Voices from the Next Generation

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SELF-CONTROL FAILURE IN CATHOLICISM, ISLAM, AND COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

by Steven Cottam

Abstract. Our human condition is often defined in terms of human fallibility; we are human specifically because we fail to live up to our own expectations. This paper explores various conceptions of one form of human fallibility: self-control failure. Self-control failure is examined through two conceptualizations, with each conceptualization observed through a corresponding theological and psychological lens: first, as the result of a divided, conflicted humanity, as understood by the Catholic Doctrine of Original Sin and psychological Dual-Process Theories of Cognition; and second, as the result of limited goal perception, as understood by Islamic conceptions of human memory and psychological Construal Level Theory. A concluding discussion considers two broader implications of the preceding analysis: first, that an appropriate understanding of human fallibility can help us to mitigate its effects, and second, that a conversation regarding overlapping concepts across academic disciplines and religious traditions can enrich understanding of said concepts.

Keywords: Catholicism; cognitive psychology; construal level; human condition; Islam; original sin; Qur'an; self-control; theological anthropology

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"To err is human; As much as humanly possible; I am only human." In our everyday colloquialisms, the word "human" has a semantic connotation of falling short. Our human condition is, quite literally, defined by our

Steven Cottam is pursuing a Masters of Theology, with a concentration in Interreligious Dialogue, at Catholic Theological Union in Hyde Park, Chicago, where he is also an intern in the Catholic–Muslim Studies Program. He can be reached at the Catholic Theological Union, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Chicago, IL 60615, USA; e-mail Cottam.s@gmail.com.

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failings. There are many types of failure over which we have little control, and of which we can say very little; we fail to live up to the expectations of those around us, or we fail to achieve goals requiring physical or mental capabilities beyond our own. However, there is one type of failure over which we have complete control: self-control failure. In the terminology of Self-Discrepancy Theory, self-control failure is a failure of the "ought" self, and occurs when we fail to live up to our standards of right conduct (Higgins 1987). The peculiar thing about self-control failure is that we experience negative affect by engaging in it, sometimes intensely so, and yet we are fully capable of refraining from it. Self-control failure is that subset of human endeavor where individuals fail "to do what they want while possessing the knowledge, skill, and opportunity required" to do so. (Fujita et al. 2006, 351).

This paper will engage in a consideration of this specific form of human fallibility through two possible conceptualizations, and will examine each through two distinct lenses: one theological, the other psychological. The ensuing discussion will explore points of comparison between these two modes of understanding. Part I of this paper will examine the concept of self-control failure as a result of a divided mind, and will examine the Catholic doctrine of original sin and psychological dual-process theories of cognition. Part II will examine the concept of self-control failure as a problem of goal perception, and will examine Qur'anic vocabulary concerning human limitations as well as psychological Construal Level Theory. Finally, a concluding discussion will consider the broader implications of this analysis.

A Divided Humanity (1): The Catholic Doctrine of Original Sin

According to Catholic teaching, human nature itself went through a process of corruption at the outset of human history. At the very beginning of human existence, humanity existed in a state called "original justice" (*Baltimore Catechism* [1921] 2006, 237; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1997, 376). One of the hallmarks of original justice was the "inner harmony of the human person"; all of humanity's perceptive faculties and appetites were subordinated perfectly to human reason and will (CCC 376–77). This inner harmony is referred to in Catholic theology as "integrity," meaning "that man's nature was wholly at peace; the body was subject to the soul, the lower powers of the soul to the higher" (Sheed [1958] 1981, 77).

This original, harmonious state, however, was corrupted by the sin of humanity's primogenitors. The account of the sin of Adam and Eve occurs in the Bible in the third chapter of Genesis.[1] According to Catholic theology, this sin represents the fall of all humankind; "not Adam alone,

but 'human nature' has been penalized for that first sin" of disobedience to God (McClear 1948, 190). Thus, due to this original sin, "the harmony in which they [Adam and Eve, humanity] had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered" (CCC 400). Humankind is deprived of the gift of integrity, and it is replaced in the human soul by concupiscence, defined as a "strong inclination to evil" (BC 264; CCC 2516). Thus, the situation of original sin "makes man's life a battle," in which humans must constantly strive to adhere to the moral law despite a strong inclination to rebel against it (CCC 409). Due to the original sin of our parents we have lost our integrity, "each of our powers seeks its own outlet, each of our needs its own immediate gratification; we have not the subordination of our powers to reason . . . every one of us is a civil war" (Sheed 1981, 80). The doctrine of original sin posits a conception of a divided humanity at war with itself.

A Divided Humanity (2): Dual-Process Theories of Cognition

In cognitive psychology the conception that our thinking is the result of two competing processes of reasoning is called a dual-process theory of cognition. As Jonathan St. B.T. Evans writes, "dual-process theories of thinking and reasoning quite literally propose the presence of two minds in one brain" (Evans 2003, 458). Keith Stanovich uses nearly identical language in defining dual-process theories; in discussing the psychological struggle of individuals committing acts that they themselves condemn as morally blameworthy, he writes that "there are two minds in conflict here . . . and that the better one is losing out." (Stanovich 2004, 33).

There are a variety of dual-process theories, all of which have called these two competing processes by slightly different names. I will begin by utilizing the language employed by Evans and Stanovich and refer to the two processes as simply System 1 and System 2. System 1 corresponds to the cognitive process, or processes,[2] that occur below our conscious thought; it is impossible to observe these processes, as these systems "post only their final product into consciousness and compete for control of our inferences, decisions, and actions" (Evans 2003, 458). System 2 corresponds to what we perceive as conscious thought.

Despite the plurality of theories, certain characteristics attributed to each system reoccur with tremendous frequency. System 1 is effortless, automatic, and associative, while System 2 is effortful, deliberate, and rule-based (Sloman 1996; Smith and DeCoster 2000). System 1 works tacitly while System 2 works explicitly (Reber 1993), or reflexively and reflectively (Lieberman 2003). System 1 engages in concrete and imagistic processing, while System 2 engages in abstract, verbal processing (Epstein and Pacini

1999). Despite their differences, "all these theories have in common the distinction between cognitive processes that are fast, automatic, and unconscious [System 1] and those that are slow, deliberative, and conscious [System 2]" (Evans 2008, 255). Additionally, all of these theories posit some type of competition between the two systems.

Most interesting for our discussion, in drawing a parallel to the Catholic notion of the loss of our integrity, is the fact that having our conscious mind suppress our System 1 processes is often extremely difficult. There is a tremendous amount of psychological experimentation pointing to the ongoing conflict between these two systems. In an experiment observing ratio bias, participants were asked to select from one of two trays of jelly beans (Epstein and Pacini 1999; Pacini, Muir, and Epstein, 1998). The first had 10 jelly beans, one of which was red. The other had 100 jelly beans, 9 of which were red. Participants were asked to select from the tray that would most likely give them a red jelly bean. Despite being aware that 1/10 offered a better ratio than 9/100, "a majority [of participants] prefer[ed] to draw from the probability disadvantaged tray that has more target items" (Epstein and Pacini, 1999, 471). This is a direct conflict between System 1 imagistic and System 2 verbal/logical reasoning; indeed, many participants gave a direct report of feeling conflicted along these two lines of thought (475). Similar findings have resulted from belief bias testing, Watson card tests (Evans 2003; Sloman 1996), conjunction-error tests (Epstein and Pacini 1999), and a variety of other experiments. According to these findings, our conscious system is in competition with an entirely separate, massively efficient, and often treacherous set of systems operating outside of our perception

Why then do we fail? According to this conceptualization of the problem, we fail because our humanity is not one single volitional entity, but rather two reasoning processes, two minds, cobbled together. This conceptualization is compelling; however, it is not the only way of conceiving the problem of human fallibility.

A Humanity with Limited Perception (1): Islam and the Limitations of Human Memory

An instance from the life of the Prophet Muhammad can serve as a good introduction into the Islamic concept of human fallibility. Tariq Ramadan narrates an instance where two of the Prophet's companions, Hanzalah al-Usaydi and Abu Bakr, went to the Prophet to discuss their feelings of hypocrisy. In prayer and when with the Prophet, both were keenly aware of God and of their religious duties. However, the daily affairs of life would make them unmindful and forgetful of these realities. Ramadan states,

> Hanzalah explained the nature of his doubts, and Muhammad answered: "By He who holds my soul in His hands, if you were able to remain in the [spiritual]

state in which you are when in my company, and remember God permanently, the angels would shake your hands in your beds and along your paths. But it is not so, Hanzalah: there is a time for this [devotion, remembrance] and a time for that [rest, amusement]." Their situation had nothing to do with hypocrisy: it was merely the reality of human nature, which remembers and forgets, and which needs to remember precisely because it forgets, because human beings are not angels. (Ramadan 2007, 112)

Unlike in Catholicism, upon the Islamic view humanity is not fundamentally flawed. However, as a result of us being material beings, our memory and our faculties of perception are limited. It is this limitation that causes our failures, and it is against this limitation that our struggle for self-improvement is directed.

There are several crucial Qur'anic terms extrapolating upon the concept of the limitations of human faculties and perception,[3] but for reasons of scope we will limit our discussion to the Qur'anic terms concerning memory, namely the Qur'anic terms for forgetfulness and remembrance. The Qur'an has two terms for forgetfulness, *ghafla* and *nasiya*. *Ghafla* is perhaps translated most appropriately as "heedlessness," a forgetting that arises from an intentional turning away (Izutsu 1959, 203–4; Qur'an 7:179). In contrast, *Nasiya* would be "forgetfulness" in its more common usage. *Nasiya* appears in the Qur'an to indicate both rather serious instances of forgetting God (Qur'an 9:67) and much more benign instances of forgetting, such as forgetting to bring your lunch on a trip (Qur'an 18:63). These terms stand in opposition to the Qur'anic term *dhikr*, "remembrance," specifically related to the intentional remembrance of God. *Dhikr* is a virtue, a means of overcoming forgetfulness, and a means of purifying the soul and satisfying the heart (Qur'an 13:28).

What do *ghafla*, *nasiya*, and *dhikr* tell us about the conception of human fallibility in Islam? Coupled with the story about Muhammad and his companions above, all three terms speak to the need for humanity to control its mental faculties. Human failure results from forgetting our duties to God and our fellow humans. The fact that we are forgetful, in many instances, is not our fault; it is part of our natural, God-ordained human condition. However, what humankind is held accountable for is not making an explicit effort to overcome forgetfulness with remembrance. As Fazlur Rahman states, "God is with man, *provided man makes the necessary effort*" (Rahman 1989, 18, emphasis his). We fail when we forget our long-term, important, superordinate goals, like obeying God or being a good Muslim, for short-term gain, like enriching ourselves at the expense of someone poorer or weaker (Qur'an 75:20). Everyday life so absorbs the attention of humanity that it "'forgets' the *āhkira* [the hereafter], the real, solid, long-range, and consequential ends, the highest purposes"; Rahman considers this short-sighted forgetfulness to be humanity's main weakness (1989, 126).

A Humanity with Limited Perception (2): Construal Level Theory

This problem of memory and perception is also the starting point and main line of research in the psychological field known as Construal Level Theory, which posits that much of how we think and act depends on how we construe different psychological targets (Trope & Liberman 2003). High levels of construal conceptualize psychological targets (tasks, events, people, things) in a few broad categories and generalizations; high levels of construal focus on primary, superordinate features (Fujita et al. 2006). In contrast, low levels of construal conceptualize targets in many specific categories and focus on subordinate, secondary features. How a target is construed affects greatly how we perceive and interact with it (Bar-Anan, Liberman, and Trope 2006; Fujita et al. 2006).

What is specifically relevant to our discussion is that, according to recent research, construal level has a significant amount of influence on our ability to regulate our self-control. When we are construing activities at very high levels there is a general tendency to exert more self-control, as there is a greater awareness of superordinate goals and a greater unwillingness to engage in subordinate activities at their expense (Fujita et al. 2006). One proposed explanation for this is that at high levels of construal a much higher degree of self-awareness and self-pertinence is activated. Antonio Freitas writes, "construing action in high-level terms . . . increases the extent to which one relates one's present decisions to one's self-standards" (Freitas et al. 2008, 1175). For example, if one thinks of joining the army in terms of "going down to the recruitment office and filling out forms," that is, if one is construing in low-level terms, than one is unlikely to consider the self-pertinence of the decision. However, if one construes the same act in high-level terms, "defending the nation," then one is simultaneously prepared to consider how this affects one's character, in terms of "being brave" or "being responsible" (1174–75).

Therefore, both Islam and Construal Level Theory would argue that a large part of human fallibility, defined in terms of self-control failure, is our inability to think about events correctly by remembering our true goals. We sacrifice superordinate gains for subordinate ones because we fail to correctly perceive those concepts, and fail to consider how our current decisions will affect our characteristics and our long-term goals. When we remember to couch our self-control decisions in terms of our overarching goals, be they as vaunted as obeying God and being a good Muslim or as common as successfully dieting, we are much less likely to engage in activities that threaten them.

Concluding Discussion

This paper has examined the concept of self-control failure through two distinct conceptualizations. First, we considered the ways in which the Catholic doctrine of original sin and dual-process theories of cognition mirrored each other in their conception of a divided humanity. Thereafter we brought to the attention how Qur'anic vocabulary concerning human limitations and Construal Level Theory both point to human failure as a problem of goal perception.

However, the question arises, why engage in such an examination? There are two primary implications of this analysis. The first is to point out that a deeper understanding of self-control failure can help us to mitigate its effects. The point of going to the doctor is not to find out precisely how sick you are, but rather to get better. Most of the psychological theorists above argue their findings, in addition to pointing to the causes of human self-control failure, also can point to a partial solution. The theologians of Catholicism and Islam would certainly argue that a correct understanding of sin would be helpful in combating it. As behavioral economist Dan Ariely suggests, "those who recognize and admit their weakness are in a better position to utilize available tools for precommitment and by doing so, help themselves overcome it" (2008, 116).

Thus, according to dual-process theorists, we can equip our reflective, System 2 selves to more adequately deal with our unconscious processes. There are a number of strategies to accomplish this. One strategy is to simply, literally, be aware of the tendency to rely on System 1 processes. Evans cites evidence that the belief-bias effect can be greatly reduced, if not eliminated, by simply pointing it out ahead of time and "asking people to make a strong effort to reason deductively" (2003, 456). Pacini and Epstein argue that instead of fighting against our reflexive systems we ought to utilize them. Since our reflexive system codes information in terms of concrete, visual images (as opposed to abstractions, such as language or symbols), visualizing desired outcomes can help accomplish them, as in the case of "training athletes and in treating phobias with systematic desensitization" (Epstein and Pacini 1999, 471). Furthermore, when trying to accomplish an avoidance task (i.e., not doing something, not lying) it is often more conducive to reformulate it into an approach task (i.e., doing something, telling the truth) because approach tasks are easier to visualize, and thus to accomplish (471). Construal level theorists have suggested that we can have greater success in goal accomplishment by construing tasks at a level appropriate to their importance (Fujita et al. 2006; McCrea et al. 2008). Such examples give a sample of how these theories can be applied to bettering human achievement, yet they hardly comprise an exhaustive list. The point of the discussion is simply to show

that a cogent understanding of why we fail can help us to do so less frequently.

The second implication of this analysis is that cross-disciplinary conversation, as well as inter-religious dialogue, can be conceptually enriching. There is an unfortunate stand-offishness that often results between religion and science, and among religions. However, this paper hopes to contribute, in some small way, to showing that this need not be the case. The point of this examination was not to arrive at a single, unified theory of human fallibility. Rather, it was to examine four different conceptions in parallel. The Catholic doctrine of original sin is not the same as the dual process theories in psychology; but there is significant overlap, and examining one in terms of the other can deepen our understanding of both. The goal of dialogue, similar to the goal of mitigating human fallibility, is not to fundamentally change who we are, but rather to make us more deeply ourselves. Hopefully, continued cross-disciplinary collaboration and inter-religious dialogue will lead to additional fruitful conversations that will help us to be better scientists, better Catholics, better Muslims, and better people.

Notes

1. Much consideration over the years has been given to the discussion of whether or not the story in Genesis 3 "actually happened." The controversy and discussion regarding how literal or figurative the narrative in Genesis 3 isis far outside the scope of this paper. The Catechism itself states that Catholics ought to understand that the narrative "uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event" (CCC 390). Suffice it to say, for our discussion, the focus is less on the narrative itself than on the theological truth it expresses. The exact understanding of the exegetical implications will have to be left to other theological and exegetical works.
2. Recently, Evans has argued that instead of discussing System 1 and System 2, it is perhaps more appropriate to discuss multiple Type 1 systems and a single Type 2 system, since experimental data is pointing more and more toward the existence of multiple, discrete, parallel cognitive processes that correspond to the description given to System 1 above (Evans 2008). However, the nuances of this new understanding of Type 1 systems are outside the scope of this article. Furthermore, it does not affect the main argument here, which is that a System 2 process often competes for control of our decisions against System 1; this argument remains valid whether System 1 is a single system or many in parallel.
3. A thorough examination of all of these different Qur'anic terms, and a full analysis of the Qur'anic conception of human perception, is outside the scope of this article. Terms pertaining to the broader Islamic conception of human perception would surely include: qatr, "narrow-mindedness" or "stinginess" in the sense of clinging to short term goods or gains; taqwa, often translated as "God-consciousness"; and ehsan, an exemplary level of faith in which the believer acts as if he/she perceives God at all times. Individuals looking to understand the broader Qur'anic idea of human perception would to do well to begin with an examination of these and related Qur'anic terms.

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