

“IT IS NO LONGER I THAT DO IT...”

Gareth B. Matthews

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh, I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death!

Romans 7:15-24

Like many other teachers of philosophy, I have often read this passage to students as a classic discussion of *akrasia*—doing what one knows one ought not to be doing. I have laid it alongside passages in which Plato argues that there can be no such thing as *akrasia*. I have compared it to the early part of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle tries to explain how, *pace* Plato, there *can* be such a thing. Sometimes I have discussed it in connection with the famous passage in Augustine’s *Confessions* where Augustine recalls his pleasure in stealing pears as a boy. “The evil in me was foul,” Augustine writes, “but I loved it.” (Augustine [1], 2.4) Of the stolen pears Augustine says later on,

no sooner had I picked them than I threw them away, and I tasted nothing in them but my own sin, which I relished and enjoyed. If any part of one of those pears passed my lips, it was sin that gave it flavour. (Augustine [1], 2.6)

Philosophical puzzlement aside, it certainly seems to be the case that one sometimes does a mischievous deed for nothing more than the pleasure one gets from knowing that what one is doing is mischievous. It is reassuring to have a saint confess to having acted in this way.

Paul, like Augustine, allows that the evil in him is foul. “I see in my members,”



Paul says, "another law at war with the law of my mind. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death!" But Paul does not, like Augustine, admit to loving the evil in him. Of course Augustine is confessing the sins of his pre-regenerate youth. St. Paul speaks as a regenerate Christian. But it is at precisely this point that my worry sets in.

St. Paul admits that, even as a Christian, he goes on doing evil things, and failing to do good ones. "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it," he says. "I do not do the good I want," he adds, "but the evil I do not want is what I do." So far, it seems, we have the confession of an exemplary Christian, well aware of his misdeeds, but still imprisoned in "this body of death."

What I find unsettling, even disturbing, is the way St. Paul seems to disown these evil actions as the actions of an alien agent, of, so to speak, a "sin brother." "If I do what I do not want," he says, "it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me."

How could I do something I don't want to do? I might, of course, be compelled to do it by someone else. Presumably that sort of situation is not relevant here. Alternatively, I might do it automatically, or unthinkingly. But it is an important point about sinful behavior that it is not unthinking in the way that, say, the knee-jerk reflex is an unthinking reaction to the doctor's mallet; the point about sinful behavior is that it has a motivational source at odds with one's better self. "I see in my members," says St. Paul, "another law at war with the law of my mind."

Some of our most sinful behavior is motivated by feelings and impulses we may be only dimly aware of, or perhaps not aware of at all. In the name of discipline I may vent disguised hostility on someone very close to me, say, my child, or a favorite student. I may thwart the career of a colleague, or of my wife, or of a friend, out of jealousy, or a fear of my own inadequacy—a jealousy or fear that I have failed to come to terms with in myself, perhaps even failed to recognize in myself. My capacity for rationalizing these dark feelings and impulses, and for disguising them, even to myself, may be quite considerable. It is not enough for me to deal with the conscious motives of my better self. I should also seek to recognize and deal with those hidden motives in me that thwart and subvert my best conscious purposes.

It is striking that St. Paul is, in this passage, quite sophisticated about hidden motivation. When he says, "I do not understand my own actions," he is taking a first step toward uncovering motivational sources that lie below the level of immediate consciousness. The upsetting thing is that he stops there, with the first step. He doesn't try to go on and understand this puzzlingly evil behavior by uncovering its motivational roots. Rather, he does the opposite. He distances himself from his sinful self and, seemingly, disowns the actions of that self. "I didn't mean to hurt you," I might honestly say, even though, on a deep level, my actions did indeed have that purpose. Surely it would not be Christian of me to note with St. Paul

that “if I do what I do not want,” for example, hurt you, “it is not longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.” Surely, as a Christian, I must try to understand why, in a way, I *did* want to hurt you, even if, in a way, that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Paradoxically, Freud seems to be more Christian than St. Paul on the matter of taking responsibility for hidden impulses. Here is a striking passage from an addendum to his famous *Interpretation of Dreams*:

If I seek to classify the impulses that are present in me according to social standards into good and bad, I must assume responsibility for both sorts; and if, in defense, I say that what is unknown, unconscious and repressed in me is not my ‘ego’, then I shall not be basing my position upon psychoanalysis, I shall not have accepted its conclusions and I shall perhaps be taught better by the criticisms of my fellowmen, by the disturbances in my actions and the confusion of my feelings. I shall perhaps learn that what I am repudiating not only ‘is’ in me but sometimes ‘acts’ from out of me as well. (Freud [4], 156)

Surely this is the Christian attitude to take. If I am to be a “new being in Christ,” it must not be simply by disowning the actions of my sinful self. It is not appropriate for Dr. Jekyll simply to disown Mr. Hyde. Dr. Jekyll needs to recognize the Mr. Hyde in himself, and it is the Mr. Hyde in each of us that needs to be redeemed in Christ.

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Am I the only one who has been bothered by this famous passage in St. Paul? Apparently not. A review of commentaries reveals that many commentators are made uneasy by it. Several try, in one way or another, to reassure their readers about its message.

Some commentators emphasize the idea of there being, according to this passage, two selves. Karl Barth, in his famous Roemerbrief, goes so far as to talk of two I’s, two “egos,” as Barth’s English translator has it. I only wish that St. Paul had himself talked this way. I wish he had said, “I am not simply one self, but two”; or, “there is no longer simply the I that does something, there is also the I that wants not to do it.” But Paul doesn’t say that. Instead he says, “It is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.”

Barth seems almost to be correcting Paul when he adds this:

Reality, even the reality of religion, knows but one man, and I, and not some other, am that man. It is one man that wills and does not perform; one man that does not will, and yet performs; within the four walls of the

house of sin dwells but one man. (Barth [2], 266)

Several commentators are worried lest readers conclude that St. Paul is trying to escape responsibility for his misdeeds. Here, for example, is C. H. Dodd:

So complete is the separation between the will to do and the deed, that the man feels that some alien power in him is actually performing his actions. Paul is not meaning to shuffle out of responsibility for his actions by ascribing them to the alien power. What he wishes to show is how completely he is under the *thralldom of sin*—so completely that he sins against his wish. Yet all the time there is another part of him which rebels against this thralldom, the *inner self*, which is here characterized as the *mind*... (Dodd [3], 114)

But, of course, it isn't just "another part of him" that, as he tells us, rebels against the thralldom of sin; it is, he says, he, himself. "I delight in the law of God," he says, "in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law..." Moreover, to claim that one is so completely under the thralldom of sin that one sins *against one's wish* is, it seems to me, to "shuffle out of responsibility for [one's] actions by ascribing them to the alien power."

That St. Paul should, in this passage, identify himself with the righteous, inner judge of his own wicked actions, rather than with their wicked agent, certainly has a philosophical point. The wicked actions are motivated by impulses and desires that St. Paul cannot, for whatever reason, recognize as his own. Since the motivation is opaque to him, the action it motivates is not, according to a familiar philosophical picture, really his own action.

The idea of a self as a conscious agent whose every thought and action is transparent to itself has a powerful hold on all of us. It is what gives plausibility to John Locke's memory criterion of personal identity. If I cannot remember having performed such and such an action then, according to this picture, it is not I that did it.

Present-day defenders of a memory criterion of personal identity have sought to deal with Thomas Reid's Brave-Officer paradox (cf. Reid [5], 3.6) by allowing that an earlier person-stage can be linked to a later person-stage through one or more intermediate stages. On this view it is sufficient for the old general to have been the young boy who robbed the orchard if the old general, though he doesn't remember robbing an orchard as a boy, does remember carrying out a dangerous mission as a young officer and the young officer remembered robbing the orchard as a boy.

From Locke's own point of view such a salvage effort would be misconceived. Under the caption, "Person a Forensic Term," Locke tells us that the term 'person' appropriates "actions and their merit." He insists that "personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it be-

comes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason that it does the present.” Whatever past actions one “cannot reconcile or appropriate to that present self by consciousness,” Locke goes on, “it can be no more concerned in, than if they had never been done.” Locke continues:

...supposing a man punished now for what he had done in another life, whereof he could be made to have no consciousness at all, what difference is there between that punishment, and being [simply] created miserable? And therefore, conformable to this, the apostle tells us, that, at the great day, when everyone shall “receive according to his doings, the secrets of all hearts shall be laid open.” The sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all persons shall have, that they themselves, in what bodies so ever they appear, or what substances so ever that consciousness adheres to, are the same that committed those actions, and deserve that punishment for them. (Locke [6], 2.27.26)

It is an extension of these claims, but a very natural extension, based on the same picture of oneself as a self-transparent agent, who has done all and only those things one can remember having done, to add that, strictly speaking, one has performed only those actions whose motivation one can recognize as having been one’s own; the rest are done by “sin, which dwells within me.” In this way the philosophical picture of the self as a self-transparent agent lies behind both Locke’s memory criterion of personal identity and St. Paul’s disownment of his sinful self.

One trouble with accepting this picture is that the motivation for some of my actions may be opaque to me because I have repressed those dark impulses. If that is so, then the righteousness of my conscious self may be, so to speak, in ransom to that repression, and to the deeds it produces. In a certain way, then, my sinful self may make my righteous self possible. If that is so, disowning the actions of my sinful self is hypocrisy twice over. It is hypocrisy in that the sinful deeds are also my own. It is also hypocrisy in that I, as the righteous judge, owe my distinct identity to having repressed the impulses I now assign to my dissociated self.

The commentators I have cited are worried about what we might call “first-order” hypocrisy in *Romans 7*—“shuffling out of responsibility” for one’s misdeeds by ascribing them to an “alien power.” When one does that one denies that there really has been *akrasia*. What looked like a case of *my* doing what I know I ought not to be doing is conceived as a case of my “body of death” doing what I know should not be done.

Augustine, in the pears passage, insists it was he who did the sinning; he even insists that the very sinfulness of stealing motivated the deed. But St. Paul is right to point out that sometimes one cannot recognize as one’s own the motivation for

what one does. The question is whether such motivational opacity, perhaps coupled with a conscious condemnation of the sinful deed, justifies one's saying, "It is no longer I that do it."

Here is where "second-order" hypocrisy comes in—pretending that my righteous self is distinct and separate, when such distinctness as it has rests on repression. I can say with St. Paul that, often enough, "I do not understand my own actions." But when he adds, "Then it is no longer I that do it," I become worried. It is not that I don't want to rise above my sinful past; it's rather that I fear any elevation that makes me an agent distinct from a sinful self that acts in me, will be profoundly self-deceptive. As Barth puts it, "within the four walls of the house of sin dwells but one man."

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NOTES

1. Augustine, *Confessions*.
2. Barth, Karl, *The Epistle to the Romans*, E. C. Hoskyns, trans. (New York: Oxford, 1933).
3. Dodd, C. H., *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932).
4. Freud, Sigmund, "Moral Responsibility for the Content of Dreams," *Collected papers*, V (New York: Basic Books, 1959) pp. 154—57.
5. Reid, Thomas, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (London: Macmillan, 1941).
6. Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford, 1975).