

# Original Sin and Its Effects

The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 describe the goodness of God's creation in which humanity is the epitome of God's creative work. Genesis 1:27 describes man and woman as the "*Imago Dei*": "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Unique in all creation, Adam and Eve were gifted with intellect and will, so they would be able to know and choose what was good. Instead, they chose to go against the goodness for which they were created. Genesis 3 describes humanity's fall from a perfect relationship with the Creator. When the relationship was broken through pride and disobedience, all relationships suffered. Adam and Eve experienced guilt and shame for the first time and covered their nakedness with fig leaves (Gen 3:7). The peace and harmony these humans experienced in paradise was shattered as they felt new and horrible feelings of regret. Adam and Eve's relationship with themselves was damaged. The word *sin* in Hebrew, *hatta*, means "to miss the mark, the target" and, in this case, to miss being human, which is to be related to God and act accordingly.

Whatever the transgression, it had the effect of destroying the intimate trust and friendship between God and humanity. After the sin, Adam and Eve hid from God (Gen 3:8). The relationship between husband and wife was damaged as they blamed each other for what they had done—the first family argument. Harmony within creation was broken, and death made its entrance into human history. The disharmony and alienation of sin affects all relationships.

1. Relationship with self is one of shame and regret.
2. Relationship with others is damaged with blame and argument.
3. Relationship with God is changed from intimacy to alienation.

In spite of this dismal situation experienced by all persons since the fall of humanity, the Church teaches that the human condition, while wounded, flawed, and weakened, is not totally corrupted or destroyed. Grace, the capacity to overcome this state of affairs, comes to us as the gift of an inner elevating and transforming power. Grace restores relationship and kinship with God, self, and others. As Saint Paul explained to the Romans: "[W]here sin increased, grace abounded all the more . . . through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 5:20–21). As horrible as sin is, the grace of God is even more powerful if we are open to radical transformation.

While Original Sin marked humanity as a whole, we as individuals or as a society today are also capable of choosing to go against the goodness for which we were created. This is called "actual sin." In describing and understanding actual sin, three aspects must be considered:

1. The intention—the purpose, the end in view. This formal element gives meaning to the action.
2. The means used—the kind of action this is. This is the external, observable material element of the action.
3. The circumstances—Who? What? Where? When? How much? How little? What if? What else? These are all reality-revealing questions.

We do not have a true moral evaluation until the intention, act, and circumstances are considered together. The act in itself cannot be accurately evaluated as moral or immoral apart from considering the intention, means, and circumstances as one reality. While we examine each of the three elements, each is dependent on the others. For example, we must consider the intention of the person acting. A good intention, however, cannot justify simply any means used. Only an action congruent with the intention adequately and morally expresses the intention. For example, a person who is passionately against abortion kills an abortion provider in order to save hundreds of babies' lives. The means used, murder, is incongruent or inconsistent with the intent of saving lives. Another example illustrates the role of circumstances in moral evaluation. Suppose you are walking alone when you see a stranger walking toward you. You take a gun from your pocket and shoot the person approaching you. Is this self-defense or murder? Is this a moral or an immoral act? We cannot evaluate this situation without asking questions



about the circumstances, as well as about your intention. What circumstances would render you guilty of murder? Of self-defense? The intention, means, and circumstances comprise one act. If any one aspect is incongruous to the others, the act or decision is immoral. If any one aspect (the intent, means, or circumstances) is evil in itself, intrinsically evil, then the entire action or decision is morally evil. Let's take a controversial example today:

<b>Intent:</b>	Discover a cure for Parkinson's disease
<b>Means:</b>	Destroy human embryos to extract stem cells for research
<b>Circumstances:</b>	Carefully monitored, legal lab procedures

If respect for life is a primary value, intentional destruction of human life, even at its earliest stage, is an intrinsic evil. Even if the research results in the discovery of a cure, the entire process is immoral because the end cannot justify the means used. If, on the other hand, stem cells were obtained from adult donors or from donated umbilical cord blood, the entire research effort could be considered moral. The intent, the means used, and the circumstances would be proportionate or congruous with each other.

This method of moral evaluation is called "casuistry" or "case study." It is based on logic and the human ability to use reason informed by faith.

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