

UNIVERSALISM AND THE SUPPOSED ODDITY OF OUR EARTHLY LIFE: REPLY TO MICHAEL MURRAY

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Abstract

In "Three Versions of Universalism," Michael Murray asks what purpose our earthly life might serve if universalism is true; and in this brief response, I suggest a possible answer.

In an article that recently appeared in this journal,¹ Michael Murray puts to universalists in general, and to me in particular, a question that deserves an answer. Behind the question he raises lies the supposed empirical fact that millions of people die in unbelief and in an unrepentant state; so if they too will be perfected in the end, as I and other universalists believe, then their perfection must be completed in a post-mortem life of some kind. This leads Murray to ask: Given that "the earthly life appears to yield poor soteriological results," just what purpose does it "serve in the outworking of God's plan for his human creation?"² Murray goes on to comment: "Obviously, the post-mortem state in which most turn to God is vastly better suited [given the universalist's view] for the conversion of the unregenerate. But if so, why not create us all *ab initio*, in this latter state?"³ Why not, in other words, just skip the earthly life, with all of the separation, trials, and tribulations it includes, and simply bring everyone to perfection, quickly and painlessly, in a post-mortem existence of some kind?

The question is important because it seems to express a widespread worry among the opponents of universalism. Even as opponents of Augustinian predestination sometimes worry that our earthly life would have no intelligible purpose if the eternal destiny of the elect should be secure from the beginning, so Murray worries that our earthly life would have no intelligible

purpose if God's irresistible grace should likewise extend to the entire human race. What purpose might our present choices serve if the end is already secure? It is St. Paul, of course, who declares that "one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (the very same "all," by the way, who died in Adam).⁴ It is also Paul who insists that our destiny "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy."⁵ But if all of this is true, what might a plausible purpose for our earthly existence be?

Now as Murray himself acknowledges, a failure on the part of universalists to answer such questions would in no way undermine their view.⁶ But fortunately, universalists have, and have provided, a host of plausible answers. My own answer will involve two steps: first, an examination of Murray's assumption that our "earthly life appears to yield poor soteriological results," and second, an account of how, even though we do not choose (freely or otherwise) our own destiny, libertarian free choice is nonetheless an essential part of the process whereby God perfects us in the end.

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Why should anyone suppose that the earthly life yields "poor soteriological results"? The answer will depend, I presume, upon one's criterion for soteriological success. It is certainly true that virtually no one, Christian or non-Christian, achieves moral and spiritual perfection in this earthly life. So if the criterion for soteriological success is moral and spiritual perfection, then success is indeed rare (perhaps even nonexistent) in this realm. It hardly follows, however, that the events in our earthly lives have no important role to play in perfecting us; nor does it follow that God could simply have skipped the earthly life, have started us out in something like a post-mortem state, and successfully have perfected us nonetheless. What is true, perhaps, is that the earthly life is better suited for establishing the need for redemption in the first place and for getting the process

underway than it is for completing the process.⁷ So perhaps a better criterion for soteriological success would be the extent to which our earthly lives prepare the way for a fuller and more perfect union with God in the future; and when judged by that criterion, I want to insist, every human life, even the most seemingly tragic, represents a degree of soteriological success.

Consider Adolf Hitler, just for purposes of illustration, and compare him to Saul of Tarsus. We are, of course, in no position to assess the hearts of others and in no position, therefore, to make such a comparison. But that is, in a sense, just my point. Do we have any reason to believe that Hitler's hatred of the Jews whom he persecuted, terrorized, and murdered was any greater than Saul's hatred of the Christians whom he persecuted, terrorized, and murdered? True, Saul did not have at his disposal the power of a modern state (or 20th Century technology), so his destructive activities were to that extent limited. But even on the road to Damascus, he was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."⁸ If anyone might have seemed incorrigible, at least to those early Christians who had learned to fear him, it would have been Saul of Tarsus. Because we know what happened on the road to Damascus and thereafter, however, we have little trouble seeing a soteriological success here. In the case of Hitler, it is quite different; we are unaware of any dramatic conversion (or revelation) that may have occurred at the end his earthly life. Still, we have no reason to deny that Hitler was in a far more hopeful condition at the end of his life, after all of his evil plans and ambitions had come to ruin, than he was at any time previously. Indeed, even as Saul received a special revelation on the road to Damascus, so the process whereby Hitler's plans and ambitions had come to ruin may also have been a revelation to Hitler—uniquely suited, perhaps, to his own spiritual needs.

But if Hitler does find his cure in a post-mortem state of some kind, why should God not simply have created him “*ab initio*, in this latter state?” Behind the question lies Murray’s conviction that, given universalism, “the post-mortem state in which most turn to God is vastly better suited [than is the earthly life] for the conversion of the unregenerate.” We must not make the mistake of supposing, however, that God’s redemptive activities in the post-mortem realm, as efficient as they may be, are logically independent of our earthly lives; to the contrary, as I and many other universalists conceive the matter, an earthly life will in many cases play an essential role in God’s unique redemptive activities in the post-mortem realm. Some universalists have supposed, for example, that God reserves his harshest forms of punishment (or his severest means of correction)—namely, purgatorial suffering in hell or temporary banishment to the outer darkness—for the post-mortem realm; many others have supposed that an important redemptive activity in the post-mortem realm will be the earthly life review; and for my own part, I suspect that God has a special way of teaching us the true meaning of our selfish actions. In some cases at least, he may require us to experience the effects of our actions from the perspective others, almost as if we were the one being affected; in that way, we shall literally reap what we have sown. A vicious child beater may thus be required to experience the beatings he has administered, together with all of the fear and the terror he has caused, from the perspective of the very child he has beaten. He will be made to see himself as the child sees him. But none of this would be possible in the absence of an earthly life. Hitler could hardly be subject to punishment (or correction) for sins he never committed; he could hardly engage in a life review if he had no earthly life to review; and he could hardly experience the horror of the very gas chambers for which he was responsible if these had never existed.

Beyond the absurdity of supposing that God could achieve his loving purposes effectively by starting someone out in purgatory or even in the outer darkness, there is also the mystery of creation itself. Because the creation of rational, independent, and self-aware beings such as ourselves is a deep and unfathomable mystery, we can hardly pontificate how God should have begun the process. But one thing seems clear: God must first *produce* rational agents before he can perfect them and reveal himself fully to them; not even God, after all, could reveal himself to a stone. So here is one plausible account of why our earthly lives must be very different from the post-mortem realm in which we finally achieve perfect union with God. Perhaps some of the very conditions essential to our creation in the first place and to the emergence of our unique personalities are themselves obstacles to a perfect union with God—obstacles that God must subsequently overcome in a variety of complex ways *after* we have already come into being. Might it not be, for example, that God’s hiddenness is more than a (questionable) concession to our freedom?—that it is also a *metaphysically necessary condition* of our creation? Why suppose it even possible for creatures like us to develop self-awareness, or to become aware of ourselves as distinct from God and from each other, or to develop a will of our own, in an environment essentially different from the earthly one? For my own part, at any rate, I suspect that the experience of ambiguity, frustration, separation, and even alienation is an indispensable condition of our emergence as rational, self aware beings;⁹ and if this is true, then God could hardly have started us out in a state in which such conditions do not exist.

As I see it, then, the purpose of the earthly realm (and even the physical cosmos as a whole) is just what John Hick and other proponents of a “soul making theodicy” have proposed. The created universe provides an environment in which God can, first, bring us into being as independent,

rational agents, and second, begin teaching the lessons of love as he reconciles us over time both to himself and to each other.

Our own moral freedom, moreover, is an essential part of the complex process whereby God transforms us into his children and perfects us in the end. But here a clarification or two is in order. As a universalist, I reject the idea, which I suspect to be incoherent anyway, that we choose freely between different possible eternal destinies; I also reject the idea that we are *responsible for* our eternal destiny, which is no less a gift from God than our birth is. I do not deny, of course, that God brings each of us to the point where we *voluntarily*, wholeheartedly, and joyfully submit our wills to him; indeed, I would insist upon that. But as for the further question of whether the final act of submission on our part qualifies as a free choice in the standard libertarian sense,¹⁰ I have come, quite frankly, to doubt it. Haven't Christians traditionally attributed even the transformation of their wills to the work of the Holy Spirit within? As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "it is God who works in you [both] to will and to act according to his good pleasure."¹¹ And in transforming the sinner from the inside out, isn't it God's purpose to elicit an act of submission so wholehearted, so full of love, and so joyful that, at the moment of final submission, no alternative choice is even thinkable or psychologically possible? If so, and if free choice (of the standard libertarian kind) nonetheless plays an important role in the whole process whereby God transforms the will and elicits the desired act of submission, then we need a fresh picture, I believe, of just what that role is.

The picture I would urge is this: Our free choices determine not our eternal destiny, which is secure from the beginning, but instead how God will respond to us in the future—that is, the means of grace he will employ—and how we will *experience* God's love within a given time-frame: whether, for example, we will experience it as kindness or as severity. "Note then," writes

Paul in his letter to the Romans, “the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise, you also will be cut off.”¹² So how we encounter God in the future is indeed, says Paul, up to us. But our ultimate destiny is not up to us, because God’s severity, no less than his kindness, is itself a means of his saving grace. In particular, God’s severity towards the unbelieving Jews—even his willingness to blind them, to harden their hearts, and to cut them off for a season—is according to Paul but one of the means whereby God will save all of Israel in the end: “a hardening has come upon part of Israel And so all Israel will be saved.”¹³ What our free choices determine, then, is not our eternal destiny, but the means required to achieve it. For the more tenaciously we cling to our illusions and selfish desires—to the flesh, as Paul calls it—the more severe will be the means and the more painful the process whereby God shatters our illusions, destroys the flesh, and finally separates us from our sin.

A virtue of the Christian religion, as I see it, is that Christians are never permitted to take credit for their own redemption or even for a virtuous character (where such exists). All credit of this kind goes to God. But the Christian religion also stresses the importance of free choice, of choosing this day whom you shall serve. Nor need there be any tension between these two emphases, provided that we regard our free choices as determining not our eternal destiny, but the means of grace available to us. Essential to the whole redemptive process, I am suggesting, is that we exercise our moral freedom—not that we choose rightly rather than wrongly, but that we choose freely one way or the other. We can choose today to live selfishly or unselfishly, faithfully or unfaithfully, obediently or disobediently. But our choices, especially the bad ones, will also have unintended and unforeseen consequences in our lives; as the proverb says, “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.”¹⁴ A man who commits robbery may set off a chain

of events that, contrary to his own intentions, lands him in jail; and a woman who enters into an adulterous affair may discover that, even though her husband remains oblivious to it, the affair has a host of unforeseen and destructive consequences in her life. In fact, our bad choices almost never get us what we really want; that is part of what makes them bad and also one reason why God is able to bring redemptive goods out of them. When we make a mess of our lives and our misery becomes more and more unbearable, the hell we thereby create for ourselves will in the end resolve the very ambiguity and shatter the very illusions that made the bad choices possible in the first place. That is how God works with created rational agents. He permits them to choose in the ambiguous contexts in which they first emerge as self-aware beings, and he then requires them to learn from experience the hard lessons they sometimes need to learn.

Incompatibilists almost always suppose that our bad choices tend to produce a bad character, even as our good choices tend to produce a good character; and within very specific and very limited time-frames, such a view may have a degree of merit. But this widespread view is also more of an *a priori* conviction about how things must work than an empirical generalization about how things do work, and the supposed causal influences are by no means obvious or easy to trace. A man who succumbs to sexual temptation in his youth and then gets burned may be less, rather than more, likely to repeat the experiment later in life; and a woman who follows a consistent pattern of selfish behavior may plunge to the depths just prior to a dramatic conversion and transformation. A pattern of bad choices, in other words, can be just as useful to God in correcting us and in teaching the lessons of love as a pattern of good choices can be. And perhaps that is one reason why Paul at least raises the embarrassing question: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?”¹⁵ After all, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”¹⁶ But Paul’s correct answer is also most emphatic: “By no means!” That

the pain I experience when I thrust my hand into a flame may serve a beneficial purpose—because it enables me to avoid an even greater injury in the future—hardly entails that I have a good reason to thrust my hand into the flame again and again. And similarly, that the misery and the unhappiness that sin brings into a life can serve a redemptive purpose—because it can provide in the end a compelling motive to repent—hardly implies that one has a good reason to keep on sinning and to continue making oneself more and more miserable.

Not that we are talking about a mechanical process here. God does not always require, for example, that we experience immediately the potentially bad consequences of our bad choices, and he may even protect us from them, at least for a season. For as I already indicated in the previous section, many universalists believe that God reserves his harshest forms of punishment (or his severest means of correction) for the next life when we shall stand much more nakedly before our Creator. In the meantime, one purpose of the earthly life may be to provide ample opportunities for less severe forms of correction, and to demonstrate the justice of the more severe forms, where such are necessary. More than a few have charged that universalists operate with an overly sentimental conception of God's love. But no one who actually reads the early Christian universalists, such as Origen or St. Gregory of Nyssa, could possibly come away with that misconception. If anything, the idea that God will in the end destroy sin altogether¹⁷ rests upon a more rigorous conception of God's holy love than does the idea that he will keep sin alive throughout an eternity of hell. For according to the former idea, God will not permit any of us to cling forever to our illusions or to remain forever ignorant of the true nature of our selfish choices. We are free to sin and perhaps even to sin with relative impunity for a while, but in no way are we free to sin with impunity forever. So unless we first repent of our sin and step into the life that Christ brings to us, God will sooner or later—in the next life, if not in this one—

permit our illusions to shatter against the hard rock of reality. Paul himself puts it this way: “each man’s works will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. . . . If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”¹⁸

No wonder the early Christian universalists were so fond of texts describing God as “a consuming fire”¹⁹ and warning that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”²⁰ For the image of fire represents both judgment and purification, two sides of the same coin, and the idea was that the consuming fire of God’s love would continue to burn us until it finally purges us of all that is false within us.²¹ The more we freely rebel against it and try to defeat it, the more deeply and inexorably it will burn, until every conceivable motive for disobedience is consumed and we are finally transformed from the inside out.

But why not, Murray asks, a more instantaneous transformation, without the prolonged trials and tribulations? Why doesn’t God just constitute all of us as saints from the beginning? The short answer is that, even if feasible, such an instantaneous transformation would be far less worthwhile than a learning process whereby rational agents choose freely, experience the consequences of their free choices, and finally learn from experience why love and reconciliation are better than selfishness and separation. Consider (or try to imagine) a world that has the same persons as the actual world, but nonetheless differs from the actual world in the following respect: In our imagined world there is no drama of history, no temptation or possibility of acting wrongly, no moral freedom, no set of moral lessons to be learned, and no struggle against evil to be won; in our imagined world we are not required, even for a season, to take responsibility for the immediate welfare of anyone, whether it be our own or someone else’s; in our imagined world we have no need to forgive others and no sins to repent of ourselves; and finally, in our imagined

world Christ's victory over sin and death could serve no conceivable purpose and could have no possible meaning for us. Despite the horrendous evils that the actual world includes, do we have any reason to believe that our imagined world would be more worthwhile than, or preferable as a whole to, the actual world?

Here, at any rate, is my own view of the matter. The existence of a supremely powerful and supremely loving God is indeed inconsistent with at least one *kind* of imaginable evil, a kind that we might describe roughly as involving *irreparable* harm—that is, harm that not even Omnipotence could ever repair or cancel out at some later time. It is logically impossible, for example, that God should grant me the freedom not only to murder my brother, but to annihilate his soul altogether. For if God truly loves my brother, then in his own mind no conceivable good could outweigh such an evil as that. And for similar reasons, neither is it possible that God should grant me the freedom to annihilate my own soul or to undermine every chance of future happiness in myself. For God draws the line at irreparable harm. But various forms of temporary harm, even evils that may appear utterly horrendous, are a different story. If God's aim is to teach the lessons of love and to prepare us for eternity, then a school similar to this earthly realm—where we are subject to being harmed in ways that God can later repair, where we face real threats, dangers, and even tragedies of a temporary kind, and where we are required to take some responsibility for each other's temporary welfare—may for all we know be the best means available to God for achieving that end.

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¹ Michael Murray, “Three Versions of Universalism,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 16 (January, 1999), pp. 55-68.

² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Romans 5:18. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations here are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵ Romans 9:16.

⁶ *Op. Cit.*, p. 63.

⁷ Christians sometimes claim that our salvation is achieved as soon as we accept Christ as our savior. But these Christians usually have in mind salvation from hell rather than, as Jesus himself understood it, salvation from sin; and they typically draw a distinction between justification, which is salvation as a legal fiction of some kind, and sanctification, which is the real thing—that is, salvation in the sense of being finally purified and perfected. Such Christians typically concede, moreover, that redemption in the sense of *sanctification* is rarely (if ever) completed in this earthly life.

⁸ Acts 9:1.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Parkland: Universal Publishers/uPublish.com, 1999), pp. 171-174.

¹⁰ As I understand the standard libertarian analysis, I perform an action A freely only if, at the time of acting, it is causally and therefore psychologically possible to refrain from A.

¹¹ Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV)

¹² Romans 11:22.

¹³ Romans 11:25-26. For a more thorough discussion of this point, see Talbott, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-76

¹⁴ Proverbs 16:9.

¹⁵ Romans 6:1.

¹⁶ Romans 5:20.

¹⁷ For an explanation of why the concept of destruction is a redemptive concept in Pauline thought, see Talbott, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-98

¹⁸ I Corinthians 3:13 & 15 (RSV). The context here concerns the work of Christian leaders, such as Paul and Apollos, who are building upon the foundation that Christ laid down. What Paul says about Christian leaders, however, is but a particular application of a more general principle. The image of fire represents the aspect of God’s inexorable love that will in the end consume all that is false within all of us, not just all that is false within Christian leaders. Indeed, strictly speaking, nothing consumed, whether it be the prideful actions of Christian leaders or the selfish actions of others, is truly built upon the foundation that Christ has laid down. And so, as Paul explicitly states in verse 15, if anyone’s work is consumed (and hence was not really built upon the foundation that Christ has laid down), this person will suffer a loss of sorts. The person will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁹ See Hebrews 12:29

²⁰ Hebrews 10:31.

²¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa thus writes: “When a baser metal is mixed with gold, refiners restore the more precious metal to its natural brightness by consuming the alien and worthless substance with fire. . . In the same way, when death, corruption, darkness, and other offshoots of vice have attached themselves to the author of evil, contact with the divine power acts like fire and effects the disappearance of what is contrary to nature. In this way the nature is purified and benefited, even though the process of separation is a painful one.” Gregory of Nyssa, “Address on Religious Instruction,” reprinted in Edward R. Hardy (ed.), *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), pp. 303-304.