**REINCARNATION AND UNIVERSAL SALVATION**

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Abstract: In this paper, we defend universalism, which we understand to be the thesis that all individuals will eventually attain communion with God, in a Vedāntic context. We first outline the specific ontological commitments that our view requires, such as the doctrines of *karman* and reincarnation, and we note one Vedāntic tradition that holds to all these commitments. We then outline the conceptual merits of our view. We also argue that certain objections to universalism do not undermine our view, as reincarnation and *karman* provide a means for all individuals to eventually freely choose to devote themselves to God, making it extremely likely that all individuals will attain salvation.

Keywords: Reincarnation, Universal Salvation, Hell, Eternal Damnation, Afterlife

Universalism is the thesis that all individuals will eventually attain communion with God and stands in contrast to eternal damnation, which maintains that some persons will reside in hell forever. While universalism may initially seem like an attractive position, its plausibility has been called into question, especially in the context of theological views that maintain that individuals possess libertarian free will[[1]](#endnote-1) (Kvanvig 1993; Walls 1992; 2015).

In this paper, we argue that in the context of Vedānta,[[2]](#endnote-2) given certain ontological commitments, universalism is a plausible thesis that is very likely to be true, and the standard objections to this thesis can be answered. The first of these commitments is that each living being is an immaterial self (*jīva* or *ātman*). For this reason, in our universalist view, *all* individuals, including living beings that are presently embodied as non-humans, such as animals, will attain communion with God.

 Furthermore, each living being, though an immaterial self, is associated with a physical body as well as a “subtle body” (*liṅga-śarīra*). This subtle body is composed of the mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), and ego (*ahaṅkāra*). While the subtle body roughly corresponds to the “mind” in some western contexts, there are some crucial differences: in our framework, *manas* is constituted of extremely refined material elements, whereas according to Cartesian substance dualism, the mind is immaterial.[[3]](#endnote-3) One’s personal identity is grounded in the spiritual self, which is the bearer of consciousness. Upon attaining liberation from the world, a self’s physical body and subtle body dissolve. Nevertheless, until these bodies dissolve, selves reincarnate by continually discarding and re-acquiring physical bodies (this continual process of birth and death is called *saṃsāra*). During this process of transmigration, the subtle body remains associated with the self. The doctrine of reincarnation implies that we have a series of lifetimes across which we live out our existence within the physical world. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend the doctrine of reincarnation in extensive depth. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there are various pieces of data, such as the research of Ian Stevenson and Jim B. Tucker, the wide behavioral divergence of identical twins, and the talents of child prodigies whose parents lack the talent in question, that one can draw on to argue for reincarnation (Christopher 2017). While the interpretation of this data is, of course, controversial, it is worth highlighting that several individuals have found Stevenson’s work compelling including Jesse Bering, a skeptic of Stevenson’s research, and the prominent physicist Doris-Kuhlmann-Wilsdorf (Bering 2013). Thus, we argue that, at the least, reincarnation is not a doctrine that should be dismissed hastily.

 Another commitment that we hold to is that every experience that an individual undergoes leaves an impression (*saṃskāra*) on its subtle body. For instance, witnessing a car crashing in front of you might leave an impression of fear on your subtle body. By continually receiving such impressions, individuals’ subtle bodies become reconfigured. In our view, each individual’s behavior is heavily influenced by its subtle body, which has been molded in particular ways by specific impressions. It is worth highlighting that because these impressions persist in a self’s subtle body across their lifetimes, they retain their soteriological progress from one lifetime to the next.[[4]](#endnote-4)

 Furthermore, we posit the existence of *karmic* mechanisms, which administer consequences to individuals in proportion to the moral quality of their actions. Thus, good deeds are met with good rewards, and bad deeds with bad rewards. However, *karmic* consequences do not need to be meted out within the same life in which one performed the actions that led to them—one can receive the consequences of an action in a future life. We maintain that these *karmic* mechanisms (1) administer justice by giving individuals consequences to their actions that are proportional to the moral quality of these actions and that (2) the suffering administered through these mechanisms serves a soul-making purpose. While an extensive account of the soul-making features of *karmic* mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper, we highlight four points.

 First,suffering, which in our view is administered to individuals as *karmic* consequences, can lead individuals to become more empathic (Hemberg 2017, 14). Second, through such suffering, individuals can develop a dispassionate outlook toward the world so that they “no longer prioritize superficial things such as money or status” (Hemberg 2017, 12). As a result, individuals can become more focused on their relationship with God. Third, *karmic* mechanisms can serve a soul-making purpose even when they administer rewards. For instance, when individuals acquire wealth, prestige, power, etc. through *karmic* consequences, they can understand that these are impermanent gains, and so they can realize that only God, and not these worldly goods, can bring them genuine satisfaction.

Fourth, the process of reincarnation terminates when individuals attain liberation from the world. In our model of reincarnation, this occurs when an individual fully dedicates themselves to God through the cultivation of devotional love (*bhakti*). It is worth adding here that according to our view, the performance of *bhakti* has a powerful purificatory effect that can reform one’s character, enable them to eliminate their moral imperfections, and destroy their *karmic* merits and demerits.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Furthermore, we hold to a simple view of identity, according to which, a person P1 is the same person as P2 if P1 and P2 have the same indivisible *ātman*. On this theory of personal identity, when a self reincarnates, they continue to remain the same person since the immaterial self does not change across lifetimes. At the same time, because this self is associated with the same subtle body when it transmigrates from one physical body to another, there is a certain continuity of one’s psyche from lifetime to lifetime. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend the simple view of identity, but the reader can consult (Swinburne 2021) for a defense of this type of view.

Additionally, we maintain that individuals, prior to attaining liberation, possess libertarian free will. We also argue that a world in which individuals have libertarian free will has more value than a world in which individuals lack libertarian free will. This is because in our view, God sustains individuals’ existence, and hence God sustains their agency. If God were to determine individuals’ nature so that they were determined to make certain choices, such as the choice to love God, then individuals would not be ultimately responsible for these choices and hence these choices would be less meaningful for them—their agency would be analogous to that of a humanoid robot whose spouse has programmed their every action.

However, when individuals in the liberated state have acquired, through their libertarian free choices on earth, (a) the wisdom by which they understand that their greatest happiness is to devote themselves wholeheartedly to God, and (b) the moral purity through which they can restrain themselves from non-virtuous action or action that runs counter to their devotion to God, they become psychologically determined to follow God. Thus, in the liberated state, individuals have compatibilist free will. However, because their nature in the liberated state is due to their libertarian free actions in the non-liberated state, they can still be considered significantly free in virtue of being ultimately responsible for their actions.[[6]](#endnote-6)

We also hold that there is a beginning to the self’s bondage in the physical world. Thus, all selves have resided within the physical world for a finite duration of time. Yet, at the same time, following the *Bhagavad*-*gītā*, we uphold that selves are not created and thus exist eternally (*Bhagavad*-*gītā* 2.12[[7]](#endnote-7)) and that selves’ existence is without a beginning (*anādī*) (*Bhagavad*-*gītā* 13.19[[8]](#endnote-8)). How selves can exist without a beginning (and without being created) and yet have a beginning to their bondage in the physical world is explained by at least one doctrine that we are aware of: the fall of the self from a divine realm. According to this doctrine, which is found in the teachings of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977 CE), selves initially exist in a divine realm with the deity Kṛṣṇa (Prabhupāda 1998b, 779–780). However, due to their libertarian free will, selves have the ability to leave this realm and experience what it is like in the physical world. When selves do so, they are considered to have fallen away from God. Moreover, this fall is not due to any moral defects in the self, since Prabhupāda holds selves to be intrinsically free from such defects (Prabhupāda 1998a, ch. 1). Rather, one explanation for this fall is that selves are merely curious to see what a life without Kṛṣṇa is like. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this view in extensive depth (for a lengthier defense of this view, see ISKCON GBC Press 1996 and Gupta 2022).

Apart from doctrinal considerations, there is additional justification for the doctrine of the fall of the self, namely, that this view avoids the difficulties faced by alternative explanations for selves’ existence within the physical world. To illustrate this point, we will advance an argument from elimination.[[9]](#endnote-9) First, we proceed by noting that for any repeatable event in which a state of affairs X has a non-zero probability of obtaining, X will obtain if this event is repeated infinitely many times. Thus, if selves have had infinitely many lifetimes in the physical world, and in each lifetime, they have a non-zero probability of attaining liberation from the world, then they should have attained liberation by now. Furthermore, if selves have existed within the physical world since beginningless time, then they should indeed have had infinitely many lifetimes—unless selves initially existed in the physical world in a disembodied state and at some point acquired a first embodied form, thus making it the case that selves have only had a finite amount of lifetimes despite being in the physical world for an infinite duration of time.

Yet, all selves have not attained liberation. It thus follows that either (1) selves have existed in the physical world without a beginning and selves initially existed in a disembodied state, (2) selves have existed in the physical world without a beginning and selves who have not attained liberation by now will never attain liberation (since the only explanation why they would not have attained liberation by now given infinite time in the physical world is that the probability of them attaining liberation in each lifetime is zero), (3) the physical world is not eternal and has a beginning (and so selves have only had a finite number of lifetimes), but selves did not initially fall from a divine realm, or (4) selves have a beginning to their bondage within the physical world due to falling from a divine realm.

As far as we are aware, (1) is not a view outlined in any account of reincarnation and has no scriptural support, so we argue that (4) is preferable to this view. View (2) has the undesirable conclusion that all selves who presently exist within the physical world will not attain liberation. Apart from being a depressing conclusion, this view is problematic because Vedāntic scriptural texts repeatedly emphasize the importance of attaining liberation from the world and provide instructions on how to attain liberation (although there are differing interpretations on how to attain liberation, Vedāntic traditions agree that there is a means to attain it). Should liberation be unattainable, there would be no purpose in Vedāntic scriptural texts mentioning the attainment of liberation. Moreover, throughout history (and in our own lives), there have been many individuals who are extremely sincere and committed to their spiritual pursuits. We find it unlikely that, contrary to appearances, these individuals will not eventually attain liberation. View (3) seems to have the implication that selves are not eternal but have been created at a certain temporal point (at the same time as or after the creation of the universe in this context). This is inconsistent with scriptural verses in the *Bhagavad*-*gītā* that state that selves are not created and exist without a beginning (such as *Bhagavad*-*gītā* 2.12 and *Bhagavad*-*gītā* 13.19 cited earlier), and so this is an undesirable view. We thus argue that the most reasonable view is (4), or the fall of the self.

Finally, it is worth clarifying one doctrine that we do *not* hold to. This doctrine (*traividhyam*), which is found in the teachings of Madhva (*c*. 13th century CE), states that selves’ intrinsic natures are different. More specifically, there are three types of selves: those who have the potential for liberation (*mukti*-*yogya*s), those who remain forever in the physical world (*nitya*-*saṃsārin*s), and those who are eternally damned (*tamo*-*yogya*s). Madhva’s reasoning for this doctrine is that there must be something to explain the diversity of selves (i.e. why some selves suffer whereas other selves prosper, why some selves are virtuous whereas other selves are wicked, etc.). Madhva argues that these differences cannot be explained by *karmic* mechanisms, because these mechanisms impartially reward and punish individuals for their actions (Sharma 1986, 309–319).

In response, we first note that if one holds to the doctrine of the fall of the self, one explanation for the diversity of selves is that selves do not necessarily fall at the same time, and so they have different starting points within the world, thus helping explain this diversity. Another explanation for this diversity is libertarian free will. Consider two individuals, Bob and Sue. Bob has a choice between action A and B. Due to his libertarian free will, Bob chooses A. Consequently, Bob finds himself in a situation where he can choose between C and D. Due to his libertarian free will, he can choose between either option. He chooses D. Now, consider Sue. Sue also has a choice between A and B. Due to her libertarian free will, Sue chooses B. Consequently, Sue finds herself in a situation where she can choose between E and F. Due to her libertarian free will, she can choose between either option. She chooses F. Here, no difference in intrinsic nature is required to explain the differences in the actions and outcomes of Bob and Sue—libertarian free will provides the answer. If one asks: why do these differences arise, the answer is that it is an aspect of libertarian free will that individuals are not determined to choose between two or more outcomes, and this is simply an aspect of the decision-making process of an agent with libertarian free will. Granted, one might argue against the possibility of there being libertarian free will; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend the notion of libertarian free will here. Given the scope of this paper, it suffices to say that we maintain that if selves have libertarian free will, then one can account for the diversity of selves without holding to Madhva’s *traividhyam* doctrine.

So, instead of holding to the *traividhyam* doctrine, we hold to the view that selves are intrinsically pure and free from moral imperfections. When selves do have moral imperfections, it is due to the contaminating influence of the physical world, and it is the self’s coverings, namely the gross and the subtle bodies, that become contaminated, and not the self itself. Thus, if selves purify themselves, through learning soul-making lessons or through the performance of spiritual activities (such as acts of devotion to God), these coverings can be removed and the self’s initially pure nature can become manifest again.

Having outlined these various ontological commitments, the question could be raised: is there any historical Vedāntic tradition that has held all these commitments? We can think of one tradition: the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition[[10]](#endnote-10) as it has been interpreted by Prabhupāda. Nevertheless, our reasoning is not necessarily specific to this tradition (or any Vedāntic tradition for that matter). We hold that universal salvation would be plausible and likely in any theological view that holds that (i) selves are intrinsically pure, (ii) selves have libertarian free will, (iii) selves can continue to make soteriological progress via soul-making after their present earthly lifetime, (iv) the nature of this post-mortem soul-making is such that selves would be prevented from remaining in a soteriological rut in which they cease to make moral and soteriological progress, and (v) selves’ existence within the physical world has a beginning. While we argue that these conditions are met in our view, we acknowledge that there may be other theological views in which these conditions are met as well.

At this point, it is also worth clarifying the scope of our argument. We acknowledge that there are many ontological commitments that we hold to, and we cannot defend them all here. So, our argument is a conditional one—if these commitments hold, then universalism is a plausible and likely thesis, and notably, this is the case even despite the fact that we affirm that selves have libertarian free will.

1. *The Conceptual Merits of Reincarnation*

Having briefly outlined our view of reincarnation, we will now illustrate some of its conceptual merits. First, our view addresses the following four stock objections to eternal damnation.[[11]](#endnote-11) The first objection has been termed the *vagueness objection* (Sider 2002), according to which, certain borderline cases present a problem for views with binary post-mortem destinations. If one individual who barely meets the criteria for entering hell only differs minutely from another individual who barely meets the criteria for entering heaven, then some justification is required for the infinite disparity in the two outcomes for these individuals.

We argue that the *vagueness objection* does not apply to our view. Reincarnation provides individuals with a variety of pathways on earth to live out their post-mortem existence, apart from heaven and hell. Moreover, each of these pathways is commensurate with the piety or impiety that the individual has generated across several lifetimes. So, individuals may differ in terms of their *karmic* merits or demerits, but the disparities in their post-mortem destinations are not on an infinite scale and the punishments and rewards individuals receive are justly merited by their actions.

 A second objection is the *proportionality objection*, which argues that eternal damnation is unjust because (1) punishments should be meted out in proportion to their associated misdeeds, (2) hell is a punishment of an infinite magnitude, and (3) no person, within a finite lifespan, could perform misdeeds that merit infinite punishment (Kershnar 2005). Since in our view, no individual is punished eternally for the finite actions they performed across their finite lifetimes, this objection does not apply to our view.

The third objection is the *diminished capacities objection*, which rests on the premise that a moral agent is only culpable when they are capable of conceiving, in a comprehensive manner, the consequences of an action. For instance, a toddler who fires a gun cannot be convicted of murder because they are unaware of the consequences of this action. If this premise is granted, and hell is a punishment that humans cannot conceive, then hell is not a just punishment (Adams 1993, 309–310).

The above formulation of the *diminished capacities objection* does not apply to our view, since in our view, individuals receive only finite *karmic* consequences that are commensurate to the worldly actions associated with them. However, another formulation, which we term the *diminished capacities objection*\*,does apply. This latter objection states that if individuals cannot conceive that their actions produce *karmic* consequences that obtain in a future life, then they cannot be culpable for these actions. We argue that this point does not undermine the justice of *karmic* consequences. If an individual can conceive of the ramifications of their actions and *karmic* consequences are commensurate to these ramifications, then they can conceive of the severity of these *karmic* consequences. For this reason, we maintain that in our view, there is no injustice, for no individuals suffer any punishments that they could not, in some sense, conceive.

The fourth objection concerns the following question Q: is worldly suffering required for greater goods to obtain? If the answer to Q is no, then an objection which has been called the *gratuitous earthly life objection* can be raised (Murray 1999a; Murray 1999b; Buckareff and Plug 2013, 139). Our specific formulation of this objection is this: if individuals do not need to endure suffering in order for greater goods to obtain, then our existence within this world involves gratuitous suffering—God could make all individuals reside in heaven and avoid suffering altogether.

Our answer to Q is yes, so this formulation of the *gratuitous earthly life objection* does not apply to our view.

 However, by answering yes to Q, two objections arise. We argue that the most promising type of theodicy states that suffering serves a soul-making purpose. In most theological views, there is some non-earthly post-mortem existence for individuals that do not enter heaven, whether it be hell or purgatory. The following question R then arises: can individuals learn soul-making lessons in this post-mortem existence more effectively than they can within earthly existence?

If the answer to R is yes, another formulation of the *gratuitous earthly life objection*, which we term the *gratuitous earthly life objection*\*, can be raised: why does God not make individuals reside in this post-mortem existence instead of on earth? If these existential locations are better locations for individuals to learn soul-making lessons, then earthly life seems to be redundant. One response is that the soul-making lessons that individuals learn in a post-mortem existence like purgatory are dependent on their actions within earthly life. But then the objection can be raised: why should individuals have to wait until purgatory to learn these lessons, when they could learn them within earthly life?

 If the answer to R is no, then the objection can be raised: why does God provide individuals with only a finite duration of existence within earthly life? Since earthly lives are more conducive for learning soul-making lessons than non-earthly lives, God could improve the value of the world by providing individuals with as much time on earth as they need in order to qualify themselves for heaven or liberation. Call the problem of justifying why individuals have only a finite duration of earthly existence the *finite earthly life objection*.

 Our answer to R is no. However, our view avoids the above objection, since in it, individuals have as much time as they need in order to qualify themselves for heaven or liberation, since they can reincarnate endlessly until this qualification is earned, and this earthly life provides the best means for this soul-making to occur.

Having shown that our view can address formulations of the *gratuitous earthly life objection* and the *finite earthly life objection*, we briefly highlight that formulations of these objections can be raised against the doctrine of eternal damnation as well as any view of the afterlife that does not include reincarnation, including certain formulations of universalism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess how well such formulations of universalism (that do not include reincarnation) can address these objections. Nevertheless, for now, it suffices to say that our view’s ability to address these objections highlights one conceptual merit of reincarnation that is worth taking into account in the context of the discourses pertaining to heaven and hell.

1. *Addressing Objections to Universalism*

We now argue that our view can address objections to universalism. To contextualize our responses, we can first note that universalism has been defended within Christianity by Thomas Talbott (1990) and David Hart (2019). Talbott defends universalism by arguing that the trajectory of rebellion against God is a negative feedback loop whereby increases in rebellion lead to increases in one’s misery and torment, and these increases in misery and torment increase one’s incentive to repent and abandon one’s rebellion (Talbott 1990, 39). Hart denies that individuals, who are free agents, could act against their best interest by rejecting God forever. He also denies that the choice to reject God could be free, since he maintains that actions are free to the extent that they are performed in a state of knowledge, and one could not reject God in such a state of knowledge (Hart 2019, 79–80; 180–195).

Universalism has been challenged by the “choice model,” according to which, individuals choose to enter into and remain in hell through their own free choices (Walls 1992; Kvanvig 1993; 2011; Buckareff and Plug 2013, 137). Jonathan Kvanvig (Kvanvig 1993, 77) argues that universalism is incompatible with God honoring our libertarian free will, since the choice to enter heaven cannot be forced on us. The possibility of choosing God, Kvanvig argues, requires the possibility of denying God. Jerry Walls also defends the choice model by stating that hell has a kind of perverse pleasure and that individuals’ suffering in hell is not bad enough to make them want to leave hell (Walls 2015, 71).[[12]](#endnote-12) Thus, defenders of the choice model argue that God’s decision to honor individuals’ libertarian free will prevents God from being able to save them from hell without eliminating a greater good, namely, free will.

Based on these points, two objections to universalism can be advanced. The *no guarantee objection* challenges universalism on the grounds that if individuals have free will, (whether understood in libertarian or compatibilist terms), then God cannot guarantee that everyone will be saved unless God manipulates them (Buckareff and Plug 2013, 141). The *denial of autonomy objection* states that if universalism is true, then individuals’ autonomy is restricted, for they do not truly have the choice to become people who reject communion with God (Murray 1999b, 58; Buckareff and Plug 2013, 140).

 Our response to the *no guarantee objection* is as follows. First, it is important to highlight that there is no limit to the earthly lives individuals can have according to our view of reincarnation. If individuals have unlimited earthly lives, and they do not have a zero probability of turning to God in *each* of these lifetimes, then the amount of earthly lives in which individuals have a non-zero probability of turning to God that individuals have approaches infinity as time approaches infinity. We also hold that if this is the case, then the probability that an individual does not choose to turn toward God converges to 0 as time approaches infinity.[[13]](#endnote-13) Our reasoning here is similar to the reasoning we used previously to justify the fall of the self. More formally, this can be modeled as follows. Let X represent the state of affairs “choosing to turn toward God in a given life,” and let N represent the number of lives that an individual has in which they have a non-zero probability of turning to God. For the purpose of simplicity, let us assume that X has the same probability across lifetimes in which individuals have a non-zero probability of turning to God (our argument will work as long as X has a non-zero probability, even if the probability X varies across lifetimes). The probability that an individual turns toward God after N lifetimes is [1 - (1 - X)N]. Let us call this probability U. As N approaches infinity, (1 - X)N approaches 0 and U converges to 1. Therefore, as time marches forward, universal salvation becomes increasingly likely, to the point of being, practically speaking, guaranteed. While it is logically possible that some individuals would not choose to turn toward God even as their number of lifetimes approaches infinity and given a non-zero value of attaining liberation in a given lifetime, this probability is infinitesimally small, and so probabilistically speaking, it is far more likely that universal salvation would obtain instead.[[14]](#endnote-14) Thus, in our view, while universalism is not a necessary truth, it is a truth that is highly probable.

 However, one rebuttal to our claim above is that it is possible that certain individuals, due to their repeated performance of misdeeds, develop a strong aversion to God and mold their subtle body in a manner that makes them reluctant to devote themselves to God in any of their lifetimes. On account of this aversion and molding of their subtle body, individuals can be psychologically determined not to choose God in every lifetime, thus giving X a zero probability across all their lives.[[15]](#endnote-15) Call this the *hard-hearted objection* (Reitan 2022).[[16]](#endnote-16) We will now argue that on our model of reincarnation, there are several reasons why X would not have a zero probability in each of an individuals’ lifetimes.

First, as we indicated earlier, we hold that the performance of *bhakti* has a powerful purificatory effect. Moreover, in our view, a self’s performance of *bhakti* brings them intense supramundane pleasure and the highest happiness that they can experience. On account of this happiness, selves can realize that their highest happiness comes from a relationship with God and not from worldly pleasures. Thus, seeing that worldly pleasures pale in comparison to the happiness one experiences in their relationship with God, selves can easily abandon their attachment to worldly goods and become completely devoted to God.[[17]](#endnote-17) Hence, through such performance of *bhakti*, even deeply-rooted psychological mannerisms, which might prevent individuals from wholeheartedly devoting oneself to God, can be overcome.

Additionally, we identify four main pathways through which individuals may be psychologically determined to reject God. (1) individuals are convinced that it is in their rational interest to reject God, (2) individuals are averse to God through their negative *saṃskāra*s (such as traumatic experiences) with respect to their engagements with God, (3) individuals have molded their behavior in a manner that inhibits them from performing *bhakti*, or (4) devotion to God conflicts with an individual’s doing some other action T, and this individual prefers, in all respects, T to devotion to God.

In the case of (1), an individual would have to be convinced that it is in their rational interest not to turn to God. However, if an individual is continually transmigrating and learning soul-making lessons due to *karmic* mechanisms and their varied experiences across lives, through which they can, for example, learn that a life that is not centered on God does not bring fulfillment, it is implausible that they could become psychologically determined to reject God in each lifetime—especially because it is in their rational interest to devote themselves to God since a relationship with God is what gives the highest happiness that they can experience.

In the case of (2), the negative *saṃskāra*swould have to be so powerful that they permanently cause an individual to be averse to performing *bhakti*, even across infinite lifetimes. However, we regard this to be unlikely. Although negative experiences do affect individuals’ behavior, it is difficult to see how a particular negative experience or a set of negative experiences could be so profoundly traumatic that they cause an individual to remain averse to God *forever*—especially when individuals are given unlimited lifetimes in which they constantly learn new soteriological lessons and reform their behavior. Furthermore, negative experiences can be overridden with positive experiences. For instance, it is plausible that as individuals continue to reside within the physical world, they meet devotees of God whose companionship leaves them with positive *saṃskāra*s. Consequently, these individuals can give up their aversion to God and develop attraction to God.

In the case of (3), since each new life is a “fresh start,” the process of reincarnation allows individuals to be able to break free from certain deeply rooted psychological and behavioral patterns that they acquired in previous lifetimes, especially in the light of the soul-making features of *karmic* mechanisms. So, individuals can gradually break out of existential ruts that would have otherwise persisted had they remained confined to one particular form of embodiment for an infinite amount of time. Consequently, individuals are prevented from having their behavioral patterns become so deeply rooted that they are psychologically determined to repeat these patterns forever. Reincarnation also provides individuals with the opportunity to develop a type of upward soteriological mobility—they can, through their choices, continually acquire physical bodies with increasing degrees of cognitive abilities and facilities for pursuing their spiritual growth.

In the case of (4), there would have to be some other course of action T that an individual prefers to devotion to God. However, on the assumption that a loving relationship with God is the highest good, no such T would be a better good than this relationship. An individual who prefers T to devotion to God might do so out of ignorance or stubbornness. However, for reasons that we have already described, given that individuals are continually learning soul-making lessons and reforming their behavior, it is unlikely such ignorance or stubbornness could persist forever.

 Now, at this point, one may object: we have evidence that certain individuals are particularly stubborn and unwilling to change. One may argue that in the light of this evidence that we do have, it seems unlikely that any individual would indeed change even if they were given repeated lifetimes.[[18]](#endnote-18) However, we also have evidence that across history, highly stubborn individuals have indeed changed due to various circumstances, even with respect to their religious beliefs.[[19]](#endnote-19) This latter evidence provides good reasons for thinking that, despite an individual’s stubbornness, this individual can nevertheless change their deeply rooted convictions given the correct circumstances. Since reincarnation provides individuals with numerous opportunities to go through life-changing circumstances, we find it plausible that even highly stubborn individuals can eventually have a change of heart in their present lifetime or in a future lifetime.

Moreover, there are two explanations for selves’ stubborn behavior in a Vedāntic context. The first is that all selves are intrinsically pure but their coverings (their gross and subtle bodies) are impure. In this case, this stubbornness is not an intrinsic part of selves but only pertains to their coverings, and so it is not eternal. Another view is that not all selves are intrinsically pure, such as in the case of Madhva’s *traividhyam* doctrine. Given the first explanation, we argue that it is more plausible that individuals could change, as this stubbornness is not truly a part of selves in an ultimate ontological sense. Granted, it might be reasonable to think that stubbornness could persist in the case where the second explanation is true; however, we do not uphold this explanation and, at least in a Vedāntic context, we find Madhva’s reasons given in defense of this explanation to be unpersuasive, as previously mentioned.

For these various reasons, we argue that individuals can avoid the fatalistic outcome of being so conditioned by their nature that they cannot bring themselves to develop the love of God that is needed to attain communion with God.

One may raise another objection, namely, the *problem of escaping heaven objection*, which in this context states that if it is possible to escape worldly existence, it should be possible also to escape the divine realm (Matheson 2014). We argue that this is not the case. Individuals would not seek to escape the divine realm because they are psychologically determined to stay with God due to possessing the wisdom by which they realize that their highest happiness is with God, along with the moral purity through which they can restrain themselves from performing actions that run counter to deepening their devotion for God. In contrast, individuals cannot be psychologically determined to stay within worldly existence, for there is no such wisdom that holds that they are happier when they reject God. Moreover, even if individuals could develop a type of ignorance or moral impurity that influences them to reject God, we argue, for reasons mentioned previously, that such ignorance or moral impurity cannot be sustained forever, since individuals would continually learn soul-making lessons that eradicate them.

Granted, our view, which follows Frederick Choo and Esther Goh (2019), rests on the premise that psychologically determined actions in the liberated state can be significantly free if liberated individuals are ultimately responsible for forming their nature through their libertarian free choices on earth. We acknowledge that notions of freedom such as this are controversial (Pawl and Timpe 2009; Matheson 2018; Choo and Goh 2019; Kittle 2020), but it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this thesis.

We now consider the *denial of autonomy objection* that we mentioned earlier. We maintain that even if all individuals will eventually attain communion with God, their choice to freely devote themselves to God can be meaningful and does not restrict their agency. Consider the consistent pursuit of virtue. Let us say that it is in one’s rational interest to consistently pursue virtue because it is objectively true that the pursuit of virtue leads to the highest happiness. Let us also say that once one, through their libertarian free choices, acquires (i) the wisdom by which they realize that it is in their best interest to consistently pursue virtue, and (ii) the moral purity through which they can restrain themselves from non-virtuous action, they become psychologically determined to consistently choose virtue. On earth, before individuals acquire this wisdom and moral purity, they have, at all times, a libertarian free choice to pursue either virtue or ego-centric activities.

` Suppose that all individuals have an unlimited amount of time to make their decision to consistently choose happiness. Suppose also that individuals are continually acquiring various *saṃskāra*s, through which they reform their moral character and gradually start to realize that it is objectively better to pursue virtue instead of egocentric activities. Since it is objectively better for individuals to consistently pursue virtue instead of egocentric activities, and since individuals can realize this fact, all individuals do eventually acquire various *saṃskāra*s through which they acquire i) and ii), even if it takes them a long time.

Suppose also that the acquisition of the above mentioned *saṃskāra*s is through individuals’ libertarian free choices.[[20]](#endnote-20) In this scenario, individuals are assured of consistently choosing to pursue virtue eventually. Still, individuals are ultimately responsible for being able to choose to consistently pursue virtue because their acquisition of (i) and (ii) is ultimately due to their libertarian free choices. Intuitively, it seems that this choice is meaningful. Yet, if this choice is meaningful, even if all individuals eventually make it, then similar choices that individuals are assured of eventually making, such as the decision to devote oneself to God, are also meaningful. For this reason, we argue that the *denial of autonomy objection* fails to undermine our view.

Finally, there is another objection one can raise against our view. One might argue that our view assumes that one can assign a non-zero probability to libertarian free choices. One might further argue that libertarian free choices have no objective probability, and so, one cannot assign a probability to them, thus problematizing our reasoning thus far. In response, we reply that our view does not require that we assign an *objective* probability to libertarian free choices. Our argument can go through even if we can only assign a *subjective* (epistemic)probability (roughly, a probability that is derived from an individual’s subjective judgement) to libertarian free choices. One could object to this by arguing that we cannot even assign a subjective probability to libertarian free choices in this case either. To this objection, we reply by arguing that we do not need to assign a precise subjective probability to libertarian free choices. All our arguments require is that we do not assign a zero subjective probability to libertarian free choices. This would amount to us needing to simply show that the libertarian free choice in question here, namely, the choice to devote oneself to God, is epistemically possible (meaning that, for all that we know, it is possible). The reasoning that we have provided also works to defend this claim, and so we argue that this objection fails.

1. *Conclusion*

As we argued, a theological view with the ontological commitments we outlined is able to provide a plausible model of the afterlife, on account of which, universalism is possible and likely through individuals’ possession of an unlimited amount of opportunities for salvation. Of course, there are various objections to other components of our view, such as the existence of *karmic* mechanisms and reincarnation (Kaufman 2005). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to respond to them, although there have been attempts to do so already (Felipe 2006; Chadha and Trakakis 2007). While a comprehensive and extensive comparison of our view to its competitors is beyond the scope of this paper, we believe that we have demonstrated the plausibility of universalism given the abovementioned commitments.[[21]](#endnote-21)

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NOTES

1. Roughly, we understand libertarian free will to mean that given the initial conditions of the world, when an agent with libertarian free will performs a libertarian free action, they were not causally necessitated to perform this action and could have acted otherwise. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Vedānta refers to the systems of soteriological practice and philosophical inquiry centered around exegesis of the *Bhagavad*-*gītā*, Upaniṣads, and the *Brahmasūtra*. Vedānta is one of the traditions subsumed under Hinduism, which we understand to be an umbrella term for the various religious traditions that have historically developed on the Indian subcontinent and are today distinguished from Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For this reason, it is erroneous to claim, as Michael Tooley has, that reincarnation requires substance dualism (Michael Tooley, *The Problem of Evil*, 12–15). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This notion is highlighted in *Bhagavad*-*gītā* 2.40 and 6.43 (Graham Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 287; 298). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There is considerable debate about the extent to which God destroys a devotee’s *karmic* merits and demerits (David Buchta, “Devotion and Karmic Extirpation in Late Vedānta”). Our view is that God completely destroys a devotee’s *karmic* merits and demerits when they perform *bhakti*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Our view closely follows the account of ultimate responsibility developed in Frederick Choo and Esther Goh (“The Free Will Defense Revisited”). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *na tv evāhaṁ jātu nāsaṁ na tvaṁ neme janādhipāḥ* / *na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ sarve vayam ataḥ param* // (Graham Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 286). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *prakṛtiṁ puruṣaṁ caiva viddhy anādī ubhāv api* / (Graham Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 312). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. We thank an anonymous reviewer for providing valuable feedback which helped us formulate this objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This is tradition that is devoted to the deity Kṛṣṇa and based on the life and teachings of Caitanya (1486–1534 CE). Recently, it has been noted that Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism can be classified as a perfect being theology (Akshay Gupta, “Re-envisioning a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava ‘Perfect Being Theology’ and Demonstrating Its Theodical Implications”). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. There are some additional objections that are pertinent to views other than our own, which we have not mentioned, and the reader can consult Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug (“Hell and the Problem of Evil,” 131-132) and Di Muzio (“Reincarnation and Infinite Punishment in Hell”) for a brief overview of them. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Hart has recently critiqued the choice model (Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 79–80; 180–195), but it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate whether or not his arguments succeed. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. It is worth noting that our view does not require that for a given individual, there are *no* earthly lives in which they have a zero probability of turning to God. Our view simply requires that individuals do not have a zero probability of turning to God *in each and every one of their earthly lives*. So, if an individual is embodied as an animal and has a zero probability of turning to God while in this form of embodiment, our reasoning in defense of universal salvation can still hold provided this individual does not have a zero probability of turning to God in each of their other lifetimes. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Our argument is similar to the “Infinite Opportunity Argument” advanced by John Kronen and Eric Reitan (Kronen and Reitan, *God’s Final Victory*); see also (Reitan, “Can Hard-Heartedness Explain Why Some Remain in Hell Forever?”). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See (Yang and Davis, “Choosing Eternal Separation”) for a similar argument. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A similar argument is found in (Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil”), where it is argued that *karmic* mechanisms and reincarnation can lead to a type of fatalism since wicked individuals may continue to become more wicked and therefore succumb to an inescapable downward moral spiral. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This motif is repeatedly found in the *Bhagavad*-*gītā*. For instance, verse 2.59 indicates that one loses their interest in worldly pleasures once they experience a superior, spiritual pleasure (Graham Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 52). Verse 6.22 states that when one experiences divine happiness, they realize that there is nothing greater to be gained (Graham Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 97). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. We owe this objection to an anonymous peer-reviewer. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. some notable examples of individuals who had a religious conversion from atheism include Anthony Flew, John Dobson, Sita Ram Goel, and Annie Besant (the latter three converted specifically to some form of Hinduism. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. So, for any given *saṃskāra* SK, at the time *t* that an agent S makes this choice C that leads to the acquisition of SK in a world W, there is another world W\* with the same initial conditions and laws in which S does ~C at *t*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. We thank Frederick Choo, Seth Hart, Wade Tisthammer for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. We also thank two anonymous peer-reviewers and the editor of this journal for helpful feedback that significantly improved the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)