



## Sin and the Universalist

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*Summary.* Since Universalists reject the notion of Hell as eternal damnation as punishment for sin, how can they provide for divine justice? Do sinners just get away with their crimes, or is something subtler going on?

### 1. What is Sin?

Unitarian Universalists don't talk much about sin. As a matter of fact much less is said about it in most pulpits these days. Even the Christian fundamentalists on the religious right present a much less threatening image of sin than in days gone by, when preachers thundered on about hellfire and damnation of sinners in the hands of an angry god. Behind the scenes priests and preachers sometimes write about sin as though it were a metaphysical force driving into temptation, as though all that was left for us to decide is whether to obey God or yield to Satan.

## 2. Traditional Concepts of Sin

It would be a mistake to think that sin is just a simple concept with lots of complex examples. Although there is general consensus that sin is evil or wrongful, there has been wide variation among faiths and cultures about what that means. Today I want to explore some of those variations to see if we can distill a concept that is meaningful to today's universalist. Such an exploration needs to consider four factors:

- The **sin itself**, that is, what is wrongfully done.
- The **consequences of sin**, that is, the punishments or other results appropriate to the sin
- **Atonement**, that is, what a person can do to achieve salvation or forgiveness for sin.

There are also variations among traditions with regard to the *etiology* or sources of sin, but I will not address those differences here.

### 2.1. Punishable Disobedience

Perhaps the most common model of sin is that it is a punishable act of disobedience to the law of God. This model is particularly favored by the "children of the Book", that is, western religions that accept the Old Testament. According to this model I sin by disobeying God. Divine justice therefore requires that I be punished, either by suffering God's wrath here in this life or in the afterlife, or by punishment levied by God's loyal servants here on earth. Punishment is understood to be a penalty imposed by an authority (such as God) in addition to the natural consequences of my actions. Salvation from sin is usually thought to require confession, repentance and restitution, though Christian doctrine usually holds that although these are necessary, they are not sufficient: God's grace is a divine act of mercy that cannot be dictated by anything the sinner does.

This model of sin and punishment coheres well with western notions of justice. Divine justice resembles secular justice in demanding punishment of acts of disobedience to lawful authority. (We could argue *ad nauseum* whether human systems of justice were instituted to reflect divine justice, or human concepts of divine justice were simply extensions of human justice.) But the concept is well-ingrained in western thought. Our culture insists on letting no crime go unpunished.

Nonetheless, I am uncomfortable with this crime and punishment model of sin. One weakness lies in identifying the laws of God to be obeyed. Secular laws are understood to apply only to the jurisdiction that has adopted them, but what about divine law? Are the Ten Commandments or the 613 laws of the Torah binding only on the Jewish people or on all of humanity? Are the laws of the Qur'an (Sharia Law) binding only on Muslims or on all people? Are religious laws imposing stoning valid at all? (Such laws are found both in the Torah and the Qur'an.) Whose rules about sexual relationships are God's laws? How do we decide? If they are merely the rules that define a people, what are we to say about groups that adopt seeming perversions of those laws, such as those found in some forms of Satanism? Bickering back and forth about whose laws are the right ones is not persuasive.

Moreover, to the extent that this model portrays human choice as merely one of obeying or disobeying God, it underestimates the complexity of human existence. The TV show, *Joan of Arcadia*, was intriguing but inherently mistaken in its depiction of God as a detail-driven micromanager, that demanded seemingly stupid actions that ultimately worked out as the right thing to have done. As humans we are constantly choosing among a vast spectrum of alternatives. We have to choose what kind of world we want to live in, given the world we see ourselves as living in now. We have to choose our ultimate personal goals for turning the world of today into the world we think we can achieve. We have to choose our strategies for achieving those goals, and our tactics for executing those strategies. Above all, we have to decide what to do now, in the present situation, given a barrage of conflicting goals and strategies. And we have to choose with grossly insufficient evidence about what the consequences of our choices will be. To cast this situation as a mere choice between right and wrong radically oversimplifies our decision-making.

Furthermore, this model seems to depend on a metaphysics of cosmic consequences for its moral balance. It is widely held that sins often go unpunished; too many sinners “get away with their crime”. For God to be all just, this, it is said, cannot be allowed. Therefore, even if crime be unpunished in this life, it must be punished in the next. Divine justice demands that sinners be condemned to punishment in the afterlife. Even Nineteenth Century Universalists, who denied that this punishment could be eternal, expected divine punishment to be meted out according to the finite deserts of the sinner. It is also often argued that without the threat of Hell, there would be no safeguard against sin. If people thought that they had a good chance of evading punishment, there would be no motivation to keep them from lives of crime. But such a metaphysics has always been dubious. What hold has it on the morality of skeptics? A feasible system of morality should not depend on such questionable foundations.

Finally, this model imposes a focus on punishment that is in and of itself harmful. It makes a virtue out of the vice of indignant rage and vengefulness. Our unending blame game pushes love and respect aside in our constant quest for heads to roll.

## 2.2. Violation of Natural Law with Karmic Consequences

That of course is a western viewpoint. But Eastern religions, especially those deriving from Hinduism, also focus on the consequences of our actions. *Samsāra* is the inexorable cycle of reincarnation in which the moral balance of my *karma* (actions) at death determines the quality of my next incarnation. Each soul's ultimate goal is to achieve *moksha* or *nirvana* through the gradual refinement of that soul's life as one of self-less karma.

There are of course many important differences between this concept of the cosmic consequences of karma and from the western notion of sin:

- There is less focus on the law-giver, that is, on God. Many eastern religions treat the gods as mere mythical personifications of natural processes.
- Karma is not so morally laden a concept as sin.
- *Samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth, tends toward *moksha* or *nirvana*, so damnation is not eternal.

There are, of course, significant similarities:

- Wrong-doing has undesirable consequences.
- Many of these consequences take effect after this life.
- Therefore, they cannot be evaded by the wrong-doer.

Thus, as in the West, divine justice and moral motivation depend on a metaphysics that many may doubt.

### 2.3. Separating Selfishness

An alternative model of sin, one often articulated in schools of theology, is based on *values* rather than *laws*. A good example of sinful values is the Seven Deadly Sins:

- Lust – to have an intense desire or need: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).
- Gluttony – excess in eating and drinking: “for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags” (Proverbs 23:21).
- Greed - excessive or reprehensible acquisitiveness: “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more” (Ephesians 4:19).
- Laziness – disinclined to activity or exertion: not energetic or vigorous: “The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway” (Proverbs 15:19).
- Wrath – strong vengeful anger or indignation: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1)
- Envy – painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage: “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Peter 2:1-2).
- Pride - quality or state of being proud – inordinate self esteem: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).

[This particular list comes from the All About God website, <http://www.allaboutgod.com/what-are-the-seven-deadly-sins-faq.htm>].

This approach focuses on the attitudes that give rise to an act, rather than on the act itself. If I act out of these sinful values or attitudes, I am unable to act out of love of God and my neighbor; I cannot follow the Golden Rule. The people around me are mere means to my own ends, not equals with whom I can develop a mutually loving relationship. Love is diminished to mere lust and exploitation. The result of acting from such sinful attitudes is separation from God, from the community of God. Because I cannot truly love, I cannot believe myself loved. I am alone, unsupported by divine love, unable to share fully in the love of my community. This alienation, this isolation, is the chief punishment for sins of values, whether or not it is accompanied by the pangs of Hell. (Indeed, I have read that for the Eastern Orthodox Church, Hell consists of perpetual alienation from a wrathful God.)

Such a concept of sin coheres well with universalism. It treats love, that is, the Golden Rule as the ultimate ideal value, and discourages attitudes that conflict with that ideal. It leaves the identification of criminal behavior and attendant punishments to local cultures and jurisdictions, which provide the context necessary to determine whether an act and its consequences are harmful or not. The question is whether acting out of sinful values actually produces an alienation sufficient to punish and deter sin.

### 2.3.1. Platonic Evil and the Life Lived

One answer to this question comes from Plato's *Republic*, which I shall mention only briefly. In this dialog, Socrates argues forcefully for the principle that the price paid by the unjust is the life they lead, and that only the just man can be truly happy. Plato's arguments anticipate the concept of alienation, placing it in the context of the just state, in which philosopher-kings rule selflessly, that is, by recognizing equal rights, needs and goals of all citizens, in other words, in accordance with the Golden Rule.

### 2.3.2. Sub-optimization Resulting in Dysfunctionality

A complementary answer to the question about alienation comes from systems theory and the concept of *suboptimization*. This term applies when a local process is made more efficient at the expense of the efficiency of the overall process. For example,

In the management book *The Goal* [<http://www.maaw.info/ArticleSummaries/ArtSumTheGoal.htm>], Eliyahu Goldratt gives the example of a decision to make machining centers in a factory more efficient by increasing the amount of metal taken off with each pass of the cutting tool. Instead of shaving a chip one millimeter thick, the tool took off three millimeters. This made the machining of the parts a much speedier process and reduced the cost of operating the machining centers. Increasing the amount of metal taken off on each pass made the parts brittle, however, which necessitated heat-treating. The increased load on the furnaces gave rise to a serious bottleneck in heat-treating and made the plant significantly less productive and less profitable. [Whose Planet Is It Anyway? March 15, 2007. <http://autisticbfh.blogspot.com/2007/03/suboptimization.html>]

For a more local example, consider the ongoing argument among environmentalists, farmers and energy providers concerning the appropriate policies for operating the dams on the Columbia River:

- Environmentalists and fishermen want to increase the flow of waters down the fish ladders (or eliminate the dams completely) in order to improve the habitat for salmon. This would both
  - Reduce the amount of water available for irrigation.
  - Reduce the output of power from the dam.
- Farmers want to increase the availability of water for irrigation in order to improve the yield from their farms. This would both
  - Reduce the amount of water available for the salmon.
  - Reduce the output of power from the dam.
- Energy providers want to increase the flow of water through the generators in order to increase the production of energy. This would both
  - Reduce the amount of water available for the salmon.
  - Reduce the amount of water available for irrigation.

Improving the policies of the dams from the perspective any one of these local interests suboptimizes the overall consensus on the functions of the dams.

What I suggest is that sinful values suboptimize the system of life. If I act out of pride or greed or rage or any of the other deadly sins, I am attempting to gain what I would not otherwise obtain. And what I get comes from a zero-sum game: my profits result in someone else's loss. They inevitably skew the system to favor a particular subsystem, me. Such a bias is always visible to other people in the system, especially those who incurred the loss, who will always react with their own attempts to bias the system in their own favor. These conflicting attempts create a social turbulence that results in a dysfunctional system in which no one is satisfied. Everyone is alienated from everyone else, as well as from the system as a whole. In Shakespeare's words, "All are punished!"

### **2.3.3. Punishment in a Values-Based Ethics**

A values-based ethics, with its focus on the natural consequences of sin, seems less in need of an afterlife in which to punish sinners. Even if some sinners fall through the cracks, that is, manage to die without ever suffering commensurately to their crime, as long as the case can be made that right action produces a life better than wrongful action (and isn't that what all the bad examples in the Bible most other literature attest to?), then the need for a Hell in the afterlife is weakened. The pain of such natural consequences may be less obviously severe than the torment of hellfire and damnation, but are less subject to philosophical doubt.

### 2.3.4. Atonement in a Values-Based Ethics

What then is the counterpart to atonement in a values-based ethics? The first approximation to an answer to this question is to tell the sinner, “Do you see what you’ve done to us? To yourself? Go ye and sin no more!” In other words, if the sinner will start acting out of love, rather than greed or anger, he will no longer suboptimize the system and everyone will benefit. In practice the answer to that question is not so easy. Actions have consequences to society, the system as a whole, that outlive even the most fervent and sincere apology. Some damages can never be adequately repaired; lost trust may never be fully regained. Healing of the system may take a lengthy, deliberate and often painful process, one akin to punishment itself.

## 3. The Universalist and Sin

Well, what are we to make of all this? I suggest the following:

### 3.1. Sin

I am skeptical that any codification of laws can ever capture the complex and sophisticated way in which we make judgments about right and wrong in every situation in every culture at every time. Even if God has such a code, humanity could never understand it.

I am also skeptical about laws conceived merely as expressions of the will of the law-giver. It is not because God wills the law that violations are harmful; rather it is because violations are harmful that God wills the law. Thus I agree in spirit with the Wiccan Rede and its version of the Golden Rule: “An it harm none, do as ye will,” as long as the people affected by our actions have a say in what constitutes harm.

Thus I am strongly drawn to a values-based concept of sin, in which what is sinful are attitudes that lead us to act in ways contrary to what a loving neighbor would act, attitudes that suboptimize the system in favor of one faction or another.

### 3.2. Punishment

With respect to punishment, I am convinced, but cannot prove, that a life of love, true love, in which I acknowledge that the value of the choices of my neighbors are equal to my own, even when I disagree with them, that such a life is better to me, than one of constant self-interested competition, with dirty tricks practiced and expected. I am convinced, but cannot prove, that such a life, practiced by each of us, is better for each of us. I am convinced, but cannot prove, that those who choose a life of sinful attitudes inevitably make their own lives worse. They punish themselves.

Therefore I choose not to worry myself whether sin goes unpunished. For the most part it does, and I am content. I have no need to speculate about an afterlife in which justice is meted out. To become angry or vengeful for another’s sins is thereby to become sinful myself, and thereby harm myself, and in my rational moments, I eschew such indulgences.

### 3.3. Atonement

Nonetheless, even though sin is ultimately punished, that justice is not generally recognized, especially in this age of skepticism for metaphysical resolutions of the problem of sin. Even when it is recognized, people make mistakes. Thus sin, that is, pride, lust, greed, anger and so on, is rampant in our society; and it does damage for which no amount of alienation can compensate. That damage is not only to our physical well-being but to the spiritual bonds that hold our society together. Healing these wounds requires a deliberate process of acknowledgement, apology, forgiveness and love by which a sinner can be restored to community. The Prayers of the Phoenix, which we recited earlier today, and the Phoenix Communion, which we performed earlier this year, are ways to combine these elements into a healing ceremony, but it is not the ceremony but our mutual acts of loving acceptance that bear the balm of healing. Let us commit ourselves not to denying the reality of sin, but to providing a doorway through which the sinner can return.

*Namaste.*