

**Jason A. Mahn**

*Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin.*

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2011.

288 pages

US\$74.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-979066-1)

Is sin good? Is it better to have sinned than never to have sinned at all? Is the fall into sin and/or evil a negative moment with an ultimately positive outcome? These are questions raised by the notion of *felix culpa* (fortunate, happy, or blessed fault), a phrase that originated with an early Christian Easter Eve Mass, in which the liturgy praises Adam's sin as happy and necessary insofar as it has gained for humanity 'so great a Redeemer' as Christ. This is a perplexing idea insofar as it seems to suggest a theodicy in which sin is logically necessary within the economy of salvation. From this perspective sin seems to be retroactively justified and even *good*.

In *Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin*, Jason Mahn argues against this conclusion, and draws on the writings of Søren Kierkegaard to examine the paradox of *felix culpa*. According to Mahn, the logic and rhetoric of the Easter liturgy is paradoxical rather than straightforward and univocal, serving as a sort of 'failed speech' that communicates past events (like Adam's sin and Christ's atonement) without making them conceptually 'present' (45-6). It expresses a 'surprise and joy' that requires that 'any logical or ontological connection between Adam's sin and Christ's atonement remain "behind the backs" of the worshippers' (48). Mahn finds Kierkegaard helpful because he retains a keen sense of precisely this paradox—unlike speculative theodicy, which justifies sin, and Romanticism, which celebrates it.

This book really needed to be written, since Kierkegaard's position on *felix culpa* is often difficult to discern. In numerous passages his writings even seem to prefer a spirited life of sin to a spiritless, passionless existence. But for Kierkegaard, Mahn argues, what is fortunate is not *actual* sin but *possible* sin (3), as it is a condition of authentic faith. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts present a sort of 'existential *via negativa* through which the reader approaches faith by confronting possibilities for failure' (173).

At first glance the distinction between possible and actual sin recalls a familiar argument: the possibility of sin is 'happy' insofar as it belongs to genuine freedom, which God gave humanity to make genuinely good actions possible. This argument has a long philosophical history, including such highlights as Augustine's *De libero arbitrio* and Alvin Plantinga's free will defense. But for Kierkegaard the possibility of sin is 'more determinate and stranger' than merely modal categories or the formal capacity to choose evil (36, 41). Human freedom is always already 'fractured' and outside of itself, such that the self does not fully coincide with itself in a pure identity and self-sufficient autonomy. Moreover, 'to be fully human is to be capable of sin; to be increasingly human is to cultivate this capability' (36-7). As one develops spiritually, sin becomes increasingly *possible*. The encounter with new actualities—the recognition of actual sin as well as

Christ's offer of forgiveness—mean that the possibility of sin is manifest in a different, more determinate way. Kierkegaard aims to cultivate the reader's awareness of these possibilities—not so they can be actualized, but destroyed (40-41). Once fallibility is revealed by the actuality of Christ's redemption, it shows itself as—paradoxically—a great blessing.

Mahn's extended analysis of Kierkegaard begins in Chapter 2, where he discusses *The Concept of Anxiety*. This book is crucial for Mahn's concerns because it concerns 'both the actuality of our fall into sin and the im/possibility of this occurrence given human nature as created good but fragile, as innocent but always already anxious' (58). According to Vigilius Haufniensis, Kierkegaard's pseudonym for this book, the self is anxious because it is constituted such that sin is a possibility for it. However, *actual* sin requires an act of the will. This seems simple enough, except that the text renders this description problematic by describing two seemingly contradictory voices: one describes sin as an unprecedented, inexplicable qualitative leap; the other describes how the fragility and anxiety of the self 'provide a context out of which sin arises, seemingly assuaging the absoluteness of its eruption' (66).

These conflicting voices make it impossible to discern in *The Concept of Anxiety* a single univocal claim regarding sin's possibility, but Mahn thinks this dissonance is crucial because it undermines the attempt to make univocal sense of sin. The fall is 'both a tragedy and a choice', and while these voices 'cannot be held together conceptually...they do come together in the performance of the confessional narrative, whether personal, biblical, or in Haufniensis's retelling' (82). Given this conceptual incommensurability, the 'concept' of anxiety yields no speculative knowledge, explanation, or justification of sin. Instead, it calls for a confession of one's own sin (83). Therein lies the felicity of anxiety. As Mahn comments, 'Occasions to sin are here beneficial insofar as they might be surmounted.' Fragility, anxiety, and the possibility of sin thereby provide a condition of possibility for the virtue of *faith*—initiating 'a transformation from ignorant and untested "innocence" to spirited and intentional faith' (77). Mahn describes this blessed anxiety as *felix fragilitas*.

Chapter 3 moves from *fragility* to the more intense condition of *fallibility*, in which possibility is heightened by already actual sin. Here Mahn draws on *The Sickness Unto Death*. Pivotal for his discussion is the passage where Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus asks whether despair is an excellence or a defect. Anti-Climacus argues that it is both, dialectically speaking: the possibility of despair is an excellence, a mark of humanity's distinction from other animals, but the actuality of despair is a defect, a sickness. This might seem to fit nicely into modal categories of possible and actual sin, yet according to Anti-Climacus sin's possibility is not an object of abstract contemplation, but a determinate, highly potent, and 'impinging power that summons every resource of imagination and will' (111).

Given his sobering analysis of despair, it might be surprising that Anti-Climacus considers it 'the worst misfortune' not to have had this sickness. Nevertheless, he argues that despair is necessary for genuine spiritual maturity. On this Anti-Climacus seems to

agree with Romanticism's desire to 'shed spiritual infantilism', but Mahn shows how Kierkegaard's text in fact deconstructs Romantic religion and its vision of spiritual maturity (110, 123). Unlike the Romantic embrace of tragedy and despair (which Mahn illustrates vividly with Lord Byron's play *Cain*), Kierkegaard identifies maturity with humble confession before God (104). In a powerful passage in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus exposes Romanticism's defiant despair as infantile. In Mahn's words, defiance is ultimately a way to avoid suffering by reflectively and ironically claiming despair as one's own (128). Kierkegaard's more radical proposal is that despair (or fallibility) is the possibility of saving faith, and that the self comes closer to genuine faith only through the *intensification* of despair, not its artificial resolution (116, 130).

According to Anti-Climacus, despair intensifies when the self encounters Christ, and a new possibility of sin arises: *offense*. This possibility arises near the end of *The Sickness Unto Death* and is central to *Practice in Christianity*, which Mahn discusses at length in Chapter 4. When faced with Christ, the self must confront not only its own fallibility, but also the temptation to be offended by God's vulnerable self-disclosure and love (134). Jesus is a human being who claims to be God and to be able to forgive sin: as Kierkegaard puts it, it takes a very high degree of spiritlessness not to be offended by such claims. According to Mahn, the possibility of offense guards against safe, sanitized, and spiritless interpretations of Christianity. The offense is blessed because it is the 'repulsion' out of which authentic faith can come into being (138).

Chapter 5 draws together Mahn's discussion by focusing more broadly on the notion of *felicitas*—that sin could be fortunate, happy, or blessed. Speculative theodicy and Romantic poetics both fall short of the rhetoric of the Easter proclamation, which 'uses the tragedy of sin to express the magnitude of good news, and uses good news to reveal the depth of sin' (175), all the while avoiding a justification or celebration of sin. This leads Mahn to a rich Kierkegaardian description of Christian existence, which is lived between cross and resurrection, between this world and the next.

Mahn's reading of Kierkegaard is both fresh and challenging, and there is a lot more material packed into 212 pages than one might expect. His arguments draw widely from Kierkegaard's writings, and while scholars might dispute various sub-points, Mahn excels at supporting his overall thesis regarding the paradoxical logic of the *felix culpa*. He convincingly shows how this logic informs Kierkegaard's writings, while also connecting this to larger questions regarding theodicy and the problem of evil. As such, this book should be of great interest to Kierkegaard scholars as well as philosophers of religion. For the latter, one of Mahn's most significant points is that the paradoxical logic of the *felix culpa* is not available as an abstract, general principle, but depends on a more explicitly confessional approach—one rooted in the particularities of Christian narrative (39). Because Kierkegaard is attentive to these particularities, he is better able to avoid the problems that attend both speculative theodicy and Romantic poetics. One of the big questions for philosophy of religion is what it might look like to follow his lead.

**Brian Gregor**  
Fordham University