

## Concerning Original Sin

According to Reinhold Niebuhr, the perfection before the fall which is meant by "original righteousness" means "perfection before the act," i. e., before actual sin(s).

*Question:* Could one say, perhaps, that what is properly meant by "original sin" is, correspondingly, something like "imperfection before the act," i. e., before the actual sin(s) relative to which the distinction between "original sin" and "actual sin(s)" can alone be made?

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1. Some years ago, I read Karl Rahner's argument to the effect that "original sin" needs to be understood in an analogical sense relative to "actual sin." Both before and after that time, I have resisted such teaching on the ground that sin which is not actual, in the sense of not being the result of misusing my own freedom, cannot be said to be my sin in any sense of the word, analogical or literal. Thus I have usually interpreted "original sin" as referring to my original possibility of inauthentic existence in contrast to "original righteousness," which refers to my original possibility of authentic existence. But to this interpretation there is the obvious objection that it makes original sin merely a possibility, despite the fact that this is hardly how the concept has been understood in the main theological tradition.

2. Against this background, or out of this context, suppose one takes seriously the insight—forcefully stated by Hartshorne, among others—that it is not biology which is in a position to explain the transmission of sin, but, rather, psychiatry (and, as one might add if one were to be informed by Habermas and Apel, the critique of ideology). On the basis of this insight, one could conceivably argue that, while "original sin," like "actual sin(s)," must indeed be understood relative to the individual fully accountable human sinner, what "original sin" refers to is not the free and responsible action(s) of the individual sinner *qua* fully accountable, which is what we properly mean by her or his "actual sin(s)," but rather whatever reactions to the actions of earlier generations of individual sinners have gone into the formation of this

individual sinner prior to the fully accountable action(s)—the actual sin(s)—whereby alone she or he actually becomes a sinner in her or his own right. In other words, each of us becomes fully accountable only through being acted upon by, and reacting to the actions of, other human beings who are already sinners and who transmit their sin to us through their own actual sin(s). Thus, while it is indeed true that "sin presupposes itself," in the sense that sin cannot be explained by anything except sin, it is also true that the sin which my sin presupposes is not (or not only) my own, but (also) that of the others to whose sinful actions I have always already had to react before I myself ever became fully accountable and, as such, capable of sin in my own right.

3. Of course, I have, in my own way, long allowed for this, insofar as I have spoken of the "profound corruption of human nature" as "a universal fact" brought about by sin, even if not "a modal necessity." Thus, if I have maintained that "every human being is continually inclined to misunderstand her- or himself before God," I have also maintained that "every human being is born into a humanity for which this generalization already holds good and which, therefore, in its thoughts, words, and deeds and their complex institutionalization in society and culture, is already a corrupted [and, as I should now want to add, corrupting] humanity." But I have also been at pains to distinguish sin itself and as such, for which each of us is responsible insofar as we are fully accountable individual sinners, from the temptation to sin, which each of us can be for others through our own actual sin(s). Therefore, I have not said or even thought that the actual sin(s) of one person could go to account for the original sin presupposed by another's actual sin(s), insofar as the other's existence prior to becoming fully accountable and, therefore, capable of actual sin(s) is always already formed by her or his reaction(s) to the actual sin(s) and the original sin of the one preceding her or him.

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1. To be a sinner is to fall short of the glory of God—to be less than one could and should be as a creature created in God's image, and than one would be were it not for the misuse of human freedom involved in being a sinner.

2. Thus it makes sense to speak of someone's being a sinner only where it is possible to speak of the misuse of human freedom that sin involves.

3. This need not mean, however, that it is solely one's own misuse of freedom, and hence one's own actual sin(s), that account for one's thus falling short.

4. On the contrary, there is in each of us, prior to our own "actual sin(s)," what is properly distinguished from it (them) as "original sin." By this is meant everything in us brought about by our reaction(s) to the actual sin(s) of others preceding us that, together with our own previous actual sin(s), if any, accounts for our falling short here and now of the glory of God through our own present actual sin(s). In this sense, "original sin" means something like "imperfection before the act," i. e., before the actual sin(s) relative to which the distinction between "original sin" and "actual sin(s)" can alone be made.

5. Thus, while "original sin," like sin in any sense, involves the misuse of human freedom, it is also always the misuse of freedom by another or others and, in this sense, an "alien" sin by contrast with one's own "domestic" sin(s), i. e., one's own "actual sin(s)."

6. "Original sin" itself and as such, however, is not the misuse of freedom by others—that, on the contrary, could only be the others' own "actual sin(s)"—but, rather, whatever is already in me, prior to any of my own actual sin(s), that has been brought about in me by the actual sin(s) of others and that accounts for my presently falling short of God's glory.

7. Considering that the self is, in a fundamental respect, a new and different self in every new moment, one can say that even one's own past actual sin(s) is(are) the sin(s) of another or others, namely, the past momentary actual self or selves from which the present momentary self can and must be distinguished. Thus, if "original sin" refers to everything belonging to the present momentary self that has been brought about by the actual sin(s) of others, rather than by the present self's own actual sin(s), the "others" referred to include any and all of the other momentary selves

belonging to the same individual sequence to which the present self also belongs.

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