

O Felix Culpa!

The Fall, the Incarnation and Greater Good Theodicies

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Abstract: The claim of the Easter Proclamation that original sin is a “happy fall” (*felix culpa*) that earned us the Incarnation of the Son of God seems to virtually contain the elements for developing a “Greater God Theodicy,” according to which sin has been permitted by God “in order to” obtain some greater goods. In this paper I introduce four ways in which greater good theodicies can be drawn from the *felix culpa* claim: two “supralapsarian” ways (a deterministic and a Molinist one) and two “infralapsarian” ways (a conditional and a retrospective one). I consider the philosophical pros and cons of each proposal, showing that infralapsarian options are preferable.

Keywords: *Felix culpa*, Evil, Theodicy, Incarnation

1. Introduction

The Easter Proclamation (also called *Exsultet*), delivered every year during the Easter Vigil in the Roman Rite of Mass, contains the following verses:

O truly necessary sin of Adam,
destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!
O happy fault [*O felix culpa*]
that earned us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!¹

Of course, this is not a text on speculative theology and does not intend to contain any explicit doctrinal or prescriptive teaching. Nevertheless, it has been the object of fruitful theological considerations. The verse seems to point to a connection between original sin, i.e., the Fall of men through which every evil and suffering entered the world, and the Incarnation, i.e., the union of divine and

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2010).

human nature in the second person of the Trinity, through which redemption, saving grace, and the union of men with God came to be. Over the centuries, many thinkers have referred to the quoted passage not only in the corresponding theological context, but also as a catalyst of reflections on God's reasons for the permission of evil.

In recent years, analytic philosophers of religion have picked up this older tradition. Plantinga went on from proposing his famous "Free Will Defence" as a response to the atheistic argument from evil (Plantinga 1974), to propose a proper Christian theodicy (Plantinga 2004) based on the *felix culpa* verse, taken from the Easter Proclamation.² Plantinga claims that God's permission of evil is a function of the good-making features of the world, among which we find the Incarnation and Atonement. He calls his proposal "supralapsarian," because as it establishes that God's decision to save some man through Incarnation is in some way logically prior to His decision to allow original sin (Plantinga 2004). Plantinga's proposal has received criticism of different kinds from authors such as Diller (2008), McCord Adams (2008), and Hudson (2018). More recently, Eleonore Stump has developed a profound "defense" against the problem of suffering based on what she calls "the *felix culpa* view." According to Stump, even if suffering does not have intrinsic value, "... the post-Fall world and the lives of those in grace in this world are somehow better, more glorious, more of a triumph for the Creator, than the world and those lives would have been had there been no Fall" (Stump 2022, 8). Her proposal is guided by the idea that even wounds and scars are part of the perfection of the true self of a human being (Stump, 2022, 18).

These recent contributions show that the *felix culpa* verse still has unexplored philosophical potential for advancing the discussion about the problem of evil. In the context of Western monotheism, in which God is considered to be omnipotent, omniscient and provident, the *felix culpa* verse can be interpreted as suggesting that the Fall and its consequences have been in some way permitted by God "in order to" obtain some greater goods, namely, the Incarnation and the goods brought by it, such as redemption, saving grace, and the union of humankind with God. Hence, the *felix culpa!* verse seems to contain virtually the essential elements of what could be called a "Greater Good Theodicy."

In this paper, I will try to explain four different ways to draw greater good theodicies from the *felix culpa* verse, weighing up the pros and cons of each of them. The different positions will be assessed primarily in terms of their philosophical consistency and their coherence with a classic version of theism, in which God is conceived as a necessary existent, personal, omniscient,

² While a "defense" is a story in which God and evil can coexist without logical contradiction a "theodicy" is a story that provides an actual reason for God's permission of evil. See Plantinga (1974, 27-28).

omnipotent, omnibenevolent, eternal, and provident metaphysically perfect being.³ The consistency of the different positions with Christian doctrine in general will be considered, but without delving in detail into a Scriptural or magisterial analysis. In the first section, I will explain the difference between supralapsarian and infralapsarian interpretations of the *felix culpa* verse, and their corresponding philosophical commitments. In the second section I will introduce two ways of drawing supralapsarian greater good theodicies, namely a deterministic⁴ one and a Molinist one,⁵ and I will explain the challenges each one of them faces. In the third section I will explain two ways of sketching infralapsarian greater good theodicies, a conditional and a retrospective one, and I will assess their prospects of success. I present that infralapsarian positions are preferable.

2. Supralapsarian vs. Infralapsarian⁶ *Felix Culpa*

Let's start with some general remarks on what the theological implications of the *felix culpa* verse could be, at least at face value. First, the statement that the Fall earned us the Redeemer (Jesus Christ) could be interpreted as a sort of link between the Incarnation and original sin. Indeed, the fact that the hymn mentions the Redeemer, and not just "redemption," suggests that the link between sin and Incarnation must not be understood simply in the trivial sense that there could be no redemption without sin, but in the more meaningful sense that somehow the Incarnation itself, i.e., the fact that God himself became man, has something to do with the Fall. Nevertheless, this interpretation of the verse says nothing *per se* about the nature of such link. It could be either a necessary or a contingent link. Also, this interpretation says nothing concrete about the logical or causal order

³ This conception is common to both the so-called Classical Theism, which affirms divine attributes such as simplicity, immutability and timelessness (see Feser 2023), and Neo-Classical Theism, which denies any or all of these divine attributes (see Feser 2022 and Timpe 2015). I do not call this conception Perfect Being Theology, because this expression does not refer to a completely determined conception of God, but to a method for deriving divine attributes a priori from a definition of God as the maximally perfect being. See Leftow (2011), Speaks (2014), and Kvanvig (2021).

⁴ By "deterministic" I refer here to "theological determinism," i.e., the idea that God determines all events that occur in the history of the world, including the voluntary actions of rational creatures.

⁵ This distinction between determinism and Molinism does not deny that the latter can be considered as a kind of "indirect" determinism. See Leftow (2021) and Echavarría (2017).

⁶ "Supralapsarianism" and "Infralapsarianism" are terms used traditionally to refer to different positions regarding the order of the decrees of God concerning election, reprobation, and the Fall. Here I will use the terms to refer to different positions concerning the order of the decrees of God in relation to the Fall and the Incarnation.

between God's decision to allow the Fall and His decision to become man. It could be either that the former is (at least logically) prior to the latter or vice versa.

In the second place, the claim that Adam's sin was "necessary," could be interpreted as suggesting that original sin is a sort of "condition" for the Incarnation. Nevertheless, this interpretation says nothing about the nature of such condition. It could be interpreted in a strong sense of necessity, so that God *could* not have become incarnate without sin.⁷ It could be interpreted as a *de facto* or hypothetically necessary condition, so that, counterfactually, God *would* not have become incarnate had men not sinned. It could be interpreted as a mere occasion, so that we know that God became man because of sin, but could have become incarnate for other possible reasons. However, the verse presumably rules out the theological idea of absolute Incarnation, or "Incarnation anyway,"⁸ according to which God would have become incarnate in any counterfactual scenario, with or without sin.

Finally, the idea that the Fall was "happy" or fortunate, could be interpreted as suggesting that, by virtue of the original Fall, some goods have been obtained (more precisely, the Incarnation itself and all its good consequences, such as saving grace and redemption), which are greater than the goods that have been lost by virtue of that very sin. Nevertheless, this says nothing about whether the overall result (understood in terms of the amount of goodness of creation) is *necessarily* better with sin than it would have been without it, or whether the goods achieved through the existence of sin could have been obtained without it. It neither implies *per se* that original sin is the *cause* or the *means* through which those greater goods are achieved.

With these general considerations and possible alternative interpretations as a background, I think that there are at least two broad ways in which a *felix culpa* theodicy can be construed, depending on the order in which one considers the decrees of God are issued with regard to the permission of the Fall and the decision of the Incarnation. If one considers that God's decision to become incarnate is logically prior to His decision to allow the Fall, so that He has decided to allow sin *because* He wanted the Incarnation to take place, the result is a sort of "supralapsarian *felix culpa* doctrine" (hereafter, *SFC*).⁹ If one considers that God's decision to become incarnate is, in some way, at least logically subsequent to His

⁷ In turn, it could be a metaphysical, logical or moral necessity.

⁸ For a complete account on this position see van Driel (2008).

⁹ I consider important to make a clarification. In the context of the doctrine of Incarnation, the term "supralapsarianism" sometimes refers to the idea of "Incarnation anyway," namely, the idea that God would have become incarnate with or without the Fall. However, in line with Plantinga's use of the term, here I will use "supralapsarian *felix culpa* doctrine" to refer to a doctrine in which God's decision to become incarnate is prior to the Fall, but linked with it in a way that makes sense to call it "happy" or "fortunate."

decision to allow the Fall, so that He decided to incarnate *because* of His knowing that the Fall takes place, then the result is a sort of “infralapsarian *felix culpa* doctrine” (hereafter, *IFC*).

The defining feature of *SFC* is the idea that God, in His providential plan, wills in the first place, and in an absolute consideration (i.e., without any condition), to produce certain higher goods, namely, the Incarnation and its consequences, such as redemption. In the second place, and as a result, He wills everything that is required to achieve those goods. Since there seems to be a certain link between the Fall and the Incarnation, God allows (or even produces) the former as a means or, at least, as a *conditio sine qua non* (without which) those higher goods could not be obtained.

IFC, on the other hand, takes a different approach. According to *IFC*, God does not intend to become incarnate in the first place. He creates men with free will so they can respond to His call to blessedness, but in giving them free will He opens the possibility for them to reject Him through a defective use of it. On a second consideration, and as a consequence of men effectively rejecting His call and sinning, He decides to become a man to redeem us. In this perspective, sin is neither a means nor a *conditio sine qua non* (i.e., without which) some goods willed by God beforehand *could* not be achieved, but rather it is either a condition without which those goods *would* not be achieved, or simply a *de facto* “occasion” for God’s decision to overcome the losses with greater goods, such as the Incarnation and its consequences.

Even if *SFC* and *IFC* are in principle both legitimate interpretations of the *felix culpa* verse, the philosophical commitments of both positions are quite different. *SFC* seems to require a conception of God’s sovereignty in which God is in absolute control beforehand (whether directly or indirectly) not just of the final overall goodness of the outcome, but also of the concrete and specific way in which the will of rational creatures contributes to the production of such goodness. Indeed, if God’s decision to become incarnate is prior to His decision to allow the Fall, and if the occurrence of the Fall is somehow required for the Incarnation, then God needs to be completely sure (or, moreover, *make* sure) beforehand that the Fall will occur. This, as we shall see, does not imply that *SFC* should necessarily adopt a fully deterministic view of created free will. It would suffice for *SFC* to find some plausible way to grant God’s absolute foreknowledge of the Fall.

In turn, *IFC* seems to require a certain openness on the part of God. Indeed, if God did not want Incarnation in the first place but decided to become incarnate as a response to human sin, it means that He did not have a completely settled plan “beforehand,” but rather that, in giving His creatures free will, He was open to different possible outcomes, some of which imply men acting against His will (i.e., sinning). This does not need to mean that God is not in control of the overall

goodness of the final outcome, or that it is not possible for Him to produce certain effects with an infallible and unconditioned will beforehand; it simply means that, at least with regard to human free will, He is open to the possibility of different ways to achieve the final goods He wants to obtain. *IFC* presents a picture of a God that takes some risks, even if He is in control of the final result. As is obvious, this picture seems to require essentially a libertarian-incompatibilist account of created free will. In the following sections I will analyse what the prospects of *SFC* and *IFC* are when it comes to drawing greater good theodicies.

3. Different Models of SFC

As I explained above, *SFC* requires absolute control on the part of God of the outcome of created free will. However, there are different ways in which God can ensure the result, through direct or indirect means. This gives rise to at least two different sorts of *SFC*:

3.1. *Deterministic supralapsarian felix culpa*

One option is to offer a deterministic supralapsarian *felix culpa* (hereafter, *DSFC*). In this option, the story develops as follows: for some reasons (for His own Glory, or to better manifest His goodness, mercy, and justice, etc.) God wants to create a world with some amount of goodness and value, in which the Incarnation (and its subsequent good effects) takes place. To make this possible, He creates men and provides them with the capacity of willing good and evil. At a certain point, God either pre-determines created free will to commit sin or —if we want to talk about God “allowing” or “permitting” sin instead of causing or producing it—, He decides not to give men the aid without which He knows they will certainly sin.¹⁰ As a result, men sin, and so God takes the form of human flesh in order to redeem humanity, as He had planned from the outset. The success of this kind of *DSFC* as a prospect for a greater good theodicy depends, of course, on the plausibility of theological determinism in general. Let’s assume that plausibility, for the sake of the argument, and see how a greater good theodicy could be drawn from *DSFC*.

In *DSFC*’s story, the Fall is not simply a mere condition, but also a *means* for achieving an end, namely, the Incarnation. So, in an *SDFC* theodicy, the reason why God produces or allows evil, is to obtain certain higher goods, such as the Incarnation and the goods derived from it. Also, the goodness achieved by virtue

¹⁰ This is how some determinist Thomists explain the permission of sin. See for instance Báñez (1934, 488a).

of the Fall and its consequences is greater than the loss produced by it. So, in an *SDFC* theodicy, the production or the permission of evil is justified by the total balance in which evil is overcompensated by greater goods. However, in this story it is not clear why and how the Fall and the Incarnation are linked. Why could God not have become man and produced the higher goods He originally intended without allowing sin? Why could God not have achieved His goals in creation (including the Incarnation) by other means and without losses?

To succeed as a greater good theodicy, *DSFC* needs to offer an answer to these questions. One simple answer could be to be skeptic about the nature of the link between sin and the Incarnation, appealing to St. Paul's "abyss of divine wisdom" (*Rm.* 11, 33). If we have independent solid reasons to believe in the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God and to support theological determinism, we could say simply that God must have some reason to act in the way He does, even if we cannot fully understand it. So, given that the Fall and the Incarnation both take place, and given that God acts based on His wisdom, He must have had some reason to allow the former and repair it with the latter. This could be a legitimate response, but it does not do much to advance a proper theodicy. This approach would be in fact closer to a form of Skeptical Theism,¹¹ which is more a defence than a theodicy.

Another option would be to try to provide a plausible explanation for what the link between sin and Incarnation could be. In this regard, there are at least three non-exclusive ways in which *DSFC* could try to ground such a link:

a. Economy: perhaps the reasons to think that sin and the Incarnation are linked are economic in nature. It could be the case that allowing sin is the shorter, simpler, and more parsimonious way for God to achieve His goal of obtaining the Incarnation and the goods derived from it. Given God's wisdom, it would be necessary (at least morally) for Him to choose the simpler ways in His works, so that the link between sin and Incarnation would become necessary too. However, this hypothesis faces some obvious difficulties. In the first place, it does not explain the reason why it is more economical for God to do things that way. In the second place, applying economic norms to God's decisions does not seem to be the most suitable way of approaching this matter. Economic principles work

¹¹ Skeptical Theism has been paradigmatically defended by Bergmann and Rea (2005). Hudson (2018, 285-286) has argued from Skeptical Theism that a *felix culpa* theodicy cannot succeed, because we are not in an epistemic position to know whether there are no other possible worlds without Incarnation and Atonement, but with some comparable goods. This does not invalidate what has been said here, namely, that if we assume from the facts that God has created a world with the Fall and the Incarnation, and if we assume His wisdom and goodness and that everything in the world is determined by Him, we can presume that He has had some reasons for actualizing this world, so there must be some link between the Fall and the Incarnation, even if we ignore what this link is.

in the context of scarce goods. Given God's omnipotence, it is not clear how and why He should save expenses when trying to achieve His goals.

b. Aesthetics: Perhaps the reasons to think that sin and Incarnation are linked are aesthetic in nature. It could be the case that, like shadows in paintings or silences in music, the contrast between the Fall and the Incarnation and more broadly, between good and evil, increases the beauty of God's works. This hypothesis, however, requires some ontological commitments that are hard to take on board. Indeed, in this hypothesis there must be something about the nature of sin (or evil in general) that allows it to increase *per se* the perfection of the world. Hence, to provide this kind of ground to the link between sin and the Incarnation, *DSFC* would need to give an account of the nature of evil different from the traditional definition of evil as a "privation." But this is a difficult task, if one wants to avoid either falling into an ontological dualism —i.e. the idea that good and evil are ontological principles—, or dissolving the essential difference between good and evil.¹² Both alternatives are at face value incompatible with traditional Theism, which affirms that God is absolutely and essentially good, and that He is the source of all being and goodness (see Aquinas, *ST I*, 6, 3).

c. Theology of Atonement: a third, and perhaps more obvious, way of linking sin and the Incarnation has to do with the nature of Atonement. It is plausible to think that, given the nature of sin itself, the conditions needed to repair its consequences can only be achieved through God becoming man, and suffering and dying for us, as different theologies of Atonement explain (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo I*, c. 5; Aquinas, *ST III*, 1, 3). Therefore, given that from a supralapsarian perspective, God's decision to become incarnate is logically prior to His decision to allow sin, if God wanted the Incarnation to take place, He had to make sure that something worthy of it (namely, the Fall) took place also. But this means that, to ground the link between sin and the Incarnation and succeed as a theodicy, *DSFC* needs to reverse the order of the usual explanation of Atonement: the nature of Incarnation (and the goods that are obtained through it) should be such that God could only produce it as a remedy for sin. There could be no other possible reason for God to become incarnate, otherwise God would have no sufficient reason to determine or allow creatures to commit sin, and there would be no reason to consider the Fall "happy" or fortunate. It follows that, if it is not to relapse into a skeptical view about God's wisdom, *DSFC* needs to provide a further explanation of why God could not have obtained the Incarnation (and the goods derived from it) without sin or, more generally, why there are some higher goods that God could not obtain without permitting some evil.

¹² The characterization of evil as dissonance is frequent in Leibniz's early writings. For an exposition and critique of this position, see Echavarría (2011, 47-80, and 2019, 84-86).

Finally, *DSFC* has the more fundamental problem (inherent to all forms of determinism) of explaining how creatures are fully morally responsible for their own sin, and that God is not ultimately responsible for it. The success of *DSFC* in this regard, depends on the success of theological compatibilism in general.¹³ Of course, all these difficulties do not completely rule out the possibility of developing a successful *DSFC-based* greater good theodicy, but perhaps turn it into a less attractive option in the face of other less problematic alternatives.

3.2. Molinist supralapsarian *felix culpa*

Another option is to offer a Molinist supralapsarian *felix culpa* (hereafter, *MSFC*). In this option, the story develops as follows: for some reasons (for His own Glory, to better manifest His goodness, mercy, justice, etc.), God wants to create a world with some amount of goodness and value, in which the Incarnation takes place. In order to make this possible, He decides to create men and to provide them with the capacity of willing good and evil. There are non-trivially true counterfactuals of created free will, and God, being omniscient, has perfect knowledge of them, which we call 'middle knowledge.' With His middle knowledge, God knows that certain individuals, when placed under certain circumstances, would freely sin. He also knows, with His middle knowledge, that the possible worlds in which the Incarnation can take place are only those in which men commit original sin. So He decides to create a world in which men are put in circumstances under which they will certainly (and freely) sin, and in which the Incarnation will take place. Let's see how a greater good theodicy could be drawn from *MSFC*.

In this story, the Fall is a necessary condition for the Incarnation, because there is no possible world with the Incarnation and without the Fall and its consequences. So, in an *MSFC*-theodicy, the reason why God allows evil is to obtain certain higher goods, like the Incarnation and the goods derived from it. Also, the goodness achieved by virtue of sin is greater than the loss produced by it. So, in an *MSFC*-theodicy, the permission of evil is justified by the total balance in which evil is overcompensated by greater goods. However, again, it is not clear in this story why and how original sin and the Incarnation are linked. In other terms, it is not entirely clear at first glance what could possibly make true that every possible world that includes the Incarnation also includes the Fall and its consequences.

To be a successful greater good theodicy, *MSFC* needs to offer an answer to this question. Of course, the theology of Atonement is also available here. In fact,

¹³ Compatibilism affirms that determinism is compatible with free will and, consequently, with moral responsibility. For a representative version of theological compatibilism see Baker (2003).

Alvin Plantinga, who proposes a sort of *MSFC*, treats the Incarnation and the Atonement as a single and inseparable thing,¹⁴ and so he takes it as a given that there could only be Incarnation (and Atonement) in a world with the Fall (Plantinga 2004, 9). Nevertheless, he does not offer any reason why there could be no Incarnation (and the goods derived from it) without sin. Therefore, the difficulties mentioned above for *DSFC* remain here.

But perhaps *MSFC* doesn't need much more than middle knowledge itself to grant the link between sin and the Incarnation. After all, middle knowledge is supposed to be pre-volitional, i.e., a type of knowledge that God has naturally, independently of any decision actually taken by God Himself or by His creatures.¹⁵ Hence, if there are non-trivially true counterfactuals of created free will and God knows that those possible worlds in which the Incarnation obtains simply *happen to be* those same worlds in which original sin takes place, there is no need to look for another ground for the link. God just knows beforehand that that's just the way things *would be*. All that *MSFC* needs is to find an independent way to grant that God effectively has middle knowledge. Perhaps this can be done via Perfect Being Theology (God has every possible perfection that is compatible with maximal perfection; middle knowledge is a possible perfection and is compatible with maximal perfection; hence, God has middle knowledge).¹⁶ If there is a way of showing that there can be non-trivially true counterfactuals of free will (and so, that knowledge of them is a possible perfection), then *MSFC* could be victorious. However, since the "grounding objection" is probably the main concern with regard to the plausibility of middle knowledge,¹⁷ it would be useful for *MSFC* to find an objective ground for the truth of counterfactuals of free will and consequently, for the link between sin and the Incarnation. Furthermore, without a ground for such a link, we would only be in a position to assert that such a link is possible—in the way Plantinga (1974, 184–189) holds that transworld depravity of all individuals is possible—, but not necessary. Under these conditions, *MSFC* would be no more than a mere defense, but it could not in any case be a theodicy.

One way of grounding the link between the Fall and the Incarnation could be to take Leibniz's way, and appeal to individual essences and compossibility. It could be the case that there are *haecceities* (i.e., individual essences), so that every possible substance has a complete concept that includes everything that could be attributed to it with truth if it were put in existence. Perhaps God, being omniscient, has perfect knowledge of the individual essence of every possible

¹⁴ Contrary to Plantinga, Diller (2008, 90-91) has correctly pointed out that Incarnation and Atonement (and thus evil) are not necessarily linked, and that one could occur without the other.

¹⁵ The strongest version of this account in recent years can be found in Flint (1998).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Suárez (1857, 356a, n. 4).

¹⁷ This argument was paradigmatically proposed by Adams (1977).

substance, so that He also knows which individual substances can be put together in the same world and which individual substances cannot. Perhaps all possible worlds of sufficient value for God to decide to create them (or the best of all possible worlds, if there is one), contain sin and the Incarnation in their very possibility. Consider the following passage by Leibniz:

God has had infinite concurrent reasons to consider at the moment He judged that this universe was worthy of His election. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the main reason was that, in the perfect representation of this possible world in the idea in the divine intellect, together with the fall of man was also surely the Incarnation of the Son of God. (Leibniz 1948, 343)¹⁸

This perspective would also be compatible with (and provide a ground for) economic and aesthetic explanations of the link between sin and the Incarnation. Indeed, one can think that the best possible world, which includes sin and the Incarnation, is the world in which God's ends are achieved through the most parsimonious means. And one can also think that the best possible world is the most harmonious one in terms of aesthetic proportions, without having to commit to an ontological definition of evil.

Nevertheless, this way of supporting *MSFC* has its own difficulties. If there are individual essences, and if each individual substance contains essentially everything that can be predicated of it, this means that there are some individuals whose nature is such as that, if they are put into existence, they will inevitably sin. This makes it difficult for *MSFC* to explain how those creatures are ultimately and fully morally responsible for their own sin, and how God cannot be found ultimately responsible for it, for it is He who decides to bring them into existence with all the properties they include in their essence.¹⁹

3.3. Greater problems for *SFC* in general

This leads us to a final challenge for *SFC*. Considered in its general terms, I think that *MSFC* seems to be in a much better position for laying the foundations of a successful greater good theodicy than *DSFC*. However, both can be subject to a sort of Dostoevsky's "Ivan Karamazov" objection. Both *DSFC* and *MSFC* seem to have an implicit consequentialistic approach to divine motivations and conduct. For them, God's primary goal seems to be not the flourishing and happiness of individual creatures, but rather the achievement of certain higher goods that God has decided to obtain (among which we find the Incarnation), even if it means the ruin of some of His creatures. Hence, given that the Fall and its consequences

¹⁸ Translation is mine.

¹⁹ For a critique of this aspect of Leibniz's theodicy, see Echavarría (2011, 297-305).

are either the means or the *conditio sine qua non* for obtaining those goods, it seems that the rational creatures that commit sin are, at least to some extent, instrumentalized by God for achieving His own ends. Provided that, through a compatibilist account of free will or through a libertarian-Molinist account of free will, we can grant that those creatures are fully morally responsible for their own sin, there will still remain the problem of the compatibility between the existence of hell and God's universal salvific will. It is an explicit Christian doctrine the idea that, in some relevant sense, God's primary intention is for each and every human being to be saved (*I Tim. 2, 4*). At the same time, for a substantial part of Christian tradition, eternal damnation is the appropriate punishment for those sinners who, at least as an indirect consequence of the Fall, obstinately reject God's saving grace. Now, in the supralapsarian picture, God, knowingly and willingly, decides beforehand either that some creatures will sin, or that some creatures that He foresaw would commit sin, will exist. If some of those creatures finally end up in hell, then it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that God never wanted them to be saved really, but rather He has created them for eternal damnation from the outset. In this scenario, it seems that God has instrumentalized those creatures to achieve some goods that have nothing to do with their own happiness and salvation.²⁰ If *DSFC* and *MSFC* want to avoid this conclusion, they have two alternatives. One of them is to simply deny God's universal salvific will. The other alternative is to embrace universalism, and to affirm that, in the end, everyone will be effectively saved; this way, the good obtained by God through the Fall and individual sins will ultimately revert in some way to the sinners themselves.²¹ Both alternatives are controversial and are not universally accepted as orthodox by Christians, so embracing either of them is perhaps a high price to pay for those who want to maintain *SFC*.

4. Infralapsarian *Felix Culpa*

As I explained above, *IFC* presents a picture of a God that takes some risks, even if He is in control of the final outcome. The general story for *IFC* develops as follows: for some reasons (for His own Glory, or to better manifest His goodness, mercy, and justice, etc.) God wants to create a world with some amount of goodness and value, in which we find personal creatures capable of participating in God's blessedness. To this end, these rational creatures are endowed with

²⁰ Diller (2008, 97) expresses a similar concern regarding Plantinga's position. Leftow (2021) has argued that Molinism is *per se* incompatible with an orthodox view of hell.

²¹ But even those who subscribe to universalism will have to deal with the problem, noted by McCord Adams, of "horrors," i.e., extremely ruinous and person destroying evils that "threaten to swallow up the positive meaning of the participant's life" and that "do not have instrumental value for the horror participant" (McCord Adams, 2008, 136).

libertarian free will, so they can freely accept God's call to blessedness. In giving them libertarian free will, God opens the possibility for them to reject His love, so He allows sin to eventually take place, but without determining it or ensuring it beforehand. At a certain point, men sin, and so God decides to become man to redeem humanity and super-compensate for evil with some greater goods, such as the Incarnation itself, and the goods that it brings.

In this picture we can say that in some way the permission of evil (understood as the possibility of the defective use of free will granted by God in giving creatures libertarian free will) is justified by the greater goods that God knows that He can eventually obtain (and in fact obtains) once such evil is produced, so that He would not allow evil to eventually take place unless He knew He could obtain those greater goods from it. This seems to be the idea contained in the classical "greater good" formulation proposed by Saint Augustine:

the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He could bring good even out of evil. (Augustine, *Enchiridion*, c. 11)

IFC is consistent with what Christian revelation and tradition seem to say concerning the "actual" reason for the Incarnation, namely, that God became man *propter nostram salutem*, as the Nicene Creed says, i.e. as a response to men's sin (*Luc.* 19, 10; *I Tim.* 1, 15). This is a clear advantage for *IFC*. Indeed, since the Incarnation is a supernatural work of God, it seems appropriate to seek the reasons for it in what God himself has revealed. As Thomas Aquinas says:

For such things as spring from God's will, and beyond the creature's due, can be made known to us only through being revealed in the Sacred Scripture, in which the Divine Will is made known to us. Hence, since everywhere in the Sacred Scripture the sin of the first man is assigned as the reason of the Incarnation, it is more in accordance with this to say that the work of the Incarnation was ordained by God as a remedy for sin; so that, had sin not existed, the Incarnation would not have been. (Aquinas, *ST III*, 1, 3)

Nevertheless, according to *IFC*, there is no reason to think that God *could* not have decided to incarnate without sin taking place. Given omnipotence, this appears to be a metaphysical possibility, as Aquinas himself says immediately after the text quoted above: ". . . the power of God is not limited to this; even had sin not existed, God could have become incarnate" (Aquinas, *ST III*, 1, 3). Moreover, we could think of different reasons, other than the Fall, that could motivate God to become man, such as establishing friendly companionship with human beings, as Stump suggests (2022, 8). Given this, within the boundaries of *IFC*, there can

be different ways to understand the role of sin and Incarnation and their relation to God's plan. This leads us to consider different models of *IFC*, depending on whether we consider that the Fall is the only reason why God *would* have decided to produce some greater goods (such as the Incarnation and its fruits), or not.

4.1. *Conditional infralapsarian felix culpa*

Let's consider in the first place what we could call conditional infralapsarian *felix culpa* (hereafter *CIFC*). According to *CIFC*, the Fall is not an "absolute necessary condition" for Incarnation. In this approach, God has freely decided to make conditional His decision to become man on some important event taking place, namely, some really serious evil (in the current case, original sin), so that, as Aquinas says, "had sin not existed, the Incarnation would not have been" (Aquinas, *ST* III, 1, 3). Hence, given God's free decision not to become incarnate unless the Fall takes place, sin would not be a *conditio sine qua non* (i. e. a condition without which) the Incarnation *could* not have taken place, but, at most, a *conditio sine qua non* it *would* not have taken place. Therefore, for *CIFC*, there is a link between sin and the Incarnation, but in this case, it is a *de facto* condition, a link that has been freely established by God. In a *CIFC*-theodicy, the goodness achieved by virtue of the occurrence of original sin is "in fact," but not by principle, greater than the loss produced by it. Nevertheless, sin or evil could be seen here as a "hypothetically necessary condition" for obtaining some greater goods that God originally had not intended.

Of course, *CIFC* faces some difficulties. In the first place, if God is good and wise, it is not clear why He would make the decision to subordinate His greatest and most noble work (i.e., the Incarnation) to something as vile as sin, as Duns Scotus objects (*Ordinatio* III, 7, 3, 14:355a). Or, put more generally, why would He subordinate His decision of producing some greater goods to the permission of some evil. Hence, to be successful, a *CIFC*-theodicy needs to provide a plausible answer to the question why God could have decided to make the Incarnation conditional on men's sin. Of course, economy, aesthetics, and the theology of Atonement are also possible options here. But some of these options face the same problems mentioned above for *SFC*: Why would it be more "economical" to produce the Incarnation on the condition of sin than without that condition? Why would it be more "aesthetic"? Certainly, the theology of Atonement makes more sense here: if, given the nature of sin, the reparation of its consequences can only be achieved through God becoming man, suffering and dying for us, then it seems perfectly fitting for Him to conditionate the Incarnation to the occurrence of sin. However, the question could still remain why subordinate such an important and noble decision to such ignoble event.

But perhaps *CIFC* has another option at hand. Perhaps God's decision to make the Incarnation conditional on the occurrence of the Fall has more to do with God's way of being than with the nature of sin. Let's consider the following explanation. Suppose God has something like a moral character. By this I do not mean simply that we can attribute to Him analogically the moral virtues that we find in creatures, as Classical Theism has traditionally held (Aquinas, *ST I*, 21, 1, ad 1). By moral character I refer here to something like a "personality," i.e., a stable way in which a person is and that rules the preferences according to which he or she behaves. Think of the way in which saints and mystics, people who are supposedly closer to God, usually refer to Him and to the way in which He treats them.²² Beyond the attributes that are rationally accessible to us through philosophical analysis, there could be some intimate aspects of God's way of being that are only accessible by personal experience, and that reveal His true self, so to say.

If all this sounds plausible, we could think that, perhaps, God's decision to make the Incarnation conditional on the occurrence of original sin has something to do with His moral character. Think of people who are capable of great achievements and sacrifices, but that, given their moral character, only proceed to act in that extraordinary way under extreme circumstances.²³ Several places in the Gospel seem to portray God as having that kind of moral character. The parable of the prodigal son (*Luke* 15, 11–32) and the parable of the good shepherd (*Matthew* 18, 12–14, and *Luke* 15, 3–7), for instance, are clear examples of stories that demonstrate how God makes His greatest efforts and reveals His truest merciful and loving character on the occasion of His children turning away from Him. Perhaps then, God's decision to become incarnate as a consequence of sin is not based on any sort of sufficient reason or metaphysical ground that links both events, but rather it is simply based on the way God *is* and *behaves* in terms of His moral character. Moreover, perhaps He allowed or opened the possibility of sin eventually taking place (by giving men libertarian free will), because He thought that this would eventually give Him the opportunity to better show His love for men, by overcompensating evil with greater goods, such as the Incarnation and its fruits.²⁴

²² See, for instance, Santa Teresa de Jesús (1997, c. 1-4, 177-204).

²³ It is important to point out that this way of proceeding should not in principle imply any character defect, as long as the person acting in this way does not commit injustice and the actions in question are of a supererogatory nature.

²⁴ One may wonder if the appeal to God's moral character is an option also for *SFC* to secure the link between sin and Incarnation. I think that this is not an attractive move for *SFC* to make. Remember that for *SFC* God decides to Incarnate in the first place and, as a consequence, He decides to make sure that sin occurs. I cannot see what trait of moral character this could be supposed to show other than a sort of Maquiavellian mindset, which is incompatible with God's goodness.

Of course, this way of grounding the link between sin and Incarnation can raise some concerns, especially from the perspective of Classical Theism. One of these concerns has to do with divine simplicity. If God has a peculiar moral character, should we conceive it as an accidental disposition, as moral character is in creatures? If that moral character makes Him act in some free and contingent way, does this mean that He could have had a different moral character that could have led Him to act in a different way? Or on the contrary, should we conceive His moral character as being identical with His nature, so God's moral character is something metaphysically necessary? Doesn't this imply, then, that He could not have acted otherwise? If the answer to the first two questions is positive, then it seems that God has some contingent (and so, accidental) properties, which seems incompatible with a conception of God as being substantially identical with anything that we can attribute to Him, as the classical doctrine of divine simplicity holds (Brower 2008). If the answer to the third question is true, then simplicity is saved, but the whole idea that sin and the Incarnation are contingently linked by God's moral character loses its sense, since the link would become metaphysically necessary, being grounded in God's nature.

Of course, this dilemma would only be a serious challenge for those defenders of *IFC* who are committed to a classical approach to divine simplicity. However, perhaps it is not an insurmountable challenge for Classical Theists willing to endorse *IFC*. According to some Classical Theists, we can attribute to God moral virtues such as justice and mercy without conceiving them as accidental or contingent dispositions;²⁵ in the same way, we don't need to conceive God's character as an accidental or contingent disposition. Indeed, nothing prevents a necessary disposition from being the ground of a contingent act, so even if God's moral character was necessary, it could still be the ground of God's decision to become incarnate on the condition of sin happening. Ultimately, the problem of the alleged incompatibility between divine simplicity and the attribution of libertarian free will to God, commonly known as the modal collapse argument, is not raised by God's moral character *per se*, so I think that the success of grounding *CIFC* in God's moral character without renouncing divine simplicity is an independent issue from that problem.²⁶

²⁵ On this topic see Echavarría (2022).

²⁶ For a complete overview of this problem and the different solutions proposed to it, see Mullins and Byrd (2022). I have developed my own perspective on this problem in Echavarría (2018).

4.2. *Skeptical-retrospective infralapsarian felix culpa*

As I showed above, Aquinas says explicitly that God *would not* have become incarnate, had sin not occurred. Unfortunately, he does not explain why he thinks that this is the case. Presumably, when he says that God *could have* become incarnate without sin, he is talking about God's "absolute power," i.e., God's omnipotence abstracted from His Wisdom and Justice (Aquinas, *ST I*, 25, 5, ad 1), so that, for him, the Incarnation in other possible scenarios is not a "real" possibility given God's Wisdom and Justice. We could speculate that he thinks that if God had other possible reasons for the Incarnation than the Fall of men, He would have revealed them. However, the fact that God didn't reveal whether He would have become incarnate without the Fall or not doesn't give us enough evidence to think that He *would not* have become incarnate in that case. Therefore, perhaps the most appropriate epistemic position for *IFC* is to just remain skeptical but open about the question of whether God would have become incarnate without original sin or not. Let's call this position "skeptical-retrospective infralapsarian *felix culpa*" (*SRIFC*).

According to *SRIFC*, the Fall is not considered a hypothetically necessary condition for Incarnation, because we are not in the position to know whether God would have become incarnate for other possible reasons. Still, in *SRIFC* we can deem the Fall "happy" or fortunate "retrospectively," for being the "actual" reason why God decided to become incarnate. To illustrate this with an example, think of a person who retrospectively calls "fortunate" or "happy" her breaking a leg for being the occasion for meeting a doctor who would eventually become her husband.²⁷ Even if perhaps it would have been possible for her to meet that person without her leg breaking, she has reasons to be grateful for her break. In *SRIFC*, sin is not a necessary condition for Incarnation, but merely a *de facto* occasion for it, i.e., a contingent circumstance that favoured it, such as the leg-breaking favoured the meeting between the husband and wife.

It is important to notice that, as in any *felix culpa* theodicy, any doctrine of absolute Incarnation or "Incarnation anyway" is ruled out also by *SRIFC*. Indeed, according to the doctrine of absolute Incarnation, God's decision to become man is independent of any particular event or creature's action taking place; therefore, according to that doctrine, we have really no reason at all to be "happy" about any particular event or action happening, in relation to the Incarnation. On the contrary, in *SRIFC*, the Incarnation is not absolutely granted, but depends on some event or creature's action taking place, even if not on the Fall in particular. *SRIFC* can still be the basis for a theodicy because, given that original sin is the "actual" reason why God decided to overcompensate evil with the greater good

²⁷ I thank Jean-Baptiste Guillon for providing me with this example.

of Incarnation and its fruits, we can legitimately say that sin has been permitted “in order to” obtain those greater goods.

Perhaps the main problem for *SRIFC* is to try to present itself as a genuine option in an infralapsarian scenario. Let’s remember that in *IFC*’s story God has originally no intention of becoming man, and only decides to do so because something not originally intended by Him happens. Now, sin is, by definition, an action done by a rational creature that goes against God’s will and intention. So, if God decides to become a man because something not originally intended by Him happens in creation, it is difficult to think of any candidates for this other than men committing sin. But if this is so, *SRIFC* simply collapses into *CIFC*. However, I consider that this is not a really serious problem for *SRIFC*. Our difficulty thinking of possible alternative reasons for God’s conditional actions doesn’t seem to be a sufficient reason for ruling them out completely. Hence, perhaps the most appropriate epistemic position for us is to just remain skeptical but open about what other possible reasons would have conditioned God’s decision to become incarnate.

5.3. *IFC and God’s openness*

Independently of the question of which form of *IFC* is more likely to be a successful theodicy, there seems to be another limitation in the proposal of *IFC*, that could make it unattractive, at least for Classical Theists. As I explained above, the picture of God implied in *IFC* is not one in which God decides or determines beforehand that some evils need to occur in order for some goods to be obtained, but rather one in which He is responsive to His creature’s decisions. Hence, *IFC* supposes God’s openness and a “risk-taking” approach to the way in which His providence works. Some may have the concern that this approach to providence somehow diminishes or even excludes some classical divine attributes such as timelessness, foreknowledge, the efficacy of God’s will, His universal causality, and His sovereignty. Doesn’t the idea of a responsive God suppose a temporal succession of moments, before and after the Fall of men? Doesn’t it imply the denial of God’s foreknowledge of human decisions? Doesn’t the idea that some free actions of creatures are contrary to God’s will imply that some things are completely beyond His intention, so His will is not completely efficacious? Doesn’t this imply that some events and actions are not “caused” by God, Who is supposed to be the primary cause of every being? Finally, doesn’t all this imply that God is not ultimately “in control,” so He is not really sovereign? All these questions could lead us to think that, perhaps, *IFC* is an

option only available for Neo-Classical Theists, such as Divine Temporalists, or Open Theists who deny foreknowledge.²⁸

I do not think that this is necessarily so. First, conceiving God as existing in time does not seem to be a necessary condition for a real and responsive interaction between God and human free will. From the perspective of Classical Theism, there are many models of conceiving and explaining how God can be absolutely timeless, and yet responsive to creatures. Take, for instance, Stump's idea that the relation between God and time as a non-transitive relation of "Eternity-time simultaneity" (Stump 2018).²⁹ According to this approach, God does not strictly "foresee" human decisions, but rather "sees" them in His eternal present, in the face of which all the moments of time are present, without becoming simultaneous with each other. If this kind of E-t simultaneity is possible, then God could decide in His eternal present to become incarnate as a response to the sin that He (fore)sees, also in His eternal present, that occurs at a certain point in time. This way, we could have God's openness without resigning divine timelessness and foreknowledge.

Second, the fact that some events, such as sinful human actions, occur "against" God's will does not necessarily imply that they are 'beyond' the scope of His will. Without resigning the efficacy of God's will, we can think that God wills some events and actions to occur only conditionally, i.e., on the condition that the creatures don't withdraw their cooperation by freely rejecting God's aid. From this perspective, even if God knows from eternity that the Fall occurs, and He decides on Incarnation also from eternity, we can still distinguish between God's "antecedent will" or *plan A*, i.e., His original but conditional intention of creating man sinless and ordered to salvation, and God's "consequent will" or *plan B*, i.e., His effective decision of permitting evil and becoming man as a response to human sin.³⁰

Third, nothing of this needs to imply the denial of God's universal causality. The classical idea of God's universal causality implies just that every perfection or actuality we find in creatures is effectively dependant on and has its ultimate ground in God's being, but it doesn't imply at all that the actions of the creature

²⁸ On Neo-Classical Theism, see Feser (2022) and Timpe (2015). On Divine Temporalism, see Mullins (2011-12 and 2014). On Open Theism, see Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger (1994).

²⁹ Other alternative models for conceiving the compatibility of God's timelessness with its responsiveness to temporal creatures include Leftow's (1991) and Rogers's (1994 and 2007).

³⁰ On the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will see Aquinas, *De veritate*, 23, 2. This distinction allows IFC to solve the problem of compatibility between God's universal salvific will, and the eternal damnation of some rational creatures. While God's antecedent will seeks to save all men, so He gives them a nature ordered to salvation and assists them with His grace, God's consequent will permits some of them to be eternally damned, out of respect of their voluntary rejection of grace.

are pre-determined by God. Many Thomists have proposed different models to explain how God's universal causality is not incompatible with a libertarian conception of creaturely free will. For instance, some have proposed a model of divine causality over creature's free actions according to which God "causes" or "moves" the actions of created free will without pre-determining them, through "shatterable motions," that cannot be started or put into existence by the creature's will, but that can be thwarted by it (Marín-Sola 1925; Maritain 1966). According to this model, if a good action is produced, it can be attributed to God as its primary cause, and to the free creature as a secondary cause, whereas, if an evil action is produced, God preserves it in existence, but the defect is attributable to the creature only. This way, God can be the primary cause of all the creature's free actions, and yet the creature can act against God's plan.³¹

Fourth, and finally, regarding divine sovereignty, it is important to establish the real meaning and scope of this concept. If by divine sovereignty we understand God's complete pre-determined control over every single aspect of the actions of creatures, including their defects, it is evident that we could only have sovereignty in a supralapsarian perspective. But perhaps Classical Theism does not require such a demanding concept of sovereignty. Perhaps, to grant God's sovereignty, we just need to establish, as I said above, that nothing happens in the world absolutely beyond God's intention, either through His positive will or through His permission. This means that God can will the occurrence of some events or actions to be conditioned on the creature's not rejecting to cooperate with God's aid, without losing control of the overall goodness of the outcome and of the occurrence of certain particular key events in history.

Consider our own experience of what it is to have control or governance over other persons, things or events. Using a sort of "Perfect Being Theology" reasoning, it seems clear to me that a ruler who knows how to take advantage of the occasions and opportunities that the different situations offer him, is "greater" than a ruler who has a completely pre-determined control over things, leaving no place for contingencies. A tennis player capable of returning all the balls, no matter how they come, seems to me undoubtedly more powerful and sovereign than one who has simply rigged the play before it starts, or that has complete control of the movements of his or her rival. Also, Tolkien's image in the *Silmarillion* of Ilúvatar improvising an increasingly more beautiful melody in response to each of Melkor's distorted chords (Tolkien 1977, 4–6) seems to me a more compelling image of the power of God's providence than the image of a composer purposely introducing dissonances in staves completely written

³¹ Other alternative proposals include Stump's "quiescent will" model (2003, 393-395) and Grant's "dual sources account" (2019).

beforehand. Of course, these are all imperfect analogies when it comes to describing how God's providence works, but I see no reason to consider that the ones that favour a deterministic picture of God are more accurate in depicting the perfection of God than the opposite ones.

I consider that *IFC* allows us to conceive God as ruling and governing in atemporal reaction to the actions and omissions of creatures in time, redirecting them towards higher goods, without renouncing timelessness, foreknowledge, the efficacy of God's will, His universal causality, and His sovereignty. For all these reasons, I submit that an *IFC*-theodicy could be endorsed by Classical Theists.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that the *O felix culpa!* verse of the *Exsultet* opens up many different ways of developing a greater good theodicies. All of them have their own theoretical virtues and their own difficulties. On the one hand, we have two supralapsarian *felix culpa* theodicies, a deterministic one and a Molinist one. Both proposals make sense of God's permission of evil, but both face some difficulties: first, to comprehensibly explain and ground the link between sin and the Incarnation; second, to preserve God's omnibenevolence in face of the accusation of instrumentalizing His creatures for obtaining some goods at the cost of their eternal damnation.³² On the other hand, I have offered two versions of an infralapsarian *felix culpa* theodicy, a conditional and a retrospective one. As I attempted to demonstrate, both provide plausible explanations for the connection between sin and the Incarnation, either as a hypothetically necessary condition, or as a *de facto* occasion, preserving at the same time God's innocence with regard to evil. I also argued that, contrary to what seems to be the case, *IFC* is perfectly compatible with some classical divine

³² One of the reviewers has pointed out to me that Supralapsarianism has an explanatory advantage over Infralapsarianism: while in the latter we have no clear explanation as to why the Fall occurred in the first place, as can be seen in the recent literature on the subject (Timpe 2013, Wood 2016, and Barnwell 2016), in the latter the explanation is that the Fall has been decreed by God to bring about the Incarnation. I do not believe that this is a real advantage, for at least three reasons. First, if we don't have a clear explanation of the link between sin and the Incarnation, the alleged advantage of Supralapsarianism disappears completely. Secondly, even if Infralapsarianism had no plausible explanation for the occurrence of original sin, the explanation that Supralapsarianism would provide would have the undesirable cost of making God responsible for the Fall, which casts doubt on God's goodness. Third, I believe that in the tradition of classical theism there are sufficient explanations for sin that do not involve making God its author. Aquinas, for instance, holds that the possibility of sin is given by the limited and imperfect character of the creature's freedom (*De veritate* q. 24, a. 7), while the actuality of sin comes from a deficient use of the creature's freedom that omits to consider the moral good, without this requiring any divine decree or pre-motion (*De malo*, q. 1, a. 3).

attributes, such as simplicity, foreknowledge, and sovereignty. I conclude that *IFC* has *a priori* better prospects for drawing a *felix culpa* Grater Good Theodicy that fits with a picture of God as a necessary existent, personal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, eternal, and provident metaphysically perfect being, and with Christian doctrine considered in its most fundamental features³³.

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