

Christian *apokatastasis*: Two Paradigmatic Objections

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Abstract: The present essay elaborates upon some of the important constituent elements of the classical universalist tradition, documented in detail by Ilaria Ramelli's recent research, in dialog with Oliver Crisp and Jerry Walls, two contemporary objectors to the doctrine of different backgrounds. Its central claim is that the classical universalist tradition can respond to and accommodate the concerns of its objectors while maintaining the firm conviction of the eventual universal salvation.

Athanasius argued that it would be monstrous and unworthy of God's goodness if he were to permit human beings, created rational *ad imaginem Dei*, to suffer corruption and be destroyed—whether through their own fault or by the deception of demons (*On the Incarnation*, 6). Leaving aside the question of whether Athanasius was himself a universalist, this line of reasoning suggests a “basic argument” in favor of Christian *apokatastasis* which challenges traditionalist and annihilationist alternatives: God's goodness demands the salvation of the human person (if not of every creature), and it is presupposed that God has the wisdom and the power to accomplish this end.¹ Now theologians of various stripes might respond to the Athanasian challenge in different ways, each drawing from the theological, metaphysical, anthropological, and axiological commitments of their respective traditions. For instance, Oliver Crisp (2010; 2014) argues against universalism on broadly Augustinian grounds, insisting that God must make provisions for the demonstration of his justice in the created order through the deservedly eternal damnation of some sinners, maintaining all the while that it is not contrary to God's goodness not to save a person. On the other hand, Jerry Walls the Wesleyan-Arminian (1992; 2004; 2015) upholds the inviolability of human freedom in

¹ Compare to (Johnson 2015), who argues that Athanasius proposes a satisfaction theory of atonement in which the vicarious death of Christ and the restoration of the *imago Dei* in humans satisfies God's goodness (8). Likewise, drawing from Irenaeus, he suggests that God undertook the work of atonement through Christ as much for his own sake as for ours, since the wisdom, power, goodness, and self-expanded identity of God as Creator was called into question by the reality of human sin—the apparent failure of God's purpose of sharing the life of the Trinity with humanity in fellowship (148).

salvation, which he claims entails that God may not have the power to save everyone, even though he desires the salvation of all.

Now in addition to Augustinianism and Wesleyan-Arminianism, there is also something of a classical universalist tradition, the development of which has been most extensively documented by Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (2013; hereafter *CDA*).² Represented by important figures in Christian theological history such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac the Syrian, and many others, this tradition offers a coherent and systematic understanding of God, human beings, and the scriptures which can prove useful to the contemporary debates regarding the question of universal salvation. In what follows, my object is to develop some of the central themes of this tradition in dialog with the objections of contemporary philosophical theologians. Where the classical universalist tradition is at odds with the traditions of its objectors, I uphold the former through varied arguments. The central conviction of the present essay is that classical universalism can accommodate the concerns of its competitors regarding the demonstration of divine justice or the preservation of human freedom while at the same time permitting a more dogmatic stance than mere hope vis-à-vis the restoration of all to God.³ I will describe some of the constituent elements of the Christian tradition of *apokatastasis* in two stages: first, addressing the Augustinian argumentation of Oliver Crisp, I touch upon the goodness and justice of God in relation to divine providence; second, with an eye to the Wesleyan-Arminian Jerry Walls and R. Zachary Manis, I discuss the question of human freedom and the nature of the sufferings of the damned in hell.

Goodness and justice in God's providence

The “goodness” of God is understood in different ways by different theologians. For example, Jerry Walls speaks of the “moral goodness” of God, which phrase “is usually understood by theists to imply that he always does what ought to be done.” Because God is necessarily good, therefore he cannot “fail to do what ought to be done” (1992, 84). Oliver Crisp appeals to just such a notion of God's goodness in order to argue that it would not be contrary to God's goodness or benevolence if he

² See (Nemes 2015) for a brief review of this work.

³ Why is a merely hopeful universalism problematic? Levenson (1988, ch. 3) argues that eschatology and the “age to come” play a particular conceptual role in Jewish theology in response to the awareness of evil in the universe. Whereas in the present age, the goodness and omnipotence of God are called into question by the “persistence of evil” in the form of cosmic anti-God forces, including the Evil Impulse within the human being, the next age is supposed to be a time where all these evil forces are defeated and God's identity as the good, omnipotent ruler of the earth is established. But if there is the possibility that some human sinners will hold out in rebellion against God until the very end, if the Evil Impulse goes undefeated in some persons and totally consumes them, then the *eschaton* will never come and God will never be truly God. In other words, a merely *hopeful* universalism calls into question our faith in the ultimate omnipotence and goodness of God as ruler of his creation.

were to damn everyone for their sins (2010, 17; 2014, 147). He proposes that, for the Augustinian as well as for other Christian traditions, “divine grace is necessarily not part and parcel of divine distributive justice” (2010, 16). God may act graciously if he so chooses, but he is never obligated to do so, since “it is of the nature of an act of grace that it is free and not obligatory” (2010, 17). Only the justice of God is absolutely inexorable and cannot be set aside. Crisp infers from this that it would not be incompatible or inconsistent with God’s goodness if he were not to save anyone, because he would not be flouting any obligations in failing to save even one person (*ibid.*).

However, such an understanding of goodness is incomplete and subject to serious objections. For on the one hand, Crisp connects divine goodness and benevolence with God’s keeping his obligations. On the other hand, he also maintains that God has no obligations whatsoever unless he places himself under them (2010, 17), except perhaps the pseudo-obligation to act in a manner consistent with his own nature (2010, 18; 2014, 149). Yet Crisp holds that divine justice is inexorable and cannot be set aside (2010, 17); perhaps we might say that upholding retributive justice is obligatory. Understood in this way, divine goodness and benevolence are therefore either devoid of content, amounting to no more than obedience to nonexistent obligations, or else they reduce to divine retributive justice. Yet it is clear that goodness and benevolence is one thing, and retributive justice is entirely another: even on Crisp’s Augustinian picture, goodness is demonstrated through the salvation of the sinner whereas justice manifests itself in the sinner’s deserved damnation. Otherwise, if they are the same, we could argue that God’s goodness is in fact demonstrated through universal damnation, whereas Crisp argues that a world in which no one is saved, though *compatible* with God’s goodness, is nevertheless lacking any demonstration of it (2010, 147-8).⁴ Likewise, Crisp affirms that goodness is demonstrated through the offer of salvation and mercy to sinners. If retributive justice is identical to goodness, then we could argue that God’s retributive justice is expressed through the salvation of all! So Crisp must reject a reduction of goodness to retributive justice, because it compromises his argument considerably. Now we might define retributive justice as an exclusive attention to merit in one person’s dealings with another. But goodness is the disposition to act for the benefit of the other, especially when she is undeserving. Thus, it is very much contrary to God’s goodness if he were not at least to attempt to save even a single person, since God’s goodness is what disposes him to save in the first place. Jerry Walls appreciates the close connection between goodness and salvation, following Wesley in linking God’s goodness with his universal love and desire for the salvation of all (1992, 83-4). Moreover, this understanding of the term ‘goodness’ is plausibly the way the term is used both in the scriptures and in the classical universalist tradition.

Consider, for example, the term ‘goodness’ as it appears in various psalms. Ps 23.6 connects God’s goodness with his mercy: “Surely goodness and mercy shall

⁴ See (von Balthasar 2014, 117-8) for a discussion of the relation of goodness and justice of God in Anselm.

follow me all the days of my life.” At Ps 25.7, the psalmist begs God: “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord.” This supplication is meaningless if God’s goodness does not dispose him to go beyond obligation and to treat the sinner with mercy; otherwise it would be perfectly compatible with God’s goodness if he were to remember the psalmist’s sins of his youth and his transgressions. So the following verse affirms: “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way” (v. 8), so that they might not suffer deserved punishment for their wickedness. At Ps 69.16, we find the following prayer: “Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.” At Ps 86.5, we find a further connection between God’s goodness and forgiveness: “For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.” Ps 106 opens with the refrain: “Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.” Goodness is paralleled with grace at Ps 135.3: “Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing to his name, for he is gracious.” As Wesley appreciated (Walls 1992, 84), Ps 145.8-9 connects God’s goodness with his grace, mercy, slowness to anger, abundant steadfast love, and universal compassion. And a final, obvious example can be drawn from the New Testament: Paul writes to Titus that “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us” (Tit 3.4-5). We can see how in all these instances, the ‘goodness’ of God apparently refers to his disposition to act for the benefit of the other, especially when she is undeserving, and this is most fully manifested in the salvation of the sinner unto eternal life.

This, it seems to me, is also the way the classical universalists thought about the goodness of God. For example, Theophilus of Antioch wrote about the imposition of mortality upon Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden as an exercise of divine goodness: “God manifested a great goodness to the human being in that he did not want it to continue to be in sin forever, but, as through a sort of banishment, chased it away from Paradise, so that it might expiate its sin through chastisement within the limit of an established time, be educated in this way, and then be called back” (*CDA* 66; *Aut.* 2,26).⁵ Clement of Alexandria affirmed that it was always open to human sinners to repent unto salvation, whether in this life or in the next, because “God’s goodness is active everywhere” (*CDA* 126; *Strom.* 4,6,37,7). He likewise connects goodness with salvation when he writes that God “almost compels people to salvation, out of a superabundance of goodness” (*CDA* 129; *Strom.* 7,14,86,6). Echoing Paul’s words at Eph 2.7, Origen wrote: “in these future aeons God will show the riches of his grace in goodness. Even in the case of the worst sinner, who has blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, possessed by sin in the whole of the present aeon and in the future from the beginning to the end, after this, in some way I do not know, God will take providential care of him” (*CDA* 177; *De or.* 27,15). Commenting upon the “end” spoken of at 1 Cor 15.28, where Christ’s enemies will be submitted to him and he to the Father, Origen insists that “subjection means the

⁵ Patristic references drawn from within Ramelli’s text (and thus paired with a page number from *CDA*) are cited using her style.

salvation of those who submit” (perhaps drawing from Ps 110.3) and that such an interpretation of the enemies’ submission is “worthy of the goodness of the God of the universe” (CDA 194-5; *Comm. In Io.* 6,57). Athanasius, who spoke very highly of Origen, respected him greatly, and was influenced by him in some respects (CDA 242-4), likewise argued that it would be unworthy of God’s goodness for his creatures to be reduced to nothing because of sin and the deception of the devil (CDA 247; *De Incarn.* 6). Ephrem the Syrian wrote that God is “the Good One who never puts limits to his goodness,” even in Gehenna where it is yet possible for sinners to find mercy if they repent (CDA 333; *Hymn. de Par.* 10,14-15). Gregory of Nyssa wrote that “God’s purest goodness will embrace in itself every rational creature, and none of the beings that have come into existence thanks to God will fall out of the Kingdom of God” (CDA 412; *In illud*, 13-14). In all these cases, we see the close conceptual connection between God’s goodness, his grace and mercy, and the salvation of the creature. It seems to me that these authors too understood ‘goodness’ as a kind of disposition to act for the benefit of the other, especially when undeserved.

Now if God is essentially good (i.e. if it is a part of his existence as such to be disposed to act for the benefit of the other, especially when she does not deserve it), then this goodness will inform everything that he does. There is a very close connection between the goodness of God and his providence, because God always acts in a manner that is consistent with his nature. Consider the parallel case of an essentially malevolent agent: either she will always cause harm, or else she will cause a proximate good for the sake of an ultimate harm; in any case, because she is essentially malevolent, she always seeks harm for its own sake. In the same way, on the classical universalist tradition, God’s providence is always aimed at the ultimate benefit of all, even if for the moment it works proximate harms. Perhaps the universalist understanding of God’s providence can be summarized by Lam 3.32-3: “Although [God] causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.”

On this matter, the classical universalists disagree sharply with Crisp’s Augustinianism. On Crisp’s view, it is clear that God does not always act for everyone’s benefit; he makes use of some persons for the sake of realizing an end at their extreme cost. The reprobate, for example, serve for the demonstration of God’s justice through their deservedly eternal damnation. But this is incompatible with the divine goodness, properly understood, and the classical universalists were adamant that the divine purpose is always good and beneficial, even in punishment. Clement of Alexandria wrote that the providential work of God is aimed at the salvation of all: “everything, both in general and in the single cases, is ordered by the Lord of the universe for the sake of universal salvation” (CDA 124; *Strom.* 7,2,12). Even the punitive work of God is subordinated to this end: “God’s punishments save and educate!” (CDA 127; *Strom.* 6,6,45-47). Indeed, Clement affirms that “God does not punish [*timoreitai*] ... but corrects [*kolazei*] for the sake of those who are corrected” (CDA 127; *Strom.* 7,16,102,1-3). In this, Clement affirms the distinction drawn by Aristotle between *timoria*, which is retributive punishment, and *kolasis*,

which is instructive (*ibid.*; *Rhet.* 1369b13). Importantly, Ramelli notes that only the latter term is used in the New Testament to describe the punishments of the next age (*CDA* 32).⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus affirms the interpretation of the punishment of the first humans espoused by Theophilus and described above, writing, “And so punishment became an act of love for humanity [*philanthropia*]; for I am persuaded that this is the way in which God punishes” (*CDA* 457; *In S. Pascha* [*Or.* 45; PG 36,633] and *In Theophaniam* [*Or.* 38; PG 36,324]). Gregory furthermore affirms that God is “always inclined to pity,” though he makes use of threats, beatings, fire, and even more radical remedies in his pedagogic work (*CDA* 452). Isaac the Syrian is especially insistent that God’s providential purposes are always positive: “Among all His actions, there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and the end of His dealings with us” (*Second Part* 39, 22). Thus, whether God’s punishment has a retributive element or not (on this point they differed), the classical universalists agreed that God never punishes *merely* for the sake of retribution, unconcerned for the ultimate benefit of the creature.

Now in this matter it appears to me that the classical universalists have the exegetical advantage. Consider the manner in which God’s creation of the world is described in Genesis in comparison with other creation mythologies. For example, in the Babylonian *Atrahasis* myth, the creation of humanity is a solution to an inter-pantheon struggle: one class of gods, the Igigi, had tired of performing the arduous labor of caring for the earth and began rioting, which disturbed the sleep of the Annunaki, an intolerable offense. The resolution was that humankind be created in order to perform the work of which the Igigi had tired; the cry at our creation was this: “Let man bear the load of the gods!” (Dalley 2000, 14). On this scheme, the gods do not have a fundamental commitment to humankind as such, and the relationship between the two is pragmatic and economical. Perhaps the gods may act for human benefit if properly incentivized, but they are not concerned for this end for its own sake. Or consider, too, the story of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. In this future-noir film, humanity has created a race of androids known as “replicants,” strong beyond the capacity of ordinary humans though indistinguishable from them otherwise. They are engineered for the purpose of effective off-planet labor, prostitution, and other such. The replicants are created with false memories and identities implanted so that they quickly assimilate into the environment of their designated work. Their lifespan is only four years, after which time *nox est perpetua una dormienda*.⁷ Some replicants learn of their lot and rebel violently against the Tyrell Corporation which manufactures them, demanding that their lifespan be extended before it is too late. Though they are free agents, capable of tasting and yearning for the good things of life, yet they are unavoidably prevented ever from enjoying these by their creators.

On the other hand, Genesis depicts the creation of humankind and of the world in general in very different terms. Here God is not ascribed any ulterior

⁶ Ramelli is aware of the use of *kolasis* in the LXX. She addresses those texts in (Ramelli and Konstan 2007).

⁷ From Catullus 5: “There remains a perpetual night to be slept.”

motives or needs, but creates entirely out of the abundance of his power and goodness. Each creature is given no other imperative except that to multiply and to fill the earth and to enjoy its life in its proper station. Fish are created in the water and mammals on inhabitable earth, rather than the other way around. Humankind, moreover, is created and given a call to reflect this selfless benevolence and generosity of God on the earth as living icons of the creator. And when God sees that it is not good for the human to be alone, he creates for him a proper helper with which to enjoy life. In all these ways, the creative act of God is depicted as selfless and disinterested, benevolent, without ulterior motives, whereas the creation (or at least the human being) is treated in every respect as an end in itself. God is specifically not modeled on human rulers and benefactors who act *quid pro quo*.

It seems to me that the Augustinian picture of divine-human relations more closely resembles the creation mythology of the Babylonians and *Blade Runner* than Genesis. And if such selfless benevolence as I've described is the first picture we are given of God in his scriptures, then it is not unreasonable to interpret what follows in the biblical narrative in the light of this beginning. When we do, we will find ourselves agreeing with Isaac the Syrian's notion, something of a hermeneutical principle for properly Christian interpretation of the scriptures, that God always acts for our ultimate benefit, even if *prima facie* things may seem otherwise to us (*Second Part* 39, *passim*). There are certainly many examples of this in the scriptures: Hannah's infertility, which initially seemed the curse of God, was actually the providential means by which the birth and dedication of Samuel to the Lord could be secured; the storm which nearly kills Jonah and the sailors is the means by which the prophet and the pagans are reoriented towards the Lord in obedience, not to mention that thereby the salvation of Nineveh is also secured; and finally, the death of Christ, who seemed "stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted" (Is 53.4), was actually the propitiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2.2). In fact, more so than in the creation narrative in Genesis, to my mind the universalist conviction of God's ultimate goodness is grounded in the perception of the love of God demonstrated through Christ's sacrifice on behalf of sinners (cf. Rom 5.8; 1 John 4.9-10). Though not himself a universalist, T.F. Torrance affirmed that the cross of Christ revealed something about God's character to us: namely, that God "loves us more than he loves himself" (Torrance, Torrance, and Torrance 2010, 14). And if God loves us more than he loves himself, if his concern for us is greater than his concern for himself, then he always acts for our ultimate good.

Now the Augustinian like Crisp will certainly wonder: where does God's justice understood as retribution fit into all of this? On this matter there are different voices within the universalist tradition, and a person need not accept one position or the other to maintain the conviction that all will be saved in the end. Isaac the Syrian specifically seems to have denied that retributive justice plays any role in God's economy whatsoever (Alfeyev 2000, 283-92; Hryniewicz 2007, ch. 7). He writes: "Even to think this of God and to suppose that retribution for evil acts is to be found with Him is abominable... A right way of thinking about God would be the following: the kind Lord, who in everything He does looks to ways of assisting

rational beings, directs thought concerning judgment to the advantage of those who accept this difficult matter... This is how everything works with Him, even though things may seem otherwise to us: with Him it is not a matter of retribution, but He is always looking beyond to the advantage that will come from His dealings with humanity" (*Second Part* 39, 2, 5). The sufferings of the damned in Gehenna are not retribution for evil, but a means by which God accomplishes their salvation: "Accordingly the Kingdom and Gehenna are matters belonging to mercy, which were conceived of in their essence by God as a result of His eternal goodness. It was not a matter of requiting, even though He gave them the name of requital" (39, 22). Isaac's principal evidence that God has no concern for retribution according to desert is the incarnation and self-sacrifice of Christ: "If this were not the case, what resemblance does Christ's coming have with the deeds of the generations which were prior to it? Does this immense compassion seem to you to be a retribution for those evil deeds? Tell me, if God is someone who requites evil, and He does what He does by means of requital, what commensurate requital do you see here, O man? ... So then, let us not attribute to God's actions and His dealings with us any idea of requital. Rather, we should speak of fatherly provision, a wise dispensation, a perfect will which is concerned with our good, and complete love" (39, 16-7).⁸ As noted above, Isaac maintains that God is never concerned for retribution, *even if* the scriptures should appear to teach this.

At the same time, other classical universalists affirmed a role for retributive justice in the divine economy, but they denied that there was any irreconcilable difference of intention between God's justice and his goodness, as if they could not both be oriented to the creature's salvation. So Clement of Alexandria wrote that repentance was possible even in Gehenna, because "God's punishments save and educate! They exhort people to repent and want the sinner's repentance rather than his death" (*CDA* 126-7; *Strom.* 6,6,45-47). In fact, the unity of divine justice and goodness was an essential premise in the defense of orthodoxy against the Marcionite heresy. Whereas the Marcionites distinguished strongly between the Lord of the Old Testament, who was just, and the Father of Jesus Christ, who is good, Bardaisan and Origen and others insisted that both alike are always concerned for the salvation of the human person (*CDA* 175, 189). For Origen, furthermore, divine providence always respects the merits of a person. Thus he warns that the restoration of each person from sinfulness to a life with God "will take place in different times, depending on each rational creature's merits" (*CDA* 201). Even though God's providential work leads every creature to eventual salvation, it does not operate utterly indifferently of each person's desert. The salvific providence of God works to "restore all to one end, taking into account the various falls and progressions, rewarding virtue and punishing sins, both now and in the future aeon and in all worlds, before and after" (*CDA* 211-12; *Princ.* 3,5,5).

In this way, we might suggest that the classical universalism of Origen better accommodates the concern that God's justice be demonstrated in the created order

⁸ Cf. (Campbell 2009): "Paul's root metaphor of God, then, is benevolent, or merciful. *There is no retributive character to the God revealed to Paul by Christ*" (706; emphasis original).

than Crisp's Augustinianism does, since *no* creature escapes the consequences of her actions. And it is possible to affirm (the universality of) divine retributive justice alongside the universality of salvation because the classical universalists did not consider that just punishment for sin had to be eternal. For example, Theodore of Mopsuestia argued that the sufferings of the wicked in Gehenna would be tempered according to their merits, drawing inspiration from Jesus's words at Luke 12.47-8: the slave who knew little would be beaten with few stripes, whereas the slave who knew more would be beaten with many stripes (*CDA* 523; *Book of the Bee* 60).⁹ Likewise Diodore of Tarsus wrote: "torment [is laid up] for sinners, but not everlasting, that the immortality which is prepared for them may not be worthless. They must however be tormented for a limited time, as they deserve, in proportion to the measure of their iniquity and wickedness, according to the amount of the wickedness of their deeds" (*ibid.*). But Diodore, perhaps inconsistently, also insists that God punishes sinners for far less than the time of their wickedness, "seeing that He requites them far less than they deserve" just as the righteous are rewarded with eternal life, by far longer lasting than the length of their life of goodness (*CDA* 523-4). Theodore insists: "So then it is not for the good only but also for the wicked; for the grace of God greatly honours the good, but chastises the wicked sparingly" (*CDA* 523). Likewise, Theophilus of Antioch, Gregory of Nazianzus, and others insisted that the death imposed upon the first humans was a grace, because this death would limit their sin to keep their guilt from becoming eternal. So the classical universalists did not consider that sin must be punished eternally, and they differed on the question of whether the punishment sinners deserved was to be meted out fully or not, but they saw no irreconcilable contradiction between affirming universal salvation and God's concern to punish people according to merits in some measure. Insofar as one is concerned that God's retributive justice be upheld, however, it seems Origen's universalism specifically better accommodates this concern than Crisp's Augustinianism.

Now we may tentatively offer another argument vis-à-vis God's justice to be drawn from the classical universalists. Gregory of Nyssa argued that those sinners who were not purified of sin in this life, "to whom no purgation of their defilement has been applied, no mystic water, no invocation of the Divine power, no amendment by repentance" must absolutely and by necessity receive something proper to their case: just as gold alloyed with dross is purified through fire, so these must also be purified through the punishments of the next world (*Great Catechism*, 35; cf. *CDA* 379, 386; *De an.* 100A). This suggests that sinful human beings are nevertheless of such value as to merit comparison to impure gold: they have a kind of intrinsic value, respect for which demands that they be purified of their sins rather than be destroyed or punished everlastingly, which would be akin to throwing away gold. Just as God's justice demands that he treats people with an eye to their merits, it seems plausible enough to suppose that he must also treat people

⁹ The NRSV renders "few stripes" and "many stripes" as "light beating" and "severe beating," which appreciates the difference in severity of punishment but does not adequately communicate that the punishments are also limited in *duration*, which is the explicit basis for their differences of *severity*.

in keeping with their value. In this way, we may infer that God's justice actually demands that he work for the salvation of the human creature, rather than for her ultimate condemnation. If God were to damn a sinner forever, or to destroy her, this would express a failure of justice of sorts in that her intrinsic value is not being respected. Jesus himself exclaims: "Of how much more value are you than the birds," who are not passed over by the providential care of God (Matt 6.26; Luke 12.24). In this way a union of divine justice and goodness is possible in defense of orthodoxy against Marcionism: though God may punish (or may appear to punish) human sinners, yet his justice respects the great value of the creatures he has made in his image, and he always works for their salvation, even if through harsher means at times. This particular argument from divine justice to salvation however, is only tentatively presented and worth developing further on another occasion.

Human freedom and the sufferings of the damned in Gehenna

At this juncture a new argument must be addressed. For those whose concern is the inviolable freedom of the human person in salvation, the question will be: how can God ensure that sinners will be saved through their sufferings in Gehenna? What guarantee can he have? Indeed, in the judgment of Richard Bauckham, "Most theologians in the modern period who maintain the traditional expectation that some will or may receive final condemnation and exclusion from eschatological salvation do so on the basis of human freedom" (2007, 319). Ramelli addresses these questions briefly in the concluding summary of her work (*CDA* 822-3), and I wish to offer the following comments as a continuation of her work by developing them in greater philosophical detail.

Jerry Walls and R. Zachary Manis in recent times have argued persuasively, drawing from Søren Kierkegaard, that some persons may choose to damn themselves and resist *ad infinitum* the offer of salvation which God extends to all. Although there is "no single type of damned character" (Walls 1992, 123), yet we might count two different models which describe how a person might choose to damn themselves, following Manis's categorization. On the first model, "hell is the explicit and direct object of choice of those who are finally lost" (Manis 2015, 2). On the second model, "hell is the consequence of certain choices made by the damned, but not that which the inhabitants of hell choose directly" (8). Reprobate individuals of the first sort are particularly demonic characters whose identities are constructed in conscious opposition to God. For example, imagine a person who, having suffered some grave injustice for which he can see no possible reparation, determines to refuse every offer of salvation in order to maintain his protest of God's goodness (Manis 2015, 3-4; Walls 1992, 127). Such a person has a "reasonable" motive for choosing damnation, which makes his choice intelligible (Walls 1992, 126): he desires the satisfaction of insisting upon himself and his "irredeemable" sufferings as a counterexample to God's goodness (Manis 2015, 4). On the other hand, the

damned of the second sort simply have weaker characters: though they might initially have felt some pangs of conscience for their wicked acts, eventually, upon having given in to their base desires for too long, they lose any capacity to change and find themselves trapped in the hell of their own reprehensible character (Manis 2015, 7-10; Walls 1992, 122-3). Indeed, for these persons, their own sense of helplessness against themselves may be at least part of the torment of their damnation (Manis 2015, 10).

Both Walls and Manis insist that the torments of hell need not prove adequate motivation for these persons to leave. In the case of the first kind of reprobates, their suffering is appropriated voluntarily as an essential part of their protest against God's goodness; they must suffer so as to show that God is unjust and has been unjust to them. But in the case of the second kind of reprobates, Manis seems to suggest that the state of eternity itself makes their change impossible: "Eternity is a state of being rather than becoming, a state in which one's character is fully stable in the sense that significant change is not psychologically possible" (2015, 13). In response to the arguments of Thomas Talbott, who insisted that the sufferings of the damned would eventually prove unbearable and motivate them to repent, Walls rejoins that the "repentance" motivated by unbearable suffering could never be genuine: "the question is whether 'repentance' that is compelled [by unbearable suffering] can be a means that leads to repentance. But for that to be the case, the discipline must lead to a genuine change of heart. It cannot simply be a matter of knuckling under because the pain is so great that one cannot stand it... Repentance that is compelled in this way is not true repentance" (Walls 2015, 78-9). Indeed, he poses a dilemma to Talbott: if the sufferings of the damned are unbearable and the damned repent, the moral quality of their repentance is compromised; but if their sufferings are not unbearable, then there is no guarantee that they will repent as opposed to merely hardening themselves even further (2004; 2015, 80-1). So Walls concludes: "As I see it, then, hell is indeed a place of misery but not unbearable misery. This is why it can be freely chosen forever as one's eternal destiny" (2004, 212; 2015, 84).

Now in response to this, it would be well for the universalist to heed the scriptural warning: "Do not add to [God's] words, or else he will rebuke you, and you will be found a liar" (Prov 30.6). Origen himself wrote that God will save even the worst of sinners "in some way I do not know," and we must maintain the ultimately mysterious nature of Gehenna. Yet at the same time, we ought to be confident in God's power to save even the worst of sinners, because "for God all things are possible" (Matt 19.26); moreover, God through Paul commands us to pray that all are saved, which implies its possibility (1 Tim 2.1-4; von Balthasar 2014, 23). Indeed, what seems irreversible and permanent to us is transient to God: when taken to see the dead daughter of Jairus, Jesus told the crowd, "The child is not dead but sleeping" (Mark 5.39); the death which we cannot change is mere sleep before the Son of God, and even the spiritually dead can be brought to life by God's grace (cf. Eph 2.5). Whereas Plato maintained that some incurably wicked persons remain in suffering in Tartarus forever, Origen insisted: "nothing is impossible for the

Omnipotent; no being is incurable for the One who created it" (CDA 153; *Princ.* 3,6,5). Yet I think we may also demonstrate some shortcomings of the arguments of Walls and Manis.

It is important to note, first, that the classical universalists affirmed ethical intellectualism, a theory of agency crucial to their thinking as regards human freedom and divine providence. On this view, "How one behaves depends upon what one knows and how one thinks and regards reality; will depends on the intellect and is not an autonomous force. As a consequence, evil is never chosen *qua* evil, but because it is mistaken for a good, out of an error of judgment, due to insufficient knowledge and/or obnubilation" (CDA 178). Because of this, divine providence is not so much characterized in this tradition by determinism or preordination, but rather by instruction and guidance, because it always appeals to the intellect of the human agent.¹⁰ Importantly, too, this teleological conception of the will carries along with it a particular mode of evaluating an agent's freedom. Because the will is intrinsically oriented towards the good as perceived and understood by the intellect, a person is therefore truly free only to the extent to which she acts upon the basis of genuine knowledge of the good; inversely, "If a person chooses evil, this person is ultimately not free" (CDA 123).

For this reason, the classical universalists described the conversion of sinners in Gehenna in terms of persuasion and illumination, which do not compromise the freedom of the sinful person so much as uphold and enable it. Bardaisan wrote: "And there will come a time when even this capacity for harm that remains in [sinners] will be brought to an end by the instruction that will obtain in a different arrangement of things: and, once that new world will be constituted, all evil movements will cease, all rebellions will come to an end, and the fools will be persuaded, and the lacks will be filled, and there will be safety and peace, as a gift of the Lord of all natures" (CDA 113; *Book of the Laws of Countries* 608-611 Nau). Importantly, Clement of Alexandria wrote of a prior moral purification followed by a subsequent illumination (CDA 125; *Paed.* 1,1,2,3), an order which will be followed by numerous other writers such as Origen and Evagrius. This seems to me to agree at least partially with the Kierkegaardian sentiment that "in the case of the most important truths, the intellect is conditioned by the will... one's ability to perceive the truth is in part a function of one's character, passions, and will" (Manis 2015, 6). However, they would certainly insist that the will never operates independently of the intellect, and so even the purification of sinners in Gehenna which precedes their illumination as regards profounder truths must nevertheless involve the correction of certain false basic conceptions regarding the good. Origen thought that the illumination of the intellect was a necessity for salvation: "That this may happen and the creatures may incessantly and indissolubly adhere to the One who Is, Wisdom must necessarily instruct them on this point and bring them to perfection, incessantly confirming and sanctifying them by means of the Holy Spirit, because

¹⁰ Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae: "the world as object is only *the means for a dialogue* of loving thoughts and works between supreme rational Person and rational human persons themselves" (1994, 11; emphasis mine).

only in this way can they understand God" (CDA 175; *Comm. in Cant.* 1). Ramelli comments that there can be no restoration apart from this: "Apokatastasis ... depends on illumination and instruction, which goes hand in hand with correction." Yet adherence to the Good must always be free, grounded in "a purified intellectual sight," and never compelled against the will of the sinner. Thus God makes use of various means—"education and rational persuasion, instruction and illumination—or fear of punishments, but only initially, when reason is not yet developed"—for the sake of leading people to free devotion to God (CDA 178).

Importantly, too, there is a sense in which Gehenna involves a kind of destruction of the sinner, though it is not a substantial annihilation of the individual. Origen gives this example: "Who is the one whom [God shall kill]? It is Paul the informer, Paul the persecutor, and then [God shall make him live], that he may become Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ... First he has a person suffer, then he restores her again" (CDA 189; *Hom. in Jer.* 1,15-16). Paul himself uses this kind of language when he speaks of a radical change of identity: he says that he has died to the Law, being crucified alongside Christ (Gal 2.19); the old man must die so that a new man might come to live, formed after the likeness of God (Eph 4.21-4; Col 3.9-10); and the Christian has become a new creation (2 Cor 5.17), though clearly there is numerical identity of substance between the Christian and the previous sinner. Gehenna's sufferings consequently bring about a kind of death of the sinful agent's identity constructed in opposition to God's will and in slavery to sin. This is the person who dies, so that a new person with a new name might come to life afterwards.

Now an initial difficulty for models like those of Walls and Manis concerns the possible motive damned persons might have for choosing damnation. For this reason, they spend much time attempting to make the choice of eternal damnation intelligible in some way. In the process, they seem to appeal to an ethical intellectualist conception of agency. Walls, for example, writes that the choice of eternal damnation "is possible because hell can somehow be judged better than heaven, just as evil can be seen as a good to be desired. Of course, objectively speaking, it cannot be better to be in hell on any terms than to be in heaven. And in the same sense, evil cannot be truly good. But if the choice of hell is an intelligible one, there must be something about the subjective experience of choosing hell which can account for why some may prefer it to goodness" (1992, 125-6). Indeed, the damned "see some advantage to be gained in the choice of evil" (1992, 129). Walls likewise affirms that human agency as such has an intrinsic object, namely happiness which is the good in itself (2015, 20-1). Finally, he grants that "the choice of evil is impossible for anyone who has a *fully formed* awareness that God is the source of happiness and sin the cause of misery" (1992, 133; emphasis original), though following Kierkegaard he does not permit that anyone can come to this kind of knowledge apart from a life lived in cooperation with God's grace" (2004, 206-7). This seems to imply that will chooses the good as understood by the intellect. It seems to follow from all this, therefore, that Walls conceives of agency on roughly ethical intellectualist lines, despite not explicitly affirming this.

Precisely on this count, I maintain, conceptions of damnation as freely chosen by the damned individual are woefully problematic and incomplete. My argument can be stated in the form of a dilemma. By Walls's own admission, the damned are capable of freely choosing their own damnation only because they find something to be preferred in the shadowy pseudo-happiness of the infernal life (2015, 89-90). If their choice is grounded in the understanding of their intellect, then God can convince the damned persons that they have made the wrong choice. After all, I take it that where disagreements between parties are grounded *solely* in the intellect, persuasion can take place so long as adequate evidence is available. This is because the intellect in itself is open to reality, to form new judgments on the basis of new experiences. Thus, if the differences of opinion between Origen and Kierkegaard are grounded merely in the intellect, then they may persuade each other so long as adequate evidence is available. It is only if non-intellectual factors interfere—fears, doubts, irrational impulses, habits, etc.—that persuasion is impeded. So also, sinners in Gehenna may not be convinced to the extent that non-intellectual factors stand in the way of their persuasion, which is to say, in the way of their openness to reality. But if their choice is not grounded in matters of the intellect, then their freedom and the intelligibility of their choice is compromised, by Walls's own stated conditions. Consequently Walls's argument fails.

Walls will immediately rejoin that there is no guarantee that the damned may be persuaded. He writes: "I am very dubious, however, that evidence is ever compelling, strictly speaking. This is especially so when we are dealing with matters as controversial as religious beliefs. The reason this is so is because belief is far more than a matter of the intellect. Our emotions, will, and desires are also involved. And if we are unwilling to repent, we cannot be compelled to do so by evidence" (2015, 81). But the same dilemma may be reiterated on another level. These emotions, volitions, and desires which impede repentance—are they grounded in the understanding of the intellect, or not? If they are not, it would seem the damned person's freedom is compromised; how free can a choice be which is made on the basis of irrational impulses and blind desires with no grounding in the agent's understanding of the world and of what is good? But if these too are grounded in the intellect, then God may simply address these impediments to repentance and convince the sinner that she is mistaken.

Now Walls insisted that genuine moral repentance cannot result from circumstances of compulsion. But it seems possible to my mind that unbearable circumstances may produce genuine moral repentance. Consider the example of David in Ps 32.3-5: "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin." Here it seems David was taken to the very limit, his strength sapped and his body coming undone, and—which is important—he ascribes his unbearable suffering to the hand of God pressing upon him. Yet he confesses his sin and is subsequently forgiven and restored. Here we have a biblical

parable of genuine moral repentance produced under circumstances which at the very least resemble compulsion and unbearable suffering. We can find yet another example in Job, whose experiences are similar to both the common understanding of damnation as well as to the Kierkegaardian understanding which Walls and Manis share. He resembles the damned protestor of God's goodness in that he insists on himself as a counterexample to God's justice and goodness (Job 9.14-8, 20, 22-3). He considers it better for him never to have been born (3.11-3; cf. the description of Judas at Matt 26.24). He wants to die but is unable (3.20-1; cf. Rev 6.15-6). His state is one of continual distress (3.26; cf. Rom 2.9, Rev 14.11) from which he foresees no escape (7.7-8), and the troubling omnipresence of God is repugnant to him (7.19). Yet following upon a dramatic revelation of God, he repents in sackcloth and ashes (42.6) and is restored to God, learning crucially that *no purpose of God's can be thwarted* (42.2). His friends are even spared by his prayer on their behalf (42.7-8). Importantly, it was an intervention and revelation of God which restores him: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42.5-6).

Walls maintains that genuine repentance cannot be compelled and that God can prevent the suffering of the damned in hell from becoming unbearable. I think that both of these propositions are false. Consider the following parable as a counterexample. Imagine that Thrasy-machus is in hell because he refuses to accept the teaching of Christ and the ethic of love which he demands, insisting instead on the law of the jungle: the advantage of the powerful over the weak. At some point during his time in hell, Genghis Khan and his band of marauders capture Thrasy-machus, tie him down, and begin to torture him for the fun of it. Of course, Thrasy-machus's sufferings are unbearable, yet he is incapable of any sort of escape, even death. Once Thrasy-machus realizes this, an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him that he can leave this place, if only he repents of his false teaching and is willing to be taught the truth of Christ; but in any case, Genghis Khan and the others are only embodying the same philosophical principles which Thrasy-machus himself upholds. Willing to do anything to escape the pain of his torture, Thrasy-machus yells out, "I repent!" Yet he is not right away taken into the presence of God, because he is unholy and unworthy of the Kingdom. So he spends some amount of time—perhaps quite a bit of time—in a liminal zone between Gehenna and heaven, being taught the truth and correcting his character. Yet because his own unbearable suffering will be inextricably connected with the principal cause of his damnation, namely his ungodly nihilistic philosophy, his moral development only has one direction: towards God. Because Thrasy-machus seeks after happiness the same as anyone else, and because he has learned that he cannot find it in a world governed by his own nihilistic philosophy, consequently there is no possibility of a definitive return to his former life. His moral development is something like that of a child: first he learns through associating certain patterns of thought or behavior with intense pain, and later develops more sophisticated moral sentiments. But suppose that after long ages, Thrasy-machus arrives at genuine knowledge of the truth, feels true regret and repentance for his former way of life, and confesses his

sins before the Lord: why shouldn't this repentance be genuine? My point in telling this story is that repentance resulting from unbearable suffering can become genuine and moral, even if it is not initially so.

There are a few things to note. Through this parable, I intended to illustrate the suggestion of Gregory of Nyssa that the damned person will "taste the evils which he desired and learn from experience ... and then ... willingly turn back in his desire towards his original blessedness" (Ludlow 2000, 100; *CDA* 427; *De mort.* 15, p. 64 Lozza). On this scheme of things, it is not merely random suffering which motivates repentance, but rather a suffering that is intimately connected with the principal impediment to a damned person's repentance. This is what makes genuine moral repentance both possible and inevitable. Furthermore, this is a salvation which is due at least in part to divine intervention: apart from the intervention of the angel of the Lord, it is not obvious that Thrasymachus would ever leave hell. Left to their own devices and strengths, perhaps human beings are quite capable of utterly ruining themselves, as Kierkegaard, Walls, and Manis emphasize. It is only thanks to God's special providence that none should do so.

Here I wish to make note of another defect in the conception of hell which Walls and Manis draw from Kierkegaard: it is too individualistic. There is no reason to suppose that a man in hell will be an island, utterly isolated from others, any more so than persons are islands here in this world or in the Kingdom. On the contrary, perhaps Gehenna is other people: perhaps the communion of sinners in Gehenna will be at least part of what makes the experience of damnation so terrible for some. Walls may object that God would prevent the suffering of the damned from ever becoming unbearable, but in response I note that some persons evidently suffer unbearably on this side of the grave, where we do not know if it is for their good or not. Why shouldn't God allow a person to taste the fruits of her choices, just like the prodigal son, if in this way she will come to realize the truth and be saved? Importantly, too, note that God is not in any way violating the freedom of the damned person in permitting her suffering to become unbearable in this way. Walls and Manis emphasize that God, out of his love and respect for the freedom of the sinner, permits her even to choose damnation (e.g., Manis 2015, 12). Yet the choice for damnation is simultaneously a choice for the company of sinners; to be in hell means to be around other reprobates as well. Consequently, in permitting sinners to undergo the unbearable suffering at the hands of others, God is giving the damned exactly what they want—of course, so that they will come to see that it will not provide them with the happiness they seek.

There are still further objections to make. Critical to Walls's defense of traditionalism is the presupposition that human psychology will function more or less the same post-resurrection as it does presently: sinners will all the same be capable of avoiding the truth, of deceiving themselves regarding reality, of suffering under the delusions which now impede their repentance in this life. Yet the classical universalists did not accept this premise. Basil affirmed that the "veil will be removed from each one's spiritual sight, which will return to being like that of angels" (*CDA* 348; *Hom. in Ps.* 33, 11). Ramelli comments: "In this condition it is

difficult to imagine how some people will be able to still stick to evil.” How does this fit into the greater classical universalist scheme? Gregory of Nyssa affirmed that “Resurrection is nothing else but the complete restoration to the original condition” (CDA 383; *Hom. in Eccl.* GNO V 296,16-18; see also *De mort.* GNO IX 51,16ff., *Hom. op.* 17,2, *Or. in Pulch.* GNO IX 472, and *De or. dom.* PG 44,1148C). This resurrection affects human psychology (i.e., the soul) just as much as human physiology, because Christ assumed the whole of human nature and not merely the body (CDA 422). Maximus the Confessor likewise affirmed this view (CDA 744f.). This spiritual resurrection, however, is for Gregory a process that takes place over time and is completed throughout the aeons, after the body has already been resurrected, because it involves the transformation and restoration of the agent’s character (CDA 383). And in light of our knowledge of the close connection between the mind and the brain, moreover, the suggestion that human psychology will be radically different in the resurrected state is eminently plausible. Now consider that Adam and Eve had an immediate awareness, a closeness and communion with God (cf. Gen 3.8), which was subsequently lost after they had sinned and which we, in our times of divine hiddenness, do not (always) experience. Perhaps this awareness will return in the next world. Walls insists that a person might only come to significant knowledge of God and of spiritual truth in cooperation with God’s grace (Walls 2004, 206-7; Manis 2015, 6). It is certainly true that we come across such knowledge in this world by participating in the life of the next through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, but in the next world it may simply be natural; neither Walls nor Manis consider the possibility of natural knowledge.

Indeed, there is that familiar Eastern Orthodox tradition according to which “The ultimate state of human beings, after the final judgment, is to behold the glory of God’s love” (Louth 2007, 242). This is a way of understanding the prophecy: “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2.14). This awareness is bliss for the redeemed, but torment for the damned. Perhaps the damned too, in virtue of their post-resurrection psychology, will have a clear perception of the truth, and their regret (“weeping and gnashing of teeth”) over having chosen wrong may be part and parcel of their sufferings. Isaac the Syrian wrote, “Those who are to be scourged in Gehenna will be tortured with the stripes of love; they who feel that they have sinned against love will suffer harder and more severe pangs from love than the pain that springs from fear” (CDA 523; *Book of the Bee* 60). Now Walls seems to endorse *something* like this picture (2015, 86). But if the damned will see God as the true Good, if they will see sin for the evil that it is, and if they will regret having sinned against God’s love, what would stop them from repenting if given the opportunity? Perhaps they may have to remain in Gehenna for some time as punishment for their sins, but it seems eminently reasonable to suppose that they would gladly and freely accepted release once it is offered.

We can see that for the classical universalists, ethical intellectualism played an important role in understanding the manner in which God’s providence makes use of the sufferings in Gehenna for the salvation of sinners. Because human agency

is always guided by a conception of the good, consequently God instructs the reprobate through their experiences in hell which will both purify their characters as well as lead them to an illumination of the mind; after this will take place the *apokatastasis panton*, the restoration of all foretold by the prophets (Acts 3.21), the *telos* when God the true Good will be all in all (1 Cor 15.28), which implies that all evil (the privation of the good) will no longer exist. In response to the direction of the present dialectic, Walls may consider rejecting ethical intellectualism, but this move would be untenable. In the first place, it is implicit in his defense against Thomas Talbott's argument that choosing eternal damnation is incoherent: his argument is grounded on the conviction that some perverse characters can mistake the worst evil for the true good, and he grants the premise that a person with fully formed knowledge of the Good could not choose evil. But more than this, it seems to me that ethical intellectualism is especially important for Christian theology. For the classical universalists, "human orientation toward God is part and parcel of human creatural nature" (CDA 820), and ethical intellectualism explained how this could be: human agency *per se* is oriented towards the good as understood by the intellect, and the true Good is God himself; consequently all agency is a search after God, even if the agent herself does not realize this. This coheres nicely with Paul's words to the Athenians: "From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17.26-7). The alternative—the denial of an intrinsic teleology of the will towards the good—seems to me more existentialist than Christian: if the human person is intrinsically open to infinite development in mutually exclusive directions, it would seem there is no human nature as such; existence would precede essence. Indeed, when Manis writes that "It is of the very essence of humanity that we are beings who choose our own eternal destinies" (2015, 17), he seems to ignore the biblical truth that God created us for fellowship with him. And the minimum of rationality dictates that he created us with a structure which predisposes us towards this end: thus a life of sin apart from God is painful, and because we always seek our own happiness, we learn that sin will not provide us what we want. Ethical intellectualism accommodates this theological truth nicely, whereas the alternative does not. Moreover, apart from an intrinsic teleology of the will, Walls could not write that the damned pervert their moral freedom (1992, 131); there is no perverting something which is intrinsically open to opposing uses.

Concluding remarks

In this essay I have attempted to sketch the contours of the classical universalist tradition in dialog with the objections and counterarguments of traditionalist contemporary philosophical theologians. I have provided many of the basic claims of the ancient universalists, and I have also strengthened their case with numerous

arguments of my own, whether biblical or theological or philosophical, by appeal to examples in film as well as in the scriptural narratives. It seems to me that certain fundamental flaws can be identified in the two paradigmatic objections to universalism which I have considered. The fatal defect of the Augustinian argument of Oliver Crisp is its deficient conception of the goodness of God, which either reduces it to retributive justice—an identification of justice with goodness which Augustinians themselves deny—or else empties it of any content, defining it as obedience to nonexistent obligations. On the other hand, the fatal flaw of Wesleyan-Arminian defenses of freely chosen eternal damnation, like those of Walls and Manis, is that they forget that human agency *per se* has an object, namely the good or happiness, and that the agent is guided by the intellect in the pursuit thereof; because of this, experience itself guided by divine providence will teach sinners the truth.

In some ways, classical universalism seems better to accommodate the concerns of these competitor traditions. For example, the Augustinian's concern for the demonstration of justice is even more strictly upheld by Origen, who insists that every person will come to meet the consequences of her action on the path of her salvation. And all the classical universalists, from Origen to Gregory of Nyssa to Isaac the Syrian, maintained that God always respects the freedom of the human agent and works together with her in order to lead her to saving knowledge of the true Good. Consider Origen's remark that "nothing is impossible for the Omnipotent, no being is incurable for the One who created it." The classical universalist is concerned to maintain both God's goodness and his majesty: the former, alongside the Arminian, through God's greatest desire for the salvation of all people; the latter, alongside the Augustinian, through God's power and wisdom to bring about every one of his purposes.¹¹

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¹¹ I am deeply indebted to Jordan Wessling, Paul Manata, Ilaria Ramelli, Jerry Walls, Jack Sanchez, and Joseph Shin for the help they provided me during the composition of this essay.

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