

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 39 | Issue 2

Article 4

4-1-2022

What Is Sin?

Brian Leftow

Rutgers University, bleftow@philosophy.rutgers.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Leftow, Brian (2022) "What Is Sin?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: [10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.4](https://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.4)

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

WHAT IS SIN?

Brian Leftow

This paper defends a definition of sin. I begin by defending the project of trying to do so. I then suggest that the Bible does not clearly define it. I then consider some candidate definitions, pointing out ways they fall short. I finally introduce my method for coming up with a better definition. I use the method to evaluate a recent proposal. Finally I offer my own. I suggest that the method favors mine over the other proposal I discuss.

We all know how to sin. Perhaps some have some vague sense of what about an act, attitude, etc. makes it sinful. But no-one knows, really, what that is—that is, what sin is. I now try to define it. Mine will be a specifically Christian project. Sin is a religious concept. Particular bodies of Scripture and tradition settle its content. I work from the Christian Bible. Those working from different Scriptures might well reach a different conclusion.

I begin by defending the project of trying to define sin. I then suggest that the Bible does not clearly do that. I then consider some candidate definitions, pointing out ways they fall short. I finally introduce my method for coming up with a better definition. I use the method to evaluate a recent proposal. Finally I offer my own. I suggest that the method favors mine over the other proposal I discuss.

Now, not only actions are sinful. At least attitudes, emotions, and thoughts also qualify. Further, Paul often speaks of sin as an inner state or force.¹ But in discussing definitions I reject, for simplicity, I speak only of acts. If my arguments work for acts, parallels will work for attitudes, etc. When I give my own proposal, I broaden out again to catch (I hope) the full scope of the sinful.

1. Definitions: Why Seek One?

It's not a priori obvious that sin admits of definition. "Sin" might be a family-resemblance term, resisting definition as Wittgenstein said "game" does.² That is, perhaps various things count as sins due to a web of likenesses, and there's no more unity to sin than that. Again, the concept of sin

¹E.g., in particular, Romans 7.

²Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #65–71.



might be a Putnam-style natural-kind concept.³ Take a paradigm case—say, the Fall as narrated in Genesis 3—and perhaps sins are things of the same nature as *that* or enough like it in the right ways. Again, suppose that being definable goes with having an essence, a nature. A long tradition stemming from Augustine sees sins as privations—lacks, holes in reality. It also contends that privations are precisely *not* entities, with essences, but instead lacks of entity. On this approach, it seems, sin will be indefinable for metaphysical reasons.⁴ Again, perhaps it's as Berkouwer suggests—sin is one thing, there are many ways to describe it, but none deserve to be elevated over the rest as the *definition* of sin.⁵

There are indeed these alternatives, and perhaps others. I do not insist in starting out that sin *must* be definable. But it is not a priori obvious that it is not. One way to find out whether it is definable is to try to define it. If I succeed, I show that it is definable; if I fail, I provide evidence that it is not. So one could look at my project as an experiment. Applying Putnam to sin asserts that sins are items of the same natural kind as (say) the Fall-sin. Natural kinds are or are part of things's natures.⁶ So making the Putnam move here would suppose that sins have a nature. If they do, it might be a definable nature. Putnam wants to show that we can (and do) operate with natural-kind terms competently without having any definition for them, but his proposal does not preclude acquiring one.

Finally, it's noteworthy that some who hold the privation metaphysics of sin—e.g. Aquinas and Augustine himself—give what they themselves call definitions of sin.⁷ This is not surprising. Privations are absences. Absences come in kinds—e.g. holes, omissions, pauses, silence, total darkness. Further, absences are individuated: the absence of Peter is not the absence of Paul. Where individuals come in kinds, a wish to define those kinds is natural, and there can be thick metaphysical accounts.⁸ Aquinas's even assigns sin a "quasi-matter" and a "quasi-form."⁹ If absences are (so to speak) bits of nothing, perhaps these metaphysical accounts or definitions must prominently involve other items that have or could have genuine positive reality. Perhaps they might really concern the things in which absences are absences, or perhaps e.g. definitions of holes are really of the property of being holed. Be that as it may, if one can say what it is to be a

³See, e.g., Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning.'"

⁴I thank a referee for this and the prior suggestion.

⁵Berkouwer, *Sin*, 255, 282–3.

⁶We need not see natures in this context as real universals. We could instead e.g. speak just of relevant sufficient likenesses, and a definition might isolate just what likenesses are relevant and sufficient.

⁷See, e.g., *ST* i-IIa 71, 6.

⁸In fact, the metaphysics of absences is something of a growth industry these days. See e.g., Casati and Varzi, *Holes*; Sorensen, *Seeing Dark Things and Nothing*; Clarke, *Omissions*; and Mumford, *Absence and Nothing*.

⁹*ST* I-IIa 71, 6.

hole, or to be holed, then even if sins are privations, I see no reason that there could not be a similar account of what it is to be a sin, or sinful.

One method of seeking a definition is to offer a candidate and see if it survives counter-examples. I now suggest counter-examples to a number of candidates. I then discuss two medieval definitions that (I think) point in a more promising direction. I then introduce and apply a method for reaching a definition.

2. Candidate Definitions

2.1 A Biblical Definition?

The Old Testament contains nothing that even looks like a definition of sin. If the New Testament defines it, it is in 1 John 3:4: "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact:

SL: sin is lawlessness."

Ian McFarland calls (SL) "the Biblical definition of sin."¹⁰ But if (SL) is a definition, it's an identity-statement. It may not be one. (SL) could be just a Hebrew poetic parallel to "everyone who sins breaks the law." That is, though it looks like an identity-statement, (SL) might not really be meant to say more than the prior sentence did. If it does say more, its force could be that the class of sins is the class of lawless actions. Again, (SL) could predicate a property of sin. It could also locate sin as a species within a genus. Sin is one species of lawlessness. Crime is another. So are civil-law violations that do not count as crimes.¹¹

(SL)'s logical form just isn't clear. If God speaks through it, He may not be speaking to provide a definition. 1 John is not philosophy, and the Bible does not generally go in for definitions. I can think of only one other text that even looks like one. So I suggest that (SL) is not a definition. Of course, questioning (SL)'s logical form creates a burden for my further argument.¹² If not everything that looks like a definition really is one, then when I claim that someone offers a definition, I need to justify the claim. I do so where appropriate below, usually in a footnote.

2.2 Sin and Divine Law

Doubtless due to (SL), many theologians define sin in terms of breaking a divine law. Augustine defined sin as "a word or deed or desire contrary to the eternal law,"¹³ then explaining "eternal law" as "the divine

¹⁰McFarland, *In Adam's Fall*, 7.

¹¹My thanks to Daniel Rubio for this example.

¹²Here I am partly indebted to a referee.

¹³*Against Faustus the Manichean*, Bk. XXII, #27, p. 285. Augustine prefaces this by saying "we must first consider what sin is," and his argument is best served by a definition, for he is looking to identify sins in "the actions of the saints" (XX, #26, p. 285). I add that such later medievals as Aquinas read this as a definition (e.g. *ST I-IIa* 71, 6).

order or will of God."¹⁴ Zwingli writes that "an act is called sin when it is committed against the law."¹⁵ Melancthon defines sin as "a defect or an inclination or an action in conflict with the law of God."¹⁶ Turretin defines sin as "an inclination, act or omission at variance with the law of God."¹⁷ According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."¹⁸ A careful definition along these lines might be

1. Act-type A is sinful =df. tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, break a law instituted by God.

(1)'s laws include moral laws if there are such things and God instituted them. But not all divine laws concern matters intrinsically moral. God made it a law for the Jews not to work on Saturday. There is nothing intrinsically morally wrong with working on Saturday. Further, while (1) may make breaches of moral law sins if moral laws are divinely instituted, it does not make them sins because they are immoral. It makes them sins because they break God's law, which just happens in this case to be a moral one.

The Bible may cut against (1). Laws govern a people. They bind only that people. So God's laws, as distinct from moral laws, may presuppose a covenant constituting some group as the people of God. There was sin long before there was a covenant. Again, God said, "don't eat from the tree." It is not clear that this made "don't eat from the tree" a divine law. If I tell you not to eat from the fridge, I have not established a law, even if I have the right to regulate what you eat. All the same, because God so commanded, it was a sin to eat the fruit. God commanded Noah to build an ark. This did not make "build an ark" a divine law. But because God so commanded, it would have been a sin to disobey.

¹⁴XX, #26, p. 285.

¹⁵Zwingli, "An Account of the Faith of Huldreich Zwingli," 40. Two things tell me that this is a definition. One is the form: "it is called sin when . . ." The sense is: it is called sin just when. What follows that can be nothing less than a necessary and sufficient condition, and philosophers often accept this as one form of definition. There is also the way Zwingli uses it in the argument that continues from this point. He gives this statement, then concludes "that our father [Adam] committed what was truly a sin" but that original sin in us is not properly called a sin (p. 40). Only a definition of sin would let him make both inferences soundly. For the first requires at least a sufficient condition, the second requires at least a necessary, and the only account given to justify both moves is the one the text quotes. It therefore has to be meant as the sort of definition just described.

¹⁶Melancthon, *The Chief Theological Topics*, 71. He labels this a definition on p. 70.

¹⁷Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 591. Turretin labels this the "formal reason" of sin—a Scholastic term for its nature, its definition.

¹⁸Q. 14. See <https://www.opc.org/sc.html>. The question this answers is "what is sin?" This is most naturally taken as asking for a definition. So the answer, quoted, is most naturally taken as giving one.

2.3 *Sin and Divine Command*

Commands which do not establish laws lead us to:

2. Act-type A is sinful =df. tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, disobey a divine command.

Philip Quinn offers something close to this:

Sin is an offense against God; more concretely, sin is what is contrary to divine commands. Thus, we are justified in proposing the following definition: It is sinful that p =df. God commands that \leftarrow p. . .¹⁹

Here is a problem for (2) and Quinn. Plausibly, anything wrong is sinful. But more things are wrong than God ever explicitly commands us not to do. This is true if only revealed commands count. It remains true if conscience too delivers divine commands, and even if moral reason and general reflection do that. So either (2) is false or there are divine commands God never actually commands *to* anyone. But something never commanded to anyone is never commanded, and something never commanded isn't a command. It is at most a thought fit to be the content of a command. Further, my objection can use a weaker premise than that anything wrong is sinful.²⁰ It would be enough if many wrongs are sinful, for it would still be plausible in that case that God has never commanded against some of them via revelation, conscience, or moral reflection.

2.4 *Sin and Covenant?*

In the same ballpark as (1) and (2) is

3. Act-type A is sinful =df. tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, violate a covenant with God.

It is wrong to violate a covenant. It's promise-breaking, or renegeing on a deal. But on (3), what makes an act sinful is not its being wrong. It is its violating an agreement with God. To me, this emphasis is right-headed. What is important about sin is that it ruptures our relation to God. It is reasonable to think that its nature is tied to what is important about it.

Still, (3) is false. According to Genesis 2–3, there was no covenant between God and Adam, yet Adam sinned. So whatever else Genesis 2–3 do, they make a conceptual point. They show that there could be sin, but no covenant. Now many Reformed theologians disagree here. They

¹⁹Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*, 88.

²⁰Thus to make my point, I need not defend this claim against Mark Ashfield's arguments in his "Five problems for the moral consensus about sins." I do want to do that, but for reasons of space, I cannot do it here.

claim that God made a “covenant of works” or “covenant of nature” with Adam.²¹ I do not see a basis for this in the Bible. In Genesis, we read:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and . . . commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’²²

Those who believe in an Adamic covenant say that God made it here. Now I have a really smart dog. He even understands English. One day I put him in my garden and said, “watch the garden for me. Bark if a thief comes. Eat anything you like except the quinces. If you eat them, you’ll be sorry.” Did I make a covenant with my dog?²³ Again, suppose that God puts Adam in

²¹See, e.g., Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 574ff. For a roll-call of others, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 211–13.

²²Genesis 2:15–17, NIV.

²³Personally, I find the dog parallel sufficient, but perhaps some readers may think it too curt. So I now take on the Reformed case in detail. All the authors I now discuss take Genesis 2–3 as literal history, Adam and Eve as real historical persons, and the covenant they allege as a real event. To simplify discussion, I speak this way. Since my point is only that there was no such covenant, I need not commit myself on the broader issue of historicity.

The first problem with talk of an Edenic covenant is that when God wants to make a covenant, He generally tells us this is what He’s doing. There would hardly be a point to it if He didn’t tell us. In Eden, he does not.

Another problem is that a covenant is an agreement, or even a contract. In the paradigm biblical cases of covenant—Abraham, Moses, David, the New Covenant—this is explicit. So is the voluntary acceptance of all parties. But my dog case is a good parallel to Eden. There is no agreement or contract between me and my dog. He just takes my orders (or not). Reformed authors try a variety of moves to deal with this.

Edward Fisher suggested that God “often contracts the covenant in real impressions in the heart and frame of the creature; and this was the manner of covenanting with man at first” (*The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 29–30). As he goes on to explain it, he seems to think that just by making Adam a sinless moral agent, God made a covenant with him. This seems just obviously false.

Turretin writes that “a law was imposed on Adam, which necessarily implies a federal agreement and contract” (*Institutes*, 574). But the Nazis imposed laws on the French for several years. The French never agreed to them, even when compelled to obey them. The most the imposition of a law tells us is that the one imposing it has the power to make it stick. Further, not every divine command amounts to a law.

Charles Hodge tries the expedient of redefining ‘covenant’: “God made to Adam a promise suspended upon a condition, and attached to disobedience a certain penalty. This is what in Scriptural language is meant by a covenant, and this is all that is meant by the term as here used” (*Systematic Theology*, 118). This would allow a “covenant” which one party never accepts. Redefining the term quietly concedes that in its ordinary sense, there was no covenant in Eden. Hodge also proposes that “law” and “covenant” are interchangeable terms (p. 118). The same comment applies.

R.L. Dabney notes the objection that what happened in Eden

was no covenant, because man’s accession to it was not optional with him: God’s terms were not a proposal made him, but a command laid upon him. I reply, if he did not have an option to accede or not, he was yet voluntary in doing so; for no doubt his holy will joyfully concurred in the gracious plan. And such compacts between governors and governed are by no means unusual or unnatural. Witness all rewards

the Garden and utters no commands, permissions or threats. Then even a “covenant theologian” would have to grant that there is no covenant between God and Adam. After a while, let’s say, Adam blasphemes and kicks his dog. On (3), then, Adam has not sinned. But surely he has.

promised by masters and teachers, for the performance of tasks, on certain conditions. (*Systematic and Polemic Theology*, ch 28)

Suppose I say to my class, “study hard and you’ll get an A on the test.” They do not reply. On Dabney’s account, they and I have made a covenant.

Some note that Noah did not explicitly accept his covenant either (Genesis 9:11–17) (e.g. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 213). I add that God calls it a covenant with “all living creatures of every kind” (v. 17). Not all of them are capable of voluntarily accepting a covenant, or even understanding what one is. However, Noah’s case has elements absent in Eden. We are told explicitly that a covenant is being made. Further, the covenant provides an explicit benefit for the “receiving” parties—no more Floods. Further, in this case, it is fair to assume that Noah and kin are desperately, pantingly eager to accept. This is a peace treaty, by a victor who has wiped out the human race save for a tiny remnant. God hangs up His war-bow as a sign of this (v. 13). Absolute victors get to determine the peace-terms. The vanquished accept them, on pain of further pounding, merely by showing up to hear what the victor will mete out. God’s term are extraordinarily generous. He guarantees peace, bestows food, and asks almost nothing in return. With the wreckage of war all around, and the victor in all His power right there, who would say no? But in Eden, there is no declaration of a covenant nor any mentioned benefit for Adam eagerly to accept. There is nothing explicit in the context for us to assume Adam’s agreement to. There are just orders. Finally, as to the other living creatures, God gave Adam rule over them (Genesis 1:26). Kingship is often hereditary. Noah and kin are the surviving claimants to the crown. So plausibly, they had the right to accept terms on their behalf.

Berkhof claims that Abraham does not explicitly accept his covenant either (*Systematic Theology*, 213). But this misreads the text, I think. Abraham had asked God for some surety that he would in fact take possession of the Promised Land (Genesis 15:8). God responded by a formal covenant ceremony modelled on the politics of Abraham’s day (Genesis 15:9–21). The covenant provided the surety Abraham had asked for, and asked nothing in return. There was thus nothing to which Abraham could have objected. By asking, Abraham had put himself in a state of conditional acceptance. He had committed himself to accept a sufficient surety if there were no conditions to make the cost of accepting too great. As there were no conditions at all, his earlier commitment became an acceptance automatically once the terms of the covenant were set. Again, there is nothing like this in Eden. Finally, some point to the covenant of Jeremiah 33:25 (with day and night and natural law) as another case of covenant without explicit acceptance. But this use of “covenant” is surely metaphor.

Berkhof also suggests, with Dabney and one Hodge, that “the perfect state in which Adam lived was sufficient guarantee of his acceptance” (*Systematic Theology*, 213). But it guarantees acceptance only if there was something to accept. The lack of explicit benefits conferred or a “here’s a covenant for you” make this questionable. Further, if Adam’s state guaranteed this, it’s not clear that his acceptance could be voluntary. If it was not voluntary, the covenant (if there was one) was not validly concluded. However, if Adam’s state did not guarantee this, then something explicit would have been needed to accept a covenant.

According to Turretin, the “covenant consist(ed) in the promise of a reward and the stipulation of obedience” (*Institutes*, 574), the reward being “life and eternal happiness” (p. 575). Many later Reformed writers follow him in this. But there is no promise of a reward in the text. There is the threat of punishment for disobedience, and that is all. Berkhof suggests that “the clear implication of the threatened punishment is that in the case of obedience death would not enter, and this can only mean that life would continue” (*Systematic Theology*, 213). But there is no guarantee that there are no further tests ahead, any of which might also bring

2.5 Moral Definitions

A common idea is that to sin is just to do wrong or moral evil. Augustine once defined sin as “the will to retain or obtain what justice forbids, when free to abstain.”²⁴ Again, W.F. Griffith Thomas wrote that “in the strict sense of the word, ‘sin’ means ‘voluntary surrender to evil.’”²⁵ In line with this, we might suggest that:

4. Act-type A is sinful =df. Tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, are evil (wrong).

But “it is evil to do evil” is vacuous. “It is evil to sin” and “it is sinful to do evil” are not clearly so. This might be just because we are not clear what goes into the concept of sin. But my own sense is that it is due to an inchoate sense that sinning is not just doing evil. (4) reduces the concept of sin to a moral concept. (4)’s *definiens* has no religious content. This is so even if moral norms are really divine commands, for (4) does not bring that fact into the concept of sin. But sin is a religious, not a moral concept. Where religion fades, sin-talk fades with it. Had no-one ever had a religion, we might well have moral concepts, but plausibly no-one would call anything sinful. That suggests that that the concept of sin has distinctively religious content.

Kant put religious content into a primarily moral definition, writing of “sin (by which is meant the transgressing of the moral law as a divine command).”²⁶ This centers the concept of sin on our relation to morality, not to God. To be religious, for Kant, is just to take duties as divine commands.²⁷ The duties are there regardless. Being religious is just viewing

death. For that matter, it is not clear in the text that Adam is in any sense immortal. After the Fall, God acts to prevent his and Eve’s eating from the Tree of Life and becoming immortal. This might suggest that death was on the cards for them regardless, though perhaps the thought is that they were once not mortal, now are mortal, and could rectify that if they ate.

Friends of an Edenic covenant sometimes point to Hosea 6:7 as a confirming text, but the translation of this verse is uncertain, and only one of its three possible renderings supports their claim. Berkhof also suggests that Christ “came to do what Adam failed to do, and did it in virtue of a covenant agreement” (*Systematic Theology*, 214). But the first does not imply the second, and Berkhof offers no other reason to accept the second. Finally Berkhof suggests that Paul’s parallel of Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12–21) implies that Adam, like Christ, was “the head of a covenant” (*Systematic Theology*, 214). But Paul describes what Adam broke as a command, not a covenant (5:14). Further, the parallel doesn’t imply this. Paul draws parallels between acts and what they bring about. There are many other ways of explaining why Adam’s act had the consequences it did.

I conclude, then, that the Bible does not really support talk of a covenant established in Eden. That is instead (to be frank) something Reformed theologians have read into the text, as part of a “federalist” approach to original sin.

²⁴On *Two Souls*, 11.15, in Schaff, 103. Augustine prefaces this with “permit me first also to define sin.”

²⁵Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, 159. It is facially obvious that this is a definition, albeit explicitly of a word rather than a real nature.

²⁶Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 37. “By which is meant” signals a definition.

²⁷Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 142.

them through a particular lens. So viewing violating them as sin is equally just adopting that lens. Thus David Attfeld, very much in Kant's vein, offers as a "preliminary definition" that "a sin is a wrong seen in relation to God."²⁸ This gets the emphasis wrong. God commanded the Jews not to work on the Sabbath. If it is wrong for them to do so, it is wrong because it violates a covenant or a divine command. The relation to God is first and basic. Only with that in place does Sabbath work count as wrong. Eleonore Stump takes sin as "something that is contrary to the will (or to the will and the nature) of a perfectly good God in virtue of being morally wrong."²⁹ This won't do. Sabbath violation is not wrong and so contrary to God's will. It is contrary to God's will and only for that reason (perhaps) wrong.

One can make our relation to God central, yet give a moral definition: Griffith Thomas at one point defines sin as "wrongdoing against God."³⁰ Mark Schroeder echoes him.³¹ Now surely if I wrong God, I sin. I'm less confident that if I sin, I wrong God, but this is at least plausible. But even if in fact, wronging God and sinning are necessarily co-extensive, wronging God may not be the core of what goes on when we sin. Moral properties supervene on non-moral. If we wrong God, we do something else, in virtue of which we wrong God. Perhaps I wrong God by lying, by cheating, and so on. But if some one thing lay beneath and unified these many ways to wrong God, that might provide the deepest account of what it is to sin.

3. Two Medieval Proposals

3.1 Anselm

Anselm wrote that:

to sin is . . . not to pay God what is owed . . . every will of a rational creature owes to be subject to the will of God . . . This is the sole and complete honor we owe God . . . Whoever does not pay God this owed honor dishonors Him, and this is to sin."³²

²⁸Attfeld, "The Morality of Sins," 228.

²⁹Stump, *Atonement*, 15–16. This is best taken as a definition. As a description, it's pleonastic—being wrong entails being contrary to God's nature and will. But a definition could include more than one sufficient condition.

³⁰Thomas, *Principles of Theology*, 158. The full text is "vice is wrongdoing against our own nature; crime is wrongdoing against our fellows; sin is wrongdoing against God" (158). This appears to be dividing a genus (wrongdoing) by differentia (against whom) to yield its species. Genus-differentia gives us an Aristotelian definition—whether Griffith Thomas meant it to or not.

³¹Schroeder, "Sins of Thought," 275.

³²CDH 11, Schmidt II 68. Anselm's inquiry in this chapter is explicitly into "what it is to sin."

One could extract three definitions here:

5. Act-type A is sinful =df. Tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, do not pay God what is owed.
6. Act-type A is sinful =df. Tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, do not subject one's will to God's.
7. Act-type A is sinful =df. Tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, dishonor God.

(5) is false. Scratching my back does not pay God what is owed, because I owe Him nothing in that respect. But it is not a sin. Perhaps, then, Anselm really has in mind that:

8. Act-type A is sinful =df. Rational creatures owe God not to do tokens of A,
or that

9. Act-type A is sinful =df. Tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, refuse to pay God what is owed.

(8) and (9) describe A in non-moral terms upon which A's wrongness supervenes. On both, we sin and therefore do wrong, and the sin consists in each in an act's relation to God.

(6) is also false; scratching my back does not in any obvious way subject my will to God's. Perhaps Anselm really means that

10. Act-type A is sinful =df. Tokens of A, *qua* tokens of A, refuse to subject a creaturely will to God's.

My comments on (8) and (9) apply to (10). That our wills are not subject to God's is a fact about our relationship to God. What matters about this fact, for Anselm, is not its moral wrongness. It is its being the "wrong" relationship to God in a non-moral sense. In that sense, for me to kiss the Queen of England on the cheek would be to take up a wrong relationship to her. That relationship is not appropriate to, does not befit, who she is and who I am, where "appropriate" and "befit" bear non-moral senses. If we do not subject our wills to God's, our relationship to Him is inappropriate or unfitting in *that* sense. That is its moral-wrong-making feature.

(7) can stand unmodified. Now dishonoring one who deserves honor is wrong. But being a dishonoring is not a moral property. It is purely descriptive. It subvenes moral properties. It's wrong to dishonor God. But for Anselm, I think, sin—dishonoring God—is the wrong-making feature, not the wrongness it makes. What makes an act sinful is that in it, we take up a particular adverse relation to God. It is something about our relationship to God, not our relationship to morality.

(7)–(10) share a feature. All define sin in terms of ways to reject God, in a sense I explain below. They are species of a genus, and the genus, I will suggest, gets us to the core of sin.

3.2 Aquinas

The *Summa Theologiae*'s question on "the definition of sin" is a careful synthesis of and commentary on Augustine.³³ Augustine had written that sin is "a turning away from the Creator . . . and . . . to creatures, which are inferior to Him."³⁴ In consequence, he held, "All sins are included under this one class: when someone is turned away from divine things . . . toward things that change."³⁵ For Augustine, this follows because the Creator is the only divine thing, and all and only creatures are changing things. Aquinas's key statement is that:

turning away from immutable good is the quasi-formal element in actual sin, and the turning toward a transient good may be the quasi-material element.³⁶

Aquinas's point is this. We sin in turning toward transient, creaturely goods. But not every way of turning to them is sinful. What makes a turning-toward a sin is that it is also a turning away from God. What to make of this depends on what to make of "turning away." When I get off my knees from prayer and seek a comfortable sitting position for the sermon, I turn away from God, toward myself and my comfort. I care only about my comfort, for the moment. But is this really sinful? Now the Latin for a turning-away is "*aversio*." "Aversion" now carries stronger freight than the bland "turning away." But the latter is what one always finds when translators render Augustine or the many others who pick the term up from him. I soon suggest that if we read our sense of "aversion" into "*aversio*," we will be near the mark in defining sin.

4. How to Define Sin

I now construct my own definition of sin. First, though, my method. I derive it from David Lewis's "How to Define Theoretical Terms."³⁷ For Christian theology is a theory about the world, and "sin" is one of its prime terms. Saying this does not imply that "sin" is in some thick sense a "theoretical term." I need take no stand on whether being sinful is an observational property. For observational properties (e.g. redness, heat) can be defined by the method I now set out. By saying that "sin" is a prime term in the theory, I mean only that it does significant work within it.

A reading of the Bible quickly turns up a set of truisms about sin, things we're quite sure of—e.g. that sin worsens our relationship with God and requires atonement. We can use these to form a "Ramsey sentence" about sin:

³³ST I-IIa 71, 6.

³⁴To *Simplician*, Book I, 2.18.

³⁵On *Free Choice* I, 16.

³⁶QD *de Malo* 4, 2c.

³⁷In Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, 78–95. For more on this philosophical method, see Nolan, "Platitudes and Metaphysics," *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, 267–300.

There is something that worsens our relationship with God, requires atonement, etc.

The Ramsey sentence provides a set of properties something has. Equally, it provides a role sin plays in the Christian theory of the world. We can then seek what has the properties or plays the role. Whatever it is, that's what sin is. When we find what has the properties, that gives us sin's intrinsic nature, not just the role it plays or some properties it bears. It gives us what *realizes* the role of sin. It tells us what sin is, though not by analyzing a concept. Ideally, finding the realizer will help explain why the truisms are true. The truisms can also test candidate definitions of sin. We can ask how well they fit with the truisms, whether they explain them, and (if they do) how well they do so.

4.1 The Sin Truisms

This kind of account of sin starts from sin truisms. I now list these, commenting on a few. I then use the truisms to evaluate a recent proposed realizer. Finally I offer my own realizer, and argue that it does better vis-à-vis the truisms than the one I discuss. I do not suppose in advance that there must be only one realizer. But our theory would be simpler with just one. We need some positive reason to posit more. So far, at least, I have not seen one.

WRONGS. All morally wrong things are sins.³⁸

So 1 John 5:17: "all wrongdoing is sin." (WRONGS) could use some explaining. The explanation could be as simple as that sin just is moral wrongdoing, if that were the correct definition.

COMMANDS. Violating divine commands is a sin.

LAWS. Breaking divine law is a sin.

COVENANTS. Violating an agreement with God is a sin.

GUILT. Sin generates guilt.

The guilt here is not a feeling. The Old Testament does not define sin, but does give master metaphors for it. It thinks of sin as a burden that weighs down (thus it is loaded on the back of the scapegoat and sent into the desert), a stain that makes unclean (thus "Wash away all my iniquity and

³⁸Mike Ashfield raises problems for this claim in his "Five problems for the moral consensus about sins." I cannot discuss them here. But they do not affect my claim that (WRONGS) is a truism. For truisms in the method I'm applying are just claims that are taken pre-philosophically as "just obvious," and so function as pre-philosophical data. Surveying random Christians will quickly convince you that (WRONGS) has this status. I am disposed to push back on Ashfield's arguments and preserve (WRONGS), but I do not need to do it to call it a truism here. For it is compatible with being a truism in this sense that once the philosophy is done, truisms wind up discredited.

cleanse me from my sin"),³⁹ and as something that indebts us. The OT does not say that sin *feels* like a burden, a stain, etc. It's not impossible that these metaphors mean to suggest feelings, but it's more plausible that they suggest an objective guilt that needs dealing with. I leave open whether this guilt is moral. The "stain" metaphor might suggest some sort of pollution that isn't a matter of being *morally* bad, as might many items in the Pentateuch's catalogue of sins. The doctrine of original sin puts some pressure on (GUILT), and might force qualification or clarification. For many have thought that the state of original sin is not itself something for which we are guilty. On the other hand, for just that reason, many have thought that original sin is only analogically or metaphorically sin.

SHAME. Sin generates shame.⁴⁰

The shame here is not a feeling. One can be shamed but not feel it, e.g. if one is the only person in town who doesn't know one's spouse is cheating. So the only *reliable* connection here is with an objective shame—a desert to have others shame one, whether or not they do it, or (so Eleonore Stump) a loss of desert of honor or of loveliness.⁴¹

WORSEN. Sin worsens our relationship to God.

SEPARATE. Sin separates us from God.⁴²

It is one thing to worsen a marriage. It is another for it to get so bad that the spouses separate. Further, the separation is an event distinct from any that might have made the marriage bad, and a relationship can worsen further after separation (consider messy divorces).

HELL. Un-dealt with, sin would result in Hell.

FORGIVE. God must forgive our sins to overcome (SEPARATE)'s separation.

ATONE. Sin must be atoned for to overcome (SEPARATE)'s separation.

ATONEMENT. The Atonement overcomes (SEPARATE)'s separation.

Given (ATONEMENT), whatever sin is, it's bad enough that the Atonement was appropriate to deal with it. If a definition of sin makes the Atonement seem "over the top," that is a large strike against it.

VARIETIES. Sin comes in "original" and "actual" varieties.

Since original sin is a state of persons, this entails that:

PERSONS. Sin is a state of persons, not just a quality of acts, attitudes, etc.

FALL. Sin is not part of our God-intended state.

³⁹Ps 51:2.

⁴⁰For the connection, see, e.g., Genesis 2:25 and the sequel in 3, Psalm 119: 5–7, 80; Proverbs 3:35, 6:33, 13:5, 18:3; Isaiah 44:9, 11; Jeremiah 3:25, 10:14; Daniel 9:7–8.

⁴¹Eleonore Stump, *Atonement*, 44.

⁴²Is. 59:2.

(FALL) is a very general, abstract moral of the story of the Fall, which does not suppose taking that story to be history.

4.1.1 *The Unobvious Truism*

Truisms should be uncontroversial. By that standard, my last might not be one. It is that

GOD ONLY. Sin is only against God.

One text pointing in this direction is Genesis 39:9. There Joseph refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife: "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" The wickedness would be done to Potiphar and/or his wife. All the same, the only sin mentioned is against God.

I draw (GOD ONLY) mainly from Psalm 51, one of the Bible's central texts on sin. The Psalm's backdrop is the story of David and Bathsheba. David lusts after Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah. He rapes her. He then tries to hide what he's done. This ultimately leads him to order his generals to get Uriah killed. So David murders him, though he uses enemy soldiers to do it. Finally, the prophet Nathan shows David how badly he has acted. Psalm 51 represents David's state of mind once Nathan has made his point. The key bit is this: "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."⁴³ Nathan gets to David by telling a story whose actors stand for David, Bathsheba and Uriah. So David realizes that he has *wronged* other humans. That's what the story brings home to him. But the Psalm says "against you"—God—"only have I sinned." This suggests that while one can *wrong* other people, one can *sin against* only God.

There are other ways to read this text. One possibility is that it uses hyperbole. It would then be saying, in effect, "My sin against you is so bad that it dwarfs my sins against others. It so exceeds them that by comparison, those sins don't even exist." Or perhaps "My relationship to you is much more important than my relationship to others. This makes sinning against you much worse than sinning against others—so much worse that it's as if sins against others don't even exist." However, this does not fit well with the rest of the Psalm:

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight. . .
Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;

⁴³Ps. 51:3–4.

wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . .

Hide your face from my sins

and blot out all my iniquity.⁴⁴

The author wants *all his iniquity* washed away. “My sin” is either the full body of his sins or this particular one. If God cleanses him, he will be “clean . . . whiter than snow,” i.e. wholly without the stain of sin. He cannot be wholly cleansed by confessing only sin against God if he has (or thinks he has) also sinned against others. He would have to confess the rest in some form to get this result. Perhaps “my sins” includes sins against others. But the only indication we get of who has been sinned against is that it is God. If the Psalmist wants forgiveness for sins against others too, surely he should (so to speak) direct some of God’s attention explicitly to those, not just to sins against Himself. The picture is instead that if God forgives all his sins against God, there is nothing left to forgive. He is “whiter than snow.”

There is also a general thought that bears mention. The Bible is emphatic that God can and does forgive all sins. This forgiveness is said to remove all guilt for those sins. If we can sin against others than God, then, the Bible implies that God can forgive me for a sin I commit against you so effectively that there is no guilt left to need forgiving by you. This is a hard saying. Suppose that Smith punches me without cause and Jones then pipes up, “that’s OK. I forgive you.” I submit that the punch remains unforgiven. Jones *can’t* forgive it. Jones doesn’t have the standing to do so because Jones is not the one offended against. It’s not clear why God would be in a different position. If you sin against me and God has the right to erase the guilt of that with no reference to me, it’s as if God has the right to erase my personhood. Further, the Bible itself suggests that God can’t, or at least won’t, erase the need for the victim to forgive:

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.⁴⁵

An easy way to deal with this is to distinguish sin from wrong and accept (GOD ONLY). We then say: if you “sin against” me, you wrong me. The sin involved is only against God. That is why God can forgive it. But when the sin has been forgiven and its distinctive sort of guilt erased, there remains the wrong you did me and the moral guilt you bear for that wrong. It is up to me to forgive it. God can’t do that for me. For He is not the party wronged, or at least not the party wronged by the very wrong done against me.

⁴⁴Ps. 51:2–9.

⁴⁵Matthew 5:25–26.

Thus my case for (GOD ONLY): the Genesis text, Psalm 51, and (GOD ONLY)'s ability to handle the problem of God's third-party forgiveness. I now consider four objections to (GOD ONLY).

4.1.2 *Objections to the Truism*

One is that a great many biblical texts speak of sinning against others than God. If I am right about (GOD ONLY), that talk needs parsing. A reasonable thought would be that "I have sinned against you" is shorthand for "I have wronged you, and in so doing sinned (against God)." This parsing gives talk of sinning against you a point even if what I do against you isn't precisely *sin* against you. For it is worse to sin against God than to wrong anyone else. So talk of sinning against another (on my reading) ups the spiritual ante. It reminds the wrongdoer that the wrong act also sinned. Thus it puts God in the picture, and tells the wrongdoer that wronging you has yielded more trouble than the wrongdoer might be thinking. Nor is it surprising that so many biblical texts speak of sin in a way that needs parsing. For it is not surprising if people not doing philosophy speak mostly in loose and popular ways, and only rarely in strict and philosophical ones.

Another objection to (GOD ONLY) is that the Bible speaks of sinning against God, as in the Genesis text above. If all sin is against God, talk of sinning against God seems pleonastic at best. Talk of sinning against God would have a point if it were also possible to sin against others, for then "against God" would be needed to distinguish one "direction" of sinning from possible others. But pleonasm is common in the Bible. Poetic parallelism, a basic technique of Hebrew poetry, expands on a thought by stating it, then putting it in slightly different words. "Sin against God" could be a word—rather than sentence-level poetic pleonasm. It could just explicate something implicit in the idea of sin, rather than add to it. The pleonasm would have a point. It would remind us of what is so bad and so dangerous about sinning.

Again, 1 Samuel 2:25 tells us that "if a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?" This rather suggests that sins against "another man" are not as such sins against the Lord—else the Lord would be unable to mediate even when the sin is against another man. But the thought may really be just that God can only mediate where there are at least two other parties to mediate between.

Finally, (GOD ONLY) flouts a venerable theological tradition.⁴⁶ Christian thinkers going back at least to Isidore of Seville⁴⁷ sort sins into those against God, neighbor and self. Peter Lombard wrote this into his *Sentences*,⁴⁸ and the *Sentences's* role as the standard theological textbook

⁴⁶My thanks to a referee for raising this.

⁴⁷Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae*.

⁴⁸Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, book II, d. 42.

made the distinction a medieval commonplace. It filtered thence into Protestant Scholasticism. So a great deal of theology has recognized sins that at some level are not against God. Now the Isidorean distinction is a reading of the biblical source material on sin. I am offering a different reading. The theological tradition suggests that a great many other thinking Christians have disagreed with my reading. The sheer weight of that majority (one might suggest) should give me pause, particularly if I think that the disagreement of epistemic peers provides evidence that I am wrong.⁴⁹

However, we should recall the role of authority in medieval theology. Respect for authorities was one of the basic rules of the craft. So medieval theologians tried hard not to deny outright what an “authority” had said. Instead, they agreed where they could, and offered “reverential interpretations” where they could not (leading to Alan of Lille’s famous plaint that “authority has a wax nose” which gets “twisted different ways”⁵⁰). It’s a good if unanswerable question how many medievals who acknowledged Isidore’s distinction would have found any use for it had it not been an element of an authoritative tradition—and had the distinction not been widespread in medieval theology, it’s doubtful that the Protestant scholastics would have picked it up. So weight of numbers may not be much of a counter-argument.

I aim to write an article, not a book—and not a historical article. But let us look at how two theologians important to the Isidorean consensus explain Isidore’s distinction. Lombard distinguishes sins against self and neighbor by noting who they hurt, but against God merely by explicating heresy, blasphemy and sacrilege.⁵¹ One suspects that he would have said that these hurt God (as Heinrich Heppe later did⁵²) had his other commitments permitted. Lombard has to be assuming that the hurt of self and neighbor is wrongful—permissible hurt wouldn’t be sinful. So Lombard could have spoken instead of who a sin wrongs, and thereby given a unified treatment of the three. Aquinas’s account of Isidore’s distinction may be this, or may differ slightly. Aquinas treats the distinction twice. His *Sentence* commentary states that every sin takes away something owed to someone, and Isidore’s distinction is with regard to the person(s) to whom the thing was owed.⁵³ In other words, sins violate obligations, and self/neighbor/God distinguishes to whom we were obligated. This differs from an account in terms of wronging *iff* violating an obligation concerning someone differs from wronging that person. The *Summa Theologiae*

⁴⁹For the import of peer disagreement, see, e.g., Feldman and Warfield, *Disagreement*.

⁵⁰Alanus ab Insulis, *Contra haereticos* 1.30, PL 210, 333A. For a truly jaw-dropping “reverential interpretation,” see Ockham’s reading of Augustine in his *Ordinatio* I, d. 35.

⁵¹*II Sententiae*, d. 42, c. 4, 3rd distinction.

⁵²Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 351. I owe the reference to Thomas McCall.

⁵³Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, d. 42, q. 2, a. 2, *quaestiuncula* 2.

adds that Isidore's distinction is in sin's "*materia circa quam*"—the matter they're about, their "objects," which make them the kind of acts they are.⁵⁴

The common thread here is a connection between sin and morality. I shortly defend a non-moral account of sin—and I could defend it just as well without taking (GOD ONLY) as a truism. On such an account, despite the (claimed) necessary connection of sin and wrongdoing, the wrongdoing is one thing and the sinning is something else. If that is so, and Isidore's distinction concerns the accompanying wrongdoing, it does not tell us anything about the nature of sin.

4.1.3 Fallbacks

Thus my case for (GOD ONLY). Still, suppose that I'm wrong about (GOD ONLY). Aquinas offers a fallback view, that any sin against anyone else is also against God.⁵⁵ Another would be that whenever one sins against anyone else, one also commits a second sin, which is against God. Either fallback would serve my argument almost as well as (GOD ONLY). Again, I have listed a fair number of truisms, and I soon offer just one realizer for the lot. One could instead adopt fewer truisms and admit more realizers.⁵⁶ Suppose, for instance, that one deleted (WRONGS), (COMMANDS), (LAWS), and (COVENANTS) from the truisms. That would trim down the sin-role, and one might then treat wrongdoing, disobedience, covenant violation and law-breaking as realizers of that role. I think the approach I take below would commend itself against this by its better explanatory value, but I cannot pursue this here. Instead, I now ask how a recent proposal by Marilyn Adams fares with my larger set of truisms.

5. Sin as Uncleaness

Marilyn Adams's candidate realizer of the sin-role is "the incommensuration of Divine and created natures"—i.e. the fact that we are too small in relation to God.⁵⁷ We are too small to deserve His love or do anything actually worth His respect or praise—anything really of merit as He sees it. Sin, as a state of a person, is being too small and unworthy. I now consider this in relation to the truisms.

Adams places a long story behind (WRONGS). Because God is "incommensurate" with us, He's beyond our categories. He is wholly other (as in Otto) and dangerous. He creates a safe way to interact with Him by erecting a conventional framework for doing so, on analogy with political treaties. Obeying His commands is that safe way. The problem with breaking them isn't that it's wrong. It's that it exposes one to the dangers of dealing with God in way not "tamed" by the covenant.⁵⁸ Sins are

⁵⁴ST I-IIa 18, 2 *ad* 2 *et corpus*; ST I-IIa 72, 4.

⁵⁵ST I-IIa 72, 4 *ad* 1. So too Berkouwer, *Sin*, 243–44.

⁵⁶Here I am partly indebted to Marcin Iwanicki.

⁵⁷Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 3.

⁵⁸For all this, Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 10–11.

acts that violate the covenant.⁵⁹ These need not be immoral. They are just whatever the covenant more or less arbitrarily says they are. Morality is just a set of human conventions. It does not apply to God or our relationship with Him.⁶⁰ For reasons of His own, God so crafts the covenant that doing wrong violates it.

While Adams does get (WRONGS) into the picture, her story is complex, and makes (WRONGS) ultimately a matter of arbitrary divine choice. If the content of the covenant that defines sin is ultimately a matter of divine convention, this is not surprising. According to Adams, our state of sin is our smallness relative to God. Many sins are moral wrongs. I do not see why being small relative to God would make one prone to morally wrong acts. There is nothing natural about that connection. Smallness might make us (in Adams's words) "incompetent"⁶¹ to keep the covenant, and so prone to all sorts of sin (covenant violation). But only by divine stipulation does this incompetence manifests itself in immoral action. That is, that (WRONGS) is a truism is ultimately (again) just God's arbitrary choice. Further, it's not clear why smallness in relation to God would make us incompetent to keep a covenant with Him. A priori, a covenant could have bound us to do only acts we're competent to do despite our relative smallness. If God wants us to keep it, and is loving and gracious, we might expect that. Further, if sinfulness is just being too small, every act manifests it, not just immoral or covenant-breaking acts. For our every act is too small, because we are. Scratching my beard is thus an expression of my sin. But surely it is not.

Adams's emphasis on covenant builds (COMMANDS), (LAWS), and (COVENANT) in by definition. As to (GUILT), if covenant violations are also immoral, they generate moral guilt. But they generate it qua immoral, not qua sinful. Sin *accompanies* what generates moral guilt rather than generating moral guilt itself. Sinful actions, as such, for her are precisely not matters of moral guilt—of faulty agency. Sin is instead pre-moral, a matter of what we are, not what we do.⁶² Qua sinful, Adams thinks, what our actions generate is a "taint,"⁶³ to which "shame"⁶⁴ at being unclean is the appropriate reaction. She offers the analogy of having dirtied one's diaper. The analogy suggests that Adams can well accommodate (SHAME).

Adams's view is adequate to (WORSEN) and (SEPARATE). She might deny that (HELL) is a truism—she is a universalist.⁶⁵ But she could also accept it and hold that all sin is in fact dealt with.⁶⁶ Be this as it may, on her account of sin, a punitive Hell would not make sense. Being too small

⁵⁹Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 12.

⁶⁰Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 2.

⁶¹E.g., Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 20.

⁶²Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 21.

⁶³Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 21.

⁶⁴E.g., Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 16–17.

⁶⁵See, e.g., Adams, "The Problem of Hell."

⁶⁶My thanks here to Christopher Willard-Kyle.

to be worthy of God's love⁶⁷ does not deserve punishment. Nor (I'd think) is doing due to our smallness acts which are incommensurate with God's being or glory. Suppose on the other hand that Hell is only a non-punitive state of separation from God. Then on her account, God could not make a creature which is not, by nature, doomed to Hell from its first instant but for His grace. God is too big for any creature as soon as it exists. Thus as soon as it exists, it is incommensurate with Him. For Adams, that is what the state of sin is. So for Adams, any possible creature is by nature in a state of sin as soon as it exists. If Hell is among the creature's options, being in a state of sin dooms it to go there. So on Adams's terms, if Hell is among a creature's options, then by its very nature, to Hell it must go, absent grace.

(FORGIVE) is not easy for Adams. Being too small for a relationship is not something one can forgive. It is not in the right category for that. So for Adams, God cannot forgive being in a state of sin. On the other hand, one can forgive covenant violations. Still, for Adams, it is not a distinctively moral sort of forgiveness. It is not like overlooking having been wronged. It is more like a mother's overlooking her baby's having soiled its diaper again.⁶⁸ This might not be the right sort of forgiveness.

(ATONE) and (ATONEMENT) raise the question of what atonement is. Most generally, it is at-one-ment—whatever it takes to make estranged parties at one. On Adams's view, our basic state of sin cannot be abolished. If that is atonement's goal, it cannot succeed. Even as perfected in heaven, we will be intrinsically too small for a relationship with God. We will remain in what Adams considers our basic state of sin. It's just that the Atonement will have overcome our shame about that, making us psychologically capable of relationship with God.⁶⁹ On pretty much any other view, the Atonement eventually does lead to our no longer being in a state of sin. It's Christian doctrine that the Atonement removes the barrier between God and us that sin creates. But the Atonement leaves us as small as we were. If our being too small for God is what makes the barrier, the Atonement can't remove it. Oddly, though, Adams can allow for (FALL). God may not have *intended* that we be too small for Him. It could be just a foreknown, unavoidable, accepted consequence of making any creature that it will be too small—and so (for Adams) sinful.

Adams can account for (VARIETIES) and (PERSONS). Original sin, as a state, could be just being "too small." Perhaps actual sins are acts typical of things as small as we. At any rate, they are covenant violations. But Adams has a problem with (GOD ONLY). For her, our state of sin is *in relation to* God. It is He for whom we are too small. But it is hard to see how being too small is in any way *against* God. I submit, then, that Adams has trouble with (WRONGS), (HELL), (ATONE), (ATONEMENT), (GOD ONLY), and perhaps (FORGIVE).

⁶⁷ Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 21.

⁶⁸ The metaphor is Adams': see "Sin as Uncleaness," 17.

⁶⁹ Adams, "Sin as Uncleaness," 21–22.

6. *The Rejection Account*

I now propose my own account. I define sin in terms of our relationship to God. If it is a morally bad state, that is a further, supervenient fact about it which is not part of sin's definition.

- Sin is a dispositional state—a complex of dispositions to reject God. It consists of God-rejecting dispositions to act, feel, want, etc. Dispositions manifest themselves. Sin does so by producing sins. To be in the state of sin is to be a sinner, someone disposed to commit sins. Dispositions also have stimulus-conditions, conditions in which they “fire.” Sin can find occasion for sinning in almost anything; almost anything can stimulate it. But it nonetheless has the sort of discriminating stimulus-conditions a disposition should have. It is sensitive to circumstances as dispositions should be, by its sensitivity to precisely what the occasion of sin is. For sinners, an attractive person may stimulate sins of lust, envy, despair, or insult. It will not normally stimulate a desire to cover the attractive person with graffiti.
- To be a sin is to be to any degree sinful.
- Sinfulness is a degreed property of type- and token acts, emotions, attitudes, desires, preferences, etc.
- A type of act, etc., is the more sinful the more its nature, independent of circumstances, is to promote or create or strengthen or express the state of sin in oneself or others.

Augustine's and Aquinas's “turning away from God” becomes sinful, I submit, just when it becomes rejection of God. When I turn to my own comfort as I arise from prayer in church, I am not rejecting God. To the contrary, I am preparing myself for proper attention to a sermon about Him. Thus my account can deal with the earlier puzzle for Aquinas. On this account, one need not first be a sinner to sin. On it, sins are *inter alia* acts, etc. that *promote* states of sin. One can promote such states without being in one. I might for laudable reasons do something that *de facto* promotes a bad habit. Why not? The Fall narrative depicts people who were not first sinners committing sins. This seems possible.

I now explain the proposal. Its central idea is rejecting God. I discuss three preliminary points about this, then explain explicit, implicit, indirect, and unknowing rejection.

6.1 *Rejecting God*

First, both people and their acts, emotions, dispositions, etc. reject God. As (PERSONS) says, sin is a state of persons, not just a quality of acts, attitudes, etc.

Further, both sorts of rejection come in degrees, but where the degrees fit in differs. With people, it's with how much they reject God. Most people do not simply 100% reject or 100% accept Him. Mixed feelings, attitudes, desires, etc. about other people are common. We are all “mixed” about

God: even saints sin, i.e. even those closest to Him have attitudes, do actions, etc. that reject Him. Attitudes, etc. that bear on God either accept or reject *simpliciter*. Hating God rejects Him. Loving Him accepts Him. Indifference rejects. If you offer me friendship, and my only reaction is “meh,” I reject your offer, and you. But the rejection of attitude, etc. comes in degrees of strength. Hitler rejected God more fervently than Richard Dawkins does.

Moving on, I ask whether one can reject God if He does not exist. A case that one can: if one cannot reject a God who does not exist, then if God does not exist, no-one rejects God. So if atheism is true, no atheist rejects God. Further, believing that Richard Dawkins rejects God commits one to believe that God exists. But surely one can believe that Dawkins rejects God even if one has no such commitment. If so, one can reject God whether or not He exists. I reply that sin is against God, and one cannot sin against a God who is not there to sin against. So if there is no God, there is no rejection of God—no God, no sin. But even if there is no God, there are attitudes that would reject Him were He there to reject, and if atheism is true, these are what Dawkins has.

6.1.1 Explicit Rejection

I now explicate explicit rejection of God. Suppose that I hope that Putin dies. This might or might not amount to rejecting Putin. It does if I hope this because I hate him. It does not if I hope this because I hope he goes to heaven. I suggest that

11. Attitude A explicitly rejects person B =df. (a) A is about B, (b) having A consciously would tell one that A is about B, (c) A is or expresses (directly or indirectly) a sufficiently negative attitude to or evaluation of B, and (d) by having the attitude, one As to put B out of one’s mind or As not to have (or continue to have) an explicit, conscious, positive-valenced personal relationship with B.⁷⁰

I offer some examples to explain (11c). Suppose I hope that you move far away. If I hope this because I dislike you, then by hoping this, I reject you. This hope directly expresses an attitude toward you which is negative enough to make this a rejection. If I hope this because I want you out of my life, this too rejects you. It indirectly expresses the underlying sufficiently negative attitude that leads me to want you out of my life. Suppose that I hope this because I want you to get your dream job, which is in another state, and I regret that this will put you out of my life. If so, hoping this does not reject you. Suppose finally that I am indifferent to you, and hope you move only so that my friend can rent your apartment. Then I reject you, though without venom. My indifference to “losing” you makes my attitude amount to rejection. Beyond these easy cases, what makes an

⁷⁰My thanks to Brad Saad for several improvements in this definition.

attitude sufficiently negative varies with the context.⁷¹ For instance, context determines whether indifference is negative enough. Indifference to an offer of friendship is negative enough. Indifference to someone's vile behavior may condone it. It is insufficiently negative to reject the person behaving so.

What I have said for attitudes has parallels for desires, emotions, and actions. Preferences need a different treatment, as these have as contents what is preferred *and* what it's preferred to. Thus I can explicitly reject God by preferring other things to God's existing or to a relationship with God. It would not be hard to treat preferences in a way broadly modeled on (11). "Sufficiently negative" will do significant work in such an account, since not every way of preferring A to B constitutes rejecting B.

As to (11d), "explicit, conscious. . ." requires comment. If God is as Christians believe, God's side of such a relationship is always in place. For He is always acting for our good, loving us, etc. If we do not believe we have such a relationship, God's relation to us is explicit and conscious, but our relation to God is not. If we believe it and don't care or don't like it, our relationship to God is not positive-valenced.

Desires, emotions, attitudes, actions, etc. can all explicitly reject God. Desires provide simple examples. I might explicitly reject God by desiring that

- He not exist.
- He leave me alone, neither having nor seeking an explicit, etc. relationship with me.
- He be less present in the world around me.
- the world do less to remind me of Him.
- He not be as He really is. This is *de facto* to want one's God-relationship not to be with God as He actually is, and so to want not to relate to God as He actually is. In the same way, it rejects the spouse who is really there to insist on seeing him/her not as he/she is, but as you wish he/she was.⁷²

According to many, the first is impossible. But we do sometimes desire the impossible. I can want to prove Goldbach's Conjecture even if it is not possibly true.

Implicit Rejection

Desires (etc.) can implicitly reject God. These fail (11b). A rejecting desire fails (11b) if it rejects B under a description that would not tell one that it is about B. If I want never to meet the world's nastiest person, I do not know that Jones is that person, and the desire satisfies the rest of (11), the desire implicitly rejects Jones. Again, consider a rejecting desire directed only to individuals qua members of a class. Suppose that I want all my

⁷¹My thanks here to Brad Saad.

⁷²My thanks here to a referee.

noisy neighbors to move away, not knowing who they are. Then the desire is about each of them, but if Jones is one of them, having the desire consciously would not tell me that it is about Jones. So if the desire meets appropriate analogues of (11c-d), the desire implicitly rejects Jones.

6.1.2 Indirect Rejection

I approach indirect rejection via an example. I may desire things that (whether or not I realize it) I can only have if God leaves me alone, does not exist, does not have the divine nature, or does not act in accordance with that nature. Suppose that, in fact, I cannot serve both God and Mammon. Suppose too that a life serving Mammon cannot be overall happy if God exists. (This might be because if God exists, my life will go on beyond death, and its post-mortem part will contain unhappiness that more than balances off whatever happiness Mammon gave me.) Then if I want an overall happy life serving Mammon, I want something I can have only if God does not exist, does not have the divine nature, does not act in accord with that nature (because He smiles on my life with Mammon), or leaves me alone. So I submit that intuitively, my Mammon-desire is God-rejecting. For if the world were to give me what I desire, the world would be as an explicit God-rejecting desire wants it to be. Thus we can define:

12. Attitude A indirectly rejects person B =df. A is not explicitly or implicitly B-rejecting, but to satisfy A, the world must be as some explicitly B-rejecting attitude would have it.

If this is right, we all very likely have desires, attitudes, preferences, etc. that indirectly reject God. For God comes with baggage. If He exists and is as Western religion or perfect being theology say, then there are also objective moral norms. These constrain our behavior in ways we do not like. There is a meaning to our lives which we do not determine. There may be Judgment and Hell. Many of us dislike these things. All of us have desires against them.

6.1.3 Ignorant Rejection

On the present account, it is robustly possible to reject God unknowingly. I might e.g. have desires which (unknown to me) could be fulfilled only if God left me alone. Again, enough selfishness might de facto be an anti-God attitude. One can be selfish without even having the concept of God. That one can sin unknowingly fits the biblical picture of sin. Leviticus has whole chapters on unknowing sins.

If rejecting God took (say) some concept close to the current theistic concept of God, my proposal would be false. For if God exists, there was sin when no-one had anything approaching that concept. I now contend that one can reject God even if one has never heard of Him, and has no concept that would be remotely adequate to Him. On my account, there is nothing particular one must believe or conceive to be able to reject God.

Suppose that I am a 16th-century racist. I know that there are non-white people. I want to live only with whites. I have no idea that anyone is Vietnamese. I do not even have the concept of Vietnam. But the content of my desire is: for all x , if x is human and not white, I am not living with x . The quantifier ranges beyond the non-whites I know about. It's intended to. I don't think I know all non-white individuals, but I do know that whoever they are, I want not to live with them. So I prefer not to live with Vietnamese people even though I have no concept of being Vietnamese. A racist can be anti-Vietnamese in all the ways that matter, yet lack that concept. I am a Vietnamese-rejecter just because I am a racist. In the same way, I can want God not to exist even if I never hear of God at all, and have no concept that would single Him out.⁷³

One way to reject God is to reject His authority over one's life. One can do that without knowing whose authority one is rejecting. Suppose I'm walking in the country and come to a "No Trespassing" sign. I don't know who put it up. It might be just a farmer expressing a preference. There might be local, state, or federal law behind it. It might even be foreign law; perhaps the sign is within the grounds of an embassy. But I go ahead and walk where the sign forbids. I reject the authority of *something*. I have no idea what. Perhaps I don't even have a clear idea of what authority is. That doesn't matter. De facto, authority has tried to bind my actions, and I have said no. Among the "No Trespassing" signs in our lives are moral "thou shalt nots." When we do what they prohibit, we reject the authority of whatever their source is. If their source is God, we thereby reject God's authority. We thereby reject God. The circumstance-independent nature of rejecting God's authority makes it a rejection of God.

Thus my account of sin, singular. I now take up sins, plural.

6.2 Nature and Circumstance

Moral value provides an analogy for a distinction in my proposal about sins. Some of the moral value of acts, etc. depends on circumstances. The act-type of loud spitting is morally neutral. A token spitting can be blameworthy due to its circumstances—e.g. when done at a funeral. However, some moral value is intrinsic to types of act. Murder is wrong just because of what it is—its nature—and independent of circumstance. I make the same distinction with God-rejection. Working on Saturday is not intrinsically sinful. It is a way to reject God only if one is Jewish and knows the Commandment. These circumstances make into a sin what is not one by its nature. Another act-description builds the circumstances in: "being Jewish, knowing the commandment, and working on Saturday." *This* is a sin independent of its (further) circumstances, by its very nature.

⁷³In such cases, if one made the anti-God content of my desire explicit, it might be disjunctive. I'm against God, but as I haven't got the ability to specify the content fully, all one could say is that what I want is that God not exist, or not have the divine nature, or not act in accord with it, or . . .

Again, murder is God-rejecting just because of what it is—its nature—and independent of circumstances. For murder is intrinsically bad. Thus to murder is to place oneself against the morally good, against what reflects the character of God precisely in the respect in which it does so. Reflections are a kind of image, and attitudes toward images often promote, etc. attitudes toward their originals. If I have distaste for things that look like the later Elvis Presley precisely in the respects in which they resemble him, I would have had distaste for the later Elvis's looks had I met him. For he looked like the later Elvis. So the more I condition myself to be against things that resemble God's character precisely in the respects in which they resemble it, the more I condition myself to be against the original when I meet it.

We can come at this from another direction. For murder-victims bear the image of God. They *are* images of God. So to murder is to take up and express attitudes to images of God. To be an image of God is to be a good representation of some aspect of God. Thus images of God deserve reverence, because those aspects do. An icon precisely as a physical object deserves reverent handling because of the image it bears. Reverent handling is a way to express reverence toward the original the icon represents. Similarly, irreverent handling expresses irreverence toward the original. To murder is to reject the image of God's demand for reverence. It is to refuse to subordinate one's ends to its demands. Irreverence toward God is a mode of rejection.

6.3 Promoting, Creating, Strengthening, Expressing

My proposal about sins includes four relationships between sins and the state of sin. Creating the state needs no explanation. To strengthen it is to make one's God-rejection more intense, and/or promote its continuing. Intensity can be measured by the effects it disposes one to produce, *ceteris paribus*. I discuss promoting and expressing with regard to acts; how to extend what I say to desires, attitudes, etc. should be clear. I say that an act promotes God-rejection if and only if it is fit by nature to raise the probability of a dispositional state of God-rejection in someone without one. There can be such acts even if (as the doctrine of original sin has it) everyone already has one. Typically, acts that promote, in this sense, will also strengthen if the state already exists. Acts more strongly promote this the more fit they are to lead to such states, the likelier they make that outcome, and the stronger the rejection in the states that do or would result.

I say that (say) an act expresses God-rejection if and only if a God-rejecting state of its agent plays an appropriate role in producing it, and the act's nature makes it a sign of God-rejection that someone well-informed and normally perceptive about such matters would understand. An act more expresses God-rejection the larger the role of God-rejection in its genesis, or the bigger the act or the sign, or the clearer the sign. Vandalizing a church may express God-rejection; if it does, it more expresses this the greater the damage.

6.4 The Truisms and the Rejection Account

I now ask how the rejection account fares with the sin truisms. First, (WRONGS). The account implies that all moral wrong rejects God. Suppose that we want both to do evil and to have a happy overall life. If God is by nature the moral enforcer, these desires jointly indirectly reject God. Further, if Aristotelians are right and we cannot help wanting to have a happy overall life, any desire to do something bad *ipso facto* is part of a rejection of God. This is more profoundly so if God is not just the moral enforcer but (as most philosophical theists think) the Good or in some sense the source or ground of moral norms.

Further, on my proposal, (WRONGS) really asserts that the morally wrong promotes, creates, etc. God-rejection. If I ignore one “No Trespassing” sign and apparently get away with it, this will likely incline me more toward ignoring others, *ceteris paribus*. I think the connection between the wrong and God-rejection could be shown in detail, for specific classes of wrong. I should do so to make it plausible that my proposal gets the extension of “sin” right. I must defer that project for now, but my comments above about murder may suggest how it would go. Parallel comments apply to (LAWS), (COMMANDS) and (COVENANTS).

I now take up (GUILT). God is our supreme benefactor. It is a bad thing to reject a benefactor. It is bad if we know what we’re doing. It is also bad if we don’t. Suppose that you are rude and dismissive of a friendly overture from someone. Unknown to you, this person was the anonymous donor who put you through college. If you came to know what you had done, you would feel you had something to atone for. That is, you would feel that you had acquired guilt. You should also feel shame, and feel that you were right to feel it—and so my account is adequate to (SHAME).

Per (WORSEN) and (SEPARATE), rejecting a person worsens one’s relationship with him/her, and can easily lead to separation. (It aims at it.) As to (HELL), on one conception, Hell is just isolation from God.⁷⁴ Such separation would lead naturally to it, if not dealt with. On an Eastern Orthodox approach to Hell, the connection is even closer. For on this view, to be in Hell is simply to see God, but with an attitude of rejection.⁷⁵ (FORGIVE) makes perfect sense on my account. Those we reject with no good cause must forgive us for relations to be renewed. *Per* (ATONE), atonement can well be understood as something to overcome a barrier our rejection causes or constitutes and restore right relations. How my view interacts with (ATONEMENT) depends on one’s theory of the Atonement. On a moral exemplar view, the Cross overcomes our rejection by displaying divine love, which changes our attitude. On Swinburne’s broadly

⁷⁴See, e.g., the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, #1033.

⁷⁵See, e.g., <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles-2009/Mettalinis-Paradise-And-Hell-According-To-Orthodox-Tradition.php>.

penitential view, it helps us overcome the barrier by providing a fitting gift we can offer God in apology.⁷⁶

My account builds (VARIETIES) and (PERSONS) in. It makes good sense of (FALL). Of course God did not intend us to be disposed to reject Him. Of course God would not make it natural to us to reject Him. Finally, the account scores high on (GOD ONLY). Rejection of a person is a desire, attitude, preference, disposition or act against that person. This is so even if the rejection is implicit or indirect.

The rejection account does very well on the truisms. I think it does better than the other considered here. I thus think it merits serious consideration.

Rutgers University

References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1991. "Sin as Uncleaness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214089>.
- . 1993. "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians." In *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump (Cornell University Press), 301–325.
- Ashfield, Mark. 2021. "Five Problems for the Moral Consensus about Sins." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 90: 157–189.
- Attfield, David. 1984. "The Morality of Sins." *Religious Studies* 20: 228.
- Berkhof, Louis. 1958. *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth Trust).
- Berkouwer, G.C. 1971. *Sin* (William B. Eerdmans Publishers).
- Casati, Roberto, and Achille Varzi. 1994. *Holes* (MIT Press).
- Clarke, Randolph. 2014. *Omissions: Agency, Metaphysics, and Responsibility* (Oxford University Press).
- Dabney, R.L. 1878. *Systematic and Polemic Theology*. <https://www.monergism.com/systematic-theology-ebook-2>.
- Feldman, Richard and Ted Warfield, eds. 2010. *Disagreement* (Oxford University Press).
- Fisher, Edward. 1850 [originally published 1645]. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Presbyterian Board of Publication).
- Heppe, Heinrich. 1978. *Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Book House).
- Hodge, Charles. 1895. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Charles Scribner's Sons).
- Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Harper and Brothers).
- Lewis, David. 1983. *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Oxford University Press).
- McFarland, Ian. 2010. In *Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Wiley-Blackwell).
- Melachthon, Philip. 2011. *The Chief Theological Topics*, translated by J. Preus (Concordia).
- Mumford, Stephen. 2022. *Absence and Nothing: The Philosophy of What There is Not* (Oxford University Press).

⁷⁶See, e.g., Swinburne, "The Christian Scheme of Salvation."

- Nolan, Daniel. 2008. "Platitudes and Metaphysics." In *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, edited by David Braddon-Mitchell, and Robert Nola (MIT Press), 267–300.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1985. "The Meaning of 'Meaning.'" In *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press).
- Philip Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 88.
- Schroeder, Mark. 2020. "Sins of Thought." *Faith and Philosophy* 37 (3): 273–293.
- Sorensen, Roy. 2008. *Seeing Dark Things: The Philosophy of Shadows* (Oxford University Press).
- . 2022. *Nothing: A Philosophical History* (Oxford University Press).
- Stump, Eleonore. 2018. *Atonement* (Oxford University Press).
- Swinburne, Richard. 1988. "The Christian Scheme of Salvation." In *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, edited by Thomas Morris (University of Notre Dame Press), 13–30.
- Thomas, W.H. Griffith. 2005. *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Wipf and Stock).
- Turretin, Francis. 1992. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, translated by George Giger, edited by James Dennison (P&R Publishing).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell).
- Zwingli, Ulrich. 1922. "An Account of the Faith of Huldreich Zwingli." In *On Providence* (Labyrinth Press).