



What could Jesus do?

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Abstract

According to many orthodox Christian theologies Jesus is not merely sinless but impeccable: he not only did not sin but could not. This is puzzling because one can only sin *by* doing something else and, *prima facie*, Jesus can do actions that you or I could do by which we would sin. I suggest that appearances to the contrary, Jesus cannot do a variety of actions that a merely human duplicate could do. His doing sinful actions is compossible with a range of empirical facts about his physical abilities and circumstances of the sort we ordinarily take into account in assessing what a person can do, but not with a wider range of theological facts concerning his divinity. Like Tim, Lewis’s time-traveler, who can kill Grandfather relative to facts about his immediate circumstances and abilities but not relative to a wider range of facts, Jesus ‘can’ in the ordinary sense sin, though he will not, but relative to a wider range of facts which obtain in virtue of his divinity, cannot.

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Sinning

The Chalcedonian Definition declares Christ to be ‘once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man...like us in all respects, apart from sin.’¹ According to many orthodox theologians this is not just to say that Christ did not sin but that he *could* not—that he was *impeccable*.

¹ Bettenson, Henry and Chris Maunder. *Documents of the Christian Church*. 3rd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999), p. 56.

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The impeccability doctrine is problematic because sinning is not a basic action: one can only sin *by* doing something else—typically, by performing a bodily action that has consequences for other sentient beings. There may be sins that have no adverse consequences for anyone but the agent. It is controversial whether any such actions could be morally wrong and controversial also whether all and only those actions that have adverse consequences other than the agent and willing participants are morally wrong. There are nevertheless uncontroversial cases of sin: actions which are clearly wrong and which individuals who use religious vocabulary would recognize as sinful. Intentionally causing gratuitous, undeserved pain or distress to another sentient being, for example, is wrong—and sinful. If a person is capable of doing actions that have such consequences then they can sin. If a person cannot sin then they cannot do that or a range of other actions. It would seem, therefore, that if Christ cannot sin then there are a great many other things he can't do.

Criteria for act individuation are disputed so here 'other things' has to be taken in the latitudinarian sense to mean either other actions or actions under different descriptions.² Nothing, for the purposes of the current discussion, hangs on which account of act-individuation we assume. Either way, we can only sin 'by doing something else', whether that is understood to mean by doing an action that 'generates' a sinning or by doing an action that *is* a sinning in virtue of falling under some other description. That is to say, assuming the coarse-grained criterion for act-individuation of the latter account, no action is brutally sinful.

An action is sinful *in virtue of* its non-normative features which may include the intention with which it was done and the status of its agent, the circumstances in which the action was done, its character and its consequences. The fact that an action is sinful is *grounded* in such facts concerning its non-normative character. An action may be sinful because it caused bodily damage or psychological distress or because it was done with the intent to induce false beliefs. Such non-normative facts explain why an action is sinful and are what *make* it sinful.

Actions that are exactly similar with respect to relevant non-normative features are the same in their normative character. Ethical properties, including sinfulness, are supervenient: there is no difference that can be stated using evaluative predicates, between states that are identical with respect to all properties picked out by descriptive predicates. This poses the question of which non-normative features are relevant for the purpose moral assessment. Intentions seem to matter and, on some accounts, so do consequences. For some kinds of actions, so does the status and history of their agents. The rightness or wrongness of action may depend upon whether the agent is bound by past promises or contractual obligations.

² According to coarse-grained criteria act individuation, when a person *Fs by Ging* their *Fing* is their *Ging* under a different description. If an agent alerts a burglar by illuminating a room by flipping a switch the whole causal process constitutes a single act, which is a burglar-alerting, light-turning-on, switch-flipping action. Assuming this account, while your *Fing* is your sinning, 'sinning' is not a basic act description: you sin by *Fing*—not vice versa. So, if you cannot do any action that is a sinning! you cannot do actions that fall under a range of other descriptions. On accounts according to which actions are individuated more finely, when a person *Fs by Ging* their *Fing* is not identical to their *Ging* but is, rather, 'generated' by their *Ging*, which may itself be generated by a sequence of other actions that, in turn, bottom out in basic actions.

The normative status of an action is not fully grounded on its intrinsic character. And when actions are the same as regards all non-normative features, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, they are the same with respect to their normative character.

Couldn't or wouldn't?

Prima facie Jesus is capable of doing a variety of actions which, because they are sinful, he cannot do. This is not so strange. There are a variety of actions of which ordinary humans are capable which many of us 'just cannot do'. Items on the 'disgust scale' developed by psychologist Jonathan Haidt are in this category. These include eating a piece of chocolate shaped like dog-poo, picking up a dead cat and, as part of a sex education class, inflating a new lubricated condom using one's mouth.³ These are however actions which, in the strict, literal sense, people *can* do and which, in extremis, even the most squeamish, *would* do. The 'just couldn't' idiom signals that we *could* do the actions in question but wouldn't.

There are other actions that most people 'just couldn't do' because they are so egregiously bad that virtually no one would do them, for example, the experiment described in 'The Case of the Obliging Stranger':

Imagine I approach a stranger on the street and say to him, 'If you please, sir, I desire to perform an experiment with your aid.' The stranger is obliging, and I lead him away. In a dark place conveniently by, I strike his head with the broad of an axe and cart him home. I place him, buttered and trussed, in an ample electric oven. The thermostat reads 450 F. Thereupon I go off to play poker with friends and forget all about the obliging stranger in the stove. When I return, I realize I have overbaked my specimen, and the experiment, alas is ruined. (Gass, 1957: 193)

'Any ethic that does not roundly condemn my actions', Gass writes, 'is vicious'. And, arguably, any ordinary human who did such an action, would sin—regardless of their circumstances, status, history, affiliations, obligations, or entitlements. But any reasonably fit human being with access to an axe, an obliging stranger, and an ample electric oven *could* have done the experiment.

Could Jesus have done such an action? He is, according to orthodox accounts, fully human as well as fully divine and so it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, given his skills and level of fitness he could, in favorable circumstances, have done the obliging stranger experiment. He wouldn't have, but he could have. And that is difficult to square with impeccability.

Prima facie, Jesus could do whatever any other physically fit, reasonably intelligent, literate first century Palestinian Jew could do. Suppose however that Φing is a kind of action, described in neutral, non-normative terms, that any normal human could do but which would be sinful if any ordinary human had done it. Since Jesus was fully human, as well as fully divine, he could have a perfect merely human dupli-

³ A partial listing her here: <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/earl/files/2013/11/DS-R.pdf>.

cate who was like him with respect to all human properties. Duplicate Jesus would be sinless but not impeccable. He could Φ but wouldn't. It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus wouldn't Φ but could and that so, like Duplicate Jesus, he is not impeccable.

If Jesus is impeccable then either he couldn't Φ or wouldn't sin if he did. This poses the question of what it is, according to the impeccability doctrine, that Jesus cannot do. Is the claim that he cannot Φ or that for him Φ ing would not be sinful: that he could not bash an obliging stranger over the head or do any of the other multitudinous actions by which ordinary humans sin or that, unlike mere humans, he would not sin by doing any of those actions? A dilemma!

The impeccability dilemma

Duplicate Jesus wouldn't Φ but *could* and *would* sin if he did. Therefore, he *could* sin. More perspicuously: possibly Duplicate Jesus Φ s; necessarily, if Duplicate Jesus Φ s then Duplicate Jesus sins; therefore, possibly Duplicate Jesus sins. By the same reasoning, if Jesus *could* Φ and by Φ ing *would* sin then he *could* sin. But Jesus is impeccable: he *couldn't* sin. So either he couldn't Φ or wouldn't sin if he did. Neither alternative is attractive.

(i) Can Jesus Φ ? Insofar as Jesus is fully human there is a sense in which he *can* do whatever any ordinary human can do. Like me, but unlike Mount Fuji, the North Pole, or $\sqrt{2}$, it is possible in the broadest sense that Jesus scratch an itch, get married, calculate π to 1000 decimal places, and speak Finnish. Ordinarily however when we consider what a person *can* do we do not have that very broad notion of possibility in mind. More often, though perhaps not always, we understand what is possible for a person as what is nomologically possible given their history, physiology, and circumstances.

For current purposes however it does not matter how we understand the notion of possibility involved in addressing the question of what Jesus can do. If Duplicate Jesus can Φ , whatever that comes to, but Jesus cannot then Jesus' inability is inexplicable. And, even if mystery is not entirely out of place in theological discussion, it should be possible to explain Jesus' *human* abilities and disabilities in the same way that we explain the abilities and disabilities of other humans. *Qua* God Jesus is omnipotent and omniscient but *qua* human there are things he doesn't know and cannot do. He can walk but cannot fly because, like other human, he has legs but no wings. He understands Aramaic but not Finnish because, like his disciples, he grew up in first century Palestine and not 21st century Finland. If Duplicate Jesus can Φ it is because he has the muscle, agility, intelligence, or whatever else it takes. Jesus is exactly like Duplicate Jesus in these respects and so, *prima facie*, he has what it takes to Φ . If he cannot, his disability is inexplicable.

Impeccability does not explain Jesus' inability to Φ since normative facts are grounded in non-normative facts—not vice versa. Impeccability encompasses a range of other disabilities in the way that clumsiness, tone-deafness, and myopia do. I cannot read the text on the computer screen at more than a foot away because I am nearsighted. My nearsightedness is grounded in the conjunction of that, my inability

to read road signs, and other disabilities. But the conjunction of those disabilities is not causally responsible for my nearsightedness. There is however a causal explanation for why I cannot do those tasks and so why I am myopic. It has to do with the axial lengths of my eyes, the curvature of refractive surfaces, and other physiological features that *make* me nearsighted.

Likewise, if Jesus is impeccable, his inability to sin is grounded in a conjunction of other disabilities including his inability to Φ so to that extent he cannot Φ ‘because’ he is impeccable. But his impeccability is not causally responsible for his inability to Φ or do any other sinful action—and, in this case there is no causal explanation. I cannot read text more than 6 inches in front of my face because of a physiological condition but there is no comparable causal explanation for why Jesus could not participate in the execution of the woman taken in adultery, pitch the paralytic into the pool at Bethesda rather than healing him, or do any other sinful actions of which he was *prima facie* physically capable.

Eyes on stalks, advocates of the impeccability doctrine will complain that this worry misses the point. Jesus was of course physically capable of doing sinful actions, including the obliging stranger experiment, but he could not have formed the intention to do any sinful action. ‘It is the Spirit that gives life, the *flesh* is of *no avail*’. (Jn 6:63) Intentions are what matter in sinning and, since Jesus is impeccable, he cannot *intend* to do sinful actions and so cannot sin.

If however Jesus is incapable of intending to do sinful actions then that incapacity is inexplicable. Jesus is not merely a human organism animated by the Logos but a fully human person body and soul so whatever neural or psychic mechanisms account for the intentions of ordinary humans should account for his. If neural mechanisms fully explain ordinary humans’ intentions, then they should explain Jesus’ intentions. Duplicate Jesus wouldn’t form bad intentions but could. If Jesus can’t then that incapacity is inexplicable. If neural mechanisms do not fully explain the intentions and actions of ordinary humans because there are, in addition, human souls tweeking their pineal glands then there is likewise a fully human soul tweeking Jesus’ pineal gland. If Duplicate Jesus in virtue of his physical and spiritual make-up wouldn’t Φ but could then *prima facie* Jesus wouldn’t but could. Yet he can’t, since he is impeccable and once again his inability to sin is inexplicable.

Duplicate Jesus is like Jesus in every human respect, not only in muscle and gut, but in brain and neural network down to every neuron, and in body and soul. We cannot, therefore, assuage worries about Jesus’ otherwise inexplicable inability to sin with the anodyne assurance that even if he is ‘physically capable’ of doing sinful actions he is not ‘psychologically capable’. Duplicate Jesus can sin: he not only has the agility, muscle, and guts to engage in overt sinful behavior—he can form the requisite intentions, even if he wouldn’t. If Jesus cannot then, given the considerations suggested so far, that is inexplicable. Once again, the notion of possibility that figures here does not matter. Jesus is impeccable but Duplicate Jesus is not so *whatever* we take the force of ‘can’ to be, there are some actions, including intentions or acts of will, that Duplicate Jesus can do but Jesus cannot do and there is no explanation for that.

It may be that, in the interests of endorsing the impeccability doctrine, we should accept the inexplicable. Alternatively, we may hold that even if Jesus did actions that

would be sinful if a mere human had done them, they would not be sinful if he did. This option is, arguably, worse.

(ii) Would Jesus sin if he Φ d? Grasping this second horn of the dilemma, suppose Jesus' impeccability consists in the fact that, though he could do any action that a mere human duplicate could do, actions that would be sinful if done by a mere human would not be sinful if done by Jesus. Morally perfect Duplicate Jesus could Φ but wouldn't because his Φ ing would be sinful. Jesus could also Φ but if he did his Φ ing would not be sinful.

This is however to secure impeccability by theft rather than honest toil and so to undermine the moral import of Jesus' sinlessness. If Jesus could do any action that a reasonably fit 30-something male could do then, in suitable circumstances, he could have done the obliging stranger experiment. He was sufficiently fit to wield an axe, one of the tools of his secular trade, to have bashed an obliging stranger's head in and, if the appropriate facilities were available, to have stuffed him, trussed him, and popped him into the oven. On this account, he would not have sinned if he had.

This, with good reason, evokes the incredulous stare: if anything is sinful, the obliging stranger experiment is. If by doing the experiment Jesus would not have sinned then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that nothing he did could *count* as sinful and this is surely theologically objectionable. Jesus was, in some human ways, different from ordinary humans. According to Scripture, he was born of a virgin, performed miracles, and was raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. None of these peculiarities, it is held, preclude his being fully human in the theologically requisite sense.

There are however some respects in which Jesus must be like us in order to be a fully human person in the theologically requisite sense including, arguably, being subject to the same criteria for moral assessment as the rest of us. He was, we are told, tempted but did not succumb to temptation. He did not, when tempted, throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and the story suggests that this was to his credit *because if he had done so he would have sinned*. If nothing Jesus did could count as sinful then his refraining would not be to his credit and the story would be pointless.⁴

We have a dilemma. If nothing Jesus did could count as sinful then his virtue in the teeth of temptation and all the vicissitudes of the human condition would be a sham: he would be impeccable by fiat. If Jesus couldn't do actions that would be sinful then his incapacity in this regard would be mysterious since he has what it takes, mind, body, and soul, to do to sinful actions even though, like Duplicate Jesus, he wouldn't. Nevertheless, arguably, even though Jesus has what it takes to do sinful actions, including the obliging stranger experiment and other egregious bads, he *cannot* do such actions: sometimes doing an action takes more than having what it takes.

⁴ It does not matter whether or not Jesus felt the 'pull of temptation'. What matters is that he could have done it and would have sinned if he had.

Counterparthood human and divine

What a person can do depends on more than their intrinsic character and local conditions. I might have what it takes to invent a gizmo—the intelligence, skills, and creativity, the time and the resources supplied by enthusiastic investors—but can't because my intrinsic duplicate, unbeknownst to me or my luckless investors, has beat me to the punch. To say that I can do an action is to say that my doing it is compossible with certain facts which may not all be obvious or even accessible. And what I can do relative to one set of facts I may not be able to do relative another more comprehensive set of facts. My inventing the gizmo is not compossible with the fact that it has already been invented.⁵ Who knew?

What one 'can' or 'cannot' do depends on the range of facts that are assumed to be relevant. Tim, David Lewis's time traveler, who goes back to 1921 to kill his grandfather has the rifle and shooting skills, the proximity to Grandfather and everything else it takes to do the job.⁶ Could he kill Grandfather? As we ordinarily understand the question of what a person can or cannot do he *could*. He has what it takes and his killing Grandfather is compossible with facts up to the time of the shooting. The then future fact that Grandfather lived until 1957 is irrelevant. This is not merely an epistemic matter: future facts are irrelevant to what a person 'can' do in the ordinary sense. In the grand scheme of things however, adopting a more exacting understanding of what a person 'can' do Tim cannot kill Grandfather since killing Grandfather is not compossible with states of affairs that obtain at other times, including the fact that Grandfather lived until 1957.

Could Jesus have pitched the paralytic into the pool of Bethesda, thrown himself off the pinnacle of the temple, or done any other action by which, had he done it, he would have sinned? Yes and no. Like Tim, Jesus has what it takes but, in the grand scheme of things, cannot. His doing such actions is compossible with the plain empirical facts we should ordinarily consider when it comes to ascertaining what a person can do. It is not compossible with a more comprehensive range of facts, among them the fact that he is divine and that God is necessarily morally perfect.

Jesus can and he cannot do any sinful action but that is an equivocation, not a contradiction. Relative to the facts we ordinarily consider relevant he can do anything that a merely human duplicate in similar circumstances with the same resources at his disposal can do, including actions that would be sinful. Relative to a more comprehensive set of facts, amongst them theological facts, he cannot. Unlike the additional facts that render Tim incapable of killing Grandfather the additional facts in virtue of which Jesus cannot do sinful actions are otherworldly—modally as well as theologically.

⁵ It is not always clear what facts are supposed to be relevant when it comes to claims about what a person can or cannot do. Could I have invented the gizmo? It depends on whether the fact that my intrinsic duplicate invented it earlier is a deal-breaker—whether, e.g. Newton and Leibniz both, independently, invented calculus.

⁶ His *Fing* "is compossible with all the facts of the sorts we would ordinarily count as relevant in saying what someone can do. Lewis, David. "The Paradoxes of Time Travel." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1976): 145–52.

According to the counterpart-theoretic take on *de re* modality the way things could be for an individual is the way things are for its counterpart at some possible world, where an individual's counterpart at a world is the object which resembles it more closely than any other object at that world in relevant respects. The answer to questions about how things could be for an object however depends on which respects of resemblance we regard as relevant. Could San Diego have been in Oregon? Yes, if we prioritize the history of its founding as relevant and note that the founders could have been blown off course, landed 1000 miles to the north, and planted the Spanish flag near what is now Portland. No, if we think that what matters is location, location, location.

Could Jesus sin? Yes, if we consider only the ordinary empirical facts of what he was like as a fully human person: facts about his fitness, intelligence, and skills, the instruments at his disposal, and his immediate circumstances. What Jesus can do humanly speaking is what his human counterparts, those otherworldly individuals who are most like him with respect to his human properties, do. If Jesus could have been merely human then he has counterparts at other possible worlds who are merely human, including not only perfect intrinsic duplicates who are sinless but imperfect duplicates who sin. Insofar as he has human counterparts who sin, he can sin.

This poses the question of whether Jesus could have been merely human, that is, whether he was only contingently divine. According to orthodox theologies, Jesus was God and if that is construed as a strict identity claim it raises delicate questions about contingent identity. If, however, we buy into counterpart theory and recognize, as Lewis suggests, a variety of counterpart relations, we can allow for contingent identities not only in this case but in a range of non-theological puzzle cases where ordinary objects are spatiotemporally coincident. So, Lewis has argued, while persons are identical with their bodies the identity is contingent insofar as there are possible worlds at which persons have different personal and bodily counterparts. 'I and my body might not have been identical', he writes, translates into counterpart theory as 'There is at a possible world, w , a unique personal counterpart x of me and a unique bodily counterpart y of my body and $x \neq y$ '.⁷

If this is correct then we may affirm that Jesus is God but could have been merely human. On the current account that is to say there is a possible world at which he has a merely human counterpart, similar to him with respect to all his human properties but not with respect to his divine properties. This seems to be a theologically acceptable assumption. On orthodox accounts Jesus was not merely a living human organism animated by the Logos who, absent divinity, would be a mere animal without a 'rational soul'. He is a fully human person who has human counterparts at nearby worlds who are merely human persons. Some of Jesus' merely human counterparts, like Duplicate Jesus, are sinless perfect intrinsic duplicates but others are imperfect duplicates who fall short and sin. So, restricting our attention to the human counterpart relation for which the relevant resemblance is similarity with respect to human properties, Jesus can sin. Relative to a more comprehensive range of facts however,

⁷ Lewis, David. "Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies." In *Philosophical Papers Volume I*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195032047.003.0004>.

including the fact that he is divine, he cannot sin. He has no divine counterparts who do.

Like Tim who has what it takes to kill Grandfather but whose inability to do the deed is explicable by reference to a more comprehensive range of facts, Jesus' inability to do sinful actions is not mysterious, miraculous, or inexplicable. There is no special intervening mechanism that stops him from pitching the paralytic into the Pool of Bethesda, stoning the woman taken in adultery, or doing any other sinful action any more than there is a special intervening mechanism to stop Tim from shooting Grandfather. And there is no intervening mechanism to stop him from feeling the pull of temptation or forming bad intentions. Jesus can and cannot sin without contradiction because 'can' is equivocal. Insofar as he is human he is merely sinless; since he is divine, he is impeccable.

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