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The Doctrine of Original Sin and the Analytic Tradition

For Peter Geach, the doctrine of original sin is so important that acceptance of the doctrine transcends all other epistemic considerations. That is, his position is ultimately reduced to fideism: we either accept or reject the doctrine and evidence cannot play a role in our decision making. If we reject the doctrine, then we reject Christianity *in toto*. The acceptance of the doctrine, for Geach, is so important that it trumps all other claims to the apostolic witness and direct inspiration from divine beings; "if we accept it, there is an end of the matter; we must hang on to that truth though one claiming the authority of an apostle, or an angel, should teach us otherwise."[1] If one rejects the doctrine she would be without "authority that should bind the conscience of a Christian," since altering this doctrine would be changing a tradition of the Church. If tradition is mutable then it is meaningless, "the claim that such a mutable tradition is to be accepted on authority by each successive generation in the form that it has currently assumed is sheer effrontery."[2] Simply put, for Geach, Christian doctrines cannot change:

> The Roman Catholic Church has itself authoritatively repudiated, in the acts of the First Vatican Council, the claim that with the progress of knowledge a doctrine continuously taught in one sense now needs to be construed in in another sense. It is not now my purpose to argue whether the Roman Church or some other Christian denomination can claim to have preserved an

1. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil: The Stanton Lectures 1971-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 85.

2. Ibid., 86.

> unchanging deposit of doctrine. What I am arguing is that only if such a claim is made is the Christian message credible at all.[3]

If the Christian faith is to have any credibility at all, it must claim to always and everywhere consist of the same doctrines construed in exactly the same manner. Whether the position asserted at the First Vatican Council was itself a change to a continually taught doctrine of the Church or not is an open question. Even if this is all rhetorical hyperbole (at minimum) for Geach, this doctrine is so important that he is willing to hang the entire faith on its validity, "if the doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin are rejected, then this involves such a sceptical attitude towards Christianity that we have no possible reason to be Christians."[4]

What would make a philosopher use such strong language concerning a deeply contested doctrine? Christianity claims to be a saving faith; part of being saved is being saved *from* something and *for* something. The doctrine of original sin defines *that from which* Christians are saved. The question of what is wrong with the world is logically prior to the question of remedy. Whereas oriental religions claim that ignorance and sorrow are the problem and enlightenment is the solution, Christianity claims that the world is distorted by "sin, or evil will; an evil so radical that it is inborn. And the only remedy for sin is conversion of the will."[5] Sin entered the world through human activity and consequently defines the human condition. Giving up the diagnosis of "sin" being the deepest problem with the world

3. Ibid., 85-86.

4. Ibid., 88.

5. Ibid., 91.

would necessarily result in giving up "conversion of the will" being the remedy and the entirety of the Christian faith would fall into incoherent nonsense.

What, then, is the doctrine that Geach defends? Simply that Adam, the original human, was sin-free with a will oriented toward God in his initial created state; he was happy and would have lived forever. Geach does not go along with the speculation that Adam was hyper-intelligent or otherwise super-human, "we need not, I think believe any such thing; we may be content to believe that Adam knew enough to serve God and live the kind of life God had made for him; if he was tending a garden, as the story has it, he would not need to know the ins and outs of Aristotle's syllogistic."[6] The main anthropological concern here is that Adam's will was operating correctly, "man's will was oriented towards God in loving obedience; man's animal impulses were firmly under control of his will; man's understanding, whatever its limits, was surely free from the distracting fancies, prejudices, and superstitions that afflict us all."[7] Geach's tripartite anthropology of will, passion (animal impulses) and understanding seems to be Platonic in structure. Yet, unlike in Plato, this understanding of the will does not always will what is seen as the good; Dun Scotus expressed the Christian understanding of the will that did not always aim towards the good—merely towards something. A will suffering from distortion through sin could not possibly aim at God—the primordial and proper object of the human will.

In this anthropology, the will is not our chosen decisions and actions as the term has come to be understood in post-Enlightenment philosophy. The will is the conative aspects of a

6. Ibid., 93.

7. Ibid., 94.

person—their patterns of behavior and reactions, trained or untrained, that go on without our understanding operating. These are different than the passions (animal impulses, biological motivations) that are simply a result of being an embodied and created being. All embodied creatures experience hunger and have sexual drives; only moral agents have will. The will is not intrinsically rational; reason can shape what the object of the will is (what we love and toward which we orient our lives), but the will is not controlled in any strong sense by the understanding. Geach summarizes it thusly, "Will is not simply, not primitively, a matter of choice. There is, presupposed to all choosing, a movement of the will towards some things that are wanted naturally; to live, to think, and the like, in short to be a man. If man were as he ought to be, there would be nothing wrong with this natural willing." But, given that our wills are distorted by the reality of sin, "a will that acquiesces in this flawed nature is perverse from the start; and from this perverse start actual wrong choices will certainly proceed, given time."[8] Without the will properly oriented, the understanding turns from the Truth of God and humankind's "mind became clouded with all manner of errors; the animal appetites and bodily functions of man, no longer subject to a will that served God, went their own way as they do in the lower animals."[9] We became liable to our uncontrolled passions and mortality. Not that the passions themselves are sinful, it is through the distortion of the will that otherwise healthy appetites become sinful. The command to be fruitful and multiply, given before the fall, clearly implies that God saw sexuality as not sinful in and of itself.

8. Ibid., 90.

9. Ibid., 95.

Sin is a distortion of the will that arises from a deliberate choice of wrong actions. All humans, due to Adam's sin, are already afflicted with a distorted will from birth, suffering at least one of the consequences of Adam's sin; "the root of evil is not in the disorderly passions, but in the will, perverse from our infancy up, that readily accepts the way we are as the way we ought to be."[10] The situation is dire, the state of being affected by sin, being the default state for humans, is seen as normal. Consequently, our desires become perverse and sinful.

It seems, at least on this analysis, that all humans bear the *guilt* of Adam's sin. That is, by simply being born, we are under the punishment of Adam's sins; we are punished for sins we did not ourselves commit. Geach insists that this is not really the case; rather, God did not intervene to prevent the natural consequences of Adam's action—God is not a co-dependent enabler, to use modern categories. Original sin, then, is not actual sin; there is no burden of guilt associated with it, but sinful actions *necessarily and inevitably* follow from the distortion of the will which is the consequence of original sin. Actual sin further distorts the will and causes the individual to incur guilt. Geach's analysis seems to be a distinction without a difference. If distortion of the will is the punishment for actual sin, then the result of original sin is *de facto* punishment for a sin the individual did not commit. There are two problems here: (1) God is seen as punishing the innocent for Adam's sin by allowing them to share Adam's punishment of a distorted will which traps them into necessarily committing actual sin; and (2) by trapping people into necessarily committing actual sins, God is ultimately the author of sin and therefore evil (or, at least, unjust for punishing humanity for our sins which we could not but

10. Ibid., 96.

commit). Since the omni-benevolent God cannot be either unjust or evil, these are severely problematic outcomes of the doctrine.

Geach's appeal to God's tough love—allowing humanity to suffer the natural consequences of its actions—may hold in the first generation, but to hold the subsequent generations as guilty for sins which necessarily result from the inborn distorted will seems to be a catch-22 from which there is no escape—at least until Christ. Especially since, in Geach's analysis, the distortion of the will seems to get progressively worse in each generation. The biblical witness and Jesus's explicit teachings proclaim that the guilt of the father does not belong to a good son; this teaching stands in sharp contrast to Geach's construal of the doctrine of original sin.

Given these unsatisfactory outcomes of the doctrine in Geach's construal, I do not find it surprising at all that many theologians would risk rejecting the faith by casting it aside. There are, of course, other ways of understanding the doctrine that potentially do not run aground on the same issues. Richard Swinburne, looks at the doctrine through the categories of freedom and morality. Drawing a distinction between a proneness to sin and a distorted will necessarily leading to actual sin, Swinburne addresses his worry that our wills are not free.[11] If our wills are not free, if our actions are not positively related to our willing them, then we cannot be held morally responsible for our actions. For example, if I am forced to pull a trigger on a gun by someone else, then it is the one who coerced me who is morally culpable for the murder; "For after all the reason why we excuse the agent whose finger is forced by another

11. Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 138.

against the trigger is because causes over which he had no control made the gun go off." For Swinburne, a will is only free if it is involved in the decision making process. A act has moral status (positive or negative) only if the acting agent's will could have done otherwise; that is, "to be morally responsible for some choice an agent must have free will in my sense of the power to make that choice or decline to do so, given the state of the world at the time including the agent's brain state."[12] If original sin necessarily leads to actual sin, then the doctrine of original sin relieves the human agent of moral culpability in the strong sense because not sinning is not an available option.[13]

Since freedom and moral culpability are intimately connected for Swinburne, he divorces the necessity of sinning from the distortion of the passions: "the bad desires in which it consists incline, they do not (as such) necessitate."[14] This is a change from Geach in that it is the passions which are problematic and distorted, much less than the will. Whereas Geach was generally positive about the passions and thought their distortion was a result of the distorted will misdirecting them, Swinburne thinks that actual sin arises from the passions. We are genetically predisposed have desires which are not congruent with the moral beliefs that we inherit from society. Our genetically disposed desires are present in Adam from our biological ancestor species since they are present other primates, "the desires which cause all the trouble

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12. Ibid., 55.

13. There is a weaker sense which Swinburne does not discuss in which the necessity of sinning is present but the agents are morally responsible because of their decisions of exactly which sins to commit and in what manner. I think Swinburne would argue that being coerced to pull the trigger does not convey guilt if the trigger is either pulled quickly or slowly; coercion would always trump the manner by which the act was committed.

14. Ibid., 138.

are there in the monkeys and apes."[15] Geach uses primates to argue that the desires are not sinful since other primates are not sinful, but rather our wills distort the desires and direct them in sinful ways. For Swinburne our passions are our genetic predispositions to sin, but sin only becomes actual in the presence of a morality which makes sin possible. Adam's example, coupled with his institution of a corrupt morality, is the social (not genetic) transmission of original sin. Swinburne sums it up this way:

> I conclude that the responsibility for the genetically inherited proneness to sin belongs neither to a first man nor to any other man. Responsibility for the socially transmitted proneness to sin does indeed belong to man, but to so many of us (to Adam, as representing us all); and yet it belongs to the first man Adam peculiarly in this sense, that he began the process to which so many of us have subsequently contributed.[16]

This is not simply a changing of the terms with the same meaning underneath. In Geach's terms, Swinburne's position is that our passions contain an inbuilt and inherited predisposition to sin that operate against our will and understanding. These passions, in and of themselves, do lead to sin—as is clearly demonstrated in the case of Adam, who had no reason to will his sin other than his passions led him to it. The animal passions lead to sin exactly because our will enables us to do otherwise; since our will is free, following our passions and not willing what we know to be morally good results in sin. We, unlike the other primates, can will/choose to not follow our animal desires—our given genetic inheritance:

> And what we are is the result of genetic inheritance—our ancestors bring us into being as the sort of being they were—and social inheritance. Their discoveries and behavior help to mould ours. All the human race are the descendants of our remote

15. Ibid., 143.

16. Ibid.

> ancestors and so our brothers. We owe so much to our fellow members of the human race, and especially to our ancestors, that we must regard ourselves as involved in their failures, and, above all, that first failure, which is symbolic of all others and started the process—the original sin—that first yielding to our animal nature instead of brining it into line with reason.[17]

Swinburne's understanding of our involvement in the failures of our ancestors and fellow humans comes from our collective debt. Even though we are not subject to the guilt of our fathers, we are subject to their debt. It is this debt which Christ paid for us in his atoning activity.

Does Swinburne solve the two worries that were present in Geach's exploration? Making the passions, rather than the will, be the source of the inherited component of our propensity to sin seems to solve the initial worry that God punishes the innocent for sins for which they are not morally culpable (page 5). However, I fail to see how this deeply solves the issue. By moving the source of our sinful predisposition from our will to our passions, we are able to choose to do other than what our passions inspire. But, as a result of original sin, our morality is corrupt and our understanding misguided—we can no longer accurately will the Good, since we are incapable of accurately identifying it with any reliability. Our moral example, initially set by Adam, is inaccurate and discerning what arises from our animal passions and our internal moral sense is problematic. Secondly, God is responsible for creating humans as they are. Appealing to the evolutionary process (without something like the Process conception of freedom reaching all the way to the bottom), shifts the mechanism by which God created human kind, but it does not alter the fact that God is directly responsible

17. Ibid., 145.

for the formation of our animal passions and their content. If our passions are sinful and were properly created by God, then God still appears to be judging us for something for which we are not properly responsible. God, by this assessment, is still the author of our inborn proclivity to sinning; God is properly the culpable agent of our sin. Our ability to will otherwise, if our will is of questionable value due to our socially inherited moral content being of dubious value, seems a thin basis for shifting the culpability to us. It seems, then, that Swinburne's position fails to solve the worries left from Geach's position.

What Swinburne does bring to the table is a compelling argument that the doctrine as construed by Geach has not been continually taught by the Church and that, indeed, it has never been taught (in Geach's construal) in the Eastern Church.[18] Only if one already subscribes to the doctrine of papal infallibility would one find Geach's epistemic moves compelling. Given that the doctrine of papal infallibility has itself not been a consistent doctrine of the Church, Geach's theological epistemic proposals are inconsistent and incoherent.

Charles T. Mathewes sets about addressing the issue by turning to the original source of the doctrine directly.[19] Whereas Swinburne found Augustine to be incoherent, Mathewes finds in Augustine's paradoxes an opportunity for deep reflection on our own assumptions.[20] The twin paradoxes that Mathewes addresses concern what it means to be an agent with an intellect in Augustine's thought: (1) The proper function of the intellect consists in knowing

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18. Ibid., 144.

19. Charles T. Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology: Interior Intimo Meo," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 27, no. 2 (1999): 195-221.

20. Swinburne, "Responsibility and Atonement," 138; Mathewes, "Augustinian Anthropology: Interior Intimo Meo," 195.

ourselves, which requires our knowing God and, thus, the subjective turn is predicated on an objective turn to God; and (2) the human will is most free when it is subject to God and, thus, the relation between freedom and submission depends on how we understand the role of our will. Matthew's finds Augustine's anthropology superior to the prevailing contemporary anthropology (as exemplified by Swinburne's understanding of a libertarian free will). By engaging Augustine's doctrines on Augustine's terms, Mathewes claims to provide a more satisfying account of the relationship between God and man:

> The difficulties vexing our understanding of Augustine's position are related to difficulties in understanding ourselves, for both sets of difficulties are rooted in a common, but flawed, conception of autonomy. We commonly understand autonomy to mean the subject's independence from outside influence or formation; thus, we take human knowing to be a matter of matching subjective mental constructs with the "outside" world, and human freedom to be a matter of subjective spontaneity.[21]

Against this view of autonomy, Augustine's anthropology is one in which the individual moves out of the center. Instead of being primarily concerned with our own beliefs and acts, humans are best understood by what the world does to and through them. Subjectivity and relativity are set aside in favor of understanding how the human agent stands in objective relationship to both God and the world. Thus, Augustine could write his *Confessions* as a book about coming to self-knowledge and God-knowledge at the same time; we know who God is most correctly when we have a deep understanding of ourself in relation to God.

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21. Ibid., 196.

Epistemically, Augustine is either neither or both an internalist and an externalist; given that he does not fit neatly into contemporary categories, both sides reject him as incoherent. According to Mathewes:

> Augustine argues, with the externalists, that our beliefs are largely beyond our control and that our minds are therefore deeply embedded in the world. At the same time, he argues, with the internalists, that our mental existence cannot be reduced to material-nomological causality and that we thus remain importantly responsible for shaping our beliefs. (Epistemic) justification, according to Augustine, does take place within the autonomous space of subjectivity, but such justification proceeds only by affirming that an irreducible otherness stands at the heart of subjectivity—the otherness of God. Augustine anchors his realism in the inwardness of our minds discerning God. Objectivity, that is, is realized through subjectivity, only because subjectivity holds, at its heart, an objective reality.[22]

That is, we are not in control of our beliefs; our beliefs happen to us based on what is happening in the world around us. On the other hand, our minds cannot be reduced to brain states. We really do make decisions about the content and status of our beliefs—that my tea has gone cold is not a belief I choose to have, but is caused by the fact that my tea, in fact, has gone cold. The concept of a proper temperature for tea and even the idea of tea itself may be socially constructed, but this social construction in no way denigrates the truth that my tea has gone cold and I am able to sense and know that it has gone cold. Our faculties of sensation and understanding are generally reliable, but are distorted by the effects of sin and thus it is our responsibility to reform them so that we can have real knowledge—knowledge of God and the world as mediated through our subjective selves.

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22. Ibid., 198.

Our epistemic faculties are generally reliable because God created them that way, "the conclusion we should rather draw is that the nature of the intellectual mind has been so established by the disposition of its creator that it is subjoined to intelligible things in the order of nature" [De Trin. 12:24]. We know the objective world because we are part of it and given the ability to know it by God. Sin does alter our ability to accurately perceive and understand it, but does not obliterate it. Because these beliefs happen to us and are properly caused by the world, we are entitled to hold them unless we find a compelling reason for disbelieving them. Matthew's assessment is that Augustine is superior to both modern internalists and externalists:

> Augustine's epistemology thus offers a way to account for what is good and true in both internalism and externalism. Internalists are often accused of subjectivist relativism, but Augustine's account understands subjectivity as always already involved with an objective reality that it cannot ignore, but at best (and at worst) deny. (This is why the primordial epistemological problem for Augustine is not simple mistakenness, but self-deception.) On the other hand, externalists are often accused of being fideists, whose theories of purely external warrant win only a Pyrrhic victory because they apparently eliminate any legitimization beyond the simple fact of belief; they thus reduce our epistemological responsibilities in ways that make us epistemologically indistinguishable from thermometers, merely charting changes in our environment.[23]

The *Confessions*, then, can be understood as Augustine's attempt at self-understanding by clearing away his self-deception. Being mistaken about facts is part of our human condition as finite, created beings—self-deception is a result of our sin.[24]

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23. Ibid., 202.

24. *Dr. Abraham—If Mathewes is right, I think an exploration of this should be the first chapter of my thesis. I want to get in there and see how Augustine's epistemology really works. I find this reading of*

Given this brief summary of Augustine's epistemology, what of the second paradox: that our will is most free when subject to God? The traditional readings of Augustine are that he is one of two forms of deterministic—either God's agency obliterates true human freedom (Swinburne) or God's grace leads to compatibilism. Again, Mathewes finds both of these assessments to be inadequate. The will is neither the free ability to make decisions as in Swinburne nor the independent flow of volition in Geach; rather, the will is our acting to bring about the good that we see (which may be mistaken or self-deceived). A will is free—not when it can do other than the animal passions or when it acts without sin's distortion—but when the agent understands the commands of the will and can integrate them within the framework of her life. Thus, "true freedom obtains when an agent's will is the integral expression of the agent's basic desires, desires that are not under the agent's control but are the hard-wired expression of the agent's nature."[25] Our will is free when we realize that it is our own and integral to our own sense of being and thus love our one true end. As long as we love more than one thing, our will will be disjointed and disintegrated. In such a state we cannot will what we want to will. Since our natural desire is to love God, if we love anything else we will be at odds with ourselves:

> In this state of disintegration, the self still possesses freedom of choice, but its loves are in internal conflict and so the will, enslaved by its own free choice, cannot will anything coherently. Augustine vividly depicts this in his *Confessions*, book 8: the will guides the agent according to what the will loves; however, in a

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Augustine really compelling but unlike any reading I've ever encountered.

25. Ibid., 204-205.

> fallen state, the will's loves conflict, and the self is perpetually torn apart by its divergent loves.[26]

Therefore, the claim that our will is most free when it is subject to God makes sense; our will is free when it is integrated towards a single goal and in line with our deepest desires (to be in communion with God). As long as a will is divided and at odds with itself and with the natural desires, the will can never be free to pursue its desires.

Swinburne's libertarianism and Geach's understanding of the passions not being the source of evil both have merit in this reading of Augustine, but neither fully explore what Augustine is doing. Before the Fall, humans are really free—so free that they can choose to do other than their passions and are able to turn from God, "we are most fully free when we assent to being the sorts of things we already are, and through we are allowed to freely dissent from God's plan, we are not allowed *wholly* to dissent from it."[27] After the Fall, humans are still free to go along with their animal passions or turn from them, satisfying Swinburne's definition of freedom. Yet, the animal passions are not in and of themselves evil. In fact, the deepest desires are the source of all goodness, an expansion of Geach's position. Sin, rather than being a simple distortion of the will, is a rift or splitting the will that sets a person at odds with herself and with her desires.

Does Augustine, in Matthewes' reading, solve the worries (page 5)? Clearly God cannot be the author of evil given the depth of freedom (in Swinburne's libertarian sense) that humans have. Turning from God was as much a violation of self as a violation of God's will. The

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26. Ibid., 206.

27. Ibid., 211.

first worry, that God is punishing innocent people for Adam's sin, still seems to be lurking around the corner. It is understandable, given this anthropology, why Adam's will was split from itself and his passions confused, but there is no clear reason why this would have been transmitted to the next generation. Here, Swinburne's account of the societal transmission becomes compelling. In his formulation, the will was intact but our desires were distorted and original sin was transmitted through our collective misunderstanding of morality (page 9). This was found to be inapt, since it did not mitigate the worry that God, being the author of our passions, was not the author of evil. In this anthropology, God is still an author of our passions, but they are not evil. Instead, our will is at odds with itself about about what our desires are and how best to pursue them. Our miseducated morality which comes from our collective following in Adam's example, then, solves the problem which Swinburne set out to solve and does not leave God as the author of evil.

This Augustinian anthropology is not without its own difficulties. The concept of self-deception is deeply problematic. Self-deception requires that an agent intentionally hold a belief that it does not believe. If Augustine holds that our beliefs are caused by the world and not a product of our own creation, how could one hold a belief that was not caused by the world? Self-deception, holding a belief that is not believed, seems to be incoherent. A disintegrated will seems to be a possible avenue to solve the problem, but Mathewes' reading of Augustine does not fully spell out the relationship between the will and believing. Believing is an epistemic activity, not a volitional one; it is difficult to see how willing different ends can lead one to hold a belief that one does not believe.

Secondly, allowing man to sin and fall—if God could have prevented it—seems to call into question God's omni-benevolence. If I had proper life-guard training and failed to save someone from drowning, even when I was off duty, I would be derelict in my moral duty. The consequences of the original parents' mistake seems to far exceed the gravity of the act, given the depth of human suffering that exists in the world at any moment. Even the radical act of God's self-giving in Christ seems, "too little, too late." Given that the result was a radical loss of freedom (we can no longer choose to be who we really are without God's gracious activity), then a momentary loss of freedom to preserve our deeper freedom seems to be a wise decision. It is not co-dependent for a parent to prevent their child from touching a hot stove before the child learns the concept of being burned.

Given all of these problems, what then should we believe? Should we follow Geach in his fideism and go along with whatever the Church as ostensibly taught continually? Should we follow Swinburne and try to develop an anthropology that takes into account the reality o sin and yet tries to preserve real moral standing for human actions? Or, does a revisionist account of Augustine's anthropology offer a more suitable line of pursuit? The worries touch deeply on the doctrine of God and have radical implications for our understanding of ourselves. The desire to ignore or discard the doctrine of original sin clearly has a strong grounding in the problems the doctrine causes elsewhere. My own inclination is to provisionally accept Mathewes' revisionist reading of Augustine and see what merits it has when applied more broadly. Since Mathewes did not discuss the status of original guilt in this reading of Augustine, I cannot comment on what Augustine's position is.

My own reading of the doctrine is currently in flux as I rethink what the will is. My own understanding has been close to Swinburne, but as of late has shifted to a more platonic/ Wesleyan model. As these changes have deep implications for huge parts of my entire theology I cannot yet predict what the final status of the doctrine of original sin will be.