As is well known, Augustine’s formulation of evil, not as an ontological reality inhering in everything that exists, but as the privation, or absence, of good, afforded him the conceptual apparatus for avoiding the doctrinal errors of Mani and Pelagius. Against Mani, it enabled him to hold that everything that exists, simply because it exists, is, at least in part, good, and that the appearance of “evil” in a thing stems, not from its nature, but from the corruption of God’s purpose for it. “I perceived, therefore, and it was made clear to me, that Thou didst make all things good, nor is there any substance at all that was not made by Thee ... because our God made all things very good.” Against Pelagius, it enabled him to maintain that the evil we do is entirely a matter, not of the impact upon us of the sin of our first parents — original sin — but of behavior stemming from our own will. “For in that when a man is born there is something good, so far as he is a man, he condemns the Manichean, and praises the Creator; but in so far as he derives original sin, he condemns the Pelagians, and holds a Savior necessary.”

There are, nonetheless, implications of Augustine’s discussion of original sin that make contemporary readers uneasy — with, for instance, his assertion concerning the guilt of unbaptized infants and the

---

1 *Confessiones*, VII, 12; cf. also *De Natura Boni*, III, where he states, “[E]very natural existent is good.” What one may say, then, of the devil, that he is both good and evil — good in that he exists as a marvelous creation of God, but evil in that his will, and subsequent behavior are corrupt — one may say as well of the “impure [human] spirit” which is “a good thing considered as spirit, but evil in that it is impure. For the one is of God, and is His work, while the other emanates from man’s own will” (*De Peccato Originali*, XLVI).

2 *Contra Duas Epistolae Pelagianorum*, III, 25.
implication that an eternity of torture awaits them as the divinely-ordained punishment for their condition. While, surely, certain of Augustine’s own contemporaries were as repelled by such assertions, our discomfort consists in our difficulty comprehending, not so much the conceptual point that as a consequence of Adam’s sin human beings should have come under the sway of death, but that infants would be so abjectly condemned as a consequence of their elders’ failure, for whatever reason, to get them baptized. It is not the conception of the doctrine of original sin per se that comes under attack, but what confidence we can place in the soundness of God’s judgment.

How important, therefore, it is for us to understand that Augustine’s doctrine of original sin speaks not so much about punishment as about how “before [God] none is free from sin, not even the infant which has lived but a day upon the earth.”\(^3\) The doctrine, as such, is a statement about the common condition of humanity. Its strength consists in its having cast an understanding of sin as being absolutely equivalent neither to our imitation of others, nor psychological conditioning, in a sinful world, shaping who we are, nor even to the actual sins which we commit, intentional or otherwise, insofar as sin originates not from a source outside oneself, but from within. Sin, as such, cannot be blamed on one’s environment; concupiscence is part and parcel of who we are. We cannot have more or less of it depending on the relative virtues of our parents, schools, or various societies. Original sin is the great equalizer.

Original sin, in Augustine’s view, is more than the behavior through which we offend our Creator. The baptism of infants, at least in the West, teaches that, prior to any act on our part, we are guilty of sin.\(^4\) The infant is “not without sin, either that which they have derived from their birth, or that which they have added from their own misconduct.”\(^5\) Sin exists beyond the works of the flesh, being inherent in the soul. Augustine conceived of this internal corruption as concupiscence and the root sin of pride.

---

\(^3\) *Confessions* I, 7.

\(^4\) The Christian East has retained the practice of infant baptism, but without the same proposed implication that the child needs forgiveness for inherited guilt.

\(^5\) *De Natura et Gratia*, IV.
For various reasons, some theologians today object to this definition of original sin.⁶ One such objection is a consequence of the rejection of the historicity of the Garden narrative. For without an historical Adam, it would seem that the doctrine of original sin could be put on the same mythological shelf as demons impregnating women and the Donation of Constantine. But should it? The earliest known exegesis of the text which suggests that the effects of Adam’s sin were inherited by his descendants comes from 4 Ezra: 3,4 — which dates back to the time of the rise of Christianity. Indeed, Hebrew Bible references, e.g. Psalm 51:5, or those listed by Paul in Romans 3:10-18, demonstrate that there is reference to human depravity in Scripture independent of the reference to it in the account of the Fall in Genesis. In fact, the clearest reference in the New Testament to the sin of Adam, Romans 5, involves, not so much a return to the Genesis account, as a juxtaposition of the role of Adam upon that of Christ. Paul’s intention in this text is not to explain human nature, but to explicate a Christology.

In any case, as Paul Ricoeur argues, a literal interpretation of the Genesis account is more of a distraction from than an anchor for the doctrine of original sin. He writes: “This interpretation has plunged Christianity into the profession of an absurd history and into pseudorational speculations on the quasi-biological transmission of a quasi-juridical guilt for the fault of an other man.”⁷ What is important, in Ricoeur’s view, is not the “false knowledge,” but the “true symbol.” In fact, once one has cast off the distraction of this historical stumbling block, one is able, finally, to work one’s way toward the recovery of meaning. What is taught in this doctrine and by this symbol is far more important than the historical reliability of a man named Adam. Draw-

---

⁶ Some contemporary feminists have suggested that the fundamental sin of women is different from that of men (e.g. Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, ed. by Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (Harper and Row, 1979). Despite the occasional oversimplification or misunderstanding of what Augustine means by pride, one may certainly dispute descriptions of original sin, suggesting alternative understandings of its root expression. What is important is that the sin is characterized by more than mere external acts or conditioning — a fundamental difficulty for those wishing to delineate between the root sin of men and women.

ing upon Ricoeur, Stephen J. Duffy summarizes the value of a non-historical reappropriation of original sin and the Fall, arguing that "the aim of this process of deconstruction and reconstruction is to open up a way between the naive historicism of fundamentalism and the bloodless moralism of rationalism, lest the treasure be hidden in Adamic myth and the Augustinian rationalization of it be squandered." The recovery of the doctrine of original sin is certainly not predicated on a literal reading of Genesis. It operates as effectively as a powerful symbol as it does as primal history. What, in my view, Duffy really is underscoring is the importance to Christianity of a strong doctrine of sin: one that will account for humanity's incessant inhumane behavior, and capture our inability to do things right. Like many other modern theologians he is interested in re-establishing a place for it in contemporary theology. The reappropriation of a traditional doctrine is, however, a delicate matter, often involving the manipulation of material to bolster something as narrow as one's own theological or political agenda. Mindful of this danger, I propose to revisit the essential meaning of original sin and underscore that way its importance to us in our own time. To accomplish this, I draw upon the three fundamental traits identified by Paul Ricoeur as central to the the doctrine of original sin: the realism, the communal dimension, and the misery of original sin.

The Realism of Sin

As noted above, many theologians, as well as non-academic Christians, have a real problem with the notion of original sin. Images of unbaptized infants in hell, coupled with the impression that God exacts from us a conduct of life far in excess of what we are capable, results,

---


9 Both Ricoeur and Duffy argue that belief in the historicity of Genesis 1-3 does more violence to the doctrine of original sin than its recognition as symbolic. While Duffy argues that a literal interpretation of the Fall will eventually lead to either Manichaeanism or Pelagianism, he seems to overlook the fact that viewing Adam, as he does, as a mere representative of humanity runs this risk to an even greater extent. One of the strengths of the Adamic myth is that it gets God off the hook for creating evil and explains innate human bondage to sin by demonstrating how Adam was different, not the same.
predictably, in the rejection of the doctrine of original sin. What, however, is truly striking is people who say they do not believe in sin at all. Explanations for this opinion range from crass misunderstandings of Greek philosophy to more sophisticated explications of the reasons for human failing and suffering. What they have in common is a basic type of gnostic notion that if human beings had the knowledge and the means to bring about an increase of happiness, love, and understanding in others’ and in their own lives, they would need to put up with far less suffering and difficulty than they presently do. The point I would like to underscore against such claims has perhaps been put best by Reinhold Niebuhr:

“It is necessary to point out that the doctrine [of original sin] makes an important contribution to any adequate social and political theory, the lack of which has robbed bourgeois theory of real wisdom; for it emphasizes a fact which every page of human history attests.”

To understand the reality of sin, and what differentiates it from ignorance — a lack of *gnosis* — one needs clearly to articulate the distinction between original and actual sin. The former is a corruption of our will or inclinations, prior to any act on our part. The latter consists of all of our sins of commission or omission — our failure to act in a virtuous manner, or even to act at all. We are implicated in the former sin before we ever raise a finger or encounter another human being. The latter is the outcome of the decisions we make in from day to day, of our own free will and under the impact of others’ influence upon us. Augustine makes this distinction in his discussion of the condemnation of infants. While unbaptized infants are guilty of original sin, their penalty must be lighter: “such infants as quit the body without being baptized,” he writes, “will be involved in the mildest condemnation of all.” While they may bear the mark of original sin, they cannot be accused of having committed actual sins. The situation is different with adults. Speaking in the voice of unbaptized adults, Augustine writes: “I

---


11*De Pecatorum Meritis et Remissione*, I, 20. Cf. also *De Pecc.*, I, 39; *De Libero Arbitrio*, III, 23.
was descending into hell burdened with all the sins that I had committed, both against Thee, myself, and others, many and grievous, over and above that bond of original sin whereby we all die in Adam.”\(^{12}\) It is not out of a motive of compassion that Augustine makes his assertion that infants will be subjected to a lighter form of punishment, but as a way of remaining consistent with some of the theological implications of his thought. The difference between the unregenerate infant and its adult counterpart is the number of actual sins committed; it is for their actual sins that adult souls must suffer the fires of hell. Infants, nonetheless, are not free from guilt. For if they do not actually sin, it is because they lack the ability to sin, not because they are unwilling to do so. “In the weakness of the infant’s limbs, and not in its will, lies its innocence.”\(^{13}\) Augustine reinforces this point in the *Confessions* in the part where he reminds us of children’s insistence on the immediate satisfaction of their desires.

The distinction between original sin and actual sin formed the basis of Augustine’s disagreement with Pelagius on the question of the latter’s overriding focus on humanity’s free will and repudiation of original sin. To be sure, the Greek Fathers, for centuries, had provided accounts of human free will. Pelagius took this a step further, however, becoming so bold as to assert that “Adam’s sin was injurious to himself alone, and not to the human race .... Evil is not born with us, and we are procreated without fault; and the only thing in men at their birth is what God has formed.”\(^{14}\) In Pelagius’ view, it is only actual sins that human beings commit. One may say human beings actually inherit the sins of their parents, if by that one means they are exposed to the negative consequences and influence of their sin, but partake not of their guilt. Augustine, for his part, held that sin is “nothing but the corruption of natural measure, form or order.”\(^{15}\) So while inherited sin is not an evil force, neither does it come to being as a merely negative influence. Original sin has corrupted our will so that before we ever encounter an interpersonal situation our inherited nature has rendered us sinful.

---

\(^{12}\) *Confessions*, V, 9.

\(^{13}\) *Ibid*, I, 7.

\(^{14}\) *De Peccato Originali*, XIV.

\(^{15}\) *De Natura Boni*, IV.
“Sin in man is perversity and lack of order, that is, a turning away from the Creator who is more excellent, and a turning to the creatures which are inferior to him.”

It is precisely this “perversity and lack of order” which corrupt our will and render us incapable of following the will of God. They blow us off course, as it were, pinning us down to the pursuit of the desires and distractions of the world, forcing our abandonment of the highest good, namely, God. It is not free will that we lack, as the later Protestant Reformers would maintain, but the freedom to pursue good or evil. So while we might originally have been designed to enjoy complete freedom and happiness as subject to God, who is the highest good, we are driven instead by the corruption of our will to pursue finite goods — temporal goods we can never completely possess. The evil of original sin consists, therefore, in its subjection of us to a kind of gravity, pulling us away from God, while pushing us down toward the indiscriminate satisfaction of our desires, and toward the disharmony, corruption, suffering that such brings.

Exactly how original sin is passed on from generation to generation is never clearly articulated by Augustine. Let us, at this juncture, examine the work of Dorothee Sölle, who attempts to position herself in continuity with the thought of Augustine, at least to some degree, on the subject of original sin. Seeing herself as anti-Pelagian, she asserts that sin “is a state, not an action.” She continues, “What is meant [by Augustine] is that we are born into conditions in which we do not cause sin but already live in sin.” Thus far she provides a fair analysis of the very basics of his thought. Difficulties arise, however, when she begins to explain how we come by this original sin. She writes:

“Sin is certainly also my decision, my free will, my ‘no’ to God, but it is also the destiny into which I was born. I am entangled in it through my parents, my teachers and my tradition.”

---

16 De Div. Quaes., I, ii, 18.
In other words, parents, teachers, tradition comprise our environment. From a psychological point of view, they fashion us into becoming the beings who we are. Sölle has no problem with that. Indeed, she argues that negative environmental influences create the state of sin in which we all live.\(^\text{19}\) While I will return to the theme of the communal dimension of sin in the next section, it is important to note this fundamental difference between Augustine and Sölle on the "realism" of sin. Augustine understands inherent sin to dwell in the souls of human beings; they are born with it, prior to any social interaction. Sölle regards sin as a social phenomenon which, theoretically speaking, may be eradicated, at least on a small scale. Ricoeur suggests, I believe correctly, that such a notion (Sölle's) of original sin is Gnostic.

"Evil for Gnosticism is an almost physical reality that infects man from outside. Evil is external. It is body, thing, and world. And the soul has fallen into it. This exteriority of evil immediately furnishes the schema of some thing, of a substance that infects by contagion. The soul comes from 'elsewhere,' falls 'here,' and must return 'there.'"\(^\text{20}\)

Tracing this inherited sin to a source in environmental factors, as opposed to the human soul, undermines the Augustinian opposition to Pelagianism in its denial of a corrupt human nature. Duffy, in his account of the origin of inherited sin, runs down the same path. "Evil," he argues, "is less an act of doing than a state of being, the misfortune of existing in the world."\(^\text{21}\) The Augustinian tradition, for its part, is insistent upon the point that humans do not become implicated in evil because they exist in the world; they become implicated in evil just because they exist.

Of course, it may be said that Sölle and Duffy, and theologians like them, present a more sophisticated interpretation and explanation of the causes of human sinfulness than Augustine's. Augustine, after all,

\(^{19}\)It should be noted at this point that Augustine does not suggest that original sin is part of our genetic makeup. He rejects this view, but clearly not in favor of the role of the environment. Aothough not clearly articulated, he did not see these as the only two options.

\(^{20}\)The Conflict of Interpretation, p. 272.

\(^{21}\)"Our Hearts of Darkness,” p. 600.
did not have the benefit of modern psychology at his disposal, and, surely, the contemporary reappropriation of traditional doctrine should not be rejected on account of what might be viewed as its divergence from the details of the original. So let us for a moment give Sölle and Duffy the benefit of the doubt, and grant the point that environment alone creates and conditions human sinfulness. Following this logic, children born into more loving, egalitarian, and, perhaps, less financially privileged families and societies, would not be as prone to becoming infected by this “original sin,” as, say, children born into families of financial privilege who live off of the work of the downtrodden, and who are raised on the basis of a skewed system of moral values. Clearly, it would be important, even here, to distinguish between original and actual sin. Furthermore, let us suppose one is born into an egalitarian society where good Christian values are taught from birth and the fruits of shared labor are divided evenly among citizens. Would we be able to argue that the child born into this environment would be afflicted with only a minimal amount of original sin, namely, that which might have crept in around the edges? This, in fact, is what Sölle appears to suggest.

“It is useful to recall other societies which have dealt with their resources in a different way from us. I am thinking, for example, of the Indians, who took only the wood they needed for a fire, who prayed to the river before catching salmon or trout. They understood themselves as part of the whole, not as lords over the whole, in a natural piety which represents the opposite to our isolation and hostility.”

Now I must say that I do not know whether Sölle ever had the opportunity to visit a reservation for Native Americans, or is relying on folklore very popular in Germany. Certainly, Native Americans live on the basis of cultural values we could greatly benefit from adopting ourselves. However, any fair-minded student of Indian culture soon realizes that the Native Americans were not, nor are they today, all spiritually-enlightened sages who live in complete harmony with nature. They were, and still are, like the rest of us, distinguished by admirable virtues, but also marred by their fair share of vice. To romanticize their

---

22Thinking About God, p. 63.
culture is not to be intellectually honest. It is, rather, to behave in a con-
descending manner towards them.

The trouble with this type of thinking about original sin is that it
takes away from it its greatest strength and virtue, namely, that it is the
great leveler, placing everyone, regardless of birth, station, or gender,
on the same grade. The attribution of inherited sin to environmental
causes has the effect of putting some on a different level than others,
with uncomfortable implications for our doctrines of justification. Sal-
vation is taken out of God's hands, and made to depend on our par-
ents, teachers, and society.\(^\text{23}\) I do not mean to suggest that better envi-
ronments will not produce better-behaved children, or that children
have no responsibility for the conduct of their families and nations.
Nevertheless, to trace inherited sin back to an origin in environmental
factors not only returns us to Pelagianism, but creates a very uncom-
fortable standard for election as well.

**The Communal Dimension of Sin**

Ricoeur, in his discussion of original sin, also develops the notion of a
common status of guilt which all of humanity shares. His point is that,
from the time of the prophets,

"this sinful condition is not reducible to a notion of individual
guilt .... The sinful condition has from the outset a communal di-

cision ... This trans-biological and trans-historical solidarity of
sin constitutes the metaphysical unity of the human race. It , too,
is unanalyzable in terms of multiple veerings of individual wills.\(^\text{24}\)

---

\(^{23}\)In *The Fall to Violence* (Continuum, 1994), Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki presents
an interesting and compelling definition of original sin as "a triadic structure consti-
tuted by a propensity toward violence, by an inter-relational solidarity of the human
species, and by social structures that shape the formation of consciousness and con-
science" (pp. 84-85). The first of these three, humanity's "propensity toward violence"
shows her willingness to take seriously the realism of sin within the human heart, be-
yond environmental influence. However, her proposal ultimately fails to satisfy be-
cause of the narrowness of this definition of sin. Defining inherent sin as a penchant
for violence bolsters her liberation agenda, but fails to recognize that violence is only
a means which humans use to achieve their goals. The problem has to be located some-
where prior to the actual violent act.

\(^{24}\)The Conflict of Interpretation, pp. 282-83.
This communal dimension serves as the great leveler. It puts everyone on the same footing from birth. Privileges of wealth or the disadvantages of poverty; education or ignorance; legitimacy or humble birth, none of these matter in this system. "Now all men are a mass of sin, as the apostle says, 'In Adam all die' (1 Cor. 15:22), and to Adam the entire race traces the origin of its sin against God."25 However we conduct ourselves in the world, we do not cancel our sinful status. While it is true that some children develop into more morally virtuous individuals than others by virtue of their parents' influence, in the world of spirit there is no such thing as pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. In Augustine's view, neither one's moral aptitude, nor even God's foreknowledge of the decisions he or she will make or of their response to His Word, wins one the right to be called righteous. The initiative remains entirely God's, regardless of what the human person has done or will do, for "it is false to say that 'it is not God who hath mercy but of man who willeth and runneth.'"26 In Freudian terms, our environments may create our supercogos, but this moral principle leaves us as corrupt as if we were the pure children of the id. The individual persists in pursuing inferior goods, incapable unassisted of seeking or attaining to God, the highest good. According to this theology, human beings are judged on the basis, not of their external actions, but of their internal will. Original sin not only levels our personhood, but the moral value of our behavior as well.

It is this element, the communal dimension of original sin, which is often misunderstood in contemporary liberation theology. It is often suggested that the community into which we are born is the source or locus of original sin. Ricoeur disagrees with that, asserting that the communal trait of original sin is "transbiological and transhistorical solidarity of sin [constituting] the metaphysical unity of the human race." It is an affirmation of the fact that we are all alike, regardless of the social context or historical era in which we live. It is a description of the human community, not of any particular community.

This misunderstanding of the communal dimension of sin is what lies behind attempts to offer a psychological explanation for human

sinfulness. In Duffy’s view, for instance, we are molded into sinful beings by the various institutions into which we are born.

“The tangle of evil persons with their evil deeds and diseased institutional structures and systems weaves a history which constitutes humanity in its network of interdependence as deaf to the appeal of the good. To be in the world is to be willy-nilly complicit in a sinful condition.”

If this reads like a gnostic interpretation of sin, there is good reason to think so. Nevertheless, and I cannot stress this enough, this criticism should not be understood to imply that we are not caught up in and shaped by “diseased institutional structures,” or by individuals who influence who we are and what we do. Such an awareness is the natural complement of Augustine’s thought. The difficulty arises when the cause of our sinful behavior is attributed to these forces rather than to a corruption of our inclinations prior to any social contact. Just as Augustine was unable to explain how this occurred, insisting that it was not due to a corruption of the human seed or via imitation, Ricoeur shares this undecided middle road, describing the human condition as “transbiological and transhistorical.”

This attempt to psychologize or culturize original sin by ascribing it to the influence of the community creates the various difficulties discussed above. It violates the function of the doctrine as the great lever and easily leads to Pelagian notions that suggest we could fix our situation if we could only fix the social structures. What is more, it takes away from us any notion of individual guilt. While we may feel responsibility for the actions of the larger group, our own misbehavior can be dismissed by blaming the system.

As noted above, Sölle understands us to exist in sin as a consequence of the corrupt conditions into which we have been born. We share in guilt, insofar as the system to which we belong, and in which we participate, contributes to the oppression of others. Consider an example which Sölle offers: Upon visiting the Netherlands as a young woman, she was struck by the fact that she was shunned because she was German. Sympathizing with these people, she reflected, “these others had a right to turn their backs on me and not to speak to me because by

language, culture and heritage I belonged to a human society which lived in a complex of guilt. I cannot get myself out of this; it just is the case."\textsuperscript{28} Continuing to reflect on this theme, she concludes that "while it is inappropriate to speak of collective guilt, the sense of a collective responsibility for guilt is necessary. I am also responsible for the house which I did not build but in which I live."\textsuperscript{29}

Leaving aside the ethical question of whether we are culpable for the sinful acts of others to which we unknowingly contributed or wherefrom we benefited, this model leads to some rather disturbing conclusions. Put simply, her argument is: I receive inherited sin by virtue of the corrupt society into which I am born and by which I am shaped into the person who I am. As a member of that society, I cannot distance myself from, but am morally responsible for, the actions of others within it. While I may not be held culpable for others' wrongdoing committed, I share in the responsibility for setting things right. The problem with this line of thought is its diffusion of guilt. One is not able to say of individuals in the community that they are guilty on account of their corrupt will. Responsibility for this corruption is assigned to the community which shaped the individual. One begins to see one's own sinful behavior the same way as one sees the sins of the "system" in which one lives. We reflect: These bad things happen because of this horrible community in which we live. It oppresses those people over there, and violates the rights of others, and shaped me in such a way that I cannot help but do wrong. But when original sin is viewed as a product of the environment, guilt becomes so diffused across the community that all notion of individual guilt disappears. Fault comes to be located always outside the individual, never within, and salvation itself comes to be viewed as the outcome, neither of the removal of guilt, nor of the forgiveness of sins, but of social reconstruction. This Pelagian notion leaves its adherents treating the symptoms rather than the illness itself.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Thinking About God, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid,
\textsuperscript{30}If my diagnosis of the problem leaves the reader with the impression that I appear to be more interested in attacking others' attempts to make sense of sin than to make such an attempt myself, I cannot argue. One will not find an alternative formulation in these pages. Nonetheless, this does not undermine the importance of this
The Misery of Sin

The final trait which Ricoeur has mined from the doctrine of original sin has to do with the power of sin, the debilitating effect it has on human will. He explains:

"Sin is not only a state, a situation in which man is sunk; sin is a power which binds man and holds him captive. In this respect, sin is not so much a veering as a fundamental impotence. It is the distance between 'I want' and 'I can.' It is sin as 'misery.'"\textsuperscript{31}

In the Augustinian model, sin is more than our context, it is a power with crippling effects. The extent of these crippling effects has been the subject of much debate, reaching a high point in the sixteenth century reformers' descriptions of the total depravity of humanity. While Augustine did not go so far as to claim that the effects of original sin compromise noble reason, he was clear about its power to corrupt our will completely. As distinct from the \textit{reatus} of sin, which describes the forensic state of our existence, subject to judgment, it is the \textit{vitium} of sin that concerns us here; that is, the effect of sin that leaves us powerless to do the good. It is the \textit{vitium} of sin which we see displayed both in the world around us and in our own behavior. Sin is a real debilitating power that manifests itself in events like the Holocaust, as well as in the more commonplace experience of Paul described in \textit{Romans 7}.

For Augustine, the nature of this corrupted will is such that human beings pursue temporal goods to the neglect of the eternal good: God. What is being pursued is not "evil" per se, but goods which should not be one's primary goal. Thus, again, what is evil in the will is not its nature, but the corruption of its natural function, which is to seek the highest good.

"[W]hether doing evil is anything else than to neglect eternal things which the mind itself perceives and enjoys and loves and

\textsuperscript{31}The Conflict of Interpretation, p. 283.
cannot lose, and to pursue, as if they were great and wonderful, temporal things which are perceived by the body, the lowest part of human nature, and can never be possessed with complete certainty.”

Such pursuits of lesser goods carry with them effects beyond the immediate physical consequences of these actions. The misdirected will further corrupts itself as each respective action perpetuates the sinful condition of the soul, leading to an entire life marked by concupiscence. Augustine, who was never a terrible scoundrel by the world’s standards, recognized in himself that,

“My will was the enemy master of, and thence had made a chain for me and bound me. Because of a perverse will was lust made; and lust indulged in became custom; and custom not resisted became necessity. By which links, as it were, joined together (whence I term it a "chain"), did a hard bondage hold me enthralled.”

This recalls to mind our earlier discussion concerning the status of unbaptized infants. Destined to play out lives of corrupt willing, it is when they are in a position finally to exercise that will that they compound sin upon sin, and bind themselves more decisively to their state of corruption. The human will is unable to pursue God, the highest good. While it remains free (liberum arbitrium), it lacks the freedom (libertas) to direct the person rightly. J.N.D Kelly is quite helpful here:

“In this sense [Augustine] can speak of a ‘cruel necessity of sinning’ resting upon the human race. By this he means, not that our wills are in the grip of any physical or metaphysical determinism, but rather that, our choice remaining free, we spontaneously, as a matter of psychological fact, opt for perverse courses.”

This is the principal point Augustine wishes to make: that we are powerless to save ourselves. We are incapable of orienting ourselves toward our own salvation, for “without His calling we cannot even will.” Human willing is entirely devoid of the power needed to accomplish

32 De Lib. Arb., I, xvi, 34.
33 Confessiones, VIII, 5.
anything truly pleasing to God or effect its salvation. God's initiative and power alone make salvation possible. "[F]or the resisting heart a hearing for the divine call is first procured by the grace of God itself, and then in that heart, now no more resisting, the desire of virtue is kindled." In Augustine's view, this is nothing other than the message of the Gospel: "For because we could not come to the Physician, He hath vouchsafed to come Himself to us."

In this regard, Sölle believes herself to be in continuity with the tradition of Augustine as she describes the crippling effects of sin in her theological framework. "So 'I' too already, speaking in terms of the present, live under violent forces: militarism, the wasting of energy, the consumption of meat, exploitation. If this is understood as the terror exercised by sin, the question then becomes how I react to it." And Sölle certainly has her ideas about better and worse ways of dealing with the problem. Whether or not her political agenda is helpful is not the point. The point, rather, is whether or not she has provided a solution to the problem of the avoidance of sin. She locates sin outside the individual, in sociopolitical structures. There is no real power of sin over the individual will. If one is not careful, this line of thinking could lead one to suggest that the solution is to be found when human beings simply become vegetarians, drive electric cars, or, when all else fails, move to a deserted island — forgetting for the moment what happened in communal living during the sixties. Sölle's system, put simply, is a Pelagian one, a fact of which she appears unaware in her discussion of original sin.

In my view, Sölle's difficulties with Augustine's doctrine of original sin are twofold. First, she is afraid that any notion of human impotence will lead to a feeling of helplessness and therefore apathy. She calls this "the anthropological pessimism of Protestantism." Secondly, she fears that any emphasis on personal guilt will lead to despair. "Many Protestants do not believe in God's gracious acquittal, but only in their own captivity and oppression under sin; they confuse real guilt, which changes us because it can be forgiven, with neurotic guilt-feelings, from

36 Serm., XXXVIII, 7.
37 Thinking About God, p. 56.
which the helpless ‘I’ sees no release.” For his part, Augustine recognized that it is this great contrast, between what we are able to do, and what God does for us, that is the essence of the Gospel. There is, in my view, no manifestation in Augustine of apathy or a neurotic lack of self-esteem. Did he not rejoice in declaring: “Thou didst beat back the infirmity of my sight, pouring forth upon me most strongly Thy beams of light.”

While Sölle projects the power of sin to be outside the individual in order to soften the harshness of Augustine’s understanding of the misery of sin, Duffy takes another tack. His emphasis is on the presence of grace in the world. He points out, correctly, that the Augustinian tradition has always taught the omnipresence of grace in the world. There has never been a time, place, or individual in which God’s grace was not present. He argues: “Grace and sin are equal valences, locked in a struggle whose outcome hangs in the balance. Grace is superior to any initial guiltlessness and to the reigning power of evil... The universality of sin is more than matched by the universality of grace.” He then asserts that the need for water baptism is thereby vitiated, for every person’s existence is “already constituted by ‘being redeemed in Christ.’” Water baptism thereby functions only as “initiation into a community affording an environment for intelligent and reasonable growth and intensification of a graced relationship already active.” His point is that grace and sin are always found together; we are never sine Christo. Our hope, then, is in grace, which is always superior “to the reigning power of evil.”

The problem with what Duffy is suggesting here begins with his suggestion that there is no fundamental difference between the redeemed and the unredeemed. It pays no respect to the absolute center of Augustine’s theology: his conversion. What Duffy is offering, once again, is a gnostic notion of sin: The world is a combination of good and evil, and all that human beings need to do is recognize the “catholicity of grace,” and start acting appropriately. The danger in failing to make a distinction between the captive will and the will of the redeemed which is beginning to experience freedom is that it becomes functional.

---

Ibid., p. 58.
29Confessiones, VII, 10.
Pelagianism. Duffy may pay lip-service to the role of grace in the will of every human being, but when pressed, the difference between his position and that of Pelagius is negligible. There is no difference between the will of the children of God and the children of the world. Once again, this returns us to the problem dealt with throughout this paper. A gnostic understanding of sin suggests that the answer for those who wish to reform our world; to eradicate sin wherever it may appear, is to attack the outer manifestations of evil alone without due attention to the internal ones. The result is a failure to take seriously economic and political ideologies which account for human sinfulness, preferring in their stead to try to adapt humanity to systems which require unselfish constituents in order to operate effectively.

The fundamental question, then, pertains to the locus of evil. For those who attempt to soften Augustine’s offensive notion of inherited corruption of the will, always locating it outside of the individual, they will inevitably find themselves treading the path of Pelagius, believing that acts of will alone are sufficient to eradicate evil and save humanity. Allow me to suggest that emphasizing human corruption is not a retreat into helplessness or apathy, but to prepare for what Kierkegaard once described as the “indescribable joy” of salvation. But let us bring this essay to a conclusion with a quote from Augustine: “I will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not because I love them, but that I may love Thee, O my God.”

---

41 Confessiones II, 1.