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Gregory Beabout

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DOES ANXIETY EXPLAIN HEREDITARY SIN?

Gregory R. Beabout

This paper aims to complement Philip Quinn's article "Does Anxiety Explain Original Sin?" Quinn showed how Kierkegaard uses the concept of anxiety to provide a more adequate account of the origin of evil in human life. By focusing on chapter two of *The Concept of Anxiety*, this paper shows how Kierkegaard also uses the concept of anxiety to explain in what sense the sinfulness of previous generations can be a conditioning factor that influences the fall from innocence without compromising human freedom.

I

In his article "Does Anxiety Explain Original Sin?" Philip Quinn provides a helpful framework to understand Kierkegaard's difficult work *The Concept of Anxiety*.¹ Quinn argues that Kierkegaard follows Kant and Schleiermacher in rejecting, at least in part, the Augustinian conception of original sin. Augustine's view is notoriously problematic as an explanation of the origin of evil in human beings, since it implicitly makes the individual responsible for sins that one did not commit. Quinn sees Kierkegaard's use of the concept of anxiety as an advance in rethinking the Augustinian interpretation of original sin, one that provides a more adequate account of the origin of evil in human life.

In order to explain how Kierkegaard uses the concept of anxiety to explain original sin, Quinn first sets forth the views of Kant and Schleiermacher on this issue. Quinn concludes that Kierkegaard's use of the concept of anxiety is an advance not only on Augustine, but on Kant and Schleiermacher as well. These two recognized the inherent flaw in the Augustinian idea of original sin, but each are left with problems of their own. Kant so overemphasizes individual choice that he is left with an ahistorical, noumenal act carried out in a social vacuum. Schleiermacher is left with an implicit determinism when he claims that humans have an innate disposition towards sinfulness. Quinn concludes that Kierkegaard's use of the concept of anxiety "comes closer than either Kant or Schleiermacher to outlining a replacement that is adequate in both substance and emphasis."²

While Quinn's account helps answer the question of his title, I will show that his explanation does not go as far as Kierkegaard's. Quinn's question is "Does anxiety explain original sin? But Kierkegaard writes of hereditary sin, not original sin. In the subtitle to *The Concept of Anxiety*, and throughout



most of the book, Kierkegaard uses the Danish term *Arvesynd*, which is better translated as “hereditary sin” than as “original sin,” since the root “*arv*” means inheritance, heritage, or legacy. So Kierkegaard uses the concept of anxiety to shed light not only on the “origin” of sin, but on its “hereditariness” as well.³

The Christian tradition, through Augustine and also in the scriptures, teaches that Adam’s sin is both original and hereditary. The *Genesis* account makes it clear that not only is the fall in Eden first, and hence original, but it has an effect on all subsequent humans, and is hence hereditary.⁴ St. Paul makes this clear in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans. So for a Christian explanation of the origin of evil in human life, we need an account of both the origin and hereditariness of sin.

In Quinn’s essay, the focus is on the question whether anxiety explains original sin. I want to complement his interpretation and analysis of Kierkegaard’s work by focusing on the question of heredity: “Does anxiety explain hereditary sin?” I will do this by providing a more detailed interpretation of chapter two of *The Concept of Anxiety* than the brief sketch set forth in Quinn’s article. By focusing on chapter two and the issue of hereditariness, I will move the discussion beyond an explanation of original sin to an explanation of the sense in which the sinfulness of previous generations can play a conditioning factor that influences the fall from innocence without compromising human freedom. I will conclude that Kierkegaard successfully uses the concept of anxiety not only to explain the origin of evil in human life, but to explain its hereditariness as well.

II

The question of the hereditariness of sin causes special and difficult problems for thinking Christians. The very concept of sin entails within it the notion of free choice.⁵ For if sin is caused by God, or the serpent, or any being other than the individual, then it is not really the responsibility of the individual, and not really sin.⁶ And if sin originates with Adam and is causally hereditary, then subsequent individuals are not really responsible for their sins; Adam is.

Kierkegaard makes it clear that sin is not the fault of God, but is a choice made in anxiety by Adam, a choice that is mirrored by the first sinful choice of each human being. Hence anxiety explains original sin by making it clear that sin originates with human beings, and that anxiety is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sin.

This is explained by Vigilius Haufniensis, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, in chapter one of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Anxiety is a psychological (and even ontological) state of simultaneous attraction and repulsion to future possibilities. In innocence, Adam is both attracted to and repulsed from the future

possibility of sin. That Adam sins is the result of his own choice, a choice made in anxiety. Anxiety then serves to explain sin as the condition for the possibility of the fall. As such, anxiety explains original sin only insofar as it is the psychological state of the individual prior to the first sin. Psychology is unable to provide a causal explanation of the fall, since sin is a free act incapable of a complete causal explanation. Hence, chapter one of *The Concept of Anxiety* is not an attempt to give a causal explanation of original sin. Rather, it seeks through a transcendental explanation to understand the origin of sin in human beings by psychologically examining anxiety, which is the state that precedes but does not necessitate the first sin.

In sum, Vigilius sets forth the following points in chapter one. Adam is essentially similar to every person. Sin entered into Adam through Adam's own sin. Particular sins are causally inexplicable. Adam is a prototype of a sinner, not the cause of sin in any other person. Sin enters in every other person through that person's own sin. Given these conclusions, the traditional paradox of original sin has been resolved. Individual are not guilty for a sin they did not commit, for example, Adam's original sin. Instead, every individual who has sinned is guilty only of his or her own sin.

III

The issue might become clearer if we contrast it with a typical misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's view on guilt and hereditary sin. Some commentators have made sense of Kierkegaard's discussion of these topics by referring to Søren's father, Michael Pederson Kierkegaard. The story is told that the father, while eleven years old, was tending his flocks on the Jutland heath. He was alone, wet, cold, and hungry. He raised his eyes to the gray heavens and cursed God for making an innocent child suffer. Apparently afterward he felt tremendously guilty for this act and thought that he and all his offspring would be damned for this sin.⁷

Moreover, the father must have also felt tremendous guilt regarding Søren's mother. Michael Pederson Kierkegaard married Kirstine Royen, his social equal, in 1794. Two years later she died without having had any children. Before the year was over and while he still should have been mourning the death of his wife, his maid (Søren's mother to be) became pregnant. Based on the birth date of the child, she must have conceived in December of 1796. The father probably found out that his maid was pregnant in January or February of 1797. In February of that year, he retired from business and took up the study of pietistic theology. We can only imagine the guilt and confusion that the father must have experienced, for within two months, he quickly married his maid, in April. Five months after the marriage, a daughter was born. During this time, the father immersed himself in reading pietistic theology. He saw himself and his offspring as guilty for his sins.⁸ (Søren was the youngest of seven children born from this second marriage.)

Søren Kierkegaard may have been strongly influenced by his father, but he apparently did not hold the same view as his father on hereditary sin. His father seemed to hold that sin is passed on from generation to generation, that sin is literally and causally hereditary, an inheritance, a legacy. Vigilius, in chapter one, rejects that view. If subsequent individuals are not guilty of Adam's sins, then neither are Michael Pederson Kierkegaard's children guilty of his sins. Hence if, as some commentators have urged⁹, Kierkegaard's writing is somehow a dialogue with his parents or his father, then *The Concept of Anxiety* is a rejection of his father's view that the children are guilty for the sins of the father. Of course, it does not follow from this that Søren Kierkegaard is declaring himself innocent. To be sure, Kierkegaard recognized himself as guilty and as a sinner. However, if he is to embrace the view that he has Vigilius set forth in *The Concept of Anxiety*, then he is guilty for his own sins—not the sin of Adam, and not the sins of his father.

Still, it is not completely satisfactory to view chapter one of *The Concept of Anxiety* simply as a rejection of his father's views on the "hereditariness" of original sin. Rather, the view that Vigilius sets forth is a reinterpretation of an entire tradition of understanding sin as hereditary, a tradition which goes back to Luther, Augustine, and St. Paul.

Given this, we can more fully understand Quinn's point about how Vigilius's view of original sin is a radical rethinking, one that virtually puts the Augustinian interpretation to rest. Vigilius has reframed the entire issue of original sin. According to Vigilius, the individual does not participate in original sin through one's relation to Adam. Most prior explanations of original sin sought to explain the sins of subsequent individuals through their relation to Adam. Vigilius holds that the individual participates in original sin through a relation to sin. Having sinned, one has participated in original sin through an experience essentially similar to Adam's first sin.

IV

The problem that Vigilius now faces is explaining in what sense original sin is hereditary. For in chapter one, Vigilius has dissolved the traditional dilemma that arises with the Western Christian notion of original sin, namely, blaming people for a sin they did not commit. However, he has created a new problem. His new problem is primarily a theological issue, for traditional Christian theology claims that Adam's sin is significant not only for Adam, but also for all humans. Still, a philosophical issue is involved. Is each individual completely in isolation from every other individual, or do individuals affect one another and if so to what extent? In chapter two, Vigilius takes up the task of showing the sense in which Adam's sin quantitatively changes the situation that all subsequent individual face, without necessitating that we become sinners. In so doing, he guards against the charge of

radical individualism without sacrificing either freedom of choice or personal responsibility for one's acts.

Adam's sin has several effects. Sin now enters into the world through Adam becoming a sinner. This does not obliterate anxiety, for the person in sin still has an ambiguous relation to the future possibility of either sinning again or being redeemed. Hence, anxiety keeps its basic structure of both attraction to and repulsion from future possibilities, but there is a change in anxiety since there is an important change in the relevant future possibilities.

Vigilius refuses to claim that one of the causal effects of Adam's first sin is the sinfulness of the rest of the human race. Instead, the two main effects are that Adam's sin changes the world and that Adam's sin changes the intensity of the desire that subsequent innocent individuals experience. Vigilius terms these objective and subjective anxiety.

V

The section on objective anxiety is initially very perplexing. Vincent McCarthy claims it is the weakest section in the book; he assumes that it is taken up only so there will be some contrast for the following section on subjective anxiety.¹⁰ McCarthy does not make it clear that in this section Vigilius is trying to make sense of the "hereditariness" of sin. In chapter one, the view that sin is strictly hereditary, that is, that it causes a flaw in the being of subsequent individuals, is rejected. In this section, Vigilius discusses the way sin and anxiety enter into the social context and the historical nexus and hence become objectified.¹¹ Haufniensis recognizes that, after Adam, individuals are not born into an environment in which sin is absent. Rather, innocent individuals are born into a world with parents who are themselves sinners, with distorted social structures, and in specific historical situations that are more or less complicated by wrongdoing. In this sense, anxiety becomes objectified.

Here, Vigilius may be shifting the meaning of anxiety, for it is not only anxiety that becomes objectified, but sinfulness. Thus, when Vigilius writes about objective anxiety, he has expanded his notion of anxiety so that he is referring to sinful social structures that become objectified as they take root and are participated in by people. In different cultures, anxiety becomes objectified in different ways¹², which is to say that in different societies, sinfulness has different expressions.

With each successive generation, the quantity of sinfulness and anxiety in the world increases. These increases in quantity affect each new innocent individual, though they do not qualitatively change the innocent individual.¹³ This means that for each individual, though the person is born into an environment with others who are themselves sinners and into a distorted social context, it is not the parents, the environment, or the social context alone that

causes the innocent person to sin. If the innocent person becomes a sinner, it is through a free act. The fact that there is an increased quantity of sin and anxiety in the world, which is begun by Adam and is continued by every sinner's sin, is not alone what caused the person to sin. The qualitative change in the person, the move from innocence to guilt, is a free act of the individual. The individual who is guilty is always, at least in part, responsible for his or her sinfulness.

There are two elements involved when an innocent person becomes guilty. On the one hand, there is the fall by the person into sin. On the other hand, there is the context in which the fall into sin occurs. "Objective anxiety" is Vigilius's term for the increase in sinfulness in the world that is one part of the fall into guilt for all individuals subsequent to Adam.

VI

The section on subjective anxiety is a continued attempt to show the significance of Adam's first sin and to explain some further sense in which sin accumulates in the world without making Adam responsible for the sin of any subsequent individual. Vigilius explains that while the object of anxiety for Adam was the nothingness of the future, for subsequent individuals this future nothingness has a more specific form, or as he phrases it, is more of a "something" (61). Haufniensis terms this "subjective anxiety" and claims it signifies two things (62).

The first thing that the change in the object of anxiety signifies is the consequence of the relationship of generation. Adam's sin (treating Adam here as a historical figure) did not take place in a developed social structure, or at least not in one that had been distorted by human sinfulness. Yet the movement from innocence to guilt that is made by subsequent individuals is made in such a distorted social structure. Hence, for subsequent individuals, anxiety is in a certain sense more intensified than it was for Adam. For example, suppose a person is born into a family and a society with a distorted structure. At some point the person may move from innocence to guilt, perhaps by taking on a distorted role in that social structure. The experience of moving from innocence to guilt will be similar to Adam's in that it was done by a free act. No science can observe in others what the guilty individual knows of himself or herself, i.e., personal responsibility. Like Adam's first sin, the movement of the individual from innocence to guilt was made by a causally inexplicable leap. However, this person's experience is different from Adam's because of the relation to the social setting in which the person was placed. The anxiety of this person is different from the anxiety of Adam in that the object of anxiety, which is the future possibility of actively taking part in this distorted social structure, is more developed than the object of anxiety for Adam.

To explain this point, Vigilius uses the figure of Eve, since she is derived from Adam.¹⁴ Unfortunately, his discussion of the role of women is annoyingly sexist to contemporary readers, and even perhaps by 19th century standards. However, the discussion of the role of women is not the main point; instead it is used as an example to explain an important difference between Adam's anxiety and the anxiety of subsequent individuals. The difference is that for subsequent individuals, anxiety's object, while still a future possibility, is more concrete, since it is the possibility of actively taking part in a distorted social structure that is already in place. The conclusion of this section is best summed up when Vigilius writes that "Christianity has never assented to giving each particular individual the privilege of starting from the beginning in an external sense. Each individual begins in an historical nexus" (73). Since every subsequent individual begins in a specific historical nexus that is already more or less distorted, the future possibility of actively taking part in that social structure is a more concrete possibility than was the possibility that Adam faced. This, therefore, is an important difference between the first sin of Adam and every other sin. Still, this is a quantitative difference in anxiety, not a qualitative difference.¹⁵

The second thing that the change in the object of anxiety signifies is the consequence of the historical relationship. The anxiety of the innocent person may have various objects, depending on the historical setting in which the innocent person has been placed. To explain his point, Vigilius discusses sensuality.

There is nothing intrinsically evil about sensuality; there is nothing wrong with being a bodily creature. However, one of the consequences of sin is that it makes sensuousness to be sinfulness. (Thus, though Vigilius rejects any austere Augustinianism which makes being bodily intrinsically bad, he does not replace it with an optimistic Pelagianism.) Sinfulness makes sensuality sinfulness. Therefore, there is an important difference between the first sin of Adam and the first sin of any subsequent individual regarding their respective views of sensuality. In the garden and while in innocence, Adam had no insight that the body was shameful. It was sin that made sensuousness to be sinfulness. However, the situation is different for people in varying historical settings. Subsequent individuals have "an historical environment in which it may become apparent that sensuousness can signify sinfulness. For the [innocent] individual himself, sensuousness does not signify this, but this knowledge gives anxiety a 'more'" (73). This means that there can be an important difference between the anxiety of Adam and the anxiety of subsequent innocent individuals regarding their knowledge of the possibility of transforming sensuousness into sinfulness. Further, this intensification in anxiety can vary in different societies. For example, the knowledge that an innocent person in a Christian society has of the possibility of making sensuousness to be sin-

fulness might vary from the same knowledge that an innocent person would have in a different society (74). Thus, the historical environment in which one is placed can make a difference in affecting the intensity of the anxiety. Still, this is always a quantitative difference, and it is never enough to make an innocent person guilty without some act of personal responsibility on the part of the person who becomes guilty.

VII

In summing up chapter two, Vigilius claims that there are three main ways of misunderstanding the role that the individual plays in becoming guilty (75-6). The first possible mistake is to view the child as a “perfect little angel” who is plunged into a corrupt society. The child is so strongly influenced by this distorted environment that, of necessity, the child is made to be bad. But this view fails to recognize what the guilty individual alone knows: personal responsibility played a role in choosing actively to participate in this distorted social setting. Hence, Kierkegaard implicitly rejects Rousseau’s view on the nature of human beings and the effect of the environment upon them.

The second possible mistake is to view the child as thoroughly wicked. This view fails to recognize the possibility of an innocence that preceded wickedness and hence it must place responsibility on something other than the guilty individual. Therefore, Kierkegaard rejects an austere Augustinianism or Hobbesian view on the innate wickedness of persons.

The third possible mistake is to view the child as neither good nor bad though capable of each, depending solely on how the child is environmentally conditioned. Again, this view ignores any possibility of personal responsibility. In this way, Kierkegaard implicitly rejects B. F. Skinner’s view on the role of the environment in conditioning the individual. Vigilius’s view—that the child is born in innocence but into a sinful society and that, in anxiety, the individual freely and inexplicably chooses evil—seeks to avoid the mistakes of each of these views by including the middle term: anxiety.

Therefore, chapter two is important at several levels. Theologically, Vigilius shows the sense in which Adam’s sin is hereditary. Adam’s sin brings sin into the world and hence changes the object of anxiety for subsequent individuals. This intensification of anxiety in subsequent individuals is “the presence of hereditary sin in the single individual” (52). This does not mean that anxiety is itself the sin. Vigilius constantly reminds us that the presence of this intensified anxiety does not necessitate sin. Thus, hereditary sin is not a flaw in one’s being caused by Adam’s sin, as most earlier interpretations had understood it. Rather, hereditary sin consists in the double fact that sin and anxiety get objectified in distorted social structures and that the innocent individual has a quantitatively increased relation of anxiety to the future possibility of actively participating in that distorted society in a distorted way.

With this, Vigilius has solved the traditional dilemma arising out of the Augustinian interpretation of hereditary sin. On Kierkegaard's view, individuals are guilty only for their own sinful acts, not for those of previous generations. Nonetheless, there remains still a sense in which the dogma of hereditary sin is true, for there is the double fact that sin and anxiety quantitatively accumulate in the world and that this objectification of anxiety in the world quantitatively increases anxiety in subsequent individuals.

At a philosophical and psychological level, chapter two is a defense against the charge of radical individualism. Haufniensis makes it clear that individuals are always placed in particular environments with unique social settings in a specific historical nexus. He wholeheartedly admits that the environment conditions the individual, for it intensifies anxiety by giving its object a more concrete form, i.e., the possibility of accepting or rejecting the specific distorted social context. This is what Vigilius means when he writes that the nothing of anxiety is made into a something (61). Still, the environment does not wholly determine how the individual will act. This is what Vigilius means when he says that the something is still a nothing (61). The individual has an ambiguous relationship to future possibilities, a relationship of both attraction and repulsion. Even if the individual has a fairly concrete image of these future possibilities, e.g., of either accepting or rejecting the possibility of actively taking part in a distorted social structure, the individual is not necessitated to do either. However, if the individual does make the leap into guilt, the condition for the possibility of that leap was anxiety.

VIII

Therefore, for Kierkegaard, the concept of anxiety is used to explain and rethink both the origin of evil in human life and the hereditariness of that evil. Every human being is born in anxious innocence. Like Adam, human beings begin life in innocence and are related to future possibilities in anxiety. The fall from innocence is the result of a choice made in anxiety. But unlike the first inhabitants of Eden, subsequent individuals are born into a world changed by sin. In this sense, all subsequent human beings are born "into" sin, that is, into a sinful world. Sin is hereditary in the sense that it quantitatively accumulates in the world, and as sin and anxiety quantitatively accumulate in the world, the objectification of anxiety quantitatively increases anxiety in subsequent individuals. Thus, the hereditariness of sin plays a conditioning role, but it is not a necessitating factor causing a qualitative change from innocence to guilt. While quantitative changes may alter the setting and texture of the first sin of subsequent individuals, it is still the case that the qualitative change from innocence to guilt occurs in anxiety, and hence remains, in part at least, the responsibility of the individual.

NOTES

1. Philip Quinn, "Does Anxiety Explain Original Sin?" *Noûs* 24 (1990), pp. 227-44.
2. Quinn, p. 242.
3. For other work on the concept of anxiety in Kierkegaard, see the collection of essays in Robert L. Perkins, ed. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985). Other works that contain a discussion of this topic include Louis Dupre, *Kierkegaard as Theologian* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), Jean Wahl, *Études Kierkegaardiennes* (Paris: Vrin, 1949), and Niels Thulstrup, "Adam and Original Sin," in *Biblioteca Kierkegardiana*, vol. 5, ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1980).
4. See *Genesis*, Chapter 3.
5. In the "Introduction," Vigilius explains that since *The Concept of Anxiety* is a psychological work, its method does not make it appropriate to include an explanation of the dogmatic concept of sin. Instead, the concept of sin is explained in *The Sickness Unto Death*.
6. For a fuller account of the concept of sin in Kierkegaard's psychological works, see Greg Beabout, *Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair: An Analysis of The Concept of Anxiety and The Sickness Unto Death* (diss., Marquette University, 1988), especially pp. 56-65, 98-100, and 163-67.
7. Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), chapter 4.
8. Thompson, chapter 4.
9. Thompson puts forth this view. Also, Mark Taylor, in an unpublished paper presented at the Søren Kierkegaard Society Meeting in New York on December 29, 1987, set forth the view that Kierkegaard's writings are to be interpreted in light of his relationship to his parents, in particular his mother.
10. Vincent McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 41.
11. This interpretation, that objective anxiety is social, was suggested to me by Stephen Evans in a personal conversation in January of 1988.
12. Three types of objective anxiety constitute the subject matter of chapter three of *The Concept of Anxiety*.
13. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 57. Hereafter page references to this book will be made parenthetically in the body of my text.
14. The fact that Eve sinned prior to Adam in the *Genesis* account is ignored by Vigilius.
15. Hence, while *de facto* sin may get worse and easier with each generation, this is not completely inevitable, since it is based on free choices.