



# Will To Knowledge

## Exploring Sin as the Human Capacity to Judge

*A paper prepared for the New Zealand Christians in Science Conference on the Fall in Science and Theology.*

*In this paper Jay proposes that we should view Sin (capital S) as the capacity to determine what is good and by implication judge between that good and that which is not good. He views this addition to the human condition at the event we commonly call 'The Fall' as the problematic source of all interpersonal dysfunction in the world, from marital and familial breakdown to international conflicts.*

*From the theology of the Apostle Paul (in particular but not exclusively) he positions the Holy Spirit as an external source available, through allegiance to Jesus, to humans that enables us to overcome Sin in our mission to co-create New Creation as participants in the purposes of God, leading to a consummation when all things will be made new in fulness at the physical return of Jesus.*

**K**ia ora koutou (life and wellbeing to you all). In keeping with Māori custom, I am obliged to locate myself, to establish from where I stand and under whose authority (that is, my family's) I speak as Māori. Since I identify most strongly with my father's world, though I was brought up in my mother's, what follows is my turangawaewae (standing place) in time and space...

*Kō Takitimu te waka* (my tribal canoe is the Takitimu). *Kō Te Waka o Kupe me Tuhirangi ngā maunga* (the mountains I belong to are known as the canoes of high chief Kupe and Tuhirangi, the sea serpent that Kupe chased along the Pacific in his discovery of Aotearoa New Zealand). *Kō Ruamahanga te awa* (my river is the Ruamahanga—it was in this river that I was baptised as a new believer in Christ in 1984). *Kō Ngāti Kabungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, kō Kai Tahu ōku iwi* (I have direct genealogical connections to these three tribes which span the East Coast of both the main islands of Aotearoa New Zealand). *Kō Ngāti Rākaiwhakairi tōku hapū* (my primary clan or family group name means to lift or hang in adornment). *Kō Kohunui tōku marae* (my clan's customary meeting place is called Kohunui—a physical piece of land on the outskirts of the village of Pirinoa, shared by our family groups, with buildings for meeting/sleeping, cooking/eating, and keeping tools and supplies). *Kō Jay Mātenga tōku ingoa* (my name is Jay Mātenga), *kō Aperahama Kubukuhu Tui Mātenga tōku tupuna* (descendent of Abraham Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga). *Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa* (and so, three times respectful greetings to you all).

On my mother's side, my English heritage can be traced back to the first settlers in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a Woiwurrung Aboriginal great great grandmother (according to family oral history) from my maternal grandmother's Australian line.

### Introduction

I am an embodied representation of multiple ethnicities incarnated into an integrated singularity otherwise known as a person. A person that wrestles, like anyone else, to live according to my ideals, values, and beliefs. I see myself in the assessment of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:14b-17, 21-24 (NLT),

...I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. But if I know that what I am doing is wrong (because the law highlights this), this shows that I agree that the law is good.

Then, further on he says...

I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?

But Paul doesn't stop there. His exasperation is met with:

Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.



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In this passage we have our starting point, and I need to establish that Sin in this discussion is not behaviour as such. I view behaviour that we normally associate as sins (with a lower-case s) as a by-product of Sin. These by-products are grouped in the New Testament under the rubric of ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*)—that which is out of alignment with a standard, failing to measure up, missing the mark, etc. What concerns me in this presentation is Sin with a capital S, the root source of sins, which I consider to be relationship-destroying behaviour that is misaligned to God’s standards revealed in Hebrew and Christian Scripture. I hold that these sin behaviours are somewhat culturally determined, whereas the Sin impulse is universally experienced as the destructive force behind relationship harming behaviours.

Sin (with a capital S) is described in Scripture as a destructive influencer in its earliest manifestation. It is introduced metaphorically from Genesis 4:7 as a monster lurking at Cain’s door waiting to devour him. A monster which Cain could and needed to control but failed. It is a capacity within our physical being, our genetic make-up and subsequent socialisation, that enables us to act in ways that contravene Divine legal precedents, with a compulsion to uphold our self-determined idea of good. So, Sin is recognised as a very real existential threat to us. Yet, as Paul notes, we are given the antidote in the life, teaching, death, resurrection, and transformative power made available by Jesus the Messiah, and activated in our person via our allegiance to Him.

Our relationship with Jesus, and the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, switches Paul’s angst into something that approximates the aspirations of our Lady Gaga when she sings,

I’m beautiful in my way  
 ‘Cause God makes no mistakes  
 I’m on the right track baby  
 I was born this way  
 Don’t hide yourself in regret  
 Just love yourself and you’re set  
 I’m on the right track baby I was born this way...

God does not make mistakes, and everything that we are born with and develop can be used for God’s purposes as we mature, but we cannot simply manifest our perfection by replacing Divine expectations with our own standards—that is not even working out for Gaga.

We need transcendent assistance that only Jesus can provide. Yet at the very root of this capacity called Sin is exactly that: the capacity to establish our own standards

of what is good... and then live to impose those upon everyone else we meet or resist the imposition of another’s good upon us.

In this paper I propose that Sin, with a capital S, is a malevolent aspect of human nature that seeks to impose and control (or, conversely, resist control). It does that through a mechanism that I call “will to knowledge”, a term co-opted from the postmodern philosophies of Michel Foucault. My rendering of this concept sees will to knowledge as a posture that is ultimately destructive and the root cause for all relationship dysfunction in the world on this side of eternity.

I will note here that I have developed this hypothesis from within the hermeneutic community known as global evangelicalism, which has common core assumptions about the world (and many non-core differences!). This large group (640+ million) interpret our reality in more or less the same way, rooted in the authority of the Protestant Scriptures, the saving power of Jesus Christ (triune God incarnated, died, resurrected, ascended, returning) the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the obligation to do good in the world according to God’s loving standards. From within this reality consensus, I hold certain things as objective reality and see our faith as a metanarrative—assumptions that people those outside of this community would not necessarily agree with.

My intention is not to impose my assumptions onto outsiders, but I would certainly welcome their engagement in if they would like to explore our reality further. This is how my thesis reconciles with pluralistic and postmodern subjectivity and relativity. In this way, I acknowledge that this paper is subjective to our in-group and relative to the ideas of other groups.

Furthermore, I draw on my personal relationship with the Creator within a te ao Māori reality, which assumes that the created universe is generative, and that the darkness/void is neither empty nor evil in itself but instead a place of potential (*cf.* Job 12:22). From this, we read that the Bible’s identifying of Sin with deeds of darkness is because it is from there that hidden motives emerge in destructive outcomes. However, it is also the place of where ignorance (darkness) can be transformed into highly beneficial understanding (light).

Having established some assumptions, we now begin. In keeping with the King’s response to the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, we will “Begin at the beginning... and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”

## 1. Genesis

Like all good biblical analysis, to understand what Paul is talking about in Romans 7 and 8, and how we move from being enslaved by Sin to being liberated by the Spirit, we have to go back to the first occurrence. To the very genesis of our species.

I will neither present a thorough exegesis nor give a cited academic defence of my position. What follows is a synopsis of conclusions I have come to after decades of consideration and research into this phenomenon—including studies in biblical analysis, post-modern philosophies, cultural and social sciences, positive psychology, and decolonial thinking.

Suffice it to say, I agree with biblical scholars who hold that the Genesis 3 event is a mythic counter-narrative of our origins that prophetically subverted the prevailing creation narratives in the region at the time. Whether the myths of Atrahasis, Gilgamesh or the Egyptian sources, the author of Genesis was drawing on ideas commonly in circulation at the time. The result that we have in our Bibles speaks prophetically against ideas of life, the universe and everything that were popularly understood by the people around the Hebrews at the time, centring Yahweh as the Creator and humanity as an intended partner in the post-creation process.

Informed by my indigenous background, I do not believe that a story needs to be factual to be real or true. The dichotomy of fact versus fiction is a European development and largely irrelevant for indigenous cultures when it comes to discerning meaning for life-application. Furthermore, with postmodern philosophers and quantum physicists, I would argue that what we might consider verifiable fact is more of an approximation of reality rather than reality itself.

Everything we consider to be fact is just a reality consensus that shapes the cognitive schema that helps us function in our worlds. I place all scientific assumptions in this category too, from mathematics to physics to evolutionary biology. They are all mere approximations (theories) that help us make sense of and take control of experienced phenomena. Some more enduring, like mathematics, and others quickly made redundant when a new concept better articulates our reality.

All human schema is powerfully shaped by things such as theories, paradigms, myths, and metaphors—our culturally formed narratives—and therefore we do well to treat our perspective with humility and respect the perspectives of others.

When it comes to narratives such as found in Genesis chapters 1 through 11, the important thing for us is not “did it actually happen like this”, but rather “how can this narrative help us to better navigate our reality?”

Explanations about phenomena are described in new ways as cultures develop, to help us to better navigate a world that is changing dynamically around us. And so it is with The Fall.

By suggesting that The Fall narrative might not be literally or factually correct, does not diminish the fact that *something* happened long ago to affect our lived reality even to this day. Furthermore, if we recognise this *something* that we experience as a problem, we are better poised to consider the solution provided for us—one that is much more literal, concrete, factual, and real in its power to mitigate the effects of the Genesis 3 event.

Therefore, I maintain that, as described in a broadly Christian a reality consensus, Sin is very real indeed. Its consequences do not simply disappear if we pretend Sin doesn't exist. And it is to this phenomenon that I now turn.

## 2. Knowledge

Common theological narratives concerning the Genesis 3 event tend to focus on what we lost. For example, we lost our intimate relationship with God, our access to eternal life, our righteousness, etc. In contrast, I have been investigating what we gained.

Western constructs of guilt, fear, and shame are often used as negative examples of what we have gained, but therapies of modern psychology can now quite effectively deal with these psychological ailments without the need for religious intervention. However, the chief thing we gained, which therapy does not deal with and likely exacerbates, was a personal capacity to imagine what is good, and in contrast determine what is not good, otherwise known as evil. We find this embedded in the very symbolism of the forbidden tree, which bore the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

My central thesis is that at some point in human history we acquired the capacity to determine for ourselves whether something is good or not good—a capacity to judge. The Bible makes an important claim that there was a time prior to us having this capacity when the world was good according to Divine standards at its very core, by default. When we consider what our capacity to judge enables us to do, and the dysfunctions that arise as a result, this creation imaginary of what was beforehand provides us with a vision of what could be again.

According to the Genesis narrative, prior to the Fall humans were devoid of value determination. Everything is ‘just cool baby’. Walking around in the nude? ‘Right on’. Disagree on what to plant next outside the bounds of the established garden? ‘No problem’. It is all just a bit of fun, and a learning experience for each of us. We do



not need to make judgements about such things because God's established morality is simply accepted as good.

There are no winners or losers, no zero-sum games. Sometimes my idea gets put into play, sometimes yours. We bring everything we have to the table and are content with how it gets applied. There is no ego involved. Each contribution is appreciated equally.

I refer to this kind of co-creative interaction as mutuality. Here, relationships are held in perfect tension, with all parties equally contributing and benefiting from the interplay of ideas and actions.

You might think of this as some sort of hippy commune utopian dream, but I the reason I can imagine this scenario as plausible in the beginning is because it is the exact scenario that we are encouraged to work towards as co-creators of the New Creation described in the New Testament (*cf.* Acts 2:42-47). The thing that is keeping us from achieving it is what I call "will to knowledge". Sin with a capital S.

As noted in the introduction, "will to knowledge" was conceived by one of the fathers of postmodernism, Michel Foucault. Foucault formed the concept as he sought to deconstruct ideas and systems that harness power within societies. His core assumption was that power was readily available anywhere to anyone, who knew how to harness it. In very simplified terms, his agenda was to expose the mechanisms of institutional power so that they might be resisted more effectively to bring about a more equitable world—to establish relational harmony.

While the motivations and applications of Foucault's philosophies leave much to be desired, core principles can help us navigate the increasingly complex world around us. The theories provide elements of a cognitive schema that has helped me better understand ancient biblical reality in today's lived experience.

While co-opting Foucault's phrasing, my use of the term bears only a passing resemblance to his original intent. For me, will to knowledge means *the imposition onto others of our determination of what is good*. That can be active, in the demands we put on others, or passive, in the expectations we have of others. The central point is that we are convinced that such things are *good*.

Again, I argue that this is the root of Sin and cause of all relationship dysfunction in the world, whereas I view relational harmony as the highest Divine good as revealed in Scripture. Somewhere in our history humans acquired the capacity to determine what is good and we use our agency to push it upon others. Should someone have a different understanding of what is good for them,

which contravenes our understanding of good, then in its extreme we determine that to be evil. And so, welcome to the world after The Fall.

Paul wrestles in Romans 7 with that good that he wants to do but can't achieve and he observes that it is the Hebrews' religious law that shows that what he does do, what he thinks is good, is determined to be not-good. This articulation of Paul's Jewish reality shows us that we require something independent of ourselves, something transcendent, to keep us from following our determination of good right off an existential cliff—this, after all, is the lesson in the tower of Babel narrative.

The law, given to the Hebrews was a standard keeper, a schoolmaster, or guardian, Paul writes in Galatians 3:24. Laws in any religion or culture work the same way. They establish a sacred expectation, an ideal, established to reign in socially destructive impulses and create a cohesive society via a social contract. As such, aspects of the established standard can sit uncomfortably with us and there are always outliers (rebels) who find paths of non-compliance.

Religious laws often create behavioural standards that even the most devout Pharisees, gurus or tohunga fail to achieve in any given culture. For try as we might to meet some of the conditions, we will inevitably fail on others. That is precisely what Jesus showed the teachers of the law when he held the moral mirror to the faces and declared their ways to be socially detrimental to the people of God.

The solution to Sin as will to knowledge is not to relinquish all our knowledge. That would be impossible. No, the answer is found in relinquishing the ego-centric imposition of our knowledge upon others. To restrain our will, our use of power. Jesus and Paul referred to this as self-denial. But that is not something we have the natural capacity to do, not in a consistently healthy way anyway. Our ego ultimately gets in the way, negatively affecting our relationships in one way or another as we imagine, pursue, and seek to achieve what we think is good.

Arguably the best example of what life without will to knowledge would look like is given to us in Philippians 2. There Paul presents Christ as an example of what our attitude or posture needs to be. Theologians call this a kenotic posture (from the Greek κενώω *kenōō*). Here Paul describes Jesus as one who has every right to exert His power and privilege yet does not. Instead, He (*kenōō*) gives it up, empties Himself, or yields it in service of others—even though it cost Him his life. Jesus is, therefore, the ultimate example of what it means to be human without Sin. Someone who had all authority to

make judgements but refrained from doing so (cf. John 12:47). Instead, He fully yielded His will to the Father, the Source, the only one who can be trusted to determine “It is good” (cf. Genesis 1). “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked. “Only God is good.” (Mark 18:10).

### 3. New Creation

Now, where does this leave us? Can we simply ignore Divine expectations and carry on our merry way, determining what seems good or right to us (cf. Judges 17:6, 21:25)? No. Because the interpersonal battle of our respective will to knowledge is ultimately destructive. Every conflict on the earth results from this. Every broken relationship is rooted in competing ideas of what is good. Societies can hold common good together via a social contract for only so long before the tensions start to create fractures. And we’re experiencing one of those times right now. Globally and nationally. It will be some time before a new consensus emerges.

The Bible tells us that we need an external force to help mitigate the will to knowledge capacity that we have. One of the many reasons Jesus died and rose again was so that he could legitimately provide us with such assistance upon his ascension. This is the significance of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

It is no accident that the Spirit features so powerfully in Romans 8 after Paul has wrestled with his own will to knowledge in Romans 7, moving on to articulate how this should work out in community in Romans 12. When we pledge our allegiance to Jesus and depend on Him to be the determiner of what is good, we are immediately opened to the Spirit who re-tethers us to God. It is the Spirit who then restrains our will to knowledge, mitigating Sin. Our life thereafter can then be spent co-creating New Creation with one another, regardless of our backgrounds (Jesus removed ‘walls of hostility’ cf. Ephesians 2:14-16), as well as with creation itself. New Creation is another way of speaking of the Kingdom of God. I prefer it because Kingdom terminology is fraught with imperial overtones that are not helpful in postcolonial contexts. New Creation is a new reality, where the will to knowledge is neutralised.

In te ao Māori terms, we are effectively whangai’d or adopted into the whānau or family of God by the blood

### Conclusion

At the beginning of the book *The Woven Universe*, a collection of writings from the late Rev Māori Marsden, some tohunga explain how they understand the universe to be generative. Always fruitful, always producing. Our reality is a kākahu or cloak made of interwoven relationships. They imagine the dysfunctions we experience in the world as rips in the fabric of the universe. The torn universe suffers from broken relationships. The tohunga had elaborate rites to repair

of Christ (whakapapa or genealogy is in the blood) and enabled by the Spirit to live according to the expectations of our new whānau.

Where our concepts of the good life led us into all manner of relationship destroying attitudes and activities, we now follow the Spirit’s leading into God’s goodness, which enhances and strengthens relationships. As N T Wright argues from Romans 8:28 (TBFE), those of us in-Christ are called to a vocation of co-creation with God as we work all things together for good—God’s good, not ours.

On another tack, consider the lists in the epistles of the by-products or fruit of the Spirit, which are brought under a single category called love. Take a look sometime at Galatians 5:22, 1 Corinthians 13, or any other list of positive character traits that reflect the character of God, which is love. They are all relationship-enhancing attributes. Not one of them has much relevance apart from interpersonal relations. They are all counter-will-to-knowledge. They are love embodied. To avoid overly romanticised misconceptions of love, I refer to God’s love in action as “will to mutuality”.

Will to mutuality is the ethic of God’s Kingdom, the norm of New Creation. It is complete submission to the rule of Christ and experiencing new life activated by Wairua Tapu, the Holy Spirit. It is mutual yielding of our knowledge of what is good to the collective, as members of one body. Contributing the best of what we have to offer as created in the image of God, but not imposing our perspective on others.

Mutuality mitigates against abuse because such relationships should be highly reciprocal—holding a tension between what you think is good and what I think is good or what others think is good. Bringing those perspectives before God and discerning a co-creative outcome that will likely be a harmony created in the tensions of our differences. For this is the important thing about true harmony: it cannot be created, anywhere in the material world (and I’d argue in spiritual reality) without tension and that tension needs to be well tuned. The Holy Spirit of the living God provides the ability, the capacity, to tune it well in alignment with God’s purposes, God’s tuning fork, for the emergence of New Creation.



different disruptions, with *karakia* and *waiata* helping to weave the threads together again. The principle is largely the same as the Hebrew sacrificial system and many other religious rites that provide a form of atonement. But soon the fabric is torn in a different place in a different way because of the will to knowledge imposed once more. And the repair process starts all over again.

It is this cycle of relationship rupture and repair that Jesus came to help us with. To break our dependence on will to knowledge and release our capacity for will to mutuality by the Spirit of God. Jesus' way is a way of mutual maturing into the full standard or character of Jesus, God incarnate (*cf.* Ephesians 4:13). What began in the garden of Eden, ended in the garden of Gethsemane when He without Sin, but with much anguish, surrendered His "nevertheless" to God. "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done".

We now carry a responsibility to manifest God's will in whatever context the Spirit of God leads us into. To co-create New Creation with whomever we find there that follows Jesus, working together for the benefit of everyone else as part of our witness to the reality of God's good news. Our mission, then, is to create and promote with our lives something like a movie trailer, a glimpse of the main feature that is coming—New Creation in its fulness, God walking with us once more in the garden and us communing with God intimately, without shame.

Na, kia noho te Atua o te rangimarie ki a koutou katoa. Amine. (The God of peace be with you all. Amen.)