

The possibility of a happy *Fall*

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How is it possible for sin to actually be a good thing? Hasn't our nature as human beings been fallible since Adam first sinned before God? Why does Christianity claim that Adam's fall might be in fact fortunate? These are some controversial ideas and questions to which Jason A. Mahn tries to find answers along with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. In fact, the author himself admits that: “This book does not so much think *about* Kierkegaard as *with* him in order to work *through* the role of sin and temptation in the life of the Christian faith.” (19)

Jason Mahn's study, *Fortunate Fallibility Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin* examines the paradox of *felix culpa*, a Christian concept which views sin or fault as being blessed, happy or fortunate. In other words, Mahn's book tries to connect Kierkegaard's core texts through this paradoxical Christian notion of sin as *felix culpa*, a fortunate fall.

In short, *felix culpa* means that Adam's Fall might be considered fortunate or happy in light of grace. The original sin appears as a fortunate and even necessary act for humanity since it led to the possibility of redemption, through Christ. In other terms, *felix culpa* suggests the necessity of sin projected on the larger plan of salvation.¹ Here is where Jason Mahn draws attention to Kierkegaard in order to argue against the

idea of justified sin, against the idea of sin as retroactively being good.

One of the most notable “corrections” which Kierkegaard makes to the notion of *felix culpa* is that he switches the view on sin as an *act* to sin as a *possibility*. Therefore *felix culpa* becomes *felix fallibility*, where fallibility denotes the possibility of sin (2). “Instead of naming the *act* of sin as happy or fortunate, Kierkegaard (and I) continuously name the *possibility* of sin as such” (4).

Mahn believes that Kierkegaard “provides an existential *via negativa* through which he labors to revive the possibility of faith.” (2). What Mahn suggests here is that while Kierkegaard believes that what is fortunate is not *actual* sin but *possible* sin, possibility transforms sin into a condition of authentic faith. Therefore, Kierkegaard speaks about *via negativa* as the possibility to transform that which is furthest from redemption, namely sin, into an occasion for faith. Actually this is one of the central ideas of this book and Mahn states it right from the start when he writes: “In short, that which is furthest from redemption provides a crucial tool for naming and engendering Christian faith.” (2). This means that while Kierkegaard traditionally writes about things such as despair, anxiety, sin (“all negative capabilities”) he ultimately depicts them as conditions of faith.

All these features are to be found in the book’s *Introduction*, along with a brief but very important discussion on Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* regarding the relation between faith and sin. What Kierkegaard calls faith in Abraham’s case is not his will to obey by sacrificing his son but his belief that there will be a divine restoration after everything would have been lost. Abraham’s faith suspends ethical foundations and human reason. Abraham’s faith is a paradox such as sin viewed as *fortunate fallibility* is.

The first chapter, *Figuring a Fortunate Fall* opens with a funny collage classroom situation. The professor scribbles on the chalkboard Augustine’s four stages of Christian sacred history, namely: the creation, the fall, the redemption, and the reconciliation of humanity. After she finishes the presentation, the professor is surprisingly asked by a student: “So, doesn’t

that mean sin is good?" (26). Since redemption and reconciliation come right after the fall, the student's questions seems quite reasonable. In fact, he intuitively gave word to the idea of *felix culpa*, a "fortunate Fall", the paradoxical Christian concept which Mahn tries to define in this first chapter. The author appeals to a multitude of historical and cultural references and circumstances of *felix culpa* (as happiness of sin) starting with the already mentioned Exsultet of the Easter vigil and continuing with Luther's famous advice addressed to Melancthon, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bob Dylan's lyrics and even some scene from the blockbuster *The Matrix*. According to Mahn, three main (rethorical) functions of *felix culpa* can be pointed out here: proclaiming the joy of salvation – discussed through the Easter vigil, Milton's *Paradise lost* or Karl Barth, justifying past sin – which provides a talk about Hegel, the modern idealist philosophy and the theodicies, and celebrating human initiative – as the Romantics did (20).

After spanning "the benefit of sin" "from pre-modern, self-consciously Christian utterances to alternative uses in modern idealist philosophy, Romantic poetry, and contemporary postmodern reconstructions" (30), Mahn initiates his core analysis with the second chapter, *Felix Fragilitas* in *The Concept of Anxiety. Why felix fragilitas?* What does this expression refer to? So far, Mahn has made it clear that sin is more a possibility than an act. In this case, the possibility of sin is registered by a person's anxiety. *Fragilitas* stands for anxiety where anxiety marks the possibility of sin, which might help make faith possible (21). According to Mahn, Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* "insists that human fragility, anxiety, and the possibility of sin – not sin itself – are fortunate in pointing us to graces of God." (54)

Mahn's interprets *The Concept of Anxiety* as a critique of Hegel's view on the necessity and legitimacy of evil in the process of world development; a critique of all projects of theodicy.² Thus, the chapter "deconstructs the modern theodicy's understanding of fortunate Fall in order to begin his return to earlier and more paradoxical expressions for Christian faith and beatitude." (53). It also "shows how the effectiveness of his theodicy depends on the univocity of his

(Hegel's) philosophical language". (53). Some modern interpreters of Hegel's theodicy such as Phillip Quinn and Gregory Beabout are also taken into account in this chapter.

In the next chapter Jason Mahn moves on from *fragilitas* to *fallibilitas*, a more intense condition for the possibility of sin. The author chooses here to draw on Anti-Climacus's (Kierkegaard's pseudonym) *Sickness onto Death*. Just as the prior chapter deconstructs the Hegelian projects of theodicy, this one focuses on the Romantic version of the fortunate Fall. The Romantic *felix culpa* expresses "the internally divided nature of the human as such" (97). For example, the Romantic poet believes that he needs to sin and suffer in order to cultivate creativity and spirit. Romantic heroes embrace despair and find suffering an inevitable condition of existence. Rebellion as expression of solipsist individuality represents the tragic necessity of Romantic existence; despite the suffering it fosters (97). Creativity grows through suffering and transgression – a key aspect of the Romantic view of life. As a key example of the romantic view on *felix culpa* Mahn initiates here a discussion on Lord Byron's *Cain*.

In Mahn's view, *The Sickness onto Death* deconstructs such Romantic leanings, identifying the virtue of faith in the possibility of human failure, the possibility of human sin (*via negativa*).³

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Jason Mahn's study is so challenging and demanding yet so interesting and rewarding to read. It does not provide you straight answers but plurivocity and apparently paradoxes to sustain Mahn's thesis. A feature Kierkegaard has a lot to do with.

At the end I should say that Mahn's study has a lot more to offer than what I have tried to summaries in this review. Throughout the pages of the study one can find insightful discussions on (for instance) Levinas's view on the Other, inspired analyses on the contemporary relevance of Kierkegaard's works or well chosen real life examples to exemplify the more abstract topics.

His use of language is fresh; his arguments are most coherent and powerful. His approach of Kierkegaard's texts is

revealing as it provides them with a core concept, the paradoxical *felix culpa* which ingeniously draws them together. You might say Jason Mahn's study tries to reconstruct the paradoxical doctrine of a fortunate Fall. Yet this book is not a postmodern reading of Kierkegaard, even though it uses deconstructive strategies, as the author himself notes (23), but a Kierkegaardian reading of self and sin; a fine feature which adds a sense of identity to this study.

Jason A. Mahn's contribution is one of the highlights of Kierkegaard's scholarship of the late years along with Simon Podmore's *Anatomy of the Abyss* or Patrick Stoke's *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* and it provides a fresh and challenging discussion on such a problematic and contemporary issue as the paradox of a fortunate sin is.

NOTES

¹ Mahn points to the Exultet – the processional hymn of the Easter Eve Mass – where one can read the lines:

“O truly necessary sin of Adam, which is cancelled by Christ's death!
O happy fault [felix culpa] which merited such and so great a redeemer!” (3)

² A thorough analysis on Hegel's view on *felix culpa* and on his speculative philosophy in relation with the language he borrows from Christianity is to be found in Mahn's study, pp. 60-64.

³ Even though Anti-Climacus argues that despair is necessary throughout the becoming of human self/ for spiritual maturity he ultimately describes Romantic despair as defiance, one of the most complex kind of despair Anti-Climacus depicts, though infantile.

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