if God exists)? The answer crucially depends upon the answers to a few other questions. In particular, these two questions are relevant:

Q1. Can a perfect being be sufficiently motivated to bring about a world that is (categorically) inferior to a universalist world?

Q2. Are there any counterbalancing reasons, such as from divine revelation, for thinking that our world is not a universalist world?<sup>xiv</sup>

Both questions deserve attention, yet it is beyond the scope of this chapter to give these questions the attention they deserve. So, it is beyond the scope of this paper to complete an argument for Universalism.

That said, the arguments I have developed still bear fruit. First, they constitute a foundational stage in a multi-stage argument for universalism. For example, someone might combine my arguments with arguments for negative answers to the above pair of questions. The result would be a complete argument for universalism. Whether any such argument would be sound is of course a matter open for further investigation.

Second, my argument could aid in one's assessment of competing interpretations of candidate divine revelations. For example, some theologians think that the Apostle Paul intended to express universalist beliefs in his letter to the Romans,<sup>xv</sup> whereas other theologians think the opposite is so.<sup>xvi</sup> If you think Paul's letter was guided in some way by God's voice, and if you think my argument for the superiority and feasibility of universalist worlds is sound, then you may have some reason to prefer a universalist interpretation of Paul's writings, other things being equal.

Third, my arguments clear ground for further exploration. We saw several methods by which God might bring about a universalist world on various theories of providence. No doubt there are other methods we might discover upon further reflection. We might also develop other models of providence and then investigate methods for bringing about a universalist world on those models. We considered, moreover, various great-making qualities in an effort to rank worlds. Although I proposed a reason to think universalists world are greater, the inquiry into potential great-making qualities of non-universalist worlds remains wide open.

A fourth and final fruit of my arguments is this: the arguments may increase the credibility of a more optimistic theology. Perhaps they could give believers in God greater reason to at least *hope* that everyone has a bright future.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 3:28 (Young's Literal Translation). Note that in the next verse, Jesus warns of an "age" (*aionios*) of unforgiveness. Although some scholars have treated the warning about unforgiveness as providing a reason to qualify Jesus' statement (e.g., not *all* sins shall be forgiven), one could treat Jesus's statement about forgiveness as providing a context for interpreting his warning about unforgiveness (e.g., the age of unforgiveness is not permanent).

<sup>ii</sup> Alvin Plantinga posed to me an option that in some sense falls between Limited Salvation and Universal Salvation. He suggested that perhaps God will continue to create sentient beings indefinitely, and that although *each* person will eventually enjoy union with God, it will never be true that all persons together enjoy union with God. I shall include Plantinga's proposal under the umbrella of Universalism.

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Rasmussen 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> This definition leaves open an in-house debate among Calvinists over whether God *decrees* both good and bad choices. Some Calvinists suppose that God decrees only good choices (or only "salvific" choices), where the bad choices are determined by God's *not* decreeing that they be good (given a person's sinful nature).

<sup>v</sup> Rasmussen 2004. Note that my argument is compatible with Plantinga's proposal that it is *possible* that every possible person is "transworld depraved"—i.e., would perform moral evil in every world in which God might have created him. My argument is about what's *probable*.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, Sennett 1999. Pawl and Kevin Timpe (2009) build upon Sennett's proposal, while emphasizing the value of freedom in heaven to choose *among* goods.

<sup>vii</sup> Alexander Pruss suggested to me that freedom without real risk of permanent loss would be less momentous.



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<sup>viii</sup> Note that there is an asymmetry between being irredeemably ruined and being irredeemably righteous. The asymmetry arises from the basic intent of a perfect being—to bring the world *toward good* and *away from bad*. Thus, even if God has reasons to never give up on morally ruined people, it doesn't follow that God must also have symmetrical reasons to never stop giving morally repaired people the freedom to ruin themselves. Perhaps one of the main values of moral freedom is that it allows beings to enter everlasting relationships without ever being forced into those relationships (cf. Rasmussen 2013). That value is not eliminated if beings are secured into their chosen relationships via natures which prevent them from later ruining their relationships.

<sup>ix</sup> I am simplifying a bit for the sake of presentation. A more nuanced version of premise (1) would allow there to be particular state of affairs that can only occur in a single world. So, for example, we could build the argument with this premise: for any great-making state of affairs that occurs in a non-universalist world, there can be a duplicate, or a similar state of affairs that is equally great-making, that occurs in a universalist world. Adding this complexity is unnecessary for our purposes, however.

<sup>x</sup> I owe this consideration to Scott Hill.

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. John Piper (1986, p. 10): “God is most gloried in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”

<sup>xii</sup> Readers are invited to weigh this cost against any goods they might think of which do not end with personal or relational well-being (including the good, if it is a good, of one's choices being more momentous by virtue of having a greater risk of permanent loss).

<sup>xiii</sup> I'm grateful to Mike Almeida for pressing a question about how we might compare the value of a universalist world with the value of a non-universalist world containing an infinite quantity of goods.

<sup>xiv</sup> Note that a negative answer to this question could constitute a reason to think that a non-universalist world is better, after all, and that my argument is misguided.

<sup>xv</sup> Talbott 1999, chapter 5.

<sup>xvi</sup> Sproul 2011.