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# MORAL DILEMMAS AND INEVITABLE SIN

## R. Dennis Potter

In this paper I define *the doctrine of inevitable sin* as the view that for each human being it is impossible to avoid committing at least one sin in this life. I argue that the argument against the possibility of moral dilemmas can be transformed into an argument against this doctrine. Since we should accept the argument against moral dilemmas, I argue that we should reject the doctrine of inevitable sin.

Celestius, a disciple of Pelagius, says, "We musk ask ourselves whether sin comes from necessity or choice. If from necessity, then it is not sin; if from choice, then it can be avoided."[1]  This is a brief statement of the Pelagian rejection of *the doctrine of inevitable sin*, which I take to be part of the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin. In this paper, I show that if the arguments against the real existence of moral dilemmas are sound, then the doctrine of inevitable sin is false.[2]  I start by giving a brief summary of the traditional argument against the existence of moral dilemmas. Next, I develop an argument against the doctrine of inevitable sin based on the aforementioned argument.

Let us consider the traditional argument against the existence of moral dilemmas. There are several ways to state this argument.[3]  But I believe it's most common formulation is:

(P1) If P ought to bring it about that S then P can bring it about that S; and if P ought to avoid bringing it about that S, then P can avoid bringing it about that S.

(P2) If P ought to bring it about that S and P ought to bring it about that R, then P ought to bring it about that both S and R obtain; and if P ought to avoid bringing it about that S and P ought to avoid bringing it about that R, then S ought to avoid bringing it about that either S or R.[4]

(S1) [supposition that there is a moral dilemma for P] Suppose that P ought to bring it about that S and P ought to bring it about that R where S and R are incompatible (they cannot both obtain).

(L1) [from P1, P2, and S1] S can bring it about that both S and R obtain.

(L2) [from S1] S cannot bring it about that S and R.

(C) [by reductio ad absurdum from S1, L1, and L2] It is not the case that there are moral dilemmas.

The intuitions behind the argument are simple. We can't be held morally accountable for events that are out of our control. And if we have an obligation to do one task and an obligation to do another, then we ought to do them both. Of course, given the prevalence of *apparent* moral dilemmas some have been persuaded that one or the other of these intuitions must go. I can't contribute to this debate here, although I agree with those who think that there are no real moral dilemmas. Without defending the argument, I will show how its premises of can be transformed into an argument for Pelagianism.

First, we need to understand the precise sense in which sin is supposed to be "inevitable." One might think that the doctrine of inevitable sin is the claim that it is *impossible* for us to avoid sin entirely. Or, to state it another way, it means that for each non–divine individual, it is necessary that that individual will commit at least one sin in her lifetime. But this is much too strong a claim. It is conceivable that a person could avoid doing anything wrong *by accident*, and perhaps the advocate of the doctrine of inevitable sin could accept this possibility. What is important to the doctrine of inevitable sin is that we could not *of our own merit* avoid sin. And so, this first statement of the doctrine of original sin would be too strong.

Perhaps the doctrine of inevitable sin is the claim that it is not within our power to avoid sin. If this is right, then the key element of the claim is the operator "P can bring it about that. . ." where "P" is replaced with the name of some agent and the ellipsis with a description of some state of affairs. If so, then we might think that the doctrine of inevitable sin is the following claim:

($IS_1$): For any person P, it is not the case that, for all S, if P's–bringing–it–about–that–S is a sin then P can avoid bringing it about that S, and if P's–failing–to–bring–it–about–that–S is a sin then P can bring it about that S.[5]

But this is problematic as well. Indeed, it entails that *for each person there is some particular sin which she cannot avoid*. Surely, this is not something the Christian Fathers would have accepted. Instead, they would want to say that although we can avoid any particular sin that we commit, we cannot avoid sinning entirely. To see the contrast between what they would accept and $IS_1$ consider the following scenario.

Ezra is sent to a mall and *must* buy at least one item. Ezra can choose any item he wants, as long as he does choose one item. Now, for any item Ezra chooses to buy, he could have decided not to buy it (namely by buying another one instead). It is within Ezra's power to avoid the purchase of any given item. Nevertheless, Ezra must buy at least one item. Now if we replace "buy an item" with "commit a sin" then the scenario is exactly like the way the world might be if the doctrine of inevitable sin is true and yet

we can avoid each sin individually.

The doctrine of inevitable sin does not say that for each person there is some sin that she must commit. Instead, it tells us that it is not within our power to avoid all sin (collectively), even if it *is* within our power to avoid each sin (individually). Once we see this point we can modify $IS_1$ to get:

> ($IS_2$) For any person P, P cannot bring it about that the following holds: for all S such that P's–bringing–it–about–that–S is a sin, P does not bring it about that S, and for all S such that P's–failure–to–bring–it–about–that–S is a sin, P does bring it about that S.

Given this precise statement of the doctrine of inevitable sin we can entertain the argument against it.

Pelagius defined a sin as a failure to avoid what is forbidden or a failure to do what is commanded (Rees 169). His claim seems true enough, although I am not sure that it is a definition. (The conditions are sufficient for sin, but it is not clear that they are necessary, since we may do something that is clearly wrong and yet is not explicitly forbidden.) I don't propose to offer a definition of sin either, but only another observation. We have an obligation to avoid sin. Indeed, we certainly ought to do what God has commanded, since his commands are perfectly good. Moreover, if we can be justly punished for sin (as Christian theology assumes), then it must be something which we are under obligation to avoid. So, any definition of sin should account for this fact about sin.

Now it seems, by P1 above, if P is obligated to avoid sin, then if P's–bringing–it–about–that–S is a sin then P could have avoided bringing it about that S.[6] If $IS_1$ had captured the content of the doctrine of inevitable sin, then we would be done. After all, P1 entails that *for any sin S and any person P, P could have avoided committing S*. But as we saw the doctrine of inevitable sin states that no one can avoid all sin (taken together), even if someone can avoid each and every sin (taken separately), as is stated by $IS_2$.

One might suppose that our ability to avoid each sin individually *entails* that we can avoid all sins collectively. But this is to fall prey to the fallacy of compossibility, i.e., it is to suppose that because A is possible and B is possible, then A conjoined with B is possible. But this is obviously false in the case of any contingent claim C: C is possible and not–C is possible, but it is not possible that it is both the case that C and not–C.

Instead of assuming that our ability to avoid each sin individually would entail that we could avoid them collectively, we can use P2 to bridge that gap. It states that if P ought to avoiding bringing about S and P ought to avoid bringing about R, then P ought to avoid bringing it about that either S or R obtain. But then that means that P *can* avoid bringing it about that either S or R obtain. If we apply this "principle of conjunction" to each of our sins then it follows that we not only ought to avoid *each* sin but that we ought to avoid *all* sin (perhaps this latter claim is a tenet of the New Testament anyway[7]). And then by P1 we get the conclusion that we can avoid all sin. Yet the doctrine of inevitable sin *does* say that we cannot avoid all sin. And so there is a contradiction.

Consider a modified version of Ezra's scenario considered earlier. Ezra is sent to a mall by a particularly strange group of terrorists. For every cent he spends, one of their hostages dies. But if he does not buy at least one item, then all of their hostages will be killed. In such a case, it would seem that Ezra has an obligation to find the cheapest thing in the mall. Now the question is whether he is responsible for bringing about (and hence morally accountable for) the bad consequence of his purchase.

It seems obvious to me that Ezra is not morally accountable for the bad consequences of his purchase if he purchases the lowest priced item in the mall. Suppose that the cheapest thing in the mall is a one cent gum ball. It is not in Ezra's power to avoid bringing it about that someone will die. If the captors will kill different people depending on which items are bought (unbeknownst to Ezra), then it is within Ezra's power to avoid the death of the individual whom they kill if he buys the gum ball. So, although he is responsible for bringing about the death of that individual, he is certainly not to be held morally accountable for it, since he made the best choice that he could make.

The story of Ezra seems to show that we have an intuition that when faced with options each one of which has evil consequences, then we cannot be blamed for choosing the least of the evils. Let's call this *the least evil principle*. If the least evil principle is true, then we cannot be held accountable for committing the least evil of the sins possible for us to commit. And yet we admitted above that sins are actions for which we *can* be held accountable, i.e., that we ought not to do. We can't blame Ezra; and so we must reject the doctrine of inevitable sin. This gives us an argument against inevitable sin.

Before we state the argument let's consider a possible objection to the analogy. Someone might argue that Ezra's mall experience is not really analogous to our lifetime. After all, Ezra is in a situation where if he fails to do anything then the worst consequence ensues. But in our lives things are not this way. We have to do something to obtain the worst consequences. In response to this objection, we can grant that Ezra's mall experience is not analogous to our lives with regard to whether sins of omission or comission are the greatest evils. But that is not the point of the analogy. The point of the analogy is that Ezra must chose to buy something or not to buy something, and whatever he chooses will lead to death, just as we must choose to act or not act, and whatever we choose will lead to sin. The story of Ezra just shows us that the least evil principle holds and we can see that this is not consistent with the doctrine of inevitable sin.

So, now we have an argument against the doctrine of inevitable sin that uses the premises from the argument against moral dilemmas and a fact about sin. It goes as follows.

(P1) If P ought to bring it about that S then P can bring it about that S; and if P ought to avoid bringing it about that S, then P can avoid bringing it about that S.

(P2) If P ought to bring it about that S and P ought to bring it about that R, then P ought to bring it about that both S and R obtain; and if

P ought to avoid bringing it about that S and ought to avoid bringing it about that R then P ought to avoid bringing it about that either S or R obtains.

(P3) [obvious fact about sin] If it is a sin for P to bring it about that S, then P ought to avoid bringing it about that S; if it is a sin for P to avoid bringing it about that S, then P ought to bring it about that S.

(S2) [supposition that sin is inevitable] For any person P, P cannot bring it about that the following holds: for all S such that P's–bringing–it–about–that–S is a sin, P does not bring it about that S, and for all S such that P's–failure–to–bring–it–about–that–S is a sin, P does bring it about that S.

(S3) Let {S1, S2, . . ., Sn} be the set of states of affairs such that P's bringing them about is a sin.

(L3) [from S3 and P1] P ought to avoid bringing about S1, P ought to avoid bringing about S2, and so on.

(L4) [from L3 and P2] P ought to avoid bringing it about that either S1 or S2 or S3, and so on, obtains.

(L5) [from L4 and P1] P could avoid bringing it about that either S1 or S2 or S3, and so on, obtains.

(L6) L5 contradicts the second clause of S2.

(C2) The doctrine of inevitable sin is false.

Although the purpose of this paper is not to contribute to the debate about moral dilemmas, I recognize that someone on the other side of the fence of the moral dilemmas issue will be unmoved by my argument. I believe that something can be said to convince the reader who is a traditional theist that there are no moral dilemmas. Indeed, I think that the traditional notion of an omnibenevolent God will naturally lead one to believe that God would not give us contradictory commandments. He would make it possible for us to obey his commandments. Consider the following scenario. A mother asks her son to remain in the house. Later she asks him to take out the garbage. Now, the obvious response on the part of the son is to assume that the former command is no longer in effect. Suppose he were to ask her if her former command has been rescinded and she were to say that it has not. This would indicate that she is either insane or cruel. The implications of this for the notion that God could give commands to his children which would be impossible to obey are counter-intuitive.

Of course, the defender of inevitable sin and original sin might have several responses to this. First, she might deny that *ought* implies *can*. If so, then I find my intuitions about what obligation entails conflicts with hers. The other route is that she might accept that ought implies can and yet

claim that in some sense we all participated in the fall of humanity which has led us to being sinful. I suppose the idea is that Adam could have chosen differently than he did, and since we participated in his actions we could have chosen differently as well. Notice that, strictly speaking, this is to deny the doctrine of inevitable sin. But it does affirm another doctrine that I would want to deny: the doctrine of inevitable sin *after the fall*. This says that given that Adam commits the original sin, the rest of us will inevitably sin. The problems with this defense of inevitable sin are several. First, it is just not clear how we could have participated in the fall. After all, as far as I know orthodox Christianity denies the pre-mortal existence of human beings, and this view of our participating, as individuals, in the fall implies a pre-mortal existence. Second, it does not seem right for God to give us commandment which we cannot keep unless everyone else keeps them as well. And yet, according to the above defense of inevitable sin, we cannot keep the commandments because Adam didn't.

On the other hand, there are two objections to my argument which don't involve criticisms of the premises of the argument against moral dilemmas. For the first objection, notice that we have assumed (i.e., in S3) that there is only a finite number of sins committable by P. This might be problematic. Maybe there is an infinite number of sins committable by P, and although for any finite number of sins committable by P, P could avoid all of them, she cannot avoid committing some sin.

This is a very substantive objection. It certainly seems plausible that there are an infinite number of sins that one could commit. Of course, we can never complete an infinite number of acts, but there is no reason to think that there are not an infinite number of possibilities open to us.

One might think that we can avoid the problem by assuming that the set of sins committable by P is infinite. But this is not enough. For then it would not be clear that L4 would follow from L3, since no matter how many times we apply a principle like P2 it will never entail that we ought to avoid bringing about each and every one of an infinite number of possible states of affairs. This point suggests how the argument could be modified to handle this objection. We could modify P2 so that it does apply to infinite sets. Instead of P2 we might have something like

(P2*)  If P ought to bring it about that S1, P ought to bring it about that S2, and so on for every member of a (possibly infinite) set {S1, S2, . . ., Sn, . . .} then P ought to bring it about that each of S1, S2, and so on, obtain; and if P ought to avoid bringing it about that S1, P ought to avoid bringing it about that S2, and so on, for each member of a set {S1, S2, . . ., Sn, . . .} then P ought to avoid bringing it about that either S1, or S2, or S3, and so on, obtains.[8]

With this premise in the place of P2 and a version of S3 where the number of states of affairs in the set is infinite the argument avoids the objection. Given the truth of these premises it is not possible for someone to be able to avoid each sin and yet not be capable of avoiding all sin.

One might point out that this is a significant modification of the premise originally taken from the argument against moral dilemmas. And while

this is true, the motivation for such a premise would be similar to the motivation for P2. Indeed, we think that we should avoid all evil acts just because we also think we should avoid each evil act. The quantifier "all" can be seen to cover the set of evil acts whether it is finite or infinite.

However, saying that P can bring it about that S1, S2, ..., Sn where *n* is a large number and the S*i*'s are spread out over a wide span of time seems to strain the ordinary meaning of this phrase. But notice the phrase 'can bring it about that ...' only means something like 'can perform some set of actions which would be sufficient for ...'. This is close to the ordinary usage, but a bit weaker. And it is really all we need for Pelagianism, since it seems that the advocate of the doctrine of inevitable sin denies that we *can bring it about that* we live perfect lives in this weaker sense.

The second objection also focuses on P2. The natural way of reading P2 is that we can *agglomerate* all of the obligations that we have *throughout our lives* into one massive obligation. This seems to imply that we have one fixed set of obligations to which we are subject throughout our whole lives. But one might argue that this is not the case.[9] Our set of obligations changes with time. For instance, I may have the obligation not to kick Ben on January 19, 2009. But I no longer have this obligation if Ben dies tomorrow. Moreover, it even seems implausible to claim that I had the obligation not to kick him ten years ago when he and I lived in different states. And this is true despite the fact that I could have hitched a ride to Ben's city of residence, rang his doorbell, and kicked him when he answered the door. What obligations we *actually* have depends on what others do and what circumstances obtain. So, what our actual obligations are in the future is indeterminate. Another way to put this point is as follows. A moral dilemma is something we confront in a particular situation. But when we are talking about the doctrine of inevitable sin we are talking about a lifetime of choices and not just one particular situation. One's life is a *series* of choices in a series of different situations featuring different sets of alternatives. There is no point in time at which I get to decide how my whole life will go.

How does this have bearing on our argument against the inevitability of sin? Well, one might argue that the doctrine of inevitable sin allows that we can at any time fulfill the obligations that we actually have at that time, but that over time we will eventually slip. So, although P2 and P2* are true—i.e., we can fulfill all our obligations—it is still inevitable that we sin. We never really face any moral dilemmas in any particular situations, and yet it is inevitable that over time we will eventually make a mistake.

I don't think that this objection works. After all, if we can fulfill all of our obligations at any given time, then it would seem that we should be able to fulfill all our obligations at all times. To see this, imagine that Ezra's captors throw a new twist into their scheme. They take Ezra into each store in the mall. In each store, he has to buy one item. The terrorists make their decisions as to who they will kill based on what item Ezra buys. In each store there is at least one item that is such that if Ezra buys it, then no one will be killed. And Ezra has an inventory of all items in all stores and a list of the consequences for buying each one. Ezra has to get through all of the stores, buying one item in each, in such a way that no one dies. But the

catch is this: his purchase of a particular item may rule out his purchase of another particular item in another store—again, Ezra knows these facts as well. So, for example, if he buys a particular pair of shoes in Foot Locker, then he is not allowed to buy a sweater in Eddie Bauer. Now the terrorists could rig the game so that no matter what choices he makes on what to buy, he will inevitably have to buy something that will cause the death of someone. This would make the goal of the game unattainable. But that is not the point. The point is that we wouldn't hold Ezra responsible for the death of one of the terrorists' hostages if the game were so rigged. And this would be the case, despite the fact that it is true of any given item that Ezra could have avoided purchasing it.

Another way to see this point is in the following way. It may be the case that our future obligations are not yet determinate. But at the end of our lives, all the obligations that we had throughout our lives do make up a determinate set. This set can be agglomerated and, according to P2*, it should be the case that we could have fulfilled each and every obligation on the list.

A weakened version of the doctrine of inevitable sin would be the following. Although anyone could, in principle, bring it about that she does not commit a sin in this life, it is extremely unlikely that this will happen. So, for all intents and purposes, sin is inevitable. What does the argument against moral dilemmas say about this view? I think that, as it stands, this version of the doctrine of inevitable sin is not refuted by the impossibility of moral dilemmas. For moral dilemmas involve a certain sort of impossibility, and this version of the doctrine does not claim that this sort of impossibility obtains. So, we might just rest content with the thought that the doctrine of *original sin* only entails something like the weakened version of the doctrine of inevitable sin.

Notice, however, that the claim that we are very, very likely to make mistakes in this life is not one that is very damning of human nature. Moreover, we can imagine how someone would defend herself before the judgment bar of God after having eventually "slipped" during this life. "It was so extremely unlikely that I would *always* do the right that you can hardly blame me for having made *one* lesser mistake in this life." It would seem almost unjust to hold someone accountable for one lesser mistake[10] in the event that it was extremely unlikely that she could avoid making any mistake. If it is almost inevitable that we commit at least a one sin, then we are almost blameless for doing so.

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## NOTES

1. Quoted in Thomas, p.134. For Pelagius' defense of the doctrine see Rees (1991) pp. 164–70.

2. Bas van Frassen (1973) has argued that the argument against the existence of moral dilemmas would make the doctrine of original sin incoherent. Marcus (1993) points out that it is the aspect of the doctrine of original sin which states that sin is inevitable that would be made incoherent. She says, "[T]here are at least three interesting doctrines, one of them very likely true, that could count as doctrines of original sin. [...] A third candidate supposes the reality and *inevitability*, for each of us, of moral dilemma. Here we do not inherit the sins of others, nor need we be weak of will. The circumstances of the world conspire against us. However perfect our will, the contingencies are such that situations arise where, if we are to follow one right course of action, we will be unable to follow another"(p.132, footnote 6).

3. Marcus (1993) states this argument a bit differently than I as follows: "If an agent can and ought to do $x$, then he is guilty if he fails to do it. But if, however strong his character and however good his will and intentions, meeting other equally weighted or overriding obligations precludes his doing $x$, then we cannot assign guilt, and, if we cannot, then it is incoherent to suppose that there is an obligation." (p.132).

4. The second clauses of P1 and P2 are not usually stated. But they seem necessary since a "sin" of omission does not always involve a "sin" of commission. And the principles should apply in both cases.

5. Again, we take into account sins of omission as well as those of commission.

6. Of course, what I say here applies mutatis mutandis to the cases in which failure to bring it about that S is a sin.

7. See Matthew 5:48.

8. Notice that P2* rules out cases where we can fulfill any arbitrarily large subset of obligations but we cannot fulfill all of our obligations, as long as we can collect our obligations into a set.

9. I thank an anonymous referee and Wes Morriston for pointing out this possible objection.

10. The kind of sin committed makes a difference. Some sins are better than others. We are imagining a case in which the sort of sin committed is fairly minor in its consequences.