

# Evolution, Middle Knowledge, and Theodicy


## A Philosophical Reflection

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**ABSTRACT** In this paper, I investigate the relationship between a nonlapsarian, evolutionary account of the origin of sin and the potential ramifications this might have for theodicy. I begin by reviving an early twentieth century evolutionary model of the origin of sin before discussing the most prominent objection which it elicits, namely, that if sin is merely the misuse of natural animal passions and habits, then God is ultimately answerable for the existence of sin in the human sphere (the “Responsibility Argument”). Though I suggest that this argument likely misfires, my main concern lies elsewhere. For the proponent of the Responsibility Argument will customarily reject an evolutionary account of sin’s origin and instead endorse something like the traditional Fall account—the doctrine of Original Sin. I argue, however, that the Fall theory is also clearly subject to a parallel Responsibility Argument, so long as we take God to possess (minimally) Molina’s *scientia media*. While I will not pretend to have solved every issue in my discussion of Molinism, still the desired conclusion should emerge unscathed: if the Responsibility Argument is a problem for an evolutionary account of the origin of sin, then it is a problem for the Fall doctrine, too.

**KEYWORDS** evolution; fall; middle knowledge; Molinism; original sin; problem of evil; Tennant, F.R.; theodicy

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INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I shall attempt to evaluate the philosophical cogency of one central aspect of a nonlapsarian Christianity, that is to say, a Christian faith which rejects the doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin.<sup>2</sup> Plausibly, the leading operation of the doctrine of Original Sin is to provide a sort of narrative which will go some significant distance in reconciling the fact of widespread sin and evil with an omnibenevolent God. But, if the ideas of the Fall and Original Sin are rejected, it seems the Christian theodist is in trouble. For the two propositions: “sin does not enter the world through a gratuitous defection from the good in time” and “universal sin exists nonetheless” naturally invite a question about the one who purportedly created such a world: did God intentionally create a sinful world, or at least a world in which sin would prove virtually inevitable? In short, this paper deals with the whence of sin absent a veritable Fall and its purported philosophical-cum-theological consequences. If it is not the case that “sin came into the world through one man” (Rom. 5:12),<sup>3</sup> from where did it come? And, more importantly, how can this nonlapsarian vision be reconciled with a good and loving God?

An altogether satisfactory answer to these questions would require far more space than the current allotment permits. Still, at least a preliminary attempt to respond is necessary, for if the elimination of Original Sin commits us to supposing God to be the author of evil, it may be far better simply to retain the doctrine in question. In this paper, then, I shall address these concerns head-on. To this end, I will begin by revisiting an early twentieth century approach to the origin of sin which proved infamous for its rejection of the Fall and Original Sin, and follow with a discussion of the criticisms this theory immediately occasioned. With this task complete, I shall then consider the question of God’s responsibility for moral evil along quite different lines, arguing that, whatever one concludes about the aforementioned theory, the Fall doctrine, too, will fail convincingly to exempt God from the authorship of such evil for precisely the same

1. I owe an inestimable debt of gratitude to various colleagues, friends, and anonymous reviewers who provided much-needed feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. In a forthcoming work, I define Original Sin broadly as “the family of views which aims to account for the ubiquity of sin, evil, death, and suffering through an appeal to a primordial “Fall” from an initial state of innocence, goodness, or perfection, whether this Fall be understood allegorically or not.” A corollary of this definition is that there can be no genuine doctrine of Original Sin without some conception of the Fall.

3. In St. Paul’s thought, of course, death follows on sin. I am simply taking for granted the falsity of this claim: unless we are totally to discount the unanimous testimony of the physical sciences, we know beyond any shadow of a doubt that death is present from the first.

reasons—that is, so long as the Molinist account of providence, or anything stronger, be admitted.<sup>4</sup> Fall doctrine or no, I suggest, we are left with the same serious questions about God and the world he elected to create. While such an argument has, indeed, been hinted at in the literature, I find that more is wanting in terms of explicitness, analytic precision, as well as depth of development.<sup>5</sup> This dearth I seek to rectify here. Without further ado, then, we turn to F.R. Tennant, longtime Cantabrigian and avid admirer of Thomas H. Huxley’s famous Romanes Lecture, *Evolution and Ethics* (Brannan 2007, 188–90).

#### I. F.R. TENNANT ON THE ORIGIN OF SIN

It is needful to emphasize at the outset that the publication of Tennant’s 1902 *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* “created a theological sensation,” in the words of one early reviewer.<sup>6</sup> The critics in particular abounded (Brannan 2007, 199–209), most of whom doubtless would have concurred with the judgement that “Mr. Tennant’s Hulsean Lectures smelt strongly of heterodoxy.”<sup>7</sup> In many ways, then, the contemporary debate surrounding the doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin in Christian theology find their origin in Tennant’s daring undertaking; it is in large part for this reason that I introduce him to the reader here. To Tennant’s “evolutionary account of the origin of sin,” then (Tennant 1902, 92). Tennant begins by signaling the occasion for his novel<sup>8</sup> hypothesis: to his mind, the treatment of the origin of sin in theological and philosophical speculation has been altogether unconvincing, and in any case demands reformulation in light of the results of the physical sciences. “What logic thus suggests,” he says, “science has begun to demand” (Tennant 1902, 80). Furthermore, what lies behind the apparent intractability of resolving the origin of sin puzzle is the Pelagian–Augustinian antinomy, “the difficulty of reconciling the

4. This paper shall therefore not deal with what is called the problem of natural evil. This is a wider topic which would, needless to say, take us quite beyond the purposes of this paper.

5. John Hick, for instance, develops a similar argument in *Evil and the God of Love* (e.g., Hick 1979, 75). It seems to me, however, that Hick’s analysis needs to be expanded considerably. The idea is there, but a lengthy, analytic exposition is to be desired. John T. Mullen employs Molinism in the Original Sin debate, but only as an aid for understanding how a nonlapsarian theology might secure moral responsibility on the part of creatures (see Mullen 2007, 274 ff.; McCall 2019, ch. 4). Finally, Mike Rea has utilized Molinism in a defense of Original Sin (see Rea 2007).

6. Taken from (“At the Literary Table” 1903–1904, 79). See also (Mead 2017, 164–6).

7. Taken from (“Notes on Books” 1905–1906, 363).

8. Tennant considers that “such a theory from first principles has not yet been undertaken by Theology” (Tennant 1902, 81).

two propositions that, on the one hand, evil is so universal as to suggest a common origin for the sinfulness of the whole race... whilst, on the other hand, our sense of guilt demands that each one is ‘the Adam of his own soul’” (Tennant 1902, 79).<sup>9</sup> To Tennant’s mind, an acceptable theory as to the origin of sin must make sense of both the practical inevitability of sin and our sense that each individual is personally responsible for bringing it upon himself.

It is here that he leaves off with the preliminary groundwork and proceeds to develop his positive account with an initial statement of his hypothesis. It will conduce to lucidity to quote Tennant in full here; the portion cited I take from his first lecture where the same hypothesis is advanced more poetically<sup>10</sup>:

What if [man] were flesh before spirit; lawless, impulse-governed organism, fulfilling as such the nature necessarily his and therefore the life God willed for him in his earliest age, until his moral consciousness was awakened to start him, heavily weighted with the inherited load, not, indeed, of abnormal and corrupted nature, but of non-moral and necessary animal instinct and self-assertive tendency, on that race-long struggle of flesh with spirit and spirit with flesh, which for us, alas! becomes but another name for the life of sin. (Tennant 1902, 11)

In short, perhaps sin—synonymous for Tennant with “moral evil”—finds its source merely in the intrinsic difficulty of subjugating the established passions to the newly discovered moral law, only recently arisen in the age-long process of biological evolution. That is, perhaps the ‘origin of sin is simply to be found in our ambiguous creaturely constitution as brutes but lately awoken from an amoral, unselfconscious slumber. Reason dawns, conscience emerges: only now may the “race long struggle of flesh with spirit” truly begin.<sup>11</sup> Hence Tennant quotes Archdeacon James Wilson approvingly: “To the evolutionist sin is not an innovation, but is the survival or misuse of habits and tendencies that were incidental to an earlier stage in development.... Their sinfulness lies in their anachronism: in their resistance to the evolutionary and Divine force that makes for moral development

9. Another cause of this “intractability” is the tendency to regard all sin as radical, conscious rebellion against God, though this is not as central to the development of his theory (Tennant 1902, 78–9).

10. (See also Tennant 1902, 81).

11. (See Tennant 1902, 94, 106).

and righteousness” (Tennant 1902, 82). The task of the human being qua rational animal, then, is to tame the non-moral “crude material of natural disposition” (Tennant 1902, 100) in accordance with the moral law, the result of which domestication we customarily call character (Tennant 1902, 107).

The foregoing is, I take it, the kernel of Tennant’s theory, though more might be said in connection with his account of the nature and genesis of the conscience.<sup>12</sup> Conspicuous to this theory in terms of Christian theology will doubtless be the absence of any sort of Fall doctrine: rather than the human race defecting from an original state of goodness, we see instead a more or less “natural”<sup>13</sup> state of sinfulness which, due to the overwhelming power of instinctual, inborn subservience to the animal appetites, almost inexorably manifests itself in actual sin once conscience emerges.<sup>14</sup> Sin, he says, is “empirically inevitable” (Tennant 1902, 110; emphasis mine). In this manner Tennant accounts for the Augustinian insight in the initial antinomy, the felt certainty that we are all enslaved to the power of sin and find it impossible to pull ourselves away from it. As for the Pelagian end of the antinomy, this too can be explained readily enough. “No natural impulse,” Tennant declares, “is itself sinful, unless present through our volition, and therefore through our fault. It is the deliberate refusal to reject the impulse, the wilful [*sic*] surrender of the government of conduct to the non-moralised sensibility, in which evil takes its rise” (Tennant 1902, 102; emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> As the appetites are inherently neutral and serve as the raw material for both virtue and vice, something more than the mere presence of impulse is needed for moral culpability to obtain. That is, sin cannot exist prior to or apart from the freedom to respond appropriately to the impulses; consequently, the Pelagian insistence on personal answerability for the existence of sin, too, is upheld.<sup>16</sup> To sum up Tennant’s position:

12. This I take to be the most contentious part of his theory, though I do not think it is needed for his overall argument to work. Briefly, I would object that for something to count as sin, it is too general to speak in terms of “an ideal” or “a moral law,” as Tennant does—then anything could conceivably count as sin or moral transgression (Tennant 1902, 99; emphasis mine). In general, his account suffers from adherence to the (in my view) wholly unacceptable idea that “ethics is to be based on psychology and sociology rather than on metaphysics” (87n), which all but compels him to adopt a largely relativistic conception of sin (pace Brannan 2007, 195). But these errors can be corrected without harm done to the overall thrust of his evolutionary theory, and so we shall leave them to one side.

13. A very slippery word—hence the inverted commas.

14. (See Tennant 1902, 107).

15. (See Tennant 1902, 107–8).

16. Though Tennant speaks of himself as rather “transcending” the antinomy (see Tennant 1902, 112, 117).

“The Fall is exchanged for an animal origin and a subsequent superposition or acquisition of moral rationality. Taint of sin is replaced by normal self-directed [evolutionary] tendencies, once very naturally, but nowadays very wrongly called sinful” (Tennant 1902, 112). But “man’s performance lags behind his aspiration” (Tennant 1902, 112)—a reality for which, given free will and apprehension of the moral law, the human person is himself ultimately responsible. It now remains to be seen how Tennant attempts to maneuver around the natural charge that he has failed to indemnify God against liability for the existence of evil.

## II. THE RESPONSIBILITY ARGUMENT

“The great objection the Christian consciousness must make,” rejoins W. Mackintosh Mackay (1903–1904, 345), “is that [Tennant] practically makes God the author of sin.” N. P. Williams (1929, 532), despite being more sympathetic to Tennant’s overall approach than Mackay, is on this score rather more emphatic:

Dr. Tennant’s position does not logically exempt the Almighty from the responsibility of causing evil, as the Fall-theory does.... We must conclude that the will of God immanent in organic evolution has brought man into existence with a secret flaw in his soul which sooner or later betrays him into actual sin. If man’s nature is a “chaos not yet reduced to order,” and if the hypothesis of a “Fall” of any kind be ruled out, we can only suppose that man started his career as a “chaos” because God willed that he should so start; and if this his “chaotic” condition involves the “empirical inevitability” of sin, then God must be deemed to have laid the foundations of human nature in such a way that sin inevitably results.

Indeed, as Williams goes on to indicate (1929, 532), Tennant does plainly affirm that God positively wills for man to be in his current “chaotic” state; at least this is the only sense that can be made of the latter’s assertion that the conflict between natural desire and moral end is “the inevitable condition of human life and the expression of God’s purpose” (Tennant 1902, 115).<sup>17</sup> The argument, which we shall dub the Responsibility Argument, boils down simply to this:

17. See also (Tennant 1902, 92–3, 11), as well as (Williams 1929, 532).

- (1) If God wills and creates  $x$ , God is fully responsible<sup>18</sup> for the existence of  $x$ .
- (2) God willed and created a being for which sin is empirically inevitable.<sup>19</sup>
- (3) Therefore, God is fully responsible for the existence of a being for which sin is empirically inevitable.

Seen syllogistically, it will be observed immediately that the argument as it currently stands doesn't quite perform all the work it is meant to. For the conclusion is not, as the critics desire, "God is fully responsible for sin," but only the somewhat weaker claim "God is fully responsible for the existence of a being for which sin is empirically inevitable." Another premise is needed here to arrive at the former, which, of course, constitutes the nub of the objection raised by Mackay and Williams. I think we can fill in the gap easily enough, however, with the following premise:

- (4) If God is fully responsible for  $x$ , he is responsible for the things  $x$  inevitably does.

From this it would seem to follow immediately that

- (5) Therefore, God is fully responsible for the fact that the being in question sins.<sup>20</sup>

I trust that (4) will be uncontroversial enough. After all, there would not be much trouble in affirming that God is responsible for the fact that Jones grows tired; nor, for that matter, could it cogently be maintained that God causes, say, a star to exist but is not responsible for the heat it emits. But if this is correct, then Mackay and Williams are in possession of the missing premise and thus have what *prima facie* appears to be a formidable objection to Tennant's theory.

Or perhaps not. To see where this argument might go wrong, it will help to consider Tennant's proleptic response to this sort of objection elucidated in the final lecture of *The Origin and Propagation of Sin*. After briefly recapitulating its main points, he explains that his theory posits that "the possibility of sin and the opportunity for its realization exist ... independently

18. We will here use the "commonsense" definition of moral responsibility, following the lead of Rea (Rea 2007, 320): "A person  $P$  is morally responsible for the obtaining of a state of affairs  $S$  only if  $S$  obtains (or obtained) and  $P$  could have prevented  $S$  from obtaining." Similar terms such as "answerability" or "liability should" be taken as synonymous with "responsibility".

19. Note that this is not to say "God created a being which, via the misuse of its free will, condemned itself to a condition in which sin is inevitable." Rather it means that God intends this "chaotic" condition absolutely.

20. It does not follow that all sin may be traced back to God's operation, but only the sins which are in some sense "inevitable."

of the individual's choice" (Tennant 1902, 119). This opportunity, he continues, stems both from man's "inherited organic nature" and his social environment, the former of which "belongs to the ordinary course of nature, whose only cause is an immanent God" (Tennant 1902, 119). Thus, insofar as sin proceeds from the failure to subject the organic nature to the rational nature, God must at least cause the conditions which, when volition is present, give rise to sin—that is, "responsibility for the possibility of moral evil and for the opportunities for its realization lies with God" (Tennant 1902, 119). But, since free will is required for the existence of sin, "responsibility for the actuality of moral evil lies with man" (Tennant 1902, 119).

Thus it is plain that Tennant would not take issue with (1) and (2) above. God has indeed created the human animal as a "chaos not yet reduced to order," in the slightly tendentious words of Williams. Accordingly, it appears Tennant would be happy to maintain (3), that "God is fully responsible for the existence of a being for which sin is empirically inevitable." But neither would he doubt the proposition expressed in (4), namely that full responsibility for a thing entails answerability for whatever the thing inevitably does. The issue, rather, is that (5) does not really follow from (3) and (4) at all; the soundness of the hypothetical syllogism here rests on an ambiguity in the word "inevitable." Tennant does not claim that sin is absolutely inevitable, but only "empirically inevitable," by which he means simply that all our experience corroborates the Pauline testimony that all have in fact sinned (Tennant 1902, 109).<sup>21</sup> He writes, "if this account of sin sees in it something empirically inevitable for every man—which of course accords with all experience—it by no means implies that sin is theoretically, or on *a priori* grounds, an absolute necessity" (Tennant 1902, 110). Rather, Tennant's view would only imply that it is immensely unlikely that someone should remain sinless—practically speaking an impossibility. Thus, for the objection to succeed, (4) would have to state

(4)\* If God is fully responsible for *x*, he is responsible for the things *x* practically (empirically) inevitably does.

However, this revised premise, too, has considerable intuitive plausibility. Though it is not, perhaps, absolutely inevitable that a human being, say, fall asleep or blink, it would not be much of a stretch to say that God is the author of sleep or blinking. Though Jones may choose if and when to sleep, given his natural constitution it is a practical inevitability that he will fall asleep eventually. And while we would not hold God responsible for the precise time Jones elects to sleep, still it would not be foolish to suppose

21. See Rom. 3:23.



God is responsible for the fact that Jones will sleep at some time. Similarly, though such-and-such a sin at such-and-such a time might not be directly referable to God's activity, that Jones will sin eventually might well be. Then again, one could perhaps reply to this line of reasoning in a broadly Aristotelian fashion by appealing to the final cause of the various human activities: the reason we suppose God is responsible for our sleep is not *per se* because it is a practical inevitability, but because sleep is a practical inevitability which serves a purpose in human life and possesses its own *telos*; consequently one ought to sleep, as it is necessary for the flourishing of the creature whose nature has been determined by God alone. Sin, on the other hand, is not like this: if sin is an anachronistic misuse of habits which now, theoretically under the dominion of reason and conscience, must be controlled to ensure the proper overall functioning of the rational animal, then there is no *telos* for it to fulfil; on the contrary, sin would positively frustrate the ends which surface with the onset of rationality. It would constitute a failure to be what God intends for one to be, in the present case an animal whose appetites are moderated and set in order by the intellectual faculty. But if this reply is on target, then (4)\* may not be as secure as it initially appeared. Perhaps it is only true that

(4)\*\* If God is fully responsible for *x*, he is responsible for some things *x* practically inevitably does.

But then the clear path to (5) would be obstructed, and the objector left with some further work to be done. Either he must indicate precisely why sin ought to be regarded as one of the practically inevitable things for which God is responsible, or else look for another way forward.

We shall not, however, run this argument into the ground with all the potential back and forth that would entail; for our purposes it suffices merely to show that there is likely a way out of the Responsibility Argument via a disputation of (4)\*. Thus the Fall doctrine dissenter has at least one strategy for defending himself against the Williams-Mackay objection. But there is, I think, an alternative means of addressing the theodicy concerns raised by Tennant's general thesis, though I am afraid it will require the elimination of our primary fallback option should it (and the above argument, too) prove unacceptable for one reason or another.

### III. MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR SIN

What the Williams-Mackay objection highlights, I think, is the widespread sentiment that we must either accept the Fall and Original Sin, or else ascribe to God the authorship of sin and evil. In this section we shall tread a path divergent from what is perhaps expected, arguing not that this

is a false dilemma,<sup>22</sup> but rather that on the Fall doctrine, too, God appears to be equally responsible for the existence of sin. Or, stated more plainly, if there are problems for theodicy latent in a theory like Tennant's, they are there for the traditional Fall doctrine as well.

Recall, first, the Responsibility Argument as it stood after necessary amendments were made to (4).

- (1) If God wills and creates *x*, God is fully responsible for the existence of *x*.
- (2) God willed and created a being for which sin is empirically inevitable.
- (3) Therefore, God is fully responsible for the existence of a being for which sin is empirically inevitable.
- (4)\* If God is fully responsible for *x*, he is responsible for the things *x* empirically inevitably does.
- (5) Therefore, God is fully responsible for the fact that the being in question sins.

It seems clear that if (4)\* is correct, Tennant's theory is shot, that is, so long as he remains desirous of upholding God's ultimate innocence vis-à-vis the existence of evil. Perhaps, we have said, there is an escape from the force of (4)\*. My basic contention here, however, is that even if (4)\* is true, an exactly parallel argument may be constructed against the defender of Original Sin such that he, too, might appear vulnerable to the very same sort of objection. Indeed, I think this argument may be levied against any proponent of the traditional Fall doctrine, so long, that is, as we suppose God's providence to include (minimally) what has gone by the name of middle knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Let us see how this might work. Following Luis de Molina, we may think of God's providence as encompassing three fundamental types of knowledge. First, in his "natural knowledge," God knows all necessary truths which, *ipso facto*, obtain in all possible worlds and are true independently of any free creative action God might take. In his "free knowledge," by contrast, God knows contingent truths which depend on his free actualization of a certain world; for instance, by his free knowledge God knew<sup>24</sup> the initial rate of expansion of the Big Bang: it could have been otherwise

22. Though I of course think this can be done, too, as the foregoing section makes plain.

23. For the following characterization of middle knowledge I am heavily indebted to (Flint 1998), esp. chs. 1 and 2, (Flint 1988), as well as (Freddoso 1988).

24. I use the past tense for the sake of the reader; nothing about Molina's theory entails God exists within time.

(contingent), and it is God who freely chooses to actualize a world in which the rate of expansion is what it is. In between these two sorts of knowledge, we might think, stands a third whereby God foreknows truths that are both “contingent” and true “independently of God’s free will.” This third category is Molina’s *scientia media* or “middle knowledge.”

Doubtless the most easily recognizable object of God’s middle knowledge is, for us, the various courses of action to be freely taken by creatures.<sup>25</sup> It is only contingently true, for instance, that on October 23, 2019 I drive my car home; but, at least if our libertarian intuitions are correct, it is also my choice to do so and therefore not God’s, and so it can be readily appreciated why Molina considers middle knowledge to be quite distinct from both God’s natural and free knowledge. Distinct though it is, however, as an object of knowledge it is still infallible: through his middle knowledge, my free, contingent choice to drive my car home on the aforementioned date is foreknown by God. Now, because of this obvious application of *scientia media* to God’s foreknowledge of free creaturely actions, it is little wonder the debate has centered almost exclusively around the Molinist entailment that “God knows with certainty what every possible free creature would freely do in every situation in which that creature could possibly find himself” (Adams 1977, 109). And it is precisely this entailment that interests me here, for with it, I maintain, it is possible to construct a parallel Responsibility Argument which demonstrates that the defender of Original Sin is in the same hot water as Tennant if premise (4)\* goes through.

To see how this is so, we can begin once more with the observation that, through his middle knowledge, God knows how a creature would freely act in any given circumstance. That is, God knows not only what Jones in fact does, but also what he would freely do in every possible situation. These “counterfactuals of creaturely freedom” may be stated thus: “agent *S* in circumstance *C* would freely perform action *A*.”<sup>26</sup> Now, if God does have knowledge of all such counterfactuals, the import for the Fall doctrine should be apparent. For, given free will—and prior to any hypothetical *necessitas pecandi*—*S* will always have a choice between *A<sup>g</sup>* or *A<sup>e</sup>* (good or evil). Granted that it is genuinely possible for *S* to choose *A<sup>g</sup>* in the first instance *C*, *S*, having elected *A<sup>g</sup>*, now finds himself in another *C* in which the choice between *A<sup>g</sup>* and *A<sup>e</sup>* becomes possible anew. And so on *ad infinitum*. Thus, even if it is incalculably unlikely that *S* always choose *A<sup>g</sup>*, such a state of affairs is at least a logical possibility; and if it is a logical possibility for *S*,

25. Though as Flint makes clear, it is far from the only one (see, e.g., Flint 1998, 42–3).

26. (See Craig 2011, 144).

it is a logical possibility for all agents, too. But this is just to say that there is some possible world in which the good is always chosen by free creatures—in other words, a world in which potentially sinful creatures never fall into actual sin.<sup>27</sup> As J.L. Mackie expresses the thought,

If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong; there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. (quoted in Plantinga 1974, 167–8)

It is clear, then, that there exist possible worlds in which free agents never sin—nay, worlds in which free agents only ever choose the good, no matter how fierce the temptations to evil. But then why didn't God choose to actualize such a world? If he was able to do so but did not, the conclusion that God is in some robust capacity responsible for sin seems inescapable: he rejected each world which contained nothing but “beings who would act freely but always go right”; he deliberately elected to actualize those creatures and events whose convergence he was certain would result in (often monstrous) moral corruption. True, on Molinism it is still ultimately our choice to go wrong, but, as William Mann sensibly points out in this connection, “we must [here] ask not why God passively allows evil to exist but rather why he actively wills evil to exist, brings evil about, is a willing conspirer in the evildoer's activity” (Mann 1988, 206). The Molinist account of providence—or any stronger model for that matter—compels us to pose the latter question. Why this world when a literally infinite array of less depraved options were available to God?

Hence, given God's knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, it appears possible to construct the following “Responsibility Argument” which ought to trouble the defender of Original Sin no less than it does the likes of Tennant:

27. Hick considers this to be damning for what he calls the Augustinian theodicy: it is, he says, “hard to clear God from ultimate responsibility for the existence of sin in view of the fact that he chose to create a being whom he foresaw would, if he created him, freely sin” (Hick 1979, 75; cf. 68ff.).

- (6) If God wills and creates  $x$ , God is fully responsible for the existence of  $x$ .
- (7) God willed and created a being for which sin is in some sense inevitable.
- (8) Therefore, God is fully responsible for the existence of a being for which sin is in some sense inevitable.
- (9)\* If God is fully responsible for  $x$ , he is responsible for the things  $x$  in this sense inevitably does.
- (10) Therefore, God is fully responsible for the fact that the being in question sins.

In what sense, however, is it inevitable that creatures sin on the Molinist account? It is clearly not absolute, metaphysical inevitability, nor are we speaking of empirical inevitability. The sort of inevitability I have in mind, rather, is best captured by further elaboration on (7). God's freedom to actualize any feasible<sup>28</sup> world coupled with his knowledge of all true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom entails that "God positively willed and created a set of agents and circumstances such that much evil would certainly result." This, I think, is what premise (7) ultimately intends to express, and it is really not so different (and may be even stronger) than Tennant's "empirical inevitability." On Molinist lines, then, sin is inevitable in the sense that, no matter how many times the universe is recreated,  $S$  in  $C$  will always freely go wrong with respect to  $A$ , and the existence of  $S$  in  $C$  is ultimately at the behest of God alone. Surely this is some variety of inevitability rather than simply loose speak—for purposes of convenience I shall call it St Andrews inevitability.<sup>29</sup>

A closer look at (4)\* and (9)\* will further corroborate the final commensurability of the two Responsibility Arguments. To assess the truth of these two premises, it must be asked what makes it the case that  $S$  inevitably sins, whether "empirically" or "St Andrewsly." In the case of empirical inevitability, it seems, the aggregate culprit is the conjunction of the free act of a morally frail nature and God's free choice to actualize this nature and attendant circumstances. There are, to say the least, many ways God could have prevented the occurrence of evil; consequently, it would be difficult to deny the *prima facie* plausibility of (4)\*. But, I think, the very same may be said of (9)\*, and this despite the Molinist's rightful insistence that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are determined by creatures themselves. For, when we

28. See p. 16 below.

29. We have Oxford commas and Cambridge change, so I thought it fitting to continue down the line.

ask what makes it the case that *S* in *C* sins inevitably in the “St Andrews” sense, the answer comes back clear as day: it is the conjunction of a true counterfactual of creaturely freedom—the free act of an apparently morally frail nature—plus God’s free choice to actualize *S* and *C*. Evil could once more have been avoided in sundry ways, and so we are led to the conclusion that, *mutatis mutandis*, the two Responsibility Arguments perform substantially the same kind of work. Given a reasonably strong<sup>30</sup> view of God’s providence, therefore, the doctrine of Original Sin fares no better as an aid to theodicy than does the evolutionary theory propounded by Tennant.

#### IV. AN OBJECTION AND FURTHER ELABORATION

It will, of course, be objected that even on Molinism God cannot actualize just any logically possible state of affairs. Because counterfactuals of freedom are contingent, and since their truth is determined by the agent himself, God is only able to create those possible worlds in which all counterfactuals of freedom are in fact true. Only these feasible worlds are under God’s power to actualize (Flint 1998, 46–54). It is at this juncture that Plantinga famously introduces the concept of “Transworld Depravity” (TWD) to defend the (possible) truth of the proposition that there is no feasible world containing moral good but no evil.<sup>31</sup> An agent *S* would suffer from TWD if and only if he committed at least one evil act in all the feasible worlds in which *S* existed (Plantinga 1974, 184–9).<sup>32</sup> But if universal TWD is true, then it would be outside of God’s power to actualize the “obviously better possibility” Mackie proposes. As Robert Merrihew Adams points out, however, Plantinga is not in the least concerned with the plausibility of such a hypothesis (1974, 116). Indeed, since the latter employs TWD only to establish the logical possibility of the coexistence of God and evil, the likelihood of its truth is, for Plantinga, neither here nor there. So long as it might be the case that all persons are transworld depraved, Plantinga has what he needs for his argument to succeed.<sup>33</sup>

30. By which I mean any view of providence which allows God knowledge of future contingents (or near-knowledge—“as if” knowledge. See p. 20 below).

31. Or, in Plantinga’s own words, “among the worlds God could not have actualized are all the worlds containing moral good but no moral evil” (1974, 185).

32. This simplified definition includes the revised account of TWD Plantinga adopts in response to (Otte 2009). For this amended definition (see Plantinga 2009; Adams 1977, 116).

33. Cf. Plantinga’s conclusion to this section: “it is possible that every essence suffers from [TWD]; so it is possible that God could not have created a world containing moral good but no moral evil” (1974, 189).

But for us the question of TWD's plausibility is deeply significant.<sup>34</sup> Even if we cannot quite concur with the judgement that TWD is strictly impossible (Meslar 2015, 210–5), still it must strike us as extraordinarily implausible. First, there is the fact that no positive evidence could ever be marshaled in defense of TWD; that is, TWD is taken seriously only inasmuch as it helps to secure the cogency of the Free Will Defense. Thus for those without a stake in this debate, TWD will necessarily appear gratuitous. But TWD might be seen to suffer from an internal implausibility as well. For, as Plantinga makes clear (1974, 185–8)<sup>35</sup> the state of affairs *T* which would occasion the inevitable misstep of the TWD sufferer is strongly actualized by God himself. But surely, we think, God could have refrained from actualizing *T*, in which case *S* would not have been compelled to go wrong? Though counterfactuals of freedom would, if known, constrain God's action in one way or another, there is nothing about them that would force God's hand in actualizing *T*.<sup>36</sup> In short, it would appear that the truth of the proposition "God cannot actualize a morally perfect world" presupposes an antecedent state of affairs for which God alone is responsible, to wit, the strong actualization of *T*; consequently, TWD seems to imply that the reason God cannot create a morally perfect world is that God Himself has already decided not to. Whatever the merits of this objection and others, however, it seems to me that, in the end, the best response to TWD is the least complicated one: the feasibility of a world in which free creatures only ever go right is far more intuitively plausible than its negation, and so even in the absence of a more sophisticated reason for rejecting TWD, the latter need not be taken too seriously.

The real debate about the feasibility of a morally perfect world, I should think, revolves instead around the very possibility of God's having middle knowledge in the first place.<sup>37</sup> Space constraints do not of course permit a full-fledged defense of the Molinist position; rather, our present purpose has been merely to demonstrate that, given the sort of foreknowledge God is said to have on the Molinist account of providence, the doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin do very little to help the theodicy. I will, however, conclude this section with a brief word on the intuitive reasonableness of *scientia media*, as my argument takes as its central presupposition

34. Adams here reads my mind: "religious thought must seek an account of the relations between God and evil that is credible," not merely logically possible (1977, 116, emphasis added).

35. This holds for the amended definition in Plantinga 2009 (see 182).

36. This objection holds for Otte's reworking of TWD, too.

37. See (Hasker 2011) for a brief anti-Molinist discussion of the two main contemporary objections to Molinism—and Thomas Flint's snappy response in the same volume (Flint 2011).

the presence of such knowledge in the divine mind.<sup>38</sup> These concluding thoughts, I hope, will further clarify the relationship this paper has sought to develop between the defender of the Fall doctrine and the question of middle knowledge.

I suspect that no argument, however ingenious, will finally settle the debate in favor of middle knowledge, if even move it an inch—the intuitions which undergird both the Molinist and anti-Molinist positions are simply too strong. As in the case of TWD surveyed above, my favored response to the standard objections to middle knowledge would not be simply along the lines of showing precisely where the critics have gone wrong (though this, too, is indispensable), but rather would I point to the counterintuitive ramifications of denying the existence of true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, as most opponents of Molinism invariably do. As Adams—no friend to middle knowledge himself—is forced to admit, there is no uncertainty about what a butcher would do were he asked to sell me a cut of meat; but if the free will objection to middle knowledge is on target, the counterfactual “if I asked the butcher for a cut of meat, he would sell it to me” cannot be true.<sup>39</sup> I would agree that our knowledge of this counterfactual, if knowledge it be, is based on prior familiarity with the butcher’s “character, habits, desires, and intentions, and the absence of countervailing dispositions” (Adams 1977, 115–6): the job of a butcher is to sell meat, and in this case, we may suppose, I know the butcher to be a decent and honest man who will gladly sell to anyone who asks. These factors influence my overall understanding of the situation (*C*) in which the butcher (*S*) will presently act (*A*); hence it is by virtue of my knowledge of *C* and *S* that I know the counterfactual to be true. Thus Adams is also correct to point to the probabilistic nature of my “middle knowledge” in this case: qua fallible human being with reasonably reliable perceptual and intellectual faculties, I do not possess absolute certainty the butcher will sell to me, but only a very high degree thereof. Consequently, in the present case it behooves us to say, if nothing else, there is an excellent chance the counterfactual in question is true, even prior to my act of inquiry.

But what of God’s perfect knowledge of *C* and *S*? Surely he cannot misjudge these and thereby be in the dark about the truth-status of the

38. Or, to reemphasize, something providentially more robust, such as the Thomist position that the truth or falsity of counterfactuals of freedom ultimately depends on the divine will. (See Flint 1998, 84–94; Freddoso 1988, 56–7).

39. Nor can it be false. The only thing that can truly be said is “if I ask, the butcher might sell.” (See Hasker 2011, 25n1).



counterfactual as I might be.<sup>40</sup> If omniscience means anything, God must know all the facts pertaining to the case at hand, both the circumstances external to the butcher and the inner-workings of the latter's mind, his thoughts, temper, and inclination to act or refrain from acting, the secret conversation within which, for one reason or another (also plain to God), might ultimately propel the butcher towards an otherwise unforeseen refusal of my request.<sup>41</sup> Thus, even if we concede for the sake of argument that true counterfactuals do not technically exist prior to the free act of *S*, in the divine mind it must be as if they existed, for to be mistaken about what *S* would do in *C* bespeaks only ignorance of what an omniscient being ought certainly to know, viz. everything about *S* and *C*.<sup>42</sup> If this points to something like a concretization of Suarez's *habitudos*<sup>43</sup> of which Adams has "[no] conception, primitive or otherwise," so be it (Adams 1977, 112). The property "being an agent who would do *A* in *C*" may be too hokey to predicate of *S*, but it represents, I think, something in *S* which is indisputable, namely *S*'s "character, habits, desires, and intentions," his thoughts, temper, and so on—that is *S* himself. But God knows *S* absolutely; therefore he knows his *habitudos*, too. Even in the technical absence of true subjunctive conditionals, then, it seems middle knowledge will remain essentially intact. And so may we conclude that, "prior" to creation, God would have foreseen the Fall and the sin of all creatures in the actual world, and that he deliberately selected this one instead of a morally perfect (or merely better!) world it was well within his power to actualize. But this appears to entail that

- (7) God willed and created a being for which sin is St Andrewsly inevitable,

and so we are back with Tennant, failing, that is, a convincing response to the Responsibility Argument put forth by Williams and Mackay.

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Now, even if the foregoing argument has been totally off base, the very fact that there is a discussion to be had surrounding these issues bears heavy implications for the doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin. Recall once more

40. Whether this divine "seeing" takes place in eternity or in time, prior to creation or at the moment of *S*'s decision makes no difference.

41. (See Hick 1979, 74).

42. If this still seems a problem for free will, then so is my knowledge in the butcher example. The latter clearly isn't, so neither is the former (we may say these cases differ merely in degree and not in kind).

43. Defined by Adams as "the property of being a possible agent who would in [*C*] freely do *A*" (Adams 1977, 111–12).

the Responsibility Argument. This argument surfaced as a response to Tennant's innovative theory which appeared tacitly to make God responsible for the existence of sin and evil. It was then seen, albeit briefly, how the objection as formulated by Tennant's critics was not quite as airtight as it was purported to be, and that even after the argument was cleaned up, purged of its logical fallacies, and put into a more rigorously analytic form, it still appeared eminently contestable. Accordingly, we might think a nonlapsarian Christianity à la Tennant seems a realistic possibility. But the Responsibility Argument is to Tennant's theory what the argument from middle knowledge is to the Fall doctrine: if God has perfect knowledge of true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, then a strong case can be made for the conclusion that God is ultimately responsible for the Fall, and thus for the existence of sin itself. Assuming our discussion of this latter argument indicates at least that the question has yet to be fully resolved, it follows that we have a significant reason to oppugn the commensurability of the Fall doctrine with the existence of an omnibenevolent God. Therefore, if it be maintained that Tennant's theory cannot be endorsed without having successfully rebutted the Responsibility Argument, neither may the Fall doctrine simply be taken for granted as if it uniquely succeeds where Tennant's theory fails. Either one must allow both hypotheses to be uncritically held, or else take up a defense of the one by seriously engaging with the arguments leveled against it. It may be said, then, that there is no neutral ground here, no default hypothesis upon which to fall back in case all else fails. The doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin are every bit as much an attempt to meet the Problem of Evil as is the nonlapsarian model set forth by Tennant, and so we are unsurprised to find that, for both theories, an easy resolution is anything but forthcoming.

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