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The human sinful nature: a mental by-product or a metaphysical anthropological dimension?

Ovidiu Hanc¹

ABSTRACT

The human sinful nature is utterly denied by our secular research because this anthropological dimension can be defined only in a theistic, moral framework. Because of this, any scientific and philosophical approach to the study of human nature is unsatisfactory without the vital contribution of Theology. Biblical anthropology is a *sine qua non* study field that will eventually elucidate the puzzle of man's soul. The human sinful nature is not only a mental by-product at the end of a long naturalistic sequence of events. It is rather an undeniable feature of the human soul that cannot be explained out by psychologists or neuroscientists. The human soul, and human conscience are reflections of a metaphysical anthropological dimension in which morality exists and sin is more than a dysfunction or a disorder of the brain. Theology enlightens our understanding of human nature, mind, and existence. Sin is a spiritual reality that cannot be neglected because it is a psychosomatic dimension that affects both soul and body. An endeavour to justify a purely scientific materialistic anthropological system negated of a spiritual dimension is to ignore the essence of human nature created in the image of God.

KEY WORDS: human sinful nature, essence of sin, conscience, anthropology, hamartiology, morality.

INTRODUCTION

According to the naturalistic paradigm that is so prevalent in scientific communities, human beings are a product of a long process of evolution in our universe. However, if we take biblical religious claims into consideration, we discover another reality in which human beings are products of an act of creation not evolution. This act of creation was followed by an act of rebellion of man toward God, an act that marked the fall in sin. This fall into sin marks an anthropological shift in which the 'sinful nature' of human beings governs the entire human existence.

Because of these two divergent models any study of the human nature will face these two antithetical paradigms: the naturalistic approach in which man is a

¹ Dr. Ovidiu Hanc, BA, MTh (QUB), PhD (QUB), Lecturer dr. Emanuel.

product of a long process of evolution and the theological approach in which man is created by God.

Theology was traditionally considered as the queen of the science, however, with the rise of modern scepticism, the existence of God has shifted from a prerequisite of human existence to the fact that it has become not only a hypothesis but moreover, an unnecessarily hypothesis. The study on human nature has often fallen into a naturalistic paradigm in which theology as a science was demoted from any epistemological claims. Nevertheless, the use of theology and philosophy in an anthropological endeavour is essential for a holistic approach in which supernaturalism can not only inform our natural research but also elucidate it.

This study tries to advocate several aspects. First, it argues that an attempt to demote theology as a biased and unscientific field of science, is simultaneously unacademic and unscientific. Such an approach is methodologically flawed since it confuses epistemology with subjectivity. It is like an attempt to discard any historical record of a specific nation written by that nation on the grounds of subjectivity. In the end, who else is more authorized to write a history of a specific country if not the historians of that country. Such an historical record can be subjective and unhistorical, but it should not be demoted as unreliable on the sheer fact that it is subjective, hence unhistorical. The use of theological studies to advocate theological dogmas seems a circular argument, nevertheless, not only in humanistic studies but also in scientific field we use scientific methods to demonstrate scientific theories.

Second, any epistemological endeavour that seeks to divorce a dialogue between science and theology will end up creating a naturalistic anthropology that cannot function without a moral dimension. Any use of an exclusive scientific critical approach to define humanity is like trying to define beauty by using physical measuring tools. Because of this, the use of theology alongside any scientific science is not only necessary but also compulsory. An attempt to create an anthropological system void of a spiritual dimension is to ignore the very root of the nature of man created in the image of God. This pivotal theological concept is definitory for all its subsequent derivations like anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, and doxology.

Third, the use of fundamental concepts as mind, soul, consciousness, and sin must be scrutinized not only by philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and doctors, but also by theologians.

HUMAN BEINGS: A BIOLOGICAL, A DUALISTIC OR A UNIFIED BEING?

The Naturalistic/Biological paradigm

The naturalistic view is that in which the existence of man is a product of a complex process of evolution. The concept of a 'sinful nature' in human beings is not something that the biological paradigm takes into consideration. The concept of the 'sinful nature' requires a moral framework, otherwise it is futile to try to assess human behaviour in a moral vacuum. In a biological paradigm the history of the Holocaust is not morally repulsive and produces no more indignation as hunting an antelope by a lion in the Savannah. Because of the lack of a moral framework, the study of human nature in a pure naturalistic or materialistic setting is inadequate.

Natural science can only try to answer the question of how we appeared on this universe; however, these answers are not beyond dispute. Although it claims to be a scientific theory, when it comes to objective analysis the theory is lacunar and unsatisfactory. For example, the naturalistic paradigm cannot account for the complexity of human beings nor for the number of human beings on earth. Regarding the complexity of human beings, the complexity of human body does not account for an accidental appearance of a living cell from a primordial soup that evolved into complex organisms. The appearance of new genetic information is unanswered since the natural phenomenon that can generate genetic information is not known. Similarly, the naturalistic paradigm is deficient in explaining the origin of human life that is generally presented in terms of evolution in hundreds of thousands of years. A simple conservative growing rate cannot account even for a time span of 50,000 years that would make the world's population a staggering figure.² The sheer number of people today is out of sync with the evolution theory.

William Lane Craig argued that in our post-Christian culture, reason and religion are at odds. In this context only the physical sciences are taken as authoritative, and "the picture of the world which emerges from the genuine sciences is a thoroughly naturalistic picture."³

Nevertheless, even though scientific naturalism shapes indeed our secular cosmological framework, the origin of human beings is still debated today and requires a broader framework that goes beyond scientifically observed natural

² White Monty, 'Billions of People in Thousands of Years?', Answers in Genesis, accessed 12 March 2022, <https://answersingenesis.org/evidence-against-evolution/billions-of-people-in-thousands-of-years/>.

³ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 16.

laws. The naturalistic paradigm has failed to give a convincing explanation on the origin of human beings, but it also failed to give a plausible clarification on the existence of the human conscience. Because of this lacunar paradigm, the use of philosophy and theology is needed to contribute to the study of human nature.

The Dualistic paradigm

This paradigm is a philosophical paradigm that takes into account the existence of a meta-physical dimension of body and soul. Starting from antiquity, philosophers considered that human beings exist in two dimensions: a physical part (*i.e.* body) and an immaterial part (*i.e.* soul). At first it was believed that sin is a matter of the body. In ancient philosophy, the soul was considered good, but it was trapped in the prison of the body. Since the body was regarded as bad, it functioned as a reality that obstructs of the manifestation of the divine nature. This concept is the basis of the teaching of purification, teaching which aims to overcome the pleasures of the body.

Schleiermacher, who was influenced by Plato's philosophy defined sin as the fight between body and soul. In this theory sin is due to body pleasures and instincts. Based on the Greek idealism that supports the superiority of the mind to the body and on the biblical texts in which Paul speaks of the flesh (σάρξ *sarx*) and its impact on the believer's life, sin is defined in this conception as the tendency of the lower or physical nature to dominate and control the higher or spiritual nature.⁴ Theologians still debate the extend in which this concept is present in the theology of the New Testament, as Gnosticism was prevalent in the thinking milieu of the first century.

The Biblical paradigm

The Bible presents the history of the creation, the fall, and the redemption of man. With the fall of man, sin has led to the corruption of man's nature and separation from God. From the moment of the fall, the whole human existence was rooted in sin. All evil deeds done by man are ultimately external manifestations of the sin that resided within. Sin has altered the image of God in man, and led to the corruption of the human soul.

Outside the spiritual realm it is futile to tackle the concept of sin. Sin is a concept that can be used only in a religious sense. An attempt to define sin outside the theological context will lead to failure. Sin is a separation and an alienation from God and a reality that is intrinsically anti-God. A broader analysis of hamartiology in line with the doctrine of God is necessary. Sin should first be

⁴ For a more broad analysis of the doctrine of sin and its nature see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 529.

defined in line with the doctrine of God and then applied to the doctrine of man. Ridderbos noted that both the essence of sin and true manhood, finds its explanation in the fundamental fact that man was created by God.⁵

In opposition to the dualistic paradigm, the biblical paradigm advocates that the root of sin is not in the flesh but in the soul. The body is regarded as good (2 Cor. 6:19-20), while sin is produced in the soul. Ultimately sin includes the whole being, including the body; however the essence of sin is found in the soul. Sin is an intrinsic spiritual reality, not a physical reality.

Sinful human nature: soul or sickness?

The soul represents the sum of our human reality, existence, and personhood (mind, emotions, and will). Our conscience is the inward metaphysical capacity that attests our spiritual dimension and witness about a reality that transcends the physical one. Our consciousness attests that our existence is more than what we see, feel, and think and bears witness to our need for God and the reality of our sinful nature.

The concept of morality and consciousness

The philosophical debate on morality goes back to Plato's moral theory and rationality. For him it is rational to be moral. Humans have goodness insofar as they stand in some relation to the Good, which subsists in itself.⁶ Philosophers debated extensively on the nature of morality and consciousness.⁷ For Immanuel Kant, conscience represents a special kind of moral judgement. His conclusion in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is as follows: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."⁸ Kant's reflection on human conscience is used by C. S. Lewis to develop his argument for God grounded not only in the general revelation but especially in the moral law.⁹

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis argued that the problem of all human neurotic manifestation is not *sin*, but the childhood experiences of every individual, experiences that carry a significant emotional substance. This view

⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 104.

⁶ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 104.

⁷ For a succinct analysis of the moral argument see Craig, 104, 172–83.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 351. For a thorough analysis of Kant's view of conscience see Umut Eldem, 'Kant's Conception of Conscience', *Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 11 (2020): 110.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001); Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 145–68.

was seen as a ‘revolutionary methodology’, therefore, many psychologists attempted to solve matters of the human soul through therapeutic psychiatric practices. In this approach, the solution to the human dysfunctionalities is not religion but psychoanalysis.

Although Freud influenced in a significant way the psychiatric approach of the 20th century, the results were not so promising. Orval Hobart Mowrer, one of the most prominent psychologists of the 20th century, is known for his research on behaviour therapy but also for his stand against the tendency to shift from the concept of “sin” to “sickness”. Mowrer admits that while the psychologists heralded the epoch-making acclaimed liberation from sin as a great incubus to have the excuse of being sick rather than sinful, they have cut the very roots of our being by becoming amoral, ethically neutral, and free.¹⁰

The impulse towards a reality that is beyond our naturalistic world cannot be explained in a satisfactory manner by psychological theories or by psychiatric treatment.¹¹ According to Freud, our search for *God/a god* is best explained by our childish behaviour. We need a father and because of this we *invent* God, as a fatherly figure that will eventually fulfil our intrinsic need. Nevertheless, the Scriptures offer a radically shifted paradigm in which God is in his pursuit of the man that He had created. The man has alienated from God and hence all his existence is unfulfilled apart from this divine relationship.

From the scientific point of view, the study of consciousness is a huge area of study, and it is far from finding a consensus among psychologists, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, and/or theologians. The classical approach to the concept of mind was coined by René Descartes in his Cartesian Dualism. According to his philosophy of the mind, which is a mind-body dualism, the mental phenomena represent a reality that is meta-physical, since the mind exists independently of the human brain. This approach was challenged by Gilbert Ryle, who postulated in his critique that our mind is just a ghost in the

¹⁰ O Hobart Mowrer, “‘Sin’: The Lesser of Two Evils”, *American Psychologist* 15 (1960): 301–4. For a response to Mowrer’s view see Edward Pohlman, ‘Psychologists Take Another Look at Sin’, *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 15, no. 3 (1961): 144–52; Russell J. Becker, ‘Sin, Illness and Guilt’, *The Christian Century* 83, no. 33 (1966): 1007–9.

¹¹ Joubert Callie argued in an objective manner that as psychiatry took biblical concepts and secularized them, the psychiatrists faced several fundamental challenges, not being able to escape their crisis. Callie Joubert, ‘A Christian Response to the Crisis in Psychiatry’, *Answers Research Journal*, no. 7 (2014): 173–87. Although concepts like sin were seen as restrictive to research, scientists use theological and moral concepts such as sin, conscience, forgiveness, etc. not as secularized concepts but as vital instruments in the psychiatric field. Sara E. Lewis and Rob Whitley, ‘A Critical Examination of “Morality” in an Age of Evidence-Based Psychiatry’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 36, no. 4 (2012): 735–43.

machine. Recent neuroscientists and psychologists continue to propose different or divergent views on consciousness.

In his study on conscience and the personal and social effects of the suppression of it, Budziszewski admitted that the natural law is unconsciously presupposed -- even when consciously denied -- by modern secular thinkers, too. He noted that “[e]verything in conscience can be weakened by neglect and erased by culture.”¹² Budziszewski correctly argues that although conscience works in everyone, it does not restrain everyone. Conscience is a universal reality of human nature that can be considered or ignored.

From a theological and biblical perspective, the consciousness is not a mere cognitive feature of our brain, nor a product or a by-product of our complex mind engine. Our conscience reflects the existence of our soul that is created by God. We are psychosomatic entities that function in a close relation between mind and body. However, the biblical theology of our mind is integrated in the whole concept of soul and conscience. As spiritual beings, humans do not have a soul. They are a soul that has a body. Although the biblical theology of the value of our bodies is important and our existence is contingent to our soul-body reality, our physical bodies are of secondary importance in relation to our souls.

In his study of neuroethics, Ben Mijuskovic admits that Christian theologians and ethicists will think differently from their secular colleagues about the conceptual and practical questions raised by disorders of consciousness. He correctly admits that “[i]f we ask what it means to be a conscious self, Christian theology is likely to raise the question of the soul.”¹³

From a biblical point of view conscience is part of the human soul (ψυχή *psuchē*) and represents the inner work of the divine law that is bearing witness of the moral reality, functioning as an inner judge of self-condemnation or self-approval (Rom. 2.14-15). The term for conscience is συνείδησις (*suneidēsis*), is found 30 times in the New Testament and represents the moral awareness as a divine given ability to perform introspection and self-evaluation.

Sin: guilt or sickness?

Karl Menninger, a renowned psychiatrist of the 20th century performed extensive research on the human condition. His book “Whatever Became of Sin?” highlighted the tendency of our society to reject and dismiss the idea of human sin, and to replace this concept with medical or psychological ones like illness,

¹² J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 25.

¹³ Ben Mijuskovic, *Consciousness and Loneliness: Theoria and Praxis* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 106.

dysfunction, syndrome, disorder, and so on. The outcome of this tendency is that humans are no longer held responsible for their action. Human actions and interaction can thus fall only under the diagnosis of medical or psychiatric investigation. Menninger notes that today there is no more mentioning of the notion of sin, although this used to be a fundamental concept used by the prophets. “It was a word once in everyone’s mind, but now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles—sin with an “I” in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything?”¹⁴

The result of such an approach is that man becomes exempt from any kind of moral responsibility for his actions. Such an exclusion would amount to an amnesty for any reprehensible act, and the concept of moral or social justice would simply be nullified. If man is no longer guilty but only sick, then guilt is no longer an inherent reality characteristic of man but an abstract external reality.

Any analysis of human being and behaviour outside an absolute moral framework will end up in a humanism in which relativity will cancel out any concept of individual responsibility. In the humanist paradigm man is good, and social values are contextual conventions that have no absolute moral dimension. Man thus becomes God. In such a theological system, we will not find the notion of sin, because sin would be an attack on the basic values of humanism. Sin from within is replaced by a disease from without, and if this “disease” cannot be diagnosed or treated, the guilt does not belong to the patient but to the limitations of medical or psychological treatment.

Sin: an error in the evolutionary process or an error in the creationist act?

The simple fact of addressing the concept of sin in relation to human beings is very challenging for the naturalistic paradigm. If sin, as a moral reality, does not exist, why do we find this concept in any given social and religious culture? If a concept does not exist, the need for a non-existing concept should not exist as well. Because of this we should analyse whether the (hypothetic) existence of a non-existing concept is not an error in the naturalistic evolutive framework. Why and how has this error appeared?

Regarding the religious paradigm, the existence of a human sinful nature is something that appeared as an error in the creation history. However, we should also ask ourselves whether the human sinful nature is a testable hypothesis.

There are other attempts to define sin through metaphysical or anthropological dualism. In metaphysical dualism, the distinction between the spiritual and the physical world is distinguished, the sin being the consequence of belonging to

¹⁴ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1974), 13.

the physical world. In the anthropological dualism the distinction is made between the outward and the inward man. The outward man is considered inferior and sensual, while the inner man is regarded as being in connection with God. When scholars try to explain the notion of sin, however, without a theological framework, this endeavour is futile.

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF SIN

From a Biblical point of view, sin represents any form of conscious or involuntary disobedience that man has in relation to God or his divine Law. Sin entered the world when man was deceived by Satan and sinned choosing to disobey God's command. The devil is described by John as the one who sins from the beginning (1 Jn. 3:8). The devil tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God, thus they became sinners. The sinful nature is a universal reality for human beings. By falling into sin man has turned away from God. This alienation is multifaceted and is manifested in spiritual death, hostility, and rebellion towards God, and because of this the entire existence and the human personality (intellect, will, and feelings) was affected by sin.

Terminology of the Old Testament

There are quite a few words in the Old Testament Hebrew that describe the notion of sin. The verb חָטָא (*cha.ta*) 'to sin' / חֵט (*chet*) 'sin' is the most frequent, together with its derivatives.¹⁵ The term is found more than five hundred times and encapsulates the idea of missing the target, making an error, or deviating from the proposed target. The principle behind the term is that of falling short of a certain standard or norm. This word is most often used in the context of deviations from moral or religious standards or in a ceremonial context connected with the sacrifices for sins (Lev. 4:1-35). Technically it can have an amoral sense referring to a slinger missing a physical target (Jud. 20.16), but the most common feature has a moral dimension in relation to God's standards. The term can often describe the formal aspect of violating God's law without describing the inner motivation for sin, but the main feature of the term is that of deliberate sin.

The term רָע (*ra.a*) 'be evil' / רָע (*ra*) 'bad' represents a bad reality, a malignant or an evil one. The term פָּשַׁע (*pa.sha*) to transgress, to rebel / פְּשָׁע (*pe.sha*) transgression, rebellion refers to the action by which an agreement or a relationship between two parties or persons is broken (Ex. 22.9; 1 Kings 12.19; 2 Kings 1.1). In a ceremonial or religious context, this term alludes to a man's rebellion against God's sovereignty and holiness (Ex. 23.21; 1 Kings 12:19).

¹⁵ to sin (*cha.ta* - חָטָא); sin (*chet* - חֵט); sinner (*chat.ta* - חָטָא); sin (*cha.ta.ah* - חָטָא); sin (*chat.ta.ah* - חָטָא).

The term עֲוֹן (a.von) ‘iniquity’/ עָוָה (a.vah) ‘to pervert’ describes the aspect of depravity, perversity, or guilt, but also describes the consequence or punishment for iniquity. It occurs for the first time referring to Cain as a reference to his punishment (Gen. 4.13). Thus, the term refers to both the deed and/or consequence of a deliberately committed evil (e.g. Lev. 5.1, 17; 7.18; Job 7.21; 10.6; Dan. 9.5, etc.).

The term שָׁגָה (sha.gah) ‘to wander’/ שְׁגִיאוֹ (she.gi.ah) ‘error’ denotes the concept of departing from a good path. Often this term is used in cases of sins committed out of ignorance, while in Lev. 4.13 and Num. 15.22 is especially referring to unintentional sin committed without a deliberate and wilful decision.

There are many other related words that encapsulate the idea of rebellion, moral failure, stubbornness, treachery, etc.

Terminology of the New Testament

In the New Testament we have several variations of words and derivatives that outline the idea of sin. The most common word is ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*) and describes the spiritual state of mankind and an offense or wrongdoing against God (Rom. 3:23). The term implies a wilful and culpable attitude, not to be confused with unintentional wrongdoing. Another term used is ἀδικία (*adikia*), which reflects an injustice or dishonesty and is often used in the legal field (Lk. 16:8-9). This term contrasts the idea of righteousness and justice (Acts 1:18; 8.23; Rom. 1:18; 3:5; 6:13; 1 John 1:9; 5:17).

We also find a suite of other words and derivatives that outline the broader concept of sin either as an offense against a legal system or moral code, or as an injustice committed against humans or divinity. Such examples are ἀνομία (*anomia*) as lawlessness (Matt. 7:23; Rom. 4:7; Heb. 10:17; 1 Jn 3:4); ἀσεβεία (*asebeia*) as a godless state; παράπτωμα (*paraptōma*) as a trespass; παράβασις (*parabasis*) referring to a violation of a law (Rom. 4:15; 1 Tim. 2:14); and many other terms reflecting stumbling, guilt, deviation, disobedience, etc.

The essence of sin

Any study of the essence of sin requires a terminological clarification, because there is a difference between the essence of sin and the manifestation of the state of sin. The essence of sin is an *a priori* reality or primary cause that determines any other subsequent form of sin. It is the difference between a virus or an infection and a disease. There are many proposals when it comes to the essence of sin; however it is important to note that various theological terminologies that were employed, at times, vary more in terminology than in description.

Disobedience

The most common biblical terms about sin in both the Old Testament and the New Testament have the meaning of missing the target or deviating from God's absolute and objective standard. In this sense, the essence of sin can be understood as man's disobedience to God. The history of biblical characters gives us examples in this regard of disobedience to God's commandments and ordinances. Disobedience can therefore be the cause of every sin or sinful attitude of man.

Man acts freely, wilfully against the will of God. Man's actions are essentially a declaration of autonomy from the divine standard, and the violation of this standard can be perceived as the root of all sins. But the question we can ask ourselves is whether disobedience is a form of manifestation of sin and not its essence, because disobedience may have a reason behind it to produce disobedience. Disobedience is not a reality that appears *ex abrupto* without a motivation for this state.

Rebellion

For some, the essence of sin is rebellion against the absolute sovereignty of God. It is difficult to differentiate between disobedience and rebellion, as they represent similar states in many aspects that interconnect and interrelate. Sin is not just an act of disobedience but a much deeper rebellion. Man's rebellion is the total and universal rejection of God's will and sovereignty.

However, the phenomenon of rebellion cannot be justified as an intrinsic reality. The manifestation of this phenomenon is most likely caused by another primary reality. Rebellion materializes in common sins, but it is a cause in itself. Rebellion is the manifestation of a state of sin, not its essence.

Sensuality

Schleiermacher defined sin as the struggle between body and soul.¹⁶ In this theory sin is due to bodily pleasures and instincts. Based on Greek idealism that upholds the superiority of the mind over the body and the biblical texts in which Paul speaks of nature and its impact on the believer's life, sin is defined in this conception as "the tendency of the lower or physical nature to dominate and control the higher or spiritual nature."¹⁷

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III.3 The Doctrine of Creation (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 35.

¹⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 529.

There are other proposals to define the essence of sin through a metaphysical or anthropological dualism to explain Pauline anthropology.¹⁸ In metaphysical dualism the distinction is made between the spiritual and the physical world: the man on the outside is considered inferior and sensual, while the man on the inside should seek to be in touch with God.

However, for Paul, the flesh is a sin-producing power not because it is sin *per se*, but because sin uses the flesh as an instrument. It is true that Paul speaks of the flesh as something that leads to sin (Rom 7:5, 8, 18, 23, 25, 8:5), but the concept of σάρξ (*sarx*) must be seen in the context of Pauline theology as a whole. The *flesh* in Paul's theology is not only the sphere of the sensual or bodily reality¹⁹ but also the spiritual sphere (Gal. 5:19-21). Paul emphasizes in his theology the importance of the body (Rom. 12:1, 1 Cor. 6:19-20, 2 Cor. 7:1) and does not classify human flesh as the source of sin.

The nature and essence of sin is not in the body since sin is spiritual in nature. Calvin stated that it is pointless and foolish to restrict the corruption only to what are called the impulses of the senses, or sensuality.²⁰ The Bible's teaching on the body does not render the idea that it is the source or the essence of sin.

Privatio

Bavinck advocated the term *privatio* to explain the essence of sin.²¹ Sin has many facets. By *privatio* sin is nothing positive, but only a deprivation of good things (obedience-disobedience, faith-unbelief, righteousness-unrighteousness).²² However, deprivation of all that is good is rather the effect of sin, not its essence. Leibnitz noted an aspect of the *privatio* theory that sin is seen as the result of man's finitude and weakness.²³ The central idea of this position is that people sin because they were created inferior. In this theory sin is seen as inevitable. Leibnitz held the theory that the existence of sin is consistent with the divine perfections. Sin is inevitable because it arises from the necessary limitations of the creature.²⁴ Because man is limited in his powers, Leibnitz asserts, he is prone to sin.

¹⁸ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 100.

¹⁹ Ridderbos, 101.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. II, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 252.

²¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 137–51.

²² G. C. Berkower, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 255.

²³ R. C. Sleigh, 'Leibniz's First Theodicy', *Philosophical Perspectives* 10 (1996): 481–99; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2013), 134.

²⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II:135.

Such a theory, however, leads to the conclusion that God, is the creator of an imperfect man who had no chance of not sinning. Sin in this equation is a necessary evil.

However, sin was man's choice not his destiny. The biblical teaching concerning the creation of man is that he is made in the image of God with free will. If God had not created the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or forbidden man to eat from it, then even if man was finite, he would not have the ability to sin. So, sin is about choice, not about the deprivations imposed on man. Man has sinned precisely because, in the freedom God has given him, he has abused it. The freedom man enjoys, however, is the *framework* for the occurrence of sin, not its *cause*. It is not the abuse of freedom alone that leads to sin. There are sins produced not only by committing them, thus making an abuse, but also by omission. Thus, simple disobedience to God in doing something is a sin committed not through abuse of freedom.

Egocentrism

Sin, having self-centeredness at its core, brings about a shift from the state in which God is the centre of man's life to the state in which man becomes the centre of his world. Sin is done against God, therefore, egocentrism is the turning away from God. Augustine stated that "pride is the beginning of sin."²⁵ Calvin also states that Augustine was not far off when he asserted that pride is the beginning of sin and identifies infidelity as what was the root of rebellion,²⁶ and in this infidelity is found pride.

In its essence, sin is rebellion against God. In daily life almost all of man's actions are directed towards himself. This can also be very clearly seen in the fact that the first commandment in the law is that of having no other gods than God. Since each commandment forbids one sin, the most important commandment (the first in the Law) is meant to forbid the most "important" sin. As Jesus said, the whole Law is summed up in this first commandment (Matthew 22:36-38). Man's sin is that he seeks to make himself God.

Moreover, sin appeared in the universe when Satan sinned, and this occurred because of a self-centred attitude. Sin is a reality that is not necessarily anthropological. Sin exists independently of man, so hamartiology has anthropological effects but is not limited to the field of anthropology. The difficulty in defining sin is that it is analysed strictly in an anthropological context and the different aspects of sin manifested by man make it difficult to

²⁵ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 505.

²⁶ Calvin, *Calvin*, II:143.

answer. There are texts in the Bible that speak of angels and the devil sinning (2 Peter 2:4; 1 John 3:8).

The essence of sin can be most clearly deduced from the study of the first sin that was committed in the universe. The appearance of sin in the universe was caused by Satan. In Is. 14:12-15 and 2 Thess. 2:4 we see Satan's actions being directed against God. His desire has been and always will be to be God or above God. Self-centeredness underlies his actions.

Barth supported the idea that sin is based on pride. His Christological model reveals that sin is pride, in contrast to the humility of the Son of God.²⁷ God is already humble even though man continues to be proud. Brunner asserted that man has his origin in God, but sin is the reversal of this.²⁸ In this context, he defines sin as defiance, arrogance, desire to be equal with God, emancipation, deliberate separation from the hand of God.

In his study of the nature and origin of sin, Robert Culver stated that Satan's basic motive was pride. It may also be called selfishness."²⁹ Starting our analysis of sin exactly where it first appeared, we conclude that self-centeredness is the essence of sin. "Sin in its essence is the act of preferring self or another being over God. It is the placing of man's ego before love and worship of the Creator."³⁰

Karl Menninger has a broader use of terms to identify the Great Sin. He notes that *acedia* is the heart of all sin, but this sin is also called selfishness, or alienation, or schizophrenia, or egocentricity, or separation.³¹ Although the terminology differs from scholar to scholar, the idea of man's egocentricity or self-centeredness is prevalent.

Arguments against this position are based on those situations where sins do not have a self-centred cause (loving a person more than God, devotion to a cause that is against God). Charles Hodge combats the idea that selfishness is the essence of sin because, in this case, happiness is the ultimate goal.³² This theory, he argues, destroys the idea of the moral good and confuses what is right with what is expedient. Yet egocentrism does not destroy the idea of the moral good because there is no exclusion of the positive side in this equation. Not every

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV.1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 358–513.

²⁸ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 129.

²⁹ Robert Culver, 'The Nature and Origin of Evil', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129, no. 514 (1972): 114.

³⁰ Culver, 114.

³¹ Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* 189.

³² Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II:145.

self-centred action that aims at happiness is sin. Almost all human actions, however, have as their goal their own person.

But a distinction must be made between the *essence* of sin and the *effect* of sin. Once sin has penetrated the human being it has led to a distortion on all levels, including the rational. Idolatry, for example, does not necessarily have an egocentric cause, although to a certain extent it should not be ruled out, but it occurs against a background of sin-distorted thinking (the existence of other deities). Idolatry is not caused by self-centeredness, but it is the effect produced by sin, which was produced by self-centredness. The primary essence of sin is self-centeredness, and it was produced when Satan wanted to be God.

CONCLUSION

Malcolm Muggeridge is credited the saying: “The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact.” Human depravity is indeed a verifiable characteristic of humanity; however, this depravity can be defined only in a theistic, moral framework. Humans like to think that they are good and moral, but man’s inclination is inherently towards evil, violence, wars, and hatred. Within a secular framework, the concept of sin, depravity and human responsibility become futile. At the intersection of Philosophy, Science and Theology we can objectively admit that without an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of human nature, any scientific and philosophical approach is unsatisfactory without the vital contribution of Theology. This inter-disciplinary dialogue is possible only if our definition of reality is not *a priori* naturalistic.

Scientists offer various solutions to the problem of sin. This problem is approached from both atheistic/secular and theistic perspectives. Secular psychologists propose the concept of illness as an answer to the dilemma of sin and human conscience. Secular neuroscientists deal with the problem strictly medically since the reality of sin is not a premise of modern secular medicine. Secular philosophers move beyond psychoanalysis to the mental phenomenon as a cognitive by-product.

On the other hand, psychology, medicine, philosophy, and theistic theology start with a holistic approach to the human being in which soul and consciousness are integral realities of human existence. Sin is a spiritual reality that cannot be neglected, a psychosomatic dimension that affects both soul and body. The sinful nature of man is indeed one of the most empiric testable hypotheses. The rebuttal of the human moral dimension is ultimately rooted in man’s desire for autocracy. The existence of a human sinful nature implies the existence of a moral dimension that makes man morally responsible before God. The natural

paradigm cannot give an answer to the realities related to human nature yet is by far the best justification for an autocratic existence.

The foundation of sin consists in man's desire to be equal with God. The essence of original sin is man's apostasy and his deep tendency to be self-absorbed. The solution to the sinful self-centred nature is the redemption through Christ. The sacrifice on Calvary is explained in the context of human self-centeredness - God gave everything for man so that man would come out of the self-centeredness created by sin (and its consequences) and give everything to God. God stripped Himself so that man would give up himself. Sin in its essence is the act of preference to self or another being before God. It is placing the ego of man in the face of the love and worship of the Creator.

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