Review of “Philosophical Myths of the Fall”

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Recommended Citation

One topic that deserves more attention from philosophers of religion is the theological claim that human nature is ‘fallen,’ or marred by original sin. How should philosophy engage with such an idea? Does it reveal a sheer incommensurability between theology and philosophy? There are some thinkers who have grappled with this problem, most notably Kant in his Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, but it calls for further attention, especially because the idea of the ‘Fall’ continues to influence philosophical thinking. In this insightful little book, Stephen Mulhall provides a fascinating look at three philosophers whose various projects integrate secularized conceptions of the Fall: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.

Although the history of Christian thought does not offer a tidy univocal concept of original sin, Mulhall maintains that the doctrine’s various formulations are nevertheless united in affirming the idea “that human nature as such is tragically flawed, perverse in its very structure or constitution” (p.6). Original sin is more fundamental than a basic capacity for sin (which any notion of genuine freedom entails), and it is a corruption more profound than mere finitude or imperfection. Beyond freedom and finitude, human beings have a basic structural disposition to sin, to the extent that even the very effort to overcome this disposition will be hindered by sin. As a consequence, the only possible escape from this state requires the intervention of divine grace. Such a proposal is deeply offensive to Enlightenment sensibilities, which exalt humanity’s capacity for moral autonomy. It is offensive because it insists that we need grace to pull us out of sin. But it also offends by claiming that human beings cannot even recognize the nature and extent of our fallenness without the aid of divine grace. Original sin is a problem that we humans cannot properly understand, let alone solve, without divine assistance (pp.7-11).

One common philosophical response to this doctrine is simply to ignore it, but Mulhall selects of group of interlocutors who all take it seriously, albeit in their own unorthodox ways. In his estimation, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein each understand the human condition in a way that reiterates “elements of a distinctively Christian structure of thought,” while severing these elements from their Christian framework (p.13). Such a move is not entirely surprising when we recall Nietzsche’s observation that German philosophy has a Protestant parson for its grandfather. There is something deeply true about this observation; yet if Mulhall is correct, one can also find this lineage behind Nietzsche himself, despite (but perhaps also accounting for) Nietzsche’s fierce antagonism toward his theological heritage. What Mulhall also locates in each of these thinkers is the view that the fundamental perversity of human nature can be overcome—not by divine
transformation or redemption, but “through a certain kind of intellectual practice that is also a spiritual practice” (p.12). In effect, then, each of these thinkers tries to “say what the Christian has to say about the human condition as fallen, and yet mean it otherwise” (p.13). But is this philosophically feasible? That is Mulhall’s guiding question in this book.

Mulhall begins his interpretation of Nietzsche by using Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as a reference point for the death of God. Just as the murder of a king “would permanently mark and alter the identity of its doer,” so the post-Christian world must come to terms with its murder of God. Just as Macbeth’s personal continuity is broken by his act of murder, so there is no casual transition from an age of faith to a world stained with the guilt of deicide (p.25). Contrary to the naïve, optimistic atheism that celebrates the death of God, Nietzsche’s madman is not a messenger of good news. The madman’s lantern does not bring the light of Enlightenment atheism, but a “dead light” that offers us no help in our lonely quest for meaning. This bleak picture becomes bleaker when the madman describes the earth as having become unchained from its sun, moving uncontrollably through the cosmos—straying, erring—because we have lost “that which is most holy.” According to Mulhall, this imagery does not suggest simple disorientation, but the more profound disorder of the ‘Fall’ into original sin (p.27-28).

A similar myth of the Fall appears in *The Genealogy of Morality*, where Nietzsche traces the development of Christian values (p.32). Despite their semblance of altruism and self-sacrifice, these values really serve to invert the nobility of ‘master morality’ into the weakness of ‘slave morality’ (p.35). Nietzsche wants to overthrow these life-denying values, along with any myth of the Fall and its accompanying notions of original sin, bad conscience, and guilt before God. Yet his genealogy generates its own myth—a “counter-myth”—of the Fall. Mulhall observes that for Nietzsche, “our acceptance of the doctrine of human nature as Fallen is itself the moment of our true Fall” (pp.38-39). Nietzsche even describes a “prelapsarian paradise,” where noble morality reigns supreme. In this idealized state, “the will to power finds straightforward expression and achieves apparently effortless dominance.” Nietzsche’s noble heroes live a life that sounds remarkably similar to the prelapsarian life described in Genesis, insofar as both stories depict a state that is “at once a fulfilment of human nature and a freedom from it” (pp.41-42). The noble figures in Nietzsche’s myth are subjects who lack all self-consciousness, and recognize no distinction between their interior and exterior life.

But Mulhall argues that this immediacy and spontaneity could never amount to anything like real human existence, which is inescapably mediated. Ironically, Nietzsche’s desire to escape the fundamental conditions of embodied existence starts to sound like the sort of world-denying asceticism he locates in Platonism and Christianity. Thus while Nietzsche envisions himself as a type of (anti-)Christ who will redeem us from Christianity, Mulhall provides good reason to believe that Nietzsche does not quite overcome the supposedly Christian contempt for concrete, historical existence. Nietzsche’s model of redemption is a return to an ideal state without the basic constitutive features of the human (all-too human) being (pp.44-45).

In chapter two Mulhall makes use of his skills as a commentator on Heidegger. Heidegger candidly admits that in using the resources of the Christian tradition, he aims to “radically rethink” this tradition and its impact on Western thought. One central aspect of this project, as it appears in *Being and Time*, is Heidegger’s attempt to rethink the ontological structures of human existence in terms of a hermeneutics of *Dasein* (the distinctly human mode of Being). But Heidegger recognizes
that in order to establish the ontological structures of Dasein, he has to assume a particular ontic starting point. Only by interpreting concrete ontic phenomena can he determine the ontological structures underlying them. For this reason Heidegger draws heavily on Christian texts, such as the epistles of Paul, and the writings of Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard. He also uses “quasi-theological” terms as ‘falling,’ ‘guilt,’ and ‘conscience.’ Given the ontological nature of his task, though, Heidegger cannot accept the ontic meaning of these terms at face value. As Mulhall writes, “he must use the words of Christianity…whilst meaning them otherwise.” The question is: Will he be more successful than Nietzsche in doing so (pp.48-49)?

Mulhall’s treatment of Heidegger begins, not surprisingly, with the notion of inauthenticity and ‘falling’ in Being and Time. He shows that Heidegger has quite a difficult time deciding whether inauthenticity is ontic or ontological. Does it have the necessity of an ontological structure, or the contingency of an ontic fact? If inauthenticity is an ontological structure, then Dasein would be inauthentic by necessity; authenticity would therefore be “inconceivable” (pp.52-53). But if it is merely ontic, then it is not the proper concern of Heidegger’s ontological analytic of Dasein. In sum, it seems that inauthenticity is “more than a fact but less than a necessity,” and thus “neither ontic nor ontological”—thereby disturbing the ontic/ontological distinction that is pivotal to Heidegger’s entire project in Being and Time (p.55). In succumbing to this ambiguity, in which Dasein’s fallenness is “more than an error and less than a fate,” Heidegger reiterates the fundamental ambiguity of “the Christian perception of human beings as at once irremediably lost and open to redemption” (p.56).

Next Mulhall compares Heidegger and Kierkegaard, specifically regarding the relation between mortality and the possible ‘wholeness’ of human existence. After showing Kierkegaard’s influence on Heidegger in this regard, Mulhall concludes that Heidegger is not quite as successful in transposing Kierkegaard (whose concerns are supposedly merely ‘ontic’) as he might think. Both thinkers have a keen sense of the limits of any attempt to explain human nature completely or totally. Kierkegaard insists on these limits, which point to the need for a relation to a divine Other. Heidegger, by contrast, wants to retain the task of “being-a-whole” within the scope of Dasein’s own possibilities; yet he also recognizes something about human existence that is essentially incomplete, and unfinishable. Here again, Mulhall demonstrates that Heidegger repeats an essential truth of the myth of the Fall: Namely, the “essentially enigmatic and perverse” origin of human existence, which frustrates our ambition to construct a final and complete account of our nature (p.66).

I would suggest that Heidegger’s basic moves stir up even more of a conundrum than Nietzsche’s. Nietzsche makes no claims to theological neutrality; instead, he launches his writings as an explicitly anti-Christian anti-theology, with its own myths and parodies of Christianity. Heidegger, on the other hand, purports to yield a theologically neutral interpretation of Dasein, since philosophy (the grounding science) is ontological, while theology is an ontic science. The Christian notion of ‘redemption,’ for instance, is therefore a particular ontic manifestation of the ontological structure of ‘authenticity’. But surely this is a theological move: The assumption that one can reduce redemptive grace, a priori, to one ontic possibility among others, and then posit a particular interpretation of ‘authenticity’ as the fundamental ontological structure of redemption, requires some major theological commitments. Heidegger may not understand these decisions as explicitly theological, but they are inescapably theological nonetheless. His claims to theological neutrality
are therefore highly questionable.

The final section on Heidegger addresses the relation between humanity and animality. Here Mulhall examines Heidegger’s critique of the notion—theologically rooted but philosophically reinforced—that human beings are compound creatures. According to this common view, the human species shares its bodily animality with other animals, yet is also differentiated from them by rationality (the *logos*), and the yearning for that which transcends “merely creaturely existence” (pp.46-47). Heidegger wants to challenge this understanding of human beings as compound, but as Mulhall notes, some commentators have charged Heidegger with failing in much the same way—i.e. presenting human beings as animals to which some other component is added (p.73). Further, Mulhall also notes that Heidegger has received considerable criticism for failing to recognize any connection between human and nonhuman animals (p.67). Thus Mulhall digs into the topic of animality in Heidegger, and examines humanity’s ambiguous relation to its own animality, as well the human being’s relation to other animals. Once again, Mulhall identifies a repetition of the Christian myth of the Fall—this time in Heidegger’s “conception of the enigmatically perverse animality of the human” (p.84). Noting the parallels, Mulhall writes:

> Genesis presents the human animal’s perverse drive beyond animality as conjured by a nonhuman animal (a snake), the external embodiment of its subjection to desire, in particular its subjection to the desire to be free (hence knowing good and evil, hence capable of genuinely individual existence); and through achieving such existence, it confronts animality (in itself and in its world) as essentially opposed to its needs, desires, and interests (the snake now ground, spitting and biting, beneath Eve’s heel) for reasons that are beyond its grasp (p.84).

Despite his attempt to overcome the understanding of the human as a compound being, Heidegger nevertheless continues to attest to the ambiguity expressed in the Genesis narrative.

Wittgenstein’s reflections on Augustine comprise the majority of Mulhall’s third chapter. This is appropriate because of Augustine’s importance in the doctrinal development of original sin, and also because of the relation between this doctrine and his account of language in the first book of *Confessions*. Although Wittgenstein finds much to contest in Augustine’s picture of language, Mulhall shows how Wittgenstein’s thought is similarly informed by the convergence of fallenness and language. After sketching Wittgenstein’s treatment of Augustine, Mulhall discusses Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the necessarily conditioned nature of human language and knowledge. The desire to escape these conditions, Wittgenstein teaches us, is “an inflection of the prideful human craving to be God” (p.94). Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy as a therapeutic discipline therefore has a distinctly spiritual dimension, since it works against the hubristic desire to be more than human (p.96).

Mulhall proceeds to compare Augustine and Wittgenstein on the fallenness of language, and concludes that Augustine’s portrayal of human development is more committed to the inescapable perversity of fallen existence. Short of Christian conversion, Augustine’s child will inevitably repeat the corruption of the surrounding adult world, because the child’s acquisition of language is interwoven with his observation of their sin and hypocrisy (p.103). Language becomes an expression of the will-to-power; it empowers the ego’s desire to remake its world by forcing others to submit to its will (p.106). Wittgenstein’s philosophy, by contrast, insists that ordinary life is in
some way “unproblematic,” and that we must accept it as independent of our will. Thus a central aim of philosophical therapy is consonant with the biblical notion that the self must die to itself, and surrender its illusion of “being at the centre of the universe” (p.108). While Wittgenstein recognizes the perversion of language and desire, he also bases “his therapeutic philosophical practice” on the belief “that we can inhabit our life of and with language otherwise” (p.112).

But is Wittgenstein’s philosophical therapy sufficient for such transformation, or is this a hubristic attempt to circumvent divine grace? Mulhall will not say for certain. He is not, however, convinced that Wittgenstein simply wants to supplant Christianity with a secularized model of redemption. Wittgenstein might actually be pointing toward saving grace (p.116-17). But instead of speculating about Wittgenstein’s own spirituality, Mulhall briefly suggests a thinker who helps to direct some of Wittgenstein’s insights and concerns toward Christian faith: René Girard. Girard argues that human development takes place through mimetic desire; in this regard he has much in common with Augustine and Wittgenstein. According to Girard, the subject’s desire is always triangular and mediated; I desire what the other desires, not because of the inherent desirability of the object, but because the other desires it (pp.112-13). This is the basis of all manner of mimetic rivalry, hatred, and even scapegoating. Girard argues that Christ reveals the violence of mimetic desire, while exemplifying an alternative mode of non-rivalrous, non-victimizing desire (p.114). For Mulhall, Girard’s analysis of the Christian narrative presents the possibility of conversion, redemption, rebirth, and a turning away from “the depth of our sinfulness” (p.115).

Mulhall’s sketch of Girard’s soteriology raises numerous theological questions: For instance, what is the status of the “possibility” of rebirth, or the “resources needed to wrench ourselves away from that fall” (p.115)? Is there a pneumatological dimension in this conversion? Granted, these theological questions are not Mulhall’s concern here. As he writes in the conclusion, this book has the more modest goal of “an initial reattunement”—i.e. helping the reader to see fallenness “as closer to essence than accident.” In his view, this reattunement is necessary if Christianity is to “appear as a viable, humanly inhabitable, intellectual and moral stance” (p.124). This may be true. But it is also true that when a philosophical text ventures to speak of the Christian “cure,” these sorts of theological questions do arise.

That said, this book does an excellent job of bringing philosophical concerns together with religious concerns. It is filled with fresh, provocative readings that will interest those working on philosophy of religion, as well as those interested in Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Wittgenstein. Plus, its relatively short length makes it particularly inviting. An afternoon or two is enough time to read it, though it offers much to ponder long after those afternoons have passed.

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