

The Essential Goodness of God's Creation and of Humanity

The Problem of Evil

In the creation account in Genesis 1, the author repeatedly states, "God saw how good it was." This simple statement is foundational in Christian thinking: God, who is completely good, created a universe that is completely good. Humans, as part of God's creation, are also good—we are even said to be created in the "divine image" (Gen 1:26–27). The account of creation in Genesis 1 culminates with the human, created in God's image, as the crowning goodness of an all-good creation. Only humans are created in the image of God, and only humans are given authority to rule and exercise stewardship over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26–27). Furthermore, humans—alone out of all creation—are both spiritual and physical, having both a physical body and an eternal soul.

In the symbolic language of the first chapters of Genesis, human life is portrayed ideally: originally, humans lived a life of meaningful work and of harmony with nature, with each other, and with God. In the Christian understanding, this ideal life of peace, harmony, and health is God's intention for all humans—the reason that God created the universe.

Chapter three of Genesis, however, narrates what the Christian tradition interprets as humanity's "Fall." Humans, through a misuse of free will, turned away from God (an action Christians call "sin"). The Christian tradition speaks of a fallen human nature—one that, although it is still in the image of God, is also prone to selfishness, deceit, and violence. Far from the original state of harmony, humans must now struggle with the harsh realities of suffering, sickness, and death.

Nevertheless, in the Christian view, God did not abandon fallen humanity. God continued to communicate with humans through natural and historical revelation, inviting humans to return to him and the original life of harmony and fulfillment. The ultimate act of God's efforts to recall fallen humanity was the Incarnation, when God's Word took on human form, reconciling the divine and the human in Jesus. Because of this action, all humans now have the opportunity for what Christians call "salvation": the overcoming of sin, sickness, suffering, and even death in a return to that lost, original harmony with God.

Christian anthropology understands this salvation as holistic: it begins already in this life and is completed in a transcendent unity with God; it involves not only the healing and renewal of the "spirit," but the resurrection and transformation of the body as well.

We now consider some details of the Christian view, beginning with the scriptural sources.

Genesis 3: A Story of Freedom

The story in Genesis 3 about humans disobeying God's commandment and eating from the tree of knowledge of good and bad can plausibly be understood as a story about human freedom.

In interpreting this account, sometimes people wonder, Why did God have to "set up" Adam and Eve for failure by giving them a commandment that he knew they would be tempted to break? Couldn't God simply have left humans in this paradise of peace and harmony?

But such a question may come from reading the story too literally. If we understand Genesis as a symbolic story, with Adam and Eve representing all humans, we can make better sense of it. Seen in this light, it is reasonable to interpret God's commandment as God's desire to provide humans with free choices. To be truly free, a human must have the ability to choose. In relation to God, the source of all



goodness and true happiness, a free choice can be framed only in terms of obeying God (choosing the true good and true happiness) or disobeying God (choosing only an apparent or temporary good or happiness). So in giving them the commandment, God creates the space of their freedom; he provides options that allow them to exercise their freedom to choose.

There is no doubt that an all-powerful God could have created humans in such a way that we would never have disobeyed him and never turned from doing good to a corruption of good. But in that case, God would have created mere robots—creations that could only react in ways that had been preprogrammed.

In giving humans true freedom, God “ran the risk” (to put it anthropomorphically) that humans would abuse that freedom and disobey him—the source of true good. And so in fact humans have done. But God must have considered the gift of freedom to be so great that it was worth the risk.

Only the ambiguous gift of freedom makes us human—otherwise we would merely react instinctively like animals, or in a preprogrammed way like machines. On a daily basis, our free choices form our character: we become more trustworthy or untrustworthy, more courageous or less courageous, based on our choices. That same freedom gives us the ability to love. We cannot force someone to love us; love is truly love only if it is given freely. And so God, having created us in a free act of love, showed an even deeper love in allowing us the freedom to love or not to love him in return. “Where there is no freedom, there can be no love.”ⁱ As Lewis writes, “Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.”ⁱⁱ

Sin

The Christian tradition teaches that humans fell away from God through sin, that fallen human nature is sinful, and that salvation involves overcoming this sinful nature. In order to grasp rightly Christian anthropology, then, we must have a clear sense of what Christians mean by “sin.”

One online dictionary defines “sin” as 1. transgression of divine law; 2. any act regarded as such a transgression, especially a willful or deliberate violation of some religious or moral principle.”ⁱⁱⁱ This concept of “sin,” however, seems to be gradually disappearing in modern thought. Let us consider some factors.

From a materialist or determinist point of view, this definition makes no sense—since our actions are determined by forces that we cannot control, and so there can be no “*willful or deliberate violation*.” Determinist-influenced language is quite common: “It was the alcohol talking, not me.” “I can’t help losing my temper, that’s just the way I am.” “Boys will be boys.” All of these expressions put the responsibility for negative actions outside of the person acting, thereby eliminating the traditional concept of sin.

Ethical relativism also rejects the reality of sin. If right and wrong are determined solely by individual circumstances, then there can be no universal “religious or moral principles.” And a person can’t violate what doesn’t exist.

As societies (especially Western societies) become more religiously pluralistic, it is increasingly difficult to agree on the specifics of a “divine law.” As (especially Western) societies become more secular, the whole concept of “divine law” gradually loses meaning.

Despite these modern challenges, Christian anthropology maintains that the concept of sin is essential for true human dignity. God has revealed universal ethical standards, not only through differing religious traditions, but in the natural law that is accessible to all. The human person has been given real



knowledge of good and evil, and the true freedom to choose between them. "Sin" is simply the failure to choose rightly.

Sin as Turning from God to Self

The *Catechism* defines sin as "an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods" (CCC, 1849).

The essence of virtually any moral wrong can be traced back to a focus on the self (and thus a failure of love)—we steal, lie, cheat, and even murder because we selfishly think we (or our group) will get some kind of benefit from it.

"Sin is an offense against God" (CCC, 1850) because God is the source of all goodness and of the natural law of right and wrong. As we have seen, all humans, whether they belong to a specific religion or not, have a sense of the transcendent and a sense of the moral law. As Paul says, "For what can be known about God is evident to them. . . . As a result, they have no excuse" (Rom 1:19–20). In the Christian view, even atheists or agnostics can be considered sinful if they act against what God has revealed to their conscience as right and wrong.

In refusing to submit to God and God's laws, humans rebel against God and, in essence, set themselves up as their own measure of right and wrong: we become our own god.

Original Sin: Sinful Babies?

According to the *Catechism*, the Catholic Church baptizes infants in order to cleanse them from the Original Sin that they inherited from Adam and Eve (see CCC, 417, 1250). For many today this teaching is inexplicable. How can an innocent baby be sinful? How can a baby commit "an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience" (CCC, 1849) even before reaching the age of reason? How can the idea that a baby "inherits" sin be compatible with the principle that persons are responsible for their own sins (see Ezek 18)?

Original Sin and Fallen Human Nature

The Catholic tradition agrees that it would be absurd to hold a baby personally accountable for sin. To sin means, at some level, to make a choice (the *Catechism* defines "sin" as an offense against *reason*) for something that our reason tells us is wrong. Obviously babies do not have the mental or emotional development to make true choices.

But think about what happens when babies begin to reach the age of reason. As they grow into toddlers, at some point they begin to make conscious choices, at the same time developing an understanding of right and wrong. So consider, will a given child at some point freely choose to do certain things that he or she knows are wrong? For example, will she choose to disobey her mother, because she enjoys seeing Mom get frustrated? Will he choose to keep some toys to himself, when he knows he should share them with his younger brother?

As the child continues to develop, will she ever choose to do anything selfish? Will he ever gossip about another person who is not around to defend herself? Will she ever be jealous of another girl who is more athletic or more popular?



To these questions we must answer “yes.” And we could easily add to the list of examples. In fact, each of us would probably have to admit that every day we do something that we know is wrong (judging other persons without knowing their full story, telling a “white lie,” not keeping a commitment because we are too tired, etc.). Furthermore, truth be told, we actually enjoy doing certain things we know are wrong. We somehow enjoy gossiping, overeating, drinking too much, watching pornography, being lazy—otherwise why would we do these things so often?

Since *all* people *inevitably* sin when they are old enough to choose between right and wrong, it is only logical to conclude that sinning is part of human nature. To be more precise, we can say that the attraction toward sin, the tendency toward sin, or even the enjoyment we get out of sin—must also be part of human nature. That tendency is somehow innate in us.

The Christian tradition tells us that these negative tendencies and attractions are part of our fallen, not our original, nature. Our own experience can confirm this teaching in a more subtle way. Though doing wrong is common, we typically do not experience it as “normal.” Unless our consciences have become hardened, we usually find our wrong actions to be shameful, we are frustrated with ourselves when we do wrong, or perhaps we try to rationalize our negative behaviors. Why would we react in this way if we really found doing wrong natural or normal? Deep within ourselves it seems that we know that human nature was not meant to be like this.

This “fallen,” negative condition of humanity is what the Catholic Church calls Original Sin. Original Sin is simply “human nature deprived of original holiness and justice”; it is “a state and not an act” (CCC, 404).

The *Catechism* continues, “As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the domination of death; and inclined to sin. (This inclination is called ‘concupiscence.’)” (CCC, 418).

So when the Catholic tradition says that a baby is born with Original Sin, it simply means that the baby is born with a human nature that is “wounded,” is weak when it comes to doing what is right, and will be all too inclined to give in to selfishness and sin when that person reaches the age of reason.

We have discussed how our own experience tends to support the truth of this doctrine. But human history in general, with its long, unhappy record of wars, violence, racism, slavery, drug and alcohol addictions, and sexual exploitations, also supports its truth. From this perspective, G. K. Chesterton was right to conclude that far from being an unintelligible teaching, the doctrine of Original Sin “is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”^{iv}

To say, then, that babies “inherit” Original Sin does not mean that Original Sin is passed down like some kind of genetic disorder. Rather, it means that Adam and Eve, in their symbolic role as representatives of all humans, simply passed on *human nature* to succeeding generations—unfortunately, it was a fallen human nature. Original Sin involves “the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice” (CCC, 404).

For Catholicism, the doctrine of Original Sin is not pessimistic, it is realistic. When we analyze our own selves, and when we analyze human history, it is only wishful thinking that would allow us to avoid the conclusion that there is something deeply flawed in our human nature.

Material in this article was adapted from *Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology*, by Martin C. Albl (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2009), pages 102, 165–166, 180–181, and 183–186, respectively.



ⁱ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 76.

ⁱⁱ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. pub. 1952), 48.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://dictionary.reference.com>.

^{iv} G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006; orig. pub. 1908), 10.

