

MIGHT ALL BE SAVED?¹

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According to universalists, everyone will eventually enjoy eternal union with God. Many hope that universalism is true. But to their dismay, it faces a seemingly decisive objection: some people reject God. In this article, we show that this fact is not a decisive problem for universalism after all. We situate our argument within a framework of hope, and contend that the good news of universalism furnishes special reason to take a kindly view towards otherwise murky or speculative metaphysical hypotheses — hypotheses that not only remove a problem for universalism but also uncover novel defenses of the view.

*For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.
But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.*

- Frederick W. Faber, 1854

1. Introduction

Some feel certain that all shall be saved. The view is optimistic indeed. But is it *true*? Some suspect not, but nonetheless *hope* in soteriological universalism. This hope is laudable, but at first glance seems hard to sustain because it appears to be in tension with the plain facts: not

¹ Thanks to Craig Warmke, Patrick Kain, Jeffrey Brower, Michael Bergmann, Jashiel Resto Quiñones, two anonymous referees, Tom Senor, and audiences at Baylor University and the University of Notre Dame for helpful comments and critique. Disputes about universalism and related matters are long and storied in both theology and philosophy. We will not, in the body of this paper, interact much with the substance of those disputes, instead presenting our own framework and ideas. Readers interested in scholarly nuance may consult the footnotes for details and connections to extant literature.

everyone *wants* eternal union with God, and some even recoil at the thought. Such rejection of God seems inconsistent with salvation and a flourishing eternal union. So, the central questions of this article: Could it be that hoping for the salvation of all is reasonable? And could such an optimistic view be *true*?²

We say yes and yes.³ Here's the plan. First, we give precise voice to the tension noted above in the form of an inconsistent triad. Second, we survey extant philosophical responses to the triad, and briefly show why each is lacking.⁴ Third, we present our own reply. To foreshadow: we'll all be saved, but not because we all have responded in this life to God's call. Rather, we'll all be saved because, in certain relevant circumstances, we *would* respond. Our reply uses a notorious resource: truths about what people *would* do. Our argument here will be subject to all of the ill repute and weighty metaphysical baggage attached to that resource. Hope will play a key role in lightening the load. For we'll argue that a proper response to all of this is to hope that certain speculative metaphysical hypotheses are true, and that with such apt hope in place, the usual objections to those hypotheses are not nearly so impressive as they might seem.

Our arguments will ultimately defend soteriological universalism. They will also uncover important connections between hope and metaphysical theory. Metaphysics can feel esoteric

² Note God's response to Sarah in Genesis 18:14: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (NRSV — here and for all subsequent biblical quotations).

³ Rea (2022) argues against the rationality of unconditional considered hope in universalism without belief that universalism is true. Rea's argument aims to push readers one way or the other — into either dropping hope or adding belief. As will become evident, our arguments aim to push readers *from* mere hope *towards* belief.

⁴ Our focus here and throughout will be on philosophical treatments of our topics — we'll thus not interact much with the voluminous treatments on the matter from exegetical, systematic, or historical theology.

and far removed from matters of the heart. This is, we'll show, far from the truth. In fact, our deepest and most daring hopes can inform the substance of metaphysical theorizing.

2. An aporetic triad

2.1. The problem and how to solve it

A dense thicket of questions grows quickly around any discussion of God, faith, and salvation.⁵ We'll not attempt much pruning here, but will simply take it for granted that there is a perfect God and that eternal flourishing union with that God is our greatest good. For those of us who've done wrong, we'll call that union "salvation"; those who'll enjoy it are "saved". Saving faith, we'll say, is an appropriate response to God that is sufficient for being saved.⁶

Every person *could* be saved. But for that happy possibility to be actual, one standard view says, all would need saving faith. Every person *could* have saving faith too, we think. But as a matter of fact, not everyone does. Not everyone wants to be saved by God, and some don't even believe in God. How could it be, then, that all shall be saved? Perhaps we can *hope* for as much, and perhaps this is what God *wants*. But it seems incompatible with the plain facts and the apparent necessity of saving faith for salvation. Something must give.

⁵ A word on theological method and scope: we'll occasionally quote from the Christian Bible. And many points discussed will find an easy home within familiar Christian theological frameworks. But our *own* views will not rely on any distinctively Christian assumptions. We offer our arguments as a gift to theists of all stripes, suitable for adaptation and use in a variety of traditions.

⁶ We'll also assume that someone who's saved will neither spend eternity in hell nor be annihilated. Our conception of saving faith leaves open the precise contours of response here at play – doxastic, practical, affective, and so on. (For more, see Rettler 2018.) We're neutral on the ultimate source of saving faith; for all we say it could be initiated by God — or not. We are also neutral on whether an individual is saved at some particular moment (as when saying a prayer) or not. We are also neutral on whether people spend some amount of time in hell or purgatory.

Even the most hopeful among us should feel the force of this line of thought. But to see whether it should make us deny that all shall be saved, we'll need to regiment things a little more carefully. Here is one way to express the main points. There appears to be a tension between these two theses:

Universalism: Everyone will be saved.⁷

Rejection: Some will (when they die) lack saving faith.

We think the tension can be made explicit by appeal to this auxiliary thesis:

Link: If everyone will be saved, then everyone (when they die) has saving faith.⁸

Universalism, Rejection, and Link cannot all be true, and so together form an aporetic triad.⁹

Our task now is to motivate each thesis, and then evaluate the triad. Our evaluation has two elements. First, we'll argue that Link is false. Second, we'll contend that Universalism and Rejection are, after all, compatible. Our argument will rely on the following:

⁷ This does not entail that everyone must be saved, or that it is a necessary truth that everyone is saved.

More on this in Section 3.

⁸ Another way to draw out the tension is to argue that the conditional probability of Universalism on Rejection is low. The resources we deploy in resolving the aporetic triad may also be applied to this probabilistic formulation of the problem — just as traditional defenses and theodicies can be adapted in reply to probabilistic atheological arguments from evil — but we'll not argue for that claim here.

⁹ For a similar triad, see Talbott (1995).

Might Have Been: although some will (when they die) lack saving faith, all who die without saving faith would have had it had things gone slightly differently in any number of different circumstances — and this matters for actual salvation.

The first conjunct of Might Have Been is just Rejection.¹⁰ The second conjunct, in essence, says that for those who lack saving faith when they die, the actual world is the odd one out for them; in nearly all of the nearby worlds — worlds in which things unfold only slightly differently — they have saving faith when they die. The third conjunct says that the second conjunct figures into God's evaluation of those who lack saving faith when they die. (More detail to come on this in Section 3.)

We'll argue that the conjunction of Universalism and Might Have Been is possibly true. Since Might Have Been entails Rejection (its first conjunct), this will show that Universalism and Rejection could be both true. We'll end with some arguments for the actual truth of Might Have Been. These arguments will go beyond showing that Universalism and Rejection are compatible. They will, if successful, provide a positive case for Universalism.¹¹

But before doing any of that, we'll briefly motivate each of the triad's component theses. Our aim here is not to decisively establish them but rather to show that they're initially plausible.

¹⁰ Its second conjunct is, roughly, our Jolly Conjecture (to be discussed below). Its third conjunct is, roughly, Sufficiency (also discussed below). As stated, Might Have Been expresses the broad story we'll rely on. In what follows we'll tinker with the details (see, in particular, sections 3.2-3.5 for variations on the second conjunct that generate variations on Might Have Been).

¹¹ Our strategy here is in obvious debt to Plantinga's Free Will Defense as in Plantinga (1974: Chapter 9). Our arguments that Might Have Been is *possibly* true and that therefore Universalism and Rejection are compatible are analogous to a *defense*. Our arguments that Might Have Been is in fact true are analogous to a *theodicy*.

2.2. Universalism

It would be very good if universalism were true. If universalism is true, then even the very worst of us are not beyond redemption. Even the very worst of us will spend eternity in union with God: a beautiful story of divine love and mercy. Imagine Judas, having betrayed the Son of God, ultimately confessing, surrendering, being accepted into eternal union with God. Groeschel paints this picture:

... Judas remained his own worst enemy even to the end, walking past the place of crucifixion to hang himself. He had to walk near Calvary, since the whole area is not very large. Having destroyed his reputation, the whole engagement of his life, he could have turned around and gone to Calvary and knelt at the foot of the Cross and asked for forgiveness. Every artist in the world would have painted the scene. There would be a picture of the scene in almost every church, St. Judas Iscariot kneeling next to John at the foot of the Cross. In every large city there would be a large church named St. Judas the Penitent.¹²

The thought experiment is striking, even unsettling. But if universalism is true, then redemption like this is somehow the ultimate fate for all of us: not one sheep left behind. The lives we view as the most tragic, like Judas', could be the most profound and inspiring instances of mercy, redemption, and love. The point is this: if salvation is the best thing that can happen to any of us, then the hypothesis that we'll *all* be saved is the best fate one can imagine for humanity. The very thought of it should amaze us; we should long for its truth.

¹² Groeschel (1995: 97).

There is thus an important asymmetry between Universalism and just about any other hypothesis philosophers develop, evaluate, and argue for or against. Philosophers like to argue about whether there are numbers, whether we are wholly material beings, whether there is any fundamental existential quantifier, whether free will and determinism are incompatible, whether semantic facts supervene on physical facts, whether knowledge entails belief... (we could go on). It is rather easy to be indifferent to these hypotheses, to not *really* care (beyond wanting to be right, to win an argument, to secure a publication, and so on) whether they or their denials turn out to be true. It would be rather strange to hope that there are no numbers, or to long for knowledge to entail belief. Universalism isn't like that at all. Universalism does — and, more importantly, *should* — command our deepest hope and longing. On this normative dimension, Universalism has impressive credentials. We'll return to this point below.

That's all about whether we should *want* Universalism to be true. Are there any reasons to think that it *is* true, though? We're not big fans of drive-by proof-texting. But here are a few choice passages that the Christian may take as evidence that all of us will be saved (emphasis ours):

- 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as all die in Adam, so *all* will be made alive in Christ"
- Colossians 1:19-20: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all* things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."
- Romans 5:18: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and *life for all.*"

Philosophers and theologians have in recent years found other reasons in support of Universalism too, of course (that a perfectly loving and powerful God would and could see to it

that all are saved, for example).¹³ These, together with theological evidence, give the view some initial support.

Here is one final reason to look askance at any denial of Universalism. The problem of evil is bad enough. But it appears to be far worse if, in addition to suffering in life, some of us will be subject to eternal torment or annihilation.¹⁴

Despite Universalism's impressive normative credentials, rejecting it is probably the leading response to our aporetic triad.¹⁵ It'd certainly be nice if Universalism were true, says that response. But hope here parts ways with the facts, and we must, sadly, go with the facts.

This response is premature. The stakes are as high as can be, and our reasons to hope in Universalism are so overridingly strong, that we should look again and again at the evidence, trying our best to find a resolution to the aporetic triad that does not require that some will be forever damned or annihilated.¹⁶ The rest of this article is our attempt to carry out that task.

¹³ See, for example, Adams (1971), Adams (1975), Howard-Snyder (2003), Kershnar (2005), Knight (2006), Kronen and Reitan (2013), Reitan (2001), Reitan (2007), Talbott (1990), Talbott (1993), Talbott (1995), Talbott (1999), Talbott (2001), and Talbott (2014). Graves et. al. make an intriguing case for universalism with respect to all sentient animals. For critical discussion and useful distinctions see, especially, Murray (1999). Craig (1991 and 1993) and Seymour (1997) are important critical discussions of, especially, Talbott's universalism.

¹⁴ As in, for example, Lewis (2007: 232). For development of the point with special reference to eternal torment, see Buckareff and Plug (2013).

¹⁵ Even Lewis (2007: 238) — no Christian theist — calls Universalism a “fantasy” that involves “ignoring (or denying) crucial texts” and “downplaying the importance of sin.”

¹⁶ We here assume that if some have done wrong and not everyone will be saved, then some will either be forever damned or annihilated.

2.3. Rejection

Rejection is the thesis that not all come to saving faith before death. The main evidence for this thesis is the testimony of people who claim to lack saving faith. There are some 450-500 million professed atheists alive today.¹⁷ So it certainly seems as though nearly half a billion people claim to lack saving faith.¹⁸ Are all of them lying? Do they fail to recognize their own saving faith? That seems implausible, and uncharitable besides.

Rejection is not, note, the thesis that some people *currently* lack saving faith; it's the thesis that some people will *die* without saving faith. You might reject Rejection on the grounds that everyone — including the half a billion atheists — makes a (perhaps stealthy) deathbed confession of faith. But this is quite the leap. And it's not clear how else one might reject Rejection. We are not, therefore, optimistic about resolutions to the aporetic triad that involve rejecting Rejection.

2.4. Link

Link says that all are saved only if all come to saving faith while alive. Link is not, note, true by definition. For saving faith, as we're thinking of things, is not a response to God that is *necessary* for salvation; it is, rather, one that is *sufficient*.

Link is a generalization of the principle that God saves only those who respond in this life with saving faith. And this principle has some initial appeal; God saves those who *want* to be saved and who have in this life *asked* to be saved. So if *everyone* is to be saved, then *everyone*

¹⁷ Keysar (2017).

¹⁸ Even if belief in God is not strictly necessary for saving faith, we think lack of belief is strong evidence of the absence of saving faith. And even if that's not right, we note alternative paths to Rejection that derive, not from apparent disbelief, but from widespread patterns of behavior or affect.

must want to be saved and ask to be saved — in other words, everyone must in this life respond to God with saving faith.

For the Christian, a case for Link can be bolstered with some more drive-by proof texting:¹⁹

- Acts 16:31: “They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”
- Romans 10:9, 13: “... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”²⁰

There are more purely philosophical reasons to affirm Link as well. God wants to save people. But a saved person is a person in union with God, which union requires *response* to God. Salvation isn't God doting on a passive receptacle; it is more like an interactive and loving friendship, marriage, or parent-child relationship. Such relationships do not flourish without mutual activity. God does not and would not and must not save someone who does not engage in

¹⁹ We do not claim that these verses are *good* evidence for Link. Establishing such support is in fact a delicate matter requiring close reading and careful attention to context well beyond a quotation here or there from a few disparate books. That said, quoting isolated verses here or there from disparate books exemplifies, we think, a standard case for Link. Some Christians might also implicate the “Fourth Spiritual Law”: “We must place our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior in order to receive the gift of salvation.” This law derives, they say, from Ephesians 2:8–9: “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.”

²⁰ Note that moving from the plain content of these verses to Link requires a curious switcheroo — from, roughly, “if you x, you're saved” to “if you're saved, you x”.

that activity. That activity just is saving faith. So if all are saved, all must come to that saving faith in this life.²¹

A final reason to affirm Link goes like this. God isn't just a God of love. God is also perfectly just. And God's perfect justice demands appropriate punishment for wrongdoing — absent atonement. Atonement is, like loving relationships of the kind described above, a process that requires mutual activity. Someone is atoned for, the thought goes, only if she responds to God with saving faith. A just God would not save sinners who are unatoned for. And sinners who do not respond to God with saving faith are unatoned for, and so not saved. Thus, if not all have saving faith, not all are saved; we need only contrapose from there to arrive at Link as stated.²²

Thus, an initial case for Link. This ends our brief tour of the aporetic triad, some easy answers, and some reasons to be unsatisfied with those answers. It is now time to provide a more convincing resolution.

²¹ Murray (1999): 58-61 proposes an argument along these lines in terms of creaturely autonomy. For critical discussion see Reitan (2001). There is a kind of easy Universalism that responds to all this as follows: to be saved is such a great good that God would do just about anything to save everyone — even at the price of reduced human response or mutual relating to God, and even the price of reduced commitment to justice. Love wins. And in this case, love wins out over either deeply mutual divine-human relations or over justice. We won't argue the point at any length here, but don't find that kind of easy Universalism promising. We'd rather find a way around Link that doesn't require diminishing or downplaying either God's commitment to mutual divine-human relations or to justice.

²² For penetrating discussion of this view of divine justice and its connections to punishment, see Talbott (1993): 153-160.

3. Luck and salvation

3.1. Luck: good and bad

Our solution deploys the notion of luck. So we begin with a few warmup remarks about the results of good or bad luck. Let us say that an action or attitude is lucky when one's having it is accidental, coincidental, or fortuitous.²³ For example, suppose one drives while under the influence of alcohol, and swerves across a normally very busy road. But it just so happens that during that time, the road is empty. We'd judge the driver as doing something morally wrong because the fact that they didn't hit anyone was lucky — that the road was empty and that they didn't hit anyone was fortuitous. On the other hand, sometimes we judge someone less harshly because they were unlucky — their doing something harmful depended on unfortunate and accidental factors beyond their control. For example, suppose someone throws a glass bottle into a recycling bin, which injures a small bird hiding at the bottom. Their harming the bird is unlucky, because it is an unfortunate coincidence that it was there.

Many would think that the drunk driver is still morally blameworthy for driving drunk despite not hitting anyone, because they were lucky that they didn't. In nearby worlds — what didn't happen but very nearly did, in other words — there were other drivers, and the drunk driver harmed them. Many would also think that the recycler is not morally blameworthy for harming the bird, because they were just unlucky that the bird was there. In nearby worlds, the bottle doesn't hit the bird, and no small animal comes to harm.

We share these reactions. And we wonder: how should we think of someone who lacks saving faith as a matter of bad luck? Consider two situations.

First is Alex, who grew up with religious parents who urged her towards saving faith. When Alex was 12, she went to a summer camp. Walking to dinner the first night, Alex

²³ There is a voluminous literature on luck and its proper analysis, interaction with which is far beyond the purview of this article. For a helpful and opinionated survey that draws connections to literature on both moral and epistemic luck, see Coffman (2015): Chapter 1.

overheard two counselors talking, and caught just a few words: “I know God doesn’t really exist...” The words planted a seed of doubt in Alex’s mind that grew, and she eventually came to reject God without ever looking back. Suppose that in all the nearby worlds in which Alex *doesn’t* overhear only that part of the conversation — either it’s quieter, or she catches more context, or it doesn’t happen, etc — she retains the saving faith of her youth. Alex is *unlucky*, then, in actually lacking saving faith.

How would a perfect God react to all this? As follows: God knows, not just what Alex does and is, but what she would have done and would be. God knows, that is, just how unlucky Alex was, and just how easily it might have been that Alex had saving faith. God, taking this knowledge into account, would judge Alex quite a bit less harshly than if she were, say, a recalcitrant non-believer in all of the nearby worlds. We are not (yet) claiming that in light of these modal facts Alex would in fact be saved. Rather, the point is this: facts beyond what Alex has actually done are at least relevant to correctly describing and evaluating her disposition towards God.

Second is Sam, who didn’t hear anything good about God until the age of 16 years. Sam’s mother taught that all religions were evil cults run by greedy charlatans. Sam was primed to reject God, and did. In fact, in all nearby worlds in which Sam has the mother they in fact have, they reject God. But in all the closest worlds in which Sam is raised by someone else — any of 1,000 different people — they come to saving faith. Of course, Sam had no choice about which mother adopted them. Their having the mother they in fact have is *unlucky* with respect to exhibiting saving faith. Given our reactions to other cases of luck, we ought to say that God knows just how unlucky Sam was, and just how easily Sam might have had saving faith. God, taking bad luck into account, would judge Sam quite a bit less harshly than if Sam were, say, a recalcitrant non-believer in all of the nearby worlds. Again, facts beyond what Sam actually does are plainly relevant to correctly describing and evaluating Sam’s disposition towards God.

Our warmup remarks thus far disclose this truth: in describing and evaluating someone’s disposition towards God, it is important to look beyond what that person actually does,

especially when what is in fact true is a matter of good or bad luck. It is tempting to form snap judgements of character on the basis of what actually happens. Such judgements are unwise. A more promising approach involves looking at other nearby worlds as well, and using what goes on there in describing and evaluating someone's *disposition* or deepest and most fundamental stance towards God.

So, what happens in nearby worlds matters for God's judgment of people, perhaps because it reveals their true dispositions — their modally robust attitudes towards God.²⁴ And if what happens in nearby possible worlds matters for God's judgment of people, and God's judgment of people determines whether people enter into eternal union with God, then it follows that what happens in nearby possible worlds matters for salvation. Actual saving faith isn't the only thing that's important for salvation. Sometimes a person's lack of saving faith is a matter of bad luck. God knows what very nearly was the case and therefore knows when someone's lacking saving faith is a matter of luck. God can use that knowledge in determining whether they shall be saved.

But what about people that only *have* saving faith as a matter of luck? Should God on that basis *deny* them salvation? We could answer in two ways. First, we could say that God wants all to be saved, and so looks for every excuse to save people, consistent with love and justice and so on. With a God like that, there may be asymmetries here between good and bad luck. Second, we could simply say 'yes'. God wouldn't grant salvation to those who have saving faith merely as a matter of good luck. Not much follows from this, though, unless someone actually meets that description. We'll argue below that no one does.

²⁴ For arguments that moral responsibility more generally turns at least in part on what we would freely do in counterfactual situations, see Zimmerman 2002; for critical discussion see Hartman 2017: Chapter 4.

3.2. From bad luck to salvation for all

The first step in our resolution of the aporetic triad was to argue that what might well have been matters for God's judgment of people. In particular, whether someone has saving faith in nearby worlds matters for God's judgment of them in the actual world.

The second step is to argue from that first step to Might Have Been and thus to Universalism. The rough sketch of the argument is that God wants all to be saved, and so makes sure that everyone either actually or very nearly exhibits saving faith, and then God — knowing all this — saves everyone.

We'll introduce some terms to aid in presentation.

Someone is unluckily faithless if and only if: though she does not have saving faith, she does have saving faith at all or many nearby worlds.²⁵ Sufficiency says this: necessarily, if someone is unlucky faithless, she is saved. (Recall that if someone has saving faith, she is saved.) Someone is secure, finally, if and only if: she either has saving faith or is unlucky faithless.

A few remarks on unlucky faithlessness are in order to elaborate on the bare definition given above. We'll explain the idea using two frameworks — counterfactuals and dispositions.²⁶

Salvifically relevant counterfactuals, let us say, are counterfactuals like these:

- Were Heathrow to have slept in on June 3, 1988, then Heathrow would have eventually come to saving faith

²⁵ For those who like variables: someone S is unlucky faithless at a world W iff: S does not have saving faith at W, but for every (or many) worlds W* near to W, S does have saving faith at W*. In the sequel and for ease of reading, we'll suppress such formal expansion.

²⁶ On some views about the relationship between modal facts, counterfactuals, and dispositions, these elaborations are equivalent. We take no stance on that point, but offer them in the hopes that they'll further sharpen focus on our target concept.

- Were Heathrow's first wife a little less kind on just one occasion, then Heathrow would have eventually come to saving faith
- Were Heathrow's first wife a little *more* kind on just one occasion, then Heathrow would have eventually come to saving faith
- Were it the case that Heathrow's mother received an "A-" in her high school geography course (instead of an "A"), Heathrow would have eventually come to saving faith

To be unluckily faithless is to be without saving faith though a vast range of counterfactuals like the above are true of one — for it to be the case that, had things been only *slightly* different, one would have had saving faith. One can think of unlucky faithlessness strictly in terms of salvifically relevant counterfactuals and leave it there; philosophers unattracted to talk of possible worlds may find this amenable.

Another elaboration. Dispositions involve a tendency towards an outcome, given a triggering condition. Fragility, for example, is a disposition to (among other things) shatter when struck. Some dispositions are manifested; the triggering condition obtains and the outcome happens, as when a fragile vase is struck and shatters. Some dispositions are unmanifested; they're there, to be sure, but the relevant outcomes don't happen because the relevant triggers don't happen. A disposition is profligate, let us say, just if it has a mighty host of triggering conditions. Our disposition to think about food when starving is profligate; when we're starving, just about any circumstance at all will prompt thoughts of food.

To be unluckily faithless is to have a profligate but unmanifested disposition towards saving faith. Unmanifested: the unluckily faithless have no saving faith. Profligate: for them, there are many triggers for saving faith. Indeed, just about any change to the circumstances of the unluckily faithless would trigger a plunge into saving faith.

Let's turn to security. Here, ordered by logical strength, are three provocative conjectures:

Tame Conjecture: possibly, everyone is secure.

Jolly Conjecture: actually, everyone is secure.

Extravagant Conjecture: necessarily, everyone is secure.

Recall our aporetic triad: Universalism (Everyone will be saved), Rejection (Some will [when they die] lack saving faith), and Link (If everyone will be saved, then everyone [when they die] has saving faith.)

We'll describe three responses to the triad – three variations on Might Have Been. Each will involve the rejection of Link and the acceptance of Universalism and Sufficiency; each will deploy exactly one of the three conjectures. We will later argue that, given that it would be a great and wonderful thing were Universalism true, we have special reason to not only hope that it is true but also to regard it in a favorable epistemic light. We recommend that readers keep this hopeful disposition in mind while considering the conjectures and the evidence for and against.

A word, though, on Sufficiency. According to Sufficiency, anyone who is faithless as a matter of bad luck is saved. God knows, of course, who is faithless in a robust, resilient kind of way, and who is faithless merely as a matter of bad luck. The actions we perform in lucky or unlucky circumstances, we all agree, do not reveal our true character or true dispositions. It's what we do across a wider range of scenarios that discloses our character most deeply. God, says Sufficiency, responds to faithlessness that is merely a matter of bad luck with mercy and counts it as saving faith. We think this is just what a perfect God would do. The Alex and Sam cases given above help motivate this judgment. Here is one more:

You manage — with careful attention to benevolence, justice, and sound gustatory judgment — an award-winning kitchen. Your star chef has been beleaguered all day, her life made miserable by a stray fly that won't leave her alone. At the moment she is about

to put the cayenne pepper into the *soup du jour*, the fly lands in her eye and bites — hard. Distressed, she pays no attention to how much cayenne pepper she’s adding, and pours in 10 times what the recipe calls for. Just before she’s to taste it, the fly bites again, this time her ear. The soup is served without her tasting it, and customer mouths are on fire.

You know this: were things to have gone just a little bit differently, it would have all been fine. If only the chef had not been bitten at all, or had only been bitten once, then the soup would have been up to its usual and impressive quality, or at least would not have been served without warning. Would you comp the chef’s dessert at the end of the shift, as has been your custom? Would you retain her in your employ?

We would. And attending to the modal facts here — taking into account just how unlucky the chef’s failure has been, that is — does not implement any undue priority of, say friendship over justice. Indeed, a sober evaluation of the chef’s performance that night *requires* taking those modal facts into account. Similarly, we think, a benevolent God would evaluate human beings in a similarly charitable way, without any injury to justice. A God like that would look beyond the actual world and share with the unluckily faithless the good of salvation.

You may object that the chef’s spoiling of the soup is a mere accident, and that actually rejecting God or failing to have saving faith is a far worse offense — more like a felony than mere negligence. Such serious offenses, the thought goes, cannot be papered over with a charitable glance at nearby worlds. We’re not convinced, and a modification of the case will show why. Let’s say the chef in fact added the extra pepper intentionally out of the briefest moment of irritation prompted by the biting fly. But let’s also say that were virtually anything to have gone differently there would have been no extra pepper in the soup. Would you still comp the items and retain the chef?

We would. Intentional spoiling of the soup would require, of course, forgiveness and redemption. You couldn’t debrief over dessert without serious conversation about what

happened. And what happened is indeed far more serious than only accidentally spoiling the soup by knocking over the cayenne pepper. But if the offense really is that modally fragile, the correct response would still be one of mercy. Similarly, we hypothesize, a benevolent God would look beyond what the unluckily faithless actually do and bring them into eternally flourishing union.²⁷ Rejecting God merely by a stroke of bad luck wouldn't show any strong or stable disposition at war with such union. Quite the opposite, in fact: the most stable dispositions of the merely unluckily faithless — as indicated by their saving faith in nearby worlds — result in responding to God with saving faith.

Thus, an initial case for Sufficiency. We will revisit Sufficiency shortly; but it is now time to show how, together with various conjectures, that thesis can resolve our aporetic triad.

3.3. A tame response

Is it *possible* that everyone is secure — that Tame Conjecture is true? It seems so. It seems that it is *metaphysically possible* that everyone either has saving faith or is unluckily faithless, and so it *could* have been that everyone who needs it either has saving faith or is unluckily faithless.

Consider, for example, a world with only one creature who is unluckily faithless. If such a world is possible, then Tame Conjecture is true. And in such a world, given Sufficiency, its one creature is saved.

Note that we haven't (yet) argued that everyone is in fact saved. Nor have we argued that every actual person could have been saved. But the conjunction of Tame Response and Sufficiency can already help us make headway towards resolving our aporetic triad. For if it is so much as *possible* that everyone is saved even though some do not have saving faith upon dying,

²⁷ *How* God does this is an important question about the mechanics of Universalism (for more on which, see 3.6). This paper is neutral on its answer.

then it is *possible* that Universalism and Rejection are both true and that Link is therefore false.²⁸

We have in the Tame Response, then, a defense. It is a story that *could* be true and that shows that Universalism and Rejection are compatible. That much – like a mere defense in reply to an atheological argument from evil – is interesting enough, even for readers who reject the Jolly and Extravagant responses to be discussed below. But we can do even better. We can offer something closer to a theodicy.

3.4. A jolly response

The Jolly Response also affirms Sufficiency, and adds to the mix Jolly Conjecture, according to which everyone is in fact secure. It follows from the conjunction of Sufficiency and Jolly Conjecture that everyone will in fact be saved. Universalism, according to this response, isn't just possible. It is true. This consequence isn't tame at all; it is contentious, and just about the best news you've ever heard.

It remains for us to argue for Jolly Conjecture. Where a proposition is *feasible* if and only if God can weakly actualize a world in which it is true,²⁹ our argument has two steps:

- a) If Jolly Conjecture is feasible, then it is true.

²⁸ We're here assuming an implicit necessity operator in front of Link; and this is fitting, if the conflict between Rejection, Universalism, and Link is supposed to be more than merely contingent.

²⁹ God strongly actualizes a proposition P just if God causes P to be true; God weakly actualizes a proposition P just if God strongly actualizes a proposition P* such that: were God to strongly actualize P*, P would be true. For more on feasibility, strong actualization, and related matters, see Plantinga 1974: 172-174 and Flint 1998: 51-54. Kvanvig (2011): 57-60 offers some helpful connections between a standard Molinist framework (as in Plantinga and Flint) and questions about universalism and the doctrine of hell.

- b) Jolly Conjecture is feasible
- c) Therefore, Jolly Conjecture is true (from a and b).

We'll support (a) and (b) in turn.

On behalf of (a): it is, given Sufficiency, quite plausible that it is better that Jolly Conjecture be true rather than false. Sufficiency and Jolly Conjecture together entail that all are saved — a fine outcome indeed. But note that the claim that it is better that Jolly Conjecture be true rather than false is compelling even without Sufficiency. Rejecting God or failing to have saving faith is bad. Rejecting God in a deep or stable or modally robust way is worse than doing so only in a fragile and unlucky way. It is better if the faithless are only unluckily faithless. In such a scenario, there is no *deep* or *stable* or *modally robust* rejection of God. All such rejection (or lack of saving faith) would be, at most, modally fragile. And so it is better that Jolly Conjecture be true rather than not.

Now, suppose that Jolly Conjecture is within God's power to strongly actualize. God *can* bring it about that Jolly Conjecture is true. And it is better that Jolly Conjecture be true rather than false. The conjunction of the two previous sentences is a strong reason to think that Jolly Conjecture is true. And so, if the conjecture is feasible, it is true.

On behalf of (b): note first that (b) does not require that God can *strongly* actualize a world where all have saving faith. Perhaps God can't do that.³⁰ But it doesn't follow that God

³⁰ We say "perhaps", because our argument here does not require the claim that follows. But here is a reason to think God cannot strongly actualize a world in which all have saving faith: saving faith requires a free exercise of the will, which in turn is incompatible with there being circumstances in eternity past (a divine decree, for example) that necessitate a given outcome. If this is right, then God is not at liberty to strongly actualize just any old possible world — a familiar point from Plantinga (1974). The view here — roughly, incompatibilism about free will and determinism, plus the view that saving faith requires free

can't strongly actualize a world where all either have saving faith *or* are unluckily faithless. We think *that* feat is much more likely to be within God's power. Here's a story about how that might go:

Assume with Molinists a division within God's 'moments of knowing'.³¹ At the first moment, God knows all the necessary truths. At the second, God knows various truths about what instantiations of creaturely essences freely would do in various circumstances.³² These are the (notorious) counterfactuals of creaturely freedom — hereafter 'CCFs'. They are contingent. But they are fixed in the order of God's knowing *before* God has chosen which essences to instantiate.³³ Some essences involved in the CCFs are like this: were they instantiated, their instantiations would be faithless in a modally robust way. Others are like this: were they instantiated, their instantiations would have saving faith. Yet others are like this: were they instantiated, their instantiations would be faithless, but unluckily so. If there are essences of these three kinds, God can decree that the only essences that are instantiated are of the second and third variety. It is open to God, that is, to ensure the truth of Jolly Conjecture.

Are there essences of these three kinds? It seems so; why wouldn't there be? Are there enough to go around — to populate a world as rich and teeming with variety as ours? Again, it

will — does not preclude (b). It does not preclude, that is, the claim that God could strongly actualize a world where all have saving faith or are unluckily faithless.

³¹ The literature on Molinism is vast. For a primer on the view, the many objections to it, and proponents' replies, see the essays in Perszyk (2012); see also Perszyk (2013).

³² Our modal terminology (worlds, essences, instantiations of essences, and so on) closely follows that in Plantinga (1974). For explanation and defense see, especially, Chapters 4-5.

³³ CCFs are tricky beasts, and the very thought of them spawns controversy. For one brief but illuminating treatment of one key question — whether they can be *explained* — see Pruss and Rasmussen (2014).

seems so, given just how many essences there are.³⁴ If both of these seemings are right, then Jolly Conjecture is feasible after all. We will later defend Jolly Conjecture against some objections, which will further bolster our case for the Jolly Response.

3.5. An extravagant response

According to the Extravagant Response, Sufficiency and Extravagant Conjecture are true. Note that we don't need the Extravagant Response to establish the compatibility of Universalism and Rejection; the Tame Response does that. And we don't need Extravagant Conjecture to establish the truth of Universalism; the Jolly Response does that. What the Extravagant response adds to these other replies is a kind of modal robustness. On this response, it's not just the case that all can be saved or that all shall be saved — all *must* be saved.³⁵

We're not convinced by the Extravagant Response. But we'll say something on its behalf and submit it as a hopeful alternative worth further consideration.

Consider an argument very much like the one discussed above:

- d) If Extravagant Conjecture is feasible, then it is true.
- e) Extravagant Conjecture is feasible
- f) Extravagant Conjecture is true

On behalf of (d): it is, given Sufficiency, quite plausible that it is better that Extravagant Conjecture be true rather than false. Sufficiency and Extravagant Conjecture together entail that

³⁴ For arguments that there are *infinitely* many creaturely essences which would in turn support our contentions here, see Rasmussen (2004).

³⁵ The universalism supported here would be of a piece, then, with that in Talbott (1990a) or Talbott (2014): 191. On various modal flavors of universalism, see Kvanvig (2011): 43-61.

all must be saved — a fine outcome indeed. But note that the claim that it is better that Extravagant Conjecture be true rather than false is compelling even without Sufficiency. For everyone in every world is better off if, necessarily, the faithless are only unluckily faithless. In such a scenario, it is *impossible* that there be a *deep* or *stable* or *modally robust* rejection of God while alive. It is necessary that all such rejection (or lack of saving faith) be, at most, modally fragile. Rejecting God or failing to have saving faith is bad. Rejecting God in a deep or stable or modally robust way is worse than doing so only in a fragile and unlucky way. And on Extravagant Conjecture, such rejections are impossible. And so it is better that Extravagant Conjecture be true than not. Now, suppose that Extravagant Conjecture is within God's power to strongly actualize. That God *can* bring it about that Extravagant Conjecture is true and that it is better that Extravagant Conjecture be true rather than false together give strong reason to think that Extravagant Conjecture *is* true. And so, if the conjecture is feasible, it is true.

On behalf of (e): again note that (e) does not require that God can strongly actualize a world where all have saving faith. All it requires is that in every possible world, everyone either has saving faith or is unluckily faithless. We have already argued that there are enough essences that either have saving faith or are such that their faithlessness is modally fragile to populate a world. Then we ask: could God — given God's nature and attributes and the truth of Sufficiency — create a world with robustly faithless people *even though* God could have instead created a world with only faithful people and unluckily faithless people? If not, then Extravagant Conjecture is true. And it is true because God's nature does not allow God to actualize a world where modally robust faithless essences are instantiated.

We propose that the Extravagant Response is, for all we know, true. We can't rule it out. Moreover, reasons parallel to those we've given in favor of the earlier responses also support the Extravagant Response. But we're not committed to the Extravagant Response. Our view is compatible, then, with the existence of worlds in which someone is in need of salvation but neither exemplifies saving faith nor is unluckily faithless. But none of those worlds are the actual world.

We began with an aporetic triad. We've offered three replies to that triad that challenge Link in various ways. If Sufficiency is true, then on those responses Might Have Been — and so also, Universalism — are either possibly, actually, or necessarily true. One might well wonder *how* Universalism is true in those situations. How, precisely, does it come to be that all are saved even when Rejection is true?³⁶ We don't know. And we don't propose to speculate further here. Our Universalist arguments are compatible with all sorts of provocative hypotheses. But deciding between those hypotheses isn't the point of this article. We have tried, instead, to resolve the aporetic triad.

3.6. Other Universalist responses

Before we briefly compare and contrast our approach with that of other universalists, it will be useful to distinguish universalist *reasons* and universalist *mechanisms*. To give reasons is to say *why* God might save everyone — by arguing, for example, that God's nature is incompatible with ultimately rejecting anyone. To propose mechanisms is to say *how* it is that God saves everyone — by suggesting, for example, that God offers everyone a second chance after death and everyone responds. There are, in fact, multiple “*how*” questions in the neighborhood. One is the question of how God could save those who die without saving faith. Second chance views address this question. Another is how God could ensure that everyone is indeed saved.³⁷ It is this question that our proposed mechanism addresses in two steps. Step 1: God takes into account, not just actual saving faith, but also the modal status of faithlessness, counting unlucky faithlessness as, well, unlucky. Step 2: God instantiates only those creaturely essences whose

³⁶ For a helpful discussion of the “means to save all”, see Kronen and Reitan (2013): 42-44. Their conception of *means* closely tracks what we will below call *mechanisms*.

³⁷ These questions are not the same. It might be that everyone gets a second chance (and so one mechanism proposed by universalists obtains) and yet not everyone takes that second chance to come to saving faith.

instantiations would either come to saving faith or be unluckily faithless. Note that the second chance universalist might want to adopt something like Step 2 to ensure that her view in fact guarantees Universalism.

A complete defense of Universalism will likely include both projects. After having given an initial case that God would want to save everyone, proposing a mechanism can remove barriers to disbelief and show that Universalism is possible or workable.

This article falls largely within the mechanism category. We propose that God can bring about the salvation of all by decreeing which essences to actualize such that all come to saving faith or are unluckily faithless. Our proposed mechanism is consistent with various reasons given as to why God might save all. And as noted, it is consistent with various proposed mechanisms too – there is no contradiction in supposing, for example, that a second chance mechanism obtains and that God also has selected for actualization only creaturely essences that enjoy the right counterfactual profile. As for universalist reasons, our main contribution has not been a positive case for Universalism. It has been, instead, to remove an important barrier to belief in Universalism. Our main task, then, is analogous to a defense or theodicy given in reply to an atheistic argument from evil.

One result from our discussion is that Universalism and Rejection are compatible. Why does that result matter, given that other universalists have already established that compatibility (more on their views in a second)? As follows. First, some people reject other universalist views but still want to be universalists; they may find our proposal useful or plausible, despite the blemishes they see in extant universalist proposals. Second, our view bolsters other universalist views, by, for example, providing reasons that God might enact the mechanisms those views posit, or a supplementary mechanism to enact alongside them.

Having mentioned alternative universalist views, we'll now say a bit about how our project interacts with them.

Marilyn McCord Adams gives reasons for Universalism and an implicit reply to the aporetic triad. Her view implies the falsity of Link on the grounds that God's supreme love for

human persons is inconsistent with some of the objects of that love being sent to eternal torment: “an omniscient, all-loving God would not willingly condemn some” (247-248).³⁸

Thomas Talbott also gives reasons; he rejects Link on the grounds that God’s mercy doesn’t allow for eternal damnation.³⁹

Our view is compatible with these positive reasons-based cases for Universalism, and with others that derive from, say, the nature of divine love, mercy, or justice, or from scriptural exegesis. Perhaps God’s love – per Adams – motivates God to actualize a world containing only people who have saving faith or are unluckily faithless. Perhaps God’s mercy – per Talbott – motivates God to actualize a world containing only people who have saving faith or are unluckily faithless.

Buckareff and Plug, and Kronen and Retain, reject Link but accept that saving faith is required for salvation; they just think people can come to saving faith after death.⁴⁰ So, they argue that God gives people in hell the choice of whether to stay. These answer one mechanism question; God offers universal salvation through extra chances to come to saving faith, and everyone eventually says yes. The view offered in this paper is consistent with these views but independent of and does not entail them. So also with other mechanism views.

To see why our view does not *require* second chances, consider what the second-chancer says about how people come to enjoy salvation: after rejecting God for a lifetime, they die. God gives them a second chance – an opportunity to unite with God. And if they turn it down, God tries again – three, four, five times, whatever it takes. What the view on offer says is that people come to enjoy salvation, not because they exhibit saving faith in this life, but because they *would* have exhibited it. God needn’t present them with another opportunity *later* because they have

³⁸ Adams (1971): 247-248.

³⁹ Talbott (1993).

⁴⁰ Buckareff and Plug (2005) and Kronen and Retain (2013).

already been presented with millions of opportunities *modally nearby*. And it is on the basis of having saving faith in those nearby opportunities that God grants them salvation.

The view on offer does not require second chances, but it does make the second chance view more plausible. First, the second-chancer may want to give an account of why God gives people second chances. She may of course appeal to divine love or mercy; we have no problem with that. But the second chance view is made even more plausible if the reason God gives everyone more chances after death is that their lack of faith is so incredibly unlucky. Another way the view on offer bolsters the second chance view is that it helps make sense of why the second chance view counts as a *universalist* view in the first place. Why think that there's nobody who, after billions of chances, still rejects God? A very good answer is that every faithless person's lack of faith was so modally fragile that it doesn't take much to change their mind, and God uses knowledge of what people would have done to determine which essences to actualize.

So, the view on offer is a new answer to the question of how all might be saved, and provides a mechanism for God to do so: pay attention to what people choose in nearby worlds, and only actualize creaturely essences whose instantiations would either come to saving faith or be unluckily faithless. This response is consistent with other universalist views, but it doesn't entail and isn't entailed by them. It does, however, cohere nicely with them, providing support for their main claims.

4. Objections and replies

4.1. What about scriptures and creeds?

Our goal in this article is not to defend Universalism against all objections. Nor has our primary focus been on theology proper or cases for or against Universalism from scripture or tradition. But brief remarks about theological worries are in order.⁴¹ We'll consider a version of this

⁴¹ There is a vast literature on Christian theological cases for and against Universalism. For a recent and universalist-friendly treatment of many of the relevant issues, see Hart (2019).

objection framed within a Christian framework; but our replies may, we hope, find expression within other traditions too.

For anyone inclined to affirm historical teachings of the Christian church — as captured by the ecumenical creeds or a plain reading of the relevant scriptures — Universalism may seem like a no-go. For it is written: “Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”⁴² And it is furthermore written: “And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.”⁴³

We reply first by inviting worried readers to take our arguments in this spirit: they reflect part of what “unaided reason” has to say on the matter. Perhaps a total assessment of the situation requires consulting revelation or tradition too. But it is consistent with *that*, and even with the claim that Universalism falters on the total evidence, that it is quite probable indeed on the evidence supplied by reason alone.

Second, revelation and tradition require careful interpretation. Surface readings are unlikely to provide decisive evidence. We’ll illustrate with examples keyed to the scripture and creed quoted above.

The line from St. Matthew’s gospel completes the parable of the sheep and the goats. And the correct procedure for “exporting” from a parable into straight-up Biblical or systematic theology is notoriously contentious and obscure. In the parable, anyone who gave no meat to the hungry or water to the thirsty would appear to be damned to eternal hellfire; and those who

⁴² Matthew 25: 45-46. See also 2 Thessalonians 1:9.

⁴³ Athanasian Creed, Articles 43-44. See also the 9th Anathema from The Anathemas of the Emperor Justinian Against Origen: “If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema.”

clothed the needy and fed the hungry inherit the kingdom of heaven. But it would be premature to conclude that we could simply delete “in the parable” and still express a truth. It’s not as though this parable teaches that as long as you clothe the needy you’ll go to heaven, for example, or that anyone who fails to give meat to the hungry goes to hell. (How much meat must one give? How frequently? Will tofu suffice?)

The line from the Athanasian Creed might *seem* on its face to imply that hell is eternally populated. But it doesn’t, unless one adds the assumption that some have “done evil” in the target sense (that all Fs are eternally damned doesn’t imply that anyone is eternally damned without the auxiliary premise that there are some Fs – a point that could be easily missed for anyone in the grips of Aristotelian categorical logic). And *that* auxiliary claim just isn’t in the creed. Indeed, if either Jolly Conjecture or Extravagant Conjectures is correct, then there’s a case to be made that the auxiliary claim isn’t even true at all. All of this is good news for anyone attracted to both Universalism and to the view that the Creed is without error; the optimists among us may even suspect that, in drafting a creed with such unintended interpretative loopholes or possibilities, the Church was here saved from unwitting error.

These remarks about the subtleties of interpretation are not decisive, nor are they intended to be.⁴⁴ But they carve out space for continued inquiry into Universalism for readers who aspire to be faithful to the teachings of scripture or tradition.

⁴⁴ For a significantly more careful and universalist-friendly treatment of texts like these, see Talbott (1992b), Talbot (1995) and, especially, Kronen and Reitan (2013): Chapter 4.

4.2. The theory requires a heterodox view of saving faith

In our view, recall, saving faith is an appropriate response to God that is sufficient for being saved. Many details are left open. So a worry arises: can those with substantive theological commitments about the nature of saving faith find our arguments helpful or persuasive?⁴⁵

They can. Here is how we'll argue the point. We'll identify two prominent and broad families of views about saving faith and show that our arguments are compatible with each of them and their motivating intuitions. This is strong evidence that our arguments have wide traction and do not rely on idiosyncratic or theologically dubious assumptions about the nature of saving faith. They are, in an important sense, neutral. In short: if Arminians and Calvinists can both accept our arguments – and we'll show they can – then our arguments command wide interest.

Some views about saving faith – call them *Arminian* – go like this: God's grace shines down on all. But it is effective – brings about actual salvation – only for those who freely choose to accept it. Salvation consists in both divine action and human reaction. If someone is unsaved, it is not because God hasn't shined down grace on them; it is because they have freely chosen not to accept that grace, and God has respected their free choice. God's respect for human autonomy is an essential and driving intuition behind Arminian views.

Our view is consistent with Arminian views and their essential and driving intuition. God respects the free choice of people who don't accept God's grace. God doesn't coerce or force anyone to accept that grace. This is precisely why God actualizes a world containing only those essences that freely come to saving faith, or are unluckily faithless. God saves those with saving faith. And God saves the unluckily faithless. This is where the Arminian might want to object – God saving the unluckily faithless means that God isn't respecting their autonomy. We disagree. God looks not only at what people freely do, but what people would freely do in a wide variety of

⁴⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising an objection along these lines and for suggesting that we distinguish various views about the nature of saving faith.

non-actual circumstances. And the unluckily faithless *would have freely* accepted God's grace in a wide variety of non-actual circumstances. Despite actually rejecting God, the unluckily faithless are in a deeper sense disposed towards God – and again, freely so. God respects this, and saves them.⁴⁶

Other views – call them *Calvinist* – go like this: God's saving grace shines down on creatures selected for salvation. And if God wants someone to be saved, they are saved. God's wishes (salvific or otherwise) are never thwarted. If someone is not saved, it is ultimately because God has not selected them for salvation – *ultimately*, we say, because the Calvinist may concede that there are *proximate* creaturely causes for that creature's not being saved (a refusal of divine grace, say). But those proximate creaturely causes of non-salvation are themselves explained by antecedent divine decree. God's role in selecting who is to be saved is an essential and driving intuition behind this family of views.

Our view is consistent with Calvinist views and their essential and driving intuition. God chooses who is saved – by selecting which creaturely essences to actualize, and actualizing only those creaturely essences whose instantiations are secure. If there is an ultimate explanation of why someone is saved, it is this: God has selected them for salvation. God has chosen them for salvation in eternity past, in fact – by selecting their essences for instantiation from all possible creaturely essences, and causing their essences to be instantiated.

⁴⁶ A referee points out that some Arminians will think that actual saving faith is not only *sufficient* for being saved, but *necessary*. The imagined Arminian disagrees with us that saving faith in nearby but counterfactual circumstances is enough; only actual choices express autonomy in the target sense. We are at an impasse: the imagined Arminian thinks that only actual responses in actual circumstances matter – no matter how modally fragile – and we disagree. But note: this isn't a disagreement over Arminianism or its essential and driving intuition, but rather over what counts as an expression of autonomy in the target sense.

There are both Calvinists and Arminians who will take issue with our arguments, of course. Our point is this: core intuitions behind those views – that God chooses who is saved (Calvinist) and that God respects human autonomy (Arminian) – are compatible with and indeed central to the view proposed in this article. Readers who hope to harmonize Arminian and Calvinist views may find this aspect of our own proposal especially attractive, in fact. And since our proposal is harmonious with the core intuitions of those views, any disagreement with our proposal stems not from core Calvinist or Arminian commitments, but from other (more idiosyncratic) theological commitments. Our view finds wide dialectical traction.

Finally, recall the distinction between universalist *reasons* and *mechanisms*. Our main contribution has been to propose a mechanism. Arminians or Calvinists who *hope* for universalism to be true but just can't see *how* God could save everyone by respecting human autonomy (Arminians) or limiting saving grace only to those selected for it (Calvinists) now have an answer. How is it that God might save all? By instantiating creaturely essences whose instantiations are secure. Of course, Arminians or Calvinists who, for whatever reason, do not *want* or *hope* for Universalism to be true will not find this mechanism so useful.⁴⁷

4.3. Why doesn't everyone have actual saving faith?

Even if Sufficiency is true — even if unlucky faithlessness suffices for salvation — it remains the case that actual saving faith is better than unlucky faithlessness. And a crucial component of our main argument is the claim that each of us might very easily have enjoyed saving faith. So why doesn't everyone *actually* have saving faith? If the mere absence of a buzzing fly, a slight

⁴⁷ A referee points out that some Calvinists are convinced that God simply *must* damn some people, for divine glory or for cosmic justice. But this conviction is not a deliverance of Calvinism as such; it doesn't follow from the TULIP formula alone, for example. And of course, if Calvinism rules out universalism, then it rules out any universalist mechanism; the anti-universalist (Calvinist or otherwise) must reject Sufficiency or Might Have Been.

variation in who adopted who, and so on would suffice for everyone having saving faith, why don't we all enjoy that happy status?⁴⁸

We reply: for any person, there's a *very* nearby world where she has saving faith. Her faithlessness is modally fragile indeed. It rests in the thinnest of reeds. It doesn't follow from this that there's a very nearby world where *everyone* has saving faith. For all we've said, the very worlds that verify the fragility of one person's faithlessness are worlds in which someone else is (perhaps unluckily) without saving faith. That much is clear. But we'll now present a story in which, even if there is a world where everyone has saving faith, God couldn't actualize that world.

The story goes like this. God aims to instantiate some optimal or satisficing number of creaturely essences such that their instantiations would have saving faith. But there's a catch. Were all of *those* creaturely essences to be instantiated and were their instantiations to have saving faith, yet other creaturely essences would be instantiated too, the instantiations of which would exemplify unlucky faithlessness.⁴⁹ But then were God to optimize or satisfice with respect to people with saving faith, at least some of us would fall into unlucky faithlessness.

⁴⁸ A principle of free recombination, according to which possible states of affairs can be freely recombined to construct new possibilities, bolsters the objection at hand. If one person could have had saving faith, and so too for another, the thought goes, then they could *jointly* have saving faith. We reply: theists already have strong reason to doubt such principles of recombination. If a perfect God exists necessarily, then anything incompatible with God's perfect nature is thereby impossible. You might have thought it was possible for there to be nothing but two men insulting each other in a lonely shack in the middle of the desert. But it is not. For such a scenario is not one that a necessarily existing perfect God would or even could allow.

⁴⁹ If you want a more specific scenario to make vivid this kind of connection between creaturely essences, consider an essence E and another one E* such that E's instantiation is the mother of E*'s instantiation. God can't, let us suppose, instantiate E* without also instantiating E. Though E* has saving faith, were E

Here's another story. God aims to instantiate some creaturely essences such that their instantiations all have saving faith. But there's a catch. The worlds with no faithlessness do not have very many instantiated creaturely essences. Many, many more will enjoy eternal union with God if God allows for some unlucky faithlessness. (Of course, even more will enjoy eternal union with God if God allows for some robust faithlessness, but God doesn't do that because it means some would go to hell.)

If one of these stories is possible — and we can't rule that out — then it is at least possible that God is not at liberty to ensure that we all have saving faith, even though everyone's faithlessness is modally fragile indeed. But then we have at least one possible answer to the question at hand. It is best, of course, for everyone to have saving faith. But even though such a scenario is *possible*, God was not at liberty to bring it about. So God, instead, brought about the best of *feasible* scenarios.

4.4. Actual failure trumps counterfactual success

You'd not field a placekicker who's missed every field goal attempt, even if you somehow knew that had things gone even a tiny bit differently, he'd have made it every time. So also, God shouldn't assess our readiness for flourishing eternal union on the basis of what we *would* do. God should look at the *actual* failures of the faithless to be ready for that union and conclude on their basis that they don't want to be in such a union.

to be instantiated, E's instantiation would be unluckily faithless. For the story given here to cohere with what say elsewhere in this article, it must also *not* be the case that, were God to optimize or satisfice with respect to people with saving faith, at least some of us would fall into robust faithlessness. You might find such a pattern of counterfactual dependence — the first pattern observed in this note but not the second — inexplicable, unpredictable, or even bizarre. Perhaps so. But for a defense of the possibility of these kinds of (sometimes unpredictable or even bizarre) counterfactual connections, see Boyce (2011: 377-382).

We reply: God isn't just a manager looking to put points on the board this quarter or even the next. God is more like a manager plotting a comeback after apparently decisive failure — that's redemption. Knowing that the kicker's failures are fragile and unlucky would make this kind of management, we think, far more reasonable.

4.5. Actual failure is decisive evidence against hidden success

The basic proposal is that, though some don't have saving faith, all are somehow *disposed* towards saving faith. But this is wishful thinking. When a disposition, time over time, fails to manifest despite trigger after trigger, this is a very good reason to think the disposition is not there at all!⁵⁰

We reply: in the absence of evidence about what might have been, we concede that the actual absence of some outcome is strong evidence that there is no disposition towards that outcome. But we have provided evidence about what might have been. Our arguments for the Jolly and Extravagant Conjectures suggest that there are indeed widespread but well-hidden

⁵⁰ So Kvanvig (2018: 119): “We can grant the theoretical possibility of such universally masked or finked faith, but once we take into account the character of the one who ordains the circumstances of one's life, one who does not wish any to perish (see I Peter 3:9), we should expect that the testing of one's faith is designed to nurture whatever faith is present and thus for such faith to be realized in action. Taking these factors into account, we can argue that the possibility of dead faith—faith that is worth having because of its connection to salvation—simply will never show up in experience, or at least it is so vanishingly improbable as to render the issue otiose. In every case in which we might suspect the presence of faith but notice that it is not expressed in deeds, the best explanation would be that no such disposition is present. For the theology in question makes participation in Kingdom-building part of the divine plan, thereby generating the obtaining of triggering conditions, with an attendant expectation that the building of faith is part of the divine plan.”

dispositions towards saving faith. These arguments cannot be neutralized merely by observing absences of actual saving faith; the stories we've given *predict* those absences, after all.

4.6. Faithlessness isn't that fragile

You are, perhaps, a recalcitrant atheist of the old school. You've been one for years, and are quite confident that your rejection of God rests on firm modal foundations. It surely obtains in a wide variety of circumstances. Were a fly to have not buzzed, you'd still reject God, and so also for all sorts of alterations to your routine whether minute or major. It just doesn't seem right to say your faithlessness is fragile.⁵¹

We reply: some kinds of unlucky faithlessness are no doubt easy to reliably detect or rule out via introspection alone. The recalcitrant atheist can be quite confident that she'd still be an atheist tomorrow even were the WiFi issues in her house to suddenly resolve. She can even be confident that she'd still be an atheist even if the heavens parted and a mighty voice called her to bow and serve God. But such "immediate" scenarios are not the only kind of fragility we've identified. We've identified other — temporally and epistemically distant — scenarios too. These concern what other people were up to and what went on in the distant past. Introspection is no help here; you'll not learn by introspection that having different parents wouldn't have made a difference to your eventual disposition towards God, for example. So recalcitrance notwithstanding, we think there's significant room for hidden dispositions towards faith despite impressive introspective evidence.

⁵¹ Craig (1989) argues that those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation — a disposition towards faithlessness. We have no quarrel with this thought, for our claim is that no one is in fact unsaved. For sympathetic but critical treatment of Craig's position, see Seymour (2000); see also Talbott (1992a).

4.7. Unlucky faithlessness needs an explanation

The main arguments of this article suggest that we are at most unluckily faithless. Perhaps we are all disposed towards saving faith, but that disposition is somehow masked or finked.⁵² This remarkable scenario requires explanation; it would be a rather unbelievable coincidence that so many of us should be faithless despite all enjoying an underlying disposition towards saving faith. What, exactly, is doing this masking or finking? And how did it come to be that all the faithless are subject to that condition?

We reply: Any precise diagnosis for widespread faithlessness can also be used to explain the systematic finking or masking of widespread dispositions towards faith. The details of that diagnosis will vary across theological traditions. But consider, for example, the view that our world is systematically broken or fallen. The fallenness of our world can be used to explain why bad things happen. It can also explain why, despite a universal disposition towards faith, so many are actually faithless. Unlucky stray flies, troubled pasts, and unfortunately overheard words — conditions that frustrate our disposition towards faith, that is — all have a common explanation: we live in a world where all is not well. In a world like that, it'd be totally unsurprising that so many of us would fail to manifest the faith towards which we are disposed.

5. Hoping for the best

We've made a case against one component of the aporetic triad — Link. We've also made a case for the possible or actual or necessary truth of Might Have Been and thus Universalism. The case is not airtight. It trades on all manner of abstruse items: counterfactuals of creaturely

⁵² A disposition is masked, roughly, when its manifestation is blocked by some other condition — like a fragile glass that would not break if struck because it is stuffed with packing material. A disposition is finked, roughly, when its trigger conditions also suffice for the disappearance of the disposition itself — like a fragile glass that would, if ever struck, be turned into steel by a nearby wizard. The classic source here is Lewis (1997).

freedom, the number and kinds of creaturely essences, what God can or cannot do, appropriate response to bad behavior that is merely unlucky, the relationship between what goes on in nearby worlds and the actual world, and so on. This is heady business. The truth here is by no means obvious.

Recondite philosophical theorizing isn't the most reputable pastime. Its outputs rarely command consensus, and its detractors are many. Even when we have a modal insight here or a gut moral instinct there, whatever evidence results is inconclusive. This is true both of what we've said and what our objectors might say in reply. But the objectors' points still impose difficulties for our case for Universalism.

We'll now show how Universalism's impressive normative credentials invite a general defense of our project. We've already argued that Universalism is the best outcome for us that we can imagine. We should *hope* for Universalism to be true.⁵³ Hoping in Universalism isn't just a dreamy fantasy, a sort of indulgent but intellectually substandard game. For those who believe in a perfect and powerful God who *wants* the best for us, hope in Universalism is well-grounded indeed. And here's the thing about well-grounded hope. It changes those who have it. It should, at least. Hope gives cheer to the heart and mind and is an antidote to despair.⁵⁴ It gives reason to press on, to remain steadfast even in the face of difficulty (intellectual or otherwise).⁵⁵

Here's how that well-grounded hope makes a difference when it comes to evaluating the arguments of this article. When you have strong reason to hope that some hypothesis obtains, and the evidence at hand is not decisive, we think you thereby have a strong reason to take a positive intellectual stance towards that hypothesis. Here are some examples of how that kind of positive stance could play out: to double- and triple-check apparently disconfirming evidence, to

⁵³ On hoping for universalism, see Talbott (2014): 191-192.

⁵⁴ In this connection, see Jeffrey (2017): 204-207.

⁵⁵ For arguments according to which faith can also play this role and a precise explication of the way in which such steadfastness can be reasonable, see Buchak (2017).

give extra weight to apparently confirming evidence, and to look for more confirming evidence. The more well-grounded your hope is, the stronger your positive stance should be.

Hope provides an intellectual multiplier. It boosts the hypothesis hoped for. Perhaps that multiplier is equal to the stakes divided by the *decisiveness* of the evidential base — hope multiplies most of all when the stakes are high and the evidence is ambiguous or difficult or tenuous.⁵⁶

We are not claiming that in just any old case, if you hope for something, you should thereby take a positive intellectual stance towards it. That you hope to win the lottery doesn't imply you should triple-check all your tickets' numbers — that's just wishful thinking. The hope must be reasonable. Nor are we claiming that in just any old case of reasonable hope, you should take a positive stance despite disconfirming evidence. That you reasonably hope to get promoted doesn't imply you should doubt the email announcing that the Board didn't approve your application — that's just ignoring decisive evidence. It's when the evidence is less than decisive that hope works in the way we've suggested.

When it comes to Universalism, the stakes are eternal union with God for everyone. They couldn't be higher. The evidence is ambiguous; we're doing speculative metaphysics, speculative moral philosophy, and speculative theology all rolled into one. And we've argued that Universalism is initially reasonable for those who believe in a perfect God. If we're right about all that, then the arguments of this article deserve a hopeful boost or multiplier. You may harbor a few doubts about their soundness. We certainly do. The thing to do in light of these doubts is not to reject Universalism or the arguments in its defense. The things to do are to check and re-

⁵⁶ The model we've offered here bears some resemblance to pragmatic and moral encroachment, according to which the practical or moral stakes of a situation make a difference to whether something is known or justified or reasonably believed or asserted; see Jorgensen (2020). But our "hopeful encroachment" is far more limited than either of these, we note — for the hope multiplier applies in a rather constricted range of circumstances.

check our work, to examine Universalism in a friendly light, and to look for evidence that could confirm the happy consequences of this article.

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