

Sinning and Forgiving Sins

by Lawrence Moonan

The key to what follows is to be found in knowing how to sin. Or again, it is not, for that could suggest that some appropriate advice was going to be given to those with practical difficulties in sinning. Now this is a matter on which advice may well be as undesirable as it is, for most of us, otiose; and in any case no such advice will be given here. No Kama Sutra of barratry, no *Teach Yourself Embezzlement* will be found in what follows. What will be found is some explanation of what is involved in saying that someone has sinned, which is far from otiose. For though sinning may be as easy as lying, the word 'sinning' can conceal a plurality of senses. Once this has been done, 'forgiving sins' is more than halfway to being explained. By way of a corollary it will then be shown why 'forgiveness', much talked of by some sensitive people today in connexion with forgiveness, cannot serve for explaining 'forgiving sins'.

A first step in the explanation proposed is to distinguish 'sinning' as simply designating some particular piece of sinning, some event or process in the world, from 'sinning' in its proper sense, as not only designating . . . (as before), but in addition also connoting that what is so designated has been held to have been done, or has been done, out of disobedience to God, or whatever. (In medieval innocence I shall speak of 'disobedience to God': let theologians or catechists substitute the phrase of their choice.) I call the second sense the proper sense of 'sinning' because that is the sense in which those who talk about sinning (preachers, moral theologians . . .) use the word in the most ordinary way, or so I believe. 'Sinning' in its less used sense of simply designating some item in the world need involve no reference to disobedience to God, or whatever; whereas 'sinning' in its proper sense, connoting disobedience to God, cannot sufficiently be understood or explained without reference to some item in the world (some piece of sinning, in the other sense) by which the disobedience to God may be accomplished.

There is nothing recondite in this, nor is there anything in it which is peculiar to theology. In much the same way, for instance, the word 'castling' may simply designate a process in the world involving the displacement of certain bodies; and in this way 'castling' can be understood without reference to chess, games or rules: 'This is how castling is done. You take that piece and move it so . . .'. Yet 'castling' is more properly used to connote in addition that the operations just described have been carried out within the conventionally regulated game of chess, and so on. And what it is important to note here is that the consequences which follow from 'x has just done A' may differ importantly, depending on whether we wish 'doing A' to carry a given connotation or not. When 'castling' for instance is taken simply to designate the physical displacements

involved in castling—as it very well could be when people as yet unaccustomed to the use of an artificial arm are being trained by learning to displace chess pieces—then ‘Jones has successfully castled’ does not imply that Jones may not reverse the process (by moving the king-shaped piece back to where it had been, and then moving the other); neither does it imply that, having done so, Jones may not castle again. When on the other hand ‘castling’ is being taken more properly, to connote in addition that the physical displacements involved in the move are being made within the conventionally regulated context of a chess game, then ‘Jones has successfully castled’ *does* imply that the move may not be repeated and that Jones cannot castle with those pieces again, in that game.

In the case of ‘sinning’ the difference in consequences can be of obvious importance. Sinning *qua* caused event or causal process in the world is just as reversible in principle as any such thing is. (If a process, it is in principle reversible; if a caused event, it can become a causing event, in whatever sense we may speak of such things.) Mr Dummett has illustrated this kind of possibility with his story of the apple:

We are to ‘imagine ourselves [as intelligent trees] in a world just like the actual world, except that the order of events is reversed. . . . The sapling grows gradually smaller, finally reducing itself to an apple pip; then an apple is gradually constituted around the pip from ingredients found in the soil; at a certain moment the apple rolls along the ground, gradually gaining momentum, bounces a few times, and then suddenly takes off vertically and attaches itself with a snap [very slightly after the snap, the intelligent trees would have to say] to the bough of an apple tree.’¹

Some medievals took a not dissimilar approach to the possibility of unlosing lost virginity, but with fitting modesty illustrated their story less circumstantially than Mr Dummett illustrated his. I wish to insist, however, that this ‘causal’ kind of reversibility is no more likely in the case of sinning than in any other: it is no more *likely* for a piece of sinning to be reversed in this way than it is likely for apples to take shape from humus and fasten themselves on branches, or for David Hume’s coal to be put on a glowing fire, and not burn. And I wish to insist even more strongly, to anticipate slightly, that in any case this kind of reversibility, while not inconceivable, is of no more practical importance to a consideration of forgiving sins than is the apple possibility to those who have to plan orchards.

There is of course a way in which an event or the occurrence of a process is not ‘reversible’, the sense in which, if something has taken place, then, whether or not it is undone in the way envisaged above, it will remain true that it has taken place, and it will never be true that it has not taken place: ‘This alone the gods cannot do, to

¹M. Dummett, ‘Bringing About the Past’, *Phil. Rev.* 73 (1964) 339.

make undone what is already done.' What could in principle be done is a Dummett-type reversal plus the supplying of false memories and false documentation, so that no one would ever suspect that what had taken place, had taken place, and that every competent man, woman and child would be prepared to swear that it had not taken place: but that is not the same thing.

Another obvious enough point, but one important enough to attend to, is that it is as an item in the world that sinning can have effects in the world, and independently of whether that item in the world should or should not be entitled to the name of 'sinning' with its connotation of disobedience to God, or whatever. If my sinning in the City makes me richer, then it makes me just as rich whether or not it should be called 'sinning' in the proper sense. If my sinning with Bethsabee issues in Solomon, or gives me a taste for the activity, disposing me to do likewise with Judith and Esther, the same is true. Of course my believing that my activity is sinful may have some effects in the world: by giving added relish to my doing of the deed, perhaps, or by diminishing the pleasure I can take in it, or contributing to subsequent feelings of guilt. This in no way detracts from what has been said, since *my believing* something or other is itself an item in the world. An important item, too, for whereas it does not follow from the fact that 'cigarette' has or ought to have the connotation of being injurious to health, or that 'nuclear bombing of cities' has or ought to have the connotation of involving disobedience to God, that anyone will stop using cigarettes or nuclear bombs; it does follow from people's really believing that the words have or should have those connotations, or really believing that cigarettes are injurious to health or nuclear bombing of cities sinful, that people who also hold injury to health, or sin, to be important, will tend, other things being equal, to lead to the avoidance of cigarettes or of nuclear bombing of cities.

Another point which can be made at this place has to do with a positive commendation of sinning which has occasionally been heard from the personalist minded. Sinning, they say, and the experience of having sinned, can positively contribute to a person's character/stability/maturity/all-American well-integratedness. It follows from what has been said that what truth there may be in this can only concern 'sinning' in its less proper sense, as designating something in the world. It is far from inconceivable that it could be to the personal advantage of someone reared in terror of hellfire and damnation to be able to experience the elation of believing that he has successfully managed to sin (in the proper sense of this), his upbringing notwithstanding. But what benefit there may come from this would come equally, whether or not the experience in question was one of actually sinning or of mistakenly believing that one was actually sinning. (He thought he was sinning when his teeth sank wantonly into the ham sandwich, but his watch had stopped and it

was really Saturday . . .) All these personalists need for their purpose, therefore, is not an experience of sinning—which despite valiant efforts we might well fail to accomplish—but an experience of believing that one has been sinning, whether one has been or not. Now it seems to the present writer that experiences of that kind are precisely what Catholic schools and Calvinist nannies have been, these many years, enabling people to have, and even making it difficult for them not to have. But it is not at all clear that that sort of thing was all that good for people to have.

That much had to be said about sinning before the question of forgiving sins could usefully be raised. As the child correctly replied to the vicar's question, the first thing one must do in order to have one's sins forgiven, is to sin. In the section now following, only difficulties specific to 'forgiving sins' will be considered. Forgiveness as such will, for present purposes, be taken to be quite unproblematical.

No theologian, so far I am aware, has ever advanced the view that forgiveness of sin requires a reversal of the process of sinning. I shall therefore leave aside this possibility (that 'forgiving sins' had to involve reference to such a reversal) and assume that in practice whatever effects in the world are likely to follow are just as likely to follow whether forgiveness intervenes or not. Another which could be advanced to explain forgiveness can be dismissed even more speedily. This is one which would have 'forgiving sins' designate some declaration that the sinning which had occurred had not occurred, or some performance to see to it that the sinning which had occurred had not occurred. The logical contradiction, or the impossibility, involved in this kind of view is manifest enough. Does forgiveness then consist in declaring that things are *as if* there had been no sinning in the first place, or in making things as if there had been no sinning in the first place? While such a view does not seem to imply any logical contradiction, it would have to have the kind of causal reversal which I set aside above, as in practice quite unlikely (and would in addition require the sedulous or miraculous falsification of memories, documents, etc.), so this kind of view may be set aside as inapplicable to the situation in which those who talk of forgiveness of sins (preachers, theologians) believe it to occur.

How then is 'forgiving sins' to be explained? Like 'sinning', it may be taken with or without connotation of some relationship to God or some activity of God's; and like 'sinning' it is as connoting such a relationship that 'forgiving' is properly to be understood. 'Your sins are forgiven' is not saying, and cannot be saying, that you have never sinned in the first place. Nor is it saying—though it conceivably could be saying—that things are as if you had never sinned in the first place. People who profess *unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum* are not committed to holding or pretending any such thing. (No more are those who add *et vitam venturi saeculi* committed

to 'continue to continue to pretend, That life will never end, And flowers never bend in the rainfall'.) What it is saying, if the first contention of this paragraph was just, is that one conventionally regulated set of possible moves has been closed by my successfully sinning. (I can, logically can, sin only once in any one such set, just as I can castle, or for that matter mate, only once in any one game, and die only once in any one life. These are all definitional points, not empirical claims.) 'Your sins are forgiven' is then saying that although one set of possibilities has been closed by my sinning (and irrevocably closed in the sense that it can never become true that that particular set was *not* closed by that particular piece of sinning), a fresh set of such possibilities is now being offered to me: a fresh set which, like the earlier one, can be closed by my sinning (and indeed not otherwise). Sinning, like checkmating, is something which can occur once and once only in the only kind of system in which it can occur. 'Your sins are forgiven' is thus saying something like: One game is over, one life is lost, irrevocably; but a new game is now being offered, a new life given, in which 'sinning for the first time' is again possible. A parallel from chess might be that, at a certain stage in a game in which I had already castled, I was told: 'You can "castle" with that knight and that pawn'. Pedants would hasten to deny that what we would be playing from then on would be the game of chess as commonly played; and they would be entirely justified in doing so. The game would be a different game: but who is to prevent our creating new games in this way?

The analogy with chess, while suggestive, limps rather importantly, and the allusion to games and the creation of them could suggest a direction which I do not propose to take, and which would lead to saying something like: 'Whereas *Language, Truth and Logic* said that theological discourse is meaningless, it ignored the possibility of different language games; and it is quite possible to conceive of a particular language game in which we can speak perfectly meaningfully of sinning or forgiving sins.' Now that may be true, but it misses a crucial point. No one need doubt that theological discourse can go on quite happily whether there is any *Theos* or even any *theion* for it to be about. Many suspect and not a few have been heard to assert that this is what has been going on for centuries, anyway. All we need, to be able to *talk* sensibly about sin, forgiveness, etc., are some convenient presuppositions, and presupposing is no more difficult than lying. The important thing is whether such talk is about what it purports to be about or is just—talk. (*En arche ho logos*? Perhaps. But a *logos* referring beyond itself. A *logos* not made, not created even? If you wish: but not not-engendered, according to the same creed.) In the case of talk about sinning and forgiving sins, either of two radically different things could be going on. If the one, then all that is happening is that the theologians are playing a game—Deludo?—in which they invent the rules and which they

themselves have created. They may be doing all this with benign intentions, in the manner of my imaginary opponent in chess who was willing to let me 'castle' with a knight and a pawn, so that some kind of chess-like game could continue. Now if this is what is going on, and the theologians know that they are the creators of the game, then they are deceiving the rest of us (into funding faculties of theology more lavishly than college chess clubs, for instance); and if they think they are not, they are deceiving themselves. . . . On the other hand, what could be going on is that people in fact sin, in the proper sense of this, or could do so; and that, if they did, they could be forgiven, in the proper sense of that. But this would not be because there can be different language games, or whatever, but because *inter alia* there happens to be a God to be sinned against and to forgive sins. (Note, too, that not just any 'Transcendent Other' or 'Ground of Being' will serve: some quite strong claims will have to be valid about the entity in question.) The rhetorical question 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' is as easy to formulate as 'Take up your bed and walk', addressed to a cripple: but it draws attention to the ontological commitment that non-deceptive or non-bogus talk about sinning or forgiving sins had to make. Unless there is at least one God of a certain kind, then no one sins and no one in consequence either can be forgiven or need be forgiven. Whether the apodosis there is true of the actual state and situation of man is no concern of mine here; and in any case I know of no earthly method of research which could reveal an answer to such a question. I simply draw the attention of our divines away from concern with the internal consistency of their language to the ontological commitments it has to make in order to be non-bogus.

Enough has now been said to show the elements by which 'sinning' and 'forgiving sin' are to be explained. There is no need to labour the point that in all this there has been neither aid nor comfort for the devout. That there has to be reference to God in an explanation of 'forgiving sins' is totally unremarkable, because there was a reference to God built into 'sinning' in the first place. No God, no sin either, and *Ecce qui tollit peccata mundi* will be as true of Hume and Sartre (in a way, and if they are indeed so successful in the matter as they believe) as of anyone else. That there has to be a God, for sins to be forgiven, and not only imagined to be forgiven, does not imply that there has to be a God in the first place: for there is no event or process in the world which has to be called 'sinning' in the proper sense of that word, with its connotation of disobedience to God. (It may be the case that *some* connotation has to be given, in virtue of some or other interpretative belief-system, but that, even if true, is the cue for another story.) Alternative descriptions are always conceivable, and many have no difficulty in finding such descriptions.

The corollary now follows. It wishes to show that a certain notion (that of 'forgiven-ness') currently canvassed by some sensitive people in connexion with sacramental forgiveness of sins, as maintained in the Tridentine Catholic tradition, while it may be highly useful for what it can do, cannot legitimately serve to *explain* 'forgiving sins', as some unguarded apologies for the notion have suggested.¹

By 'forgiven-ness' we are to understand the situation of someone who has sinned and (interiorly) repented, and who is now functioning (again) in the *koinonia hagiois* of the Christian community, accepted by his peers as a fully active member of that community. Such forgiven-ness, some urge, is a more primitive sign of forgiveness than is the curate's 'Your sins are forgiven', and is more suited than is the curate's declaration to signify sacramentally (to people who think more highly of community approval than of curates) that sins are being or have been forgiven. This could be disputed but is plausible enough, and I do not propose to dispute it now. The acceptance of a speaker's French by the community of French-speakers is doubtless a more primitive sign (one less obviously a social construct) of the fitness of the speaker's French to function in the French language, than is a declaration of fitness by some *Académie*; and one might think more highly of community approval than of the pronouncements of such an *Académie*. But the crucial point remains that the message that one is accepted as functioning in the *koinonia hagiois*, expressed in the welcoming behaviour of the community, still has to be explained or understood, just as 'Your sins are forgiven' was, when it was seen to express the same kind of message.

Forgiven-ness may be better way of 'saying' that someone's sins are forgiven, just as tender caresses, or careful sterilization of feeding bottles, may be better than a verbal formula for saying 'You are loved, or welcomed' to a baby; and just as a common life over a period of time may be a better way of saying something else than is standing before a lion-stamped priest, two witnesses, thirteen little girls in pink dresses and three hundred suspicious relatives (or even friendly ones) and saying 'I will'. But even if it is, forgiven-ness will still be no more than an alternative expression of something to 'Your sins are forgiven', an alternative *explicandum*. It cannot therefore serve to *explain* 'forgiving sins', unless pocket-dictionary synonyms are to count as explanations.

¹It is because I think the notion of forgiven-ness to be helpful, in its place, that I have added the corollary. I should also add, with due thanks, that it was sensitive handling of the notion by Fr Denis Keating, O.P., which more than other considerations led me to attend to it (though it was not he, so far as I recall, who made the suggestion rebutted).