

1 The Puzzle of Sin and Free Will

This Element grapples with a puzzle at the heart of Christian thought – a tension between claims that are central to Christian teaching. But what *is* the heart of Christian thought? What claims are central? Keith Yandell once proposed that what makes something a *religion* (and what distinguishes one religion from another) is that it offers a *diagnosis* – “an account of what it takes the basic problem facing human beings to be” – and a *cure* – “a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem” (1999, 17). Considered this way, we may get to the essence of Christianity by asking what it diagnoses and what it prescribes. Yandell characterizes Christianity thus: “The basic religious problem is sin, and the deepest religious need is for forgiveness,” later clarifying that “Forgiveness is provided by God’s grace or unmerited favor” (1999, 25).

Yandell’s characterization, while sparse and absent some concepts central to the Gospel (e.g. justification, salvation, reconciliation – not to mention the Trinity, Incarnation, or Resurrection¹), certainly gets at a key aspect of the Christian message: that we are sinners, and in need of forgiveness. Some Christian theologians have proposed that rather than beginning with an understanding of the basic human problem and looking to (Christian) religion to find a solution, we approach from the opposite direction, starting with Christ as cure in order to reveal what most deeply ails us.² If the good news is that through Christ we are *saved* (or justified, forgiven, or reconciled), then the fundamental problem is that we need salvation (or justification, forgiveness, or reconciliation). This answer then raises further questions: From what do we need to be saved – and why? For what do we need to be forgiven? Why do we need justification or reconciliation?

No matter which way we approach Christian thought – from what it diagnoses, or from what it prescribes – we end up, in characterizing Christianity, making essential reference to the concept of *sin*. And it is the New Testament’s conception of sin, and its relationship to other concepts such as human agency, autonomy, and responsibility, that generate a puzzle.³ The puzzle may be put

¹ Some of these concepts feature in Yandell’s lengthier characterization.

² Douglass Moo summarizes the scholarship of E. P. Sanders, who argued that “Paul’s theological reasoning moved ‘from solution to plight’,” reassessing “the nature of humanity’s problem” on the basis of his experience of “the good news of God’s intervention on behalf of humanity in Christ” (Moo 2013, 108). Moo reports that “Sanders’s ‘solution to plight’ analysis of Paul’s theology has been widely accepted” (Moo 2013, 108).

³ The reader may notice that we move below from a focus on “the heart of Christian thought” or claims “central to Christianity” to consideration of various passages of the New Testament. But what is the relationship between Christian teaching and biblical texts? The answer to this question is complicated and could take an entire book to explore. Suffice to say here, Christians interpret the New Testament in light of credal statements, ecumenical declarations, and other historical documents, even as these pronouncements themselves reflect interpretations of biblical texts.

succinctly as follows: on the one hand, sin seems like something that we do not do freely, and so something for which we cannot be responsible; on the other hand, sin seems like something for which we *must* be responsible, and so something which we indeed do freely.

The reason that our sin seems unfree is that, according to the New Testament, sin is *unavoidable* for humans (apart from Christ). We may see this by starting either with biblical portrayals of sin, or with the evident universal need of salvation (or justification, forgiveness, or reconciliation). To start with the prescriptive end, Jesus even before his birth is portrayed as one who will save people *from their sins* (Matt. 1:21) and by forgiveness *of their sins* (Luke 1:77); he is the one who “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), who was made “to be sin . . . so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).⁴ Unless we think that some human beings are not in need of salvation, or can save themselves from sin – possibilities that the New Testament unequivocally rules out (1 Tim. 4:10: “we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of *all* people”; Acts 4:12: “there is salvation in *no one else*; Ephesians 2:8: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and *this is not your own doing*”) – then we must admit that *all* are sinners; sin is a universal human problem. And, indeed, this is precisely what the New Testament writers are at pains to emphasize (see Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8).

Moreover, turning to the diagnosis, or biblical characterization of our fundamental problem, sin seems not simply something we happen to commit but might have avoided; rather, sin exercises a kind of “dominion” over all of us (Romans 5:14, 6:12, 6:14), against which we are (or were, before being saved) helpless. Paul likens being “under” sin both to being a slave (Romans 6:6, 6:17, 6:20, 7:14, 7:25; see also John 8:34) – a paradigmatically *unfree* person – and to being dead (Ephesians 2:1, 2:5; Romans 6:13); and if there is anyone who is less free than a slave, it is a dead person! In his letter to the Romans, Paul personifies sin as a “power” who “dwells” within him, holding him “captive” and making him do what he does not want to do (3:9; 7:19, 7:20, 7:23); here as in other places, Paul seems to be describing a universal human condition when he writes, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:26–27). Thus again the human condition is revealed through the nature of our salvation: Christ is the liberator and life-giver (see Moo 2013).

While there are thus many sources one could explore in consideration of the fundamentals of Christian teaching, this book focuses mainly on the New Testament, because the puzzle of sin and free will stands in such sharp relief in its pages.

⁴ Throughout this book, biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, and all emphases are added.

Finally, there is the idea, suggested in the New Testament and developed by the Christian tradition, that each individual does not independently fall prey to this same power at some point in their lives. Rather, we are all *born into sin*, in the sense that our nature is corrupted in a way that makes sin inevitable for each of us. And our sins are all connected and in some way explained by the “original” sin of the first human sinner, Adam. The doctrine of original sin will be explored further in the next section.

Of course, the idea that we are not free with respect to sin might be resisted, and we will consider in depth some attempts to defend human freedom with respect to sin later in this Element. For now, we consider the other New Testament idea that seems to be in tension with this one: that sin is something for which we are responsible. One easy route to this conclusion is to note the frequent language of divine *judgment* against sinners. The New Testament characterizes all humans, on account of their sins, as liable to condemnation and wrath, and saved only through the grace of God. Paul even describes the salvation wrought through Christ’s death as salvation “from the wrath of God” (Romans 5:9), and Christ as the one “who rescues us from the wrath” (1 Thess. 1:10). And it is sin that brings condemnation; indeed, Paul writes that the very sin (Adam’s) that apparently makes sin inevitable for the rest of us “led to condemnation for all” (Romans 5:18). Our universal condemnation is traditionally understood not (only) as condemnation for Adam’s sin, but as condemnation for our own sin, which Adam’s sin makes inevitable. Besides condemnation and wrath, Paul describes humans as liable to “recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5), “vengeance,” and “the punishment of eternal destruction” for not knowing God and not obeying the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8–9). If there is any question about the justice of God’s directing his wrath against helpless sinners, Paul is at pains to clarify: “what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means!” (Romans 3:5).

And themes of divine judgment are found not only in Pauline epistles. John says that those who do not believe in the Son “are condemned already” (3:18) and that “whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath” (3:36), while in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus counsels, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (5:29; see also Mark 9:43–48). The language of judgment, condemnation, wrath, and (eternal) punishment all strongly suggest that we are *responsible* for our sin. And free will is normally understood as a requirement for responsibility – that is, we are only responsible for what we do, or how we are, insofar as we do it or are that way freely, or at least, freely did something in the past which led to our present

state (Wolf 1990; Fischer 1994; Ekstrom 2000; Mele 2006; Levy 2011; Pereboom 2014).

Another route to get to this second idea, that sin is something we do freely and for which we are responsible, is to focus on the New Testament injunction to *repent*. Repentance is an early and consistent theme in Jesus’s preaching (see, for example, Matt 4:17), involves turning away from one’s sins (and toward God), and is tied to forgiveness. Jesus tells his disciples, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [the Messiah’s] name to all nations” (Luke 24:47), while Peter commands the crowds to “repent . . . and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” (Acts 3:19). But a person’s repenting from sin implies that she is responsible for sin – and so again, that she sinned freely.

A third, related route to our apparent freedom and responsibility with respect to sin is based on the New Testament theme of forgiveness of sins, which, as noted above, is central to the Gospel (see also Acts 2:38, Col. 1:14, Ephesians 4:32, 1 John 1:9). Forgiveness is distinguished from excuse on the basis of responsibility ascriptions. I may excuse you for pushing me in a crowd of people when I realize that you yourself were pushed and couldn’t help but push me in turn; in excusing you, I thereby acknowledge that you were not really responsible for what you did. Forgiving you, in contrast, would seem to require taking you to be responsible for pushing me (Hieronymi 2001; Garrard and McNaughton 2010; Strabbing 2017; Warmke, Nelkin, and McKenna 2021). Thus God’s forgiveness of our sins would also seem to require that we are responsible for those sins (Capes 2022).

And so we have a puzzle to solve! Of course, there are quite a number of puzzles in the New Testament – how God can be one, if three persons; how Jesus can be both fully God and fully human; why an omnipotent and perfectly good God would allow evil in the world – and a common approach to these apparent contradictions is simply to throw up one’s hands and declare them divine mysteries. Indeed, we might think that this is the best or only way to respect the authority of Scripture and the inscrutability of God (see Romans 11:33).⁵ Yet the puzzle here seems importantly different than other theological puzzles to which this type of response is often directed: for the puzzle here is not simply or primarily about the nature or mind of *God*, but about *our own* nature and capacities. It is a puzzle about human agency and responsibility, and so solving it, or at least making some attempt at considering possible responses, seems important to our own self-understanding.

⁵ Another possibility is simply to accept that the New Testament contains a contradiction. Not many have gone this route, though some theologians describe *sin* as a “surd.” See, for instance, Tanner (1994, 112) and Burrell (2008, 186).

In what follows, therefore, I consider three types of responses to the puzzle of sin and free will. In Section 2, I approach the puzzle from a *libertarian* stance – roughly, from the position that our free will with respect to sin requires our ability to do otherwise than sin and so is incompatible with our being determined to sin. In Section 3, I look at what might be said by a *soft determinist* – one who accepts that we are determined to sin, and yet insists that our free will and responsibility for sin are compatible with this determinism. And in Section 4, I consider the perspective of those who accept the unavoidability of sin but are *skeptics* about free will. I intend to show that none of these responses to the puzzle is completely without costs, in terms of naturally interpreting biblical passages and maintaining theological doctrine (and common sense). In the fourth and final section I propose what I take to be the least costly resolution to the problem, which might be located somewhere between free will skepticism and compatibilism about free will and determinism.

2 Libertarian Solutions

Introducing Libertarianism

Many respond to the puzzle presented in the previous section by insisting that free will is a non-negotiable feature of the biblical picture of humanity – and of our life experiences and practices.⁶ So if our free will is in conflict with the unavoidability of sin, then so much the worse for the unavoidability of sin! But why think the unavoidability of sin is in conflict with free will, anyway? One intuitive answer is that free will involves the *ability to do otherwise*: it requires having at least two options, and being able to bring about either option (see van Inwagen, 2008). But if sin is unavoidable for me, then I have no other option than to sin – or, if I do have another option, I do not have the ability to bring it about. A second, related answer is that if sin is unavoidable for me, then I must be determined to sin – that is, my sin must be necessitated by something else, so that given this “something else,” I had to sin. But being determined or necessitated in this way is incompatible with being free. The idea that free will is incompatible with being completely determined in one’s actions is called *incompatibilism* – as opposed to *compatibilism*, the idea that determinism doesn’t rule out one’s being free. The view that free will exists and is incompatible with determinism is called *libertarianism*. Many libertarians (called “*leeway incompatibilists*” – see Timpe 2007) hold a view of free will as the ability to do otherwise, though some (“*source incompatibilists*”) maintain that free will is about being the ultimate source of one’s actions, which, while ruling out

⁶ Much of this chapter develops arguments first presented in Vicens (2022b).

determinism, may or may not require the ability to do otherwise (see Tognazzini 2011).

Why be a libertarian? Since libertarianism is a combination of two theses – the *existence* of free will and the *incompatibility* of free will and determinism – it will require reasons supporting each of these theses. In the previous section we saw biblical reasons for the existence thesis: free will seems required for moral responsibility, and so divine condemnation and forgiveness, as well as human repentance, which are all central themes of the New Testament. Moreover, setting aside the biblical evidence and divine–human relations, if free will is required for moral responsibility, then it will be essential to our holding *each other* responsible as well, from the attitudes involved in human relationships – gratitude, anger, guilt, forgiveness, etc. – which seem to have assumptions of responsibility “built in” to them (see Strawson 1963), to practices of punishment and reward. Free will also seems to many like something we can “read off” of our experience, and that grounds our everyday processes of deliberation and decision (van Inwagen 1983) as well as our creative acts.

But why be an incompatibilist about free will and determinism? Most of the reasoning here is more philosophical and technical, though some take incompatibilism to be a deep-seated intuition, and others think that not only the existence of free will but the existence of indeterminism is presumed in our making choices or can be read off of our experience of choice. Laura Ekstrom, for instance, maintains that “we regard the future as including alternatives that are open to us” in the sense of “genuinely available forking paths” (2021, 64), and Robert Kane has likened our sense of our own agency to Jorge Luis Borges’s “garden of forking paths” (2005, 7). Kane’s own developed view of free will, based in part on this sense of agency, is of a power to literally create the self, by acting so as to “form one’s own will in a manner that is undetermined by one’s past” (2005, 172).⁷

One of the most common types of arguments for incompatibilism is the Consequence Argument, which begins with the fact that if an action is determined by something other than the agent acting then *what determines the agent’s action* is not under the agent’s control, and concludes that neither is the *action itself* under the agent’s control (see van Inwagen 1983; Vicens 2012b; Finch 2022). For example, suppose a person’s violent behavior on a certain occasion is completely determined by some combination of factors including his genetics and early childhood experiences of abuse and neglect (among many other factors including the situation at the time of the violent episode). What it

⁷ See also Searle (1984, 95) and O’Connor (1995, 196–197) for the view that our experience of our own free choice is evidence for libertarianism.

means for his behavior to be determined by these factors is that it *had* to happen, given the occurrence of these factors, or in other words, that his behavior could *not* have been prevented, unless at least some of these factors had been prevented. Now we might think that these determining factors did not themselves all have to happen – it was not absolutely necessary that the person was neglected or abused, say. But the point is that the person himself did not have control over whether he was neglected or abused at such a young age – nor did he have control over his genes, or the way in which this confluence of factors influenced his behavior (by assumption: for if he did have control over this influence, then his behavior wouldn't be determined). And so we may conclude that he did not have control over the behavior itself; and so he cannot be considered free with respect to, or responsible for, his violent behavior. A second type of argument for incompatibilism is the Manipulation Argument, which depends on the premise that there is no relevant difference between factors that preclude an agent's acting freely – in particular, manipulation by another agent – and determination of the agent's action by something other than the agent herself (see Pereboom 2001, 110–117; Mele 2006, 184–195). Finally, as we will see in the next section in considering difficulties faced by compatibilism, there may be distinctly theological reasons in favor of incompatibilism, having to do with God's lack of responsibility for human sin, and God's standing to blame and punish.

Sin as Almost Unavoidable

Returning to our puzzle we may ask, how can the libertarian make sense of the apparent unavoidability of sin as presented in the New Testament? One way would be to understand sin as *for all intents and purposes* universal and inevitable, while still leaving open the possibility of an individual's not sinning. Richard Swinburne, for instance, describes human sin as “pervasive” and “almost unavoidable” (1989, 146), while Thomas Talbott offers an account of the “near universality and seeming inevitability of human sin” which “virtually guarantees” that individuals will sin (2008, 306–7). I see two sub-options here. The first would be to emphasize the fact that we each have many opportunities to sin, given the length of our lives and the extent of our free will. Even if it's not highly likely that I will sin on any particular occasion, still, given enough occasions, it is highly likely that I will sin eventually. Consider, on analogy, that if I flip a fair coin once, it is not highly likely that it will come up heads: the probability is only 50 percent. But if I flip the coin ten times, the probability that it will come up heads at least once becomes 99.9 percent. And presumably, we

have many more than ten chances to sin! And so, while the probability that each individual sins isn't exactly 100 percent, it is approximately so.⁸

The main problem with this picture should be obvious: while it is highly likely that each individual will sin, it is not guaranteed. And while the more opportunities an individual has to sin, the greater the probability that she will sin eventually, the more individuals there are, the greater the chances that one of them will *not* sin. But the New Testament authors speak as though the universality of sin is a foregone conclusion, not something that is simply highly likely. And the possibility – however unlikely – that someone (apart from Christ) will be sinless would seem to obviate the necessity of a universal Savior from sin. Relatedly, this probabilistic picture doesn't seem to match the New Testament portrayal of sin discussed in the previous section, as a kind of power that has dominion over us, making us like slaves in need of liberation, or dead people in need of new life.

The second sub-option would be to say that it is not only that we are very likely to sin at some point in our lives, but that there are many so-called near occasions for sin when sin is very likely. The high probability may be explained in terms of our disordered desires, warped attitudes, or self-interested motivations, and the difficulty that we face in overcoming them to avoid sin on any given occasion. This seems to be the position of both Swinburne and Talbott; Swinburne writes of our strong selfish desires (1989, 112) that “incline” us to sin (1989, 138) and amount to a “proneness to objective wrongdoing” (1989, 112), while Talbott describes our early childhood context as one of “ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception” that, in combination with our natural instincts, “comes close to guaranteeing . . . that we would repeatedly ‘miss the mark’” (2008, 306).

Of course, there is still the possibility that some individual may “beat the odds” and avoid sin on every occasion, making a person sinless and in no need of salvation from sin – though perhaps it better accounts for the biblical characterizations of sin as a force to be reckoned with. However, this view faces an additional difficulty. For it would seem that if determinism completely eliminates the possibility of free will and moral responsibility, then, the closer one gets to determinism, the more diminished one's free will and moral responsibility are. If, given factors over which one has (had) no control, one is 99.999999 percent likely to sin on a given occasion, one would seem to be less blameworthy for sinning than if one is, say, 50 percent likely. Philip Swenson (2021), in attempting to solve the problem of moral luck, presents

⁸ Some authors seem to think that even if sin is not unavoidable for an individual on any particular occasion, it may be unavoidable (and not simply *almost* unavoidable) over the course of the individual's life. For a critique of this idea, see Franks (2012) and Vicens (2022b).

a view according to which a person is less blameworthy for moral wrongdoing the less likely she is (through no fault of her own) to avoid moral wrongdoing. The problem is that on this view, if an individual is, through no fault of her own, *virtually guaranteed* to sin, then she will be *virtually blameless* for doing so. But a main motivation for maintaining libertarianism, as mentioned already, is to make sense of the biblical language of divine judgment of sin, including *condemnation*, *wrath*, and *hell*. And no one could be deserving of hell unless her blameworthiness were “turned up to the maximum,” so to speak. So the idea that we are by nature very inclined to sin without being strictly necessitated to do so seems to undermine a central theological motivation for maintaining libertarianism.

Guaranteeing Sin through Middle Knowledge

We have been working under the assumption that if it is *guaranteed* that a person will sin, then that person must be *determined* to sin – and so, to avoid this deterministic conclusion, we have considered the possibility that a person’s sinning is not absolutely guaranteed but simply very likely. But some would question our starting assumption: Why think that something cannot be guaranteed to happen unless it is determined? Couldn’t there be some facts about what a person will do – facts that could be known by an omniscient God – even if the person has the ability to do otherwise? Such knowledge – called “simple foreknowledge” – would allow the possessor assurance that all created persons with libertarian freedom will in fact sin, and so will be in need of salvation from sin. Of course, simple foreknowledge would be in an important sense “after the fact”: God would not know that I *will in fact* sin in my life until deciding to create me, in the circumstances in which I will sin. But God might have another type of knowledge – knowledge before deciding to create a person – of what she *would* do, *were* God to create her in particular circumstances. This knowledge is *counterfactual* knowledge, since it needn’t be about the actual world – after all, God might decide not to create the person, or not to put her in the circumstances in which she would sin. Luis de Molina dubbed such knowledge “middle knowledge” since it is *in between* God’s “natural” knowledge (of necessary truths), and “free” knowledge (of contingent truths which He determines). Middle knowledge is knowledge of contingent truths, the truth value of which is up to (possible) free creatures and not God (see Freddoso 1988; Flint 1998).

Middle knowledge might help us make sense of the unavoidability of sin. For God might know, even before creating the actual world, that each of the people He will create, if given significant freedom (freedom to choose between good and evil),

will sin at some point in their lives. In fact, God might even know that, for any person He might create, if He created them with significant freedom, they would sin at some point in their lives – this is Alvin Plantinga’s (1974) thesis of “transworld depravity.” Neither universal sin nor transworld depravity can be explained by the fact that actual or possible people are determined to sin, say Molinists (defenders of middle knowledge); rather, such people have the ability to do otherwise, but God knows that they will not do otherwise if given the opportunity. So Molinists can maintain both the unavoidability of sin, and the existence of (libertarian) free will with respect to sin. Or so they say!

However, serious objections have been raised to the metaphysical possibility of middle knowledge, or the idea that there could be counterfactuals of libertarian freedom. According to the “grounding” objection, for instance, there is nothing that could ground counterfactuals of libertarian freedom, or make them true, since the individuals they are about might never exist or be in the circumstances they describe; and these “facts” are not supposed to be determined by anything except the individuals themselves (see Adams 1977; Hasker 1989).

While we will not get into the details of such objections, the doctrine of middle knowledge also seems unable to answer a question relevant to the issue under consideration here: *Why* do all (actual or possible) people sin? As Hugh McCann and Daniel Johnson note, on the “standard” (libertarian) view, it “can only be a mystery” why, “although all of us possess libertarian freedom, and so have the option of serving God, still *all* humans sin” – as if “God suffers a terrible run of bad luck in a grand lottery of his own institution,” in finding that every actual or possible person He does or could create would sin at least once if given the chance (2017). This seems unproblematic for the purpose for which Plantinga originally proposed the transworld depravity thesis: as a thesis which is *possibly* true (or, rather, a thesis about what is possible) about the options God faced at creation; for Plantinga was only trying to show that the existence of evil is not logically incompatible with the existence of a perfect God. But here we are considering not merely what is possible, but what we know (or at least are supposing) to be true: that sin is universal and inevitable for all created persons, such that all are in need of salvation. But then both transworld and actual-world depravity seem inexplicable and implausible. And as noted already, the New Testament does not present the universality of sin as an odd coincidence, but a reality predicted and explained by certain more fundamental facts about sin and human nature. As I have put the point elsewhere, while God’s knowledge of transworld or actual-world depravity might give us a guarantee of the brute fact of sin’s *universality*, the New Testament tells of sin’s *unavoidability* due to its *mastery* over us (Vicens 2022b).