

“Why Socrates Was Wrong: Moral Theology and Original Sin,” paper presented in the international academic conference *Il peccato originale: Una prospettiva interdisciplinare*, Rome, Italy, March 3, 2005.

Why Socrates Was Wrong: Moral Theology and Original Sin

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Philosophical anthropology sets the basic framework for the moral life in its grasp of the freedom of the human person. Human reason and experience testify to man’s ability to know moral good and evil, to deliberate, to choose, and to grow in virtue through adherence to the good. Yet an essential datum for explaining and understanding the moral life of human beings lies beyond the reach of human reason, and is accessible only through biblical revelation. That is the doctrine of original sin.¹

This doctrine influences a study of the moral life not so much through the historical *fact* of man’s first sin as through the *consequences* that sin had on the entire human race, consequences woven into the fabric of all future human activity. Moral theology does not concern itself so much with how this sin is passed on as with its abiding effects on man’s nature as a moral being.² Original sin disrupted God’s plan for man. It brought disorder to the original harmony existing in man’s interior and in his relations with his Creator and his fellows.³ This disorder profoundly influences the way actual human persons live out their lives as moral beings. In striking terms, the Council asserts that as a result of original sin, “all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness.”⁴

The specific ways in which original sin affects moral theology span an immense gamut. Here I will endeavor only to adumbrate what I consider to be the key areas where original sin colors the moral life, and hence moral theology. I will roughly organize these points under four general headings: (1) the human person himself, (2) his relationship with God, (3) his relationship with his fellow man, (4) his relationship with the rest of creation.

The Effects of Original Sin on the Acting Person

¹ “Following St. Paul, the Church has always taught that the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination towards evil and death cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam’s sin” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 403).

² Moral theology also draws important lessons from the Genesis narration of man’s first sin, in that it provides a paradigm for all future personal sin and teaches much about the nature of sin itself. “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. This is what man’s first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 397).

³ “Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things” (ibid. 403).

⁴ Vatican Council II, pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et spes*, 13.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the doctrine of original sin to moral theology is the bracing *realism* it imposes on our understanding of the human person and his actions.⁵ The moral life is posited on man's ability to know good and evil and to freely pursue them. Yet both his knowledge and his freedom were darkened by the sin of our first parents. Man is still good, indeed very good, yet he is not Rousseau's *bon sauvage*, corrupted only by the external influence of society.⁶ He bears the seeds of corruption within himself. Because of original sin man tends toward inordinate self-love and needs education, socialization, instruction and character formation.

Thus moral theology must come to grips with man's condition as a fallen creature, taking inventory of strengths and weaknesses. We cannot behave or theorize as if we were not fallen, did not tend "naturally" to sin, due to concupiscence. A program of diet and exercise aimed at a healthy person will differ substantially from a regimen drafted for the ill or infirm. Moral theology must bear in mind that the Christian message itself is directed not to original man, but to sinful man.⁷

I have articulated the following outline in five points, corresponding to five specific areas where the doctrine of original sin influences the moral structure of the acting person: (1) moral knowledge, (2) weakness of will, (3) virtue, (4) temptation, and (5) conversion.

Moral Knowledge

At the level of moral knowledge, man's ability to discern the good was clouded by original sin. What was evident to our first parents, fallen man sees in a vague and muddled way. In this regard Aquinas writes, "Of spiritual punishments, the principal is weakness of reason, the result being that man encounters difficulty in acquiring knowledge of the truth, and easily falls into error."⁸ Thus man's perception of God's eternal law through natural reason, while maintaining its fundamental structure and validity, became debilitated and needful of external assistance. "The precepts of natural law are not perceived by everyone clearly and immediately," we read in the *Catechism*. "In the present situation sinful man needs grace and revelation so moral and religious

⁵ "Not only is *this doctrine an integral part of Christian revelation*; it also has great hermeneutical value insofar as it helps one to understand human reality" (Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus annus*, May 1, 1991, no. 25).

⁶ According to Rousseau, men in a state of nature are pre-social animals who do not know good and evil, but their independence, along with "the peacefulness of their passions, and their ignorance of vice" keep them from doing ill (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* [1755], Maurice Cranston, tr. [London: Penguin, 1984], 71-73). Rousseau first argued that civilization had corrupted human beings in his essay, *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences* in 1750. For Rousseau, the natural moral state of human beings is to be compassionate; civilization has made us cruel, selfish, and bloodthirsty.

⁷ "The human race is in a pathological condition... The facts of the human condition must be taken into account in considering the practical implications of the true, general requirements of human morality. If the facts—which are only fully disclosed by revelation—are ignored, people will behave more or less unrealistically" (Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, vol. 1 of *The Way of the Lord Jesus* [Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997], 25-E, p. 607).

⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, 52.

truths may be known ‘by everyone with facility, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error.’”⁹

Thus not only those divine mysteries beyond the reach of reason but even moral truth accessible to man’s intelligence needs the aid of grace and revelation. In a well-known text Aquinas considers whether it is fitting that truths accessible to reason should be proposed to man as an object of belief.¹⁰ Aquinas enumerates three disadvantages that would result if certain truths were left solely to the inquiry of human intelligence. First, few people would arrive at these truths, either because of a natural indisposition to speculative thought, or laziness, or a lack of time to devote to such pursuits. Second, these truths would be reached only after a long time, because of their complexity and depth, the need for previous knowledge of many things, and the fact that youth do not possess the calm and prudence needed to reach the knowledge of sublime truths. Third, much falsehood is mingled into the knowledge acquired by human reason, especially on more difficult topics, and given that many people considered wise teach contrary opinions regarding these issues. These same arguments, which Aquinas adduces regarding the revelation of divine truths such as the existence of God, apply equally well to principles of the natural moral law.¹¹

Differences in natural law theory between Catholics and ecclesial communions of the reformed tradition substantially hinge on our different understandings of the consequences of original sin. The chief agents of the Protestant reformation, whose accentuation of the corruption of human nature after the Fall cast doubt on reason’s capability of furnishing trustworthy ethical criteria, by and large sidelined the natural law in favor of the law of the Gospel.¹² Martin Luther posited a nearly absolute corruption of reason and will which pushed both knowledge of the good and its accomplishment beyond the realm of human possibility.¹³ The ability of reason to ascertain moral truth was seen to be so limited as to be unreliable, and at any rate was superseded by Christian revelation. Thus Luther’s *sola fides* stands in contrast with the Catholic *fides et ratio*.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1960, citing Pope Pius XII, *Humani generis*: DS 3876; cf. *Dei Filius* 2: DS 3005.

¹⁰ Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 4.

¹¹ Speaking of the difference between a purely natural ethics and Christian ethics, Peschke asserts: “There is only a difference in the knowledge and understanding of human nature, of the ultimate end, and by that of the moral law; a difference, certainly, which is still important and which is not to be slighted. Christian faith imparts to man an insight into human nature, the final goal and the moral order which is much deeper, fuller, and more to the point than the insight gained by reason alone” (C. Henry Peschke, *A Presentation of General Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, vol. 1 of *Christian Ethics* [C. Goodliffe Neale: Alcester/Dublin, 1977], 104).

¹² Martin Luther retained natural law in his theology, “though not without transforming its place and meaning within the framework of his overall understanding of the Gospel” (Carl A. Braaten, “A Response to Russell Hittinger,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie [Grand Rapids, MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center/William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997]: 31).

¹³ De Finance notes that “Lutheran theology, in the measure in which it holds that human nature has been totally corrupted by original sin, so that human reason is now entirely incapable of grasping moral and religious truths, cannot but reject the notion of natural law. It is only revelation that can give people the knowledge of moral truths” (Joseph de Finance, *An Ethical Inquiry*, Michael O’Brien tr. [Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1991], § 182, p. 312).

John Calvin, on the other hand, held that a sort of natural law is present in fallen man, and whereas his reason is often sufficient to discern right from wrong, he is incapable of carrying out the good he sees. “There is imprinted on their hearts a discrimination and judgment by which they distinguish between what is just and unjust, between what is honest and dishonest... not of the power to fulfill the law, but of the knowledge of it.”¹⁴

Weakness of Will

Calvin’s reflection on man’s inability to fulfill the law brings us to the second major effect of original sin on the moral life, namely weakness of will. After speaking of the first effect of original sin as weakness of reason, Saint Thomas adds that because of sin man “is unable wholly to overcome his animal propensities, which sometimes even obscure his mental vision.”¹⁵ Further along he adds that “when the first man sinned, his reason rebelled against God, and the consequence was that his lower powers ceased to be perfectly subject to reason, and his body to his soul.”¹⁶

Socrates, and Plato as well, thought that virtue consisted in knowledge, and that moral faults were the result of ignorance of the good.¹⁷ Whoever knows what is good—he postulated—will do it. Evildoing can only stem from a failure to perceive the good. Yet this very sanguine approach to human nature fails to take into account the internal disorder and irrationality resulting from original sin.¹⁸ The rebellion of man’s passions against his reason produces an internal division, described eloquently by Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans.¹⁹ “With my mind,” writes Paul, “I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans, 2:15*, cited by Daniel Westberg, “The Reformed Tradition and Natural Law,” in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids, MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center/William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997): 184, note 6.

¹⁵ *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, 52.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Cf. *Protagoras* 345de, 355b-358a; *Gorgias* 488a; *The Sophist* 228cd; *The Laws* 731c; *Timaeus* 44b, 87ab.

¹⁸ Others, such as Aristotle, recognized the error of Socrates’ position even prior to Christianity. Speaking of his own moral experience, Ovid wrote, in a line similar to Paul’s, *Video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor*. Yet whereas this frailness of will can be perceived by reason, it only finds an adequate explanation in the Christian doctrine of original sin.

¹⁹ “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin” (Romans 7:14-25).

This disorder among the faculties produces a dislike for goodness. Moral rectitude no longer seems attractive or worthy of pursuit, but rather weighs on man like a burden imposed from without.²⁰ The original connaturality between man and his true good no longer obtains, and man must struggle against his lower nature to conform his choices to his rightful end. In this regard, freedom itself, understood as the ability to carry out one's proposals, suffers from the internal subordination of the faculties.²¹

Virtue

In this light, the central role of virtue in the moral life can be understood as a reeducation and reordering of the faculties according to their original perfection and the harmony that reigned among them. Virtue, as a stable perfection of an operative faculty, redresses the disorder caused by original sin. The deprivation of original holiness and justice produced by sin affects man at three distinct levels. Three levels of disorder call for three levels of reordering.

First, at the level of the faculties and passions themselves. As a person wears corrective lenses to compensate for a defect in the visual organs, so too certain virtues serve to correct the internal operations of the faculties. The intellectual virtues such as wisdom and knowledge perfect man's reason. Other virtues, such as temperance and fortitude with their allied virtues, reorient and channel the concupiscible and irascible passions.

Second, at the level of the relationship among the faculties, the disorder produced by sin, whereby the lower faculties do not submit to the guidance of reason illuminated by faith, must be redressed. Chief among the virtues coming into play at this level is the cardinal virtue of prudence, which perfects practical reason and serves as a guide (*auriga virtutum*) for the other faculties. The prudent person not only knows what is right and good, but is able to carry it out. This reordering of the faculties among themselves bears the fruit of human freedom.

Third, at the level of one's relationship with other persons—God and others—original sin produced a rift which also calls for virtuous correction. The properly Christian virtue of humility allows a person to regain a correct understanding of who he is before God and others, correcting the imbalances of disordered self-love and self-importance. Justice, perfected by the theological virtue of charity, directs one's actions in accordance with love for God above all things and a love for others that mirrors Christ's self-sacrificing love.

Temptation

Since man's wounded nature, deprived of its original rectitude, is inclined to sin, the nature of temptation itself changes. Temptation comes no longer solely from without, as in the case of Adam and Eve, or even that of Jesus in the wilderness, but from within.

²⁰ "Original sin transforms the human situation in many ways, making moral uprightness seem unattractive and the irrationality of immorality seems unimportant" (Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, vol. 1 of *The Way of the Lord Jesus* [Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997], 25-E, p. 607).

²¹ "Since man's freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower" (*Gaudium et spes*, 17).

After the Fall, the traditional enemy of man—the devil—is joined by two others: the “flesh” and the “world.”²² Paul exhorts the Galatians to live by the Spirit, resisting the desires of the flesh. “For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.”²³ He enumerates the “works” of the flesh as fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and such like things.²⁴

This warring of the flesh against the spirit in turn gives rise to two other corollary phenomena proper to the moral life of fallen man. The first is the need for a healthy distrust of one’s own feelings and inclinations. Whereas all of Adam’s impulses were ordered to the good, ours are not. We cannot spontaneously follow every inclination with the assurance that it will lead us in the right direction. We must continually evaluate them according to the criteria of right reason and God’s revealed will, and often resist what our natural urges desire. “If it feels good do it” does not embody a sound moral program for fallen man. This distrust of self likewise grounds the prudence of avoiding occasions of sin, since one’s own weakness and inclination to evil can gain the upper hand over good proposals in situations of trial.

The second corollary to this internal division is the need for asceticism, which would not have been necessary were it not for original sin. The need for self-denial constitutes a fundamental requirement for those who would acquire the freedom of the Spirit. Paul again reminds us that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”²⁵ This self-discipline, fortified by divine grace, allows the “new man” to triumph over the old. Only when this fundamental self-mastery is achieved can man truly put himself at the service of God and neighbor.

On the other hand, the Christian understanding of penance goes beyond the exercise of self-discipline and implies union with Christ and the making up in our own flesh what is lacking to the passion of Christ for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.²⁶ Not only are we called to do the right thing, but also, in imitation of Jesus, to make reparation for our sins and for the sins of all persons.²⁷ In this way we share in the redemptive work of Christ. The need to take up our cross daily and follow him is a result of original sin, but simultaneously a wonderful grace and a means of union with Christ.

Yet the self-giving, kenotic character of Christian love is not the fruit of sin, but is proper to the nature of Trinitarian love itself. Nevertheless, this love, experienced as

²² In fact, the “world” only becomes an enemy because of man’s sin. The inducement to sin provided by the world is a result of the disorder of creation and sinful social structures, which are fruit of man’s sin.

²³ Galatians 5:17.

²⁴ Cf. Galatians 5:19-20.

²⁵ Galatians 5:24.

²⁶ Colossians 1:24.

²⁷ “The temperance of Adam, that of original justice, could not in fact have implied this ascetical exigence Infused temperance is the rule for the use of and the desire of pleasures of touch, in a subject that is called to celestial life. But by reason of the subject in which it is found, in sinful man redeemed by Christ, infused temperance takes on a new ‘modality,’ which it would not have had in the state of original justice: and that modality is the necessity of mortification and of the imitation of the Cross of Jesus.” (Louis B. Gillon, OP, *Christ and Moral Theology* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1967), p. 127-28, note 22).

death to self, becomes unpleasant, difficult and threatening to fallen nature, as a result of man's closing in on himself. Just as man's creative nature and vocation to work is experienced as fatigue and labor after the Fall, so too man's loving nature and vocation to communion with God and neighbor is perceived as a threat to man's happiness and self-affirmation.

Conversion

The need for penance in turn underscores another distinctive feature of Christian morality, that of conversion. James Hanigan has claimed that "Conversion is the foundational experience of Christian life and so of Christian ethics."²⁸ While this claim may be extravagant, since while conversion may well have been the central message of John the Baptist it does not seem to be so of Jesus, it certainly holds an important place in Jesus' moral teaching and indeed constitutes his first recorded message of his public ministry: "Repent and believe in the Good News!"²⁹

Conversion is essential to the moral life of the Christian, precisely because of our fallen nature. Fallen man is, in the words of C. S. Lewis, "not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms."³⁰ Moral theology therefore must address the reality of this rebellion and insist on the role of conversion in the Christian life. Conversion, in the Christian context, refers not only to an initial turning away from sin and accepting the moral demands of life in Christ, but constitutes a permanent way of life. As Pope John Paul has written, "It is one's whole existence that becomes penitential, that is to say, directed toward a continuous striving for what is better."³¹

Our holiness, the goal and ideal of the moral life, is different from the holiness of innocence, of one who was always true to the beloved. It is the holiness and union of one who has left and who has returned, who has been welcomed back and forgiven. Our path to holiness passes necessarily through the disavowal of sin, the rejection of Satan and all his pomps and works, and the subsequent turning back to God. It also passes necessarily through the experience of God's love under the form of mercy.

The realism implied by the acknowledgement of original sin imposes a necessary sobriety on the moral life. On the other hand it is not a cause for discouragement. The entire message of the Gospel is directed to fallen man, and we are assured that we can do all things in him who strengthens us.³² This realism is exemplified in Christ, who "knew

²⁸ James P. Hanigan, "Conversion and Christian Ethics," in *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 242. See also Charles E. Curran, "Conversion: The Central Moral Message of Jesus," in *A New Look at Christian Morality* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1970):25-71.

²⁹ Mark 1:15. Cf. Pope John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, December 2, 1984, no. 1.

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, [1943] 1984), 44.

³¹ Pope John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, December 2, 1984, no. 4.

³² Cf. Philippians 4:13.

what a man had in him.”³³ When Peter falls before him after the miraculous draught of fishes, exclaiming: “Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” Jesus counters: “Do not be afraid! From now on you will be a fisher of men.”³⁴ With full cognizance of our wounded nature and inclination to sin, Jesus calls us to cooperate with him in the project of redemption.

The Effects of Original Sin on Man’s Relationship with God

Original sin produced not only an interior disorder, but more importantly a disruption of our original friendship with our Creator. As a person, man was made for communion with God and his fellows. After the Fall, this vocation to love persists, but sin closed man in on himself and set him in opposition to God. In place of the intimacy that our first parents enjoyed with God, sin brought with it man’s first experience of shame. On sinning, Adam and Eve hid from God, ashamed of themselves and for the first time aware of their nakedness and vulnerability.³⁵ The reality of their sin led them to experience their own unworthiness that leads one to distance oneself from the Creator. For the first time, their instinctive reaction was not to turn to God for help, but to flee from him, to hide from him. Shame causes fear, which has to do with punishment.³⁶

Along with shame came suspicion. The devil had sown doubt in the hearts of Adam and Eve—doubt regarding God’s motives, truthfulness and absolute goodness. Man’s sin served only to magnify this distrust. When we do evil, we begin to suspect others of evil. God’s commands no longer seemed to express the love of a father looking out for his children, but the arbitrary will of a despot. This “hermeneutics of suspicion” in dealing with the commands of the Creator in turn leads man to adopt a master-slave mentality, rather than a father-son relationship of trust. Saint Catherine of Sienna describes these two fundamental approaches to dealing with God as a servile fear (*timore servile*) and holy fear (*timore santo*).³⁷ After the Fall, in fact, all sin continues to have the double root of disobedience and distrust.³⁸

Yet the loss of original integrity with its debilitation of man’s freedom, while on the one hand thrusting man away from the Creator, simultaneously opens a new road of entry to God through Jesus Christ. Man must turn to God in radical humility, convinced of his

³³ John 2:25.

³⁴ Cf. Luke 5:1-10.

³⁵ Cf. Genesis 3:8-10.

³⁶ Cf. 1 John 4:18.

³⁷ Cf. among many references, Saint Catherine of Sienna, *Dialogue*, chapters 58 and 59.

³⁸ “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. This is what man’s first sin consisted of (Cf. Genesis 3:1-11; Romans 5:19). All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 397).

need for salvation and his own inability to save himself.³⁹ After the Fall, man no longer has the chance to “get it right” on his own. Original sin did away with the possibility of a practical Pelagianism. Indeed, Pelagius’ assertion of man’s ability to do good on his own was posited on his prior denial of the transmission of original sin. The very experience of his impotence urges man to throw himself into God’s arms, sure of finding the strength and mercy he so desperately needs.

Here we must also insist on the difference not only between the moral life of man pre- and post-Fall, but the still greater difference between the moral life of man pre- and post- Redemption. We are not in the same situation as Seth, or Noah, or Jacob, or Micah, before the advent of the Savior. We are called to perfection precisely because for God all things are possible and Christ has won these graces for us. He repeats to us what he said to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you.”⁴⁰ Through the infused virtue of humility we are able to recognize our dependence on grace, and thus the essential *moral* role of baptism, actual graces, prayer, and the sacrament of penance. Christ’s loving sacrifice transforms the shame of weakness into a path to glory and communion with God.

Though God is the source of all life, man begins his life in a situation of disunion and separation from God. Because of original sin we are born into the unnatural state of enmity with our Creator. That chasm is bridged through the free gift of baptism, by which we are restored through Christ’s merits to friendship with God and indeed elevated to divine adoptive sonship. In this way we experience the truth of the words of Saint Leo the Great: “Christ’s inexpressible grace gave us blessings better than those the demon’s envy had taken away.”⁴¹

The *felix culpa* of which we sing in the Easter Exultet is not mere pious hyperbole. We recognize that though sin in and of itself is never “happy,” the power of God’s love is such that he was able to turn this most unhappy event into the source of boundless grace for us. Thus St. Paul says, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more.”⁴² Fallen man’s experience of God’s love is different from that of original man, since the latter knew him only as Creator, whereas the former knows him as redeemer, who “loved the world so much that he gave his only son” to be its savior.⁴³ If, as Saint John asserts, man’s love for God is always a response to his experience of God’s love for him, then man’s possibility to love God (the heart of the moral law) must necessarily be greater for redeemed man than for original man.⁴⁴ The experience of our own radical unworthiness

³⁹ “Sacred Scripture speaks to us of this reconciliation, inviting us to make every effort to attain it. But Scripture also tells us that it is above all a merciful gift of God to humanity. The history of salvation—the salvation of the whole of humanity as well as of every human being of whatever period—is the wonderful history of a reconciliation: the reconciliation whereby God, as Father, in the blood and the cross of his Son made man, reconciles the world to himself and thus brings into being a new family of those who have been reconciled” (Pope John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, December 2, 1984, no. 4).

⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:9.

⁴¹ Saint Leo the Great, *Sermo* 73, 4: PL 54, 396.

⁴² Romans 5:20.

⁴³ Cf. John 3:16.

⁴⁴ Cf. 1 John 4:10. Here we see in effect Saint Thomas’s observation that “God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good” (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 1, 3 *ad* 3).

heightens our experience of God's *hesed*, his merciful love. Countless saints testify to the efficacy of meditation on Christ's Incarnation and Passion in order to grow in love for God and neighbor.⁴⁵

The Incarnation of the Word—itsself made necessary because of the Fall—makes possible the personal exemplarity of Christ (*imitatio Christi*), which stands at the heart of the Christian moral life. Whereas Christ was already the exemplar of *creation*, in assuming human nature he becomes the visible model for sinful humanity, marking out for us the path of holiness.⁴⁶ Moral theology would melt into a mere philosophical ethics were it not for the Incarnation. Moreover, just as Adam's sin is transmitted by propagation and not merely by imitation, so too Christ's holiness and its concrete expressions in human life are not merely exemplified in Christ for our imitation, but infused in the person through baptism and made possible by grace.

Additionally, in his moral teaching, Christ expressly invites us to look back to God's original plan for his creation, which had become obscured after the Fall. "It was not like this in the beginning."⁴⁷ Christ reminds us of God's original intent and his plan for man and woman in creating them to his image, the image and likeness of love.

The Effects of Original Sin on Man's Relationship with his Fellows

The sin of our first parents not only disrupted the relationship between man and God, but also between man and his fellows. Upon the creation of woman, Adam exclaims his admiration and joy: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."⁴⁸ He is delighted to have finally found a worthy helpmate, a partner to whom he could give himself and whom he could in turn receive as a free gift. Yet this companion prepared by God to help man becomes through the first sin a source of temptation and evil. From that moment on, human relations are marked by suspicion, distrust and hostility, by lust and domination.⁴⁹ Adam and Eve's desire to clothe themselves illustrates their need to protect and cover their vulnerability, no longer sure of love and fearful of becoming an object of use and exploitation. Man realizes that the egoism to which he himself is prone also marks the lives of his fellows and thus he can no longer trust the purity of their intentions in his regard.

The disorder in human nature brought by original sin not only affects the wounded moral agent, but also the other persons with whom we deal. Every other person I meet is also a sinner, tainted by original sin and actual sin as well. While this knowledge entails a certain distrust of the "world" as a source of temptation, it also opens up new horizons for the moral life.

⁴⁵ To cite just one example, Saint Teresa of Ávila writes: "As often as we think of Christ we should recall the love with which He bestowed on us so many favors and what great love God showed us in giving us a pledge like this of His love, for love begets love" (*The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Ávila*, tr. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, [New York: One Spirit, 1995], 198).

⁴⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 459.

⁴⁷ Matthew 19:8.

⁴⁸ Genesis 2:23.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 400.

Several years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book called, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.⁵⁰ His title is deceiving because from a biblical perspective there is no such thing as a good person. “No one is good but God alone.”⁵¹ We cannot be kind only to the deserving, since in reality none is deserving. God saved us when we were still enemies, and calls us to love our enemies as well.

The Christian moral life comprises the need to be forgiving as well as forgiven, the need for a patient charity, a willingness to suffer at our neighbor’s hands. Justice, a natural virtue, is no longer sufficient, since all men are guilty and deserving of punishment. Because of the Fall, we are able to share in God’s gratuitousness and magnanimity in dealing with our neighbor. In other words, the love we aspire to as a moral ideal is a gratuitous love toward our fellow sinners, not a love due to the meritorious just.

“Healthy people do not need a doctor, sick people do. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”⁵² Christ came to save sinners, and the intentionality expressed by that “coming to” transcends his Incarnation and public ministry and extends to the relationship between Christ and every Christian, indeed every human person. The Christian moral life entails therefore a “preferential love” for sinners, as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Despite the separation and division wrought by sin among human persons, it also provides the occasion for a healing of communion. With the loss of the interior illumination proper to man in his original integrity, fallen man experiences a necessary *interdependence*. Man finds himself needful of spiritual directors, guides, confessors, preachers, the example of the saints. In this way man continues to find a true “helpmate” in his fellows. Though there is but one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, Christians are called to share in this mediation by interceding for and serving their neighbor as Christ’s ambassadors.⁵³

At the level of special moral theology these principles have specific applications. In sexual ethics, fortified by fecund studies of a theology of the body, the damaged relations between man and woman, and the subsequent danger of instrumentalization, find a necessary point of reference in God’s original plan for their union.

Catholic social doctrine likewise draws important orientations from the doctrine of original sin. Rejecting utopian idealism, Catholic social thought embraces the realism of man’s fallen condition in offering guidelines for the organization of the earthly city.⁵⁴ Man, though free, needs help, support and guidance from social structures and from the sanctions that the public authority can provide. An evaluation of economic realities requires a similar realism, perhaps not going as far as Adam Smith’s enlightened self-

⁵⁰ New York: Avon Books, 1981.

⁵¹ Luke 18:19.

⁵² Cf. Matthew 9:12-13.

⁵³ Cf. 1 Timothy 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:20.

⁵⁴ “The social order will be all the more stable, the more it takes this fact into account and does not place in opposition personal interest and the interests of society as a whole, but rather seeks ways to bring them into fruitful harmony. In fact, where self interest is violently suppressed, it is replaced by a burdensome system of bureaucratic control which dries up the wellsprings of initiative and creativity” (Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus annus*, May 1, 1991, no. 25).

interest, but avoiding at the same time a utopian view that idealizes man's capability for disinterestedness. The Catechism soberly warns: "Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action and morals."⁵⁵

The Effects of Original Sin on Man's Relationship with the Rest of Creation

Lastly we must take a brief look at the effects of original sin on man's relationship with the rest of creation. The disorder resulting from man's disobedience extends to the rapport between the human person and the rest of the created world. Citing Paul's letter to the Romans, the Catechism states that as a result of original, "Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Because of man, creation is now subject 'to its bondage to decay.'"⁵⁶ The biblical account of the punishment due to man's first sin speaks of this enmity. God says to Adam and Eve, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you."⁵⁷ The natural world is no longer a friendly "garden" or home for man, but a hostile, alien environment.

Moreover, the Augustinian description of sin as *aversio a Deo* and *conversio ad creaturas* throws important light on this relationship.⁵⁸ Instead of being friends and helpers, stepping stones to God and a manifestation of his goodness, creatures often become obstacles to man's happiness and a substitute for God. Thus the temptation of idolatry presents itself as a new choice between God and his creation. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator," writes Paul to the Romans.⁵⁹

Since man no longer lives in the complete truth, his place in the created world is jeopardized. Though he still understands himself to be the pinnacle of creation, the essential distinction between persons and non-persons is blurred. The responsible stewardship to which he is called faces the opposing temptations of negligence and abuse of creation on the one hand, and the glorification of the environment and elevation of animals to the rank of persons, on the other.

The Mosaic injunctions against stealing and "coveting" our neighbor's goods illustrate the new temptations with which man is faced in his relationship with the material world. Dissatisfaction with a sufficiency and the consequent avarice it spawns leads man to look on his neighbor as a competitor, an enemy who threatens his happiness. The capital sins of envy and greed distort the relationship between man and the created world, and thereby further frustrate the loving relations that should reign between the human person and God, and weaken man's bond with his fellows.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 407.

⁵⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 400, citing Romans 8:21.

⁵⁷ Genesis 3:17-18.

⁵⁸ Cf. Saint Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, 2, 19, 52-53: NBA 3/2, 277; *Contra Faustum*, 22, 27: CSEL 25, 621.

⁵⁹ Romans 1:25.

Hence a new Ignatian discernment is needed in man's relationship with creatures. They are to be used in as much as they lead us to God.⁶⁰ The exercise aims at the attainment of a holy indifference so that creatures will cease to hinder our attainment of God, but rather serve to glorify him. Paul's injunction to use all things to the glory of God becomes an exercise in temperance, the reordering of our relationship with created things in accordance with God's plan.⁶¹ The spiritual poverty preached by Christ, entailing a healthy detachment from created things, becomes an essential Christian virtue leading to the spiritual freedom needed for a life of charity.

Conclusion

Theologians could speculate endlessly on what would moral theology have been like had there been no original sin. Man's original harmony, both internal and in his relationship with God and others, would have offered a series of parameters quite different from those now faced by moral theology.

In a sense the Fall radically altered the moral life yet in another sense changes nothing at all. If we read through the third part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, devoted to the moral life, we realize that precious little of what is written there would be relevant were it not for original sin. On the other hand, what is truly essential to the Christian and indeed the human vocation remains intact: we are created in the image and likeness of love, in the image of the Blessed Trinity. We are called to communion, to love and be loved. As fallen creatures the path we must travel to get there is conditioned by the reality of our actual sinfulness and our sinful inclinations, but the goal is the same.

The importance of the doctrine of original sin for moral theology lies principally in the realism it imposes on our moral reasoning. Moral theology seeks to systematically explain how faith in Jesus Christ should inform and shape Christian life. This endeavor can be fruitful only when theologians understand that the men and women called to follow Christ are concrete human persons, heirs to the sin of Adam but also redeemed by the blood of Christ and sharers in his divine life.

⁶⁰ In the meditation on the Principle and Foundation of his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius Loyola wrote the following: "Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it. For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created" (Saint Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Literary Translation and a Contemporary Reading*, ed. David Fleming, S.J., tr. Elder Mullan, S.J., [Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978], p. 22).

⁶¹ "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).