Chapter 1

Vandalism of Shalom

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Mac in Grand Canyon

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Not the Way
It's Supposed to Be

A Breviary of Sin

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

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The tow truck driver is an heir of St. Augustine, and his summary of the human predicament belongs in every book of theology. For central in the classic Christian understanding of the world is a concept of the way things are supposed to be. They ought to be as designed and intended by God, both in creation and in graceful restoration of creation. They are supposed to include peace that adorns and completes justice, mutual respect, and deliberate and widespread attention to the public good.

Of course, things are not that way at all. Human wrongdoing, or the threat of it, mars every adult’s workday, every child’s school day, every vacationer’s holiday. A moment’s reflection yields a whole catalogue of wrongdoing, some of it so familiar we scarcely think of it any longer as wrong: a criminal in a forties film noir hangs up a pay telephone receiver and then, before exiting the booth, rips from the telephone book the page he had consulted and pockets it. At school, a third grader in a class of twenty-five distributes fifteen party invitations in a manner calculated to let the omitted classmates clearly see their exclusion. Her teacher notes but never ponders the social dynamics of this distribution scheme. Two old flames meet again for the first time since graduation and begin to muse with nostalgia and boozy self-pity over what might have been. Though each feels happily married to someone else, somehow the evening climaxes for the two grads in a room at the Marriott.

Perhaps we think most often of sin as a spoiler of creation: people adulterate a marriage or befoul a stream or use their excellent minds to devise an ingenious tax fraud. But resistance to redemption counts as sin, too, and often displays a special perversity.

In the summer of 1973, a British journalist named Jonathan Dimbleby filmed a dispiriting report of hunger in Ethiopia. To show some of the setting of this misery, the journalist juxtaposed shots of famished Ethiopians with shots of Emperor Haile Selassie’s feasts. Newspapermen from across the world soon showed up in Addis Ababa to cover the yoked stories of popular starvation and official comfort. The next wave of foreigners escorted substantial food gifts from various countries. In the arrival of these gifts, Ethiopia’s finance minister spied an opportunity. To the great emergency stores of food donated by compassionate peoples of the world, the minister applied a substantial customs duty. Of course, the donating nations were dumbfounded and said so. Their protest, in turn, dumbfounded the imperial court:

“You want to help?” the minister asked. “Please do, but you must pay.” And [the benefactors] said: “What do you mean, pay? We give help! And we’re supposed to pay?” “Yes,” says the minister, “those are the regulations. Do you want to help in such a way that our Empire gains nothing by it?”

Shalom

As the great writing prophets of the Bible knew, sin has a thousand faces. The prophets knew how many ways human life can go wrong because they knew how many ways human life can go right. (You need the concept of a wall on plumb to tell when one is off.) These prophets kept dreaming of a time when God would put things right again.

They dreamed of a new age in which human crookedness would be straightened out, rough places made plain. The foolish would be made wise, and the wise, humble. They dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would run with wine, weeping would cease, and people could go to sleep without weapons on their laps. People would work in peace and work to fruitful effect. Lambs could lie down with lions. All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; all humans would be knit together

1. And Philip Yancey, who reminded me of this scene and of its redolence, belongs on every writer’s list of fruitful and imaginative friends.


4. Cf. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 5.33.3: “The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten
in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God. Shouts of joy and recognition would well up from valleys and seas, from women in streets and from men on ships.

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rite state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

"The way things ought to be" in its Christian understanding includes the constitution and internal relations of a very large number of entities—the Holy Trinity, the physical world in all its fullness, the human race, particular communities within this race (such as the ancient people of Israel, the New Testament church, the American Federation of Musicians), families, married couples, groups of friends, individual human beings. In a shalmonic state each entity would have its own integrity or structured wholeness, and each would also possess many edifying relations to other entities. The All Terrain Vehicle Sports Club, for example, might relate to forest streams by placing them off limits to its members in an effort to preserve their ecological health. "The way things ought to be" would also include in individuals persons a whole range of intelligent responses to other creatures (and even to their relationships with still other creatures)—a spread of appropriate thoughts, desires, emotions, words, deeds, and dispositions. Gratitude, for example, is as fitting an emotional response to undeserved kindness as delight is to such created excellences as the velvety coat of a puppy or the honking of geese in a November fly-by or the hitchhiking home of young beetles on the backs of bees.

Of course, the shalmonic dreams of the Hebrew prophets are visionary: the literal coursing of Chardonnay through mountain streambeds is not an essential feature of everybody's picture of an ideal world. Nor would all agree with Milton's portrait of Eden as a "happy rural seat of various view" or More's vision of Utopia as communist uniformitarianism. Still, every one of us does possess the _nation_ of a world in which things are as they ought to be. Moreover, though we would stock this world and arrange its workings differently according to our varying ideas of what the Bible calls "good" (Would heavy metal music play any part in a perfect world? Would it, at least, be audible only to its own fans?), we would nonetheless agree on many of the broad outlines and main ingredients of a transformed world.

It would include, for instance, strong marriages and secure children. Nations and races in this brave new world would treasure differences in other nations and races as attractive, important, complementary. In the process of making decisions, men would defer to women and women to men until a crisis arose. Then, with good humor all around, the person more naturally competent in the area of the crisis would resolve it to the satisfaction and pleasure of both.

Government officials would still take office (somebody has to decide which streets are cleaned on Tuesday and which on Wednesday), but to nobody's surprise they would tell the truth and freely praise the virtues of other public officials. Public telephone books would be left intact. Highway overpasses would be free of graffiti. Tow truck drivers and erring motorists would be serene on inner-city streets.

Business associates would rejoice in one another's promotions. Middling Harvard students would respect the Phi Beta Kappas from the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople and would seek to learn from them. Intercontinental ballistic missile silos would be converted into training tanks for scuba divers. All around the world, 6. See Richard J. Mouw, _When the Kings Come Marching in: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem_ (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 19-20.

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people would stimulate and encourage one another's virtues. Newspapers would be filled with well-written accounts of acts of great moral beauty, and, at the end of the day, people on their porches would read these and savor them and call to each other about them.

Above all, in the visions of Christians and other theists, God would preside in the unspeakable beauty for which human beings long and in the mystery of holiness that draws human worship like a magnet. In turn, each human being would reflect and color the light of God's presence out of the inimitable resources of his or her own character and essence. Human communities would present their ethnic and regional specialties to other communities in the name of God, in glad recognition that God, too, is a radiant and hospitable community of three persons. In their own accents, communities would express praise, courtesies, and deferences that, when massed together, would keep building like waves of a passion that is never spent.

Sin: A Definition

In biblical thinking, we can understand neither shalom nor sin apart from reference to God. Sin is a religious concept, not just a moral one. For example, when we are thinking religiously, we view a shopkeeper's defrauding of a customer not merely as an instance of lawlessness but also of faithlessness, and we think of the fraud as faithless not only to the customer but also to God. Criminal and moral misadventures qualify as sin because they offend and betray God. Sin is not only the breaking of law but also the breaking of covenant with one's savior. Sin is the smearing of a relationship, the grieving of one's divine parent and benefactor, a betrayal of the partner to whom one is joined by a holy bond.

Hence in the most famous of the penitential psalms, traditionally ascribed to David after his adultery with Bathsheba, the author views his sin primarily, perhaps exclusively, as a sin against God:

7. The golden calf idolatry of Exod. 32, e.g., counts as treachery because it violates the covenant vows of Exod. 24:1-8.

8. The Jerusalem Bible translates vv. 3 and 4 in a way that, perhaps deliberately, leaves ambiguous the object of the confessed offense: "I have sinned constantly in mind, having sinned against none other than you." Does the psalmist think he has sinned against God preeminently or exclusively?

9. In my usage, acs include thinking, speaking, desiring, etc., as well as "deeds" when they are distinguished from thoughts and words, as in the General Confession from the Book of Common Prayer: "I have sinned in my thoughts, in my words, and in my deeds."

10. The offered definition is criteriological as opposed to ontological; i.e., it tells us how we know that something counts as sin rather than what sin itself actually is. In other words, the definition tells us what is sinful but not what is sin. The same would be true if we were to describe sin as the violation of God's law—a more typical and more immediate test for the presence of sin—or if we were to describe it as culpable shalom-breaking. To solve this problem, if it is a problem, we could describe sin as, say, the power in human beings that has the effect (including the criteriological revealing effect) of corrupting human thought, word, and deed so that they displease God and make their authors guilty. We would then stipulate that this power lies paradoxically behind our neglects and inattentions as well as behind our assaults and trespasses.
enlarge and specify this understanding of sin. God is, after all, not arbitrarily offended. God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. (Indeed, that is why God has laws against a good deal of sin.) God is for shalom and therefore against sin.\textsuperscript{11} In fact, we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (e.g., by disease), morally, spiritually, or otherwise.\textsuperscript{12} Moral and spiritual evil are agential evil — that is, evil that, roughly speaking, only persons can do or have. Agential evil thus comprises evil acts and dispositions. Sin, then, is any agential evil for which some person (or group of persons) is to blame. In short, sin is culpable shalom-breaking.

This definition may strike some as disappointingly formal; it tells us how an act qualifies as sin, but it doesn’t tell us which acts qualify in this way. And, of course, questions about whether particular acts count as sin are old and numerous. Take a very homely incident. Suppose you are a dinner guest of a beaming but shaky hostess. As the evening progresses, you discover that her tastes and achievements in cookery lie at a discouragingly low level. At some point she asks you in front of six other guests how you like her Velveeta, Spam, and lima bean casserole.\textsuperscript{13} The table falls silent, faces turn to you, and your hostess waits expectantly. Now what? On the spot, you have to make a decision, so you do. You do not tell the brutal truth. Nor do you evade (“I didn’t know a casserole like this was even possible!”). You lie. Indeed, you lie winningly.

Have you disturbed shalom or preserved it?

Questions of this kind often arise when more than one moral rule applies to a given act and when to obey one rule is apparently
to disobey the other. In the case of the hostess, “Tell the truth” appears to lead one way and “Be kind” another.

But maybe this is overdramatizing the scene. Maybe we have a setting here in which shalom is better served by following custom than by agonizing over the applicability of moral rules. Maybe in some social settings a murmur of approval over a doubtful casserole is only a formality, only a customary nicety. Maybe it possesses no more moral or declaratory force than “Dear” at the start of a letter to the IRS.

Obviously, many moral dilemmas rise to a far more serious, and sometimes even agonizing, level. Bad enough to know the will of God and to flout it. But what if you simply do not know how to please God and build shalom? We Christians derive our vision of shalom from Scripture, from general revelation, from centuries of reflection on them, and from whatever wisdom God grants us. Often the yield from these sources is pretty plain: generally speaking, robbery, assault, malicious gossip, fraud, blasphemy, envy, idolatry, and perjury break the peace, while almsgiving, embracing, praising, harvesting, thanksgiving, complimenting, truth-telling, and worshiping God build it.

But how about killing another human being? Everybody agrees that unjust killing is evil and a disturbance of shalom; but which killings count as unjust? Slaying your parents to speed up the inheritance process surely qualifies, but how about slaying the marauder who cuts your phone line, forces your side door, enters your family home at 3 A.M., and threatens your nine-year-old with rape? Is it, so to speak, all right with God if you use force to defend your household and repel the invader? How much force? May you, for instance, blast away with a shotgun? Only after an initial warning? What if there isn’t time? If you do shoot, must you aim someplace other than the torso or head? Does it matter whether the invader is drunk or crazy? Suppose there are three invaders and you are terrified: do these facts bear on your blameworthiness in the eyes of God if you shoot? As a householder, are you morally obliged to prepare nonlethal defenses in advance and to practice them?

Other than household defense, what about the famous hard cases that crop up in the abortion, euthanasia, and just-war debates no matter what position you take in these debates?
Questions of this kind, and attempts to clarify and answer them, can be found in books on ethics and on law, and readers who want to pursue such questions should turn to them. To think theologically about sin is a somewhat different project. Though in the chapters ahead we shall have occasion again and again to discuss particular sins, the first and main task is to locate and inspect the general phenomenon, to place sin and describe it.

This is where the definition comes in. “Culpable disturbance of shalom” suggests that sin is unoriginal, that it disrupts something good and harmonious, that (like a housebreaker) it is an intruder, and that those who sin deserve reproach. To get our bearings, we need to see first that sin is one form of evil (an agential and culpable form) and that evil, in turn, is the disruption or disturbance of what God has designed.

This design naturally includes not only the proper relation of people to people and of people to nature and of nature to God but also the proper relation of people to God. Human beings ought to love and obey God as children properly love and obey their parents. Human beings ought to be in awe of God at least as much as, say, a first-year violin student is in awe of Itzhak Perlman. They ought to marvel at God’s greatness and praise God’s goodness. Failure to do these things — let alone indulgence in outright scorn of God — is sin because it runs counter to the way things are supposed to go.

Godlessness is anti-shalom. Godlessness spoils the proper relation between human beings and their maker and savior.

Sin offends God not only because it bereaves or assaults God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it bereaves and assaults what God has made. Sexism and racism, for example, show contempt both for various human persons and also for the mind of God. God savors and wants not only humankind but also human kinds. In the cramped precincts of their little worlds, sexists and racists disdain such differences in kind.

In sum, shalom is God’s design for creation and redemption; sin is blameworthy human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.

Of course such ideas annoy certain people. The concept of a design to which all of us must conform ourselves, whether we like it or not, appears absurd or even offensive to many. People who believe in naturalistic evolution, for example, think that human concepts, values, desires, and religious beliefs are, like human life itself, metaphysically untethered to any transcendent purpose. Our lives and values are rather the product of such blind mechanisms as random genetic mutation and natural selection. In the view of such naturalist believers, there isn’t any “way it’s supposed to be” or anyone like God to sponsor and affirm this state of affairs. Thus, there isn’t anything like a violation of the way it’s supposed to be or anything like an affront to God — and hence there isn’t anything that fits the definition of sin. In particular, the concept of sin makes no sense if human life, taken as a whole, is purposeless — only “the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms,” as Bertrand Russell once put it — for, at its core, human sin is a violation of our human end, which is to build shalom and thus to glorify and enjoy God forever.

Moreover, whether or not they believe in evolutionary naturalism, people who think of human beings as their own centers and lawmakers reject the whole idea of our dependence on a superior being. Indeed, they find this idea entirely distasteful. To them the proposal that we ought to worship someone who is better than we are, that we ought to study this person’s will and then bend our lives to it, that we ought to confess our failures and assign life’s blessings to him — to them, the notion that we ought to take this posture toward anybody else at all is humiliatingly undemocratic, an offense to human dignity and pride.

Not incidentally, the pride that resists God and God’s superiority also resists objective moral truth. For such truth — the assertion that some acts are right and some wrong regardless of what we think

14. For an ingenious development of a suspicion in C. S. Lewis and others that naturalism and evolutionary theory are incompatible — that, in fact, evolutionary theory itself gives the naturalist a clinching reason for rejecting naturalism — see Alvin Plantinga, Warrant and Proper Function (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 216-37.

about the matter — stands against the freedom of human beings to create their own values, to make up moral truth as they go along.

Serious Christians view attitudes of this kind simply as modern instances of sin's age-old power to deceive. Humans notoriously suppress truth they dislike, says St. Paul. In the biblical view, we not only sin because we are ignorant but we are also ignorant because we sin, because we find it convenient to misconstrue our place in the universe and to reassign divinity in it. (Of course, Christian believers engage in these misconstructions and reassignments, too; they simply do so less consistently than stable secular humanists.)

**Interscholastic and Intramural Distinctions**

Sin is *culpable* disturbance of shalom — that is, culpable in the eyes of God. In this way and others, sin distinguishes itself from many of its conceptual near-neighbors. Though partly overlapping with it, sin is distinct from crime, for example. A main reason for the distinction is obvious: crime is statute-relative in a way that sin is not. Thus, some sin, such as writing a no-account check in order to buy lottery tickets, probably breaks a criminal statute in every jurisdiction in which there are banks and lotteries. But a lot of sin (e.g., frittering your life away on trivial pursuits) is perfectly legal, and some (e.g., godlessness) is in certain legal jurisdictions even obligatory.

On the other side, though most crime offends God and therefore counts as sin, certain forms of civil disobedience in a righteous cause (e.g., sit-ins in protest of segregation) may offend Caesar but not God.

How about the relation of sin to immorality? If we follow a big and popular convention in restricting the scope of morality to, roughly, intra-creaturely behaviors, attitudes, rights, and obligations, then moral right and wrong are grasped and judged on a horizontal plane, so to speak. (In this convention, spirituality and spiritual evil are the vertical complements to morality and immorality.) From this perspective, all culpably immoral acts are sin: theft, for example, is both immoral and sinful. But not all sin is immoral: according to the convention, a person who broke the Sabbath, for instance, or who, despite years in the best seminaries, offered Jesus Christ only polite respect — and then only for his political courage — would have committed spiritual evil and would, if culpable, be guilty of sin but not of immorality.

But maybe this is the wrong way to cut the pie. Maybe we would do better to think of morality as applying to universal obligations that can also be universally accessed, while reserving the concepts of sin and righteousness to cover special obligations that fall on particular persons or communities. If so, all idolatry is immoral, not just sinful, since (we might argue) all human beings have a built-in sense of God that they are obliged to respect and to translate into worship. On the other hand, Jonah's and Israel's disobedience with respect to specific commissions by God would count as sin but not as immorality.

The distinction between sin and immorality is knotty in lots of ways that need not delay us, and in the pages ahead I shall not fuss over it.

Besides distinguishing sin from crime and immorality, we must also distinguish it from disease. True, sinful acts sometimes transmit

16. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them" (Rom. 1:18-19).

17. For a contemporary theory that moves strongly and intelligently along these lines, see Alan Donagan, The Theory of Morality (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977); especially chaps. 1, 2, and 7.

18. The relation of sin to moral wrongdoing has attracted a growing and sophisticated literature. See, e.g., the debate in Religious Studies 20 (1984) involving Basil Mitchell, "How Is the Concept of Sin Related to the Concept of Moral Wrongdoing?" (pp. 165-73); Ingolf Dalférth, same title (pp. 175-89); and David Artfield, "The Morality of Sins" (pp. 227-37). See also Marilyn McCord Adams, "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," Faith and Philosophy 5 (1988): 121-43; and "Theodicy without Blame," Philosophical Topics 16 (1988): 215-45. What seems clear is that all *culpable* moral wrongdoing is sin but that not all wrongdoing is culpable (as in some cases of wrongdoing by children, mentally deficient or disturbed persons, or persons whose morally wrong acts are determined by outside influences). What is much less clear is how much of sin is morally wrong and, especially, what standard we have for making this judgment.
grieve God, and the willingness to grieve God by one’s acts is itself grievous. Moreover, acting against one’s conscience blunts and desensitizes it; indeed, repeated thwarting of one’s conscience might eventually kill it. The subjective sinner therefore risks moral suicide.

But risking or actually committing moral suicide is objectively sinful. So in this way, all subjective sinners are also objective sinners — people who, so to speak, keep shooting themselves in the conscience. Making this distinction requires a commitment to a limited kind of moral subjectivism: some acts are genuinely (even if not objectively) wrong for one person but not for another, and they are wrong on account of what the person thinks about them. It also requires a commitment to a limited kind of moral absolutism: it is always wrong to act against one’s conscience.

All sin is equally wrong, but not all sin is equally bad. Acts are either right or wrong, either consonant with God’s will or not. But among good acts some are better than others, and among wrong acts some worse than others. Christians believe that thinking deliberately about adultery is just as wrong as committing it and not a different offense in kind. But Christians also know that adultery in one’s heart damages others less, at least for the short term, than does adultery in a motel room and may therefore rank as less serious on the badness spectrum.

Similarly for other offenses: given a choice, our neighbor would

21. I owe this point to Robert C. Roberts.
22. This distinction is standard in much of the Christian tradition, Protestant as well as Catholic. Consider the Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 8: “We . . . confess that sins are not equal; although they arise from the same fountain of corruption and unbelief, some are more serious than others. As the Lord said, it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for the city that rejects the word of the Gospel (Mt. 10:15; 11:20-24).”
23. The source of this conviction is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27-28).
24. Still, adultery in one’s heart damages oneself in subtle, progressive, and unpredictable ways, and damage to oneself may ripple out to affect others, so that the final tally in seriousness between adultery in one’s heart and adultery in a motel room may be closer than we think.
rather have us covet her house than steal it. Neglecting to feed one's children seems clearly worse than neglecting to expose them to the fine arts (though that is bad enough). The badness or seriousness of sin depends to some degree on the amount and kind of damage it inflicts, including damage to the sinner, and to some degree on the personal investment and motive of the sinner. This is the heart of the distinction between mortal and venial sin in the Catholic tradition and a place where legal and theological thinking overlap. Most criminal codes acknowledge the relevance of motive in measuring the seriousness of an offense: the codes set higher penalties for premeditated murder than for involuntary manslaughter. And they acknowledge the relevance of the amount and kind of damage done by an offense: the codes set higher penalties for murder than for attempted murder. But, of course, both measurements count: a premeditated theft of the whole supply of paper towels in a restaurant rest room is a less serious offense than an involuntary vehicular manslaughter.

Where both crime and sin are concerned, involuntariness may mitigate, but it doesn't necessarily excuse. A thoroughly ungrateful person, for example, may be ungrateful without having in any way chosen to be so. Indeed, she may not even know that she is ungrateful. It may never occur to her that, where God, family members, and friends are concerned, she ought to feel some of the mixed sense of being blessed and indebted that spiritually healthy people feel. Her ingratitude is scarcely under her control in at least these respects and hence can be said to be involuntary. But it is also clearly sinful. If the ingrate were to detect her flaw and see its unloveliness, she would rightly feel obliged to confess and repent of it.²⁵

Involuntary sins are surprisingly common. For example, the traditional seven deadly sins (pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust) are usually involuntary. They are desires, beliefs, and attitudes over which a person may have little or, at best, only variable control. Faithful warriors against these sins thus experience familiar failures, slight improvements, backslidings, painful conquests, Pyrrhic victories, broken treaties, and humiliating compromises. The Scriptures claim that human beings need powerful outside intervention to control and eventually conquer their faults, but all veterans of the sin wars know this by personal experience as well. Where the deadly sins are concerned, a person may not want these states of mind (nobody wants to be envious), may not choose them, may not mean or try to have them.²⁶ In fact, just the contrary. Yet there they are. And we rightly call them sins even when they are involuntary.

Of course, some people do want some of these sins. Certain people want lust, for instance, and do what they can to excite it. They want not just sex but also the appetite for sex. Even then they may disappoint themselves. As St. Augustine knew, jaded appetites can be hard to freshen up. We cannot control lust very well at all: even people who want lust often cannot get it or, at least, cannot express it.²⁷ Much the same thing could be said about anger, sloth, and other deadly sins: they neither appear nor disappear on command. Involuntary sin is not under a person's control in the ways just described. But in order to call it sin, we have to stipulate that its owner acquired it through some fault of her own, that she is responsible for having it—in short, that she is culpable. And here matters become murky.

Take the case of a white boy raised in a family of racists in Mississippi in the 1850s. Call him Jim Bob. The local cultural assumption of white superiority threads through all of Jim Bob's education, adult modeling, and training in etiquette. Jim Bob never


²⁶. According to Adams, voluntary control includes at least one of the following: trying to do (or have) something, meaning to do it, or choosing to do it ("Involuntary Sins," pp. 8-9).

²⁷. In The City of God 14.15-16, Augustine speculates that the entailment of our will—shown in particular by its failure to govern the various forms of libido—is poetic justice: insubordination at the heart of our lives mirrors our insubordination to God. One dramatic instance of this, Augustine delicately suggests, is that male erections are no longer voluntary. Both senescence and lasciviousness have become (often unwanted) events rather than acts. The soul is so divided that impotence bedevils not only the godly who are earnestly attempting to beget children, but also lascivious playpersons who are impotent even to do evil. See also Garry F. Wills, God, Religion and American Politics (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 282-83.
encounters forceful alternatives to this assumption. He is dimly aware that some Yankees and certain Southern eccentrics are “nigger lovers,” but the one time he asks about these unusual creatures, respected local authorities assure him that they are all either crazy or phony. Unless, like Huck Finn, extraordinary circumstances encourage in him the growth of a fugitive’s independent mind, Jim Bob will simply absorb racism from his environment. The things he sees and learns will combine to corrupt his consciousness so that he simply adopts — without challenge or struggle and likely with only a little reflection — the assumption that the rigid posture of whites toward blacks is some patronizing blend of superiority, wariness, control, and apartheid.

Biblically instructed Christians now know that a racist state of mind is wholly wrong, an offense to the aggrieved race and an offense to God. Racism is a breach of shalom and, seemingly, an excellent example of sin. But if a particular person has this state of mind so inadvertently that it would be true to say of him that he could not have helped acquiring it, that there is now no realistic way he could avoid having it, can we still call him guilty for having it? And if not, do we call his state of mind sin? Is Jim Bob’s racism sin? And is Jim Bob a sinner just because he has this state of mind?

Questions like these lead us, of course, into great philosophical and theological swamps. Fortunately, we needn’t wade into them all the way up to our necks in order to stay on the route we have begun, but I do want to say at least something about the questions just raised, both to secure a working use of the operative word sin and also to prepare the way for chapters to follow. Hence, three observations.

1. The suggestion that Jim Bob could not have helped acquiring his racism is speculative. Cultural influences, personal strengths and insights, the human capacity for self-deception, conscience as shaped by “the law of God written on the human heart,” and numerous other factors combine in such intricate ways that we are seldom in a position to make accurate judgments about even our own blameworthiness, let alone someone else’s. Judgments about degrees of culpability, unless they are demanded of people filling such special roles as that of parent, judge, or jury, may therefore wisely be left in the hands of God.

2. The Christian tradition has traditionally and plausibly reserved the word sin for culpable evil. The criterion of culpability distinguishes sin from certain natural evils, from simple errors and follies, and especially from moral evils (kleptomania, say, or necrophilia) that might have been blamelessly acquired. Thus, if Jim Bob is not to blame for acquiring his racism, we can characterize his wrongful state of mind as moral evil but not, strictly speaking, as sin. Still, we will tend to call Jim Bob’s racism sin (a) because moral evil in a person is often sin, and we do not know that Jim Bob’s is not, and (b) because, living in a no-fault culture, we fear the softness of self-deception more than the hardness of accusation.

3. Even if Jim Bob is not to blame for his racism, somebody is. Somebody in the chain of influences leading to Jim Bob’s racism knew better, and this is true even if we have to follow the chain back to our first parents, who emerged good and innocent from the hands of God.

What Jim Bob’s racism shows us is that moral evil is social and structural as well as personal; it comprises a vast historical and cultural matrix that includes traditions, old patterns of relationship and behavior, atmospheres of expectation, social habits. Of course, culpability in social and structural evil is notoriously hard to assess.

28. For a 1950s version of this story, see Melton A. McLaurin, Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1987). McLaurin escaped the settled racism of his upbringing by profiting from the example of black friends whose lives exposed the racist lies McLaurin had been taught.

29. I am supposing that incompatibilism is true — i.e., that an agent’s freedom, and hence his moral responsibility, with respect to some act (or, in this case, the acquisition of some evil state of mind) is incompatible with that act’s being determined by causes other than the agent. For more on the relation of involuntary sin to blameworthiness and on the bearing of compatibilist and incompatibilist theories on the theory of involuntary sin, see Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” pp. 28-31.

Still, we know perfectly well that human pride, injustice, and hard-heartedness weave the web of social evil in which people like Jim Bob get caught and that this is true even when we cannot state with certainty whose pride, injustice, and hard-heartedness have produced the sticky strands. What we can state is that wherever people are to blame for these faults that generate racism, their racism itself renders them blameworthy and therefore additionally sinful. In case they infect others with racism (children, say, or pupils), that new and derived racism is often called sin because it is the fruit of sin and because it is morally evil. Accordingly, lots of Christians would simply call Jim Bob's racism sin, no matter how he acquired it.³¹

In so doing, they would be following a long tradition. The paradigm case is the doctrine of original sin. All traditional Christians agree that human beings have a biblically certified and empirically demonstrable bias toward evil. We are all both complicitous in and molested by the evil of our race. We both discover evil and invent it; we both ratify and extend it.³² But in particular cases, including our own, only God knows the relevant degrees and even the relevant kind of blame for original and actual moral evil.³³

Though we cannot always measure culpability for it, we do

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³¹ Following suit, in the pages ahead I'll usually speak of moral and spiritual evil as sin without pausing to inquire into the perpetrator's degree of culpability for their evil. Usually, but not always. Sometimes the issue of culpability sticks its head up and demands attention, as we've just seen in the case of involuntary sin, and as we shall see in the cases of addiction and of moral evils that look inevitable in particular social contexts.


³³ If we are culpable for original sin, as the Augustinian and Calvinist traditions maintain (the Heidelberg Catechism says in answers 7 and 10 that "we are born sinners — corrupt from conception on" and that God is "terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit"), we are culpable in some different sense of culpability than is used in ordinary discourse about actual sin. The major difference according to these traditions is that — whether because we were seminally present in Adam or because Adam was appointed by God as our "federal head" — we human beings inculpate ourselves before we are even born. Everybody is a sinner by second nature. Thus the Reformation contention that we are not only sinners because we sin; we also sin because we are sinners.