Annihilation or salvation? A philosophical case for preferring universalism to annihilationism

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Abstract: In *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism*, we argue that for every version of the doctrine of hell there is a version of the doctrine of universal salvation that, granted traditional Christian teachings, is more philosophically defensible. This article explores whether a parallel case can be made for preferring universalism to annihilationism. While assuming for the sake of this article that the chief arguments for favouring universalism over the doctrine of hell, developed in *God's Final Victory*, are strong, we argue that a comparably strong parallel case for favouring universalism to annihilationism can indeed be made.

Introduction

In *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism*, we argue that for every version of the doctrine of eternal hell (or 'hellism'[1]), there is a version of the doctrine of universal salvation ('universalism') that, granted traditional Christian teachings, is more philosophically defensible. While we claim that a parallel case can be made for preferring universalism to annihilationism (the doctrine that those created persons who remain unrepentant of their sins cease to exist at death or some point thereafter), we offer only a brief sketch of how that parallel argument would go (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 179–180). The aim here is to develop that parallel argument.

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We should first note that there are at least two main versions of annihilation-ism.[2] The first, which B. B. Warfield (1932, 447) calls annihilationism *proper*, holds that the souls of the unrepentant are actively put out of existence either at bodily death or sometime after. Although one might imagine God annihilating them by some act of destruction, the traditional Christian assumption that every creature's continued existence depends on being preserved in being by God entails that God could annihilate them by simply withdrawing that sustaining power.[3]

The second version, usually called conditionalism, holds that human souls are not by nature immortal[4] and that unless God intervenes to preserve them, human souls cease to exist at bodily death. Immortality, then, is not natural to human persons[5] but is 'a gift of God, conferred on those who have entered into living communion with Him' (*ibid.*, 448). As Warfield notes, many conditionalists 'adopt the materialist doctrine of the soul' whereby the soul depends on the body in such a way that life beyond death requires the miraculous divine act of resurrection to a new body (*ibid.*, 448–449).[6] Strict conditionalism would hold that God reserves such a resurrection for the saved, although some posit a general resurrection for *all*, after which God annihilates the unsaved.[7]

We will initially focus on the former version of the doctrine, annihilationism proper, before turning to conditionalism at the end. For much of what we say it makes no difference which version we consider, but where it might make a difference we find it more helpful first to argue that universalism is preferable to annihilationism proper and then to consider whether something about conditionalism gives it an advantage. Beyond this, we focus primarily on annihilationism proper because we find it more plausible given broader Christian teachings.

In assessing the relative merits of universalism and annihilationism, we largely set aside narrow questions of scriptural interpretation in favour of the following more philosophical question: which doctrine fits better with core Christian teachings about God, especially God's moral character? We focus especially on two teachings that have been widely endorsed:

> (A) God embodies perfect complacent love,[8] that is, the love that respects the intrinsic worth of everything, including God and all of His creation, in a manner that reflects and honours that worth.[9]

> (B) God embodies perfect benevolent love, that is, the love that seeks to bestow what is good and prevent/alleviate what is bad for creatures, not because it is earned or deserved but simply because the creature's welfare is valued for its own sake.[10]

To avoid misunderstanding, a brief comment about (A) is warranted up front. God's holiness, justice, and respect for creaturely autonomy – divine attributes central to soteriological debates – are considered in this article under the heading of God's complacent love. We do this because we think these properties

are best understood as manifestations of the underlying divine disposition to respect the intrinsic worth of things, a point we develop and defend in a later section. Our propensity to organize God's properties in this way should not be misconstrued as a failure to attend to God's justice or holiness in favour of fixating narrowly on God's love. Such a charge is often leveled against universalists, but usually those who level it have in mind love in the sense of what we here call benevolent love. And it should be clear that we do not in this article fixate narrowly on benevolent love at the expense of God's holiness and justice. We simply believe that holiness and justice are forms of a distinct kind of love, and so organize our thinking in that way. Thus, for example, when we consider the view that God's benevolent love must be constrained by that dimension of God's complacent love called divine justice, we have in mind a view substantively identical to what is commonly expressed by those who say God's love must be constrained by God's justice – unless one believes God's justice is a moral attribute that is not rooted in God's complacent love; a view we do not consider here but do address in *God's Final Victory* (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 111–116).

A second point of clarification has to do with the article's scope and aims. Our aim is to show that our arguments for favouring universalism over hellism – arguments developed rigorously in *God's Final Victory* and elsewhere – can be adapted into a case for favouring universalism over annihilationism. The focus here, therefore, is on addressing the distinct issues that arise when these arguments are adapted in the indicated way. While we *sketch out* key arguments that have elsewhere been rigorously defended, our aim is not to offer full defences of these arguments here. Instead, we assume here that these arguments in their original context have considerable power, and ask whether there is something about the difference between hellism and annihilationism that undercuts this power when the arguments are adapted to the latter. We argue that there is not.

The argument in outline

With these clarifications in place, let us consider in outline the argument we defend here. It can be formalized as follows:

1. It is within God's power to save all.
2. If it is within God's power to save all, then with respect to the choice between annihilationism and universalism Christians should prefer the doctrine that better harmonizes with God's complacent and benevolent love – at least assuming that both doctrines enjoy comparable scriptural support.
3. Universalism better harmonizes with God's complacent and benevolent love than does annihilationism.
4. Therefore, Christians should prefer universalism to annihilationism – at least assuming that both doctrines enjoy comparable scriptural support.

This formalization telescopes the arguments of the comparative case for universalism developed in *God's Final Victory*.[11] In that book, however, the argument is that Christians should prefer universalism to any version of hellism. Here, the argument shifts the comparison from hellism to annihilationism.

This is how we will proceed in defence of this argument. Since the aim of the article is to adapt the overall argument from *God's Final Victory* to the topic of annihilationism, it does not make sense to reproduce here the parts of that argument that would not need to be altered for the sake of considering annihilationism rather than hellism. Since the main case for premise 1 of the above argument is the same whether the alternative to salvation being considered is damnation or annihilation, we do not explore here these reasons for thinking God has the power to save all. Instead, we assume it is in God's power to transform the heart of, and thereby convert, even the most recalcitrant sinner.[12] This strikes us as a reasonable assumption with respect to an omnipotent God.[13] And if it falls within God's power to convert every sinner, then premise 1 above is true. The full defence of this premise, in terms of defending the possibility of efficacious grace, can be found in *God's Final Victory* (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 132–137).

But even though we here refer the full defence of premise 1 to that book, we do want to address briefly one important reason why some might be sceptical of this premise. Specifically, some might think God lacks the power to save all on the grounds that salvation is impossible apart from a creature's autonomous choice to be saved.[14] If this is so, then it is not within God's power to save all unless God has a means of ensuring that all created persons autonomously choose salvation. But if this is why someone is sceptical of premise 1, then what we say later in this article, under a different heading, will provide a response.

More precisely, in asserting premise 1 above we mean to assert only that God has the power to save any rational creature in *some* way, not that God has the power to do this in a way *that simultaneously respects their freedom or autonomy*. Perhaps God can save some only by interfering with their capacity to freely decide their fates. If one thinks it more important morally for God to respect their autonomy than to save them, one might then think God does *not* save them – not because God lacks the power to do so but because God can do so only in a way that is morally unacceptable. This view is one we explore in our defence of premise 3, which will be the article's main focus. But our strategy for defending it includes arguing that God *has* autonomy-respecting means of saving all available. If this argument is sound, it not only answers the worries of those who think it would be wrong for God to save all because only autonomy-violating means of doing so are available (and use of such means is immoral), but it also answers the worries of those inclined to reject premise 1 on the grounds that an autonomous choice is necessary for salvation.

Before turning to these issues as they relate to premise 3, however, we should consider premise 2.

Premise 2: Doctrinal harmonization with God's moral attributes

Premise 2 holds, in essence, two things: (a) when choosing among rival doctrines about how God acts, Christians should favour, all else being equal, the doctrine that fits best with the Christian understanding of God's moral attributes; and (b) this understanding is well captured, at least as it pertains to salvation's scope, by the claim that God embodies perfect complacent and benevolent love (where the former encompasses the attributes typically construed as *impediments* to universal salvation, namely divine justice, holiness, and respect for autonomy).

But the premise also affirms that all else is not always equal – and a key way in which things might not be equal is in terms of Scripture. In assessing rival doctrines, Christians should examine what, if anything, Scripture directly teaches. Unfortunately, with respect to salvation's scope what Scripture teaches is far from clear.[15] On their most straightforward readings, some passages apparently say that all humanity is saved,[16] while others apparently deny this – implying in some cases a post-mortem state of enduring anguish,[17] in other cases annihilation.[18]

Given such difficulties it can help to consider both the linguistic and historical context in which the Scriptures were written[19] and the broader scriptural narrative or argument in which they are embedded.[20] But another helpful approach is the philosophical one suggested here: which doctrine fits better, rationally, with what Christians believe about God?

Although distinct from the approach of looking at what Scripture *directly* says, this approach starts with Christian beliefs that have emerged from centuries of Christian engagement *with* Scripture and as such *is* scriptural. It asks what these scripturally grounded beliefs imply, thereby offering an account of Scripture's more *indirect* teachings and hence a scriptural basis for reaching conclusions when Scripture's direct teachings are unclear.[21]

With that said, let us look more closely at complacent and benevolent love. While not in ordinary use today, 'complacent love' was an important notion in scholastic theology and can serve as a helpful way to unify an array of divine properties, including those which Christians do routinely invoke today, such as God's holiness and justice. The idea behind complacent love is that we can love something in a way that responds to its worth, valuing or respecting it in accordance with its inherent value. God's justice and holiness can both be seen as expressing this responsiveness to inherent worth.[22]

This is clearest in the case of holiness. To say that God is holy is to speak of an unsurpassable worth demanding the highest respect. Traditional theology holds that when God calls on creatures to respect this worth it is not out of egotism[23] but because God loves everything according to its intrinsic merit and is appropriately offended when anyone belittles or defiles this merit – much as we are offended by slavery, which belittles and defiles human dignity. All inherent worth originates in the creator, the supreme good (Who is also Goodness

itself).[24] Sin, a disordering of our values, fails to value appropriately what springs from God, and as such fails to honour God properly.[25] This is what the Christian tradition has typically meant in saying that sin's mere presence affronts God's holiness.[26]

Justice, which is about giving what is due, can also be seen as an expression of complacent love.[27] To love someone in accord with their worth means acting in ways that show respect for that worth, including giving them what they are due. Vindicatory justice is about responding to those who fall short in this regard. Following the Lutheran scholastics, we understand vindicatory justice as a way to affirm inherent worth when others have diminished or devalued it.[28] As argued in *God's Final Victory*, such undervaluing 'needs to be answered, not merely with a contrary claim, but with *repudiation*' (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 105). The core idea of vindicatory justice is that proportional punishment offers the only fully adequate repudiation of sin, and hence the only fully adequate way to 'defend and fully manifest the value' of what has been denigrated by sin. As such, 'God punishes sinners so that His own infinite value, and the value of His creatures, will be affirmed in the face of the sin that actively denies these values' (*ibid*.).

Benevolent love, in contrast, is the love that does not wait on worth. If complacent love *respects* value, benevolent love *bestows* it – giving what is good *for* a recipient *to* them regardless of what they deserve. Many Christian theologians regard creation as a primordial example of such love: *being itself* is bestowed on entities that cannot deserve *any* goods because, prior to its bestowal, they do not exist at all.[29] Preservation, construed as the same divine act as creation,[30] also expresses benevolence. Beyond this, Christianity holds that God wants to bestow what promotes the true good of creatures (as opposed to simply satisfying their desires)[31] while they are in a fallen state and so fall short of God's glory.[32] God desires the good of those who have not earned it and, indeed, cannot. Notably, the tradition holds that among the chief goods creatures can enjoy is moral sanctification itself,[33] which is only available through God's grace.[34] To *earn* this good would require the kinds of good works only the morally sanctified could perform.[35] Hence, worthiness for the gift requires its prior possession. God's benevolence bypasses this conundrum by willing a creature's good without regard for worth.[36]

Even if the divine characteristics encompassed in complacent and benevolent love do not exhaust God's moral attributes, they capture key themes, seminally expressed in Scripture and consistently endorsed by Christian communities through the centuries, that are central to theological discussions about salvation's scope – including concerns about God's holiness and justice and God's respect for the freedom of creatures to pursue ends they have chosen for themselves. As such, these divine attributes offer a strong foundation for considering the relative merits of annihilationism and universalism.

Premise 3: Universalism better respects God's complacent and benevolent love

If the debate rested solely on divine benevolence, universalism would readily win the day. A case for annihilationism might refer to God's benevolence but only as a reason to prefer annihilation to eternal torment. If it is better to perish than endure hell, a benevolent God might put the damned out of their misery.[37] But salvation is clearly better than either damnation or destruction. While annihilation may spare creatures from *enduring* evils, it permanently removes the good of existence while depriving God of the opportunity to express benevolence in the future. A God morally disposed to bestow goods without regard for merit would thus be disposed, all else being equal, to confer the ultimate good of union with God rather than impose (or permit) annihilation. A philosophical case for annihilationism must therefore show that there exist contrary moral reasons weighty enough to outweigh benevolence.

The clearest potential candidates for such reasons all spring from God's complacent love. The first is divine holiness: God's complacent love for God. Arguably God's holiness cannot tolerate unrepentant sin, and would thus demand that the damned be annihilated rather than persist in offending God's majesty.[38] But while this could be a reason to prefer annihilationism to hellism, universalism holds that all are eventually saved – meaning all eventually repent, receive God's grace, and are purged of sin. As we note in *God's Final Victory* (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 36–38), this means that universal salvation eliminates the affront to God's majesty posed by sin in a way that eternal damnation does not.[39] Hence, annihilationism and universalism *share* an advantage over hellism,[40] according to which the sinful dispositions of the damned are sequestered but not removed from God's creation, remaining an endless affront to God's holiness. On both annihilationism and universalism, no such affront persists. If both doctrines share this feature, how can God's holiness be a reason to prefer one over the other?

The annihilationist might answer that, on most versions of universalism, the unrepentant will persist in sin *for a time*, affronting God's holiness in a finite hell before being saved. Annihilation removes these affronts. But could God's desire to remove *finite* offences trump the urgings of benevolence? Christians must assume that God permits finite affronts in this life and hence that God's moral character leaves room for them. Furthermore, annihilation prevents the unrepentant from ever coming to contrition and repentance. Setting aside the fact that universal repentance would permit God to show benevolence unconstrained by worries about ongoing affronts to divine holiness,[41] there is the fact that a will exterminated in a state of opposition to God never has its error corrected. The will never turns from its error but ends in a state of error, such that error becomes in a sense the final note in that soul's existence, a dissonance silenced but eternally unresolved.

But with contrition and repentance the erroneous will is corrected and comes to honour God's holiness. As Talbott (2014, 152) asks with respect to the monstrous Holocaust agent Adolf Eichmann, 'Do we not want him to reclaim enough of his humanity to admit that he was wrong and to appreciate why he was wrong? Do we not want his illusions stripped away, so he can stand naked before his Creator?' Such contrition, whereby he comes 'to appreciate the meaning of his punishment and the true nature of his evil deeds', seems to achieve more of what God's complacent self-love demands than mere extermination.

This leaves two arguments for favouring annihalitionism over universalism. First, one might think annihilationism fits better with God's vindicatory justice on the grounds that, although no creature is worthy of salvation, some are so unworthy of it that it offends justice to save them. Second, one might think that, since God's complacent love for the damned involves respecting what they are, it demands respecting them as autonomous agents capable of freely choosing their destinies. If some reject God in a settled way, complacent love might call for honouring this final choice (while benevolence and holiness motivate God to annihilate them).

Let's consider each argument in turn. As we do so we will initially assume, as already noted, that annihilation involves a divine act of putting creatures out of existence, perhaps by withdrawing the power that preserves them – in other words, annihilationism proper.

We begin with the idea that some sinners are so unworthy of salvation that vindicatory justice precludes God from saving them. The idea here is that complacent love calls God actively to repudiate offences against the inherent worth of God and creatures. Those who defend eternal damnation on the basis of divine justice typically argue that universal salvation must be rejected because, in some cases, a punishment of *infinite severity* is demanded by human sin. This argument is subject to a range of challenges,[42] but the annihilationist might seek to sidestep them by arguing that what distinguishes annihilation is not its *infinite severity* but its *finality*. Perhaps some offences are so serious that any repudiation that's less than *final* would be insufficient to vindicate the real value of what has been insulted. While annihilation amounts to a *final* repudiation, universal salvation ensures that every punishment ends in redemption, situating it in an eternity of blessing that, arguably, trivializes the punishment's power to repudiate. Thus, only a final repudiation such as annihilation is adequate to the demands of justice.

We have two responses. First, even if no rational creatures are worthy of salvation, the tradition widely affirms that all were created for the sake of union with God.[43] And insofar as persons are created in God's image, they bear an impression of the divine nature – arguably even an impression of divine infinity, since they could under the right conditions grow forever in knowledge and love. But this means that created persons possess an inherent worth that, so long as they exist, cannot be extinguished even by grave depravity. As St Augustine puts it,

> [G]ood can exist without evil, as in the true and supreme God himself . . . but evil cannot exist without good, because the natures in which evil exists, in so far as they are natures, are good. And evil is removed, not by removing any nature, or part of a nature, which had been infected by the evil, but by healing and correcting that which had been vitiated and depraved. The will, therefore, is then truly free, when it is not the slave of vices and sins. (Augustine (2006), bk XIV, ch. 11, p. 547)

If this is right, then annihilation destroys what has inherent worth, which at least prima facie fails to show the respect for that worth demanded by complacent love. Hence, if we accept the idea that some offences against intrinsic worth can only be repudiated through destruction, we end up positing a kind of moral dilemma for complacent love: some offences against intrinsic worth can only be repudiated by presumptively offending against intrinsic worth. In this dilemma, it is not obvious that the prima facie requirement to repudiate offences is more pressing than the prima facie requirement not to offend. In fact, the contrary seems presumptively more plausible.

A second response is, we think, more definitive. The problem with holding that some offences, as a matter of justice, call for a final repudiation of the sort annihilation provides, is that it is hard to see in a Christian context how this could be said of some offences but not all. In the Christian tradition all of us sin and have fallen short of God's glory.[44] And *all* sins display a failure to value God as highly as God's worth demands. But God's worth is infinite. To fall short in valuing God as we should is to attach merely finite worth to God, and the difference between God's actual worth and any finite valuation is infinitely great. The Lutheran Orthodox, in the spirit of Anselm, thus concluded that from a divine standard, every human sin is infinitely grave.[45] *All* of us are positively unworthy of salvation.[46] If *anyone's* sin is so serious that God cannot allow the punishment to be swamped by salvation's joys, then this is true for *everyone.*

In *God's Final Victory* (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 116–123) we argue that for these reasons, if one is convinced that justice demands eternal damnation one must suppose that God either damns all or finds a way to meet justice's demands other than by punishing sinners, such that those demands no longer impede God's benevolent will. If we suppose the latter, God's justice would no longer be an impediment to anyone's salvation. The Atonement offers clear grounds for Christians to suppose the latter. Traditional theories of the Atonement hold that God has found a way unequivocally to repudiate sin while fully expressing complacent and benevolent love for sinners. There are alternative understandings of the Atonement, of course, but they tend to share the conviction that any impediments to divine benevolence imposed by vindicatory justice have been overcome on the cross.[47]

Clearly, this same line of argument applies to a defence of annihilation on the grounds of divine justice, even if what justice is taken to demand is *final* repudiation rather than *infinite* punishment: given the gravity of all human sin, either justice demands that all human sin receives a final repudiation, or the

Atonement offers an alternative way to meet the demands of justice. Since the former would entail universal annihilation, something no Christian could endorse, the Christian annihilationist should favour the latter. But in that case, the demands of justice would not impose an impediment to saving all. If some are annihilated, then, there must be some different impediment.

The clearest alternative here is God's respect for autonomy, which brings us to the final defence of annihilationism we will consider: God's complacent love for creatures demands that He respect their free rejection of Him by annihilating them. Suppose the only way for God to save a person is by overriding her autonomy – by trumping her free choices about the course of her life and so forcing her into a final fate at odds with what she has chosen. One might then think that God's benevolent and complacent loves clash in a dilemma not even the Atonement can resolve. It is one thing for God, through the Cross, to throw wide heaven's doors, something else to make everyone enter. Perhaps the best accommodation between benevolent and complacent love is to do the former but not the latter – express benevolent love by inviting all in, and express complacent love by respecting the choices of those who refuse.[48]

There are several problems with treating this as reason to prefer annihilationism over universalism. The most obvious is that the unrepentant might not want to be annihilated. If God annihilates them anyway, isn't God violating their autonomy by forcing on them a final fate they have not chosen – which is precisely the purported problem with universalism? Saving persons in spite of their choices might express benevolent love at the cost of complacent love, but annihilating them expresses neither. In this way annihilationism shares a purported disadvantage with universalism that at least some versions of hellism avoid. On some versions of hellism the damned simply are those who have freely rejected God, and hell just *is* the resultant alienation. In short, the unrepentant endure hell because unrepentance *amounts* to choosing hell. But it is far less obvious that unrepentance amounts to choosing non-existence.

Paul Griffiths suggests one response to this concern. Following Augustine, he takes the nature of unrepentant sin to be a turning of the creature away from God, such that 'the project of sin' is really the project of 'extrication from participation in God' (Griffiths (2007), 424). But insofar as God is the source of being, he sees this project as a fundamental orientation of the will towards non-being. The determined sinner, on this view, is engaged in a self-chosen project of 'diminution towards nonexistence', a 'diminuendo that will (or may) end in silence' (*ibid.*). Like Griffiths, Jonathan Kvanvig (1993, 147) argues that to reject God is fundamentally to reject all goods, including existence itself, such that existence in hell is teleologically ordered towards annihilation. On this picture one might suppose that determined sinners at least implicitly choose self-annihilation, even if they haven't formulated the intent explicitly.[49]

But there are problems with such a supposition. Even as Griffiths extracts his view from Augustine, he expresses it in a fashion that calls into question the

appropriateness of understanding it as an autonomous (if implicit) choice for self-annihilation:

> It involves error: the sinner takes to be more what is in fact less; but it also more importantly involves will or intention: the sinner wants to move away from God and towards himself, and does what is necessary to bring this about. (Griffiths (2007), 424)

Valuing the less valuable above the more valuable is not the same as valuing non-existence as such, since what is less still *is*. And the intent described here, and which seems to express well the orientation of the sinful will on traditional Christian thought, is the intent to vaunt *the self* above God: the sinner intends to 'move . . . towards himself', not towards nothing.

Thus, on this picture self-annihilation is not what sinners *intend*. They intend to vaunt themselves while failing to recognize their dependence on God. Neither the resultant self-diminishment nor its outer limit – annihilation – is what's *intended*. To adopt the Augustinian view that sinful rebellion against God orients the self towards non-being is not to say that committed sinners intend self-annihilation but to expose how sin's distorting influence leads sinners to act in self-defeating ways: in trying to vaunt themselves they achieve the opposite.

But perhaps the annihilationist thinks that, at least eventually, all who reject God's offer of salvation *do* actually come to seek their own annihilation. Those who reject God but do *not* seek annihilation are deluded, unintentionally tending towards non-being out of self-defeating pride. But wouldn't existence in such a state of alienation from God ensure that the delusion is ultimately exposed, its intolerability laid bare? Rejecting God is rejecting everything good and real. While pride and self-deception might mask this for a time, eventually the intolerability of existence apart from God becomes clear.

But if so, the creature's preference of destruction emerges precisely because the creature is so crushed by the natural fruits of her God-rejecting choice that she understands how un-choiceworthy God-rejection is and would rather cease to exist than keep experiencing those fruits. She sees at last that the very thing for which she has chosen God-rejection – her desire to vaunt herself – is undermined by that very choice. As such, this is a moment at which the creature realizes that rejecting God is supremely unchoiceworthy, something that, according to universalist arguments, makes them *ripe for salvation*.[50]

While there may be moments in a creature's existence when her wilfulness is so potent that God must choose between realizing the benevolent desire for her salvation and respecting her autonomy, those who reach *this* state have come to know first-hand how unchoiceworthy rejecting God is. They have 'hit bottom', and the impediment to salvation imposed by self-deception collapses. Furthermore, the point at which they genuinely prefer annihilation to continued existence apart from God is a point at which they no longer experience the attachment to self necessary for pridefully vaunting the self. To *genuinely* desire annihilation is to desire the self's extermination, and hence to desire that one's will

should never again prevail over any competing will, finite or divine. A prideful attachment to the triumph of one's will is thus compatible only with desiring anni-hilation *erroneously conceived* – that is, not *actual* annihilation. Were God to confer actual annihilation in that case, God would not be conferring what was autono-mously chosen.

In short, the only time when actual annihilation would respect autonomy appears also to be a time when the motivating forces behind the unregenerate creature's resistance to God (delusional beliefs and a prideful will) are shut down. To suppose God lacks the resources to inspire repentance in that moment seems to involve positing a God less resourceful than the infinitely resourceful one Christianity affirms. At least we can say this: before annihilating those ripe for salvation, benevolence would move God to seek to inspire them, in that pivotal moment, to choose self-actualization rather than mere destruction.

If Christian teachings are right, the choice of annihilation is nothing like the choice of the terminally ill patient who asks to be taken off life-support. That choice may indeed be rational. But someone who fully understands the nature of the options and is not in bondage to bad habits would have every reason to prefer salvation to annihilation or any other option. This is why Thomas Talbott (1990, 37) argues that those who reject God must be either ignorant, deceived, or in bondage to controlling affective states. And if these conditions prevail, the choice will not be genuinely autonomous. In other words, even if God's compla-cent love moves God to respect autonomy, respect for autonomy is not the same as respect for someone's ill-conceived preferences. Those who seek their own extinction either do not know that eternal blessedness is an option, do not understand what that option entails, or can't help rejecting it because they are addicted to destructive desires. Hence, they are gripped by forces that preclude autonomous choice. Talbott thus concludes that God can guarantee the salvation of all simply by bestowing on them what they need for genuine autonomy. In so doing, God both restores their capacity for autonomous choice and eliminates every motive for rejecting God. That very act guarantees their salvation, since those with no motive to reject God and every motive to embrace God infallibly choose the latter. In short, God's respect for autonomy is not an impediment to saving all, since what such respect motivates is divine action that by its nature guarantees salvation.

To us, the most compelling objection to this argument is this: perhaps the only way to be truly freed from all ignorance and deception is by first being saved. Not until we experience the beatific vision itself do all ignorance and deception fall away.[51] Jerry Walls, for example, concedes that once we have 'absolute clarity of vision' every motive to reject God disappears. But such clarity 'is only achieved as we progressively respond with trust and love to God's self-revelation' (Walls (2004), 210). So, the clarity comes only at the conclusion of a process of making choices without that clarity. What the clarity does is ensure that those who have developed the relationship with God *constitutive of salvation* remain in that state.

If this is right, then what Talbott has shown is that *once* persons are saved, they freely but unfallibly stay that way because salvation removes all ignorance, deception, and bondage to desire. But then Talbott's argument becomes this: Whatever creatures might choose before being saved, once they attain salvation they see the choice-worthiness of salvation with perfect clarity. Prior to salvation, they have only what Marilyn McCord Adams (1993, 313) has called 'impaired freedom'. Since choices under conditions of impaired freedom aren't autonomous, God has no reason to respect them. Hence, God has no reason to respect choices that creatures make prior to salvation.

But many Christians have a deep intuition that even prior to salvation, we have *some* capacity for choice that calls for respect. Perhaps we lack the ideal condition in which all blinders are removed and God's utter choice-worthiness is apparent. But maybe, as John Hick (2001, 42) puts it, we must exist at an 'epistemic distance' from God if we are to be in a position where both choosing God and choosing alienation are real possibilities. If so, then such epistemic distance, with its attendant ignorance and deception, is necessary for us to play a role in our own salvation. Perhaps the resultant freedom, a kind of imperfect terrestrial freedom, still has value – at least once we're free from bondage to controlling desires.[52]

Granted this perspective, is the divine dilemma laid out above revived? Must God now choose between respecting the terrestrial freedom of unrepentant sinners and gifting them with the good of salvation? There is a reason to think otherwise, at least granted the claim accepted by both Talbott and critics such as Walls: *once* someone is saved, the experience of the beatific vision erases any motive that might lead them to reject God. If, furthermore, terrestrial freedom is characterized by the real possibility of both choosing God and choosing otherwise, the continued existence of such freedom guarantees the continued possibility of repentence. If that is not a real possibility, the sinner doesn't actually have terrestrial freedom.

In *God's Final Victory*, we argue that on these conditions, all God needs to do to save all is give the unregenerate indefinite opportunities to choose God by preserving them indefinitely in being while never withdrawing the offer of salvation.[53] If sinners have terrestrial freedom under such conditions, then it is possible they will repent in any one of an endless sequence of choice opportunities (or, if repentance is a multi-stage process, begin that process). By the mathematics of infinity, the probability that any given sinner will make the choices required for salvation approaches 1 as the decision opportunities approach infinity. Once they make the right choices, they experience the beatific vision and so become confirmed in blessedness. Thus, were God to sustain each unrepentant sinner in being while ensuring they remain free to choose Him, the chance that any sinners remain eternally unsaved would be rendered infinitesimally remote. To believe that anyone is eternally unsaved under those conditions is like believing that if I were to start flipping a fair penny over and over for the rest of eternity, I'd

never get heads even once.[54] The view's falsity is mathematically certain if not logically so.

If this is right, God could save all by sustaining recalcitrant sinners in being indefinitely while preserving their freedom. Why, then, would God annihilate them instead? By affording recalcitrant sinners indefinite opportunities to repent, God could both respect the autonomy of all and bestow the benevolent gift of salvation on all. If such a choice is available, God's complacent and benevolent love would converge on favouring it over both hell and annihilation.

But perhaps this it too quick. Although those saved after being indefinitely sustained in being are not saved against their wills, annihilationists might claim there remains a way their free will is ignored. After all, on this view some recalcitrant sinners could languish in hell for a considerable time. If they desire to be put out of existence during this time, wouldn't God violate their autonomy by preserving them? Perhaps their salvation, when it came, would be freely chosen. But in the meantime, wouldn't God be sustaining them against their wills?

While we are tempted to object to this argument by revisiting the observation that choosing annihilation in such a case is irrational and hence not truly autonomous, we will instead pursue a different response. For the above argument to succeed, one must assume that self-annihilation falls within the scope of a human agent's natural powers. All finite beings face innumerable limits on what we can do, and hence what we can freely choose to do. Because of how I'm made I cannot right now flap my arms and fly. God could have made me differently, but that God chose not to build arm-flapping aeronautical power into my natural capacities does not violate my autonomy.[55] If it did, God would be routinely violating human autonomy, and the case against universal salvation based on respecting autonomy would collapse.

So, if sinners who want to be put out of existence don't get what they want, that would violate their autonomy only if (a) they possess the power, as part of their nature, to put themselves out of existence; (b) they exercise that power by a free choice of will; and (c) God intervenes to prevent them from achieving their aim. If they lack the power in the first place, God is not violating their autonomy by not giving them what they want.

So, is self-annihilation within a creature's power? Clearly, it is in our power to end our earthly lives by disrupting the healthy functioning of our bodies. We can do it directly (as in suicide) or indirectly and unintentionally (by, say, chain-smoking). If humans are reducible to physical bodies and our consciousness is just an emergent property of the brain, one could argue that we have the power to destroy ourselves and that if we choose to, God must respect this choice out of complacent love even if doing so thwarts His benevolent will. This move amounts to endorsing a version of conditionalism. Since we will be focusing on conditionalism in the final section, we put off addressing this possibility until then.

If we assume, with the weight of the Christian tradition, that human beings are not just physical bodies but have rational souls that by their natures are

immaterial, incorruptible, and immortal, we would clearly lack the ability to put ourselves out of existence. Only God could do that. But the annihilationist might say that positing the incorruptibility and immortality of the soul begs the question against the annihilationist. So let's consider the merits of the following view: although we possess immaterial souls, we also possess the power to put those souls out of existence. Unlike conditionalism, our ceasing to exist requires an act of annihilation, but this is not an act that God does to us but one we do to ourselves.

Is this view plausible? Clearly, we have the power to disrupt complex physical systems. But immaterial souls are not composed of parts in the way physical bodies are. While our ability to destroy our bodies is an empirical fact, a purported ability to put our souls out of existence is mere speculation. Is it plausible speculation?

Paul Griffiths endorses just this speculative position. While he concedes that such self-annihilation is not possible under Thomistic assumptions about the soul,[56] he believes he has staked out 'a consistent, persuasive, and elegant Augustinian position according to which we can annihilate ourselves' (Griffiths (2007), 438). The essence of that position is this: sin is an orientation of the will against God, the source of all being, and through sin we are able to damage our souls in a way that amounts to a real 'ontological loss' or 'decrease in being' (*ibid.*, 423). In effect, sin is a directedness towards non-being that, according to Augustine and many Church Fathers, can and does result in a *diminishment* of one's being. But if we can through sin diminish ourselves, why couldn't we, via a sufficiently persistent orientation towards sin, put ourselves out of existence altogether?

We concede that sin damages the soul. But such damage, even construed as vitiation or diminution, needn't have complete dissolution as its final end. According to mainstream Christian moral theology, the main form sin's damage takes is the disordering of our values and desires.[57] While this is a species of *error*, and thus the absence of a due good and hence a vitiation, it is not obvious that *error* trends towards non-being. In the domain of knowledge, an intellect that entertained nothing but false beliefs would still exist, but in a deeply distorted form unmoored from its purpose. As Plato notes in the *Republic*, the distinctive evil of the soul is wickedness, but when we become corrupted by wickedness we continue to exist in a distorted form.[58] Wickedness *twists* but does not destroy. Purely based on experience it seems that no matter how badly we mangle our souls through sin, our souls continue to exist in their mangled forms.[59]

According to the metaphysical picture sketched out by Aquinas and others, the only thing that can put an immaterial soul out of existence is God removing His sustaining power. But suppose the annihilationist isn't convinced by this. Still, we think the annihilationist must concede that God *could* design rational creatures such that they lacked the power to put their souls out of existence. There is nothing metaphysically impossible about this. Even if such creatures had the power to turn

from God and become diminished, this just means that God has left it up to them whether they avail themselves fully of what God offers (e.g. sanctifying grace). But in order to avail themselves of *anything* they must first exist, which means that God's sustaining power was bestowed prior to any choice of theirs and could, without contradiction, remain wholly in God's hands even if in other ways God has afforded them the freedom to self-diminish. Put simply, our existence as beings who make choices is something we possess because of what God has done, not because of any choices of ours. There does not appear to be any impossibility in God designing us such that the persistence of this property *remains* entirely in God's hands. Whether we go out of existence would in that case depend on what God does: *we* could not complete the project of 'extrication from participation in God' (Griffiths (2007), 439).

So, God *could* create only rational creatures who *lack* the power of self-annihilation. And there is moral reason to suppose God *would* do that, because if God created rational creatures *with* the power to self-annihilate, doing so could generate a moral dilemma forcing God to choose between the rival urgings of benevolent and complacent love. God could avoid this dilemma and thereby remove constraints on the expression of divine love simply by *not* investing rational creatures with the power to self-annihilate. Since there is this moral reason to suppose God would not invest rational creatures with self-annihilating power, there is reason to think that humans, as rational creatures created by God, in fact lack this power.

Conditional immortality

Above, we suggested that annihilationists could claim that it falls within our power to destroy ourselves because our existence depends entirely on a body, which it falls within our power to destroy. Were this true, it would ground a case for claiming that divine respect for creaturely autonomy demands allowing us to annihilate ourselves. This view, however, is no longer annihilationism proper but conditionalism. On this view, human existence is material and without God stepping in to sustain us after death we naturally perish. Post-mortem survival is thus a divine gift – one God bestows only on those who have made the right earthly choices.

On this conditionalist view, most of the unregenerate will never learn at first hand the objective horror of continued existence apart from God, since they will perish before experiencing this horror. But for that very reason, they are far less likely to *choose* annihilation. The unregenerate would go out of existence not because they have chosen it but because that's just what happens unless God intervenes. The exception would be suicides – and, arguably, only those who authentically seek non-existence unencumbered by errors of understanding or controlling affective states such as clinical depression. In other cases of earthly death, even those resulting from unwise choices, our own destruction is not

what we choose. Hence, God would not violate creaturely autonomy by preserving the unregenerate after bodily death except in a very few cases – or perhaps in no cases at all, if none who deliberately kill themselves really conceive their options properly.

Of course, conditionalists could note that if humans go out of existence naturally at death, then living on after death falls outside the scope of our power and hence is something we can wish for but not autonomously choose. As such, God would not violate the autonomy of the unregenerate by letting them go out of existence at bodily death. But the key question isn't whether God's respect for autonomy *permits* annihilation. If that respect permits but does not *require* annihilation, then it imposes no impediment on God acting on benevolence and complacent love for their being. And if God isn't precluded from acting on these motives, God would preserve them in being. Respect for autonomy would call for the annihilation only of those who actively choose it – and it seems that few if any do.

Still, the conditionalist might suppose there is a narrow range of individuals towards whom their conditionalist thesis applies: those who commit suicide in an actual attempt to annihilate themselves, and who fully grasp what their annihilation entails. The first thing to note here is that the resultant doctrine is far from what annihilationists generally hold: it is no longer the unregenerate who go out of existence at bodily death, but only those few who commit suicide with a clear intent to achieve non-existence properly understood. Stalin would be saved – and maybe Hitler, depending on how he understood his suicide.

Second, even if some who commit suicide understand what annihilation involves, there is reason to think they do not properly understand the *alternatives* and hence what they would be giving up. Surely Talbott and Walls are right that any who clearly discern what salvation entails have no motive to choose anything else. Clearly understanding what annihilation involves is not equivalent to clearly understanding *the choice*. The latter requires clearly understanding annihilation *and* its alternatives. Is it impermissible to block an irrevocable choice, if and when that choice is made without proper understanding of the alternatives?

Imagine a suicidal person who leaps in front of an oncoming bus, fully aware of what the choice will do but deeply misguided about the alternatives – about the prospects for future happiness, the value of their lives, and so on. Would it violate their autonomy to seize them before the leap? We are sceptical, but for the sake of argument let us suppose it does. Still, there remains the powerful intuition that a loving parent who intervened to stop their child's suicide did nothing morally wrong. Perhaps this is because, in a case like this, there are moral reasons to save the child that counterbalance respect for autonomy. One such reason would be complacent love for the intrinsic value of the child's continued existence. Another would be benevolence, especially if the parent knows that given time and the right kind of support and medical help, the child will go on to enjoy a blessed life. Like the loving parent in this case, God – the ultimate loving parent of us all – would have these motives to save determined suicides. If annihilationists defend

what is left of their view by taking respect for autonomy in such cases to be such a pressing moral concern as to override these rival motives, it seems they would have to accept the deeply counterintuitive consequence that a loving parent is morally bound to stand by and let a suicidal child leap in front of a bus even though, were they to intervene, they could guarantee that the child would grow up to have a richly rewarding life.

On a more basic level, there is something deeply puzzling about the chief premise of conditionalism. For the conditionalist, unless God miraculously intervenes to preserve a creature's existence at bodily death, the creature goes entirely out of existence because it is in the nature of the human person to do so. Immortality is a supernatural gift that God withholds from the unregenerate. But setting aside our metaphysical worries about this view, if it's part of the nature of human persons to go out of existence at bodily death, that would be true because God created rational beings with that nature. But couldn't an omnipotent God, instead, have brought into existence rational creatures whose nature included an immaterial soul that survived bodily death? And if so, why didn't He? Why would a God motivated by both complacent and benevolent love opt for the former arrangement?

Given the short duration of earthly life and the impaired nature of terrestrial freedom, the soteriological results of such an arrangement are bound to be poor. And God could improve those results immeasurably simply by extending the opportunity for repentance and conversion beyond earthly death, which God could do by creating persons with immortal souls who lacked the natural power to put their souls out of existence. God's benevolent love would certainly favour this arrangement, as would His complacent love for the worth of our existence.

What about His complacent love for our nature as autonomous beings? As already noted, if it was not in our power to put our souls out of existence God would not violate our autonomy by sustaining us long enough to secure our salvation. And this leads to the following question: if God could create rational creatures who lacked the power to destroy themselves (by giving them immortal and incorruptible souls that only God could destroy), and if this enabled God to avoid conflicts between the urgings of complacent and benevolent love, why would God opt instead for one of the more morally fraught arrangements favoured by annihilationists? If there is good reason to think God wouldn't do so, then there is good reason to suppose that human beings in fact are the kinds of creatures God would prefer to create: ones with immortal and incorruptible souls that only God could destroy.

One final point is worth noting. Anyone who's been on the receiving end of high pressure sales tactics knows that 'limited time offers' not only limit what options fall within the scope of our choices but exert a kind of coercive pressure that standing offers don't. Sales people know this and use the ticking clock to pressure us – a kind of psychological manipulation.[60] Such manipulation might be justified by

benevolent love if the violation of autonomy is small and the benefits great. And so we can imagine that God might impose some such pressures when they serve creatures' welfare (such as a divine message of the form, 'If you don't repent in this life, you may need to go through hell in the next before you are saved'). But an all-or-nothing limited-time-offer is so prone to bad results that it is hard to see how its coercive pressures can be justified based on benevolence. Thus, an arrangement of this sort – in which the clock is ticking down and unless we repent before we die we're irretrievably destroyed – would have to be motivated by something other than love. But God is love.

In sum, we think a traditional understanding of God's moral character – in terms of complacent and benevolent love – would favour the following view: God would design rational creatures with natures such that in some form they persist indefinitely so long as God continues to extend the sustaining power upon which all existing things depend. Furthermore, God would continue to extend that sustaining power despite creaturely recalcitrance, using the natural consequences of alienation from God to expose its un-choiceworthiness, until inevitably every free creature comes to see the light and returns in love and joy to the bosom of God.

To defend an alternative view, annihilationists would have to do one of the following: (1) challenge the traditional view of God sketched here; (2) argue, contrary to the tradition, that humans either lack immaterial souls or possess the power to destroy those souls; and then further defend *both* the counterintuitive view that this arrangement is the one a God of complacent and benevolent love would favour *and* the counterintuitive view that given this arrangement, God's respect for the autonomy of those determined to destroy themselves would trump the combined weight of His respect for their very existence and His benevolent love for them. We are not optimistic about the prospects of these options, and so conclude that the case for the preferability of universalism to annihilationism is strong.

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Notes

1. In using this term, we recognize that universalists often endorse the notion of a finite hell that some or many endure before their eventual salvation – and thus might be dubbed 'hellists' in a sense. Nevertheless, it is useful to have a short designator analogous in form to 'universalism' and 'annihilationism', and 'hellism' seems the least clumsy option.

2. Spencer (1998, 2) identifies three versions, the third being the view that all perish forever at bodily death.

3. One might also think that the soul could annihilate itself through 'the gradual enervating and sapping work of sin itself on the personality', as Warfield (1932, 450) notes. This is a possibility we will consider in a later section.

4. Christian theologians who teach that humans souls are by nature immortal do not mean that they could continue to exist without God's sustaining activity but rather that, as immaterial and so simple, they *have no inner tendency towards corruption and do not need to be joined to a body to exist*.

5. Even those in the tradition who held that human *souls* are by nature immaterial and immortal did not say the same of human *persons*, since human persons are constituted by soul and body and so are *able* to be corrupted. But they also held that, since the immortal souls of humans are the nobler part of them, since humans were created in God's image, and since humans are by nature ordered to union with God (at the very least in the sense that their 'hearts will not rest until they rest' in Him), human persons are immortal in a secondary sense. This means that it was not part of God's original plan that humans should die, and that, had the first humans not sinned, they would never have died nor been subject to any diseases or infirmities. See on this the comments by John Quenstedt in Heinrich Schmid (1905, 228).

6. What makes an act of God miraculous cannot be precisely determined in abstraction from a detailed account of the metaphysical grounds of natural laws and of the mode of God's concurrence with the actions of secondary causes. But, on any account of the miraculous, a miraculous divine act would be an act which, *at a minimum*, is an exception to well supported inductive generalizations concerning how creatures causally interact with each other, exceptions which can only be explained by God's exercising His absolute power, understood as the power He has to produce, *by merely willing it*, any absolutely possible state of affairs. Granted God's perfection, such an act would perfectly accord with the ultimate ends of divine providence rather than being capricious.

7. See Warfield (1932, 449). The latter appears to be the view of prominent annihilationism Edward W. Fudge (2011, 378; *Idem* 2012).

8. Using 'complacent' to describe a love grounded (at least partly) on the intrinsic worth of a thing and 'benevolent' to describe a love not necessarily so grounded is a terminological approach particularly favoured by Reformed Scholastics of the latter half of the seventeenth century. Others in the tradition used other terms, and even those who used 'complacent' and 'benevolent' were not slavish in their usage, particularly in light of the richness of Scriptural terminology. Thus, instead of 'complacent love', many spoke of 'the love of acquiescence', as well as of 'delight', 'delectation', or 'joy in the good', and instead of 'benevolent love', many spoke of 'grace', 'kindness', 'charity', and even 'goodness'. Often simply 'love' was used for both and one would need to attend to the context to tell which sort was meant.

9. Augustine (2006), bk XI, chs 21–22, pp. 436–440; Maximos the Confessor (1981a, First Century, text 25, p. 55); Melanchthon (1965, Locus VI, p. 72); Turretin (1992, First Topic, q. XX, p. 242). John Gerhard (2007, ch. VIII, sect. XI, § 223, p. 212) helpfully notes that, when theologians speak of the complacent love God has for creatures, they mean to refer to 'that love by which He loves his own good which has been communicated to His creation'.

10. See John of Damascus (1958, bk III, ch. 1, pp. 267–269); Luther (2015b, Proof of Thesis 28, p. 104); Hollaz (1722, I, cap. I, q. 45, pp. 295–296); Schleiermacher (1928, § 167, pp. 730–732).

11. In *God's Final Victory*, we present three separate arguments for universalism, one based on God's complacent love for all human beings, one based on His benevolent love for them, and one based on his special love for the blessed. We then respond at length to two objections to these arguments, one being that God may not will the salvation of all because it would be contrary to His holiness and justice to do so,

the other being that, although God may will the salvation of all, it is either metaphysically impossible for Him to do so, or morally impossible for Him to do so, in that any means He could use to save all would violate creaturely autonomy.

12. Scriptural passages that support this include Eph. 2:1–10; 2 Cor. 4:3–6; Col. 2:13; Rom 8:1–11.

13. While God's omnipotence can be variously construed, we favour construing it in terms of *metaphysical* possibility, roughly defined as the ability to bring about any metaphysically possible state of affairs by an act of will, where the state of affairs is conceived indexically such that included in the conception of the state of affairs brought about by an agent, A, is A's relation to the other conditions as the one responsible for bringing it about. The purpose of this indexical understanding is to avoid worries related to what Plantinga has dubbed Leibniz's Lapse: even though the state of affairs in which Joe does X freely in a libertarian sense is a metaphysically possible state of affairs, it is metaphysically impossible for me to bring about this state of affairs because the resultant complete state of affairs would not merely include the metaphysically possible feature of Joe doing X freely in the libertarian sense but also the metaphysically impossible feature of Joe being caused by me to do X freely in a libertarian sense. A metaphysically possible state of affairs is one that (1) is not contradictory, and (2) does not violate any necessary synthetic truth – that is, a truth that is necessary but not logically so (its negation does not imply an explicit contradiction). A full discussion and defence of necessary synthetic truths is beyond this article's scope, although we suspect that many of the principles invoked by universalism's opponents are best understood as *purported* necessary synthetic truths – for example, 'Those who do wrong deserve to be punished' – such that hellists and annihilationists would probably accept the existence of such truths.

14. One might suppose, for example, that a transformation of someone's will from recalcitrant and God-rejecting to repentant and God-seeking, if it does not involve a concurring exercise of the person's autonomy, amounts to annihilating the unregenerate person and replacing them with a different person. While we find the view of personal identity underlying such a supposition implausible (insofar as it ties a person's identity more closely to the contingent reality that their will is unregenerate rather than to their essential nature as creatures created by God for union with God), we will not develop this point here since the arguments aimed at showing that God can save all in autonomy-respecting ways addresses this view as well as what we find to be more plausible bases for thinking creaturely autonomy is an impediment to universal salvation.

15. For an overview of the conflicting character of the relevant scriptural texts, see Kronen & Reitan (2011), 56–58. Cf. Martensen (1890), § 284, pp. 475–476.

16. See, for example, John 12:30–32; Rom. 5:14–21; Rom. 11:26–36; 1 Corin. 15:20–28; and Col. 1:12–20.

17. See, for example, Matt. 25:31–46; Luke 13: 23–28; and Rev. 14:9–11.

18. See, for example, 2 Thess. 1:5–9 and Philipp. 3:19.

19. Such as Robin Parry (2006, 151–153) does in his universalist reading of 2 Thess. 1:6–10.

20. The kind of look that Parry (2006) seeks to provide in chapters 2–4 of *The Evangelical Universalist*.

21. A strong case can be made for the view that many central doctrines of orthodox Christianity, e.g. the doctrines of the Trinity and of creation *ex nihilo*, are only implicitly (even if quite clearly) taught by Scripture.

22. See Dorner (1887), 78–81; Martensen (1890), § 51, pp. 99–100; Charnock (1979), vol. II, Dis. XI, pp. 114–116; Mueller (2003), 500.

23. Augustine (2006), bk X, ch. 3, pp. 368–369; Melanchthon (1965), Locus II, p. 13, Locus III, p. 39; Gerhard (2007), ch. VIII, sect. XVII, § 295–296, p. 255; Charnock (1979), 206–208.

24. Augustine (2006), bk XII, ch. 21, pp. 436–438; Maximos (1981a), Third Century, text 72, pp. 94–95; Maximos (1981b), Second Century, text 4, p. 138; John of Damascus (1958), 354; Aquinas (1820), Liber, I, cap. 37–40; Luther (2015d), 303; Suarez (2015), Tract. I, Lib. I, cap. VIII, pp. 17–20; Hollaz (1722), I, cap. I, q. 28, Obs. 3, p. 273. The tradition made this point by speaking of creatures as participating in God's being and goodness, and of God as the exemplary and unparticipated cause of all created good.

25. See Augustine (2006), bk XI, chs 16–17, pp. 433–434, chs 21–22, pp. 436–440: John of Damascus (1958), 354. Cf. Genesis, 9:6.

26. See Mueller (2003), 502. Cf. Is. 6:1–7.

27. See Augustine (2006), bk XV, ch. 22, pp. 609–610. Cf. Leibniz (1951), 564–570.

28. See Schmid (1905), 348–351.

29. John of Damascus (1958), 205; Aquinas (1948), I, q. 20, a. 3; Melanchthon (1965), 39; Aulen (1948), 181. The older Protestant dogmaticians could make this point nicely by saying there was no *external* impelling

cause of creation (since 'before' being created the creature is intrinsically nothing), but only an *internal* impelling one: God's goodness understood as benevolent love.

30. Augustine (2006), bk XII, ch. 25, p. 490; Aquinas (1948), I, q. 104, a. 1; Melanchthon (1965), 41; Suarez (2002), Disp. 21, sect. 2, pp. 120–129.

31. Augustine (2006), bk XIV, ch. 13, pp. 550–551; John of Damascus (1958), 388–389; Aquinas (1948), I-II, q. 92, a. 1; Melanchthon (1965), 103; Martensen (1871), § 121–123, pp. 368–375.

32. John of Damascus (1958), 267–269; Luther (2015e), 270; Gerhard ((2007), ch. VIII, sect. XI, § 216, pp. 206–207. Cf. Is. 49:15–16; Jer. 31:20; John 3:16–17; Rom. 5:6–8.

33. Augustine (2006), bk XXII, ch. 30, pp. 1028–1032; John of Damascus (1958), 339 and 346; *Idem* (1981), 341–342; Maximos (1981a), Century One, texts 12–15, p. 54; Luther (2015c), 524–525, 530–531; Melanchthon (1965), 141, 153, 173, 175–180. Cf. Col. 3:5–10; Rom. 6: 1–11.

34. Augustine (2006), bk XV, ch. 6, p. 578; Aquinas (1948), I, q. 23, a 5, I-II, q. 109, a. 4–9; Maximos (1981b), First Century, text 31, p. 120; Melanchthon (1965), 52, 57–58. Cf. John 6:29; Eph. 2:1–5; Cor. 4:6; Tit. 3:1–7.

35. Augustine (2006), bk XII, ch. 9, pp. 466–468; Aquinas (1948), I-II, q. 109, a. 4–10; Luther (2015c), 514–515.

36. Maximos (1981b), First Century, text 12, p. 116; John of Damascus (1958), 268; Gerhard (2007), ch. III, sect. X, § 215, pp. 204–206, sect. XI, § 227, p. 214. Cf. Ps. 103:8–14; Rom. 3:22–25–10; Rom. 5:8.

37. As a matter of fact, annihilationists invoke benevolent love in just this way. See, for example, Pinnock (1990), 246–247.

38. Perhaps for this reason some classical theologians, though officially hellists, wrote things implying the wicked will be annihilated. Melanchthon, for example, wrote: 'Through external punishments God wants us to realize that he is wise and righteous, draws a distinction between virtue and vice, and destroys everything that is contrary to his wisdom and purity' (Melanchthon (1965), 95). Cf. Josh. 24:19–20.

39. See also Talbott (2014), 152.

40. A point that John R. W. Stott acknowledges in his case for why annihilationism is preferable to hellism. According to Stott, 'the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with the promises of God's final victory over evil', a problem both universalism and annihilationism avoid (Stott (2014), 54).

41. There is also the biblical case that universal repentance actually occurs. See, for example, Philip. 2:9–11.

42. See Kronen & Reitan (2011), 91–126.

43. Augustine (2006), bk X, ch. 3, pp. 368–369; John of Damascus (1958), 235; Aquinas (1948), I-II, q. 2, a. 8, q. 3, a. 8; Hollaz (1722), I, cap. V, q. 11, p. 458, II, cap. I, q. 20, pp. 518–524. We should note here that a disagreement arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians concerning whether intellectual creatures are *naturally* ordered to union with God. The Protestants said yes, the Roman Catholics no. But a careful study of their writings reveals that their differences were fewer than once thought. The real nature of their differences can best be seen in their positions on whether the so-called 'concreated' virtues of unfallen humans – virtues directing them towards heaven which, had they persevered during their time of trial, would have made them fit for it – were natural (the Protestant view) or supernatural (the Catholic view). The Protestants admitted those virtues were not natural in the sense of being constituent parts of the human essence or essential prop-erties emanating from it, and they allowed them to be supernatural 'with respect to their efficient cause', since only God could have produced them in unfallen humans or restore them in fallen ones; finally, they admitted that those virtues were graciously given in that humans could no more earn them than they could earn being created. But they insisted those virtues were natural in the sense of intimately charac-terizing and perfecting human nature and fitting humans for their natural end, union with God. They further insisted that, if God had created humans without those virtues, He would have made them in a fallen state. The Roman Catholics admitted that those virtues perfected human nature, that only union with God can constitute the fullest happiness of humans, and that God created humans and angels for the sake of that union. But they insisted those virtues were supernatural in that only God could have produced them in unfallen humans, only He could restore them in fallen ones, and in that they proximately fitted humans for obtaining a supernatural good. In light of all this, the disagreements between classical Protestants and Catholics on these matters appear to be largely verbal. Hence, adopting the Catholic position would not seem to weaken our argument against annihilationism based on God's complacent love for intellectual creatures since that position holds that there is a *deep and essential directedness towards union with God in all intellectual creatures*, even if such a union is called supernatural rather than natural.

44. The Scriptural basis for this teaching is overwhelming. Following are a few of the dozens of biblical passages that support it: Gen. 6:5; Ps. 14:3; Luke 11:13; Eph. 2:3–4; 1 Cor. 2:14.

45. See Quenstedt (1701), p. III, cap. III, mem. II, *De officio Christi*, sect. I, XXXI, p. 228; quoted in Schmid (1905), 351. To say that all sin as such is infinitely grave is not, however, to say that a sin of infinite severity that has been *repented of* has implications for the sinner as grave as sin that has not been repented of. One might hold, for example, that while Christ's Atonement pays the penalty for sin, a subjective choice by the creature – to repent or turn in faith to Christ – determines whether that payment is attributed to the sinner. We critically examine this and similar views in *God's Final Victory* (Kronen & Reitan (2011), 120–123).

46. See Rom. 3: 9–18, 21–25.

47. On the broadly Lutheran view we favour, humanity is confronted on the cross with the stunning gravity of sin: every failure to love, every sin, is an act of *crucifying God*. See Luther (2015a), 172. On such a view, the cross not only manifests sin's gravity but repudiates it: human error is laid bare and denounced as God in human form takes the place of every victim and declares, 'What you have done to the least of these you have done to me.'

48. This is the perspective endorsed, in distinct ways, by both Walls (1992) and Kvanvig (1993).

49. Kvanvig (1993, 152) thinks it may be the case that 'some never get to the end of the road toward annihilation'. As such, his position is more of a hybrid between annihilationism and hellism.

50. See Kronen & Reitan (2011), 141–146.

51. For a development of this response, see *ibid.*, 153.

52. This appears to be the view favoured by Walls (2004, 210–211).

53. See especially Kronen & Reitan (2011), 160–177.

54. Some may wonder about the application of the laws of probability to human choices in the manner suggested by this argument – as if free choices work like coin flips do. We defend the plausibility of this in our book (*ibid.*, 156–160). For an earlier detailed development of this entire line of argument, including a discussion of the relationship between free choice and randomness, see Reitan (2007).

55. On might argue that God could not have designed *humans* with the power to fly – that what it is to be human somehow excludes flight, such that any being God made with that power would not be human. But if one thinks that, it provides even stronger grounds for thinking God does not violate our autonomy by creating us without this power.

56. In Griffiths' words, 'Aquinas's position is of course not compatible with the claim that we can bring ourselves to nothing. For him, were any one of us to be brought to nothing, this would have to be because of something God does or does not do' (Griffiths (2007), 433).

57. See, for example, Kronen & Reitan (2011), 13 and 96–97, for developments of this point.

58. See *Republic* X, 609–611 (Stephanus nos).

59. For a more detailed critique of this position, see Brown & Walls (2010), 47–53.

60. For a fuller discussion of limited-time offers and their relationship to autonomy, see Kronen & Reitan (2011), 173–174.