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# WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT BE DETERMINISTS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF HUMAN SIN

Thomas Talbott

In response to Lynne Rudder Baker's intriguing paper, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians," I suggest that, even if a Christian simply lets the chips fall where they may with respect to the dispute between libertarians and compatibilists, a Christian should not be a determinist. I also offer for consideration a rather controversial non-Augustinian explanation for the near universality and seeming inevitability of human sin.

In an article that appeared in this journal a few years ago,<sup>1</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker explained why, in her opinion, Christians should not be libertarians, where a libertarian (in the philosophical sense) is someone who believes both that freewill exists and that freewill is incompatible with the deterministic thesis that every event has a sufficient cause. In particular, a libertarian thinks it impossible that a genuinely free choice should be the product of sufficient causes over which the choosing agent has no control. According to Baker, however, a Christian ought to reject this libertarian view in favor of compatibilism, the philosophical view that, contrary to what some might believe, freewill and determinism are quite compatible. And, not surprisingly, her main theological consideration, which she defended from an Augustinian perspective, was the traditional Christian understanding of predestination and salvation by grace.

Now, for my own part, I seriously doubt that St. Paul's understanding of predestination carried any implication of a rigorous overall determinism; indeed, as I have elaborated elsewhere, it seems to me that Paul provided a perfectly clear picture of how God could employ a person's uncaused moral choices, whichever way they might go, as a means of producing his predestined ends.<sup>2</sup> But because compatibilism could be true even if the thesis of determinism should be false, and because indeterminism may seem to threaten freewill every bit as much as determinism does, I shall not here argue that Christians should adopt the standard libertarian understanding of either freewill or moral responsibility. Instead, I shall argue as follows: Whether or not a Christian can consistently be a compatibilist, consistently be a libertarian, or even consistently hold that the concepts of *freewill* and *moral responsibility* are ultimately incoherent, the Christian understanding of sin—the idea that sin stands in fundamental opposition to God's will for our lives—is nonetheless incompatible with a thoroughgoing determinism. I shall then end the paper with a fairly controversial proposal concerning how to understand the near universality and seeming inevitability of human sin.



But first I want to compliment Baker for having distinguished carefully the Augustinian doctrine of predestination and salvation by grace from the Augustinian doctrine of limited election, the latter of which would restrict God's mercy and compassion to a chosen few. She thus wrote: "My suggestion is not to dilute the Augustinian doctrine of grace, but to embrace its content fully, while only expanding its scope."<sup>3</sup> As a universalist myself, I wholeheartedly agree with such sentiments, even as I welcome Baker's tentative endorsement of Christian universalism. But even as a universalist, I hold that indeterminism plays a crucial role in creation, in the drama of human history, and in the process whereby God brings history to a glorious end through his providential control over it.

### *The Ultimate Cause of Sin*

My most basic argument is not only relatively simple; it also clarifies why Augustine himself never embraced, not even after his controversy with Pelagius, a thoroughgoing determinism. For orthodox theology has always rejected the idea that God is the ultimate cause of sin. So if sin exists and God is not its ultimate causal source, then the thesis of determinism—and, in particular, the thesis that God determines, either directly or indirectly through secondary causes, every act of will—is false.

Now if this simple argument is sound, then, whatever the truth about compatibilism, Christian theology clearly requires a distinction that Baker appears to reject: the distinction between God's directly causing something and his permitting it.<sup>4</sup> Suppose, by way of illustration, that indeterminism (of a genuinely random kind) really does exist at the quantum level and that no sufficient cause existed for a change of state that occurred yesterday in a given radium atom. It follows that God did not causally determine this change of state. He nonetheless retained a kind of providential control over it in the sense that he could have prevented it. Were he, for example, to have annihilated the atom at a time prior to the uncaused change of state, or were he not to have created anything at all, he would have effectively prevented the event from occurring.<sup>5</sup> God therefore permitted the event without directly causing it. Nor do we have any reason to deny, so far as I can tell, that God might permit an undetermined choice to go in one direction even though he might have preferred that it go in another.

Of course some in the Augustinian tradition do hold that God is the ultimate cause of all sin, including its original introduction into the universe,<sup>6</sup> and it appears as if Baker is at least sympathetic to such a view.<sup>7</sup> But even the Reformed churches have typically rejected that view, however inconsistently, as heretical and dishonoring to God. The Canons of Dort, which are just about as Augustinian as you can get, thus declare that "The cause or guilt of . . . unbelief *as well as of all other sins* is no wise in God" (my emphasis),<sup>8</sup> and the Canons go on to declare concerning Adam and his first sin:

His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole man was holy. But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and by his own free will,

he forfeited these excellent gifts; and in the place thereof became . . . wicked . . . obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.<sup>9</sup>

Even though this (rather standard) understanding of the first human sin seems to me philosophically untenable, not to mention exegetically untenable as an interpretation of the relevant biblical materials (see below), the clear motive here is to relieve God of both moral and causal responsibility for the corruption of the human race. Augustine himself was especially clear on the matter of causal responsibility: "How, then," he wrote, "can a good thing be the efficient cause of an evil will? How, I ask, could good be the cause of evil?"<sup>10</sup> With respect to the fallen angels, Augustine also wrote: "If one seeks for the efficient cause of their evil will, none is to be found. . . . Thus, an evil will is the efficient cause of a bad action, but there is no efficient cause of an evil will."<sup>11</sup> You cannot get much more explicit than that.

None of this, of course, will come as any news to Baker, who points out herself the following important feature of Augustine's thought: "Perhaps at creation, Adam had free will as the libertarians construe it, but the Fall destroyed it for Adam and his descendants."<sup>12</sup> That seems to me a correct interpretation of Augustine's later view, though Augustine himself tended to express it rather confusedly. For Augustine often spoke as if the entire human race were itself a person who freely sinned against God, was condemned, and subsequently lost the freedom to act rightly. He thus wrote: "Man was . . . made upright, and in such a fashion that he could either continue in that uprightness . . . or become perverted by his own choice. Whichever of these two man had chosen, God's will would be done, either by man or at least *concerning* him."<sup>13</sup> And again: "Thus it was fitting that man should be created . . . so that he could will both good and evil—not without reward if he willed the good: not without punishment, if he willed the evil."<sup>14</sup> And finally: "For it was in the evil use of his free will that man destroyed himself and his will at the same time . . . [Accordingly, the] sin which arises from the action of the free will turns out to be victor over the will and the free will is destroyed."<sup>15</sup>

Nor was Augustine alone in speaking of humankind in this way; one encounters similar expressions in a host of theologians and even in some of the credal statements. (Long before they became politically incorrect, such statements as "Man was created with freewill," "Man sinned," and "Man was justly condemned" always struck me as category mistakes, because the term "man," when used to signify humankind, does not signify a concrete person with the power to make choices.) But in any event, Augustine took very literally the idea that we all sinned in Adam; and if we fail to appreciate this, we are apt to miss two important points. First, however confused his understanding of original sin might have been, Augustine never changed his mind on the question of whether God is the ultimate cause of sin. And second, even his defense of limited election rested upon an incompatibilist understanding of moral guilt.

Consider first his conviction that the human race corrupted itself without any causal help from God. Not even when God hardens the hearts of the non-elect, blinds them, and confirms them in their evil ways is any action of his a *sufficient* cause of their sin. For even here, Augustine insisted,

God's actions are but a judicial response to an antecedent moral corruption that God himself did not causally determine. So the *full* explanation of any human sin, including one that results from God's having hardened a heart, will include a factor—namely, Adam's original sin and the subsequent corruption of the human race—for which God was not the sufficient cause. Put it this way: No human sin, according to Augustine, is the product of sufficient causes that lie either in eternity itself or in the past prior to the time of Adam's first sin. Nor, as we have seen, is any non-human sin (in the fallen angels, for example) the product of antecedent sufficient causes either. According to Augustine, therefore, God is not the ultimate cause of any sin.

Beyond that, Augustine's whole defense of his doctrine of limited election rested on an idea that virtually all compatibilists in the philosophical world reject: the idea of *intrinsic desert*,<sup>16</sup> which entails that certain punishments (or certain rewards, as the case may be) are *intrinsically fitting* responses to certain actions. As a result of original sin, he argued, we are all part of a corrupt mass, are all guilty of a heinous sin against God, and are all such that we deserve to suffer everlastingly for our sin. Everlasting punishment, in other words, is the intrinsically fitting response to our sinful condition, which is somehow "our" doing, not God's. The non-elect cannot justifiably complain, therefore, when God merely gives them the punishment they deserve. For "who but a fool," Augustine declared, "would think God unfair either when he imposes penal judgment on the deserving or when he shows mercy to the undeserving?"<sup>17</sup> Applying this to the story of Jacob and Esau, Augustine went on to suggest that God "loved Jacob in unmerited mercy, yet hated Esau with merited justice."<sup>18</sup> His entire defense of limited election, then, rested upon the assumption that we are all morally responsible for a libertarian free choice (albeit Adam's original sin) that God himself did not causally determine. In Augustine's own words, "the whole human race was condemned in its apostate head by a divine judgment so just that even if not a single member of the race were ever saved from it, no one could rail against God's justice."<sup>19</sup>

### *Grace and Incompatibilism*

The Augustinian understanding of limited election, which implies that even those who die as unbaptized infants will be eternally separated from God, is one that most Christian philosophers today would reject as both morally repugnant and inconsistent with the loving nature of God. And as I have already indicated, Baker suggests, correctly in my opinion, that we should divorce the doctrine of predestination and salvation by grace from this morally repugnant doctrine of limited election.

What some appear not to have appreciated, however, is that the Augustinian understanding of salvation by grace also rests upon an explicitly *incompatibilist* conception of moral responsibility. Have not Christians traditionally believed that, because they are saved by grace (or by God's causal activity), they can take no credit for their own salvation or even for a virtuous character (where such exists)? Certainly Augustine held that view. For even as the hard determinists, who are also incompatibilists, reject the idea that we are morally responsible for actions whose sufficient causes lie in

the distant past, so Augustine rejected the idea that we can credit ourselves for the work of God within and its consequences in our lives. He argued, in particular, that human beings have no power to save themselves—no power, apart from the grace of God, even to will the good—and hence that “neither does he who is saved have a basis for glorying in any merit of his own.”<sup>20</sup> Or, as St. Paul put it: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this [the faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”<sup>21</sup>

Now remarkably, some recent Augustinians appear to be compatibilists with respect to one’s responsibility for bad actions and yet incompatibilists with respect to one’s responsibility for good actions. As a particularly instructive illustration, consider how the Augustinian, Bruce Ware, treats a person’s decision in this life either to accept Christ or to reject him (whatever, exactly, either expression might mean). According to Ware, “those who reject Christ deserve the condemnation they receive, for they did what they most wanted in that choice to say ‘no’ to God’s gracious offer of salvation.”<sup>22</sup> In the following quotation, moreover, Ware leaves little doubt that, like the early compatibilists, he regards doing what one most wants as a sufficient condition of being morally responsible for one’s actions: “So long as those who reject the gospel act out of their own natures and inclinations, choosing and doing what they most want, . . . they are fully responsible for their actions.”<sup>23</sup> But if doing what one most wants is a sufficient condition of being morally responsible for one’s actions, should we not also conclude, by parity of reasoning, that those who accept Christ deserve moral credit for their faith, for their repentance, and for their willingness and to say “Yes” to “God’s gracious offer of salvation”? Not according to Ware. For he immediately writes: “And those who receive Christ cannot boast at all [or even take any credit] in their receiving the eternal life that comes by faith . . . , for apart from God’s effectual and gracious work in their lives, to open their hearts . . . and their eyes . . . , they, too, would never have come.”<sup>24</sup> Ware thus agrees with Augustine that, apart from God’s gracious work in their hearts, Christians are absolutely no different from those who reject the gospel. So if, according to Ware, all credit for salvation goes to God because he graciously regenerates the hearts of the elect, causing them to repent, it is surely fair to ask: Why should not all the blame for damnation likewise go to God, if he brings those who are eventually damned into an earthly existence, allows them to inherit a sinful nature not of their own generating and over which they have no control, blinds them to the truth, and causes them to be hard of heart? The question is especially acute for any Christian who, like Baker, appears to accept a fully deterministic scheme, but who also, *unlike Baker*, insists that God restricts his grace to a limited elect.

Still, given her apparent acceptance of determinism, even Baker must confront such questions as these: If God is the ultimate cause of both a good and an evil will,<sup>25</sup> then how are we to maintain, if at all, the traditional Christian asymmetry between *merited* blame (in the case of sin) and *unmerited* favor (in the case of salvation from sin)? If God’s being the ultimate cause of a person’s bad will, as Baker seems to believe, does not transfer the blame for the bad will from the person to God, why should God’s being the ultimate cause of a person’s good will transfer credit for

the good will from the person to God? And if Christians deserve moral credit for the transformed will that God brings about in them, why should they not take full credit for it? Arminians and other freewill theists typically try to account for the relevant asymmetry in the following way: Salvation, faith, and a transformed heart, they insist, are themselves a gift that we have the power to refuse. So if we freely exercise our power to refuse the gift, then we have no one but ourselves to blame; but if we do not freely refuse the gift, we still are in no position to take moral credit for that which is essentially a freely offered gift. A strength of this Arminian view is that, unlike Baker's view, it does not make God the ultimate cause of sin. But a weakness, in my opinion, is that it takes no account of the New Testament idea that our natural unwillingness to be rescued is part of the very condition from which we need to be rescued. Nor should we liken Jesus Christ, I contend, to a lifeguard who throws a lifeline to a drowning swimmer, leaving it up to the swimmer whether or not to grasp the line; we should instead liken him to a lifeguard who drags an unconscious swimmer, incapable of even grasping a lifeline, out of the water to safety. As Jesus himself put it, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw [or drag in much the way that a fisherman uses a net to drag fish to shore] all people to myself."<sup>26</sup>

Now a Christian compatibilist might try to account for the asymmetry between merited blame and unmerited favor by taking literally Paul's assertion that election and therefore salvation "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy."<sup>27</sup> For the dispute between libertarians and compatibilists is presumably relevant only to that which is, either directly or indirectly, the product of human will or exertion. So if, as Baker suggests, "No finite will, on either a compatibilist or a libertarian conception, has a causal role in bringing about salvation,"<sup>28</sup> then it might seem as if those Christians who are libertarians and those who are compatibilists should be able to agree that salvation, at least, is not something for which we are entitled to credit ourselves. But unfortunately, such a move will not be of much help to a Christian compatibilist who believes that God is the ultimate cause of sin. For even if salvation (including belief, faith, and trust in God) is a gift that no human will "has a causal role in bringing about," it will nonetheless have effects in a person's life; a regenerated heart, for example, will most definitely shape a person's will and subsequent choices. So this leaves us with essentially the same question concerning these subsequent choices: If Christian saints, those whose hearts God has regenerated, are not permitted to credit themselves for their virtuous choices, such as those involved in genuine repentance, why should sinners blame themselves for sins that God has also causally determined? And, alternatively, if sinners are required to accept blame for sins of which God is the ultimate cause, why shouldn't Christian saints likewise credit themselves for virtuous choices of which God is the ultimate cause? At the very least, a Christian compatibilist who wants to maintain the traditional asymmetry between merited blame and unmerited favor owes us some explanation of why sinful choices and virtuous choices, where God is the ultimate cause of both, should be treated so differently from each other.

My own view, for what it is worth, is that Christians need to rethink the whole concept of moral responsibility in light of this remarkable fact: Both

Jesus and Paul consistently rejected as inappropriate the very reactive attitudes upon which so many rest their understanding of moral guilt.<sup>29</sup> Personally, I doubt that the ideas of intrinsic desert and “metaphysical guilt” played a substantial role, if any at all, in their thinking. Yes, Paul explicitly stated in Romans 1:32 that those who commit certain sins are “worthy of death,” and this may initially appear to imply that death is the intrinsically fitting punishment for sin. But the appearance is in fact misleading. For within the context of Pauline theology as a whole, the relationship between sin and death is clearly non-contingent. First, the relevant death, which Paul elsewhere described as “the wages” (or the price) of sin<sup>30</sup> and also as “the end” of sin,<sup>31</sup> is spiritual death; it is separation from God and from the ultimate source of human happiness. Nor could it have been otherwise, because in sinning one precisely chooses death over life, separation over reconciliation. In Paul’s own words, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”<sup>32</sup> So death, which is the unavoidable consequence of sin, is its intrinsically fitting punishment only in the sense that a painful burn is the intrinsically fitting punishment for intentionally thrusting one’s hand into a fire.

Whatever position one might take on the issue of intrinsic desert and “metaphysical guilt,” however, orthodox Christianity has always denied that God is the sufficient cause of either sin or its unavoidable consequence, namely spiritual death. God is instead the “Great Destroyer” who destroys sin and death in the end and thereby rescues his loved ones from these two great enemies. But if that is true, how might we plausibly understand this matter?

#### *Indeterminism, Separation, and the Mystery of Created Personhood*

Reflect for a moment on the context in which our earliest choices *in fact* arise. We all emerge as self aware beings and begin making choices in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, and behind our earliest choices lie a host of genetically determined inclinations and environmental (including social and cultural) influences. Beyond that, our in-born instincts initially compel us as children to pursue, even as the higher animals do, our own needs and interests, as we perceive (or misperceive) them. Such a context comes close to guaranteeing, I should think, that we would all start out in life repeatedly misconstruing our own interests, given the Christian understanding of them, and repeatedly pursuing them in misguided ways; it comes close to guaranteeing, in other words, that we would repeatedly “miss the mark,” which is the literal meaning of at least one Hebrew word for sin. For even if a small child’s behavior manifests a good deal of causal contingency, as I believe it does, the absence of clarity together with the child’s other natural impulses virtually guarantees that it will at times act disobediently and in egocentric ways.<sup>33</sup> That is the enduring element of truth, as I see it, in the traditional understanding of original sin—which, in my opinion, has nothing to do with inherited guilt. Because we are born into a context that virtually guarantees misguided choices almost from the beginning of our lives, particularly in the absence of firm and loving parental guidance, and because our choices (or quasi-choices) made in ignorance<sup>34</sup> begin shaping our character even before we

are fully aware of what is happening to us, it is almost as if we were born with a bad moral character—or an “inherited” sinful nature,<sup>35</sup> to use the theological term—not of our own choosing.

So how should a Christian who rejects both the idea of inherited guilt and the idea that our current condition is a punishment for Adam’s original sin understand these matters? The answer lies, I believe, in the mystery of created personhood. Although creatures such as ourselves are clearly possible—we do, after all, exist—we know almost nothing about what is, and is not, metaphysically possible in the matter of *creating* independently rational creatures who are (a) aware of themselves as distinct from their environment and from other people, (b) capable of acting on their own and of making rational judgments concerning the best course of action, and (c) capable of learning from experience and from the consequences of their actions. It is easy enough to *imagine* an omnipotent being instantaneously creating a self-aware, language using, fully rational, and morally mature person who is capable of acting on his or her own, but I, for one, see no reason to think this metaphysically possible at all.<sup>36</sup> My aim here, however, is not to defend my own convictions in this matter; it is instead to contrast two very different metaphysical pictures and two very different ways of explaining the near universality and seeming inevitability of human sin.

Accordingly, as a contrast to the Augustinian explanation already discussed, let us now consider the radically different hypothesis that God had no choice, provided he wanted to create any persons at all, but to create them in much the way he *in fact* created us—that is, he had no choice but to permit their embryonic minds to emerge and to begin functioning on their own in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and indeterminism.<sup>37</sup> The supposition here is that in creating independent rational agents, or in bringing them into being from the abyss, so to speak, God had to satisfy certain metaphysically necessary conditions of their coming into being, and these include what I shall call, for want of a better expression, an initial separation from God. By this admittedly vague expression, I mean to imply, among other things, a severance from God’s direct causal control on the metaphysical level and an experience of frustrated desire and frustrated will—the sort of thing that naturally leads to a sense of estrangement and alienation—on the psychological level.<sup>38</sup> If these should be metaphysically necessary conditions of our creation, then our very creation would *virtually guarantee*<sup>39</sup> the occurrence of error and misguided choices. So whereas the Augustinians hold that we would never have inherited our sinful dispositions and moral weaknesses, had Adam not failed his test in the Garden of Eden, our alternative hypothesis implies that these are, from a practical perspective, unavoidable consequences of conditions essential to our creation—that is, conditions essential to our *emergence* as individual centers of consciousness with an ability to make rational judgments and to learn *for ourselves* important lessons from experience and from the consequences of our own actions. What some Christians will no doubt find controversial here, perhaps even heretical, is the further implication that our first parents came into being with the same sinful dispositions and moral weaknesses common to the rest of us.

Before addressing that issue, however, I want first to clarify a point and then to suggest some definite theological advantages, as I view them,

in our alternative hypothesis. The point to be clarified is this: If creatures such as ourselves could never have *emerged* in a fully deterministic context, then neither could human consciousness, human rationality, or human freedom have so *emerged*. But even if one were to grant all of this, a possible position would nonetheless be that our genuinely free actions, or perhaps the freest of all our actions, are fully determined by our immediate desires, beliefs, and reasonable judgments concerning the best course of action. So in no way does our alternative non-Augustinian hypothesis entail the standard libertarian conception of freewill. We are considering, after all, two different ways of explaining the near universality and seeming inevitability of human sin, both of which reject the idea that we start out as free moral agents. Whereas the Augustinians try to explain this by appealing to the unavoidable effects of original sin in our lives, our alternative explanation appeals to the unavoidable consequences of conditions essential to our creation. It seems utterly non-controversial, moreover, that young children are not yet moral agents and therefore not yet *free* moral agents, however causally undetermined much of their behavior might be.<sup>40</sup> But in addition to that, many traditional Christians, both inside and outside the Augustinian tradition, have believed that, with the one exception of Jesus Christ, all the descendents of Adam are *already* sinners, *already* “dead” in their “trespasses and sins,”<sup>41</sup> from the very beginning of their moral consciousness. Such Christians typically take their cue from St. Paul, who described the context in which our moral consciousness first emerges as a kind of bondage or enslavement to the *personified* powers of sin and death. Some of Paul’s words—as when, for instance, he wrote: “For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me”<sup>42</sup>—might even be taken to imply that sin is something that *happens to us* rather than something we do freely from the beginning of our lives.

Now as I see it, our alternative non-Augustinian hypothesis has several advantages for Christians, and I shall here mention three—recognizing, of course, that others may not regard them as advantages at all. First, and perhaps most important of all, our alternative hypothesis enables us to abandon two unfortunate Augustinian ideas: that of inherited guilt and that of God’s having *punished* the entire human race for the sin of Adam. It enables us to abandon these ideas, moreover, without compromising the idea that, because sin and spiritual death threaten the very possibility of a life worth living, they are genuine enemies that God is bound by his own nature eventually to destroy. They are enemies in the sense that they stand in direct opposition to God’s will for our lives.

Second, our alternative hypothesis also enables us to deny that God is the cause of sin even as we let the chips fall where they may with respect to the dispute between compatibilists and incompatibilists. Just where the proverbial chips might fall will no doubt depend on a host of issues, such as the nature of moral guilt, the point of holding people morally responsible, and the question of alternative possibilities—issues that lie far beyond the scope of this paper. But wherever the chips might fall in this matter, it is perhaps worth pointing out that even a compatibilist such as Daniel Dennett appears to concede that a *purposive agent’s* non-coercive control (or manipulation) of our desires, beliefs, and will is incompatible

with genuine autonomy. Dennett thus distinguishes *mere determinism* from various *non-coercive forms of control*, arguing that, however exhaustively it may determine our future, “*the past does not control us,*” at least not in the way a purposive agent might. It does not control us in the latter sense because “there is nothing in the past to foresee and plan for our particular acts”; neither are there “feedback signals from the present to the past for the past to exploit.”<sup>43</sup> Remarkably, Dennett even concedes that a Laplacean “superhuman intelligence” that also determines the future could easily control us and would indeed undermine our compatibilist autonomy.<sup>44</sup> As even Dennett appears to concede, therefore, not even compatibilist autonomy could exist in a theistic universe in which God causally determines every event.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, if our very creation requires an indeterministic process and therefore a causal break from the past, then we can accept *both* an important claim that libertarians have made *and* an important objection to the standard libertarian analysis. We can accept, on the one hand, the libertarian claim that none of our free actions are the product of *sufficient* causes that lie in the distant past. For if, thanks to the causal break at the beginning of our own lives and the lives of our ancestors as well, none of our actions, not even the determined ones, are the product of sufficient causes that lie in the distant past, then neither are our free actions the product of such causes. We can also accept, on the other hand, the frequently expressed objection that indeterminism of any kind in the process of deliberating and choosing introduces a degree of randomness, even irrationality, into it. The latter claim—which, so far as I can tell, no one has successfully refuted<sup>46</sup>—accords nicely with the idea that, although God is not its cause, sin is nonetheless something that happens to us early in life rather than something we do freely from the beginning of our lives.

Is my point, then, that the concept of freedom is simply incoherent? Not quite. Elsewhere I have suggested that a coherent account of freedom will involve two crucial ideas: first, that freedom, like moral responsibility and rationality, are a matter of degree, and second, that some of the very conditions essential to our *emergence* as free moral agents are themselves obstacles to a fully realized freedom—obstacles that can be overcome only *after* our incipient rationality has begun to function on its own and we are therefore capable of learning lessons for ourselves.<sup>47</sup> Consider ignorance, for example. Many have suggested that our freedom in relation to God requires that we *start out* in a context where God remains hidden from us, and I agree. But for as long as God’s true nature and very existence remain hidden from us, neither are we free to reject anything but a caricature of God; hence, we are not truly free in relation to God. And similarly for indeterminism: Even if our moral freedom requires that we *start out* in a context of indeterminism, as I believe it does, the randomness and irrationality that indeterminism implies is nonetheless an obstacle to a fully realized freedom.<sup>48</sup> So perhaps Paul, who regarded freedom as a *consequence* of our salvation rather than as a precondition of it, had something to teach us about freedom after all. For according to Paul, our earliest moral experience arises from an emerging ability to understand moral rules (or the moral law), and it is inevitably an experience of the will in bondage to sin. Our salvation, therefore, consists in our being released from this bondage,

so that our wills can be set "free from the law of sin and death."<sup>49</sup> Put it this way: God can correct us and eventually transform us only *after* we have emerged as rational agents who can either cooperate in the process or learn important lessons from our refusal to cooperate.<sup>50</sup>

Still, whatever the perceived advantages of our non-Augustinian hypothesis might be, some will no doubt object to its implication that our first parents came into being with the same sinful dispositions and moral weaknesses common to the human race as a whole. But as is now well known (thanks to John Hick in particular), St Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons between roughly 177 and 202 A.D., did not view the first human sin as a fall from a higher state to a lower one. In that respect, his view was quite different from Augustine's, and I think it important to appreciate, first, how well the above non-Augustinian hypothesis comports with the Irenaean understanding of original sin, and second, how well the Irenaean understanding comports with the primary sources of the Christian faith.

### *Augustine verses Irenaeus on Original Sin*

As Irenaeus understood it, Adam's initial sin arose in the first place for just this reason: Like every other child, he first emerged and began making choices in a morally immature state. Irenaeus even went so far as to suggest that, when compared to the guardians of this world, namely the angels, Adam had a distinct disadvantage. For whereas the angels "were in their full development," Adam "was a little one; . . . he was a child and had need to grow so as to come to his full perfection."<sup>51</sup> The serpent, Irenaeus declared, thus had little trouble in deceiving him: "the man was a little one, and his discretion still undeveloped, wherefore also he was *easily* misled by the deceiver" (my emphasis).<sup>52</sup> As Irenaeus understood the first human sin, then, it was virtually an inevitable consequence of the unperfected condition in which our first parents initially emerged and started making choices. They may have started out as innocently as any other child—"their thoughts were innocent and childlike"<sup>53</sup>—but, like every other child, they made their first moral choices in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, a context in which their judgment was already clouded and they had no clear idea of what they were doing. Their decision to eat the forbidden fruit, in other words, was no more a perfectly free choice, however causally undetermined it may have been, than the disobedient choices of a typical two year old are perfectly free.

Observe also how well this understanding of the first human sin comports with both the actual story of Adam and Eve, as recorded in Genesis, and the New Testament commentary on it. So far as I can tell, not one word in the Christian Scriptures implies that our first parents were any less disposed to act in misguided and self-centered ways than their merely human descendants are; nor does anything there imply that someone not already in a "fallen" (or, more accurately, an unperfected) condition might nonetheless succumb to temptation and sin. Were not Adam and Eve subject to the same ambiguities, the same ignorance, and even the same delusions to which the rest of us are subject as well? Like the rest of us who enter this earthly life as newborn babies, they came into being with no clear understanding of good and evil. So what could it possibly

mean, I would ask, to say that someone with no clear understanding of good and evil was nonetheless created morally upright? And what might it mean to say that such a person had a clear understanding of who God is, or to declare, as the Canons of Dort do, that Adam had “a true and saving knowledge of his Creator”?<sup>54</sup> In the Genesis account, Adam and Eve certainly knew that some authority (a kind of parental figure, if you will) had commanded them not to eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden; but like the children they were in all but appearance, they also confronted this command without any understanding of why they were required to obey it or why the command had been issued in the first place. It is as if God had simply told them, as loving parents sometimes do with immature children and in an effort to protect them from danger: “You must obey this command because I said so!” And like the children they were in all but appearance, their eyes were opened to their own imperfections or sinful propensities (the symbol for which in the story is their nakedness)<sup>55</sup> only *after* their emerging wills had already mired them in an act of disobedience. It therefore seems to me quite plausible for a Christian to think of this story not as an account of how human beings came to acquire a “sinful nature” in the first place, but rather as an account of how our first parents’ natural propensity to “miss the mark” originally manifested itself in the context of ambiguity and illusion in which they first emerged.

Certainly the idea that Adam and Eve came into being with the same imperfections and egocentric dispositions common to human beings in general is no more philosophically problematic than the idea that an inherited sinful nature was God’s supposedly just punishment of the human race as a whole for the sin of Adam and Eve. The idea that all humans beings, including Adam and Eve, begin life with the same imperfections and egocentric dispositions also seems to accord very well with Paul’s magnificent vision of creation in two stages. As I have expressed this vision elsewhere:

The first Adam, according to Paul, ‘was from the earth, a man of dust’ and ‘became a living being’; the second was not from the earth, but ‘from heaven’ and ‘became a life-giving spirit’ (I Cor. 15:45 and 47). The first Adam thus represents the first stage in the creation of God’s children: the emergence of individual human consciousness in a context of ambiguity, illusion, sin, and death; the second Adam, or Jesus Christ, represents the second stage: the divine power that successfully overcomes all sin and death and therefore all separation from God, so that the true Sons and Daughters, or the true creations of God, can emerge.<sup>56</sup>

Paul also made the following statement: “As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust,”<sup>57</sup> and this at least suggests that Adam and his descendents (“those who are of the dust”) all come into being in the same context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception and with similar dispositions and propensities. The Psalmist thus declared that the Lord “does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” Why not? Because “he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.”<sup>58</sup>

In any event, I find this vision of creation in two stages exceedingly suggestive. God must first bring us into being as immature rational agents; then, once we are independent of God's direct causal control and our incipient rationality begins functioning on its own, God can relate to us not merely as the Creator who designed us and certainly not as a manipulative agent who controls all of our desires, beliefs, and judgments, but as a loving parent who works with us, guides us, and corrects us even as he permits us to learn valuable lessons from experience and from the consequences of our actions. According to the Christian religion, moreover, love is the one power in the universe that transforms without manipulating; hence, it is through sacrifice and acts of self-giving love that God will eventually transform us without manipulating us. And, of course, the supreme sacrifice, as Christians understand it, was God's Son having "emptied himself," having taken "the form of a slave," and having suffered a humiliating death on a Cross<sup>59</sup>—though it was also, according to the author of Hebrews, the Son's triumph over death and the fear of it that enabled him to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death."<sup>60</sup>

### Conclusion

If God is not the cause of sin and did not in effect program us to be sinners, and if, according to Christian theology, we are all "by nature" sinners nonetheless, the question naturally arises concerning the best explanation for the near universality and seeming inevitability of human sin. In opposition to the standard Augustinian explanation, which appeals to the corrupting effects of original sin on the human race as a whole, I have recommended that Christians consider, if only for the purpose of formulating objections to it, the very different hypothesis that God had no choice, provided he wanted to create any persons at all, but to permit their embryonic minds to emerge in a context that virtually guarantees erroneous judgments and misguided choices of a kind that Christians typically associate with sin. I have no doubt that such a hypothesis will raise, as it should, many questions in the minds of thoughtful Christians—most notably questions about the nature of sin and one's responsibility for it. Once the questions are raised, the objections are formulated, and various replies are examined, perhaps then we will be in a better position to assess this alternative hypothesis in a reasonable way.<sup>61</sup>

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### NOTES

1. Lynne Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003), pp. 460–78.

2. See Thomas Talbot, "Universal Reconciliation and the Inclusive Nature of Election" in *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*, Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), chap. 7. See especially the section entitled "Predestination without Determinism," pp. 257–60.

3. Baker, *op.cit.*, pp. 472–73.
4. "Let us put aside qualms that, for an omnipotent and omniscient being, the distinction between causing (or intending) and permitting (or allowing) is a distinction without a difference" (*ibid.*, p. 468).
5. If middle knowledge is impossible, as some Christians believe, and God *had* annihilated the radium atom at the earlier time  $t_1$ , he could not, it is true, have based his decision to do so on the certain knowledge of what *precise* uncaused event would have occurred at  $t_2$  had he had not annihilated the atom at  $t_1$ . Still, he could have based his decision on a general intention not to permit *any* uncaused change of state in that atom to occur at  $t_2$ .
6. See, for example, Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing company, 1961), pp. 238–41.
7. See Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 468.
8. *Canons of Dort*, First Head of Doctrine, Article 5. One could claim, I suppose, that the intent here is merely to deny that the *immediate* (as opposed to the ultimate) cause of sin lies with God. But the clear motive behind the next quotation is to relieve God from both moral and causal responsibility for the corruption of the human race.
9. *Canons of Dort*, Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Article 1.
10. *City of God*, bk. XII, chap. 6.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 463.
13. *Enchiridion*, chap. XXVIII.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, chap. IX.
16. In calling this a libertarian idea, I do not mean to suggest that the idea of intrinsic desert is *essential* to the view that freewill exists and is also incompatible with determinism. But as a matter of historical fact, most libertarians have embraced this idea, especially in their argument for an incompatibilist understanding of moral responsibility, and most compatibilists have rejected it.
17. *Enchiridion*, chap. XXV.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.* For the sake of accuracy, I have altered the position of "not" in Albert C. Outler's translation, which reads: "not even if a single member of the race were ever saved from it, no one could rail against God's justice."
20. *Ibid.*
21. Ephesians 2:8–9. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version copyrighted in 1989 by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
22. Bruce Ware, "Divine Election to Salvation," in Chad Owen Brand, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 39. The form of the sentence quoted here may seem to entail only that God's causal activity is a necessary condition of salvation and not a sufficient condition. But although Ware nowhere employs the language of necessary and sufficient conditions, his expression "*effectual* and gracious work in their lives" is intended, I think, to convey the idea of a sufficient condition as well. Apart from God's gracious work, no one will be saved; hence, his gracious work is a necessary condition of salvation. And because his gracious work is always *effectual*, it is also a sufficient condition of salvation. According to Ware, therefore, God's work of grace in a person's heart is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of salvation. Ware thus writes: "At its heart, the doctrine of unconditional election assures the believer that salvation, from beginning to end, is *all* of God (*ibid.*, p. 59—his italics).

25. See Baker op. cit., pp. 466–68.

26. John 12:32. The same verb is used in John 21:11: “Simon Peter climbed aboard and *dragged* the net ashore. It was full of large fish.” (NIV).

27. Romans 9:16. For Baker’s treatment of this text, see op. cit., p. 465.

28. Baker, op. cit., p. 466.

29. Jesus: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:44,45, and 48). Paul: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:14, 17, and 21). Of course, no one can establish a controversial exegetical thesis simply by citing a couple of texts as if they were self-explanatory. But for a thorough discussion of these and a host of other relevant texts, see Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

30. Romans 6:23.

31. Romans 6:21.

32. Romans 8:6.

33. I do not mean to imply that the above-mentioned “genetically determined inclinations” and “inborn instincts” are bad in and of themselves—as if a newborn baby could flourish without them. Neither do I mean to imply that we have here a sufficient cause of specific bad judgments and misguided choices. It is instead *the combination* of our genetically determined inclinations *and* a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and indeterminism that virtually guarantees, given a long enough stretch of time, bad judgments and misguided choices.

34. Contrary to a widespread belief I have encountered, the New Testament clearly endorses the idea that even our worst sins are grounded in ignorance. Whether or not Paul actually wrote (in his own hand) the letter known as I Timothy, for example, the self-description attributed to him there surely did reflect accurately the converted Paul’s understanding of his former life. Having been the most prominent religious terrorist of his day, he regarded himself as “the foremost” or “the worst” of sinners (1:16 and 17), and he sincerely believed, no doubt, that he had nonetheless “received mercy because” he “had acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1:13). Even Paul, therefore, seems to have acknowledged the essential role that ignorance plays in sin. So did Jesus. For even though his well-known prayer from the Cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 13:34), does not appear in some of the best manuscripts, it surely does represent a reliable tradition. And besides, Peter made virtually the same point to a group whom he charged with killing “the Author of life”: “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers” (Acts: 3:17). So the Christian Scriptures clearly testify to the essential role that ignorance plays in even the worst of sins.

35. By “nature” in the present context, I do not mean, of course, an essence in the philosophical sense. A sinful nature is simply a defective moral character, an inborn propensity to “miss the mark.”

36. A question that a Christian might naturally raise at this point concerns the creation of angels. Are they not “self-aware, language using, fully rational, and morally mature”? And are they not capable of acting on their own? Perhaps. But we have almost no biblical information on how they came into being. So my hypothesis in its most radical form is that not even the angels could have been created instantaneously as fully rational and morally mature agents, or even as sinless beings. For all we are told, they may have experienced eons of evolution and moral development before they appear on the human scene.

37. I shall make no attempt, for obvious reasons, to prove this hypothesis; nor shall I argue for it, except insofar as I discuss some of its advantages for Christians. The fact is that interesting *proofs* are hard to come by in philosophy, particularly with respect to matters that deeply divide us, and, for that very reason, are probably overrated. But in any event, important discussions relevant to a partial defense of the hypothesis now under consideration would include Alvin Plantinga's argument for the irrationality of naturalism in *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York and Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 12; William Hasker's explanation of why the physical isn't closed in *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 58–80; C. S. Lewis's argument against naturalism in the two editions of *Miracles*; Victor Reppert's discussion of the Lewis argument in *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003); and J. R. Lucas's argument against determinism in *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 114–34.

38. A newborn baby comes screaming into this earthly life with what, from its own point of view, must be incredible frustration; and even in the most loving families, the baby will continue to experience many periods of frustration as its developing will comes into conflict with its surroundings. For all we know, moreover, it could not have been otherwise; that is, for all we know, it is metaphysically impossible for an individual center of consciousness with a will of its own to emerge in the absence of all frustration of this kind.

39. I am not claiming that a sinless life in created persons is *logically impossible*. But even if, with respect to each of our early choices, the odds of making a wrong choice were an even 50/50, it would still be virtually inevitable that we would make a misstep sooner or later. If you add in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, then the odds of such a misstep occurring sooner or later become astronomical.

40. My own suspicion, for what it is worth, is that the behavior of both small children and the higher animals manifests a good deal of indeterminism. But it is non-controversial, I presume, that neither are morally responsible for their actions. Whether a dog leaps this way or that while playfully romping in the yard may simply be a matter of random chance.

41. Ephesians 2:1. Augustinians and freewill theists will, of course, disagree over the question of whether God vivifies all sinners enough to permit a free choice concerning their eternal destiny, or whether he vivifies only the elect and thus guarantees their salvation.

42. Romans 7:11.

43. Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: MIT Press, 1984), p 72.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

45. Accordingly, in a companion to this paper, entitled "Compatibilist Autonomy in a Theistic Universe," I plan to examine in some detail compatibilist responses to the incompatibilist's argument from manipulation and argue that not even compatibilist autonomy, given the most plausible accounts, could exist in a *theistic* universe in which God causally determines every event.

46. The best defense of this objection is, in my opinion, Peter van Inwagen's. See Part 2 of "Free Will Remains a Mystery" in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Robert Kane (Oxford and New York: The Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 167–75.

47. See my entry on universalism in *The Oxford Handbook on Eschatology*, Jerry Walls (forthcoming). For an excellent discussion of similar ideas, see Alfred R. Mele's discussion of "little agents" in *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 129–33

48. For a more complete statement of these ideas, see my entry on universalism in op. cit.

49. Romans 8:2.

50. Here it matters not whether our cooperation is understood in libertarian or compatibilist terms. For in neither case can God simply “zap us” or surreptitiously control us; he must instead permit us to learn from experience and from the consequences of our own actions why love and reconciliation are better than hatred and estrangement. In short, he must transform us by providing us with more and more *evidence* of a kind that would, in the end, compel belief in anyone rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent.

51. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, chap. 12.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., chap. 14.

54. If Adam and Eve did have a “a true and saving knowledge” of their Creator, as the Canons declare, then they would be counterexamples to the Reformed idea that, once one achieves such “a true and saving knowledge” of God, one can never again fall away from it. I find the latter idea, moreover, far more persuasive than I do the former.

55. See Genesis 3:7–11. Observe that, though they were already naked before their first act of disobedience, they were unaware of it until afterwards. Similarly, I think it plausible to believe that, although they already had sinful dispositions before their first act of disobedience, they were unaware of it until afterwards.

56. Thomas Talbott, “Christ Victorious” in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 18.

57. I Corinthians 15:48a.

58. Psalm 103:10 and 14.

59. Philippians 3:6–8. Those who accept legalistic theories of the atonement tend to see Christ’s death on the Cross as a sacrifice to God from the human side, and Jesus’ whole life was indeed a sacrifice in the sense that in obedience to the Father he was willing to humble himself and to enter into our earthly life. As I see it, however, a more profound understanding, such as we encounter in a religious writer such as George MacDonald, is that the death of Christ was God’s sacrifice to us, the means by which he eventually transforms us without manipulating us.

60. Hebrews 2:15.

61. My thanks to two anonymous referees and to Tom Flint, whose eagle eye will serve this journal well, for comments on the paper.