

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 30 | Issue 4

Article 12

---

10-1-2013

## John Kronen and Eric Reitan, GOD'S FINAL VICTORY: A COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL CASE FOR UNIVERSALISM

Ioanna-Maria Love

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Love, Ioanna-Maria (2013) "John Kronen and Eric Reitan, GOD'S FINAL VICTORY: A COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL CASE FOR UNIVERSALISM," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 4 , Article 12.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201330446

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol30/iss4/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

to the views in question. These chapters follow what one might call a historical method.

Chapter 4 is, in my estimation, the only chapter that brings these two methods together in a unified way. This non-uniformity of style might well make the book difficult for some readers. Those interested in the exposition of a Thomistic view of DDS might find one half of the book overly focused on contemporary, analytic arguments. Others interested in the analysis of the arguments might find the long sections explaining, but often not analyzing, Aquinas's arguments to be tiresome.

My own view, as someone interested in both these topics and methods, is that each part of the book does its useful share in making the general case that Dolezal intends to make in the text. Part of what one needs to do when resuscitating a maligned doctrine is show that it is, in reality, that very doctrine one is breathing life into. One has to show that it is resurrection and not frankensteinian devilry that one is attempting. But another part of saving the doctrine is showing that the wounds it has received are not hopeless. There is no use propping up the doctrine if the next argument will send it tumbling again. I think that Dolezal has succeeded in the former part, and, with the large exception of the appeal to mystery in the final chapter, has succeeded in the latter as well.

*God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism*, by John Kronen and Eric Reitan. Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 240 pages. \$65.00 (hardcover).

IOANNA-MARIA LOVE, University of Glasgow

In *God's Final Victory*, Kronen and Reitan offer a comparative defense of a doctrine of universal salvation by critically challenging any form of a doctrine of hell that holds that some human beings will be forever separated from God. Their aim is to explain why a doctrine of universal salvation is more philosophically defensible and better philosophically fits with the most plausible understandings of core teachings of Christian tradition than any versions of hell. The book presents a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the relevant philosophical and theological literature. No person who engages in the problem of hell and universal salvation will be able to dismiss the arguments made in this book.

What strikes me as exceptional is the presentation and attention to detail in unfolding the various versions of hellism and universalism in this book. Following a clear chapter 1 "Introduction," in chapters 2 through 4, Kronen and Reitan set their comparative case in favor of universalism by enumerating the various species of both doctrines of hell (DH) and doctrines of universal salvation (DU) respectively. They argue that defenders of each species of DH or DU can find support for their views in Scriptures.

However, taking scriptural texts in isolation is not the best way in addressing disagreements that emerge between the doctrines.

In chapter 2, Kronen and Reitan distinguish different versions of hellism in two ways, first, by the nature of the suffering of the damned and, second, by the causes of damnation. There are those versions of hellism which appeal to retributive justice—known as juridical doctrines of hell from which the most important are (1) the Classical doctrine of hell or traditional doctrine of hell and (2) the retributive doctrine of hell and (ii) those versions which appeal to God's respect for human freedom—referred to as liberal doctrines of hell. All versions of DH commit one to the view that God is "either defeated by sin or complicit in its perpetuation thus raising serious questions about God's sovereign, goodness, or both" (25). Kronen and Reitan argue that these versions of DH fail.

In chapter 3, Kronen and Reitan offer two complete versions of DU. According to the first, which they call DU1, God wills the salvation of all human creatures by God's "perfect benevolence," by virtue of the "all sufficient Atonement of Christ," God's "complacent love for His own majesty" and God's "complacent love for rational creatures as created in His image and essentially ordered to Him as its ultimate objective end" (30). The means God might use to save the wicked is "by efficacious grace" (42).

According to the second version, which they refer to as DU2, God wills the salvation of all God's human creatures for the above reasons, but the means God may use to save the wicked are by preserving them indefinitely and working on their salvation until a time comes that they will accept the offer of salvation (44–47).

In what follows, Kronen and Reitan argue that either DU1 or DU2 is superior to the most defensible version of DH.

In chapter 4, they reject the common assumption that the witness of Scripture unanimously supports DH over DU. It is difficult to claim, they argue, that DH can be verified by an appeal to Scriptural plain sense, because taking scriptural passages in plain sense does not offer a decisive guide in choosing DH over DU. What is required is to pursue a careful philosophical engagement with core Christian Principles in order to be able to interpret Scripture in the best way possible.

In chapter 5, they offer a *prima facie* case for favoring DU over DH given a Christian understanding of love. They offer three arguments for DU in terms of "God's benevolence," "God's complacent love" and God's "love for the blessed" (68). These arguments are convincing, as long as we assume that "there is nothing in God's character that would conflict with His love so as to impel Him not to will the salvation or the means of saving all" and "there is available to God a morally permissible means of saving all" (127). Defenders of DH have to deny one or the other of these assumptions. Those who deny the first appeal to divine justice and hold that salvation of sinners would violate the demands of retributive justice. Those who deny the second appeal to human freedom and hold that salvation is guaranteed only if God wills or can override human freedom, but either

God is not able to do this, or freedom is of such importance that it would be morally impermissible for God to act on it.

The heart of the book, chapters 6 through 8, focuses on a detailed explanation and critical assessment of the two defenses of DH. Kronen and Reitan go through the difficulties and objections facing both versions as well as the ways to overcome these point by point while developing their comparative case in favor of DU. I believe the most important contribution to contemporary debate in this book is their critique of the argument from freedom—that is, the argument that there can be no universal salvation without God's compromising creaturely autonomy, something which a morally perfect God would not do—by employing the "Argument of Efficacious Grace" (131–137) and the "Argument from Infinite Opportunity" (160–162).

In chapter 6, they argue that demands of justice actually provide God with further reason beyond God's love to will all human creatures' salvation as an end. Endorsing an Anselmian theory of atonement, they argue that because "Christ satisfied the demands of justice on the cross God is free to act on His benevolence to pursue the salvation of all" (33). Crucifixion, in their view, "is seen both as God's ultimate condemnation for all sin at its root, and at the same time, as the greatest expression of divine love for fallen humanity" (116). Embracing a vicarious Atonement would put aside any account of justice and sin that would demand eternal damnation.

In chapter 7, Reitan and Kronen challenge the liberal doctrine of hell and specifically the argument from freedom in terms of what they call the "Argument from Efficacious Grace," which is a species of grace "sufficiently by itself to fully convert creatures, such that all who receive it are saved" (128). Both argue that if there is such a grace and God can legitimately extend it to all human beings, then there is a version of DU which holds that God ensures the salvation of all by applying efficacious grace and so liberal doctrines of hell fail.

They concentrate on the claim that God can guarantee salvation by conferring efficacious grace without overriding any individual's freedom by endorsing a Thomistic view of freedom. In a nutshell, the Thomistic view holds that the human will is ordered to follow reason and, in turn, reason is ordered to follow what is objectively good. Consequently, an action is free as long as reason and a person's will operate according to their natures. This shows, they hold, that "one can produce uniform motives in ways that impede rational freedom and in ways that do not" (135). Efficacious grace is a divine act that produces "uniformly salvation-favoring motives" (135) in a way that it does not violate freedom. God has the means to save the sinners: He "can and morally may present creatures with a full understanding of what union with Him involves while removing any affective impediments to acting on this understanding" (179), and this would guarantee the conversion of any creature. In this way, they claim, the Thomistic view of freedom supports DU1.

In chapter 8, they challenge further the argument from freedom, and in particular the Molinist account of freedom, in terms of what they refer to as the "Argument from Infinite Opportunity." They argue that even if God is morally prohibited from "extending efficacious grace out of respect for libertarian freedom, He retains a morally permissible means of guaranteeing universal salvation" (129). God shows his love for the unregenerate by indefinitely preserving them "in conditions suited to inspiring free repentance," a state in which they remain free to choose communion with God. In doing so, "God can bring it about that universal salvation amounts to a kind of mathematical certainty" (44). This leads them to hold that DU2 is more plausible than any liberal doctrine of hell.

Chapter 9 ends the book with a summary of the overall argument with reflection on the Doctrine of Annihilation and the Doctrine of Soteriological Agnosticism as well as other Christian concerns about the connection between this life and whatever life may come beyond this one.

Views and arguments in the book are clearly presented and explained, and the prose succeeds in constructing an accessible and pleasurable narrative. However, I am not convinced that the arguments offered guarantee universal salvation for a few reasons. Due to limitations of space, I briefly note only two.

It is evident that Kronen and Reitan build their arguments and explain freedom within a theological framework. If we stand back, however, from this theological framework and consider the goals to which human actions are directed, goals which are different from the ultimate goal—the Christian God—it would be incorrect to hold that actions which are not directed towards the ultimate end are irrational and thus not free. If we step away from this framework and take into account how philosophers have explained rationality, we get different views that take different approaches to what it means to act rationally and freely. If we view freedom in non-theological terms, then one may well have to accept that some people may have knowledge of what is best for them and yet they refuse to be in relation to God, while making a choice which is rational and free.

Secondly, as much as I would like to accept the view that God will achieve God's universal purpose by preserving the sinners in conditions which will help them freely repent and choose communion with God, there are some issues which have not been addressed in the book and need to be dealt with, such as: will there be some kind of punishment for the worst sinners, and if there is, how will punishment help sinners freely to accept God? What would be different in the afterlife environments which would lead even the worst sinners to repent and be reconciled to God? What element do the next worlds have that would necessarily lead sinners to come to God?

Although I remain unpersuaded by the arguments offered, Kronen and Reitan's work is an important contribution to the debate, and it must be said that specialists and enthusiasts will find this an excellent, challenging and most welcome work.