

IN DEFENSE OF NAÏVE UNIVERSALISM

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Abstract. Michael J. Murray defends the traditional doctrine of hell by arguing directly against its chief competitor, universalism. Universalism, says Murray, comes in “naïve” and “sophisticated” forms. Murray poses two arguments against naïve universalism before focusing on sophisticated universalism, which is his real target. He proceeds in this fashion because he thinks that his arguments against sophisticated universalism are more easily motivated against naïve universalism, and once their force is clearly seen in the naïve case they will be more clearly seen in the sophisticated. In this essay, I argue that Murray’s arguments against naïve universalism have no force *whatsoever*.

1. NAÏVE UNIVERSALISM

According to naïve universalism, says Michael Murray, “upon death all persons are instantly transformed by God in such a way that they fully desire communion with God and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever”.¹ This, however, is only a species of the genus. Another species has it that human organisms turn to dust and ashes not long after their deaths, and go out of existence for a very long time; but, on the Great Day, they are resurrected, at which time they are judged for their earthly lives and then instantly transformed by God so that they fully desire communion with Him and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever. Yet another species is that, upon death, human souls are released from their bodies and “sleep” for a very long time; but, on the Great Day, they are awakened and reunited with their resurrected bodies, judged for their earthly lives, and then instantly transformed by God so that they fully desire communion with Him and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever. And there are many other species besides. What is essential to the genus is the thesis that,

- *after* death, God will instantaneously transform all persons in such a way that they fully desire communion with God and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever.

It is not essential that the instantaneous transformation occur *upon* death, contrary to what Murray says.

This *divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation* thesis, as we might call it, is compatible with the claim that nobody ever has had or ever will have communion with God; for one can fully desire something and be fit for it, and yet not get it. Consequently, the naïve universalist will insist on *the communion thesis*, the proposition that

¹ “Three Versions of Universalism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999), 56. All page references in the text are to Murray’s paper.

• all persons will have communion with God and be fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever. Naïve universalism, then, is comprised of these two, and only these two, essential theses.² Traditionalists deny both of them; sophisticated universalists only deny the first.

I turn now to Murray's arguments.

2. THE GRATUITOUS EARTHLY LIFE

Naïve universalism, contends Murray, "seems to undercut the possibility that the earthly life and the evils it contains have any significance, thus making the evils of the earthly life utterly gratuitous" (61). But why suppose that naïve universalism has this untoward implication?

2.1 Initial Assessment of the Argument from Gratuitous Evil

According to Murray, naïve universalism implies that the evils of the earthly life are gratuitous because

On the [naïve universalist's] picture, all human beings end up in perfect communion with God, enjoying the beatific vision forever. This entails, however, that one's fate in eternity is entirely independent of the individual choices a person makes and the beliefs a person adopts in the earthly phase of their existence. Thus, the evils that one experiences in the earthly life are gratuitous. Why, one is led to wonder, would God put us through such a pointless exercise, an exercise filled with much misery, suffering, and travail, only in the end to invest the experience with no ultimate consequence or significance? (56)

What, exactly, is the argument here? It appears to be this:

The Argument from Gratuitous Evil

1. If naïve universalism is true, then all human beings end up in perfect communion with God (by divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation), enjoying the beatific vision forever.
2. Necessarily, if all human beings end up in perfect communion with God (by divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation), enjoying the beatific vision forever, then their fate in eternity is entirely independent of their earthly choices and beliefs.
3. Necessarily, if their fate in eternity is entirely independent of their earthly choices and beliefs, then all of the earthly evils they in fact experience are gratuitous.
4. So, if naïve universalism is true, then all of the earthly evils human beings in fact experience are gratuitous. (1-3)
5. Necessarily, if God exists, it is false that all of the earthly evils human beings in fact experience are gratuitous.
6. So, if God exists, naïve universalism is false. (4,5)

What should we make of this intriguing argument?

Premise 5 is arguably true. For even if God might permit *some* gratuitous evil, He would not permit *all* the earthly evils that human beings in fact experience if *all* of them were gratuitous.³ But what about premises 1-3?

² But even this isn't quite right. The naïve universalist can allow that many human persons will never die, namely those who will still be alive at the coming of the Lord and who will be caught up with the dead in Christ in the clouds to meet Him in the air (I Thessalonians 4). Furthermore, the naïve universalist can allow that, say, Enoch, was never, and will never be, transformed by God after his death. For not only did he never die, he didn't need to be transformed, for "he walked with God" (Genesis 5; Hebrews 11). And perhaps others will not need to be transformed. So we'll need to qualify the view accordingly; consider it done.

³ On the compatibility of God and *some* gratuitous evil, see Peter van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* (1988), 167-68, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained

Let's begin with premise 1. Why suppose it is true? Presumably because, *by definition*, naïve universalism implies that all human beings will end up in perfect communion with God. But that can't be right. Neither of the two definitive theses of naïve universalism, nor their conjunction, state or imply that all human beings end up in *perfect* communion with God. For (A) one can fully desire communion with God and thus be fit for the beatific vision, and even get it, and yet get an *experientially imperfect* version of it. Perhaps (A1) God instantaneously transforms some persons so that they comprehend and fully desire the most satisfying communion with Him, but the degree to which He grants them their desire and gives them what they are fit for varies dramatically according to their earthly choices and beliefs. Alternatively, perhaps (A2) the degree to which God instantaneously transforms some persons varies according to their earthly choices and beliefs, in which case He might only transform them so that they comprehend and fully desire an experientially paler version of communion, paler than one that they might have desired and experienced had their earthly choices and beliefs been different. In at least these two ways (and, no doubt, there are others), naïve universalism is compatible with some persons—perhaps even all persons—ending up in communion with God, enjoying the beatific vision forever, but *not* ending up in *perfect* communion. Therefore, premise 1 is false.⁴

Suppose we substitute a true premise for Murray's premise 1, a premise that accurately represents the implications of naïve universalism—say, by dropping the word “perfect” from 1. Consider it done. In that case, we'll have to modify premise 2, in order to retain a valid argument:

2*. Necessarily, if all human beings end up *in communion* with God (by divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation), enjoying the beatific vision forever, then their fate in eternity is entirely independent of their earthly choices and beliefs.

Unfortunately, 2* is false. For, as we just saw in the last paragraph, even if naïve universalism is true, one's fate in eternity—that is, how things go for one in eternity—may well depend, in no small part, on one's earthly choices and beliefs. Of course, the naïve universalist claims that one's being in communion with God will not depend on such things; after death, one will enjoy the beatific vision, forever. But other facts about one's communion with God—enormously significant facts—may well depend on one's choices and beliefs, as options (A1) and (A2) suggest.

2.2 Four Objections

Responding to four objections to my assessment of The Argument from Gratuitous Evil will clarify and, I hope, strengthen my case against it.

by God," in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 230ff, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* (1991), note 11, and "Reflections on the Chapters by Draper, Russell, and Gale," in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 234-35. The first three essays are collected in his *God, Knowledge and Mystery* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), of which see also pages 15-19. For more on the matter, see William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), 23-44, David O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), and Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "Is Theism Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999), 115-30.

⁴ It would be a mistake to suppose that my objection to premise 1 is merely a matter of my characterizing naïve universalism in such a way that it does not imply perfect communion. Murray's characterization has no such implication either. He writes: "As I will use the term here, naïve universalism (NU) is the view that upon death all persons are instantly transformed by God in such a way that they fully desire communion with God and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever" (56). My characterization differs from Murray's only by changing "upon" to "after" and adding the communion thesis, differences which are friendly clarifications, both of which Murray accepts.

Objection 1. “Contrary to what you say, naïve universalism has *three* essential theses, not two. The third thesis—the *perfection thesis*, let’s call it—is this:

- Post-mortem communion with God will be perfect for all those who experience it. Anything less would be beneath the magnanimity of one perfect in love. So your initial assessment of Murray’s premise 1 is incompatible with naïve universalism.”

Reply. I have two things to say about this objection. First, many contemporary universalists—none of whom, so far as I know, are naïve ones⁵—possess moral sentiments that would incline them to affirm the perfection thesis if they were naïve universalists. I will insist, however, that the perfection thesis is not essential to naïve universalism. For it puts naïve universalism at odds with an ancient Christian doctrine—affirmed by many Greek and Latin Fathers, some Protestant divines, and, arguably, St. Paul and Jesus—according to which, as J.N.D. Kelly abbreviates it, “the felicity of the blessed will be graded in accordance with their merits”.⁶ The naïve universalist has enough of a burden to bear in denying the canonical teaching of the Church on the eternal punishment of the unrepentant; to insist that she *must*, as a matter of definition, bear yet another, even if lesser, burden is uncharitable.

Second, consider a *species* of naïve universalism that does endorse the perfection thesis. Its proponent will accept premise 1, but deny premise 2—as should the rest of us. For consider this possibility: (B) one can fully desire communion with God and thus be fit for the beatific vision, and even get a perfect version of it, but *arrive at it imperfectly*. All else being equal, if one arrives at the beatific state kicking and screaming or with a yawn, one will bring about a state of affairs that is significantly worse than the state of affairs that one would have brought about if one had arrived with open (even if trembling) arms. That is, all else being equal, state of affairs

- I. One’s arriving kicking and screaming or with a yawn at a perfect version of the vision and experiencing it forever after
- II. One’s arriving with open arms at a perfect version of the vision and experiencing it forever after.

is worse than the state of affairs that might have obtained, namely,

Although (I) and (II) share an equally good part—namely, a perfect version of the vision, experienced forever after—(II) is significantly better than (I). (There are different accounts of *why* (II) is better than (I), but my purposes do not call for me to take a stand on that matter. *That* (II) is better than (I) suffices.) And here an important point emerges: whether one’s fate in eternity includes (I) or the comparatively much better (II) depends on one’s earthly choices and beliefs—even if one will end up in *perfect* communion with God forever after. So, the naïve universalist rightly denies premise 2, even if she endorses the perfection thesis.

Objection 2. “You have misunderstood Murray. He did not mean to imply that, on naïve universalism, *nothing* that happens to one in the afterlife depends on one’s earthly choices and beliefs. He only meant that, on naïve universalism, the fact that *one will enter into eternal communion with God, enjoying the beatific vision forever* does not depend on one’s earthly choices and beliefs. That fact, and that fact *alone*, is what he means by the words ‘fate in eternity’. Thus, you should have formulated his second premise like this:

- 2**. Necessarily, if all human beings end up in communion with God (by divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation), enjoying the beatific vision forever, then *they will end up in eternal communion with God* entirely independently of their earthly choices and beliefs.

⁵ Murray says that nobody appears to hold naïve universalism, although Marilyn Adams entertains it seriously in “Divine Justice, Divine Love, and the Life to Come,” *Crux* 13 (1976-77), esp. 22-6.

⁶ *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1976, 5th edition), 487.

Putting it this way avoids the criticisms you've raised."

Reply. Perhaps it does. But note that if Murray goes with 2**, he has a valid argument only if he modifies premise 3 like this:

3**. Necessarily, if *all human beings will end up in eternal communion with God* entirely independently of their earthly choices and beliefs, then all of the earthly evils they in fact experience are gratuitous.

But why suppose 3** is true?

Here we need to tend carefully to Murray's definition of "gratuitous evil". An evil is gratuitous, he says, if and only if it is not non-gratuitous. And,

NGE. An evil E is non-gratuitous if, and only if, (a) there exists some outweighing intrinsic good G such that it was not within God's power to achieve G without either permitting E or permitting some other evil at least as bad as E and (b) there is not some further intrinsic good G*, which is both exclusive of G and greater than G, which could have been secured without permitting E or some other evil at least as bad as E. (56)

Murray argues for premise 3** on the grounds that conjunct (b) in the right half of NGE is not satisfied, even if the intrinsic goods of the earthly life satisfy conjunct (a). For

[t]he intrinsic goods of the earthly life, on the [naïve universalist] scheme, seem outweighed by the good one would have experienced if one had been created enjoying perfect communion with God from the beginning. Why would God prefer to have us spend our first seventy or so years of existence in this earthly phase, enjoying a measure of intrinsic good but with the accompanying evil required to secure it, rather than positioning us in such a way that these years are spent in perfect communion with Him in heaven? After all, any earthly goods obtained would pale in comparison with the goods achieved by spending those years in this way. (57)

What should we make of the line of thought here?

Well, firstly, it involves a misleading characterization of the goods that might justify God in permitting evil and suffering, on the naïve universalist scheme. From what Murray says here, you'd think that *only* the "intrinsic goods of the earthly life" could justify God in permitting earthly evil and suffering, on naïve universalism. But that's just not true. Goods of the afterlife might justify God as well, as we've seen. Secondly, ignoring Murray's misleading characterization, and focusing instead on conjunction (b) of NGE, we can see that the main premise in the argument of the passage is (must be) that

- There is a good—namely, (III) a state of affairs in which human beings are created enjoying perfect communion with God from the beginning⁷—that is exclusive of and greater than any good for the sake of which God permits evil and suffering and this good could have been secured without permitting any evil or suffering.

But this premise is false. For, on the naïve universalist's scheme, there exists some outweighing good state of affairs for the sake of which God may well have permitted evil and suffering and which was not within God's power to achieve if he had prevented all evil and suffering, namely:

(IV) All humans are created free with respect to (i) ordering their souls and being responsible for the well-being of others, in the earthly life, and (ii) choosing to be in perfect, eternal communion with God, and being fit in the earthly life for such communion. Each of them in fact chooses rightly, for the most part, despite temptations and trials to the contrary.

⁷ I have grave reservations about the very possibility of unqualifiedly *perfect* communion with God being *imposed from the beginning*. But I'll let that go, for now.

After their deaths, God completes the job for them by instantaneously transforming them into the sorts of persons that they approximated on their own.

Furthermore, Murray's (III) is not greater than (IV). Consequently, both the main premise of Murray's argument for 3**, and 3** itself, are false.

Objection 3. "Murray is mainly concerned *not* with those who are well on their way to developing godly characters but rather with those who have not 'cultivated well-ordered characters' (58), 'those who have cultivated self-loving characters' (58), those who '[want] no part of communion with God' (64), those with characters that 'preclude the desire to be in communion with God,' (60) those who 'shun communion with God' (64). On naïve universalism, Murray states, 'they will be "miraculously transformed" into lovers of God'; consequently, 'the evil [they experience] *in via* is thoroughly gratuitous' (58). These words suggest that he means to restrict his argument to those who are indifferent toward God, or worse, and who perish in their indifference.⁸ In that case, we might revise his argument like this:

The Revised Argument from Gratuitous Evil

- 1r. If naïve universalism is true and there are some who perish in indifference, then there are some who perish in indifference and end up in communion with God (by divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation), enjoying the beatific vision forever.
- 2r. Necessarily, if there are some who perish in indifference and end up in communion with God (by divine post-mortem instantaneous transformation), enjoying the beatific vision forever, then there are some who perish in indifference and end up in communion with God entirely independently of their earthly choices and beliefs.
- 3r. Necessarily, if there are some who perish in indifference and end up in communion with God entirely independently of their earthly choices and beliefs, then all of the earthly evils they experience are gratuitous.
- 4r. So, if naïve universalism is true and there are some who perish in indifference, then all of the earthly evils they experience are gratuitous. (1r-3r)
- 5r. Necessarily, if God exists, it is false that all of the earthly evils they experience are gratuitous.
- 6r. So, if God exists, naïve universalism is false. (4r,5r)

This revised argument avoids all of the criticisms that you have raised thus far."

Reply. Does it? Suppose we modify the main premise of Murray's argument for premise 3** so that it is a defense of premise 3r. In that case, the main premise will be this:

- There is a good—namely, (III') a state of affairs in which those who perish in indifference are created enjoying perfect communion with God from the beginning—that is greater than any good for the sake of which God permits evil and suffering and this good could have been secured without permitting any evil or suffering.

But this premise is false. For, on the naïve universalist's scheme, there exists some outweighing good state of affairs for the sake of which God may well have permitted evil and suffering, a good state of affairs that is compatible with there being some who perish in indifference and which was not within God's power to achieve without permitting some suffering and evil, namely:

- (IV') Those who perish in their indifference are created free with respect to (i) ordering their souls and being responsible for the well-being of others, in the earthly life, and (ii) choosing to be in perfect, eternal communion with God, and being fit in the earthly life for such communion. Each of them in fact chooses rightly, for the most part, despite temptations and trials to the contrary. After their deaths, God completes the job for them

⁸ Let's leave the "or worse" tacit from here on out.

by instantaneously transforming them into the sorts of persons that they approximated on their own.

Murray's (III') is not greater than (IV'). Consequently, the modified main premise of Murray's argument from 3r, and 3r itself, are false.

Objection 4. "Although the objection I am about to give targets both of your replies to Objections 2 and 3, I'll spell it out with respect to the latter.

You say that 'on the naïve universalist's scheme, there exists some outweighing good state of affairs for the sake of which God may well have permitted evil and suffering,' a good that is at least as great as Murray's (III') and which could not obtain without the permission of some evil and suffering, namely the state of affairs you label (IV'). To be sure, (IV') exists; that is, there is some unactualized, merely possible state of affairs that you've described. But (IV') has not occurred, and never will occur. And there lies the difficulty. For even if there is some unactualized, merely possible outweighing intrinsic good, so long as it never occurs, so long as it never becomes actual, it does not justify God in permitting any evil or suffering.⁹ Thus, it is false that, on the naïve universalist's scheme, there exists—that is, there *occurred or will occur*—some outweighing good state of affairs of the sort you've described for the sake of which God may well have permitted evil and suffering. At any rate, (IV') is no such state of affairs."

Reply. I deny that if some good state of affairs justifies God in permitting evil and suffering, it must become actual at some point in the future, if it is not already actual. It is false that if some unactualized, merely possible good exists but never occurs, then it does not justify God in permitting any evil and suffering. He may be justified in permitting a good deal of evil and suffering for the sake of a monumentally good state of affairs provided the expected utilities justify the permission. And on the naïve universalist's scheme, the expected utilities may well justify the permission of a good deal of evil and suffering, given that God's initial goal was to bring about either (IV) or (IV'). Sadly enough, neither state of affairs has occurred; indeed, they will (now) never occur. But it does not follow that He was not justified in permitting the evil and suffering required for them to occur. That follows only if the expected utilities did not justify their permission. And this need not be the case, given the universalist's scheme.¹⁰

2.3 Traditionalism and Murray's Argument from Gratuitous Evil

It behooves the traditionalist to resist Murray's Argument from Gratuitous Evil. For, if it succeeds against naïve universalism, an analogous argument succeeds against traditionalism:

- 1rt. If traditionalism is true, then there are some who perish in indifference and end up in hell forever.
- 2rt. Necessarily, if there are some who perish in indifference and end up in hell forever, then all of the earthly evils they experience are gratuitous.
- 3rt. So, if traditionalism is true, then there are some who perish in indifference and all of the earthly evils that they experience are gratuitous. (1rt,2rt)
- 4rt. Necessarily, if God exists, it is false that there are some who perish in indifference and all of the earthly evils that they experience are gratuitous.
- 5rt. So, if God exists, traditionalism is false. (4rt,5rt)

⁹ As William Rowe puts the point, "if some good state of affairs we know of does justify God in permitting E1 and E2 [two instances of horrific suffering], that good state of affairs must become actual at some point in the future, if it is not already actual". See "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 264.

¹⁰ For more on this point, see Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "Open Theism and the Compatibility of God and Gratuitous Evil," unpublished.

And in defense of premise 2rt, we have this Murrayesque line of thought:

- 2rta. Necessarily, *if* there are some who perish in indifference and end up in hell forever, *then* there is a good—namely, (III') a state of affairs in which they are created enjoying perfect communion with God from the beginning—that is both exclusive of and greater than the goods for the sake of which God permits their earthly suffering and this good could have been secured without permitting any evil or suffering.
- 2rtb. Necessarily, *if* there is a good—namely, (III')—of the sort described, *then* all of the earthly evils experienced by those who perish in indifference and end up in hell are gratuitous.

I suggest that the traditionalist respond to this argument in a manner analogous to that in which I have responded to Murray's.¹¹ Let's turn now to Murray's second argument.

3. THE DENIAL OF "AUTONOMY"

Murray's second argument is rooted in the idea that, on naïve universalism, a certain feature of free choice would be missing, a feature that gives free choice "the significance that makes it worth having" (59). He calls the feature he has in mind "autonomy," "a freedom of choosing *that is expressed in actions that influence the course of events in the world*" (58, his emphasis).¹² He further describes what he has in mind in this passage:

[A] world with "autonomous" creatures is a world where creatures are not only allowed to make evil *choices*, but choices which issue in evil *acts* and have evil *consequences*. A world with agents who can choose freely but are unable to act autonomously would be a world filled with freely choosing brains-in-vats. While free choosing might go on, the choices would never have expression in or impact on the local environment, whether good or evil. (58, his emphasis)

Now, Murray is well aware of the fact that one can have autonomy with respect to one state of affairs but not another. Indeed, he explicitly states that naïve universalists can allow that human beings have autonomy with respect to the development of their earthly characters, i.e. "soul-making" (59); and they can allow that human beings are autonomous with respect to earthly love of God. On these things all sides are agreed. So, what's the problem?

Murray begins to express the problem he has in mind like this:

...[W]hile [naïve universalism] allows freedom of choice, it denies autonomy (in the above sense) because eternal outcomes do not vary with earthly choices. (59)

This expression of the problem is unfortunate, twice over. First, it is a *non-sequitur*. It simply does not follow from the fact (if it were a fact) that naïve universalism implies that "eternal outcomes do not vary with earthly choices" that naïve universalism "denies autonomy". Naïve universalism can allow autonomy with respect to earthly soul-making and earthly love of God even if it does not allow autonomy with respect to eternal outcomes. Second, it is false that naïve universalism does not allow

¹¹ One might object to this argument on the grounds that, unlike universalism, traditionalism invests the earthly life and the evils it contains with enormous meaning and significance, thus making the evils of the earthly life *nongratuitous*. After all, unlike universalism, on traditionalism, where one spends eternity depends on one's earthly choices and beliefs. Unfortunately, the reasoning here is fallacious. The notions of gratuitousness and nongratuitousness at play are not the notions used in common parlance. Rather, they are technical notions, ones that are stipulatively defined by Murray, ones that allow for the theoretical possibility, even on traditionalism, that earthly evil might have great "meaning" and "significance" and yet be "utterly gratuitous".

¹² Murray attributes this notion of autonomy to George Schlesinger, "The Scope of Human Autonomy," in Kelly James Clark, ed., *Our Knowledge of God* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 215-23.

autonomy with respect to eternal outcomes. As we saw in section 2 it can do so in several ways, and, no doubt, there are other ways.

(This is as good a place as any to mention another one. I see no reason to think that, throughout eternity, we won't be able to remember our earthly careers. *What* will we remember? Well, might not the choices we make during our earthly careers have a bearing on the answer to that question? Will we remember spurning God? Will we remember willfully ignoring His love, His will, His commandments? Will we remember needlessly harming His creatures, human and nonhuman? Will we remember untold unkindnesses toward other humans, all of whom (on universalism) we will be with forever in the community of the blessed? To the extent that we will remember such things, we will have cause for lingering regret. How much will we have to regret? And how gnawing will it be? That all depends, I would think. It depends on what we choose and believe, now, during our earthly lives. This, then, is another way in which autonomy with respect to eternal outcomes can vary according to earthly choices and beliefs.)

Murray continues with these words:

...[a] [W]hile [naïve universalism] allows human beings to make choices, including choices that are relevant for soul-making, it does not allow outcomes to vary accordingly, since those who choose to develop characters which are self-directed and not God-directed are summarily transformed. [b] More broadly we might say that one can *choose to cultivate* a morally vicious character, but in the end one cannot *have* such a character. [c] One can choose to act in such a way as to acquire such a character, but in the end one will be unable to effect such a development in character. (59, his emphasis)

Here, again, we need to avoid misrepresentation. As for [a], there are some outcomes which naïve universalism does not allow to vary in accordance with the choices that human beings make; specifically, it does not allow the fact that one enters into eternal communion with God to vary in accordance with human choices. It does, however, allow many *other* outcomes to vary in accordance with human choices, even eternal outcomes, as we've already seen. As for [b], on naïve universalism, one can both choose to cultivate a morally vicious character and, in the end, really get one, one that would endure forever if it weren't for God's transformative grace. Similarly for [c]. Although one cannot choose to act in such a way as to acquire a morally vicious character that lasts forever, one can, in the end, affect a morally vicious character. All that follows from naïve universalism is that no human being has autonomy with respect to being *eternally* indifferent toward God.

So now, with these misrepresentations out of the way and the actual implications of naïve universalism firmly in mind, what becomes of Murray's argument? It starts out like this:

1. If naïve universalism is true, then no human being has autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever.
2. Necessarily, if no human being has autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever, then....

Then *what*? How are we supposed to proceed? What Murray *says* follows is this:

...[2a] for God to set us up in this fashion [i.e., so that no human being has autonomy with respect to being indifferent toward God forever] is just to take away the autonomy we need for free action to have the significance that makes it worth having. [2b] One might think about [naïve universalism] by way of the following analogy. On the picture proposed by the [naïve] universalist, it is as if one were to go to the drive-through window at a fast food restaurant, make a selection, and order. But, no matter what is ordered, the attendant hands over the same food. If you order fish, you get a hamburger, if you order ice cream, you get a hamburger, if you order French fries, you get a

hamburger... You are welcome to freely choose whatever menu item you like, but at this restaurant, you have it *their* way. [2c] And so it is on the [naïve] universalist picture. You are welcome to do whatever you like, but with God, you have it *His* way. [2d] As a result, while free choosing may go on in the [naïve] universalist's world, it is a free choosing that is without autonomy, since one is transformed into a lover of God, whether one chooses to be such or not. (59, his emphasis)

What should we make of these four alleged implications, [2a]-[2d]?

Unfortunately, none of them constitutes an accurate characterization of naïve universalism or its implications. [2c] does not follow. On naïve universalism, there are lots of things we do not have *His* way. His way has all of us loving Him and each other, in the here and now. [2d] is a *non-sequitur*. Even if "one is transformed into a lover of God, whether one chooses to be such or not," it does not follow that one's free choosing is "a free choosing that is without autonomy". *Only* free choosing with respect to being indifferent toward God *forever* is without autonomy, on the naïve universalist's picture. [2a] does not follow since it neglects the fact that, on naïve universalism, we have autonomy with respect to many things other than being indifferent toward God forever. As for [2b], the drive-thru analogy: although it provides a good laugh, it is inapt. A more apt analogy has it that the kitchen sink isn't on the menu, but if you order fish, you get it, if you order ice cream, you get, if you order French fries, you get them... You are welcome to choose freely whatever *menu item* you like, but at this restaurant, the kitchen sink stays. (Hardly a surprise.) And so it is on naïve universalism. You are welcome to choose freely whatever *menu item* you like, but humanity broiled eternally isn't on the menu. My analogy is more apt than Murray's since, unlike Murray's, it does not imply that on universalism we have no autonomy whatsoever.

So, we're in search of a way to complete premise 2 of the Argument from the Denial of Autonomy. Fortunately, a plausible candidate is implicit on the bottom of Murray's page 59. The naïve universalist, says Murray, seems to admit that "there are occasions in which we ought to prefer to lose our autonomy rather than experience the consequences of our choices". Indeed, the naïve universalist *does* admit this. In fact, she heralds it, shouts it from the mountaintops. With respect to being indifferent toward God forever, the naïve universalist insists, it is preferable that we lose our autonomy rather than experience what would be the consequences of our choices on the traditionalist picture, i.e. suffering in hell forever. So let's go with it. In that case, we have this completion of premise 2:

2. Necessarily, if no human being has autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever, then it is preferable not to have autonomy on that score than to suffer in hell forever.

At this point, Murray observes that God could have arranged earthly affairs so that we have free *choice* at all times, but *autonomy* only when the choice we made was morally good. If God had arranged earthly affairs in this way, morally evil choices would be allowed, but they would never be permitted to affect how earthly affairs go. He calls such an arrangement "limited *earthly* autonomy". Now, compare limited earthly autonomy with "limited *eternal* autonomy," which Murray characterizes as follows:

Universalists hold that God allows us to make free choices in matters that bear on the outworking of our character, but they also hold that God does not allow such choices to have their natural outcome when that means becoming an enduringly vicious character, i.e., becoming a person who is not fit for perfect communion with God. Thus the "natural" outcome for those who cultivate a character which precludes the desire to be in perfect communion with God, viz., separation from God, is thwarted, with the result that only those choices which contribute towards the having of a God-loving character have any effect on one's eternal state. (60)

How does the distinction between limited earthly autonomy and limited eternal autonomy bear on naïve universalism? In this way, says Murray:

If God is obliged¹³ to give free creatures limited eternal autonomy (as most universalists argue), why not limited earthly autonomy as well? To put it another way: if, for whatever reason, God deems it unfitting to grant limited earthly autonomy, why doesn't the same hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for eternal autonomy? Any answer which would justify one would seem to justify the other. Thus, since limited autonomy is not found in the earthly arena, we have no reason to think that different principles would be at work in the case of eternity. (60)

Putting the pieces together, we have this argument:

The Argument from the Denial of Autonomy

1. If naïve universalism is true, then no human being has autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever.
2. Necessarily, if no human being has autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever, then it is preferable to lack autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever than to suffer in hell forever.
3. Necessarily, if it is preferable to lack autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever than to suffer in hell forever, then God deems it fitting to grant limited eternal autonomy.
4. Necessarily, if God deems it fitting to grant limited eternal autonomy, then He deems it fitting to grant limited earthly autonomy.
5. It's false that God deems it fitting to grant limited earthly autonomy.¹⁴
6. So, naïve universalism is false. (1-5)

What should we make of this argument?

To answer that question, let's first highlight certain features of Murray's characterization of limited *eternal* autonomy, in the next to the last passage quoted above, and contrast it with another characterization that accurately represents the actual implications of naïve universalism. First, contrary to what Murray says, on naïve universalism, God *does* allow our choices to have their natural outcome when such choices are relevant to "becoming a person who is not fit for perfect communion with God". What the naïve universalist says is that if one's choices lead one in the earthly life to become unfit for communion with God, then God will transform one after death into one who is thus fit. Second, while Murray is right that, on naïve universalism, "the 'natural' outcome for those who cultivate a character which precludes the desire to be in perfect communion with God, viz., separation from God, is thwarted," it does *not* follow that "only those choices which contribute towards the having of a God-loving character have any effect on one's eternal state". For, as we have seen, naïve universalism allows

¹³ I must interject: universalists tend to emphasize the love of God, not His dutifulness, as what motivates His universalist decrees.

¹⁴ Premise 5 might be read as

5a. God deems it fitting to grant *unlimited* earthly autonomy,
or it might be read as

5b. God deems it *unfitting* to grant limited earthly autonomy.

Murray conflates the two. In the passage quoted above (p. 60, middle), he uses 5b: "God deems it unfitting to grant limited earthly autonomy". In the next paragraph while spelling out the same argument (p. 60, bottom), he uses 5a: "it [autonomy] is not restricted in the earthly case". 5a, of course, is manifestly false. Our autonomy in the earthly case is restricted in all manner of ways. No matter what choice I make, I cannot bring it about that you consciously suffer for two hundred years; nor can I bring it about that you feel pain beyond your physiological threshold. 5b, on the other hand, is true. Our choices frequently bring about ill in the world. So long as we read premise 5 as 5b, we'll be in the clear.

that many choices that contribute to the *lack* of a God-loving character have an effect on one's eternal state. So, Murray's characterization of limited eternal autonomy is this:

- God arranges earthly affairs so that “only those choices which contribute towards the having of a God-loving character have any effect on one's eternal state”.

He says this is a consequence of naïve universalism. He is wrong. Rather, on that view, limited eternal autonomy is this:

- God arranges earthly affairs so that those choices which contribute toward earthly indifference have no effect on the fact that, after death, one will be transformed into one who is fit for eternal communion with God.

We have, therefore, two characterizations of limited eternal autonomy, Murray's and the naïve universalist's. Which should we use in assessing Murray's argument?

Suppose we use Murray's. In that case, what should we make of premise 3? Premise 3, given his characterization (and spelling out what he means by “limited *eternal* autonomy”), states that

- 3m. Necessarily, if it is preferable to lack autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever than to suffer in hell forever, then God deems it fitting *to arrange earthly affairs so that “only those choices which contribute towards the having of a God-loving character have any effect on one's eternal state”*.

3m is false, for what I hope by now is an obvious reason. Even if it were preferable that human beings lack autonomy with respect to being eternally indifferent toward God than to suffer hell forever, God might permit *other aspects* of one's eternal state to be affected by earthly evil choices, e.g. in the ways I've indicated in section 2.1 and in the second paragraph of the present section.

Now suppose we use the naïve universalist's characterization of limited eternal autonomy to assess the argument in question. In that case, premise 3 states that

- 3u. Necessarily, if it is preferable to lack autonomy with respect to being indifferent forever than to suffer in hell forever, then God deems it fitting *to arrange earthly affairs so that those choices which contribute toward earthly indifference have no effect on the fact that, after death, we will be instantly transformed into persons who are fit for eternal communion with God*.

3u is true; however, we must modify premise 4 accordingly (to retain a valid argument):

- 4u. Necessarily, if God deems it fitting *to arrange earthly affairs so that those choices which contribute toward earthly indifference have no effect on the fact that, after death, we will be instantly transformed into persons who are fit for eternal communion with God*, then He deems it fitting to grant limited earthly autonomy, i.e. to arrange things in such a way that we have free choice at all times on earth but autonomy only when the choice we make is morally good.

What should we think of 4u? As we saw in the passage last quoted above, Murray defends it by asserting a certain sort of symmetry between the two cases. Whatever reason God has for deeming it fitting to grant limited eternal autonomy, He would have, *mutatis mutandis*, for deeming it fitting to grant limited earthly autonomy; and, whatever reason God has for deeming it unfitting to grant limited earthly autonomy, He would have, *mutatis mutandis*, for deeming it unfitting to grant limited eternal autonomy. So, if God grants the one, He grants the other; and, if He does not grant the one, He does not grant the other.

Whatever merit this line of reasoning might have when it is *Murray's* characterization of limited eternal autonomy that is at issue, it has none whatsoever when it is the *naïve universalist's* characterization of limited eternal autonomy that is on the table. There are some reasons for God to deem it *unfitting* to arrange things so that we have limited earthly autonomy that would not hold, *mutatis*

mutandis, for God to deem it *unfitting* to arrange things so that we have eternal autonomy as characterized by the naïve universalist. For example, here's such a reason: an earthly life arranged so that we have free choice at all times but autonomy only when the choice we make is morally good would be one devoid of genuine loving relationships between humans and deep responsibility for the well-being of others. Is that a reason, *mutatis mutandis*, for God to deem it unfitting to arrange things so that we have limited eternal autonomy as characterized by the naïve universalist? Of course not. An earthly life arranged so that those choices that contribute toward earthly indifference have no effect on the fact that after death one will be in eternal communion with God need not be a life devoid of such love and responsibility.

Wrapping up, we can pose Murray's Argument from the Denial of Autonomy with a dilemma. Either we characterize limited eternal autonomy as he does or as the naïve universalist does. If we do the former, then his premise 3—i.e., 3m—is false. If we do the latter, then premise 4—i.e., 4u—is false.

4. DIVINE LOVE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Murray explicitly presents two arguments against naïve universalism. In the last section of his discussion of sophisticated universalism, however, he implicitly presents another argument against naïve universalism.

The naïve universalist affirms that a God who was perfect in love would not permit autonomy with respect to being indifferent toward Him forever; a God who was perfect in love would miraculously transform those who are indifferent toward Him at life's end. Murray turns the tables. He argues that it is precisely *because* God is perfect in love that He would *insist* on autonomy. It is precisely because God is perfect in love that He would never miraculously transform those who are indifferent toward Him. He writes:

If my adult son decides to choose a career, a mate, etc. which I believe (or know) will be destructive for him, I may counsel him in the strongest terms not to do so. But if I were to kidnap him and surgically or chemically alter his brain so that he will not choose those things, I would be meddling in a way that displayed disrespect for his autonomy as a person, and thus did not display love for *him* at all.¹⁵ To interfere in this way would remove his autonomy and thus the *meaningfulness* of his freedom, and this would be to undermine both his human dignity and the real purpose of the earthly life: autonomous soul-making. Thus, it seems that, in fact, love does not clearly require miraculous transformation of the recalcitrant unbeliever. (66)

The implication is clear. If God were to transform the recalcitrant unbeliever miraculously after death, He would be “meddling in a way that displayed disrespect for his autonomy as a person”. Such disrespect would not “display love for *him* at all”. Rather, it would “undermine both his human dignity and the real purpose of earthly life: autonomous soul-making,” hardly the activity of one who is perfect in love. What should we make of this argument?

We can put it fairly and clearly like this:

The Argument from Divine Love and Human Dignity

1. Necessarily, if naïve universalism is true, then God miraculously transforms recalcitrant unbelievers after death.
2. Necessarily, if God miraculously transforms recalcitrant unbelievers after death, He removes their autonomy.

¹⁵ Murray's endnote here: “Unless, of course, he is suffering from a condition that prevents him from making these decisions on his own,” e.g. mental illness.

3. If God removes their autonomy, He removes the meaningfulness of their freedom.
4. Necessarily, if God removes the meaningfulness of their freedom, He undermines their human dignity and the real purpose of their earthly lives (autonomous soul-making).
5. Necessarily, if God undermines their human dignity and the real purpose of their earthly lives (autonomous soul-making), then He does not love them perfectly.
6. God *does* love them perfectly.
7. So, naïve universalism is false. (1-6)

As with Murray's earlier arguments, this one suffers from overstatement. Nobody—traditionalist and universalist alike—should accept premise 2. God does not *remove* (Murray's word) the autonomy of recalcitrant unbelievers by miraculously transforming them after their death. Rather, He *restricts* their autonomy. If we wish to use the word "remove", then, lest we misrepresent naïve universalism, we must specify *exactly* what He removes; and, on naïve universalism, God *only* removes autonomy with respect to *eternal* recalcitrance.

If we're going to proceed, we'll need a more accurate representation of the implications of naïve universalism in premise 2. Consider it done. In that case, premise 3 must be modified as well, to retain a valid argument. Thus, we get this modification of the first few premises of the argument:

1. Necessarily, if naïve universalism is true, then God miraculously transforms recalcitrant unbelievers after death.
- 2*. Necessarily, if God miraculously transforms recalcitrant unbelievers after death, then He removes their autonomy with respect to being eternally recalcitrant.
- 3*. If God removes their autonomy with respect to being eternally recalcitrant, then He removes the meaningfulness of their freely choosing to be eternally recalcitrant.
- 4*. Necessarily, if God removes the meaningfulness of their freely choosing to be eternally recalcitrant, then He undermines their human dignity and the real purpose of their earthly lives, i.e. autonomous soul-making.

From here the argument proceeds as before.

Unfortunately, this needed modification has a false premise, namely premise 4*. All manner of autonomous soul-making may well occur even if God removes one's autonomy with respect to being eternally recalcitrant, and (hence) the meaningfulness of one's freely choosing to be eternally recalcitrant. Murray can avoid the objection here by modifying premise 4* as follows:

- 4**. Necessarily, if God removes the meaningfulness of their freely choosing to be eternally recalcitrant, then He undermines their human dignity and the real purpose of their earthly lives, i.e. autonomy *with respect to being eternally recalcitrant*.

What should we make of 4**?

I think it's false. 4** is true only if human dignity rests *entirely* on one's autonomy with respect to being eternally recalcitrant. But it doesn't. Human dignity is not an all-or-nothing affair; it can be exemplified to a greater or lesser degree. In that case, even if lacking autonomy with respect to being eternally recalcitrant somewhat undermines human dignity, it need not undermine it entirely or even extensively. There is *so much* more that dignifies human beings.

But what of Murray's analogy with his son? If God were to miraculously transform the recalcitrant unbeliever after death, wouldn't that be like a father altering his adult son's brain against his will so that he chose a less destructive path (career, mate, etc.)? And since the latter is objectionable, isn't the former?

I suspect that there are significant and relevant differences between the two cases. First, the destructive consequences of choosing a mate or career badly are not even remotely so grave as those of choosing to reject God on the traditionalist scheme. Moreover, as the gravity of the consequences of an

adult son's choices increases, so does the plausibility of loving intervention on the part of a father or friend. Think in this connection of parents who "rescue" their older child from a cult that has brainwashed them into subservience (even if the child freely entered the cult), or who bring their strung-out adult children to rehabilitation and recovery centers. But even in such cases as these, the gravity of the situation does not even come close to that of rejecting God on traditionalism. Second, and more importantly by my lights, no father is God. And even though a son belongs to his father, that son belongs to God in a much more fundamental way than he belongs to his father. The relationship between a human father and his son may well not ground a right to intervene and rescue his son from the gravest consequences of his free choices, whereas the relationship between God and one of us may well ground such a right, perhaps even an obligation. It seems to me that it is not at all clear that the analogy Murray offers is detrimental to naïve universalism.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Contrary to what Murray avers, naïve universalism is at home with our earthly free choices having enormous repercussions not only here and now but in eternity. If we are to argue against it, therefore, we must do so while acknowledging its resources to dignify human beings and to invest their earthly choices with eternal significance.

Lest the import of what I have argued be misunderstood, I want to make it clear that, for all I have argued, there may be some other reasons of a philosophical nature for concluding that naïve universalism is false or otherwise defective. Much more importantly, however, nothing I've said rules out the view that the plain sense of Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Church precludes naive universalism. In short, nothing I've said is even remotely relevant to the view that I hold, namely that God has pretty much informed us that universalism, in both its naïve and sophisticated forms, is false.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thanks to Frances for *very* helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to Michael as well.