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THE AUTHOR OF SIN?

Hugh J. McCann

It is argued that God can be the first cause of human deciding and willing without being touched by our sinfulness, and without damage to our moral authenticity as agents. An argument for divine impeccability is offered, together with a suggestion for a theodicy of sin based on the demands of responsible freedom, but different from the usual free will defense in that it allows for complete sovereignty on God's part.

An age-old dispute among both theologians and philosophers has to do with whether divine sovereignty is reconcilable with human free will. If, as we would expect, God's sovereignty over creation is complete, then nothing ever occurs except by his decree. The creative fiat of God is equally and fully responsible for all that exists. This has seemed to many, however, to destroy human freedom—at least if we understand that in the libertarian sense—and with it any legitimate notion of moral responsibility. Classically, however, it was held that God's sovereignty is compatible with our freedom, and I have argued previously that this is not only true, but necessary to an adequate theory of human action.¹ What I want to do here is explore some of the implications of such a view. In particular, I want to consider whether, as some might claim, God must on this account be held to be the author of sin, and hence sinful himself.² Secondly, I want to suggest that although the position I defend does rule out the most familiar form of free will defense against the problem of moral evil, libertarian free will still figures importantly in a plausible theodicy of sin. I will begin by rehearsing briefly what I take the relation between God's will and ours to be, following which I will discuss the implications of this for theodicy. Next, I shall argue that the position I defend is no threat to the sinlessness of God, and then explain how I think a theodicy of sin might go. Finally, I shall have just a little to say about what our moral authenticity as agents should be thought to consist in, on the view I defend.

I. God's Will and Ours

To appreciate what the real relation between divine and human willing must be, we have first to realize what free will is not. Consider, for example, my decision to write this paper. Obviously, we want this to have been



a responsible decision on my part, and hence a free one. We should not suppose, however, that in order for my decision to be free, I had to confer existence on it. Libertarians are widely disposed to think something like this is so—to believe that since a free decision is not naturally caused, its existence will have an accounting only if it is caused by the agent. And they think of causation as a matter of existence conferral. It is, however, a mistake to think we are able to confer existence on our own decisions and actions. For consider: if I conferred existence on my decision to write this paper, I had to do so either through a separate act, or as part of my very act of deciding. If it was through a separate act, then that act will become the focus of our concerns about freedom. To satisfy those concerns, we will have to require that it too derive its existence from something I did, and then we are headed for a vicious regress. So the first alternative will not do. But neither will the second. For until my act of deciding to write this paper is on hand, it cannot be a vehicle for my conferring existence on anything; and once it is on hand it already exists, so that any existence conferral must come too late. It is, then, impossible for us to confer existence on our own decisions and actions. Whatever libertarian voluntariness does consist in—a matter on which I shall have more to say later—it does not consist in our creating our own actions.³

But if this is so, we have a problem. We cannot say the existence of our decisions and actions has no accounting *whatever*, since that would make them violations of the principle of sufficient reason—precisely what determinists object to about libertarian freedom, as well as something that promises to place our doings completely beyond the reach of providence. The only alternative, I think, is to hold that our decisions and actions, like ourselves and all else in the world, owe their existence entirely to the creative will of God, and are to be explained in terms of his purposes in creating us. Here too, however, there is a mistaken conception to avoid. We tend to portray God as effecting changes in the world in the same way we do when we perform volitional movements. That is, we imagine that he issues a kind of command, and that this act in turn produces the mandated effect via event causation. It is a mistake, however, to think there is some causal nexus that joins God's will to the world. If there were, then since causal relations are contingent, God would have had to create it. On the present model, that would require another process of command and causation, and we would again be facing a regress. The only way out is to hold that God *directly* creates whatever we take the imagined causal relation between his will and the world to consist in. But if his will can be directly efficacious in this task, then it can also be directly efficacious in the creation of us and our actions. There is, then, no nexus here, nor is there any causal distance whatever between God and either us or our behavior. Rather, we and all that we do have our being *in* God, and the *first* manifestation of God's creative will regarding our decisions and actions is not a command that causes those acts, but nothing short of the acts themselves.

If this is correct, then although God's creative fiat provides entirely for the existence of our decisions and actions, they are not brought to pass by event causation, even from on high. The manner in which our actions come to pass is not one in which God acts upon us or does anything to us,

nor are we rendered passive in any way by his action. Rather, God creates us *in* our willings, so that all that we are and do emanates directly from him. Because this is so, I claim, God's activity as creator, even though it is completely comprehensive, does not endanger our freedom. His relationship to us is not analogous to that of the puppeteer to his puppet—which would indeed destroy our freedom—but rather to that of the author of a novel to her characters. The characters do not exist as an event-causal consequence of anything the author does. Rather, their first existence is in her creative imagination, and they are born and sustained in and through the very thoughts in which she conceives them, and of which they are the content. The interesting thing about this relationship is that it is too close to permit the author's creative activity to damage her characters' freedom. On the contrary, it is perfectly legitimate for her to present them as free and responsible beings. Indeed, it is not even possible for the author to enter into the world of the novel and interact with her characters in such a way as to undermine or pervert their integrity as agents. Only other characters in the novel can do that—subject, of course, to the will of the author.

As I see it, our relation to our creator is much the same. We, of course, have more than mental existence; we are real. But we too are brought to be and sustained in being entirely in and through our creator's will. We are not self-creating in any way, and we can no more engage in decision and action apart from our creator's will than can the creatures of fiction. Here too, however, the relationship is too close to undermine our freedom. God does not, in creating us, act upon us, or produce any intervening cause—even an act of will on his part—that somehow makes us do what we do. There is indeed an exercise of his will, but in it he simply becomes the ground of our being. We exist not as a consequence of his willing but, speaking analogously, as its content. This permits all that legitimately belongs to responsible freedom—of which, again, I shall have more to say later—to characterize our actions, just as it does those of fictional creatures. The author of the novel never makes her creatures do something; she only makes them doing it. It is the same between us and God. He does not make us act; he makes us acting, so that the freedom that goes with genuine action can still be present. The only legitimate question has to do with our integrity as agents—with whether we will turn out to have a substantive and genuine moral character, or will come across as contrived and manipulated, as somehow lacking a true and unified moral self. There is no reason to expect the latter outcome, especially when an all-wise and powerful God is producing the work. God is not the kind of author who must manipulate his characters to achieve his ends.

II. Implications for Theodicy

I am aware that, on first hearing, this is an enigmatic sounding view. But that does not make it false, and if the argument that leads to it is correct, the alternatives are destructive not only of God's sovereignty but also of any rational account of free action. Suppose, therefore, that this or some similar account of the relationship between God's will and ours is true. What would be the consequences for theodicy? I think one clear conse-

quence is that the standard free will defense against the problem of evil becomes untenable.⁴ According to the free will defense, evil is of two kinds. *Moral* evil is evil that occurs through rational action on the part of creatures: it either consists in or is causally owing to sinful exercises of will on our part. *Natural* evil, by contrast, comes about entirely through the operation of natural causes. The argument of the free will defense is that at least where moral evil is concerned, God is not to be faulted. He bears no direct responsibility for sin and its consequences because he does not cause our wrongdoing; we do, through the exercise of our free wills. Except for our decisions and volition, moral evil would not exist, so we alone are to blame for it, not God. It is obvious, however, that if the relationship between God's will and ours is as I have described, this argument will not wash. As creator, God is intimately and directly involved with the occurrence of those acts in which we sin—as involved as we would be in a story we create, or a song we compose. Our freedom does not, therefore, get God off the hook. This does not undo the distinction between moral and natural evil. It remains legitimate, and if I am right we are still free in bringing moral evil to pass. But this fact can no longer be exploited to shield God from responsibility for moral evil, because the actions in which we sin bear exactly the same relationship to God's will as creator as does anything else that occurs in the world.

A theodicy of sin will have to go differently, then, on the view I uphold. Are there other important consequences? It might be feared that there is one, which would render the view unacceptable: namely, that if it is true God becomes the author of sin, in such a way that his own will is tainted, so that he himself becomes sinful.⁵ To see how this could seem to be so, we need to consider where in our misdeeds the locus of sin actually lies. Suppose Smith maliciously decides to kill Jones—by shooting him, let us say—and then engages in the volitional activity needed to carry out his intention: he wills the movement of his finger on the trigger of a gun he has pointed at Jones. Some might think the moral evil here lies in the harm perpetrated by Smith's action—that is, in Jones's death. In fact, however, Smith would sin in this case even if no harm comes to Jones: if the gun fails to fire, say, or if Smith is afflicted by sudden paralysis, so that he cannot even move his finger. Smith would still be guilty, by virtue of his decision and volition alone. By contrast, if Jones were to die as a consequence of some innocent act on Smith's part—in an unavoidable auto-pedestrian accident, let us say—then there would be no wrongdoing by Smith, even though the same harm was caused. The lesson of this example is that the true home of moral evil is in the will itself. When Smith succeeds in murdering Jones, the true locus of moral evil is not in the harm caused to Jones, if any, but in Smith's malicious will. Jones's death counts as moral evil only *extrinsically*, in that it is caused by Smith's evil will. The evil of Smith's decision and volition, on the other hand, is *intrinsic*: they would have been evil no matter how they came about.⁶

With this in mind, consider the relation between God's will as creator and Smith's will to kill Jones. What I have suggested is that it is even closer than the relation of an event cause to its effect. God creates Smith *in* his willing to kill Jones, in such a way that the actual process of Smith's deciding and volit-

ing counts as the content of God's will as creator. But then, someone will surely argue, God too must be held to perform acts of will that are intrinsically morally evil. After all Smith's murder seems on this account to be equally an expression both of Smith's will and of God's, and so should equally be imputed to both. How, then, can God not be guilty of the injustice? Indeed, why is he not more guilty, since it is God's will alone that directly and finally accounts for the existence of Smith's deeds? In short, according to this argument, even if the closeness of the relationship I have claimed between God's will and ours succeeds in preserving both his sovereignty and our freedom, it does so at the cost of making the relation between God's will and our sin too intimate—to the extent that God becomes guilty, even paradigmatically guilty, of all the moral wrongdoing that ever occurs.

I want to argue that the concern raised in this objection is groundless, that in no way does God's position as creator of those actions in which we sin threaten his perfect goodness. The objection is, however, a natural one to raise here, and I think it is important to realize why. It is not always emphasized, but one of the most attractive features of the standard free will defense is the sheer separation it introduces between God's will and anything that has even a whiff of sin to it. Indeed, I would suggest, this separation is even more important to the argument than the issue of responsibility. I know of no version of the free will defense that ascribes to God no responsibility whatever for the existence of moral evil. Even if we hold, as some philosophers do, that prior to our action God has no certain knowledge of how we will use our freedom⁷—so that he does not know, as creator, whether anyone will sin, or for that matter whether anyone will be saved—we have to fend off a charge of recklessness. We need to show that God was justified in risking complete failure in the enterprise of creation. If, on the other hand, we hold, with most philosophers, that God somehow knows how we will behave even though we are free, we have to find justification for God to have created a world in which he knew evil would come to pass, whether or not he was directly involved with it. So no matter how our theodicy tries to exploit creaturely freedom, there is some supplementary work of exoneration to be carried out. In all its versions, however, the free will defense places God at a distance from sin, by making our will in the matter ontologically independent of his. I imagine there are two perceived advantages in this. First, it secures God's impeccability, at least as far as our personal wrongdoing is concerned: he is shielded from our misdeeds, and so cannot be morally contaminated by them. Second, it secures our autonomy as agents, by making us fundamentally independent of God in our decision making, so that we can establish our own moral destiny.

I think we should be suspicious of both these supposed advantages. On reflection, the first point is one on which the free will defense can be seen as far too fastidious. God's position as creator should not require that he be insulated from moral evil; it should be intrinsically such that no matter how intimately he is involved with us, he cannot be touched by our fallenness. Moreover, the gulf the free will defense places between God's will and ours belies the urgency with which, in all theistic traditions, God addresses our sinfulness. Moral evil is not just a malady afflicting rational souls. It is a cosmic crisis, whose remedy requires desperate sacrifice, far

more than anything in keeping with the idea that we creatures, in solitary magnificence, had somehow invented wrongdoing. As for the second "advantage," what could be less edifying than the idea that we who have our very being in God are able by our own power to establish a personal destiny, especially a moral one? What did the sin of Adam and Eve consist in, if not an attempt at exactly this?

III. *Is God a Sinner?*

We are concerned, then, with two questions: first, the legitimate one of what a theodicy of sin might look like if those acts of will in which we sin are willed by God as well; second, the issue of whether in being so intimately involved with our wills God does not become the "author of sin," and thereby incur guilt as bad, at least, as our own. I have said that I think this second concern is misguided, and I want to begin by addressing it, since what I have to say on this issue will pave the way for some thoughts about the theodicy of sin.

There is no question that the relation I have postulated between his will and ours makes God the author of sin in one sense: namely, that he is the First Cause, as tradition would say, of those acts of will in which we sin. All of our willings owe their existence immediately to God, just as we do, and could never take place but for his active participation, in the form of willing that they occur.⁸ The question is only whether this leads to the unacceptable consequence that God himself incurs guilt in the process. Consider again, then, Smith's decision to murder Jones. Why should anyone think that God's creatively willing the occurrence of this event makes him guilty of anything? Perhaps the worry is that God might actually participate in Smith's decision, that when Smith decides to kill Jones there actually occurs a joint exercise of agency, in which Smith and God together settle on doing Jones in. If this were so, it would seem God must share in the malice of the decision, just as he shares in the decision itself, in which case Smith's sin is also God's. This view of things is, however, mistaken. When Smith decides to kill Jones, the decision is predicated of Smith alone, and belongs entirely to him. He alone forms the intention to kill Jones, hence he alone can incur the guilt of doing so. God does not and cannot participate in Smith's decision, for he belongs to an entirely different order of being. Nor does he, in providing for the existence of Smith's decision, decide in his own right to kill Jones. The content of God's will is not that Jones should die—which, as we have seen, may never occur—but rather Smith's act of deciding. In propositional terms, God wills that Smith decide to murder Jones. And of course, as in all things, his will is efficacious. So if God incurs any blame in the transaction, it has to be for that—for willing Smith's act of deciding.

Is there a basis in God's so willing for convicting him of sin? Well, again, not in any harm to Jones, since that may never come. Still, it is the case that evil occurs when Smith decides to do in Jones: Smith decides sinfully. And Smith is harmed by that, as are we all when we decide immorally. Furthermore, you and I would certainly be found at fault were we to contrive to have Smith decide to murder Jones. The question we

must ask is whether the same holds of God.⁹ Answering this question requires care, however, for just as, in Smith's dealings with Jones, his sin arises not from any harm that comes to Jones but rather out of his own will, so must any sinfulness that accrues to God by virtue of willing Smith's deeds be founded in God's will, not in any harm to Smith. If God is guilty of moral evil, that evil has to lie in what is predicated of him—namely, his creating Smith the person who decides as he does—not in what is predicated of Smith, namely, Smith's sinful decision. Is it then, immoral of God to engage in the creative act of will whose content is Smith's act of deciding to murder Jones?

To answer that question, we have to know not just that the true home of moral evil is in the will, but also what it is that actually *makes* wrongful willing wrong. We have to know what constitutes the sinfulness of sin. The best way to find that out is to begin with ourselves, and perhaps the first answer that comes to mind is this: that iniquity lies not in evil that is willed, but in the willing of evil—so, in Smith's case, not in the death he intends for Jones, but in his willing that death, by deciding on the murder. But that would not be a good answer, for at least two reasons. First, our primary aim in wrongdoing is always some anticipated good.¹⁰ The guiding purpose of a thief is not to steal but to gain wealth, and the things wealth can bring; the coward who flees the battlefield wishes not to abandon cause and comrade, but to preserve his life. And we would expect Smith too to be aiming at some good: perhaps he stands to inherit a fortune with Jones out of the way, or wishes to visit due recompense on Jones for some grievous misdeed. Second, it is not always wrong to will evil. The exception, if any, would be sin itself, which we have yet to define. That aside, I think it would be universally agreed that there can be morally sound reasons for willing the death of another, for depriving others of their property, or for causing others to suffer. And there is a third point to be considered: there are some cases of sinful deciding where it is hard to put one's finger on *any* evil that falls within the actual content of the decision.

A nice illustration of this may be found in the biblical story of the Fall, from which I think there is much to be learned about the nature of moral evil. The fruit of the tree of knowledge, we are told, was good for food and pleasing to the eye (*Gen.* 3:6). But in this it was no different from the fruit of any other tree in the Garden (*Gen.* 2:9), including the tree of life—from which, by the way, it seems never to have occurred to Adam and Eve to eat. The decisive appeal of the forbidden fruit was that it brought knowledge—knowledge of good and evil, which would make Adam and Eve like God. Even in pursuing knowledge of good and evil, however, Adam and Eve did no wrong, for if such knowledge is a divine trait it cannot be a bad thing to have. Wherein, then, lay the problem? According to traditional theology, it lay in the fact that in eating of the tree, Adam and Eve were defying a divine command. God had ordered them not to eat of the tree, and they knowingly did so, thereby putting themselves in rebellion against God. Not that rebellion was the *point* of their decision; the point was to achieve a certain kind of standing. But for the sake of that standing the two were willing to rebel, to set aside a life in which their wills would be subordinate to God's edict, and instead to strike out on their own. They

sought, in short, the very thing that we noted a moment ago has a suspicious ring to it: an independent destiny, founded upon their own autonomy, and aimed at becoming like God.

If we take this as our model, we should expect that in all intrinsic moral evil, the same rebellion is replicated. To sin is to set oneself in rebellion against God by flaunting his edict, by knowingly deciding or willing what he has forbidden us to do. In Smith's case, then, the moral evil of his decision to murder Jones consists not in the harm he wills for Jones, nor in his willing that harm, but rather in his willing it in defiance of God's command that we not engage in unjust killing. Similar observations would apply to the thief who steals to be comfortable, and the coward who runs from his duty. It is important, moreover, to emphasize that it is God's *commands* that are crucial here, not his will. What God finally willed in Smith's case, and in that of Adam and Eve, is obvious: he willed that they do exactly what they did. That is especially true on my account of providence, but it is true on most others as well. But he commanded the opposite, and that is what counts. It is not, of course, the whole story. God's moral injunctions probably are in accord with what is sometimes called his *antecedent* will: that is, with what he would have preferred in the abstract, apart from the particular considerations that lead him to will finally that we engage in acts that are sinful.¹¹ But what God prefers becomes obligatory only if we are commanded to do it, which need not be the case. God might have preferred, in the abstract, that you be doing something enjoyable just now, rather than reading this paper. He might have preferred that I not write the paper. But it hardly follows that either of us are behaving immorally in doing what we are doing.¹² At worst, I should think, we are simply being foolish.

I think, then, that the traditional view is correct: the sinfulness of sin consists in our placing our own projects above God's decrees, by defiantly willing what he has commanded us not to do. But then it turns out to be impossible for God to sin. The reason is simply that no one can be in moral rebellion against himself, for no one has moral authority over himself. I have moral authority over my teenage son. If I tell him he is to be in by midnight, I impose an obligation on him which, if he acts out of duty, will be carried out. I can, however, have no such effect on myself. I can, of course, engage in the game of self-commanding—as when, in the morning, I order myself to answer the importunate alarm clock. But this kind of “command” results in no duty; at best, it can only remind me of obligations I already have, but which originate from some other authority. The reason for this has to do with the functional role of commands, which is to subordinate the agency of one person to that of another. When they work, the person in authority achieves his intentions simply by speaking, because they are carried out by the one receiving the order. So when I command my son to be in by midnight, I don't have to go and fetch him home myself at a quarter 'til; he, being a good kid, will do it for me.

Obviously, however, this sort of arrangement requires that the commander be distinct from the one commanded. To think that I could satisfy both roles myself is both needless and silly. Needless because I do not, at least in the first instance, control my decisions and actions by arousing my sense of duty: I control them by deciding and acting. And silly because any

obligation I could establish by issuing a self-command could instantly be expunged by the same means. The entire notion that I might have moral authority over myself is, therefore, vacuous. And so it is with God. If his ordinances are the source of moral obligation, then he is the ultimate moral authority. There is none higher, and there is no obligation that does not stem from his edict. But then, since moral authority is binding only over others, God cannot bind himself to any moral obligation, and so has none. It follows that God cannot sin; he cannot flaunt his own authority, and beside that authority there is no other.¹³

This is, of course, an argument for divine impeccability. I prefer it to arguments that appeal to God's essential goodness, because those tend to threaten his freedom. The reason God cannot sin is not that he is under some compulsion, logical or psychological, to be good, but because sin is just not possible for a being in his position. Accordingly, God is not the "author of sin" in any sense that could bring him guilt. It is true that no evil touches us except by his will. But he does not wrong us in willing the events and actions in which moral evil—or, for that matter, natural evil either—comes to pass. Just the opposite. We belong to him as our creator, lock, stock and barrel—our lives, our fortunes and our destinies—just like characters in fiction. Accordingly, while God does will Smith's action of deciding to kill Jones, and while his will is fully efficacious, he is no more guilty of sin in the matter than Mozart was guilty for creating Don Giovanni a seducer and murderer.

IV. The Theodicy of Sin

There is, however, some further work to be done. The argument just given may do well in securing divine impeccability, but it offers very little reassurance on the question of God's goodness. Given his position, God could easily be sinless in his dealings with us, yet care little or nothing about us, be willing to see us and our destinies sacrificed for purposes irrelevant to our well-being, and perhaps even take some satisfaction in our suffering and confusion in being thus spent. A treatment of the relationship between God's will and ours ought to be able, if not to set our minds fully at ease on this score, at least to offer some helpful suggestions about what God may be up to in creating us the sinners we are, how doing so can both manifest his goodness and serve our good. Let us turn, then, to the part of theodicy that deals with intrinsic moral evil. Why should it be that the best of all possible worlds would be populated by creatures like us, by an entire race of beings who, though they claim to be in control of their own destiny, are sinners one and all?

This is an issue on which the standard free will defense is well aimed. According to it, what justifies God in creating a universe that contains free creatures who sin is that such a universe is far more valuable than a world without free beings. That seems right, for free creatures do represent an enhancement to creation. As free beings, we have the interesting feature that our nature is, in a sense, incomplete: what we are never fully determines what we will do. In consequence, we must complete our nature through our choices, in which we voluntarily select our actions. Such deci-

sions do more, however, than fix momentary goals; they also establish our values. By engaging in rational decision making, we construct for ourselves a character, or moral identity: a set of precedents and dispositions that embody the overarching values of our lives, and organize our experience in pursuing them. This moral identity helps fill the gap in the agent's nature resulting from free will. It never comes to *determine* our behavior, for values can always be reconsidered. But it does create reliable expectations, and by so doing it decides our moral caliber. Through the exercise of our freedom, then, we rational creatures settle our moral worth. And that is a good, for it makes us like God—whom we believe also puts in place his perfect goodness, through his own free action as divinity and creator. By creating us with free will, then, God creates us in his image, adding immensely to the perfection of the universe.

But we haven't said anything about moral evil yet, and that has to be considered. For the sad fact is that there are some—those whom we fear may be lost—who seem never to succeed in establishing an acceptable moral identity. And even those of us who appear to succeed have no easy time of it. Just the opposite: all of us sin. All of us, at times in our lives, perhaps for considerable periods, take up the futile quest of Adam and Eve, in which the moral order is rejected. We set aside God's commands, and whatever destiny complete obedience to them might have brought, and with the same false heroism insist on having things our own way regardless of what God has told us to do. What could be the point of that? Why, to echo the complaint of J. L. Mackie,¹⁴ could not God have created a race of free beings who were always obedient, who never engaged in this kind of defiance?

Here, I think, is a point on which the analogy to the author and her characters fails. The writer does not have the power to elevate her characters to a position where they can truly interact with her; she may be "friends" with them in a metaphorical sense, but that is all. With God and us it is different: according to traditional belief, at least some of us are destined for a relationship of fellowship with God, who so loves all men that he wishes to share his life with us, in a state of eternal union. Ultimately, then, God aims to be not only our creator, but also our friend. True friendship, however, is a matter of mutual commitment. And the commitment has to be voluntary; it cannot be imposed, or wrested from the other by force. If God only *exacts* devotion from us, we are reduced to being his subjects. To be friends with him requires something quite different: it takes a meaningful and responsible decision on our part to accept the offer of friendship he presents to us. But (and here finally is the rub) a responsible choice in God's favor requires that we understand the alternative—which is to be at enmity with him. Guilt, remorse, a sense of defilement, and the hopeless desolation of being cut off from God cannot be understood in the abstract, because if they are only understood abstractly they are not *ours*. Only through experience can we understand what it means to be in rebellion against God, and we gain that experience by sinning. By turning away from him we come to know what it means to be alone, and we learn that however successful they may be, our own projects cannot satisfy us. Only then are we in a position to choose responsibly to accept or to reject God's offer of fellowship. In short, it is only from a

stance of sinfulness that we are able to settle our destinies in an informed, responsible, and morally authentic way.¹⁵

If this is correct, then the foundational good of our earthly existence, and the basis for our entire destiny—namely, our moral autonomy—is something God can will for us in complete love, but that we cannot exercise in a way commensurate with our eternal destiny without becoming blameworthy. Our freedom, which makes us most like God, and fits us for friendship with him, can be responsibly exercised to enter or shun that friendship only if first employed in a conceit of rebellion, through which we may come to appreciate the emptiness of our feigned independence. Only in the context of that experience can we make an authentic decision to take up or refuse fellowship with God. When the decision is positive—and we must remember that this too is a decision we make in God's creative will—a great good is achieved: a desolate and sorrowful sinner is brought to share in the life of God. It is important to realize that in this process, sin is not merely a causal means or stepping stone to a happy outcome. It is an indispensable *part* of the process—something without which a legitimate choice to accept God's friendship is not just causally but conceptually impossible. But that is not all, for when we do turn to God we do not simply leave our former selves behind. Rather, the autonomy we once insisted upon is consciously surrendered to God—the very source who ruled it from the beginning anyway—and once surrendered that autonomy forms the core of a new understanding and a richer relationship, in which we, who now have knowledge of good and evil, are able to act as informed and wholehearted participants in the divine enterprise of working good. Sin is, in the term Roderick Chisholm once used, *defeated*: bound up in a total state of affairs that counts as a far greater good, in which the evil is addressed and, so to speak, refuted.¹⁶

If all of this is right, then in the case of the saved, at least, a plausible theodicy of sin appears pretty feasible. But what of the lost? Traditional eschatology seems clearly to assume there are such beings, and of course their rebellion is not defeated through repentance. Rather, it is made permanent by their continual rejection of God, and ends in the damnation of the individuals concerned. Could a loving God possibly will not only the existence of such beings, but also the very decisions on their part in which they continually turn aside from him, as well as the final reprobation to which they are condemned? I think it is possible. Part of the answer one gives here depends on what one thinks the sufferings of the lost consist in. But whatever they are, theologians have always agreed that the greatest evil sustained by the lost is final and irremediable separation from God. Nothing could be worse than to be cut off from the love and friendship of a father whose power extends to every detail of the universe, and who invites us to a share in his very life. But if this is the greatest evil of damnation, then no one who ends that way is treated unfairly, for this separation is precisely what one chooses by insisting on a life of rebellion rather than seeking reconciliation with God. Indeed, having once created beings destined to be lost, it is hard to see how a loving God could do anything but honor their choice in the matter.¹⁷ It may be argued, furthermore, that in doing so God displays his perfect justice, so that in this if nothing else, the

sinfulness of the reprobate is defeated.

I think, however, that our real concern about the lost is not how they are recompensed for their lives. What is troubling, rather, is that God should create such beings at all, much less will their performance of the very actions through which they reject him. It may be argued, however, that even here God's love is at work. The lost are, after all, full participants in securing their tragic destiny; and while a life ruined by final rebellion is morally indefensible, it is still morally meaningful. Through their actions, the lost carve out for themselves a character which, though not upright, represents a real option for a free creature. To the extent, therefore, that moral autonomy is a good, it can be willed for a creature by a loving God even when it takes this form. So we should not suppose God is not lovingly involved in the lives of the reprobate. Still less should we suppose that he would have shown greater love toward the lost by omitting them from creation. That would be meaningless, for what does not exist cannot be loved. Equally, it is meaningless to think the lost would be better off had they not existed. What does not exist is neither well nor poorly off, nor anywhere in between; and it is as good for the reprobate to have life, the opportunity for salvation, and an autonomous choice as to whether to accept it, as it is for the saved. What is not good for them is the use they make of the opportunity, in choosing to be without God. But that decision—even though it too occurs within God's will—is fully theirs, and thus its consequences are fully earned.

I think, then, that the relationship I have claimed between God's will and ours lends itself to a theodicy of sin that has at least some persuasiveness. I hope it is clear, moreover, that libertarian free will is indispensable to that theodicy. Nothing of what has been described would make sense if our choices were not our own, if in our decision making we enjoyed no spontaneity, but were instead only the passive instruments of independent, determining conditions. Unlike the familiar free will defense, however, this approach does not endanger God's sovereignty. As creator, he is fully involved in those acts in which we sin, for they can occur only through his will. But he incurs no blame for them, for they are our acts, not his, and although they place us in rebellion against him, they do not put God in rebellion against himself. It is worth noting, too, that the present view makes it possible to explain what, on the standard free will defense, is something of a mystery—namely, that although all of us have the option of serving God from the outset, still *all* humans sin. The reason for this is not that God suffers a run of astonishingly bad luck in some grand lottery of creaturely freedom. Rather, it is because only by passing through sin are we able to achieve a responsible and authentic moral identity, and justly be granted the eternal recompense appropriate to it.

V. Moral Authenticity

There may, however, be a lingering suspicion in all of this—namely, that an authentic moral identity is not truly possible for us if the relation between God's will and ours is as I have described.¹⁸ Granted, some may say, a

decision God wills that I make must be predicated of me. But there are many things predicated of me—my desires, for example, or the thousand passing thoughts that occur in a day—for which I am not responsible, directly anyway, because they do not have the character of action. And the fear is that if God is the First Cause of my decisions and willings, then they too must lack that character. For, it will be argued, our sense when we act is that *we* are the cause of what we do: that the appearance of our deeds in the world is finally owing solely to us, that we are their ultimate source, and that this is precisely what sets decision and volition apart from experiences like the onset of desire, in which we are passive rather than active. Now if, as I have claimed, it is God who is the source of our deeds, then, so the argument runs, this sense we have—call it the sense of agency—must be an illusion. If God creates me the person who decides to write this paper, and creates me in the willing it takes to write it, then it is he, not I, who structures the world through my action; he, not I, who forms and integrates my moral character. And then my moral authenticity is destroyed. My character counts as mine in the sense that it is correctly predicated of me, but not in the sense that I may fairly be held responsible for it.

The complaint here is not about bad authorship, but about any authorship at all. That God should create us in our deciding does not make it any less the case that when we decide, we do so knowingly, and for the sake of the objectives embodied in our reasons for deciding. Nor does it prevent what we decide on any particular occasion from fitting into a life structured by long range needs and ambitions, and guided by a unified character. Indeed, a life formed under God's providence will likely be far better unified and harmonized than any we could construct on our own hook. The difficulty is rather that if God's will is ontologically foundational in the matter—as it surely must be if the existence of our acts of will is to be credited to him—our very sense of agency seems to be undercut. What we call “deciding” and “willing” seem not to deserve the name, because they are not put there by us, and because any design we may have in acting as we do is subordinated to the all-embracing design of God. That upsets our sense of control: we thought that *we* commanded our destiny, only to discover that it was God all along. How is this complaint to be addressed?

The short answer, of course, is that if we thought controlling our destiny meant limiting God's options in any way, we ought to have known better. And we do limit his options if we think our deeds and judgments ever lead the course of providence, so that God must somehow adjust his behavior to ours, or work around us to achieve his ends. Such a presumption is simply not commensurate with the classical conception of divinity. What we should conclude, however, is not that our sense of agency is inherently false, but that we misconceptualize that sense if we think authentic agency requires that we confer existence on our actions. The argument given earlier shows we can do no such thing—nor, I would urge, does any of us have the faintest idea what it would consist in to confer existence on an event of any kind, or what it would feel like to do so. But we do know what it feels like to act, and it feels a lot different from being acted upon, or having some blind accident befall us. The essential features of agency, both of which we are aware of in acting, seem to me to be two. The first is a certain

spontaneity, which is apparent to us in what Carl Ginet calls the “actish phenomenal quality” of action.¹⁹ There is something *sui generis* about this quality, but I think we all know what it is. When we engage in decision and volition, we do not feel that something is happening to us, or that we are being acted upon. We feel energetic and spontaneous—as though we are starting something. Our sense is that we *do*, rather than undergo. The second feature is a matter of intention. When we engage in acts of will, we mean to be doing exactly what we are doing. We are committed, not just to the goal we set up or pursue, but to the decision and pursuit themselves. That is why we never hear of anyone inadvertently or accidentally deciding or willing to do something. It is not even conceptually possible for me to have decided inadvertently or by accident to write this paper, because when I decide I *must* intend to decide, and to decide exactly as I do. It is, then, essential to our acts of will that we are active rather than passive in their performance, and that they are intentional.

If these are the essential features of agency, then we need to notice two things about them. First, both are fully compatible with God’s role as First Cause of our acts of will. The feature of intrinsic intentionality poses no difficulty at all here: there is no reason why, as my creator, God cannot will that I engage in an activity to which my personal commitment is essential, in that I must intend to do it. That God should have willed it does not interfere in any way with my commitment; I can still be completely dedicated to what I am doing. The feature of spontaneity may seem more difficult, but here too I think we are on safe ground. For God can also will that I engage in doings that are intrinsically active. And if divine creation is analogous to human creation—so that those doings count as the *content* of God’s will, rather than consequences of it—then I am not acted upon, nor do I undergo or suffer anything when I engage in them. On the contrary, when I decide to act and engage in the relevant volition, I do start something. I begin a sequence of events whose source in this world lies entirely in my purposive behavior, and whose eternal source operates in such a way that the very event which is my action as his creature counts from the eternal perspective as his action as creator. There is no event cause anywhere in sight; all that I do, accordingly, is fully natural and voluntary.²⁰

The second thing to be noticed is that these two features are all that is needed to make me a morally authentic being. It is through my willing alone that my moral character is put in place, and we have seen that there is no reason to think God’s role in the occurrence renders my character anything but fully unified and integrated. Moreover, I am free of causal determination and fully active in the occurrence of my willings, and I could not mean them more than I do. There is every reason to think, therefore, that I am morally responsible for my deeds, and for what I make of myself in performing them. If it seems otherwise, it is because we think we can make sense of a third condition: that I somehow be able to create my own actions, so that their appearance on the cosmic scene outreaches not only the other powers of the world, but God’s power as well. The fact is, however, that we cannot make sense of that requirement, and neither do I think it would add anything to our authenticity as agents if we could. It is

not, after all, as if our will could ever run athwart God's; on the contrary, whenever we contrive to oppose him he has, as it were, already willed that we do so. We may, of course, feel offended by this—as well as by the fact that since God creates us in our decisions and actions, what we do is virtually guaranteed to serve purposes of which we know nothing. But it is not true that if that were to change, our decisions would suddenly become more spontaneous, or our intentions more sincere. They already have these features as fully as it is possible to have them. The only change would be that our wills would finally be out of God's reach—just as Adam and Eve wished they could be. And then we could never rest fully in God's providence, and so could never be safe.²¹

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NOTES

1. Hugh J. McCann, "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 582-598. See also William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 98-101; and McCann, "Sovereignty and Freedom: A Reply to Rowe," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 110-116.

2. See especially Katherin A. Rogers, "Does God Cause Sin? Anselm of Canterbury Versus Jonathan Edwards on Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty," *Faith and Philosophy*, 20(2003): 371-378.

3. For a very similar line of argument see Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, Volume I of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, gen. ed. Perry Williams (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 175-179. It may be argued, furthermore, that even in the case of event causation, to construe causation as a matter of existence conferral is incoherent. See Jonathan Kvanvig's and my, "The Occasionalist Proselytizer: A Modified Catechism," in J. E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991): 587-615.

4. The classic contemporary presentation of the free will defense is by Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), Part Ia.

5. Rogers, "Does God Cause Sin?" p. 372.

6. It should be added that where Smith succeeds in killing Jones, his act of killing Jones also counts as intrinsically evil. The difference is that the moral evil of this action is *derived* from the basic activity on which it is founded—that is, from Smith's volition. The moral evil of Smith's decision and volition is, by contrast, both intrinsic and *underived*.

7. This kind of claim is characteristic of what are sometimes called "openness" theories of divine providence. For defenses of such accounts, see William Hasker, *God, Time, and Foreknowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Bassinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

8. Cf. Aquinas's insistence that the act of sin is from God. *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q. 79, Art. 2.

9. Rogers suggests it would. Regarding a case of child molestation she writes, "...it is very difficult to see how, if God causes the molester complete with his choice to abuse, he is not to blame for the choice and the ensuing act"

(Ibid., 372-373).

10. This is, of course, a common theme in classical theology. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 3.

11. It should be clear—contrary to an argument of Anselm's cited by Rogers (op. cit., 372)—that God's will is not in contradiction if his *antecedent* will is that we not decide or act wrongfully, whereas his final or *consequent* will is that we engage in some decision or action that is in fact wrongful, and places us in rebellion against him. See Anselm, *On Freedom of Choice*, ch. 8, in Anselm, *Three Philosophical Dialogues*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 46-47.

12. Nor would we be sinning if God had communicated his preferences to us—provided it was clear that they were only preferences, not diplomatically expressed commands.

13. To adopt this approach to ethics is, of course, to be faced with one horn of the *Euthyphro* problem: we must wonder whether morality is not thereby made an entirely arbitrary thing, so that what is right and wrong could have been the exact opposite, had God only commanded that it be so. Space does not permit adequate treatment of this problem, but I think it may be argued that God's commands are tied to something else he creates—namely, the natures of things—and so are not arbitrary.

14. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200-212, 209.

15. It is interesting to ask whether Adam and Eve were rightly held responsible for eating of the tree since, in their innocence, they had no experience of the consequences of rebelling. I think the answer is yes, because the two were not being held responsible for bringing the consequences of their disobedience on themselves. They were being held responsible for the disobedience itself, for choosing to eat of the tree, which they knew they were forbidden to do. This is a choice of a specific action—quite a different matter from the choice involved in conversion, which involves an entire approach to living. I see no reason to deny that even an innocent Adam and Eve could understand the alternatives in this case—that is, those of obedience or disobedience to God's command—well enough to be held responsible.

16. Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968-69): 21-38.

17. Cf. the view of damnation defended by Jonathan Kvanvig in *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

18. I have tried to address this difficulty before, but it seems nagging enough (Rogers, for example, is certainly concerned by it) to deserve some further attention.

19. Carl Ginet, *On Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 13. Ginet argues—and I think he is correct—that this feature tends to be misconstrued as betokening a causal relation between the agent and action.

20. This presumes, of course, that God's will too is free in the libertarian sense—something I have assumed throughout. I think the objections sometimes raised against this claim can be answered, but that discussion will have to wait for another time.

21. Earlier versions of this paper were read at McMurry University, at the University of Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion, and at a Society of Christian Philosophers session held at a meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association. I am very grateful for the comments received on these occasions, as well as for the helpful assistance of the referees and Editor of this journal.