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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An offer we can't refuse: guaranteeing universal salvation

Blake McAllister

Department of Philosophy and Theology, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, USA
Email: bmcallister@hillsdale.edu

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Abstract

Source incompatibilism allows for a choice to be both determined and free in a libertarian sense so long as the agent had enough of a free hand in shaping the character that determines that choice. I argue that God can capitalize on this possibility to ensure that all freely accept his offer of salvation. He can do so by placing any hold-outs in a remedial version of hell where continued rebellion leads to increasing misery. Through their own free choices, the damned inevitably make themselves so miserable that they determine themselves to repent – a choice which, while guaranteed, remains free.

Keywords: universalism; hell; free will; source incompatibilism; Thomas Talbott

Introduction

Universalism proper is the position that, necessarily, all humans will be saved.[1] A common argument for universalism says God *wants* to save all, God *can* save all, so God *will* save all. A bit more carefully:

The Universalist Argument

1. Necessarily, if God has the means to save all humans and it is not impermissible or unloving to use those means, then all shall be saved.
2. Necessarily, God has the means to save all humans.
3. Necessarily, it is not impermissible or unloving to use those means.
4. So, necessarily, all shall be saved.

Some Christians object to (1). They contend that God could have competing aims which he prioritizes over universal salvation, such as maximizing his own glory. Thomas Talbott (2014, Ch. 4) calls these 'Augustinians'.

What I want to consider instead is the objection posed by those who Talbott calls 'Arminians'. Arminians object to either (2) or (3) of the universalist argument based on human freedom. Which premise they reject depends on whether forcing people to be saved is impossible or just immoral. Is a forced marriage real but unethical, or else no true marriage at all? What is common to both complaints is the contention that, as Jonathan Kvanvig (1993, 170) puts it, 'universalism founders on the rock of human freedom'.

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Arminians see freedom as an obstacle because of their commitment to incompatibilism. If free choices cannot be determined, then how is God to ensure that all freely choose salvation? Call this 'the problem of free guarantees'.

My goal is to solve the problem of free guarantees, or rather to show how it might be solved given a certain approach to libertarian freedom. I'll start by showing how previous responses end up abandoning libertarian freedom or failing to secure a genuine guarantee. I'll then show how a genuine free guarantee might be achieved.

While I'm operating within the Christian tradition, other theists could appropriate my solution if their religious traditions allow.

Failed solutions

The problem of free guarantees is actually quite easy to solve *if* Molinism is true. God could use middle knowledge to ensure that he never creates any human who does not eventually accept his offer of salvation. If God necessarily adopts this 'no human left behind' policy, then all possible worlds in which humans exist are ones in which all humans are saved. Molinists like William Lane Craig object to universalism not because God can't guarantee universal salvation without violating human freedom, but because they believe it is open to God not to adopt the 'leave none behind' policy needed to do so.[2] That is, their objection is really to (1) of the universalist argument rather than (2) or (3).

My goal, however, will be to solve the problem of free guarantees without relying on any controversial assumptions about divine foreknowledge (including the assumption that God *has* foreknowledge). A quick overview of previous attempts will prove instructive.

Talbott (1990, 2001, 2014, Ch. 11) argues that God can ensure universal salvation by placing any who resist God's offer in a remedial version of hell. There the damned experience the full wretchedness of their spiritual condition. Inevitably, Talbott claims, those in hell will become so miserable that they will, like the prodigal son, come to their senses and accept God's ongoing offer of salvation.

To avoid Pelagianism, Talbott (1988, 17–18) adds that God's grace enables the damned to accept this offer. Moreover, the first human movement in acceptance consists merely in the cessation of resistance to God, and is itself possible only through prevenient grace.[3] Taking advantage of their surrender, God bestows on them whatever positive attitudes (e.g., faith) are necessary for salvation.

Is it not possible for those in hell to hold out forever – to be 'rebels to the end' as C.S. Lewis (2001, 130) puts it? Talbott says no. For a choice to be genuine, not some random spasm of the will, it must be rational in the minimal sense of being based on reasons. But anyone in hell who isn't plagued by ignorance or disordered desire will have zero reason to continue rebelling.

How does God rid people of ignorance and disordered desire though? Talbott (1990, 36–37) sometimes speaks as though God can accomplish this unilaterally,[4] but clarifies elsewhere that God educates the damned by allowing them to experience the natural misery that results from sinful resistance. Given enough time, personal experience convinces them that continued resistance is futile and they stop desiring to rebel (Talbott 2003b, 261–262).

Jerry Walls (1992, Ch.5; 2003, 112; 2015, Ch. 3) doubts that insight is inevitable. The misery of the damned *might* teach them the futility of resisting God ... *or* they might construe it as further evidence of God's malicious and tyrannical character. On the other hand, if the miseries of hell really *are* so unbearable as to render self-deception impossible, then repentance is determined and, assuming incompatibilism, thereby unfree.

In this way, Walls (2015, 81) presses Talbott with 'A Hell of a Dilemma'. If the miseries of hell necessitate repentance, then that repentance isn't free in a libertarian sense. If the miseries of hell do not necessitate repentance, then repentance isn't assured.

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As I read him, Talbott concedes the point (or at least declines to defend against it).[5] He writes,

> contrary to what Walls represents, I hold that the decision to submit one's will to God ... is rarely, if ever, free in the standard libertarian sense. It may indeed be the freest of all decisions, given a proper analysis of "freedom," but it is not free in the standard libertarian sense. (Talbott 2003a, 26)[6]

Instead, Talbott turns his sights to what Eric Reitan (2007, 415ff) calls 'rational freedom', which Reitan says 'is [in Talbott's estimation] the only kind of freedom really worth having, and hence the only kind of freedom that God would have a moral obligation to preserve'.

In short, Talbott doesn't offer us a solution to the original puzzle that our acceptance of salvation cannot be both guaranteed and free in the libertarian sense.

Here is where Reitan takes up the case. While favorable to Talbott's focus on rational freedom, Reitan (2007, sect. IV, 2003, 137–140) tries to show that those in hell might be guaranteed to repent *even if* they retain libertarian freedom. Offer those in hell enough chances to be saved while furnishing them with the grace that makes repentance possible, and it becomes 'mathematically certain' that they accept the offer eventually. Jeremy Gwiazda (2011) makes the same point in terms of probability: so long as the chances of accepting each offer are greater than 0, then the probability that all offers are rejected approaches 0 the longer the offers continue.

Unfortunately, even if Reitan's entire line of reasoning is granted, it doesn't resolve the problem of free guarantees. This is because indefinite offers secure 'what *amounts to* a guarantee' but not an *actual* guarantee (Reitan 2007, 425). We can conclude that all *will* be saved but not that this outcome is *necessary*. Reitan (2003, 140) is aware of this:

> Of course, to say that a probability approaches zero over time is not to say that it ever *is* zero. Thus, someone might claim that, strictly speaking, it is possible for someone to reject God *forever*. But the possible world in which this occurs is so remote that there seems to be no good reason to think that it is actual.

Neither Talbott nor Reitan succeeds in solving the problem of free guarantees, then. Talbott gets a genuine guarantee but only by replacing libertarian freedom. Reitan maintains libertarian freedom but must settle for less than a full guarantee.

Source incompatibilism and rational determination

My own solution to the problem of free guarantees requires source incompatibilism. Since I cannot argue for the truth of source incompatibilism here, my thesis is conditional: *if* source incompatibilism is correct, then God can guarantee that all humans freely accept his offer of salvation.

Incompatibilism says that freedom is incompatible with causal determinism. Incompatibilism is generally motivated in one of two ways. Some identify *alternative possibilities* as central to freedom, then argue that determinism precludes alternative possibilities (e.g., van Inwagen 1983). Others identify *ultimate sourcehood* – 'that the ultimate sources of our actions lie in us and not outside us' (Kane 2005, 6) – as the essence of freedom, and rule out determinism on the basis that determinism rules out sourcehood (Klein 1990; Kane 1996; Stump 1999; Zagzebski 2000; Pereboom 2001; Kane 2005; Timpe 2012).[7] Source incompatibilism follows the latter path.

If causal determinism is true, then our choices are fully explained by factors external to us and outside our control – like the initial conditions of the universe in conjunction with

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the laws of nature (Kane 2005, 122–123; Timpe 2012, 138–140). But in that case, the ultimate sources of our choices lie outside us.

Regarding alternative possibilities, some source incompatibilists are happy to relinquish them entirely (Stump 1999; Zagzebski 2000). Others, myself included, think that we cannot be the ultimate source of our choices without having alternative possibilities at some point (Kane 2005, 124–131; Timpe 2012, Ch. 9). Otherwise our choices are effectively in the same position they were in under causal determinism, being fully explicable by whatever external factors entail those choices. In this way, alternative possibilities are a necessary condition on freedom without being that in which freedom consists.

While alternative possibilities are necessary *at some point*, they are not necessary *at every point*. Given source incompatibilism, it's possible that individual choices be determined (there is no possibility of doing otherwise in those circumstances) yet free.

To see how this is possible, start with the largely (but not entirely) uncontroversial observation that free choices must be made based on reasons.[8] Choices not based on reasons would not be genuine choices at all but something more like spasms of the will. So if an agent S must choose either to A or not-A, and she has reasons to A but no reasons to not-A, then S is determined to choose to A. When an agent is determined in this particular way, she is *rationally determined*.[9]

While the clearest cases of rational determination are those where the agent lacks any reason to not-A, they are not the only ones. Eleonore Stump (1999, 323) offers the example of being offered a nickel to cut her daughter into little pieces. Here Stump has a reason to cut up her daughter (a nickel isn't nothing!), but the reason is woefully inadequate. It is so inferior to Stump's reasons for refraining that it is psychologically impossible for Stump to act on that reason. Thus, an agent can be rationally determined to choose to A not because she lacks any reason to not-A but because her reasons to A are *overpowering*.

From the standpoint of source incompatibilism, a choice can (in select instances) be both rationally determined and free.[10] To see this, begin with an ordinary choice that every libertarian concedes is free. Say there's a cupcake in front of me, and I'm deciding whether to eat it. I have reasons on both sides, neither of which are overpowering: cupcakes taste good, but I don't need the calories. I'm not causally determined to make either choice – the laws of nature and total state of the universe leave open what I do now. Add the most favorable story you can think of about how my choice comes about (e.g., via agent-causation). I choose to refrain from eating the cupcake.

Now change the situation slightly. Instead of this being just an ordinary cupcake, it's my 4-year-old daughter's special birthday cupcake – one that she's been eagerly awaiting for days now. I notice that the cupcake looks tasty. If I scarf it down quickly and feign innocence, no one would know I ate it. Should I take it or not? Everything about this choice is the same as before with one exception: this time the reasons to refrain are overpowering. It's not that I don't have a reason to take the cupcake (cupcakes still taste good), but acting on that reason is unthinkable to me – I wouldn't ever do it in those circumstances. I choose to refrain from eating the cupcake (and chuckle that the prospect even popped into my mind).

If the first choice is free, then why not the second? I am as much the ultimate source of the second choice as I am the first.

This reasoning seems persuasive save for one complication. I have the reasons I do, and those reasons have the strength that they have, because of my character. My character steers what things I take notice of, whether I recognize them as good, and how good I evaluate them as being. This means that coming to have a certain character can rationally determine me to make certain choices and not others. Well, what if stealing my daughter's cupcake is unthinkable for me simply because I was born with an agreeable character, or, more extravagantly, because my neurologist wife did some rewiring the previous night so I

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wouldn't ruin our daughter's big day? Ultimate sourcehood is maintained only if the character which rationally determines my choice is formed in the right kind of way – or at least not formed in the *wrong* kind of way.

In particular, three things must be true about the character that rationally determines me if those rationally determined choices are to be free.

First, there cannot be any complete explanation of my character in factors external to me. If there were, then there would be a complete explanation of *my choice* in factors external to me (since my character fully explains my choice), and we would run into the same concerns we had with casual determinism. My choice could be explained without any mention of me.

This outcome is avoided if my present character can be partially explained (in a non-deviant way) by prior free choices that were themselves free and rationally undetermined. Following Robert Kane (1996, 2005, 130–131), we can call these 'self-forming choices'.[11] If my character is the result of self-forming choices, then we cannot explain why my character is as it is now without mentioning *me*. But then we cannot explain my choice without mentioning me either.

Second, it must be that any self-forming choices were not made in conditions of coercion, manipulation, exploitation, or any others that eliminate my responsibility with respect to those choices.

Third, when I'm making these self-forming choices, it needs to be reasonably foreseeable that they might result in me coming to make choices of this further sort (the ones that end up being rationally determined) (Hartman 2020, 1426–1431). Let's assume, following Timpe (2011), that this requires me to have a justified belief to this effect (if only dispositional) or to be culpable for failing to have such a belief.

In sum, I propose that S's choice to perform action A in accordance with character C can be both rationally determined *and* free in a libertarian sense if the following conditions are met:

(i) There is no complete explanation of C in terms of factors external to S;
(ii) No self-forming choices necessary to explain C were formed in conditions that removed S's responsibility for them (such as coercion, manipulation, exploitation, etc.);
(iii) It was reasonably foreseeable to S that S's self-forming choices (if there are any) might result in S's choosing to do A.[12]

When a rationally determined choice meets these conditions, let's call it a 'self-determined choice'.

From a source incompatibilist perspective, the claim that self-determined choices are free should be very appealing. There is no possibility of doing otherwise, granted, but freedom does not consist in alternative possibilities. While the lack of alternative possibilities is normally a reliable indicator of a failure vis-à-vis sourcehood, it is not so here. Everything we ordinarily want with respect to sourcehood is still present.

Precursors

The possibility of libertarian free actions being rationally determined has been explored in other contexts. Kane, in responding to Daniel Dennett (1984), considers Martin Luther's famous refusal to recant: 'Here I stand. I can do no other.' Kane (2005, 82), a libertarian, suggests that Luther might still have been responsible 'even if Luther could not have done otherwise' so long as 'he was responsible by virtue of earlier choices and actions *for being the sort of person he had become at that time*'. Kane continues, 'Often we act from a will already

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formed, but it is "our own free will" by virtue of the fact that *we* formed it by other choices and actions in our past for which we could have done otherwise.'[13]

Building on an idea from James Sennett (1999), Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe use this sort of reasoning to resolve the problem of heavenly freedom.[14] It is possible for the saints in heaven to be free yet determined not to sin so long as this determination results from 'the character the redeemed have formed in their pre-heavenly existence' (Pawl and Timpe 2009, 410).

Finally, Timpe (2014, Ch. 7; 2016) argues that God can be rationally determined to make some choice (to keep a promise, for instance) yet still make that choice freely. This is because God 'is not made to have his moral character' by anything external to him. Nor is God's character 'something that He just happens to have' (Timpe 2014, 109). It is necessary that his character be precisely as it is – that is, the divine nature precludes God from ever having anything other than an impeccable moral character. It follows that God's decision to keep his promise meets all three conditions of a self-determined choice: the first is satisfied because God's moral character is explained by his own nature and not by anything external, and the second and third because God makes no self-forming choices at all. That is why his choice remains free, even if determined.

The self-determining solution: The set-up

The possibility of free, rationally determined choices opens up a solution to the problem of free guarantees. What if those in hell inevitably become so miserable that they become rationally determined to repent? So long as they enter into this state of brokenness as a result of their own free choices, then their repentance is both free and guaranteed. This is 'the self-determining solution' to the problem of free guarantees.

Here are the central, non-trivial claims required for the self-determining solution to work. First, there is:

> *The Set-Up* – Necessarily, God can place anyone who resists his offer of salvation in hell and continue to offer her salvation and whatever grace is necessary to stop resisting.

The term 'hell' is disposable here. By 'hell' I simply mean a place of remedial chastisement in which two things are true: one, it is increasingly miserable the longer people choose to rebel, and, two, this misery is the consequence of their own rebellion – that is to say the misery should not be externally imposed like lashes from a whip but consist in the inner turmoil that naturally results from rebellion against God.

I envision hell as an isolated environment where people undergo a vivid and unceasing experience of their true spiritual condition.[15] Since their spiritual condition is miserable, the experience of that condition would feel miserable, and would be accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame, rage, anxiety, longing, depression, despair, loneliness, and more – the full panoply of hellish miseries that plague the sinful even in this life. The rebels in hell would be free to deceive themselves about these experiences and the feelings they engender. They might tell themselves that God is a tyrant who demands slavish obeisance and that these experiences are illusions sent to torture them into submission. Still, they cannot escape the experiences themselves, which cannot be avoided even for a moment, and only get worse the more they double down on their rebellion.

Even if the miseries of hell are different than I'm envisioning, and start out less intense, they are certain to become horrifying when extended over a long enough period of time. Existence itself would become torturously boring if we did not have something as endlessly enrapturing as God to preoccupy us (Williams 1973). Imagine, then, placing someone in a

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sinful condition in solitary confinement from which there is no relief. What solitary confinement does to people after just a few years is shocking. Can you imagine how desperate one's situation would be after a billion years? It's unspeakable. This is part of why mild views of hell aren't plausible.[16] They not only fail to do justice to the Scriptural witness about the dreadfulness of hell, but they don't properly take into account the length of eternity and how misery is magnified over time.

A common objection to the set-up is that some metaphysical obstacle renders postmortem repentance impossible. Most prominently, Aquinas holds that the disembodied soul cannot engage in the sorts of activities required to alter the soul's fundamental disposition toward God – a concern shared by a number of early church fathers. This objection relies on controversial metaphysical commitments about the soul and the nature of moral and spiritual growth,[17] but even if those commitments are granted, the objection still fails. God can simply restore the damned to a mutable body. Walls (2011, 143) points out that Aquinas commits himself to this possibility in accepting the legend of Trajan, a Roman emperor restored to life by the prayers of Gregory the Great, who subsequently came to faith and was saved.[18] What's more, the Scriptures themselves say that the damned will be restored to bodies prior to judgment (Jn 5:29; Dan 12:2). Accordingly, Walls (2011, 143) explains, 'The more typical reasons for denying postmortem repentance are in the vein that God *would* not grant such repentance after death, rather than that he *could* not.'

Guaranteed repentance

The next step in the self-determining solution is to assert that, in the aforementioned conditions, repentance is inevitable:

> *Guaranteed Repentance* – Necessarily, anyone in the above conditions would, at some point, either make a rationally undetermined choice to stop resisting ("the easier way") or else make herself so miserable that she becomes rationally determined to stop resisting ("the harder way").

The idea here is intuitive enough. The misery mounts. Eventually the reasons to stop resisting become overpowering (assuming one hasn't thrown in the towel long before then). It needn't be, as Talbott envisions, that people ever get to a point where they entirely lack reasons to keep resisting. It just needs to be the case that whatever they are getting from their rebellion pales in comparison to their overwhelming desire to escape. There are limits, remember, to just how irrational human choices can be – we cannot act for no reasons at all, nor for reasons that are overpowered. And given enough time, how could the scales *not* be tipped overwhelmingly in favor of surrender?

Avoiding guaranteed repentance requires that one's commitment to rebellion can be so absolute that no matter how incomprehensibly miserable that rebellion makes her, she remains forever unwilling to cede even the slightest bit of territory to God. Such hard-heartedness strains credulity. Not only from a psychological standpoint but from a theological one.

If Augustine is correct that 'You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You,'[19] then we should expect anyone in a state of rebellion to be, well, *restless*, searching, longing, and so inherently unstable, capricious, liable to change. The invincible resoluteness, the fixed determination of will, necessary to hold out forever simply isn't realizable within the sinful soul. We cannot be committed to *anything* so absolutely save God himself, for that would be to find our rest in something other than him.[20] Reitan (2022, 380) seems to be getting at something similar when he writes: 'While we can, through sinful choices, make ourselves very broken indeed, we cannot reach such a degree

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of absolute depravity that there remains no lingering foothold for the good – because our nature, stamped with God's image, *is* that foothold.'

Indeed, such a foothold seems built into the nature of rationality itself. All rational action is motivated by a desire for something construed as good, and thus grounded in a primordial desire for the transcendent Good as such. Even our rejection of God, therefore, arises from the inescapable pull we feel toward him. Accordingly, our rejection of God can never be absolute. We can never bring ourselves to a place where there is absolutely no desire for God to which he can appeal.

Furthermore, if we ever *did* reach a point of being completely closed off to God, why couldn't God simply open us back up? Robert Hartman points out that, on widely held understandings of depravity, humans *begin* their earthly lives determined to reject God's offer of salvation, yet God empowers us to accept his offer without any violation of our freedom. There is no reason, Hartman (2023, 719–720) argues, God couldn't offer this same prevenient grace to those in hell. Notably, the main objections to this reasoning contend that God *wouldn't* soften the hearts of the damned, not that he *couldn't* (Hartman 2023, 720-721). Such objections do not challenge God's ability to guarantee repentance, only his willingness.

Even if these considerations are not decisive, surely the evidence weighs heavily in favor of guaranteed repentance. I suspect skepticism on this point usually arises from prior commitments about how to read Scripture,[21] or deference to the tradition,[22] rather than disagreement about the psychology of hell itself. In any case, I'll say more in defense of this step when responding to objections (see objection 1).

Self-formed character

Assuming that repentance is guaranteed, does it meet the requirements of a self-determined choice?

Regarding condition (i):

> *Self-Formed Character* – Necessarily, the character that rationally determines someone in hell to stop resisting is partially brought about by her own undetermined, self-forming choices such that there is no complete explanation of that character in factors external to her.

This is pretty plainly true. The damned are given free rein. If their resistance makes them so miserable that it breaks them, then that brokenness is the result of their own choices.

The fact that they didn't *intend* to become broken is irrelevant. Consider Rodion Raskolnikov, the protagonist of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov decides to murder a lecherous pawnbroker in a kind of Nietzschean attempt to live beyond good and evil. He intends for his conscience to die alongside his victim. The opposite occurs. Raskolnikov is so haunted that he is forced to acknowledge the moral law's claim on him. Eventually, he is compelled to make a full confession, despite having the opportunity to get off scot-free. Raskolnikov's repentant character was self-formed, even though he didn't intend to become this sort of person and even though he intended to become the opposite.

I'll consider another challenge to this step of the argument below (see objection 4).

No coercion

Condition (ii) on self-determined choices is that the relevant self-forming choices cannot be made under conditions of coercion (or manipulation, exploitation, etc.).[23] The

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satisfaction of this condition is more controversial. Walls (2004, 1992, 132) says this process seems an awful lot like conversion at the point of a sword. J.I. Packer (2004) says it comes uncomfortably close to brainwashing. The self-determining solution denies these characterizations:

> *No Coercion* – Necessarily, the conditions in which someone makes these self-forming choices are not coercive (manipulative, exploitative, etc.) in ways that remove her responsibility for the character that results from them.

I'll defend this claim below (see objection 2).

Reasonably foreseeable

Condition (iii) for a self-determined choice is that it must be reasonably foreseeable to the damned that their rebellion ultimately results in repentance:

> *Reasonably Foreseeable* – Necessarily, God can ensure that anyone who doesn't have a reasonable belief (if only a dispositional one) that continued rebellion might give way to repentance is culpable for failing to have such a belief.

This seems true. It should be plain to anyone who considers it that those in hell might eventually make themselves so miserable that they reach a breaking point. The requirement, keep in mind, is not that the damned believe they *will* be broken, but only that they *might* be broken. If they truly lack this belief (even dispositionally), then such ignorance can only be culpable. God can easily ensure this by giving the damned evidence for all the key points. Such evidence can be distorted through an act of self-deception, but that only highlights the culpability of their ignorance. In any case, I argue below (see objection 1) that such acts of self-deception cannot last forever.

Genuine surrender

Two clarifications before moving on.

First, it may seem that, at best, hellish torment could guarantee only unwilling obeisance – conformance of outward action without inner change (e.g., McClymond 2018, 956). This is mistaken. If there is no genuine inner submission to the will of God, then there is no relief from the misery. Those in hell might try a million times to fake surrender, to 'give God what he wants' while remaining defiant in spirit, but God cannot be mocked. Only the genuine cessation of resistance can rescue them from the spiritual anguish their rebellion engenders. Eventually, they will see there is no recourse save true, on-their-knees, dear-God-please-help-me brokenness. And once that point is reached, *it is God himself* who cultivates the more positive aspects of repentance within them.[24]

As proof of concept, look at Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programmes. Step 1 is admitting powerlessness and the inability to manage one's own life. Step 2 is the recognition of a higher power that offers restoration. Step 3 is giving oneself over to this higher power. This is the foundation of recovery. And it is (apart from some miraculous intervention) achievable for addicts only after hitting rock bottom. What is rock bottom? It's being so utterly broken by suffering that you stumble upon the gift of desperation – a willingness to do absolutely anything, even die, if that is what it takes to stop going on as before. This is the crack in one's resistance that allows the grace of God in. And you know what – *it works!* The result of such recovery programmes is not mere behaviour modification but inner renewal, a completely new and abundant way of life.

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Second, as any recovering addict will tell you, our initial surrender is almost always partial and imperfect. Resistance is relinquished bit by bit. Once the process gets started, however, there is no reason to doubt God can bring it to completion.[25] After tasting relief, the person will have strong reasons to keep cooperating with God; but even if they reach a point where they refuse to surrender any further, the original process repeats itself. The misery mounts until it breaks their resistance. Even if they don't run towards heaven, step-by-step they will back away from hell.

Objection 1: Ignorance and vice

Objectors like Walls (2003) generally cite two obstacles to guaranteed repentance: ignorance and vice. The person in hell may have overwhelming motivation to escape but remain ignorant of how to do so, or the person may know how to escape but be so gripped by disordered desire that she refuses to do so. These are formidable obstacles, but they can and necessarily will be overcome given enough time (and the occupants of hell have no shortage of that).

However much the person desires not to repent, it's inevitable that they come to desire relief even more. In saying this, I do not by any means downplay just how difficult disordered desire can be to overcome. Augustine writes:

> When the mind is so oppressed by the habit of lusting that it finds it very hard to abandon those things it is used to enjoying, it is rightly said to suffer violence when it is being turned away from them and led along the road of virtue.... [T]his violence is rather like a kind of pain felt by a man who is being cured, as if he were having his unhealthy limbs cut off. For such people have grown so used to the sickness of vice that they think virtue is a kind of mutilation.[26]

I don't disagree. My contention is simply that the damned will eventually come to realize the truth of Jesus's words: 'And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell' (Matt 5:30).

But what if someone remains ignorant of how to escape her misery? What if she believes surrender will increase her misery, not lessen it? Such ignorance cannot be due to a lack of evidence. Personal experience will provide the damned with ample evidence that rebellion is the source of their troubles; and God is able to furnish supplemental evidence if necessary.[27] The damned remain ignorant, then, only by skewing the evidence in an act of self-deception.

The thing about self-deception is that it must be motivated.[28] If what I have said about the overwhelming misery of hell is correct, then the damned inevitably reach a point where they no longer have adequate motivation to deceive themselves. Their one, all-consuming priority is escaping their misery. Deception is a luxury they can no longer afford. The reasons *not* to self-deceive become overpowering.

It's worth noting that even Walls (1992, 132–133) seems to concede this step in the argument. When he appeals to self-deception and disordered desire, his point isn't that they prevent any guarantee of repentance. That much, Walls admits, is assured in conditions of ever-increasing misery. His point is that they prevent any *free* guarantee of repentance – that something about the conditions renders the choices made within them unfree.

I already addressed Walls' concern that those choices are unfree simply because they are determined. Walls' other concern is that those choices are unfree because coerced.

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Objection 2: Turning the screws

Walls is not the only one who thinks this vision of hell sounds coercive. Michael McClymond (2018, 956) describes it this way:

> Talbott offers a disturbing picture of the process involved in postmortem salvation. With the best of motives, God employs the postmortem equivalent of waterboarding or electroshock, at ever-increasing levels of intensity, until the poor sufferer finally "cries uncle" and surrenders to God's demand to be recognized. Though Talbott speaks of love, this seems more like torture.

While surrender would be guaranteed in such conditions, the coercive nature of those conditions would prevent such surrender from being free.

The key difference between hell and torture is that the pain of torture is externally imposed, whereas the misery of hell is the result of one's own sinful condition. The damned in hell are miserable because that is what it feels like to be separated from God, not because God is artificially visiting that suffering upon them.[29] As the Scriptures say, 'Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me' (Jer 2:19).

This is not, however, to say that God plays no role in punishing the damned. On my view, God does two things which end up increasing their suffering compared to what they endure in this life: he *withdraws* any means of relief, and he *draws near* to his creatures. Let's examine these to see if either is coercive.

Our present environment affords us temporary means of relief such as stimulants, entertainment, and sleep. We can use these to avoid awareness of our sinful conditions or suppress negative feelings. Such coping mechanisms never work perfectly (the misery always catches up to us), but temporary evasion is possible. In hell as I see it, God no longer affords us these means of relief with the intention of getting us to repent. Is this coercive?

Surely not. God's role here is comparable to that of a father who, after due warning, withdraws financial support from his drug-addicted daughter in hopes that, by no longer shielding her from the full consequences of her addiction, she would choose to enter a programme of recovery.[30] The daughter might accuse her father of coercing her ('Why can't you just let me live my own life!?'), but her accusation is baseless. He *is* letting her live her own life. The daughter might have a point if she is entitled to the father's support, or if withdrawing that support leads to irrevocable harm, but nothing like that is true with God. God provides us temporary shelter from our sins out of mercy, not obligation. And if my thesis is correct, the harm brought about by this withdrawal is never irrevocable but inevitably leads to everlasting beatitude.

The second thing God does is reveal himself to all creatures. This is the traditional idea that all creatures will come to experience God's presence and that this experience is simultaneously joy to the saints and torment to the wicked.[31] Zachary Manis (2019; 2024) calls this 'the divine presence model' of hell. The unveiling of the divine presence enacts what Manis (2024, Ch. 19) calls 'the judgment of transparency', in which all deeds done in darkness, and all hidden purposes of the heart, are disclosed by the light of Christ – including to the sinful person herself. This is the vivid experience of our own sinful condition that I incorporated into my description of hell. The question before us is whether God's revelation of himself, which also reveals us to ourselves, coerces repentance.

Right off the bat, it's odd to construe felt awareness of our situation as a kind of external threat or pressure that might diminish freedom. Say I'm ridden by guilt and inner turmoil after secretly wronging my wife. These feelings become so unbearable that I confess and apologize. In what way was I coerced?

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The difference, the objector might say, is that God *brings about* this felt awareness through his presence. Alright, let's amend our example then. Say I've secretly wronged my wife, but I'm managing (with some success) to ignore or downplay this fact. When my wife enters the room, however, her presence cuts through my defenses and I'm struck by the enormity of my wrongdoing. Feelings of guilt and shame come pouring out. I confess and apologize. Did my wife coerce me? Obviously not. What if she had discovered the violation and entered the room *intending* for her presence to elicit a confession? Still, there is no coercion. How is the situation any different with God?

One potential difference is that my wife does nothing impermissible by entering the room. She has every right to be there, and I have no right to keep her away. There are, however, situations in which I might have a right to be left alone. The charge of coercion might gain some traction *if* it turns out that God's revelation of himself violates this right to privacy.

We do not, however, have any right to be left alone by God. We are *his* creatures living in *his* creation. Is the Creator not allowed to dwell in his creation however he sees fit? The fact that God has so far chosen to remain hidden (Isa 45:15) should not deceive us into thinking we are entitled to it. And even if we *did* have such a right, everyone who's privacy God 'invades' ultimately comes to an idealized standpoint from which she retroactively waives that right.

There is no reason, then, to think that God coerces us to repent by consigning us to hell.

Objection 3: Autonomy

Michael Murray (1999, 58) notes that theists tend to want more than mere free choices; they want 'a freedom of choosing that is expressed in actions that influence the course of events in the world'. If I am given the freedom to choose, but those choices don't make any impact on the world, then my freedom seems rather trivial. Murray labels the thing that is missing 'autonomy'.

Murray argues that universalism undermines our autonomy with respect to one extremely important outcome: our final destinations. Consider how Talbott (1990, 39) wraps up the initial presentation of his argument:

> So in a sense, all roads have the same destination, the end of reconciliation, but some are longer and windier than others. Because our choice of roads at any given instant is truly free in the libertarian sense, we are genuinely responsible for the choices we make; but because no illusion can endure forever, the end is foreordained.

Murray's complaint is that, while our choices make a difference to *how* we enter heaven, they don't seem to have any influence over *whether* we enter heaven. The final destination is the same no matter what we do. Hence, we lack autonomy over one of, or rather *the*, most important thing in our lives.

The objection doesn't contest whether the choices which lead us to heaven are free in the libertarian sense. So it isn't challenging the possibility of a free guarantee. It's asserting that a free guarantee is possible (if at all) only at the cost of autonomy.

The universalist could bite the bullet and concede that, when it comes to our final destinations, we are free but not autonomous. Why should we want such autonomy when it comes with the risk of eternal damnation? Perhaps a better response is that we *do* have autonomy in the universalist scenario, and that this becomes clear once autonomy is properly understood.[32]

Murray is assuming that we don't have any real influence over our destinations unless there is some *other* destination at which we might end up. More precisely, autonomy with

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respect to heaven requires that there is a possible world where we end up in heaven and another possible world where we do not, and that our own free choices are the deciding factor between the two. Essentially, Murray is grounding our autonomy in alternative possibilities.

If we ground freedom in sourcehood rather than alternative possibilities, however, then we will almost certainly want to ground autonomy in a similar way. Influence over our ultimate destinations isn't measured by whether there is a series of possible choices that result in a different outcome but by whether that outcome is brought about *by us*.

Accordingly, since we are operating from a sourcehood perspective, we should conclude that we *are* autonomous over our final destinations even on the universalist picture. We are autonomous not because there are some possible worlds where we end up in heaven and others where we end up in hell, but because we all arrive in heaven through our own free choices.

Objection 4: The limits of human nature

Finally, some objectors contend that the miseries of hell would pass beyond what any human (really, any free creature) is capable of enduring. Thus, they argue, we are determined to repent not by virtue of any particular human character or agential structure but by features inherent to human nature itself.[33] The trouble with this is that we can explain why those in hell surrender simply by citing the limits of human nature – something over which those in hell have no control. It follows that their repentance cannot be attributed to any of their past self-forming choices. Worse yet, if the parameters of human nature are set by God, then we seem to have a complete explanation of our repentance in God's prior activity.[34]

I will set aside this last worry: essences are independent of the divine will.[35] God doesn't determine the essential features of humans any more than he determines that squares have exactly four sides. But the prior worry remains: human nature isn't shaped by *our* choices either.

An initial response is that we *do* need their past self-forming choices to explain why people repent in the time and manner they do. When exactly do they give in? Do they give up quickly or hold-out a long time? When they do repent, do they surrender fully or must they be dragged heavenward inch by inch? Human nature does not settle such things – the agents' freely formed characters do. This seems enough to ensure that their brokenness 'counterfactually depends on past directly free actions' (Hartman 2020, 1426), which is generally all that source incompatibilists require here.

All this secures, the objector may retort, is that *the manner in which* the repentance occurs remains free. *That* the repentance occurs (at some point or other) is still required by human nature, and so the threat to freedom remains. I'm not sure this pushback succeeds. No particular choice to repent is ever determined by human nature but only ever by the specific characters that each person had a hand in freely shaping. I fail to see, then, how the freedom of those particular choices is threatened by the fact that, at some point or other, repentance is inevitable. Nevertheless, let's follow the argument through on the assumption that there is a threat to freedom here.

There are two ways to respond depending on what kind of source incompatibilism we wish to endorse.

The first, more demanding kind says that we are the ultimate source of our action only if we are 'responsible for anything that is a sufficient reason, cause, or motive for the action's occurring' (Kane 2005, 121–122). Kane falls into this category. Kane (2002, 412) writes:

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> If agents are to be ultimately responsible for [and so the source of] their own wills, then if their wills are already set one way when they act, *they* must be responsible for their wills having been set that way—not God … or fate or society or behavioral engineers or nature or upbringing. And this means that some of their past voluntary choices or actions must have played an indispensable role in the formation of their present purposes and motives.

In short, the determining aspects of our characters must be freely formed.

The second, less demanding kind of source incompatibilism requires only that the determining aspects of our characters not be externally formed – i.e., that there be no 'externally sufficient causal chain which results in that choice' (Timpe 2012, 138–139; 2014, 104). Timpe's treatment of divine freedom seems to place him in this category since God remains free despite the fact that God's character does not result from any prior free choices. Sourcehood requires not that 'her character is formed in the right way' so much as that 'it's not formed in the wrong way' (Timpe 2016, 277).[36]

The difference between these two kinds of source incompatibilism is subtle and almost never relevant. In virtually all cases, if the determining aspects of our character aren't formed through our own choices, then they come from something outside us; so there is no externally sufficient causal chain if and only if our character is shaped through self-forming choices. What pulls the two accounts apart are cases where the determining aspects of our characters are not formed at all – where those aspects result neither from any self-forming choices nor from any external source but are necessary features of all humans as such. Are we the ultimate source of the choices arising from these essential human features?

My own answer is yes. I find the divine case convincing here. To be the ultimate source of his choices, God doesn't need to form the character from which those choices flow. It is sufficient that they stem from his essential features – features that define who and what he is – because in doing so they originate *from him*.[37] The same, I think, is true of us. Our essences, or natures, should be understood as internal to us, not external influences. Thus, the choices that flow from those natures do not originate from without but from within.

Opposition to this position often misconstrues the sort of determination at issue. For instance, an objector might ask us to consider a human who was brought into existence determined to murder someone, or never to eat meat, or always to act morally. Shouldn't we agree that such choices aren't free? We should, but this poses no trouble to my position. Humans cannot be determined to make such choices *by nature* since clearly not all humans are determined in these same ways.[38] The person in such scenarios is being determined *by her initial agential endowment* – an endowment that is simply given to her by external causes rather than belonging to her by nature. Very few choices, it turns out, are necessitated by human nature itself, and when we maintain focus on those rare few choices, I find little difficulty in saying that they remain free even though we did not get to pick the features of ourselves from which they flow.

If we adopt this less demanding form of source incompatibilism, then the overall objection is rebuffed completely. The fact that human nature entails eventual repentance is no threat to its freedom, for it still finds its origin in the essential features of these human agents and, hence, in the agents themselves.

If we adopt the more demanding form of source incompatibilism, then the objection might stick, though then again, maybe not. As stated earlier, even if repentance is bound to happen eventually, no particular act of repentance is ever entailed by human nature. How exactly, then, is that particular act of repentance not free?

Regardless, substantial progress has still been made. Worst case, God can guarantee that all repent without *God himself* violating our freedom. As a foil, consider the position of

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Marilyn McCord Adams. Adams (1999, 157) believes that God guarantees human repentance, but only because God stands willing to override human freedom. Many deem such a violation morally problematic. In contrast, by consigning people to a remedial hell, God can ensure that everyone repents without overriding anyone's freedom. If anyone's freedom is (partially) extinguished, it is not God's doing but her own. Hence, God has the means to guarantee repentance while avoiding any morally questionable violations.

Conclusion

I have argued that if we ground libertarian freedom in sourcehood rather than alternative possibilities, there is a way for God to guarantee that everyone freely accepts his offer of salvation. At the very least, God does not need to violate anyone's freedom in order to ensure universal salvation. Human freedom may not be an insurmountable obstacle to God's universal salvific will even for the libertarian.

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Notes

1. Kvanvig (2011, Ch. 3) calls this 'necessary universalism.'
2. Craig (1989, 183–184) says if 'the terrible price of filling heaven is also filling hell', then there are some possible worlds in which God reluctantly accepts the cost.
3. See 'quiescence' in Stump (2010) and Timpe (2007).
4. If so, John Sanders seems right to complain that such a radical transformation is a violation of our freedom unless it is 'the culmination of our present libertarian choices' (Sanders 2003, 180); and if it's not a violation, why doesn't God enact this change from the beginning and avoid moral evils altogether (184).
5. This is a shift from his earlier work, where Talbott (1990, 39) shows concern for maintaining libertarian freedom – 'What we need at this point is a picture of how the end of reconciliation could be foreordained even though each of us is free in the libertarian sense' – and seems to think he has achieved this – 'all roads have the same destination ... [but] Because our choice of roads at any given instant is truly free in the libertarian sense, we are genuinely responsible for the choices we make ...'. Although even then, Talbott (1990, 38–39) agreed with Marilyn McCord Adams (1999, 157) that God would be willing to violate our freedom if that was necessary to prevent our eternal damnation.
6. Elsewhere Talbott (2004, 222–223) writes, 'When sinners try to separate themselves from God as far as they can, God knows that at some point libertarian freedom will no longer be possible.'
7. See also Talbott (1988, 17).
8. Timpe (2014, Ch. 2) calls this 'the reasons-constraint on freedom'.
9. See Hartman (2020, 1419–1421), for a careful discussion of this kind of determination, which he connects with the ideas of 'volitional necessity' in Frankfurt (1988) and 'moral incapacity' in Williams (1993).
10. Such choices are sometimes called 'indirectly free' (e.g., Hartman 2020).
11. Kane talks instead about self-forming *actions*, but I will focus on choices rather than actions for the sorts of reasons articulated in Timpe (2016, 278).
12. I leave open exactly when this must be reasonably foreseeable. Any reasonable answer should work just as well for my argument.
13. For more, see Kane (1996). Similar views can be found in O'Connor 2009; Zimmerman (2011). Perhaps the most carefully developed account of these sorts of free choices is Hartman (2020).
14. Talbott (1988, 17) also proposes this sort of solution.

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15. This same basic idea, though perhaps different in the details, can be found in Talbott (2014) and others.
16. On mild views of hell, the damned do not experience hell as especially torturous. Walls (1992, 126), for instance, says he imagines the damned being 'almost happy'. He quickly clarifies that 'They do not, of course, experience even a shred of genuine happiness. But perhaps they experience a certain perverse sense of satisfaction, a distorted sort of pleasure.'
17. For example, Walls (2011, 143) writes, 'The argument ... will have little force for dualists who believe that the soul retains the power to will and choose and make morally significant choices.'
18. Aquinas discusses Trajan in *Summa Theologica*, Supplementum, Q71, A5, AD5.
19. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, Chapter I.
20. Also relevant here is Stump's argument that we cannot be wholly united around anything but goodness (Stump 2010).
21. See, e.g., Walls (2015, 209). For a plausible universalist reading of Scripture, see MacDonald (2012).
22. See, e.g., Timpe (2014, Ch. 5).
23. 'Coercion' will serve as a catch-all to cover all of these.
24. For a discussion of how this sort of divine grace is compatible with freedom, see Timpe (2014, Ch. 4).
25. Indeed, if God is able to fully sanctify the faithful at the moment of death without threatening freedom or continuity of identity (as a great many Christians believe, though I myself am wary), then the initial surrender of those in hell would also seem to be sufficient for that purpose.
26. Augustine, *On the Choice of the Free Will*, Book I, Ch. 14. Translation by Thomas Williams.
27. It is not hard to think of ways God could do this. God could, for instance, simply make the relevant information seem obviously true. See McAllister (2024) for an argument that seemings provide foundational evidence for their content.
28. 'Minimally, self-deception involves a person who (a) *as a consequence of some motivation or emotion*, seems to acquire and maintain some false belief despite evidence to the contrary...' (Deweese-Boyd 2023; emphasis mine).
29. Talbott agrees. Talbott (2003b, 262) sometimes refers to the miseries of hell as 'forcibly imposed punishment', but he clarifies, 'the expression "forcibly imposed punishment" is misleading, if it is taken to imply a source of misery other than the sin that lies within'. See also Talbott (2004, 217–218).
30. Concerning a notorious and unrepentant sinner, Paul directs the church at Corinth: 'Let him who has done this be removed from among you' (1 Cor 5: 2). He expands, 'you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Cor 5:5). (See also 1 Tim 1:19-20.)
31. Manis (2024, Ch. 18–20) presents a compelling Scriptural case for this view.
32. For a different strategy, see Hartman (2023, 720–721). Hartman argues that there *is* a violation of autonomy, but it is permissible since the violation is fairly minimal and more than compensated for by the great benefit conferred on those whose autonomy is violated.
33. I'm grateful to Chris Hauser and Jordan Wessling for raising this objection.
34. Thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.
35. There are theists who disagree (e.g., Descartes), but they are few and far between.
36. Presumably, source incompatibilists like Stump and Zagzebski who eschew alternative possibilities might also side with this sort of source incompatibilism and, if Henry Allison (2002) is correct, also Kant (see Hartman 2026, 143–144).
37. For a dissenting opinion, see (Morriston 2000, 2006).
38. *Why* can't we be determined to make such choices by nature? The answer doesn't seem to have anything to do with humans specifically but with finite rational agency as such. Finite rational agency includes the ability to appreciate and act on a variety of reasons in such a manner that, when it comes to murdering someone, refusing to eat something edible, acting in ways that are moral, etc., more than one choice will always be logically possible for agents of that type. If this is correct, then no finite rational agents (human or not) are determined by nature to make such choices. Thus, when Morriston (2006) asks us to envision a finite rational agent who, by nature, always acts morally, he is asking us to envision the impossible.

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