

Original sin is the original such choice away from grace; its effect, step by step through the ages, is to disrupt the social and spiritual context of our birth; baptism frees us from the spiritual disruption, but not from its social consequences. Actual sin — our own everyday stuff — means putting our immediate priorities ahead of God's priorities: first ahead of developing a relationship with our Father and then ahead of loving our brothers and sisters.

So much for definitions.

Everyone Believes in Sin

Get this straight: secular thinkers often deny the reality of sin, but they have their own list of sins, changing with the fashions: intolerance is now considered a very serious personal evil, closely followed by any failure of self-acceptance, and then by various things like racism, sexism and homophobia. In Catholic theology, all varieties of uncharitable thought are considered sinful, so social intolerance is sinful in thought, word, action, or neglect of appropriate action. We also teach that prayer includes listening, which actually depends on some measure of peace within ourselves (self-acceptance) without which we cannot discern God's voice properly. So the sins recognized in secular culture are also recognized within Catholicism, under other names; and in fact, Christianity is the origin of the idea of a love so universal that intolerance would be wrong.

Nevertheless, Catholic doctrine never agrees that the unfashionable sins are the worst. Fashion or lack of fashion is irrelevant.

Note, however, that the ability to include the insights of others (the secular world) as a special case of your own view is the sign of a superior cosmology (see chapter 5, p. 150). The demand that someone drop his priorities in favor of yours is actually the impulse of brainwashing, of intellectual bullying.

In any case, even a secular person whose definitions of sin are very truncated and full of denial still recognizes that persons have responsibilities and that being answerable to certain responsibilities often goes against our most immediate inclinations — our laziness, our appetites for rich food and flattering encounters, our impulse to seek our own way and defend our silly priorities and unexamined opinions. Sometimes also, our responsibilities go against our social life: we want a higher social position than we can justly obtain; we are envious of others' just achievements; we make our anger a point of identity and refuse or obstruct mediation: one way or another, we exercise power against both principle and kindness.

So the idea of sin is not exclusively Christian and we must be ready to insist on this; everyone believes in sin; we just have different lists and it's fair to ask another person to defend his list. Be ready to defend your own as being based on universal principles, especially noticing those principles which the other person also accepts.

Sin and Disorders

That said, a few general words are in order about psychological disorders and parallel sins, which is our next topic.

Not all disorders are sins. There is a mix of genetic, chemical, and social causes as well as personal history and personal choices in each disorder. Whatever the mix, however, sin as a personal choice does strengthen the hold of a disorder. The most important reason for learning *other causes* than personal choice is that we not judge others harshly and that we find new ways to serve them; we really do not know how they stand before God. The most important reason for learning the role of choice and developed habit is that this is the area where we can certainly make changes and regain our self-ownership. It is very freeing to have confidence in our ability to change, and it's surprising how large is the area of our own freedom once we begin to exercise it. It grows!

Some abnormal psychology is simply the result of circumstance. Remember how Jesus deals with the man born blind. In those days, this was thought to be the result of sin; not without reason, since gonorrhoea, commonly the result of sexual misadventure, does cause blindness. But Jesus says that this man's blindness is not due to sin, either his own or his parents, but is there to reveal the glory of God; and then

Jesus heals him.

The secular critique of Christian ideas about sin, when it has any weight of truth, is directed at drawing attention to the suffering of vulnerable people who are in the grip of some disorder that they cannot overcome, and for whom guilt is not a word of truth and freedom, but a further burden.

That said, I wish to return to the important principle that sin — chosen wrongdoing, chosen evil-thinking, chosen ungracious talk — *all actual sin* — strengthens the hold of a disorder whether or not the disorder itself *originates* with sin. Certainly some disorders must originate in sin; for example, when we know we have failed in our responsibilities, the healthy personal response includes guilty feelings; but then these can become crippling shame if we do not find reconciliation.

Two Domains of Sin

Even before listing anything, it may be useful to remark that there are two basic sins, pride and sensuality; everything else goes under one of these headings. At the same time, aside from genetic and developmental disorders, there are two basic types of personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorders (NPD), a big word for self-centeredness, and “impulse control disorders”. The parallel is simple. Pride is putting ourselves in the center of our sense of reality and fulfillment; this is the narcissistic personality disorder. Sensuality is putting the pleasures of our animal nature at the center of our attention and even our world-view. This leads to addictions of every kind, which is to say, in psychological terms, this leads to impulse control disorders.

To spell this out a little more, we will go through some sins and some disorders.

Four Forms of Pride

Traditional Catholic teaching lists seven deadly sins, seven basic sinful attitudes from which all other sins flow. They are called deadly because any one of them can overwhelm the entire vitality of a soul. The first four have to do with pride and self-centeredness:

pride

Of course there is a right and appropriate personal pride in the healthy person. God made each one of us and called his work “very good.” You are meant to enjoy being yourself.

As a sin, pride is a centering on the self as more capable, more important, more intelligent and generally more perfect than is actually the case; furthermore, the prideful person presumes that his superior abilities are an adequate reason not to be gentle, patient, kind, or understanding towards others and not to seek or offer love. Neither God nor any other person has a proper importance to the proud.

Narcissism is a psychological disorder of unhealthy self-admiration, leading to the tendency to relate to others as objects, not as persons. The narcissistic person is never grateful but ever boastful. He may be ashamed of certain of his wrongdoings, but only because they wound his self-image, not because they wound others or damage relationships. He is exploitive; he feels entitled to whatever gifts he receives; and he is likely to be enraged by anyone who questions his entitlement.

As a personality disorder, narcissism often arises from an early failure to receive appropriate encouragement and a right sense of personal dignity. This sets off cravings for attention that are essentially childish, but nevertheless real. Later in life, narcissism may grow through over-exposure to wealth or fame so that the value of personal love is eclipsed and unable to develop properly.

It cannot always be clear when a person has chosen his pride and when it arises out of circumstances that are merely given in his life. Either way, this person will be in need of help; either way, so long as a person has any integrity of will, he needs to make choices of humility and truthfulness which will help him to re-center beyond himself.

envy

Noticing the accomplishments of others and being inspired to achieve more within ourselves is a healthy disposition. Occasionally, people use the word envy when it's just healthy admiration.