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Daring After Hart: Lonergan, Blondel, and Balthasar on the Problem of Human Freedom

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the problem of human freedom in the wake of David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved*. It renews and reasserts the crisis of every human freedom's eternal destiny. With insights from Maurice Blondel, Bernard Lonergan, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the article makes a case for distinctive conceptions of human freedom, divine agency, and the problem of hell. The article closes by reading *Theo-Drama* as a map marking places for further theological exploration.

Keywords

Hans Urs von Balthasar, Maurice Blondel, divine agency, David Bentley Hart, hell, human freedom, Bernard Lonergan, nature and grace, soteriology, universal salvation

In this article, I study David Bentley Hart's "Fourth Meditation" in *That All Shall Be Saved*, which argues for universal salvation by reflecting on human freedom.[1] I explore Hart's critique of the relationship between free will and damnation. Then I describe speculative difficulties that persist despite Hart's argument. I emphasize the difficulties themselves, and I leave the matter of their ultimate effect on universal salvation "downstream," encouraging subsequent theologians to speculate

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about possible solutions. My reply to Hart synthesizes Bernard Lonergan on divine agency, Maurice Blondel on human freedom, and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the two problems (divine agency, human freedom) united to one another. Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* in particular serves not as a set of solutions but as a guide indicating theological difficulties that invite further study and debate among theologians.

The article's synthetic argument challenges Hart's description of a human freedom that cannot ultimately reject God. In his reflection on human freedom, Hart makes a specific case for divine goodness, for the irrepressible effectiveness of divine action, and for our freedom's radical reliance on—and fulfilment in—God. The present article reconceives divine action in a proportionate universe. It reassesses human freedom, its nature, and its measure. With and against Hart, I argue that our freedom is free with God's own freedom. Without any change to God, we borrow from God whenever we act, and God makes our action effective. But these realities explain the infinite weight of our acting; they do not resolve the mystery of our eternal fate. For we are creatures who desire God and who already participate in God in our desiring. Within our freedom's positive purpose and power resides the infinite standard of our acting and the means to refuse it. We borrow from God to refuse God, and we affirm God's presence to our action even in our refusal. Such an argument does not affirm or deny universal salvation as such. The article "merely" reasserts the crisis of our freedom's eternal destiny by describing it differently. It frames that crisis as a place for further theological speculation. Perhaps indeed all are saved. Nevertheless, my article shows how arguing for universal salvation through an examination of human freedom proves difficult, perhaps impossible, at least for now. So, my article opens again the gates of hell. Hell takes up again its fierce shadow over our desires and our deeds—a shadow that looms not because hell makes our freedom "really" serious but because heaven does. This act of opening is also an act of hope. Hope that theologians might overcome sophisticated versions of universal salvation's challenges to our ability to reason about it.

Hart's Meditation on Freedom: An Overview

Hart calls human freedom "rational will."[2] Human volition is intelligent, mediated by intelligence through intentions[3] and ends.[4] Intention requires a rational consciousness to grasp an end, to know it, and to set it before the will, which must deliberate over and enact it. But there is more than one end operating simultaneously on and in the human will. There is not only an object intended and carried out but also a final, ordering cause that makes our more proximate willing possible and effective. "Rational will," explains Hart, "is by nature the capacity for intentional action, and so must exist as a clear relation between (in Aristotelian terms) the 'origin of motion' within it and the 'end' that prompts that motion—between, that is, its efficient and final causes."[5] This final cause is God.[6]

2. David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2019), 166.
3. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178.
4. Hart, 173.
5. Hart, 178.
6. Hart, 172.

Hart has in mind at least two elaborations of "rational will." One is from the position of objects and ends (of the will), and the other from the position of the human will itself. Hart argues, first, that "God must be the whole proper end of the rational will, and must therefore be able in himself to fulfill the rational appetite for truth and happiness."[7] It is not only that human beings intrinsically desire their own ultimate fulfilment in beatitude[8] but also that God orders, brings about, and directs our cosmos and our nature.[9]

Human nature is "in the image of God" with God as its ultimate fulfilment.[10] God renders possible and effective every single element in the chain of causes and ends. Hart explains, "There is an original and ultimate divine determinism of the creature's intellect and will, and for just this reason there is such a thing as true freedom in the created realm."[11] Our freedom is neither arbitrary nor independent from God's own. And this makes way for Hart's second elaboration of "rational will."

Human freedom not only desires God but also requires God.[12] In its operation as much as in its existence, our rational will relies on God. "[God] is the very power of agency," insists Hart. "He is the Good that makes the rational will exist."[13] It is possible for a reader to "hear" a semblance to Thomas Aquinas in this kind of argument.[14] Hart's expansions of the "rational will" span familiar theological touchstones around human and divine freedom. But for Hart, the real question is about salvation.

With his two elaborations of rational will, Hart affirms a single divine end for every rational will and rejects the possibility of eternal perdition. With a rational will so ordered by and dependent on God, for Hart it is absurd to characterize God as an "option" that the will can refuse.[15] It is also difficult for Hart to imagine what exactly such an option, set before a contingent, noninfinite rational nature, would be. "Nothing in our existence is so clear and obvious and undeniable," Hart insists, "that any of us can ever possess the lucidity of mind it would require to make the kind of choice that, supposedly, one can be damned eternally for making or for failing to make. . . . In another sense, moreover, the free will defense [of perdition] fails even properly to

7. Hart, 170.
8. Hart, 172, 175.
9. Hart, 185–86.
10. Hart, 172.
11. Hart, 179.
12. Hart, 183.
13. Hart, 185.
14. Mats Wahlberg, "The Problem of Hell: A Thomistic Critique of David Bentley Hart's Necessitarian Universalism," *Modern Theology* 39, no. 1 (2023): 48, https://doi-org/10.1111/moth.12816. Hart objects to being called a "compatibilist" on human and divine freedom (in 2020), though not in direct reference to Wahlberg's article (from 2023). See David Bentley Hart, "What Is a Truly Free Will?," *Public Orthodoxy*, April 24, 2020, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/04/24/what-is-a-truly-free-will.
15. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 184.

define the terms of the choice it claims a soul can make."[16] Elsewhere, Hart underlines that the very conditions of our free will cast doubt on our ability to earn "irrevocable retribution."[17] Hart also objects to the metaphysics of hell. He finds metaphysically suspect the divinity who resides underneath the "free will defense" of eternal perdition.[18]

Hart insists that our freedom in its fullest or most exact sense is a freedom not of options but of fulfilment. "Freedom," he argues, "is a being's power to flourish as what it naturally is, to become ever more fully what it is. The freedom of an oak seed is its uninterrupted growth into an oak tree. The freedom of a rational spirit is its consummation in union with God."[19] Our freedom is defined by what it is for, and therefore by its ultimate fulfilment in God.[20] Hart expresses concern over how our failure to reach our ultimate end refutes our autonomous motion in its nature as an autonomy with an end, reducing human freedom to the deliberation between two options.[21]

Finally, God wills our salvation. We cannot frustrate God or else damn ourselves in spite of him.[22] Indeed, Karen Kilby notes that the question of divine goodness is essential to Hart's book.[23] God is good, God intends our salvation, and God does not do the monstrous thing: leave his creature suffering eternally. Hart even insists that eternal perdition renders Christian faith "incoherent."[24] He resists any easy comportment with the thousand logical necessities of a divinity that supposedly permits such permanent annihilation of a creature's happiness. Dismantling the eternality of hell mostly falls under the purview of the other meditations in *That All Shall Be Saved*.[25] With respect to freedom, however, Hart asks how—and denies that—any created freedom can permanently choose against God.[26]

16. Hart, 180–81; see also 176; presaged in David Bentley Hart, "God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*," *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3, no. 1 (2015): 1–17; and Roberto De La Noval highlights it in "The Fork in the (Final) Road: Universalist and Annihilationist Eschatologies—And What Ultimately Divides Them," *Pro Ecclesia* 25, no. 3 (2016): 316, https://doi.org/10.1177/106385121602500305.
17. David Bentley Hart, "*That All Shall Be Saved*—A Response to Benjamin B. DeVan," *Christian Scholar's Review* 50, no. 1 (2020): 98.
18. See Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 79, 166–67, 178–79, 188.
19. Hart, 172; see also 186.
20. Hart, 53.
21. Hart, 169, 171, 192; see also R. Trent Pomplun, "Heat and Light: David Bentley Hart on the Fires of Hell," *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (2021): 530, https://doi-org.10.1111/moth.12650.
22. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 192–94.
23. Hart, 73.
24. Hart, 18, 39, 66, 208.
25. Especially in the biblical chapter: Hart, 92–192.
26. Hart, 178–80. See Kilby, "Against the Infernalists," *Commonweal*, March 16, 2020, 72–73, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/against-infernalists. For the sake of space, I must omit much of the Christology extending Hart's argument here; it deserves its own article.

Transition: Hart's Sticking Points

Hart's fiercest challenge to "infernalists" is his claim that human freedom, as rational will, is only or ultimately free in its positive exercise. He relies on Maximus the Confessor and Gregory of Nyssa to argue that human freedom is only free in God. Human freedom is not by its nature, nor in its proper definition, the capacity to contradict its own character as rational. Hart's core definition of freedom does not "contain" sin. Indeed, Hart's argument has a positive aspect: To be free is to choose God. Christ is the ultimate proof of this thesis: The Incarnate Word is the man of freedom, the man who chooses God. "If human nature required the real capacity freely to reject God," Hart argues, "then Christ could not have been fully human. According to Maximus, however, Christ possesses no gnomic will at all, and this because his will was perfectly free."[27]

In essence, Hart and his opponents interpret the fact of human sin differently. Both take it as a fact. But for Hart, this fact is ultimately irrational in the sense that it cannot be properly attributed to either human freedom or God. It is helpful to let Hart speak at some length:

> The point remains, then, that a human being cannot be said to have the "capacity" for sin if sin is literally impossible for the person he is; and so, even if this capacity was wanting in just the single person that Jesus happened to be, while yet that single person truly possessed a full and undiminished human will and human mind, then the capacity to sin is no necessary or natural part of either human freedom or human nature. Rather, it must be at most a privation of the properly human, one whose ultimate disappearance would—far from hindering the human will—free human nature from a malignant and alien condition. What distinguished Christ in this regard from the rest of humanity, if Christological orthodoxy is to be believed, is not that he lacked a kind of freedom that all others possess, but that he was not subject to the kinds of extrinsic constraints upon his freedom (ignorance, delusion, corruption of the will, and so forth) that enslave the rest of the race.[28]

The "capacity" of human freedom is fundamentally positive for Hart: It is cooperation with God, deification, effected in Jesus Christ. So, too, is our freedom's nature positive. Sin is aberration, not an in-built capacity. Similarly, divine necessity plays a decisive role in Hart's positive argument: God wills, creates, and effects the playing-out of our freedom, not in a neutral or negative capacity but as an unfolding in and before God.[29] All this is in contrast to Hart's opponents as Hart describes them, where the fact of sin is rendered as part of a logical circle in which freedom and sin mutually define one another. Because sin exists, it must be due to freedom, and then the "option" to sin becomes elemental to human freedom, explaining sin and confusing its nature as a fact.[30]

27. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 189.
28. Hart, 190.
29. See the remarkable passage in Hart, 190–96.
30. Hart, 192.

Hart's argument makes any reintroduction of an "option to sin" to human freedom seem like a reintroduction of the troubled logical circle that Hart rejects. "Capacity to sin" as a concept is fundamentally impossible. The ruination of sin is, instead, irrational. Moreover, Hart's positive definition of human freedom means that any sin renders human freedom unfree. Sin transfigures the concrete dilemma of human freedom but not its ultimate nature, which remains the same. Christ, in this kind of argument, restores our freedom. He gives us again our freedom's use. He helps us in its use. Because of the dominance of this positive vision, any ultimate and eternal decision for evil is simply impossible. The mechanism, human autonomy, cannot abort itself. Or, to speak more figuratively: One not only should not, but also cannot really, cut off one's nose to spite one's face. We are not in charge like that.

Our freedom is God's creature in an intimate and full sense. Hart's vision underlines divine redemption as the fulfilment of the universe. He offers us Gregory of Nyssa's example: "In *On the Making of Humanity*, Gregory likened evil in creation to the shadow cast by the earth (which, according to the cosmology of the time, was how night was understood): a diminishing cone of darkness dying away weakly in a universe of light. Sooner or later, the rational will must exhaust even its furthest reaches."[31] Hart has a cosmic vision in mind. At least, a cosmos of a certain kind, gained from the insights of Gregory and Maximus. Hart is concerned with the implications of a cosmos that is fundamentally and only good. "If a rational creature formed in the divine image required such a contrast fully to know God's goodness," Hart argues, "then God's self-revelation as the Good in creatures could never be complete in itself."[32]

Hart underlines how our freedom is ultimately defined not by itself but "in" God. Here it is helpful to recall a position from the last section's more general summary: God brings about our freedom in its very autonomy as much as he brings about its fulfilment. To borrow older terminology, the divine will is irresistibly effective in every regard. In Hart's sharpest challenges to infernalists, he strives to follow through on this basic set of insights. Hart rejects any confusion or concealment of creation's positive structure and purpose, particularly the confusion that supposes the human will can permanently choose evil and therefore warrant eternal perdition. Ultimately, Hart rejects an "option" for the human will as (1) cosmically nonsensical since the universe is only good; (2) not in fact determinative of freedom's nature as rational will; and (3) occluding freedom's real and positive character as deification in Christ.

Bernard Lonergan: Divine Agency in the Universe

A key part of Hart's meditation on human freedom is that divine action irresistibly leads human freedom to its fulfilment, and this is because divine action is not only divine but also intrinsic to our freedom's operation. That, then, shapes the question of this section: How is divine action intrinsic to human freedom's operation? To answer this question, Bernard Lonergan introduces three interlocking notions that describe a universe where human freedom is at once autonomous and necessarily reliant on

31. Hart, 165.
32. Hart, 169.

divine action: divine agency, extrinsic predication, and the theorem of the supernatural. It is important to notice how Lonergan's description of divine agency in the universe is distinct from yet not absolutely opposed to Hart's. Finally, because this section bears the most abstract but also the most important relationship to the article's overall argument, I will repeatedly pause to integrate its implications.

In Aristotelian terms, our question is about God as an agent of motion. For the sake of brevity, I want to focus on the young Bernard Lonergan's most important recovery of Thomas Aquinas's theory of agency: Agents of motion do not change, but patients of motion do.[33] Aquinas's theory runs against our natural assumptions, since we rightly think of agents as the causes of motion, and all the agents that we directly experience are also in motion. But our assumption conflates what it means "to move" (to be an agent) an object and what it means "to be moved" (to be a patient). Agency is confirmed not in the agent but in the movement of the patient. As Jonathan Heaps explains of Lonergan, "Agency, then, is a matter of the patient's dependence for its act upon another and so the transit from *posse agere* to *actu agere* is verified in the changed patient rather than any change in the agent."[34] God is an agent in this sense. Besides this, motion is caused by movers-and-moved being brought into the correct relation to one another. God moves the universe in this way, too (which is to say, providentially); movers are brought into, or prevented from, a correct relation to what they move through divine "premotion" and "application."[35]

I have described how all agency, whether human or divine, is extrinsically predicated. "Extrinsic predication" is the technical term for Aquinas's theory of agency, where passion is denominated from the agent, since a patient is moved by the agent, and where action or agency is denominated from the patient, since, as Lonergan explains, "action is an act (going) from the agent to another."[36] Again, agency qua agency is *confirmed in the motion of an object or patient*, not in whether the agent also moves (and therefore, in Aristotle's terms, is itself the patient of something else). That confirmation of agency is called extrinsic predication. For agency is predicated from something other than the agent. Thus, God's agency, resulting in the motion of the world, is extrinsically predicated: *ad extra*. The patient is the universe. The agent is God. The divine act of creation is therefore denominated from the veracity of the

33. Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 70–72, 261–69.

34. Jonathan R. Heaps, *The Ambiguity of Being: Lonergan and the Problems of the Supernatural* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2024), 78.

35. Heaps, *Ambiguity of Being*, 79–81. *Theo-Drama*'s term "movement" (often *Bewegung*) is not quite Aristotelian "motion." Balthasar uses "movement" within a larger set of analogies that name the "stage" of world history, changing historical situations, the dialectical interplay between ideas, or Balthasar's own transforming point of view. The dramatic category that best connotes Aristotelian motion is not "movement" but "action." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 343–53, Kindle; *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 223–36, Kindle.

36. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 266; Heaps, *Ambiguity of Being*, 77.

universe. "There is no extrinsic denomination," says Lonergan, "without the actuality of the extrinsic denominator."[37]

The "extrinsic" of "extrinsic predication" can be especially misleading in God's case. The extrinsic quality of divine agency, as with all agency, refers to how agency is confirmed by the motion of a patient, which in God's case is the universe. "Extrinsic" does not mean that the universe is, somehow, outside of or external to God, who in any case is not a body. It does not mean that God is above or below anywhere in the universe. As Balthasar points out, where else would the universe be but grounded in the Trinity?[38] Extrinsic, instead, describes what it means to understand the universe as not-God, as not necessary to God, as contingent, as created. It describes how God nevertheless causes the causes in the universe that is not God. The extrinsic in "extrinsic predication" means, most of all, that the primary referent for any actuality in the universe, with respect to us, is the existent "this" in the universe itself. It means that the actuality is predicated of God by way of the universe, not the other way around.

Extrinsic predication is how Thomas Aquinas can explain that the act by which God creates is the act that God simply, eternally is. It is how Thomas can say that God does not change at all even though the world exists. For divine agency is denominated extrinsically: Motion is verified in the world. "God is immutable," Lonergan explains. "He is entitatively identical whether he creates or does not create. His knowledge or will or production of the created universe adds only a *relatio rationis* to the *actus purus*."[39] Or again, "*creatio* is simply the relation."[40]

If divine action is intrinsic to human action, if divine action irresistibly renders our freedom effective—if we know that God wills our salvation—then divine agency's character is fundamental to any argument about what God irresistibly brings about in the proportionate universe through human freedom. So far, Lonergan has recovered Thomas Aquinas so that all motion is predicated of agents "extrinsically": Motion is verified in the patient, which in God's case is the universe. But this position throws us into the much larger problem of how to make sense of the patient. At this point in the argument, Lonergan focuses on a historical version of this problem as it shows up in Western theology: the question of how grace is necessary and yet the will free. There was no solution found in Augustine, who simply affirmed both things.[41] Moreover, nature and grace were only discoverable in the world together. "The whole problem lies in the abstract, in human thinking," explains Lonergan. "The fallacy in early thought had been an unconscious confusion of the metaphysical abstraction 'nature' with concrete data which do not quite correspond."[42] There is not over here "nature" and over there "grace," proving their entitative difference by somehow finding them apart; there is only a concrete world where the Spirit is poured out. But *thinking* about this concrete world, with its necessary grace and its free human will, proves difficult.

37. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 107.
38. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:271.
39. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 105.
40. Lonergan, 268; see also 78.
41. Lonergan, 181.
42. Lonergan, 17.

As Lonergan tells the story, the struggle over grace and freedom continues for centuries after Augustine's death. Then Philip the Chancellor radically clarifies theological reflection by proposing two orders distinguished entitatively from one another: a natural order and a supernatural order, a world where divine action (creation, grace) is disproportionate to the being-in-act of nature. Or, as Balthasar explains, "God's real world order is the de facto unity of two materially distinguishable and distinct orders that can be differentiated in analysis but are still not separate in reality."[43] Philip's proposal is, for Lonergan, the first emergence of the "theorem of the supernatural." It is a theorem that proposes an entitative order distinct from, or "above" (*super-naturam*), nature.

The theorem of the supernatural fundamentally clarifies the ambiguous data found in the concrete world, where nature and grace are always experienced together. It makes clear that there is a valid "line of reference termed nature."[44] In the Middle Ages, this line of reference helped theologians intellectually disambiguate the concrete universe.[45] "Philip's achievement," says Lonergan, "was the creation of a mental perspective, the introduction of a set of coordinates, that eliminated the basic fallacy [that tried to explain nature and grace at the same time] and its attendant host of anomalies [Pelagius's errors; arguing that grace gives human nature its freedom *simpliciter*; and so on]."[46] Ryan Hemmer calls Philip's theorem "a repatterning," one whose effectiveness is its very mobility.[47] So the theorem funds not only the distinction between nature and grace but also the disproportion that is creation's reliance on God for its act.[48] It is in this sense that Lonergan calls God alone "absolutely necessary." For God's essence is to exist.[49]

Contingence and necessity are important to Hart's argument. We know that God wills to redeem the world, and what God wills to bring about in the world, God irresistibly brings about. Through Lonergan's eyes, I am resituating that claim in a larger context. God's effect, which is the existence of the world and all movement in it, is denominated of God *ad extra*. In this respect, extrinsic predication names the disproportion between the absolutely necessary (God) and the contingent (the world), between the absolutely unconditioned and the conditioned. It is true that what God knows and wills necessarily exists, and that God knows and wills the world.[50] But this "necessity" is the necessity whereby the world relies on God for its act.[51] As Heaps explains, "There is no contradiction between the statement that what God causes to be

43. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 404.
44. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 17.
45. Lonergan, 184–85.
46. Lonergan, 17.
47. Ryan Hemmer, *The Death and Life of Speculative Theology: A Lonergan Idea* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 97.
48. Heaps, *Ambiguity of Being*, 97.
49. Heaps, 97; and Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 185–86, 283.
50. Lonergan, 108.
51. Lonergan, 104.

in God's transcendence necessarily exists and the statement that what God causes to be is contingent. Indeed, these are convertible statements."[52] Only God is absolutely necessary. Every other necessity relies on God and in that sense is contingent.[53]

The theorem of the supernatural clarifies the problem of the absolutely necessary and the contingent. One of the theorem's major specifications, extrinsic predication, explains why things like sin, contradiction, or self-contradiction are possible in the universe at all. Contradiction is possible because it is a "stage" of action that is not God. Though God's action can never be contradictory, and though God acts "in" every action of the universe, indeed irresistibly, that action is predicated of God *ad extra*. There exists a proportionate universe in which human self-contradiction is, as Lonergan says, a "surd" in the facts of human history.[54] That surd renders human situations impossible to comprehensively treat, fragmenting attention and concern for others with sin's irrationality. Balthasar, similarly, describes sin's fractious interpersonal costs: "What was intended as a relationship of loving solidarity [in action] becomes a relationship of mutually antagonistic absolute entities."[55]

Contradiction is not a positive capacity all by itself, nor is it intrinsic to created being. I am not secreting freedom and sin's mutual determination back into the picture through the back door. Created being's positive quality remains, as ever, its character as the "passion" of divine agency. The world's quality as "in motion" or "moved" has God for its agent. Even in a theological point of view like Lonergan's, sin remains irrational and cannot be understood in itself. It plays no role in defining divine agency, extrinsic predication, or the line of reference termed "nature." Nevertheless, the universe in its very reliance on divine being is not identical with divine being.

Should a proportionate agent contradict its purpose or frustrate its own character, that contradiction is not a denial of divine agency's irresistibility and rationality and unicity. It does not contradict the character of divine action because that action is predicated of God *ad extra*—indeed (in the case of sin or contradiction) predicated *ad extra* as divine "permission." Nor does contradiction, in a universe predicated extrinsically, redefine a proportionate being. Proportionate being remains defined not by its sin but by its nature and so its purpose—which it contradicts. Indeed, because God's agency is extrinsically predicated, our agency does not subject God to his creature. "[The] fallacy lies in supposing," Lonergan says, "God's knowledge of the creature, or his creative will and operation, to be some reality in God that would not be there if he had not created."[56] God does not wait for either our virtue or our sin.

Lonergan's recovery of the theorem of the supernatural and of extrinsic predication describes why the intrinsic and determinate quality of divine agency says much less to theologians than we might think. A universe where no individuated nature whatsoever

52. Heaps, *Ambiguity of Being*, 96–97.
53. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 109.
54. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, Collected Works, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 45–46, 651–52.
55. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 171, Kindle.
56. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 105.

frustrates its purpose, or a universe where a few natures frustrate their purpose, or one, or many, or most: any of these could reasonably be ours. The datum that is our absolute reliance on God, or that is our having a *telos*, in itself is not enough to "say" which universe (where all are saved or a few) is ours in truth. The fact that God's action alone is absolutely necessary does not tell us the fate of all things. Hart, and a few of his interlocutors, make much of divine volition, and they make much of teleology.[57] But the character of the universe does not tell us what God does or must do with it. Whatever happens in the world, it will always be through the same, absolute reliance on God, who wills (or permits) what happens perfectly and irresistibly. It will always be denominated of God extrinsically. The whole matter depends, therefore, on what in fact happens, on our capacity to know these facts. "There is no extrinsic denomination without the actuality of the extrinsic denominator."[58] And so, for us to know what happens to every freedom in the world, God would have to reveal it to us, or else we would have to wait to find out for ourselves what God in fact does.

A more traditional Thomist argument would next discuss divine willing and divine permission. But my interest is not a traditional Thomist argument. Instead, I want to know what human freedom is. I want to know whether or why such a freedom could suffer eternal perdition. These are the matters that remain completely open in my positive argument so far.

Maurice Blondel: Human Freedom

Maurice Blondel makes three contributions to the article's total argument: (1) a distinct definition of human freedom, (2) a description of human action's dependence on divine freedom for its act, and (3) an explanation for why our freedom faces eternally grave decisions. The summary below "blends" early and late Blondel, much as Balthasar does in *Theo-Drama*. I do not give a picture of Blondel's total intellectual development; I give a sense of Blondel's most relevant insights for application to Balthasar's *Theo-Drama*.

Like Hart, Blondel roots human freedom in human consciousness and in our consciousness's rationality. Blondel argues that human consciousness is an act. Blondel calls it an "interior light" (*lumière intérieure*), one "without which nothing would be for us, and which, far from receiving its irradiation from objects, seems, on critical and

57. Among Hart's interlocutors, see Benjamin B. DeVan, "Shall All Be Saved? David Bentley Hart's Vision of Universal Reconciliation—An Extended Review," *Christian Scholar's Review* 50, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 91; Joshua R. Brotherton, "That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation (Review)," *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 4 (2020): 1395–396, https://doi-org/10.1353/nov.2020.0075; Taylor Patrick O'Neill, "That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation (Review)," *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 4 (2020): 1401–3, https://doi-org/10.1353/nov.2020.0076; and James Dominic Rooney, "The Ends of the Divine: David Bentley Hart and Jordan Daniel Wood on Grace" *Nova et Vetera* 22, no. 3 (2024): 827–29, https://doi-org/10.1353/nov.2024.a934928. I should note that this article shares many sympathies with O'Neill's review.

58. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 107.

thorough reflection, to illuminate them with its own light."[59] So consciousness is an act that enables other acts; consciousness is a "light" that makes way for what it will illuminate without being the illuminated activity.[60]

Our consciousness of action posits our action as free. According to Blondel, "It is because we are reasonable and conscious of ourselves that we judge ourselves capable of voluntary initiative."[61] Freedom, for Blondel, is that particular power without which an action does not occur, where the power in question is the contribution of freedom itself. Freedom is the requisite and the effect. Blondel says, "Freedom is not, as it has too often been represented, and quite wrongly, like a simple arbitral power."[62] Instead, "freedom is not distinct from the use we make of it."[63] Even withholding action is an act of freedom.[64] Already, Blondel is clarifying for this article. He describes human freedom as a power. Our freedom is that which requires our conscious contribution to occur. Freedom is the power by which it occurs. It is the requisite *and* the effect. Freedom is the power that applies to whatever requires "me" consciously or else it does not come to be: moving my hand, focusing my attention, reflecting, deciding (and thus the intense intimacy of coercion, which enlists against me what still requires me). Our freedom not only heads outward toward an end, not only arbitrates and decides, but also accompanies our conscious action as fundamental to its character.[65]

Much like his definition of "action," Blondel's definition of "freedom" is maximally broad, designed to contain its every permutation. Unlike Hart's definition of freedom, Blondel's is not constrained to human freedom's ultimate, most proper, most real use in its cooperation with deification in God. Though both men begin with human consciousness, and though Hart's definition of freedom implicitly refers to a cognate broadness in the phrase "rational will," Hart's human freedom is more emphatically determined by teleology—both in the sense of having an end and in the sense of that end's realization. Indeed, for Hart, one must have both. But for Blondel, to be conscious is to be free. Self-consciousness—not self-knowledge, but that act by which "self" is at all, or that wakefulness that throws its light on being—is free.[66]

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59. Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée vol. 1: La genèse de la pensée et les paliers de son ascension spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), x; see: 81–82, 398–401; reprised in *La Pensée vol. 2: Les responsabilités de la pensée et la possibilité de son achèvement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 198, 274–79, 397–400. For Blondel's *L'Être et les êtres, La Pensée*, and *L'Action (1936)*, I use digitized editions through "Les classiques des sciences sociales" from la Bibliothèque Paul-Émile-Boulet de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and available at classiques.uqac.ca. The digitized versions note the original pagination.
60. Blondel, *La Pensée*, 1:64; see also 1:113–14.
61. Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, 2nd ed., trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 124.
62. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 129.
63. Blondel, 135.
64. Blondel, 129.
65. Maurice Blondel, *L'Action (1936)*, vol. 2, *L'action humaine et les conditions de son aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 153.
66. Blondel, *L'Action (1936)*, 1:387–88. In the relevant passage, Blondel himself cites *La Pensée*, 2:365.

Everything from experience, to experience's spontaneous rise to thought, to deed: All this is also free. It may well be spontaneous, but it is not automatic. No, in these things, human consciousness is autonomous. "Not that we should claim that every intellectual affirmation is an act of free will," explains Blondel; "we shall see the error of such a paradox. But it is the native exercise of intelligence that implies an initiative, an orientation that we must account for as the common source of personal thought and freedom."[67] Or again, in a rephrasing of the original *Action*, "[Freedom] comes from the dynamism of spontaneous action, which is why it necessarily tends towards the dynamism of reflective action. In this, it bears the indelible mark of its origin [in consciousness], and it continues the permitted and legitimated movement of voluntary action's internal logic."[68]

For Blondel, human action is structured by the will. This claim is something like Hart's position, but with a distinctive explanation of the will and how it structures our action. Our will is characterized by an interior distinction between what Blondel calls the "willing will" and the "willed will."[69] It names the disproportion between the fund of all our willing and its discrete objects. The driving question in both versions of *Action* (1893, 1936) is whether the human will can "equal" itself. In other words, is there any willed act or object that can rise to the proportion of the willing will? Is there any act of the will that can satisfy the will so that it does not will further and more? "What do we will," Blondel asks, "when we will truly all that we will?"[70]

Blondel follows the "determinism" of action's expansion through the whole proportionate universe. Nowhere does the will equal itself. "In my action," says Blondel, "there is something I have not yet been able to understand and equal, something which keeps it from falling back into nothingness and which is something only in being nothing of what I have willed up to now. What I have voluntarily posited, therefore, can neither surpass nor maintain itself. . . . There is a 'one thing necessary.'"[71] Blondel argues that there is a supernatural order. It alone explains the infinite fund of the willing will and its infinite expansion outward.[72]

Blondel says that action received from this supernatural order would, should it come into being, fulfill or equalize the human will.[73] But it is a supernatural order. Though philosophy can hypothesize a "one thing necessary," reason cannot by itself affirm it, and the will does not have any governance over it.[74] One could artificially call a halt to human willing's expansion to its absolute border through action that Blondel calls "superstition."[75] And so one could maintain the illusion of total

67. Blondel, *La Pensée*, 2:90.
68. Blondel, *L'Action (1936)* 2:166–67.
69. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 52, 134.
70. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 135; Maurice Blondel, *Action (1936)*, 2:161–62.
71. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 324; and Maurice Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies of Christian Religion*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2021), 9–10.
72. Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les êtres* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1935), 12–14; *La Pensée*, 2:293.
73. Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 14–15.
74. Blondel, 47; and Cathal Doherty, *Maurice Blondel on the Supernatural in Human Action: Sacrament and Superstition* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 117.
75. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 332–44.

autonomy. But for Blondel, the point is to confront how the human will is, from its first moments to its farthest horizons, acquainted with a reality in radical disproportion with itself. The human will, though natural, is acquainted with the supernatural. Blondel writes, "Instead of looking for the necessary outside the contingent, as an ulterior term, it manifests it within the contingent itself, as a reality already present. Instead of making it a transcendent but exterior support, it discovers that it is immanent at the very center of all that is."[76]

It would take a separate article to prove or disprove all the details of the comportment between Lonergan's "supernatural" and Blondel's "supernatural." Much the same can be said of Balthasar and Lonergan,[77] or of Balthasar and the analogy of being[78] (his primary means of naming and navigating the theorem of the supernatural), though the literature for both subjects is much more established. Some Lonergan scholars have expressed a positive attitude toward Blondel's "supernatural," and Matthew Conway has studied Blondel's engagements with Thomas Aquinas.[79] Balthasar's role as a third element of this article's synthesis helps emphasize the shared ground among all three thinkers. This synthesis is proof of their shared ground. But for the sake of a more careful legibility, perhaps we can say that at its minimum, Blondel's

76. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 317; *L'Être et les êtres*, 177; and *L'Action (1936)*, 1:399–400.
77. With respect to Lonergan and Balthasar, see, for example, Eugene Richard Schlesinger, "Overcoming the 'Distance': Robert Doran as a Bridge between the Trinitarian Analogies of Bernard Lonergan and Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Theological Studies* 82, no. 4 (2021): 626–45, https://doi-org/10.1177/00405639211052311; and Peter Drilling, "Relating the Theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan on Divine Action in the World," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2016): 267–83, https://doi-org/10.1177/0021140016643775. Though there are many more such articles, I finish by mentioning their major progenitor, Robert M. Doran, "Lonergan and Balthasar: Methodological Considerations," *Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (1997): 61–84, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399705800104.
78. Among an overwhelming number of resources, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "L'métaphysique d'Erich Przywara," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 145, no. 3 (2023): 372–86. This is an easier-to-find translation of Balthasar's 1933 article, "Die Metaphysik Erich Przywaras," *Schweiz* 33 (1933): 489–99. See also John R. Betz, "The *Analogia Entis* in Erich Przywara and Ferdinand Ulrich: Toward a More Catholic Metaphysics," *Communio* 46, no. 1 (2019): 109–33; Andrew Prevot, "Dialectic and Analogy in Balthasar's 'Metaphysics of the Saints," *Pro Ecclesia* 26, no. 3 (2017): 261–77; and Pascal Ide, "L'analogie selon Balthasar: une relecture à partir de l'amour de don," *Science et Esprit* 66, no. 1 (2014): 85–108, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44618435.
79. On the comportment between Lonergan and Blondel, see Heaps, *Ambiguity of Being*, 131–58; Anne M. Carpenter, *Nothing Gained Is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2022), 38–45. On Blondel and Thomas Aquinas, see Michael Conway, "From Neo-Thomism to St. Thomas: Maurice Blondel's Early Encounter with Scholastic Thought," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 83, no. 1 (2007): 1–22; and "A Thomistic Turn? Maurice Blondel's Reading of St. Thomas," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 84, no. 1 (2008): 87–122, https://doi-org/10.2143/ETL.84.1.2030895. See also Marc Leclerc, "Maurice Blondel, philosophe à la croisée de l'Eglise et de l'Université," *Gregorianum* 83, no. 3 (2002): 461–71, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23580787.

"one thing necessary," which posits a supernatural order, does not contradict Lonergan's far more Aristotelian "theorem of the supernatural" (let alone Balthasar's *analogia entis*). Lonergan and Blondel's arguments articulate two different methods of "repatterning" the concrete data of the created world, and both methods fundamentally attempt to disambiguate the data into two integral orders that are distinct but not separate: natural, supernatural.

Blondel says that the human will is an integral structure. It has "necessities" and "determinisms." He argues, "The very interplay of this determinism is explained and consecrated by freedom."[80] The will's desire for equalization is necessary to it; its real equalization would be a supernatural act. Both claims are equally true. For Blondel, our freedom's basic structure is as a desire for a supernatural act. That structure becomes a question and a decision that the will poses to itself about itself. We can either consent to the "passion" of being acted upon and transformed or else refuse and remain the same.[81] "But, by himself," Blondel says, "man can do nothing about it. His natural state is to be unchanged. And not to be changed, is the irremediable abortion of his destiny."[82] This crisis is what Blondel calls human freedom's "option."[83] It is necessary to conscious action.[84]

The will itself provides the norm that judges our use of it. Our freedom is rational; our will desires God. Such is the deepest direction of our being, but also our judgment: our consent and our refusal face the immanent standard of our own desire. Therefore, says Blondel, "What judges [man] is his very action."[85] It is not a matter of violating or following an abstract norm but a concrete reality contained in our freedom's effective structure. Whether we act for passion or act against it, still, we become what we will. Still, we remain subject to our yearning for God. In Blondel's words, "The human will thus proposes for itself the series of means whose effect is to impose on it the exercise of its power. Hence, in this very necessity, it does not undergo anything that it has not willed."[86]

We can ask if Blondel has, by reintroducing the notion of an option that human freedom necessarily faces, walked us right back into the iron-chained circle between sin and freedom that Hart so strenuously rejects. It is important, then, to notice the exact nature of this option. It is not a choice between God on one side and evil on the other, as in Hart's predominant mode of indicating what he means by a "free-will defense" of eternal perdition.[87] Nor is it a choice between God and a specific,

80. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 125; Maurice Blondel, *L'Action (1936)*, 2:149–53.
81. Blondel, *La Pensée*, 2:71–72; *Philosophical Exigencies*, 86–88; 114, 123; James Le Grys, "Blondel's Idea of Assimilation to God through Mortification of Self," *Gregorianum* 77, no. 2 (1996): 315, 325–29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23579492; and Thomas Alferi, "Résistance et accomplissement de la volonté divine: Une relecture de Maurice Blondel, *L'Action*," *Science et Esprit* 67, no. 2 (2015): 265–69.
82. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 343; *Philosophical Exigencies*, 191.
83. Blondel, *La Pensée*, 2:108–09.
84. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 340.
85. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 341.
86. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 328; and Blondel, *La Pensée*, 1:110.
87. Referenced specifically on Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 180–82, 187.

horrendous sin that warrants the name "evil." Lastly, it is not a direct confrontation with God at all. It is a choice over whether to follow or refuse one's own, interior yearning to its end in vulnerable surrender to divine action (over which one has no purchase). To falter, in Blondel's sense, is to abruptly end the expansion of desire at an artificial point one can still control. "We would will to be self-sufficient; we cannot be."[88] Blondel often calls such action "superstition." He emphasizes its character as a counterfeit of the fully human action that is surrender to God.[89] It is, in Blondel's words, "the use of a remainder of human action, outside of the real."[90]

Recall that our self-conscious action is spontaneous but not automatic. Recall that to be conscious is to be free. Finally, recall that our freedom is that which requires our contribution to occur, whether in thought or in deed. Now Blondel's argument refers us to our ability to cease our own self-transcending movement outward. It is a refusal, a decision, but also the end of something. Most of all, it is a failure to be fully oneself. Much as Lonergan often discusses the human refusal to follow the "dictates of intelligence"—whether by not asking further questions about ourselves or about our world, by failing to pay attention, by being obtuse to new problem—Blondel describes how we face a decision not so much between two separate things but over whether to follow what our interior nature asks us to do and to be. The mechanism for our success or failure, and the judgment of our success or failure, is us, our very selves, our own desire to be intelligent and to be good—allied with our capacity to refuse, to "no longer," to "no further," to try to do anything but surrender to the one thing necessary. "He wills," Blondel says, "but he did not will to will."[91]

The question of how we might distinguish between mortal and venial sin is relevant here, but it is too complex to treat in the space I have. It is more urgent to consider how Hart might object to Blondel's position in other ways. So far, I have emphasized how in Blondel's option there is only our positive desire for God and a capacity to artificially circumscribe it. It is not a something-else but an end before the end. Hart's point of view presents at least two objections to this argument. (1) Does not God necessarily, irresistibly will our free action? (2) If this is so, are we not incapable of ultimately refusing the direction of our desire? Or, modifying the question to a version Balthasar and John Thiel ask in very different ways: Are we not incapable, however "long" or "much" it takes for God to win out?

But then we must recall Lonergan's specification of the theorem of the supernatural with respect to divine agency: extrinsic predication. It is true that whatever God wills occurs irresistibly. But that tells us less about what God wills than we want it to. It tells us less because it is true for anything that occurs in creation, and so untrue for what does not occur. Which is to say, what does not occur, what does not exist, God does not will. (Here the Thomist language of "permission" again haunts the conversation.) The problem becomes, then, a question of fact. A question of the facts we know. If I freely follow through the direction of my own freedom, then it is not only because of me but also because of God. My autonomy remains a patient of divine agency. But there is no

88. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 303.
89. See: Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 285–98; and *L'Action (1936)*, 2:319–40.
90. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 284.
91. Blondel, 303.

extrinsic denomination without the actuality of an extrinsic denominator. For it to be true that God has willed my action, I have to in fact act. God's action is the ontological condition for the existence of my human action, and the fact of my action existing is the epistemic condition for the truth of the claim that God has acted. In the case of Hart's argument, we would have to know, in fact, that every instance of human freedom follows through its yearning in God. We would have to know this either by God revealing it to us or by waiting to find out for ourselves.

It is perhaps the case that God wins out in the sense that every single human freedom effectively cooperates with God. I will deal with that a little more in the last section of this article. But it is also the case that God irresistibly "wins out" even if that is not true. And for Blondel, at least, we must also face the reality of superstitious action. It is a fact of concrete human living. It is a fact staring us in the face. "These willful illusions," Blondel says, "that survive the most illuminating disappointments, these sometimes heroic sacrifices one makes for the sake of honor, of camaraderie, of human solidarity, of esprit de corps, of proprieties, even when one otherwise knows that one makes them only routinely, in boredom, for nothing: all that is touching, but it is nonsense."[92] "Nonsense," we must remember, because it is not the ultimate act of surrender to God, however grand. According to Blondel, we must admit that this particular capacity of ours to "not will to will" is a fact. Sin is a failure of freedom. Because it is freedom that fails, that failure is an implication of the nature of that freedom.

Hart might reasonably object that our freedom is only truly free in God. We have seen Blondel himself affirm this sense of human freedom in his notion of its surrender-fulfilment in a supernatural act. But it is also true that Blondel's definition of freedom is much sparer, and so much broader, than Hart's. Our freedom is still freedom when it wounds itself by willing not to will. Freedom is "merely" that which requires my conscious contribution to occur. And if, for Hart, human freedom must become truly itself or else God is a moral monster, then Blondel renders that dilemma into an open question about God and the facts we know. The fact of autonomous entelechy is not proof of autonomy's ultimate fulfilment. It is only proof of that autonomy's teleological existence and its possible fulfilment. God is not required to fulfill it even though God is required for it to be fulfilled. For grace is necessary and the will is free. For divine agency radically transcends the universe. Because of this, the threatening horizon opens up in all its severity: Perhaps God *is* a monster. Or, if we know that God is not a monster because faith tells us this, it is not clear that we know how with respect to the facts about human freedom that we have. Again, we would have to be told or else find out what is in fact the case. It is not clear that we have all the relevant facts here. What is clear, at least for this article, is the dilemma.

Blondel, like Lonergan, argues that God operates in every operation of human freedom, though he frames it using different conceptual language. Blondel describes this divine operation in human operation in terms of a "synthesis of man with God," one that "is in perpetual becoming, as if stirred by the inspiration of an infinite growth."[93] Or, as Balthasar says of Blondel, God "gives the creature the opportunity to lay hold

92. Blondel, 304.
93. Blondel, 325; and Blondel, *L'Être et les êtres*, 45; *L'Action (1936)*, 1:429–30.

of its own freedom, a freedom that both is its own and comes from an external source."[94] That "external source" is God. For Robert Koerpel, Blondel's notion of action "represents a shift toward understanding God's power as the original dynamism of spiritual beings, which resides beyond the intellect and the will, while at the same time functioning as the source of power for the intellect and the will."[95] Again, Blondel's synthetic notion of human freedom does not contradict Lonergan's description of divine and human agency, which is also synthetic, since it describes two simultaneous actors (the unchanged agent, the patient of motion): God and the human being.

Blondel brings this article to its sharpest point. He gives human freedom a definition, a single supernatural end, an interior norm, and an option regarding its final destiny. Where Hart's argument about human freedom renders an eternal hell impossible, Blondel's reintroduces the possibility. Our action does have a certain permanence, our action does have an infinite norm by which it exists, all because our will borrows from God. "Fearsome grandeur of man!," writes Blondel. "He wills that God be no longer for him, and God is no longer for him. But, keeping the creative will always in his depths, he adheres to it so firmly that it becomes completely his. His being remains without Being. And when God ratifies this solitary will, it is damnation."[96] For Blondel, freedom's reliance on divine action proves the gravity of our freedom's execution in the world. It proves its permanence. With our freedom, we render inviolable actions into being.[97] The interior norm of the human will, together with its synthetic effectiveness, means that it is possible for human freedom to render itself into a self-contradiction. Contradiction, that is, of one's own desire for self-transcendence, effected by the power of one's own freedom.

Before pivoting to Balthasar as a roadmap, first I want to explore Balthasar's explicit agreement with Blondel and his expansion of Blondel as a way of rounding off the theological problems that Lonergan and Blondel have raised. Blondel surfaces repeatedly in *Theo-Drama*. He appears in the Prolegomena's pivot from theater to theology,[98] as Balthasar describes human freedom,[99] as he characterizes the problems that arise in our use of it,[100] as he frames background metaphysical concerns,[101] and as he connects Christ's self-consciousness to the crisis of our sinful freedom.[102] With respect to our freedom and its crisis before God, Blondel's most important influence

94. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:158.
95. Robert C. Koerpel, "Between *History and Dogma*: On the Spirit of Tradition in the Demands and Limitations of Modernity," *New Blackfriars* 95, no. 1044 (2014): 17, https://doi-org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01464.x.
96. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 342.
97. Blondel, 343; and *L'Action (1936)*, 2:544–46.
98. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:481–82.
99. Balthasar, 2:215.
100. Balthasar, 4:158, 166.
101. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 199, 570, Kindle; *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 146, Kindle; and Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:273.
102. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:171, 560; and 4:306, 493.

on Balthasar is the notion that human freedom's "option" arises interiorly. The option is inevitable, since it emerges from our freedom's natural structure. "The self-actualization of this [finite] freedom, at its summit," Balthasar argues, "must lead irresistibly to a choice (Blondel's 'option'): if it is authentically to lay hold of itself as freedom, it cannot see itself as purely autonomous but must also realize that that is a gift, owing its existence to some other source."[103] In this relatively late part of *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar runs through problems like power, freedom, and evil. But Blondel's option also appears earlier, in the foreground to Balthasar's first major discussion of infinite and finite freedom. As Balthasar notes there, Blondel "describes the constellation of forces and situations surrounding every human being as the thickening of a plot: it can only be solved by each person 'going through the point of decision' for or against God's absolute freedom."[104] Blondel argues that our freedom's option is integral to it; Balthasar follows him.

In Blondel's wake, it becomes more obvious that in *Theo-Drama*, human self-contradiction is a central theological challenge. It is not the only challenge, but it is central. Balthasar describes "self-contradiction" as the act of choosing our own freedom over God. This claim is, of course, an example of Balthasar's direct engagement with Blondel, but it is also a specification of Blondel. And it is a helpful specification because it indicates the proximate object that human freedom not only uses but also chooses to run its counterfeit of its own self-transcending desire. Fundamentally, that counterfeit is a distortion of freedom's original and fundamental situation.[105] Therefore, much as in freedom's fulfilment, the contradiction involves an action: the election of our own autonomy rather than an act of surrender to God's. (Again, I must prescind from questions of venial and mortal sins.)

The counterfeit also replaces one referent with another: my autonomy rather than God's. "We must realize," Balthasar says, "that the *desiderium naturale*, arising from created freedom, is directed toward God and hence cannot be satisfied on earth."[106] The counterfeit reorders the claim: Where I would embrace vulnerable exposure to an entitative order over which I have no dominion, I choose to experience my autonomy for its own sake. It is, after all, already mine and already mine to freely "have" as such. Significantly, then, it is not quite a decision for "something else" entirely or absolutely, since it decides for what we already possess, but it does at the same time give Blondel's "will not to will," the refusal to be changed, a heuristic object—"heuristic" in the sense that it can occur in a myriad of concrete forms and situations, but with the same object. Balthasar's version of the "will not to will" is not a "something else" in the sense of "something evil." My freedom, as much as my own being, is good. It is good, and it is made to be with God. But because our action is synthetic, it retains the power and objectivity of its divine-human character, which becomes a measure or a judgment of

103. Balthasar, 4:157.
104. Balthasar, 2:484, note 2. Balthasar cites Maurice Blondel, "Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d'apologétique," in *Les Premiers Écrits* (Paris: P.U.F., 1956), 44.
105. Regarding that original situation, recall, for example, Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:145.
106. Balthasar, 4:159; see also 151–52.

our self-contradiction. Balthasar argues that "in attributing its own gift-quality to itself, finite freedom is alienating something that belongs to the absolute and is inseparable from it and attempting to put it at the disposal of finite freedom."[107]

This act of self-contradiction is a contradiction because we freely desire God. It runs against the "direction" of our desire, the *ratio* of its operation, and its purpose. And the contradiction persists because our freedom participates in God's: Our freedom is effective with a divine effectiveness. "If created freedom chooses itself as the absolute good," Balthasar says, "it involves itself in a contradiction that will devour it: the formal object that informs it—which is in fact absolute, self-positing freedom—is in constant contradiction with finite freedom's pretentious claim to be infinite. This contradiction, if persisted in, is hell."[108]

Balthasar's "definition" of hell is precise: It is the persistence of human freedom's contradiction of itself and its absolute reliance on God, achieved with the power of this very reliance. It is notable that *Theo-Drama*'s hell is, in this sense, not a new state or status for the human will after death. Its whole shape is determined and enacted in life. It is true that Balthasar is concerned with other things, too, like the "chaff" of guilt. But hell is not a question of quantitative guilt, of decisions severe "enough."[109] It is a question of choosing oneself as absolute, of deploying the strangely absolute quality of one's own freedom to elect it as absolute. This makes hell an exact problem. "Freedom is not exhausted in the momentary choice of finite goods," argues Balthasar,

> for, traversing mere finitude, it has an infinite horizon and is able to make a qualitative choice with regard to it. Either it chooses this infinite horizon as its own possession, thus positing itself as absolute autonomy, or it chooses it as its origin and goal and thereby recognizes the existence of a superordinate absolute autonomy (of whatever kind). This fundamental choice, however, which causes the scales to rise or fall, does not take place *in abstracto* but in the succession of individual life situations; it takes place in a series of acts and stances that are all vulnerable to death and thus constantly highlight the finitude of the arena in which this freedom has to exercise its choice.[110]

Freedom's self-contradiction becomes one of the driving questions in *Theo-Drama*'s sprawling speculations. And that brings us to the final section of this article: exploring Balthasar's attempt to treat self-contradiction as a theological concern, not to adopt all his answers but to speculate about our own.

Theo-Drama: Divine Agency, Human Action, and Theological Speculation

At this point, it will be helpful to offer a condensed synthetic review of my argument's implications. My argument renders impracticable certain aspects of Hart's argument in

107. Balthasar, 4:170.
108. Balthasar, 5:285.
109. Balthasar, 5:280; and 4:142–48, 174–82, 322.
110. Balthasar, 5:280.

favor of universal salvation as presented in his meditation on human freedom. This does not mean that Hart is ultimately wrong.

Even if Hart is correct to say that human freedom never faces a clear instance of a decision for or against God, the position is not a defense of universal salvation, since the synthetic (Lonerganian-Blondelian Balthasarian) position I have argued for has no need of such an instance. It is sufficient for us to be confronted with the mystery of ourselves, with what Balthasar calls the "hieroglyph," the "existence in contradiction," who is "man": the strange, immanently irresolvable paradox of being ourselves.[111] Nor does my synthetic position require anything so discrete as a clear realization regarding "the seriousness of this life that is forever," as Blondel phrases it.[112] For we experience our yearning for God in our every conscious act.

If, for Hart, divine action is infallible and irresistible, then this article agrees. It agrees and it adds the theorem of the supernatural and extrinsic predication. For divine action in the universe is predicated of God from the patient, which is the universe. This metaphysical reframing explains how our action can be infallibly God's and ours. It explains how it is possible for the proportionate universe to contain contradictions and for God to allow them without contradicting himself. It describes sin as a contradiction, as irrational. And what is irrational cannot be reduced to rational causation.

Hart's argument from human freedom relies on our closeness to God. Blondel turns that closeness on its head: God's acting in our acting is what renders our use of our freedom eternally serious—most of all positively. But if we can tie the knot of our will by electing its finitude as a kind of infinity, if we can contradict the direction of our own yearning, then Blondel warns us: It becomes so.[113] For we bear eternity in our acting. We bear the capacity to decide positively and permanently, since the weight of infinity resides behind our willing. But this also confirms that to be conscious is to enter the world bearing an infinite measure. It confirms how that infinite measure is immanent to us. As Balthasar says after *Theo-Drama*, "God does not damn anyone . . . the man who irrevocably refuses love condemns himself."[114] Here Balthasar echoes Blondel, cited above: "What judges [man] is his very action."

Should hell prove permanent, it would rely on the permanence that already resides in our every action. For we are creatures who do things that we cannot undo. Our action is already synthetic, already divine and human. That is how it is effective and permanent. This permanence intends us for glory, but it does not vanish when we choose ourselves instead. Or, to put it another way, divine action heals and elevates an essential structure. There is in that structure a power to cooperate with God when God

111. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 44; see also "Hellas and Israel," *Explorations in Theology vol. 3: Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 389–90; *The Christian and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 73–74; *Life Out of Death: Meditations on the Paschal Mystery* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 15–18; and *Theo-Drama*, 2:25, 103.

112. Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 205. The phrase is Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's.

113. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 342–43.

114. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "A Short Discourse on Hell," in *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 104.

grants our cooperation. This grave immensity of ours, this being ourselves, remains in us even when we turn it against its purpose.

Hart emphasizes divine goodness to see the force of his argument to its end. God cannot be a monster, Hart insists. God is infinite goodness. All shall be saved, or else Christian faith is incoherent. One can disagree with Hart, but it is not necessary to disagree with him. My argument does, however, raise problems. There are at least four: (1) human freedom is effective even in its self-contradiction; (2) the contradiction in question is the violation of an interior, rational norm (desire for God); (3) our reason and our action participate in God, which means that ours are not merely finite norms and deeds; and (4) the theorem of the supernatural repatterns the facts of our concrete universe, making them more significant while also constraining us to those facts we really know. By way of our freedom and by way of God's, our action marks us with the seal of our own willing. Our action and our self-contradiction, our willing and our willing not to will, are facts. Thus do we face the possibility of dying as we have willed to be: in God with God, in God as a self-contradiction.[115] This contradiction, Balthasar says, is hell.

Such are the problems. They are not doctrinal problems; they are speculative ones. They regard rational coherence. They are not claims about what God has revealed, but they seek revelation's coherence. Speculative theology "provides the technical terms with their definitions," says Lonergan; "it does not provide the objects that are defined. . . . It is not something by itself but the intelligible arrangement of something else."[116] I have speculated over the terms and operations of human freedom in a proportionate universe. But speculative problems and speculative failures are only speculative. They are not heterodoxy.[117]

Hell, as Balthasar describes it, is possible to human freedom. The concept has no need to weigh scales between deeds, nor to offer a disgusting-enough example of a human life worthy of divine abuse forever.[118] And if self-contradiction is the problem in theory, it seems likely to be a problem in fact. The facts seem to indicate that we often fail to will to the full extent of our power to will; given its prevalence, we also die with that failure and its contradiction still a fact. But Balthasar does not affirm souls in hell as a fact. Instead, Balthasar continues to reason about the problem of universal salvation. There is no need to judge his intentions here.[119] We might instead see Balthasar's continuations as a map marking subjects for future theologians to explore. I will name a few.

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115. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:285; and Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 328.
116. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 163.
117. Lonergan, 160, 163–64.
118. As alleged in Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 83, 138, 146.
119. In contrast to Tina Beattie, "Sex, Death, and Melodrama: A Feminist Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *The Way* 44, no. 4 (2005): 160–76, https://www.theway.org.uk/back/444Beattie.pdf; or, with very different concerns, in contrast to Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 71–93; see also 54–58.

Balthasar insists that God deals with the *pathos* of the world "from within."[120] He explains, "God no longer deals with man from without but—by becoming man—from within man and at man's innermost level; Jesus is the man who burns with God's fire."[121] Balthasar emphasizes that Jesus's self-consciousness is fundamental to the divine work completed in the Incarnation. To be conscious is to be free, and our freedom is at issue.[122] In this emphasis, Balthasar explores something important to Blondel. Human action, since it is a synthesis, has to be treated as a synthesis. "Action is a synthesis of man and God," says Blondel; "neither God alone, nor man alone can change it, produce it, or annihilate it. To rectify it, a decree of omnipotence is not enough. Something else is needed."[123] "*Pathos* from within," then, is a theological principle organized around a theological problem: our action as a synthesis.

Our action is not only synthetic. It is also temporal. So, Balthasar turns to the problem of human action in time. He wonders whether christological representation has limits as a concept.[124] Human action occurs unrepeatably over time: Each time is a new time. Balthasar puzzles over theological language for articulating that, for example, in Christ my own relationship to my actions is transfigured in me.[125] Balthasar wonders which notions theology might need in order to say that Christ takes upon himself instances of human action that are not his own—and in what sense theology should not say this.[126] Jacob Lett's *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Representation* is an enormous achievement on this subject.[127]

For Balthasar, the problem with the freedom of the "damned," or those who die in self-contradiction, is that hell is not forever in the sense of time. Its forever is the absence of a horizon of change. Balthasar calls hell "timelessness."[128] The position confirms his rejection of conversion after death.[129] It underlines how the "problem" of hell, for Balthasar, is the human will turned against itself. Undoing the knot of

120. Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); and Steven Nemes, "Praying Confidently for the Salvation of All," *Heythrop Journal* 61, no. 2 (2020): 285–96, https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12378.
121. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:61.
122. Balthasar draws directly from Blondel. See footnote no. 23 in Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:560.
123. Blondel, *Action (1893)*, 343.
124. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:270.
125. Balthasar, 4:359–60, 396–400 (church and sacraments). See also Jonathan Ciraulo, *The Eucharistic Form of God: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Sacramental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).
126. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:385–86.
127. Jacob Lett, *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Representation: God, Drama, and Salvation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2023). "Christ acted in humanity's place that humanity might act in his place" (8).
128. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:289–95.
129. Balthasar, 5:281.

contradiction is a change, which requires time.[130] The imperious effectiveness of human willing is set on the clock of human being-alive. But this position on the nature of being dead is itself a speculative decision on Balthasar's part, and as cited in *Theo-Drama*, the position is largely derived from Adrienne von Speyr. Balthasar uses other sources elsewhere, including Augustine and Otto Betz (in *Dare We Hope?*) and even Dante's *Inferno* (in *Glory of the Lord*). For all that, it is still a position about something that is, for us, an indeterminacy. The living do not know what it is like to be dead. John Thiel's *Now and Forever: A Theological Aesthetics of Time* both makes Balthasar's decision about the evidence more obvious and offers a different speculative position on the dead, one that still includes some sense of time.[131] Thiel's position indicates—provided we can correctly know about the dead—the possible final success of Hart's argument for universal salvation through figures like Gregory and Maximus. Thiel's work also proves the productiveness of exploring speculative questions anew, whether one does so with Balthasar or without him, or without at least a version of him (the version, say, in *Theo-Drama*, or in this article).

"*Pathos* from within" governs Balthasar's strangest explorations of death, forsakenness, and hell in *Theo-Drama*'s last volume. The dominant question in these later passages is whether the "curve of Christ's being" can address the most extreme situations that Balthasar anticipates for human freedom.[132] It is a way of asking about human action not in its quality as a synthesis, nor as temporal, but as a solidarity. Balthasar tries to articulate how God reunites a self-contradicting human freedom to humanity in Christ.[133] The nature of our action's solidarity is, then, another potential locus for theologians. What Trent Pomplun suggests for Hart could serve well for developing Balthasar.[134]

Finally, Balthasar presses for understanding not only logically but also artistically. A significant instance appears in the middle of *Theo-Drama* 5's most difficult passages. There, Balthasar asks whether our self-contradiction is forever. In the struggle for answers that follows, Dostoyevsky suddenly pierces the veil over human understanding. He intervenes with narrative gestures. *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment*, Balthasar notes, contain moments that bring together the patience of love with the irresolvable "timelessness" of forsaken self-contradiction.[135] Balthasar reflects, in Dostoyevsky's wake, "Man's shell is not hard enough [for forsakenness to be permanent], however, for it is formed of a contradiction. Perhaps the man whose shell can be

130. See Joshua R. Brotherton, "The Possibility of Universal Conversion in Death: Temporality, Annihilation, and Grace," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 3 (2016): 307–24, https://doi-org/10.1111/moth.12255; and Harvey Egan, "Hell: The Mystery of Love and Eternal Obduracy," *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2014): 313–41, https://doi-org/10.1177/0040563913519034.

131. John E. Thiel, *Now and Forever: A Theological Aesthetics of Time* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), 166–67.

132. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:287.

133. Balthasar, 5:257.

134. Pomplun, "Heat and Light," 528; see also Lett, *Balthasar's Theology of Representation*, 36–51.

135. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:294.

broken open is not yet really in hell but only—in his rebellious attitude to God—turned toward it."[136] There is reasoning here: A contradictory freedom is not ultimate despite its participation in what is ultimate. And it is not impermeable, or else God could never reach any sinner at all. There is also imagery here: narratives from Dostoyevsky, a hard shell broken open. But these gestures suggest intelligibilities without fully laying hold of what those intelligibilities would be. Balthasar does not leave us with an answer.[137] Still, he suggests that the arts offer theology more instruments with which to ask difficult questions about universal salvation.

Conclusion

I have made the case for a synthetic position that can comment on the problem of human freedom and universal salvation as argued in David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved*. With Lonergan, I clarified the nature of divine action in the universe. Action is predicated of God extrinsically. The theorem of the supernatural provides a mental perspective that makes sense of divine action in a proportionate universe without threatening divine aseity or sundering the necessity of grace for a free human will. With Blondel, I introduced to human freedom an eternal value and an eternal effectiveness, indeed an "option." Human freedom's rationality and its desire for supernatural fulfilment characterize its option, providing it with an interior norm to follow or to refuse. I discussed how human freedom is a synthesis of divine action and human action, a "borrowing" from divine freedom. Finally, I explored *Theo-Drama* to indicate where Balthasar's theological speculation might be instructive for the resulting problem.

The problem of human freedom and damnation became a problem "again" as the article ran its course. For hell is our freedom in self-contradiction—contradiction of our desire for God, contradiction of our rational participation in God—when the door of time closes over our heads. Hell is not a new situation but one that freedom carries into death. All freedom "need" do to bring infinite judgment upon itself is to wield its own strange infinity against itself: It need only choose itself. Finite freedom, borrowing its power from the absolute, renders itself absolute.

Though in this article the problem of freedom, salvation, and damnation recur, there may be available to theology a repatterning at the level of theory that would free reason from the snares described above. In that case, this article's use would be to indicate what some of the speculative problems around human freedom presently are. Of course, revealed doctrine does not require speculative perspicacity to be correctly affirmed. Nevertheless, Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* encourages us to keep thinking about universal salvation's speculative problems as much as its doctrinal ones. In that sense, I hope that this article helps theologians dare to do more than conclude.

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136. Balthasar, 5:295.

137. Balthasar, 5:301–02. "Perhaps Thérèse of Lisieux followed the only possible path" (301).

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