The Inevitability of Sin

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Abstract: Part of the traditional Christian doctrine of sin is the claim that, due to the effects of original sin, acts of sin are inevitable. Of course, our reflection on sinful actions is shaped by how we think about human freedom and divine providence more broadly. Some have argued that libertarians have a difficult time accounting for the inevitability of sin. This paper uses David Lewis's work on counterfactuals and possible worlds to give an account of how the inevitability of sin can be understood. It then shows how both theological determinism and Molinism can give an account of sin's inevitability so understood. In doing so, I show that sin's inevitability only follows if we restrict our focus to certain possible worlds that share certain features with the actual world. But once such a restriction is made explicit, I then develop a framework for how the libertarian non-Molinist can also use a similar restriction to give an account of the inevitability of sin given original sin.

Keywords: Sin, Inevitability, Original sin, Libertarianism, Theological determinism, Molinism

Introduction

The Christian doctrine of original sin is understood as a kind of state or "condition" that humanity is.[1] In his work, Jesse Couenhoven describes original sin as original in the sense that "it is an evil at the origins of human agency, and from which human agency flows."[2] Drawing on Augustine, the Christian theologian whose thought is most closely associated with the doctrine of original sin, Couenhoven argues that the doctrine of original sin has five parts and distinguishes between them as follows:

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[1] See Mann 2001, 47.
[2] Couenhoven 2016, 193. See also the discussion in Mellema 2021.

(a) the primal sin;
(b) the participation of the rest of the human race (except Jesus and, in some traditions, Mary) in that sin because of their solidarity with those who committed the first human sin;
(c) involuntary and inherited common guilt that all humans (again except Jesus and, in some traditions, Mary) are subject to because of that solidarity;
(d) penalty to human nature because of the primal sin; and
(e) the transmission of inherited sin and its penalty.[3]

While some associate original sin with the first of these, the primal sin understood as the temporally first sin, one can think of the primal sin as the cause of or occasion of original sin; in what follows, I set aside any further discussion of the primal sin.[4] Part (b) of the doctrine of original sin is a claim about the scope of those who are affected by original sin; I address it in section 1 given that it puts constraints on how we should think about the remaining parts of the doctrine of original sin. I then turn, in the rest of the paper, to claim (d), what Oliver Crisp calls "an inherited corruption of nature"[5] and in particular the claim that part of the penalty to human nature due to the effects of original sin, acts of sin are inevitable.[6] While the focus in what follows is entirely on acts of sin, I'm inclined toward agreeing with Ian McFarland's claim that acts of sin "do not get at the heart of the phenomenon of sin"[7] and certainly don't exhaust the kinds of sin we need to think carefully about. But every article must have its focus, and mine here is on acts of sin. I call the claim that, given (d) humans are now unable, on some understanding of 'unable', to avoid sinning 'the inevitability thesis'. In section 2 I draw on David

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[3] Couenhoven 2013, 46; for slightly different categorizations, see Blocher 1997 and Crisp 2019, chapter 7. For an excellent recent paper on potential mechanism for the transmission of original sin, see Green 2022. Green argues that perhaps the transition of sin can be understood as involving maturational naturalness: "It isn't carried by our genes in any deep sense. It is not communicated mysteriously, one immaterial soup to another in the womb. It certainly isn't placed in the soul by divine fiat. Rather, if one takes human nature together with what human environments have in common, the result is a human disposition to be alienated from God, self, others, and nature" (35). Such a disposition is triggered by a salience framework that is modeled for us by other human agents.

[4] For a range of treatments, see the materials discussed in Timpe 2014, chapter 3, and Timpe 2021.

[5] Crisp 2015, 264.

[6] In what follows, I assume that free will is required for acts of sin. That is, I take an agent's moral responsibility for their acts of sin to presuppose that they have free will. See Timpe 2014, chapter 1.

[7] McFarland 2016, 303.

Lewis's work on counterfactuals to give one specification of how to understand the inevitability thesis.

It is sometimes claimed that certain views of human freedom, namely libertarian non-Molinist views, cannot account for the inevitability thesis, and thus that such views of freedom should be rejected by those who want to affirm traditional Christian doctrines (among which I think the inevitability thesis is numbered). But it's not clear that such an objection to libertarian non-Molinism holds. Section 3 shows how views of divine providence that endorse theological determinism and theological compatibilism, can account for the inevitability thesis using Lewis's account of inevitability. Section 4 attempts to provide a Molinist defense of the same. What these two sections show is that sin's inevitability only follows if we restrict our focus to certain possible worlds that share certain features with the actual world. But once such a restriction is made explicit, in section 5 I develop a framework for how the libertarian non-Molinist can use a similar restriction to give an account of the inevitability of sin given original sin. Perhaps there are reasons to reject Lewis's account of inevitability and the underlying understanding of conditionals it builds on. But what the paper attempts to show is that the criticism of libertarian non-Molinist views from the inevitability thesis is more complicated than it first appears. And I don't yet think it has been shown that the libertarian non-Molinist cannot endorse the inevitability thesis without contradiction.

1. Exceptions that Question the Rule

Original sin is sometimes referred to as human beings possessing a sinful nature. But such a view leads quickly to Christological worries. As theologian John E. McKinley understatedly puts it, "Jesus Christ is a complicated person."[8] According to Christian doctrine, there's something unique about the Incarnate Christ: he is fully human but also, given the hypostatic union between his human nature and the divine nature of the second person of the Trinity, as the Council of Chalcedon put it he is "equal in all things to us except sin." There are two parts to this uniqueness. First, there's the claim that the Incarnate Christ not only did not sin but could not sin, which Timothy Pawl refers to as 'the impeccability thesis.[9] The impeccability thesis prevents us from understanding original sin as involving a sinful human nature. If, as the Christian tradition has held, the Second Person of the Trinity

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[8] McKinley 2021, 119.
[9] Pawl 2021, 94; see also Pawl 2019.

becomes incarnate and assumes a human nature, then if human nature were somehow itself sinful, Christ would also be sinful in virtue of assuming a sinful human nature. But Christianity holds that the Incarnate Christ is fully human as well as fully divine, and yet without original sin.[10] So if the impeccability thesis is true, then we ought not understand original sin as entailing that human nature became sinful through the impacts of the primal sin. Human nature, even post Fall, isn't inherently sinful: "the exclusion from sin from the combination of the true humanity of Christ seems to imply that true humanity does not need to entail the ability to sin."[11] Instead original sin should be understood as a distortion in human nature Because such language about human nature itself becoming sinful can be misleading[12] and also potentially in conflict with the conviction that all things created by God are good, original sin is perhaps better described in terms of human nature's being distorted.

However, the impeccability thesis by itself doesn't establish the uniqueness of the Incarnation. For that, it must also be the case that all other humans do in fact sin. For if other humans were also able not to sin and actually avoided sinning, then the Incarnate Christ wouldn't be unique. So to secure the second half of the uniqueness claim, one also needs the claim that all other humans are *able to* and *do* sin. On some views of human origins, Adam and Eve (whether as historical figures or as representatives of the first humans[13]) were able to avoid sinning but didn't, and thus were able to sin given that they did. Furthermore, some branches of Christianity hold that Mary, the mother of Jesus and *theotokos*, was in a similar position. Second, to establish that Jesus was unique in not sinning, it must also be the case that all other humans not only *can* but *do* sin. Here, of course, one runs headlong into Marian doctrine, as the Catholic Church holds that because of divine grace Mary is free from the effects of original sin and, as a result, was "free of every personal sin her whole life long."[14] Pope Pius IX wrote that "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, *preserved*

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[10] For discussions of the relationship between Christ's divine nature and the human nature assumed in the Incarnation, see Pawl 2019 and 2016.

[11] Dockter 2021, 75. Similarly, if the impeccability claim is true, then the ability to sin cannot be a necessary condition for freedom; see Pawl 2021, 96 and Timpe 2014. For a different view, see Sumner 2014.

[12] See Copan 2003, 523.

[13] See van Inwagen 2006, lecture 5 for a discussion of human creation and sin that doesn't involve Adam and Eve being historical individuals.

[14] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 493.

immune from all stain of original sin."[15] The sinlessness of Mary is official Catholic doctrine, with Vatican II declaring that "the immaculate Virgin, *preserved free from every stain of original sin*, when the course of her earthly life was completed, was taken up body and soul to heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as queen of all so that she might be more fully conformed to her son, the lord of lords . . . and victor over sin and death."[16]

The Orthodox tradition is more complicated, given that it tends to have a different understanding of original sin, where the doctrine is less dogmatically circumscribed than it tends to be in the Latin West. It's also harder to specify what Orthodox dogma commits one to beyond the decrees of the ecumenical councils. Many doctrines not explicitly binding by the ecumenical councils end up locally promulgated as a common theological commitment. In this way, many Orthodox Christians hold that while Mary was born into the same sinful world as the rest of us are and thus needed to be redeemed from sin and its effects in some sense, she did not commit any personal acts of sin. I think it's accurate to say that there is a general Orthodox consensus that Mary committed no acts of sin.[17]

Some Protestant confessions seem to at least potentially allow for Mary to be excluded from the scope of original sin insofar as their statements regarding the doctrine have implicit quantifier restrictions. Article 15 of the Belgic Confession, for instance, states that "by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race;"[18] but clearly the 'all' isn't intended to be an unrestricted quantifier given the Incarnation. Something similar can also be said of article 16's claim about "all Adam's descendants having thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of Adam."[19] The Canons of Dort make clear that Jesus alone is excluded from the scope of the quantifier: the corruption of original sin "spread, by God's judgment, from Adam and Eve to all their descendants—except for Christ alone— . . . by way of the propagation of their perverted nature."[20] Belief in the

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[15] Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854): DS 2803, as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 491.

[16] *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* volume 2, 894f.

[17] I thank Jon Jacobs, Jeremiah Carey, James Dominic Rooney, Nate Placencia, and Omar Fakhri for helpful conversations here.

[18] Belgic Confession article 15; in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources*, 40.

[19] Belgic Confession article 16; in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources*, 41.

[20] Canons of Dort, The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, article 2; in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources*, 130.

immaculate conception and sinlessness of Mary is explicitly ruled out by other Protestant denominations as well. The Episcopal Church's article IX on original sin claims "it is the fault of corruption of the Nature of every [human], that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby [humanity] is very gone from original righteousness," and article XV explicitly claims that other than the Incarnate Christ, "all the rest [of humanity] . . . offend in many things."[21]

But having now discussed the exception(s) to the rule, I set them aside. In sections 2 through 5, all utterances of the sort that "all humans *such and thus*" should be interpreted as implicitly restricted in light of the discussion in this section.

2. The Inevitability Thesis

With the exception(s) established, I turn then to the rule (though the exception(s) should be kept in mind, even though I will no longer make them explicit). The 'rule' is found in Couenhoven's claim (c) of his treatment of original sin, which holds of humans in virtue of the solidarity mentioned in claim (b). He describes this third component as the conceptual center of the doctrine of original sin, with the other parts of the doctrine providing "a background that assists us in understanding the center of the doctrine."[22] He understands this conceptual center to itself be the conjunction of two smaller claims: the first being about constitutional fault, which he sometimes calls "original sin itself,"[23] and the second being that one is morally blameworthy or suffers from original guilt in virtue of that constitutional fault. While I take Couenhoven to be correct that much of the historical reflection on original sin involves both of these elements, the second of these claims has been widely rejected by many philosophers writing on original sin.[24] Fortunately, for present purposes, I can sidestep the issues of original guilt and focus on constitutional fault.

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[21] *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979 version, articles IX and XV, 869f. Article VII of the Methodist Articles of Religions parallels the article IX of the Episcopal Church on this point though without the explicit exemption of Jesus that one finds in article XV.

[22] Couenhoven 2013, 47.

[23] Couenhoven 2013, 23.

[24] Thomas McCall refers to those views that reject original guilt as "corruption-only doctrines" (McCall 2019, 156). The denial of original guilt is found in the Catholic tradition (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2003, part I, section 2, paragraph 7, 405) and many of the Orthodox traditions (see Louth 2020). Among contemporary philosophers, corruption-only views are endorsed by Crisp 2020, McFarland 2016, McFadyen 2016, Hudson 2014, Wyma 2004, Plantinga 2000, Quinn 1997, Morris 1992, and Swinburne 1989. William Wainwright, in contrast, holds that original guilt is essential to the doctrine of original sin (Wainright 1988, 31).

Couenhoven describes constitutional fault as a kind of moral "improper functioning *qua* human being" that involves "an inherited state of disordered desire and ignorance."[25] Acts of sin arise from this constitutional fault.[26] While some have held this disordering to only incline one to commit acts of sin,[27] it's much more common to understand it as implying that acts of sin are inevitable.[28] The Council of Trent, for instance, anathematized all who hold that Adam and Even's sin didn't defile the whole human race by causing the loss of original holiness and justice such that they will sin.[29] In a later session, the council made it even clearer that because of original sin humans are not just inclined toward sin but will commit acts of sin:

> If anyone says that a person, once justified, cannot sin any more or lose grace, and therefor that one who falls and sins has never been truly justified; or, on the other hand (apart from a special privilege from God such as the church holds in the case of the blessed Virgin), *that he can avoid all sins, even venial sins, throughout his life: let him be anathema*.[30]

The inevitability of committing acts of sin given original sin shouldn't be understood as the view that particular sins are themselves inevitable, but rather that some sin or other is inevitable. As Paul Copan puts it, "though we do not sin necessarily (that is, it is not assured that we must commit this or that particular sin), we sin inevitably (that is, in addition to our propensity to sin, given the vast array of opportunities to sin, we eventually do sin at some point)."[31] This is, as I've called it, the inevitability thesis.

But how exactly we should this claim that given the impact of original sin on the human condition, all humans are now unable to avoid sinning?[32] In an interesting paper, W. Paul Franks understands the inevitability thesis as follows:

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[25] Couenhoven 2013, 12 and 30.

[26] This claim too needs to be understood as having an implicit restriction; it is not the case that the initial (primal) human sin arose from constitutional fault.

[27] see for instance Swinburne 1989, 138.

[28] See for instance Crisp2019, 150.

[29] Session 5 1st decree, paragraph 5-6; in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* volume 2, 667.

[30] Session 6, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* volume 2, 680 (emphasis added).

[31] Copan 2003, 531.

[32] If you felt any inclination to argue with the 'all' in this sentence, reread the last sentence of the previous section.

> (1)   Necessarily in a world tainted by original sin, (a) every human subsequent to Adam and Eve is born in a condition such that it is inevitable that she sin (given that she performs at least one morally significant action), but (b) it is not inevitable that she sin on any given occasion.[33]

(I return to Franks' evaluation of (1) in section 5 below, where I argue that it's too strong of a way to understand the inevitability claim.) Claim (1) involves what David Lewis calls 'a necessity operator':

> an operator that acts like a restricted universal quantifier over possible worlds. Necessity of a certain sort is truth at all possible worlds that satisfy a certain restriction. We call these words *accessible*, meaning thereby simply that they satisfy the restriction associated with the sort of necessity under consideration. Necessity is truth at all accessible worlds, and different sorts of necessity correspond to different accessibility restrictions. (Lewis 1973, 4–5)

Necessity operators involve an accessibility relation, where that relation serves to restrict quantification over possible worlds in giving the truth conditions for that operator. So, for a necessity operator $\Box$, any possible world i, and a proposition φ, the proposition $\Box\varphi$ is true at world i *iff* for every possible world j such that j is accessible from i, φ is true in j.

Lewis specifies an inevitability relationship as one kind of necessity operator, one involving a temporally restricted accessibility relation:

> Corresponding to a kind of time-dependent necessity we may call inevitability at time t, and its strict conditional, we assign to each world i as its sphere of accessibility the set of all worlds that are exactly like i at all times up to time t, so $\Box(\varphi\supset\psi)$ is true at i if and only if ψ is true at all $\Box\varphi$-worlds that are exactly like i up to t. (Lewis 1973, 7)

The type of inevitability that Lewis has in mind here is temporally inevitability: some proposition is inevitable in a world relative to a time *iff* all the worlds that share that history of the world up to that time are worlds in which the proposition

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[33] Franks 2012, 358; citations omitted. Franks' discussion focuses on those view which affirm the inevitability of sin without original guilt. But it's worth exploring whether or not even those views which do accept original guilt as part of original sin are able to account for the inevitability of sin.

in question is true.[34] But the inevitability of sin isn't inevitable given the history of a world up unto some time *t*; rather, it's inevitable given certain facts about the human condition. The inevitability of a human sinning follows given that they suffer from original sin as that doctrine has historically been understood. Sin will be inevitable for a particular human, *H*, in a world *i* if its sphere of accessibility includes no worlds in which *H* freely avoids sinning.[35] We thus look to not only what *H does* in *i*, but what *H would do* in other nearby possible worlds. Inevitability is thus a counterfactual notion.

Lewis understands counterfactuals in terms of overall similarity of worlds. Suppose ~*p* is true of the actual world, *α*; under what conditions would it be true that either *q* or ~*q* would have been true if *p* had been true?

$$p \ \square\!\!\rightarrow q$$

is true *iff* the set of all worlds closest to *α* in which *p* is true, $S_{(p, \alpha)}$, are worlds in which *q* is true. Similarly,

$$p \ \square\!\!\rightarrow \sim q$$

true *iff* the set of all worlds closest to *α* in which *p* is true, $S_{(p, \alpha)}$, are worlds in which *q* is false.[36]

We can then understand the claim that it is inevitable that a particular human *P* sins given that they suffer the penalty to human nature because of the primal sin as follows:

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[34] Lewis puts most of *Counterfactuals* in terms of sentences being true or false, though he also talks about propositions being true or false (Lewis 1973, 46-47). Following Plantinga (1974, chapter 4), I'll speak in terms of propositions rather than sentences.

[35] I put the point this way in terms of there being no accessible worlds in which *H* freely refrains from sinning rather than only worlds in which *H* sins for reasons that will become clearer as we go, but the basic point is this: which other considerations are allowed to help determine the accessibility relation?

[36] Here I am making the Limit Assumption which Lewis himself did not make, but that's for the sake of simplicity of presentation. I also do not want to suggest that the principle of conditional middle holds in general for Lewis's view of counterfactuals. Putting the point in this way is, again, done for the sake of simplicity of application to the inevitability of sin.

> It is inevitable that P sins in i given that they suffer from original sin *iff* the set of all worlds most like i, $S_{(oP,\ i)}$, are worlds in which P commits at least one sinful action if they commit free actions at all.[37]

Likewise, it will be inevitable that some particular human P sins in the actual world as follows.

> It is inevitable that P sins in α as a result of original sin *iff* P suffers from original sin (that is, oP) in α and the set of all worlds most like α, $S_{(oP,\ \alpha)}$, are worlds in which P commits at least one sinful action if they commit free actions at all.

We can then understand the claim that all humans in the actual world suffer from original sin then as follows:

> It is inevitable that every human in α sins as a result original sin *iff* every human in α suffers from original sin (that is, oH) in α and the set of all worlds most like α, $S_{(oH,\ \alpha)}$, are worlds in which the humans in those worlds commit at least one sinful action if they commit free actions at all.

So the accessibility relation involves holding fixed the people and original sin. But what else? Different views specific different thing. But the various views can be comparted in terms of what else needs to held fixed in comparing overall similarity of worlds, and what constrains the accessibility relation that the modal operator is understood in light of. (The accessibility relationship here cannot be one of logical necessity or physical necessity.)

Lewis admits that world similarity is vague, and that it depends on, among other things, context. But, he makes clear, "not anything goes . . . There is a rough consensus about the importance of respects of comparison, and hence about comparative similarity."[38] Let us refer to those factors that we hold consistent to evaluate worlds for their similarity 'the comparison base'. Given the vagueness of the similarity relationship (and thus the coordinated vagueness of counterfactuals), we may not be able to fully specify all and only the things that determine similarity are explicit. We can assume, for instance, that a discussion of the inevitability of sin ought to hold fixed the individuals in mind, as well as their suffering from original sin. So we will take these two factors to be part of the comparison base. What else

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[37] Since I am assuming facts about P across all the worlds in $S_{(oP,\ i)}$, this is related to Lewis' discussion of centering. For more on centering, see Lewis 1979 and Liao 2012. Accepting centering means that the actual world is closest to itself, though that doesn't help us regarding counterfactuals.

[38] Lewis 1973, 93-4.

should be held fixed? That depends on the rest of one's theological views. We can compare theological views in terms of the different things that they take to be among the features that determine world similarity (that is, we can compare them in terms of their comparison base) for the purpose of understanding how they account for the inevitability thesis. The next three sections examine how three different theological views could understand the inevitability thesis, and what they'd take to be among the comparison base in order to account for sin's inevitability. Folks have suggested that theological views that include libertarianism about human freedom, and particularly those libertarian views that reject Molinist accounts of divine knowledge and providence, cannot provide a way of understanding the inevitability thesis. But I argue that it's not clear that they can't. More specifically, unless there is independent reason for ruling out certain ways of accounting for the accessibility relation, there is logical space for the libertarian non-Molinist to endorse the inevitability thesis.

3. Inevitability on Theological Determinism

This section explores how the theological determinist can account for the inevitability thesis, and what it holds to be crucial to the relevant accessibility relation. Assume that theological determinism is true. That is, assume that it is true that for every event, God's actively willing that particular event is both necessary and sufficient for the occurring of that event.[39] Assume also that theological compatibilism is true—that is, assume that the truth of theological determinism is compatible with human freedom and responsibility.[40] According to the first assumption, everything that happens happens exactly as God wills it to happen. Since God's willing is sufficient for the occurrence of what God wills, it is not possible for God's willing to be frustrated. And, according to the second assumption, if among the things that God wills is that God wills some human agents to act freely

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[39] Derk Pereboom defines theological determinism as the view that "God is the sufficient active cause of everything in creation, whether directly or by way of secondary causes such as human agents" (Pereboom 2011, 262).

[40] Not all theological determinists are committed to theological compatibilism simply in virtue of endorsing theological determinism. But if theological determinism is true and theological compatibilism is false, then humans are neither free nor responsible (in the basic desert sense). If no humans are free or responsible, discussions of sin would have to be sufficiently revisionist that I won't consider them here (despite liking many a revisionist!). Pereboom explores Christianity without moral responsibility (see Pereboom 2005 and 2011), but I am not aware that he addresses the nature of sin on such a view.

and responsibly, then they do so. The conjunction of these assumptions establishes the claim that humans sin *iff* God wills for them to sin.

Proponents of this pair of views can account for the truth of the inevitability thesis by taking the following to be true (called 'TD1' for being the first claim regarding theological determinism):

> TD1 God wills that each human person in world i commits at least one sin.

While this claim establishes that all humans *do* sin, it doesn't yet establish that all individuals *must* sin, as the inevitability thesis claims. Given the sufficiency of God's volition regarding events for their occurring, theological determinists are also committed to the following claim:

> TD2 Necessarily, if God wills that each human person in world i commits at least one sin, then each human person in i commits at least one sin.

When TD1 and TD2 are combined, they entail the following:

> TD3 Necessarily, given that God wills that each human person in world i commits at least one sin, then each human person in i commits at least one sin.

There is a sense in which TD3 expresses a claim about what humans *must* do in i — given the contents of God's will in TD1, then it is not the case that they can avoid sinning in that world. And this seems sufficient to establish the inevitability thesis.

One might object that this isn't enough for the inevitability thesis given that it is conditional upon God's volition. That is, hasn't yet been established for theological determinism is the following necessary claim (NC):

> NC Necessarily, all humans must commit at least one sin.

Christianity has typically held that not only that *what* God chooses to create, including which if any humans are part of that creation, is contingent, but the fact that God chooses to create *at all* is itself contingent. So at the very least, NC needs to be restricted to those worlds in which God has chosen to create, and more specifically those worlds in which God has chosen to create free human creatures. Given divine freedom as it relates to *whether* and *what* to create, we can specify the restriction to such worlds as follows:

> NC1   Necessarily, for every world *i* which contains free humans, all those humans commit at least one sin.

But NC1 is too strong, since on it sin becomes an essential property of every free human person. What is needed is a way of restricting the relevant worlds such that sin is inevitable for every human in that world without it being true that they sin in every world in which they exist. Earlier we said that what was needed to secure the inevitability thesis was for the set of accessible worlds to be worlds in which the humans in those worlds commit at least one sinful action if they commit free actions at all. Since, on this theological view, God's willing that the world be *such and so* is necessary and sufficient that it be *such and so*, we can restrict the accessible worlds to those which include the divine volition indicated in TD1. (That is, we can say that God's volition that each human person in that world commits at least one sin is part of the comparison base by which we determine which worlds are accessible to *i*.) Had God's volition indicated in TD1 been different, then it would not have been either actual or inevitable that each person in *i* would sin. So even on the strongest account of divine providence, the conjunction of theological determinism and compatibilism, the inevitability of sin is accounted for by restricting the comparison base in a particular way.

The theological determinist must give an account, of course, for why TD1 would be true given its implications for the problem of evil. Why would God will in such a way as TD1 claims? But the proponent of theological determinism is already committed to there being a reason for why God wills all the evils that occur,[41] and thus I don't see that this is a further difficulty for the view rather than another aspect of a difficulty that's already acknowledged.[42]

4. Inevitability and Molinism

I now turn toward exploring the inevitability thesis according to Molinism. Particularly since the publication of Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil* and Thomas Flint's *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Molinism has come to play a very prominent role in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Molinists defend a robust account of divine providence on the basis of what is referred to as

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[41] For attempts to defang the 'author of sin' objection against theological determinism, see Welty 2016, White 2016, and Bignon 2018. It is not clear to me that any of these attempts are ultimately successful.

[42] See Pereboom 2005 and Mann 1988 for discussions.

God's 'middle knowledge.' Molinists differentiate different aspects of God's knowledge with an ordering holding between those different aspects.[43] First, God's natural knowledge is God's pre-volitional knowledge of necessary truths. For example, God knows that it is a necessary truth that all parts of creation depend upon God for their creation and conservation, even prior to or apart from the divine decision to create anything. God's free knowledge, on the other hand, is God's post-volitional knowledge of contingent truths; God can know that it is a contingent truth that Oliver the sassy sheepadoodle does in fact exist, but only logically posterior to His volition to bring creation, including canine crossbreeds, into existence and sustaining at least one such dog in existence. Most accounts of the nature of divine knowledge include both natural and free knowledge. What is unique to Molinism is its holding that in addition to natural and free knowledge, God also has middle knowledge—a kind of knowledge that is 'in the middle of' or between God's natural and God's free knowledge. Like God's natural knowledge, God's middle knowledge is pre-volitional. But, on the other hand, like free knowledge it is knowledge of contingent truths. In terms of providence, the most important objects of God's middle knowledge are what are called 'counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.'[44] A counterfactual of creaturely freedom (CCF for short) is a contingent proposition about how a creature would freely act in a particular situation. Such propositions have the following form:

> If agent *A* were in circumstances *C*, *A* would freely do *X*.

The 'freely' in CCFs should be understood as involving libertarianism; *A* freely does *X* only if *A*'s doing *X* is neither causally nor theologically determined. At the heart of the Molinist's view, God pre-volitionally knows what all possible created persons would freely do in every possible circumstance by knowing what CCFs are (contingently) true and which ones are (contingently) false. God can only actualize those possible worlds that are consistent with the set of true CCFs. Those worlds which are not consistent with the set of true CCFs are possible (since the set of true CCFs could have been different), but they are not, in Thomas Flint's terminology, feasible.[45]

Folks who endorse Molinism can also endorse the inevitability thesis by taking advantage of what Al Plantinga has labeled 'transworld depravity':

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[43] This is a logical, not temporal, ordering. See Flint 1998 and Hasker 2009, 334.

[44] Flint 1998; since not every CCF is in fact a counterfactual, it is perhaps better to call them 'free will subjunctive conditionals' as Mann 1988 does, 50.

[45] Flint 1998, 51.

> A person *P suffers from transworld depravity* if and only if the following holds: for every [possible] world *W* such that *P* is significantly free in *W* and *P* does only what is right in *W*, there is an action *A* and a maximal world segment *S'* such that
>
> > (1) *S'* includes *A*'s being morally significant for *P*
> >
> > (2) *S'* includes *P's* being free with respect to *A*
> >
> > (3) *S'* is included in *W* and includes neither *P*'s performing *A* nor *P*'s refraining from performing *A*
>
> and
>
> > (4) If *S'* were actual, *P* would go wrong with respect to *A*.[46]

Bruce Langtry gives the following as a loose approximation of transworld depravity: person *P* suffers from transworld depravity if and only if, as a matter of contingent fact, if God were to create *P* and *P* is free, then whatever else God were to allow regarding creation, *P* would go wrong with at least one morally significant action.[47] That is, if a person, Paul, suffers from transworld depravity, then no matter which possible world God actualizes[48] such that Paul exists in that world and is free, there is a true CCF regarding Paul such that it is true that Paul freely commits at least one sin (e.g., endorses misogynistic expectations) in that possible world. No possible world in which Paul exists, is free, and there is no sin is a feasible world. If Paul suffers from transworld depravity, then there is a sense in which he will sin in that world. And if all possible humans suffer from transworld depravity, then it's the

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[46] Plantinga 1977, 48. He restates TWD on 52 (and on Plantinga 1974, 188) in terms of essences rather than persons, where persons are instantiations of essences, which are understood as abstract objects. This modification need not concern us at present.

[47] Bruce Langtry 2010, 145. Langtry's actual formulation of TWD is about essences rather than persons since "Plantinga does not believe that there are non-actual persons, yet the Defence [i.e., Plantinga's free will defense] requires consideration of both whether actual persons could suffer from transworld depravity and also whether God could have created other people instead, who did not suffer from transworld depravity. Talk of essences provides a way of discussing both questions" (145). For simplicity's sake, I'll focus only on persons and not essences, though those who prefer not to admit the existence of non-actual persons as abstract objects are welcome to interpret what follows using essences instead. Both Langtry and Richard Otte have taken issue with Plantinga's formulation of transworld depravity; Plantinga agrees that Otte has shown his initial treatments of TWD were problematic in Plantinga, 2009. Nevertheless, in what follows I set these issues aside, as the central point I want to make would still follow with an updated account of transworld depravity. For a discussion of how Plantinga's view of transworld depravity relates to his '*o felix culpa*' theodicy, see Davis and Franks 2018.

[48] Unless the circumstances in which Paul freely acts (and sins) are causally isolated from earlier free choices, either by Paul or by other free creatures, the use of 'actualizes' here will be 'weakly actualizes'; see Plantinga 1974, 172.

case that if God creates a world containing free humans, then they will sin. That is, no world containing free humans and yet no sin would be among the set of feasible worlds. As Plantinga himself says, "The whole point of introducing TWD [is] to show how it could be that it wasn't within God's power to actualize a world containing free creatures who always do what is right; it is possible that the counterfactuals of freedom should fall out in such a way as to preclude God's doing that."[49]

Though not himself a Molinist, William Hasker argues that while the Molinist can account for the inevitability of sin using transworld depravity, that view would actually entail something stronger: "it seems that anyone who suffers from it [i.e., transworld depravity] must of necessity go wrong morally on *the very first occasion* on which that person makes a choice between moral good and evil."[50] We can understand Hasker as here endorsing the following necessary clam:

> NC2   Necessarily, if a human person suffers from transworld depravity, then they must freely choose evil on the very first occasion of making a choice between moral good and moral evil.

Why does Hasker think this follows from transworld depravity? His reasoning is as follows:

> Suppose this is not so [i.e., assuming that a human who suffers from transworld depravity does not sin on the very first occasion when they make a choice between moral good and evil]; suppose someone who suffers from transworld depravity makes her very first moral choice a choice for the good. This poses no problem, you might think; that person will have plenty of additional chances to go wrong. But suppose she doesn't have any more chances? It seems entirely possible that, having made one free choice for the good, the person might have no further opportunities at all: perhaps her existence comes to an end at that point or circumstances change in some way that she never again chooses between moral right and world. If this were to occur, then the person would have been given freedom to choose between good and evil, and yet would never have chosen to do evil—but that would mean that, contrary to our supposition, the person was not trans worldly depraved after all. Indeed, if this scenario is even *possible*, it follows that she is not transwordly depraved, for transworld depravity means that *in any possible set of circumstances* in which the person is free to choose between good and evil (*including* the scenario in which the person makes only one morally significant choice in her lifetime), she

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[49] Plantinga 2009, 182.

[50] Hasker 2008, 61.

chooses evil at least once. So if the person is in fact transwordly depraved, she will choose evil on the very first opportunity that presents itself to her.[51]

This, however, doesn't follow. The Molinist's defense of the inevitability of sin claims only that in each feasible world in which a human person exists, that human finds themselves in at least one situation in which they freely sin. But what is feasible depends on the set of true CCFs. Molinism does not commit one to the claim that every world in which the agent is in that same situation is one in which the CCFs are the same. The possible world in which the agent in question dies immediately after not sinning at their first possible opportunity and the possible world in which they never do are distinct, and thus may have different true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. At the very least, the Molinist would need to give an account of why the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom align in such as a way as Hasker presupposes.

As we saw in the previous section, saying that all humans will sin doesn't yet establish the inevitability thesis which says that they *must* sin. But, as we also saw, it's asking too much to establish the necessity of all humans sinning. The inevitability of sin only requires that the comparison base for the similarity between worlds contains something such that all the accessible worlds share that feature. But assume that it is contingently true in i that all possible human persons suffer from TWD, and that this truth is part of the comparison base. It would follow that not only every feasible world containing free humans but also every accessible world in $S_{(oH, i)}$ is a world in which each human commits at least one sin in that world. We've already seen that it is appropriate, when seeking to account for the inevitability of sin in i, to restrict accessibility to the set of worlds $S_{(p, i)}$ that share a contingent truth p (here, the conjunction of the relevant counterfactuals that go into establishing TWD). On this view too then, like with theological determinism, Molinism can establish the inevitability of sin with the additional assumption of transworld depravity by such an account of the accessibility relation.[52]

The Molinist's defense of the inevitability thesis will only work if both of its driving assumptions, namely the truth of Molinism and the thesis of transworld depravity, are true. Unfortunately, I don't think that either is. I've indicated my two primary objections to Molinism elsewhere.[53] First, I think that a version of the grounding objection against counterfactuals of creaturely freedom works. God is not

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[51] Hasker 2008, 61

[52] See also the discussions in Rea 2007, Anderson 2021, and Loke 2022 chapter 6 for other Molinist-based proposals.

[53] Timpe 2018.

the ground of the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, nor are the agents that the counterfactuals are about, since their truth is independent of the agents' existence. As Richard Gale puts it regarding what makes the CCFs true: "As they used to say in the Bronx, 'Don't ask!' Here's where the regress of explanations hits the brick wall of brute, unexplainable contingency. There are no further elephants or tortoises upon whose back this contingency rests."[54] I think brute counterfactuals of creaturely freedom cannot bear the weight needed for Molinism. But second, even if they could, one can run an argument parallel to the Consequence Argument for incompatibilism against Molinism.[55] And if this is right, then Molinism can't secure the high level of providential control that it seeks to while still maintaining libertarianism. Even if I were inclined to think that Molinism was true, I'd agree with Josh Rasmussen that the probability of trans-world depravity is sufficiently low that we ought to reject it—or at least look for accounts of theological doctrines that don't require TWD for their plausibility.[56]

5. Libertarians on Inevitability

But can a libertarian who rejects Molinism still endorse the inevitability thesis? W. Paul Franks suggests the answer is 'no'. As mentioned in section 2, Franks understands the inevitability thesis as follows:

(1)   Necessarily in a world tainted by original sin, (a) every human subsequent to Adam and Eve is born in a condition such that it is inevitable that she sin (given that she performs at least one morally significant action), but (b) it is not inevitable that she sin on any given occasion.[57]

Franks raises (1) as an objection to those views that endorse only what he calls original inclination and not original guilt, where the latter is "one's being born guilty" and the former is "one's being born in a condition that inevitably leads to

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[54] Gale 2007, 55. See also McCann 2011 and Craig 2001.

[55] For a further development of this concern, see Climenhaga and Rubio 2021.

[56] Rasmussen 2004. More specifically, he thinks that the probability of there being no feasible evil-free worlds is 0. One need not think it's that low to think that it's sufficiently low that we ought not endorse it. For another criticism of TWD and its role in Plantinga's free will defense, see Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorn 1998.

[57] Franks 2012, 358; citations omitted. Franks' discussion focuses on those view which affirm the inevitability of sin without original guilt. But it's worth exploring whether or not even those views which do accept original guilt as part of original sin are able to account for the inevitability of sin.

sin."[58] Franks is a libertarian, and as a result thinks that humans are free and thus cannot be determined to always act as they do. But the doctrine of original guilt, Franks claims, is difficult to reconcile with libertarianism, since it seems to require one to be blameworthy for things over which one has no control.[59] He thus restricts his attention to original inclination and argues that (1) false. To see why, he asks us to consider a possible world (much like the worlds that Hasker considered, but without assuming the truth of Molinism) in which a human performs only one morally significant action in their lifetime. The existence of such a world would mean that:

(2)   Possibly, some human performs only one morally significant action in her lifetime.[60]

Franks thinks that the truth of (2) "seems assured" and takes it to be true that there is "no reason one could give for taking it to be false."[61] However, according to (1a) above, it is true of that individual that she inevitably sins in that particular action. That is, it follows from (1a) and (2) that

(3)   If some human performs only one morally significant action in her lifetime, then that action is inevitably sinful.[62]

However, from (1b) it follows that:

(4)   If some human performs only one morally significant action in her lifetime, then that action is not inevitably sinful.[63]

(3) and (4) together entail a contradiction. Thus Franks thinks that one can't be a libertarian who endorses original inclination without original guilt and endorse (1a). He rejects that the constitutional fault of original sin ensures sinful actions: "we are

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[58] Franks 2012, 355.

[59] Loke agrees: "the view that 'All human beings (except, at most, four) are guilty from birth in the eyes of God, and this guilt is a consequence of the first sin of the first [human]' (Original Guilt) is unwarranted and is contrary to the principle of justice that we should not be judged for what we are not responsible for" (Loke 2022, 132). It's not clear that libertarians cannot give an account of participation in the first human sin; see Rea 2007 and the discussion in Crisp 2019.

[60] Franks 2012, 359.

[61] Franks 2012, 359 and 363.

[62] Franks 2012, 359.

[63] Franks 2012, 359.

influenced by a fallen world to sin, but are free at any point to refrain from sinning."[64] Sin thus is perhaps very likely, but not strictly speaking inevitable. And Franks is not the only one to think that the libertarian non-Molinist cannot account for the inevitability of sin. Richard Swinburne also rejects that, as a result of original sin, sin is inevitability given his commitment to a libertarian view, which he sees as requiring a commitment to the view that a free creature cannot be responsible for an unavoidable or inevitable action:

> Adam's responsibility for our sinfulness is confined to a responsibility for beginning the social transmission of morality (as such a good thing) which made sin possible, but a morality which, as a result of his own sinful example and perhaps false moral beliefs, was no doubt a corrupt morality and so made it easier for our genetically inherited proneness to sin to work in Adam's successors.[65]

Swinburne thus thinks that sinful acts are "almost unavoidable"[66] but not inevitable, as expressed by Franks' (1). And theologian McFarland endorses a compatibilist view of human freedom in part because he doesn't think that the libertarian (presumably who also rejects Molinism) can account for the inevitability of sin.[67]

There are two ways that one could argue that libertarian non-Molinism could go to avoid the claimed inconsistency. The first way is to recognize that not all libertarians are committed to (1b) insofar as they think that one can be free and responsible for an action even if it's inevitable so long as they played the right role in it's becoming inevitable. Source libertarians are not committed to the claim that every action for which one is morally responsible is one for which the agent must have alternative possibilities. Consider, for instance, Dean Zimmerman's 'virtue libertarianism':

> The highest such good [that libertarian freedom is necessary for] is the very possibility of creatures capable of displaying moral virtues—hard-won habits due, at least in part, to a lifetime of free choices. Choices made because of a genuinely moral virtue (as opposed to a merely excellent disposition) redound to the credit of the agent even when the virtue is so ingrained to make the choice, now, inevitable. Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for choices rendered inevitable by vices. Strictly speaking, such choices and action are not freely taken—i.e. they are not examples of the base case of indeterministic, free choosing. Still, if an agent is an uncoerced

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[64] Franks 2012, 370.
[65] Swinburne 1989, 143.
[66] Swinburne 1989, 146.
[67] McFarland 2016, 311-317.

expression of character traits for which one is responsible, the action is one for which we should hold a person responsible. We might even want to say that such actions and choices are "freely undertaken" in the sense that they are the expression of a character formed by a history of freely chosen action, despite the fact that the agents no longer have a choice about their behavior in these circumstances. Still, libertarians will think actions free in this broader sense could not occur without, somewhere down the line, free choices in the narrower sense—instances of the base case of freedom, requiring indeterministic circumstances.[68]

How might an agent be responsible for the first human sin that makes inevitable for them further acts of sin? Realists, as opposed to federalists, about original sin hold that there is a real unity between all who are justly punished for original guilt and the first human sinner. As Augustine puts it,

> The first human beings . . . having become the first sinners, were then punished by death in such a way that whatsoever sprang from their stock should also be subject to the same penalty. For nothing could be born of them which was not what they themselves had been . . . so that what arose as a punishment in the first human beings who sinned also follows as a natural consequence in the rest who are born of them.[69]

The best-known elaboration of realism comes from Jonathan Edwards, who held that all humans are one simply because as God declares us to be: "there is no identity or oneness [that does not] depend on the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator . . . *Divine constitution* [God's treating all humans as one entity] is the thing which *makes truth*."[70] Influenced by Edwards, a number of philosophers have considered the possibility of perdurantism being used to provide a basis for realism.[71]

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[68] Zimmerman 2012, 176-7. On my preferred view, we can think of those actions that are the inevitable results of the moral character an agent has freely formed as both free *and* responsible actions; but I don't think that anything of substance here hangs on this difference between Zimmerman's and my view.

[69] Augustine *City of God*, XIII.iii.

[70] Edwards 1758: part 4, ch. III [1970: 404].

[71] Perdurantism is, roughly, the view that ordinary objects like humans persist through time in virtue of having temporal parts. See the discussions in Wainwright 1988, Wyma 2004, Crisp 2005 and 2009, Rea 2007, and Hudson 2014. Anderson thinks that the "creative metaphysical wrangling" needed to get participation of all humans in the first human sin would be a "hard sell" (Anderson 2021, 8 and 9). It may be, however, that such humans on such a view might not satisfy the epistemic condition on moral responsibility, even if it can be shown that they satisfy the control condition (that is, even if they have free will). See Timpe 2011 for a discussion of the difficulties spelling out the epistemic condition even apart from considerations of original sin.

Rather than going into the details of how such a view would look, notice from the quotation from Edwards that realism is dependent upon divine willing. If God had made a different decision regarding identity, then not all humans would be responsible for the first sin that formed their character in such a way that later sins were inevitable. So, as was the case with theological determinism in section three above, God's willing that the world be a certain way (here, that the relevant personal identity relation holds) restricts the accessible worlds as part of the relevant comparison base. That is, we can say that God's volition that Sinner Sal in i be identical with the person who committed the first sin in i is part of the comparison base by which we determine which worlds are accessible to i. Had God's volition indicated in i been different, then it would not have been either actual or inevitable that Sinner Sal would sin, since then the set of all worlds most like i would have been different. The libertarian non-Molinist is no more committed than the theological determinism to the claim that a person must sin in every possible world in which they suffer from original sin, only that they sin in all the accessible worlds. That is, Franks' (1a) need not be interpreted as making a claim about all possible world's in which humans suffer from original sin, but only those worlds that are most like i. Sin is inevitable for a particular human in a world i if that worlds' accessibility relation includes no worlds in which they freely avoid sinning.

This then leads us to the second possibility for avoiding Franks' claimed inconsistency for the libertarian non-Molinist. I've suggested that for the theological determinist, the Molinist, and the libertarian non-Molinist who endorses realism, the set of accessible worlds relevant to the claim that it is inevitable that a human sin can be restricted by what I called the comparison base. For the theological determinist, the comparison base includes the divine volitions regarding the human in question. For the Molinist, it includes the set of true CCFs that entail that the human suffers from TWD. For the libertarian non-Molinist who endorses realism, it includes divine volitions regarding personal identity. It would thus be inappropriate to require of the libertarian non-Molinist more generally to establish that some human P inevitably sins in α as a result of original sin *iff* P suffers from original sin in α and all the worlds in which P exists and suffers from original sin are worlds in which P commits at least one sinful action if they commit free actions at all. It only requires that the set of all worlds most like α, $S(P, \alpha)$, are worlds in which P commits at least one sinful action if they commit free actions at all. So we do not yet have reason to think that the libertarian non-Molinist cannot give an account of inevitability involving a different comparison base.

Of course, to develop this possibility beyond a mere framework, the libertarian non-Molinist would need to give an account of just what features ought to be in the

comparison base that would restrict the accessibility relation in this way. Why are the possible worlds in which the agent does sin more relevant for evaluating the counterfactuals than worlds in which they don't? But, as the discussions of theological determinism and Molinism make clear, there might be reasons to think that other elements of one's theological package should be part of the relevant comparison base. To avoid being *ad hoc*, the comparison base would need to be plausible. But, as I discuss elsewhere, we need to make judgements about the philosophical commitments of our theological packages in a wholistic way, and judgements about plausibility are in part a function of other positions that we're antecedently committed to.[72] For those Christian philosophers that take Church tradition to be a source of evidence regarding theological and philosophical views, the Church's historical commitment to the inevitability thesis carries at least some, and perhaps significant, epistemic weight. It may even give us theological reasons to favor certain ways of determining the accessibility relation even if there are not decisive philosophical arguments on offer.

Conclusion

In the previous pages, I've tried to give an account of the historical Christian theological claim that given the impact of original sin, acts of sin are unavoidable for human agents. I've shown how a number of theological traditions can understand that inevitability thesis. I've also sought to show that despite the claim that libertarian non-Molinist views cannot account for sin's inevitability, there are philosophical resources that can be brought to bear in giving a framework for how they can. Ian McFarland writes that "original sin is a derivative doctrine: it is deduced from the more fundamental Christian claims that Christ is the Saviour of all, and that that all need to be saved."[73] A commitment to this fundamental Christian claim gives us reasons for further exploring the possibilities regarding how best to understand the inevitability of sin.[74]

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[72] See the discussion in Timpe forthcoming, particularly section 3, for considerations relevant to this paragraph.

[73] McFarland 2016, 311.

[74] Thanks to Christa McKirland, Chris Menzel, and two anonymous reviewers for *TheoLogica* for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

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