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## SUMMARY

[1] This dissertation investigates the relationship between the inevitability of and the responsibility for sin: how can people be held responsible for sins they commit inevitably? The response offered by the classical doctrine of original sin holds that people sin inevitably as a result of the first transgression of the first human being Adam. In some way, all human beings were connected to Adam when he sinned. Accordingly, Adam's sin is their sin, and they are themselves responsible for the fact that they sin inevitably. In formulations of the doctrine of original sin that do not follow this classical response, the question of human responsibility for inevitable sins remains largely unanswered. In this study, I will evaluate the classical doctrine of original sin and propose an alternative.

### I. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

[2] **Augustine** (354-430), the father of the classical doctrine of original sin, posits that all people were born with an inner disharmony he qualified as *concupiscentia* ('desire'). This *concupiscentia* is the senses' disobedience to the spirit, a state of moral ignorance and weakness. After the first sin of Adam, this *concupiscentia* became a part of human *nature*, and thus explains why every person necessarily sins.

According to Augustine people sin by their own will, which does indeed have freedom of choice (i.e., *liberum arbitrium*), but is not free to choose the good and to realize that choice (i.e., *voluntas*). This view aligns well with classical compatibilism's view on free will.

In his later writings Augustine emphasizes that the state in which we are born is not only punishment for Adam's sin, but is itself also sin, rendering all people guilty before God even before they are born. This is because every person shares in Adam's sin and thus becomes him- or herself guilty of that sin. For, the entire human race was already present in Adam when he sinned.

Does this also apply to the human soul? According to Augustine, sin is in the first place a matter of the human soul. But were all human souls in Adam when he sinned? The terminology Augustine uses to describe what happens to the soul is reflective of Plotinus's doctrine of a pretemporal fall of the pre-existent soul. Augustine does not teach such a pretemporal fall of the soul, but he does teach an ontological fall of the entire human race in Adam. Just like in Plotinus's Neoplatonic anthropology all souls share a common existence in the one World Soul, so Augustine holds all human beings to have a common existence in Adam that precedes their individual existence. When Adam sinned, all human beings sinned in this common existence with Adam. This renders them all guilty, even before their concrete appearance in history. Because that guilt is common, it is not an alien guilt (i.e., the guilt of another), but their own.

In the reflection closing this chapter, I (1) point to the anti-fatalist character of Augustine's doctrine of original sin, (2) demonstrate how his compatibilism fails to establish the responsibility of sins committed inevitably, and (3) discuss Augustine's philosophical foundation for the bond he envisions between Adam and his descendants.

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[3] **Anselm of Canterbury** (1033-1119) emphasizes that people sin with their *will*, as rational beings endowed with the capacity of judgment. Accordingly, young children cannot sin. Nevertheless, Anselm does insist that such children are sinful and deserving of the judgment of God, since they lack the *rectitudo* ('rightness') they owe him. This is because all people sinned in Adam. Anselm does not mean that all human beings committed Adam's sin personally. Rather, at the moment of this sin, the entire human nature was present in him (and in Eve), so that human nature as a whole was corrupted: it lacks the required rightness. This is what Anselm calls *peccatum originale* or *naturale*, distinct from personal sin (*peccatum personale*). *Peccatum originale* makes it inevitable that all human beings become sinners.

Even though the absence of the original rightness is not a personal sin, it is imputed to each and every person, even when she or he has not yet committed any personal sins. Behind this view is Anselm's extreme philosophical realism according to which 'human nature' is not just a concept, but an independent reality that is not exhausted in the reality of individual people. Since the human nature that sinned in Adam is spread over all human beings, all people really sinned when Adam sinned.

In my reflections, I note two tensions in Anselm's thought. (1) While he does not include the possibility of sin when defining free choice, in his reasoning he does. (2) Anselm on the one hand posits that when Adam sinned, we did not sin (i.e., we were not there yet; it is not our *peccatum personale*). On the other hand, he teaches that in Adam the entire human nature—and thus every human individual—was involved in and guilty of the first sin.

[4] **John Calvin** (1509-1564) argues that people sin necessarily, and do not have a free will. This does not mean, however, that they are not responsible for their sins. This is something people themselves experience. They have a certain awareness of God; if they deny the existence of God, they do so against their better judgment. Furthermore, people have a conscience, that is, an innate awareness of good and evil that refuses silencing. Yet Calvin also writes that people cannot come to true knowledge of God apart from the gospel of Christ (even though we do find among the heathens some knowledge of good and evil).

According to Calvin, human beings do sin necessarily, and yet they are not coerced to sin, since they sin with the assent of their will. As such, freedom and necessity are compatible (whereas freedom and coercion are not). Moreover, the necessity with which people sin is the result of a voluntary choice for sin, which was made by their father Adam. All human beings are guilty of this first sin. The fact that they are born in sin is a punishment for this guilt.

On what basis does God then impute the guilt of Adam's sin to all humankind? Calvin's response is informed by a philosophical realism: 'human nature' is an independent reality that does not coincide with the reality of individual human beings. The entire human nature was present in Adam. Accordingly, when Adam sinned, the entire human race really sinned.

The doctrine of original sin found in the *Belgic Confession* (1561) and the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) is representative of the realism of Anselm and Calvin. Over the course of time, however, Reformed orthodoxy saw the development of a federalist foundation for the imputation of Adam's sin to his descendants. Within such a perspective, Adam's sin is imputed to all people insofar as Adam was the head of the covenant (*foedus*) which God made in him with the entire human race, and in which, by God's decree, Adam represented all humankind.

Placaeus (Josué de la Place, 1596-1655) rejected such a notion of Adam representing his posterity. According to Placaeus, Adam's sin is not imputed immediately to his descendants so as to render them guilty of Adam's sin. We do indeed share in the corruption following from Adam's sin, but it is only because of our assent to the sinful condition in which we are born that we, like Adam, are considered sinners. As such, Placaeus is a proponent of a 'mediate' view on imputation. According to this doctrine, the corruption is the cause of our guilt rather than its consequence. Placaeus's teaching was rejected in the *Formula consensus Helvetica* (1675).

At the end of this chapter, I reflect on (1) Calvin's ambivalence on the question as to whether or not people have true knowledge of God in the context of a possible pardon for unbelief; (2) Calvin's compatibilism, which in the end shows itself to be insufficient for establishing moral responsibility for inevitable sins; and (3) Calvin's realism as it relates to the bond between Adam and his posterity (i.e., when Adam sinned, all sinned).

## II. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

[5] What can be gleaned from **Genesis**, and from chapters 2 and 3 in particular, about the power of sin, human responsibility for sin, and the consequences of Adam's sin, also for his descendants?

I argue that Genesis 1-11 has historiographical intentions, and that many aspects of the stories in Genesis 2 and 3 refer symbolically to factual events. The theory of evolution speaks a very different language, offering a direct and factual description of what it holds to have taken place. It is good to accept the existence of the respective stories told by Genesis and evolution theory. The proposals which theistic evolutionists have offered up to now for reading the first chapters of Genesis in such a way that they do not conflict with evolution are unconvincing.

At the same time, Genesis and evolution theory do both direct our attention to history. I discuss three resulting points of tension. (1) Did the human race originate from a single pair of human ancestors (i.e., monogenesis), or was there a larger population (i.e., polygenesis)? In the book of Genesis, the term 'adam' is used both collectively for 'the human race' and individually for the first human being. There seems to be no interest in this biblical book for the exact number of people in primal times. (2) Was there a moment in history when the human race began to sin? Genesis makes it clear that a break occurred, transitioning from a sinless beginning to history to its sin-filled continuation. Humanity and sin therefore do not coincide, but people rather *became* sinful. (3) Did death come to humanity as a consequence of sin? The book of Genesis holds this indeed to be the case. That does not mean that the human race's nature is immortal, or that any predecessors of the human race could not already have been subject to death.

The garden of Eden is a symbol of the presence of God. Life in that garden is characterized by an unimpeded and intimate communion with God. Accordingly, the fact that man and woman were expelled from the garden following the entrance of sin is the greatest and most comprehensive consequence of sin: it signals the end of that unimpeded communion with God. The tree of life illustrates that human beings depend on God for their life; the fact that they were denied access to that tree after the first sin implied the arrival of death.

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The tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolizes the capacity to distinguish for oneself between good (beneficial) and evil (harmful). Eating from that tree implies that the human race assumed a position of autonomy before God, which is the very essence of sin. Genesis emphasizes that man is himself responsible for and guilty of his transgression.

The first man and woman's eating from the forbidden tree at the snake's prodding demonstrates that sin is not part of what it means to be human; sin did not come from within but from the outside. Genesis offers no account for the origin of evil. The possibility of being seduced (by the tempter, the snake) belongs to the good creation of God. That possibility implies that there is in the human race susceptibility for being tempted.

The consequences of sin are not limited to Adam and Eve, but extend to their descendants. All people are born outside of the garden, that is, outside that unimpeded and intimate communion with God, and all that this loss implies. After the first transgression of Adam and Eve, sin grows rapidly, revealing itself as both radical and universal.

[6] Are Adam's descendants punished for their forefather's transgression? Do we see a collective punishment upon the entire human race? If so, does this imply that all people are considered guilty of that sin? Can these questions be answered by consideration of the examples of **collective punishment** in the Old Testament?

I discuss four models that seek to accommodate the biblical data concerning collective punishment in the Old Testament: (1) development from collective to individual retribution; (2) 'ruler punishment'; (3) 'corporate personality'; and (4) the 'father's house' (*bēt 'āb*) as a moral collective. I conclude that this final model is most promising for elucidating the relationship between collective and individual, and for offering an account of collective and transgenerational punishments. In ancient Near East culture, also the more comprehensive social units (e.g., tribe, nation) were viewed and experienced metaphorically as a *bēt 'āb*. The impression one gets is that in cases involving such metaphorical extension of the notion of the *bēt 'āb*, there is no transgenerational punishment on the basis of collective guilt, but rather cumulative punishment on the cumulative sins of the past and present generations. In cases where it is not clear that the new generations actually follow in the sins of the past generations, these new generations may still suffer the consequences of the transgressions their forefathers or the past generations committed, but these consequences are not to be understood as a punishment upon these new generations.

In the ancient Near East cultural context in which the first chapters of Genesis were written and first read, the human race was presumably viewed as a *bēt 'āb* of Adam. As a *bēt 'āb*, the entire human race thus shares in the consequences of Adam's sin. This does not imply that all people are considered guilty of that transgression; every new generation incurs its own guilt.

[7] According to **Paul**, the fact that people cannot avoid sin follows from Adam letting sin enter the world. Ever since that time, people came to be 'under (the power of) sin.' In order to tempt people, sin uses the law, whether written or in another form. As 'flesh' people are unable to resist sin's surpassing power (where 'flesh' does not *per se* qualify people as sinful, but rather as weak, also in the face of sin). As a result, sin comes to 'dwell' in each and every person.

Nevertheless, people remain responsible for and guilty of their sin. This is because the human race does have some knowledge of God, even part from the gospel, and yet does not worship God, and because people, notwithstanding their knowledge of what God requires of them, fail to do his will. God holds human beings to be responsible for their sins, even though they at birth enter into a catastrophic situation of which they are not the cause—i.e., the surpassing power of sin (Paul does not state that people are born sinful and guilty). Their powerlessness before sin is no excuse for them. The fact that they cannot cope with sin does not take away their responsibility for their committing sins. Paul offers no solution to the relationship between sin's inevitability and the sinner's moral responsibility.

What is Adam's role with respect to the sin and guilt of all his descendants? Human beings are guilty before God, not because they are in some way responsible for Adam's sin and guilt (since Paul does not hold that they sinned 'in Adam'), but on account of their own sins. Adam is the one who through his transgression let sin enter human reality. Ever since that time, sin has a surpassing power which the human race cannot match. As such, it is because of Adam that all people sin and therefore stand condemned.

### III. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

[8] Why is sin **inevitable**? The biblical data offer no reason to posit a sinful nature into which every person has come to be born ever since the first sin of Adam. Nevertheless, the Bible's qualification of the human race as 'flesh' does point to a disposition to sin present in human nature (even in Adam before his first sin; he too was 'flesh'): it is a susceptibility for the 'desire' for what is in essence a form of autonomy.

In an attempt to mobilize anthropological insights for the elucidation of the human disposition to a sinful independence from God, I turn to Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Ricœur, and Wolfhart Pannenberg's views on sin, which are all informed by notions of identity: what is that human fallibility that leads people to failure? From them I harvest the following elements. Kierkegaard: for the formation of their identity, people depend on a power outside of themselves (fallibility). That power is God; when they do not seek their security in God, they look for it either in themselves or in the affirmation of others (failure). Niebuhr: the human race is finite and aware of that finitude (fallibility); people can deny that in their arrogance and self-love, or escape from their freedom in sensuality. Both options are indicative of a preceding lack of confidence in God (failure). Ricœur: the human race is a mediation—and thus a conflict—between the finite and the infinite in terms of perception, practice, and especially feeling, and is thus unstable (fallibility); the pursuit of things that are in themselves not wrong, such as possessions, power, or respect, can turn into an endless search for them (failure). Pannenberg: the human constitution witnesses of a tension in the 'ego' between centrality and exocentric self-transcendence (fallibility); people turn to the other (including God), and at the same time they alienate themselves from the other (failure).

But does this human fallibility make sin inevitable? According to Scripture, there was in history a first transition from disposition to act. This is a historical datum, and not just some supra-historical principle as a premise to explain current human existence. On the basis of the Genesis account, one must maintain that Adam and

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Eve's first sin was not inevitable. Things changed, however, once they were expelled from the garden and began to live outside the presence of God, without access to the tree of life, as a portent of death. For Adam's descendants sin is inevitable. Every new generation ends up in the power of sin; sin comes to live in them. This must be explained by the fact that the sin of the first man effected a fundamental change in the situation in which his descendants were born (not in paradise, but outside of it), and by the fact that its effects are passed on from one generation to the next, making the disposition to sin more powerful.

Sin is also an interpersonal and a supra-personal reality. Behind sin's surpassing power stands the power of Satan.

[9] If sin is inevitable, can sinners still be held morally **responsible** for their sins? The classical doctrine of original sin departs from two classical (Aristotelian) conditions for moral responsibility: (1) people have to do what they do voluntarily, that is, they must themselves have control over what they are doing; and (2) they have to know (be able to know) that what they are doing is good or evil. Briefly, what they do must be done 'willingly' (i.e., the control condition) and 'knowingly' (i.e., the epistemic condition). I will first evaluate the classical doctrine of original sin using these conditions.

The doctrine of original sin posits that, even though human beings individually do not satisfy those conditions (since they are born in sin and guilt, and therefore do not choose sin willingly and knowingly), their first father Adam did satisfy those conditions when he sinned: he sinned willingly and knowingly, and was therefore guilty. According to the doctrine of original sin, this guilt is imputed to his descendants because it *is* the guilt of all people. This claim is based on a philosophical realism assuming a supra-personal, ontological unity between Adam and his posterity which is located in their common human nature. It is this human nature that sinned when Adam sinned, and it is in that nature that all people who would ever share in this nature committed sin. The fall into sin was an ontological fall of the human race.

This conception rests on philosophical, speculative (Neoplatonic) premises. It fails to satisfy the condition for moral responsibility according to which the person in question must him- or herself be the source of that for which he or she is held to be guilty (i.e., the control condition), and its solution is out of line with the biblical data.

So too the federalist solution to the problem of the grounds for the imputation of Adam's sin fails to satisfy. This view holds that the sin of *another* is imputed to all people. For that reason, also federalism fails to satisfy the condition for moral responsibility according to which the person in question must her- or himself be the source of that for which she or he is considered guilty, and it similarly is out of line with the biblical data.

In this context, I also discuss a variety of proposals for an *indirect* imputation of Adam's sin (Anselm, Placaeus, Henri Blocher, and Ian McFarland), and conclude that they too are unconvincing.

From the perspective of the classical, Aristotelian conception of moral responsibility ('willingly and knowingly'), one must therefore conclude that we cannot speak of inherited guilt. But is that classical conception itself convincing? To answer this question, I go on to treat the two conditions for moral responsibility which it posits.

For the first condition ('willingly'), my point of departure is the classical compatibilism encountered in Augustine and Calvin: in order to be morally responsible,

it suffices for people to have the ability to do what they will to do, without impeding obstacles. By extension, one can posit that moral responsibility does not require people to have alternate possibilities; it satisfies for them to will what they do (Harry G. Frankfurt). Part of what it means to be human is to assume responsibility for the ‘mechanism’ by which we make choices and perform acts (even if we were factually to have no alternatives); that is part of human identity (John M. Fischer and Mark Ravizza). That we really do assume that responsibility is evident from our conscience: we are aware that we are responsible for what we do and fail to do. We are the source of not only our conscious and willed acts, but also of our non-willed mental states (the attributionist approach of Robert M. Adams and Angela M. Smith: “attributability is enough for accountability”). In the context of human inevitable sins, this attributionist approach implies that in order for us to be responsible for our sins, it suffices for us to be their source. It is not necessary to have had the option not to commit the sin as well; in other words, the sin need not be avoidable. Nor is it necessary to trace back our inevitable sins to a choice we made, which in turn led to that inevitability (the tracing principle). Inherited guilt is not a condition for guilt.

So too the attributionist approach meets the intention of the second classical condition (‘knowingly’: to be responsible, people must *know* what is demanded of them, and, at the very least, *know* that God exists): to be responsible for our sins, it suffices that those sins can be assigned to us, that we ourselves are their source. This applies even in cases of moral ignorance, and on the assumption that people of themselves have no knowledge God or lack a religious consciousness.

The attributionist redefinition of the classical conditions for moral responsibility also leaves no room for the notion of ‘inherited guilt.’ At the same time, what it does succeed in is to establish what the concept of ‘inherited guilt’ intended to address, and what the present study was seeking a solution for, namely moral responsibility for inevitable sins.

Finally, I address the recent threat to moral responsibility represented by an increasingly popular neuroscientific determinism, which bases itself on the discovery of unconscious processes behind our acts. Here too the attributionist approach to moral responsibility shows itself to be of use insofar as moral responsibility is not limited to matters that we consciously will and know. The crucial point in this context is the fact that we are the *source* of the things for which we are either reproached or lauded. These are not limited to the things of which we are conscious. Therefore, neuroscience’s discovery of unconscious processes behind our acts serves to bolster rather than to undermine a philosophically responsible (attributionist) view on moral responsibility.

**[10]** In the **epilogue** I first reflect on the solution I have proposed for the question of the relationship between the inevitability of sin and humanity’s responsibility for sin. Thereafter I examine the intentions of the classical doctrine of original sin.

Against the fatalism of Manicheism, the classical doctrine of original sin sought to retain human responsibility for sin. Since it located sin in the human will, it failed. On the other hand, attributionism did prove successful by virtue of the emphasis it places on sin as something that is our own (apart from the question as to whether or not the sins were committed ‘willingly and knowingly’).

Against Pelagianism, the classical doctrine of original sin sought to retain the inevitability of sin: sin is not only something we choose, but it also ‘chooses’ us. Sin is a power to which we are subjected. Here too the voluntarism of the classical doctrine



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of original sin proved to be problematic: if sin is committed 'willingly and knowingly,' how can young children already sin and even be born as sinners?

As such, it is important not to restrict oneself to a single expression when speaking of human sin: it is a matter of acting *and* of being overpowered. We need to pray to be forgiven *and* to be set free.\*

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\* Translated from Dutch by Albert Gootjes.