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# PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION: On Original Sin — I

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A Hopefully Useful Way of Thinking About Original  
Sin

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# 1 Introduction and Motivation for This Entry

The reason I am writing this entry is because often, the concept of Original Sin is misunderstood, and is a stumbling block to many. And so, although I cannot say my understanding is perfect, I think that I have useful tool in understanding Original Sin.

I will try to be concise in this entry, and so I will only have one main section. Furthermore, I shall assume that whoever reads this will have some basic understanding of Original Sin and the Fall, although I will provide some basic quotes from Wikipedia.

## 2 The (Hopefully) Useful Idea

So, before we jump into what my way of thinking about Original Sin may be, I'll paste a quote here from wikipedia<sup>1</sup>:

“Original sin is the Christian doctrine that holds that humans, through the fact of birth, inherit a tainted nature in need of regeneration and a proclivity to sinful conduct.”

Hopefully this gives a brief overview of the idea of Original Sin for those less familiar with it. However, I understand that some may still have questions, and so that is why I have made this entry in the first place.

Essentially my idea uses the concept that St Thomas Aquinas described. His idea is that we all do things for the sake of what we perceive to be good. But, the key word here is ‘perceived’. The mess of our world comes about mainly because everyone at some point in their lives at least does something they perceive to be good, yet is the complete opposite.

Now, some may have reservations with this concept, but I would ask those of you who do to really consider it. For example, sure, we can agree that stealing is bad, but nonetheless thieves steal precisely because they think it is good (good for them). In the same way, murderers murder, and all the rest. We really do operate on this basis. If you even think about all the actions you did today of your own free will, I guarantee you that you did them because you perceived them to be good, or for a good aim. Even if you are coerced to do something, it would be that you see the “lesser of two evils” as a good choice, as opposed to for example being subject to a threat by the coercer.

Now, it is with this lens that I wish to look at the Fall. For those unfamiliar I would recommend reading Genesis Chapter 1, 2 and 3 (only a few pages in total) in the Bible. But, for the sake of completeness, I include the first paragraph of the Wikipedia entry<sup>2</sup> here:

“The fall of man, the fall of Adam, or simply the Fall, is a term used in Christianity to describe the transition of the first man and woman from a state of innocent obedience to God to a state of guilty disobedience. The doctrine of the Fall comes from a biblical interpretation of Genesis, chapters 1–3. At first, Adam and Eve lived with God in the Garden of Eden, but the serpent tempted them into eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original\\_sin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original_sin).

<sup>2</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_man).

good and evil, which God had forbidden. After doing so, they became ashamed of their nakedness and God expelled them from the Garden to prevent them from eating from the tree of life and becoming immortal.”

I perfectly understand that many will not be satisfied with this short summary by Wikipedia, and many will not be satisfied with the story itself. However, I think that the reason for the latter is because of the misunderstanding of Original Sin. Wikipedia<sup>3</sup> adds that “[...]the Fall brought sin into the world, corrupting the entire natural world, including human nature, causing all humans to be born into original sin, a state from which they cannot attain eternal life without the grace of God”. These quotations lack a lot of explanation, but hopefully they give a good overview.

Now, in light of this, I suggest that it is useful to think of Original Sin as essentially being the throwing off of our fundamental compass of what is Good. Now, in (Catholic and Orthodox at least) Christianity, God is good, and is indeed Goodness itself, in its entirety. And so, God is the ultimate guide and end of what is Good, in the True and complete sense. Before the Fall, human nature was essentially by default perfectly tied with God. This meant that whatever perceived good humanity had, it was actually Good, because human nature was fundamentally in tandem with God who is Goodness itself.

The eating of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” is precisely the proclamation that “I know what is good and evil, I will decide.” This is what I meant when I talked about the throwing off of our fundamental compass of what is Good. This is ultimately the choosing of our own will over God’s. We are, figuratively speaking, casting away a perfect compass in exchange for one that is not only misguided, but also one where the needle need only be pushed by our own finger, to the direction of our own choosing. This is literally the original sin as it were.

Now, the consequent problem people may have is how this affects human nature for all generations down the line. There may be two ways of looking at this with what we have said. Firstly, we can say that the altered compass we talked about earlier is something of a universal compass, embedded in the essence of humanity which we all share. And so it is of no surprise that we also share in its corruption since the Fall. Secondly, we can bring in what we’ve talked about before, that is the idea of acting to what we see as a perceived good. This lends us to the questioning of just where we obtain our values from. The answer is of course, the people around us. Whether they be our parents, our friends, books, or videos (made by people). And so, in a literal sense, when the Fall occurred, we would naturally receive corrupted values by the fact that we can only obtain our values from our parents, and the generations

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<sup>3</sup>Also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_man).

before us (which leads to the Original Sin of Adam and Eve). And so it is also in this sense that we inherit Original Sin, through the values we can only naturally pick up from our parents and those around us, which trace back to the Fall, and so are fundamentally off the mark.

Now, this does not mean that then there are no True values of what is good and bad, it just means that we are fundamentally flawed in navigating those True values, left to our own devices. That last bit is important, because our own devices are precisely not what we are left with, since that is exactly where God enters the picture – not that He was ever left from it exactly, or is not the canvas either.

I have left out one thing: ourselves. We of course not only listen to others, but also to our own reason and conscience. The first, our reason, can obviously be flawed, no questions asked. The second, our conscience is probably more trustworthy and worth listening to, also because we aren't really able to say that is merely our own. In many ways it is the remnants of the perfect compass that Adam and Eve chose to throw away. By being so fundamental to our nature as humans, it would only be natural that we have a 'perfect-compass-shaped hole' in our souls, and that is probably what our conscience exactly is. And so, our conscience could be said to be the echo of footsteps that walked with God in a perfect manner before the Fall – something very much worth listening to. But nonetheless, our conscience is limited by the very imperfect human nature which interprets it, including the fundamentally thrown-off perception of what is good initiated by Original Sin.

The final aspect I wish to include about Original Sin is that it points to a fundamental altering of our proper nature, just like the discolouring of an eye. In the same exact way as we are unable to see the eyes we look from, it is not obvious for us to see the effects of Original Sin, or the Fall. This also I think is worth taking into account.

I have tried to keep this short, and so I think I will leave it at that, but I hope it has been interesting, and has provided a key to the depth of the nature of Original Sin, and indeed the Christian understanding of human nature.

I have tried to minimise typos, but I can't promise they aren't here, so apologies if there are any.

Thank you for reading.

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