

## Hopeful universalism

MICHAEL REA

*Department of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, 100 Malloy Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556*  
*mrea@nd.edu*

This paper argues against the rationality of “hopeful universalism”, the components of which include the *unconditional considered hope* that soteriological universalism is true, and an absence of belief that it is true. Some proponents maintain that there is simply not enough evidence to affirm or deny universalism; others believe that it is probably false but nonetheless hope they are mistaken. This paper argues that worshippers of God who maintain unconditional considered hope in the truth of universalism ought either to believe universalism or seek to abandon their hope in its truth, depending (in part) on how their confidence in the considerations that steer them away from universalism measure up against the beliefs that underwrite their hope in its truth. For such people, neither withholding belief in universalism nor believing that it is false while continuing to hope that it is true is a rational option.

My goal in this paper is to argue against the rationality of a soteriological position that has occasionally been defended in print and seems to be quite common among Christian theologians, clergy, philosophers, and laity.<sup>1</sup> The position is “hopeful universalism”, and its components include the *considered unconditional hope* that soteriological universalism is true together with an absence of belief that it is true.<sup>2</sup> Some proponents maintain that there is simply not enough evidence to affirm or deny universalism; others believe that scriptural evidence supports its denial, so it is probably false, but nonetheless hope they are mistaken. I will argue that worshippers of God who maintain considered hope in the truth of universalism ought either to believe universalism or seek to abandon their hope in its truth, depending (in part) on how their confidence in the considerations that steer them away from universalism measure up against the background beliefs that underwrite their hope in its truth. For such people, neither

---

<sup>1</sup> Notable defenses of hopeful universalism include Von Balthasar 2014 and Jones 2012. (Von Balthasar, in turn, offers an extended quotation from Edith Stein (1962: 158 - 159, quoted in English translation in Von Balthasar 2014: 174 - 177) as expressing “most exactly the position that [he has] tried to defend.”) I think that the arguments in this paper also count against the rationality of *wishing* that universalism were true—a wish that, e.g., William Lane Craig, seems to embrace at the end of an article defending the doctrine of hell: “No orthodox Christian *likes* the doctrine of hell or delights in anyone’s condemnation. I truly wish that universalism were true, but it is not.” (1989: 186) I will not try to defend this conclusion here, but I think that, if one is prepared to grant that wishing for something presupposes its goodness, the conclusion that it is irrational to wish for universalism to be true while believing that it is false can be established in roughly the same way as the conclusion that the irrationality of hopeful universalism is established.

<sup>2</sup> I add the qualifier “unconditional” to make it clear that hoping that universalism is true *just so long as it is God’s will* or something like that will not count as embracing hopeful universalism. But for the most part in what follows I will speak simply of the “considered hope” that universalism is true, leaving the qualifier implicit.

withholding belief in universalism nor believing that it is false while continuing to hope that it is true is a rational option.<sup>3</sup>

For purposes here, I will understand “considered hope” to be hope that is reflectively embraced, as contrasted with fleeting hopes, or hopes that one finds in oneself but wishes to be gone; and I will understand soteriological universalism to be the thesis that all human beings will eventually be saved, and that this outcome is somehow *guaranteed* by God rather than being contingent on its just happening to turn out that all human beings freely do whatever it is (if anything) that human beings must freely do in order to be saved.<sup>4</sup> In saying that the outcome is *somehow* guaranteed by God, I leave open various ways in which the guarantee might be effected. One might be a divine commitment to override the freedom of some people should it turn out that they prove persistently resistant to other efforts to bring salvation to them; but another might be something more like a divine commitment to “outwit” human freedom, as Edith Stein puts it. (1962: 159, quoted in English translation, in von Balthasar 2014: 177.) The idea expressed by Stein and endorsed by von Balthasar (2014: 177) that God might guarantee salvation for all by outwitting human freedom could, I think, be explicated along Molinist lines; but, as I read both Stein and von Balthasar, their preference would be simply to affirm as a divine mystery the claim that God can genuinely *guarantee* salvation for all without taking away the real *possibility* that people freely choose in ways that lead to damnation.

Being saved, as I shall understand it here, includes going to heaven, enjoying eternal life, and receiving whatever other benefits have been promised to those who believe in and follow Jesus.<sup>5</sup> That said, the thesis of this paper is that if someone who worships God has considered hope that universalism is true, they rationally ought to believe that universalism is true.

---

<sup>3</sup> I do not claim novelty for this conclusion so much as for its defense. For example, David Fergusson (2001: 197) gestures at something like this conclusion, but he does not formulate it as I have here, nor does he argue for it in any detail.

<sup>4</sup> Traditional Christianity is deeply resistant to the idea that human beings must (or even can) do anything substantive to contribute to their salvation, and suggestions to the contrary are typically decried as “Pelagian” or in some other way heretical. Nevertheless, it is common to maintain that human beings are in some sense free, and that there is some connection between free acts like *repenting*, or *seeking God*, or *refraining from resisting God* and being saved. It is beyond the scope of this paper to try to sort out how this idea might or might not comport with anti-Pelagianism. My main point here is simply that a “hopeful universalism” that hangs its hopes on how the ultimate pattern of *human choices* might turn out rather than on how God will act to *guarantee* the salvation of all is not the sort of hopeful universalism that I am targeting in this paper. (See, e.g., Hart 2019 for a defense of the kind of hopeful universalism that is *not* my target.)

<sup>5</sup> In characterizing salvation this way, my aim is simply to capture, with as much theological and exegetical neutrality as possible, what I take to be a traditional and widely endorsed Christian understanding of what salvation amounts to. Systematic theologians differ, of course, in their views about what is involved in all of the “components” of salvation that I have here identified – going to heaven, having eternal life, and receiving “whatever other benefits” have been promised to followers of Jesus – and I intend to take no stand on these controversies. Those with significantly different understandings of the nature of salvation will, obviously enough, arrive at different characterizations of what universalism entails, as well as different understandings of how well-grounded *hope* for the truth of universalism on the basis of scriptural and systematic theological considerations might be. But, given how I have defined “hopeful universalism” and given the particular premises I offer in support of the thesis of this paper, I see no reason to think that such differences will impact my argument.

There are, of course, nearby views that fall somewhat short of universalism thus defined but that have nonetheless been objects of hope for people who believe but are uncomfortable with traditional Christian teachings on hell. One example is the view depicted and, in a way, defended in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, that, although hell may in fact be populated eternally, all of its inhabitants are free to leave and so it remains populated only because people voluntarily and persistently choose to be there. Depending on what one thinks scripture teaches about God's dispositions toward those who fall short in this life of doing or possessing whatever is required for salvation, the arguments of this paper may also demonstrate the irrationality of hoping for near-universalist views like these to be true while at the same time believing that they are false. But, to simplify the discussion, I will focus my attention on hopeful universalism as I have defined it. My argument is fairly simple, so I will present it straightaway in section 1, together with some brief remarks in support of the premises; and then I will develop it further by discussing objections in sections 2 and 3.

### **The main argument**

In the philosophical literature on hope, there is broad consensus on the following two claims:<sup>6</sup>

CLAIM 1: To hope for a state of affairs to obtain is, in part, to desire that it obtain.

CLAIM 2: It is impossible to hope for states of affairs that one knows to obtain, nor is it possible to hope for states of affairs that one confidently believes to be impossible.

My argument depends on CLAIM 1, but I have no defence of it to offer except for the fact that it seems obviously true and is a point of general agreement among philosophers working on the nature of hope. So I will simply take it as an undefended premise. My argument does *not* depend on CLAIM 2, so I won't say anything in favour of accepting it; but I mention it because it is at least superficially plausible and, on the assumption that it is true, my conclusion can be strengthened in a way that I will explain toward the end of this section.

So hope involves desire. But certain kinds of desire presuppose the goodness of what is desired. Some philosophers think that *all* desire presupposes the goodness of what is desired.<sup>7</sup> But defending this very general claim is complicated by two facts.

First, it seems not only possible but commonplace to desire things that we don't necessarily believe to be good but that we merely believe *might* be good. I remember wanting very much to see the first of the *Star Wars* prequels; but I have never had the belief that that particular movie was *good* – not before seeing it, and certainly not after seeing it. Or, to take a more serious example, consider someone suffering from a terminal disease who learns of an

---

<sup>6</sup> See Bloeser and Stahl 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Plato and Aristotle most notably; but see also (e.g.) Raz 2010 and references therein.

experimental treatment where the odds of its curing the disease are thought to be about equal to the odds of expediting death. It seems that one might desire the treatment without necessarily believing that the treatment *is* or *will be* good, but only believing that it *might be* good (or might be very bad).

I think, however, that these and similar examples can be addressed by specifying more carefully what is the object of desire. In the *Star Wars* case, the direct object of my desire was not the movie but rather *seeing the movie*. And, although I thought the movie was bad and would surely have acknowledged in advance of seeing it that the movie might be bad and that I might even regret seeing it, I nevertheless wanted to see it because I thought that there was something good about seeing it. If I did not think this, if instead I thought that it would be better not to see it than to see it, or if I had no view on the matter, I wouldn't have wanted to see it. Similarly with the experimental treatment. What the patient wants, plausibly, is to *try the treatment*; and it is hard to make sense of that desire without supposing that they believe that it is a good thing to try the treatment – presumably because the treatment affords some chance at longer life whereas, absent the treatment, they have little or none. If they were genuinely belief-neutral on the goodness of trying the treatment, it is hard to imagine them wanting to try the treatment. At best they would be indifferent to trying it.

Notice, too, that in the experimental treatment case, the person desiring the treatment may well have the settled belief that, if the odds break against them, it will be very bad *to have tried it*. Likewise, insofar as I would be willing to acknowledge in advance that I might regret seeing *The Phantom Menace*, I manifest a belief that *having seen it* might be bad. But all of this is perfectly compatible with believing in advance, in each case, that it is a good thing, given my total evidence about the risks, rewards, likelihood of each, and so on, to go ahead and choose in favour of having the experience. And, again, it is hard to see what could possibly ground the desire apart from such belief.

The second complication is the fact that it seems clearly possible to desire what one takes to be bad in some sense – wicked, harmful, unhealthy, etc. – simply because it is bad. The question, then, is whether desiring what is bad – wanting to steal apples simply for the sake of committing a crime, proclaiming “Evil, be thou my good!” and then living accordingly, or rebelling against God just for the sake of rebellion, for example – always presupposes that the object of desire is, in some meaningful sense, good. Perhaps one can desire to steal apples simply for the sake of committing a crime, for example; but maybe one can't desire to commit a crime without somehow presupposing that there is something good about doing so. Perhaps in saying “Evil, be thou my good!”, Milton's Satan is not so much declaring an intention to set evil as his aim in ways that other people set goodness as theirs, but is rather manifesting a belief that what is normally *considered* evil is in fact, by a different but to his mind superior reckoning, good.

I find such lines of reasoning plausible, and I think that much of what I said about belief-neutral desire can be adapted to support them. But rather than try to further defend the general thesis that desire always presupposes belief in the goodness of what is desired, I will instead restrict my focus to a narrower class of desires. Specifically, I will focus on the *considered* desires of *someone who worships God*, where God is understood to have the traditional theistic

attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. Let us call these “considered theistic desires.”<sup>8</sup> The premise I want to defend and to rely on in the argument of this section is that *rational considered theistic desires* always presuppose the goodness of what is desired.

Considered desires, again, are desires that one reflectively embraces. In other words, they are desires that one recognizes within oneself and allows to persist unchecked. So, for example, in writing this paper I wanted to finish it, I recognized I wanted to finish it, and (of course) feeling no inner conflict over it, I allowed the desire to persist. By contrast, I might feel some inner conflict over wanting to skip my morning run, and if I do, this will likely be because I recognize a tension between that desire and other important desires I have, like wanting to stick with my routines, or to maintain my health. In recognizing that tension, I might “disown” the desire. That is, I might come to view the desire as a kind of intruder, something to be gotten rid of, if at all possible. That’s not to say I would succeed in ridding myself of it, or even that I wouldn’t give in to it; but I would recognize *it*, rather than one of the conflicting desires, as an intrusion that I would prefer to be rid of. If I do disown it, then (even if it in fact persists) it is not among my considered desires because I am not allowing it to persist unchecked. If I don’t disown it, then it remains among my considered desires.

Considered desires are not always rational. Suppose, again, that I want to skip my morning run but I have a second-order desire to prioritize my desires to stick to my routines and maintain my health. Suppose I also believe that skipping my morning run is inconsistent with that prioritization. In this case, it seems, if I recognize that I want to skip my morning run and do *not* disown the desire, I am being irrational. Or, more carefully: it would be irrational to accept the desire to skip my morning run without either adjusting my second order preferences about how my desires are to be prioritized or revising my beliefs about how skipping the morning run fits with that prioritization. Responding to such conflicts with belief-revision is the familiar phenomenon of *rationalization*. Responding to such conflicts by disowning the desire results in a state of affairs that we would likely describe either as weakness of will or an exercise of self-control, depending on which of our desires wins out. Responding by accepting the desire to skip and revising the problematic second-order desire about how my desires are prioritized is *rational acceptance* of the desire to skip; and so, in that case, the desire to skip would become a rational considered desire (assuming, anyway, that there is nothing otherwise irrational about desiring to skip the run).

In light of this, it seems clear that *rational considered theistic desires* always presuppose apprehension of the object of desire as good. Worship is intimately connected with love and other related attitudes like devotion and allegiance.<sup>9</sup> As such, it involves at least one of what Eleonore Stump (2018) identifies as the constitutive desires of love – specifically, desire for the good of the beloved which, in the case of God, seems equivalent to a desire to obey God and to see God’s will done on earth. It also involves a second-order desire to prioritize the satisfaction

---

<sup>8</sup> The label is not meant to convey that all desires in the class pertain to theism. Some, such as the considered desire to maintain a consistent exercise routine, might not. Rather, it is just meant to convey that they are considered desires held by someone who is both a theist and a worshipper of God.

<sup>9</sup> See Rea 2020 for discussion.

of those two constitutive desires.<sup>10</sup> Human weakness virtually guarantees that we will fail sometimes to prioritize our desires for union with God and our desire to do God's will; but if we do not at least *want to want* to prioritize these things, it is hard to see how we could be said to be genuine worshippers of God. But then for someone who worships God (assuming they take God to be perfectly good), desiring what they do not believe to be good will be inconsistent with their second order desire to prioritize the constitutive desires of worship. If they are genuinely belief-neutral on whether the object of desire is good, maintaining the desire (unconditionally) is, at best, reckless in light of their second-order desires, and so hardly consistent with giving those desires priority. If they believe that the object of desire is *bad*, then maintaining the desire is obviously worse than reckless. Either way, then, the desire will be one that they, as worshippers of God, rationally ought to disown. Hence, it cannot be among their rational considered desires. Thus, rational considered theistic desires presuppose the goodness of what is desired.

Now consider a worshipper of God who *believes* that soteriological universalism is definitely, or very probably false. In believing this, one is obviously committed either to the idea that it would be all-things-considered good if soteriological universalism were true but God simply cannot make it so, or that God could have made it so but it would, for some reason, not be good for God to do so (perhaps because in guaranteeing that all are saved, God would have to sacrifice some greater good). The former alternative, to the extent that it differs from the latter, sacrifices divine omnipotence, and so it is not an option for people who remain committed to theism. The latter option, by contrast, is a traditional line on why soteriological universalism is false. God *desires* that everyone be saved (1 Tim 2:4), but God's unilaterally bringing that about even for the steadfastly unrepentant would be inconsistent with divine justice, the preservation of divine glory, respect for human freedom, or some other very great good. So theistic belief that soteriological universalism is false carries with it commitment to the view that, even though there is something quite *bad* about its being false, it is nevertheless all-things-considered good and the will of God that it be false, given human sin and rebellion and a variety of other facts about good, evil, and the relations among them. Of course, people often fail to accept all of the commitments that their beliefs carry; but this particular commitment is one that seems generally to be affirmed by those who have thought enough about soteriological universalism to believe that it is false despite hoping for its truth.

If all of this is right, then the person who reflectively embraces hopeful universalism is in the unfortunate position of having a considered desire – that universalism be true – that conflicts with what she believes to be the perfectly good will of God; and so she has a considered desire the maintenance of which is manifestly inconsistent with the second-order desire, partly constitutive of her status as a worshipper of God, to prioritize her desire to see God's will be done over other desires of hers. Rationality may not require her to abandon the desire altogether. In fact, it might be psychologically impossible to do so. But it does seem to require her to *want* to want to abandon that desire, and so not to have the *considered* hope that universalism be true.

---

<sup>10</sup> The other of the two constitutive desires of love, on Stump's view, is desire for union with the beloved.

For those who accept CLAIM 2 along with a few further assumptions that often accompany theistic belief, the conclusion of this argument can be strengthened as follows. Many theists will grant that if it is not in fact good that God guarantee salvation for all, then it *cannot possibly* be good for God to guarantee this; and many will likewise grant that God is necessarily good. But these assumptions together imply that soteriological universalism (as I have characterized it) is false. If CLAIM 2 is correct, then it follows that it is not just irrational, but impossible, for one who sees this implication to hope that universalism be true. Thus, given a certain (I think common) combination of views, hopeful universalism is not just irrational, but impossible.

Note, too, that although my argument started by targeting the rationality of believing that universalism is false while hoping that it is true, it might just as well have started by targeting the rationality of withholding belief one way or the other about universalism while hoping that it is true. One who withholds on universalism is committed to thinking that universalism *might* (for all she knows) be true. But if she also reflectively embraces hopeful universalism, she will then be in the position of having a considered desire – again, the unconditional desire that universalism be true – that conflicts with what she recognizes *might* be the perfectly good will of God; and so she will again have a considered desire that is inconsistent with the second-order desire to prioritize the desire to see God’s will be done, whatever it might be, over other desires of hers. The upshot, then, is that if one finds oneself unconditionally hoping that universalism is true, the rational move for one who remains committed to worshipping God is to believe that universalism is true (on the grounds that it seems all-things-considered good, and God is perfectly good) or seek to abandon one’s unconditional hope that universalism is true.<sup>11</sup> This might seem to be a difficult dilemma, at least for one who is sold both the reliability of scripture and the repugnance of the doctrine of hell. But I do not think it should be so.

Take a comparison case: The passages describing the conquest of Canaan are notoriously difficult. Taken at face value, they seem to teach that, to help Israel secure their promised land, God commanded the wholesale slaughter of non-combatants and the taking of women into forced marriages. Many of us are deeply sold on the idea that these sorts of behaviours are evil and so could *never* be commanded by a perfectly good being; and it seems to me to be wholly unproblematic to reason from that vision of goodness – a vision that I, for one, believe I have inherited from the very Bible that includes these troubling passages – to a position of confidence that God did not indeed command such things, and that we are therefore in the dark about how to understand their presence in holy scripture. Indeed, it seems unproblematic to do this even while maintaining confidence in the reliability of scripture; for, after all, it does not follow from the fact that one cannot tell what certain passages of scripture aim to teach human beings that they are unreliable in whatever content they aim to teach. In saying that the reasoning here is unproblematic, I do not, of course, mean to suggest that this approach raises no theological problems whatsoever. It does; and the problems are both deep and possibly intractable.<sup>12</sup> But

---

<sup>11</sup> Note that conditionalizing the hope is one way of abandoning the *unconditional* hope.

<sup>12</sup> See the essays in Bergmann, Murray, and Rea 2011 for a variety of different perspectives on how problematic scriptural passages might be dealt with (focusing in particular on passages in the Old Testament). The introduction

the problems, in my view, include first order problems about the interpretation of scripture and second order problems about the nature and reliability of scripture; they don't include problems about the goodness of God or the wickedness of war crimes. So too, I think, in the case of soteriological universalism.

Admittedly, what I have recommended as "the rational move" for the hopeful universalist might at first glance seem to smack of hubris. The proper interpretation of scriptural passages that seem to teach a doctrine of eternal hell is debatable and debated; so forming a merely tentative belief on that doctrine on the basis of one's best interpretation of scripture seems to strike an appropriate balance between piety and humility. The piety comes in letting one's belief be formed by what one takes to be the best interpretation of scripture; the humility comes in acknowledging that one's interpretive abilities are fallible. All the more so, it would seem, if the belief one forms is in conflict with one's intuitions about what is good; for then both piety and humility are manifest in the disposition to let scripture *correct* one's views about what is good. Holding one's view of the good fixed and taking that as reason to overthrow one's best interpretation of scripture might then seem at odds with humility and piety. How then can it be recommended?

The better question, I think, is how can it be consistent with piety or humility to leave unchallenged the hermeneutical principles that led one to interpret scripture as teaching a doctrine that, according to one's best (and presumably scripturally-shaped) conceptions of love and goodness, is inconsistent with the perfect love and goodness of God? Holding one's hermeneutical principles doggedly fixed no matter the conclusions one reaches is not necessarily a sign of humility or piety, and is often inconsistent with both. Thus, it seems to me, what I have described as the rational move for the hopeful universalist – either embrace universalism or seek to give up the hope (depending on the outcome of one's reflective reconsideration of one's hermeneutical principles, among other things) – is not only a move consistent with humility and piety, but may even be required by humility and piety.

Thus ends my main argument. In the next three sections, I consider objections.

### **Hoping that we are mistaken**

Set aside theology for a moment and consider ordinary cases wherein we acquire evidence for unwelcome conclusions about friends, family, or trusted institutions. Perhaps one acquires powerful evidence that a trusted business partner has been paying large sums of money out of the company account to individuals who have no known business dealings with one's company. Or perhaps one acquires compelling evidence that a long-term romantic partner has, for the past year, been keeping regular secret appointments with someone at a nearby hotel bar. In such cases, even if one arrives at the confident belief that one's partner has behaved badly, it

---

to that volume discusses the approach I have described here and summarizes some of the problems with it (and with other approaches as well).

is entirely natural, and not at all obviously unreasonable, to hope that one is wrong, to hope that one has misconstrued the evidence or that one's partner has good and justifying reasons for doing the things that seem, on the surface, to be so bad. In fact, hoping in situations like these that one is mistaken might seem not only reasonable but virtuous, a manifestation of epistemic humility, a disposition to interpret others as charitably as possible, or faithfulness to a friend or romantic partner.

Why not then say the same thing about hopeful universalism? Why not suppose that hopeful universalism simply amounts to the very reasonable and virtuous hope that, in reaching a disturbingly conceptually revolutionary conclusion (namely, that a doctrine of eternal hell is true) about God's behaviour, one has made a mistake somewhere along the way in one's theorizing, and the mistake is *not* one about the goodness of God? The best theories of hope allow for one to have rational hope even for things that one takes to be highly improbable;<sup>13</sup> so there is no in-principle irrationality in believing a conclusion *and* hoping that one is mistaken. (For example, I think that plenty of people who buy lottery tickets rationally believe that they will lose but hope they are wrong.) So why not think that this is the hopeful universalist's situation?

The answer lies in an important disanalogy. In the two cases I have described, the most obviously reasonable hope is *not* that one is mistaken about whether embezzlement or an affair constitute bad behaviour, but rather about whether the otherwise neutral acts of making payments from the company account, or keeping regular appointments with someone, were done in the service of bad ends. So, in the cases I have described, we would expect that, despite hoping that they are mistaken about the explanation for their partner's behaviour, the subject in question will adjust their confidence in their partner's *goodness* in accord with their level of confidence that they are not mistaken about the behaviour. If you have good evidence that your business partner is embezzling, you might reasonably hang on to the hope that the evidence is misleading, but if the evidence is very strong, and if you are confident that embezzlement constitutes a betrayal of trust, you can't reasonably hang on to your previous level of confidence in your business partner's trustworthiness.

But what if you aren't so confident that embezzlement is a betrayal of trust? Suppose your admiration of your business partner is so powerful that, confronted with evidence that they are embezzling from your company, you find yourself thinking that *if* they are, then embezzlement must be okay after all. You might then be willing to adjust your belief in the badness of embezzlement, but you might at the same time hope that you are mistaken about whether your partner is embezzling so that you don't have to make such an adjustment. Life is much simpler, after all, if goodness is as you take it to be, and your partner's character is as you take it to be. If this is indeed a rationally defensible cluster of beliefs, hopes, and dispositions, then hopeful universalism would seem to be rationally defensible as well.

The problem with this line of reply, however, is that the cluster of beliefs, hopes, and dispositions that I have just described appears reasonable only because some important details

---

<sup>13</sup> See, again, Bloeser and Stahl 2017.

are left unspecified. In particular, what is unspecified is your relative level of confidence in each of the following three propositions:

- (i) Embezzlement is bad.
- (ii) Your partner has embezzled.
- (iii) Your partner is deeply good and trustworthy.

You cannot rationally believe all three propositions. Rather, it seems that whichever two propositions here enjoy your highest credence count together as a defeater for your belief in the third. So, for example, if you are most confident that (ii) and (iii) are true, you have a defeater for your belief that embezzlement is bad. In fact, given your high confidence in (ii) and (iii), you have very good reason for believing the negation of (i): it is not the case that embezzlement is bad. Given this, you have no good reason for hoping that your partner has not embezzled. (More exactly: you have no moral reason for such a hope. Maybe you will have practical reason for hoping you're mistaken – e.g., perhaps you think your partner is very good, but not the best business manager, and maybe you think embezzlement isn't the practically best way to solve problems. But these sorts of possibilities have no analogue in the case of hopeful universalism.) Likewise, if you are most confident that (i) and (iii) are true, you have a defeater for your belief that (ii) is true, and, indeed, you have good reason to believe its negation: your partner has not embezzled. Thus, you should not only hope that your partner has not embezzled, you should believe that your partner has not embezzled.

The parallels with hopeful universalism should be obvious. Suppose one is deeply committed to the goodness of God, and suppose one has high confidence that scripture reliably teaches that universalism is false. One then has a defeater for the belief that it would be a bad thing, all things considered, if universalism is false and, indeed, one has good reason to believe that it would *not* be a bad thing if universalism is false. In that case, there are no rational grounds for hoping that universalism is true. On the other hand, if one's confidence in God's goodness and the badness of hell trumps whatever confidence one has that scripture reliably teaches that universalism is false, one has a defeater for the belief that scripture so teaches. In that case, then, one should not only hope that universalism is true, one should believe that it is true.

### **Hoping for what we do not think is likely**

The next objection I want to consider concerns the scope of my argument.<sup>14</sup> One might worry that if my argument is sound, it proves too much: it shows that worshippers of God cannot rationally maintain considered hope in *anything* they do not think is likely to happen. Besides being counterintuitive, this sort of conclusion seems to flout one of the most basic truisms about hope. Again, the best theories of hope maintain that hope for what is improbable can be, and often is, entirely rational.

---

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to one of the reviewers for *Religious Studies* for raising (in slightly different form) the concerns discussed in this section.

The reason one might think my argument has this problematic consequence is as follows. Suppose I purchase a lottery ticket and think (reasonably enough) that the chances of my winning are extraordinarily slim. Given just about any of the theories of providence that have been developed and defended throughout the history of Christian theology, it follows from the fact that my chances of winning are extraordinarily slim that the chances of God's permitting or actively bringing about my winning are extraordinarily slim; and this, in turn, implies that my winning is very probably *not* consistent with God's all-things-considered desires for the world. If I see this but nevertheless hope (unconditionally) that I win, it looks as if I am prioritizing my own desires over what I think is probably God's will for the world, which is, for reasons already discussed, in tension with the second order desires that are partly constitutive of my status as a worshipper of God. Accordingly, I should not hope to win (or should, at any rate, disown the hope). An interesting further consequence, if this is right, is that I should not *pray* to win – and, generalizing the argument now, I should not pray for *anything* that I do not think is likely to happen. After all, it would seem to make no sense to pray for things one does not hope will occur.

Moreover, it looks as if my argument will also show that worshippers of God cannot rationally hope for anything they think *might not* happen, regardless of what they think of its likelihood. Suppose, for example, I find myself hoping that there is life on other planets, but I have no idea whatsoever whether this is likely or not. Won't this be reckless for just the same reasons that hoping for the truth of universalism would be if I have no idea whether it might be true? God might not want there to be life on other planets; and, as a worshipper of God, my priority should be to see God's will done in the world. Accordingly, I should not unconditionally hope that there is life on other planets.

I do think that unconditional hope is complicated for worshippers of God, and for precisely the reasons these objections point toward. But I do not think it follows that worshippers of God cannot *ever* rationally hope (even unconditionally) for things they think might not happen or are unlikely to happen. Let us focus on things that are thought to be unlikely, since those will comprise a subclass of the things one thinks might not happen. One disanalogy between hope for a winning lottery ticket and hope in soteriological universalism is that, in the former case but not the latter, it is not clear that the outcome depends solely on God's will. Soteriological universalism, as I have characterized it, implies that God guarantees salvation for everyone; and whether God is willing to guarantee a particular outcome is solely up to God, because it is solely up to God whether God is disposed to intervene, if necessary, to ensure that the outcome occurs. Not so in the case of lotteries, however. Being omnipotent, God *can* guarantee, for any particular lottery, whatever outcome God desires. But it is not clear that God is disposed to do this for every lottery. Some, maybe all, lottery outcomes might be left to chance, the operation of natural laws, human free choices, or some combination of these (depending on how the lottery is constructed).<sup>15</sup> But if this is right, then unconditional hope in a particular lottery outcome might

---

<sup>15</sup> Proverbs 16:33, which says "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone," is sometimes cited as evidence that God guarantees the outcome of every lottery; and the choosing of Matthias as an apostle (Acts 1:21

just be unconditional hope that the natural course of events breaks in one's favour; and this will not pose any tension with a second order desire to prioritize God's will. If God has genuinely left an outcome partly to chance, free choice, the laws of nature, or some combination thereof, then any of a variety of possible, and even unlikely, outcomes will be consistent with God's will. And, of course, the same reasoning applies to a great many other apparently unlikely events that we are inclined to hope for.

However, if a worshipper of God finds herself unconditionally hoping that God will *guarantee* a particular outcome – as would be the case if one were hoping for God to “rig” a lottery in one's favour, and as is the case when one hopes that universalism is true – then I do think there is tension with her second order desire to prioritize God's will. For, again, it is solely up to God whether God is willing to guarantee the outcome; and so, in hoping unconditionally for a particular outcome, one might be hoping for something that is in fact inconsistent with God's will. If this is the content of one's hope, then, for exactly the reasons given earlier, I think that the rational move is either to seek to abandon the hope or to believe that the outcome will occur. And here again we may note an interesting consequence for the practice of prayer. If this reasoning is sound, then, assuming prayer involves hope that God will guarantee the occurrence of what one is praying for, one should, rationally speaking, either refrain from praying unconditionally for things that one thinks might not occur, or one should believe that those things will occur. If this is right, it goes a long way toward explaining why scripture enjoins us to pray without doubt (as in James 1:6).

### **Resisting personal transformation**

In section 2, I considered the objection that hopeful universalism seems just to be an instance of a very familiar phenomenon, namely, that of (reasonably) hoping that one is mistaken in one's judgment about the behaviour of somebody who has hitherto enjoyed one's deep trust and respect. In this section, I consider the objection that hopeful universalism seems to be an instance of another familiar phenomenon – that of (reasonably) resisting certain kinds of personal transformation.

In her widely discussed work on epistemically and personally transformative experiences, L. A. Paul has argued that one might reasonably choose *not* to undergo experiences that one expects to be both epistemically and personally transformative even in cases where one has good reason to think that, after undergoing the transformation, one will be happy to have done so.<sup>16</sup> As she characterizes them, *epistemically transformative* experiences are experiences

---

– 26) can be seen as predicated on a similar idea. But this just points to the fact, which I would in no way deny, that it is possible to offer scriptural support for a theory of providence according to which nothing is left to chance. At the same time, plenty of theologians in the Christian tradition have rejected such theories of providence, and have offered alternative readings of these passages and their own scriptural support for their own preferred theory.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Paul 2015 and 2020.

of a new kind, or of a sort that you've never had before, and you have to have this kind of experience yourself in order to know what it's like. By having it, the experience teaches you what that kind of experience is like, and gives you new abilities to imagine, recognize, and imaginatively model possible states involving that kind of experience. (2020: 17)

*Personally transformative* experiences are experiences that “chang[e] or replac[e] a core preference, through changing something deep and fundamental about your values.” (2020: 17) Among the paradigm examples she offers of experiences that are (or would be, if they were real) both epistemically and personally transformative are *becoming a parent*, *going to college*, and *becoming a vampire*.

Consider, for example, how you might approach a decision about whether to become a parent. Since the experience is epistemically transformative – that is, you can't know what it will be like for you without undergoing the experience yourself – it is impossible for you allow your choice to be informed by reliable imaginings about what it will be like to be a parent. You might have a lot of information about what other people say it is like for them to be parent, and you might even have a lot of statistical information about whether the “average” parent is glad about or regretful of the transformation. But mileage varies, and none of this information will give you any basis for reliably imagining what the experience will be like *for you*. Thus you are deprived of one of the most common strategies we use for making decisions about what experiences to undergo.

The second problem, and the one more pertinent to our present discussion, is that, because the experience will be personally transformative – that is, one that will change your core values and preferences – it is a challenge to determine whether to allow the decision to be guided by your present preferences or by the preferences you (perhaps) expect to have after the transformation. Suppose, for example, that you value your active, nocturnal social life and your relative freedom from domestic responsibilities; but suppose, too, that you know that there is a good chance that, whatever it will be like for you to be a parent, at the very least your priority structure will change and you will likely come to have a more child-oriented preference structure than you have now. Suppose further that, right now, you strongly prefer *not to be someone with a child-oriented preference structure*, even though you also realize that if you genuinely come to have such a preference structure, you will (of course) be glad to have it and glad to have come out of your career-and-social-life oriented phase. How then do you make the decision? Do you give weight to your current preference structure, or do you discount it on the grounds that, if your preferences do change, you will be glad they have changed?

Our focus here is on *self-interested* preferences – i.e., preferences grounded in considerations about what one wants for oneself, what is in one's own best interests, and so on. (Obviously the sort of decision we are talking about here would be quite easy if, say, you learn that if you become a more child-oriented person, your transformation will somehow lead you to do things that have horrific consequences for millions upon millions of people.) Given this focus, Paul does not seem to think that one response or the other is rationally mandated; but she does think it is at least entirely reasonable to allow yourself to be guided by your current preference structure. Commenting on this very example, she writes:

What a person cares about can change, hugely, when they have a child, and this happens in virtue of the psychological and biological changes that make them a parent. If so, then your concerns about the choice are perfectly legitimate. You are not being perverse. You are not confused. You are not ignorant of your own preferences. Your worry is not about whether you'll be happy with who you've become *after* you've been transformed. Your worry is that, right now, what you care about – now – isn't consistent with being transformed. Becoming a parent would change you in ways that, right now, you reject. If you do not want to have a child, then, in your current childless state, you don't care about the things you'd care about as a parent, and, even more importantly, you don't want to care about them. You want to preserve who you are *now*, and what you care about *now*. In these circumstances, it's perfectly reasonable to resist the pressure you are getting from the experts. That's because there is no implication that somehow, becoming a parent would be better for the self you are now. Rather, becoming a parent would *replace* the self you are now with a different self, an alien self: a self that, right now, you don't want to become. (Paul 2020: 35, emphasis in original)

Moreover, she thinks that the same sorts of considerations carry over to decisions about religious transformation. The religious sceptic might recognize that opening herself to experience of God may well result in a transformation that alters her preferences to match those of religious believers she knows; and she might well prefer not to become that sort of person. And, on Paul's view, it is not unreasonable to allow such fear of "preference capture" to inform one's decision about whether to undergo certain kinds of religious experience.

If all of this is correct, the application to the present discussion is straightforward. Suppose you currently prefer that universalism be true, but you believe (on the basis of scriptural teachings, and your belief that God is good) that it might be false, and all-things-considered *good* that it be false. Suppose you also believe that, if it is false, then once you have attained the beatific vision your preference structure will fall into line and you will be glad that it is false.<sup>17</sup> Finally, suppose that right now you prefer *not* to undergo that kind of value change – you don't want to be the sort of person who is glad that universalism is false. If it can be rational to prefer not to undergo the transformation involved in becoming a parent or undergoing a religious experience even though you have good reason to think that you will value having done so later, why can't it be rational to prefer not to be someone who values the falsity of universalism? And if it can be rational to prefer not to undergo such transformations, why wouldn't it be rational to hope against them?

The answer, in short, is that, although it can be rational to hope against such transformations when one rationally prefers to avoid them, one is not rational in preferring to avoid transformations that one believes will leave one all-things-considered better off (again, assuming we are still focused on self-interested preferences).

---

<sup>17</sup> In being glad that universalism is false, one need not be glad that people are in hell; though some in the Christian tradition have thought that those who make it to heaven would indeed be glad of this. Jonathan Edwards expresses something like this view in his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (Edwards 1741: 11).

Paul's focus in her discussion of experiences like having a child, going to college, and becoming a vampire is on the question of how we might assign expected utility to our options. As noted above, we cannot reliably do so in the usual way, by imaginatively modelling what the outcome of each option will be like; and doing so in other ways – like relying on testimony from others, or on statistical information, leaves us alienated from our decision since we are, in that case, deciding not on the basis of our *own* valuing of the outcome but on the basis of other people's valuing. But, importantly, the concern about alienation is only a concern because the values on the basis of which we are deciding in the latter sort of case might diverge from what is all-things-considered good *for us*.

If I decide to become a parent, for example, because all the parents I know are happy and, furthermore, all of my other evidence points to the conclusion that "typical parents" are happy, I effectively make my decision on the basis of other people's preference structures *without really knowing* whether or to what extent the decision will comport with my own current preferences and values. But if I find that I actually believe that *I* would be all-things-considered better off if I became a parent, then there is, after all, something in my present value structure that underwrites choosing in favour of that option; and to prefer the contrary is simply to prefer an option with a lower expected utility for oneself. That is not rational.

This, then, is the position of the hopeful universalist. As a *worshipper* of God, she had better believe that God is perfectly good and that she will, therefore, be all-things-considered better off if she brings her preferences in line with God's. But then it will not be rational for her to prefer not to match God's preferences with respect to universalism, in which case it will not be rational for her to hope against a transformation in which her preferences fall in line with God's should it turn out that God in fact wills the falsity of universalism.

## Conclusion

The attraction of hopeful universalism lies in the fact that it seems to be a happy halfway house between full-blown acceptance of universalism on the one hand and abandonment of some of our deepest intuitions about how a perfectly good and loving being would behave toward broken persons in less than epistemically ideal circumstances. What I have argued in this paper, however, is that there is in fact no happy halfway house. To the extent that one genuinely, reflectively, and categorically prefers that universalism be true (as contrasted with preferring it only fleetingly, or conditionally upon its already being God's will), one's conviction that God is good provides one with reason to believe that universalism is true.

This conclusion might at first appear to be an uneasy fit with conclusions I have defended elsewhere. In particular, I have argued that our epistemic limitations undermine inferences from our beliefs about the nature of love and goodness to conclusions about what a perfectly good or loving God would in fact do.<sup>18</sup> For example, the problem of evil trades in part on the idea that

---

<sup>18</sup> See Bergmann and Rea 2005 and Rea 2013 and 2018.

there seem to be some actual evils that a perfectly good and omnipotent being could have prevented without losing any greater good, and so if God exists, God *would* have prevented these evils. Similarly, the problem of divine hiddenness trades in part on the idea that a perfectly loving and omnipotent deity would not leave anyone in a state of nonresistantly failing to believe in God or bereft of deeply longed for experiences of the love or presence of God. But in response to both problems I have argued that, because the phenomena in question might well serve goods beyond our ken that justify God in permitting them, we are not entitled to infer from the fact that such phenomena occur that there is no God, or that God is not perfectly loving or good. I still stand by those conclusions, so it is incumbent to me to explain why they do not count against the argument of the present paper. Why, in particular, don't the same considerations, or those considerations together with a robust appreciation of God's transcendence, make it irrational for hopeful universalists to believe (as I have argued they should, under certain circumstances) the truth of universalism on the basis of the background beliefs that underwrite their hope for universalism and their worship of God?

The sorts of inferences I was most concerned to rebut in addressing the problems of evil and divine hiddenness are inferences from expectations about what a perfectly good or loving being would do, together with facts about what such a being (if there is one) *clearly has not done*, to the conclusion that there is no such being. Evil and suffering are abundantly manifest in the world; so too are various forms of divine hiddenness. It is therefore overwhelmingly clear that, if God exists, God has not prevented such things. Those who invoke evil and divine hiddenness as reason to disbelieve in God reason from this fact about what God has obviously not done, together with the premise that a perfectly good or loving deity *would* prevent evil and divine hiddenness, to the conclusion that there is no perfectly good or loving deity. But that is not the sort of reasoning that I am recommending to the hopeful universalist.

Although there is a tradition of interpreting scripture in a way that supports the denial of universalism, our grounds for believing that *God has not acted so as to make universalism true* are nowhere near as good as our grounds for believing that *God has not acted so as to prevent people from suffering in horrendous ways*. Absent such grounds, those who believe on the basis of their (admittedly limited) grasp of love and goodness that a perfectly good or loving being *would* act so as to make universalism true are not forced to choose, as in the problems of evil and divine hiddenness, between rejecting this belief and rejecting belief in God. They can instead reject the premise that God has not acted so as to make universalism true, and they can do so on the strength of their conviction that God is good and their further conviction that the doctrine of hell is incompatible with perfect love and goodness. The situation of the hopeful universalist is, therefore, entirely unlike our situation with respect to the problems of evil and divine hiddenness; and so, by my lights, the solutions to those problems that I have elsewhere advocated do not have application here.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Laura Callahan, Oliver Crisp, and Amy Seymour for helpful conversations about the ideas in this paper, and to Laura Callahan, Preston Hill, Derek King, Kris McDaniel, Andrew Torrance, and two anonymous referees for *Religious Studies* for helpful comments on earlier versions of it.

## References

- ALMEIDA, MICHAEL J., AND GRAHAM OPPY. (2003) 'Sceptical theism and evidential arguments from evil', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, **81**, 496–516.
- BERGMANN, MICHAEL, MICHAEL J. MURRAY, AND MICHAEL C. REA (eds), (2011) *Divine Evil?: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- BERGMANN, MICHAEL, AND MICHAEL REA. (2005) 'In defence of sceptical theism: a reply to Almeida and Oppy', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, **83**, 241–251.
- BLOESER, CLAUDIA, AND TITUS STAHL. (2017) 'Hope', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope/>.
- CRAIG, WILLIAM LANE. (1989) "'No other name": a middle knowledge perspective on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ', *Faith and Philosophy*, **6**, 172–188.
- EDWARDS, JONATHAN. (1741) 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God' in Edward Hickman (ed.), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 7 – 12.
- FERGUSON, DAVID. (2001) 'Will the love of God finally triumph?', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 186–202.
- HART, DAVID BENTLEY. (2019) *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- JONES, PAUL DAFYDD. (2012) 'A hopeful universalism', *The Christian Century*, **129**, 22–27.
- PAUL, L. A. (2015) *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).  
(2020) 'Who will I become?', in Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler (eds) *Becoming Someone New: New Essays on Transformative Experience*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 16–36.
- RAZ, JOSEPH. (2010) 'On the guise of the good', in Sergio Tennenbaum (ed.) *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 111–137.
- REA, MICHAEL. (2013) 'Skeptical theism and the "too-much-skepticism" objection', in Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil*, (Malden, MA: Wiley), 482–506.  
(2018) *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).  
(2020) "Protest, worship, and the deformation of prayer." in Michael Rea (ed.) *Essays in Analytic Theology, II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- STEIN, EDITH. (1962) *Welt und Person: Beitrag zum Christlichen Wahrheitsstreben, Edith Stein's Werke VI*, L. Gelber and R. Leuven (eds.), (Freiburg: Verlag Herder).
- STUMP, ELEONORE. (2018) *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- VON BALTHASAR, HANS URS. (2014) *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?: With a Short Discourse on Hell, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press).