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Fall and original sin

Olli-Pekka Vainio

Curiously, the doctrine of original sin has been called both "the most vulnerable part of the whole Christian account" and "the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved" (Madueme 2014; Chesterton 2006: 24). Underlying this paradox seems to be our simultaneous experience of the universality of sinfulness and our capacity to imagine a world without sin.[1] However, the Christian account of this duality seems, at least to some extent, to contain elements that make it scientifically and philosophically difficult to accept.

The Fall, more specifically, is central in the Christian narrative, as it explains the meaning behind the economy of salvation. According to a standard version of this narrative, humans were created in an original state, which was pure and free from sin or death, but this state was disturbed by the Fall, i.e., the moment at which human rebellion against God began. Consequently, to return humankind to a prelapsarian state, God established a covenant with the Patriarchs, Israel, and, ultimately, assumed a human nature in the man Jesus Christ; this final act purifying humankind of sin. The whole narrative plays out like traditional theater: set–upset–reset.

The doctrine of the Fall (DOF) is indispensable to Christian theology, as, firstly, it offers an account of human history in which God is not the originator of sin, and, second, it argues that humankind's current state is degraded and that Christ will save humanity, thus giving a reason for the economy of salvation. However, there are several ways of considering the Fall: is it historical or ahistorical? Is it momentary, protracted, or eternal? Is it particular to an original human couple or relevant to a wider group of people? Does the Fall happen downwards or upwards (Smith 2016)?

In any case, the result of the Fall is original sin. All Christian churches subscribe to some version of the doctrine of original sin (DOS), which serves two functions. First, DOS enables a distinction between the status of humans as we are now are (sinners) and how we should be (righteous). Secondly, it is linked with the doctrine of atonement and the gift of grace merited by Christ: as we are all sinful in Adam, we are all saved in Christ (Rom. 5:12–21). Here, DOS functions as an ultimate equalizer, making everyone equally far from God and paving the way for unmerited redemption through grace. Some further issues also arise from DOS—namely, what was transmitted to us from the original couple and how did this transmission take place?

[1] It is often easier for us to imagine things that are evil than things that are perfectly good. Recent, impactful artistic expressions of the effect of sin on all are Steve McQueen's *Widows* (2018) or David Simon's classic *The Wire* (2002–2008). Depictions of goodness, on the other hand, are often bland or static. C. S. Lewis's *Ransom* trilogy seems, however, to offer a believable illustration of societies that have not fallen into sin.

There are both scientific and philosophical objections to the DOF and DOS as traditionally conceived. The following chapters explore objections to both doctrines. First, I will discuss various interpretations of the Fall. Then I will offer a brief sketch of the challenges facing the theories regarding the transmission of original guilt.

The Doctrine of the Fall

When the world was believed to have only been a few thousand years old and Adam and Eve were believed to be our not-so-distant relatives, it made sense to believe that, when Genesis (ch. 3) and Paul (Rom. 5: 12–22; 1 Cor 15: 21–22, 44–49) spoke of the Fall of Adam, they were speaking about (1) a momentary event and (2) a single person (or couple), (3) whose act of disobedience caused their progeny, to lose their original righteousness. The biblical prooftext for this view was Rom. 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

There has always been some ambiguity about the exact nature and the effects of the Fall. For example, Roman Catholic theology has traditionally taught that the Fall merely removed original righteousness, while some Protestants have taught that the Fall corrupted human nature.[2] The Fall has also sometimes been described as a fall "downwards," from a pure original state to one of sin, while others have interpreted it as a fall "upwards," towards greater self-consciousness, moral responsibility, and consequently a sense of guilt (Wiley 1989: 40–2).

When the world was discovered to be significantly older than previously thought, however, and when modern genetics offered an empirical method for tracing out humankind's past, it became virtually impossible to believe in this traditional historical account of the Fall. As a result, recent discussion has mostly focused on the question of whether the fall into sin could have taken place without an original individual or couple and without the Fall having to have been a single event in time. That is, can one still today subscribe to DOF and DOS without a literal interpretation of an Edenic state?[3]

The following offers a summary of the possible options for understanding the Fall:

HFS: Historic Fall of a single couple
HFG: Historic Fall of a group of hominids, either in
a) a single moment of time or

[2] On Protestant views, see Batka (2016) and Calvin (2008: 2.1.8); on how Augustine's doctrine of sin can be interpreted in different ways, see Nisula 2012. On the Catholic doctrine, see Anselm (2000); cf. Aquinas, ST II.I.82.2. Some magisterial documents discussing the theme include the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*, §1, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, §4–11, and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §385–421.

[3] For a longer survey of Christian options on the issue, see Barrett and Caneday (2013).

b) over a period of time

AF: Ahistoric Fall

FH: Fall in Hypertime

The adherent of HFS must decide whether the original couple were our biological ancestors or our spiritual ancestors, since the interpretation of the original couple as both our biological and spiritual ancestors does not seem plausible in light of contemporary science. A literal reading of Genesis, accompanied by a particular kind of interpretation of the various family trees supplied in the Bible, put Adam and Eve at about 6000 years in the past, some place in Mesopotamia. According to modern biology, at that time, human population had already spread across the globe and would have comprised between 1 and 15 million individuals. (Stone 2014; Falk 2017)

In this case, one might still argue that Adam and Eve were our spiritual ancestors, but it becomes harder still to argue that they could also have been our biological ancestors. Even pushing the original couple further back into the past (approx. 1.8 million years BC) does not seem to resolve the issue (Stone 2014). While we can trace our ancestry back to a mitochondrial Eve and a Y-chromosomal Adam (who were the individuals from whom our X and Y genes originate), these individuals seem not to have lived at the same time. This version would also require a non-literal reading of the biblical family trees and other stories that describe the beginning of the human race.

However, it is still possible to claim that Adam and Eve were a historical couple whom God chose amongst the nations at a point in time when there were already millions of people wandering the earth. By this act of election, the couple became our spiritual ancestors, even if we are not direct biological descendants from this couple.[4] This interpretation is typically coupled with that of *federalism*, which tries to explain how the Fall of two individuals can affect the whole of the human race. According to this interpretation, Adam became the federal head of the human race, and everything he did affected all his subjects, much like everything a king or queen does would affect everyone in his/her realm. Federalism is discussed in further detail below.

The momentary HFG shares similar problems with HFS. It is hard to imagine an act that all human individuals around the globe could have participated in at one moment of time. This is not a problem for the protracted HFG, but this seems to break the one-Adam-one-Christ analogy in Romans

[4] The encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950: §37) seems to require the faithful to believe in the principle of monogenism, according to which "the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. Now it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own." For a discussion, see Levering (2017: 231–33). Levering suggests that the magisterium could allow for abandoning monogenism, if one could explain how polygenism could be reconciled with the conciliar documents.

5:18–19: "consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." Nevertheless, "one Adam, one Christ" need not be the only way to understand this passage (Williams 1927; Enns 2012: 119-35).

Many modern theologians and philosophers who wish to remain within the boundaries of the classical Christian tradition, while accounting seriously for advances in scientific study, often opt for a protracted HFG. For example, C. S. Lewis writes,

> We do not know how many of these creatures God made, nor how long they continued in the Paradisal state. But sooner or later they fell. Someone or something whispered that they could become as gods—that they could cease directing their lives to their Creator and taking all their delights as uncovenanted mercies […] They wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, This is our business, not yours." […] We have no idea in what particular act, or series of acts, the self-contradictory, impossible wish found expression. For all I can see, it might have concerned the literal eating of a fruit, but the question is of no consequence. (Lewis 2015: ch. 5)[5]

HFG theories wish to retain some link to actual human history and ancestry, but some theologians think this is unnecessary or even harmful. AF theories either entirely abandon the historic Fall or treat the actuality of the Fall as unknowable. An example of the former approach is Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1999) reinterpretation of the Fall and original sin as a natural corruption of our self-consciousness. The latter approach, on the other hand, can be found, for example, in Søren Kierkegaard's (1981). While Kierkegaard does not deny that some event in the past might have taken place, he thinks that starting from a historical perspective prevents us from really seeing ourselves in Adam's shoes, and a focus on historicity will subsequently preclude our attempts to understand the weight of *our* sin. The problem with this stronger version of AF, however, is that it seems to equate original creation with the Fall. This in turn contradicts at least some of the original intentions that drove the first theologians to develop DOF and DOS in the first place (Trueman 2014).

The most recent theory for understanding the Fall is Hud Hudson's (2014) account of the Fall in hypertime. Hudson asks us to imagine the world as a block that grows by one slice every moment in time. We can imagine a world that was literally like Genesis 1, and it is in this world that the Fall takes place. Banishment from paradise then involves the actual termination of this world. However, God preserves

[5] For similar accounts, see also Van Inwagen (2006); Jenson (1999); Smith (2016).

one time-slice from this Genesis Fall-world and appends it in to our current world's past, into a moment when hominids were just developing consciousness and moral sense. If God indeed is an omnipotent being, God would be capable of such a deed, and there would be nothing related to the philosophy of time that would prevent this sequence of actions from having taken place. According to Hudson, this imaginative proposal enables one to hold on to both a literal reading of Genesis and a modern scientific reading of our evolutionary past.[6] However, Hudson does not insist that this is how history actually unfolded, since the point of this theory for Hudson is to make a more general argument about the compatibility of philosophy, theology, and science, according to which our convictions about the alleged conflicts of science and theology is largely based on existing philosophical presuppositions (Hudson 2014, 1–11, 41).

The Doctrine of Original sin

It is sometimes erroneously argued that St. Augustine invented DOS. However, many church fathers before him had already formed the notion, following St. Paul, that Adam's fall somehow affected human nature as a whole (Wiley 1989: 13–55). While Augustine certainly offered the first rigid definition of DOS, later approved at the councils of Carthage (AD 418) and Orange (AD 529), there is an ongoing debate about to what Augustine's DOS essentially amounts (Couenhoven 2005; Nisula 2012; Sanlon 2014).

Michael Rea (2007) argues that the traditional DOS comprises the three following claims:

> 1. All human beings suffer from a kind of corruption that makes it very likely that they will fall into sin.
>
> 2. All human beings suffer from a kind of corruption that makes it inevitable that they will fall into sin, and this corruption is a consequence of the first sin of the first man.
>
> 3. All human beings are guilty from birth in the eyes of God, and this guilt is a consequence of the first sin of the first man.

[6] A similar proposition involving other realms has been explored by Chinese science fiction author Cixin Liu in his *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy (Liu 2016). The universe itself undergoes a Fall, from a ten-dimensional Edenic State to the four-dimensional experience with which we are familiar. Liu does not give reasons behind what ultimately causes the Fall in the higher dimensions, but his novels hint towards a theory according to which universe is a "dark forest," where it is always safer for an individual to eliminate others before they can eliminate that individual. This is the cosmic original sin, which corrupts all existence. This pertains not only to humans but also affects the higher dimensional life forms, whose actions transfer the pattern of elimination to the lower dimensions, just as the Fall in the angelic world affects the human world in the Christian narrative.

Let us make the following distinction: the *moderate* version of DOS includes only claims 1 and 2, while the *strong* version includes all three claims (Crisp 2015). Following this definition, many Reformed, Lutheran, and other Protestant churches have traditionally adopted the strong version of DOS, while Orthodox churches have adopted the moderate version (Louth 2013: 68–78). While Catholic tradition once maintained the strong claim, the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* seems to have moved the faith towards the moderate version of DOS (CCC §405). I will first look at the philosophical defenses of the strong DOS then assess whether the moderate DOS can fulfill the traditional desiderata of DOS.

Strong DOS

Rea (2007: 320) notes that the strong DOS seems to be in conflict with the following two theses concerning moral responsibility and our inability to have prevented the first sin.

> 4. 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.
>
> 5. No human being who was born after Adam's first sin could have done anything to prevent Adam's first sin; and no human being who is born corrupt could have done anything to prevent her own corruption.

The guilt that is transmitted to us can be understood as Alien Guilt or Personal Guilt. Alien Guilt theories suggest that the progeny of Adam participates in the guilt of Adam and thereby share his guilt, even if we have not committed any actual sins. *Federalism* explains how this take place: since he specifically was addressed by God, Adam was given a special role in the human race and became our "head"; thus, everything the head does affects his dominion, just as, when a king goes to war with another nation, all the king's subjects are therefore at war with that nation (Blocher 1997; Walton 2013).

Indeed, federalism seems to capture some of the intentions of the biblical texts and accurately describes shared decision-making in this fallen world. For example, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, some 100,000 Japanese residing in the USA were interned in concentration camps, many of which were US citizens. While only perhaps a tiny fraction of them had been involved in military affairs and espionage, the whole group was subjected to punishment because of their relation to their federal head, Emperor Hirohito. From the viewpoint of political pragmatism, the decision seems to make sense; but, from the viewpoint of the individual, this was a tragedy and took little, if any, consideration of justice. In

sum, accepting Alien Guilt theories requires abandoning claims 4 and 5, as some theologians, such as St. Anselm and Jonathan Edwards, appear to do.[7]

Personal Guilt theories try to offer ways to subscribe to all five claims. Instead of Adam's sin and guilt being considered alien, they are understood somehow to be universal, though this connection requires a complicated theory of the metaphysics of persons. In his thorough article, Rea (2007) distinguishes several theories; but I note here only those that Rea considers to be the most cogent accounts of DOS: Fission Theory and Conditional Transworld Depravity.

Fission Theory is a theological counterpart to the physical theory of persistence, explaining that the human stages x, y, and z of Adam that led him to the first sin are similar to us in that Adam and I share the same or similar human stages x, y, and z. In the same way that two copies of *War and Peace* can be said to be the same book, and God treats the human race as the same human. How then does this theory join claims 4 and 5? In this metaphysical construction, I could have prevented Adam's sin because *I was Adam* (Rom. 5:12); therefore, claim 5 is refuted. But how plausible is this account of personhood, given that it requires us to think that, while Adam and I did not share spatial stages, we nonetheless shared a temporal stage? Fission Theory does well to explain situations concerning, for example, Siamese twins, who before separation shared the same spatio-temporal stages; but removing spatiality from human constitution creates additional problems that are hard to solve (Hudson 2014: 77).

The Transworld Depravity solution requires that one commit to the existence of true counterfactuals of freedom, which can have false antecedents, and that we are free to decide which counterfactuals of freedom are true of us. This means that we possess the sort of freedom by which we could have prevented the first sin, if we would have been there, but we did not do so. Effectively, this requires that I would have had to have power to decide whether or not Transworld Depravity pertained to me. The challenge this view faces is that is it subject to all the standard objections to Molinism and therefore dependent on the plausibility of God having middle knowledge and the possibility of backwards causation (Laing 2019).

This discussion shows that it is possible to defend strong DOS, but making it philosophically plausible requires extensive metaphysical explanations, which makes the approach unpalatable to laypeople as well as to many philosophers. Whether or not this lack of credulity is actually relevant to these constructions is uncertain, since all philosophical theories share more or less the same fate: pushed to extremes, problems always arise.

Moderate DOS

[7] Rea (2007: 322), however, points out that, while Edwards abandons these moral maxims, his own theory in fact offers a way of sustaining them, unbeknownst to him.

The moderate DOS attempts to dodge the problematic claim that has to do with the imputation of the guilt of the original couple to their progeny, which many contemporary theologians think is morally and philosophically unsustainable.[8] According to the moderate DOS, we are responsible only for our own personal and actual sins, not for the sins of the original couple. Nonetheless, we are affected by their sin such that we are destined to live in a world where we, too, will inevitably fall.

Does this mean that the game is rigged? It was not our fault that we were born into this wretched human race. Maybe if we would have had a say, we would have chosen some other, less sinful world to inhabit. Our situation is somewhat analogous to those who lived in Nazi Germany. Everyone at the time was indoctrinated and expected to participate in various levels of fascist acts, starting from the Hitler Youth and culminating in an active role in the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Even if we could say that a young German boy, Hans, would not be fully culpable for joining the Hitler Youth, because there was no option for him to do otherwise, we might still say that it was not right for him to have done so.[9] Consequently, Hans and his parents are to some extent blameworthy for not standing up to the Nazis. Nevertheless, we would ultimately judge Hans's character based on his actions, not merely on his membership, for which he was not responsible. In fact, we might even think that, if Hans did good in this situation, this is especially laudatory because of his membership in a community that had done everything in their power to limit moral behavior. Paradoxically, then, being born in a sinful state appears to be a merit for some—namely, to those who resist this condition.

If the moderate DOS is to escape the philosophical problems outlined above, however, it needs to explain why being born in a corrupt state does not mean that the game has been rigged against Hans. To offer another analogy, our fallen situation resembles a poker game, where players are playing with decks lacking odd-numbered cards but are nevertheless expected to play a straight flush in every single game. In this scenario, the similar faults of players are not imputed to others, and each individual player is judged by her own merits or lack thereof. But the situation is hardly any fairer than in the strong DOS.

One way the moderate and strong versions differ from one another is in their account of moral responsibility, with the moderate version emphasizing the individual in reckoning moral responsibility. That is, individuals are never responsible for their actions when there is nothing that they could have done to prevent being in that state, a condition present also in the strong DOS. It might be possible to rescue the moderate view by claiming that moral responsibility must only require that the actions performed by an individual genuinely reflect the kind of person that an individual is. In other words, people must recognize their actions as *their* actions. However, in the literature on moral responsibility,

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[8] For a discussion, see, e.g., Crisp (2015); Kärkkäinen (2015); McFarland (2010); Swinburne (1989: 141–143).

[9] The membership of the Hitler Youth was optional until 1936, when it became compulsory for all the children born in Germany.

this requirement is often coupled with additional desiderata, which includes, among other things, the absence of manipulation. If Hans were, before his birth, subjected to the experiments of an evil Nazi scientist whom altered his DNA to create a perfect national socialist, we would not blame Hans; instead, we would attribute the evil Hans commits to the scientist.[10]

If this question could be answered, we still might ask whether the moderate view is able to do justice to the traditional function of DOS. I think it can. The moderate version attributes to all humans a state where they will inevitably fall into sin and from which they are unable to save themselves. The moderate DOS might also have advantages over the strong version, which seems to trivialize the notion of actual sin. Namely, even if one draws a distinction between the original sin and actual sins, it is ultimately the original guilt that damns a person, not his or her actual sins. Thus, there seems effectively to be no difference between jaywalking and committing genocide (McFarland 2007: 146–7, 155–6).

Conclusion

To conclude, one's interpretation of DOF is, to a great extent, governed by biblical hermeneutics and more specifically on the reliability of the Bible with regard to genealogies and history. Another important issue is one's interpretation of Romans 5. Nonetheless, it seems that, as there are no strong conciliar claims to be made on these issues, churches are relatively free to construct various interpretations of the Fall.

As for DOS, the strong version is justifiable, if one accepts the metaphysical constructions that enables the treatment of Adam and his progeny as one person. The obvious downside is that these constructions are so delicate that, for most people, it is easier simply to dismiss the notion of inherited guilt. The moderate version somewhat reduces the burden, but its challenge is to account for moral responsibility in light of an inherited corrupt nature.

Literature survey

A thematic introduction to original sin is Jacobs (2008) and a good historical survey is Wiley (1989). Three edited collections that cover a good amount of various related topics are Madueme and Reeves (2014), Smith (2016), and Burdett (2018). Different viewpoints on the question of the historicity of Adam are offered in Barrett and Caneday (2013). Books that engage with biblical material include Blocher (1997), Enns (2012), and McFarland (2010). A cogent philosophical defense of the strong version of DOS is Michael Rea (2007). Hud Hudson (2014) offers a broad discussion of various perspectives.

[10] For a discussion on why the postlapsarian condition is not a manipulated state, see Bignon (2017).

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