CHAPTER 5

NATURE OF SIN


Cf. also commentaries on Romans 5—esp. Calvin, Hodge, Shedd, Barth, Murray, Cranfield

Excellent bibliographical information in Great Books, Syntopicon 2:ch. 86

(For origin of sin, see ch. 4, sect. “Adam’s Fall into Sin”)

Biblical terms

The following are the main biblical terms for sin:

Significant OT terms

הָטָה hātāh or נַחְטָה nḥättāt, sin, moral failure

Judg 20:16, sling and not miss

1 Sam 12:23, sin by failing to pray for you

Ps 32:1, whose sin is covered

עָוֹן awōn, iniquity, crookedness
Gen 15:16, iniquity of Amorites
Ps 32:2, Lord imputes not iniquity

παράβασις peša‘, transgression, rebellion

1 Kgs 12:19, (political)
Isa 1:2, they have rebelled
Ps 51:13, I will teach transgressors

All three terms used together in Ps 32:1-2, “Blessed is he whose transgressions (peša‘) are forgiven, whose sins (ἵππος ἡτᾶς, related to ἡτᾶ) are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin ( 生命周期) the Lord does not count against him.”

**Significant NT terms**

ἁμαρτία hamartia— (n) sin; ἁμαρτάνω hamartano— (v) sin (similar to Heb. ḫאטא‘)

Rom 3:23, all have sinned, come short

πονηρός poneros, evil, iniquity (similar to Heb. 生命周期)

John 3:19, men loved darkness, because their deeds were evil

παραβαίνω parabaino, transgress, break a law (similar to Heb. peša‘)

Matt 5:2-3, transgress the tradition . . . transgress the commandment

Cf. παράβασις parabasis, transgression

Other NT words:

ἀδικία adikia, unrighteousness

ἀνομία anomia, lawlessness

κακός kakos, bad, evil
Scriptural evidence concerning the nature of sin

Sin a condition or disposition of the heart
Ps 51:5, a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me
Jer 17:9, heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure
Matt 7:17-18, good and evil fruit from corresponding trees
Matt 15:19, sins come from the heart
Rom 7:7-25, Paul’s internal struggle with sin in the heart

Sin includes thoughts and affections
—Verses in previous section
Exod 20:17, not covet
Lev 19:17, not hate
Matt 5:27-28, not lust
Cf. degrees of murder in criminal justice

Sin includes outward acts
Matt 18:21, brother sin against me
John 3:19, deeds are evil
Rom 7:19, the evil which I do

**Sin includes omission of doing right**

1 Sam 12:23, sin by ceasing to pray for you

Jas 4:17, know to do good and do it not—to him it is sin

**Sin need not be conscious**

Lev 5:14-19, sins unintentionally . . . even though he does not know it, he is guilty

Ps 19:12, secret faults

Ps 139:24, see if there be any wicked way in me

**Sin can be directed against oneself or others**

Prov 6:32, destroys his own soul

Prov 8:35-36, does violence to his own soul

2 Kgs 14:24, Jeroboam . . . made Israel to sin

Matt 6:12, our debtors

Matt 18:21, my brother sin against me

**But all sin is directed primarily against God**

Prov 8:35-35 (cf. above), he that sins against me (wisdom)

1 Sam 12:23 (above), sin against the Lord

Gen 20:6, Abimelech withheld from sinning against God

Gen 39:9, Joseph to Potiphar’s wife

2 Sam 12:13-14, David’s sin; cf. Ps 51:4, “against you, you only, have I sinned”
Luke 15:18, sinned against heaven

1 Cor 8:12, you sin against Christ (cause brother to fall)

**Sin reveals pride against God and rebellion against his law**

Dan 4:30, Nebuchadnezzar

2 Cor 5:15, not henceforth living for themselves

2 Thess 2:3-4, Antichrist

1 Tim 3:6, Satan

1 John 3:4, “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (ἀνομία anomia)”

**Inadequate philosophical views of sin**

—Outline of Hodge 2:130-49

**Dualistic view**

Held in various forms by Gnostics, Marcionites, Manichaeans

Two forces: spirit and sinful matter

Removes evil from sovereignty of God

Ethical consequences: asceticism, or indulgence

**Sin as limitation of being**

Spinoza, F. C. Baur, Carlyle, tendencies in Augustine

Since God is the absolute existence, non-existence is evil

Denies goodness of finite things in universe, results in pantheism

Results in ignoring moral laws
Leibnitz’s theory of privation

Similar to Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus

Effort of theist to allow coexistence of perfect God with evil in the universe

Since this is the best possible universe, sin must be unavoidable.

Since God the only effective agent, sin is not his work: must be what he has not done; no efficient cause needed.

Makes sin necessary, and God the author of sin

Theory of necessary antagonism

Blasche, Rosenkranz

Universe formed by separation between good and evil; good requires evil

Thus evil cannot be blameworthy

Sin as self-consciousness

Schleiermacher

Complicated view; good summary & evaluation in Hodge 2:138-40

Sin is the God-consciousness being partly replaced by the self-consciousness in spiritually-dual man

Denies a personal God; sin a subjective apprehension, not a moral evil

Sin as sensuousness

Evident in Manichaeanism, Romanism

Man a duality, body and spirit; if bodily desires overcome spiritual desire, result is sin
Does not adequately explain body as good, or sin as spiritual

Note Hodge’s discussion of biblical terms for *flesh, carnal, spirit, spiritual* (2:143-44)

**Sin as selfishness**


Not self love, but undue preference of one’s own happiness over that of the common good

Universal good or happiness replaces God’s glory as the chief end of man

Sin made to contribute to happiness

Replaces God’s law with subjectivism—problem of Epicurus

**Earlier theological approaches to the nature of sin**

Cf. Hodge 2:149-80

**Early church writers**

General, sometimes inconsistent

General agreement on 4 points (quoting Hodge 150):

1. That all men in their present state are sinners.

2. That this universal sinfulness of men had its historical and causal origin in the voluntary apostasy of Adam.

3. That such is the present state of human nature that salvation can be attained in no other way than through Christ, and by the assistance of his Spirit.

4. That even infants as soon as born need regeneration and redemption, and can be saved only through the merit of Christ.
**Pelagius and Augustine**

(Ca. A.D. 400)

Cf. Hodge 2:152-64

Pelagius: Ability limits obligation. “Sin, therefore, consists only in the deliberate choice of evil. It presupposes knowledge of what is evil, as well as the full power of choosing or rejecting it” (p. 153)

False conclusion of this view, pp. 153-55

Augustine’s reply: two levels—philosophic (temporary impact), and theological (permanent impact)

*Philosophically.*—evil is negation of being. A helpful definition in his argument against the Manichaeans, who said sin a substance. Yet Augustine stronger than the limitation of being view mentioned above: sin a voluntary, moral evil, deficient in its conformity to God’s standard.

*Theologically.*—Cf. his *Confessions, City of God*, Bks. 12-15 and his writings against Pelagius:

- Guilt and pollution evident to his conscience (the pears)
- Guilt and pollution includes affections, feelings, emotions; absence of right affections
- This guilt and pollution result of voluntary act of the will—true for himself, for all others, for Adam

Hodge’s summary of Augustine’s conclusions (pp. 160-61):

“From these facts of consciousness and experience Augustine drew the inevitable conclusion, (1.) That if men are saved it cannot be by their own merit, but solely through the undeserved love of God. (2.) That the regeneration of the soul must be the exclusive and supernatural work of the Holy Ghost; that the sinner could neither effect the work nor cooperate in its production. In other words, that grace is certainly efficacious or irresistible. (3.) That salvation is of grace or of the sovereign mercy of God, (a.) In that God might justly have left men to perish in their apostasy without any provision for their redemption. (b.) In that men, being destitute of the power of doing anything holy or meritorious, their
justification cannot be by works, but must be a matter of favor. (c.) In that it depends not on the will of the persons saved, but on the good pleasure of God, who are to be made partakers of the redemption of Christ. In other words, election to eternal life must be founded on the sovereign pleasure of God, and not on the foresight of good works. (4.) A fourth inference from the principles of Augustine was the perseverance of the saints. If God of his own good pleasure elects some to eternal life, they cannot fail of salvation. It thus appears that as all the distinguishing doctrines of the Pelagians are the logical consequences of their principle of plenary ability as the ground and limit of obligation, so the distinguishing doctrines of Augustine are the logical consequences of his principle of the entire inability of fallen man to do anything spiritually good.”

In other words, Augustine demonstrates the fact that the famous “five points of Calvinism” stand together and are mutually supportive and dependent.

**Roman Catholic teaching**

Ambivalent: some Augustinian, some semi-Pelagian (pp. 166-67); cf. Hodge 2:164-80

Decrees of Council of Trent ruled out the strongest positions on both sides (pp. 174-77)

Difficulty of interpreting the RC position (pp. 177, cf. 179)

The modern Catholic church still officially opposes both Pelagianism and full Augustinianism (Calvinism): “The Church’s teaching on the transmission of original sin was articulated more precisely in the fifth century, especially under the impulse of St. Augustine’s reflections against Pelagianism, and in the sixteenth century, in opposition to the Protestant Reformation. Pelagius held that man could, by the power of free will and without the necessary help of God’s grace, lead a morally good life; he thus reduced the influence of Adam’s fault to bad example. The first Protestant reformers, on the contrary, taught that original sin has radically perverted man and destroyed his freedom; they identified the sin inherited by each man with the tendency to evil (concupiscencia), which would be insurmountable. The Church pronounced on the meaning of the data of Revelation on original sin especially at the second Council of Orange (529) and at the Council of Trent (1546).” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [1994], parag. 406)

**Protestant doctrine of the nature of the sin**

[Outline below from Murray 2:ch. 8, which largely is from Hodge 2:180-92]
1. Sin is a real evil

   Not an illusion, a deficiency, a limitation, or a necessary side of good

2. Sin is a specific evil

   Sin is of a different nature than are its consequences: disease, calamity, death

3. Sin is a moral evil

   A violation of God’s moral nature and government

   1) It is wrong, contrary to the “ought”

      (Cf. much-used term “inappropriate behavior”) “It is not something simply unwise, or inexpedient, or hurtful, or painful, or calamitous, or unfortunate”

   2) It is violation of law

      Law given because it is right; not simply advantageous, expedient, utilitarian

   3) It is violation of God’s law

      God’s moral law is the extension of his moral perfection into the creation. Love must be defined by law (1 John 3; Murray 78; cf. Christian Ethics course)

   4) God’s law is pervasive

      Applies to deeds, words, thoughts, intents of heart; cf. WLC 99:1-2

4. Sin involves both pollution and guilt

   Pollution—*macula*, “stain, blemish,” defilement of soul resulting from sin

   Guilt—*culpa*

   Liability to punishment—*reatus*

   Punishment—*poena*
Reatus potentialis, “potential guilt”

= “Demerit,” demeritus

Reatus actualis, “actual (imputed) guilt”

= “The judgment of demerit,” judicium demeriti

= “Obligation to penalty,” obligatio ad poenam