

Must all be saved? A Kierkegaardian response to theological universalism

Jack Mulder, Jr.

*Department of Philosophy, Hope College, 126 E.10th street, Holland, MI 49423,
USA (E-mail: mulderj@hope.edu)*

That God could create beings free over against himself is the cross which philosophy could not bear but upon which it has remained hanging.¹

-Kierkegaard

Abstract. In this paper, I consider how a Kierkegaardian could respond critically to the question of strong theological universalism, i.e., the belief that all individuals *must* eventually be reconciled to God and experience everlasting happiness. A Kierkegaardian would likely reject what Thomas Talbott has called “conservative theism,” but has the resources to mount a sustained attack on the view that all individuals must experience everlasting happiness. Some have seen that Kierkegaard has some potential in this regard, but a full Kierkegaardian response to strong theological universalism has yet to be given. In this paper, I give such an account.

1. Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard has an enigmatic legacy. On the one hand, his rescue of “New Testament Christianity,” as he so fondly called it, from the synthesizing clutches of Hegelian speculation often endears him to those who would seek to defend a traditional Christianity. Yet these are often turned away by his polemical attack on the Christianity of his day, which was so vociferous that he crept closely to direct criticism of the New Testament apostolic community itself.² There are also those who embrace his harsh critique of so-called Christendom but wish he had seen through to a rejection of Christianity, or at any rate, to a much more critical stance with regard to traditional Christianity. This mixed reception situates Kierkegaard’s thought at an interesting place between fundamentalism and secularism, or perhaps, religious liberalism. I think that this interesting place is where Kierkegaard belongs. However, in this paper, I wish to show that

one tenet typically associated with religious liberalism is one to which Kierkegaardians need not subscribe, namely, the strong doctrine of universal salvation.

In one of Kierkegaard's journal entries, he writes, "[t]hey argue about whether God intends the salvation of all or only some – almost forgetting the far more important theme: You, O God, intend my salvation; would that I myself might intend it also."³ This journal entry reflects Kierkegaard's frequent refusals to answer metaphysical questions about the immortality of the soul, as well as doctrinal questions such as the one here, having to do with God's universal or only limited salvific will. The passage, like so much of Kierkegaard's writings, in effect says, "Stop working on metaphysical questions and start working on yourself!".

Now I don't for a moment wish to obscure this well documented fact about Kierkegaard's intentions. But let us not forget another point worthy of note, namely, that the fact that Kierkegaard often cautions his readers about their losing themselves in abstract questions at the expense of their spiritual health does not mean that he lacks beliefs about the answers to these questions. In fact, the discourse in which he most strongly protests against anyone's focusing too much on the question of the immortality of the soul is aptly entitled, "*There Will Be the Resurrection of the Dead, of the Righteous – and the Unrighteous.*"⁴ The point is not to profess agnosticism about religious or philosophical truths but to direct one's spiritual attention in the right direction, in this case to the fact that because of the resurrection of the dead (and immortality of the soul) there will be a *judgment*.

In like manner, while Kierkegaardians worthy of the name should have an appropriate concern for the spiritual attentiveness of individuals, they nonetheless may have a belief about whether what I will call strong theological universalism, i.e., the view that all human individuals *must* gain salvation, is true or false, and I want to show here that they can assemble good reasons to believe the latter (on the assumption that they can already provide adequate justification of one sort or another for belief in the theistic underpinning of that view).

In this paper, I am concerned to explain what I take to be Kierkegaardian reasons for thinking that Strong Universalism (SU) is false. I should like to make a distinction between what this paper will, to some extent, make clear that I *believe* about Kierkegaard's thought and what this paper will attempt to *argue* about Kierkegaard's thought. My *belief* is that certain portions of Kierkegaard's thought, pseudonymous or signed, *come close* to requiring the rejection of

SU. No doubt certain aspects of this paper will make it clear why I believe this. Yet, in order to avoid what would be an interminable and unhelpful (for purposes of this paper) debate about just what degree of agreement with Kierkegaard's texts is required for one to bear the name "Kierkegaardian," I will confine myself to the more modest aim of arguing that Kierkegaard's texts provide the resources for a critical response to SU.⁵ Accordingly, this paper is motivated philosophically, and I shall make liberal use of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms to craft the argument. This does not mean that I take the pseudonymity issue within the context of Kierkegaard's writings to be unimportant or philosophically uninteresting, quite the contrary. Yet, the argument in no way relies upon those fascinating aspects of Kierkegaard's literary production. Another assumption I should make clear at the outset: With regard to some significant passages in Kierkegaard's authorship, I take him to be explicating, rather than revising in such a way as to reject, what he takes to be traditional Christian doctrine.

2. On theological universalism

Before we get to our Kierkegaardian response to universalism, let's have a brief look at universalism itself. Let us call SU the view that, owing perhaps to some perceived contradiction between God's mercy and the affliction of an eternal punishment, not only *is* hell empty (or lacks human inhabitants) but that it *in principle must* be empty (or lack human inhabitants). This strong view is not to be taken lightly, for it is to it that many universalists seem to incline. Further, the impulse according to which people might endorse this view has a good bit going for it. Not only do traditional, and in particular, Christian theists believe that God desires the salvation of all (see esp. 1 Tim. 2:4), but most traditional theists believe that God is sovereign, and that he has the power to bring about whatever he wishes for the world, with only the restriction, which as Aquinas argued, is hardly a restriction at all, that God's choice be logically (or absolutely) possible.⁶

Occasionally, the desire that hell lack human inhabitants even shows up in traditions that have formally defined hell's existence.⁷ For instance, in the Catholic tradition, the Fatima prayer finishes its plea to Jesus with, "[l]ead all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of thy mercy." Yet it is just as much a part of that tradition that it is at least possible that some souls are not finally led to heaven.

The desire that no one suffer eternal torment is a worthy desire, and the desire seems to belong (in some sense) to God as well. Accordingly, the questions, “if God loves us so much, how could he wish to send anyone to eternal torment?” or better, “how could God’s fervent desire for the salvation of all be frustrated?” are, after all, good questions. Hell, unlike purgatory, is a *final* destination. Once one is in hell, it is impossible for one to leave. Evidently, individuals in hell don’t offer petitions for their release, or, if they do, those petitions are denied by God. Aren’t these facts inconsistent with a loving God?

According to SU, these facts are inconsistent with a loving God. Although the contemporary literature on the topic of hell and, often, by consequence, universalism, is vast, I shall focus primarily on one particular representative theistic philosopher, Thomas Talbott, who has championed universalism by denying that various forms of theism that endorse the doctrine of everlasting punishment in hell are logically consistent.⁸ Talbott claims that four propositions should be held by anyone whom he will call a theist.⁹ These are:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God is both omniscient and omnipotent.
- (3) God loves every created person.
- (4) Evil exists.

A person he calls a conservative theist (CT), however, holds to an additional proposition, which Talbott takes to be inconsistent with the above four. That proposition is:

- (5) God will irrevocably reject some persons and subject those persons to everlasting punishment.

Talbott distinguishes this position from what he calls moderately conservative theism (MCT), which endorses, not (5), but (5’), where (5’) is:

- (5’) Some persons will, despite God’s best efforts to save them, finally reject God and separate themselves from God forever.

Talbott thinks that the conjunction of (5) with (1)–(4) is inconsistent as is the conjunction of (5’) with (1)–(4). By contrast, his (5’), which, together with (1)–(4) entails universalism (or what he, explicitly

acknowledging his bias, calls “Biblical Theism”), is, supposedly, consistent. That proposition is:

(5'') All persons will eventually be reconciled to God and will therefore experience everlasting happiness.¹⁰

Two things, it seems to me, are immediately worthy of note about (5''). The first, as Michael J. Murray has noted, is that it is not identical to what Murray has called, “naïve universalism,” the view that “upon death all persons are instantly transformed by God in such a way that they fully desire communion with God and are thus fit for enjoying the beatific vision forever.”¹¹ Rather, Talbott’s universalism is consistent with, and even suggests, not hell, but a sort of purgatory. *Eventually* all persons will be reconciled to God. Probably some, but presumably many, are not in a position to enter into communion with God upon their deaths.

The second thing worthy of note is that Talbott here gives no intermediate option between (5') and (5''). But there certainly is one, and it requires only a possibility operator in front of (5'). So let’s call it by that name.

◇(5'') *Possibly*, some persons will, despite God’s best efforts to save them, finally reject God and separate themselves from God forever.

If we need a name, we’ll call the person who endorses this proposition, together with (1)–(4) a Cautiously Moderate Theist (CMT). This, however, is in no way a *response* to Talbott, since he clearly thinks that ◇(5') is just as inconsistent as (5').

To see why, let’s first consider his response to the suggestion that people choose hell and, accordingly, damn themselves. Talbott writes,

[w]hat could it possibly mean to say that some sinners are trying as hard as they can to damn themselves?... The picture I get is something like this. Though a sinner, Belial, has learned, perhaps through bitter experience, that evil is always destructive, always contrary to his own interest as well as to the interest of others; and though he sees clearly that God is the ultimate source of all happiness and that disobedience can produce only greater and greater misery in his own life as well as in the life of others, Belial *freely* chooses eternal misery (or perhaps eternal oblivion)

for himself nonetheless. The question that immediately arises here is: What could possibly qualify as a motive for such choice? As long as any ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom; but once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly “free” to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself.¹²

Although the passage about Belial is supposed to show how deeply incoherent the suggestion of someone’s damning herself is, Talbott does not rest his whole case on this point.

Next, he argues, there are two conditions under which we feel justified in interfering with the freedom of others. Talbott claims that these are (a) we feel justified in preventing one person from doing irreparable harm to another (giving an example of a father’s reporting his son’s murderous plot to the police for the sake of the intended victim) and (b) we feel justified in preventing a person from doing irreparable harm to herself (giving an example of a father’s physically overpowering his daughter in an effort to prevent her from committing suicide).¹³ Citing faulty inferences from these claims, he notes that, “even if a loving God can sometimes permit murder, he could never permit one person to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in another; and even if he can sometimes permit suicide, he could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves.”¹⁴ This is meant to suggest that under certain circumstances, while freedom is better than coercion, God might prefer coercion to damnation.

Further, anyone’s perfect happiness in heaven is taken by Talbott to be incompatible with anyone else’s suffering everlasting torment. He writes, using his daughter as an example,

[i]f I love my own daughter as myself, her damnation would be an intolerable loss to me and would undermine the very possibility of my own happiness. . . . And if supremely worthwhile happiness requires that I learn to love my enemies even as I love my own daughter, then the damnation of a single person is incompatible with such happiness in me.¹⁵

These, then, are Talbott’s main lines of argument against the view that it is possible for some individuals to damn themselves, and I will try

to address each in turn. First, there could be no possible motivation for the free decision to damn oneself; second, God prefers merciful coercion to human voluntary damnation; and third, the eternal suffering or misery of anyone is incompatible with the eternal happiness of another.

3. A Kierkegaardian conception of God: against “Conservative Theism”

Turning now to our Kierkegaardian account, let us first notice that, in his own works, Kierkegaard seems to share Talbott’s rejection of “Conservative Theism.” For Kierkegaard rejects the view that God is an external object, sentencing individuals to hell for failing to acquire certain belief states, or even for having flouted one (or more) too many divine decrees. Johannes Climacus is explicit about this at *CUP*, pp. 162–163. He writes,

God is not something external, as is a wife, whom I can ask whether she is now satisfied with me... God is not something external, but is the infinite itself, is not something external that quarrels with me when I do wrong but the infinite itself that does not need scolding words, but whose vengeance is terrible – the vengeance that God does not exist for me at all, even though I pray (*CUP*, pp. 162–163).

To think of God as an external person of this sort involves a complete (and existentially pernicious) misunderstanding of God, for Kierkegaard. In fact, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms seem to be of one voice in repeatedly denying that God is a person in the external sense (see also, for instance, *SUD*, p. 80; *JP*, 2:1349; *JP*, 2:1449).

Now, just as Kierkegaard scorns purely doctrinal questions whose answers do not result in spiritual upbuilding for the individual, so he warns us against trying to learn about God in the abstract, because, according to him, God is not an external object. Vigilius Haufniensis writes, “[w]hoever lives in daily and festive communion with the thought that there is a God could hardly wish to spoil this for himself, or see it spoiled, by piecing together a definition of what God is” (*CA*, p. 147). Johannes Climacus writes, “[t]hus God is a supreme conception that cannot be explained by anything else but is explainable only by immersing oneself in the conception itself” (*CUP*, p. 220).

What it seems Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors mean by this is that God ought not to be treated as an external object, whose approval needs to be sought, at least not in the way any human's approval needs to be sought. Climacus further writes of the wellspring in each person where God is said to reside (*CUP*, p. 183). Yet, it becomes clear that, for Kierkegaard, because of sin, the person cannot reach that wellspring.¹⁶ Yet, the wellspring metaphor is again invoked in *WL*, where redemption from this predicament has been found in Christ, who, by coming into time, made it possible for us to commune with God again. Here, however, God is love, and love is God. For one to come into contact with God just is for one to love, and for one to love just is to experience God welling up within oneself. This is what Kierkegaard means in saying that God is not a person or an object in the external sense. Kierkegaard writes,

[l]ove's hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, *if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being's love* (*WL*, p. 10, emphasis mine).

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard writes, “[t]he love-relationship requires threeness: the lover, the beloved, the love – but the love is God” (*WL*, p. 121). I take it that part of the reason Kierkegaard is so intent on attacking the view that God is an external person is that this view disqualifies God from being love. One of Kierkegaard's favorite ways of referring to God and the Christian requirement is “the unconditional” (*JP*, 4:4893–4919), and it is fair to say that many of the demanding claims that Kierkegaard's Christian love makes on us are made because this is the only way Kierkegaard thinks that love can be genuinely unconditional. As I read Kierkegaard, he here takes it that if God is not the same as love in the strongest sense, then there is no love, and out the window go the first and second great commandments, and with them all the law and prophets. To be sure, Christianity hangs in the balance. To this effect, Kierkegaard writes, “[t]his business of a friend in heaven is a sentimentality which has made a thorough mess of Christianity” (*JP* 2:1285).

Kierkegaard links the fact that God is not a person in the external sense with human freedom as well. He writes,

God is not in the external, palpable sense a power who, face to face with me, asserts his rights... But to repeat, God is not an external, palpable power who bangs the table in front of me when I want to alter his will and says: No, stop! No, in this sense it is almost as if he did not exist. It is left up to me (*JP*, 2:1273).

For Kierkegaard, it is not as if God stands, over against a human being, demands that his will be done, and, failing compliance, damns a human being to hell. Rather, God is unconditional love, and without participation in this love, a human being does not live the blessed life. Kierkegaard writes, “[p]recisely because God cannot be an object for man, since God is subject, for this very reason the reverse shows itself to be absolute: when one denies God, he does God no harm but destroys himself; when one mocks God, he mocks himself” (*JP*, 2:1349).

Another passage, however, complicates things. Kierkegaard writes, [t]hat a human being has been able to live on for 10, 20, 30 years without having noticed that God exists [*er til*] – O, it is frightful to deserve God’s being so angry with him. For God is the one who loves, and the first form of love is this that in love he makes one aware that he exists so that one does not fool around without becoming aware of God. *But it is the wrath of God to permit a human being to walk as an animal whom he does not call* (*JP*, 2:1367).

Now, just as God’s “anger” is discussed in connection with God’s love, and presumably the refusal of it, the “wrath” of God here is treated as permitting a human being whom he does not call to walk as an animal.

It’s been argued, and I think, persuasively, that Kierkegaard belongs in the Arminian camp with respect to grace and salvation, rejecting the Calvinist position because he believes it to make God the cause of sin.¹⁷ In contrast to the classical Calvinist position, this position holds that God predestines some people to salvation, but does it having foreseen the kinds of lives that they would live. In doing so, God fails to offer salvation to some, but that is because he knows that they would not accept it. Classical Calvinism (along with Thomism), by contrast, holds that God predestines without regard to foreseen merit or faith.¹⁸

But why not go beyond this question to a rejection of predestination altogether? Kierkegaard did, after all, write that the notion of predestination must be regarded as a “thoroughgoing abortion” (*JP*, 2:1230). Yet, let us notice that, for Kierkegaard, God is eternal love, and as truly eternal, he does not change. Thus, God knows the fate of all human individuals, as all time is laid bare before him. Existence is a system for God, but not for us, as we live in time and not eternity (*CUP*, p. 118). Accordingly, “before the world began” God “knew” the fate of all human individuals, and God creates them with this knowledge, that they will choose the particular fate that he knows they will choose. This is the sense of conditional predestination. In fact, because eternity is so radically different than time for Kierkegaard, there is actually no divine sense to be made of words like “before” and the past tense involved in “knew,” but this is how they appear from our existential perspective.¹⁹ This appears to be what Kierkegaard means in saying that “only that person is saved from despair who is *eternally* saved from despair” (*WL*, p. 42).

What remains is to understand what Kierkegaard means in saying that God’s wrath is the permitting of a human being whom God does not call to walk as an animal, especially given what that would mean for human freedom in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Yet, it would seem that, in order for that to be true, God must select some individuals who will not receive his truly efficacious grace, which seems to risk a retrogression into “conservative theism,” and ultimately, into unconditional predestination, which Kierkegaard seems clearly to reject. Accordingly, it is to the topic of human freedom in Kierkegaard that I turn in the next section.

4. A Kierkegaardian conception of human freedom

Here’s the problem for which Kierkegaard’s account of freedom needs to provide a solution. On the one hand, Kierkegaard denies that God damns anyone to hell for disobedience as if he were an external person. Yet, on the other hand, he claims that God’s wrath is such that it permits those whom God does not call to “walk as... animal[s].” This seems to imply that God does stand as an external power demanding obedience, since presumably this is the reason that certain individuals are not called. How can we provide a solution to this? Kierkegaard begins to provide some resources for this in the pseudonymous text, *The Sickness Unto Death*.

There, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, claims that despair, which is, at its root, a human being's defiant resolve to remain separated from God, is the ruin of a human being. Yet, on the other hand, the fact that a human being *can* despair is a great dignity to the human being. Anti-Climacus writes,

[i]s despair an excellence or a defect? Purely dialectically, it is both. If only the abstract idea of despair is considered, without any thought of someone in despair, it must be regarded as a surpassing excellence. *The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal, and this superiority distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit.* The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness (*SUD*, pp. 14–15, emphasis mine).

What might Anti-Climacus mean here? It clearly does seem that he means that the possibility that a human being possesses of ruining herself spiritually is actually a dignity to her, one that is lacking in the brute animals. Now a human being, Anti-Climacus says, is like a house (*SUD*, p. 43). There is a basement, a first and a second floor. A human being who, as most (we are told) do, chooses to live in the basement, only lives in sensate categories having to do with pleasure and the pursuit thereof. This results in almost no distinction between human beings and brute animals. But the possibility of despair indicates that a human being is in transition, is intended to be something more, namely, spirit. What does this mean?

First, let us notice that Anti-Climacus distinguishes despair from a common sickness like a cold by noting that while someone might possibly choose to go outside in the rain having good reason to believe that she would catch cold if she did so, once she has thus voluntarily contracted the cold, she at no further point in the illness is bringing that illness upon herself. On the other hand, the person in despair is always bringing the despair upon herself. Anti-Climacus writes, “[e]very actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair, he *is bringing* it upon himself” (*SUD*, p. 17). Now, despair has certain levels, and the most intense despair, the devil's despair, is to know precisely what one's blessedness is and to reject it. All despair is traceable to this form of despair, though

the less intense despairs occur when people pretend that they are not in despair, and hide their condition from themselves. Thus, if we can figure out what is meant by this most intense form of despair (defiance), we will have understood despair at its most fundamental level, the other types arising from self-deception.

Perhaps the most philosophically interesting commentary Anti-Climacus gives us on what despair is occurs in Part II of *SUD*, where he distinguishes despair, or sin, from ignorance. Socrates, in the early Socratic dialogues at least, claims that no one could believe something to be bad and yet pursue it. Thus, all actions that are bad or wrong result in some way from ignorance about what is good or right. In the *Protagoras*, Plato has Socrates say,

[n]ow, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good. And when he is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater [i.e., the worse] if he is able to choose the lesser [i.e., the better] (359d).²⁰

Anti-Climacus will have none of this. Assuming (rightly, it would seem) that ignorance is thus Socrates' explanation for the Christian doctrine of sin, he writes, "[i]f sin is ignorance, then sin really does not exist... If sin is being ignorant of what is right and therefore doing wrong, then sin does not exist" (*SUD*, p. 89).

Why is it the case that if sin is ignorance, then sin does not exist? In order to briefly examine this, let us define sin as the conscious rejection of the good for which an individual is genuinely blameworthy. Now it would seem to be a necessary condition for an individual's being genuinely blameworthy for an action that the action not have its ultimate cause in the ignorance of the subject.²¹ Accordingly, if the subject rejected the good for the reason that she could not accurately understand what it was, then she is not fully blameworthy for this rejection, because she lacks the conscious defiance that is, on this view, at the root of all despair. The objection that this choice has no rational motivation, and is thus incomprehensible, far from being treated as an objection, is *embraced* as foundational to the doctrine of sin, for Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard.²² Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard are radical and uncompromising on this point, and it is hard to overestimate the ramifications of this point in Kierkegaard's larger thought.

Jerry L. Walls attempts to use Anti-Climacus's work here in an effort to combat Talbott's universalism.²³ But it seems to me that he appropriates just enough of Anti-Climacus's work to vitiate his own analysis. Walls writes,

[w]hat all these cases show us, I want to emphasize, is that hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there. In each case the choice of evil is somehow justified or rationalized. In each case there is an echo of Satan's claim that hell is better than heaven. That belief is what finally justifies and makes intelligible the choice of hell... Hell cannot truly be heaven, or be better than heaven, any more than evil can be good. But this lesson may be finally lost on those who persist in justifying their choice of evil by calling it good.²⁴

Walls here construes the choice of hell as justified or rationalized by one's conception of it as somehow good and that the gratification involved in hell motivates the choice to go there.

Anti-Climacus might respond that the first could be true, but not the second. When we speak of rationalizing one's choice, we sometimes mean that, *after* we performed a certain action, we tell ourselves a soothing story about why we did it. If this is all we mean by rationalizing one's choice of hell, then Anti-Climacus may accept it, since we lie to ourselves in a host of ways, according to him, especially about why, in the past, we chose evil. But the desire for perceived gratification in hell that outweighs the perceived gratification of heaven cannot be, according to Anti-Climacus, what actually motivates the choice of hell. If this were the case, then the ultimate sin of the damned issues from a false set of information. Walls' unfortunate construal of heaven's superior goodness as a *lesson that is lost* on the damned seems to fall prey to this objection.

Despair, then, is, at its root, inexplicable, but Anti-Climacus rejects the covert assumption that Talbott and his detractors seem to accept, namely, the assumption that no inexplicable or irrational choice can be blameworthy. Now, to simply reject this could, of course, seem like a cheater's way out. But Kierkegaard does not believe that it is. In discussing what he takes to be a fault in Kant's discussion of radical evil, he writes,

[i]t is customary to say something like this: To say that we cannot understand this and that does not satisfy scholarship and science,

which insist upon comprehending. Here is the error. We must say the very opposite, that if *human* scholarship and science refuse to acknowledge that there is something they cannot understand, or, more accurately, something that they clearly understand that they cannot understand, then everything is confused (*JP*, 3:3089).

The point of this seems to be that Kierkegaard wishes to reply to those who cannot find a motivation for the choice of hell and thus reject its very possibility, that they themselves are unwilling to acknowledge the limits of their own understanding, or at least, that they fail to appreciate what he thinks are the disastrous consequences such a rejection would have for human freedom.

If one thinks that a motivation, sufficient in the abstract for anyone's making the same choice must be found for every action, then human freedom essentially does not exist, Anti-Climacus would argue. If each sinful action is due in some part to an agent's ignorance or some other defect having to do with her motivational structure, then some accounting must be given for this earlier defect which caused this sin. If this does not terminate in some inexplicably deep ground of the agent (because Kierkegaard insists in the rest of the above journal entry that the inexplicable must be preserved), then it simply arises out of an ignorance for which the subject is not blameworthy. If this is the best we can do, then we have a world without sin, but also a world without the possibility of despair. Consequently, for Anti-Climacus, we would have a world with infinitely less human dignity. Further, according to Kierkegaard, this would seem to entail an unconditional doctrine of predestination, which, he thinks, makes God the cause of sin (see *JP*, 2:1302).

Kierkegaard elsewhere has his own nuances to give to the notion of faith, which, Anti-Climacus claims, is the opposite of despair (*SUD*, p. 49). In *JP*, he writes, "[f]aith is essentially this – to hold fast to possibility" (*JP*, 2:1126). Now, do the blessed in heaven hold fast to the possibility of redemption? Yes and no. They do hold fast to it in the sense that they will never let it go, for they are finally and permanently redeemed. Yet, in another sense, they are not really holding fast to this possibility at all. This is because they cannot possibly *let go* of their blessedness. In one of his rare claims about the afterlife (*WL*, p. 194), Kierkegaard notes, "[Christianity] will be abolished in eternity, where it will cease to be *militant*" (Danish: *stridende*, striving or fighting). In a curious Kierkegaardian mix, then, the blessed in heaven should have the passion and bliss of faith, but not the struggle.

Perhaps, on earth, it is a dignity to be able to despair, but in heaven, to have chosen oneness with God²⁵ in virtue of this earthly dignity is itself attaining a higher dignity, or moving out of the basement to the luxurious second floor, to follow up on the house analogy. At this point, we'll need to go a bit beyond what Kierkegaard actually tells us to consider the damned in hell.

Do the damned in hell despair? Yes and no, it would seem. Anti-Climacus notes that one can try to obscure his despair all he wants, and yet,

eternity will nevertheless make it manifest that his condition was despair and will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his self, and it will become obvious that he was just imagining that he had succeeded in doing so. Eternity is obliged to do this, because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity's claim upon him (*SUD*, p. 21).

That is, God intends the person to become spirit, as he is intended and best suited to be, and yet one can simply decide, knowing precisely what he ought to do, that he will not become this self. He wishes to be something other than what he truly is. Yet, this is ultimately just an effort to “fashion... a self such as he wants” (*SUD*, p. 68), and human beings simply do not create themselves. Hell is clearly a permanent state, for Anti-Climacus (one is “nailed” to oneself). Yet, because it is a horribly permanent state, after death, it is clear that one cannot be constantly bringing the spiritual torture that is despair upon oneself, just as Anti-Climacus insists is true of despair as we saw earlier. This is because in this sort of permanent state, one has earlier chosen, but in view of this earlier choice has finally contracted, the spiritual torture of hell, much as if one had voluntarily contracted a cold that one is no longer bringing upon oneself. This appears to be the sense of Anti-Climacus's claim that eternity “nails” one to oneself. Accordingly, just as the blessed in heaven experience the passion and bliss of faith, but they are no longer struggling to acquire faith, so the damned in hell must experience the pain and torture of despair, but this is no longer because their defiant resolve is constantly bringing it upon them, at least not in the same way in which such resolve was bringing it upon them in their earthly life.

In this somewhat attenuated sense, then, the damned in hell do not despair in the strict sense, because they are not bringing their

despair upon themselves. But then, in hell, it is not possible to despair in the fullest sense. What this means, for Anti-Climacus, is that the damned in hell have voluntarily chosen a lesser plane of existence. This, I think, is why Kierkegaard says that it is the “wrath of God” to allow those whom he does not call to walk as animals. Yet, why does God not call them? The answer seems to be that God is eternal, and sees them in their steadfast defiance. Accordingly, he does not call them precisely because his call does not (and would not) reach them.²⁶ This, then, is our response to the criticism that God is construed as an external power who demands compliance and damns those who don’t comply. By way of response, a Kierkegaardian God is eternal love, and only fails to save those who defiantly and irrationally do not want his salvation. Yet, we can do this, and this ability is an infinite dignity to us as humans. This is why one ought to concentrate on intending one’s salvation just as God already intends it for us, as Kierkegaard says. Damnation is our no to God’s yes. When one mocks God, accordingly, he mocks himself.

How shall we respond, then to Talbott’s other reasons for endorsing universalism? Recall that the second claim was that God prefers coercion of those he loves to their damnation. Yet, a Kierkegaardian could respond that the blessed life is the life of faith and/or love, where one experiences unity with God, who just is love. If this is what the bliss of heaven essentially is, then only on what Kierkegaard would see as an inadequate conception of the Christian afterlife (which he would see as creating numerous other problems) could one claim that God could coerce someone into heaven. God can give someone all the earthly delights she might wish, but God can no more make someone love him, than a mother can force a child to apologize to his sibling *with sincerity*.

A Kierkegaardian response to the other problem Talbott discussed, namely, that anyone’s damnation is incompatible with anyone’s salvation, might have it that Talbott’s view is out of line with what seems to be Kierkegaard’s view of hell (although it is fair to say we never get a fully explicit doctrine to that effect). For the thing to notice about Kierkegaard’s view here is that, when one voluntarily excludes oneself from reconciliation with God, one gets what one, albeit irrationally and despairingly, wants. The freedom in virtue of which one chooses hell could only be sacrificed at the cost of the infinite dignity that very freedom bestows on humans. Would one wish for the salvation of those who do not want salvation? This again misconstrues heaven as primarily a place into which one can be smuggled,

free from garden-variety unpleasanties. Rather, given the highest dignity an earthly creature can have (which can only bring joy to a loved one in heaven), an individual in hell has chosen a life of lesser dignity than she might have had.

If God does will the good for his creatures (as Talbott insists), then a Kierkegaardian can insist that the good of human creatures is appropriately found in having the kind of dignity that results in their having a say about their eternal destiny. But the claim I want to make about this kind of dignity is that it cannot be endorsed without understanding that it comes with a cost. Freedom, of course, is not cheap, and if we prefer, as I think we should, the eternal dignity of our loved ones over against their being coerced into a state that we are assured is happiness, but seems to take little account of the unique dignity of the human individual (and thus her deepest happiness), then we must countenance the idea that such individuals may choose what is not ultimately in their best interests. Might such a choice cause a measure of earthly sorrow? If it does, then this view would no doubt have it that there is comfort in heaven, where the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old and New Testaments appear to give us assurances that our tears will be wiped away (see Isaiah 25:8 and Revelation 21:4). Yet, it's not clear to me that the bliss of heaven need entail that one be as happy with respect to one's earthly relationships as one could be, only that one be as happy with those relationships as one should be, in light of one's present entrance into reconciliation with Ultimate Reality. Accordingly, it is because of the dignity granted human beings that they can, though are never forced, to choose hell. This entails that, while it is possible that all human individuals go to hell, it is also possible (in the broadly logical sense) that none do. Accordingly, a Kierkegaardian can assemble resources for a defense of her endorsement of $\diamond(5')$.

5. A final worry

I wish to close with a final worry that was left unaddressed by the preceding remarks. The objection it involves is, perhaps, the most serious. It is this: perhaps it is right that we should admit it to be possible that someone choose a lesser dignity. Yet, if God is love, why not place the individual not in hell but in a state where the opportunity is always present to enter into oneness with God? Even if she never does choose to do so, at least the opportunity is there. This actually inau-

gulates a fifth option between Talbott's universalism and $\diamond(5')$. The new option holds (1)–(4) and now a final proposition, namely,

- (6) *Possibly*, some persons will, despite God's best efforts to save them, *continually* reject God, but nonetheless, God will always allow the option of salvation to remain open.

Let's call this Holding Pattern Theism, since the individual who hasn't entered heaven is in a sort of holding pattern until she does (even if she never in fact does). How should or could a Kierkegaardian respond to this? I want to suggest, in what follows, that the answer may perhaps be sought in Kierkegaard's existentialism. Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard would agree, though not in the same way, that "what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end."²⁷ This is the human dignity, that it has a necessary contribution to make in determining its eternal destiny.

Kierkegaard might insist as he sometimes does, that contemplating one's finitude in view of one's death is an important part, though only a part, of how one comes to glimpse the eternal. Kierkegaard tells us that, "death is the schoolmaster of earnestness" (*TDIO*, p. 75), and that it is nothing short of rebellion (perhaps also despair) to be unwilling to fear death (*TDIO*, p. 81). Remember, it is not that we ought to fear death and are unaware that we should, it is that the deepest part of us already knows we should fear death and rebels. In the light of one's finitude, then, one determines one's posture toward the eternal. If this is not resolved in the direction of God in one's lifetime, there is little reason to think it will be resolved in that direction thereafter, since the problem is, on this view, not that we lack information about the benefits of life with God.

Further, suppose for the moment that (6) is right, that the option is always open for an individual to choose eternity in oneness with God, even if she never actually does. Next suppose that an individual, given this infinitely extended deadline, somehow decides to come around and choose her eternal destiny as union with God. Yet, if here she chooses her eternal destiny, this moment has a surpassing significance for her, for it is in this moment that she chooses, forevermore, that her life acquire a higher dignity and meaning. The question now seems to be this: how could her decision, with all the knowledge of what it entails, to *reject* God, have any *less* significance? Keep in mind that the question is not how offended God might be at her defiant

rejection, but rather what this decision does, psychologically speaking, to her soul.

Now, it might seem that our garden-variety instances of willful rejection of God (or perhaps what the Catholic tradition calls mortal sin) are of a different character than this one moment, infused with eternal significance, in which an individual chooses her eternal (lesser) dignity. So how plausible can it be to claim that there is one moment in which an individual chooses *without hope of redemption* her eternal (lesser) dignity? At first, many might say, this seems miserably implausible. After all, God, who, as Talbott points out, faces “only logical limits,” could surely give the person an extended deadline. Nothing about the notion seems logically impossible. But consider just what God is doing when he grants this extension. The picture the universalist might have is this: an individual is on a bridge from a lesser place to a better place, and, even supposing (contra Talbott) that freedom is such a good that God would only have the individual *choose* the better place, why could God not simply see to it that the bridge remained functional, perhaps indefinitely, until the individual did choose the higher and better place (even if she never in fact did)?

This is a formidable challenge for someone who believes that hell is primarily about everlasting punishment. But someone who believes (as I think Kierkegaard does and Kierkegaardians can and perhaps should) that heaven and hell are primarily about freedom and human dignity will consider the argument to commit the fallacy of weak analogy. For someone who truly chooses the lesser dignity of a defiant human (closer to the level of beast than spirit) is not on a bridge to a higher place; her earthly life is that bridge. If she genuinely chooses the lesser dignity of defiance, it is such a decisive change that the matter is more (but not exactly) like choosing a different species than choosing to go to another side of a bridge.²⁸

One might nonetheless persist, I suppose, in finding it implausible to claim that a human being really does determine her dignity in the course of this life. But Anti-Climacus has a psychological explanation to offer for this ring of implausibility. He writes,

[s]uch things do not create much of a stir in the world, for a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having. The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other

loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. – is sure to be noticed (*SUD*, pp. 32–33).

The reason, by and large, this view seems implausible is, according to Anti-Climacus, that we are for the most part in despair, especially the form of despair that is ignorant of being in despair, for this is where the individual is not conscious of the dignity that she has, and that Anti-Climacus assigns, to the category of spirit (*SUD*, p. 44). Only in what Anti-Climacus calls defiance is this refusal to accept our infinite dignity characterized as a pure rebellion, without any self-deception.

The kind of hard-hearted defiance of which Anti-Climacus believes us to be capable and of which Talbott believes us to be incapable is so decisive when sustained directly before God, that it does nothing short of determining our eternal destiny. This capability is a dignity to us as humans, but it is also eternity's claim upon us. Accordingly, it seems more plausible to say that the holding pattern ought to allow at least the option of either permanent heaven or permanent hell. The one is permanent because of its self-determining defiant resolve. The other is permanent because union with God is partaking of eternity.

Yet, how long must this holding pattern last? The answer, for Kierkegaard, is that, the holding pattern just is, in general, this earthly life, and it lasts long enough to allow the person to gain a consciousness of herself before God, and to determine, in light of her finitude, how she stands with regard to the infinite. Mercifully, God does not annihilate those who reject him, but grants them the lower dignity that they despairingly want, with only the torturous reminder that it was their choice. None of this, however, prevents Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard's highest pseudonym) from praying, in the very text in which he claims that this earthly life is just such a test (see *PC*, pp. 183, 259–262), and in some of the most moving passages in the entire corpus, for Christ to do as he said he would (John 12:32), and draw all to himself.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Kierkegaard's texts provide reasons for rejecting what Talbott calls "Conservative Theism," and also for rejecting Talbott's universalism or "Biblical Theism," as he calls it. The position for which I have suggested a Kierkegaardian can provide a partial philosophical defense is "Cautiously Moderate Theism,"

which affirms the possibility that some may reject God so decisively that faithful union with God may be forever precluded by this defiance. Nevertheless, this position does not claim that philosophically it can be decided (absent special revelation about the fates of certain individuals) whether any have in fact chosen this fate. I have nowhere attempted to argue that some individuals do in fact so decisively reject God that hell turns out not to be empty.²⁹

Notes

1. A preliminary caution is in order. Although the wording of this entry might seem to indicate that Kierkegaard conceived of God as an individual over against other individuals, I think that there is substantial evidence, some of which will be presented in what follows, that should show that this is not what Kierkegaard means. Since the topic is freedom, perhaps Kierkegaard simply has in mind to stress that an individual has the radical freedom that allows her to stand defiant before God, refusing to rest therein. Below I list the translations of Kierkegaard's writings I have used with relevant abbreviations (references to these will appear in the main text): Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress (CD)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson (eds.), *The Concept of Anxiety (CA)*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (eds.), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments (CUP)*, Vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991. 2 vols.); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *For Self-Examination and Judge For Yourself! (FSE)*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *The Moment and Late Writings (M)*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *Practice in Christianity (PC)*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *Sickness Unto Death (SUD)*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers (JP by volume and entry number)*, 7 vols., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, vol. 1, 1967; vol. 4, 1975); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *Three Upbuilding Discourses on Imagined Occasions (TDIO)*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds.), *Works of Love (WL)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). The journal entry that begins the paper is *JP* 2:1237.
2. See, for example, *M*, p. 181, where Kierkegaard discusses Peter's speech, which, according to Acts 2:41, was to have made 3,000 converts. Here, Kierkegaard writes, "[e]ither the follower is greater than the master, or the truth is that the apostle is a bit too hasty in striking a bargain, a bit too hasty about propagation; thus the dubiousness already begins here."
3. *JP*, 4:4920.

4. *CD*, pp. 202–213.
5. My thanks to a reviewer for the helpful suggestion that I make my aims more clear in this regard.
6. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948, reprinted in Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 5 vols., Pt. 1, Question 25, Article 3. There, Aquinas notes, “it is better to say that such things [namely, those that imply contradictions in terms] cannot be done than that God cannot do them.”
7. For an explicit and official statement that the Catholic Church endorses hell’s existence and its eternity, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), #1035. Not in contradiction to this statement but interesting nonetheless is Pope John Paul II’s statement to a general audience dated Wednesday 28 July 1999. There the English text reads, “[e]ternal damnation remains a real possibility, but we are not granted, without special divine revelation, the knowledge of *whether or which* human beings are effectively involved in it” (emphasis mine). The transcript can be found on the Vatican’s website, www.vatican.va. See also Pope John Paul II’s, Vittorio Messori, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 185–187.
8. “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 19–42.
9. I shall not comment on or question his definition of “theism” since its precise usage is not important for my purposes in this paper. However, this definition does seem to exclude the likes of Charles Hartshorne and William Hasker (and all open theists, at least on one controversial definition of omniscience) from the class of “theists.” I would probably opt for a weaker definition of “theism,” but again, this is not crucial for the argument of the paper.
10. Paul Jensen, in a careful discussion of Talbott, distinguishes between hard and soft universalism, rightly citing Talbott as an example of the former, since Talbott thinks that non-universalist theisms (at least of the traditional sort he describes) are logically impossible. Hard universalism, according to Jensen, is the view that, “no person *can be* finally lost,” and soft universalism, according to Jensen, is the view that, “no person *will be* finally lost” (see “Intolerable But Moral? Thinking about Hell,” *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 235–241), p. 236. If, as is true on the traditional view, God exists necessarily and possesses (at least) his moral attributes essentially, then any universalist claim that God’s goodness is incompatible with hell will have to be of the “hard,” or, as I prefer to call it, strong variety. With respect to the statement by the *Catechism*, and the Pope’s statement to a general audience, it would seem that Catholicism rejects SU (or Jensen’s hard universalism), but might find it in principle possible, in the broadly logical sense, that soft universalism could be true (with respect to, at any rate, human individuals). Nonetheless, given what the Catholic Church has said about the existence of hell and mortal sin (see *Catechism* #1033), it seems clear that facts about God’s nature and human freedom (pre-eminently the latter) will make it the case that hell is always a possible destiny for each individual.

11. "Three Version of Universalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 55–68, p. 56. For a response, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "In Defense of Naïve Universalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003): 345–363.
12. "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," p. 37.
13. For some interesting criticism of Talbott's examples, see Charles Seymour, "On Choosing Hell," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 249–266.
14. "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," p. 38.
15. "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," p. 39. For a much longer treatment of this same type of argument, see Eric Reitan, "Eternal Damnation and Blessed Ignorance: Is the Damnation of Some Incompatible with the Salvation of Any?" *Religious Studies* 38 (2002): 429–450.
16. This is the metaphysical reason for the phenomenological frustration that occurs at Religiousness A, when an individual attempts to relate to her absolute $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, and cannot, because, having used time in the attempt, she no longer relates to the absolute absolutely. See *CUP*, esp. p. 526. For a good secondary treatment on the difficult issue of Religiousness A, see David Law, "Resignation, Suffering and Guilt," in Robert L. Perkins (ed.), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), pp. 263–289.
17. See Timothy P. Jackson, "Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on grace and free will," in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
18. See John Calvin, in Henry Beveridge (ed.), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), Book III, chapter 22, section 1, pp. 212–214, also *The Canons of Dort*, First Main Point, Article 9 (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988). See also Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Question 23, Article 5.
19. Of course, this conception of God comes with problems that have been long documented in the literature, a consideration of which cannot take place here.
20. See John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).
21. In order to substantiate what I mean by "ultimate cause" perhaps it will be helpful to recall Aristotle's distinction between someone's doing something in an ignorance for which she is responsible, and someone's doing something in an ignorance for which she is not responsible. On this distinction, see Terence Irwin (ed.), *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III, chapter 5, pp. 7–13, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), p. 38. Also, see Anti-Climacus's discussion of how, in the view of "Christianity," there is a distinction between not being able to understand and not being willing to understand (*SUD*, p. 95).
22. After summing up what I take to be his objection to Socrates in this regard Anti-Climacus immediately writes, "[b]ut can any human being comprehend this Christian teaching? By no means, for it is indeed Christianity, and therefore involves offense" (*SUD*, p. 95). Kierkegaard himself notes that Kant's theory of radical evil has only the fault that it "does not definitively establish that the inexplicable is a category..." He goes on to note that, "everything turns on this" (*JP*, 3:3089). Also important for support in this regard is *JP*, 1:733, where Kierkegaard notes that the demoniac knows what the remedy for his sickness is but refuses it.

23. See *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), esp. chapter 5.
24. Walls, pp. 128–129.
25. See, for instance, *JP*, 1:773, where Kierkegaard notes that faith establishes a unity of the divine and the human.
26. I am aware that what I take to be Kierkegaard's view, namely, "conditional predestination" may presuppose the availability of middle knowledge (since I believe Kierkegaard also believed in comprehensive divine foreknowledge). Yet, to attempt a defense of middle knowledge against a host of contemporary objections, all of which are just as contentious as the positions they contest, would far exceed the scope of this paper.
27. See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche*, (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 127 in Zarathustra's Prologue.
28. This may account for part of Kierkegaard's insistence that Christianity involves "literally a new life" (*FSE*, p. 76). This may raise other significant philosophical problems about the continuity of a person throughout such a radical change (which Kierkegaard insists this is), but to do justice to such a philosophical problem would fall outside the scope of this essay.
29. I would like to thank Bertha Alvarez and Andrew Dell'Olio for conversations or comments that led either to the writing of this essay or to its improvement, or both. Thanks are also owed to the Philosophy Department at Hope College for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this paper, and to the members of my Philosophy of Religion class at Hope College in the spring of 2005 for helpful discussion on these issues.