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ESSAYS

This section is devoted to essays on Thomistic theology, philosophy, scholarship, and topics related thereto.

ON ETERNAL HELL, AGAINST THE MURMURERS

By Dominic V. Cassella

In the thirteenth century, with the resurgence of Aristotle's writings in the West, a growing number of Christian philosophers began to propose that the cosmos and the totality of creatures were eternal and had no beginning in time. The theory grew in popularity as the Aristotelian commentaries from Averroes seemed to prove its veracity. To address this controversial issue, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote a small, three-thousand-word treatise titled *On the eternity of the world, against the murmurers*.

Aquinas begins the treatise by establishing that both those who argue for a beginning in time and those who argue for the eternity of the world agree that God could have

made something that has always existed. In fact, the Angelic doctor spends the entire essay arguing for the coherence of the view that God could have created a cosmos without a beginning and shows clearly that there is no contradiction in holding this opinion. Aquinas even concludes his work by quoting the Church Fathers who acknowledge that an eternal cosmos is possible in principle but ultimately contradicts the tradition and teaching of the Catholic Faith.

In his *Scriptum (Commentary on the Sentences II, d. 1, q. 1, a. 5)*, we read that there is a position “of those who say that everything besides God began to be, but that God nevertheless could have produced things from eternity. Thus, it could not be demonstrated that the world had a beginning, and this rather has been held and believed by divine revelation...And I agree with this position. For I do not believe a demonstrative argument to this effect can be made by us, just as we cannot do so with regard to the Trinity, even though it is impossible for the Trinity not to be.”

What we can take away from this debate and the writings of Thomas Aquinas is that the truths of revealed faith cannot be reasoned to. No matter how wise the philosophers, no one can use reason to arrive at the truth of the Trinity, the Incarnation, or the beginning of the world in time. While wise men will always arrive at the same mathematical conclusions or engineer the same buildings and rockets, truths of faith are entirely outside of our grasp. Faith is revealed; it is gratuitously given through the scriptures, and we are supposed to humbly accept these revealed truths and diligently ponder them.

With the resurgence of some of Origen's and St. Gregory of Nyssa's thoughts, an analogous debate has grown in popularity among Catholic and Orthodox Christians concerning an old opinion. Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith, articulated this theory in a 1995 article in which he said he relies “firmly upon the truth that all are saved.”^[1]

The doctrine that all shall be saved, known as universalism, is divided into two camps. The first is a soft, hopeful universalism whose proponents include (to varying degrees) Hans Urs von Balthasar,^[2] Kallistos Ware,^[3] Robert Barron,^[4] and Larry Chapp.^[5] This version of the universalist theory does not argue that Hell is an ontological impossibility for God and ultimately sits comfortably within the breadth of orthodox opinion. Instead,

it says that we can hope that all men have accepted the grace they need for eternal salvation and that Hell is empty (perhaps except for the fallen angels).

The second version of the universalist doctrine is a hard universalism, sometimes called simply from the Greek *Apocatastasis*. This is the belief that all will be restored into God, and none will suffer hell or punishment eternally. The major voices for this version of the theory come from David Bentley Hart,^[6] Aidan Kimel,^[7] and Jordan Daniel Wood.^[8]

For our purposes here, I would like to consider universalism only under the aspect of *apocatastasis* because it is the belief that hell is an ontological impossibility. In contrast to this, would be the Perditionist position which holds that God does save some people and damn others, but nevertheless, He could have saved all persons.

In the discussion between Universalists and Perditionists, the conclusion is not agreed upon. The only reason that the Perditionist can feasibly reject the Universalist's conclusion is if either the Universalist's logic is flawed, or his premises are flawed. So, by way of an overview, let us consider the Universalist's perspective more closely by examining their core premises.

First, they assert that God wills the salvation of all souls.^[9] Second, they argue that the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will collapses in the eternal state,^[10] meaning God's ultimate desire for salvation will be fully realized.

To understand this collapse, we must clarify the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will. Drawing from St. John Damascene's *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, the antecedent will refers to what God wills universally and absolutely, such as His desire for all people to be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4). The consequent will, however, takes into account human free will and specific circumstances, permitting certain evils to take place for the sake of a greater good. Universalists argue that this distinction collapses in eternity, where God's ultimate will must prevail, while Perditionists maintain that it persists, allowing for the reality of eternal damnation as part of God's ordered justice.

Additionally, the Universalist maintains that God creates for the sake of the persons He creates, implying a divine commitment to the individual's ultimate good.^[11]

Furthermore, Universalists contend that salvation from damnation is better for the subjective person than damnation, and thus God, in His goodness, would choose what is best for His creation on the individual level.^[12] Some might also infer that the Universalists believe this cosmos represents the best possible world that God could have created, reinforcing their view that eternal damnation is incompatible with divine perfection. These premises collectively form the foundation of their argument against the possibility of eternal condemnation.

These claims each lay the foundation for the Universalist concluding that God would not prepare eternal punishment for those justly damned. Of these premises or claims, only the first is shared by the Universalists and those who appeal to the tradition of eternal damnation. That God wills the salvation of all souls (1 Timothy 2:4) is an agreed premise, which may only carry slight variation and qualification between the two interlocutors.

From the Perditionist point of view, the truth of this premise comes from the truth of reason by which we learn that God's will is directed toward His Glory as its proper object, and this it has perfectly attained, never has not attained, and is in no danger of losing. So, while God does will the salvation of all souls, He also wills that there be no moral evil at all. Yet, in this cosmos, there is moral evil and that moral evil is allowed in order to attain the good of the whole ordered cosmos, by which God's glory is manifested.

In contrast to the Perditionist view of God's will for the salvation of all, from a Universalist perspective, the willing of the salvation of souls *is* the willing of the end of creation. God creates for the salvation of all. But such an understanding of the motives of creation—while questionable in itself—leads us directly to the second Universalist premise concerning the antecedent and consequent will.

Yes, God wills the salvation of souls, but a Perditionist may point out that God wills no evil at all. Are we not confronted with temporary evils daily? As I understand it, both the Universalist and the Perditionist believe these everyday evils can be understood given the distinction between an antecedent and a consequent will. However, unlike the Perditionist, the Universalist thinks this distinction does not hold in eternity.

The reason for the Universalist's denial of the antecedent-consequent will distinction as a sufficient explanation for those suffering eternal damnation is—as they claim—that the

antecedent and consequent will collapse into each other. The distinction of wills collapses because of their first premise that God creates for the salvation of each person in creation. As a Universalist understands it, the consequent will applies to those things that God allows in order to direct all persons to Salvation with Him. If the allowance of evil is to bring persons to salvation with Him, then there is no need for a consequent will to be distinct from the antecedent will in the end times.

The Perditionist will see this and say that the collapse of the antecedent and consequent will is nonsensical because the collapse is predicated on a false notion of the Divine motive for creation in the first place. God creates not for the persons He has created, but He creates out of Love of Himself. God directs the allowance of evil (the permissions of the consequent will) toward the Glory and Love of Himself—though the allowance of some evils may be to save souls so that God may be glorified. But, because of this, the antecedent will that wills God's Glory can have a consequent will that wills the Damnation of those Worthy of Damnation. In such a cosmos, the good of the whole creation is to manifest God's justice, mercy, and love, and this is willed to be done in a cosmos that has an eternal hell.

That God is capable of making a cosmos that has evil in it is self-evident: look around. That the evil in such a cosmos contributes to the Glory of God is also evident and agreed to on both sides. As Aquinas says in his *Summa* (ST III, Q. 1, a. 3, ad. 3), "For God allows evils to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom; hence it is written (Romans 5:20): 'Where sin abounded, grace did more abound.'" Nothing about this would change if the end of creation as a whole is the glorification of God. If the Universalist wants to challenge this, they have to say that God cannot be glorified by the eternal suffering of an individual person—and yet, it is clear that justice enacted does glorify God even if the one suffering justice does not delight in it.

In fact, as Boethius puts it in his *Consolation*, the wicked are more miserable when they escape punishment than when they are justly punished. Lady Philosophy explains that punishment, being an act of justice, carries an inherent goodness, while impunity, as an injustice, adds further evil to the wicked. She states, "the wicked have some good annexed when they are punished, to wit, the punishment itself, which by reason of justice is good, and when they are not punished, they have a further evil, the very impunity." Thus, the wicked who evade justice suffer greater misery, as their unpunished state lacks any redemptive participation in goodness and compounds their

spiritual wretchedness. This paradox underscores the ultimate impotence of evil and the inherent justice in the moral order.

But the Universalist will say, “it would be better if all men were saved and no man was left in Hell. So, would God not do what is better?”

But it would be better if no moral evil was present in the world at all, and yet we experience temporary moral evils every day. God, indeed, could have created a world where persons went from the beginning to the end of time without suffering any loss of “good where it ought to be” due to moral failure. Yet, that is not this creation. According to the Thomistic (perhaps even Scholastic generally) tradition, God could have freely made all men love Him in every thought, word, deed, and omission. God did not do this, and He allows moral evils and, by them, draws out greater goods—not necessarily greater goods for those committing the moral evils, but a greater good on the order of the cosmos as a whole.

To this, we might add that God is not limited by anything; He creates *ex nihilo*, and the *nihilo* cannot restrict God. And so, by reason, we can see that God has an infinite choice of cosmos from which to create, and each option is infinitely less good than Himself. For example, while Cosmos A may be better in relation to Cosmos B, both A and B are equal in their relation to God—that is, they are both infinitely less good than Him. So, when God chose to create the World that He did, He chose from a selection of options that were identical in the most important way—namely, that each possible cosmos is infinitely less good than God is. By His creating anything, He is gratuitously sharing His goodness.

The Universalist may say, “that is all well and good, but given that God does create this or that Cosmos, He must make it the best it can possibly be.”

Now, this premise may or may not be true, but the presence of evil in this temporal life demonstrates that evil is not necessarily contrary to the best possible cosmos, even if a Perditionist concedes the Universalist's objection. At this point, the Universalists will have to return to making the argument concerning the collapse of the antecedent-consequent will, or they must concede that eternal damnation cannot be proven to be contrary to what we know about the Triune God. If the former, the argument is running

in circles. If the latter, then the burden of proof rests in examining Scripture and tradition, which overwhelmingly sides with the belief in an eternal Hell.

The debate between Universalists and Perditionists ultimately hinges on conflicting understandings of God's will, justice, and the purpose of creation. Universalists assert that God's goodness and love necessitate universal salvation, interpreting the collapse of antecedent and consequent will as proof that eternal damnation is incompatible with divine perfection. Perditionists, however, argue that God's justice is also a reflection of His glory, and the presence of moral evil through sin and eternal damnation in creation serves to manifest both His mercy and justice throughout the cosmos. Thus, eternal hell is not a failure of divine love but an integral part of the ordered whole that glorifies God.

Now, unlike the debate concerning the eternity of the cosmos, where Thomas Aquinas argued for the logical consistency of the position, I have spent this time arguing for the non-demonstrative nature of the Universalist arguments. In fact, I do not think any Perditionists think that it would be a logical inconsistency if God wanted to create a cosmos with no eternal hell. Instead, both Universalists and Perditionists might think a cosmos without an eternal hell may be entirely fitting and possible for the Divine. However, unlike the Universalists, the Perditionist recognizes that an eternal hell and a loving God (1 John 4:7-12) are not in ontological tension. Given the lack of Universalists' ability to demonstrate the impossibility of hell, the only solution—as in the situation of the eternity of the world—is to look at the tradition and humbly ponder it.

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[1] Michael Pakaluk, “Ethicist says ghostwriter’s role in ‘Amoris’ is troubling,” Crux, January 16, 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2017/01/ethicist-says-ghostwriters-role-amoris-troubling>

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope: That All Men Be Saved?*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

[3] Kallistos Ware, “Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All,” *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), p. 193-215.

[4] “Dare We Hope? Resource Page,” Word on Fire Institute, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://www.wordonfire.org/hope/>

[5] Larry Chapp, “Universalism, Balthasar, the Massa Damnata, and the Question of Evangelization,” *Gaudium et Spes* 22, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://gaudiumetspes22.com/blog/universalism-balthasar-the-massa-damnata-and-the-question-of-evangelization>

[6] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[7] Aidan Kimel, Jr., *Destined for Joy: The Gospel of Universal Salvation* (Independently Published, 2022).

[8] Jordan Daniel Wood, “The Hell Debate at CUA,” Words in Flesh, published June 11, 2024, <https://jordandanielwood.substack.com/p/the-hell-debate-at-cua>

[9] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, p. 85-86. Hart argues that creation cannot be called good if there is any possibility of a human soul going into eternal punishment.

[10] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, p. 82. Here Hart takes issue with the distinction between consequent and antecedent will altogether. “No refuge is offered here by some specious distinction between God’s antecedent and consequent wills—between, that is, his universal will for creation apart from the fall and his particular will regarding each creature in consequence of the fall. Under the canopy of God’s omnipotence and omniscience, the consequent is already wholly virtually present in the antecedent. Nor, for the same reason, does it help here to draw a distinction between evils that are positively willed and evils that are providentially permitted for the sake of some greater good. A greater good is by definition a conditional and therefore relative good; its conditions are already and inalienably part of its positive content. Moreover, in this case, the evil by which this putative good has been accomplished must be accounted an eternally present condition within that good, since an endless punishment

is—at least for the soul that experiences it—an end intended in itself. This evil, then, must remain forever the “other side” of whatever good it might help to bring about.”

[11] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, p. 90. “So, if all are not saved, if God creates souls he knows to be destined for eternal misery, is God evil? Well, perhaps one might conclude instead that he is both good and evil, or that he is beyond good and evil altogether, which is to say beyond the supremacy of the Good; but, then again, to stand outside the sovereignty of the Good is in fact to be evil after all, so it all amounts to the same thing. But maybe every analogy ultimately fails.”

[12] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, p. 90 and other references above.

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