

### *Miss-Behaving*

Because of the peculiar history of the Roman Empire, we ended up with two different versions of Christianity in the world. Not radically different, and clearly the same religion, but definitely different. One evolved in the western, Latin-speaking part of the empire, and ultimately produced both the Roman Catholic and later most of the Protestant churches. This is the version most of us are familiar with. The other evolved in the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the empire, and produced the Orthodox churches of Greece and eastern Europe, as well as the ancient churches of the middle east and south Asia, such as the Coptic Church in Egypt. Because these two traditions of Christianity were at a certain point—and again because of the course of Roman history—largely cut off from one another, and then faced very different challenges, it caused them to develop in very different and quite distinctive ways.

One of those ways was how they came to think of the fundamental problem facing humanity, the problem for which religion—and specifically, Christianity—was seen to be the solution. In the West, and largely due to the enormous influence of a single person, the man we know as St. Augustine (i.e., Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, d. 429 AD), that problem was sin, sin specifically understood as the breaking of God's law, a juridical problem requiring a juridical solution. This is why, in the West, there is a great deal of emphasis on the death of Jesus Christ as "satisfying" the penalty (or sentence) incurred by human beings guilty of breaking God's law. All of which was conceived, and largely expressed, in the terms of Roman jurisprudence, specifically Latin jurisprudence.

But in the East, the problem was not sin, at least not primarily, but rather mortality, or more precisely, the fear of death, a fear, a dis-ease, that was seen as casting such a shadow upon human life that it distorts our perception of reality and therefore corrupts our judgment, leading us to act in ways that consistently miss the mark. In fact, that's what the Greek word (*hamartia*) that is translated into English as "sin" literally means, to "miss the mark." Or to put this in slightly different language, sin is "miss-behaving," that is to say, it is behaving in such a way as to repeatedly *miss* the mark.

What prompted all these thoughts about sin, death and Roman history was, of all things, a trip to the pool this past week. I took along a book to read, a book that one of you (Cade Massey) had given me a couple of years ago as a good introduction to his discipline, the field of behavioral economics. This particular book had been written by one of Cade's mentors, a man named Richard Thaler, who is quite prominent in that field. Interestingly enough, the name of the book is *Misbehaving*.

Well, the more I read, the more it dawned on me that this 21<sup>st</sup> century economist was talking about exactly the same problem as the Apostle Paul wrote about in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, though granted Thaler never uses the word “sin.” But then neither does Paul, because “sin” is an English word that has all sorts of connotations that the word that Paul does use—that Greek word *hamartia*—simply did not have, certainly not in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, I think “misbehaving” is a far better translation of what Paul is talking about than our word “sin,” particularly with all the moralistic connotations that word has gathered over the years.

You see, there’s a fundamental problem affecting us human beings, whether you’re talking about that problem from the point of view of behavioral economists or of theologians, and that is we all have a tendency to jump to conclusions. Now Thaler doesn’t use that term, and neither does Paul, but they both should have, because that’s really what they’re both talking about, our jumping to conclusions. It is a universal human tendency because there are situations when we have to jump to conclusions, have to because we don’t always have time to be calmly deliberative and rationale in responding to a situation. When you’re driving down the Schuylkill Expressway and some idiot swerves in front of you, you do not have time to calmly deliberate all your options. You’ve got to do something, and do something fast, most likely hit your brakes, even though that may not always be the optimal reaction. Still it’s probably better than doing nothing while going through all the possible responses. This was especially true some 50,000 years ago when our ancestors on the African savannah occasionally turned the corner and came face to face with a lion. At which point you’d better jump to a conclusion, and do it fast.

But that presents a problem, because even though there are times when we have to jump to conclusions, such impulsive, hasty judgments are subject to a whole host of possible errors which in the short term may or may not be evident, which is why it’s so difficult for us to learn from our mistakes. Difficult, because usually, when our impulsive decisions turn out well, we congratulate ourselves on our brilliance. When they don’t turn out so well, well, that must be someone else’s fault, certainly not ours. As a result, the errors that creep into our hasty judgments have a tendency to become deep seated habits (or biases) that consistently skew the way we view the world around us, and thus cause us to act in ways that (as Paul says) “miss the mark.” Thaler and another one of his colleagues named Dan Kahneman, one of whose books Cade also gave me, give tons of examples of how we do this in everyday life, how we very often jump to conclusions that are just plain wrong.

Both Thaler and Paul explain this tendency in very similar ways, though not surprisingly, they use very different language. Paul talks about the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, two words that have come down to us in the theological tradition with all kinds of connotations, especially the word “flesh” (e.g., “sins of the flesh”). But Paul simply means the conflict between the mortal reality of our earthly bodies and all their mundane concerns, especially our fear of death, and the eternal reality of the spiritual realm, with the problem being the human tendency

to let those daily, mundane concerns obscure our view of the greater and enduring spiritual reality.

By contrast, Thaler speaks of the *doer* part of us, and the *planner* part of us. Kahneman talks about fast and slow thinking. But while they're using different words, they're all talking about the same thing, the tension that is a part of all our lives, the tension between immediate short term concerns and the more lasting values of the long term. The tendency then is for us to get stuck in the here and right now, jumping to conclusions, and making decisions that are inevitably flawed, hence our "miss-behaving." Our acting on the basis of a flawed logic that consistently ends up missing the mark because our view of reality is so often skewed.

But while Thaler and Paul may have very similar diagnoses of the problem confronting human life, they have a very different sense of the solution to this problem, a problem that for Thaler actually seems to have no solution, at least none that I can see. The problem is simply the human condition, and we're stuck with it. Of course, it's better to be aware of it than not, but there's no escaping it. But for Paul, the problem does have a solution, and that solution is pure and simply Jesus Christ, himself a man of the flesh with all the same mundane concerns that all of us have, but who lived by the values of the spiritual realm, thus showing us what true humanity can be, how we can actually live our lives in the short term with our eyes on the long term, or as he would say, live our lives in the flesh with our eyes on the spirit.

Most of all, for Paul the resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us that even the very real mortal reality of death is not the end, but simply a new beginning, a second birth (to use John's language), a rising to life eternal, to life in the spirit. All of which means seeing this world in very different terms than others do, understanding full well what the problem is, and how much it affects us all, but also knowing the solution, and finding in Jesus Christ the true meaning (and the true measure) of human life.

But seeing the world from the perspective of the spiritual reality, and not that of the flesh, means resisting the logic of the flesh, resisting the temptation—that is always there—to jump to conclusions, conclusions that are rooted purely in the short term immediate perceptions of our mortal selves and their mundane concerns, which consistently lead us to miss-behave. Most importantly of all, a spiritual view means seeing the other people around us not as the world sees them right now (i.e., in the flesh), but as they will be in the spirit in Christ Jesus. Because in Christ Jesus, we are a new creation, though that new creation is visible only to those who walk by faith and not by sight. Which is why Jesus so often taught in parables, trying to help people to see that new reality, that new creation, that is even now coming to be, a reality that to the eyes of the flesh is not yet visible, but which, like a tiny mustard seed, shall grow into the everlasting kingdom of God, where we shall all find our true home.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*