

GOOD FOR GOODNESS' SAKE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF
ORIGINAL SIN AND THE NATURALIST PERSPECTIVE CONCERNING SIN

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Haylee Holeman

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1. Introduction

The fact that evil exists in the world seems obvious. Natural disasters, pandemics, and even extreme catastrophes such as human genocide run rampant in the world today, but still many people refuse to acknowledge the existence of evil. In the Christian worldview, the doctrine of original sin answers the questions concerning the existence of evil in the world, but for those who do not believe in Christianity, or in any religion at all for that matter, the question of why evil exists in the world is one with which they must wrestle.

This paper will focus specifically on the naturalist, or new atheist, perspective on why evil exists in the world. As people who do not believe in any sort of supernatural or religious being, they place all of their eggs in the basket of science. The Christian, on the other hand, argues that evil came into the world as a result of the events in the Garden of Eden recorded in Genesis 3. Every human born into the world is pre-disposed to evil because it is in the nature of all people, and this is what the Christian worldview labels the Doctrine of Original Sin.

This paper will provide a definition alongside church history concerning the doctrine of original sin within Christian theology. In addition, it will highlight and detail the naturalist perspective on the existence of evil in contrast with that of the Christian worldview. Lastly, this paper will present arguments for the reader to disprove the naturalist view on evil and sin as well as to support the Christian doctrine of original sin.

2. Description and History of the Doctrine of Original Sin

As stated previously, Christians define the doctrine of original sin within the context of the events of Genesis 3. In this passage, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's direct orders not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and as a result sin came into the world.

The definition of sin is: “whatever is opposed to God’s will...The results of sin are truly catastrophic—sin wreaks havoc on our relationships with God, one another, and the rest of creation.”¹ In Romans 5:12-21, Paul also speaks to original sin, stating that “trespass led to condemnation for all men...”² Therefore, one can define the doctrine of original sin as follows: everyone born into the world after Adam and Eve is predisposed to sin because they automatically possess a sin nature—a tendency to disobey God. Not only that, but the world in general is tainted by sin, which is why people experience sickness, death, and pain.

The Doctrine of Sin throughout Church History

The concept of original sin permeated Jewish culture before the Christian church ever came into the picture. First century Jews believed that God had chosen them and initiated a covenant with them. In addition, as God’s covenant people, they were to obey his commandments and keep His law because they were also a fallen people.³ One part of the Law was the sacrifices which the Jews had to continually offer to God as payment for their sins. God knew that the Israelites could not keep His Law perfectly because of their sin natures, so through sacrifices He made a way to dwell with them. The same was true for foreigners who desires to join the nation of Israel. Living within the Law set the Jews apart from the pagan people around

¹ Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), Chapter 1.

² Romans 5:12-21. All Scripture references are in ESV unless otherwise stated.

³ Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2002), 14.

them, and if the Gentiles wanted to join become part of Israel and worship the God of Israel, they had to comply with the Law.⁴

However, prominent non-Jewish as well as non-Christians throughout history have also acknowledged that the world is broken. Philosophers such as Confucius and Plato have contemplated whether or not humanity is good. Confucius believed that humans are “predisposed to virtue” because humanity’s instinct is compassion. Changing forces in society keep humans from their true goodness because of corruption.⁵ Plato, in one of his longest dialogues, *Laws*, wrote about a Cretan, a Spartan, and an Athenian arguing about what makes a law good versus bad. In this dialogue, Plato refers to “universal human frailty,” insinuating that humans experience some sort of universal curse.⁶ The concept of evil’s existence in the world is not a new one considering it is something that even the world’s oldest known philosophers contemplated, yet to this day it continues to be a debated issue among philosophers, scientists, and the average person walking on the street.

When the Christian church came into the picture, they believed—and continue to believe to this day—that Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection on the cross was the perfect sacrifice and solution to humanity’s problem of original sin. For Jesus’ sacrifice to be necessary, there had to be some sort of problem that captivated the whole world. This is where the doctrine of original sin comes into the picture. While the church believed this from the start, most people attribute the official doctrine of original sin to Augustine of Hippo.

⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁵ Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 12. Google Books.

⁶ Ibid, 4.

Augustine was a church father during the Patristic period in church history. Augustine spent much of his time arguing that he was not the first to come up with the doctrine of original sin, and Augustine drew from early church fathers such as Irenaeus to defend himself.⁷ Though Augustine himself did not invent the doctrine, his ideas dominated the western church of his time. Even Martin Luther, who lived around 1,000 years after Augustine, used Augustinian ideas when describing the doctrine of original sin. In his Smalcald Articles, Luther wrote “this inherited sin has causes such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of revelation in Scripture.”⁸ Luther emphasized sin’s power over humanity, arguing that even reason cannot comprehend it because only Scripture shows a person how broken he or she truly is.

In the modern world, the doctrine of original sin continues to be an important teaching of the Christian church. Evangelical Christians tend to agree with the Augustinian definition, but some non-evangelicals such as Danielle Shroyer, a pastor and leader within the emerging church, argue that the doctrine of original sin has actually eroded our understanding of what it means to have a relationship with God.⁹ However, the reality is that the Bible speaks clearly to the fact that original sin does exist, which explains why the world and the people living in it are broken.

⁷ Hans Mandeume, *Adam, The Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 86.

⁸Ibid, 109.

⁹ Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 8. Google Books.

Biblical Evidence for the Doctrine of Original Sin

The first passage that comes to mind when contemplating original sin is the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. As previously mentioned, this tells the story of Adam and Eve and their disobedience to God's commands. Because of their disobedience, sin entered into the world and God cursed all of humanity as a result. In addition, God forced them out of the garden of Eden, which He had created for them and their relationship with God was severed. As the story of Genesis proceeds, the widespread effects of sin become obvious starting with Adam and Eve's own sons.¹⁰ Sin continues to weave through the narrative of the Old Testament, claiming even those most esteemed servants of God, such as Abraham, Moses, and David.

In the New Testament, Jesus himself highlights the need for repentance and forgiveness of sins from all people. At the start of his ministry, one of the first things he called for people to do was "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."¹¹ Often, such as the case in the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2, before he heals a person physically, Jesus forgives their sins. Clearly, sin is an important issue to Jesus, so much so that He came to earth to save His people from the punishment that sin brings. Jesus knew the gravity of the situation in regards to original sin, and He Himself showed to be the remedy for it.¹²

Paul also writes concerning the original sinfulness of humanity in Romans 5. He writes, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over

¹⁰ McCall, 41.

¹¹ Matthew 4:17.

¹² McCall, 77.

those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.”¹³ Here Paul is saying that because of the sin of one man, Adam, sin now infects all people. In verse 7 of the same chapter, he also writes that there was no need for Jesus to die for a righteous person, but because all people are sinners, Christ died for the redemption of all. Paul reiterates the idea of original sin in Ephesians 2. He tells the church in Ephesus that they were once dead in their trespasses and following after the world. He also writes that all once lived in pursuit of their flesh which led them away from God.¹⁴

As illustrated, the Bible speaks clearly concerning the sinfulness of man. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the world is full of sin and evil, and every person is born with a sinful nature. Inclination to disobey God is humanity’s default, but God provides a way of redemption through His Son, who was the only sinless person in the world.¹⁵

However, even if one does not believe in the Christian worldview, evil’s existence in the world seems to be an un-problematic idea considering all of the pain and suffering that occurs on an individual as well as a collective level in peoples’ lives. Even if one does not agree that the answer to sin and suffering is salvation in Jesus Christ, it seems as though it would not be difficult to get someone to admit the reality of evil’s existence. And yet some people argue against the very existence of evil in the world, much less humanity’s responsibility for it. One such group are the new atheists, or in other words, naturalists.

¹³ Romans 5:12-14.

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:1-3.

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:15.

3. The Naturalist Worldview Concerning the Doctrine of Original Sin

To understand how the naturalist worldview perceives the concept of original sin and the problem of evil in the world, one must first get a whole picture of their beliefs. The following seven tenants from Dr. John F. Haught summarize the naturalist worldview:

1. Apart from nature, there is nothing. There is no God, no soul, and no life beyond death.
2. Nature is self-originating, not a creation from God.
3. The universe has no overall point or purpose. However, human beings are able to live their lives in a purposeful manner
4. Since God does not exist, everything is explainable through science and natural causes.
5. Every feature of living beings can be explained in purely natural terms.
6. Faith in God causes evil and should be wholeheartedly rejected on all grounds
7. Morality does not require belief in God, and people behave better without faith than with it.¹⁶

One example of the naturalist worldview is Sam Harris, an American author, philosopher, and neuroscientist who has written numerous works with the goal of showing how religion is both destructive and a waste of time. He argues that the world can eliminate faith through the use of science and reason.¹⁷ Because we will all eventually die, the only meaning we can get out of this world is happiness, and faith “poisons everything.”¹⁸ Therefore, the only way to eliminate

¹⁶ John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), xiv. Google Books

¹⁷Ibid, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.

suffering in this world is to abolish any sort of faith, not only Christianity but all faith traditions.¹⁹

Needless to say, the naturalist worldview to which Harris attests adamantly argues against the concept of original sin. Naturalists are called such because they believe that science is the only means by which anyone can know anything about the world. If it cannot be proven with the scientific method, it cannot be true. They apply this same idea to morality; they argue that good and evil do not exist because they cannot be tested. This would explain why they believe religion to be destructive—because all religions, including Christianity, advocate that something beyond the material exists, which is completely contrary to the naturalist worldview.

Atheists promote themselves as both intellectually and morally superior to any sort of religious person, including Christians, because they believe that in their worldview evil simply disappears. They would argue that religious people believe fantasies that cannot be proven and faith is simply a lapse of judgment.²⁰ If morality does not exist, then good and evil also cannot exist.

In short, their argument for why evil exists in the world is simply because people who are predisposed to evil will act in that way.²¹ Richard Dawkins, arguably the most famous naturalist of today, stated in his book, *River Out of Eden*, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good.

¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

²⁰ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 617.

²¹ Robert Stewart, “What’s Wrong with the New Atheism?” *Christian Apologetics: PHIL5301* (Class Lecture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA, September 24, 2020.)

Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”²² He summarizes the naturalist argument in two sentences—nothing outside of what is natural and material exists, including evil and good. Therefore, if this is the naturalists’ argument—that original sin cannot exist because nothing outside of what is material and scientifically proven exists—how does one go about arguing against them? How does one prove that original sin does exist in the world? The following section of this paper addresses precisely this issue.

4. Defending the Doctrine of Original Sin Against the Naturalist Worldview

When Christian engages with a naturalist, the first step to a successful argument is convincing the naturalist that morality does, in fact, exist.²³ Because morality cannot be proven by science, naturalists refuse to acknowledge its existence. However, morality, and in this case especially evil morality, is very real and prevalent in the world today. Many types of immoralities exist, from immoral actions to immoral attitudes, and this truth is even prevalent in literature such as fairy tales and Harry Potter.²⁴ Even in governments, many civil laws illegalize things which are immoral, such as stealing or murder.²⁵ In addition, a quick look at history will demonstrate that morality exists. Look at the Holocaust, for example. If morality does not exist, or even if it is simply objective, the atheist cannot claim that Adolf Hitler was wrong to kill so many people. Each of these examples demonstrate that religion is not necessary to understand

²² Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133.

²³Groothuis, 618.

²⁴ John Cowburn, *Problems of Suffering and Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012), 83.

²⁵ Ibid, 90.

that morality exists. Though morality cannot be proven by science, it is evident in the world around us and cannot be ignored.

Another method of debate when encountering a naturalist is proving the fact that Christianity and science can co-exist. Because naturalists believe that any sort of religious or spiritual person is an enemy of science, a Christian must prove themselves to be a friend of scientific discovery. The Bible teaches that God is the Creator of the world, but God provided science so that humanity could explore and learn about the world. Christian scientists use the various scientific fields to discover God's Creation and to learn more about God Himself.²⁶ Science is a means to an end, not the end itself. In fact, many of the most famous scientists, including Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler, were theists.²⁷ Even the scientist who originally came up with the theory which has led to Big Bang model of the origin of the universe, Georges Lemaître, was a Christian who served as a Belgian priest.²⁸ Every one of these examples proves that Christianity does not reject science but rather embraces it. The difference for the Christian is that they believe that science is not the end of all things, but rather that the One who created the world gifted humanity with science for the purpose of gaining a closer relationship with Him.

Just as Christianity does not reject science, so it also does not reject rational thought, which many naturalists accuse all people of all religions, not just Christians, to be without. Jesus Himself tells us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our *minds*, so Christianity calls people to use their minds well.²⁹ While naturalists would like to paint all people of faith as

²⁶ John C. Lennox, *Gunning For God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford: Wilkinson House, 2011), 23. Google Books.

²⁷ Ibid, 29.

²⁸ Ibid, 28.

²⁹ Matthew 22:37.

turning a blind eye to reality, one method of refuting this claim is by pointing to their own heroes and demonstrating how they are faulty as well. One such example is Stephen Hawking, who states in his latest book, *The Grand Design*, that “philosophy is dead.” However, this statement in itself is a classic example of logical incoherence because that statement is itself a philosophical statement.³⁰ Stephen Hawking provides just one example of how naturalists wield the faulty logic that they so often accuse Christians of using.

In summary, some methods for debating naturalists include: getting them to admit that morality is real, convincing them that Christianity is not an enemy of science, and showing them through examples how their own leaders misuse logic and rational thought. For people who put all of their eggs in the basket of science, these three strategies could very well cause them to doubt their beliefs, even if it does not ultimately lead them into belief in Christianity. The naturalist worldview contains many missing links, and with the right arguments it just might be possible to get them to see them.

5. Conclusion

The naturalist worldview can be summarized in the following lyrics from the popular Christmas song, “Santa Clause is Coming to Town.” The song states, “...so be good for goodness sake,” insinuating that there is no purpose to be good except for the sake of goodness. No higher being or morality exists to show what goodness is, and ultimately there is no purpose in doing good things other than the satisfaction in knowing you did not do evil.

However, the Christian worldview offers purpose and redemption in the midst of evil and suffering. The doctrine of original sin which has permeated the theology of God’s people—from

³⁰ Lennox, 31.

the Israelites to the modern church—offers an explanation for why evil exists in the world but it also highlights just how much grace God had for His people to save them from an imperfect and immoral world. The naturalist worldview, on the other hand, offers no hope of escape and actually wrongfully denies the existence of sin and evil in the first place. By studying the beliefs of naturalists, Christians will be better equipped to give a defense against them and hopefully show them the truth in Christ Jesus.

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