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A GUARANTEE OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION?

Eric Reitan

Recent defenders of the Christian doctrine of eternal damnation have appealed to what I call the “No Guarantee Doctrine” (NG)—the doctrine that not even God can ensure both (a) that every person who is saved freely chooses to be saved and (b) that all are saved. Thomas Talbott challenges NG on the grounds that anyone who is truly free will have no motive to reject God and will infallibly choose salvation. In response to critics of Talbott, I argue that in order to avoid Talbott’s critique of NG, its defenders must adopt a view of human freedom in which there is a random element in choice. And if free choice involves such an element, then it is within God’s power to achieve a mathematical guarantee of freely chosen salvation for all. Thus, NG must be rejected.

I. Introduction

In recent years philosophers have turned a critical eye to the traditional Christian doctrine of eternal damnation (ED)—that is, the doctrine that some persons after death persist in a state of endless suffering. Contemporary defenders of ED typically argue that those who are eternally damned end up in this state not by virtue of divine punishment for sin (as older theologians believed) but by virtue of their own free choices.¹ The idea is roughly this: The suffering of the damned is the natural result of existing in a state of alienation from God, and even though God ardently desires to save all persons from this state by bringing them into loving communion with Him, whether or not any person is in fact saved in this way depends upon that person’s free choices. And, as Eleanore Stump maintains, “It is not within God’s power to ensure that all human beings will be in heaven, because it is not within the power even of an omnipotent entity to *make* a person freely will anything.”² Thus, there can be no guarantee that all are saved, and ED is therefore at least possibly true.

A core premise of Stump’s line of thought is that God cannot ensure *both* that all are saved *and* that all the saved have freely chosen to be saved. But what does Stump mean when she says God cannot *ensure* this outcome? Presumably, she means that it is not within God’s power to bring about this state of affairs even in Plantinga’s weak sense. More precisely, then, this line of argument assumes what I will call the “No Guarantee Doctrine,” or NG:

(NG): It is not within God’s power to bring it about (weakly) that both (a) every person who is saved freely chooses to be saved and (b) all are saved.



NG has been strongly challenged in recent debates by Thomas Talbott.³ Talbott's critique of NG relies, however, on an understanding of human freedom that, while plausible, is rejected by those who embrace a strong libertarian view of freedom. My aim in what follows is to argue that NG should be rejected even by these strong libertarians.

In critiquing NG, I assume two things. First, for the sake of simplicity I assume that what is necessary for salvation is a single free choice to accept (or not resist) God's grace, rather than a series of such choices. This assumption is in line with the views of those Christians who believe that all we need to do in order to be saved from damnation is to accept—or, even more modestly, choose not to resist—the operation of divine grace. For example, the Lutheran Orthodox believed that once we make the choice not to resist God's grace, we in effect allow God to “flood” into our lives and proceed to do whatever is necessary to secure our eternal salvation. This is usually taken to involve a transformation of our character, or *sanctification*. It is important to stress, however, that the Lutheran Orthodox rejected the idea that divine forgiveness for human sin depends on such sanctification, instead maintaining that God's forgiveness of sin precedes the transformation (the transformation itself being necessary not for *deserving* heaven, but rather for being brought into a state suitable for the enjoyment of heaven). The sanctification process is conceived as occurring over time and occurring with the *concurrence of the reformed will*, but at this stage in the process, the will is freely concurring with God in only a compatibilist sense. In other words, the only *libertarian* free choice in the process of salvation is the initial choice not to resist God's grace.⁴

Although I make this assumption for the sake of simplicity, my argument will work even if salvation is reached through a series of free choices—even if, that is, we assume that the road to heaven involves an ongoing sequence of choices that are free in the libertarian sense. For example, even if we accept the Lutheran view that the choices that directly perfect our character in the process of sanctification are not free in the libertarian sense, one might still believe that one retains the freedom, in a libertarian sense, to “unplug” from the divine grace that drives the process (this appears to be what the Lutherans have historically believed). As such, there may be, throughout the process that culminates in eternal beatitude, a sequence of free choices (in the libertarian sense) not to shut off the operation of grace. If so, then what is needed for salvation is a series of choices, not a single choice. I show at the end of the essay that, even assuming such a sequence of choices, salvation is guaranteed.

My second assumption is that once we are “saved”—not in the sense of having had an initial conversion experience, but rather in the sense of enjoying the beatific vision, that is, enjoying the fullness of loving communion with God—we are confirmed in this state. In other words, once we are in heaven we will never return to a state of alienation from God. This assumption is, I suspect, nearly universally embraced by Christians. How could the blessed in heaven truly be “saved” from damnation if their status is precarious and they could at any time tumble back into hell? How this assumption relates to human freedom is a question I will not explore in detail at this point, although I will return to this issue when considering objections to my argument. For present purposes, I content myself

with identifying two obvious alternatives: either human freedom is such that once one experiences the ultimate human good (loving communion with God) there is no possible world in which even a free person turns away from it; or freedom has served its purpose once one has achieved this ultimate good, and hence can be suspended without any violation of the person.⁵

II. Talbott's Critique of NG and the Libertarian Defense

In a series of articles, Talbott offers powerful reasons to think that no one who knows the significance of the choice would freely choose alienation from God over communion with Him.⁶ As Talbott claims, no one would have any possible motive for choosing alienation if they knew the truth and were not being controlled by some non-rational affective state. The choice of alienation would therefore have to be based on some "ignorance, deception, or bondage to desire"⁷—in which case the choice would not be genuinely free. God could thus ensure the salvation of every person without interfering with freedom—by simply eliminating these barriers to free choice, which I will henceforth refer to as "salvation inhibitors."

If we accept Talbott's reasoning, we are in effect accepting the judgment that there is no possible world in which someone who is freed from all salvation inhibitors will freely choose alienation from God. But here is where concerns about Talbott's thinking are most likely to arise. It is widely held that a minimum requirement for a choice to be free in the libertarian sense is that it is possible for one to have chosen otherwise.⁸ If so, then we must take Talbott to be supposing that, at least when human beings are confronted with choosing the ultimate good in the absence of any salvation inhibitors, their freedom is not libertarian. Although free in the sense that they choose in accordance with their own desires and rational judgment of what is best, their choice is *determined* in the sense that there is no possible world which is such that it shares all the same relevant background conditions as the actual world (specifically the facts that the person has full knowledge of the nature of the choice and that the person is not in bondage to any desire) and yet the person makes a different choice.

This, a critic of Talbott might say, is not libertarian freedom but only compatibilist freedom. And the critic may be inclined to voice the following complaint: Of course it is possible for God to guarantee that all freely choose salvation in a *compatibilist* sense. What is not possible is for God to guarantee that all freely choose salvation in the *libertarian* sense—more precisely, in the sense of free choice which is such that for every free choice we make it is possible for us to have chosen otherwise. But those who endorse NG presumably presuppose that humans have precisely this sort of libertarian freedom—at least until their ultimate salvation is achieved. And if this is true, then for each person there will always be a possible world in which that person freely chooses damnation.

This line of criticism, it seems to me, does not do justice to the subtlety of Talbott's views on human freedom. More precisely, I think that the kind of freedom that Talbott is attributing to human beings is neither compatibilist freedom *nor* libertarian freedom, but rather what we might call "rational freedom." For Talbott, rational freedom is the only kind

of freedom really worth having, and hence the only kind of freedom that God would have a moral obligation to preserve. As I understand it, what I am calling rational freedom presupposes four things: first, that values are objective, such that for every decision there is a choice that is objectively the best; second, that the rational faculty makes judgments about what is best in accord with its (often limited or misguided) grasp of this objective order of values; third, that the will can be effectively “programmed” to be dominated or controlled by things other than this rational judgment—things such as deeply entrenched bad habits, addictions, and enduring coping mechanisms derived from a dysfunctional childhood; fourth, that the will is “naturally” ordered to choose in accord with the judgments of the rational faculty (we might call this the “default setting” of the will), such that when non-rational controlling factors are dislodged the will always chooses in accord with these rational judgments. The conflict between first-order and second-order desires can be understood, in this scheme, as the conflict between those desires that have been programmed to dominate the will and the “default” desire to choose in accord with the judgments of reason.

The will, then, is naturally ordered to follow reason, and the reason is ordered to discern the objective order of values. When both function correctly, we have rational freedom. Rational freedom should therefore be contrasted with any state in which either the rational faculty is impeded in reaching a sound judgment about what is good, or non-rational motivations so dominate the person that the he or she is unable to choose in accord with reason. Rational freedom exists only when these impediments (“ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire”) are lifted. When bondage to objectively irrational desires is in place *and* the reason is deluded into judging the desired objects to be good, the result is something resembling compatibilist freedom (one is free in the sense that one chooses in accord with both first-order and second-order desires). When bondage to desire is lifted and the reason is no longer *deluded*, but *ignorance* remains, there is an indeterminacy to choices that resembles libertarian freedom. Insofar as the Sartrean existentialist denies an objective order of values, this state of libertarian freedom becomes the ultimate expression of human freedom. But genuinely rational freedom, as that is understood by Talbott (in keeping with the Christian notion that there is an objective order of values), is found in neither of these states. Instead, it is found when two conditions are met: first, the rational faculty is neither deluded *nor* ignorant about what is good, thereby providing a fully satisfactory account of what is good; second, the will is not subject to the control of any non-rational faculty, thereby inevitably choosing in accord with the rational faculty.

It follows from this understanding of what free choice involves that anyone with genuine freedom would choose communion with God over alienation from God. Hence, on Talbott’s view, not only is NG false, it is *necessarily* false. The only possible condition under which some are not saved would be if some were not rationally free.

Hence, those who accept NG *must* subscribe to some different understanding of freedom. As we will see in the next section, there are two ways to do so—but both approaches entail that the human freedom referenced in NG includes an essentially and irrevocably random element. What I

will show in the final sections of the paper is that if freedom does include such a random element, then NG is false. Put another way, in order for defenders of NG to avoid Talbott's challenge they must construe the freedom that is at issue in NG such that it includes an element of arbitrariness which, once embraced, decisively undermines NG. I turn now to the task of showing that the alternatives to Talbott's understanding of freedom entail a random element.

III: *Random Choices*

As noted above, defenders of NG must subscribe to an understanding of freedom different from Talbott's. There are two ways to deny Talbott's view. On the one hand, they can deny Talbott's claim that once freed from all salvation inhibitors (all ignorance, deception and bondage to desire) we infallibly choose communion with God. They might do so on the grounds that any freedom worth having includes the capacity to make choices different from the ones that we in fact make. On the other hand, they might accept Talbott's view that once freed from all salvation inhibitors we cannot but choose union with God, but hold that salvation is a necessary precondition for being freed from all salvation inhibitors. In effect, experience of the beatific vision is *the only way* to wash away *all* ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire. As such, Talbott's rational freedom cannot be the sort of freedom at issue when we are considering free choices that *lead* to salvation, and hence cannot be the sort of freedom referenced in NG. But there might be *another* kind of freedom worth having that *can* be exercised prior to salvation, a kind of freedom which is such that it is always possible for someone who possesses it to reject God.

In this section, I show that either of these approaches requires us to hold that there is something essentially random or arbitrary operating in the "free" choices that lead to salvation. Let us begin by considering the first approach. This approach presupposes a radical sort of libertarian freedom according to which it is possible for persons who are freed from salvation inhibitors to nevertheless choose contrary to their own settled and unwavering rational judgment concerning what is best. In other words, it is possible for a person not in bondage to any non-rational affective state *both* to judge (correctly, on Christian assumptions) that choosing communion with God is infinitely preferable to alienation from God *and* to choose alienation from God.

Typical accounts of this sort of radically free choice betray an implicit confusion by appealing to motivations such as "pride" to *explain* the choice. This is confused because an implication of the judgment that choosing God is infinitely preferable to choosing alienation from God is the judgment that satisfying one's own "pride" is infinitely inferior in value to achieving communion with God. And since we are assuming that the person is not in bondage to any non-rational affective state, we are assuming that the person is not *determined* in any way to act out of pride. Thus, this supposed "explanation" of the radically free choice of alienation from God turns out to have the following form: A person who is not in bondage to prideful feelings and who recognizes pride to be utterly unworthy of choice nevertheless chooses to act on pride. "Pride" can hardly explain one's choice in

this situation, since one is free not to act on prideful feelings and one has no *reason* to choose pride. The choice of pride is itself a kind of inexplicable choice.⁹ What should be clear, however, is that *any* explanation that could be offered for choosing to act contrary to one's own settled best judgment, when one is not in bondage to any non-rational affective state, turns out to be this kind of empty explanation. If there is no ignorance, deception, or bondage to desire operating to explain the choice to reject God, then such a choice must remain unexplained and unexplainable. That is, there cannot be any reasons for making such a choice.

The result is that we can only account for this sort of radical view of freedom by insisting that there is something fundamentally arbitrary or random at work in human choice: the reason why it is possible for someone who is not in bondage to desire to choose contrary to what reason recommends is the simple fact that some human choices are inexplicably random.¹⁰ Furthermore, this randomness cannot be the result of a more basic non-random choice. When I look at a menu and cannot decide between two entrées, I may effectively choose an entrée at random—but underlying that choice is the more basic choice to “let chance decide,” and this choice is not random at all but based on the reasoned judgment that, since my preferences do not lean me towards one entrée over another, and since I must choose if I am to eat, it makes sense for me to make the choice at random. But it makes no sense at all to randomly make the choice about whether or not to accept God's grace, especially if I am freed from all salvation inhibitors. To choose to let chance decide whether I will know eternal bliss or perpetual misery is to leave in the hands of chance the very last thing that any rational person would leave up to chance if he or she could help it. Thus, if chance does play a role in this decision, it is because the person *can't* help it. There simply is a random element operating in human choice, and the operation of this random element is, in an important sense, outside the person's rational control.

It might be thought that this conclusion can be avoided by holding that, even when all salvation inhibitors are removed, this does not entail the removal of all non-rational motives for action. Even if we are no longer in bondage to such motives, they may persist. Perhaps we can choose to reject God because we retain the power to act on irrational desires—desires that would motivate us to reject God—even after we are freed from any bondage to such desires. The idea here is that libertarian freedom involves the power to select among motives, and that even once all salvation inhibitors are removed there may remain motives that would lead us to reject God were we to choose them.

The problem with this idea is that it takes freedom to involve an act of *choosing* among motives, and it is fair to ask why we would choose one motive rather than another. What motivates the choice of motives? Nothing? If so, then our choices turn out, once again, to be random. But if there is something that influences our choice of motives, what would that be? Some second-order motives, we might say. But if we are freed from all salvation inhibitors, then what second-order motive could inspire us to choose a first-order God-rejecting motive? If we are freed from all ignorance and deception, we could have no rational basis for selecting such a motive. And if we have been freed from all bondage to desire, there can

be no second-order irrational desire that *determines* our selection of this motive. Hence, either our selection of it is random, or our selection of this motive is explained by the fact that we have *chosen* to have our choice of second-order motives be determined by an irrational third-order motive. But then this choice needs to be explained. The only escape from an infinite regress here is to posit a random element operating in human choice.

This is not to say that human choices need to be conceived of as *entirely* random. We might, for example, maintain that when a person's rational judgment speaks in favor of a choice, this increases the probability that the rationally endorsed option will be chosen. Assuming that bondage to non-rational affective states has been eliminated, we might imagine that when reason judges "A" and "B" to be equally desirable, this affects the free will by turning its decision into a kind of coin flip—even odds that it will randomly embrace "A" or "B." If reason regards "A" as many times more desirable than "B," that affects the free will by radically reducing the odds that "B" will be chosen. We might imagine that the choice becomes like the roll of a many-sided die, with "A" being represented on more sides of the die than "B." As reason more strongly favors "A" over "B," "B" is represented on fewer and fewer sides.

Presumably the choice of alienation from God would be extremely *improbable* in someone who has (according to typical Christian standards of valuation) correctly judged communion with God to be immeasurably superior to alienation from God. But this is not to say that the choice is *impossible*. If we conceive of human freedom as possessing this random feature, we could still maintain in the face of Talbott's arguments that some persons who are freed from ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire will nevertheless choose alienation from God at any time T. The implications of this point will be developed in the next section. For now, I simply want to stress that those who seek to avoid Talbott's rejection of NG by understanding freedom in this radical libertarian way are committed to a view of human freedom that makes randomness an ineradicable operative element in our choices.

The same is true for those who pursue the second approach sketched out above. Here, the idea is that salvation is a *condition* for rational freedom, because it is only once we enjoy the beautiful vision, and are therefore saved, that all deception and ignorance is gone. If so, then rational freedom cannot be the kind of freedom we are talking about when we consider the choices of persons who have yet to be saved. If there are any free choices that are a *condition* for salvation, they cannot be choices that are free in Talbott's sense.

Now one conclusion to draw from this line of thinking is to hold that NG becomes trivially true but ceases to be an impediment to God's saving all. This follows if we hold that rational freedom is the only true freedom, the only kind of freedom worth having and hence the only kind of freedom that would demand God's respect. If salvation is a condition for rational freedom, and if rational freedom is the only meaningful kind of freedom that God could be called upon to respect, then there is no meaningful freedom prior to salvation and it is not possible for *anyone* to freely choose to be saved. Thus, it would be trivially true that it is not within God's power to guarantee that everyone makes such a choice. But neither

would it be compatible with God's goodness for God to make salvation conditional upon a free choice when such a choice is impossible for anyone who is not yet saved. Hence, any argument for ED that relies on NG would collapse.

The only way out of this predicament, for the defender of ED, would be to say that there exists a kind of freedom that is not rational freedom but is nevertheless a freedom worth having, and hence is a kind of freedom that God would be called upon to respect. And it is *this* kind of freedom that is being referenced in NG.

But what would this "next-best freedom" look like? Clearly, much of what Talbott has to say about choices that are made in the grip of ignorance, deception, or bondage to desire is indisputable: Those who have been decisively misled and are acting on false beliefs cannot be said to act freely. Likewise, those who are being controlled by affective states that they cannot override by even the greatest exercise of will cannot reasonably be said to be free. And surely God is capable of liberating us from such obvious impediments to free choice without the need to display the full and irresistible majesty of the beatific vision.

The "next-best freedom" that is at issue in NG must be understood as the freedom that exists when all salvation inhibitors have been removed *except those that cannot be removed short of experiencing the beatific vision*. And if there is anything that God cannot do prior to saving us, it is to free us from all *ignorance*. What characterizes our existence prior to our final salvation is an ineradicable uncertainty about what is truly best. Prior to experiencing the beatific vision, we cannot know beyond all doubt that communion with God is the ultimate good against which nothing else compares. And uncertainty about the relative value of our choices is enough to generate an indeterminacy in our decision-making.

But to say that our decision-making prior to salvation is inevitably subject to the indeterminacy that flows from uncertainty about the relative value of our choices is simply to say that, in this pre-saved state, there is something inextricably random about our choices. This is most obvious when faced with the need to make a choice when our judgment is entirely silent. We have no reason to regard one alternative as preferable to another. And so we just choose—at random. We *cannot* do otherwise. If we truly had a reason for making the choice that we do, then our judgment would not be silent. In cases of complete uncertainty, our choice *must* be arbitrary.

The same is true if, among the available alternatives, our judgment has available to it equally strong (or weak) reasons in favor of (and/or against) each. If this is truly the case, then we lack any reason to prefer one alternative over another. When we choose option A, we might share the reasons that speak in A's favor when asked, but those reasons would not explain why we did it, since we had equally compelling reasons to follow an alternative course. No reason *could* explain our choice. That we have the capacity to choose in these circumstances may be a good thing, insofar as the alternative is a kind of paralysis. When the motives for making one decision or another are equally rationally compelling (or unconvincing), such that our rational judgment cannot guide us, we nevertheless have the power to choose. But this power—precisely

because it is the power to choose among reasons for action that are equally compelling—is nothing other than the power to choose in the absence of reasons, that is, arbitrarily. It is the power to make a kind of mental coin flip rather than remain paralyzed.

Of course, many cases of actual choice are not like this. In many if not most cases, one alternative stands out as having the strongest considerations in its favor. In these cases we surely can have reasons for preferring one alternative over another. What we cannot have is reasons for preferring the *less* favored option. Hence, if we do choose the less favored option, it will be for no reason at all, and hence must once again be explained by virtue of an arbitrariness operative in human choice.

It is reasonable to suppose that with respect to the choice about whether or not to accept communion with God, at least when we have the “next-best freedom” that exists once we have been stripped of all those salvation inhibitors that *can* be stripped away prior to salvation, we have more reason to choose communion with God than we have to choose alienation. Hence, at the very least it is more likely that we will choose communion with God. But does it remain possible for us to choose alienation from God? If so, how? If our judgment is that the reasons in favor of choosing God are the most compelling, then none of the reasons *against* choosing God could explain the choice to reject God. For if we appealed to such reasons we would need to explain why we were acting on reasons that we judged to be, all things considered, poor reasons on which to act. There could be no *reason* to explain acting contrary to one’s best judgment. Pseudo-reasons such as pride do not explain such a choice, for reasons already noted. Hence, if we do in some possible worlds choose contrary to our best judgment when the weight of evidence is suggestive but not conclusive, it will be because the randomness that prevails when the weight of reasons on both sides is balanced somehow persists when the weight of reasons leans in favor of one alternative. I should note, however, that the random element may be progressively less influential as the weight of reasons becomes more lopsided (consider again the example of the many-sided die in which one alternative is represented more often than another).

The most plausible way to reject this conclusion, it seems, is to argue that our choice of the less reasonable alternative is explained, not by a random element in human choice, but rather by the willful decision to attend to reasons and evidence in a distorted way. We might explain the decision to reject God by arguing that, when we are confronted with a body of evidence that is suggestive but not compelling, we have the power to attend to some but not all of the evidence, and hence allow the less compelling evidence to move us. Put another way, we decide to pay attention to the reasons in favor of one choice and ignore the reasons in favor of the other. We thereby choose which motive will move us.

The problem with this explanation is that it posits a choice that itself needs to be explained, namely the choice to attend disproportionately to the less compelling evidence. Why make such a choice? It does not seem that the weight of reasons could speak in favor of this choice, so this choice would have to be explained either in terms of a prior choice to attend to reasons in a distorted way, or in terms of a random element in human choice. If we choose the former, then we have another choice to explain.

To avoid an infinite regress of choices, we must ultimately appeal to a random element.

In summary, then, it appears that in order to escape Talbott's reasoning against NG, its defender must posit that the kind of freedom operative prior to salvation includes a random element. Why God would feel compelled, morally, to respect any freedom of this sort is a question I will not consider with care here. It seems to me that God wouldn't have any duty to respect such freedom, and that the case for ED based on NG would fail for that reason. But instead of pursuing that line of argument, I will challenge the claim that NG is true given this understanding of human freedom.

IV. Radical Libertarian Freedom and the Guarantee of Universalism

Given the view that human freedom contains a random element—what I will hereafter call the radical libertarian view of freedom, a view which I think *must* be endorsed in order to avoid Talbott's critique of NG—does it follow that it is impossible for an omnipotent God to guarantee that all will freely choose salvation? I will argue here that it does not. Given my initial assumptions, which imply that once a person chooses communion with God that person is ultimately confirmed in eternal bliss, it follows that God can save all even assuming this radical libertarian view of freedom. The only things God must do in order to ensure universal salvation are (a) strip away all those salvation inhibitors that He can strip away prior to salvation,¹¹ (b) sustain every person in a *temporal* existence at least until they choose communion with God,¹² and (c) leave the choice of communion with God an "open choice" such that every person is free to choose it at any time. It certainly seems to be the case that accomplishing all three of these things falls within the scope of an omnipotent being's power.

To see why (a)–(c) would ensure universal salvation, consider the following. We have already argued that if (a) is met, a free person will more likely than not choose communion with God over alienation, even assuming a radical libertarian freedom. For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose that the odds are even.¹³ If God brings about (b) and (c), then the choice whether or not to embrace communion with God is not a choice that is made only once, but rather a choice that the person is confronted with at *every moment* of an existence of potentially infinite duration. At each moment of this indefinite existence, there is a fifty percent chance that this person will choose communion with God over continued alienation—at which point the person is saved. Under these conditions, the salvation of the person becomes a mathematical certainty.

The mathematical certainty of this outcome can be usefully depicted using the language of possible worlds. To do so, it will help to introduce some terminology. Let us call a complete possible state of affairs at any particular moment a "possible moment." A "possible world" is a totality of temporally successive possible moments. A "possible world segment" is a totality of temporally successive possible moments up to a particular time. A "possible world tree" is a collection of possible worlds that share the same possible world segment up to time T (the "trunk" of the tree), at which point they diverge. An "indeterminacy" in a possible world segment is some random factor operative at time T such that after T there is

more than one possible world sharing the same world segment up to *T*. At any moment, there are a finite number of possible world segments in a possible world tree. However, as the timeline moves towards infinity, so long as there are indeterminacies remaining within any possible world segment the number of possible world segments within a tree expands without bound.

With this terminology in mind, let us consider the claim that universal salvation is guaranteed under conditions (a)–(c). Let us imagine a possible world segment *P1* in which the only thing that offers any indeterminacy is Fred, who at *T1* has yet to choose communion with God. Let us suppose further, for the sake of simplicity, that the only choice “open” to Fred, and thus the only source of indeterminacy in *P1*, is the choice of whether or not to accept communion with God. God removes all salvation inhibitors from Fred, so that at *T1* there is a fifty percent chance that Fred will choose communion with God. I will assume that even though any segment of time is infinitely divisible, human experience divides time into discrete successive moments that are not similarly divisible in human experience, and hence that the human capacity to make a choice takes place in such discrete successive moments. With this in mind, at *T2*, the moment immediately following *T1*, we have two possible world segments in the possible world tree that shares *P* as its “trunk.” In one of these possible world segments (*P2*_{saved}), Fred chooses communion with God. In the other, *P2*_{unsaved}, he persists in rejecting God. At *T2*, *P2*_{saved} lacks any indeterminacy: since Fred has chosen communion with God, and since that choice confirms Fred in salvation, the possible world extending into the future from *P2*_{saved} is a possible world in which Fred is saved at every subsequent moment. In *P2*_{unsaved}, however, Fred is confronted at *T2* with the same choice he faced at *T1*. Thus, at the subsequent moment, *T3*, we have three possible world segments: *P2*_{saved-ext} (the extension of *P2*_{saved} up to *T3*), *P3*_{saved}, and *P3*_{unsaved}. This process continues indefinitely. As the timeline continues forward, the number of possible worlds in which Fred remains unsaved becomes a progressively smaller percentage of the possible world segments in the possible world tree branching from *P1*. As the timeline approaches infinity, within this tree the percentage of world segments in which Fred has not yet made the choice of communion with God, and hence remains unsaved, approaches 0. Thus, following the standard mathematical rules of probability, we can say that given infinite time it is mathematically certain that Fred will be saved.

In effect, we can liken Fred to a single penny that starts out heads-side up in a box and has crazy-glue on its heads-side. Even if there is an even chance at any shaking of the box that the penny will remain head-side up, we would expect that in a few shakings it would get “stuck” heads-side down. If we are willing to rattle the box indefinitely, we are guaranteed that the penny will eventually stick in the heads-side down position. The guarantee is given by the fact that as the timeline approaches infinity, the percentage of possible world segments (in the relevant tree) in which the penny remains head-side up approaches 0.

It should be obvious that the number of pennies in the box makes no difference, since the same analysis can be applied to each penny. Likewise, if we have a world with twelve billion people rather than just Fred, the

outcome will be the same: given an indefinite timeline, all will eventually be saved. In short, by bringing about (a)–(c), it is within God's power to ensure that all are saved. Furthermore, we can add that even if the interval between decision-moments is significantly greater than I have supposed, such that Fred is only confronted with a genuine choice about whether or not to accept God's grace once every five years, the outcome will be the same. So long as the timeline is infinite, Fred is still confronted with an infinite number of decision-moments.

Of course, I began with the assumption that salvation is based on a single choice. What if, instead, it is based on a series of choices? What if the process of becoming saved is a complex one in which the person must freely concur with God's salvific intentions at every stage in the process? Imagine that in order for the penny to stick head-side down in the box, it must land heads-side down on twelve successive occasions. The probability of this happening in any given sequence of twelve coin flips is very low. Hence, we would expect that it would take a very long time for the penny to get stuck heads-side down. But we would still be inclined to say that if we had infinite patience and kept on rattling forever, we would eventually achieve the desired result. The reason for this inclination can be mathematically represented in the same general way: the percentage of possible worlds in which the requisite sequence of outcomes has not yet appeared becomes progressively smaller as the timeline moves forward—and while the curve is far more shallow than our previous curve, it still approaches 0 as the timeline approaches infinity. Given infinite time, it is mathematically certain that the requisite sequence of outcomes will eventually occur.

V. Objections

Perhaps the most significant objection to this line of argument challenges my appeal to an infinite timeline to guarantee that Fred is saved. Many are inclined to argue that, since one never reaches the end of an infinite sequence, no *actual* sequence is infinite. Likewise, no actual timeline is infinite. Hence, in any *actual* timeline, no matter how long, it is possible that Fred remains unsaved. Put another way, at any time *T* the probability that Fred has yet to choose communion with God is a real probability greater than 0.

I am prepared to grant that this is true. Two responses are, however, warranted. First, those who want to claim that some person—say Fred—is *forever* damned are making a claim *about an infinite timeline*. They are not merely asserting that Fred is alienated from God up to some time *T*. They are making the further assertion that Fred is damned *at every time T* indefinitely into the future. And insofar as this claim is about an infinite timeline, the mathematics of infinity applies to it. What I have shown here is that Fred being *forever* damned has a mathematical probability of 0.

Of course, someone who takes seriously the idea that we will never reach the end of an infinite timeline might be prepared to accept this point and abandon any claims about persons being forever damned. They might be prepared to embrace a more modest claim to the effect that, for *any* time *T* one chooses to contemplate, it remains possible that there are persons

who remain alienated from God. Thus, at no time *T* do we have a guarantee that all are saved.

But if God is prepared to allow our temporal existence to continue *until* we choose to be saved, and if the likelihood of our remaining unsaved becomes increasingly remote as the timeline moves forward, isn't there still a sense in which our salvation is guaranteed? Given an indefinite (if not infinite) timeline, the question becomes whether we will eventually reach some time *T* at which we choose communion with God. This is akin to asking whether, given the ability and willingness to flip a fair coin *indefinitely* until it lands heads-up (even if that should take a trillion tries, or two trillion, etc.), we will eventually toss a coin that lands head-up. The answer is such a resounding yes that we have what *amounts to* a guarantee. Certainly, under these conditions it is not merely reasonable to believe that the coin will eventually land heads-up. It would be madness to think otherwise. Likewise, adherence to a doctrine of eternal damnation amounts to a kind of insanity.

But all of this assumes that Fred's choice to reject God at *T*₁ (once he has been freed from all salvation inhibitors) will have no impact on the probability of Fred continuing to reject God at *T*₂. But a critic of my position might argue that this is an unfair assumption. Many defenders of ED point to a contingent psychological fact about human beings: our choices produce habits which dispose us to make similar choices in the future. God might be motivated to create us with this psychological feature because it makes it possible for us to choose to become a certain kind of person. We can choose our *character*, not merely isolated acts. Defenders of ED routinely appeal to this fact of human psychology, and argue that we can become so confirmed in the habit of rejecting God that it is no longer possible for us to accept divine grace.¹⁴ This, they say, is what it means to be damned. Furthermore, were God to intervene in this process of character-formation, God would be interfering with our freedom to choose what kind of people we are to become.¹⁵

Following this line of thought, a critic of my argument might say that if Fred is freed from all salvation inhibitors (or at least all those that can be eliminated prior to salvation) he might yet choose to reject God, and if he does so this choice might initiate a process of character-formation that would, if Fred is sufficiently unlucky, culminate in a fixed God-rejecting character. Fred progressively hardens his heart against God. The more often he rejects God, the more likely he is to reject God again in the future, until eventually he reaches a point where he has an irredeemably bad heart. Furthermore, according to this challenge, God could not interfere with this process without also interfering with Fred's freedom to choose who he is to become. As such, it is not in God's power to ensure that Fred is saved without interfering with Fred's freedom. And so, it might be concluded, NG is true after all.¹⁶

In my statement of this argument, I used the phrase "if Fred is sufficiently unlucky." I did so quite deliberately. I have argued that *if* Fred is able to choose to reject God when he is freed from all salvation inhibitors, and hence has absolutely no motive whatsoever to reject God and every conceivable reason to embrace Him, the reason is that there is something fundamentally arbitrary at work in human free choice. This, I

have suggested, is what the strong libertarian defender of ED *must* hold. Thus, in order for this challenge to my argument to work, we must assume that the habit-forming feature of human choice applies not only to choices that proceed from reasoned judgment, but also to fundamentally random choices of the sort operative when Fred, freed from all salvation inhibitors, nevertheless rejects God. Only on this assumption can Fred's random choice to reject God create any hardening of heart.

Notice, also, that even if hardness of heart is partly responsible for Fred's present choice to reject God, in that it affects the probabilities in favor of rejecting God, if the hardness of heart arose from a previous choice that was determined entirely by the random element of human choice, then this random element fully explains Fred's current rejection of God.

With that in mind, the objection to my argument can be restated as follows: Fred might be eternally damned because he might be so unlucky that the random element of human choice operates against his interests not once, but so consistently as to ultimately deprive him of the freedom to choose in favor of his interests. And God so respects the operation of this random element that he would rather see Fred damned by bad luck than interfere with these "coin flips" or their tragic outcome.

Now it's surely problematic to describe this random process, which inflicts on Fred a fixed God-rejecting character, as the process of Fred "freely choosing a God-rejecting character." But that's exactly what must be maintained for this objection to my argument to work. So, for the sake of argument, let's treat this as a case of Fred freely choosing to harden his heart against God. If we do so, then we might well say that it is not within God's power to save poor unlucky Fred without interfering with Fred's freedom. But what we now confront is a new difficulty: Why would anyone think that Fred's freedom in this sense is worth preserving? Why think that God has some moral obligation to sit and watch the random element in Fred's will doom him to eternal misery?

If there really is a random element operating in human freedom, it would seem that a good God would so structure human psychology that choices resulting entirely from this random element would be exempted from the habit-forming tendencies characteristic of other choices. It makes sense for God to design us so that deliberate, reasoned choices play a role in forming our character. It doesn't make sense for God to allow metaphorical coin flips to do so.

To put the point in its simplest terms: a random element in human freedom, coupled with a policy of divine non-interference with the operation of human freedom, can be reconciled with God's goodness *if* the random element lacks the power to fix character. After all, under those conditions, as I've argued, nobody will be doomed by bad luck. But the following conjunction cannot, it seems, be reconciled with God's goodness: the random element in human freedom has the capacity to fix character, and God refuses to interfere with this random process or its consequences even when the process results in a person's eternal damnation.

This conjunction implies that God would permit bad luck to damn someone. But it seems that a perfectly good God who had the power to prevent bad luck from damning a person, without doing something that is morally objectionable in itself, would do so. And it seems that He *does*

have this power. For he has the power to design human psychology such that the random element of human choice (assuming that there is such a thing) lacks the capacity to fix character. And there does not seem to be anything morally objectionable about doing this.

Hence, anyone committed both to the strong libertarian view of freedom and to the view that God never interferes with human freedom should deny that Fred's randomly determined choices are habit forming. But if we admit that these random choices are not habit-forming, then God can guarantee that Fred freely chooses salvation by bringing about (a)–(c), and my original argument stands.

I turn now to a final objection. I save this objection for last because reflecting on it will prove especially helpful in highlighting the implications of the arguments developed here. The guarantee of universal salvation defended here depends upon my assumption that, once a person has made the choice (or sequence of choices) that brings about communion with God, that person is confirmed in bliss and there is no longer any possibility of becoming alienated from God. But a critic might wonder whether, given this assumption, it can meaningfully be claimed that anyone *freely* chooses communion with God.¹⁷

To see the potential problem here, consider the following analogous case. Imagine a universe in which a supremely powerful Devil is able to confirm in damnation anyone who has made the choice to commit a particular sin, call it S. Let us suppose, as before, that there is a random element operative in human choice. All it takes for damnation is *one* unfortunate random choice. We will assume, furthermore, that those who persist in resisting S do not become confirmed in that choice. They do not become "S-resistant," but remain equally likely to choose S at some time in the future. We might imagine that, as before, the random element in choice is affected by rational judgments, so that those who judge S to be a foolish choice are *unlikely* to randomly choose it (and hence damnation), but still have some possibility of doing so—the choice of S appears on one side of a many-sided die. In such a case, it is guaranteed, given an infinite timeline, that even these wise persons who consistently resist S over time will be damned, because given infinite time it is mathematically certain that there will be at least one unlucky roll of the dice. Thus, universal damnation would be guaranteed. But would we want to say that, in such a universe, *all* those who are damned *freely choose to be damned*?

There is something intuitively implausible about saying so. Hence, my critic will argue, it is likewise implausible to claim that, given my picture of things, the saved *freely choose to be saved*.

This criticism, however, assumes a parity between the two cases that cannot reasonably assumed.¹⁸ Whatever one thinks of the plausibility of the radical libertarian view of freedom, the claim that the damned in the analogous case *freely choose* their state is implausible for reasons that do not apply to the claim that the saved *freely choose their* fate when conditions (a)–(c) obtain. The disanalogy rests on *why* the damned in the analogous case would be confirmed in damnation after choosing alienation from God.

At the start of the paper I offered two possible accounts of how human freedom might be related to the assumption that the saved are confirmed

in bliss once they have made the choice (or sequence of choices) that brings about communion with God: either human freedom is such that once one experiences loving communion with God there is no possible world in which even a free person turns away from it; or freedom has served its purpose once one has achieved this ultimate good, and hence can be suspended without any violation of the person.

Neither of these alternatives can be plausibly invoked in the case of someone confirmed in damnation. This fact may explain why it is highly implausible to claim that the damned in the analogous case have freely chosen their state.¹⁹ To see why this is so, let us consider both of the accounts, sketched out above, of the relationship between human freedom and being confirmed in blessedness. The first assumes that once we have achieved communion with God our freedom acquires a compatibilist character (even if it may not have had such a character prior to salvation). This strikes me as the far more plausible account, especially when we explain it in terms already discussed in section III. As noted in that section, one way to avoid Talbott's critique of NG is to hold that, prior to salvation, we cannot have complete knowledge of the good, since such knowledge only comes once we have achieved the communion with God that *constitutes* salvation. This response to Talbott does not deny his account of freedom or the value that he attaches to it, but rather denies that perfect freedom in Talbott's sense can be attained prior to salvation. Prior to salvation, we lack complete knowledge of the ultimate good. In the absence of such knowledge, there remains an inescapably arbitrary dimension to human choice.

But on this view, once we have achieved communion with God that arbitrary element disappears, because we now have the complete knowledge that we had lacked. With this fullness of knowledge, our rational freedom can operate unimpeded by any ignorance, and it will inevitably choose what is best: union with God.

On this picture, it should be obvious *both* that confirmation in blessedness is no violation of human freedom (but rather the perfection of it) *and* that there can be no confirmation in damnation that has a parallel explanation that renders it similarly compatible with human freedom. On the contrary, it seems that in order for a person to be confirmed in the choice of damnation, the person must be in the grip of some significant deception or bondage to desire—both of which are impediments to freedom. Given the nature of freedom, the only way to confirm someone in a state of alienation from God is to thwart the exercise of freedom, whereas all that is needed to confirm someone in blessedness is to bring about a state in which all impediments to freedom are removed.

The critic of my argument fares no better by opting for the second account of the relationship between human freedom and confirmation in blessedness. On this account, the reason why the blessed cannot fall away is because their freedom has achieved its purpose and hence needn't be sustained. Again, this account is best understood in terms of ideas raised in section III. In that section, I suggested that another way to avoid Talbott's arguments against NG is to reject his account of freedom altogether on the grounds that the only valuable kind of freedom involves the capacity to have done otherwise. In other words, to have a freedom worth having with respect to some choice, it must be the case that one does

not make the same choice in every possible world. Since Talbott's rational freedom entails that, under ideal conditions, one does make the same choice in every possible world, this account of freedom is regarded as defective. What I showed was that, in order to have this supposedly valuable freedom at all times, it must be the case that when one has every reason to make one choice and no reason to make another, there remains some possible world in which one chooses in a manner that is contrary to all reasons—and hence chooses without reason, or arbitrarily.

It is, admittedly, hard to fathom what purpose such freedom would serve in the created order, or why anyone would regard it as valuable (let alone the most valuable kind of freedom). But let us assume for the sake of argument that there is something intrinsically valuable about this kind of radical libertarian freedom. If we make the further assumption, as defenders of ED seem to do, that freely chosen salvation is superior in some way to salvation that is not so chosen, then the purpose of this kind of freedom would presumably be to achieve this superior outcome. That is its *telos* in the natural order. But freedom of this kind, if possessed by the saved, would compromise their salvation by rendering it subject to arbitrary loss. And a salvation that is impermanent and can be lost by an unlucky roll of the dice is no salvation at all. Hence, if we construe freedom in this radical way, freedom *must* be revoked in order for salvation to exist. And if the purpose of freedom is to make possible freely chosen *salvation*, then this freedom must be revoked once salvation is chosen in order for freedom to serve its function in the natural order. Such loss of freedom would not violate the *telos* of freedom but would be required by it, and hence could not be construed as a morally objectionable violation of freedom.

Understood in these terms, freedom can be legitimately revoked only once the creature has chosen salvation. Revoking it when a creature has chosen damnation would be a wrongful violation of freedom—thus explaining our intuitive judgment in the analogous case.

This outcome can be avoided only by assuming a different purpose for human freedom. For example, one might believe that there is something intrinsically desirable about a universe in which the final destiny of every person is a freely chosen one, and that the purpose of human freedom is to bring about such a desirable state. But if freedom is understood to involve an inexplicably random element, this would amount to saying that there is something intrinsically desirable about a universe in which the final destiny of every person is determined by chance. As hard as it is to make sense of the claim that radical libertarian freedom is intrinsically valuable and that salvation freely chosen in this sense is preferable to salvation not so chosen, it is even more difficult to make sense of the claim that there is something intrinsically desirable about a universe in which at least some are damned, and their damnation is the result of nothing but bad luck. Surely given the Christian understanding of God, we could not think that *God* would judge such a universe to be intrinsically desirable.

Perhaps what all of this shows most clearly is that there is something fundamentally misguided about the view that radical libertarian freedom is intrinsically valuable and preferable to the kind of rational freedom that Talbott describes. Hence, if we want to reject Talbott's argument against NG, the only plausible strategy is to accept his view of freedom but argue

that prior to salvation it can only operate imperfectly. But if this is accepted, it is plain why we can plausibly maintain that the damned in the analogous case did not freely choose their state while the saved, given conditions (a)–(c), did.

In summary, it seems that by performing (a)–(c), God could guarantee the salvation of all in a manner that respects human freedom. And it seems clear that it is within the power of an omnipotent God to perform (a)–(c). NG thus seems to be false, and conservative theists may need to look elsewhere for a plausible justification of ED—by, for example, arguing that there is something *morally* problematic with performing (a)–(c). It will not work to say, with Stump, that it is simply not in God's power to bring about the freely chosen salvation of all.²⁰

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NOTES

1. A number of philosophers offer versions of roughly this defense of ED. See, for example, Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell," in Alfred J. Freddoso, *The Existence and Nature of God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 37–54; Eleonore Stump, "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1986): pp. 181–98; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford University Press, 1993); William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): pp. 172–78; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

2. Stump, pp. 194–95.

3. See, especially, Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): pp. 19–42; "Providence, Freedom, and Human Destiny," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): pp. 227–45; "Craig on the Possibility of Eternal Damnation," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): pp. 495–510.

4. See the Lutheran Orthodox development of this view of salvation as summarized by Heinrich Schmid in *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (The United Lutheran Publication House, 1899), pp. 458–80.

5. The former is the more common view, and appears to be the position taken by St. Thomas Aquinas and his followers. See *Summa Theologica* I–II, Q 4, art. 4.

6. See "Doctrine," pp. 34–39; "Craig," pp. 500–03.

7. "Doctrine," p. 37.

8. There are some important challenges to this idea that genuine freedom in any sense involves the power to do otherwise. Harry Frankfurt, through a series of examples, raises some especially important challenges to this idea. See his 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,' *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969), pp. 829–39. I will not address this controversy here, since the challenge to Talbott that I am considering arises only if freedom is taken to involve the ability to have done otherwise.

9. Jerry Walls, although he appeals to something like pride to explain the choice of the damned, appears to recognize that such a choice would be inexplicable in the face of full knowledge. Thus, he appeals to willful self-

deception as a precondition for the possibility of this sort of prideful choice. The problem with this response is that the choice to deceive oneself calls for explanation—is that choice made out of ignorance, deception, or bondage to desire? If so, it would seem that the choice of self-deception is not genuinely free. For a full critique of Walls's attempt to avoid Talbott's critique of NG, see Eric Reitan, "Human Freedom and the Possibility of Eternal Damnation," in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. Robin Perry (Paternoster Press, 2003).

10. One important recent defender of libertarian free will, Robert Kane, essentially admits that there is an arbitrary dimension to choices that are free in the libertarian sense. His project appears to be the defense of the coherence and usefulness of freedom conceived as involving a random element. See Robert Kane *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

11. There are some, such as Michael Murray, who argue that there is something morally objectionable about stripping away salvation inhibitors. See Michael J. Murray, "Three Versions of Universalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999); pp. 55–68. For a thorough critique of Murray's position, see Eric Reitan, "Universalism and Autonomy: Towards a Comparative Defense of Universalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): pp. 222–40.

12. Since there are those who will argue that the state of communion with God is eternal in the sense of existing outside of time (rather than for an infinite duration), it would be problematic to claim that God would sustain every person in a temporal existence forever, since this might amount to excluding every person from communion with God. It is not similarly controversial to suggest that God would sustain those who have yet to be saved in a temporal existence. It certainly seems that God *could* do so.

13. We might, for example, believe that due to profound limits to the human intellect, the access we can have to the objective order of values is so restricted that we are only able to conclude that communion with God has an even chance of being better than alienation from God. While this view seems implausible at best, I will assume it for the sake of argument.

14. Among the thinkers who argue roughly along these lines are Michael Murray in "Three Versions of Universalism" and Jerry Walls in *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, especially chapter 5.

15. It might be better to say that our *autonomy* is being violated, rather than our freedom. This is the approach that Michael Murray favors. Murray rejects any version of universalism which holds that those who become God-rejecting people are continually forced by God to "choose again" until they break their bad habit. "In the end," he maintains, "if I choose to cultivate a character which includes the disposition to shun communion with God, I will not be allowed to become that sort of person. While my choice in the matter remains free, my autonomy is ultimately thwarted." See Murray, p. 64.

16. I am indebted to Thomas Talbott for pointing out this line of objection.

17. I am indebted to William Hasker for pointing out this line of objection.

18. I should also note that the implausibility of claiming that the damned in the analogous case freely choose their fate does not obviously undermine the force of my argument. I am perfectly prepared to admit that the overall picture of freedom that must be embraced in order to avoid Talbott's argument—the picture in which free acts contain an inexplicably random element—is implausible. My argument here is not that such a picture of freedom is plausible, but that it is *necessary* in order to escape the force of Talbott's reasoning—and that this escape is no escape at all for the defender of ED, since it, too, leads to the conclusion that God can guarantee the salvation of all while respecting individual freedom.

19. More broadly, the implausibility of claiming that the damned have freely chosen their state in this case may be rooted in the very considerations that Talbott invokes against eternal damnation: because of the nature of human freedom—because it is ordered towards union with God—being confirmed in damnation (unlike being confirmed in salvation) *must* be achieved in a way that violates freedom.

20. I would like to thank Thomas Talbott, John Kronen, William Hasker, and two referees for *Faith and Philosophy* for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.