

Original Sin and Christian Philosophy
 Paul Copan
 Palm Beach Atlantic University
 West Palm Beach, Florida

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The first lesson in the old Puritan *New England Primer* declares, “In Adam’s fall/We sinned all.” Romans 5:12 declares, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” Somehow there’s been something of a “spiritual infection” passed on to us from Adam.¹ This has traditionally been called “original sin.” Edward T. Oakes observes: “No doctrine inside the precincts of the Christian Church is received with greater reserve and hesitation, even to the point of outright denial, than the doctrine of original sin.”²

Is this *fair* to be held responsible and strapped with the consequences of an act committed by *someone else* in radically different circumstances so long ago?³

In the thick of the French Enlightenment optimism⁴ that extolled human reason and virtue (*sans* Christian dogma and creeds), thinkers such as Rousseau and Voltaire were united in their opposition to the doctrine of original sin. According to Rousseau scholar Allan Bloom, “Rousseau’s *Confessions* were, in opposition to those of Augustine, intended to show that [man] was born good, that the body’s desires are good, that there is no original sin.”⁵ According to Rousseau’s

¹ Donald Bloesch, “Sin,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1012.

² “Original Sin: A Disputation,” *First Things* 87 (1998): 16.

³ *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 124.

⁴ This was a much more hostile version than that of the English.

⁵ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 170.

understanding, the cause of man's dividedness is the "opposition between nature and The general upshot of the French Enlightenment's view was that "sin" comes through ignorance and improper social conditioning. With a proper education and social development, evil can be overcome.⁶

The doctrine of original sin is one form of the problem of evil. In this essay, I would like to doctrine of original sin as it bears upon the Christian philosophy, and I hope to utilize some of the resources available to us in the literature on the problem of evil by looking at questions such as these: Is our possession of original sin unfair since Adam was the one who "did the deed"? Does God unjustly impute guilt/blame to us, or does he unfairly "load the dice" so that we are doomed to sin with its attendant condemnation from the start? The particular challenge we face is this: How can we as Christian address the doctrine of original sin with the fewest barriers and with greatest philosophical/theological force? In this essay, I draw on Christian theism's various metaphysical and theological resources to address this troubling question.

I shall look at various preliminary matters and set forth my qualifications (using a bit of automotive lingo) regarding human nature, the image of God, the lack of doctrinal precision in Romans 5:12, distinguishing between *guilt* and sin's *consequences*, and the like. Then I shall offer a range of points that defending the possibility and plausibility of original sin in light of the non-Christian's criticisms.

I. Preliminaries and Qualifications

1. Putting It in Reverse: We must remember that Genesis 1-2 comes before Genesis 3, that human nature was first made good by God but has been corrupted. Not infrequently, lay

⁶ Gillian R. Evans, Alister E. McGrath, and Allan D. Galloway, *The Science of Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids/Basingstoke, U.K.: Eerdmans/Pickering, 1986), 224.

Christians as well as pastors and, yes, even theologians are quick to begin their anthropology with human beings as sinners. One Reformed pastor I knew of would wryly comment upon the birth of a baby in his congregation: “Another sinner born into the world!” Not infrequently we hear: “Human beings are nothing but sinners” or “We aren’t good but sinful.” Unfortunately, this “such a worm as I” anthropology is imbalanced and one-sided. What is neglected is that human beings have been created in the *imago Dei*, as the apogee of God’s creation.

Echoing Martin Luther’s *simul justus et peccator*, we must affirm that Christians in particular are sinner-saints, not sinner-slugs. More broadly speaking, all humans are *unworthy* of God’s grace, but not *worthless*. We are a mixed bag—a disfigured beauty, a damaged work of art. Hamlet speaks of both aspects when he utters, “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!” On the other hand, man is also “the quintessence of dust.”⁷ Atheist Michael Martin admits to this admixture; within the space of two paragraphs that humans *both* “seem so ungod-like” *and* are superior to animals in “intelligence, advanced linguistic and artistic capabilities,” possessing “mathematical, scientific, and technological knowledge.”⁸

⁷ *Hamlet* 2.2.

⁸ Michael Martin, “A Response to Paul Copan’s Critique of Atheistic Objective Morality,” *Philosophia Christi*, 2 (2000): 75-90. I reply to Martin’s mistake in “Atheistic Goodness Revisited: A Personal Reply to Michael Martin” *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, Vol. 2 (2000): 91-104. For some strange reason, in a later on-line essay, Martin persists in accusing me of a “contradiction” he himself espouses (humans as a mixed bag of goodness and evil) *and* that I had already addressed in my response to him (“The Naturalistic Fallacy and Other Mistaken Arguments of Paul Copan” [2000]: http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/copan.html). Martin’s obvious error is failing to distinguish between essential and accidental properties. Thomas V. Morris puts it this way: “There are properties which happen to be *common* to members of a natural kind, and which may even be *universal* to all members of that kind, without being *essential* to membership in the kind” (*Our Idea of God* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991], 164). On the differences between essential and accidental, see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).

This underscores an important point: we do a disservice to the Christian doctrine of anthropology by emphasizing human wickedness to such a degree that we obscure the goodness of God's creation. (Thus, the above survey question asked by Barna is skewed because in assessing the answer, he overlooks the goodness of the divine image and focuses only on human sinfulness.)

While Christian philosophers ought not ignore the painfully obvious fact of human depravity, they must set this against the backdrop of the goodness of God's creation. In doing so, we may more effectively build bridges with, say, the Hindu if we speak of human beings as having something special or unique about them, even if they are not divine. To focus only on human sinfulness creates no small barrier for the Hindu.

Any attempt at Christian philosophy that ignores the *imago Dei* in all of us is a deficient one. An accurate biblical anthropology must acknowledge the beauty of the divine image (Gen. 1:27; Gen. 9:6; Psalm 8; James 3:9) even if it is fallen and marred. So we must beware of putting our theological motorcars in reverse. Begin with Genesis 1-2, not Genesis 3!

2. *Improper Alignment*: Because human beings still possess the divine image, this makes them good in their very nature. But sin—which is not intrinsic to our nature—has internally damaged and corrupted us so that our faculties are malaligned. This point follows from and amplifies the first. Philosophically speaking, the *nature* of something is “what makes a thing what it is.” Or as Alvin Plantinga puts it: “an object has a property *essentially* if it has it in such a way that it is not even possible that it exist but *fail* to have it.”⁹ Using the term “sinful nature” without careful qualification can lead to onto-theological problems! As Christians, we do not literally have *both* a “sinful nature” and a “new nature.”

If we use the term “sinful nature,” I suggest we use it *metaphorically* but carefully *qualify* what we mean. On a number of occasions, I myself have tried to clear up some confusion because inquirers have heard or read references (say, in the New International Version [NIV] translation of the Bible) to the “sinful nature” and have tried to work this out *ontologically*. This reading, though, can lead to misguided theologizing. To cite Thomas Schreiner, “Such a[n ontological] perspective [of ‘flesh [Gk. *sarx*]’] is reflected in the NIV translation that renders *flesh* as ‘sinful nature.’ Such a rendering is unfortunate since it introduces ontological language precipitously into the Pauline materials and compels readers to understand flesh solely in ontological categories. A more satisfying approach understands flesh in redemptive-historical categories.”¹⁰ According to Rom. 8:9, believers are *not* “in the flesh” but—in the new realm in which believers dwell through Christ—“in the Spirit.”

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “Essence and Essentialism,” in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 138

¹⁰ Thomas R. Scheiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 143. Schriener cites the work of Walter B. Russell regarding how “flesh” should be understood salvation-historically: Walter B. Russell, “The Apostle Paul’s View of the ‘Sin Nature’/ ‘New Nature’ Struggle,” in *Christian Perspectives on Being Human*, J.P. Moreland and

An appropriate theological and philosophical nuancing of “sin” and “human nature” is found in the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1580),¹¹ which responded to the heretical substantializing of sin by theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-75). As this Formula

David Ciocchi, eds. (Baker, 1993), 210; Walter B. Russell, “Does the Christian Have ‘Flesh’ in Gal. 5:13-26?” *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (June 1993):179-87. See also Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 434-45.

¹¹ See Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol 3 (New York: Harper, 1877), 1.1 (all emphases mine). Note that the context of these statements was the Flacian Controversy, in which theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-75) claimed to be siding with Luther on the substantialization of original sin. When asked, “Do you mean to deny that sin is an accident [*accidens*]?” Flacius replied: “I have said that Scripture and Luther affirm it is a substance [*quod sit substantia*].” (Cited in F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1921], 144.) But this was a mistaken understanding of Luther, as the Formula of Concord (which was agreed upon by some 8,000 Lutheran leaders) attempts to make right. Flacius was also declared heretical by the Weimar Colloquium of 1560. As James Leo Garrett, Jr. writes that Flacius “came *dangerously close* to embracing the view that sin is in every sense natural” (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 463 [my emphasis]). According to the Formula of Concord,

We believe, teach, and confess that *there is a distinction between the nature of man itself [ipsam hominis naturam], not only as man was created of God in the beginning pure and holy and free from sin, but also as we now possess it after our nature has fallen [jam post lapsum naturam illam habemus]; a distinction, namely, between the nature itself [ipsam naturam], which even after the fall is and remains God’s creature, and Original Sin [peccatum originis]; and that this difference between nature and Original Sin is as great as between the work of God and the work of the devil.*

It goes on to say (1.12):

this distinction should be maintained with the greatest care, because *the dogma that there is no distinction between the nature of fallen man [naturam hominis] and Original Sin [peccatum originis] is inconsistent with the chief articles of our faith* (of Creation, of Redemption, of Sanctification, and the Resurrection of our flesh) and *can not be maintained except by impugning these articles. . . .*

And the Son of God, by a personal union, *has assumed this nature [illam humanum naturam . . . assumpsi]*, yet without sin; and uniting not other flesh, but our flesh to himself, hath most closely conjoined it, and in respect of this flesh he has truly become our brother. . . .

This same nature of ours (that is his own work) Christ has redeemed [*Eandem humanam nostram naturam . . . Christus redemi*], the same (inasmuch as it is his own work) he sanctifies, the same doth he raise from the death But Original Sin he has not created, has not assumed, has not redeemed, doth not sanctify, will not raise again. . . . (my emphasis).

acknowledged, there is a danger in equivocating on the meaning of the word *nature*. We can mean either (a) “nature” as signifying “the very substance of man, as when we say, “God created human nature” or (b) when it is sometimes used as a “temper, condition, defect, or vice of any thing implanted and inhering in the nature, as when we say: ‘The serpent’s nature is to strike, man’s nature is to sin and is sin.’”¹² In the latter sense, *nature* “denotes, *not the very nature of man, but something which inheres and is fixed in his nature or substance.*”¹³ This must not be confused with the good nature God has created. Even if one may use it metaphorically, we must reject “sinful nature” in any philosophically precise sense. Otherwise, one moves in the direction of the Manichean heresy (strongly opposed by Augustine in his earlier writings), in which evil becomes ontologized.¹⁴ Earlier, Aquinas pointed out that “man’s nature” should be understood in two ways: (a) “in its integrity, as it was in our first parent before sin” and (b) “as it is corrupted in us after the sin of our first parent.”¹⁵ Indeed, we are naturally inclined toward virtue, but this virtue is damaged when we sin.¹⁶ Aquinas speaks of four *wounds* of nature (ignorance, weakness, malice, and desire),¹⁷ but these are to be distinguished from the essential nature that God created to be good. Still earlier, when Augustine refers to original sin, he speaks of the disordered or exaggerated desire (concupiscence) that seeks to fill the void only God can fill. Because of the fall, human nature is in out of alignment—out of harmony with itself. Rather than repeating the

¹² Ibid., 1.12.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Moreover, Scripture itself is not always philosophically precise about the use of the word “nature” (*physis*)—for example, in Gal. 2:15, Paul identifies himself with those who are “Jews by nature [*physis*].” Similarly, we ought to be careful about using, say, Eph. 2:3 (we were “by nature children of wrath”) with philosophical precision. Paul often uses *physis* to refer to “the state of things,” “things as they are (from correspondence from Douglas Moo, 14 July 1998).

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica* I/II, 109.2.

¹⁶ Ibid., I/II 85.1.

¹⁷ Ibid., I/II 85.3.

Manichean error (of making sin or evil into a substance), he sees sin as a corruption of what God created to be good. This disharmony needs radical divine intervention—as opposed to Pelagius’ assumption that Adam’s bad decision could be reversed through following Christ’s moral example.¹⁸ (It should be noted that Eastern Orthodoxy did not hold to the doctrine as strongly as did Augustine; Orthodoxy traditionally affirmed both the free will of humans and that humans were born into sin.)¹⁹

Apologetically speaking, we can more capably defend the rational integrity of the Incarnation if we recognize that it was possible precisely because our human nature reflects the divine image—as a finite subset of particular divine attributes.²⁰ Christ identified with us by taking on human nature—what makes us what we are (in addition to weakness and frailty). New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce aptly writes: “it is because man in the creative order bears the image of his Creator that it was possible for the Son of God to become incarnate as man and in His humanity to display the glory of the invisible God.”²¹ One theologian puts it this way: “If human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, (Gen. 1:26-7), there must be something divine about every human being. If, and this is our case, the divine Logos could assume a humanity, there must be something human about God.”²² No wonder the psalmist says, “You have made [man] a little lower than God” (Ps. 8:5)! Although there are various pictures and

¹⁸ For a good summary of Augustine’s views, see Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 200-7.

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 2: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 294-5.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of this, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991); at a popular level, see Paul Copan, *“That’s Just Your Interpretation”* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 121-43.

²¹ In E.K. Simpson and F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of Paul to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 194.

models of the atonement, penal substitution is central for understanding the atonement.²³ This being the case, in Christ's taking on the same human nature we have, He pays the debt to God that we sinful humans could not pay. Only He, as the God-man, could pay it.

Theologian Harold O.J. Brown comments on the Formula of Concord, which offered much-needed philosophical precision on sin and human nature:

The sweeping Christological implications of Flacius' view are apparent. If man is by nature a sinner, then in the incarnation either Jesus became a sinner or did not truly assume human nature. . . . *If sin belongs to the very nature of man, then Christ cannot be consubstantial with us, as the Chalcedonian Creed affirms, unless sin also belongs to his nature, which the creed denies.* . . . The mistake lies in thinking that the Fall has so altered human nature that sin is now an essential component of humanity, so that no one and nothing can be human without thereby partaking in error and even in sin.²⁴

The Council of Florence (1442) rightly affirmed: "The church asserts that there is no such thing as a nature of evil, because every nature insofar as it is a nature, is good."²⁵ Thus I would concur with Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest: "The *imago Dei* ontologically remains undestroyed in all persons. . . . However overtly depraved, all humans in their being remain constitutionally image-bearers."²⁶ Similarly, the British theologian Colin Gunton writes that because creation—which includes the *imago Dei*—is the work and good gift of God, "it is necessary to conclude that evil . . .

²² Gerald O'Collins, *Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 233.

²³ The arguments of Joel Green and Mark Baker notwithstanding (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000]). See John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987); Steven L. Porter, "Rethinking the Logic of Penal Substitution," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2002), 596-608.

²⁴ Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 344 (my emphasis).

²⁵ Session 11 (4 February 1442).

²⁶ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 2:237.

is not intrinsic to the creation, but some corruption of, or invasion into, that which is essentially good.”²⁷ Elsewhere Gunton writes:

Because all that God creates is good, evil must be something extraneous to or parasitic upon creation as a whole. If the universe is created good, and with an end in view, evil becomes that which corrupts the good creation and so thwarts God’s purpose for it.²⁸

The Anglican theologian Philip Edgcumbe Hughes declares that original sin is “the perversion of man’s true nature. . . . Man’s greatest need is to recover his truly natural state.”²⁹

If human nature is good (i.e., to err is *not* human!),³⁰ and sin or evil is not some added entity (which is the Manichean heresy) but a privation or a corrupting power, how are we to put these together? Henri Blocher states how our nature is affected by the fall: “It does involve an ambiguous reversal of created hierarchies, such as that between body and soul. More generally, it involves a disorganization of humankind’s exquisite complexity, with functions, instincts, and powers given over to uncontrollable divergence.”³¹ Australian theologian Charles Sherlock makes a similar point: “Where then is the image of God now? The structures which show the (ontological) reality of being made in God’s image remain, but are corrupted, inverted. They work against their intended nature and purpose. . . .”³²

Like a wheel axle that is thrown out of alignment when hitting a curb (without the addition of another entity), so human nature becomes corrupted or distorted by sin (without the entrance of

²⁷ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 203.

²⁸ Colin E. Gunton, “Creation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143.

²⁹ *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 127.

³⁰ At least *essentially* (although this is different from general *empirical* considerations).

³¹ Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 90. This series has now been reprinted by InterVarsity Press.

³² *The Doctrine of Humanity*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 89.

another ontological entity). Even though sin is “accidental” rather than “essential” to human nature, we should still refer to sin as pervasive and affecting us deeply.³³ As the *Formula of Concord* declares: “Original Sin is no trivial corruption” but a “profound” one,³⁴ affecting every aspect of our being, like the mingling of wine and poison.”³⁵

3. Transmission Problems: The precise nature of the connection between us and Adam’s sin is not as clear as we would like it to be (nor as some say it is), and this flexibility may offer us a greater apologetical advantage for the Christian philosopher: Note again Romans 5:12:

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” After surveying various theories about how sin is transmitted to us and how Adam’s sin affects us, James Leo Garrett writes: “To affirm the universality of sin is easy and to affirm the universality of depravity is not difficult, but to settle on the relationship of the sin of Adam and Eve to our sin is indeed difficult.”³⁶

One contributing factor is that the parallels between Adam and Christ in Romans 5 have sometimes been drawn too tightly; for example, although Adam’s sin transmitted to us a negative inclination, this is not balanced out by Christ’s conferring upon us a “good inclination” at justification.³⁷ Those who seek to prove a tight connection between Adam and us appeal to Hebrews 7:9-10 (Levi’s being in the loins of Abraham when he gives a tenth of his plunder to Melchizedek), but this proves too much: “all actions of all progenitors would have to be ascribed to each of their descendants, which is nearly absurd.”³⁸ Or we can ask: Does Christ’s death put

³³ Ibid., 93.

³⁴ Formula of Concord, 1.3.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.7.

³⁶ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 493.

³⁷ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 67.

³⁸ Ibid., 115.

us in right standing before God regardless of our making a personal and conscious choice in response to God's prevenient grace?

Although some dogmaticians would disagree, we can safely say that there is *a consensus about the lack of consensus* on how far theological extrapolation can go regarding original sin. We must be careful about too tightly connecting ourselves with Adam and loading Romans 5:12 with more theological freight than it may be able to bear. As Charles Sherlock observes, "a full-blown Augustinian position is not supported by the actual Greek text of Romans 5:12."³⁹ Blocher, who distances himself from the Augustinian "imputation of alien guilt," notes that if Adam's misdeed is imputed to all (and he asks: "is it the most natural reading?"), then it must be understood that "nowhere else is that thought distinctly expressed."⁴⁰ Douglas Moo wisely writes:

Perhaps, indeed, Paul has not provided us with enough data to make a definite decision; and we should probably be content with the conclusion that Paul affirms the reality of a solidarity of all humanity with Adam in his sin without being able to explain the exact nature of that union.⁴¹

Blocher believes that we are found guilty and spiritually dead by virtue of our sinful condition in which we find ourselves (e.g., our skewed human faculties) rather than the imputation of Adam's guilt to us. Blocher rejects "the unattested and difficult thesis of the imputation of an *alien sin*" without downplaying "the tragic realism of the Augustinian human predicament."⁴² So it seems that there is flexibility with how we are to understand original sin. As with a number of

³⁹ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 65. It has been noted by many Augustine wrongly took the *in quo* (from the Greek *eph' h_*) to mean "in whom [i.e., Adam]" instead of "in that" or "because." Thomas Schreiner sees in this text a reference to all people sinning personally and individually because they enter the world spiritually dead because they are born in Adam (*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, 148). He follows Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Consecutive Meaning of *eph h_* in Romans 5:12," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 321-39.

⁴⁰ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 74.

⁴¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 328n.

recent evangelical commentators, I have diverged from the traditional Augustinian view, while affirming that there is something deeply flawed in human beings. Again, as Cornelius Plantinga writes, Christians agree on the “universality, solidarity, stubbornness, and historical momentum of sin.”⁴³ Indeed, orthodox Christianity has held that the pervasiveness of sin is *semper, ubique, ad omnibus!* All agree that there is a deep corruption, that human beings are not *sound*—as the Anglican prayer book hyperbolically emphasizes: “There no health in us.”⁴⁴ There is a negative inclination—an *aversio a Deo* (the creature’s turning away from God) and the *conversio ad creaturam* (turning, instead, our love to creatures). But it seems that we can legitimately allow for a range of orthodox interpretations as to how Romans 5:12—and original sin—should be understood (without, of course, falling into the Pelagian error of our merely *imitating* the act of Adam rather than the orthodox view of more organically *participating* in it).

Blocher concludes his monograph on original sin:

With all due respect to the Reformed theology to which I am indebted, I have been led to question the doctrine of alien guilt transferred—that is, the doctrine of the imputation to all of Adam’s own trespass, his act of transgression. If Scripture definitely taught such a doctrine, however offensive to modern taste, I should readily bow to its authority. But where does Scripture require it? My investigation did not find it in the only passage from which it is drawn, Romans 5. Could it be, then, a case of laying a heavy burden upon people’s shoulders, beyond the express demands of God?⁴⁵

Recognizing that there is some room for flexibility, Christian philosophers may more effectively address questions and dispel misunderstandings about Christian worldview.

⁴² Blocher, *Original Sin*, 80.

⁴³ *Not the Way It’s Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids/Leicester, U.K.: Eerdmans,/Apollos, 1995), 33.

⁴⁴ As Cornelius Plantinga points out, the fact that we are aware of our lack of inner health is indeed the first sign of health.

⁴⁵ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 128.

4. *Estimated Damage—Total Loss?* It seems both theologically permissible and apologetically useful to speak about original sin in terms of “damage” rather than “[alien] guilt”; but even if “guilt” is somehow involved, it should be construed as conditional: The traditional teaching of original sin in Augustinian tradition implies, among other things, that we have (a) a sinful disposition which is inherited from Adam and (b) Adam’s guilty status is imputed to us apart from any immoral actions humans may commit. As we have seen, (b) would present problems: Are all without exception imputed an alien guilt and therefore damned to separation from God—including infants, the senile, and the retarded?

Romans 5 does not appear to have in mind the handicapped or infants. Rather, Paul seems to be speaking of those who *knowingly* sin. As Doug Moo writes: “Paul does not seem even to be considering in these verses the special issues created for the doctrine of universal sin and judgment by mentally restricted human beings.”⁴⁶

Blocher raises the question about the need for atonement (or not) for infants. If they are “innocent” and then die in their infancy, then why think that the death of Jesus on their behalf is required?⁴⁷ But I would reply that atonement is still necessary because the soul of the infant still possesses a deformity that the atonement of Christ can graciously heal.

Reformed philosopher Ronald Nash notes that even though we inherit a sinful *condition* as members of the human race, we are *judged* according to our sinful *deeds* that we commit “in the body” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Nash makes this point to say that *all* those dying in infancy are

⁴⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 331. Regarding various theories of how sin is transmitted, see Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 233-38.

⁴⁷ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 24.

saved.⁴⁸ Biblical scholar Wayne Grudem notes that final condemnation ultimately falls upon those who have acted sinfully and turned away from God; indeed, God will judge us according to what we have *done* (Romans 2:6; Colossians 3:25).⁴⁹ Indeed, the “soul who sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4; cp. 18:20). Under Israel’s civic law, only the guilty party is to be punished: “everyone shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy. 24:16). The king Abimelech (after taking Sarah for his wife) pleads his innocence before God since his error was unintentional (Genesis 20:4-7), which God acknowledges—but after thoroughly scaring the tar out of him!⁵⁰

One further point of clarification here: We should distinguish between *damage* or *consequences* for one’s sin and the *guilt* of one’s sin. For example, the sin of Achan (and the apparent complicity of his family) in Joshua 7 reveals that the consequences of one man’s sin affects well-being of the entire community. In 2 Samuel 24:17, David, who had required that a census be taken, confesses to the Lord: “I am the one who has sinned and have done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family.”

So while we may have an inclination to sin and while our bodies may die—all as a result of Adam’s sin in the Garden—his transgression does not entail the conferral of an alien guilt upon us at conception. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that *one’s individual actions can have a powerful effect on others*. Even David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his having Uriah the Hittite killed (2 Samuel 11) brought on serious consequences: “the sword shall never depart from your house” (12:10), not to mention the death of his beloved—but illegitimate—son. We need only think

⁴⁸ Or, as he puts it, part of the “elect.” See Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 60-65.

⁴⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 495. The repeated phrase line that God will “reward each person according to what he has done” is found at various places: Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Ps. 62:13; Prov. 24:12; Job. 34:11; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:8; 1 Pet. 1:17.

of children of alcoholics and divorce—or AIDS or crack babies—to witness the obvious. Another example is when a president or king declares war on another country, the children born during the war would then be at war with another nation.⁵¹ They find themselves in such a situation through no choice of their own.

The challenge for the Christian is to put in perspective our corporate connection to Adam (something individualistic Westerners resist) while also accounting for individual human responsibility (which makes sense of the justice of punishment and personal moral accountability). Blocher cautions those who would make our connection with Adam so tight as to undermine individual responsibility.⁵² He also shows how the likes of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards were not always consistent in their handling of original sin. On this point, Blocher admonishes: “When giants stumble, we should look out for slippery stones in our path.”⁵³

Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga speaks of sin in two respects: (1) *sinning*—something for which one is responsible (“he is guilty and warrants blame”), and (2) *being in sin*—a condition in which we find ourselves from birth.⁵⁴ Whereas I am culpable for a sinful act, original sin is not something for which I am culpable: “insofar as I am born in this predicament, my being in it is not within my control and not up to me.”⁵⁵ Thus Plantinga distinguishes between original *sin* and original *guilt*, rejecting the latter. We are born with an original corruption, a self-centered orientation that permeates all we do. Simply being born does not render an infant guilty

⁵⁰ “Behold, you are a dead man . . .” (Gen. 20:3).

⁵¹ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 129.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁴ *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 206-7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 207. Richard Swinburne, in *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), agrees that we have a propensity toward sin but he (erroneously) denies that “the proneness was caused by the sin of the first sinner” (143).

before God—even if, say, atonement is still necessary for removing the stain of sin. So, though we do not sin *necessarily* (i.e., it is not assured that we must commit this or that particular sin), we sin *inevitably* (i.e., in addition to our propensity to sin, given the vast array of opportunities to sin, we eventually do sin at some point).⁵⁶

It is a commonplace that Blaise Pascal took the stronger Augustinian version of the imputation of an alien guilt.⁵⁷ Pascal spoke of original sin and held to it in its strongest version (“transmission of guilt” rather than “transmission of damage”). In his book on Pascal, philosopher Thomas Morris comments: “On this point I believe Pascal may have gotten a little carried away.”⁵⁸ Morris, instead, opts for the “transmission of damage” version of original sin. Morris sees the “transmission of guilt” as apparently “impossible and unjust.”⁵⁹

Now even if we grant that guilt is somehow transmitted, there are some noted evangelical theologians who have offered the suggestion of *conditional guilt* as a plausible explanation. Theologian Millard Erickson, not wanting to eliminate the forensic aspect of our link to Adam,⁶⁰ suggests that the condemnation we incur in Adam is *conditional*: that is, *if* Adam's guilt (as well as our own) is somehow reckoned to us, it is *not* bestowed or imputed at conception. Guilt comes, rather, *when there is a conscious and voluntary decision made on our part*. Any guilt we would share with Adam (not to mention our own personal guilt) is *conditional* based upon our

⁵⁶ This paragraph is based on a discussion with Alvin Plantinga (Madison, WI) in October of 1996. Swinburne argues that “bad desires incline,” but “they do not (as such) necessitate” (*Responsibility and Atonement*, 138).

⁵⁷ *Pensées* #131.

⁵⁸ *Making Sense of It All* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 141.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁰ “We were all involved in Adam’s sin, and thus we receive both the corrupted [state] that was his after the fall, and the guilt and condemnation that attach to his sin (Erickson, *Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983-85], 639).

response to God's grace as morally accountable agents. Similarly, theologians Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest comment on our *conditionally* sharing guilt with Adam:

in Adam the sentence of condemnation is passed upon the whole human race, but *it is effectually executed only upon those who responsibly sin*; in Christ the verdict of justification is provided for the whole race, but is effectual only for those who trust him and are born again . . . although all are justly under the sentence of their natural and legal head [Adam], *none will suffer the execution of the penalty who have not themselves responsibly sinned*. Hence responsible sinful choice and action of a person must have taken place before that person suffers the penalty of eternal death. None will suffer eternally for being born in Adam's fallen race alone.⁶¹

Erickson puts it this way:

We become responsible and guilty *when we accept or approve of our corrupt [state]*. There is a time in the life of each one of us when we become aware of our own tendency toward sin. At that point we may abhor the sinful [state] that has been there all the time. We would in that case repent of it and might even, if there is an awareness of the gospel, ask God for forgiveness and cleansing. At the very least there would be a rejection of our sinful makeup. But if we acquiesce in the sinful [state], we are in effect saying that it is good. In placing our tacit approval upon the corruption, we are also approving or concurring in the action in the Garden of Eden so long ago.⁶²

In light of what we have said, perhaps we should question a frequently smuggled-in sixth point of Calvinism—*Unconditional Condemnation!*

In Adam, we find ourselves living with the fall-out from our predecessor's transgression, but this does not imply that his guilt is imputed to us.

⁶¹ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 2:235 (my emphasis). This is also the view of David L. Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). He concludes, after surveying Scripture on the topic of sin, concludes that the biblical teaching stresses our being born with a propensity to sin, but this by itself does not bring condemnation (which comes when this propensity is acted upon). On the broad views regarding the transmission of sin (legal, federal, biological, social, etc.) and its key proponents, see Smith's summary on 367.

⁶² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 639 (my emphasis). (Erickson uses the word "nature." I have used "state" to prevent confusion.)

II. Strategies and Resources for the Christian Philosopher

Regarding Original Sin

In light of some of these prolegomena on original sin, I shall now offer some suggestions for dealing with the topic as we defend the plausibility of Christian theism and the gospel it proclaims.

1. Road-tested: The doctrine of original sin has the benefit of universal empirical verifiability; thus it supports a Jewish-Christian anthropology as opposed to more neutral or optimistic views of human nature sans grace: G.K Chesterton is noted for his famous statement: “Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”⁶³ Indeed, the “ancient masters of religion” began with the fact of sin—“a fact as practical as potatoes.”⁶⁴ Even the naturalistic evolutionist Michael Ruse sees the explanatory power of original sin in the Jewish-Christian tradition:

I think Christianity is spot on about original sin—how could one think otherwise, when the world’s most civilized and advanced people (the people of Beethoven, Goethe, Kant) embraced that slime-ball Hitler and participated in the Holocaust? I think Saint Paul and the great Christian philosophers had real insights into sin and freedom and responsibility, and I want to build on this rather than turn from it.⁶⁵

The existence of evil seems obvious to our most basic and reliable intuitions.

So when the antagonist asks, “How could a morally respectable God allow human beings to get *this* bad,” we can reply, “If there is no God, why think that things are really evil—as opposed to ‘abnormal’ or socially/biologically determined?” To talk about evil ultimately brings us to a

⁶³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image/Doubleday, 1959, repr. ed.), 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Michael Ruse, “Darwinism and Christianity Redux: A Response to My Critics,” *Philosophia Christi* NS 4/1 (2002): 192.

theistic (or more specifically Christian) context;⁶⁶ naturalism is not quite at home in this setting. The philosopher Stephen Layman points out this shortcoming in the naturalistic ethic of, say, Aristotle: evil and sin (and, consequently, human alienation from God) do not easily fit within his ethical system, nor is it obvious how to discover by Aristotle's methods how this alienation can be put to rights. The worldview that offers the more plausible context for the deep evil and misery in the world is to be preferred—namely, Christian theism.⁶⁷

Thus the first point is that empirical verifiability of genuine sin and evil direct us toward a Christian anthropology. The second point is like unto it.

2. Heir-conditioned? Naturalistic explanations of moral evil (e.g., evil as “abnormal” or “maladjusted” according to psychological/therapeutic categories) are woefully inadequate to deal with their depth and horror, whereas the Christian worldview furnishes a sufficient context to understand it. Anna Russell is known for her “Psychiatric Folksong”:

At three I had a feeling of ambivalence toward my brothers;
And so it follows naturally, I poisoned all my lovers.
But now I'm happy, I've learned the lesson this has taught,
That everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault!

Common in naturalistic circles are attempts to get around evil and sin by referring to a “negative environment,” to “abnormality,” or “dysfunction.” Welcome to what Philip Rieff calls “the triumph of the therapeutic.”⁶⁸ Are we conditioned heirs, reduced merely to causes and effects that have preceded us?

⁶⁶ Cp. Rom. 1-3.

⁶⁷ C. Stephen Layman, *The Shape of the Good: Christian Reflections on the Foundation of Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 140.

⁶⁸ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Such a view of “heir conditioning” is standard fare in the world of science (read, “scientism”) and sociobiology, which E. O. Wilson has defined as “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.”⁶⁹ The problem with such reductionism is this: how can we make sense of personal moral responsibility and punishment if our behavior is nothing more than acting out our physiology? Are we truly willing to say that the Columbine killers were simply “abnormal”—not *evil*?⁷⁰

When we examine philosophies or non-Christian religions regarding the human problem/condition, we often find important emphases, but they are ultimately unsatisfactory. Marx’s emphasis on alienation and class struggle, Freud’s explanations of aberration as neuroses, or B.F. Skinner’s behavioristic theorizing about social environments is inept at capturing the core of the human problem.⁷¹ (This is not to say, though, that we cannot use some of their emphases to capture various facets of the fallen human condition.) One Enlightenment thinker who was not hoodwinked by the likes of Rousseau and Voltaire was Immanuel Kant. He entitled one section of his book *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*: “Of the indwelling of the evil principle next to the good, or, about the radical evil in human nature.”⁷²

We could even add that Eastern religious traditions that place sin or evil in the category of illusion or the result of desire fail to capture the power and depth of sin. To reduce evil to illusion or ignorance or the result of mere desire strikes one as hollow compared to the Christian doctrine. But even so, Eastern religions recognize that there is something fundamentally flawed

⁶⁹ *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 4.

⁷⁰ On this, see Gordon Graham’s excellent book *Evil and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷¹ See ch. 2 of Bernard Ramm, *Offense to Reason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

⁷² Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960).

with humanity, that there is a malalignment with the Ultimate Reality.⁷³ This can serve as a bridge to explain how original sin has a greater explanatory power than do Eastern alternatives.

We are not simply ignorant, maladjusted, or the like. We are sinners. As Karl Menninger noted in his *Whatever Became of Sin?*, the elimination of guilt and sin from our vocabulary merely sweeps an inescapable problem under the rug.

I believe there is “sin” which is expressed in ways which cannot be subsumed under verbal artifacts such as “crime,” “disease,” “delinquency,” “deviancy.” There *is* immorality; there *is* unethical behavior; there *is* wrongdoing. And I hope to show that there is usefulness in retaining the concept, and indeed the SIN, which now shows some sign of returning to public acceptance. I would like to help this trend along.⁷⁴

Gordon Graham’s *Evil and Christian Ethics*⁷⁵ reveals how naturalistic or humanistic “scientific explanations” of horrendous evils prove inadequate. Take, for example, the phenomenon of serial (or multiple) killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer or the Columbine killers (Dylan and Klebold). Calling such killers *necessarily* and *always* “mentally ill” (and tying these “illnesses” to physical deficiencies) is inadequate and hollow. To call these murderers “out of touch with reality” flies in the face of their appearing “normal” in their dealings with other human beings, who are later shocked when they discover what these killers have done. Also, these killers are often very skilled, calculating masterminds when it comes to carrying out their murders. The *means* they utilize are quite rational, given the evil *ends* they are pursuing.⁷⁶

Following the pattern of Hume, who divorced science of the mind from moral philosophy, contemporary secular analysts can only say that Dahmer was *abnormal* (that is, *statistically-*

⁷³ Kelly James Clark addresses this point in his book, *When Faith Is Not Enough* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁷⁴ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 46 (his emphasis).

⁷⁵ See also Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123-9.

deviant); multiple murders then become only *highly unusual*, not *evil*. Furthermore, these killers, who, in fact, are *not* clinically insane or mad (i.e., out of touch with reality and possessing a large cluster of disordered beliefs), simply *are* what they are. If one adheres to naturalism, one cannot explain deep evil.⁷⁷

3. Complete Diagnostic Check: If we consider only original sin, then we are looking at an incomplete picture. Original sin must be understood in the fuller context of grace, redemption, and hope to understand properly its significance and depth. Secular alternatives offer no such hope:

Psychologist Paul Vitz asks:

What do we tell the over-ambitious business man at age forty that his career is finished because of a serious—possibly fatal—illness? What do we tell the woman alone in a desperately aging body and with a history of failed relationships? Does one say ‘go actualize yourself in creative activity’? For people in those circumstances such advice is not just irrelevant, it is an insult. It is exactly suffering, however, which is at the center of the meaning and hope of the religious life.⁷⁸

Hobart Mowrer rightly noted that when we deny the reality of sin, “*we cut ourselves off . . . from the possibility of radical redemption (recovery).*”⁷⁹

One of the problems with relativism and perspectivism is that no forgiveness is required since there is no objective moral law has been violated. Perhaps part of the reason the idea of salvation is not so enthralling to many Westerners is that they have so obscured its significance by resorting

⁷⁶ Gordon Graham, *Evil and Christian Ethics*, 131.

⁷⁷ This is not to deny that there is a theological irrationality and abnormality” involved in sin. Because, as Aquinas declared, the “guilty character of sin consists in the fact that it is committed against God” (*Summa Theologica* III.46.2 ad 3), sin is an irrationality that flies in the face of how we were designed to function. Thus for Aquinas sin is both *contra naturam* (against nature) and *actus contra rationem* (an act against reason). See *Summa Theologica* I/II.78.3; II/II. 153.2; II/II.168.4).

⁷⁸ Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 104

⁷⁹ O. Hobart Mowrer, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1961), 40 (his italics).

to modernistic or therapeutic categories. Without the language of sin, the language of salvation appears irrelevant. Where the therapeutic abounds, there rationalizations abound still more. But when we recognize that sin abounds, only then can we recognize the superabundance of divine grace.

Gary Anderson rightly maintains, "Original sin is not a self-contained philosophical doctrine, but depends on the religious experience of redemption. The moment we isolate the sin of Adam from this broader framework we lose its larger meaning."⁸⁰ We cannot think of the first Adam without thinking of the second Adam.

As we saw earlier, simply thinking about ourselves as worthless is a false picture of who we are; we are human beings made in the image of God. Likewise, despairing about our sinfulness and falling prey to hopelessness fails to take into account the complete picture of our situation, which involves provision for our redemption. Our human sinfulness is part of the picture; the other part is divine redemption and grace:

Sin is never the total picture in anyone's biography. For human history is not only a history of perdition but a history of salvation. Hence life is drawn by a second vector, grace; and Christology rather than original sin is the fundamental axis for the doctrine of soteriology.⁸¹

If people reject the Christian faith solely because of original sin, then they have acted prematurely; they have failed to consider the fuller picture that helps make sense of the doctrine. In defending the idea of original sin, we must point out to the critic that we cannot consider this doctrinal dangler without the narrative/historical context which explains the solution God has provided. If we follow the secularist line, we are driven to despair because of the track record of

⁸⁰ "Necesarium Adae Peccatum: The Problem of Original Sin," in *Sin, Death, and the Devil*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 38.

⁸¹ Stephen J. Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 618.

man's inhumanity to man generation after generation. Naturalistically speaking, we are without hope for resolution to our deep depravity. Thus we must keep in mind the complete diagnosis—the damage as well as the basis of and the hope for full repair.

4. *Sin as the "Troubleshooter's Guide": The doctrine of original sin suggests the need for divine grace/mercy and the insufficiency of our own human resources to deal with our guilt/sin. Original sin serves as a pointer toward transcendence.* We are probably familiar with those auto "Troubleshooting Guides" produced by the Shell Oil Company—what to do in emergencies, how to spot signs of trouble and how to repair the damage: "When you've got such-and-such a problem, this might be the likely solution." Similarly, when we see something wrong, we are not left stranded by the theological roadside. Our very failure points us toward the solution. We see in Romans 2:14-15 that there is a moral law written on the hearts of Gentiles, who "do instinctively the things of the law, their conscience bearing witness, alternately accusing or else defending them." As the Thomistic doctrine of natural law rightly affirms, a moral standard exists that is rooted in God's "eternal law" (or, more specifically, the divine character). Thus, as Thomas Reid later noted, general virtues and vices (such as treating another person as you want to be treated) "must appear self-evident to every man who has a conscience, and has taken the pains to exercise this natural power of his mind."⁸² So even though God's moral law has been violated by each of us, this violation also serves as a sign of hope.

As John Hare observes in his book *The Moral Gap*,⁸³ we are aware of (a) a moral ideal or standard and (b) our own sin and inability to live up to that standard. What is needed is (c) divine

⁸² Reid, "Of the First Principles of Morals," Essay 3 in *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, intro. Baruch A. Brody (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), 364-7.

⁸³ John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

assistance/grace. Original sin serves as a reminder that we have violated the moral law and that we are in need of redemption and grace. Thus Kant's "ought implies can" should be modified to "ought implies can—with God's available grace."⁸⁴

The entrance of sin into the world has brought momentous and devastating consequences. We come into the world as "damaged goods"—persons affected deeply by the power of sin and its consequences. Our profound awareness of our sin reminds us of our moral *accountability* to God and our moral *inadequacy* before God and thus the need for assistance beyond our own resources. Despite the skeptic's charge that each human stands or falls on her own merits rather than another's, the fact "as practical as potatoes" is that our only real alternative is to cast ourselves upon God's mercy. As Aquinas notes: "in the state of corrupted nature man needs grace to heal his nature in order that he may entirely abstain from sin."⁸⁵

In this vein, we can make the apologetic point that the Christian revelation, unlike other religious systems that tend to be works/merit-based (and are thus doomed only to add to the weight of guilt and shame), offers us grace in Christ's substitutionary death and the provision of God's Spirit. As Terence Penelhum points out, we find in these resources the desperately-needed relief in the merits of Another and release from the burden of self-effort to achieve salvation or liberation.⁸⁶

5. Following (or Straying from) the Map: If God, by His Spirit, gives sufficient grace and opportunity to all people (even if most may reject it), then God is being neither unjust nor unloving

⁸⁴ Hare makes this point in "Naturalism and Morality," in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, ed. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (London: Routledge: 2000), 194.

⁸⁵ *Summa Theologica* I/II.109.7.

⁸⁶ Terence Penelhum, *Christian Ethics and Human Nature* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 22, 41. I would disagree, however, with Penelhum's revised understanding of original sin, which is shaped by his belief in the evolution of the human species.

in allowing us to be damaged by the consequences of Adam's sin. Even though most people reject God's grace (as Romans 1 indicates), God offers sufficient direction to us so that we may cast ourselves upon God's mercy. We are not thrown into this world without available divine resources. God's prevenient grace is available to all through the Holy Spirit, who convicts people (John 16:8) and is able to draw them to Himself (John 6:44).⁸⁷ The fact that God has given us freedom of the will entails the possibility of "always resisting the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). God desires that all persons come to a knowledge of the truth (2 Peter 3:9). John Stott urges: "We have to remember too that God does not *want* anybody to perish but *wants* everybody to be saved."⁸⁸

Persons are not condemned to hell—the absence of God's presence (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9)—because they were born at the wrong place or at the wrong time. If a person is condemned, it is because he has resisted the grace of God in his life and is thus seals his own fate. *A person cannot point to her sinful condition as the basis of her eternal separation from God.* As William Craig observes, God doesn't send people to hell; rather, they freely choose to ignore and resist God's initiating grace in their lives so that they end up condemning themselves. This means that *the only obstacle to universal salvation is human free will and its resistance to God's loving initiative.*⁸⁹

Ultimately, hell is "God's withdrawing of his presence and his blessings from men who have refused to receive them."⁹⁰ In the end, Lewis wrote, there are only two kinds of people: those

⁸⁷ I discuss the question as it pertains to the unevangelized in my book *"True for You, But Not for Me,"* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 123-63.

⁸⁸ *Evangelical Essentials*, 328.

⁸⁹ Taken from William Lane Craig (debate with Ray Bradley), "Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?" Debate found at <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-bradley0.html>.

⁹⁰ Stephen Travis, "The Problem of Judgment," *Themelios* 11 (Jan. 1986): 53.

who say *to God*, “Thy will be done,” and *those to whom God says*, “Thy will be done.”⁹¹ Scottish pastor and author George MacDonald put it this way: “The one principle of hell is: I am my own.”⁹²

Thus in the task of Christian philosophy, *we must avoid the red herring of original sin as inevitably condemning a person without the cooperation of his will*. This original corruption, by itself, does not condemn us, but rather when we align ourselves with it. Christians must place an emphasis on the *direction* of one’s life as shaping one’s *destiny*: Is one regularly resisting the grace and the knowledge of God or not? Is one moving in a Godward direction or not? Scripture’s emphasis seems to be more on the direction of one’s heart and will that condemns a person as opposed to individual acts of wrongdoing. As Joel Green and Mark Baker put it, God’s wrath against sin is against *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness* (Rom. 1:18); these are identified not with “individual acts of wickedness” but with a *general disposition* to “refuse to honor God as God and to render Him thanks.”⁹³ William Lane Craig observes:

The orthodox Christian need not hold that *every* sin merits hell or has hell as its consequence; rather hell is the final consequence (and even just punishment) for those who irrevocably refuse to seek and accept God’s forgiveness of their sins. By refusing God’s forgiveness they freely separate themselves from God forever. The issue, then, is whether the necessity of making this fundamental decision is too much to ask of a human being.⁹⁴

God has not left human beings to make this choice on their own. *God is ready by his Spirit to equip anyone for salvation*. But how will they respond?

⁹¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan), 38.

⁹² C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 85.

⁹³ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 54-55; cp. 95.

⁹⁴ William Lane Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 88.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, said hell exists for those who refuse to acknowledge their guilt; therefore they can accept no forgiveness.⁹⁵ He goes on to say later: “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.”⁹⁶

6. *Being at the Scene of the Accident*: One particular objection commonly raised regarding Adam’s headship of the human race is this: “Why should Adam be *my* representative head? He really fouled things up, and now, through no fault of my own, everyone else is paying the consequences.” Behind this comment is an unarticulated, arrogant presumption: “If *I* had been in Adam’s place, *I* would have obeyed God’s simple command not to take from the fruit. *I* could have prevented the calamitous fallout from the first disobedience.”

This counterfactualizing, of course, presupposes divine middle knowledge. Fully exploring the connection between middle knowledge and original sin would require a lengthy essay—perhaps in some possible world. Here, however, we can ponder: Perhaps it’s the case that had *any* of us human beings been in Adam’s place, each of us *would have* freely chosen to eat of the fruit and refused to trust God’s word and character. What if *every* human being God created would also have fallen into sin just as Adam did? Though human sinlessness in the garden is logically possible, it could be the case that those human beings God has actually created would have, according to His middle knowledge, chosen the same Adamic *course*, resulting in the same Adamic *curse*. The selection of another person would have produced no different outcome. Had any of us actualized human beings been in Adam’s place, none of us by his free choice would have avoided bringing about the fall and its consequences.

⁹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 122.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

Now this point does *not* address the specific connection between Adam and the rest of the human race (*e.g.*, how corruption is transmitted). This point *does* offer perspective, though, about the inappropriateness of blaming Adam, whether expressly or implicitly: “God, I thank You that I am not like [Adam]” (cp. Luke 18:11). This middle knowledge perspective deflates charges of divine injustice regarding Adam’s being our representative head since *God knows that the rest of us would have acted in the very same way in the same circumstance*. After all, God could have placed the objector in the garden, and the rest of the human race would have felt the same effects (and would have beaten up on that objector just as Adam has been). Besides exonerating God against charges of injustice, this point can also serve as another important reminder to walk humbly before God and one another.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The broader topic of the problem of evil will leave us with unanswered questions, but the Christian philosopher is still able to place evil in a plausible context (*e.g.*, evil suggests some standard of goodness or design plan from which something deviates). The doctrine of original sin in particular—a subset of the problem of evil—can likewise be placed into its appropriate context by the Christian theist. First, he can show that deep sinfulness—not simply abnormality or mental illness or deviancy—best explains the human misery we witness and experience in the world. Then he can move from there to argue that original sin is not the full picture, but there is a broader context of redemption and hope to help make sense of it. The secularist alternatives offer no hope or solution. Furthermore, original sin reminds each of us that we are in need of divine grace in light of the “moral gap” each of us experiences.

⁹⁷ Thanks to Frank Beckwith and Bill Craig for their discussions on this point.

We could also add to this discussion that we truly do not understand the dramatic consequences of sin and how they have spilled out all over humanity through the ages. As with the evidential problem from evil (even if God exists, how could he allow *so much* evil?), we can answer that *we may not be in a good position to assess what the limits of the consequences of Adam's sin should be.*

Furthermore, the Christian philosopher, even if he cannot supply full answers, can point to the love of God in Christ by saying, "If God is willing to go to such great lengths to bring us to reconciliation with Himself by experiencing weakness, facing injustice, and enduring horrible suffering for our sakes, then surely we can leave in his hands such difficult questions as original sin." Indeed, the Jewish-Christian tradition offers us a foothold—a context—for understanding original sin as well as a solution for overcoming it. The humanistic/secularistic alternatives fail miserably. On this problem—as with all others—it is better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of man.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee who offered helpful suggestions for this essay.