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CAN EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY CONFIRM ORIGINAL SIN?

John T. Mullen

Christian responses to the developing field of evolutionary psychology tend to be defensive, focusing on the task of showing that Christians have not been presented with any reason to abandon any central beliefs of the Christian faith. A more positive response would seek to show that evolutionary psychology can provide some sort of epistemic support for one or more distinctively Christian doctrines. This paper is an attempt to supply such a response by focusing on the distinctively Christian doctrine of original sin, which presents itself as an especially likely candidate for support from evolutionary psychology. I consider five versions of the doctrine in order of increasing content, arguing that all but the last can receive such support. However, in order to argue for the fourth version (which includes the doctrine traditionally described as "original guilt"), I enlist the aid of a Molinist understanding of divine providence. A consequence of this application of Molinism is that God holds us morally accountable, not only for what we actually do, but also for what we would do in any non-actual conditions, and that He acts on His knowledge of what we would do in such conditions. Because many may find this consequence problematic, I also argue that it is both morally acceptable and necessary for the perfection of the relationship between God and human beings. The last version of original sin that I consider insists that it must be the causal product of the first sin of the first human being(s), but I argue that this is not a reasonable alternative if original sin is to be equated with behavioral tendencies inherited from an evolutionary ancestry.

Most contemporary Christian scholarship regarding the relationship between the emerging field of evolutionary psychology and the Christian faith focuses on potential conflicts between the two. Evolutionary explanations for various ethical or religious beliefs and behaviors are frequently evaluated for compatibility with Christian explanations for the same. The two explanations may be judged to be in some sense incompatible, thus requiring some sort of adjudication. Or it may be argued that an evolutionary explanation can be accepted without thereby acquiring a reason to abandon or significantly alter one's distinctively Christian beliefs, despite an abundance of claims to the contrary. But in either case the field of evolutionary psychology is viewed as a potential threat to Christian faith, and the task is to offer a defense in the face of the threat. All of this work is important, necessary, and illuminating. It is understandable and perhaps even inevitable that a defensive response should be the first order of business, especially in view of the more outlandish and often intemperate anti-religious claims of some evolutionary psychologists. But thus far

the Christian community has given little to no attention to the ways in which evolutionary psychology might offer some sort of epistemic *support* for distinctively Christian doctrines (and thus also for the Christian faith itself). I take it that this is an undesirable state of affairs that requires correction. If there is anything to the old adage that the best defense is a good offense, then the Christian community should begin to explore the possibility of finding *support* for the Christian faith in evolutionary psychology. This paper, then, is a preliminary attempt to do just that. Though I will focus exclusively on the distinctively Christian doctrine of original sin, I certainly do not mean to suggest that the prospects for discovering such support relations are limited to that doctrine.

I submit that the doctrine of original sin presents itself immediately as an *obvious* candidate for support from the science of evolutionary psychology. Those to whom this claim does not seem obvious are very probably conceiving of original sin in one of its more specific and historically controversial forms. And I concede that as one adds content to the doctrine, it does indeed become more difficult to see how it can be supported by evolutionary psychology. Indeed, one might think that it becomes so difficult as to make it obvious that it is *not* so supported. Nevertheless, I will shortly consider most of the historic versions of original sin in order of increasing content, and argue that all but one of them can indeed be rendered more epistemically probable upon the addition of evolutionary psychology to one's belief structure. It will turn out, perhaps unsurprisingly, that this relation of epistemic support depends a great deal on which beliefs are already sitting in one's belief structure when one takes up the inquiry.

Let us begin by considering a minimal version of original sin and convincing ourselves that we really ought to be able to support it with the simplest and least controversial consequences of evolutionary psychology:

(OS1) Human beings generally¹ inherit at conception a set of conditions that make it very likely that they will sin² when they reach a certain point of moral maturity.

OS1 is very weak in content. Because it is so weak, it is very easy to see in it a deep consonance with an evolutionary inheritance. Christians are very frequently admonished, by Scripture, Tradition, and by the many sermons they hear, to be ever on their guard against the moral corruption they possess *by nature*. We are told that we must never assume that all our natural inclinations are morally good and right, but must learn to distinguish the good from the bad within ourselves, i.e., even from among our internal inclinations. And now our latest science is telling us that we have inherited from our ancestors certain behavioral tendencies that lead us to protect and serve our own interests at others' expense, to preserve and enhance our own reproductive fitness *relative to others*, etc. As Langdon Gilkey puts it, we have "genetic influences that lead us to competitiveness, brutality, violence, selfishness, and hedonism."³ And as Keith Ward puts it, "If...one sees human persons as having become a dominant species by being more efficient at replicating, obtaining scarce energy supplies, and eliminating competitors in the struggle for life, then it is perfectly understandable that they should have strong drives to sexuality, possessiveness, and aggression. Instead of sin being almost impossible to account for, it may

seem that it is goodness which now becomes virtually impossible. Lust, greed, and aggression are the natural inheritance of every human. How then could anyone escape their power?"⁴ Even popularizations of evolutionary psychology occasionally read like secular sermons, admonishing readers to beware lest we be deceived by our evolutionary inheritance into mistaking merely selfish impulses for what we really ought to do.⁵ And, perhaps ironically, this close fit between inherited behavioral tendencies and moral turpitude was not lost on some important early defenders of evolutionary theory. John Stuart Mill, for example, thought it was obvious that "if Nature and Man are both the works of a Being of perfect goodness, that Being intended Nature as a scheme to be amended, not imitated, by Man."⁶ And even Thomas Huxley, known primarily for his aggressive defense of Darwinism, tells us that "the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, but in combating it."⁷ So we seem to have very strong intuitive, *prima facie* reasons to equate some of our inherited behavioral tendencies with that corruption of our natures that we are so often exhorted to resist. We should therefore *expect* that the former can serve as some sort of evidence for the latter.

We shall consider stronger versions of original sin in a moment, but we have not thus far specified the sort of epistemic support we should be seeking. Because I see no need to make this task any more difficult than it needs to be, I suggest that we should begin with the weakest of all epistemic support relations, what is sometimes called the relevance criterion of confirmation. According to this criterion, a body of evidence, *E*, confirms a hypothesis, *H*, if and only if one's assessment of the epistemic probability of *H* increases when *E* is added to one's belief structure. Now the epistemic probability of any proposition can only be assessed relative to some background set of beliefs (or perhaps knowledge), *B*. And so the criterion for epistemic support that we should have in view is, I suggest, the following:

$$P(H / (E \& B)) > P(H / B)$$

where *H* is one of the versions of the doctrine of original sin, *E* is the collective deliverances of the science of evolutionary psychology, and *B* is everything else that one might believe (excluding, of course, *H*, *E*, $\sim H$, $\sim E$, and anything that entails *H* or *E* or $\sim H$ or $\sim E$). Because *B* varies from person to person, this confirmation relation is also person-relative. But there is no avoiding that, and it is not problematic. What counts as confirming evidence for us depends essentially on whatever else we know or believe. We must therefore proceed by assuming that there is enough overlap in our background beliefs to enable us to come to rough agreement in our assessments of the relevant epistemic probabilities. There is no need here to consider stronger criteria of confirmation, because we are now asking whether evolutionary biology can lend *any* sort of epistemic support to original sin. The weakest of supports will suffice for that purpose.

In the case of OS1, we may assume that *E* includes the proposition that *human beings generally inherit at conception a strong behavioral tendency to promote their own welfare at the expense of others*. Let us also assume that *B* includes the following propositions: *It is almost always sinful (i.e., morally wrong) to promote one's own welfare at the expense of others*, and *It is very*

unlikely that a strong behavioral tendency will be resisted without exception throughout the life of any human being. If these are granted, then E & B together entail OS1, and so $P(OS1 / (E \& B)) = 1$. And whatever assessment one might make of $P(OS1/B)$, it seems clear that it must be less than 1. Hence E confirms OS1. But that was too easy. Versions of original sin as weak as OS1 are indeed *obviously* supported by evolutionary psychology. So, let us add a little more content to OS1.

The first way we might strengthen OS1 is to add an inevitability requirement. So consider:

(OS2) Human beings generally inherit at conception a set of conditions that make it *inevitable* that they will sin.

I take it that a strong behavioral tendency is the most that we can expect from the science of evolutionary psychology, i.e., the inevitability we seek is not to be found there. So, in order to preserve the support relation for this version of original sin, we must make a corresponding adjustment to B. The necessary adjustment is, I submit, quite reasonable. Let us add to B the proposition that *constant resistance to strong behavioral tendencies throughout the life of a human being requires a level of attention to one's volitional freedom that far exceeds the natural ability of human beings.* Then, because that which is necessary is missing, it follows that it is inevitable that human beings who mature to a certain point will sin. Because the suggested addition to B is a psychological claim, one might wish that it have empirical support. Unfortunately, I know of no research that either supports or refutes the above modification to B. But if we may rely on introspection in this case, I think the above claim is very hard to deny. We are very much aware from personal experience how difficult it is to remain attentive to our moral freedom to the degree required to ensure that we will remain blameless at all times. Nor is it too much to claim that that level of attention is simply beyond our psychological strength. I think we can agree that this is a very reasonable modification, unless someone can refute it by empirical research in cognitive psychology. We do indeed have that belief in our set of background beliefs, or we will easily acquire it once we consider it.⁸

We may now strengthen OS2 still further by specifying the *type of inheritance* that is supported by evolutionary psychology. It seems clear that if the conditions that make sin inevitable for us just are the behavioral tendencies we inherit from our evolutionary past, then that inheritance is a *genetic* inheritance. Now the inheritance of original sin *through biological procreation* is also a significant feature of the doctrine of original sin as it has been taught in a wide variety of Christian communities for a very long time. And so we are now in a position to claim support for the following historically affirmed version of original sin:

(OS3) Human beings generally inherit at conception a set of *genetic* conditions that make it *inevitable* that they will sin.

Although no additions to either E or B are necessary here, we should pause briefly to anticipate two possible objections that might cause some to be reluctant to accept OS3, regardless of how well it might be supported by evolutionary psychology.

First, someone might suppose that original sin, to be acceptable at all in the modern world, must be regarded as a purely social phenomenon. The idea is that something went wrong *culturally* at some time in the now-inaccessible mists of antiquity, and that a *cultural* corruption resulted that has been propagated to all (or almost all) human beings ever since. If our genetic inheritance plays any role at all on this view, it is merely to make us compliant and conformable to social norms, especially during our formative years. But the content of the social norms could be anything, and they in fact lead us morally astray only because we still suffer the negative effects of some catastrophic cultural event many millennia ago. This view might be held for a variety of reasons. It might seem attractive to those who wish to retain some sort of historicity for the doctrine of the Fall, despite having become convinced that the opening chapters of *Genesis* are non-historic (or at least that the Fall narrative there is non-historic). It also might seem attractive to those who view redemption in purely social terms, and who seek to secure it by effecting social change. However, though the historicity question will be considered below, we may effectively ignore any general reasons someone might have for holding this view and focus our attention on the very strong claim that original sin must be *exclusively* cultural. There is no need to quarrel with the claim that many of the conditions we inherit at conception are social (i.e., cultural) conditions. In fact, that much seems very clearly to be so. Nor is there any need to dispute the claim that we have genetic predispositions to adopt the cultural norms to which we have been predominantly exposed in our formative years. Again, that much seems unproblematic, and it may likewise be supported by empirical psychological research, evolutionary or otherwise. But it is extremely problematic, in the face of contemporary evolutionary biology, to deny that there is *any* genetic component at all in our inherited tendencies to sin. Though it is evident that some of our inherited tendencies to sin are cultural, it is equally evident that at least some are genetic. The confirmation relation that is presently under consideration, whereby OS3 is confirmed by evolutionary psychology, can stand as a decisive (in my view) argument that *some* of our inherited tendencies to sin are indeed genetic. (Recall that those who are convinced that original sin is a purely cultural phenomenon may not simply include that belief in B, because it is a denial of the hypothesis under consideration.)⁹ So if anyone is tempted to view original sin as an *exclusively* cultural phenomenon, then it seems to me that the claim of exclusivity should be given up. But this should be a small price to pay, given that everything *else* one might believe about inherited cultural norms remains intact.

Second, previous attempts to equate genetic behavioral tendencies with some version of original sin have been met with charges of "Gnostic Dualism." The idea has been tainted ever since. In 1976, Donald T. Campbell created a stir of sorts when he advanced the quasi-Freudian view that original sin is the psychological tension created within us when our genetically inherited tendencies lead us in one (morally wrong) direction while our culturally (or socially) inherited tendencies lead us in another (morally right) direction.¹⁰ By 1993, Philip Hefner had developed Campbell's view into a doctrine of salvation as cultural transformation, complete with a view of original sin that functioned in a way roughly

analogous to the more traditional view (or views).¹¹ But Hefner's attempt was met immediately by a response from Langdon Gilkey on behalf of theological orthodoxy (readers of Gilkey will recognize that this is not a customary role for him). In addition to making the cogent point that culturally inherited tendencies can frequently be quite perverse, Gilkey expressed concern that Hefner had identified bodily existence as *the* source of evil. According to Gilkey, Hefner had "listened too eagerly to the siren songs of genetics!"¹² In fairness to Hefner, it should be noted that he had indeed stressed human freedom as a necessary condition for moral responsibility. But regardless of whether Gilkey's concern is fair to Hefner, we may set it aside with respect to the present attempt to equate our genetic inheritance with original sin. It should be clear that OS3 says nothing about a necessary connection between embodiment as such, and sin. Even if it is true that *our* bodies supply *us* with sinful tendencies, it does not follow that *all* bodies *must* do so (Jesus is presumably a decisive counter-example, though the virgin birth may be necessary to ensure this), nor does it follow that all persons with sinful tendencies are embodied. We may equate original sin with something we *happen* to inherit genetically, and yet escape the charge of Gnostic Dualism by affirming the *possibility* (and, in at least one case, the actuality) of sinless, morally significant, bodily existence. Brief reflection will reveal that OS3 is consistent with the possibility of such an existence.

Let us now proceed to what is probably the greatest difficulty that confronts any attempt to equate genetic inheritance with original sin, and which may be the reason for the general reluctance of contemporary Christian philosophers to avail themselves of such a simple and obvious means of support for a distinctively Christian doctrine. This is the problem of divine justice, especially when it is coupled with the view that we human beings are somehow responsible for our own genetic inheritance. And so, consider:

(OS4) Human beings generally inherit at conception a set of *genetic* conditions that make it *inevitable* that they will sin, *and for which they are morally responsible*.

OS4 adds to OS3 what is sometimes called "original guilt," a doctrine that is often associated with the Augustinian tradition. It turns out that it is somewhat difficult to catch Augustine himself endorsing OS4 explicitly, but that need not deter us. OS4 is an intriguing and widely held view in its own right. Many have claimed Scriptural support for it from Psalm 51, among other texts, coupled with a definition of sinfulness that entails moral responsibility. For that reason alone it deserves our attention, even if it should turn out that Augustine himself did not really hold it. But it also deserves the attention of anyone for whom OS3 seems plausible. That is because it is difficult to maintain that we are morally responsible for actual sins that are causally traceable to an inherited behavioral tendency, without holding that we are also somehow responsible for the tendency itself. Note that I did not claim that this was impossible, but merely difficult. But if OS4 is true, then we are relieved of the need to give an account of precisely where moral responsibility enters into the causal chain leading to our actions. Similarly, if it strikes one as at least questionable that

God would “stack the deck” against us by making moral obedience so very difficult, then one has at least a *prima facie* reason to consider OS4 seriously. If our condition is somehow our own fault, then there is no longer any concern that God has unjustly stacked the deck.

But our immediate problem is that we seem to have a defeater for OS4 no matter how much support it might receive from E according to the support relation we have been considering. Almost all of us have, in our set of background beliefs B, the belief that *it is not possible for any human being to be morally responsible for any condition inherited at conception*. Let us call this belief, R. Since R entails that OS4 is false, it must be excluded from the set of background beliefs against which the probability of OS4 is assessed. Nevertheless, because $P(OS4 / R) = 0$, we can be sure that the addition of E to one's belief structure will not change the overall epistemic probability of OS4. The support relation remains, but OS4 itself has been utterly defeated. To rescue it, one must find a way to deny R. But R seems so intuitively correct.

Nevertheless, I believe that R can be reasonably denied, thereby allowing the epistemic support OS4 receives from E to remain undefeated. To argue for this, I will enlist the aid of the “Molinist” view of divine providence that has been developed for the purpose of explaining the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom.¹³ According to Molinism, there are contingent truths about what each of us would freely do in any given set of circumstances, and God, omniscient as He is, knows these truths about us (though He cannot alter them, lest freedom be compromised). Thus far then, Molinism has nothing whatever to do with the problem of reconciling original sin with evolutionary psychology. Yet, it follows from Molinism that God knows what each of us would do if we were placed in a set of “garden-like” conditions such as that described in *Genesis* 2 and 3. These are the most favorable conditions imaginable for passing an obedience test: no original sin at all, and a very pleasant existence. We may then take the *Genesis* narrative to be, at the very least and whatever more it may be, God's way of communicating to each of us what we would have done in garden-like conditions. And presumably God also knows that He would respond to our disobedience in the same way that He responds to the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the biblical narrative, i.e., by expelling us into a “fallen” state to live out our lives in a “fallen” world (but with the possibility and hope of redemption). But, allow me to suggest, if God knows all this, then He is free (in the sense that there would be nothing morally amiss in it) to bypass the actual test and bring us into existence directly into an already “fallen” world. The process by which He might thus bring us into existence might well include an inheritance of sinful behavioral tendencies and an environment of selfish competitiveness, all of which we must learn to resist and combat as part of the process of being redeemed. But because the truths about us that God would base all these choices upon are indeed “up to us,” we would still be morally responsible for the “fallen” condition into which we were conceived. And so adding Molinism to one's belief structure allows one to expel R from it, and thereby enables evolutionary psychology to remain undefeated in its service as epistemic support for a doctrine of original sin as strong as OS4.

A number of important questions arise at this point, but first it will be helpful to view this application of Molinism from another perspective. Keith D. Wyma has also noticed that Molinism might be useful for assuaging concerns about divine justice in the doctrine of original sin. He further notes that Molinism comports very well with what is sometimes called the “representational” view of the Fall, and it provides us with reasonable interpretations of some difficult Scriptural passages (such as Romans 5:12–21). But Wyma stops short, I believe, of drawing out the full consequences of Molinism. His excellent and insightful remarks are worth quoting at length:

God, in considering whom to create and where and when to place them, could make use of [His knowledge of what each of us would do in any given state of affairs]. In creating Adam’s progeny, God could restrict Himself to the set of possible humans who would freely have done as Adam did in the circumstances of his temptation and fall. That is, I propose that the humans who exist, and who have existed and who will exist, constitute some subset of those possible humans who would freely have fallen just as Adam did. Thus, Adam’s rebellion becomes a kind of paradigm for all of us, since his action represents what each of us would have done in his place. In him, we all sinned, *figuratively* speaking.

Because of that, God can justifiably create us in the same state to which Adam was putatively condemned. There’s no point in replaying the Fall over and over to the same result. It’s as if God said to Himself, “The first scene will always be the same, so let us join the action *in media res*; begin with the second scene, where the lives follow their own unique paths.” This justification then helps to make sense of why our state of original sin traces back to Adam. Because we are the ones-who-would-freely-have-acted-as-he-did, our relation to Adam allows the punishment his rebellion received to be applied to us as well. His action stands in for ours; on account of what he did, we too suffer the consequences and share in his condemned state.

Moreover, this justification also confers some vindication for God’s creating us in a state from which we cannot fulfill his moral demands. God knows that even if we were created with more perfect moral capacities, like Adam’s initially, so that we would be fully capable of carrying out his moral commands, we still would *not* do so, as Adam did not. Therefore, if we would not obey even if we could, God need not ensure that we could. It would be useless over-development to give us increased moral capacities. For that reason, setting the limits to our moral capacities truly does resemble setting the boundaries of any of our other abilities; all such limiting falls to God’s unconstrained, free choice, since it is not a question of moral obligation for God.¹⁴

Just so. But note that the view of original sin that Wyma has in view here is not OS4, but OS3. When he does consider OS4, which he calls the “pre-dominant view on original sin,” he explicitly denies that Molinism can be

enlisted to justify it, and then goes on to declare that it “needs alteration.” The alteration he proposes is that original sin should not be regarded as “grounds for guilt,” but is instead a “state of *innocent sinfulness*” (emphasis his).¹⁵ The latter is an extremely awkward locution that should be avoided at all costs, but the idea seems to be that “original sin” is a misnomer.¹⁶ Other terms would capture the idea better, and Wyma himself suggests “shortfall” as a possible substitute. This leaves Wyma with the task of explaining how we can be blameworthy for the *inevitable* consequences of the conditions we inherit at conception even though we are not blameworthy for inheriting those conditions, and to his credit he goes on to take up that task. I am not persuaded that his efforts are successful, but I will not join that debate here. Let us focus instead on his reasons for rejecting Molinism as a justification for OS4, because if they are found wanting then there will be no need to alter OS4.

Wyma’s objection to a Molinist defense of OS4 is, I suspect, quite common. He appeals to our general reluctance to blame others unless they have actually committed a sin. He writes:

If it’s true that we would have rebelled as Adam did, it’s one thing to skip giving us his test, but it seems a much farther step to blame us for failing it. As an analogy, take one of the unfortunate subjects of Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments involving authority and electric shock. Suppose a test subject has displayed willingness to inflict extreme pain on the word of an authority. Further suppose this confirms that the subject would also have been willing to follow orders in carrying out Hitler’s genocidal plan in Nazi Germany. Let’s say then, that it’s true of this subject that she would freely have helped to commit genocide if her governmental authorities had told her to. Do we then blame her for the Nazi atrocities? Does this counterfactual concurrence make her guilty of those crimes? No; because although she would have committed the acts, she in fact did not. Similarly, it seems unjust for us to share Adam’s guilt, as only he actually committed the transgression in question.¹⁷

But this is not a good reason to think that God cannot hold us accountable for what we would do in conditions that are not actual. Wyma is subtly asking the wrong questions here. He asks, “Do we then blame her for the Nazi atrocities?” Well, of course not, because it is essential to the “Nazi atrocities” that they be actions committed by the Nazis who actually committed them. And so she *could not* have committed *those atrocities*, although she would have committed her own atrocities. Or again, Wyma asks whether she is made guilty of *those crimes*? No indeed, but we are wondering about *other* crimes, namely, the possible crimes *she* would have committed. If Wyma had asked about actions of a type similar to that of the *Nazi atrocities*, that would be another matter. But he asks his questions about the *Nazi atrocities* specifically, and then appeals to the very strong inclination we all have to give a negative answer to *those* questions as a reason to think that none of us should be blamed in any way for what we would do in non-actual conditions. But the latter conclusion does not follow from the mere fact that no one would blame her for the *Nazi atrocities*.

So we should ask instead, "Do we blame her for the atrocities she would have committed?" And the answer to that is not so obvious. There is an ambiguity in the word "blame" here. If we are asking whether *we* would *punish* her for what she would have done, then the answer is clearly "no," *we* would not. But if we are asking whether we would think less of her in a moral sense, then the answer is clearly "yes." Our moral judgments are not at all blind to what we think others would do in non-actual conditions, though punishment does seem to be a response that is inappropriate for *us*. If we think we know that someone would take a bribe if we were to offer it to him, then we do think less of him. And that is a perfectly appropriate response, even though we do not call the police until he actually takes a bribe.

Should we then conclude that God will likewise think less of us, but that He would also be wrong to punish? No, we should not jump to that conclusion either. We must ask why we would not punish even when we would render a serious negative moral judgment. Perhaps the difference lies in our ignorance, i.e., that we never really *know* what others would do. And since punishment is somehow more serious than merely thinking less of people, we are willing to base the latter on our fallible judgments, but not the former. If that is correct, then God would be within His rights to punish on the basis of counterfactuals, because He is not ignorant (provided Molinism is true). However, this is not satisfactory. We must also account for hypothetical cases in which we *do* know what others would do, for at the very least God could give us this information in such a way that we know it is coming from God. But it still seems as if we should not punish, even if God were to tell us what others would do. Why is that? Is it because it is always wrong for anyone, including God, to punish on the basis of counterfactuals? Or does it have more to do with our perceived authority to punish? I strongly suspect that it is the latter. We can just as easily imagine cases where people commit actual crimes, and yet we have the same mixed reaction of thinking less of them while yet being unwilling to punish them. We may want others to punish them, but we would not do it ourselves. Why not?

I suggest that our intuitive judgments about whether we would punish someone or not are based primarily on whether we think we have the authority to punish, and we human beings never have anything more than delegated authority to punish. Furthermore, the conditions under which the authority to punish has been delegated to human beings seem to be severely limited. A common view is that only those in the service of a legitimate state, parents, and perhaps those whom parents have explicitly authorized, may punish for moral wrongdoing, and even then only when actual acts of commission or omission come to the attention of the one in authority. No human being has ever been granted the authority to punish on the basis of counterfactuals. These severe limitations on our authority to punish are sufficient, I suggest, to account for our intuitive judgments that we would not punish on the basis of counterfactuals. We humans have never been granted the authority to punish on the basis of counterfactuals, so that is why we think it would be wrong for *us* to do so. But the source of these intuitive judgments is our perception of the conditions under which we have been delegated the authority to punish,

and not some universal moral principle that forbids all punishment on the basis of counterfactuals. If there were such a principle, then why would it not extend to a prohibition against rendering negative moral judgments as well? I can see no reason why it would not. So we should not conclude that God, who does not have to have the authority to punish delegated to Him, and who does have the requisite knowledge, cannot act in judgment on the basis of *everything* He knows about us. The door is therefore left open for a Molinist justification of OS4.¹⁸

We might crack that door open just a little wider by thinking briefly about what it means to be *perfectly* reconciled to God. This is, presumably, a condition for which all Christians long and hope with great intensity. It has also been promised to us by God Himself. But can anyone ever be in such a condition if God knows that there are conditions such that we would sin if we were placed in them? We have already seen that the relationship between two persons is damaged when one of them knows that the other would sin in a given set of non-actual conditions. There is no reason to think that this principle fails if one of the persons is God. Thus it seems to follow that the only persons who can be in a *perfect* relationship with God are those who would not sin in any set of present or future conditions.¹⁹ But this is, I take it, a description of a completely redeemed person. A redemptive process is therefore necessary if there is *anything* about us that damages our relationship to God, and that includes its being true of us that we would sin in some possible set of future conditions. These conditions need not become actual, and we need not be aware that we would sin if they were actual. God's knowledge of these truths is alone sufficient to damage the relationship and place us in need of redemption. And if it were somehow improper for God to *act* on this knowledge, then it would be improper for Him to undertake the task of redeeming us and we would remain forever in our unredeemed condition. So we should regard it as a very good thing that God is within His rights to act redemptively on the basis of His knowledge of counterfactuals. If it were not so, we could never be redeemed.²⁰

Finally, there is yet another historically prominent version of original sin that is worthy of our consideration. However, in this case I do not think it is possible to preserve the epistemic support that I have claimed is enjoyed by the previous four versions of original sin. Some might wish to further strengthen OS4 as follows:

- (OS5) Human beings generally inherit at conception a set of genetic conditions that make it inevitable that they will sin, and for which they are morally responsible, *and which is a causal product of the first sin of the first human being(s).*

I suspect that one of the motivations for affirming OS5 is a desire to retain some historic content to the Fall narrative. However, that is not a good reason to affirm OS5. An historic Fall is consistent with OS4 alone (though OS4 is also consistent with a non-historic Fall), and there are a variety of possible historic scenarios one might construct that would not require one to view original sin as the causal product of the first sin of the first human being(s). I tend to be skeptical of such scenarios, partly because they seem bizarre to me, partly because they can be dropped without loss of

any significant (to me) doctrinal content, and partly because there seems to be no way to decide between the possible scenarios one might imagine. But in any case, those who are fond of inserting a historic "garden event" within the larger flow of evolutionary development are free to do so without thereby committing themselves to OS5.²¹

But OS5 is destructive of any support for original sin that might be forthcoming from evolutionary biology. The reason is that any plausible candidate for the first human being will himself/herself have a significant evolutionary ancestry from which he/she inherited the very behavioral tendencies that we are now equating with original sin. So, he/she is already in a state of original sin, at conception. So, unless someone can make sense of backward causation, it is not possible for original sin to both *be* the sinful tendencies one has inherited from one's evolutionary ancestry and simultaneously be the direct causal product of an actual sinful action that one has performed.²² Evolutionary biology cannot support OS5 in the straightforward and simple way that it can support the weaker versions of original sin, even OS4 (provided Molinism is true). Therefore, in the absence of a very good reason to prefer OS5 over OS4, the Christian community should not (by insisting on OS5) cast off the epistemic support that evolutionary psychology can supply for the doctrine of original sin. Furthermore, OS4 does not seem to require any tampering with any other doctrine that is regarded as significant by any prominent Christian community, past or present.²³ And so, I say, we should *all* settle on OS4.²⁴ But this would not be a case of settling *for* something that is less than what was desired or hoped for, but rather a case of settling *on* a view that best incorporates and integrates all of what seems to be the case from both faith (Scripture and Tradition) and reason (our best contemporary science).²⁵

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NOTES

1. The addition of the word "generally" is intended to allow for a small number of exceptions. All Christians will of course regard Jesus as an exception. Some Roman Catholics will add Mary. Those who hold to an historic "Fall" will make exceptions of Adam and Eve. Exceptions beyond that are rare and even more problematic, but I don't wish to exclude them by fiat. In subsequent definitions I shall omit the clause that follows the word "sin," but it should be tacitly assumed in those definitions as well. I am intentionally leaving vague and unspecified the relevant point of moral maturity, since it certainly varies from person to person, and seems to remain vague even in the case of a single individual. In formulating this and subsequent definitions of original sin, I was helped greatly by Michael C. Rea, "The Metaphysics of Original Sin," in D. Zimmerman and P. Van Inwagen, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 319–56.

2. The word "sin" is used broadly here to refer to any sort of moral demerit. It is restricted neither to wrongs directed specially or consciously against the person of God, nor to actions and overt behavior, but extends also to beliefs, desires, "attitudes," dispositions, and any other states of persons to which one might wish to attach moral properties.

3. Langdon Gilkey, "Evolution, Culture, and Sin," *Zygon*, vol. 30, no. 2 (June 1995), p. 300.

4. Keith Ward, *Religion and Human Nature* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 163.

5. For one such popular presentation of evolutionary psychology, see Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Random House, 1994). Wright is neither a biologist nor a philosopher, but a journalist. One might wonder whether a thoroughgoing evolutionary ethical theory leaves any room for what we *really ought* to do. That is a very important question, though we must leave it aside for now. Wright writes as if he is entitled to moral categories despite his account of their origin. For example, he says that "a good starting point would be to discount moral indignation by about 50 percent or so, mindful of its inherent bias, and to be similarly *suspicious* of moral indifference to suffering. We *should be* especially vigilant in certain situations." (p. 343, emphases mine). Or again, "chronically subjecting ourselves to a *true and bracing moral scrutiny*, and *adjusting* our behavior accordingly, is not something we were designed for. We are potentially moral animals—which is more than any other animal can say—but we aren't naturally moral animals. To be moral animals, we *must realize* how thoroughly we aren't" (p. 344, emphases mine).

6. John Stuart Mill, "Nature," first published 1874, reprinted in vol. 10 of J. M. Robson, ed., *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 398–99.

7. Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, first published 1894), p. 83.

8. Certain theological beliefs will also accommodate the inevitability requirement. Consider those who think that some motivations (such as a love of God, or a desire to please God, etc.) are necessary conditions for full moral rectitude, and that these motivations are not present in human beings "naturally," and that human beings can acquire them only through a special act of divine grace. Such people already have a set of background beliefs that preserves the support relation for OS2. This is another case where that which is necessary is simply missing, so that we must *inevitably* "fall short."

9. If another argument is needed, one might point to the apparent fact that sin is not easily eradicated simply by placing human beings in positive cultural conditions. Indeed, I take it that one of God's reasons for establishing a Church (i.e., an organized community of the faithful) on earth is to supply us with a morally positive cultural inheritance. But do I really need to convince anyone of the difficulties involved? Original sin is definitely *not a purely* social phenomenon.

10. Donald T. Campbell, "On the Conflicts Between Biological and Social Evolution and Between Psychology and Moral Tradition," *Zygon*, vol. 11, no. 3 (September 1976), pp. 167–208. Note the contrast between Campbell's view of "social evolution" and the one expressed in the preceding paragraph. Campbell represents the now-growing group of scholars that views a social moral code as a fitness-enhancing trait of a group of organisms. There is now a vast literature devoted to group selection theory and its potential to explain both ethics and religion. Those who continue to maintain a negative view of culturally inherited behavioral tendencies will find their view loosely validated by current work in "meme" theory, where self-propagating (and sometimes parasitic) cultural "memes" function as analogues of biological genes.

11. Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993). For Hefner's treatment of original sin in particular, and his development of Campbell's view, see chapter 8, "Biological Perspectives on Original Sin" (pp. 123–42).

12. Gilkey, "Evolution, Culture, and Sin," p. 306.

13. The name derives from the sixteenth-century Cardinal Luis de Molina. One can make a reasonable case that Augustine and Anselm were Molinists, though this is disputed. Recent development of the Molinist position has been undertaken by Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Flint, and many others. For a thoroughgoing contemporary defense of Molinism, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). Molinism remains controversial, but I think I can safely appeal to it as a very influential and intuitively satisfying view that enjoys wide support and has not been refuted (see also note 22 below). Since the debate about Molinism itself is well underway, I shall consider in this paper only those objections to my proposed application of Molinism that are *not* merely objections to Molinism itself. This type of objection grants that Molinism is true, but then goes on to claim that it cannot be enlisted in any attempt to rescue OS4 from the charge that it is inconsistent with divine justice. Keith Wyma offers an objection of this sort, which I consider below.

14. Keith D. Wyma, "Innocent Sinfulness, Guilty Sin: Original Sin and Divine Justice," in Peter van Inwagen, ed., *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 268–69.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

16. This is also the view to which F. R. Tennant came to in one of the first attempts to examine the doctrine of original sin in the light of evolutionary biology. See F. R. Tennant, *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1908). According to Tennant, "no natural impulse is itself sinful, unless present through our volition" (p. 104). Since he saw no way that the behavioral tendencies we inherit from our evolutionary past could be present through our volition, he concluded that such tendencies are not sinful in themselves.

17. Wyma, "Innocent Sinfulness, Guilty Sin: Original Sin and Divine Justice," pp. 270–71.

18. This response to Wyma's objection remains neutral regarding the proper *goal* of punishment. I have said nothing about whether punishment is valuable for rehabilitation, retribution, deterrence, or some combination of the three, and everything I have said is consistent with any view one might have about that.

19. Note that it is not necessary (for being in a perfect relationship with God) that there was never a time when it was true of us that we would sin in some set of hypothetical conditions. If that were a necessary condition then everyone on this planet must forever abandon hope of ever being in a perfect relationship with God. Rather, the necessary condition (for being in a perfect relationship with God) is merely that there be no present or future time at which it is true of us that we would sin in some set of hypothetical conditions.

20. There is a plausible interpretation of Jesus' teaching on adultery in Matthew 5:28 that, if correct, would lend considerable Scriptural support to the conclusion that it is just to punish on the basis of knowledge of counterfactuals. If Jesus is teaching that anyone who would freely commit adultery if given the opportunity is in fact guilty of adultery, then the above conclusion is strongly reinforced. For this point I am indebted to comments from Michael Thune. However, I am not entirely persuaded that this is the correct interpretation of Matthew 5:28.

21. As far as I can tell, the only historic scenarios that would *require* a reasonable person to commit to OS5 are those that include the following: Prior to an actual sin committed at time *t* no human being had any sinful behavioral tendencies at all (i.e., there was no original sin), but after *t* and because of the sin committed at *t*, all human beings had some sinful behavioral tendencies. This scenario is indeed grossly incongruent with any attempt to *equate* original

sin with sinful behavioral tendencies inherited from an evolutionary ancestry. For the evolutionary process in view naturally confers on any human being who is a product of it behavioral tendencies to assert himself/herself at the expense of others (i.e., sinful behavioral tendencies). And thus the only way there can be a time t at which *no* human being had any sinful tendencies at all is for *all* human beings to have been miraculously preserved from the ordinary effects of the evolutionary process at *all* times prior to t . This is logically possible of course, but I take it that most reasonable people will simply reject the attempt to equate original sin with tendencies inherited from an evolutionary ancestry before they will accept such pervasive (and *ad hoc*?) miraculous activity on God's part. But it should be noted that the above scenario is an extremely restricted one. Even those who insist that *some* human beings were once in an historic state of "original righteousness" can reject it. For one might suppose that a given pair of individuals was selected by God for an historic test and were for that reason miraculously preserved from original sin (much as Jesus Himself may have been through the virgin birth). These individuals would then be in a historic state of "original righteousness." After their actual sin, they may be somehow altered so as to share in the sinful tendencies of their fellow humans (the ones who received their sinful tendencies through the ordinary course of evolutionary development). They would then serve as representatives of all their fellow humans based on God's knowledge of what each individual would do in similar conditions. Though the sinful tendencies of the individuals who are historically tested would be the causal product of their own actual sins, the sinful tendencies of other human beings would not be. And so it is possible to preserve a theologically significant, historic state of "original righteousness" for some human beings without accepting OS5. The latter scenario is sufficient to show this, regardless of whether one is otherwise inclined to accept it, and regardless of whether there are other scenarios that are likewise sufficient.

22. Molinism does entail that we have some *counterfactual* power over the past, and thus the Molinist defense of OS4 that I have just recommended can also be used to explain how death and suffering can be connected in some way to human sin. But counterfactual power over the past is different from direct backwards causation, and nowhere near as problematic. Time and space preclude a discussion of the complex issues involved here, but interested readers should consult the recent debate about the merits of Molinism between Thomas Flint (pro) and William Hasker (con). Once again, I think I may safely maintain that Molinism remains at the very least a viable option, and perhaps even the best option.

23. This is important because several authors have claimed that any adequate Christian response to evolutionary biology must include some sort of reinterpretation of the doctrine of the atonement. For a moderate example, see Keith Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, Chapter 9, pp. 186–203. For a more radical reinterpretation, see Patricia A. Williams, *Doing Without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 182–97. These reinterpretations of the atonement are held to be necessary because we inherit our sinful tendencies from our evolutionary ancestry, and we could never be blameworthy or in need of atonement on that basis. But this is just to claim that OS4 must be false. I take it that if OS4 can be preserved, there will be no reason to reinterpret the doctrine of the atonement (or any other historically prominent doctrine).

24. Anti-Molinists must of course settle for OS3, but then it will not be so easy to avoid any further doctrinal tampering. That is because, once again, it is very awkward to think of ourselves as being in need of *moral* redemption if we are in no way responsible for conditions that make it *inevitable* that we

will be in need of that redemption. Thus OS3 creates considerable pressure to view redemption in a *non*-moral way. Does this amount to an argument for Molinism? That depends on how strongly one prefers OS4 over OS3 and its doctrinal consequences. However, one might wonder whether the very fact that Molinism can be applied to the problem of original sin in a promising and satisfying way (and this much is granted even by Wyma, who rejects OS4 in favor of OS3) can itself be parlayed into an argument for Molinism. Such an argument might appeal to the fact that Molinism was developed for the purpose of explaining the relationship between divine providence and human freedom, and *not* for the purpose of reconciling original sin with evolutionary biology, or for finding support for the former in the latter, etc. Its usefulness in dealing with the latter problems may then be loosely regarded as a sort of "novel prediction," often thought by philosophers of science to be a very strong epistemic virtue. Any theory that "bears fruit" beyond the original stock of facts it was invoked to explain begins to look correct, and Molinism may be bearing just that kind of fruit here. But this introduces a line of inquiry that must be taken up elsewhere.

25. I am grateful to all the participants of the "Nature in Belief" seminar at Calvin College (Summer, 2004) for their help in the research and preparation of the first drafts of this paper. I am especially indebted to Jeffrey Schloss and David Vanderlaan, both of Westmont College. Likewise, thanks are due to all the participants and attendees of the subsequent "Nature in Belief" conference at Calvin College (November 3–5, 2005), and of the Society of Christian Philosophers Midwest Regional Meeting at Notre Dame University (April 20–22, 2006), for helpful and insightful comments on a later draft of this paper. Finally, thanks are due to the editor and referees of this journal for additional suggestions that helped make it a better paper.