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The Arbitrariness of the Primal Sin

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1. Introduction

It is common, especially among medieval treatments of free will, to distinguish voluntarist accounts from intellectualist ones. Colleen McCluskey differentiates the two approaches as follows:

> In light of a common theory of human psychology, the medieval debate centered upon whether human beings act freely primarily in virtue of their wills or in virtue of their intellects. Those who argue that freedom is primarily a function of the intellect are known as intellectualists while those who argue that freedom is primarily a function of the will are known as voluntarists, from the Latin word for will, *voluntas*.[1]

While both of these approaches have their share of proponents, Robert Brown claims that the voluntarist approach is the more common in the history of Christian theology: "The early Christian tradition, after several centuries of vigorous debate, chose to locate the source of human evil exclusively in the exercise of will rather than the deficiencies of intellect."[2] This distinction is not restricted to medieval writers, as one can find defenders of both approaches among contemporary philosophers. For example, Eleonore Stump's Thomistic inspired view is—perhaps not surprisingly—an intellectualist account,[3] while many

[1] McClusky, 2007. See also Brian Leftow, 1998.
[2] Brown, 1978, 216.
[3] See, for instance, Stump, 2003, 1990.

agent-causal accounts, such as Timothy O'Connor's, have voluntarist leanings.[4]

A common objection to voluntarist accounts is that they leave the exercise of an agent's free will as inexplicable or incomprehensible. In what follows, I evaluate voluntarism and intellectualism regarding their explanatory strength with respect to the primal sin. (My reasons for focusing on this particular sin will be made clear in the next section.) It turns out, within such a theological context, the explanatory benefit of intellectualism is significantly less than critics of voluntarism often suggest. Considerations of the primal sin show that both voluntarist and intellectual accounts involve an unresolved arbitrariness at the heart of their accounts of free agency. This suggests that, at least for theists, intellectualism is no better than voluntarism in this respect and that, on the assumption that such a sin happened, voluntarist accounts are not as problematic as many believe them to be.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I explain what is meant by 'primal sin' and why there is reason to look at this sin in particular. I then compare this paradigm sin from voluntarism and intellectualist approaches. More specifically, I approach the issue of primal sin by looking at the two most developed extant accounts of it in the contemporary literature.[5] Both accounts are libertarian accounts insofar as they suppose that the truth of theological determinism would render the devil unfree, and thus not responsible, in his fall. Furthermore, both accounts are inspired by medieval theologians, though they aim to provide satisfactory philosophical accounts of the primal sin and not be mere historical exegesis. Given that historical interpretation is not my goal here, I will let the two contemporary proponents of the views under consideration speak for themselves, taking their exegesis as accurate for present purposes.

[4] See, for instance, O'Connor, 2000.
[5] An anonymous reader for the press has indicated that many of the conclusions I come to in this paper were anticipated in Hoitenga, 1997. Space does not permit, however, a comparison with Hoitenga's text.

2. Primal Sin

It need not be said that throughout his life Augustine was perplexed by evil. One author has recently written that "Augustine's account of the problem of evil came in the end to embrace almost every other area of his writing."[6] It was the attempt to reconcile evil with the existence of God, for example, that constituted one of the main reasons for his nine-year affiliation with Manichaeism.[7] And subsequent to his conversion to Christianity, Augustine's reflection on the nature and origin of evil produced the early work *On Free Choice of the Will*, as well as some of the most alluring passages of the latter *Confessions* and *City of God*. Augustine played a key role in developing and popularizing what is now commonly referred to as the free will defense.[8] According to Augustine:

> We have determined that the choice to follow and embrace one or the other [of good or evil] lies with the will, and that only the will can depose the mind from its stronghold of power and deprive it of right order. And it has become clear that we should not blame anything when someone uses it wrongly; we should blame the one who uses it wrongly.... We are now in a position to ask whether evildoing is anything other than neglecting eternal things, which the mind perceives and enjoys by means of itself and which it cannot lose if it loves them; and instead pursuing temporal things—which are perceived by means of the body, the least valuable part of a human being, and which can never be certain—as if they were great and marvelous things. It seems to me that all evil deeds—that is, all sins—fall into this one category.[9]

However, even after developing the free will defense, Augustine was still perplexed by the origin of evil given the role of an essentially good God who created the world in general, and free creatures more specifically. Given his nature, God wouldn't create anything that was intrinsically evil.

[6] Evans, 1999, 340.

[7] The Manicheans, as well as gnostics in general, thought that reflection on primal sin gave credence to their own dualism by posing the following dilemma: "Was Adam created perfect or imperfect? If perfect, then how could he fall? If imperfect, why did a perfect God create an imperfect being? Would not God [then] be ultimately responsible for the fall?" (Seymour, 1999, 256). The present paper attempts to provide an answer to the second of these questions.

[8] The *locus classicus* for the free will defense to the logical problem of evil is Plantinga, 1977. For a more elaborate, and technical, discussion of the same issues, see also Plantinga, 1974. More precisely, Augustine was likely giving a free will theodicy. However, insofar as giving the actual reason God has for allowing evil entails giving a possible reason for the same, it is not inappropriate to describe Augustine's project as a defense.

[9] Augustine, 1993, 27.

But if all the agents that God creates are created good, how is it that at least some of them do evil? The answer, of course, is that an agent wills to do evil, but this answer immediately raises another question: where does the evil will originate? A creature's having free will prior to the fall might account for the possibility of evil, but that isn't sufficient to explain why that possibility was actualized by an otherwise morally untarnished creature. According to William Babcock, this is a question that "Augustine never fully escaped nor finally solved."[10] In the present paper I seek to address how an agent that is created as all good could nonetheless will to do evil.

According to a common strand prevalent throughout much of the Christian tradition, the devil was an angel and the first creature to sin.[11] This sin has traditionally been seen as pride, though others have held it to be primarily a sin of envy.[12] The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for example, puts it as follows:

> Behind the disobedient choice of our first [human] parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God... Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called "Satan" or the "devil". The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: "The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing." Scripture speaks of a sin of these angels. This "fall" consists in the free choice of these created spirits, who radically and irrevocably rejected God and his reign.[13]

[10] Babcock, 1988, 30.

[11] In discussing Augustine's account of primal sin, which we'll return to below, Scott MacDonald describes it as "an idea without which he [Augustine] thinks no account of sin can be complete: the idea that imitation of God in the form of prideful self-assertion is at the bottom of all sin" (MacDonald, 2003, 408). For a very interesting discussion of the origin of the fall in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theology, see Steadman, 1960.

[12] For discussions of the primal sin as pride, see the entry on the devil in Fitzgerald, 1999, 268; Aquinas, 1948, 63.7; Milton, 1931, XV, 181; and Lewis, 1940, 69ff. For a discussion of the minority position which roots the primal sin in envy, see King, 2012, 262ff.

[13] 2nd edition, paragraphs 391 and 392; footnotes omitted. For an account of sin originating in the free will of the devil from a very different theological perspective, see Gregory Boyd, 2001: "The New Testament repeatedly identifies the originator and head of the rebellion against God as Satan. Indeed, although it does not locate the entire responsibility for all evil on Satan, it does trace all evil back to him.... Second, and closely related to this, because Scripture depicts Satan as being far more powerful than any of the demonic or human agents that are under him, he represents the ultimate challenge for our theodicy. The challenge of explaining how God could create beings who can resist his will and genuinely war against him is epitomized in Satan. If we can account for his existence, we shall have thereby accounted for the existence of all lesser evil against" (17).

Following Scott MacDonald, I will refer to this first purported case of sin as the 'primal sin':

> The fall of the angels constitutes the paradigm case [of evil-originating free choice] since, unlike Adam's and Eve's sin in the garden, the first angelic sin is entirely unprecedented. We can think of that first evil free choice as constituting primal sin. The first sin deserves to be called primal, however, not just because it is temporally first but also because it is something radically new in creation: the first evil appears against a backdrop of utter goodness. All things created by God, including the rational creatures whose free choices are the original evils, are wholly good and without flaw.... There can be no context of defect or corruption into which the first sin fits. Good creatures with good wills voluntarily introduce evil into a world where there was none before. Primal sin is not only unprecedented but also seemingly unprepared for and unprompted.[14]

Focus on the primal sin thus makes the discussion of the relationship between free will and sin a bit cleaner than it would be otherwise, particularly given the dynamic relationship between an agent's moral character and her choices. For every sin other than the primal sin, that choice to sin will have in its causal antecedents the causal consequence of an earlier sin.[15] To take an example, consider a particular sinful act by gluttonous Gene; say that, on a given occasion, he eats an entire carton of Moose Tracks ice cream and then, despite knowing better, gets into the freezer for yet even more.[16] Given that he is aware that his motivational reasons do not align with the normative reasons, part of the explanation for this choice will be the thoroughly gluttonous disposition Gene has fostered over the previous years. But an investigation of primal sin will avoid these complications arising from previous sinful choices and a bad moral

[14] MacDonald, 1998, 110f.

[15] This will be particularly true with respect to human freedom if one takes seriously the doctrine of original sin. For a very useful philosophical discussion of this doctrine, see Rea, 2007 and Wyma, 2004. For more on the distinction between actual and original sin, see Quinn, 1998.

[16] Jonny Brown has suggested that the use of a 'fairly pedestrian sin' such as that involved in the example of gluttonous Gene, to which we'll return later, may inadvertently trivialize the seriousness of the subject-matter. There is a growing body of literature which does suggest that the level of moral seriousness in an example can greatly impact one's intuitions regarding freedom and moral responsibility, as can the difference between an actual example and a hypothetical example; for an overview of these data, see Sommers, 2010, particularly section 3. While I am sensitive to this data, I do not think the use of the present example is infelicitous. For one, the use of a more serious example may elicit more compatibilist intuitions. Insofar as the present paper is working on the assumption of incompatibilism, I want to minimize that tendency.

character, as well as the further issues of the bondage to sin and original sin. Katherin Rogers makes a similar point in a recent study of Anselm's account of freedom:

> I have been discussing Anselm's theories regarding human free will. In fact, much of his central argument occurs in *De casu diaboli*. The contemporary reader may find it odd that Anselm would focus on the will of Satan. Whatever one's view of the Heavenly Host and their fallen brethren, it should be appreciated that Anselm chooses to discuss the fall of the devil from the best analytic motives. He is interested only in morally significant choice, and he is deeply concerned to get to the bare metaphysics of free will. He prefers to set aside instances of choice where the core act is difficult to discern, being encrusted with layers of competing desires born of years of lived history. He wants to examine a pure instance of choice, and he wants to put the central and most difficult puzzle of created freedom in the starkest terms: how could a being made perfectly good, with no one and nothing already evil in the world to tempt him, possibly choose against the will of God?[17]

Rogers's comments also suggest a reason for not focusing on the fall of humans, as according to traditional theology their fall was influenced by agents who had already fallen. My focus here on the fall of the devil is then, in one sense, merely a placeholder for whatever the first temporal sin was; I am not doing what Robert Brown has referred to as "theological history."[18] As such, I do not intend the following discussion to have purchase only for those who belief in the literal existence of the devil, and his role in the fall of the human race.[19]

[17] Rogers, 2008, 7.

[18] Brown, 1978, 319.

[19] Whatever the other specifics of one's theology, it seems that Christian orthodoxy commits one to believe in a temporally first sin given the Christian doctrine of God's creation. Furthermore, there will also be a temporally first sin of a human, regardless of whether one interprets the second chapter of Genesis literally, as the following passage from Swinburne makes clear: At some state in the history of the world, there appeared the first creature with hominoid body who had some understanding of the difference between the morally obligatory, the morally permissible (i.e. right), and the morally wrong; and an ability freely to choose the morally right. So much is obvious; since on modern evolutionary views, as well as on all views held in Christian tradition, once upon a time there were no such creatures and now there are some, there must have been a first one. It seems reasonable to consider such a creature the first man; and we may follow biblical tradition and call him 'Adam'. (The Hebrew word means 'man'.)" (Swinburne, 1989, 141). Shane Glackin has suggested that in an evolutionary account, there will be vagueness with respect to not only human nature, but also responsibility and sin. I'm inclined, however, to think that that vagueness will be epistemic in nature, and not metaphysical. Even if I'm wrong, the implications of vagueness regarding human nature and moral responsibility must be left for another time.

There is also one additional reason for focusing on the primal sin. If a satisfactory account of the primal sin can be given, then that account—plus the causal contribution to other sins that it makes possible—should also go a significant distance towards providing an understanding of how other subsequent sins are possible for a fallen, sinful creature. Thus, to quote McDonald, the primal sins—whatever they may be—"are important not merely because of their temporal priority and causal significance but also because they are in a certain way paradigms."[20] But, as we'll see below, the issue of primal sin also appears, at least initially, to be a philosophical conundrum—"a problem all of whose possible solutions are unsatisfactory."[21] And if the primal sin can be shown to only appear to be a conundrum, then the same would also be true of sins in general. I turn now to comparing two approaches to the primal sin.

3. Voluntarism: Katherin Rogers on Anselm

I'll approach the issue of primal sin by looking at the two most developed extant accounts of it in the contemporary literature. Both accounts are libertarian accounts insofar as they suppose that the truth of theological determinism would render the devil unfree, and thus not responsible, in his fall. Furthermore, both accounts are inspired by medieval theologians, though they aim to provide satisfactory philosophical accounts of the primal sin and not be mere historical exegesis.

Having already mentioned Rogers's discussion of the primal sin in her study of Anselm's account of freedom, I'll begin there.[22] Rogers's treatment of the issue is embedded within the larger context of her discussion of Anselm's departure from Augustine on the nature of free will, and presupposes a number of interpretive issues.

> [Anselm's] basic metaphysics and epistemology are solidly Augustinian. And yet Anselm did not agree with everything the Master had said. He does not say it explicitly, but it is clear that his work on free will is motivated by a fundamental problem which he finds in the work of Augustine. It is in his book *De casu diaboli* that he comes to grips with the basis mechanics of created freedom, and the question which drives the work is this: how could Satan, created perfectly good, choose to sin? Anselm's student interlocutor spells out the 'standard' answer he has heard. Satan sinned because he chose not to persevere in the good will which God had given to him at creation, and the reason he did not persevere was that God had not given him the necessary perseverance. Though Anselm does not cite the source, this is Augustine's position. But in Anselm's view this answer is, at best, radically incomplete. How, if Satan could not help but fall without the God-given perseverance, can we avoid the conclusion that God is responsible for the sin?[23]

As this quotation indicates, Rogers argues that Augustine's view is best understood as a form of compatibilism. More specifically, she thinks that "Augustine is a compatibilist from his earliest work on freedom through his anti-Pelagian writings, and the freedom possessed by the un-fallen and fallen will is a compatibilist freedom."[24] While this is a controversial claim, it need not concern us here insofar as Augustine scholarship is not my primary goal. What is less controversial is that Anselm was a libertarian regarding free will.[25] And it is precisely Anselm's rejection of Augustine's compatibilism (as Rogers interprets him) and his embracing of theological determinism which underscores Anselm's problem with Augustine's account of the primal sin. She continues:

> As Anselm recognized, Augustine's analysis of the choice of the unfallen will, the will in its ideal condition, raises exactly the same problem as his view of saving grace. According to Augustine, the created will chooses on the basis of what it most desires.
>
> There is nothing in Augustine's work to suggest that on this most fundamental point about the working of the will he distinguished between the pre-lapsarian and the post-lapsarian condition. But everything about the creature, including its knowledge, will, and desires, and everything about his situation, including whatever can be a possible object of desire, are from God. Thus, as I shall argue, on Augustine's understanding, God is not only the architect of the original situation in which the created agent finds himself, He also controls the outcome. But then God is responsible for created choices, even in the beginning when the will is in its original, pristine condition. The upshot seems to be, as Anselm acknowledges in *De casu diaboli*, that the very first choice for evil can be traced to God.[26]

[20] MacDonald, 2003, 397.

[21] O'Connor, 2005, 207.

[22] Rogers seems to endorse Anselm's view insofar as she describes him as "offer[ing] viable solutions to some of the puzzles which have plagued Christian philosophers since the days of Augustine and which are still hotly debated today" (Rogers, 2008, 1). In what follows, I shall interpret Rogers to be endorsing the Anselmian view that she elaborates.

[23] Rogers, 2008, 31; see also 93ff.

[24] Rogers, 2004, 415.

[25] See, for instance, Visser and Williams, 2008.

[26] Rogers, 2008, 32.

Rogers thinks that the choice for sin, on the assumption of both theological determinism and compatibilism, is either "unintelligible"[27] or leads to the conclusion that "the responsibility for the original evil lies with God,"[28] an evaluation with which I am inclined to agree. Instead, Anselm's account of the primal sin is thoroughly incompatibilist in nature:

> God does not cause sin, nor does He bear the ultimate responsibility for it as something He could and should have prevented. The source of sin is the created agent. Given Anselm's analysis of what free choice means one can only be unjust under one's own steam. As he writes in *De casu diaboli* 18, 'I think you realize that God cannot cause [one to be] unjust in any way at all, unless it is by not causing [one to be] just, when He could do so. Before having received justice, no one is just or unjust, and after having received justice no one becomes unjust except through abandoning justice on their own (*sponte*).... But if God is not the cause of sin, then the rational creature must be a primary agent. Choice must in some way originate in the creature.[29]

Rogers's reconstruction of Anselm's metaphysic of free will is complex, and many of the details are unnecessary for present purposes.[30] But it will be helpful to have in mind the two inclinations (or *affectiones*) that Anselm thinks are necessary if a will is to be free: the desire for benefit and the desire for justice.[31] These are not two, on Rogers's interpretation, exclusive objects of desire; rather they differ in terms of being different orders of desires, in a way reflective of Harry Frankfurt's more recent discussion of first- and second-order desires. The desire for benefit is the desire for things the possession of which one thinks will lead to her happiness; the desire for benefit is thus a first-order desire. The desire for justice, in contrast, is "a desire for 'rightness of will preserved for its own sake'. It is therefore a second order desire that one's first order desires should be properly ordered—should be as they ought to be."[32] Both kinds of desires, however, provide the agent with motivational reasons for acting. Sin in

[27] Rogers, 2008, 47.

[28] Rogers, 2008, 51.

[29] Rogers, 2008, 92f. Rogers later says that "the first sins of Adam and Eve were in essence the same as the sin of the devil" (129).

[30] The reader is reminded that my goal here is not Anselmian scholarship, but rather a comparison of two approaches to human freedom and the primal sin. For a different interpretation of Anselm than Rogers's, see James Gibson's wonderful essay in this volume.

[31] 'Justice' here is taken to refer primarily to the cardinal virtue, understood as 'rectitude of will preserved for its own sake.'

[32] Rogers, 2008, 67.

general occurs when an individual pursues her desire for benefit in a way that is not properly ordered, that is, in a way that contradicts the normative reason of justice:

> In order to allow created freedom, God bestows upon the created agent the two *affections*. Thus, morally significant choice consists in a struggle within the agent, due to the conflict between the desire for the inappropriate benefit and the desire for justice which would lead him to endorse only the appropriate desires. Preceding the final decision they are, as it were, two streams of desire competing for ascendency. Or, to put it another way, the agent is trying to pursue two desires, where ultimate success regarding one entails the abandonment of the other. Sin occurs when the agent 'succeeds' in following the desire for the inappropriate benefit.[33]

Anselm, like the majority of the medievals, does not think that anyone wills injustice (or any other evil) for its own sake; rather, they will it under the description of something beneficial: "Anselm explains that the injustice of the bad angel consists not in willing injustice per se, but in willing benefits which he should not have willed... There is absolutely nothing intrinsically bad or tainted about the forbidden benefit. It is not some selfish advantage intrinsically opposed to justice."[34]

This, of course, raises the question—why would the devil choose to forgo a higher good, here justice, and pursue a lower good, here benefit?[35] Insofar as we are focused at present on the primal sin, the answer cannot be original sin, a previous sin, or a corrupted moral character. Neither is it simply a result of ignorance, such as being unaware that one's motivational reasons fail to track the normative reasons, for on Anselm's view "the devil must know that he ought not to will the inappropriate benefit at that time."[36] Thus he thinks the primal sin is not grounded in ignorance, but in an active and informed choice. But is such a choice explicable? According to Rogers, in one sense it is not:

[33] Rogers, 2008, 118.

[34] Rogers, 2008, 67f.

[35] Augustine puts it this way: "That angel [Lucifer], delighting in himself rather than in God, was unwilling to be subject to Him and swollen with pride he abandoned the Highest Essence, and he fell" (as quoted in King, 2012, 266). Similarly, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "In that sin man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good" (398). This raises the parallel question: why would a non-fallen human choose the self over God?

[36] Rogers, 2008, 96.

'But why did he will what he ought not?' asks the student. 'No cause preceded this will, unless it was that he was able to will.' But this ability per se is not really the cause, since the good angels were equally able to desert justice. 'Why then did he will?' The teacher responds, 'Only because he willed. For this choice had no other cause by which it was by any means impelled or drawn, but it was its own efficient cause, and effect, if such a thing can be said.' Here we have libertarianism of the self-causation variety stated with brutal clarity and with no attempt to downplay its core problem.... Anselm does not go on and try to mitigate the problem of intelligibility.[37]

Rogers is well aware that this answer will raise questions of the coherence of Anselm's view:

Like the student at the end of the *De casu diaboli* we still want to know what explains the beliefs and character of the agent that explains the preference for one option over another. If there is absolutely nothing about the beliefs and character of the agent that causes the preference, then... isn't the choice more like an accident that happened to the agent rather than an action for which he can be held responsible?.... But if nothing about the agent determines that he will make one choice rather than the other, isn't the choice just a piece of luck? How can responsibility be grounded in luck? And remember that in Anselm's universe, Satan's 'bad luck', if that is what it is, results in eternal damnation.[38]

Another way to put the same question is to ask for what is often called a contrastive explanation: what is that explains why the devil chose to sin rather than to not sin?[39] Furthermore, it seems to many that if a contrastive explanation cannot be given, then the account of free action fails. Rogers is willing to grant that there is no contrastive explanation; as a result, she agrees that there is ultimately something "inexplicable and ultimately mysterious" about the primal sin.[40] She elaborates as follows:

[37] Rogers, 2008, 97.

[38] Rogers, 2008, 98f.

[39] See, for instance, Clarke 1996, especially 192ff. Note that Rogers thinks the call for a contrastive explanation is different from the luck objection to libertarianism; see Rogers, 2008, 99, footnote 32. Furthermore, on this point the problem facing an incompatibilist account of primal sin is stronger than the objection that incompatibilist accounts of free will cannot account of contrastive reasons in general. A number of incompatibilists have sought to address this latter problem; see, for instance, Kane, 1996, Hitchcock, 1999, and Ginet, 1989. But even if the libertarian can give an account of acting for reasons in general, there still remains the problem of specifying what reason a non-fallen agent would have for choosing to sin.

[40] Rogers, 2008, 87. However, on Rogers's view, this can also be true of other libertarian free choices, and not just the primal sin. See also Rogers, 1997, 10.

We can point to the reasons for choosing either option. But there is no antecedent cause or explanation for the preference of the one over the other. It does not really help to add that he made the reasons for one choice outweigh the reasons for the other by choosing, since the outweighing comes after the choosing. We still want to know why the devil chose sin over justice. And Anselm's answer is, only because he chose. There is no more to be said, and this is an uncomfortable stopping point for it seems to grant that the intelligibility problem is not entirely soluble.[41]

But Rogers denies that the inability to give a contrastive explanation undermines the cogency of the account under consideration.

I take it that Anselm sees and is willing to accept that there is a certain mystery at the core of free choice. But perhaps this need not count as a criticism of his theory. Anselm is extremely optimistic about the scope and range of the human intellect, but his subject-matter, God and the relationship of the created to the Creator, leads him to assume that he will run up against issues that he cannot divide and conquer.... In the *Cur deus homo*, where he argues that if reason has concluded that something is the case, the investigator ought to take it as at least provisionally proven, even if he cannot grasp how it is the case. Created freedom seems to be one of those instances. There is sin. God does not cause it. Therefore it originates in the created will, although this seems a mystery.[42]

In this passage, Rogers appears to be attributing the mystery involved in why the devil would choose to sin to an epistemic failing on our part; that is, she seems to be suggesting that given our finitude, we are simply unable to discern what the contrastive explanation is. But shortly thereafter, she argues for a stronger conclusion, and that is that there really is no contrastive explanation that can be given: "such a thing is impossible."[43] What it means for a creature to be created in the *imago dei* is for it to be both free and responsible, to have a certain degree of aseity and to be, with respect to its moral character but not its existence, a self-creator. "God has constructed the system so that the rational creature can, in however limited a way, mirror this divine aseity by contributing to its own being. It is a dim reflection of its Creator, but it is a true one in that, through free choice, it participates in its own creation."[44] Suppose that Rogers is right about the implications of being created *imago dei*. And suppose that she is also right that the inability to give a successful contrastive explanation is not fatal, in general, to the libertarian's view of free will. One can agree with her up to

[41] Rogers, 2008, 104.

[42] Rogers, 2008, 105.

[43] Rogers, 2008, 107.

[44] Rogers, 2008, 106.

this point and still think that the account of the primal sin she develops is wanting—because it seems that, at the end of the day, Rogers's Anselmian inspired answer to the question of why the devil fell in choosing the desire for perceived benefit over the desire for justice is a brute just because. So even if her account can survive some of the challenges it faces, we are still left with an unsatisfactory account of primal sin insofar as it is, at root, not just unexplained but inexplicable. According to Robert Brown, it couldn't be otherwise; an account of the primal sin "must be incomprehensible" and "inexplicable."[45] Any attempt to give such an account is "a conceptual blunder."[46]

4. Intellectualism: Scott MacDonald on Augustine

In a pair of recent papers, Scott MacDonald develops an account of the primal sin inspired by Augustine. Though Augustine is usually described as a voluntarist rather than an intellectualist[47], I think that MacDonald's reconstruction of Augustine's account of the primal sin is clearly intellectualism, for reasons that will become clear in what follows. In the first of these papers, "Primal Sin," MacDonald takes as his starting point a criticism by William Babcock that the primal sin was "a random outcome, an event of pure happenstance rather than the agent's own act."[48] More specifically, MacDonald describes his project as follows:

> I think that Babcock's assessment of Augustine's account is mistaken. In particular, I reject the inference from Augustine's claims that primal sin can have no cause (or only a deficient cause) to the view that primal sin must be a mere 'random outcome, an event of pure happenstance,' and so not a manifestation of genuine moral agency. My view is that Augustine's rather abrupt refusal to undertake a search for the causes of evil free choices is misleading, in effect masking his own patient and subtle pathology of sin in general and primal sin in particular. A careful look at Augustine's moral psychology of sin will, I think, provide the materials

[45] Brown, 1978, 315 and 27 footnote 1. Brown takes his cue from Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the fall of Adam: "The first man, in his turn, is summed up in one act: he took the fruit and ate it. About that event there is nothing to say; one can only tell it; it happens and henceforth evil has arrived" (Ricoeur, 1967, 244).

[46] Brown, 1978, 326.

[47] See, for instance, Mendelson, 2012.

[48] Babcock, 1988, 47, as quoted in MacDonald, 1998, 112.

> for constructing a defensible account of the radical voluntary initiatives that, on his view, introduce evil into God's good creation.[49]

MacDonald's reconstruction is guided by the conviction that there are two 'faces' to morally evil choices. First, since the primal sin—like all choices to sin—is a morally evil act of will, the faculty of the will must play a central role. But, and this is the second central element of MacDonald's account, this act of will is not inexplicable as both Rogers and Babcock think: "the psychological continuity between primal sinner and primal sin is provided by the other part of the explanation of the sin: insofar as sin is an act of will it is motivated in a perfectly ordinary way by the agent's beliefs and desires."[50] And for Augustine the choice to sin, like all acts of will, aims at what is perceived to be good by the agent in some way: "If we are to make sense of a person's voluntary actions, we must understand what in or about those actions moves her to view them favorably, what it is in them that she loves or takes to be worth seeking."[51] As we'll see more fully below, the intellect plays a crucial role in Augustine's view of sin; but this quotation also gives evidence for Augustine's acceptance of the reasons constraint on free choice.

Augustine's account of primal sin, MacDonald argues, must be taken in the context of the larger context of theodicy of which it is a part. Here, as is well known, Augustine holds that all evil is a privation or corruption of a good created by God, rather than having ontic status of its own.

[49] MacDonald, 1998, 113. MacDonald makes it clear that his primary aim is not Augustine exegesis, but rather an Augustinian reconstruction of primal sin: "Although I find the materials for this part of my project in Augustine's writing, particularly in *De libero arbitrio* and *City of God*, I extend Augustinian ideas beyond what I can claim to have found explicitly in the texts. For this reason I am not able (and am not particularly concerned) to distinguish clearly this constructive enterprise from the more strictly reconstructive first part of this paper" (MacDonald, 1998, 113). For concerns about MacDonald's interpretation of the relevant Augustinian texts, see Rogers, 2008, 49f and Mann, 2006. For an account of Augustine as a voluntarist, see King, 2012. King's understanding of Augustine's view is very similar to Roger's interpretation of Anselm. This should not be surprising, however, since King writes that "Anselm is clearly at pains to make his account fully compatible with Augustine, cleaning up and extending Augustine's views" (King, 2012, 281). King's reading of Augustine's account bears significant similarities to Rogers's, discussed above. If King is correct that Augustine ought be interpreted as a voluntarist, then the distinction between voluntarist and intellectualist accounts of primal sin cannot be illustrated by Anselm and Augustine, respectively. However, insofar as I am not primarily concerned with the interpretive issues, I can set aside this potential worry.

[50] MacDonald, 1998, 113.

[51] MacDonald, 2003, 398.

"Primal sin conforms to this general account: the first evils are defective free choices that constitute a corruption in rational nature. Primal sin occurs when, by an act of free will, rational creatures irrationally turn away or defect from the highest good."[52] MacDonald elaborates this point elsewhere as follows: "We sin, Augustine believes, not because we are motivated by bad things but because we pursue perfectly natural and appropriate delights inordinately, preferring them and the things in which they reside, to higher goods."[53] But in order for the devil to be blameworthy for this turning away, rather than God, it must also be shown that such a choice is voluntary.[54] The difficulty, of course, is describing how an otherwise uncorrupted agent could voluntarily choose to sin without that choice being inexplicable.

On Augustine's view, in order for the primal sin (or any sin) to be something for which the agent is responsible, it must be a result of the agent's free choice. And like Anselm will do later, he denies that there is a positively existing previous cause of the devil's choice to sin. But this is not to say that the devil had no reason or motives for his choice:

> Augustine holds that sin is essentially a disordered act of will, the turning away from the highest good toward a lesser good. As he sees it, then, the sinner's act of will—the choosing of the lesser good—is motivated by the fact that the sinner perceives the goodness of the object he comes to choose.... So on his view, there is a straightforward sense in which something moves a primal sinner's will: the object toward which the disordered act of will is directed; and a straightforward sense in which that act of will is intelligible: it is directed toward an object that is worth choosing. Augustine's denial that there is any cause of sin other than the will itself is clearly not meant to suggest that sins are bare, utterly unmotivated acts of will. On his own account events of that sort would be nothing more than unintelligible eruptions in the lives of sinners and not voluntary acts at all.[55]

So far, MacDonald's account may seem to be little different from Rogers's for, though it provides a motive or some perceived good for the choice to sin, and thus the choice is not completely inexplicable, it does not yet

[52] MacDonald, 1998, 115.

[53] MacDonald, 2003, 400.

[54] If Augustine can succeed in this, MacDonald thinks that Augustine will have succeeded in showing that God bears no responsibility in the fall since according to Augustine "the sole source of evil is in the free choice of the will" (MacDonald, 1998, 136 footnote 14).

[55] MacDonald, 1998, 118f.

provide a contrastive reason or explanation for why the motive to sin prevailed over the competing motive to choose to align oneself with God.

MacDonald continues: "Primal sinners' defection from God, then, cannot be explained simply by the fact that they perceive some created thing as good and so reasonably desire it. Moreover, it is no help simply to add that they desire some created thing more than they desire God, for that irrational preference is just what needs explaining."[56] And it is at this point we begin to see why MacDonald's account is best viewed as a form of intellectualism, rather than voluntarism. The reason why is that the faculty of the will which chooses to sin does so, on MacDonald's reconstruction, only as a result of the agent failing to 'see' properly:

> [Augustine] suggests that the will falls when it fails to guard against sin. It follows from primal sin's being a *sin* that it could have guarded against. Its actual occurrence shows that primal sinners failed to guard against it. What could primal sinners have done to guard against sinning? I think the answer must be that they failed to pay attention to the reason they had for loving God above all things, namely, their knowledge that God is the highest good.... Had they attended to the reasons they possessed, they would have seen that rationality required them to love God above all things.... Primal sinners, then, must have made their evil choices in some sense without thinking, without deliberating sufficiently, without taking account of relevant information that was nevertheless in their possession.[57]

Noting the language here—'pay attention to reasons', 'knowledge', 'what rationality requires', 'thinking', 'deliberating'—all of these suggests the faculty of the intellect is playing the primary role. And MacDonald seems to admit as much: "the irrationality in primal sin must consist in a kind of carelessness in practical reasoning."[58] MacDonald also claims that these failures of practical reasoning are not themselves the result of a disordered choice by the will, for if they were, the case under consideration could not be the *primal* sin. Furthermore, he explicitly distances himself from a voluntarist reading of Augustine at this point. "On this account, primal sinners are not guilty of naked irrationality, of looking the greater good

[56] MacDonald, 1998, 119.

[57] MacDonald, 1998, 120f.

[58] MacDonald, 1998, 121. See also the following pages where the language has further intellectualist overtones: 'attention', 'neglect of overriding reasons', 'failure to hold love to the bounds dictated by reason', 'being less than fully informed by my reasons', etc. On page 127, MacDonald also attributes intellectual, but not volitional, finitude as a necessary condition of primal sinners. And even later in the article, he writes that "the ability to choose otherwise is grounded in the ability to reason otherwise" (132).

squarely in the face and at the same time voluntarily and with full knowledge preferring a lesser good. In their case that sort of naked irrationality would be inexplicable because it is impossible."[59] So the failure arises not in the will's volition to act contrary to what the agent knows to be the relevant normative reasons, but instead from the agent's intellect failing to properly grasp or weigh the normative reasons in the first place.

MacDonald is aware that the intellectualist story he's told so far will likely not be fully persuasive to everyone. As he rightly recognizes, "Augustine sees that arguing that the trail of moral culpability stops at created rational beings requires him to maintain that the first sinners are not created defective in any morally relevant way—that is, that the moral defects constituted by their primal sin are not preceded by any other morally relevant flaw in creation."[60] But why would a non-fallen and, thus far, morally perfect being fail with respect to her practical reasoning in the way that MacDonald suggests is required for the primal sin? MacDonald considers an objection of just this sort and replies as follows:

> It might be objected that we have not yet made any progress on the main task of resolving the paradox of primal sin, namely, showing that irrational free choices that appear necessarily unmotivated are nevertheless intelligible as the choices of morally responsible rational creatures.... One might object that he has only pushed the problem one step back, from unmotivated choices to unmotivated failures in practical reasoning. If an essential element in primal sin remains at bottom unmotivated, then primal sin itself must be ultimately inexplicable and therefore unintelligible as an instance of moral agency.
>
> The objections rests on the assumption that, if primal sin is to be an instance of genuine moral agency, it must be explicable right down to the bottom, as it were, in terms of the primal sinner's reasons and motives. The objection's point is that Augustine's account leaves something in primal sin inexplicable in those terms and for that reason leaves primal sin itself unintelligible.[61]

MacDonald's response is to deny the assumption the objection rests on. He admits that the agent's act of will has an explanation in terms of the agent's reasons. But what he denies is that the failure to attend properly to her reasons is something that the agent does. And since it isn't something that he does, it need not be explicable. "Strictly speaking, then, Augustine's account leaves no act of the primal sinner unmotivated or unintelligible."[62]

I'm willing to grant that omissions are not positive actions, and thus need not always be motivated and chosen by the agent for reasons. But not all omissions are equal in this regard. When a person neglects a relevant consideration that lies outside of his cognitive reach, then his ignorance counts as a moral excuse. For example, consider again gluttonous Gene, whom we encountered earlier. Gene's favorite ice cream is homemade pistachio, which he is inclined to eat in substantial quantities on a nightly basis. If Gene has never learned about proper nutrition—if, say, he's never encountered the Food Pyramid, doesn't know that his favorite treat has 343 calories per half-cup serving, has never been told of the link between sugar consumption and the risk of developing type-2 diabetes, etc.—that's one thing. But if, on the other hand, Gene is aware of all of these factors and simply fails to consider the relevant reasons for changing his dietary practices by not paying attention to the relevant normative reasons or by seeing how they compare with his motivation to eat the ice cream, we would say that Gene's *done* something: he's failed to consider what he knows. And this kind of failure of practical reasoning, even if not a positive action, is something for which Gene could justifiably be held responsible for if we flesh out the story in the right way. For example, Gene may have engaged in a practice of forming his moral character in such a way that normative reasons simply have no motivational purchase on him and, over time, are no longer noticed by Gene. But insofar as we're talking about primal sin, a parallel story cannot be told regarding the devil's failure of practical reasoning. Another option is that Gene's intellect is simply unable to consider these reasons; perhaps his intellect is systematically insensitive to dietary reasons, or the basics of nutrition are for some other reason beyond his intellectual grasp. In this case, Gene wouldn't be blameworthy for this failure of practical reasoning with respect to the normative reasons that should

[59] MacDonald, 1998, 121. Brian Leftow suggests that despite the previous paragraphs, MacDonald's account is voluntarist insofar as practical reasoning is under the control of the will. But if that's the case, then his account differs even less from the kind of voluntarist view discussed above, and it is hard to understand his rejection of the latter. Like myself, Stewart Goetz also reads MacDonald's account as intellectualist; see Goetz, 2009, 31ff}.

[60] MacDonald, 1998, 116.

[61] MacDonald, 1998, 130.

[62] MacDonald, 1998, 131. Since the failing to attend to reasons is not, on MacDonald's view, something that the agent does, Goetz denies that MacDonald's account provides a solution to the problem of primal sin: "If the first human sinners failed to attend to reasons they had for delighting in the highest good and only attended to the reason they had to eat the fruit of the tree, then they directly formed by default the intention to take the fruit. They did not first choose to take the fruit" (Goetz, 2009, 34).

guide his behavior. But this option is not available for MacDonald regarding primal sin, however. For as he notes,

> it is not open to Augustine to appeal to cognitive deficiencies of this sort... because ignorance of or cognitive error with respect to the relevant facts would undermine the primal sinner's responsibility for failing to love God in the appropriate way. Insofar as ignorance and cognitive error mitigate irrationality they also excuse it, provided that the agent is not culpable for the cognitive deficiencies themselves.[63]

Instead, MacDonald argues that "on certain occasions our exercising or failing to exercise that ability [for practical reasoning] is simply and entirely up to us and so something for which we bear ultimate moral responsibility."[64] This way of putting it is unfortunate, as it suggests that the failure to exercise practical reasoning is a result of a previous act of the will, contradicting what he's articulated above. So, what it appears that he means is that agents sometimes experience *de novo* failures of intellect that are themselves without reasons. But this then sounds like it is something that merely happens to the agent, rather than something that the agent controls. And it is hard to see how an agent could be morally responsible for such a failure—particularly a failure with the drastic consequences that Augustine thinks primal sin has on the devil and, through him, on the rest of creation! MacDonald claims that "in primal sin we have pure morally culpable wrongdoing laid open to view,"[65] and his main criticism of voluntarist accounts is that they leave the primal sin as something "utterly unintelligible, that no intelligible motivation can be found that would explain [it]."[66] But the intellectual failure that undergirds his entire account of primal sin is no more explicable than is the act of will on the voluntarist picture that Rogers sketches and that MacDonald rejects. As Rogers notes in her own discussion of MacDonald's account, "the initial failure [of practical reasoning] is not a voluntary act, or indeed any sort of act at all. But then, contrary to MacDonald, the failure itself cannot be blameworthy."[67] The failure of practical reasoning that leads to the primal sin, and thus indirectly to all other moral evil, is simply something that happens to the agent. This

[63] MacDonald, 1998, 119f. Similarly, King writes that "if Lucifer did not know that the action he was contemplating was morally wrong, and so ought not be done, then Lucifer would be ignorant rather than blameworthy" (King, 2012, 274).

[64] MacDonald, 1998, 131.

[65] MacDonald, 1998, 133.

[66] MacDonald, 2003, 410.

[67] Rogers, 2008, 49.

failure would seem to be more a design flaw than moral agency in action. Furthermore, one might wonder if understanding the primal sin as primarily a *de novo* failing of practical reasoning can do justice to the seriousness of sin.[68] Failing to consider the reasons for not engaging in a gluttonous activity is one thing, but failing to consider why one shouldn't fall from the state of grace is another. It is hard to see how the devil's fall—which would in turn lead to the fall of humanity, original sin, murder, rape, genocide, etc.—can satisfactorily be explained by merely failing to consider reasons that one has but isn't moved by. So the comparative claim that intellectualist accounts of the fall are superior to volunatarist accounts in virtue of their lesser degree of arbitrariness doesn't hold up.

5. Taking Stock

Over half a century ago, C. S. Lewis wrote that "the first sin... must be something which a being free from the temptations of fallen man could conceivably have committed."[69] In the previous two sections, I've explored at significant length what I think are the two best treatments of the primal sin that can be found in the contemporary philosophical literature. One of those treatments, Rogers's Anselmian understanding is decidedly voluntarist in nature. MacDonald's Augustinian treatment, on the other hand, comes out (perhaps surprisingly) as intellectualist in orientation. While there are certainly options for other voluntarist and intellectualist accounts which perhaps differ in some of the details from these accounts, I think that we can take these two accounts as sufficiently representative of their traditions to take comparative stock. Furthermore, insofar as these two traditions are the two guiding paradigms of the interaction of the faculties involved in free agency, whether or not a satisfactory account of the primal sin can be given would seem to depend on one or the success of one or the other of these approaches. Brian Leftow has suggested, for example, that we perhaps could give a better account if we had a more robust angelic psychology, such as including the passions:

> The problem with Satan's fall... is that it's a whopping big case of akrasia, but we're trying to make sense of it while denying ourselves the resources we have in the human case for doing so (e.g. passions). This leads directly to its becoming

[68] This point was raised by Stephen Boulter.

[69] Lewis, 1940, 76.

inexplicable.... So why not draw the moral that we've got the wrong picture of angels, and add some resources needed to make sense of the story? Why think that angels don't have passions, for instance?... Desire almost paralyzes the will to do otherwise (phenomenologically).... The stronger the passion, the more likely one goes with it, *ceteris paribus*. Given a very strong passion, it can become probable that one goes with it. When what is probable happens, then *ceteris paribus* what made it probable may explain it. Do reasons really give us anything more?[70]

There are two reasons, however, why this line is not persuasive. First, one can raise a parallel dilemma to this role of the passions that was raised against the role of the intellect on MacDonald's account above. There it was asked if the devil was incapable of attending, with his intellect, to the relevant motivational reasons for choosing against God or not. If he wasn't so able to, then it looks to be a design flaw on the part of the Creator rather than a moral failing on behalf of the creature. Similarly, here, if the devil was simply unable to resist a motivational affection reason for a lower good, then that would appear to absolve the devil of moral blame. On the other hand, if the devil was able to attend the relevant reasons he had and compare them to the normative reasons he's aware of, but simply didn't, the charge above was that this does not resolve the arbitrariness worry that the intellectualist raises against the voluntarist. In the case of the passions that Leftow is raising, if the devil could have resisted the disordered desire but simply didn't, this appears to be no less arbitrary, for it seems as if the only difference is if the motivational reasons at issue are intellectual or affective. The second response to Leftow's suggestion is related. He suggests that on the voluntarist account, "reasons [don't] really give us anything more." But this is not to say that the passions give us any more of an explanation than does the voluntarist account. And if the latter involves an unsatisfactory degree of arbitrariness, then so would Leftow's suggested amendment to angelic moral psychology.

So it looks as if whether or not a satisfactory account of the primal sin can be given would seem to depend on the success of either the intellectualist or voluntarist approach. The chief virtue of MacDonald's intellectualist account is that it seems to avoid the volitional arbitrariness that Rogers's account accepts (more on this below); but this is true only if we take that agent's intellect to not be under the control or guidance of the will at the time in question. Remember MacDonald's claim that "on certain

[70] Leftow relayed this objection in personal correspondence.

occasions our exercising or failing to exercise that ability [for practical reasoning] is simply and entirely up to us and so something for which we bear ultimate moral responsibility."[71] If the exercise (or lack thereof) of practical reason is itself the result of the will, then MacDonald's account fails to differ in this central regard from the kind of voluntarist explanation that he's seeking to avoid. But if, on the other hand, this failure of practical reason is *de novo*, it's not clear that we have any more satisfactory answer. For either the intellect could have attended to the reasons for not sinning but didn't, or it could not. The latter option, of course, is problematic for traditional Christian views of human nature, insofar as the Creator, rather than the creature, would then be responsible for this inability. The ultimate explanation for primal sin (and for subsequent sins, it would seem) thus would fall to God's creative act rather than the misuse of free will; as such the attempt to safeguard the goodness of God that lies at the heart of much Christian philosophical and theological reflection regarding evil fails. If, on the other hand, the created intellect could have attended to the reasons it did possess but simply did not, then there is—despite MacDonald's efforts—a brute inexplicability at the heart of his intellectualist account.

Unlike MacDonald, Rogers unapologetically accepts seeing the primal sin as something both "inexplicable and ultimately mysterious."[72] Like Brown, she thinks that any further explanation for why the devil would make this choice is to seek an explanation where none can be given. There are, of course, parallels between Rogers's account and other debates in agency theory. As mentioned above, many object to libertarian views of free will in general because of their inability to provide contrastive reasons for the agent's choices. And while a similar kind of inexplicability seems to be at work in cases of weakness of will in general insofar as the agent chooses what she (rightfully) knows is good, but a lesser good, the brute arbitrariness of this choice is significantly starker. This is true both because one cannot appeal to any previous moral corruption in explaining that choice and because the monumental consequences that follow from this choice in Christian theology. Furthermore, this inexplicability is not caused by the rejection of a teleological account of agency or the reasons constraint on free choice, which both Rogers and Anselm would accept (as would MacDonald and Augustine). It looks then as if a Christian account of primal sin cannot avoid all arbitrariness. And many, even those who

[71] MacDonald, 1998, 131.

[72] Rogers, 2008, 87.

are inclined to libertarian accounts of agency, will likely find something unsatisfactory about this arbitrariness. Whether or not this amounts to an insurmountable objection to the philosophical respectability of Christian accounts of free will and sin will depend, among other things, on the positive merits that those accounts can offer. But with respect to the explicability of the primal sin, intellectualist accounts do not offer the advantage over voluntarist accounts that they are sometimes claimed to do.[73]

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