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ON RESPONSIBILITY AND ORIGINAL SIN: A MOLINIST SUGGESTION

Mark B. Anderson

A crucial objection to the doctrine of original sin is that it conflicts with a common intuition that agents are morally responsible only for factors under their control. Here, I present an account of moral responsibility by Michael Zimmerman that accommodates that intuition, and I consider it as a model of original sin, noting both attractions and difficulties with the view.

The Christian message begins with one's recognition of deep failure as a moral and spiritual agent. It continues to include hope for one's moral and spiritual restoration. Christian doctrine generalizes over these features, in such a way that all of us can recognize our failure and identify a source of hope.

But the Christian doctrine targeting the first feature—the doctrine of “original sin”—might do more to *undermine* than to promote our recognition of deep moral failure. The doctrine, in its original Augustinian form, has two components: what are sometimes called “original guilt” and “original inclination.” Original guilt is the idea that all of us come into the world already morally blameworthy (perhaps for Adam's sin). Original inclination is the claim that we are now constituted in such a way that we are prone to err, and thus are likely (perhaps bound) to sin during our lives.¹ One of the results of the doctrine thus construed is to increase the scope of sin so that (almost) all persons fall under its dominion and thus are in need of redemption. But a second consequence is that the Christian message on blameworthiness or “guilt in the eyes of God” seems to clash with our understanding of moral responsibility. How can we be deserving of condemnation before we even develop as moral agents? And how is it just to blame us in virtue of how we behave when endowed with a distorted constitution, a constitution we inherited from the beginning of our lives?

¹I prefer the language “original inclination” in order to distinguish it clearly from original guilt. But those who write on this topic usually speak of it as a deeply damaging wounding of the fabric of our constitution, not as a mere surface-level aberration in our desires.



Several writers on this subject have attempted to refine the doctrine of original sin in order to preserve the first (presumably welcome) consequence while avoiding the second (unwelcome) consequence. They have been far from uniform in their strategy, but one frequent suggestion has been simply to abandon the deeply counterintuitive notion of original guilt, while preserving original inclination, noting that even libertarianly free agents, thus inclined, will inevitably sin at some point during the course of their lives.² Variations on this theme are common enough that it might be called the “new Augustinian normal,” although of course it is far from a consensus opinion among mainstream Christian philosophers.³ My own suggestion, by contrast, is to invert this proposal, and to maintain original guilt in particular. (I have no recommendation regarding original inclination.) Perhaps paradoxically, the very concern about moral responsibility which leads us to oppose original sin, when expressed in its strongest form, gives us reason to *accept* the most (initially) counterintuitive component of the doctrine.

In what follows, I will present that objection in a strident way, on the assumption that the high-stakes game of postmortem reward and punishment requires that agents exercise ultimate control over their moral status. But the “new Augustinian normal” cannot meet this demand—at least, not without significant embellishment. I then consider an attempt to take that challenge seriously which comes from Michael Zimmerman, and I develop Zimmerman’s account as an alternative approach to original sin.

I confess at the outset, however, that I have little hope that this alternative approach to original sin will cohere with the scriptural source material on the topic. That is to be expected, due to the obvious reason that the Apostle Paul, whose writings in Romans 5 provide the historical springboard for the doctrine, seemed not to have considered luck to be a problem for ultimate justice in the first place.⁴ Perhaps the non-Pauline bent of my proposal might suggest that it doesn’t really deserve the title “original sin” at all. Nevertheless, it serves a Pauline *purpose*—it increases the scope of sin’s dominion to include all of us—while doing less violence to our

²See, for example, Copan, “Original Sin;” Wyma, “Innocent Sinfulness;” and perhaps Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

³For instance, in *Responsibility and Atonement*, Swinburne abandons original guilt while maintaining original inclination, but denies that original inclination strictly renders human sin inevitable. Similarly, Collins (in “Evolution and Original Sin”) and Mullen (in “Evolutionary Psychology”) both emphasize original inclination in their accounts of original sin, even if they do not explicitly deny original guilt. Craig (in “#549 Original Sin”) explicitly embraces and defends original guilt, but equally explicitly denies its centrality to Christian doctrine. In each case, it is original inclination, not original guilt, which takes priority of place.

⁴The effect of passages like Romans 9, for instance, is that God gets to choose on whom he will bestow his grace—and on the basis of no human striving whatsoever. Further, he can “harden the heart” of individuals (such as Pharaoh) to meet his own ends. Thus, Paul appears to be largely indifferent to the kind of concern about the fairness of rewards or punishments that motivate this discussion.

convictions about what ultimate justice would look like. That should be of interest on its own merits.

1. *The Objection*

The present problem for original sin is this: How am *I* to blame for the cards I have been dealt (original guilt), or for my poor performance in light of the poor cards I have been dealt (original inclination)?

This question is not confined to the religious sphere—it has always been at the core of skepticism regarding moral responsibility in general. The hard determinist offers one variation of it: one way of understanding the cards we have been dealt is as a deterministic causal sequence. But determinism isn't the only threat here, and the moral luck literature has revealed that there exists a problem for responsibility quite apart from determinism's truth or falsity. Compatibilists and libertarians alike struggle to accommodate the demands of the most vociferous of skeptics. This is because any act we make, whether it is freely willed or not, depends upon a host of features we do not control: the peculiar make-up of our physical and mental constitution and our position in a particular place and time—which will then influence the moral tests we face and the resources we have for meeting them. For any free act one performs, we can identify factors beyond one's control such that, if they did not obtain, one would have done something else.

Observations of this sort led Nietzsche to deny the possibility of the kind of ultimate moral responsibility that he took to be an idol of his addled contemporaries. More recently, Thomas Nagel's seminal paper on moral luck has invited skepticism about responsibility.

Galen Strawson has taken that invitation. So has Neil Levy. Once we confine our attention only to what we can control, Nagel writes, "[t]he area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point."⁵

The typical reaction to this strident skepticism is to shrug it off as making absurdly strong demands on moral responsibility. Given the central role that responsibility plays in our everyday lives, it would be silly to saddle it with an impossible condition and then flush the entire thing down the toilet. But when Nietzsche scoffs at ultimate moral responsibility, he has a particular target in mind: the idea that we could ever deserve ultimate judgment. Similarly with Strawson:

As I understand it, true moral responsibility is responsibility of such a kind that, if we have it, then it *makes sense*, at least, to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven.⁶

⁵See Strawson, "Impossibility of Moral Responsibility;" Levy, *Hard Luck*; and Nagel, "Moral Luck," 35.

⁶Strawson, "Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," 9.

Naturally, when we are dealing with original sin, it is precisely this ultimate judgment that is in the balance, and so in this context the extraordinary demands of the skeptics take greater urgency than they would otherwise have. Whatever luck-laden concept of responsibility we are willing to employ for our terrestrial needs, we are tempted to concede that the raised stakes of ultimate judgment should require some ultimate form of control.

Of course, this temptation may still be wrongheaded. Perhaps, even after reflection on the ultimate theological context of eternal judgment, we might insist that “true moral responsibility” is genuinely subject to factors beyond our control—i.e., that there is “true moral luck.” This seems to be precisely what the “new Augustinian normal” will require, at least in the straightforward way in which that position was presented above. If we inherit some defective condition which inclines us to sin, then that condition (over which we have no control) will influence what we do during the course of our lives, and of course on this proposal we may be responsible for our subsequent sin. Original inclination posits very bad luck in our constitution; given the way it is said to play out in our actions, we would be saddled with very bad constitutive moral luck.

Perhaps that is the best we can do. But I am interested here to see whether we might do better—that is, whether we might preserve original sin while at the same time honoring the strident anti-luck intuition of the skeptics and denying all moral luck. In the next section, I will identify a strategy for meeting that challenge.

2. Zimmerman and the Counterfactual Gambit

Theological history has offered multiple strategies for engaging the strong anti-luck challenge offered above. Michael Rea has offered an interpretation of Jonathan Edwards, according to which we are something close to *causa sui*, since (using some creative metaphysical wrangling with personal identity, which in part invokes divine fiat) we strictly and literally sinned with Adam in the Garden.⁷ Any corrupted nature we inherit is thus our own fault. Robert Adams has reminded us of Kant’s work in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, according to which we create our own defective constitution through an act outside of time, as transcendent beings of the noumenal world.⁸ Alternatively, we could neutralize luck’s effect on our moral status by attempting to eliminate the vicissitudes of fortune altogether, and to connect our status to some essential element of our natures. As Charlotte Katzoff has pointed out,⁹ a suggestion of this sort has been offered by Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague, also known as “the Maharal.”

⁷Rea, “Metaphysics of Original Sin,” 335–338, 341–342.

⁸Adams, “Original Sin.”

⁹Katzoff, “Religious Luck and Religious Virtue.”

Each of these strategies is a hard sell. In the case of Kant, we must work our way through the obscurities of the phenomenal/noumenal distinction and the problematic notion of timeless agency. Neither Edwards nor the Maharal seem particularly interested in the above objection themselves, and the metaphysics employed in each case seems ill-suited for the purpose. For Edwards, the result (that we literally sinned with Adam) is derived only as an effect of divine fiat. With the Maharal, the concept of luck that is neutralized—involving chance or modal fragility—is not the one that is relevant for the objection. The objection concerns luck as the absence of control,¹⁰ and we have no control over our essential properties.

So much, then, for creating ourselves (either within historical time or out of it), and so much for constraining the realm of contingency through a revisionary modal metaphysic. There remains at least one other option, which, in a manner of speaking, is the opposite of the Maharal's: rather than deny that our lives could have been relevantly different from what they currently are, we may embrace this fact, and then revise our understanding of moral responsibility to be sensitive to it. This is the suggestion of Michael Zimmerman. It, too, may be a hard sell, but it is worth exploring in the current context.

Zimmerman's radical opposition to moral luck is expressed in a strong comparative condition of control:

If (a) someone's being *F* (where "*F*" designates some complex property comprising both epistemic and metaphysical components) is sufficient for that person's being morally responsible to some degree *x*, then, if (b) it is true of *S* at some time that he or she would be *F* if *p* were true, and (c) *p*'s being true is not in *S*'s control at that time, then (d) *S* is morally responsible to degree *x*.¹¹

The effect is that luck be neutralized, not by the impossible demand that the agent be *causa sui*, but by considering what would have been true of the agent had things beyond his or her control gone differently.

As Zimmerman develops his case, he considers a sequence of examples, beginning with one adapted from Nagel. George murders Henry by gunfire, thereby instantiating some complex *F* which guarantees his culpability: malice, knowledge of the likely effects of his actions, control over his bodily faculties, free will, the causing of harm in some straightforward (non-deviant) way, and so on. Meanwhile, across town, Georg's otherwise qualitatively identical attempt at murdering Henrik is upset by the unexpected interception of his bullet by a passing bird.¹² Surely, he says, luck in the results of their actions should not generate a difference in their degree of responsibility. We could, of course, try to derive their moral parity

¹⁰Or so I say. Recently, some scholars have bucked this trend by offering modal or chancy analyses of moral luck. For defenses of the traditional understanding of moral luck as involving lack of control, see Hartman, *In Defense of Moral Luck*, and Anderson, "Moral Lack of Control."

¹¹Zimmerman, "Taking Luck Seriously," 565n33.

¹²Zimmerman, "Taking Luck Seriously," 560.

simply by deleting a component of F from consideration when evaluating each agent's culpability—say, by ignoring the results of the act and focusing only on the act itself (including the description of the agent's mental states, her free will, and so on). But this strategy will not help with a host of other examples where Zimmerman's anti-luck intuition seems equally strong. Georg would have been just as responsible had he never fired the gun at all, due to a truck cutting off his line of fire,¹³ or if he had simply been too deaf to hear Henrik's insults, and thus not enraged enough to formulate his murderous intention in the first place.¹⁴ Passing birds, passing trucks, and past-its-prime hearing are all neutral from a moral point of view and are (in these cases) beyond the reach of Georg's control; given that Georg would have murdered Henrik but for features like these, Georg is responsible to the same degree as George, even if he never succeeded in his attempt, completed his attempt, or formed his intention to begin with.

Cases like these carry intuitive appeal in part because they track common patterns of evaluation that some of us are already inclined to make. "Be careful around Georg," we might say. "He's the kind of guy who can fly off the handle at a moment's notice—he's not above murder at a perceived insult." Such a guy, we are tempted to suggest, could well be morally on a par with many of the inmates on death row, even if he has a clean criminal record. Yet the implications of Zimmerman's anti-luck principle will reach much further than these examples let on: for the kind of guy one is (one's temperament, values, and so on) will typically *not* be neutral from a moral point of view, but may itself be beyond the reach of one's control (and thus serve as a value for p in the above principle).

It is not hard to imagine how this may be so. Consider some fictional cases. Jean Valjean, Hugo tells us, becomes a noble man, and this nobility helps him to bring about the noble things he does. But the fate of his character hinges on whether the saintly bishop protects him from arrest in the opening act of the novel. Perhaps his doppelgänger Jacques Valjacques is not so lucky, goes back to prison, and becomes a villain. Madame Defarge, Dickens tells us, happily knits while watching the heads of the innocent roll. Then again, Madame Defarge is also the victim of the cruelty of Marquis St. Evremonde. Perhaps her doppelgänger Madame Debarge does not suffer in her youth and becomes a kind of female Pimpernel. And so on. Valjean's and Defarge's characters are themselves subject to luck. So, by Zimmerman's principle, we must think of what each would have done in the shoes of his or her doppelgänger—how Valjean would have behaved if burdened with the villainous character of Valjacques, or what Defarge would have done had she enjoyed the nobler dispositions of Debarge.

¹³Zimmerman, "Taking Luck Seriously," 563.

¹⁴Zimmerman, "Taking Luck Seriously," 565.

Of course, we must be careful. Regardless of what he would have done in Valjacques's shoes, Valjean is not guilty *for* Valjacques-like villainy, since no such villainy occurred in his case; nor could Defarge be praiseworthy *for* Debarge-like heroism. Zimmerman distinguishes between the scope of responsibility (what we are responsible for) and the degree of responsibility (how blameworthy or praiseworthy we are). The former is subject to luck while the latter is not; nevertheless, he insists, "[d]egree of responsibility counts for everything, scope for nothing, when it comes to such moral evaluation of agents."¹⁵ The effect of such a view is that factors beyond our control no longer have any influence over how we stack up morally, all things considered. When we look at our "true moral responsibility," everything hinges upon facts about us—both what we in fact do and what we would have done if things were different.

Now, such a view will ultimately require true counterfactuals of libertarian freedom. Obviously, counterfactuals of some sort are necessary—we need facts about what Valjean would have done in radically different circumstances. But not just any counterfactuals will do. I won't put too fine a point on it here, but the gist is this.¹⁶ There must be indeterminacy in the range of counterfactual behavior in question; otherwise, the counterfactuals would be merely inelegant comments on the laws of nature, and all agents would be indistinguishable in terms of degree of moral responsibility (barring differences in essential properties that constrain the range of counterfactual circumstances they can inherit, but as noted earlier, appealing to essential differences does nothing to increase the degree of our control over our moral standing). And not just any indeterminacy would do. Employing counterfactuals of probabilistic freedom (which Zimmerman himself suggests)¹⁷ makes moral responsibility a function of inelegant comments on probability, which is not much of an upgrade. Random or capricious indeterminacy seems the wrong thing in which to ground responsibility. Rather, the indeterministic differences in responsibility between moral agents need to be up to the agents themselves. We are left with full blown counterfactuals of libertarian freedom, the kind of thing of which Molinism is made.

Of course, Molinism has faced a great deal of opposition, but it also has a surprising number of proponents—at least as many as there are proponents of the metaphysical notions promulgated by Edwards, Kant, and the Maharal. I won't rehearse the debate over the plausibility of Molinism here. The question to ask in this context is not metaphysical, but moral: *assuming* that Molinism is true, can the proposal being offered by Zimmerman make sense as a theory of ultimate moral responsibility?

¹⁵Zimmerman, "Taking Luck Seriously," 568.

¹⁶To get the finer point, see Hartman's treatment of the subject in his comprehensive examination of moral luck (*In Defense of Moral Luck*, 73–80).

¹⁷Zimmerman, "Taking Luck Seriously," 573–574.

Well, it is unlikely ever to win the popular vote. We are talking about a perspective according to which what you would have done as a Cro-Magnon in the Paleolithic Age counts every bit as much toward your degree of responsibility as what you actually do during the course of your life. Such a thesis is bound to provoke an incredulous stare. For instance, here is Rik Peels's reaction: "If we continue this line of reasoning, we turn out to be blameworthy for being such that we would have done all sorts of wrongs in radically different historical circumstances, in other parts of the universe, and in scenarios in which our character is radically different," which "seems to be a dire consequence, to say the least."¹⁸ Indeed, it does seem to be dire—and as popularity contests go, how things seem matters more than what lies behind the seeming. But we may legitimately ask whether the incredulous stare is justified. What *makes* this consequence so dire, exactly?

There are several concerns. The first and most obvious is epistemic: how could we ever know what Valjean would have done if he had been in the shoes of Valjacques? How can anyone (other than God) know what you would have done as a Cro-Magnon in the Paleolithic Age? Since we are talking about an unrestricted range of counterfactuals of freedom, the vast majority of the facts that ground our moral responsibility will be inscrutable to mere mortals. That means that no mere mortals can have a clear sense of how they stack up morally, all things considered. As a result, Zimmerman's proposal flunks out completely when we consider the many uses to which we ordinarily put the concept of moral responsibility. Who deserves what prison sentence? On a retributivist line, according to which our punishment should match our desert, we are unsure. (Perhaps the prosecutor is more blameworthy than the defendant.) Should I blame someone who has done me wrong? What if I would have done the same or worse in his shoes? Should I *apologize* to the one who has done me wrong, since it might turn out that I would have done *worse* in his shoes? And so on.

However, for anyone familiar with the history of the moral luck issue, this consequence is familiar and to be expected. Anti-luck scholars have always inherited the burden of explaining our luck-sensitive praising and blaming practices, given their luck-neutral account of responsibility. (Why do we blame the drunk driver who kills someone more than the drunk driver who gets home safely, if the two are morally on a par?) A typical strategy has always been to appeal to some epistemic feature—luck plays a role in what we know about, not in the actual desert of the agents.¹⁹ Zimmerman's proposal simply follows this course to its ultimate limit. Just as his zeal for protecting moral responsibility from luck reaches an extreme, so too does the gap between our actual practices of praising and

¹⁸Peels, "Modal Solution," 76.

¹⁹For examples of this kind of response, see Jensen, "Morality and Luck;" Richards, "Luck and Desert;" and Rescher, "Moral Luck."

blaming and his understanding of what our moral responsibility amounts to. And this extreme gap is (predictably) capable of being explained in part by an extreme limit in our knowledge of the relevant facts. Extreme epistemic limitation, then, seems to be the natural consequence of the very project we are embarking upon, and so it should be no surprise that the resulting luck-free concept of ultimate responsibility should have little value for our ordinary needs.

The more pressing problem in the current context is not epistemic. Rather, it is whether Zimmerman is offering us the right sort of control over our responsibility—the sort in light of which “it *makes sense*, at least, to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven.” There is at least one significant concern about whether he is.

The luck-neutralizing effect of Zimmerman’s proposal requires that the actual course of events, including one’s actual behavior in the real world, counts no more against one’s degree of responsibility than any other actualizable history in which one participates. If I would have raided my neighbor’s supply of mammoth meat as a Cro-Magnon in the Paleolithic Age, then this fact (and others like it) count toward my degree of responsibility every bit as much as the facts describing my actual behavior in the actual world. When one surveys the entirety of facts upon which my degree of responsibility is based (that is, when one surveys the entirety of true counterfactuals of freedom describing my counterfactual actions), then what I actually do in the course of history counts for only the tiniest fraction of the facts determining my blameworthiness or praiseworthiness. Now, what can I do here, in the actual course of events, to change what I would have done as a Cro-Magnon in the Paleolithic Age? What kind of control can I be said to exercise over facts like these?

The answer, surely, is that there is nothing I can do to change the truth value of counterfactuals of freedom with false antecedents.²⁰ The effect of making responsibility sensitive to counterfactuals of libertarian freedom, then, is to *split* two features that we normally ascribe to

²⁰Here, it is worth noting a suggestion by Michael Rea that would identify original sin with transworld depravity. His goal is to show how original sin is consistent with the following principle:

(MR) A person P is morally responsible for the obtaining of a state of affairs S only if S obtains (or obtained) and P could have prevented S from obtaining. (“Metaphysics of Original Sin,” 320)

To get this result, he employs the following premise:

(M2) For any counterfactual of freedom C that is true of a human person P, P is or was able to prevent C from being true of P. (Ibid, 345)

But (M2) is surely false: I can do nothing to prevent the truth of counterfactuals that describe what I would have done in the Paleolithic Age.

responsibility-grounding control. On the one hand, we care about alternative possibilities—the idea that, to be responsible for something, it must be (or have been) within the agent’s power to prevent that thing from occurring. On the other, we want the thing for which the agent is responsible to be ultimately up to the agent.²¹ Typically, we expect to treat these features together; an ordinary account of control will show how the agent could have done otherwise (in some sense), and how the event in question is ultimately up to the agent (in some sense).²² But if Zimmerman’s proposal is right, we do not have significant alternative possibilities concerning our blameworthiness or praiseworthiness. We are capable of doing otherwise with respect only to a tiny percentage of the facts that ground our responsibility. The rest of these facts are features of us to which we are condemned. So how can it *make sense* for God to make some ultimate judgment of us in virtue of them?

The answer is that the *other* feature of responsibility-grounding control is dialed to its maximum setting—responsibility, on this construal, is all about us and nothing but us, and in a way that is distinctly different from the Maharal’s attempt to ground our religious fate in our essential properties.

We must, of course, remember the question before us: *assuming* that Molinism is true, can we make sense of a Zimmerman-like perspective on moral responsibility? But the assumption of Molinism involves the assumption of an extraordinarily robust set of facts about persons. These are not facts about external circumstances, or the regularities of nature, or necessary truths. They are facts about our libertarian free will. The Molinist, then, believes in an extraordinary catalogue of facts about our free will which his opponents refuse to acknowledge. Rather than balk at his employment of them in an assessment of the agent’s moral standing, we might wonder whether he can responsibly *ignore* their relevance. (If you would have been a villain but for some fortunate turn of events, doesn’t that matter?) And if he did ignore their relevance, wouldn’t it follow that one’s responsibility has more to do with *God’s* decision about which world to actualize than the *agent’s* decisions in the course of history, which are in part contingent upon God’s creative act?

In fact, the Molinist believes in something that his opponent cannot recognize: a complete and pure description of an agent’s libertarian free will. For those who deny that there can be true counterfactuals of libertarian freedom, a complete description of an agent’s will cannot extend beyond the confines of the actual world—and so it is riddled with the impurities of luck, which create the traction of circumstances against which that will

²¹Robert Kane, for one, identifies each of these features as stimulating incompatibilist thought on the free will issue, although he thinks the latter to be the dominant motivation (see his *Significance of Free Will*).

²²The most obvious exceptions to this trend are those who, in the wake of Frankfurt, deny the principle of alternative possibilities in the first place.

is exercised. But for the Molinist, the complete description of the agent's will must include a great library of true counterfactuals of libertarian freedom which, taken in total, eliminate those impurities. What is left is the naked will. If that naked will becomes the object of our evaluation, then it is me and me *alone* that is on the scales of justice—not the circumstances of my birth, not my neurological makeup, not the culture in which I was raised, nor any other feature of me external to my will.

It is this emphasis on the will that sets a Zimmerman-like approach to responsibility apart from the Maharal's. Functionally, there is little difference between the two accounts: one enters the world with a moral status that one can do precious little to change. But if, like the Maharal, we decide simply to ground our religious standing in essential properties, we will load the scales of justice with impurities: our evaluation might well *include* such features as the circumstances of my birth, my neurological makeup, or the culture in which I was raised, so long as these features are stripped of their contingent status. For Zimmerman, by contrast, it is the will alone that matters. So, while his account all but abandons our access to alternative possibilities, it makes us ultimately responsible in an ultimate way. And if God judges us against the standard of a complete and pure description of our own will, what could be fairer?

Perhaps there is another issue here—perhaps our metaphysical problem about alternative possibilities might be thought to prompt a corresponding motivational problem. If there is little we can do to change our degree of responsibility, what motivation do we have to do the right thing? After all, no matter how deeply we are invested in doing our duty, no matter how severe the sacrifices we make, our efforts won't do much to change our moral standing in the eyes of God.

The question of moral motivation is an ancient one, and I do not want to make light of the objection. However, the current objection gets its teeth only if the solution to the problem runs through our desire to be good in the eyes of God (which is distinct from our desire to please God)—and there may be something cynical about solving the problem of moral motivation in this way. Euthyphro-like reasoning might encourage us to hold that God's own commands are motivated by the objective value of their content. If that's good enough for God, why shouldn't it be good enough for us? (Why not kick Suzie in the shins? Because Suzie is a person and it is bad to cause her unnecessary pain.) But if the facts on the ground are not enough to motivate us, why shouldn't our love of God and the desire to please God be our proper motivation? Further, if it is dialectically innocent to assume that all human persons are in need of God's grace (as, indeed, that is the idea the doctrine of original sin is attempting to explain), then shouldn't we conclude that the quest to make ourselves good in the eyes of God is a fool's errand to begin with?

Musings like these prevent me from embracing one of the criticisms that is sometimes levied against this counterfactual understanding of moral responsibility. In her survey of possible solutions to the problem

of religious luck, Zagzebski considers something very like our current Molinist suggestion, and then quickly discards it:

A feature of it that many would find seriously defective, though, is that it makes the actual world meaningless as far as moral evaluation is concerned. In fact, there is really no reason to have an actual world at all for such purposes; God might just as well have created the beings he wanted and have gone straight on to their final judgment, skipping the in-between step of letting a particular world unfold.²³

Zagzebski is right, of course, that on the current proposal the unfolding of world history would cease to have a significant impact upon the objects of moral judgment. And yet it may be she, and not her opponent, who is denigrating the value of the actual world—if, that is, she is inviting us to treat the world as a mere theater for working out our salvation or for separating the wheat from the chaff. The rest of us see rather more in it than that. In fact, it is precisely because the actual world has value that there are moral obligations at all. There is only one (actual) world, after all, and we are all stewards of it. Because there is just one world, we only get the tiniest of glimpses into who we are, morally speaking, but this blindness does nothing to mitigate our need to love and care for the one world that exists.

3. *Original Sin Revisited*

The foregoing (criminally cursory) comments are intended to show that, however inadequate it might be for our everyday use, a Zimmerman-like approach to moral responsibility is not altogether implausible in the context of ultimate judgment from an omniscient being with the aim of ultimate justice. But they also suggest a way of understanding original sin—or, more precisely, original guilt.

How is it that we can say that I am endowed with nothing but “my helpless estate,” as one hymn puts it, or that amazing grace is needed to “save a wretch like me,” as another expresses it (sometimes enthusiastically sung by a preschooler with scarcely any understanding of the words)? What makes my estate so helpless, and how might the apparently innocent preschooler be a wretch after all? My estate is helpless because there is very little I can do to change my moral standing. And even the preschooler is a wretch, because the counterfactuals that describe his or her will were true long before his or her birth—they are so original, in fact, that (on the middle knowledge hypothesis) they are logically prior to the existence of the universe. Despite all this, there can be no doubt about the justice of the case—for it is each person’s will and that will alone that is being judged. Paradoxically, the dominant objection to original sin, when given free rein, leads us right back to one variant of it. This is not original guilt for Adam’s sin, *per se*, but it is original guilt nonetheless.

²³Zagzebski, “Religious Luck,” 408.

3.1. Attractions of the View

This understanding of original sin carries several advantages over a more traditional approach. The first, and most important for the current context, is that it promises to increase the scope of sin's dominion to include all of us without violating our most fundamental intuitions about what ultimate justice should look like. That was the difficulty with which we began, and a Zimmerman-like proposal offers a way forward in this regard.

Naturally, this is not the first time that Molinist counterfactuals of freedom have been levied for this purpose. Rea explores the idea of identifying original sin with transworld depravity.²⁴ Copan, Mullen, and Craig all employ these counterfactuals in a more focused way: perhaps we are responsible for what we would have done in Adam's situation, and perhaps all of us would have sinned in the Garden.²⁵ Each of these proposals inherits an additional metaphysical commitment, however, that the Zimmerman-like proposal does not carry. In Rea's case, we must assume that each of us really is transworld depraved—that no matter how God made the world, if he put us in it, we would err. In the case of Copan, Mullen, and Craig, the assumption is that each of us would have done the same as Adam in the Garden. Here is Copan on the topic:

One particular objection commonly raised regarding Adam's headship of the human race is this: "Why should Adam be my representative head? He really fouled things up, and now, through no fault of my own, everyone else is paying the consequences." Behind this comment is an unarticulated, arrogant presumption: "If I had been in Adam's place, I would have obeyed God's simple command not to take from the fruit. I could have prevented the calamitous fallout from the first disobedience."²⁶

Indeed, that is an arrogant presumption. But then Copan proceeds to make a presumption of his own—that all of us would have failed the same test. What justifies this claim (other than convenience for defending the doctrine of original sin)?²⁷

There is a further puzzle concerning a strategy like Copan's. Clearly, such a proposal requires that we can be to blame for what we would have done in other circumstances. I have suggested above that this is not problematic. What *is* problematic is that we should be responsible only for what we would have done in Adam's situation *alone*. Why single out Adam? If I can be responsible in virtue of my counterfactual behavior, why consider only one instance of it? Why not all of it? (Here we face a situation analogous to what we saw in the case of Edwards. Edwards asks us to believe that God, by arbitrary fiat, assigns the stages of Adam to me,

²⁴Rea, "Metaphysics of Original Sin," 345–353.

²⁵See Copan, "Original Sin;" Mullen, "Evolutionary Psychology;" and Craig, "#549 Original Sin."

²⁶Copan, "Original Sin," 540.

²⁷An anonymous reviewer for this journal has suggested one possible explanation: the *felix culpa* theodicy.

so that Adam's behavior is my own. Why Adam's stages and not Mother Teresa's? Why not everyone's?) Adam, of course, might play a unique role in history, serving as the "federal head" of humanity. So, we may be particularly interested in what we would have done in his shoes. Even so, if we can be morally responsible in virtue of what we would have done in *Adam's* shoes, that is because we can be morally responsible in virtue of what we would have done in others' shoes *generally*. (Put contrapositively, if I can't be responsible in virtue of my counterfactual behavior generally, it makes little sense to say that I could be responsible in virtue of what I would have done in the Garden.) This way of reasoning, then, leads well beyond thinking of some particular counterfactual of freedom. It leads to thinking of the entire scope of our counterfactual behavior—which is the proposal Zimmerman is offering.

For that matter, the proposal on offer makes no essential reference to an historical Adam at all. Some might find this to be a problem with the view. I am inclined to think of it as an advantage. Perhaps, despite our current understanding of natural history, the idea of an historical Adam cannot be dismissed out of hand.²⁸ Nevertheless, the idea is hardly the sort of thing to attract scholars who are not already well within the cloister, and so a view on original sin seems to increase in plausibility by shedding its commitment to it.

Similarly, the view on offer requires no commitment to the doctrine of original inclination—in fact, luck in our constitution is one of the things Zimmerman's proposal is protecting our responsibility *from*. Again, some might find this to be a problem. (Copan on this score cites a famous quip from Chesterton that original sin—and in particular original inclination—"is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved."²⁹) But there is a way in which it is an advantage. After all, it seems that any inclination that we inherit will have some neurological correlate, quite apart from whether mind-body reductionism is true. If our inclinations are distorted, why should we look for a spiritual, rather than a neurological, solution to our problem? A completed brain science, it seems, may threaten to render a spiritual solution obsolete. Of course, careful accounts on original inclination may successfully navigate around this problem.³⁰ One benefit of the current proposal is that it doesn't have to. No neurological advances can protect us from our Molinist counterfactual profile—they can only change the constitutive features we inherit.

Finally, the Zimmerman-like approach to original sin may promise to offer a more convincing account of the "equalizing" tenor of Christian

²⁸Hud Hudson (in "Essay on Eden") has reminded us that literalism about Genesis 3 may be as much a metaphysical as an empirical hypothesis, and so might not admit of straightforward empirical refutation.

²⁹Copan, "Original Sin," 533.

³⁰Robin Collins, for one, claims that original inclination is a kind of inherited spiritual darkness which operates on its own level, like culture, but distinct from both culture and biology ("Evolution and Original Sin," 470–473).

teaching on sin. “None is righteous, no, not one,” says the Apostle, citing Psalm 14:3. “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it,” says James. All are equally guilty, equally in desperate need of God’s grace. Yet, on the surface, these claims do not seem to match our moral experience: there seems to be a stark moral difference between a Gandhi and a Pol Pot; some, it seems, are worse sinners than others. How, then, can we vindicate the idea that we are all in the same mess when it comes to sin? One strategy is to go deep, to examine the foundations of our motivations and to uncover whatever rot might lie beneath. But another is to go wide, to consider what we would have done had our luck been different. That is the strategy suggested by Zimmerman. The two strategies, of course, are not exclusive, but the latter will secure the desired result most swiftly and obviously, for the reasons discussed above. What would you have done had you been in Pol Pot’s shoes? Do you even know?

3.2. *Objections*

On the other hand, there are concerns about the adequacy of this model of original sin. The first and most obvious, as noted at the outset, is its lack of scriptural motivation. Given that Paul seems uninterested in the problem which set our path, however, I do not take this feature to be a surprise. Given that our original problem really *is* a problem (contra Paul), the best one could hope for is that a Zimmerman-like approach to the topic may deliver some of the same results that Paul wished to secure, even if it is in a non-Pauline way.

Nevertheless, since our model has taken such an unconventional route, we might wonder whether we have opened up another scriptural problem: quite apart from whether scripture coheres with this model of *original sin*, we might question whether we see in it anything like this notion of sin at all—the notion that we can be blameworthy in virtue of the counterfactual.

In fact, I suspect we might. For instance, several prescriptions of the Sermon on the Mount could easily be given a counterfactual reading. (The lascivious but corpuscular gentleman with an eye for his neighbor’s wife lacks only the opportunity to commit adultery, and thus is as blameworthy as his svelte doppelganger who completes the deed.) Matthew 11:21 invokes counterfactual reasoning in the condemnation of the cities Chorazin and Bethsaida. In general, much of the tenor of Jesus’s ministry will have an anti-luck bent, and counterfactual reasoning easily comes to mind as a way of articulating it. Those who would stone the sinning woman discover that they have no moral high ground from which to do so—as sinners themselves, who knows what they would have done in the woman’s shoes?

But at no point do we find anything quite like the suggestion that we may be responsible for what we would have done in radically different

circumstances, as the Zimmerman model would have it. Nor should we expect to do so: the subject matter of the New Testament is rather too urgent to engage in such speculations. But this fact needn't prevent *us* from speculating—and the speculations provided here do not strike me as being beyond the pale, given that they are an extrapolation of an idea that appears to cohere with much of the scriptural narrative.

But naturally, the objections to this model will extend well beyond its apparent lack of harmony with the scriptural record. A second concern with the current proposal is that, to the extent that we part ways with original inclination, we will part ways with some of the apologetic uses of that doctrine. One is Copan's suggestion that original inclination may do more to explain our moral experience than any secular substitute.³¹ Another may stem from Reformed epistemology, which will make use of the noetic effect of sin.³² Of course, a Zimmerman-like model on original sin is not inconsistent with some doctrine of original inclination, but it leaves that doctrine less motivated, and so it might undermine these and other apologetic pursuits.

Third, we may justly ask why a Zimmerman-like approach to responsibility should be construed as a model of original *sin*, as opposed to original righteousness, or some combination of the two. In a later work, Zimmerman acknowledges that his account of responsibility entails that we are condemned *both* to be culpable (for our counterfactual bad actions) *and* to be laudable (for our counterfactual good actions) at the same time.³³ Why, then, in evaluating our counterfactual moral profiles, should we emphasize the culpability, insisting that we are dealing with original sin, rather than something else?

An answer to this concern will likely employ one or both of two strategies. On the one hand, we might make pessimistic predictions concerning what we are likely to do in alternative circumstances. On the other, we may suspect that the standards we face from a perfectly just God are rather higher than may otherwise be supposed. Consider, as an exercise, a test raised by John Mullen when discussing this topic: what does it mean to be perfectly *reconciled* to God? Wouldn't some sort of counterfactual purity be necessary? If I happen to do the right thing, but would easily do the wrong thing in other circumstances, wouldn't that suggest that I am *not* perfectly reconciled to God?³⁴ If Mullen's suggestion is correct, then it seems that we are right in emphasizing the problem of culpability, and that the game we are playing has rather stricter rules than the game being played in the secular world.

But Mullen's suggestion also leads us to the fourth and most perplexing problem facing our current proposal. For how *could* such a reconciliation

³¹Copan, "Original Sin," 533–536.

³²For example, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

³³Zimmerman, "Moral Luck: A Partial Map," 606.

³⁴Mullen, "Evolutionary Psychology," 278.

occur in the first place? Molinism, after all, is a proposal about God's *middle* knowledge: the objects of this knowledge are explanatorily prior to God's creative act. Thus, if the counterfactuals which ground my responsibility are beyond the reach of neurological science to change, they are also beyond the reach of *God* to change. (We must remember that Plantinga's original purpose in invoking them in his rediscovery of Molinism was to identify a kind of thing that God *cannot* do.) We do not have this problem on the more traditional view according to which we now inherit a kind of fallen condition. A fallen condition can be cured; depraved counterfactuals of libertarian freedom cannot. Doesn't this entail that the current proposal secures original sin at the price of abandoning hope for any future redemption? Original sin of this sort seems rather *too* original.

In fact, this feature of our counterfactuals threatens to upset the traditional understanding of *both* ends of history. As noted earlier, the current proposal makes no reference to an historical Adam. But it also contains no room for a moral prelapsarian state of any sort—whether at the front end of human history or in the lives of individual persons. We are brought into the world with the moral status that we have, and if there ever was such a person as Adam, *he* was brought into the world with moral status that *he* has. Thus, the current proposal appears to be inconsistent with the doctrine of a Fall from innocence.³⁵

The degree to which this is a problem depends on the degree to which we are attached to that doctrine. I suspect, though, that the primary significance of the doctrine of the Fall lies with the *other* end of history. For instance, in his discussion of original sin, Copan emphasizes the importance of mankind's prelapsarian state, because he sees in it the fact that, in our very nature, we have the *imago Dei*—the sort of thing that is worth redeeming in the first place. "We are a mixed bag, a disfigured beauty, a damaged work of art," he writes,³⁶ and thus it is conceivable that we become a restored work of art on the other side. But if the pregame matters because of the endgame, then the endgame is the feature that matters most, and it is here that the current proposal needs to get it right.

Perhaps, despite appearances, it can do so, and I suspect that the problems we see here are manageable—or, at any rate, close to as manageable as analogous problems we will face on a more traditional understanding. Mullen himself provides a hint of how our solution might work in an endnote:

Note that it is not necessary (for being in a perfect relationship with God) that there was never a time when it was true of us that we would sin in some set of hypothetical conditions. If that were a necessary condition then everyone on this planet must forever abandon hope of ever being in a

³⁵It is not, however, strictly inconsistent with the history of the Fall. It is also worth noting that my own suggestion is not the only one with this consequence. Rea's suggested association of original sin with transworld depravity appears to generate the same result.

³⁶Copan, "Original Sin," 521–522.

perfect relationship with God. Rather, the necessary condition (for being in a perfect relationship with God) is merely that there be no present or future time at which it is true of us that we would sin in some set of hypothetical conditions.³⁷

As it stands, this suggestion is not quite enough—counterfactuals of libertarian freedom do not simply change their truth value over time. However, other things do change over time, and those other things may constrain the range of hypothetical scenarios that it is possible for us to inherit, consistently with that history. Here is one conceivable way: Suppose God creates a new heaven and a new earth and sustains them in a particular way for all eternity, severely delimiting the range of any possible future circumstances. A certain counterfactual purity may yet hold within that narrower range of circumstances, despite the fact that we may be thoroughly depraved outside of it. Because of God's activity, however, we would never sin in any future scenario that is possible relative to that activity.

How would we evaluate agents who inherit such divine grace? Relative to God's grace, we may say that they are redeemed. But in an absolute sense, given Zimmerman's method, we must say they are still depraved—for it would still be true of them that they would sin under less heavenly circumstances. Thus it is that "no man may boast" in such a heaven. Compare this against the traditional account, according to which our debilitating fallen condition (original inclination) is cured, and we enjoy an eternity in heaven untainted by sin. Still, there are no boasters in this heaven, either. That is because the citizens of this heaven *have in fact* sinned, and a complete description of their histories must acknowledge this fact. Their presence in this heaven is due to the grace of God. In an absolute sense, which acknowledges all the facts about these agents (including their complete history), even on the traditional model, we may say that they are depraved. Their redemption is relative to a particular segment of their histories, just as redemption on a Zimmerman-like account is relative to a particular segment of their counterfactual profiles. If there is a difference between the two models, it is that, on the traditional model, we may say that the redeemed are fully redeemed *at this and all future times*. We cannot say this on the Zimmerman-like model. Yet, we may wonder how significant the distinction is between being redeemed *at this and all future times* and being redeemed *relative to facts that occur at this and all future times*. Perhaps the distinction is not at all significant—in which case the Zimmerman model fares as well as the traditional one.

Of course, there are further problems lurking in the background. If God could simply make a new heaven and a new earth that expunges all possible sin, why didn't God do so to begin with and circumvent the mess we are in now? This is the "problem of heaven," which is one of the thorniest elements of the broader problem of evil. If it is true that we would never

³⁷Mullen, "Evolutionary Psychology," 281n19

sin in such a future, can it really be *libertarian* free will that we enjoy there? This is the “problem of heavenly freedom,” which threatens to make havoc with free will theodicies. I will not here attempt a solution to these problems but will simply observe that they are not new ones. When it comes to providing room for hope in our future regeneration, the Zimmerman-style suggestion on original sin offered here is not obviously on worse ground than a more traditional model.³⁸

Finally, it is worth pausing a moment to consider one of the more poignant moments of world literature—the famous chapter “Rebellion” from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this passage, Ivan Karamazov torments his younger brother with detailed descriptions of atrocities committed against children, as he develops his own peculiar version of the problem of evil. At one point he says:

Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It’s beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony . . . Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child would have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn’t grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dogs, at eight years old.³⁹

I worry that, in offering this proposal on original sin, I may have become the “jester” who earns such acute scorn from the great novelist. There is, of course, this great difference: the jester is presenting the child’s counterfactual sin as a theodicy, whereas I have not done so. Nor have I diminished the degree of the atrocity committed against the eight-year-old boy, offered any argument about the reality of hell, opined on the necessary conditions of salvation, or speculated on the child’s ultimate fate. But I have been suggesting that the boy may have been “truly morally responsible” in such a way that he was deeply blameworthy, perhaps even—in some ultimate sense—deserving of what he received, despite the fact that his suffering was senseless on every other level. Such is the price of acknowledging sin’s dominion over all of us.

Perhaps that is a bridge too far. But if it *is* a bridge too far, we will have learned something. We began this investigation with an attempt to offer an account of moral responsibility that neutralized the effects of luck, that put us—the moral agents ourselves—fully in the driver’s seat when it comes to how we are appraised in the eyes of God. With the aid of our Molinist metaphysic, we came to a conclusion according to which our responsibility is determined by all and only the facts about our will. But if the resulting consequences are too difficult to swallow—if being cut down in our youth can actually save us from the horror of finding ourselves deeply morally flawed in the eyes of God—then perhaps we are

³⁸I should note as an aside that the current suggestion on original sin is not committed to any particular soteriology. Some of the concerns about justice that provoke it might also prod us toward a kind of counterfactual approach to salvation, but that is a separate issue.

³⁹Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 226.

conceding (or insisting!) that ultimate justice is a luck-sensitive affair after all, and that we can be more or less to blame because of things we do not control. But if we insist on a luck-free evaluation of agents, we may find ourselves drawn right back into the maw of acknowledging our—and yes, the child’s—original guilt.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers of this journal for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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