

WHAT SIN IS: A DIFFERENTIAL ANALYSIS

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Every sin, according to the Westminster Confession, is “a transgression of the righteous law of God” (Chapter 6.6). Few Christians disagree.¹ Yet the Confession’s definition of sin is incomplete, because while it expresses a truth about sin, it says too little to discriminate sin from the evil St. Augustine called the penalty of sin, “that evil which one in no sense does, but only suffers.”² Sin certainly involves transgression of divine law, but so does any evil—and not every evil counts as sin. Natural evils, for instance, such as the damage that can be done by earthquakes and hurricanes, are not sinful. The Confession falls short, therefore, in that it under-specifies the kind of evil that sin is.

The Westminster Larger Catechism is sensitive to this problem, and accordingly expands on the Confession’s depiction of sin, indicating that sin is “any want of conformity to, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature” (Q. 24). The Catechism of the Catholic Church observes, somewhat similarly, that sin “has been defined as ‘an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law’” (#1849).³ By directing our attention to agents, these accounts of sin rule out the possibility that hurricanes—which are neither reasonable creatures nor have desires about which they make statements when they wreak havoc—might sin, thereby helping us to distinguish sin from natural evil.

Nevertheless, these catechetical accounts of sin remain underdeveloped. Even with the improvements they make on the Westminster Confession’s depiction of sin, neither catechism attends closely enough to the distinction between evil and sin, with the result that both leave open important questions about what sin is. Both, for instance, leave open the possibility that we should count as sin the actions of a schizophrenic who curses against God.

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Moreover, both accounts underdetermine whether accidental errors—such as ignorant breaches of the divine law, or the mistakes made by medical residents, who unknowingly or unthinkingly commit errors that result in harm to their patients—are sin.

The point of these introductory remarks is not to rail against these catechisms—I selected them because they define sin more clearly than many other catechisms, and given their intended audience, they should not be expected to develop a full-blown and sophisticated theology of sin—but to raise the main puzzle discussed in this article, a matter on which a number of recent theologians have taken positions, but which has not received especially prominent or focused attention: how does sin differ from that which is “merely” evil? What particularizes sin as such? This article pursues answers to those questions. Thus, it is intended to be a contribution to the philosophical theology of sin, not in the phenomenological vein that characterizes many modern treatments of sin, but in an analytic vein that ventures beyond discussion of the elements necessary to the Christian doctrine of sin in order to find a view closer to being sufficient to pick out the sin among evil. Sin is certainly evil, but it is also something more—yet what, in addition to evil, is sin? That question is raised by, and has obvious implications for, our ideas about what counts as sin, but my main focus will be elucidating what differentiates sin from evil.

I pursue a differential analysis of sin in this essay by characterizing and comparatively evaluating three views of sin. The strengths and weaknesses of these proposals are tested by examining how well they cohere with and make sense of widespread Christian beliefs and practices concerning sin, historic and modern—not because I assume it is impossible to use the term “sin” to mean something other than that which Christians have typically meant in using the term, but because I seek to develop an account that (as much as possible) sums up the meaning of the term within that tradition, and to clarify my options for doing so. My claim is that the way Christians have traditionally spoken about sin is best summed up and clarified by the third option offered below, more than the first two. The procedure I am following is, inevitably, somewhat messy, since one might find fault with either my characterization of central Christian practices and speech about sin, or my attempt to succinctly offer a core conception of sin that illuminates those practices.⁴ Nevertheless, I trust that readers will find this attempt at conceptual clarification helpfully provocative.

In speaking of traditional Christian commitments about sin, I have in mind particularly the following three ideas:

- (A) only persons sin (not non-human animals or the rest of creation—a view the catechisms discussed above seem to favor);
- (B) sin is that which makes persons appropriate candidates for divine forgiveness;

and

(C) sin is that which makes persons appropriate candidates for divine retributive punishment (most radically but not solely exemplified by hell).

I also suppose that

(D) the more a view of sin can accommodate and make sense of Scriptural and other Christian speech and practices concerning sin, the more attractive it is.⁵

As we try to make sense of these commitments, it will become clear—if it is not already—that it is very helpful for a guide for sin-talk to indicate what distinguishes sin in particular from evil in general.

Finally, I find preferable views that understand “sin” as having a unitary sense that refers to a single concept; it is confusing to call different things by the same name. Some theologians disagree: for instance, it is now common to distinguish “actual” sin, sin in the proper sense, from “original” sin—because the latter is thought not to be something for which one can be responsible, unlike the former.⁶ Yet while the Christian tradition has differentiated original from personal sin as different kinds of sin (like “white-collar” and “blue-collar” are different kinds of crime), some of its most important voices have frowned upon the view that that these are sin in different senses.⁷ They have done so for the good reason that distinguishing between two different senses of the word “sin” makes it difficult to see the respect in which they are both fully, equally, and properly called sin, rather than simply being called misfortune or evil.

Sin Moralism

Perhaps the most common modern way of understanding sin is as a *moral* evil.⁸ If, as is widely believed, only persons can be moral or immoral, understanding sin as a moral evil is an apt explanation for why only persons can sin. Moreover, since immorality is widely thought to be a condition for deserving retributive punishment, understanding sin as a moral evil seems to make sense of the traditional beliefs that sin deserves punishment, and can only be removed by forgiveness. Defining sin as a moral evil also has the advantage that it can help us with a further distinction, one many theologians rely on regularly: that between sin and non-moral evils (which, though they may result from personal sin, or the presence of sin in the world, are not themselves sinful). Leprosy, for instance, is a misrelation of one (at least, one’s peripheral nervous system) to oneself, and clearly an evil. It is not, however, thought to be a moral evil, which seems to explain why leprosy is not thought to be a sin.

Equating sin and moral evil presently seems obvious and uncontroversial to many believers and non-believers alike. Yet that equation has been heatedly contested by a variety of theologians. Below, I summarize three arguments against the idea that sin can be defined as moral evil. The third has been the most influential, but all three should be addressed by any systematic attempt to think through what sin is.

In "Man the Sinner," H. Richard Niebuhr succinctly presents the three lines of thought we will consider in support of the view that "to say that man is a sinner is not equivalent to the statement that he is morally bad."⁹ First, he claims (1) that while sin might involve moral guilt, the concept of sin should not be reduced to that of moral guilt because the latter is less fundamental than the former. The ultimate source of morality is "what man finds to be wholly worthy, intrinsically valuable—in other words . . . his god or gods."¹⁰ Religious categories of what is valuable are, therefore, more basic than ethical categories, and the former should not be thought to depend on the latter.

Correlatively, Niebuhr goes on to claim (2) that sin is "a psychological state qualitatively different from the moral state."¹¹ As Kierkegaard writes,

Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself. . . . The emphasis is on before God, or with a conception of God . . .*¹²

Sin's "before God" might be taken to mean simply that sin is moral guilt plus religious emotional overtones, but (referring to Rudolf Otto) Niebuhr indicates, without elaborating, that it is a state that should be taken on its own terms.

Niebuhr seems to place more weight on a third line of thought, however (3): Scripture and theologians have applied the term "sin" to evils other than those now typically described as immoral. He indicates that sin has been thought to include physical evils, such as demon-possession, and that priestly practice implies a concept of sin that is more than moral wickedness.¹³ Marilyn McCord Adams expands on this claim at some length in "Sin as Uncleaness," where she argues that the traditional association of sin and pollution makes it theologically inappropriate to collapse sin into moral evil. Included under the rubric of "pollution" are the abominations discussed in Leviticus, and more generally, anything that counts as an impropriety in the relation between created persons and God.¹⁴

Whether Niebuhr would fully endorse Adams's view is uncertain, but their common point of departure is summarized by Kierkegaard's claim (echoing Romans 14:23) that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.¹⁵ Since much that is associated with the improper relationship to God Kierkegaard sums up by calling unbelief is widely considered ethically permissible, thinking of sin simply as immorality unduly narrows the concept of sin.¹⁶

A further development of (3) is the idea that sin has traditionally been considered "a *status* man has suffered and inherited."¹⁷ Sin has been

understood not only as a human activity but as a power that can help us understand why broken relationships occur. As such, sin is not simply a voluntary wrong action, but an explanatory term that predicates a wrong way of being that is not widely considered immoral in itself.¹⁸ The doctrine of original sin is the best known and most influential expression of these ideas, but the associations of sin and pollution Rudolf Otto, Mary Douglas, and others retrieve can also point in this direction.

The Content of Moral Evil

We have seen that a number of influential theologians have articulated reasons not to reduce sin to moral evil. In their view, while sin might well include moral evil, ways of speaking about and responding to sin that are central to the Christian tradition suggest that it is something more, and something else, as well.

Perhaps the most obvious response to these criticisms of what I will call “sin moralism” is Ingold Dalferth’s argument that Christians have reason to extend their accounts of morality, whatever they may be, to include a good deal more content than recent philosophical approaches have.¹⁹ As he points out, and as is apparent from the catechetical accounts of sin cited at the beginning of this essay, this is easiest if one subscribes to divine command theory: if we understand immorality (and sin) as the violation of the divine moral law by a rational creature, a relationship between creator and Creator is built into morality. But even if one does not favor a divine command meta-ethics, there is no reason for Christians to restrict morality to inter-human or intra-creation relationships. Why not think of our relationship with God as, at least in part, a moral relationship? Do we not, after all, owe God praise and worship—both directly and in our behavior towards the rest of God’s creation? And why should we not call the refusal of such worship unethical? If we do, the force of argument (2) is blunted; for the Christian, morality, too, is “before God.” There is no reason for ethics to be the exclusive province of secular philosophy. In fact, biblical parallels between concerns about injustice and sin provide motivation to expand the content of ethics.

The sin moralist can also grant that argument (1) has some cogency without having to abandon the idea that describing sin as a moral evil is a helpful association. A definition does not have to be a reduction, because a definition of a term need not be considered more fundamental than the term being described by its relationship to other terms. Such attempts at elucidation should not be ruled out—even for fundamental concepts like sin, faith, or God—because it is always appropriate to ask what Christians mean when they speak of these things. Thus, “moral evil” need not be considered more basic than “sin” for it to be helpful to elucidate the latter in terms of the former, just as it is helpful to speak of sin as unbelief, idolatry, or violation.

This is especially the case when associating “sin” with another term expands our understanding of both terms.

The more difficult issue for the sin moralist is the overlapping concerns about Scriptural and other talk about sin presented in (3). Traditional willingness to call *sin* involuntary behaviors or states such as many kinds of idolatry and unbelief, the inherited guilt associated with original sin, and the pollution associated in the Hebrew Bible with accidentally touching a dead body, have been hard for sin moralists to accept. A thoughtful sin moralist can make some headway in accounting for the idea that some kinds of idolatry and unbelief are sin by appealing to the notion of culpable ignorance: there are things people ought to know, and are responsible for having ignored.²⁰ But those who defend sin moralism have been reluctant to abandon what Marilyn McCord Adams calls a “voluntaristic” conception of sin, according to which one sins only when one makes competent, voluntary choices to do so.²¹ Their reluctance is based, at least in part, on the fear that if morality and immorality are not tied, at the least, to voluntary behaviors, then we will end up unfairly calling immoral, and sinful, the uncontrolled cursing of those who suffer from Tourette syndrome or the innocently ignorant beliefs of persons in ages past. That commitment permits the sin moralist to go only so far in embracing traditional descriptions of what counts as sin: since even the historically prominent and important doctrine of original sin has been difficult for sin moralists to accept, it is hard to imagine even a greatly nuanced and expanded account according to which the “uncleanliness” of touching a dead body would count as a moral evil.²²

Anti-moralistic Views of Sin

It is natural and appropriate for the sin moralist to attempt to counter criticism by inquiring how theologians who seek to avoid moralizing sin believe the concept *should* be understood. Sin moralists have, at least, attempted to clarify how sin differs from evil. The question, then, is whether others can do better; perhaps certain ways of speaking about sin that have been popular in the past should not be accommodated by modern Christian views of sin, but rejected, and perhaps the weaknesses of sin moralism are less severe than those associated with alternative views.

Unlike moralistic views of sin, which have clustered around a small number of central paradigms, it is difficult to offer any one characterization of modern anti-moralistic views of sin, which have been unified more by their rejection of a perceived wrong turn in sin-talk than by a positive account of what sin is. Nevertheless, it is helpful to tease out some of the central moves made by prominent anti-moralists—beginning (once again) with H. Richard Niebuhr.

Keeping (1) and (2) in mind, Niebuhr suggests thinking of sin as a religious evil that involves loyalty to a false god, and which therefore implies false

worship and rebellion against God.²³ Not dissimilarly, Basil Mitchell defines sin as a “breach in man’s relationship with God and hence with other men, through failure to love him and them in him.”²⁴ These descriptions of sin mention necessary elements of any Christian conception of sin, and they are broad enough at least to begin to allay the concerns raised in (3).

At the same time, they lack the virtues that may be most responsible for making sin moralism attractive: though they go some way towards helping us see the difference between sin and natural evil (a hurricane does not seem capable of having breaches in its relationships, even if it is or does natural evil) they do not assist us greatly in our attempts to explain why sin is an evil only persons can have. For instance, it is not obvious that non-human animals do not worship, or that the fallenness of creation has not warped that worship in some manner (cf. Isaiah 43:20; Job 38–41; Romans 8:20–22). Likewise, non-human animals may very well have breaches in their relationships, even though the wolf’s present inability to eat together with the lamb without eating the lamb (cf. Isaiah 65:25) is not nominated sin.

The reason such problems arise is that these descriptions of sin do little to clarify how the evils that persons simply suffer differ from their sins.²⁵ Thus, they do not go very far in helping us discriminate evil from sin (are the effects of Alzheimer’s, when they harm relationships and diminish love, sin? Surely not; but why?). Furthermore, they do little to explain why it might be fitting for sinners to be punished, or forgiven, rather than merely pitied.

Defenders of sin moralism might readily suggest that not just any breach in relationship—even false worship—should be considered sinful, because even if false worship is considered a moral evil, only moral evils for which persons are morally responsible count as sinful. This line of argument reasserts the import of the idea of voluntary moral evils.

In response, sin moralism’s opponents have increasingly resisted the notion that sin is something for which persons are morally responsible. Marilyn McCord Adams is especially clear on this point: if, as she proposes, “sin is uncleanness arising from the incommensuration of Divine and created natures . . . the logically appropriate feeling response for creatures is not guilt (which befits a rebellious use of free agency) but a sense of taint and shame.”²⁶ And though his concept of sin is not as radically focused on ontic incommensurability, Niebuhr may well agree with Adams’s views concerning sin and moral responsibility: “Christianity is not primarily concerned with the question of assessing blame but with the fact [of disloyalty to God] and the cure.”²⁷ A sense of guilt, Niebuhr writes, “has become a barrier to the modern man’s understanding of the gospel.”²⁸

Alistair McFadyen, who both worries about sin moralism and seems to want to retain the traditional belief that sin necessarily involves guilt, follows Niebuhr in marginalizing the relationship between sin and culpability.²⁹ Following that thought to its logical conclusion seems to imply that theologians should resist the idea that sinners deserve to be punished, since it is hard to

see how retributive punishment can be deserved by those who are not culpable. Anti-moralists can, however, find a place for punishment on consequentialist or therapeutic grounds. Thus, purgatory, as a reformatory punishment, is presumably compatible with anti-moralistic views of sin, even if hell is not. In accord with this logic, Marilyn McCord Adams endorses universal salvation as the appropriate divine response to the shame necessitated by creation, and while they are sometimes more equivocal in their claims, a number of modern theologians have been sympathetic to her concerns and solution.³⁰

It is important to note that anti-moralism about sin does not entail giving up on the existence of free will or responsibility, and thus blame or guilt. Anti-moralistic views need not indicate that persons are never morally responsible for sin. Thus—at the price of implying that the word “sin” has two senses, with significantly different implications—the anti-moralist could argue that some sin deserves retributive punishment, or at least blame, while not believing that all sin does.

Even so, while opponents of sin moralism can claim that their view(s) of sin cohere with Biblical and theological sin-talk in an important respect—that of the breadth of what has been called sin—it has been difficult for them to fully embrace other traditional commitments about sin—the ideas that all sin is blameworthy, properly punished, and in need of a divine forgiveness that only guilty persons receive. Moreover, they have difficulty clarifying the distinction between evil in general and sin in particular. Thus, one might begin to have some sympathy with the sin moralist’s doubts about speaking of non-voluntary sin as sin in any proper sense—why bother to call sin that which is not blamed, and for which one is not culpable?

Sin as Culpable Evil

Both sin moralists and their critics have found it difficult to articulate accounts that adequately explicate the Christian speech and practices concerning sin mentioned above. That fact might appear to imply that traditional Christian sin-talk is not coherent enough to be summarized in any one, consistent, way—but I propose that there is another core conception of sin that can more adequately account for traditional Christian sin-talk. Analytic philosophers have not explored the ramifications of their discussions of blame and responsibility for sin-talk, but they can nevertheless be “plundered” by theologians for use in our ruminations about what sin is.³¹ The remainder of this article builds on a philosophical theology of responsibility and blame that opens up a way of elucidating what sin is that mitigates the weaknesses of the views discussed above. In summary, the view I propose is that sin is best understood as brokenness and misrelation of a certain sort—that of culpable evil.³² Let us call this view “sin responsibilism.”

An important advantage of sin responsibilism as an analysis of the implications of Christian sin-talk and practices is that it offers a more minimal and modular core conception of sin than the views surveyed above. On the view that sin is a culpable evil, the particular actions or states that one will consider sinful depends not only on what one considers evil, but also on that for which one believes persons can be culpable. Thus, sin responsibilism by itself (shorn of particular theories of responsibility and blame) is highly flexible: what counts as sin depends heavily on how one fills out the content of the term “culpable.” Moreover, although sin responsibilism could be allied with sin moralism in certain ways—both views, for instance, use the term “sin” only in one, unequivocal sense—it need not make particular reference to the domain of morality. This enables alliances with anti-moralists as well.

Speaking of sin as blameworthy, and something for which a person is responsible—the two notions I mean to invoke in speaking of “culpable evil”—might be thought to imply a moralistic view of sin, but it does not. This insight is easily obscured by the common, and misleading, habit of using the descriptor “moral” to mark the kind of responsibility at stake in speaking (among other things) of sin as a culpable evil. Though I wrote of “moral” responsibility earlier in this essay, I did so as a concession to common practice that makes it easier for readers to understand the kind of responsibility at stake in our discussion—not mere causal responsibility, but what Susan Wolf calls “deep” responsibility.³³ She notes that there is a superficial use of the term “responsibility” that simply implies causal responsibility. That is not the responsibility with which we are concerned—a physician may unknowingly commit an error that results in harm to a patient, but not every wrong (especially those not due to evil beliefs or desires or a negligent lack of knowledge or effort) for which a person is causally responsible should be condemned as sin.

Deep responsibility is the kind of responsibility that indicates something about what kind of a person one is, and what one is accountable for.³⁴ The most commonly discussed species of deep responsibility is that which we call moral—responsibility for what we consider morally significant—but persons can be deeply responsible for states of affairs that may (depending on one’s views about morality) not be part of the moral sphere. For instance, we often praise and blame people for artistic endeavors that we consider non-moral, because we typically suppose that such endeavors reflect on them in a deep and significant way. Thomas Aquinas seems to express such a view when he distinguishes between evil and sin, first indicating that sin is a species of the broader category of evil, and then adding that an artist can be blamed for her or his work not only when the artist intends something sinful but when the artist produces a bad thing while intending to produce something good, because he or she is a poor artist.³⁵

Because persons can be deeply responsible for non-moral states of affairs and actions, concerns about deep responsibility should be distinguished

from concerns about morality. The question of how morality relates to sin is, therefore, distinct from the question of how deep responsibility relates to sin. Though Ingolf Dalferth is right in saying that Christians have good reasons to broaden the scope of moral theory, we do not need to answer the question of sin's relation to moral wrong, or whether morality encompasses various aspects of the God-relation, to hold that we ought to apply the negative evaluation "sin" only to states of affairs for which a person is deeply responsible.

We have seen that critics of sin moralism worry about linking sin to moral responsibility, but I see no good reason to believe that sin is not linked to deep responsibility—and many reasons to believe that it is. How could persons *deserve* the blame traditionally associated with sin if sin is not linked to deep responsibility, and thus to objective guilt? Moreover, sin has always been associated with subjective guilt that is forgiven, punished, or both; if such reactions were inappropriate, it is hard to see how one could call one's view of sin Christian. The idea of deep responsibility explains why we do not consider it appropriate to have such reactions towards just anyone who participates in evil. For instance, we do not blame, punish, or forgive the children forced into child prostitution rings; we simply pity them. Those children neither sin when they are involved in such evil, nor are they in need of forgiveness; we find it unjust to blame them, and our beliefs about responsibility explain why. It makes sense, then, to think of sin as a blameworthy misrelation to God and the world. Sin is not simply evil; neither is it merely evil to which humans contribute. Rather, sin is a culpable evil.³⁶ More precisely, the sin described in divine law consist of (in)actions or states that deserve blame.³⁷ And a person's sin is a blameworthy (in)action or state of affairs—a violation of God's *shalom*, a brokenness, a misrelation, idolatry—for which that person is deeply responsible.

The above discussion presupposes the following distinction between deep responsibility and blame: while a person should only be blamed for that for which he or she is deeply responsible, the conditions for what counts as blameworthy differ in a number of important ways from the conditions for deep responsibility (a similar point holds for what counts as praiseworthy, and some of what counts as neither). One of the main differences is that blaming a person implies thinking or speaking of something about that person as evil, while considering a person deeply responsible for something implies that that person fulfills certain standards of agency. In addition, it is essential to keep in mind that a person can be deeply responsible for evils for which he or she should not be blamed. We might not blame a person for being responsible for an evil—going to war, for example—if we believe that responsibility for such an evil can be justified as appropriate under the circumstances. Thus, it is not redundant to speak of evil actions for which a person is deeply responsible as blameworthy; calling the action blameworthy indicates not merely that it was evil but also that it was not justifiable.

The strengths of the sin responsibilism just sketched include its ability to explain not only why sin makes persons suitable candidates for retributive punishment, and in need of forgiveness, but also why it is the case that only persons sin (assuming as correct the widespread supposition that only persons can be deeply responsible). It also succinctly marks the difference between sin and evil—including the natural evil that earthquakes either are or give rise to, the fallen sinlessness of non-human animals, and diseases like Alzheimer's—and does so without tying the concept of sin to any particular moral theory, or to moral theory at all. Moreover, it does so while allowing for a range of opinions about what, exactly, sin is, and what counts as sin. Thus, sin responsibilism is more open to the complexities of traditional sin-talk than the views surveyed above.

Sin responsibilism is a modular analysis, in two ways. First, given its emphasis on deep rather than moral responsibility, sin responsibilism is agnostic about the relationship between sin and morality. Thus, sin responsibilism has room for Aquinas, Kierkegaard, and other theologians' suggestions that there are non-moral sins. At the same time, it is also open to a sin moralism that is chastened insofar as it accepts that describing sin as moral evil does not necessarily imply any particular theory of the conditions under which we are deeply responsible. One argument for this chastening has already been given—the fact that we are deeply responsible for more than moral states of affairs suggests a gap between theories of morality and theories of responsibility. A further reason for making this distinction is that describing what counts as relevant to moral considerations is not the same as describing the conditions under which a person is deeply responsible. Moreover, even if each moral theory did imply a particular theory of responsibility, the variety of possible moral theories makes it possible for sin moralists to accept quite a number of theories of responsibility. Thus, describing sin as moral evil need not be thought to imply a voluntaristic conception of the conditions pertaining to deep responsibility. The two concepts are separable, and it would not be self-contradictory for a person who thinks of sin as a culpable moral evil to shed the constraints of voluntaristic conceptions of the conditions pertaining to deep responsibility.

This comment points to the second way in which sin responsibilism is modular: the breadth of what a sin responsibilist considers sin depends heavily on the theory of deep responsibility associated with it. If one believes that culpability is tied to conscious and non-determined choices between alternatives, the scope of what is called sin may not differ too greatly from the (unchastened) sin moralism described near the beginning of this essay. At the other extreme, it might be possible for a sin responsibilist to defend a theory of collective responsibility that would make it possible to consider uncleanness culpable. Such an account would certainly include responsibility for social and collective sins, but one that was able to suggest conditions of deep responsibility for what Marilyn McCord

Adams calls uncleanness would go beyond the talk about social sin that is now common in theological circles.

Readers will have noticed by now that while the first proposal about sin's relation to evil examined in this article had to do with the relationship between sin and morality, a close examination of what is at stake in the conversation about what sin is shifted the focus of the discussion by raising the question of the manner in and degree to which sin is something for which persons are accountable and blameworthy. This points to two key mistakes made by both of the approaches to sin surveyed above. The first mistake is that both sin moralists and anti-moralists have too closely associated the view that sin is moral evil with a voluntaristic conception of the conditions of deep responsibility. Conflating these two theories has created the false impression that one cannot speak of sin as moral evil without presupposing a particular account of culpability. Second, the resultant disagreement about whether sin is a voluntary moral evil has distracted attention from the fact that these apparently opposing views implicitly share a fundamental commitment: the belief that persons are only (objectively) guilty and blameworthy for evils they voluntarily and knowingly choose. The sin moralists' response to traditional sin-talk in light of these beliefs has been to truncate what counts as sin, while the anti-moralists' response has been to soften the historic association between sin, blame, and punishment.

Sin responsibilism's minimalism enables it to avoid these mistakes. Its modularity means that it is an analysis of sin that fits a wide range of possible ways of speaking about sin. Yet the same features that make it a flexible core conception of sin also point to the need for each sin responsibilist to develop the view in a particular manner: once the clarifications offered above have been understood, theologians of many sorts may be able to agree that sin is culpable evil—but one must then explain what one means when one speaks of sin as culpable evil, which requires defending specific views concerning how sin, morality, blame, and responsibility are related.

Some Limits of Sin

My own version of sin responsibilism is incomplete, in that I do not claim to offer anything more than a core conception of what sin is. Nevertheless, I believe that it helpfully addresses the concerns labeled (A) through (D) and (1) to (3) earlier in this article. I begin with a comment about a term not included in the version of sin responsibilism I defend: sin is not necessarily a culpable *moral* evil, because there may be sins that are not necessarily immoral. A heretic's carefully considered and not ill-willed belief that God is not Triune is an example of a sin of unbelief that I am uncertain whether to call immoral.³⁸ Thus, I am a non-moralistic sin responsibilist, one who does not object to describing some sin as culpable moral evil, but one who does not consider it necessary to describe all sin that way. At the same time, I admit

that the non-moralistic understanding of sin I offer is incomplete. A full definition of sin would require a more fine-grained description of the limits of non-moral sin, because it does not seem appropriate to call all of the non-moral evils for which persons can (on many accounts) be responsible and even blameworthy “sin.” Consider, for instance, at least some instances of bad grammar or poor musical technique: a person might have such faults, and be responsible and even blameworthy for them, but in many cases we are reluctant to call even negligently split infinitives sinful (such evils do not seem to require forgiveness).³⁹ If so, defining sin as culpable evil has limitations. This is a topic worth pursuing further, but I do not do so here, because it is more important to explore the question of what sinners are blameworthy and responsible for—that question is more central not only to sin responsibility but to making sense of the traditional commitments about sin explored in this article.

While I believe that sin is typically social and collective, I also share the widespread commitment to what I will call personal deep responsibility. What I mean by “personal” is that a person can fairly be said to be deeply responsible only for what that person is, stands for, or has done. One expression of this view is the widely shared conviction that moral liability cannot be transferred from one person to another.⁴⁰ As a result, and for reasons explored in more detail below, I consider sin a personal culpable evil. Thus, I am unwilling to defend blaming people for uncleanness or pollution *per se*, and what counts as sin on the version of sin responsibility I defend below is not as wide-ranging as some anti-moralistic views. At the same time, I defend a number of controversial ideas about the scope of deep responsibility, including the idea that we can be culpable for involuntary sins, a view that widens the scope of what can properly be called sin far beyond that which unchastened sin moralists have been inclined to permit.

I have two arguments to offer in defense of thinking of sin as a personal culpable evil. The first, which pertains especially to claims (D) and (3) above, is that what we call sin need not be as expansive as some anti-moralists suggest. The second is the contention that the other concerns present in (A) through (D) as well as (3) can be addressed by a theory of responsibility that explains how persons can be deeply responsible for involuntary sin, sins of ignorance, and social and original sin, among others. I explore the plausibility of such a theory in the final section of this article.

My first contention, then, is that Christians, at least, need not consider every kind of uncleanness spoken of in the Old Testament sin. In part, that is because the New Testament undermines associating the idea of sin with the ideas of pollution or uncleanness. Jesus straightforwardly asserts that ritual impurity does not divide persons from one another; it is what comes from the “heart” that defiles (Mark 7:14–23). As the apostles work out the implications of this principle, their focus turns away from concern about pollution to a specific kind of uncleanness, the evil of the “uncircumcised heart.” How the

metaphor of the “heart” makes this kind of specification possible is a topic developed in the final section of this article.

Even the Hebrew Bible⁴¹ need not be thought to imply that we should equate sin and impurity: while one is supposed to be cleansed afterwards, it is hard to see how touching a dead body in order to bury it, or a person with a bodily discharge in order to heal, counts as false worship or an offense against *shalom* (cf. Numbers 19; Leviticus 15). Such pollution might be evil in some sense, but it need not be blamed: a failure to keep covenant with God and purify oneself when one knows one has been unclean would certainly count as sin, but in the Hebrew Bible uncleanness itself neither necessarily breaks divine law nor is always sin (for instance, leprosy does not make a person sinful, though it does make a person unclean). In addition, while sin certainly separates sinners from a holy God, not everything that impedes worship of or relationship to God is sin: finitude itself places severe restrictions on human capacities to know and love God, but both Christians and Jews have traditionally been opposed to thinking that finitude implies sin.⁴² Skepticism about the relationship between uncleanness and sin, then, far from secularizing the concept of sin, is theologically appropriate.⁴³

There are times when the Hebrew Bible might seem to reject the idea of personal responsibility, but whether commonly used examples prove this point is more complex than is sometimes realized. For instance, the story in Joshua 7 about Achan, and the destruction of his entire household, does not necessarily imply that his guilt is imputed to his household. On some theories of punishment the destruction of his household should imply that, but for others it does not, and I see no particular reason to assume that the Achan story implies either a rejection of personal deep responsibility or a radical theory of collective responsibility; it might instead imply a radical theory of collective penalization. Some such theory of punishment seems, for instance, to be at work in the condemnation of David’s son to die as recompense for his sin with Bathsheba; there is no hint that the child shares his parent’s guilt, but he is nevertheless punished for it (2 Samuel 12:14).⁴⁴ The problem of what it is legitimate to infer about biblical notions of sin from biblical stories of punishment adds further complexity to the question just raised about how uncleanness and sin are related in the Hebrew Bible.

Finally, it is notable that the Hebrew Bible increasingly turns away from radical conceptions of collective punishment or responsibility, on which persons can be tainted simply by virtue of family or other communal relations with evildoers: “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children . . . each is to die for their own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16; cf. 2 Kings 14:6). The movement towards a more personal conception of punishment and responsibility, on which persons are responsible only for what they stand for or that to which they themselves contribute, is especially clear in the prophets (Jeremiah 31:29–30; Ezekiel 18).⁴⁵

In conclusion: it only makes sense to understand sin as culpable evil if one is prepared to offer a theory of how persons can be culpable for that which one wishes to name “sin.” I do not know how one would develop a plausible theory of deep responsibility for many of the kinds of uncleanness or pollution of which Marilyn McCord Adams has written—but the above arguments about the limits of what Christians should blame by calling “sin” suggest that attempts to take (D) seriously do not require such a theory. At the same time, the need to respond to other concerns present under (3) provides theological encouragement to develop expansive theories of deep responsibility that challenge voluntarism. I close this article by sketching such a theory of personal deep responsibility, which I call reformed compatibilism. Reformed compatibilism shares with sin moralists the view that sin implies accountability, and with anti-moralists the belief that sin-talk does not necessarily imply human control, or avoidability.⁴⁶ In combining these two insights it both defends and casts light on the doctrine of original sin’s seemingly mysterious insinuation that postlapsarian culpable evil is a kind of bondage, freedom from which requires sanctifying grace.

Reformed Compatibilism

The intuitive center of reformed compatibilism is the idea that what we care about in caring about deep responsibility is not so much self-making as self-disclosure. This point can be elucidated by expanding on the claim that we are deeply responsible for what we own. There are at least two kinds of personal ownership relevant to that claim. I mark the qualitative difference between the two kinds of ownership relevant to a discussion of deep responsibility by speaking of the difference between “mere” and “robust” ownership. Many things that are part of our identities, things that we own, are not attributable to us in such a way that it is fair to blame us for them. For instance, my pale skin might make it easier for me to be sunburned and perhaps to develop skin cancer, but I cannot be blamed for the paleness of my skin because it is a merely biological fact about me. The fact that I worry about giving my students grades they do not deserve reflects my character in a deep way, however, and it is robustly owned. Reformed compatibilism accounts for our willingness to blame people for the latter, but not the former—and explains the difference between robust and mere ownership—by emphasizing that (to use the common biblical terminology) one of these comes from and discloses the heart, while the other does not.

The “heart” is an ancient trope for a person’s rational, emotional, and volitional self.⁴⁷ It is a unitive metaphor; the mind is not understood as separate from the heart, but as part of it (and *vice versa*). Thus, to speak of the heart is to invoke not merely bodily facts such as one’s skin color, height, and so on, but that which the human body makes possible: a rational, affective, and volitional self that has and expresses views and attitudes. The reason that

the former are not robustly owned is that while they can indeed be important to our identities, they are not constitutive of who we are in the same manner as the cognitive and conative. Robust ownership is of attitudes and emotions, and disclosure of those attitudes and emotions in words and other actions.

The idea that we are deeply responsible for what we robustly own, and that robust ownership is of the heart, and what comes from it, make sense of the idea that only persons can sin: only persons have the hearts that make culpable evil a possibility. It also clarifies why biological conditions like leprosy are not sinful. A person should not be blamed for evils that are not evils of the heart; leprosy, cancer, and the like do not disclose a person's beliefs and desires, and so they are not things for which a person can be considered culpable (one might be responsible for somehow intentionally contracting leprosy, but that is a separate kind of case).

Robust ownership is of that which discloses who we are as persons; as a result, it is a different kind of ownership than mere ownership, just as causal and deep responsibility are qualitatively different kinds of responsibility. At the same time, however, both robust ownership and deep responsibility come in degrees, because some things involve more of a person's heart than others. I more deeply own a lie, for instance, if I thought about it beforehand and decided to lie, rather than if it just sort of came out because I was afraid and panicked, because in the former case I stand wholeheartedly behind my deception in a way that I do not in the latter case. And because deep responsibility depends upon robust ownership, responsibility, too, comes in degrees. This can make ascriptions of robust ownership and therefore deep responsibility difficult, especially at the extremes of minimal robust ownership and deep responsibility (we have trouble, for instance, deciding what the very young, or the very senile, are responsible for, if anything). Yet, while recognizing this fact, reformed compatibilism affirms that both deep responsibility and robust ownership are threshold concepts: one can own things more or less, and be more or less responsible, but one must at least meet a minimal standard for either to be the case. And that minimal standard is evocatively captured in the biblical language of the heart.

This minimal standard for self-disclosure is often overlooked, while the idea of self-making has not only received outsized attention but has often been mistakenly considered a necessary condition of being deeply responsible at all. Many discussions of responsibility emphasize actions persons have voluntarily chosen, or beliefs or desires a person has endorsed as important and meaningful; the reformed compatibilist view is that while it does matter whether a person fulfills such conditions—because persons who do typically bear more responsibility than those who do not—persons are not only deeply responsible for what they endorse or voluntarily choose. I hold this view for two main reasons.

My first and central claim is that one's heart is one's own in the robust sense required for deep responsibility even when one has not voluntarily or

consciously chosen or endorsed it. A person is accountable for his or her heart even if it is not that person's conscious construction, but constructed by powers as diverse as God, other created persons, and what St. Paul speaks of as the power of sin. This is because speaking of the heart is speaking of who a person is. One does not have to make one's heart one's own; a person's cognitive and conative life simply is her or his own. Thus, while it is true that created persons tend to lack control over their hearts—we are not always in a position to consciously choose what we believe or care about—we cannot plausibly claim that our hearts are therefore not robustly our own. One indication of this truth is the fact that we are not simply passive with regard to our hearts; we do not simply “suffer” our hearts because we *are* our loves, convictions, and so on, and are active in being so.

Reformed compatibilism emphasizes, therefore, that the robust ownership that is the basis for deep responsibility is tied up with the personal activity Kierkegaard calls “the inward movement of the heart.”⁴⁸ Voluntary choice and other means of taking control of one's life and self can add to and build on that robust ownership, but they are not the sole basis of deep responsibility. Among other things, this view implies that human persons can be at least minimally responsible for *being* who they are without having been responsible for *becoming* who they are. Because we are not self-created creatures, the fact that we do not always have much control over having our hearts does not imply that we cannot robustly own those hearts, or disclosures of them.

This has the further implication that deep responsibility can be shared, and in multiple ways. A teacher might bear some responsibility for a student's virtues or vices even while the student is also responsible for the same traits. Likewise, all those who are active in relation to a project of some sort—a corporation, perhaps, or a corporate act like fighting a war, or not fighting poverty—share responsibility for it. This makes it possible to speak of a kind of collective responsibility that is not opposed to but flows out of the way reformed compatibilism makes sense of the idea of personal deep responsibility.

Second, persons can and often do disclose their hearts involuntarily, but while that may decrease the degree to which they own the action in question, involuntary disclosure by itself is not enough to eliminate deep responsibility for what is disclosed. We know from experience that an involuntary omission, such as forgetting a friend's birthday, can be a window into a person's cares and commitments; when a friend does not pay attention to you, or lacks insight into your life, you wonder if that person really cares about you.⁴⁹ And we often blame friends for not noticing things about our lives, birthdays as well as other joys and sorrows. But because what we attend to is so deeply connected to who we are, to where our hearts are at, it is hard for us to control voluntarily. It is no wonder, then, that Christians in a variety of liturgical traditions regularly ask God for forgiveness for sins “both known and

unknown." Our hearts can be disclosed involuntarily, without our even realizing it—and when they are, we are responsible, and can be praised or blamed, not because we chose to make a statement, but simply because what is in our hearts discloses who we are.

An important caveat to the claims just made, one that assists in clarifying the limits and nature of that for which we are deeply responsible, is that while persons are at least minimally deeply responsible for what they robustly own—and persons robustly own their "hearts" and the activities that disclose them—that is only true so long as the movements of our hearts, and the actions and inactions they motivate, are not produced in us in a manner that violates the functioning proper to the heart. What counts as proper functioning for human beings, and why, are complex questions about which I say only a little here. It is important to note, however, that irrationality does not, in itself, exempt from responsibility. Indeed, far from excusing, calling a person's beliefs or emotions irrational can be a kind of blame, a way of speaking about sins of foolishness. The malfunction that exempts a person from responsibility is not simply that of the self-deceptions and acceptance of lies that characterize so many of our hearts.

What the improper function inimical to deep responsibility does involve is, perhaps, most easily explored via an example. A schizophrenic break in which a man is under the (non-self-induced) delusion that he is Jesus Christ is a case where there is an obvious lack of proper function, because of which we do not blame that person. The reason a person should not be blamed for delusions of this sort is somewhat more complex than the reasons given above for not blaming a person for leprosy, because the former are evils that do involve a person's beliefs and desires; some illnesses are cognitive. However, if they do not engage a person's beliefs and desires properly, they do not disclose that person's heart.

It is for a similar reason that we do not (or should not) blame people for accidental actions that do not show what their hearts are like. If a medical resident non-negligently botches a procedure, and thereby harms a patient, he or she is causally responsible for a bad thing, but not blameworthy for it, because causal responsibility for such accidents says nothing about that person's heart—even though we can and do blame persons for accidentally disclosing their hearts.⁵⁰ We might think that it is appropriate for residents to do what they can to ameliorate the negative effects of accidents to which they causally contribute, and why we think so is an interesting question, but it does not necessarily imply that residents are deeply responsible for sheer accidents. In fact, we call such things "accidents" precisely in order to express our sense that there is a lack of a proper connection between what came to pass and the hopes and other attitudes of the persons whose accidents they are.

This bare-boned description of reformed compatibilism and some of its implications naturally provokes an array of questions: is it fair to consider

persons responsible for their hearts when the state of their hearts may have been determined by external forces, or by what seems to be luck? How does the idea of free will relate to the minimal condition of deep responsibility described by reformed compatibilism? The list goes on, and cannot be adequately addressed in a single article. Rather than take up any particular objection individually, I close my discussion of sin by offering a glimpse of one of reformed compatibilism's virtues: its ability to address concerns about the breadth of what should be called sin, and in particular the question of the kind of social sin the Christian tradition has named original sin. Original sin is social sin because the conceptual center of the doctrine of original sin is the idea that sin can be inherited.⁵¹ One of the main insights (and controversies) at issue in the Augustinian doctrine of original sin is its appropriation of the Pauline idea that sin is not simply an action but a status, a way of being that has explanatory power because it gives us insight into why persons perform the individual sins that we tend to notice. In my view, sin has this explanatory power because and insofar as it is understood as a state of the heart in which persons can be ensnared. Sin is a godless power in that it can breed warped beliefs and desires in our hearts without our having first wanted it to, often without our even knowing what has happened.

Sexism is a profound example of this power of sin. Sexism can be seen as one kind of original sin, insofar as it is a cognitive and conative framework that persons inherit from one another, and which we consider not just faulty but blameworthy in itself.⁵² Sexism may not always be an inherited sin, but it certainly is when, as often happens, persons imbibe sexism as one of the plausibility structures of the communities in which they are reared; sexist stances are often ignorant, and unchosen. That should mitigate our blame—it is worse to be a self-conscious sexist than an ignorant one. Nevertheless, even persons who find, to their dismay, that their hearts have been constructed as sexist by persons and powers whose teachings they have involuntarily internalized should be held deeply responsible and blameworthy for the evil beliefs and the actions that flow from them, because—regardless of how they came by their sexism—it is implausible to suggest that the hearts of those whose beliefs and emotions are sexist are not robustly their own. If my beliefs and loves are false, twisted, and unjust, that reflects poorly on me, and it is incumbent on me to repent of and seek forgiveness for the movements of my heart.

Reformed compatibilism's defense of the idea that even ignorant sexists are culpable for their evil attitudes does not imply that we cannot have great sympathy for them—indeed, it implies the opposite! Far from asserting that sinners are culpable only insofar as they are autonomous, reformed compatibilism recognizes that sinners are at once the agents of sin and trapped by the power of sin, overcome by it. When sin is the plight of discovering evil in one's heart, as the sin of sexism can be, it is both blameworthy and explanatory, at once a power that harms us by influencing our very identities and a

fault for which we are accountable. Viewing original sin as a culpable evil refuses to condescend to sinners by exempting them from responsibility, and thus from robust ownership of their evils—it is more respectful to be blamed for our faults than merely to be pitied for them. At the same time, it also attends to the lack of control that sinners typically have over their having come to own sinful hearts—reminding us that even those who own their evil in the manner required to be culpable for it are weak and misguided creatures who desperately need grace, not least the grace of forgiveness.

It has become apparent that we cannot discuss what sin is without raising complex questions about responsibility and blame. The point of mentioning reformed compatibilism is not to attempt to resolve all of those questions—too little has been said about reformed compatibilism here to fully develop this theory of the conditions of deep responsibility, let alone defend it—but to make more plausible the claim that sin responsibility not only assists us in the task of understanding what kind of evil sin is but can do so without unduly restricting the scope of what we call sin.⁵³ Elucidating the idea of sin by referring to the notion of culpable evil helpfully (if not exhaustively) clarifies the content and limits of sin, and I find sin responsibility a better way to account for the demands of traditional Christian sin-talk than the alternatives discussed above. This is especially true when non-moral sin responsibility is combined with the understanding of the conditions of deep responsibility I call reformed compatibilism, since that view permits a wide-ranging appropriation of traditional Christian sin-talk that makes sense of the idea that persons can be blamed for sin that they share collectively with others, and to which they are captive because of a regrettable inheritance. Because we do not create ourselves, but are begotten, even our hearts are vulnerable to being shaped in ways that are evil—but a person is not a sinner passively, and we do not simply suffer our sin. Rather, sin is a certain kind of activity, a person's cognitive and conative evil, as well as actions or inactions that express or disclose that evil. The fact that the sinners' plight is the bent activity of their own hearts motivates the forgiveness for which it makes sinners eligible, since forgiveness cannot be given to merely passive victims who are simply to be pitied, and yet it seems appropriate to be generous with persons whose portion is blameworthiness.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful for the helpful conversations about drafts of this paper I have had with my wife, Amy Tsou, M.D., our friends Tara and Matthew Megill, M.D., James Wetzel, members of the Villanova Department of Humanities (Margaret Grubiak, Eugene McCarraher, Anna Moreland, Mark Schiffman, and Thomas Smith), Hans Madume, and for the insightful comments provided by an anonymous reviewer and the editors of *Modern Theology*.
- 2 St. Augustine, *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian*, edited by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Roland J. Teske, S.J., *The Works of Saint Augustine*, Vol. 1/25, *Answer to the Pelagians, III* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), I.46.

- 3 This passage quotes Aquinas quoting Augustine; see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), I-II 71.6. Aquinas also agrees with Calvin in speaking of sin as hanging back from the good that belongs to one by nature (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II. 109.2ad2; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Vol. 20, The Library of Christian Classics [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960], II.1.5), but that depiction of sin, too, suffers from the insufficiencies of the accounts of sin discussed above.
- 4 Seeking necessary and sufficient definitions of various terms, or necessary and sufficient conditions for a variety of states of affairs, has become the trade of many analytic philosophers, not least in the field of epistemology. One of the lessons of the increasingly complex attempts to provide necessary and sufficient conditions of epistemic merits like justification and warrant has been that attempting to provide a complete set of such conditions may not only be impossible but misguided when taken too far (see Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007], Ch. 1, for an argument to this effect). Giving up on the idea that we can have or should seek definitions that provide “a single formula that captures without remainder the essential characteristics of every instance of some kind” (Roberts, *Intellectual Virtues*, p. 20) should not, however, be thought to imply the worthlessness of searching for conceptual clarification that explores and (hopefully) extends our understanding of central concepts, including that of sin.
- 5 I am inclined to add that central examples of sin matter more than peripheral ones, but what one considers a central example of sin is likely to depend heavily on what one thinks sin is, how one believes Scripture and tradition are or should be related, and which theologians or confession one considers most important, so this caveat may not be especially helpful for attempts to discriminate the strengths and weaknesses of competing views of sin.
- 6 So, e.g., Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 26n33.; Robert C. Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Other in an Age of Therapies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 300. Edward Oakes notes that “. . . the Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church, surprisingly enough, calls original sin a “sin” only in an analogous sense (#404), because unlike other (presumably real?) sins it is only contracted and not committed—a concession that would certainly have surprised Augustine . . .” (“Original Sin: A Disputation,” *First Things* 87 [1998]). Paul Ricoeur (*The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967]) and others have also argued for a distinction in the Pentateuch between understandings of sin as guilt and sin as stain.
- 7 Anselm (“On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin,” in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 361), for instance, explicitly inveighs against the idea that original sin is not real sin.
- 8 Cf. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York, NY: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1973), pp. 18–20; Marguerite Schuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 102. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* also defines sin as a moral evil (see the first lines of the article at <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=10849>). This is not simply a modern view of what sin is, however; Augustine’s great opponent, Julian of Eclanum, defined sin as “nothing but a free will that departs from justice” and clarified the meaning of “free will” somewhat by noting that “one cannot call . . . sin, something that is as its nature has compelled it to be” (Augustine, *Unfinished Work.*, III.157).
- 9 H. Richard Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” *Journal of Religion* 15 (1935), p. 273.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 77.
- 13 Alistair McFadyen pursues another take on this issue, as well as the idea that sin is before God, when he indicates his concern that, “The danger attending modern theologies of sin is

- a total collapse into moral categories, which—in a secular culture—exclude any active reference to God” (*Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001], p. 40).
- 14 Marilyn McCord Adams, “Sin as Uncleaness,” *Philosophical Perspectives, Philosophy of Religion* 5 (1991), pp. 2–3.
 - 15 Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, pp. 109ff.
 - 16 Cf. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1939), p. 154; Basil Mitchell, “How Is the Concept of Sin Related to the Concept of Moral Wrongdoing?,” *Religious Studies* 20 (1984), pp. 165–173; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 166, 241–244.
 - 17 Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), p. 287.
 - 18 Mitchell, “Concept of Sin,” p. 166; Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 70; McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 199, 221.
 - 19 Ingrid Dalferth, “How Is the Concept of Sin Related to the Concept of Moral Wrongdoing?,” *Religious Studies* 20 (1984), pp. 175–189. A negative way of putting this point is to say that because the content of the term “moral” is such a highly contested question, criticizing the generic idea that sin is a moral evil has serious limitations.
 - 20 Cf. Holly Smith, “Culpable Ignorance,” *The Philosophical Review* 92, no. 4 (1983), pp. 543–571; Carl Ginet, “The Epistemic Requirements for Moral Responsibility,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000), pp. 267–277.
 - 21 Adams, “Sin as Uncleaness,” p. 2.
 - 22 As we will see, I too am unwilling to speak of uncleanness as sinful in itself. Thus, I consider the doctrine of original sin a more significant test case of the limits of sin moralism. For a description of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin that pays attention to a number of the ethical questions the doctrine raises, see Jesse Couenhoven, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005), pp. 359–396. Most sin moralists agree with Phillip Quinn’s argument, in rejection of the notion of original sin, that “we are guilty only for our own morally evil actions, and so we acquire guilt only by committing personal sins” (“Sin and Original Sin,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997], p. 548). Insofar as they accept the idea that original sin is properly called sin, sin moralists have trouble explaining how it is fair to hold persons responsible for original sin (see, for example, Schuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners*, Ch. 9). I suggest later in this article that sin moralists have more options for handling this problem than they or their critics may realize, but only if they chasten their views in certain ways.
 - 23 Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” p. 277; cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Volume I: Human Nature (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), p. 179; McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 221–223.
 - 24 Mitchell, “Concept of Sin,” pp. 169–170; cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/1*, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 398; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 45–46; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), p. 98; Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Self and Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 23–24.
 - 25 Theologians sometimes distinguish between “sin” and “sins,” the former being a pervasive and ongoing orientation, and the latter encompassing discrete evil actions that display this orientation. I intend my analysis of “sin” to cover both terms, but nothing in this article relies on this distinction, as I have doubts about the viability of a thoroughgoing distinction between sin and sins—in this article, use of the word “sins” simply indicates the plural of “sin.”
 - 26 Adams, “Sin as Uncleaness,” p. 21.
 - 27 Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” p. 277.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, p. 278. Similarly, Rita Nakashima Brock addresses the question of responsibility for sin by re-imagining sin, so that sin is “a symptom of the relational nature of existence,” a “sign

- of our brokenheartedness" not connected to punishment, blame, or guilt, but rather to a more therapeutic language of healing (*Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* [New York, NY: Crossroad, 1988], p. 7).
- 29 McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 247–249.
- 30 Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 127–128. The issue I intend to raise here is not whether universalism is true, or even traditionally Christian, but whether sin is properly blamed, and retributively punished, regardless of whether all sinners are redeemed in the end. While a number of recent theologians have argued that Christians should not defend retributive punishment (e.g., Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005], pp. 170–171), I worry that abandoning retributive justice is not as compassionate and decent as it might appear, because the notion plays an important role in guiding and limiting education as well as punishment. Without a notion of what is due individuals, "therapy" can easily get out of hand (*A Clockwork Orange* comes to mind)—but the issue cannot be pursued here (for initial reflections on retributive punishment that I find promising, see C. S. Lewis, "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, edited by Walter Hooper [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970] and Jeffrie G. and Jean Hampton Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988]).
- 31 Cf. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Volume 1: Foundations*, edited by William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 37.
- 32 In calling sin a kind of evil, I do not mean to imply that "mere" evil is more fundamental than sin; like most Christians, I follow Augustine in thinking that sin is the deepest, and primary, evil. My thanks to James Wetzel for helping me clarify this point.
- 33 Susan Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 40–43.
- 34 The "responsibility" we have in mind we when ask what my responsibilities are invokes a different sense of the term; roughly, the deep responsibility tied to accountability with which this section is concerned is "backward-looking," whereas the responsibility tied to one's duties and obligations is "forward-looking." It is worth noting that both of these uses of the term "responsible" appear to differ from H. Richard Niebuhr's definition of responsibility "as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in is a continuing community of agents" (*The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], p. 65), though his usage of the term has more in common with that which I am calling "forward-looking."
- 35 Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Jean Osterle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 2.2; *Summa Theologica*, I–II 21.2. Interestingly, Aquinas also suggests in these passages that sin is a broader category than that which is blameworthy, because natural actions can be sinful even when they are not in the power of the natural agent. I am uncertain how precisely Aquinas is speaking of "sin" and "blame" in these passages, or what precisely he means by those terms; in an attempt to make room for the doctrine of original sin, he may be attracted to the idea that "sin" has more than one sense.
- 36 Cf. Plantinga Jr., *Breviary of Sin*, pp. 12–18.
- 37 Cf. Robert Merrihew Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *The Philosophical Review* 94 (1985), pp. 3–4n1.
- 38 This example raises questions about responsibility for beliefs that are partially dealt with in the final section of this article. It also poses complex questions about the nature of morality that cannot be pursued here. Well-intentioned false beliefs about God may be vicious in some ways, but it is hard to say whether that should be thought to imply their immorality, as not all defects are moral. At any rate, the fuzziness of the idea of the moral undermines the usefulness of trying to use that term to delimit what counts as sin.
- 39 Perhaps these examples work insofar as they are of matters that seem too trivial to be called sin? I want to thank Amy Tsou for pressing me on these issues.
- 40 Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 147.
- 41 The term Hebrew Bible is used here synonymously with the term Old Testament.

- 42 Asserting the claim that finitude and sin are not mutually implicating is, of course, a major reason for the historic theological import of the doctrine of an historic fall.
- 43 Marilyn McCord Adams's suggestion that the ontic gap between humans and the divine is or necessarily leads to sin misreads Scriptural indications. Being unworthy of divine favor is not necessarily an indication of sin, because not every lack of perfection is sin (it is not, for instance, sinful for human beings not to be *a se*, as many Christians have held that God is); to say otherwise conflates finitude with sin. Thus, the reality that "all flesh is grass, and the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field" (Isaiah 40:6) is not a condemnation of sin, but a statement about the kind of goodness available to us.
- 44 It is worth noting that even today it is widely accepted as morally permissible to make innocent members of communities suffer for the sins of their leaders (in the levying of economic sanctions, for instance), so we, too, allow persons to be penalized for things we admit are not their fault. We tend not to defend the direct and intentional killing of innocents, however, and that is an important disanalogy with the Achan and Bathsheba stories.
- 45 Brevard Childs suggests the corollary principle that Biblical commandments are always addressed to the individual, before God (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992], p. 575). If he is right, that would certainly support my case. But at any rate, it is important to note that none of what I am arguing need be taken to undermine the idea of social sin, or less radical versions of the idea of collective sin (understood as sin accomplished by groups of persons, or human institutions). For instance, a commitment to personal deep responsibility is an idea with which some versions of the doctrine of original sin are compatible; one can defend the idea that persons can be deeply responsible for original sin without giving up on a commitment to the idea that responsibility is for what each individual stands for or contributes. Thus, it would be a mistake to oppose the idea of personal responsibility to those of social or collective sin; these ideas are all compatible.
- 46 Concerns about avoidability and responsibility are connected to the so-called Kantian dictum that "ought implies can," which original sin violates in at least one common sense of "can," since it is a bad state that cannot be avoided by the power of the individual person in question, but can only be cured by "the medicine of Christ." However, if "can" allows for outside help—and it is not obvious why it should not—then those who are given grace can avoid original sin. See Christopher W. Gowans, *Innocence Lost: An Examination of Inescapable Moral Wrongdoing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 75–81 and pp. 139–140, for thoughts about the many things the Kantian dictum can mean, and worries about whether we should adhere to it. John E. Hare (*The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996]) argues that Kant allows divine grace to assist the human "can," making him quite Augustinian on this point. See also the compelling arguments in favor of rejecting the dictum in Nomy Arpaly, *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage: An Essay on Free Will* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), Ch. 3; Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); and Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973), pp. 160–180.
- 47 James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1–8* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), p. 100.
- 48 Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession* (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), p. 217.
- 49 Cf. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1970), pp. 37–38.
- 50 I have been focusing on blame because our topic in this article is sin; however, similar points apply to the conditions under which we praise other persons, as well.
- 51 Couenhoven, "Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin."
- 52 Augustine, of course, considered infants as well as adults guilty of original sin; my view is that he is right only if it is appropriate to say that infants have "crooked hearts" in the biblical sense on which I have drawn above. Reference to the sketch of Augustine's ideas about free will presented in Jesse Couenhoven, "Augustine's Rejection of the Free Will Defence: An Overview of the Late Augustine's Theodicy," *Religious Studies*, no. 43 (2007) and "Dreams of Responsibility," in *Augustine and Philosophy*, edited by Kim Paffenroth and Phillip Cary (forthcoming) begin to give some sense of how the reformed compatibilism sketched here coheres with one strand of Augustine's own late views.

- 53 I pursue these tasks in a book manuscript currently titled "Determination, Disease, and Original Sin: An Augustinian Essay on Moral Responsibility." Philosophical theories of responsibility with some similarities to reformed compatibilism are defended in Arpaly, *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage* and Angela Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life," *Ethics* 115, no. 2 (2005), pp. 236–271. There are a number of differences between these theories and reformed compatibilism, however, perhaps especially that they pay only indirect attention to the importance of proper function for ascriptions of deep responsibility.