Why we mess things up

Is there any chance that people will not sin?

by Charles Hefling in the June 25, 2014 issue

One of Bill Watterson's wry *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips opens with six-year-old Calvin asking "Do you think babies are born sinful? That they come into the world as sinners?" (See above.) The reply from Hobbes the tiger (which Calvin finds insulting) is, "No, I think they're just quick studies."

Precocious though he is, it's not likely that Calvin would have come up on his own with the question he puts to Hobbes. Somehow, it seems, he has got hold of one corner of the Christian doctrine known as original sin. It is a contentious doctrine, not least because of the grim verdict that some versions of it pronounce on newborn babies. Hobbes is not the first to take a dissenting view in that regard.

What Hobbes dissents from, however, is only one of the assertions about original sin included in the predominant theological tradition. Besides asserting that there is such a thing, that tradition proposes an explanation of *why* there is, where the blame for it lies, what its consequences are, who is affected and how, what can remedy things and what cannot. Some of these propositions have been more controversial than others, and at times the controversy has deteriorated into hairsplitting, but the issues at stake have everything to do with Christian life and practice.

One thing that makes the traditional conception of original sin difficult to accept is the way it has been bound up with the story of Adam and Eve. An elaborate doctrinal formulation and a seemingly ingenuous episode from Genesis have been presented as a kind of package deal. The conflation was unexceptional, if not inevitable, so long as it was possible to believe that the first few pages of the Bible constitute a straightforward factual record. That is still possible, although it requires some pretty desperate maneuvering.

Does evolutionary biology demolish the idea that humankind began without nonhuman antecedents? Well, then Adam and Eve must have been a pair of Mesopotamian farmers, garden tenders of a sort, selected by God to be our first parents. As for the “fall” from Paradise, even if the magic tree and the talking snake have to be demoted to folklore status, the drama of origins that actually took place must at some point have erupted in a primal catastrophe—maybe an “original scapegoating,” as some followers of René Girard postulate, even if that means expanding the cast of characters to give Cain and Abel major roles.

This kind of rescue operation appears to assume that what there is to say about original sin has been and can be said only because of what Genesis supposedly reveals. The truth of the doctrine stands or falls with the veracity of the biblical narrative, at least in its broad outlines. But that cuts both ways. On the same assumption, it could be argued that once the narrative is acknowledged to be an ancient Near Eastern cosmogonic myth, the whole intellectual contraption called original sin can likewise be set aside as a venerable antiquity.

That would perhaps be a mistake. At least it is worth asking whether the package deal can be untied—whether some or all of what has been meant by original sin can be affirmed, and should be, without trying to derive it from or graft it onto a just-so

story.

Best to begin where there can be some agreement: not with sins, as they are commonly thought of, let alone “original” sin, but with an observable fact, fairly obvious and fairly indisputable, that sooner or later leads to theological questions. For this fact, Francis Spufford’s justly praised book *Unapologetic* has a memorable name: “the human propensity to fuck things up.” The operative word is aptly chosen: a mildly shocking expletive, yet at the same time somehow banal. Spufford is not thinking mainly of flagrant, criminal wrongdoing nor, on the other hand, of petty peccadilloes, though none of these is excluded either. By a HPtFtU (his polite abbreviation) he means “not just our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident” but “our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people’s.”

Examples of the HPtFtU are legion. Assuming that there is no need to rehearse them, there are two interrelated questions to ask about the proclivity they exemplify.

Question One: Who is responsible for it?

Question Two: What can be done about it?

Question One cannot be ignored for long by anyone who believes in a God who is “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen,” and whose creations are ipso facto good. Here is not the place to tackle the general problem of theodicy—how far God is responsible for physical disasters like tsunamis. For the moral disaster that is the HPtFtU, in any case, God is not responsible; on that, Christian tradition is as unanimous as it ever is. The inclination to break stuff is ours and ours alone. Accordingly, it would seem that it is up to us, individually and collectively, to reverse this all-too-human trend by amending our ways.

But the traditional answer to Question Two has been that what human effort as such can do by way of permanent, thoroughgoing remedy is—nothing. Only God can do what needs to be done. We may help a little, perhaps; but if we do we are only cooperating with a divine operation. To put it in theological terms, our HPtFtU is one reason why we need grace.

It was Augustine, taking his cue from Paul, who almost single-handedly packaged these two answers together with Genesis, elaborated them, bestowed the result on

Western Christianity, and in the process invented the term *original sin*.

Yet even if Genesis is interpreted as literally as Augustine ended up interpreting it, the foundation is not as solid as it might seem. “In the beginning” everything is good, as God intended; that much is clear enough. Something goes wrong only when two of God’s creatures choose to do what they ought to have left undone. Why, being good themselves, do they choose evil? Adam blames the lapse on Eve, Eve on the serpent, and the buck stops there, as far as the story goes. Presumably, then, the serpent was evil. But why so, since presumably it too was created by God?

Milton pushed the blame back a step, building a magnificent epic on biblical hints about a prior, cosmic fall on the part of Lucifer. But *Paradise Lost* is no help. A personified, supernatural tempter may be a more plausible originator than a mendacious reptile, but the personification only displaces the problem. Archangels are God’s creatures as much as snakes and humans are. Why did Lucifer fall? To say he rebelled out of pride is no answer. Who made him rebellious?

Assigning blame for the “original” sin to some created being answers Question One only inasmuch as it exonerates the Creator. Why a creature, whoever it was, would do whatever the first sinner did remains unexplained.

Turn now to Question Two. According to Genesis, choosing to eat the forbidden fruit was not a one-off event: it altered for the worse both the constitution and the destiny of the eaters and also of their descendants ever after. Exactly how the altered condition passed from Adam and Eve to us is not stated, but Augustine thought he knew, and his hypothesis was to become the authoritative teaching. In the words of the Westminster Confession, it is to the effect that the transmission occurs “by ordinary generation,” as part and parcel of biological reproduction. That is why, in the Augustinian view of things, babies are sinners from birth. It is also why there is nothing that anyone generated in the ordinary way can do about his or her condition: the effects of the first couple’s fall are as congenital as a four-chambered heart.

Those effects, as the traditional doctrine expounds them, had best be spelled out. They are two. In the first place, everyone begotten and conceived in the usual human way is characterized by a defect, a disorientation, a moral impotence—a *vitium*, in technical parlance. This is what manifests itself in and as the HPtFtU. In the second place, however, since it is a moral birth defect rather than a

physiological trait, this *vitium* entails a *reatus*, a forensic status of liability to punishment; in a word, guilt. And since God is the offended party, the appropriate punishment of the guilty is damnation.

On the one hand, then, because of what happened in Eden we can no more keep to the straight and narrow than we can fly by flapping our arms; on the other, we may expect to suffer the just and everlasting consequences of our failure. Such is the woeful story of the human race that has been read into and/or out of Genesis. It addresses Question Two insofar as it explains why humans stand in need of God's grace, which is the real point of the question; but the way the story addresses it bristles with difficulties.

For one thing, it is commonly said that what is now "fallen," because of the "original" sin in Eden, is human nature. But if what is meant by human nature is everything that comes to us from our parents in our genes, the Augustinian theory amounts to a claim that a characteristic acquired by two individuals during their lifetime also has been inherited by their biological progeny. The idea that organic, physical traits, once acquired, can then be transmitted genetically has long since been weighed and found wanting. The parallel idea of acquired moral or spiritual traits that are replicated by biological means is all the more dubious.

For another thing, what is inherited is said to be not simply an impaired capacity, such that not to sin is now impossible, but guilt as well, such that we deserve retribution not only for evils we choose to perpetrate but for disobedience on the part of two vastly remote ancestors. There is a difference between their sin and ours, in that theirs was the originating sin and ours is originated, but the consequence is the same: one and all, we are to blame not only for any wrong we may actually do—that is fair enough—but also for being incapable of doing otherwise. Which comes pretty close to saying that human beings are damned for being human.

This staggering conclusion made even Augustine uncomfortable, but for evidence that it must be right he could—and did—appeal to Christian sacramental practice. Why, he asked, should infants, even before they have done anything wrong, be brought to baptism, which the Nicene Creed declares to be for "the forgiveness of sins," unless there is something they need to be forgiven for? Babies must already be sinful, appearances notwithstanding, and they must have contracted the infection from someone. Who else, ultimately, but Adam and Eve?

How this can be true—how moral responsibility and guilt can possibly be engendered by bodily mating—is a problem that later theologians tied themselves in knots trying to solve, with highly unconvincing results. *That* it is true, however, has continued to be taught, long after post-Darwinian accounts of human origins undercut the credibility of the tale of which it is (supposedly) a corollary. It even shows up in comic strips.

To return to the initial query: How might the two questions formulated at the outset be answered without resorting to a method of exegesis and a line of reasoning that no longer commend themselves? Spufford's careful language offers a clue (not that he would necessarily endorse everything that follows in my argument). He speaks of a propensity, a tendency, an inclination. These are all statistical notions, names for the probability that something will happen. Does it always happen that humans sin? Obviously not. Do they often sin? Yes, sadly. Is there any chance, any likelihood, any probability at all that they will not sin? That is where the real issue lies. It calls for a distinction.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that at the moment when I have to choose between two courses of action, right and wrong, the probability of choosing good and avoiding evil is zero. That would be as much as to say that I do not choose at all, that I sin necessarily, that it is flat-out impossible for my action to be other than it is. Calvin—the reformer, not the tiger's pal—did say just that. He denied human freedom, and without freedom in the relevant sense choosing is not choosing. Any such denial in turn obliterates the meaning of personal responsibility, and the logical consequence, which Calvin also drew, is (double) predestination.

Suppose, on the other hand, that there is *some* possibility of my choosing what I ought to choose, as I find myself doing at least now and then. That is not at all to say that over any appreciable length of time I will consistently decide for and carry out every course of action that I know is best. On the contrary, sooner or later it becomes overwhelmingly likely that I will . . . screw things up. That is what the HPtFtU means. It is also what Paul is talking about, somewhat perfervidly, in Romans 7. In the abstract, I can avoid each moral pitfall that presents itself. Indeed I may want to. But can I avoid them all? The probability is never zero, for reasons stated, but it may be, and concretely speaking it commonly is, vanishingly small. That, as Paul says, is a law—a statistical law.

Why is it a law? Because none of our choices is ever made from a neutral position, as though we had never made a similar choice before. Nearly all our decisions between acting and not acting in such-and-such a way are made from habit, which is simply another way of talking about the statistical likelihood that we will so act. To put it in more contemporary idiom, we operate most of the time according to “moral heuristics,” unformulated rules of thumb that have become second nature. Either way, the likelihood is that on any given occasion I will make much the same sort of decision that I have usually made up to now. Can I overrule my tendencies and proclivities? Certainly—provided I stop and think, so as to persuade myself that a different choice is preferable.

But persuasion takes time, and more important, persuadability itself is a habitual disposition. Can I persuade myself, or let myself be persuaded, to be more open to persuasion? That way infinite regress lies. Meanwhile, life goes on, and “not to decide is to decide”—that is, to decide unreflectively, on automatic pilot, as it were. I have to act somehow, and to take the path of least resistance by letting habit have its way is to lower yet a little more the probability of my acting differently in future.

Habits in the most serious sense always limit freedom—and a good thing too, since without them we would never get anything done. Still, for better or worse they do restrict the range of choices that we are ready and willing to make. Now, the HPtFtU can be thought of as an aggregate of (skewed) habits, of (im)moral heuristics, which orient our spontaneous impulses in directions that we may later regret. With that, Question One comes up again. For if what I do I mostly do by second nature, am I to be held responsible for being so constituted?

Perhaps not; not directly and individually anyway. Long before any individual knows enough about *ought* and *ought not* to make (or regret) a genuine decision, parents and friends and the Internet have played their part in forming his or her moral heuristics. Yet it remains that we—the human species collectively—must own responsibility for constructing cultures, societies, communities, and institutions that encourage the acquisition of some habits and discourage others. On the positive side, that is what the church is for, considered as a community that values forgiveness and healing and promotes the habits which its theology calls faith, hope, and love.

It will probably be evident that everything so far leans toward the stated opinion of Hobbes—the tiger, not the philosopher. This position will not sit well with those who

cleave to an Augustinian brand of orthodoxy. Humans may be quick studies, they might object, but it is one thing to be in the habit of sinning, and quite another to be a sinner.

Is it, though? The nature-versus-nurture dichotomy, which this objection seems to invoke, is too clumsy to be helpful in understanding any complex human reality. We ought to know that by now. Better to say that to acquire and appropriate a second nature is itself an intrinsic component of the nature humans are born with, and that the acquiring and appropriation begin at birth, and probably well before.

The theologically relevant point to emphasize, however, is that although the results of psychosocial heredity can, within limits, be changed, the limits are very narrow. Christians will want to add that really fundamental change depends on the help of a God who can pluck out a heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) or, less metaphorically, a God who can shift the probabilities in such a way that the HPtFtU becomes a tendency to heal stuff instead of wrecking it. That is not all that grace does, but it is where it starts.

That leaves one last thing to say in connection with Question One, the question of origins. Granted that in the world which actually exists everybody needs divine assistance because nobody can help absorbing HPtFtU, what explains the fact that it is there to be absorbed—that there is not, say, a human propensity to get things right? If humankind's collective making of humankind is somehow corrupt, what corrupted it? Must there not have been an original corrupter after all? Since a malevolent God is ruled out ex hypothesi, it seems we are no better off than we were with the snake in the garden. The existence of evil in the most serious sense of the word has still not been explained. What did cause it, or does cause it, in the first place?

Here, to give him credit, Augustine was on the right track. To the question of why sin occurs at all, in the first place, the answer is that it is the wrong question. It is rather like asking me whether I have stopped biting my fingernails: there is an unstated and in this case an unsound assumption. In a way, that assumption is built into the very name "*original* sin," which arguably ought to be dropped. For it suggests that there is an origin, an initial cause, an intelligible relation between sin and some antecedent. Is there?

Faulty choices have consequences, of course, which are commonly unintended but which can be understood as consequences. But at the beginning of the sequence, if we are talking about sin itself and not just bad events that follow, there is a gap, a surd, a glitch, a blank, the absence of what ought to be there but isn't. In other words, sin in the relevant sense is not an event but the failure of an event, namely, the event of choosing rightly. Such a failure is like *nothing*. It is not *something* but the lack of something, the lack of any rhyme or reason, any intelligibility, including the intelligibility we call causation. It can be conceived, but only negatively, since there is nothing for a positive understanding to get hold of.

By no means is this to say that the evil which might best be called *basic* sin is not a fact. It is—a hideous, mind-numbing fact. But it is a false fact. That phrase makes no sense—and that is the point. There is no sense to be made of the failure that suffuses the HPtFtU. Much, indeed most, of the difficulty inherent in traditional teaching about "original" sin arises from a mistaken attempt to make sense of it. If it made sense, if it were intelligible, it would to the same extent be good. Which it in no way whatsoever is.

Does an utterly negative conception of what gives rise to destructive actions and institutions solve the theological problem of God's responsibility? Not quite. Even if everything that God makes is good, the universe is so made that human wickedness, which assuredly does occur, can occur. Short of resorting to the fairy-tale picture of a feeble, ineffective Creator, it must be true that a universe in which the evil of sin would never occur was a viable option, but also true that God has not opted to create it. What are we to say about that?

There is only one thing that can be said, or ever could, and Augustine said it as well as anyone: "Almighty God, himself supremely good, would never allow anything evil to invade his works, unless he were so almighty and so good that he can bring good even out of evil" (*Enchiridion* 11). That being so, the real question is not why God did not make his human creatures infallible as well as free; it is what God has done and is doing to bring good out of the fact that we fail. And that is the point at which specifically Christian theology, the theology of divine grace, begins.

This article has been edited to restore the opening paragraph that appeared in print.