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Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life:
Towards a Constructive Development of the Idea of Social Sin within the Catholic Tradition

Charlotte Rose Bray

Abstract

The idea of 'social sin' remains a contentious topic within Catholic thought. By drawing on diverse thinkers from both within and outside of the Catholic tradition, this thesis seeks to discern what sin is and how it impacts human life. It explores why unjust social situations can properly be called sin from a Catholic theological perspective, and how this sin can be understood to impact one's agency, freedom, and historical condition vis-à-vis God. The first chapter explores the controversy in the twentieth century concerning the language of 'social sin' through a critical appraisal of John Paul II's theology. It suggests that the Pope's theology of sin is problematic, being both individualistic and moralistic in emphasis, and leaves many issues unresolved. The second chapter seeks to show how the theologies of Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría, and José Ignacio González Faus can help resolve some of these salient issues. It draws on their definitions of sin, as well as their ideas concerning sin's blinding effects and the historical mediation of God's self-communication, revelation, and grace. The third chapter explores the precedent within the Catholic tradition for expanding the concept of sin beyond exclusive focus on individual acts and attitudes for which we can be found morally culpable. It does this by analysing the theologies of original sin presented by Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent, and their explanations of how original sin shapes the human situation. The final chapter seeks to nuance the concept of selfhood which underlies accounts of social sin by examining Judith Butler's theory of human vulnerability and the 'constitutive sociality of the self'. This chapter proposes one way we can understand the complex relation between the personal and social dimensions of sin. It does this by situating acting individuals as embodied, interdependent, relational beings whose subjectivities and agency are vulnerable to being misshapen by their social and cultural environments in ways that harm both themselves and others.

SIN AND THE VULNERABILITY OF EMBODIED LIFE:

TOWARDS A CONSTRUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA OF SOCIAL SIN WITHIN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

CHARLOTTE ROSE BRAY

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (2022)

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Introduction

In his book *Bound to Sin* Alistair McFadyen argues that the language of sin has disappeared from public discourse. This, he contends, is linked to the "more general retreat of God-talk from public life."[1] The language of sin does, however, get used in a variety of different ways in modern society. Many, like myself, who have grown up with Scottish relatives will have been surrounded by casual usage of the vocabulary of sin from an early age. This was due, in part, to my Scottish relatives' frequent exclamations of 'Och, that's a sin!' For those not familiar with the colloquial language of Greenock, the phrase roughly translates to 'what a shame' or 'that's unfair.' Thus, this particular cultural rendering of the term 'sin' is associated with feelings of disappointment, sadness, or pity. Similarly, the phrase 'sinfully delicious' is often used to describe a tasty, but usually unhealthy, food item which one feels guilty about consuming, but which is too tempting to resist. A quick google search reveals thousands of results for the term, predominately in reference to cakes, cookies, and bakeries. Therefore, the language of sin has also become an adjective one uses to describe something which is simultaneously both pleasurable and bad for you. A further example would be the famous YouTube channel called 'CinemaSins', which boasts over 9 million subscribers and over 3 billion video views.[2] The channel has its key tag line declaring that "no movie is without sin." The purpose of the channel is to offer comedic critiques of films by pointing out their flaws in good-natured and humorous videos online. Here the terminology of sin is used as a comedic way to identify flaws and errors. Hence, rather than falling out of use, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the language of sin has instead been appropriated by the general public for different purposes. It has slid into associative relationship with various meanings within the popular cultural imagination, beyond that of the theological.

So, is McFadyen wrong to contend that the language of sin has disappeared from public discourse? What McFadyen means when he argues that sin has disappeared from public discourse is not that the terminology itself has completely

[1] Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin,* Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, VI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 4.

[2] Data accurate at time of writing. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/CinemaSins/about> [accessed 11 May 2022]. See also <https://cinemasins.com/> [accessed 17 May 2022].

vanished. His argument is more nuanced than this. Rather, he is asserting that the *theological* understanding of sin has been abandoned and, in its place, sin has taken on a trivial meaning. The examples used above, therefore, serve to underscore McFadyen's point that sin has become trivialised in modern society; it has become associated with minor "peccadilloes and temptations."[3] The language is still used within public discourse, but it does seem to have lost its serious theological depth and meaning. As McFadyen explains, this trivialisation expresses an underlying and widespread doubt that sin is "worth taking seriously as a means for speaking about reality."[4] He continues:

> [S]uch trivialisation itself reflects the fact that the language of 'sin' has fallen largely into disuse in general public (but also in much Christian and theological) discourse as a language for talking about the pathological in human affairs.[5]

Whilst it is true that the language of sin has, to some extent, remained in common usage among the general public, nevertheless, many have rejected the terminology altogether as being incredibly damaging and problematic. As Darlene Weaver notes, many people argue that it should be rejected as "archaic, dysfunctional, or irrelevant."[6] Perhaps this is because, historically, the language of sin has been used as a weapon to ostracise, exclude, and condemn people, particularly those who do not fit within the parameters of predominant notions of morality or normality. For example, the vocabulary of sin has been used against those who express nonnormative forms of sexuality and gender. As Linn Tonstad notes, many queer, non-binary, and trans people have faced exclusion and persecution within Christian communities due to this language.[7] Moreover, unmarried single parents or those who have gotten divorced and remarried have often had similar experiences; historically they have been condemned as sinners or as 'living in sin.' Thus, sin is regarded as an "alienating or even meaningless language" which is thoroughly "negative and stigmatizing."[8] In

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[3] McFadyen, p. 3.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Darlene Fozard Weaver, 'Taking Sin Seriously', *The Journal of Religious Ethics,* 31.1 (2003), 45-74, (p. 45) <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1111/1467-9795.00122>.
[7] Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Cascade Books: Eugene, 2018), pp. 120-121.
[8] Ibid., p. 121.

these cases, sin-talk seems to have functioned as a form of social control whereby Church leaders pass judgement on those who find themselves outside of, or on the margins of, the parameters of normative morality. As McFadyen also notes, for many sin remains tied in association to attitudes of blame, judgement, and condemnation, as well as personal feelings of guilt and shame.[9] Because of this association, it is possible to argue from a theological perspective that Christians should abandon the language of sin. Weaver writes that, for those who advocate for such a rejection, "[s]in seems too allied to anachronistic and faithless views of God as wrathful and punitive and to excessively juridical accounts of atonement and salvation."[10] Many thinkers, both secular and Christian, associate the language of sin with high-profile fundamentalist and right-wing religious groups such as Westboro Baptist Church. These groups regularly employ the language to promote hate and intolerance for those whom they condemn as sinners. They predominately use the terminology to speak about God's retribution and righteous punishment for sin. As Weaver summarises, the vocabulary of sin has been utilized by particular Christian communities to serve "troubling social and political agendas."[11] Weaver continues that, for those who advocate for the abandonment of the language: "Even if it could capture something true about our existence in relation to God and others, sin-talk seems too prone to scapegoating and self-righteousness. Its value as a conceptual resource is undermined by its destructive effects as a rhetorical device."[12] The argument follows, therefore, that to make the faith more appealing to contemporary audiences, and to do justice to the loving and inclusive God revealed at the heart of the Christian Gospels, the language of sin must be abandoned due to its legacy of exclusion and harm. As McFayden affirms, many Christians have supported the abandonment of this vocabulary, predominately due to it being a source of "embarrassment for Christian faith in the modern world."[13]

Thus, in the modern period, it seems that the language of sin is either sequestered to the realm of the trivial — that is, regarded as something not to be taken seriously — or it is rejected as a deeply damaging, exclusionary, and potentially dangerous rhetoric. Although there is a shared vocabulary being used throughout the

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[9] McFadyen, p. 3.
[10] Weaver, p. 45.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid. This is not Weaver's personal argument; in this quote she is presenting a viewpoint different to her own.
[13] McFadyen, p. 4.

various examples we have explored so far, its meaning radically changes from one context to the next. Sin, therefore, is not a homogeneous concept. There is a need to pay attention to what the employer of this language is trying to do or convey when using it. Even *within* the Catholic tradition, theologians will be referring to slightly different realities when using this common language. Hence, despite using the same terminology, thinkers are often speaking at cross-purposes with one another.

Although the concept of sin is at the core of Christian theological discourse and is essential for the Church's understanding of humanity's situation, there seems to be a cultural, and even theological, confusion about what sin is. Due to the concept's multivalence, it is unclear whether it would be possible to 'pin down' a precise definition for sin, or indeed whether such an attempt would be desirable.[14] Within the Catholic tradition this ambiguity concerning the precise *theological* meaning and scope of the term 'sin' became evident in the twentieth century, after CELAM bishops and Latin American liberation theologians used the language of "social sin" and "structural sin" to depict their historical situation.[15] They used the language of sin to describe the vast amounts of structural injustice and exploitation in Latin America which were resulting in poverty, dehumanization, and death for so many. Through their use of this vocabulary, these communities raised an implicit, but significant question; how does the concept of sin relate to, and shed light on, historical and local situations? This was a significant moment for the development of the idea of sin within Catholic thought; it made prominent the notion that the language of sin can be used to describe unjust and disordered social structures and situations. It was not long before the language of 'social sin' was being included in the papal encyclicals of John Paul II. This vocabulary, however, has not had an uncontested history, despite its incorporation into the corpus of Catholic social teaching. The introduction of this terminology was met with much criticism. The public controversy which followed was

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[14] I shall expand more upon this idea at the end of this introduction.

[15] Since the 1960's magisterial teaching documents of the Catholic Church have articulated an account of sin which acknowledges its social dimensions. However, the emergence of the language of "structural" and "social sin" within the writings of CELAM bishops and Latin American liberation theologians presents a particularly important and influential turning point within Catholic thought. For a fuller treatment of the development of the social dimensions of sin within magisterial documents from the second Vatican Council to John Paul II see Margaret Pfeil, 'Toward an Understanding of the Language of Social Sin in Magisterial Teaching', (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2000) in ProQuest Dissertations and Theses <https://search-proquest-com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/docview/304614481/21947FACE77C4BF4PQ/2?accountid=14533> [accessed 2 June 2019].

dominated by tense disagreements over the precise meaning, scope, and appropriateness of the terms 'social sin' and 'structural sin.' As we shall see in chapter one, John Paul II did introduce the language of social sin into his papal encyclicals, however the meaning and scope of the term was significantly altered. Both the Pope and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith contested the understanding of sin as propagated by liberation theologians as being erroneous and controversial. The Magisterium's critical response to the account of sin emerging from Latin America, and its own subsequent formulation of social sin, will be the focus of the first chapter of this thesis.[16] As we shall see, however, this controversy left many issues unresolved. The papacy's public critique brought into stark relief the difficulty we have identified, that is, that the meaning and scope of the term sin is unclear even *within* the theological tradition of Catholicism. This disagreement over the language of sin thus brings into light two critical issues: First, it is unclear why, from a Catholic *theological* perspective, unjust and disordered social structures, situations, or cultures can be called sin. Second, there are conflicting and uncertain accounts of the extent to which this 'sin' affects human living and acting in the world.[17] Indeed, despite its critique of liberation theology over this very issue, the Magisterium of John Paul II's papacy did not present a fully satisfactory Catholic *theological* understanding of (1) why social situations can be called sin and (2) how this sin impacts human life and agency. As I shall argue in chapter one, this is because John Paul II instead presents an individualistic and moralistic account of sin which has internal inconsistencies.

In chapter three, we will find out why it is problematic, from a specifically Catholic theological perspective, for John Paul II to limit the language of sin to a moralistic discourse. In the thesis which follows, however, I begin from a particular analytical starting point, that is, that for the language of sin to function properly, it must operate as a *theological* language. Sin should not be limited merely to a moral language. The Anglican theologian Alistair McFadyen has had significant influence on the development of my thought in this regard. Throughout the thesis, the impact his work has had on my own developing thought will be clear, particularly in my critique of the magisterial account of social sin presented in chapter one. As McFadyen

[16] Here and in the remainder of the thesis I shall use 'the Magisterium' as a shorthand for the specific Magisterium of John Paul II's papacy.
[17] Although it was the CELAM bishops and Latin American liberation theologians who first, at least implicitly, struggled over these questions, it was John Paul II's critique which made them prominent.

contends: "Only if Christian faith possesses a specifically theological understanding of what sin is and how it functions might it have something to offer secular diagnosis and therapy."[18] It would be pertinent now, therefore, to briefly outline McFadyen's distinction between a theological and a moralistic account of sin so as to clarify my own conceptual starting point. This will help to explain some of the basic assumptions that will guide my analysis in the rest of the thesis.

In his seminal text *Bound to Sin,* McFadyen argues that the key role of the language of sin is to speak about the world's pathologies in relation to God.[19] This is the core *theological* purpose of the language of sin; it is, fundamentally, a relational language. McFadyen concludes:

> To speak of what damages human beings as sin is to claim that the essential character and defining characteristic of such pathology, however else it may be described and identified in non-theological languages, is theological: disruption of our proper relation to God.[20]

Thus, McFadyen argues that a properly theological account of sin must necessarily have a reference to "God's active and dynamic relation to the world"[21] by naming the pathology it refers to as constituting "a denial of and opposition to God."[22]

McFadyen's key contention is that this fundamentally *theological* function of sin-talk is precisely what we have lost in modernity. For various reasons, modern theologies of sin have reduced the discourse of sin to a moral language: we speak about sin predominately in moral categories.[23] With this came a corresponding flight from theological thought to ethics.[24] So what does McFadyen mean when he claims that sin has been reduced to a 'moral language'? For McFadyen, moral discourse is predominately concerned with determining responsibility for the performance of acts which are deemed either moral or immoral: "It is a language of responsibility, in the

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[18] McFadyen, p. 11.
[19] Ibid., p. 4.
[20] McFadyen., p. 5.
[21] Ibid., p. 10.
[22] Ibid., p. 11. This is why it is important to keep using the language of sin within Catholic theological discourse despite its legacy of exclusion and harm. The theological meaning of sin is necessarily related to God; alternative languages, such as that of vice or morality, do not sufficiently convey that one's activity or one's situation impacts one's relation with God.
[23] Ibid., p. 19.
[24] Ibid.

sense that it holds and calls people to account for their actions."[25] It does this by tracing the origin or cause of an act back to a singular person. This, however, is not sufficient for the attribution of responsibility within a moral frame of reference. Rather, for one to become culpable for an act, one needs to possess "freedom in the sense of self-determination"[26] when causing said act. As McFadyen writes:

> [M]oral evaluation concerns itself with action that is freely willed, and we escape moral responsibility where our acts may be shown to be compelled, determined or otherwise unavoidable […] We may be neither morally praised nor blamed for that which we have not freely chosen or could not avoid.[27]

Freedom — understood as freedom from determining influence — is a prerequisite, therefore, for one to be deemed morally responsible for one's actions and behaviour; it must have been possible for one to have "willed or done otherwise."[28] We are only accountable insofar as we are the cause of a *free, personal act.*[29]

For McFadyen to say that the language of sin has been transformed into a moral discourse, therefore, means that sin has become understood as a morally wrong act which a person freely commits. Two points are noteworthy here: First, the language of sin is limited to describing an *act* of an *individual person*; second, one is only found guilty of sin when one possesses the self-determination and freedom of choice necessary to have been able to do or will otherwise. Hence, in modern theologies of sin, "accountability for sin is restricted to that over which [one has] some power or control, and in relation to which [one is] free."[30] If one does not possess this freedom, then one does not sin. Moral culpability, rather than disruption of our proper relation to God, becomes the criterion for recognising sin. As McFadyen concludes:

> Sin thence refers to *acts* of *free* moral agents; to *sins* rather than to *sin* as some conditioning substratum of action; to culpable breaches of moral law. In modernity, then, sin becomes formally a moral language, and the principal

[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 20.
[27] Ibid.
[28] McFadyen., p. 21.
[29] Ibid., p. 40.
[30] Ibid.

> criterion of culpability is shifted to the structure of independent and autonomous subjectivity.[31]

Crucially, what drives this conception of sin is the underlying assumption characteristic of modernity that each person is an "individually autonomous subject."[32] One's assumed autonomy becomes the "sole basis for establishing responsibility and guilt."[33] Indeed, it is only through one's capacity for self-determination — independent and transcendent of any form of social compulsion or determination — that one can become morally culpable for one's acts. As McFadyen asserts:

> The guiding assumption here is that the moral subject is free and neutral in relation to the possible objects of moral choice, so that her moral choices may be deemed to be freely made — that is, decisions of pure intentionality or subjectivity, unfettered and uninfluenced by external factors and relationships.[34]

McFadyen critiques this anthropology of humans as individually autonomous subjects. He does this through an exploration of the dynamics of willing within certain past social situations which have resulted in exploitation and harm, namely, the Holocaust and historical child abuse. Through this investigation, he concludes that willing is bound up with situation.[35] A person's will is shaped by the relational dynamics, histories, and socio-political conditions in which they are immersed. McFadyen describes how individuals involved in the Holocaust and historical child abuse were led to make certain choices and actions which supported the pathological situation.[36] The wills of the victims, survivors, and perpetrators were shaped and utilised by supra-personal forces. Their wills and agency were not overpowered by these external forces, but rather were co-opted and oriented in such a way that they voluntarily supported or cooperated with the unjust situation through their actions.[37] McFadyen argues that these particular situations reveal "the descriptive inadequacy of any simplistic notion of willing as the exercise of completely free choice."[38] He

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[31] Ibid., p. 26.
[32] Ibid., p. 23.
[33] Ibid., p. 27.
[34] Ibid., p. 21.
[35] McFadyen., pp. 126-127.
[36] Ibid., p. 195.
[37] Ibid., pp. 126-127.
[38] Ibid., p.126.

concludes: “There seems to be a much more complex interrelationship between the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’ (the interpersonal, political, social, historical) than may be allowed for in the oppositional dichotomy assumed by moral frameworks.”[39] McFadyen questions the premise which a moralistic account of sin stands on, that is, that one is an autonomous, free, and self-determined individual, and that this autonomy, freedom, and self-determination is the “sole basis for establishing responsibility and guilt.”[40] Through his analysis of these pathological situations, McFadyen arrives at an account of the human person as being socially constituted. His conclusions are similar to Judith Butler’s understanding of the “constitutive sociality of the self”[41] — a theory which we shall explore in chapter four — despite never engaging with Butler’s work himself. Hence, my own study compliments McFadyen’s work; his theories will be supported and expanded upon by the theorists I explore in this thesis.

In the following chapters, therefore, I draw on McFadyen’s definition of moral discourse and his specific description of what constitutes a moralistic account of sin. It is used as a guide to analyse whether Catholic theologies of sin are reduced to a moral language of blame: Do moral categories limit or shape what is said about social sin? This investigation will lead us to analyse John Paul II’s account of social sin using McFadyen as a dialogue partner. McFadyen’s claim that the language of sin has been reduced to a moral discourse — rather than a specifically theological discourse — will be tested in relation to papal encyclicals and, indeed, proven true. As we shall see in chapter one, John Paul II presents an individualistic and moralistic account of sin in line with those McFadyen critiques. There are, however, undercurrents within his writings which suggest that an alternative theological understanding of sin is possible. This seems to create inconsistencies within his thought.

As the first chapter will demonstrate, therefore, the controversy in the late twentieth century concerning the meaning and scope of the term ‘social sin’ never came to a satisfactory conclusion, with many issues left unresolved. An opportunity was lost; what could have been a fruitful dialogue on how to properly develop the theological understanding of sin in response to the signs of the times, and

[39] Ibid., p. 133.
[40] Ibid., p. 27.
[41] The phrase “constitutive sociality of the self” comes from Butler. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Abington: Routledge, 2004), p. 19.

correspondingly on how the traditional doctrine of sin can help illuminate and interpret these signs, was cut short. While many Catholic theologians and ethicists now use the language of social or structural sin, it is mainly used as a rhetorical device to emphasise that a situation or social structure is unjust or wrong. The precise *theological* meaning and scope of the term remains ambiguous. Moreover, the significance of the traditional theological account of sin for our understanding of the human situation — including the human person's freedom and agency in relation to sin — is left unexamined. Overall, Catholic theologians who use the language of social sin fail to first ask: *Why* can we describe social structures, cultures, or situations using the theological language of sin? And, if they can properly be called sin within a Catholic theological framework, then how does this sin shape human living and acting in the world? What insight or wisdom does the Catholic tradition offer regarding what sin does to us and how it shapes our lives in a fallen, yet grace-filled, world? There are a few notable exceptions to this. None of these thinkers, however, manage to fully or satisfactorily answer the unresolved questions which arose as a result of the Magisterium's critique and consequent 'correction' of the concept of social sin. Moreover, it is John Paul II's definition which remains the official teaching on social sin. On the whole, Catholic theologians uncritically adopt the moralistic account of sin presented by John Paul II;[42] an account which depends upon a sharp distinction between 'personal sin' — understood as free and conscious acts by an individual — and 'social sin' — understood as the social consequence of these free choices throughout history. Modern thinkers are preoccupied with discerning the specific relation between these two types of sin; often for the purpose of discerning how one might distribute culpability for

[42] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all the theologies of social sin in modern scholarship and demonstrate why they present predominately individualistic and moralistic accounts of sin. Out of all the Catholic thinkers I have encountered who are working on this specific subject area, however, Daniel Finn has presented the most comprehensive and systematic attempt to answer the salient issues I have identified, that is, why it is that social structures, situations, or cultures can properly be called sin, and how this sin impacts human life and agency. Moreover, his account is representative of how most contemporary Catholic theologians attempt to resolve these two salient issues. His theology, however, seems to uncritically maintain an individualistic and moralistic account of sin, which, as we shall in chapter three, is problematic from a Catholic theological perspective. This is because it is discontinuous with major aspects of the pre-existing Catholic tradition. For example, Finn writes that sinful structures can only analogously be called sin because "only a person can 'commit a sin.' […] Social structures themselves do not sin in the literal sense." He further argues that "when social structures are sinful […] They do not force individuals to be sinful, but they make it more likely." According to Finn they do this by generating "restrictions and opportunities that encourage sinful decisions by persons within them." See Daniel K. Finn, 'What Can You Do?: Understanding Sinful Social Structures', *Commonweal,* 5 October 2018, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-can-you-do> [accessed 17 May 2022]. See also Daniel K. Finn, 'What is a sinful social structure?', *Theological Studies*, 77.1 (2016), 136–164 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563915619981>.

these wrongful acts and situations. Hence, the salient issues that surfaced during the twentieth century surrounding the language of sin have yet to be fully thought through. These unresolved questions set the agenda for the rest of the thesis. By drawing on resources both within and outside of the Catholic tradition, I will begin to discern what a truly Catholic theological account of social sin could look like. These resources can help us to discern why, from a Catholic *theological* perspective, social structures, situations, and cultures can be called sin. Further, these theological and secular resources can help us understand how this sin impacts human living and acting in the world. Each of the remaining chapters will focus on sets of thinkers who can aid us in unique ways. The chapters will therefore be ordered thematically, rather than in chronological order of when these thinkers developed their thoughts.

The theologies of sin presented by Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría, and José Ignacio González Faus remain a rich and fruitful resource which can contribute towards the development of a compelling Catholic theological account of social sin. These particular liberation theologians present distinct and unique theologies. Their accounts, however, have not yet been systematically analysed in contemporary literature which tends to generalise Latin American liberation theology without attending to the variations between individual theologians. Our next port of call, therefore, will be to explore what I consider to be the best of Latin American liberation theology on social or structural sin.[43] In chapter two, I shall explore how these theologians can help resolve the salient issues which arose from John Paul II's critique, and subsequent reconfiguration, of the idea of social sin. The chapter will outline the contributions these thinkers can make towards a Catholic theological account of what sin is and how it affects human life and agency. As we shall see, however, due to the specific concerns and methodologies of these liberation theologians, their configurations of social sin do not fully settle the problems we have identified.

Catholicism has a rich and varied tradition on sin which can help shed further light on these salient issues. Indeed, delving deeper into the pre-existing tradition can aid us in our discernment of what sin is and the impact it has on the human situation. Hence, in chapter three I shall identify traditional resources which can aid us in this way. To do this, the chapter will explore the theologies of Thomas Aquinas and the

[43] The theological works this chapter will engage with were published after the Magisterium's public critique, and thus are not representative of the theology John Paul II was originally responding to.

Council of Trent, particularly looking at their respective interpretations of the doctrine of original sin. The writings of Aquinas and Trent are paradigmatic of orthodox, mainstream Catholic teaching regarding original sin. Aquinas is one of the most notable theologians of the Western tradition, whose thought has had a seminal influence on Catholic social teaching and Catholic theology more generally.[44] His account of original sin was highly influential for the definitions which came after it, especially that which was presented at the Council of Trent. Moreover, the decree on original sin generated at the Council of Trent constitutes, as Nicholas Lombardo states, "the most authoritative magisterial document on the subject of original sin."[45] George Vandervelde similarly adds that, to this day, the decree remains the most "comprehensive" and "definitive" teaching on original sin published by "the extraordinary teaching authority of the Church."[46] Thus, for the Roman Catholic Church, "the Council of Trent is the single most important document on the subject of original sin."[47] Further, the Council of Trent was an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church which convened as a response to the Protestant Reformation.[48] One of the main purposes of the council was to clarify the Catholic Church's teaching on various theological themes in response to the challenges posed by Reformation theologians.[49] Hence, the decree on original sin is an important resource; it can aid us in our discernment of what constitutes a distinctively *Catholic* theological account of sin. These two bodies of thought can therefore serve as representatives for the Catholic tradition regarding original sin.

As we shall see in chapter three, the theologies of Aquinas and Trent put into question the orthodoxy of a theological account which limits the definition of sin to a

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44 Indeed, even in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* John Paul II draws upon Aquinas' theology of sin in the context of speaking about mortal and venial sin. See Pope John Paul II, '*Reconciliatio et paenitentia*' (December 2, 1984), hereafter RP, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html> [accessed 2 June 2019], §17.
45 Nicholas Lombardo, 'Evil, Suffering and Original Sin', in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology,* ed. by Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 139-150 (p. 143). Oxford Handbooks Online ebook. <https://www-oxfordhandbooks-com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566273.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199566273> [accessed 3 March 2020].
46 George Vandervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), p. 33.
47 Ibid., p. 32.
48 Lombardo, p. 143. See also Matthew Knell, *Sin, Grace and Free Will: A Historical Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2017-), II: *From Anselm to the Reformation*, (2019), p. 269.
49 Lombardo, p. 143.

freely willed, immoral human act. Nevertheless, upon first reading, Aquinas does seem to present a moralistic account of sin as being merely a bad human act which we voluntarily commit through our use of reason and free will. Through a deeper exploration of these two bodies of thought, however, I shall seek to show how both Aquinas and Trent present theological accounts of sin that are more complicated than a merely moralistic idea of sin can account for. It would not be an exaggeration to say that both their theologies can challenge the very foundations upon which modern moralistic discourse stands. Thus, going beyond McFadyen, in this chapter we will be able to discern why limiting the language of sin to an individualistic and moralistic discourse is problematic within a Catholic theological register. This will enable us to understand *why* McFadyen's critique of moralistic accounts of sin can be maintained from a Catholic theological perspective. This will reconfirm our conclusion from chapter one, that is, that John Paul II's moralistic theology of sin is discontinuous with some major aspects of the Catholic tradition. Indeed, moralistic and individualistic accounts of sin such as his undermine the traditional belief in the communal inheritance of sin and guilt within the doctrine of original sin.

Although the doctrine of original sin can help develop our understanding of how sin shapes the human situation, the specific way original sin does this is not to be wholly and uncritically transferred into a theology of social sin as if the two terms are interchangeable. One cannot equate original sin with social sin. It would be useful, therefore, to look at contemporary resources outside the Catholic tradition to help discern how social sin impacts human life and agency. Hence, in the final chapter of this thesis, Judith Butler will be explored as a dialogue partner to help address the salient issues identified in chapter one that were not fully resolved by the Catholic resources investigated in the second and third chapters. Butler's account of human vulnerability and 'the constitutive sociality of the self' can aid us in this regard. Their theories can help us understand how unjust, disordered social situations contrary to the will of God shape human living and acting in ways which distort our relations to God and others. The turn to queer theory in general, and Judith Butler in particular, may be a surprising move for someone attempting to develop a Catholic theological account of sin. The Magisterium of the Catholic Church has long held an anxiety around modern gender theory or so-called 'gender ideologies'. Butler — a prominent feminist and queer theorist — is not, therefore, an obvious dialogue partner for

Catholic theology. Nevertheless, I believe that such a move can and does work despite this obvious tension. Butler's theories regarding the vulnerability of embodied life, the 'constitutive sociality of the self', and the violent effects of social norms can be drawn upon even if one were to reject some of their more radical contentions regarding gender. Personally, I find Butler's theories on gender to be convincing and compatible with Christian thought. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, to present a full and compelling argument for why this is so. Hence, in chapter four I will draw upon Butler's thinking in such a way that, even if one were to disagree with some of Butler's more controversial conclusions regarding gender, one could still learn from other aspects of their wider thought; aspects which I shall show are compatible with Catholic thinking.

Moreover, if we follow the views of the liberation theologians we will discuss in chapter two, it is the primary victims of social sin who are able to perceive its existence most clearly. It is the grace of Christ present in these victims which unveils the presence of sin and, by doing so, helps sinners to overcome their blindness. Historically, the LGBT+ community has experienced systemic injustice and discrimination predicated on their respective sexualities, genders, and races. These injustices have claimed lives and, indeed, continue to claim lives to this day. These systemic pathologies hence constitute a vigorous and deplorable denial of God's will.[50] Butler is a feminist, queer theorist in a society which oppresses and marginalises those who express nonnormative forms of sexuality and gender. Hence, Butler is in a position to apprehend the concrete ways systemic pathologies such as sexism and homophobia are embedded in our societies. Their social and political positionality enables them to see — more clearly than others not oppressed or marginalised by these

[50]As Catholic social teaching and the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, the belief in the intrinsic dignity of every single person means that every form of prejudice and social or cultural discrimination must be denounced as incompatible with God's plan. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [hereafter CCC], (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), §1928-1948.) It also condemns any form of violence against people predicated on their sexuality or gender. Thus, every single human person should be treated with respect and as equals. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith writes in its letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons in 1986: "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech and action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs […] The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law." See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons' (October 1, 1986), available at: <https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html> [accessed 17 May 2022], §10.

systemic pathologies — how these social injustices come to shape the world around us by distorting our relations with one another. Butler's theories regarding how unjust societies form subjectivities and shape consciousness can therefore help us to discern how social sin impacts human living and acting in the world. Butler's writings can also help develop the idea of social sin in such a way that the centrality of personal agency and responsibility is maintained; this is a concern which is central to John Paul II's thought. It is unclear, however, what Butler would think of this project, that is, whether they would approve of their thought being brought into dialogue with Christian thinking around sin. As previously noted, the notion of sin has been used as a rhetoric to marginalise, exclude, and discipline members of the LGBT+ community in ways that have done real harm. It is my hope, though, that Butler would look kindly upon work which attempts to rethink this Christian language in such a way that it becomes the source of Christian calls for justice and solidarity, rather than division and violence.

It is my hope that this thesis will contribute towards unpicking some of the critical issues which were brought to light by the controversy in the late twentieth century regarding social sin. It is not within the scope of this thesis to fully resolve these issues. I am not convinced that such a project would even be possible. I begin this study acknowledging that sin — a universal phenomenon which requires universal salvation — blinds and disorientates us all. Any project which presumes to be able to fully solve or definitively explain the mystery of sin and its relation to human freedom will inevitably fall short. That being said, sin does have concrete effects and visible manifestations in the world. Moreover, the dynamic and active presence of grace within history continues to bring sight to the blind and effect conversion. Some limited knowledge of sin is therefore possible. Hence, acknowledgement of our limitations when speaking about sin should not lead us to empty our sin-talk of any specific reality. It is important that we continually strive to improve upon our insights into the reality of sin. The importance of better understanding sin is predicated on the premise that by comprehending it one becomes better enabled to recognise, denounce, and repent from it. Furthermore, the way we speak about sin affects our personal and ecclesial practices. A more comprehensive and nuanced ecclesial understanding of sin can better equip the Church to articulate a theological and practical response to its presence. As Pope John Paul II affirms, our acknowledgment of sin is the first essential

step towards building more harmonious relations with God, ourselves, one another, and the world around us.[51] It is with this aim in mind that I begin this thesis; it is my hope that a *better*, if not perfect, way of speaking about sin may result from it.

[51] RP, §13.

1. Social Sin in the Thought of Pope John Paul II

Since the 1960's, magisterial teaching documents of the Catholic Church have consistently articulated an account of sin which acknowledges its social dimensions. The language of social sin, however, did not emerge in ecclesiastical texts until the 1970's. The terminology first became prominent in Latin America, in the context of Latin American bishops and liberation theologians interpreting their historically situated experiences in the light of faith. It was in the documents produced by the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America, better known as CELAM, that the concept of social sin was first articulated in ecclesiastical teaching. At Medellín in 1968 the Latin American episcopate depicted the underdevelopment prevalent in Latin America as an unjust reality of institutionalized violence which constituted a "sinful situation."[52] The final document produced at Puebla in 1979 restated Medellín's conviction that the growing gap between the rich and poor constituted "a situation of social sinfulness."[53] It asserted that this situation of poverty was a product of economic and political structures which were impregnated with the cultural values of "materialism" and "consumptionism."[54] Puebla interpreted the crisis as a cultural "crisis in moral values"[55] which penetrated both the "environment" and "lifestyle" of the people to such an extent that it undermined "communion with God"[56] and adversely affected "the freedom of all."[57] Going beyond Medellín, therefore, Puebla was the first ecclesial document to use the term "social sin" as distinct from personal sin[58] to depict unjust structures and situations.[59] As Margaret Pfeil notes, these texts are significant because they introduced the language of social sin into official Catholic teaching through an exercise of the Bishops' magisterium.[60] These writings, however, were pastoral documents directed to the Church in Latin America, and hence were not

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[52] Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, 'Document on Peace', in *Liberation Theology: A Document History,* ed. by Alfred Hennelly (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 106-114, §1.
[53] Third General Conference of Latin American Episcopate, 'Evangelization in Latin America's Present and Future', in *Puebla and Beyond*, ed. by John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980), pp. 123-285, §28.
[54] Ibid., §30. See also §54-56 and §70.
[55] Ibid., §60.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., §328.
[58] Ibid., §482.
[59] Ibid., §281.
[60] Pfeil, pp. 70-71.

intended to provide a universal teaching for the whole Church. An important moment for the development of the category of social sin, therefore, came when Pope John Paul II incorporated this language into magisterial documents addressed to the universal Church. His incorporation demonstrates an attempt to formulate a universally applicable definition for the entire Church.[61] Moreover, it is the definition presented by John Paul II which remains the official teaching on social sin.

The Pope articulated his account of social sin as a response to Latin American liberation theology. Liberation theologians were using the language of structural sin to describe the vast amounts of structural injustice and exploitation in Latin America which were resulting in poverty, dehumanization, and death for so many. John Paul II, alongside the various congregations in the Roman Curia under his papacy, were critical of this theology. The most explicit critique came from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith[62] in its 1984 document 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation.'[63] According to the CDF itself, the purpose of this instruction was to highlight those elements of liberation theology which were uncritical in their adoption of various aspects of Marxist thought. This undiscriminating use of Marxist thought was, in the CDF's view, deeply "damaging to the faith and to Christian living"[64] as it reduced faith to politics. In the document, the CDF argues that liberation theologians present erroneous interpretations of core theological themes such as the "real meaning" of sin and liberation.[65] The instruction critiques the account of social sin in Latin American liberation theology. It does not, however, explore any correct usage of the language. It characterises the idea of social sin as localising evil "principally or uniquely in bad social, political, or economic 'structures' as though all other evils came from them," and thus critiques it on this basis.[66] The document's discussions on liberation, structural injustice, and sin in general lays the groundwork for the account of social sin presented by Pope John Paul II and in subsequent CDF writings. Thus, in this chapter I shall occasionally examine CDF texts alongside the

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[61] Ibid., p. 172.
[62] Hereafter referred to as CDF.
[63] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, hereafter CDF, 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"' (August 6, 1984), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html> [accessed 23 September 2020].
[64] Ibid., introduction. See also, Pfeil, p. 138.
[65] CDF, 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"', §XI, ¶17.
[66] Ibid., §IV, ¶15.

Pope's own writings, although the focus will remain on John Paul II's account of social sin. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to evaluate the fairness of the Vatican's critiques of liberation theology. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to expound the Magisterium's own formulation of social sin; a formulation which emerged specifically as a response to Latin American liberation theology. Although John Paul II does not explicitly critique liberation theology in the papal writings we will examine, he does reference the CDF's 1984 document when discussing erroneous ideas of social sin.[67] This suggests that he regards his particular rendering of the term social sin to be a correction to the theologies of sin in Latin American liberationist thought. As David Tombs asserts, "the Vatican sought to make the language and themes of liberation theology its own while purifying them of previous errors."[68] Thus, Grégoire Catta notes that John Paul II's writings must be understood within "the polemical context of the relations between Latin American liberation theology and the Vatican."[69]

Through my analysis of John Paul II's construal of the idea of social sin, I hope to show how his account brings into light two critical issues: The first is that it is unclear why, from a Catholic *theological* perspective, unjust and disordered social structures, situations, or cultures can be called sin. Second, there are conflicting and uncertain accounts of how this 'sin' impacts human living and acting in the world.[70] The Pope's theology reveals the lack of clarity over the theological meaning and scope of the term sin within the Catholic tradition. This chapter will argue that the disagreement between the Vatican and Latin American liberation theology over the meaning, scope, and appropriateness of the language of social sin never came to a satisfactory conclusion. Despite its critique of liberation theology over this issue, the Magisterium of John Paul II's papacy does not present a satisfactory Catholic *theological* understanding of why social situations can be called sin and how this sin impacts human life and agency. Instead, John Paul II presents an individualistic and moralistic account of sin. Moreover, throughout the chapter I shall elucidate the theological, philosophical, and anthropological premises which underlie the Pope's

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[67] RP, §16.
[68] David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology*, Religion in the Americas Series, I (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 231.
[69] Grégoire Catta, *Catholic Social Teaching as Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), p. 73.
[70] Although it was the CELAM bishops and Latin American liberation theologians who first — at least implicitly — struggled over these questions, it was John Paul II's critique which made them prominent.

account of sin. This will enable us to discern *why* John Paul II presents his theology of sin in the way he does; that is, what the Pope's core concerns are regarding social sin, and what is at stake in his specific emphases.

Although John Paul II presents a predominately moralistic account of sin when speaking about social sin, there are aspects of the Pope's thought which suggest that an alternative Catholic construal of sin and its relation to human freedom and agency is possible. His theology of sin appears to have some internal inconsistencies. There are various undercurrents within his thought which potentially open new pathways for further discernment. Thus, this chapter will also seek to identify promising areas within the Pope's thought that can be used to constructively develop the theological anthropology underlying the idea of social sin. These aspects of John Paul II's thought will become particularly significant in later chapters. In papal encyclicals, however, theological themes are not always presented systematically and comprehensively, but, more often than not, are referred to by way of suggestive allusion.[71] Thus, some creative interpretation of the Pope's references will be required on our part.

1.1 Social Sin in the Writings of Pope John Paul II

John Paul II first incorporated the notion of social sin into his teaching in the 1984 apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia.* It is this text which constitutes the Pope's most detailed engagement with the idea. Moreover, as Pfeil asserts, it is in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* that a magisterial document directed to the whole church most explicitly uses the language of social sin.[72] The purpose of the exhortation was to synthesise the conclusions of the Sixth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in 1983, and also to further explore the themes of reconciliation and penance.[73] In the second part of the document the Pope presents an extended engagement with the idea of sin. One of John Paul II's concerns in this section is to circumscribe the category of social sin in response to what he regards as erroneous usages of the term. Thus, he outlines his definition of social sin as distinct from that which preceded it.

In the exhortation John Paul II asserts that unjust situations or structures can only be called sin in an analogous sense. This is because the Pope defines sin as the

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[71] Catta, p. 76.
[72] Pfeil, p. 128.
[73] RP, §4.

conscious act of an individual which derives from free will, and which opposes God's will and the moral law. He contends:

> Sin, in the proper sense, is always a personal act, since it is an act of freedom on the part of an individual person and not properly of a group [...] there is nothing so personal and untransferable in each individual as merit for virtue or responsibility for sin.[74]

For the Pope, the origin of sin is always the free choice of an individual. This suggests that an act must be committed consciously, voluntarily, and deliberately to constitute a sin within his thought. John Paul II does admit that social structures, systems, or other people may condition or influence individuals to act in various ways. Yet *how* they can do so is not described. He writes that, in such circumstances, these exterior factors may attenuate "the person's freedom and therefore his responsibility and guilt."[75] He circumscribes this, however, by affirming the inviolability of an individual's freedom: "it is a truth of faith, also confirmed by our experience and reason, that the human person is free. This truth cannot be disregarded in order to place the blame for individuals' sins on external factors such as structures, systems or other people."[76] John Paul II rejects any account of human agency where exterior forces such as social situations are seen as determining personal action. These external factors cannot be the direct cause of sin due to the person's intrinsic freedom. Hence, underlying this account of sin is a theological anthropology which emphasises the human person as the primary or sole cause of their own acts.[77]

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[74] RP, §16.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] See also Pope John Paul II, '*Veritatis splendor'* (August 3, 1993), hereafter VS, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 2 June 2019], §40. John Paul II's use of language here — particularly his description of sin as fundamentally a "personal act" — is reminiscent of his philosophical writings prior to becoming Pope. In *The Acting Person*, Karol Wojtyla writes that, for an act to be considered an act of the person or a 'human act', it needs to be intended: The act needs to be committed consciously, voluntarily, and deliberately. It needs to be a self-determined exercise of the will. A personal or human act, therefore, is an actualization of free will. (See, Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 25-26.) Thus, the cause of this act needs to be the conscious efficacy of the human person. Wojtyla further writes that in situations where the human person loses their ability to act consciously, voluntarily, and deliberately, "there is no real acting but only a special sort of happening — something happens in and with him, something that he neither determines nor fulfils." Moreover, whenever a person acts by necessity — without the crucial experience of 'I may but I need not' and thus without the real participation of free will — one lacks the element of freedom necessary to be an act of the person. (See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 246. See also pp. 66-68; 100-101.) As Wojtyla concludes, "freedom is expressed by efficacy and efficacy leads

Three points are noteworthy here: First, according to the Pope the language of sin is limited to describing an *act*; second, acts can only properly be called sin when they are attributed to an *individual person* as opposed to a group or society; third, for John Paul II, one is only found guilty of, and responsible for, sin when one's choices and actions are freely made, that is, when one's actions are not induced or determined by external factors such as structures, systems, or other people. If these exterior forces do influence one to act in ways contrary to the divine will, then the Pope regards this influence as attenuating one's freedom. Hence, one's responsibility and guilt for sin is also lessened, if not eliminated. For John Paul II, therefore, the conditions for the attribution of moral culpability are the same requirements needed for one to be found guilty of sin. Moral culpability becomes the criteria by which sin is judged to be either present or absent; one can only be found guilty of sin when one possesses the self-determination and freedom of choice necessary to have been able to do or will otherwise. Although, the Pope's emphasis on the inherent freedom of the human person suggests that, to some extent, one always retains the self-determination, efficacy, and freedom of choice to be able to do what one wills.[78] Hence, one can always be found morally culpable for any act one commits. For John Paul II, sin is a morally wrong act which a person willingly and freely commits.

In the Pope's account of sin, therefore, he places emphasis on the centrality of personal agency and responsibility for sin. He also underscores the idea that the human person is free to choose not to sin. For John Paul II, it seems that these emphases are necessary for a proper construal of sin. Moreover, it is these ideas which underlie and circumscribe the Pope's definition of social sin. He asserts that there are only three correct usages for the term. First, sin can be defined as social because "every sin is

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to responsibility." (See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, p. 180.) This suggests that when the Pope uses the language of 'personal act' to define sin in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia,* he is referring to an act which results from a person's conscious efficacy; this means that an act has to be committed consciously, voluntarily, and deliberately in order to constitute a sin.

[78] This emphasis is also present within John Paul II's writings before he became Pope. In the philosophical works of Karol Wojtyla, freedom is identified with self-determination. The human person has a power over themselves and their actions that nothing and no one else can have. This is because, according to Wojtyla, only the human person has the "exclusive power to control the will." He further explains that "[i]t is because of the person's exclusive power over the will that will is the person's power to be free." (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, p. 122.) Wojtyla asserts that one experiences one's freedom and self-determination when one acts not by necessity but merely because one wills it. He argues: "The freedom appropriate to the human being, the person's freedom resulting from the will, exhibits itself as identical with self-determination, with that experiential, most complete, and fundamental organ of man's autonomous being." (See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 115.)

social insofar as and because it also has social repercussions."[79] Due to human solidarity, every act of sin is social because it affects others. The second way one can refer to sin as social is when sins constitute an attack against another person. The third understanding of social sin is when it "refers to the relationships between the various human communities."[80] For the Pope, however, this final interpretation of social sin cannot be called sin in the proper sense, despite these relationships being unjust, disordered, or opposed to the divine plan. According to John Paul II's definition of sin, unjust situations or social structures can only be named sin in an analogous sense because situations and structures cannot in themselves sin. Indeed, because the Pope regards sin as a morally wrong act which a person personally and freely commits, structures cannot properly be regarded as sinning due to their lack of moral agency and free will.[81] Nor can they properly be referred to as sin for this same reason. He even goes so far as to state that situations, structures, and institutions cannot be regarded as good or bad in themselves: "A situation — or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself — is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad."[82]

So why can social structures be called sin in an analogous sense according to the Pope? For John Paul II, unjust situations or social structures *can* be named sin in a derivative sense, but only because they are rooted in the sinful acts of individuals — what he terms 'personal sin'. He draws a sharp distinction between 'personal sin' — understood as free and conscious acts — and 'social sin' — understood as the consequence of these free choices in history. For the Pope, only the former is properly called sin, whilst the second is only derivatively understood as sin due to its reliance on the former for its existence. Hence, John Paul II insists upon a reading of social sin as purely the consequence of 'personal sin', and therefore purely the result of many individuals' freely willed choices and actions over time:

> Whenever the church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behavior of certain social groups,

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[79] RP, §15.
[80] RP, §16.
[81] Kristin E. Heyer, 'Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors', *Theological Studies*, 71.2 (2010), 410-436, (p. 415) <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1177/004056391007100207>.
[82] RP, §16.

> big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. […] The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.[83]

Unjust situations or social structures can only be called sin because they are the result of individual acts of personal sin. By distinguishing between 'personal sin' and 'social sin' in this way, the Pope is able to maintain his definition of sin as a morally wrong act, whilst also demonstrating why structures or situations can also be called sin. John Paul II further clarifies that the personal sins which are at the root of sinful situations can be acts of commission or omission. They can be a case of people actively causing, supporting, or benefiting from the unjust situation or they can be a case of people who fail to resist or avoid the evil situation "out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference."[84] These examples seem to indicate that the personal sins which are at the root of unjust situations are those voluntary actions which result from the conscious efficacy of the human person. The Pope, however, does admit to the complexity involved in affirming the primacy of personal sin in the creation and sustenance of unjust social situations. He writes that their "causes are complex and not always identifiable." Hence, he affirms that "if one speaks of social sin here, the expression obviously has an analogical meaning" due to the difficulty of assigning blame to any particular person. He circumscribes this, though, by asserting that this "must not cause us to underestimate the responsibility of the individuals involved."[85] Thus, again John Paul II's theology of sin is constrained by his equation of guilt with moral culpability: The descriptive language of 'sin' can only be attributed to a social situation in an analogical sense due to the difficulty of tracing the origin or cause of said situation back to individual acts, and hence because of the difficulty of tracing moral blame for this situation back to individual persons.

Underlying the Pope's configuration of social sin is a social theory which highlights the incapacity of social structures or situations to exist independently of the actions and choices of individuals. Without this contribution to their presence and sustenance, even if only through compliance or acquiescence with the status quo, these

[83] RP, §16.
[84] RP, §16.
[85] Ibid.

structures would not exist. As Christine Hinze notes, for John Paul II, “groups never exert agency completely apart from the intentions and decisions of members.”[86] Here the Pope is reinforcing the 1984 CDF instruction’s emphasis on the primacy of personal actions in the creation and sustenance of unjust structures. The 1984 instruction emphatically states that the cause of unjust situations are individual and freely-willed acts: “Structures, whether they are good or bad, are a result of man’s actions and so are consequences more than causes. The root of evil, then lies in free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ.”[87] Throughout this CDF instruction, it is the hardened hearts of human beings, rather than any social conditions, situations, or structures, which are regarded as the primary source of social wrongs.[88] The CDF similarly argues that sins — understood specifically as voluntary and freely willed acts — are the primary cause of any structural injustice or “slavery in the cultural, economic, social and political spheres.”[89] The 1984 document is even more cautious than John Paul II in its conclusion that one can speak of unjust structures as “marked by sin, but one cannot condemn structures as such.”[90] The instruction, published only a few months before *Reconciliatio et paenitentia,* never makes use of the language of ‘social sin’ or ‘structural sin’. Throughout this text, social structures are repeatedly described as violent, unjust, or evil. The language of sin, however, is used far less regularly in reference to them.[91]

The Pope further develops his understanding of social sin in the 1987 papal encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis.* His focus for this social encyclical was the topic of development and the challenges concerning development in the contemporary world. While discussing these issues, John Paul II draws upon theological and anthropological concepts such as solidarity, freedom, and sin. It is his configuration of these theological themes in the context of speaking about the obstacles to

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[86] Christine Firer Hinze, ‘The Drama Of Social Sin and the (Im)Possibility of Solidarity: Reinhold Niebuhr and Modern Catholic Social Teaching’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 22.4 (2009), 442–460, (p. 445) <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1177/0953946809340947>.
[87] CDF, ‘Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”’, §IV, ¶15.
[88] See for example, CDF, ‘Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”’, §IX, ¶8
[89] CDF, ‘Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”’, introduction.
[90] CDF, ‘Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,’ (March 22, 1986), available at: <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html> [accessed 23 September 2020], §74.
[91] See for example, CDF ‘Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”,’ §IV, ¶15 and §XI, ¶8-10.

development which is relevant for our own purposes. As we shall see later in the chapter, the way these concepts interact or create tensions with one another within the encyclical add various layers of complexity to the account of social sin which was presented in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*.[92] In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II denounces the existence of “economic, financial and social mechanisms” which accentuate wealth for some and poverty for others, thus resulting in situations of superdevelopment and underdevelopment. He admits that such mechanisms “often function almost automatically,”[93] however he reemphasises the centrality of personal agency in their creation and sustenance:

> Political leaders, and citizens of rich countries considered as individuals, especially if they are Christians, have the moral obligation, according to the degree of each one’s responsibility, to take into consideration, in personal decisions and decisions of government, this relationship of universality, this interdependence which exists between their conduct and the poverty and underdevelopment of so many millions of people.[94]

The Pope argues that, although there are economic and political causes to this state of underdevelopment, it primarily has a moral cause; the source of this state of underdevelopment is in the “behavior of individuals considered as responsible persons.”[95] The immoral actions of individuals can become obstacles which “slow down” and “hinder” the course of development. This emphasis on personal agency in situations of injustice lays the groundwork for his reflections on sin.[96] He argues that a world which is divided into the nation blocs of East and West, which is sustained by the dominant ideologies of Marxist collectivism and liberal capitalism, and where “different forms of imperialism hold sway” can only be described as a world which is “subject to structures of sin.”[97] Thus, again the Pope is endorsing the language of Latin American liberation theology. Here, however, he uses the phrase ‘structures of sin’ as

[92] We shall explore these tensions further later in the chapter.
[93] Pope John Paul II, ‘*Sollicitudo rei socialis’* (December 30, 1987), hereafter SRS, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html> [accessed 2 June 2019], §16.
[94] SRS, §9.
[95] SRS, §35.
[96] Pfeil, p. 149.
[97] SRS, §36.

opposed to 'social sin' to depict unjust and disordered social situations.[98] Nevertheless, this endorsement is not without qualifications: John Paul II restates his earlier thought that such sinful situations "are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove."[99] He goes on, however, to assert that these "structures of sin" then "grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins."[100] Previously, the Pope never explicitly articulated that sinful situations can be the source of personal sin, despite admitting that humans can be influenced by social situations. In this encyclical, though, both 'personal' and 'social' sin are depicted as mutually reinforcing.

Despite this indication that structures of sin can influence behaviour, it is unclear to what extent this acknowledgement allows also for a recognition of the social conditioning of human freedom and agency. *How* do these structures of sin influence behaviour such that they cause individuals to personally sin? In his reflections on what he regards as a culture of "consumerism" and "materialism," John Paul II seems to acknowledge that cultures can influence people to behave in ways which negate their good and the good of others.[101] Moreover, as Gregory Baum notes, the Pope is aware that the ideologies of Marxist collectivism and liberal capitalism blind people to such an extent that they are prevented from recognising the injustice of these systems.[102] Indeed, John Paul II seems to suggest that such ideologies can obstruct people from "a true awareness of the universal common good."[103] Yet *how* these ideologies can do so is not described. This acknowledgment that one's awareness of the common good can become obstructed, however, does suggest that certain goods can become difficult to imagine or to conceive due to various ideological, political, or cultural influences. Our knowledge of the good can become disrupted by the social situations in which we are immersed. John Paul II himself writes that "[t]he sum total of the negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to

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[98] It seems, however, that for the Pope these terms are interchangeable. It is unclear, therefore, what the difference is between the phrases 'social sin' and 'structural sin' within John Paul II's thought, if indeed there is any difference.
[99] SRS, §36.
[100] Ibid.
[101] SRS, §28.
[102] Gregory Baum, 'Structures of Sin', in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical "On Social Concern"*, ed. by Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 110-126 (p. 114).
[103] SRS, §36.

further it, gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome."[104] Despite this assertion, though, he only uses the language of 'personal sin' to depict those behaviours which result from a conscious awareness of the injustice of the situation. He quotes from *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* to exemplify the relation between social sin and personal sin: One personally sins when one consciously supports the sinful situation or fails to resist it "out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference."[105] He further illustrates how one might personally sin in this way when discussing the specific situation of underdevelopment:

> [I]t must be said that just as one may sin through selfishness and the desire for excessive profit and power, one may also be found wanting with regard to the urgent needs of multitudes of human beings submerged in conditions of underdevelopment, through fear, indecision and, basically, through cowardice.[106]

These examples again suggest that the personal sins which are at the root of sinful situations are self-determined acts which result from a person's conscious efficacy; an act has to be committed consciously, voluntarily, and deliberately in order to constitute a sin within the Pope's thought. Hence, John Paul II's assertion that structures of sin cause further sin can be read in this light: Structures, created by sinful individuals but which "go far beyond the actions and brief life span of an individual,"[107] influence us to sin by presenting opportunities for us to consciously misuse our freedom in support of evil situations and by presenting obstacles which encourage us not to resist the situation. Consequently, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, he emphasises personal agency in situations of structural injustice,[108] and sin, properly speaking, remains limited to the realm of conscious and voluntary free choice. In this encyclical, therefore, John Paul II again presents a moralistic account of sin, despite his more nuanced assertion that structures of sin can cause further sin. This moralistic account is underscored when he explicitly writes that the "true nature" of the evil in the world concerning the issues of

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[104] Ibid.
[105] SRS, §36 footnote 65.
[106] SRS, §47.
[107] SRS, §36.
[108] See also SRS §9 and §35.

underdevelopment and superdevelopment is moral: "it is a question of a moral evil, the fruit of many sins which lead to 'structures of sin.'"[109]

In later encyclicals, however, the Pope develops his thoughts on the capacity of social forces, such as culture, to condition personal agency. It is in the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* where John Paul II most explicitly reflects on the capacity of culture to influence one's thinking, behaviour, and worldview. This encyclical is significant as it frames discussion of social sin in cultural terms, rather than economic and political as was emphasised in his previous writings. In the context of speaking about what he regards as the "culture of death" in society — a culture which he refers to as a "veritable structure of sin" — the Pope argues that culture has the capacity to eclipse values and deform conscience.[110] This is because this "culture of death" tolerates and fosters behaviours which devalue life. He writes: "The moral conscience, both individual and social, is today subjected […] to an extremely serious and mortal danger: that of confusion between good and evil."[111] He affirms that, due to the influence of this culture, one's conscience can become confused and one's ability to discern good from evil distorted. This leads to a "change in the way in which life and relationships between people are considered."[112] Moreover, he asserts that psychological, cultural, and social conditioning may induce people to carry out sinful actions. He qualifies, however, that such social conditioning lessens, or even removes, one's subjective responsibility.[113] The idea that one's conscience can become deformed by external forces such as culture was present in germinal form in the Pope's earlier writings. In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* John Paul II acknowledges that the moral conscience can become eclipsed or numbed by aspects of one's culture: "it happens not infrequently in history, for more or less lengthy periods and under the influence of many different factors, that the moral conscience of many people becomes seriously clouded."[114] Significantly, he also writes that this clouding of conscience leads to "an obscuring also of the sense of sin, which is closely connected with the

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[109] SRS, §37.
[110] Pope John Paul II, '*Evangelium vitae'* (March 25, 1995), hereafter EV, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html> [accessed 2 June 2019], §11.
[111] EV, §24.
[112] EV, §4.
[113] EV, §66.
[114] RP, §18. See also RP, §26 where the Pope writes that the person's "innermost self", namely one's "conscience", can be "attacked, put to the test, confused and obscured" by culture.

moral conscience, the search for truth and the desire to make a responsible use of freedom."[115] In both of these encyclicals, however, there is no explanation of *how* conscience can be eclipsed; how can a culture of death influence us into patterns of thinking and behaviour which negate God's will in history? As we shall explore in chapter four, contemporary theorists argue that cultures influence us by providing the criteria by which we judge things to be true, real, good, and valuable.[116] John Paul II comes close to such an understanding himself in *Evangelium vitae* when he claims that crimes against life are regarded as legitimate due to the widespread cultural assumptions regarding the values of autonomy and efficiency.[117] These cultural assumptions make it difficult "to grasp clearly the meaning of what man is, the meaning of his rights and his duties."[118] Similarly, in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* he links the deformation of conscience to a widespread loss of the sense of sin within society.[119] Despite these acknowledgements, however, he does not go as far as contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler who argue that cultures contribute towards the constitution of the self through the "staging" and "structuring" of worldview, emotion, and desire.[120] As we shall see in chapter four, to follow this argument through would lead one to understand that cultural norms are not only situated outside oneself in an exterior situation, but that they also come to live *within* oneself. They do this by providing the lens through which one views the world and, in Butler's words, the "horizon" for "any sense of choice" that one has,[121] hence influencing one into sinful behaviour. Nevertheless, the Pope's brief allusions to how disordered cultures can impact the operations of conscience suggest a more nuanced understanding of the way "structures of sin" affect human living and acting in the world. These allusions indicate that social sin does not merely shape one's external environment, presenting opportunities for one to consciously misuse one's freedom, but that it also shapes one's interiority by distorting or clouding conscience. Due to this distortion of conscience, one's knowledge and sense of the good can become warped, one's ability to discern good from evil distorted, and one's sense of sin obscured. As we shall see later, though, despite these allusions, John Paul II ultimately

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[115] RP, §18.
[116] See, for example, Butler, *Undoing Gender,* p. 206.
[117] EV, §11-19.
[118] EV, §11.
[119] RP, §18.
[120] See, Butler, *Undoing Gender,* p. 15.
[121] Ibid., p. 33.

maintains that culture can never fully obscure one's conscience. This safeguards the idea that structures of sin can never fully determine human action, nor completely shape one's interiority. By doing so, he also protects the belief that one can always be found morally culpable for one's actions.[122]

There is, therefore, some ambiguity concerning the role which cultural conditioning plays within John Paul II's thought. The Pope acknowledges that supra-personal forces such as culture can influence behaviour; an influence which he admits on occasion can attenuate freedom and guilt. Yet, individuals always retain the capacity to transcend social conditioning and resist any influence to sin; hence, they remain responsible for their actions. This complexity is exemplified in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* where the Pope argues that humans have the capacity "to transcend every social order so as to move towards truth and goodness."[123] Nevertheless, John Paul II affirms that the human person is also "conditioned by the social structure in which he lives."[124] He further asserts:

> The manner in which the individual exercises his freedom is conditioned in innumerable ways. While these certainly have an influence on freedom, they do not determine it; they make the exercise of freedom more difficult or less difficult, but they cannot destroy it.[125]

In *Veritatis splendor* he similarly writes that, although "it is always possible that man, as the result of coercion or other circumstances, can be hindered from doing certain good actions […] he can never be hindered from not doing certain actions, especially if he is prepared to die rather than to do evil."[126] Overall, therefore, for the Pope, social conditioning seems to be a case of exterior influences which one remains free to resist, but which nonetheless can obstruct one from enacting the good by tempting one to sin or making it difficult to resist.[127] This is why, in *Evangelium vitae*, he even goes so far as to assert that we "allow" ourselves to be influenced by social climates, as cultural

[122] See EV, §24: "All the conditioning and efforts to enforce silence fail to stifle the voice of the Lord echoing in the conscience of every individual."
[123] Pope John Paul II, '*Centesimus annus'* (May 1, 1991), hereafter CA, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html> [accessed 2 June 2019], §38.
[124] Ibid.
[125] CA, §25.
[126] VS, §52.
[127] SRS, §36.

assimilation remains within the realm of free choice.[128] It seems, therefore, that 'social sins' or 'structures of sin' help to create the environment within which one exercises one's freedom, but have no power to shape one's interiority, subjectivity, or actions unless one freely allows these sinful situations to do so. Darlene Weaver's critique of Charles Curran's account of sin can also be used to describe John Paul II's own thought. Indeed, it seems that, for the Pope, social sin "operates around and on but not in" the human person: "[S]in helps to create the moral arena and possibilities within which the person exercises her freedom [...] but will only characterize her orientation if she activates her relation to sin through a free decision." This is because, within his thought, the human person possesses a "reservoir of freedom or agency untouched by sin."[129]

Thus, in the context of speaking about social sin, the Pope presents a moralistic understanding of sin. First, sin in the proper sense is limited to an *act* of an *individual person*. Indeed, despite John Paul II's acceptance of the language of social or structural sin, he stipulates that unjust situations, relationships, or structures can only be named sin in an analogous sense. Second, one is only found guilty of, and culpable for, sin when one possesses the self-determination and freedom of choice necessary to have been able to do or will otherwise. Like other moralistic accounts of sin, moral culpability becomes the standard or criterion by which sin is judged to be either present or absent in one's actions. As McFadyen indicates, although it is admitted that external factors may influence action, nevertheless for moralistic accounts of sin "it is our own, free action — and not pathological sociality — for which alone we stand accountable."[130] Moreover, for the Pope, social structures or situations can only encourage us to misuse our freedom. Sin remains within the realm of free choice with the corresponding attribution of moral culpability. In reference to John Paul II's account of social sin, McFadyen himself notes that:

> [S]in remains here correlated with notions of personal responsibility construed in moralistic terms: as the free (i.e., self-determined, rather than socially or

[128] EV, §21.
[129] Weaver, p. 54. Here Weaver is not referring to John Paul II's account of sin, but her critique of Charles Curran can also be applied to John Paul II's thought.
[130] McFadyen, p. 39. McFadyen is talking more generally about social reinterpretations of sin, rather than John Paul II explicitly, however his footnoting of *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* suggests that he includes the Pope's construal of social sin within this analysis.

> structurally determined) acts of moral agents […] It is yet assumed that the kind of agency involved in sin is moral […] Hence the reality of sin is again identified as residing in the moral interiority of the person, which remains unaffected by structural pathologies, at least sufficient for her assimilation of and shaping by these structures to be characterised in moral terms: as at some level and to some extent a free act.[131]

Indeed, the Pope's emphasis on freedom and self-determination being prerequisites for attribution of responsibility reduces the language of sin to a moral frame of reference.[132]

Thus, we can now see why the Pope appeals to the conscience of individuals as his principal response to social sin. He indicates that such moral suasion will eventually lead to a transformation of unjust structures.[133] Indeed, John Paul II writes that, by diagnosing the evil present in the world as primarily moral in this way, we are able to "identify precisely, on the level of human conduct, the path to be followed in order to overcome it."[134] There is an urgent need for individuals to convert and to "change the spiritual attitudes which define each individual's relationship with self, with neighbor, with even the remotest human communities, and with nature itself."[135] This conversion needs to be accompanied by a formation of the virtue of solidarity within each individual. He explains that this virtue is not a mere "feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people." Rather, it is "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual."[136] According to the Pope, it is only in this way that the structures of sin present in society can be overcome, namely by transforming individuals' "hearts of stone" into "hearts of flesh."[137] There is a priority

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[131] McFadyen, p. 36 footnote 38. Here McFadyen is explicitly addressing the definition of social sin presented by John Paul II. His analysis, however, is limited to a single footnote. Thus, McFadyen does not present any in depth evidencing, nor does he grapple with any of the complexities within the Pope's thought.
[132] Ibid., p. 36.
[133] Perhaps this is also why *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* is addressed to "all men and women of upright conscience," rather than just the Catholic Church. See RP, §4.
[134] SRS, §37.
[135] SRS, §38.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

placed on the need for individual conversion; this is over and above the need for transformation of any disordered cultural, economic, or political structures.

John Paul II's moralistic account of sin, and correspondingly his derivative understanding of social sin, was taken up by the various congregations in the Roman Curia under his papacy. The CDF instruction published in 1986 asserts:

> [T]he sin which is at the root of unjust situations is, in a true and immediate sense, a *voluntary act* which has its *source* in the *freedom* of individuals. Only in a derived and secondary sense is it applicable to structures, and only in this sense can one speak of "social sin".[138]

By the 1986 document, therefore, the language of social sin is acknowledged, if only in a limited and derivative sense. This is presumably as a response to John Paul II's own acceptance of the term in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*. Again, however, the language of sin is limited to a moralistic discourse due to the CDF's restriction of sin to an act which is freely and willingly committed by an individual person. Thus, the CDF repeats John Paul II's assertion that unjust situations and structures can only be called sin in a secondary and derivative sense. Moreover, they can only be called sin in this derivative sense because, according to the CDF, the cause of unjust situations are individual and voluntary acts of sin.[139]

Many other congregations in the Roman Curia also began to use the vocabulary of social sin as a result of John Paul II's own acceptance of the language. The terminology was included in documents such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The authors of these documents, however, merely repeated the Pope's individualistic and moralistic account of sin. Thus, because these documents remain influential and authoritative texts within the contemporary Catholic Church, we can see that it is the definition of social sin presented by John Paul II which remains the official teaching. The Catechism contends that sin is fundamentally a "personal act."[140] It further asserts that:

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[138] CDF, 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation', §75. Emphasis mine.
[139] See for example, the CDF 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation', §46 and the 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"', §IX, ¶8.
[140] CCC, §1868.

> Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. 'Structures of sin' are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a 'social sin'.[141]

The Catechism, therefore, repeats John Paul II's analogical account of social sin, as well as his belief in the primacy of personal sin. It does, however, use the language of victimhood in reference to those individuals who are led by sinful structures to "do evil in their turn." This suggests that anyone conditioned by these structures in such a way that they are led to do more evil are not merely perpetrators of evil, but are also, fundamentally, victims of sin. This expansion of the notion of victimhood to include perpetrators of evil will be a theme we shall explore further in chapter two in the context of exploring Latin American liberation theology. Significantly, however, the Catechism does not employ the language of sin to describe these evil actions. This suggests that the vocabulary is only properly employed when describing voluntary and self-determined acts of free moral agents. Once again the terminology of sin is limited to a moralistic discourse. Similarly, in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,* the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace repeats John Paul II's account of social sin almost verbatim contending that "in its true sense, sin is always *an act of the person*, because it is the free act of an individual person." They repeat the Pope's argument that it is unacceptable to pursue an account of social sin which exonerates individual persons by "admitting only social guilt and responsibility." They conclude that "[a]t the bottom of every situation of sin there is always the individual who sins."[142] The Council does, however, argue that:

> [Structures of sin] are always connected to concrete acts of […] individuals […] It is thus that they grow stronger, spread and become sources of other sins, conditioning human conduct. These are obstacles and conditioning that go well beyond the actions and brief life span of the individual and interfere also in the process of the development of peoples, the delay and slow pace of which must be judged in this light.[143]

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[141] CCC, §1869.
[142] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Continuum, 2012), §117.
[143] Ibid., §119.

Thus, structures of sin can condition human conduct in such a way that they cause further sin to occur. Nevertheless, the Council does not expand upon this idea. Apart from the acknowledgement that structures of sin condition human conduct, the document uses the same wording as *Sollicitudo rei socialis.* Hence, the *Compendium* adds nothing new to the account of sin presented in the Pope's own writings. The recognition that sin conditions human conduct is likely meant to reinforce John Paul II's account of how structures of sin cause further personal sin to occur. Thus, it is the definition of social sin presented by John Paul II which remains the official teaching of the Church.

1.2 Digging Deeper: The Pope's Wider Theology of Sin

Within the context of discussing the idea of social sin, John Paul II presents a predominately moralistic reading of sin. Outside of this specific context, however, the Pope draws on a broader theological understanding of sin. By doing this, he implicitly acknowledges that the language of sin has a wider meaning beyond that of merely an individual, immoral act which is freely and willingly committed. There is, therefore, a lack of clarity over the theological meaning and scope of the term sin within the Pope's writings. Indeed, there are elements of John Paul II's thought which challenge the moralistic and individualistic account of sin he presents in the context of speaking about social sin. It must be noted, however, that John Paul II does not draw on these broader notions of sin systematically and comprehensively, but rather by way of suggestive allusion. Hence, some creative interpretation of his assumptions shall be required. As Catta asserts, however, the Pope's suggestive references open pathways for further discernment.[144]

Within the writings of the Magisterium of John Paul II's papacy, there are various theological meanings and metaphors associated with the language of sin beyond that of merely a free, immoral act. Sin is regarded as contempt for God; a separation or breaking away from God; a rejection of loving communion with God; a turning away from God; the source of division and oppression; the root of human alienation; a disordered act; and a wishing to be free from God or to replace God.[145] Thus, these documents do ascribe various *theological* meanings to the language of sin.

[144] Catta, p. 76.
[145] See, for example, RP, §17-18.

In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* John Paul II argues that the language of sin, by necessity, has a relation to "the will of the Triune God, his plan for humanity, his justice and his mercy."[146] Sin is a disruption to our proper relation with God.[147] For the Pope, the *essence* of sin is rejection of God; it is "disobedience to God, to His law, to the moral norm that he has given man."[148] Immoral acts are not sinful merely because they are immoral, but because they constitute a rupture of our relationship with God due to our disobedience to God's moral laws. Immoral actions and choices are sin precisely *because* they are a rejection of God's law. The Pope states:

> Exclusion of God, rupture with God, disobedience to God: Throughout the history of mankind this has been and is, in various forms, sin. [...] It is the disobedience of a person who, by a free act, does not acknowledge God's sovereignty over his or her life, at least at that particular moment in which he or she transgresses God's law.[149]

God is regarded as the creator of the moral law and sin as the breaking of this law. It does seem, however, that moral categories still limit and shape John Paul II's interpretation of this theological underpinning. Indeed, if sin, properly speaking, is a transgression of God's law, then why does this transgression have to be committed freely, deliberately, and consciously? Why is sin "clearly [...] a product of man's freedom,"[150] as the Pope so emphatically writes? It is unclear why an act must have its source in the conscious efficacy of the human person to be a sin. Surely a person can act in such a way that they offend God's will without consciously and deliberately doing so. Moreover, if sin is properly regarded as a rupture of relation with God or an opposition to God's plan within history, then why is sin limited to individual acts? Surely situations, social structures, and communities can be regarded as mitigating, offending, or opposing God's will within history, thereby disrupting the proper relation between humanity and the divine. It is unclear, therefore, why John Paul II argues that sin can only properly be understood as a free, immoral act in the context of speaking about social sin. It seems that, despite this theological underpinning, the primary and defining characteristic of sin for the Pope is that it is an immoral act for

[146] RP, §17
[147] RP, §14.
[148] Ibid. See also RP, §17.
[149] RP, §14. See also RP, §15.
[150] RP, §14.

which one can be found morally culpable. Moral culpability, rather than rejection of God or disruption of proper relation to God, becomes the criterion for recognizing sin. The specifically theological definitions of sin are not consulted when addressing the concept of social or structural sin. The Magisterium instead reverts to a moralistic, rather than specifically theological, account of sin when it seeks to correct liberation theology's so-called erroneous understanding of social sin.

Nevertheless, there are elements of the Pope's wider thought which challenge his moralistic and individualistic account of social sin. In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* John Paul II acknowledges a wider understanding of sin by drawing upon the traditional belief in original sin. His allusions to the doctrine of original sin question the very premise upon which a moralistic account of sin stands, that is, that one is a free and fully self-determined individual. At the beginning of the exhortation, John Paul II argues that the root cause of the divisions which are prevalent within human society — divisions which can be found even within the church itself — is sin.[151] He contends that such ruptures have concrete social, structural, economic, and political manifestations in the world today: "These consequences of sin are the reasons for division and rupture not only within each person, but also within the various circles of a person's life: in relation to the family, to the professional and social environment."[152] Thus, the Pope concludes that the only way to heal these rifts and bring about true and lasting reconciliation is "conversion from sin."[153] The sin which is at the root of these societal divisions, however, is not just personal sin — that is, "the sin which each one of us commits when we abuse our own freedom" — but also original sin.[154] For the Pope, original sin is a sin which "all of us bear from birth as an inheritance from our first parents."[155] Here John Paul II acknowledges that we all inherit sin prior to any conscious personal action or exercise of freedom. It is original sin, namely the sin we all inherit as a consequence of humanity's ruptured relation with God, which is the

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[151] As Catta notes, however, this emphasis on division as a sinful condition means that there is less stress in John Paul II's writings on the diversity of positions within the Church as being "an expression of an ongoing discernment in which the Spirit is at work." Catta suggests that the Pope's significant emphasis on division as an expression of sin may have been influenced by his personal experience of being part of a "resisting church facing an oppressive atheist regime in Poland." Indeed, this experience led the Pope to equate "fidelity to the church" with "a high level of formal submission to the institution and avoidance of visible signs of dissension in it." See Catta, pp. 57-58.

[152] RP, §13.

[153] RP, §23.

[154] RP, §2.

[155] Ibid.

originating cause of the divisions which afflict the human race.[156] Here, therefore, the notion of sin is broadened; there is a fundamental sociality to sin which all humans participate in.

Elsewhere in the exhortation, John Paul II alludes to another aspect of the traditional doctrine of original sin, that is, the belief that all humans are inclined to sin from birth. He argues that the first step towards conversion and repentance is to acknowledge oneself as a sinner who is, in his own words, "capable of sin and inclined to commit sin."[157] This reference to a widespread inclination of humanity towards sin suggests that human freedom may be constrained by sin prior to any personal action or decision, although the Pope does not go so far as to suggest this himself. John Paul II further alludes to this traditional idea of concupiscence when he argues that sin disorders and destroys one's internal balance. This is a particularly Thomistic understanding of the consequences of sin on human nature.[158] The Pope argues that sin introduces a division into one's conscience which "pervades [one's] whole being and separates [one] from God and from [one's] brothers and sisters."[159] This means that humanity "almost inevitably" acts and chooses in ways which distort our relationships with each other and the nonhuman world:

> Since by sinning man refuses to submit to God, his internal balance is also destroyed and it is precisely within himself that contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his relationship with others and with the created world. This is an objective law and an objective reality, verified in so many ways in the human psyche and in the spiritual life as well as in society, where it is easy to see the signs and effects of internal disorder.[160]

It is notable that the Pope recognises this internal disorder as being present in individuals throughout human history from the "first sin" committed at the origin of humankind. He uses the figurative biblical stories of Genesis to symbolise this:

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[156] RP, §15.
[157] RP, §13.
[158] We shall explore this Thomistic understanding of the consequences of original sin on human nature further in chapter three.
[159] RP, §31.
[160] RP, §15.

> In the description of the 'first sin,' the rupture with Yahweh simultaneously breaks the bond of friendship that had united the human family. Thus the subsequent pages of Genesis show us the man and the woman as it were pointing an accusing finger at each other. Later we have the brother hating his brother and finally taking his life.[161]

This suggests that when the human person inherits original sin at birth, they also inherit the internal disorder which "almost inevitably" makes them act in ways which distort their relations with one another. Thus, there are elements of the Pope's own thought which challenge his moralistic and individualistic account of sin. His allusions to a Thomistic understanding of the consequences of original sin on human nature question the premise upon which a moralistic account of sin stands, namely, that one is a free and fully self-determined individual. Instead, it seems that one's freedom is conditioned by sin prior to any personal action or decision of will. Having said that, the Pope does avoid fully dedicating himself to a reading of original sin as radically conditioning human freedom when he states that humanity *almost* inevitably acts in such a way that one's relations are disordered. The inclusion of the qualifying term 'almost' enables him to avoid a deterministic account of original sin and human agency. Ultimately, however, it seems that, for the Pope, original sin is regarded as an inherited condition which leaves a person internally disordered in such a way that they are likely to commit further sins. These allusions to the traditional doctrine of original sin appear to expand the notion of sin beyond the definition which John Paul II argues is the proper construal of sin, that is, a self-determined immoral act which is freely committed. Perhaps one could reconcile these different strands of his thought by saying that original sin, like social sin, can only be regarded as sin analogically. The Catechism of the Catholic Church takes this route; it argues that original sin is called sin "only in an analogical sense" because it is a sin "contracted" rather than "committed", a "state" rather than an "act."[162] This is not, however, a move which John Paul II explicitly makes within the exhortation: He repeatedly refers to original sin as sin with no qualifications. This suggests that there may be inconsistencies within his thought concerning the idea of sin. We shall explore the Catholic notion of original sin further in chapter three. For now, however, it is important to note that there are

[161] Ibid.
[162] CCC, §404.

various undercurrents within the Pope's thought which suggest that an alternative understanding of sin is possible, despite John Paul II presenting a predominately moralistic account of sin in the exhortation.

For the Pope, original sin is a reality which all people inherit from birth. It is a condition which leaves a person internally disordered in such a way that they are likely to commit further sins. Nevertheless, in the context of speaking about social sin, the Pope writes that any internal "tendencies, defects and habits linked with [one's] personal condition"[163] — and which influence one to sin — "attenuate, to a greater or lesser degree, the person's freedom and therefore [their] responsibility and guilt."[164] Although John Paul II does not clarify what internal defects he is speaking of, presumably one can include within this the internal disorder humans inherit as a consequence of original sin. Thus, it is possible to interpret the Pope as arguing that the internal defect one inherits due to original sin attenuates one's freedom, and hence also one's responsibility and guilt for any immoral act one commits as a consequence. The logical corollary here is that sin itself is seen to help create the conditions for one's responsibility for sin to be lessened, if not eliminated.[165] The Pope's equation of moral culpability with guilt for sin could, therefore, undermine his central concern to maintain a sense of personal responsibility for sin. Similarly, John Paul II also argues that personal acts of sin have a devastating effect on the individual who commits them: they weaken one's will and cloud one's intellect.[166] Thus, it is possible to regard this weakening of will and clouding of intellect as being included among the internal tendencies, defects, and habits which limit a person's freedom. Hence, one can be found less culpable for any immoral act one commits as a consequence. Again, therefore, it would seem that sin helps to create the conditions in which one's culpability for it is lessened.

1.3 The Pope's Reasoning

So, why does the Pope present a moralistic account of sin in the context of speaking about social sin even though he acknowledges a wider understanding of sin elsewhere in his writings? His motivation can perhaps be discerned through his opposition to

[163] RP, §16.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Weaver uses a similar argument to critique Charles Curran's account of sin. See Weaver, p. 54.
[166] RP, §16.

what he views as an erroneous idea of social sin.[167] Although John Paul II does not identify where this erroneous interpretation originates from, his referencing of the CDF's 1984 document suggests that he regards his circumscription of the term 'social sin' to be a response to the theologies of sin in Latin American liberation theology. He contends:

> This usage contrasts social sin and personal sin, not without ambiguity, in a way that leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin, with the recognition only of social guilt and responsibilities. According to this usage, […] practically every sin is a social sin, in the sense that blame for it is to be placed not so much on the moral conscience of an individual, but rather on some vague entity or anonymous collectivity such as the situation, the system, society, structures or institutions.[168]

The Pope's circumscription of social sin to being purely the result of personal sin enables him to reject any deterministic accounts of social conditioning.[169] His emphasis stems from a concern that to say otherwise would lead people to deny accountability and culpability for their sins, as well as their roles in the sustenance of unjust situations.[170] This concern is again emphasized by the Pope in the context of discussing the reasons for the disappearance of a sense of sin within society. He writes that "a certain cultural anthropology so emphasizes the undeniable environmental and historical conditioning and influences which act upon man, that it reduces his responsibility to the point of not acknowledging his ability to perform truly human acts and therefore his ability to sin."[171] Indeed, he accredits a widespread loss of the sense of sin within society to a tendency to "see errors and faults only in the context of society."[172] Presumably, this is because accountability and responsibility for sin are equated with a modern notion of moral culpability. Thus, if one's choices and actions were found to be socially conditioned, then one would be less culpable due to one's lack of freedom of choice. One's sense of responsibility for sin, therefore, would also

[167] RP, §16.
[168] Ibid.
[169] RP, §18.
[170] Hinze, p. 445.
[171] RP, §18.
[172] Ibid.

be lessened.[173] What the Pope does not seem to realise, however, is that this concern is reliant upon an equation of responsibility for sin with a modern notion of moral culpability; this is an equation which may not be in harmony with traditional Catholic thought on the topic. Thus, in John Paul II's account of sin, his concern seems to be on safeguarding individual responsibility for sin by emphasising the freedom of the human person to choose not to sin. Safeguarding a sense of responsibility for sin seems to be of the utmost importance to the Pope. He explicitly writes that his understanding of social sin is meant to be "an appeal to the consciences of all, so that each may shoulder his or her responsibility seriously and courageously in order to change those disastrous conditions and intolerable situations."[174] His emphasis on freedom and the primacy of personal sin allows him to safeguard the capacity of the human person to

[173] This assumption can be traced back to the earlier philosophical work of Karol Wojtyla. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully examine the notion of responsibility in Wojtyla's early philosophical writings. As Sr. Mary Angela Woelkers notes, however, examining the notion of responsibility within the thought of Wojtyla "illumines and enriches the understanding of the magisterium of Pope John Paul II." (See Sr. Mary Angela Woelkers, 'Freedom for Responsibility: Responsibility and Human Nature in the Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla', *Studia Gilsoniana*, 5:4 (2016), 633–647, <https://doaj.org/article/9cd7bec1039b4b64a78924c380710c4f> [accessed 24 July 2022], (p. 634).) Wojtyla argues that responsibility is intertwined with self-determination and efficacy. Humans only feel responsible to the extent that they feel they are the self-conscious cause of an act. See, for example, *The Acting Person* where Wojtyla argues that "[t]here is between person and action a sensibly experiential, causal relation, which brings the person, that is to say, every concrete human ego, to recognize his action to be the result of his efficacy; in this sense he must accept his actions as his own property and also, primarily because of their moral nature, as the domain of his responsibility" (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 67). Similarly, in 'The Person: Subject and Community' Wojtyla writes that "[b]etween the concrete human act and the particular self there exists a close causal and efficient connection. On the strength of this connection the act cannot be detached from the given self and ascribed to another as its author. [...] We attribute the act, and hence conscious action, to this self as its conscious author. In such agency there appears the factor of will, and therefore of liberty, and hence that of moral responsibility." (Karol Wojtyla, 'The Person: Subject and Community', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 33.2 (1979), 273-308, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20127345> [accessed 2 March 2020], (p. 280).) Indeed, in *The Acting Person* Wojtyla asserts that there are situations where the human person loses their "ability to act consciously" and hence, in these circumstances, one's actions do not result from one's conscious efficacy. In these cases, he argues, one cannot be found responsible. Thus, one's will needs to be operative within one's activity in order to be found responsible for it; one needs to act consciously, intentionally, and deliberately. (See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 246.) He further argues that "any judgement about moral values, about any merits or demerits attributed to man, have to begin by determining *efficacy, self-determination*, and *responsibility*; in other words, we have first to establish whether this particular man-person *did* or *did not* perform the action." Thus, we can see that, in the thought of Wojtyla prior to becoming Pope John Paul II, in order to determine whether a person is responsible for a certain act, one needs to discern whether that person was the efficient cause of said act, whether they acted intentionally, deliberately, and consciously, and thus also whether their act was self-determined. (See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 267.) Hence, we can see why John Paul II would think that one's sense of responsibility for sin would be lessened if one's choices and actions were found to be socially conditioned, as one's sense of efficacy in relation to one's activity would be lessened and one's acts would not be fully self-determined. As Wojtyla concludes, "freedom is expressed by efficacy and efficacy leads to responsibility." (See Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, p. 180.)

[174] RP, §16.

freely choose between good and evil — although he does not use such terminology — and thereby also maintain a sense of individual responsibility for sin.

Hence, the Pope's construal of social sin stems from a motivation to safeguard freedom and reject any form of determinism that would challenge the belief that individuals can freely discern between good and evil. We can see from John Paul II's wider thought that he regards this capacity as an aspect of human dignity, and a manifestation of the *imago Dei*. He asserts:

> The biblical author sees as part of this image […] those spiritual faculties which are distinctively human, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will […] The ability to attain truth and freedom are human prerogatives inasmuch as man is created in the image of his Creator.[175]

Freedom and accountability for sin are regarded as manifestations of the *imago Dei*.[176] Perhaps, then, it is for this reason that John Paul II insists upon the centrality of personal agency in his definition of social sin: In his view, the idea of social sin risks emphasising the social conditioning of human actions to such an extent that it negates personal responsibility for sin and hence would "deny the person's dignity."[177] Similarly, in *Veritatis splendor* he draws on the writings of the Second Vatican Council to argue that:

> Human dignity requires man to act through conscious and free choice, as motivated and prompted personally from within, and not through blind internal impulse or merely external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when he frees himself from all subservience to his feelings, and in a free choice of the good, pursues his own end by effectively and assiduously marshalling the appropriate means.[178]

His emphasis on the inalienability of freedom is not derived merely from the assumptions characteristic of modernity.[179] There seems to be a deeper theological anxiety regarding the belief that humans can freely enact the good and resist sin, and

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[175] EV, §34. See also CA, §38 and RP, §18.
[176] RP, §16.
[177] Ibid.
[178] VS, §42.
[179] This is contrary to what McFadyen seems to indicate. See McFadyen, pp. 109-108. McFadyen is talking more generally about social reinterpretations of sin rather than John Paul II explicitly, however his footnoting of the Pope's encyclicals suggests that he includes his thought within this analysis.

the teaching that this capacity is a manifestation of our dignity as created in God's image. The Pope's emphasis on human dignity being rooted in one's ability to enact the good and resist sin specifically through one's conscious efficacy, however, suggests that his interpretation of this traditional belief is shaped by modern instincts.[180]

Moreover, John Paul II uses this anthropology to critique what he views as Socialism's erroneous understanding of the human person. He argues that Socialism denies the dignity of the human person:

> Socialism […] maintains that the good of the individual can be realized without reference to his free choice, to the unique and exclusive responsibility which he exercises in the face of good or evil. […] The concept of the person as the autonomous subject of moral decision disappears, the very subject whose decisions build the social order.[181]

Thus, this theological anthropology of persons as free, responsible, and autonomous moral agents is a central aspect of the Pope's theological corpus. As Catta notes, John Paul II lived under an oppressive communist regime in Poland and, during his papacy, helped to establish democracy within the country.[182] Thus, the Pope's personal history will have coloured his sense of the importance of this theological anthropology due to his reliance on it to condemn Socialism's errors. This, in turn, will also have coloured his perception of the theological ideas coming out of Latin America — ideas such as social sin — which had the potential to challenge this anthropology. Moreover, this theological anthropology of persons as autonomous moral agents who are the sole cause of their own acts is a central aspect of John Paul II's moral teachings. In *Veritatis splendor* he writes that "the moral life calls for that creativity and originality typical of the person, the source and cause of his own deliberate acts." He further asserts that "[a]t the heart of the moral life we […] find the principle of a 'rightful autonomy' of man, the personal subject of his actions."[183] Perhaps, therefore, John Paul II presents

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[180] Indeed, there is still work to be done on discerning whether John Paul II's particular understanding of the *imago Dei,* and therefore human dignity, is traditional or whether his understanding of it is shaped by modern instincts.
[181] CA, §13.
[182] Catta, p. 51.
[183] VS, §40.

a moralistic account of sin to safeguard this theological anthropology of persons as free, responsible, and autonomous moral agents.

Another motive for the Pope's insistence on the centrality of personal agency and accountability for sin can be found within *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* itself. His motivation for writing the exhortation was to renew in the faithful a dedication to the practices of sacramental reconciliation, particularly individual confession.[184] As Pfeil suggests:

> It is against this background, then, that his interpretation and usage of the language of social sin […] may be understood. His emphasis on the first form of sacramental reconciliation coincides with his insistence on the centrality of personal agency in sin.[185]

Perhaps John Paul II regards the idea of social sin as risking emphasising the social conditioning of human agency to such an extent that it undermines the importance of participation in the sacrament of reconciliation. The fear seems to be that one would be exonerated from any sense of responsibility for one's actions if one's agency was found to be socially conditioned. Hence, one would not feel the need to attend confession and be absolved of any wrongdoing. This fear, however, is again reliant on equating a sense of personal responsibility and guilt for sin with a modern notion of moral culpability.

It is not merely the Pope's personal belief in the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation, however, which provides an impetus for him to present a moralistic account of sin. The history of the practice of confession has had a seminal influence on shaping the Catholic imagination regarding sin. To truly account for John Paul II's turn to a moralistic and individualistic account of sin, therefore, one needs to understand the influence which the practice of private, auricular confession has had on the popular Catholic imagination. Whilst a detailed outline of the historical development of this practice within Catholic thought is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is pertinent at this point to briefly sketch out some of this history in order to situate John Paul II's moralistic account of sin within its intellectual and historical context.

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[184] RP, §31. See also Pfeil, p. 136.
[185] Pfeil, p. 136.

In his exploration of the history of Catholic moral theology, James Keenan notes the impact which the practice of private confession has had on Catholic thought from its introduction in the sixth century. A significant moment for the development of this practice was in the thirteenth century, when Pope Innocent III declared at the fourth Lateran Council that all Catholics had to be in a 'state of grace' to receive communion at Easter. From that point on Catholics had an obligation, known as the Easter duty, to confess their sins in private confession at least once a year, whereas prior to this announcement only priests and religious had been required to do so. Keenan notes that, as a result of this obligation, moral manuals and a *Summa Confessorum* were produced to teach lay people how to confess and inform priests on how to hear confession for "a larger and more diverse group of sinners."[186] These manuals distinguished between what does and does not constitute a sin which requires confession. They also set out the penance for different sins based upon their various degrees of seriousness. John Mahoney argues that this practice of classifying and cataloguing the various sins one could perform led to sin becoming "almost domesticated and trivialized."[187] Sin became known as something one could define, manage, and therefore, control. Ultimately, the penitent could come to know and understand how sin works. As Thomas Tentler similarly argues:

> The examination of conscience, interrogations, general confession, forms of etiquette, and the like, were all designed to get at sin. In different ways they encouraged the penitent to think about his sins, identify them, classify them, and tell them. By these means sacramental confession inculcated an attitude toward sin and the self […] [T]he fundamental assumption is that the average Christian can know and weigh his sins, because the church teaches the essentials of morality and because rational man — free and responsible — can apply this teaching to his life.[188]

The influence of this practice is still being felt. As Mahoney writes: "There is much to be said for the view that the Catholic Church has never quite shaken off, or

[186] James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 2.
[187] John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 32.
[188] Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 134.

recovered from, the penitential movement of the sixth to the sixteenth centuries."[189] He argues that the importance placed upon the practice of confession within the Catholic Church has historically led to "a preoccupation with sin[s]" within the Catholic tradition, alongside "a concentration on the individual; and an obsession with law."[190] Mahoney further concludes that:

> This stress on the individual, with a view to his confession, is one reason why the Church's moral tradition has found it difficult to handle the idea of collective responsibility on a large scale […] It is an approach to 'social justice' in which the influence of confession has led to a concentration on individuals and a reluctance to 'exonerate' them by recognizing a more social meaning to sin and an element of sinfulness in institutions, or, indeed, in social circumstances.[191]

It is likely that this practice has had significant influence in making the Catholic tradition more open to the philosophical assumptions characteristic of modernity; this practice has guided Catholic thinkers towards a moralistic and individualistic understanding of sin.[192]

1.4 The Pope's Underlying Theology: How Can the Human Person Resist Sin?

Within the thought of John Paul II, the human person is regarded as having the capacity to resist sin and any exterior forces compelling one to sin. He repeatedly emphasises that the human person is free and hence remains culpable for their actions. What is his theological basis for these claims? The Pope's idea that humans have a capacity to resist sin rests, first, on his theological anthropology of persons as possessing a conscience, and second, on his Christology. Exploring these ideas will help us to further discern the theological underpinning for John Paul II's account of sin, particularly his account of how sin impacts human living and acting in the world.

[189] Mahoney, p. 7.
[190] Ibid., p. 27.
[191] Ibid., p.34.
[192] Perhaps it is because McFadyen is conducting his analysis from a protestant theological background that the significance of the sacrament of confession on specifically Catholic moralistic theologies of sin is absent from his analysis.

For the Pope, every human person possesses a conscience as every person possesses the intellectual capacity to discern the universal truth about the good.[193] The human person is able to reason; through this capacity one is therefore able to discern the "universal knowledge of the good" and apply it to particular situations.[194] Once one applies this knowledge of the universal truth to any given situation, one is able discern what one should, and should not, do.[195] Conscience, therefore, is primarily an act of a person's intelligence and reason. One is able to discern good from evil through this exercise of reason.[196] Underlying this belief is an optimistic understanding of the human capacity to reason and a belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature, as well as a Thomistic assumption that faith perfects and elevates nature and reason, rather than destroying it.[197] Moreover, as we saw previously, the capacity to reason and discern between good and evil is regarded by the Pope to be a manifestation of the *imago Dei* within humanity.[198]

The language that John Paul II uses in connection with conscience is also reminiscent of the natural law tradition. In *Veritatis splendor,* the Pope, quoting from Aquinas, asserts that the natural law is that law which is "inscribed" in the human heart, and which is "the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided." He further explains that "God gave this light and this law to man at creation."[199] Thus, John Paul II is drawing upon the natural law tradition in his discussions on conscience and the human capacity to discern good from evil.[200] In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* he refers to the act of examining one's conscience as an examination of "the interior moral law" and "the ethical norm written in [one's] inmost being."[201] He elsewhere refers to the moral

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193 VS, §32.
194 Ibid.
195 See VS, §54.
196 See VS, §44.
197 There are also basic assumptions made here regarding the existence of universal truths, as well as the human capacity to apprehend these truths through reason.
198 EV, §34. See also CA, §38; RP, §18.
199 VS, §12.
200 There is disagreement amongst scholars on how to properly interpret the natural law tradition, particularly regarding the understanding as propagated by Thomas Aquinas. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, to fully explore these differences of interpretation and compare them to John Paul II's particular use of natural law. What is clear, however, is that, for the Pope, the natural law reveals what is good and what is not; it is the universal moral law which all humans can access. Moreover, through one's conscience, one can apply this knowledge to historical cases to rationally discern what to do in particular situations. This access to the natural law through one's intellect, and its application through one's conscience, enables one to choose the good and avoid sin.
201 RP, §18.

norm as being inscribed by God into the hearts of all humanity; a moral norm which is confirmed and perfected through revelation.[202] In *Veritatis splendor* this relation between natural law and the operations of conscience is further clarified:

> [W]hereas the natural law discloses the objective and universal demands of the moral good, conscience is the application of the law to a particular case; this application of the law thus becomes an inner dictate for the individual, a summons to do what is good in this particular situation. Conscience thus formulates moral obligation in the light of the natural law: it is the obligation to do what the individual, through the workings of his conscience, knows to be a good he is called to do here and now.[203]

He writes, therefore, that one's conscience is the "sacred place where God speaks to man."[204] It is through the operations of conscience that we can come to know God's will and God's law for humanity.

In *Evangelium vitae* John Paul II argues that social conditioning can never fully obscure one's conscience: "All the conditioning and efforts to enforce silence fail to stifle the voice of the Lord echoing in the conscience of every individual."[205] Conscience thus seems to consist of something more than merely an act of intelligence. Moreover, in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* he describes the moral conscience as a "sort of moral sense which leads us to discern what is good and what is evil...like an inner eye, a visual capacity of the spirit, able to guide our steps along the path of good."[206] It seems, therefore, that one is able to instinctively discern between good and evil through one's conscience: "Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: 'do this, shun that'. For man has in his heart a law written by God."[207]

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[202] RP, §14.
[203] VS, §59.
[204] VS, §58.
[205] EV, §24. This statement seems to create a tension with his earlier acknowledgement that culture can impact the operations of conscience, as well as his acknowledgement in VS that one's conscience can err. See VS, §62-63. The language used here is also similar to the language used in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* which depicts the natural law as being immutable: "it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies." See, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §141.
[206] RP, §26.
[207] VS, §54.

In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* the Pope explicitly links the operation of conscience to one's capacity to recognise sin. He writes:

> [The] sense [of sin] is rooted in man's moral conscience and is as it were its thermometer. It is linked to the sense of God, since it derives from man's conscious relationship with God as his Creator, Lord and Father. Hence, just as it is impossible to eradicate completely the sense of God or to silence the conscience completely, so the sense of sin is never completely eliminated.[208]

Consequently, our ability to recognise sin lies in our conscience: If we are sincerely open to truth and reason, we can become aware of the universal moral law, and hence repent. John Paul II concludes that one's conscience is therefore intimately related to one's freedom.[209] Quoting from the Second Vatican Council, he asserts that "the most secret core and sanctuary of a man," namely one's conscience, is "strictly related to human freedom.... For this reason conscience, to a great extent, constitutes the basis of man's interior dignity and, at the same time, of his relationship to God."[210] The assumption here is that one remains free to avoid sinning because one is *always* able to recognise sin through one's conscience. Despite his assertion that culture can deform or numb conscience, here the Pope argues that one's conscience can never be fully silenced. Perhaps one can reconcile these thoughts by arguing that one's sense of sin may be affected by one's culture, in the sense that it becomes more or less effective or clear, but that it can never be fully destroyed; hence, at some level, one is always able to recognise sin through one's conscience.

Underlying his ideas regarding the inviolability of conscience, the Pope continues to pursue an account of sin which affirms that there are personal dynamics within us which can resist any social forces compelling one to sin. For John Paul II, this ability to transcend determining conditions rests in our conscience, and hence in our intellectual capacity to discern the universal truth about the good, which he seems to indicate is available to us independent of our social or historical situatedness. We always retain the capacity to know and recognise sin independent of any social

[208] RP, §18.
[209] The relation between freedom and conscience is made even more explicit within the philosophical writings of Wojtyla prior to becoming Pope. Indeed, he argues that "freedom is expressed by efficacy and efficacy leads to responsibility, which in turn reveals the dependence of freedom on truth; but this relation of freedom to truth constitutes the real significance of the conscience as the decisive factor for the transcendence of the person in his actions." (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, p. 180.)
[210] RP, §18.

conditioning factors. There is, therefore, an aspect of the self which is independent and transcendent of one's social and historical situatedness.[211] This is why the Pope can suggest that we "allow" ourselves to be influenced by social climates, as cultural assimilation remains within the realm of free choice.[212] His vision of the human person is of a moral agent who retains the freedom, knowledge, and obligation to choose not to sin.[213]

Perhaps it is for this reason that John Paul II can claim that each individual has "moral responsibility for the acts which he personally performs." Indeed, he asserts that "no one can be exempted from this responsibility."[214] This statement, however, seems to create tension with his earlier assertion that cultural conditioning may mitigate responsibility. Perhaps one could reconcile these seemingly divergent thoughts by regarding all people as maintaining, at some level, responsibility for one's acts. This responsibility, however, can be diminished depending on the extent to which one has been influenced by various social factors. Nevertheless, even this diminished responsibility is still responsibility. Thus, because one always remains free to refrain from sinning regardless of one's social climate, one always continues, at some level, to be responsible for one's acts. John Paul II, however, does not explicitly explain the relationship between these seemingly divergent thoughts himself.

McFadyen, however, critiques notions of the human capacity to avoid sin which revert to "the permanent inviolability of personal freedom, whatever the social distortions one is subject to."[215] He critiques the idea that there is a "transcendental personal core" of a person's agency which is "not corruptible by external contingencies in the situation,"[216] and that this sphere of personal being is the source of one's ability to make deliberate choices not to fall prone to systemic situational pathologies.[217] He convincingly argues that such an emphasis fails to account for the ways in which many systemic situational pathologies, such as abuse and the Holocaust, shape identities and their dynamics of life-intentionality, including their

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[211] See also VS, §53 where John Paul II explicitly writes that "that there is something in man" which "transcends" culture, namely one's human nature.
[212] EV, §21. Perhaps one can also infer from this that a person's conscience is only obscured or numbed when they allow it to be so affected by their social environment.
[213] EV, §28.
[214] EV, §74.
[215] McFadyen, p. 37.
[216] Ibid.
[217] McFadyen, p. 143 footnote 26.

willing, desiring, and capacity to discern the good.[218] Such theologies of sin therefore fail to provide explanatory and descriptive power in relation to these pathologies.[219]

For John Paul II, however, it is not merely one's conscience which safeguards one's freedom. To understand why humans are free to resist sin and any societal forces influencing one to sin, we need to understand the Christology which underlies the Pope's thought. For John Paul II, Christians are already caught up within the economy of salvation: The effects of Christ's victory over sin are already being made present among them. Christians possess "a power which preserves [them] from falling into sin."[220] This power, however, does not originate from anything Christians themselves do:

> The Christian has received the guarantee and the necessary strength not to sin. It is not a question therefore of a sinlessness acquired through one's own virtue or even inherent in man, as the Gnostics thought. It is a result of God's action.[221]

This divine action has a specifically Christological emphasis. Despite the Pope's affirmation of the goodness of human nature and reason, it is the presence of Christ within Christians which enables them to attain freedom from sin: "the Christian has within himself the presence of Christ and the mystery of Christ, which is the mystery of God's loving kindness."[222] The Christian, therefore, is a locus of Jesus' salvific grace. As Catta aptly writes, for the Pope, "humanity, marked by sin and limitation, needs God's revelation."[223] Hence, this is why John Paul II writes in *Redemptor hominis* that Jesus' entry into history as a human person in the incarnation was an "act of redemption [which] marked the high point of the history of man within God's loving plan."[224] In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, however, the Pope focuses more on Christ's continuous presence in the world today effecting salvation.[225]

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[218] Ibid., pp. 126-130.
[219] Ibid.
[220] RP, §17.
[221] RP, §20.
[222] RP, §20. See also RP, §23.
[223] Catta, p. 57.
[224] Pope John Paul II, '*Redemptor hominis'* (March 4, 1979), available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html> [accessed 24 September 2020], §1.
[225] Catta, p. 72.

While Christians possess the grace and strength necessary to resist sin, they must nonetheless actively and consciously draw from this power to refrain from sinning:

> [O]ne must say that "no one born of God commits sin"; but the expression has an imperative sense: Sustained by the mystery of Christ as by an interior source of spiritual energy, the Christian, being a child of God, is warned not to sin and indeed receives the commandment not to sin but to live in a manner worthy of "the house of God, that is, the church of the living God."[226]

The Pope reemphasises this point when he writes that no-one, not even Christians, are completely without sin. He contends:

> Deceived by the loss of the sense of sin and at times tempted by an illusion of sinlessness which is not at all Christian, the people of today too need to listen again to St. John's admonition, as addressed to each one of them personally: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," and indeed, "the whole world is in the power of the evil one."[227]

Sin has wounded the human person to such an extent that they are continuously tempted to sin. John Paul II characterises this temptation to sin as a "dark area" within Christians where an "infectious source of sin" operates and weakens one's "spiritual faculties." This source must therefore "always be fought with mortification and penance."[228] It seems that, for John Paul II, although humans *can* refrain from sinning theoretically, nevertheless none are able to fully do so in this lifetime.

Thus, there are two strands within the Pope's thought concerning the human ability to abstain from sin. His vision of the human capacity to avoid sin is founded upon his theological anthropology of human persons as, first, possessing a conscience, and second, redeemed by Christ. Hence, even if resisting sin remains a challenge, nonetheless, for John Paul II, it is possible for humans not to sin. Indeed, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* he concludes that:

> The Church has confidence also in man, though she knows the evil of which he is capable. For she well knows that — in spite of the heritage of sin, and the

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[226] RP, §20.
[227] RP, §22.
[228] RP, §31.

> sin which each one is capable of committing — there exist in the human person sufficient qualities and energies, a fundamental "goodness" (cf. Gen 1:31), because he is the image of the Creator, placed under the redemptive influence of Christ, who "united himself in some fashion with every man," and because the efficacious action of the Holy Spirit "fills the earth" (Wis 1:7).[229]

It is unclear, however, whether John Paul II's conclusion that it is only through Christ's salvific presence that one can attain the necessary strength not to sin creates tension with his affirmation that one's freedom is rooted in one's ability to recognise sin through one's conscience. Perhaps one solution to this tension would be to say that it is through one's conscience that one *recognises* sin, but only through Christ's salvific grace that one is able to *resist* sinning. This, though, would seem to undermine the Pope's conclusion that one's conscience safeguards freedom. If one were unable to resist sin even when recognising it, one could not be regarded as fully free. Alternatively, if one emphasised the goodness of human nature to such an extent that one could both recognise and resist sin due to one's conscience, then this could be regarded as semi-Pelagian. To avoid this semi-Pelagianism, therefore, Christ's salvific grace would have to be operative within one's conscience. One could interpret the Pope's thought in this way, particularly when he writes that it is the "voice of the Lord" which echoes in the conscience of every individual.[230] He similarly asserts that Christ has united himself with every human person.[231] Hence, one's capacity to resist sin and any social forces compelling one to sin would ultimately depend upon the salvific grace of Christ operating within one's conscience. Human freedom would therefore be dependent upon Jesus' redemptive presence in the world. John Paul II, however, does not present this underlying theology comprehensively and systematically. Thus, it remains unclear how these beliefs relate to one another. Ultimately, for the Pope, sin's existence in the world is not able to fully determine human living and acting. He bases this belief on the Church's teachings concerning the redemptive influence of Christ and the fundamental goodness of human nature. Humans, however, will always feel the influence of sin and will, therefore, always remain tempted by it. Nevertheless, one's life will not be determined by sin, unless one freely chooses to sin.

[229] SRS, §47.
[230] EV, §24.
[231] SRS, §47.

1.5 Concluding Thoughts

As we have seen, John Paul II presents a predominately individualistic and moralistic account of social sin. The Pope's restriction of sin to a self-determined and immoral act which is freely and willingly committed seems to create inconsistencies within his thought. Indeed, there are undercurrents within his writings which suggest that an alternative theological understanding of sin is possible, particularly when he alludes to the traditional belief in original sin. His references indicate that a strictly moralistic account of sin may not be in harmony with traditional Catholic thought on the topic. His equation of responsibility for sin with a modern notion of moral culpability risks undermining the belief in the non-personal inheritance of sin and guilt within the doctrine of original sin. Thus, his account does not seem to satisfactorily explain why, from a Catholic *theological* perspective, unjust and disordered social structures, situations, or cultures cannot properly be called sin.

The Pope's writing brings into sharp focus that one cannot merely name social structures, situations, or cultures sin without first analysing what sin is within a Catholic theological framework. If sin can only be regarded as a morally wrong act which an individual freely and willingly commits, then John Paul II is right to constrain the use of the term 'social sin' in the way he does. If, however, the language of sin is not limited in this way within the Catholic tradition, then he has no theological basis for his restrictions. Thus, a critical question emerges: What is sin, and why can social structures, situations, or cultures be called sin within a Catholic theological framework? The Pope's allusions to the doctrine of original sin provide us with a helpful starting point for further reflection on this topic. We shall, therefore, explore the theological account of original sin further in chapter three.

Furthermore, John Paul II does not present a satisfactory account of how sin impacts human living and acting in the world. As we have seen, the Pope's definition of social sin rests upon a distinction between the freely willed act of an individual and the social condition within which that act takes place. His emphasis on the inherent freedom of the human person suggests that, to some extent, one always retains the self-determination, efficacy, and freedom of choice necessary to be able to refrain from sinning and act independent of any social conditioning factors. Hence, one can always be found morally culpable for any act one commits. So-called "structures of

sin" or "social sins" merely shape the external environment within which the human person exercises their freedom. They present opportunities for the individual to consciously misuse their freedom. It is only in this way that the human person can be thought of as being acted upon and influenced by sinful structures or cultures. It seems that, for the Pope, 'social sin' or 'structures of sin' have no power to shape one's interiority, subjectivity, or actions unless one freely allows these sinful situations to do so. Using the language of Weaver, therefore, we can say that social sin seems to operate around and on, but not in the human person. There remains a fundamental separation between the person and the social situation they are part of, that is, between the interior and the exterior. By maintaining the belief in human freedom to such a degree, John Paul II limits how much structures of sin can impact human agency. This limitation does not do justice to the complex ways social environments effect our lives. Moreover, this belief creates tensions with the traditional understanding of original sin; a doctrine which John Paul II himself draws upon at several points in his writing, thus seeming to create an internal inconsistency within his thought. Indeed, although we need to explore the doctrine of original sin further in chapter three, the teaching does seem to suggest that one's agency and freedom is always already conditioned by sin prior to any personal act of will. This belief seems to challenge the very premise upon which his moralistic account of sin stands, namely, that one is a free and fully self-determined individual. Further, the Pope's account of how humans can freely refrain from sinning is unclear and risks being regarded as semi-Pelagian, despite his affirmation of the need for grace. Thus, further discernment on *how* humans can resist sin is needed.

It is John Paul II's sharp distinction between the personal and the social which inhibits him from moving beyond an analogous and derivative formulation of social sin. What is missing from his account is a more nuanced understanding of agency and freedom as socially conditioned. Kristin Heyer has also raised this concern: "[The] circumscription of the category [of social sin] to underscore individual responsibility […] constrains its value for uncovering the subtle social dynamics that impact personal agency."[232] In his commentary on *Sollicitudo rei socialis* Baum similarly argues that the Pope's understanding of the relation between structural realities and personal agency is not as sensitive to the "unconscious, nonvoluntary dimension of social sin

[232] Heyer, 'Social Sin and Immigration', p. 419.

— to the blindness produced in persons by the dominant culture, blindness that prevents them from recognizing the evil dimension of their social reality."[233] Baum critiques John Paul II's account of sin for failing to answer whether people who unconsciously participate in sinful situations are guilty of sin. Using the Pope's framework, Baum himself affirms that "as long as there is ignorance or nonrecognition […] there is no critical freedom and hence no personal sin."[234] What Baum does not seem to note, however, is how the Pope's conception of sin remains tied to a moralistic framework whereby one can only be found guilty of sin when one retains the critical freedom and awareness necessary for culpability in a moralistic framework. It is unclear, though, *why* critical freedom and awareness is necessary for the attribution of sin and guilt. What are the resources within the pre-existing tradition which support this viewpoint? Baum's recognition that people are unconsciously and involuntarily involved in sinful situations presents an important development of John Paul II's account. Nevertheless, his attempt to resolve how we can apportion culpability remains limited by his correlation of guilt to conscious intentionality. Going beyond these critiques, I would argue that what is needed is not just a recognition of the impact of external social forces on agency: what is needed is an account of the human self as socially and historically formed. Although the Pope affirms that the person's "innermost self", namely one's "conscience", can be "attacked, put to the test, confused and obscured" by culture, he does not write about the role of culture in the constitution of the human self.[235] There is a lack of reflection on the role that culture or other humans play in the constitution of this very conscience and capacity to reason, which for him seems to pre-exist any social influence.[236] There is also, therefore, a lack of reflection on the impact culture has on the formation of one's personal subjectivity, including one's worldview, will, affect, desire, and agency. Hence, in chapter four I shall seek to show one way we can constructively develop Catholic thinking in this way by drawing upon resources outside of the Catholic tradition. These

[233] Baum, p. 113. Here Baum is comparing the Pope's account of social sin to the theology of sin within Latin American Liberation theology and the CELAM documents. As we shall see in the next chapter, central to liberation theology's account of sin is an understanding that ideologies blind people to such an extent that they are coerced into sinful behaviours without being aware of the sinfulness of their situation.
[234] Baum, pp. 113-114.
[235] RP, §25.
[236] Although the insistence throughout Catholic teaching on the need for formation of conscience suggests that this should be the logical corollary. See EV, §96.

resources will help us to develop a Catholic understanding of the "constitutive sociality" of our human selves.[237]

As we have seen, John Paul II has core concerns which are at the root of *why* he presents his account of social sin in the way he does: First, he aims to safeguard the belief that it is possible for humans to know and attain the good. Second, he is concerned to maintain a sense of individual accountability for sin. Third, he intends to uphold the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation. Thus, it is my contention that any constructive development of the idea of social sin which remains attentive to these concerns could be regarded as staying in faithful, but creative, continuity with the Pope's thought. Any Catholic account of social sin which wishes to do so will therefore need to avoid presenting a fatalistic account of the human situation. The strength of the Pope's position is that it does not foreclose the possibility that sinful situations can be transformed due to these situations being rooted in human agency and responsibility. The human person, therefore, must be open to transcendence and transformation. Similarly, a Catholic account of social sin will also need to safeguard a sense of responsibility for sin, as well as maintain the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation in order to stay in creative fidelity with the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

1.6 Becoming

There is a final aspect of John Paul II's theological anthropology, however, which we have not yet examined. This is, namely, his dynamic understanding of the human person as being in a process of becoming. This dynamic account of human living and acting in the world opens another pathway for further reflection on the sociality of human existence, goodness, and sin. Moreover, it can potentially be used to develop a more nuanced Catholic construal of freedom and its relation to sin, as well as a more dynamic and social understanding of human selfhood and the human condition. Hence, we shall now explore this dynamic account of the human person.[238]

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[237] The phrase "constitutive sociality of the self" comes from Butler. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 19.
[238] This will also be an important exercise for later in the thesis, when I shall refer back to this theological anthropology to justify my own constructive developments as being in faithful continuity with various aspects of the Pope's own thought.

John Paul II's emphasis on freedom being an inherent and core aspect of the human condition can sometimes give the impression that he regards the human condition as static and fixed. A static sense of freedom seems to underlie some of the restrictions he places on the idea of social sin: The human person is always free and hence, on the whole, any disordered or immoral act is freely and willingly committed. There are aspects of the Pope's thought, however, which present a more dynamic understanding of the human person. In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* John Paul II writes that "man was not created, so to speak, immobile and static."[239] He draws upon Genesis to reflect upon this dynamic understanding of the human condition, explaining that humanity's origin, that is, being created by God in God's image and likeness, gives humanity a special vocation which is to be accomplished in history. The history of humanity is therefore dynamic; it is the story of a continual becoming whereby humans become who they are and who they are called to be, that is, the image and likeness of the divine.[240] As Catta explicates, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* "being human is not a static condition but a process of becoming human oriented toward fulfilling a divine (or transcendent) vocation."[241] The Pope writes:

> The story of the human race described by Sacred Scripture is, even after the fall into sin, a story of constant achievements, which, although always called into question and threatened by sin, are nonetheless repeated, increased and extended in response to the divine vocation given from the beginning to man and to woman (cf. Gen 1:26-28) and inscribed in the image which they received.[242]

Significantly, however, this process of becoming is presented as being continually threatened by sin. Sin is therefore regarded as something which obstructs the human dynamism towards fulfilling their vocation. Human selfhood, therefore, is never static or fixed, but rather is in a constant process of becoming oriented either towards, or away from, fulfilling one's divine vocation. Indeed, in *Veritatis splendor* the Pope writes that it is through performing morally good acts that the human person "strengthens, develops and consolidates" within themselves their "likeness to God."[243]

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[239] SRS, §30.
[240] Catta, p. 59.
[241] Ibid.
[242] SRS, §30.
[243] VS, §39.

Therefore, one's likeness to God is not regarded as something merely static, but rather dynamic. It is something one develops and strengthens over time through the reflexive nature of human acts.[244]

Moreover, John Paul II links the task of integral human development to the process of fulfilling the human vocation to be in the image and likeness of God. He writes:

> It is logical to conclude, at least on the part of those who believe in the word of God, that today's "development" is to be seen as a moment in the story which began at creation, a story which is constantly endangered by reason of infidelity to the Creator's will, and especially by the temptation to idolatry. But this "development" fundamentally corresponds to the first premises. Anyone wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and of all people, with the excuse that the struggle is difficult and that constant effort is required, or simply because of the experience of defeat and the need to begin again, that person would be betraying the will of God the

[244] This emphasis, namely, that the human self constitutes, actualises, and develops itself through action, was present in the early philosophical writings of John Paul II before he became Pope. In fact, John Paul II goes into much greater detail on this idea in his personal writings than he does in his papal encyclicals. In *The Acting Person* Wojtyla spends a great deal of time exploring how the human being forms themself by their acting. (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 70). Moreover, he explicitly uses the language of 'becoming' in relation to this constitution of the human self through action. He writes that, "[i]t is man's actions, his conscious acting, that make of him what and who he actually is. This form of the human becoming thus presupposes the efficacy or causation proper to man." (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 98). Moreover, he further contends that it is specifically through one's moral actions that one determines oneself. He argues that one becomes either a good or bad person by performing either morally good or bad acts: "the person, the acting ego, also experiences the awareness that he is the one who is determined by himself and that his decisions make him become somebody, who may be good or bad." (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 113. See also, p. 98). It is through this type of moral becoming that the human person constitutes themselves as a person and thereby becomes more human (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 99). Although Wojtyla does not use the language of vocation or the *imago Dei* in connection with this becoming of the human person in his philosophical writings, he does use the language of fulfilment, writing that the human person 'fulfils' oneself through this process of becoming good. He argues, therefore, that "I do not fulfill myself because I accomplish an act, but only because I become good when the act is morally good." Thus, one fulfils oneself when one acts in accordance with what one's conscience discerns to be good. This also means, however, that when one performs an act which is contrary to what the conscience discerns to be good, one becomes what Wojtyla calls "an evil man." He further writes that "[c]ommitting such a deed does not bring self-fulfillment, but is rather a 'nonfulfillment' of self." (Wojtyla, 'The Person: Subject and Community', pp. 286-287.) Hence, this is why Wojtyla argues that one's conscience is "the necessary condition of man's fulfilment of himself in the action." (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 160). According to Wojtyla, this tendency to fulfil oneself also reveals the autoteleology of the human self, as well as the "ontological transitoriness or contingency of the individual real being: man is a contingent being." (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 154). This tendency towards fulfilment, therefore, shows that human selfhood is not complete. (Wojtyla, 'The Person: Subject and Community', p. 284) This dynamic understanding of the human person, therefore, has been a constant theme throughout the Pope's many writings.

> Creator. […] [We need to] commit ourselves more resolutely to the duty, which is urgent for everyone today, to work together for the full development of others: "development of the whole human being and of all people."[245]

The task of integral human development, and hence also the task of becoming more fully human and fulfilling one's vocation, cannot be accomplished individually; it is a task which can only be achieved socially through the efforts of everyone working together, including whole communities and societies. The Pope writes:

> The obligation to commit oneself to the development of peoples is not just an individual duty, and still less an individualistic one, as if it were possible to achieve this development through the isolated efforts of each individual. It is an imperative which obliges each and every man and woman, as well as societies and nations.[246]

This task is the obligation of all because of the fundamental interdependence of the human family.[247] Indeed, because of this interdependence, John Paul II argues that all people are "linked together by a common destiny." Thus, he concludes that "the good to which we are all called and the happiness to which we aspire cannot be obtained without an effort and commitment on the part of all, nobody excluded."[248]

There is, therefore, a fundamental sociality to the human achievement of the good in this lifetime. This achievement of the good is intimately bound up with the human vocation to be God's image and likeness. It is also, therefore, necessarily linked to the human task of becoming more fully human, that is, who we are and who God calls us to be. This is a fundamentally social and dynamic process which takes place within history. The human vocation cannot be achieved individually, and thus neither can the good be accomplished through the isolated efforts of one individual. Moreover, because integral human development is a necessary part of the process of fulfilling the human vocation, this means that there is an obligation for all people to participate in, and work to transform, the economic, structural, political, cultural, and spiritual spheres of human existence in such a way that the full development of the whole

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[245] SRS, §30.
[246] SRS, §32.
[247] SRS, §17 and §38.
[248] SRS, §26.

human being and of all people is achieved.[249] Hence, there are structural and political aspects to the fulfilment of one's vocation and the achievement of the good. This social vocation and dynamic process, however, is continually being obstructed and threatened by sin.

Following on from this dynamic understanding of the human person, in the final chapter of *Sollicitudo rei socialis* the Pope presents a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of freedom than that presented in the context of speaking about social sin.[250] As Catta argues, the Pope's use of the theological concept of liberation when discussing development "enriches the theological anthropology offered by the encyclical with a dynamic approach of human freedom as a process rather than a mere state."[251] In his conclusion to the social encyclical, John Paul II asserts that "[h]uman beings are totally free *only* when they are completely themselves, in the fullness of their rights and duties."[252] Thus, full freedom is presented as something which we do not merely possess as a given from birth; it is something which humans need to achieve. Moreover, for the Pope, a necessary part of this process of achieving total freedom is the attainment of full integral development, which includes, but it is not limited to, freedom from all slaveries in the economic, social, and cultural realms. He writes:

> Peoples and individuals aspire to be free: their search for full development signals their desire to overcome the many obstacles preventing them from enjoying a "more human life." […] It is fitting to add that the aspiration to freedom from all forms of slavery affecting the individual and society is something noble and legitimate. This in fact is the purpose of development, or

[249] SRS, §39.
[250] This is in contrast to John Paul II's philosophical writings from before he became Pope, where freedom is regarded as the root of human becoming. Thus, freedom in *The Acting Person* is regarded as more of a state than a process. Indeed, for Wojtyla, one can only fulfil oneself and 'become' good or bad through one's freely willed, conscious, and voluntary acts. Therefore, for Wojtyla, the ability to fulfil oneself and become more fully human relies upon the human person already possessing freedom, efficacy, and self-determination as core aspects of the human condition. He argues that freedom "constitutes the root factor of man's becoming good or bad by his actions […] It also takes place in efficacy and thus plays a decisive role in man's acting. By being interwoven with efficacy, freedom and efficacy together determine not only acting or action itself, which are performed by the personal ego, but their moral goodness or badness, that is to say, the becoming of man morally good or bad as man" (Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* p. 99).
[251] Catta, p. 65.
[252] SRS, §46. Emphasis mine.

> rather liberation and development, taking into account the intimate connection between the two.[253]

Furthermore, for John Paul II, genuine freedom is not the freedom to do whatever one wills free from external constraints.[254] Rather, it is a freedom *for* something; it is the freedom to be fully human, in the fullness of one's rights and duties. Hence, it is also the freedom to fulfil one's vocation to be fully in the image and likeness of the divine. In *Veritatis splendor* he writes that "the acceptance of God's plan is the only way to affirm [genuine] freedom."[255] The Pope asserts, therefore, that this freedom is also a freedom *for* the good, and more fundamentally a freedom *to* love, a love which is expressed in the exercise of solidarity:

> The freedom with which Christ has set us free (cf. Gal 5:1) encourages us to become the servants of all. Thus the process of development and liberation takes concrete shape in the exercise of solidarity, that is to say in the love and service of neighbor, especially of the poorest: "For where truth and love are missing, the process of liberation results in the death of a freedom which will have lost all support."[256]

Moreover, because the process of becoming truly free is intimately linked to integral human development, it is also necessarily intertwined with the task of becoming more fully human and fulfilling one's divinely appointed vocation. As Catta aptly concludes, for John Paul II:

> Freedom appears here as a continuous process oriented to an end […] It is the freedom to exercise solidarity, to be committed to the common good. […] It is also never an individualistic freedom, nor is it to be confused with pure autonomy, because it is oriented toward fulfilling the social nature of being human and is aware of the structural dimensions of the obstacles to it.[257]

Indeed, just as the process of becoming more fully human is continually threatened by sin, similarly the Pope writes that the fundamental obstacle to achieving full integral development and authentic liberation in this lifetime — and hence also true freedom,

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253 SRS, §46.
254 See VS, §34.
255 VS, §45.
256 SRS, §46.
257 Catta, pp. 66-67.

although he does not explicitly make this link — is "sin and the structures produced by sin as it multiplies and spreads."[258]

We can also see an underlying dynamic understanding of freedom in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*. As we saw earlier, the Pope regards the conscience to be the root of human freedom. He also argues, however, that one's conscience needs to be formed within the ecclesial community.[259] He asserts that one necessarily needs to form one's conscience, "lest it become a force which is destructive of the true humanity of the person, rather than that holy place where God reveals to him his true good."[260] John Paul II's emphasis on the need for catechesis and formation of conscience suggests that, not only does he regard full freedom as needing to be achieved over time, but also that it can only be achieved within the context of a virtuous social and ecclesial community. Relationality is thus essential for genuine freedom. Thus, we can interpret the Pope's thought in such a way that there is a fundamental sociality to the human achievement of the good in this lifetime.

Hence, a more nuanced theological understanding of freedom begins to emerge within John Paul II's thought. Here total freedom is regarded as something one needs to achieve in history as part of a dynamic social process, the end of which is the fulfilment of one's vocation to be God's image and likeness in the world. Moreover, structural sin, and sin in general, are regarded as the fundamental obstacles to total freedom in this lifetime. This dynamic understanding of freedom is not necessarily inconsistent with the Pope's assertion that the human person is always free. One could reconcile these thoughts by saying that, to some extent, the human person always remains free to resist sin and any cultural or social forces influencing one to sin, however one is not always free to attain full integral development due to our dependence on others for this. Thus, one can also have more or less freedom depending on whether one's social community and exterior circumstances impede or facilitate the fulfilment of the human vocation. Total freedom, therefore, is not an inherent and immutable aspect of the human condition. It can only be achieved by humans working together socially.

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[258] SRS, §46.
[259] RP, §26. This emphasis on the need for formation of conscience creates significant tension with his earlier assertions that humans always have a sense of sin due to the operations of conscience.
[260] RP, §26.

John Paul II's dynamic understanding of the human person presents us with new opportunities for further reflection. We can draw on this anthropology for a more nuanced Catholic construal of freedom and its relation to sin than that presented during his discussions on social sin. Moreover, it can potentially be used to construct a dynamic and social account of human selfhood. This theological anthropology, therefore, can help develop the idea of social sin. Indeed, it can be used to expand upon the Pope's thoughts on the relation between human solidarity and sin which he briefly explored in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*. His reflection is worth quoting in full:

> To speak of social sin means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the communion of saints, thanks to which it has been possible to say that "every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world." To this law of ascent there unfortunately corresponds the law of descent. Consequently one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family. According to this first meaning of the term, every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin.[261]

For the Pope, just as there is a fundamental sociality to human goodness in this lifetime, whereby one's goodness, or indeed a whole community's goodness, lifts up the rest of the world with them, there is also a "law of descent," whereby one person's sinfulness also drags down their entire social and ecclesial community. This imagery of 'dragging down' suggests that when one person sins, we are all affected in such a way that we too become sinners or sinful, although the Pope does not go so far as to suggest this himself. Due to human solidarity, every individual's actions affect others, for better or for worse. Thus, there is a fundamental sociality to human goodness and

[261] RP, §16.

human sinfulness. There is, therefore, a wider "communion of sin" which we all participate in. Just like human goodness, human sinfulness can also be regarded as a fundamentally social and dynamic process. The picture of human sinfulness which John Paul II begins to develop here has the potential to challenge his individualistic and moralistic interpretation of sin. At the very least, it suggests that an alternative construal of social sin may be possible. Thus, in the next chapter I shall explore the best of Latin American liberation theology on sin to discern whether their theologies can help towards the development of an alternative Catholic theological account of social sin.

2. Liberation Theology: Contributions from the Margins

As we saw in the previous chapter, John Paul II presents an individualistic and moralistic account of social sin which is unsatisfactory for many reasons. It is this definition, however, which remains the official teaching on social sin in the Catholic Church. Within the wider Catholic tradition, though, there are a variety of thinkers and theological traditions that can be drawn upon to help constructively develop the Church's theological account of social sin. These thinkers and traditions can help supplement those areas of the Pope's theology which suggest that an alternative construal of sin and the human person is possible. One of these theological traditions is Latin American liberation theology. Liberation theology is a contextual theological movement which became prominent in Latin America in the late twentieth century. It was liberation theologians who first made the language of "social sin" and "structural sin" prominent within the Catholic tradition. The theologies of sin presented by Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría, and José Ignacio González Faus remain a rich and fruitful resource which can help towards the development of a compelling Catholic theological account of social sin.[262] As we shall see, moral categories do not limit or

[262] The particular theological works that this chapter will engage with were published after the Magisterium's public critique, and thus are not representative of the theology which John Paul II's critique was originally responding to. Moreover, this thesis is limited to drawing upon the writings of these theologians which have already been translated into English. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse every piece of theological writing that these theologians have published. Therefore, in this chapter, I shall focus mainly on the accounts of sin presented within four particular published works: Sobrino's books *No Salvation Outside the Poor* and *The Principle of Mercy*, Ellacuría's collection of essays *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation*, and an article by González Faus entitled 'Sin'. I have chosen these particular theologians and published works because there is a coherence and complementarity to their theologies when read together. I have also chosen to include González Faus as a representative of liberation theology, despite his nationality being Spanish and remaining in Spain, because Sobrino and Ellacuría thought it fit to include his work on sin and theological anthropology in their edited collections on the fundamental concepts of liberation theology. See *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology,* ed. by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993) and *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology,* ed. by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996). These edited collections have become seminal texts for understanding the underlying systematic theologies of Latin American liberation theologians. It is likely, therefore, that González Faus' theological work on sin is regarded by Latin American liberation theologians, including Sobrino and Ellacuría, to be representative of the theological movement. Further, González Faus is widely regarded as a liberation theologian and has historically been an important collaborator in the liberationist theological movement in Latin America; from the 1980's he has taught classes and been a guest lecturer at prominent Latin American universities, such as the Central American University in San Salvador where both Sobrino and Ellacuría taught and worked. In the remainder of the chapter, therefore, whenever I refer to 'Latin American liberation theology' or 'liberation theology', I am using this language as a shorthand to refer specifically to these theologians rather than to Latin American liberation theology as a whole and the many diverse theological thinkers and theologies within it.

shape what they say about sin. In this chapter, I will suggest that we can draw upon these particular theologians to address some of the salient issues which arose from John Paul II's account of sin. I shall outline some of the contributions which these liberation theologians can make towards the development of a truly Catholic theological account of what sin is and how it impacts human living and acting in the world. This chapter will be selective in its recounting of their theologies, only focusing on those aspects of their thought which could be helpful towards our aim of developing a properly Catholic theological account of social sin. In the course of doing so, however, I hope to address some of the limitations of these theologians' thought and hence identify areas in need of further development.

2.1 The Methodology of Liberation Theology

Before we explore the idea of social sin within Latin American liberation theology, we must first understand the distinct methodology which these theologians use to come to their conclusions. It is this methodology which leads liberation theologians to articulate a definition of social sin which differs from that presented by John Paul II. As we previously saw, the Pope's reflections on sin begin with theological presuppositions which are viewed as antecedent to historical contingent experience. Charles Curran, Kenneth Himes, and Thomas Shannon argue that John Paul II evidences a methodology that is "more transcendental and independent of particular historical and cultural events."[263] His commitment to the theological anthropology of human persons as free, self-determined, and responsible moral actors leads him to present a moralistic account of sin, with all the qualifications and restrictions such an account entails. Prominent liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, however, use a different methodology. They begin their theological writings from a commitment to staying faithful to reality, or, using Sobrino's phrasing, honesty with what is real.[264] These theologians aim to see reality as it is. For them, the intellectual task consists in grasping and facing reality.[265] This includes the project of

[263] Charles E. Curran, Kenneth R. Himes, and Thomas A. Shannon, 'Commentary on *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*On Social Concern*)', in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations,* ed. by Kenneth R. Himes and others (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), pp. 415-435 (p. 426).
[264] Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 62. See also Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 96 where he refers to "honesty with the real."
[265] See Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 2.

"taking hold of reality", which, in Ellacuría's words, means "being inside the reality of things — not only standing before the idea of things or their meaning — a 'real' being in that reality, activity, as opposed to a reified and inert way of being; it implies being among them through their active, material mediations."[266] In other words, one needs to be incarnated within reality in order to see it as it really is. Hence, Sobrino and Ellacuría demonstrate a methodology which is rooted in historical consciousness rather than universal ideas. For them, reality is more important than ideas. In contrast to John Paul II, therefore, the concern to stay faithful to pre-existing doctrinal, theological, or philosophical beliefs is not their starting point.[267] As Kristin Heyer explains, "[i]n contrast to the magisterial approach, liberation theologians write less out of a concern for safeguarding continuity with the theological tradition and more out of a primarily pastoral concern for distinctive contexts."[268]

Sobrino writes, however, that it is precisely this 'taking hold of reality' which we, as sinful human beings, tend to shy away from: "We are always seeking excuses to avoid confronting — or even coming into contact with — reality."[269] Despite this, he concludes that it is of the utmost importance that we "open ourselves to [reality] to grasp its truth and demands."[270] This is because, for Sobrino, historical reality is the location of God's continuing presence and revelation in the world. He interprets this divine presence christologically: Predicated on the historical Jesus as revealed in scripture and ecclesial tradition — the historical Jesus who identified Himself with the poor and oppressed of the world — Sobrino regards the poor in Latin America as the continuation of Christ's presence in history.[271] As Rafael Luciani explains, "Sobrino

[266] Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Hacia Una Fundamentación Filosófica del Método Teológico Latinoamericano', *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 322-323 (1975), 409-425, (p. 419), as cited by Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, pp. 2-3.
[267] Pfeil, p. 176. The CELAM conferences of Medellín and Puebla can also be seen as using this methodology. As Pfeil asserts, for the Latin American episcopacy, "the historical circumstances of their local communities constituted their departure point." See Pfeil, p. 176.
[268] Heyer, 'Social Sin and Immigration', p. 421.
[269] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 39.
[270] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, pp. 61-62.
[271] For liberation theologians, the methodological starting point for Christological reflection is the historical Jesus as recorded in scripture and tradition as opposed to any abstract theological or philosophical reflection on Christ's divinity. Liberation theologians regard this distinct methodology to be "an epistemological break with traditional Christologies." (See Jorge Costadoat, 'Central Themes in Sobrino's Christology', in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology,* ed. by Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008). Kindle ebook,) As Roberto Goizueta notes, for liberation theologians, "christological reflection cannot be undertaken apart from reflection on the Jesus of history as he is revealed in the Sacred Scriptures and in tradition." (Robert S. Goizueta, 'The Christology of Jon Sobrino', in *Hope and Solidarity*, ed. by Stephen J. Pope.) Costadoat further explains that "Latin American Christology adopts the historical Jesus as its methodological starting point

interprets [the situation of Latin America] christologically and not only from the point of view of the social sciences. The poor are the setting where Christ, seen as the poor, is present in history."[272] As we shall see further later, Sobrino centres this Christology around the event of Jesus' crucifixion; he writes that the poor and oppressed in Latin American are crucified peoples: "From a Christian point of view, God himself makes himself present in these crosses [...] the crucified people are the actualization of Christ crucified, the true servant of Yahweh."[273]

Due to this divine presence, liberation theologians conclude that it is only through the experience and perspective of the poor and dispossessed that one can come to a true apprehension of reality, that is, the world as it really is. The experience of the poor is the hermeneutical lens through which they interpret reality and the faith. Hence, their definitions of sin are shaped by the life experiences of the poor in Latin America. As Sobrino says: "in order to know what sin is and what to do about it, one must be actively open to what God says of sin and does about sin."[274] One must therefore be attentive to God's revelation about sin among the poor and oppressed. Thus, liberation theologians' theological reflections do not begin from theoretical or universal abstractions about the nature of human freedom or acting, but rather from the historical reality of Latin America. Liberation theologians explore the theological concept of sin from the "situation of inhuman poverty in which millions of Latin Americans live," and from the cries of the poor and oppressed that rise up as a result of this structural injustice. Sobrino asserts that "[a]ll reality must be seen in terms of this reality of unjust poverty, and in this reality we have to see and live our whole Christian life."[275] It is this reality which constitutes the signs of the times and which is the location of God's revelation and presence in the world. Hence, Sobrino concludes that "it is not arbitrary partiality or merely pedagogically convenient to

because that is the only way of rescuing and safeguarding Christ from the distortions of his divinization and abstraction, which operate as if it were possible to know what it means to be 'Christ' without reference to Jesus of Nazareth. For Sobrino, Christ reveals the true God, and Jesus reveals what is meant by Christ." (See Costadoat).

[272] Rafael Luciani, 'Hermeneutics and Theology in Sobrino's Christology', in *Hope and Solidarity*, ed. by Stephen J. Pope.

[273] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 51. See also p. 78; 97; 99. See also Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 71; 75.

[274] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, pp. 88-89

[275] Ibid., p. 60.

begin [theological reflections] with the sinful reality of Latin America. It is necessary."[276] Dean Brackley further explains that:

> From the beginning, liberation theology emphasized that theological reflection presupposes a practical commitment that locates the theologian in the world of the victims of injustice. While liberation theologians have never claimed to have a monopoly on truth or an automatic advantage over other forms of theology, they have claimed that this commitment and location afford a privileged perspective for understanding both the truths of the faith and reality in the light of faith.[277]

Indeed, it is this experience of unjust poverty which leads liberation theologians to develop the doctrine of sin in distinctive and novel ways.

Thus, a distinct way of doing theology begins to emerge within the thought of these theologians. Theological reflection should begin by discerning God's self-communication in history; one needs to pay attention to what God is saying and doing within present reality. Theological reflection which begins from universal or theoretical abstractions about the nature of human freedom, or from pre-existing doctrines which do not take into consideration lived experience or the true reality of things, would not be considered the ideal way to do theology. Brackley explains Sobrino's thought here, arguing that "[b]y limiting itself to reflecting on the truths of the faith in the abstract and developing their virtualities deductively, theology falls into an implicit 'deism.' It ignores God's self-communication in history today, degenerating into abstractions that ultimately distort that communication."[278] This is not to say that pre-existing doctrines, traditions, or theological beliefs are contrary to God's historical self-communication, but rather that this self-communication is the hermeneutical key to truly understanding pre-existing truths of faith. Brackley expounds that, for Sobrino, "God [does not communicate] a radically new message in our time. Rather, God reminds us of forgotten or undeveloped truths and communicates old truths in new ways that produce life today. It is precisely by

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[276] Ibid.
[277] Dean Brackley, S.J., 'Theology and Solidarity: Learning from Sobrino's Method', in *Hope and Solidarity*, ed. by Stephen J. Pope.
[278] Ibid.

attending to such signs, writes Sobrino, that we can best safeguard what God has revealed, develop its virtualities, and recover what has been forgotten."[279]

Thus, for these liberation theologians, reflection on sin needs to arise from a commitment to being honest with reality and confronting the world as it really is. One needs to be actively open to God's historical presence within this reality, allowing this presence to change one's perspective and illuminate the truths of faith and pre-existing theological beliefs. For this to happen, theology needs to be done in solidarity with 'the poor', namely, the victims and survivors of structural injustice and social marginalization. It is in this way that one becomes incarnated in reality in such a way that one is able to apprehend it as it really is. Thus, it is only in solidarity with 'the poor' that one can fully recognise God's action and self-communication within history, as well as those things which are opposed to God, in other words, the graced and sinful aspects of reality.

The work of early Latin American liberation theologians has, however, been criticised by liberation theologians such as Marcella Althaus-Reid for not staying faithful to this core methodology. Althaus-Reid argues that early liberation theologians only valued the perspectives of certain types of people living in poverty, that is, the 'decent' ones. They did not pay sufficient attention to the experiences and perspectives of other marginalised and oppressed communities who were considered 'indecent' by the prevailing sexual morality, for example members of the LGBT+ community or women who were also living in poverty. She writes: "the liberation theology project was never concerned with inclusivity but only with including *some* of the nobodies of Church and theology, the poor."[280] Her argument is summarised by Thia Cooper: "Liberation theology opted for the poor *but* not for all poor, just the 'decent' poor."[281] In other words, they did not attend to the many diverse and intersectional realities of communities living in poverty. Liberation theologians avoided reflecting on any experiences or perspectives that could challenge the patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions of prevailing theological and moral norms.

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[279] Ibid.

[280] Marcella Althaus-Reid 'Class, Sex and the Theologian: Reflections on the Liberationist Movement in Latin America', in *Another Possible World,* ed. by Ivan Petrella, Luiz Carlos Susin and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2007), pp. 29-41 (p. 31). Kindle ebook.

[281] Thia Cooper, *Queer and Indecent: An Introduction to Marcella Althaus Reid* (London: SCM Press, 2021), p. 39.

In fact, Althaus-Reid argues that early liberationists unconsciously supported and contributed to these oppressive "colonial, theoretical constructions […] such as the ideologies of gender, race and sexuality."[282] By ignoring the complexity and intersectionality of people's real lives in this way, Althaus-Reid contends that Latin American liberation theology idealises people living in poverty.[283] In Cooper's words, it "fetishes people, replacing real people with ideas. [It] turned idealistic rather than reflecting reality."[284] As Althaus-Reid further explains: "Liberationists from the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America had a discourse which is sometimes lacking reality […] There has been a gap in liberation theology and it is, paradoxically, a gap between uncontested ideologies and critical reality."[285] Moreover, liberation theologians ignored the presence of God within these 'indecent' groups of people.[286] As Cooper expounds, "[f]or liberationists, Christ could be a poor rural man with some indigenous heritage but not gay or female, and so forth. Only approved expressions that were similar to Jesus' own historical context made sense to liberation theology."[287]

Althaus-Reid further argues that once liberation theologians developed a theology that they thought could contest the political, economic, and theological status quo, they refused to allow marginalised communities to continue to challenge their theological beliefs.[288] Cooper explains that, according to Althaus-Reid, liberation theologians believed that they had successfully found the definitive "systematic truth from the poor's perspective."[289] They therefore halted the process of reflexive theological thought from the perspective of the marginalised.[290] Cooper clarifies: "Liberation theology stopped doubting once it found its own answers, rather than continuing the spiral of action and reflection."[291] In other words, they refused to continually allow marginalised communities to challenge their theology and reveal God's self-communication. As Althaus-Reid elucidates, by ignoring the reality and diversity of these communities' sexual and gendered lives, liberation theology became

[282] Althaus-Reid, p. 31.
[283] Ibid., p. 33.
[284] Cooper, p. 43.
[285] Althaus-Reid, pp. 30-31.
[286] Ibid., p. 36.
[287] Cooper, p. 38.
[288] Ibid., p. 36.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Ibid., p. 38.

"stagnant".[292] Cooper further explains that, for Althaus-Reid, "[l]iberation theology adhered to the colonial notion of a centre of knowledge; it assumed that there was one true theology to find and one type of community that could find this theology: the poor. When varied critiques began to emerge from women, indigenous groups and homosexuals, liberation theologians ignored them."[293] Althaus-Reid herself concludes that:

> None of the great names from the liberationist ranks has ever produced any nuanced, deep theology which could justify a claim that liberation theology has heard the voice of the voiceless when ideologies of gender and sexuality have been the cause of suffering and marginalization of our own people.[294]

It could be argued, therefore, that liberation theologians did not stay fully faithful to their core methodology of finding Christ's presence and revelation within those people who are socially marginalized. This is due to their alleged exclusion of those who could be considered most marginal. As Cooper concludes:

> Unfortunately, liberation theology continued to exclude people outside the 'moral' system, even though Jesus himself was outside the moral system of his time [...] Liberation theology criticized the exclusion of the poor from theology but it also excluded some, those most marginal.[295]

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to evaluate whether Althaus-Reid's criticisms in this regard are fully warranted. Liberation theologians such as Sobrino have, however, admitted to this weakness of their early theological thought:

> I confess that even after having shared the Latin American experience, I have only gradually begun to hear and understand the cries of women, indigenous people, and Afro-Americans. And I believe those cries have not only added — horizontally we might say — new varieties or species of poverty; they have also enriched its depth: they have broadened and deepened the mystery of the poor.[296]

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[292] Althaus-Reid, p. 37.
[293] Cooper, p. 36.
[294] Althaus-Reid, p. 38.
[295] Cooper, p. 40.
[296] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 25.

Althaus-Reid's critique is helpful, however, in that it further reveals to us the epistemological and hermeneutical implications of the liberationist methodology and Christology. Indeed, to stay truly faithful to this methodology, one must attend to the presence of Christ within *all* the victims of structural injustice and social marginalization, no matter how 'indecent' they seem, and include even those perspectives which liberation theologians themselves may have originally excluded. Based on liberation theology's own methodological commitments, it is only in this way that one can apprehend reality as it really is. It is only in solidarity with the most marginalised that one can fully recognise the graced and sinful aspects of the world. Hence, one's theology needs to remain open to correction and critique based upon the experiences of the marginalised and excluded. Thus, any theological conclusions we may draw from liberationist theology — or, indeed, any other thinkers within the Catholic tradition — must always remain open to development and critique based upon the experiences and perspectives of the most marginalised.

2.2 The Liberationist Theology of Sin

This fidelity to seeing and apprehending reality through the perspective of the poor and oppressed leads Sobrino, González Faus, and Ellacuría to condemn the Latin American reality as sin.[297] For them, certain historical and social situations can, and indeed must, be called sin. The Latin American situation must be named sin because, from the perspective of the oppressed, it constitutes a denial of God's will and an offence against God.[298] Sobrino draws upon the language of Puebla, writing that this situation is "contrary to the creator's plan and the honor this deserves."[299] Predicated on the biblical revelation of God's preferential option for the poor read through the perspective of the dispossessed in Latin America, these theologians conclude that any social structures or situations which perpetuate poverty and injustice must be regarded as contrary to the divine will for human flourishing. Ellacuría contends that, "for the oppressed believers, injustice and whatever brings death and denies dignity to the children of God are not merely historical effects or even a legal failing; they are sin in a formal sense, something that formally has to do with God."[300] As Michael Lee

[297] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 60.
[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ignacio Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* ed. by Michael E. Lee (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), p. 151.

explains, for Ellacuría, unjust poverty is "the great negation of God's presence in, and will for, the world."[301] The language of sin is not limited to describing a free act committed by an individual person; it is not merely a moral failure. Rather, sin is regarded as that which denies, or is contrary to, the will of God.[302] This theology leads these theologians to reject moralistic and individualistic accounts of sin. As Ellacuría concludes: "Sin should not be understood primarily as an offence against God that has been made personally, but rather as the real straying from, or real annulment of, the divine plan as it is glimpsed in nature and as it manifests itself in salvation history."[303]

Ellacuría, González Faus, and Sobrino use the theological language of sin to depict the political and economic structures in Latin America which create situations of injustice, poverty, and death. Ellacuría asserts:

> The realities of the poor and their unjustly inflicted poverty; the social, economic, and political structures on which their reality is based; and the complex ramifications of hunger, illness, imprisonment, torture, murder […] are all negations of the Reign of God.[304]

Hence, economic and socio-political structures which do not satisfy basic needs but instead oppress whole peoples are not purely social or political problems. According to Ellacuría, they are "a theologal problem, in the strict sense, having to do with the salvific will of God and the establishment of the Reign of God among human beings."[305] They can be called sin because they impede the establishment of the Reign of God within history; they are therefore contrary to the divine will and plan for the world. Thus, here we can see what is at stake in the Latin American theology of sin: To deny that the unjust social structures, institutions, and collective behaviours which cause poverty are sin in the formal sense would be to deny that they are contrary to God's will for human flourishing. As González Faus argues:

> Sin […] means that which God rejects and cannot accept in any way. Therefore denying the notion of structural sin is equivalent to saying that the present

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[301] Michael E. Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation: The Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría,* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), p. 69.
[302] See also Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 154.
[303] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 45.
[304] Ibid., p. 154.
[305] Ibid., p. 184.

situation of the world (and in particular the third world countries) is not a situation that arouses God's rejection and anger.[306]

The strength of this position is that it takes a traditional, albeit abstract, definition of sin — sin as that which is contrary to the will and plan of God — and gives us concrete and objective examples of where we can see this type of sin within history. As Ellacuría explains: "Sin in the abstract does not lend itself to much study, but it can manifest itself concretely in subtle forms that require more careful theological analysis."[307]

Consequently, social structures, cultures, and situations can properly be called sin when they negate the divine will for history. This, however, is not the sole reason they can be called sin. Indeed, these theologians do not limit themselves to one definition, analogy, or metaphor for sin. As Ellacuría explains, the ways we speak about sin — including the categorisation of sin into the three main types of original sin, social sin, and personal sin — "only analogically begin consideration of the concept of sin."[308] This does not mean that we cannot refer to these realities as sin. On the contrary, Ellacuría writes that these realities are, properly speaking, sin; they remain in need of God's grace and salvation.[309] We can, however, only ever speak about sin in an analogical sense. Sobrino further clarifies that this is because of the inclusion of God within formal theological definitions of sin: "the element of God in the definition necessarily invests the very reality of sin with a certain 'indefinition,' inasmuch as the indefinable, transcendent God now comes into the definition of sin, and concretely, precisely in relation to sin."[310] Thus, sin is not something which humans can ever completely know, although it can be manifest in concrete, visible ways in history. This analogical understanding of all the language we use to describe sin suggests that a certain flexibility and humility is needed in our theological sin-talk: Our definitions and understandings of sin must always remain open to correction and critique. It also suggests that we cannot limit ourselves to one defining and conclusive metaphor for sin.

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[306] José Ignacio González Faus, 'Sin', in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology,* ed. by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996, pp. 194-204 (p. 199).
[307] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 151.
[308] Ibid., p. 44.
[309] Ibid.
[310] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 88.

Hence, a variety of metaphors and analogies can be used to describe sin within the thought of liberation theology. Ellacuría regards original, social, and personal sin to properly be regarded as sin for multiple reasons:

> In effect, they are dominators and oppressors of the human being and of humanity. They are a negation of the divine image in the human and are the fundamental obstacle between the human and God, between human beings, and between humanity and nature. Stated in classical terms, they are the fundamental disobedience to the design of God for humanity, history, and nature; they are the negation of the faith in all of its rich fullness (Severino Croatto) and in time the negation of love.[311]

González Faus adds that sin can also be understood as a distortion and degradation of humanity's relationships with God and each other.[312] Sobrino similarly employs different metaphors and analogies; he writes that sin is present in Latin America in "a thousand forms — as hubris and as oppression, as lying and as murder."[313] Thus, within the thought of these liberation theologians, there are numerous different ways to describe and define sin.

These theologians argue, however, that there is one particularly effective way to identify sin within history — despite the variety of different metaphors and analogies which can be used — that is, the presence of death. Sobrino draws upon the scriptural connection between sin and death to assert that sin is that which kills human persons, or, using his own words, it is that which "puts persons to death."[314] This definition of sin is grounded in Sobrino's Christology and centred around the event of Christ's crucifixion. He asserts that one must "gaze on Christ crucified" to truly know what sin is as Jesus is the one who reveals sin to us. Reading the scriptures through the perspective of the poor and marginalised leads Sobrino to assert that Jesus Christ is "the offended one" who has "been put to death."[315] Moreover, it was sin that was the cause of this death.[316] He argues, therefore, that the prime analogate for sin is murder: "murdering the Son of God and continuing to murder the sons and daughters

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[311] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* pp. 44-45.
[312] González Faus, p. 199.
[313] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 100.
[314] Ibid., p. 86.
[315] Ibid., p. 95.
[316] Ibid., p. 60.

of God in history."[317] Thus, we can detect the presence of sin within the world today by identifying that which kills or murders human persons. Sobrino does not, however, identify sin merely as that which causes death; it seems that a person dying naturally and peacefully of old age would be not regarded as a victim of sin in the same way within Sobrino's thought. Afterall, Jesus "suffered death on the cross and not any other death."[318] It is thus a specific type of death through which we can detect sin: it is that death which is actively inflicted.[319] Hence, it is a type of death whereby there are both victims and executioners;[320] the killers and the killed.[321] He thus concludes that "sin, in all its forms, is an evil, is that which puts to death the spirit and flesh of human beings."[322]

Ellacuría similarly draws upon the close traditional connection between sin and death. He asserts, however, that the effect of sin is death in general: "definitive death, as a consequence of natural (original) sin, emerges in many forms in history. The overabundance of sin in history carries with it an overabundance of death in history."[323] Thus, a peaceful death by natural causes would also be considered an effect of sin. He argues:

> Liberation theology, following the most profound theologies in this line of thought, contemplates God as the God of life and, consequently sin as the agent of death. In light of this, one of the best ways to struggle against sin is to struggle against death in all its forms, but initially in the form of human survival.[324]

Ellacuría admits that liberation from death will only appear fully after death in the afterlife. Nevertheless, he concludes that, in their struggle against sin, Christians are called to resist the forces which cause premature death within history so that all might live life to the fullest and achieve integral development.[325]

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[317] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 87.
[318] Ibid., p. 51.
[319] Ibid., p. 50.
[320] Ibid.
[321] Ibid., p. 87.
[322] Ibid., p. 100.
[323] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 45.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Ibid., pp. 45-46.

In a similar vein, albeit using slightly different language, González Faus argues that "the true meaning of the Christian notion of sin" is "human damage."[326] He explains that this understanding of sin as human damage clarifies what is meant by the abstract definition of sin as offence against God: "God offers history to human beings as a scope for their human creativity, so that they can transform it into the Kingdom of God: a space of freedom and justice, for giving and fellowship. Therefore an offense against God is through damage to human beings."[327] Anything which causes harm to the human person is contrary to the divine will and plan for the world; it impedes the establishment of the Kingdom or Reign of God in history, and hence is sinful. González Faus thus expands Sobrino and Ellacuría's understanding of sin as that which causes death to include all forms of human harm and damage.

Thus, sin causes harm, and even death, to the human person. Why, then, can social structures and situations properly be called sin based upon this theological understanding of the relation between sin and death? Sobrino contends that "the transcendental relation between sin and death" is evident in the historical situation of Latin America.[328] He explains:

> Death is what the Latin American peoples are subjected to in thousands of ways. It is slow but real death caused by the poverty generated by unjust structures — "institutionalized violence": "the poor are those who die before their time." It is swift, violent death, caused by repression and wars, when the poor threaten these unjust structures.[329]

The unjust socio-political and economic structures in Latin America are sin because they actively and violently cause death. Ellacuría refers to this death-dealing structural injustice as social or historical sin.[330] Moreover, Sobrino identifies both victims and executioners within this sinful reality. He argues that this situation of poverty, death, and institutionalised violence is part of the ongoing legacy of colonialism. It is therefore caused by the different empires who have exerted their power in Latin

[326] González Faus, p. 200.
[327] Ibid., p. 203.
[328] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 60.
[329] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 50. See also p. 149 where Sobrino writes: "Many men and women in Central America and elsewhere in the world are dying the slow death of oppression or the quick death of repression. This is the most basic fact in the world today, and it is a fact utterly in defiance of God's will."
[330] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 46. See also p. 45.

America throughout history, and who imposed their authority, rule, economic systems, and cultures onto the region and its peoples. Thus, he writes that this situation has been inflicted upon the Latin American peoples by "the Spanish and Portuguese yesterday, the U.S. and its allies today; whether by armies or economic systems, or the imposition of cultures and religious views, in connivance with local powers."[331] Hence, Sobrino repeatedly refers to the people living in poverty in Latin America as the crucified peoples.[332] In emotive prose, Ellacuría similarly writes that, in Latin America, "the death of the poor is the death of God, the ongoing crucifixion of the Son of God."[333]

González Faus expands upon this theological link between sin and death; he argues that outside of the specific context of Latin America sin may cause other types of death beyond the physical, such as cultural or social death. A lack of existence, visibility, representation, or participation within the public sphere could also be considered a type of death which is actively or violently inflicted upon persons. He speculates that in Europe "the victims of this death may be ignored as not belonging to this world or are reduced — within it — to an easily hidden minority, or a minority unworthy of 'democratic' consideration just because it is a minority."[334] Sobrino similarly alludes to this type of death, but within Latin America itself: He writes that "indirect" death occurs when people are "deprived even of their cultures" which "weaken[s] their identities" and renders them "more defenseless."[335] There are thus many ways in which sin may be said to cause death within history. As Sobrino so hauntingly concludes: "We live in a world that murders, and in this is the most radical truth of that world."[336]

It is in this way that González Faus, Ellacuría, and Sobrino make objective and visible the abstract definition of sin as an offence against God. González Faus even suggests that the definition of sin as an offence against God would be meaningless without the added clarification that an offence against God is human damage.[337] As Sobrino argues, defining sin in purely abstract terms or in terms of human subjectivity

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[331] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 50.
[332] Ibid. See also Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* p. 4 where Sobrino explains that the crucified peoples' lives are "laced with death, not natural but historical death, which takes the form of crucifixion, assassination, the active historical deprivation of life, whether slowly or quickly."
[333] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 151.
[334] González Faus, p. 194.
[335] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 50.
[336] Ibid., p. 95.
[337] González Faus, p. 202.

alone tends to "undermine an awareness of sin by failing to indicate it in its historical objectification — failing to show it as something visible and verifiable, and accordingly, something of which one can and should have an awareness."[338] Such abstract theologies have difficulty pointing to real verifiable sins within history. The liberationist definition of sin as that which causes death and harm to the human person overcomes this weakness as it enables us to identify sin within history. As Sobrino notes, we are able to recognise ourselves as sinners not only transcendently, but also historically.[339]

This theology of sin could be applied to current social injustices which ethicists condemn as sinful. Within the context of the United Kingdom, a culture and history of homophobia and transphobia has resulted in LGBT+ people, particularly LGBT+ youth, being at a higher risk of "suicidal behaviour, mental disorder and substance misuse and dependence than heterosexual people."[340] The stigma, abuse, and discrimination which the LGBT+ community faces as a result of an ongoing culture of homophobia results in human harm and even death. Thus, although Christian ethicists have previously used the language of social sin in association with cultural and institutionalised homophobia, I would propose that drawing from liberation theology allows us to see *why,* from a theological perspective, this is so: it causes damage and death to human beings, and hence is contrary to the divine will. The same could be said for other cultural and structural injustices which ethicists frequently condemn as sin. In recent years, our news feeds have been inundated with reports of death and trauma as a result of systemic and institutionalised racism, xenophobia, ageism, and sexism. Although there are many instances of physical, biological death in relation to these injustices, one can also find numerous examples of cultural or social

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[338] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, pp. 85-86.
[339] Ibid, p. 86.
[340] Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Public Health England, 'Preventing Suicide Among Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young People: A Toolkit for Nurses' <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/412427/LGB_Suicide_Prevention_Toolkit_FINAL.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2021], p. 10. The document also states that "Among LGBT youth in the UK, one in two reported self-harming at some point in their life and 44% reported having thought about suicide." See also the Stonewall website where it states that "more than one in four (27 per cent) trans young people have attempted to commit suicide and nine in ten (89 per cent) have thought about it. 72 per cent have self-harmed at least once. (*Youth Chances 2014*, *sample size = 956*)" accessed online at: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/trans_stats.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2021], p. 1.

death, including many cases of social abandonment.[341] Hence, the theology of sin presented by liberation theologians has relevance beyond the specific context it was written from and for. As González Faus writes:

> [S]tructural sin is the sin of the world and not only of a particular situation. Puebla speaks of it as a "permanent process" (Puebla Final Document, no. 281). It is structured in different circles according to the different cultural situations or economic relations. The centre of each of these circles is always falsification or the oppression of some human beings by others.[342]

In light of the contemporary climate crisis, however, González Faus and Sobrino's narrowing of the scope of sin to that of specifically *human* damage and death could be regarded as too anthropocentric. Nevertheless, this identification of sin with death and harm enables us to more easily identify historical and objective sins.

This theology could, however, prevent people from developing a sense of responsibility for sin. On an instinctive level, a law-abiding person within the UK would not identify themselves as personally responsible or accountable for the deaths or harm of other people, especially if their deaths were a result of institutionalised homophobia, racism, or xenophobia; nor would they regard themselves as 'murderers' of people in other countries who die from poverty and the ongoing legacy of colonialism, particularly as the causes of these deaths cannot easily be traced back directly to them as individual persons. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason, though, that this type of language is important; it can fulfil a prophetic role by helping us to realise that our cooperation with socio-political and economic injustice or the cultural status quo can contribute towards human harm and death, even if we cannot be regarded as morally culpable for these deaths as an individual.

Within Ellacuría's thought, unjust social structures or situations are not called sin only because they cause death or constitute an obstruction to the realization of the divine will within history. Ellacuría draws upon the traditional identification of idolatry with sin to argue that disordered social structures can be condemned as sin

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[341] For example, see Michael Banner, 'Dying and "Death Before Death": On Hospices, Euthanasia, Alzheimer's, and on (Not) Knowing How to Dwindle', in *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 107-134. Oxford Scholarship Online ebook.
[342] González Faus, p. 199.

because they are idolatrous. He asserts that oppressive economic and political structures — such as those existing in Latin America at the time of his writing — become "absolute idols to whom the dignity of human life is sacrificed, sometimes by means of exploitation and other times by consumerism."[343] To understand why Ellacuría argues that social structures can be considered idolatrous, however, we first need to understand the theological anthropology and theology of history which underlies his thought.

Ellacuría bases his theology of history on his understanding of the doctrine of creation and the theological anthropology which emerges from it. He affirms that the whole of creation is "the taking-form *ad extra* of the Trinitarian life itself."[344] Creation is an act of self-giving and communication of the divine life by God. Each thing that exists, therefore, is "a limited way of being God"[345] and all of creation has a sacramental element. Moreover, there is a "dynamic openness" within creation that is "precisely the growing presence of the divine reality in the creature."[346] For Ellacuría, humanity "as a formally open essence" is that reality in which "that taking-form of the Trinitarian life is present more and more, although always in a limited way."[347] Humans are therefore dynamic realities who are open to transcendence and the growing presence of the divine within them. This dynamic openness — whereby the creature participates more and more in the Trinitarian life, and thereby becomes a more "limited way of being God" — is part of the divine will for creation.[348] There is, however, a natural limit to how much the human person can become a 'way of being God' in history. This is due to the fact that humans are creaturely realities who are finite; hence "at a certain level […] no more of [God's] self-giving is offered."[349] Ellacuría describes humanity as "open but limited, limited but open."[350] Thus, in a similar vein to John Paul II, one can discern a kind of becoming within Ellacuría's

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[343] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 184.
[344] Ibid., p. 151.
[345] Ibid. See also Geoffrey J. Dornan, 'History, Salvation and the Reign of God: Ignacio Ellacuría reading El Salvador through Xavier Zubiri' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University, 2014) in ProQuest Dissertations and Theses <http://ezphost.dur.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/history-salvation-reign-god-ignacio-ellacuria/docview/1552970600/se-2?accountid=14533> [accessed 24 June 2021], pp. 397-398.
[346] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 152. See also Dornan, pp. 397-398.
[347] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 152.
[348] See also Lee, p. 60.
[349] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 152.
[350] Ibid.

theological anthropology:[351] Humans become more who they are and who God calls them to be — that is, a 'limited way of being God' — by participating more in the divine reality within history. Human selfhood can therefore be considered as dynamic, rather than static.

Within this worldview, humans are significant because they have the intelligence to apprehend and respond to this presence of God within the world:

> There is a strict experience of this theologal dimension, and through it there is a strict personal, social, and historical experience of God. This experience has different degrees and modes; but when it is a true experience of the real theologal dimension of human beings, of society, of history, and in a different measure, of purely material things, it is an experience and physical proof of the triune life itself, however mediated, incarnated, and historicized.[352]

Because of humanity's dynamic openness, intelligence, and creativity, they are able to facilitate God's presence within history. Humans have the ability to discern "what things announce and facilitate the coming of God and what things conceal and obstruct it."[353]

It is for this reason, therefore, that history has an "essential openness"[354] whereby it is dynamically open to new possibilities and transcendence; it is the location where humans actualise possibilities in reality.[355] Whilst reflecting on Ellacuría's philosophical anthropology, Geoffrey Dornan explains that, "in their openness *to* reality; human beings both apprehend and opt for possibilities *in* reality. Moreover because of this, history itself is transcendentally open: open for either good or evil."[356] History is the location where humans can support the 'more' of God's presence becoming actualised. It is the place where God's self-giving and communication can be supported or negated by human beings. As Michael Lee explains, for Ellacuría, "all of humanity's historical works [are] the objectivization of a 'yes' or 'no' to God's self-communication, and the objectivization of grace in which

[351] See also Dornan, p. 222, where Dornan writes that, in Ellacuría's anthropology, "we detect a process of becoming and it is this becoming that implies that history represents a crucial aspect of the human."
[352] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 152.
[353] Ibid., p. 178.
[354] Ibid., p. 152.
[355] Ibid., pp. 175-177.
[356] Dornan, p. 394.

either the divine self-giving and human action agree, or human action rejects the offer of grace."[357] History, therefore, becomes "the location par excellence for the revelation and glorification of God," but it can also be "a place of concealment and perdition."[358] Ellacuría further explains:

> History, both personal and social, becomes the best place (metaphysical density) and the only possible place (openness), for a doubly gratuitous revelation and salvation that allow human persons and all humanity to participate in God's own trinitarian life — and not merely the place where through creation and conservation we can see the presence, essence, and potency of God.[359]

The importance of this for Ellacuría is that God offers Godself within history. Transcendence is something that "transcends *in*" and not "*away from*" history; "something that physically impels to *more* but not by taking *out of*."[360] He concludes: "History itself is the manifestation and always-open presence of God, and it can be so in an always-faithful way to the point where it can be called, and can become, the Reign of God."[361] Thus, history is a dynamic reality which is open to transcendence and the growing presence of the divine within it.

It seems to be implicit in Ellacuría's thought that social structures are the product of this human creativity and opting for possibilities within history. This means that they also have the potential to obstruct or support the presence of the divine within history. Moreover, once created by humans, social structures, institutions, and cultures, which outlast individuals, come to configure the human agents within them who act based on this configuration. They therefore become forces which shape the dynamism of history through influencing the persons within them. Hence, economic and socio-political systems are social forces which can become "determinants of the course of history."[362] The social structures and institutions of different social groups have the power to conceal or obstruct God's self-giving within history. As Ellacuría

[357] Lee, p. 61. See also Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* pp. 175-176.
[358] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 179
[359] Ibid., p. 176.
[360] Ibid., p. 142. See also Lee, pp. 58-59.
[361] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation*, p. 179.
[362] Ibid., p. 184.

contends: "The forces and dynamisms of history and the agents who participate in it can conceal and disfigure the communication of God."[363]

This leads Ellacuría to deepen his understanding of sin as idolatry. As we have seen, the dynamism towards the growing presence of the divine in history can be limited in two ways: the first is the natural limit insofar as humans are finite creatures and hence "at a certain level […] no more of the self-giving is offered."[364] Second, the dynamism of the divine presence can be limited by "negation in the historical process."[365] We have already seen how social structures have the potential to conceal or obstruct God's self-giving in history. Beyond this, however, the dynamism of the divine presence can be negated when something that is limited is made "absolute and divine, and so in this sense positively denies God and falls into idolatry."[366] Ellacuría affirms:

> Idolatry, by making absolute what is limited, closes and denies the divine presence that is in all historical things. This closing in on a limit is precisely what negates the presence of that "more" and that "new" through which transcendence becomes present in the form of personal revelation.[367]

Wealth, power, national security, and one's political party or organization can be absolutized to the extent that they are converted into idols "to which all other human possibilities are sacrificed."[368] Ellacuría argues:

> When the dynamism is limited, now not only in natural evolution but by deliberate negation in the historical process — whether personal or social — that by absolutizing the limit impedes and even explicitly negates the dynamism of the Trinitarian life (although it cannot destroy it), then we have a case of sin in its formal sense.[369]

This also means that structural sin can be created by people with good intentions, and hence is not always created by personal sin. Indeed, structures, institutions or social bodies can be created with the intention to achieve "a more humane and open history

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[363] Ibid., p. 178. See also Lee, p. 69.
[364] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 152.
[365] Ibid.
[366] Ibid. See also Lee, p. 69.
[367] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 153.
[368] Ibid.
[369] Ibid., p. 152.

[…] that open[s] human beings more and more to themselves and to others." However, when these structures, institutions, or social bodies become absolutized to the extent that they impede or negate the dynamism towards the transcendence and 'more' of God's presence — which always exceeds and is greater than that which human institutions can provide — this "idolatrous absolutization converts the limit into a positive obstacle and [becomes] a negation of something that is always greater than any objective realization of any subjective intention."[370] This happens when something is presented as "a full and definitive presence" when it is actually only "a partial and transitory presence of God, thus denying a 'more' that is the historical presence of the transcendent."[371]

Perhaps the Latin American political philosopher Enrique Dussel can help illuminate Ellacuría's idea of absolutization and idolatry here. Although Dussel does not explicitly engage with liberation theology in his book *Twenty Theses on Politics*, he does explore some of the political and philosophical premises which underlie it, including the idea of absolutization. Dussel links his understanding of fetishism to idolatry:

> In the sense that things "made by the hands of man" are idols, fetishism is similar to idolatry, as both terms refer to the making of "gods" through the imaginative control of the human being. These gods are "made," but then are worshiped as divine, as absolute, and as the origin of all else.[372]

He explains that, due to human finitude, all political decisions, systems, and institutions are imperfect: "no decision is perfect, as this would require infinite intelligence, pure fraternity and unlimited time — all things that are impossible in light of human finitude."[373] Thus, all political and economic institutions, structures, and systems will inevitably result in unforeseen and unintended negative effects.[374] They must, therefore, always be open to change, development, and improvement. As Dussel concludes: "it is necessary to accept the finitude of the human condition that manifests

[370] Ibid., p. 153.
[371] Ibid.
[372] Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics,* trans. by George Ciccariello-Maher (London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 30.
[373] Ibid., pp. 65-66.
[374] Following the tradition of liberation theology, Dussel argues that "for the most part it is the *minorities* or the opposition who grasp these negative effects since they are the ones who suffer from them." (Dussel, p. 66.)

in all political institutions (which as a result are not intrinsically corrupt but can become corrupted easily) and as a result to also accept the struggle to always reinvent, improve, and transform".[375] The problem comes, however, when prevailing systems are "slowly transformed — by the entropy of institutions through time — into a coercive fetish"[376] or, using Ellacuría's words, are absolutized. Perhaps we can interpret both Ellacuría and Dussel here as arguing that fetishism or absolutization occurs when institutions and systems become regarded as perfect, absolute, or the best or only version that could possibly work, and therefore are absolutized to such an extent that people refuse to transform, improve, or revise them despite their negative or destructive effects. Using Ellacuría's words, the "new" and "more" of God's presence and Reign is therefore impeded or negated due to this absolutization: the dynamic openness of history becomes closed off due to this refusal to explore new possibilities. These institutions or social structures become idols which are worshipped as absolute: "a divine character is attributed to what is not divine, but rather limited, because a limit is made absolute."[377] Hence, perhaps we can now see why Ellacuría regards the oppressive and death-dealing economic and political structures in Latin America to be "absolute idols to whom the dignity of human life is sacrificed"[378]; they have become absolutized to such an extent that people refuse to transform them despite their negative effects. Thus, the dynamism towards the Reign of God on earth is impeded and even negated due to this refusal to explore new possibilities.

We can now see why social structures can properly be called sin within Ellacuría's thought. Social structures have the potential to obstruct the realization of God's will and self-giving in history, just as they also have the potential to support the divine plan and the gift of God's self.[379] They are forces which can shape history in such a way that the dynamism towards the growing presence of the divine is impeded or negated. As Lee writes, within Ellacuría's thought, sin is a "negation of the inherent dynamism of divine presence in human existence."[380] Individual human beings, whole communities, social structures, and cultures can therefore be called sinful when they

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[375] Dussel, p. 126.
[376] Ibid., p. 88.
[377] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 153.
[378] Ibid., p. 184.
[379] Ibid., p. 150.
[380] Lee, p. 69. See also Dornan, p. 397.

reject, conceal, impede, or negate the "communication and gift of God's Trinitarian life."[381] As Ellacuría further explicates:

> Some actions kill (divine) life, and some actions give (divine) life. Some belong to the reign of sin, other to the reign of grace. Some social and historical structures objectify the power of sin, and serve as vehicles for that power against humanity, against human life; some social and historical structures objectify grace and serves as vehicles for that power in favour of human life. The former constitute structural sin; the latter constitutes structural grace.[382]

It could be argued, however, that Ellacuría's sharp separation between historical works which objectify grace and those which reject it is too dualistic. Theologians such as Althaus-Reid critique liberation theologians for being too caught up within traditional Western dualisms.[383] As Cooper summarises, for Althaus-Reid "[l]iberation theology worked within the Western framework of dualism; good and bad; white and black; male and female, accepting these dualisms as normative."[384] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully evaluate the fairness of Althaus-Reid's judgement regarding liberation theology as a whole. Nevertheless, in the specific context of speaking about sin and grace, Ellacuría does appear to present a dualistic worldview. This dualistic thinking seems to preclude the possibility of historical works which both support the Reign of God in some ways, and yet impede it in others. It thus does not reflect the experience many people have whereby they are forced to choose between conflicting or competing goods in such a way that both human harm *and* good results. Arguably, the majority of human actions, choices, and social structures or situations are neither wholly sinful and devoid of grace, nor completely virtuous and without sin.[385] As Julie Hanlon Rubio writes: "Institutions are typically complex

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[381] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 193.
[382] Ibid., p. 150. See also p. 180.
[383] See, for example, Althaus-Reid, pp. 31-33.
[384] Cooper, p. 37.
[385] Julie Hanlon Rubio explores this ambiguity alongside the idea of conflicting goods within situations of social sin. See Julie Hanlon Rubio, 'Cooperation with Evil Reconsidered: The Moral Duty of Resistance', *Theological Studies*, 78.1 (2017), 96-120 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916681993> (pp. 119-120). See also pp. 111-112. She draws upon womanist theologians, as well as the Catholic manualist tradition, to argue that people live within certain limitations which often necessitate some level of cooperation or complicity with evil. She argues that, in a fallen world, it is impossible to avoid all the ways one can cooperate with, or be complicit with, unjust and sinful situations (Rubio, p. 116). Hence it is impossible to avoid all evil (Rubio, p. 117). She writes that humans are "limited by the circumstances of their lives, their family responsibilities, their professions, and the realities of living in a society in which their views are not widely shared" (Rubio, p. 119). Moreover, she argues that we

combinations of good and evil."[386] An acknowledgement of the reality of competing goods could help to mitigate the paralysing guilt associated with feeling trapped within a sinful social system that one cannot reasonably extract oneself from, such as when one is conflicted by other responsibilities and goods. Similarly, in this age of globalisation it would be impractical, if not impossible, to assume that everyone has the privilege to be able to reasonably extract themselves from their social locations in such a way that they no longer participate in, or benefit from, cultural, socio-economic, and political systems which cause harm. Thus, some level of complicity or cooperation with sinful situations may be inevitable to attain other goods in ways which cause both human harm and good.[387] As Lee explains, however, for Ellacuría human acts and historical works constitute either a 'yes' or a 'no' to divine grace; through our acts and works we either accept and cooperate with, or reject, grace.[388] But is it realistic to conclude that all occasions of sin constitute a complete rejection of God's grace? Or does grace remain present within situations of sin, continuously calling humans to conversion and enabling some measure of limited progress towards the historicization of the Reign of God even in the most bleak and sinful of human situations? For example, many people are employed in jobs which contribute to environmental degradation, such as those who work in the fossil fuel industry, or in the industrial fishing profession. These careers arguably contribute to human harm and death because of the way they contribute to climate change and environmental degradation.

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live in a world where "goods can and often do conflict" (Rubio, p. 112). Because of this, there will always be some level of complicity or co-operation with evil and sin; for example, when one votes for imperfect political candidates or parties. She writes, therefore, that "personal responsibility for lessening social sin must be considered alongside the reality of conflicting goods and the potential harm to others arising from accommodation" (Rubio, p. 116). Nevertheless, those who find themselves unable to leave or abstract themselves from sinful situations have a moral obligation to find creative ways to resist the system (Rubio, p. 116). She draws on womanist theologians to suggest that resisting sinful situations, and helping to alleviate suffering, is more important than attempting to attain a pure, personally sinless life by disentangling oneself from the situation altogether in order to avoid sin (Rubio, p. 116). Such an attempt at purity would be impossible (Rubio, pp. 119-120). Strategies of resistance, however, will look different for each person depending upon the limitations and circumstances they find themselves in: "circumstances may determine what shape my resistance takes." (Rubio, p. 111. See also, p. 116). She therefore presents a vision of humans caught up within situations of social sin as "non-innocent people of good will in a complicated modern world" (Rubio, p. 120). Unlike Rubio, however, my interests do not lie in discerning the appropriate terminology to depict how we contribute to sinful situations, nor in discerning how to assess the amount of personal responsibility we hold for these sinful situations through traditional moral frameworks. Nevertheless, her work raises useful questions about the reality of conflicting goods, as well as the impossibility of avoiding all sin, which can be used to develop the idea of social sin beyond that of a restrictive dualistic framework.

[386] Rubio, p. 111.

[387] Ibid., pp. 111-112.

[388] Lee, p. 61.

Hence, they could, arguably, be called sinful. Nevertheless, it could be maintained that these jobs also have the potential to contribute towards a partial historicization of the Reign of God when they create a sense of community, or when they enable a person to provide for their families' basic needs, or when they provide the energy to light or heat people's homes. Do these workers reject the gift of grace every time they mine, or fish, or extract oil? When certain careers, social structures, and human acts contribute to some level of human harm, does that automatically mean they are completely devoid of grace and goodness? Or are sin and grace not as incompatible as Ellacuría seems to present? Does sin always constitute a complete rejection of grace? Or can one sin — that is, contribute to human harm or obstruct some aspects of the divine will within history — without completely rejecting grace? Perhaps some historical works and acts can impede certain aspects of the Reign of God, whilst simultaneously supporting other facets of it. In this way, social structures and institutions could potentially serve as vehicles for *both* sin *and* grace. Within our complicated fallen world, a dualistic account of sin which sharply separates historical works which objectify grace from those which reject it seems unhelpful and unrealistic. Nevertheless, Ellacuría's observation that human choices, actions, and historical works can support the Reign of God and the presence of divine grace within history, or reject or impede it, remains useful for our exploration of why social structures, situations, or cultures can be called sin. Indeed, even if social structures promote the good in some ways — and therefore can be considered graced — if they impede the Reign of God in other ways, they could nonetheless still be considered sinful due to this.

Moreover, Ellacuría's dualistic thinking even leads him to conclude that "sin is defined by grace and grace by sin."[389] It would be different to say that today we primarily experience grace through God's loving and merciful action towards humans enabling conversion from sin. In this framework we experience grace primarily as a response to sin, through God's forgiveness and mercy. However, to conclude that grace cannot be defined without sin, or that it is defined *by* sin, seems problematic. Catholic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas have traditionally stated that grace was present in history prior to the Fall; it enabled humans to achieve the good and live in

[389] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 142.

a state of original justice.[390] Hence, to state that grace is defined by sin seems to challenge this traditional belief in the presence of grace prior to sin. Moreover, such a statement seems to problematically limit the scope of grace to that of merely responding to human sinfulness, rather than as also constituting a divine gift which enables progress towards humanity's fulfilment in the fullness of God, as well as being a gift which enables human achievement of the good within history.

Nevertheless, Ellacuría, Sobrino, and González Faus manage to move beyond a merely moralistic account of sin to present multiple *theological* reasons as to why the disordered social structures in Latin America can properly be called sin. According to these theologians, we can call social situations sin when they are contrary to the divine will, when they impede the establishment of the Reign of God in history, when they cause human harm and death, or when they can be considered "idols to whom the dignity of human life is sacrificed."[391] Moreover, what is pertinent within the thought of these theologians is their contention that there is an indefinability to sin which means that all the language we use to speak about sin is analogous. Thus, there can be no one exclusive, definitive, or conclusive definition for sin. Instead, these theologians offer a multitude of theological definitions, metaphors, and analogies that can be used. This suggests that we must always remain open to correction and critique in our theological sin-talk.

2.3 Accountability Beyond Blame

González Faus, Ellacuría, and Sobrino manage to move beyond a moralistic account of sin towards a more explicitly theological one. Sin is not limited to an individual person's freely willed act for which they can be found morally culpable. As Ellacuría writes, "[t]o think that sin exists only when and insofar as there is personal responsibility is a mistaken and dangerous devaluation of the dominion of sin."[392] He argues that social sin *is* sin, despite not being attributable "directly and immediately to any human in particular."[393] Liberation theologians, however, are not unconcerned with maintaining a sense of accountability for sin. Ellacuría, Sobrino, and González

[390] See for example 1a. 95, 1. All quotations from the *Summa Theologiae* throughout this thesis are taken from the Blackfriars editions and translations of the text. See St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* ed. by T. C. O'Brien and others, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-1981).
[391] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 184.
[392] Ibid., p. 150.
[393] Ibid., p. 44.

Faus regularly underscore the importance of recognising our responsibility for sin. González Faus contends that structural injustice is caused by human responsibility and wrongdoing, and that Europeans especially are in danger of blinding themselves from their responsibility for this sin.[394] Sobrino critiques the social sciences for laying the blame for structural injustice exclusively on structures, which, in his words, "tends to reduce personal responsibility to anonymity."[395] Ellacuría writes about the need to take responsibility for reality and bear its burden.[396] He argues that wealthy and privileged minorities, who have made "domination, exploitation, and consumerism the gods of their institutional existence," have *objective culpability* for the sinful situation of the world.[397] Thus, although Ellacuría states that personal responsibility is not necessary for the attribution of sin, this does not mean that he regards no one as responsible. Perhaps we can interpret this differentiation between 'personal responsibility' and 'objective culpability' as implying that one can be found objectively guilty and responsible for sin through participation in the communal guilt of one's society or social group, without also being found *individually* and *personally* responsible for the situation from a modern moralistic viewpoint. Thus, accountability for sin goes beyond being responsible for merely our own free action; it expands to include accountability for the pathological situations we are immersed in.

These theologians, however, do not let their concern to maintain a sense of responsibility for sin overshadow their main task of condemning disordered situations as sin, even if it is not immediately evident where responsibility for this sin should lie. Nor do they equate responsibility for sin with a modern notion of moral culpability. In Latin American liberation theology, the focus is less on discerning the individual sinner's guilt and more on prophetically denouncing the poverty and death experienced in Latin America as being against God's will, and hence constituting sin. As Sobrino affirms, his purpose is to "make the First World aware of its own sin and move it to conversion."[398] It therefore focuses on affirming the need for Christians to end this suffering and death through commitment to structural reform and solidarity with those affected. What one individually does, or has done, within this situation is

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[394] González Faus, p. 194.
[395] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 85.
[396] See Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, pp. 2-3.
[397] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 160.
[398] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 68.

important, but ultimately should not be the focus. Sobrino even warns against an excessive concern with discerning one's personal sin and the precise amount of culpability one has for it. He argues that this is actually a type of selfishness: "in Christian terms, persons are called on to turn their gaze upon, and to try to resolve, the negative ultimacy to which *others* are subjected, rather than be obsessed with their *own* sin."[399] The focus in liberation theology is not on individual guilt or action, but rather on the very lives of the poor which are being threatened; it condemns the sources of this unjustly inflicted death as against God's will and calls Christians to action against these sources. It is not the behaviour of the oppressors which should be the primary focus of theological reflection, but rather the victims and their liberation. Liberation theologians try to move the conversation beyond excessive focus on individual blame and guilt, and instead try to promote conversion and structural reform through prophetic condemnation of injustice and its causes. Part of this prophetic denunciation does, however, include creating a sense of accountability and responsibility for the situation on the part of higher income countries.

2.4 Social Sin and Personal Sin

On the surface, it may appear as if Ellacuría, González Faus, and Sobrino present a similar account of the relation between personal and social sin as John Paul II. They argue that sinful social structures have their origin in human actions and attitudes. As Sobrino explains, personal sin — understood as an individual act or attitude — introduces "many evils into reality," including different forms of social sin.[400] Ellacuría uses the example of an individual's greed for possession and wealth which "distorts history and leads it toward oppression."[401] Ellacuría similarly writes that sinful social structures "proceed from persons," although he qualifies that they are not "attributable directly and immediately to any human in particular."[402] Moreover, both liberation theologians and John Paul II agree that social sin can be the cause of personal sin. González Faus aptly summarises this cyclical relationship when he writes that, "[w]hen human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn, make

[399] Ibid., p. 85.
[400] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy,* p. 58.
[401] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 191.
[402] Ibid., p. 44.

human beings sin."[403] There are, however, nuanced differences between liberation theology and John Paul II's thought concerning *how* these personal acts — which are both the cause and effect of structural sin — come to be. Indeed, these differences lead to divergent accounts of the extent to which sin impacts human life, particularly with regards to human agency and freedom. To understand these differences, however, we first must be familiar with the divergent theological anthropologies which underlie these two theological strands.

In the previous chapter we saw how John Paul II regards the human person as a free and, to some extent, autonomous moral agent. Alternatively, within Ellacuría's theological anthropology, human persons are historical realities who are configured, in part, by the historical social forces and structures they inhabit. These social forces and agents are not merely economic or political systems but include all those social forces that "make up culture in the broadest sense."[404] As he asserts, "[w]e have already seen how much the shape of human life depends on the social structure in which human beings develop, which for them is never neutral but a principle of humanization or dehumanization, a principle of life or death, a principle of sin or grace."[405] Thus, the human person is always already configured by sin and/or grace prior to any individual act one commits due to one's situatedness within a socio-historical and cultural context. González Faus also roots his theology of sin in a communitarian social theory;[406] he writes that the human person is never autonomous, but rather is shaped by the institutions they are part of: "where people live together they are never contiguous […] They are inserted into a world of mediations and institutions: family, marriage, profession, city, economy, culture, state, and so on. Therefore the human community is always more than the sum of single human beings."[407] Due to this social configuration of the human person, Ellacuría regards "all personal or collective freedom" to be "conditioned."[408] This is why he describes economic, cultural, and socio-political systems as "determinants of the course of

[403] González Faus, p. 198. See also Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 44 where he writes that structural sin is both "the effect of sin and the cause of new sin."
[404] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 184.
[405] Ibid., p. 182.
[406] See also Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. 43.
[407] González Faus, pp. 197-198.
[408] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* pp. 184-185.

history."[409] These liberation theologians therefore critique the theological anthropology which they perceive to be unconsciously underlying most European theologies of sin, that is, the image of the human person as "neutral in the face of good and evil, equidistant from both, not conditioned to decide for one or the other."[410]

This liberationist theological anthropology has implications for our understanding of the relation between the personal and social aspects of sin. Ellacuría, González Faus, and Sobrino do regard structural sin to be a result of human acts in history, both individual and collective. This origin in human acts, however, does not equate to John Paul II's derivative understanding of social sin as being merely the accumulation of personal sin, that is, the free and conscious acts of individual moral agents. On the contrary, as we saw earlier, structural sin can be created by people with good intentions. Moreover, it seems that liberation theologians do not regard sin to be limited to the realm of conscious and voluntary free choice. Hence, the acts of sin which are at the root of the existence of structural sin do not necessarily have to be conscious and voluntary acts which originate from an individual's autonomous free will. Indeed, the human person may already be configured by sin so that they are conditioned to act in certain ways prior to any individual choice. These acts nonetheless create and contribute to the existence of sinful structures.

Moreover, for John Paul II, structures of sin influence individuals to personally sin by presenting opportunities for them to consciously misuse their freedom in support of evil situations and by presenting obstacles which encourage them not to resist the situation. Hence, the sin which is the effect of social sin remains limited to the realm of conscious and voluntary free choice. Liberation theologians, however, present a more nuanced account of how structural sin influences one to sin. Perhaps the best way to explore this relationship is to examine González Faus and Sobrino's understanding of the theological relationship between sin and blindness. González Faus predicates his account on his exegesis of scripture, specifically Paul's letter to the Romans. He contends that the first analogy for sin should not be conscious actions

[409] Ibid., p. 184.
[410] González Faus, p. 195. We can perhaps include John Paul II's thought within this category of European theologies of sin, although González Faus is not explicitly including him within this critique.

which one recognises as wrong and for which one feels a sense of remorse or guilt.[411] Rather, he asserts:

> Real sin (Paul's hamartia) involves an identification with the sin by the one who commits it, which makes him or her become a liar (cf. John 8:44: Satan who is a liar and father of lies) or blinds his or her heart (cf. Mark 3:5).[412]

Individuals are often unable to recognise sin as it is masked from them. Moreover, it is we who conceal it from ourselves, so much so that we become unable to feel remorse or recognise ourselves as sinners.[413] Sobrino similarly argues that the reality of sin is often hidden from us. He writes that sin has a tendency to "justify itself" and even "present itself cynically as its opposite."[414] He asserts: "sin and concealment go together, both personally and socially. And the size of that concealment is a measure of the sin."[415] Kristin Heyer contends that, for Sobrino, "the unjust act or situation is always accompanied by the lie, collective or individual, that seeks to offer its own self-serving logic and so obscure its reality as sin."[416]

What does this mean, though, for the relationship between the personal and social aspects of human sinfulness? Due to our configuration by the social institutions, structures, and cultures we are born into, we often uncritically assume the principles and worldviews which these institutions present to us, and then act based upon this configuration. As González Faus explains: "the community and the structures governing life together in it can create, more easily than the individual, a series of situations making necessary (and therefore apparently reasonable) ways of behaving which favor individual greed, even though these harm the life and dignity of many others."[417] This, therefore, is one way sin blinds us: it makes certain sinful behaviours or ways of living seem reasonable and even necessary. Moreover, humans are the ones who create these structures, cultures, and institutions; therefore, it is we who blind ourselves from sin, albeit unconsciously. In this way, human beings become liars who

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[411] González Faus, p. 197.
[412] Ibid.
[413] Ibid. See also Sobrino where he writes that "we have the innate tendency to hide from ourselves and repress our truth as sinners." (Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 89.)
[414] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 61.
[415] Jon Sobrino, *Where is God?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 41.
[416] Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders,* p. 44.
[417] González Faus, p. 198.

"seek to oppress their own truth."[418] Sobrino also draws this conclusion from the scriptural tradition, arguing:

> [W]e have the innate tendency to hide from ourselves and repress our truth as sinners (what Paul universalizes in Rom. 1:18ff.), to the point of being able actually to think that we give worship to God when we send our siblings to their death (see John 16:2) […] [W]e produce human traditions in order to justify the voiding of God's will, or in order to act in a manner contrary to the divine will, although we may spuriously think we are acting in God's name.[419]

Thus, the responsibility for this collective blinding lies with humanity itself, even though we may not be found culpable for it from a modern moralistic perspective.[420]

González Faus gives two examples of how specific socio-economic systems can blind us so that we are unable to recognise the sinfulness of the situation:

> The two ruling systems in our world are based upon a lie that is never stated but transmitted through the injustice of their socioeconomic relations. The false truth of capitalism is that a human being *is not worth anything.* The false truth of the communism existing at the moment is that a human is *always an enemy.*[421]

He argues that certain forms of personal action, thinking, and behaviour necessarily follow from these wider cultural and structural attitudes; these behaviours are "justified by the reasons inherent in the system."[422] He exemplifies this through the true story of a devastating earthquake in Mexico City. After the earthquake, some business owners prioritised retrieving machinery from the ruins of their buildings before any attempt was made to rescue the workers who were trapped beneath the rubble. Out of context this behaviour may seem outrageous, however González Faus explains that these actions are "rational within the logic of competition and profit maximisation; the machine cannot be replaced without a considerable investment whereas it is quite easy to replace the worker."[423] In this particular situation, therefore,

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[418] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy,* p. 93.
[419] Ibid., p. 89.
[420] See also González Faus, pp. 196-197.
[421] González Faus, pp. 199-200.
[422] Ibid., p. 200.
[423] Ibid.

human beings were valued primarily in terms of their economic usefulness, which led to them being regarded as replaceable or expendable. Because of this, certain unjust decisions or actions, such as those taken by the business owners, were deemed normal and justifiable.

Sobrino similarly explains that a capitalist society — what he terms a "civilisation of capital" — prioritises and values above all else the possession and accumulation of capital, as well as one's enjoyment of it.[424] This cultural and socio-economic outlook leads people to act in certain ways which cause human harm: "[t]he civilization of wealth produces primordial ways of thinking and feeling that in turn mold cultural and ideological structures that contaminate the very air we breathe."[425] The image of the good life which is promoted by capitalism is often "accepted without justification and unquestioningly prized and promoted" by the people living within the socio-economic system.[426] Thus, individualism, comfort, pleasure, and the possession of capital become regarded as ultimate social goods to be prized above all else. Once this outlook is uncritically accepted within society, people become unrestrained in their pursuit of this image of 'success' and 'the good life,' which inevitably leads to the despoilment of other people's lives, as well as their own dehumanisation.[427] Thus, cultural, socio-economic, and ideological structures blind us in such a way that disordered ways of acting and behaving become regarded as normal, justifiable, or even necessary. As Sobrino concludes:

> Such dehumanization is assumed with an attitude of impotence and naturalness ("That's just the way things are!), and it is hardly noticeable since, in contrast to the evils that produce physical death or move people toward it, the evils of the spirit are not so obviously calculable. But they are harmful.[428]

It is in this way that structures of sin influence individuals to commit acts of sin.

Sobrino also briefly notes another way people can become blinded or contaminated by this socio-economic system and image of the good life, that is, by the mass media:

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[424] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 35.
[425] Ibid., p. 40.
[426] Ibid., p. 41.
[427] Ibid., p. 40.
[428] Ibid., p. 41.

> We are dehumanized by going beyond the pale of the truth — by concealment of the truth and proliferation of the lie, by silence in the face of scandalous inequality between rich and poor, by the dormant state of the rich — and also of the poor — that is precisely intended by the mass media.[429]

The roles which the mass media and social media play in shaping people's worldview so that they become blinded to sin needs, however, to be explored further.

We do not have to look further than the UK to find other examples of how a society which values and prioritises the accumulation of capital can cause individuals or companies to act in certain ways which cause human harm. In 2020 the fashion brand Boohoo, as well as other prominent names within the fast-fashion textile industry, were accused of having poor working conditions and possible minimum-wage violations at factories in its supply chain within the UK.[430] Unfortunately, this cannot be considered an isolated incident, but is one example of an industry-wide way of working; around the world, garment workers are often paid very little in poor and unsafe working conditions. Within the logic of neoliberal consumer capitalism — which prioritises profit maximisation and values competition and self-advancement — both the senior directors at Boohoo and the managers within these Leicester factories could be regarded as acting rationally and justifiably; after all, they were helping the company to accumulate more profit in a competitive market. As we have seen, the blinding effects of the sinful structures of one's society make disordered ways of acting and behaving become regarded as normal, justifiable, or even necessary. Perhaps they did not recognise that what they were doing was wrong and contributing to injustice; perhaps the managers were just doing what they thought they needed to do to get by and earn their pay cheque in a tough economy and job market; or perhaps they prioritised the accumulation of profit over the well-being of their workers. Nevertheless, these decisions and actions contributed to human harm. As María Teresa Dávila asserts: "'Cheap fashion' is an example of the hidden exploitation and violence that *takes place every day* as market values clash with care for the

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[429] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 40.

[430] Archie Bland, 'Revealed: Auditors Raised Minimum-Wage Red Flags at Boohoo Factories', *Guardian*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/aug/28/revealed-auditors-raised-minimum-wage-red-flags-at-boohoo-factories> [accessed 19 May 2021].

environment and concern for the poor."[431] In a similar way, the logic of neoliberal consumer capitalism — which equates success with material achievement and regards the accumulation and possession of material goods on the part of consumers to be a social good — suggests that the people who buy these fast-fashion products are also acting reasonably and justifiably. Here we see another example of how the image of 'success' and 'the good life' offered by consumer capitalism can lead one to act in ways which despoil other people's lives: many individuals are so blinded by the values of individualism, consumerism, and self-advancement that they do not care, or even consider, where their garments come from or how much garment workers are paid; nor do they consider the significant environmental impact of fast-fashion. Their image of the good is so skewed by the socio-economic system that they do not realise that their actions are contributing to injustice and real human harm, or, if they do, they do not feel a sense of remorse or guilt for it. As Dávila argues, the cultural values which shape middle-class identity — values such as "individualism, self-advancement, and competition" — often create tension with values associated with the option for the poor.[432] Hence, despite being a contextual theology with a specific emphasis on pastoral concern for the Church in Latin America, we can see how the theology of sin presented by liberation theologians has relevance beyond the specific context it was written from and for.

Thus, one cannot evaluate an individual's actions without paying attention to the wider cultural, economic, and social forces which influenced their decisions. As González Faus writes, "one person alone could not construct [the] whole system of excuses" needed to blind oneself from sin. Hence, "evil, like the human being is never just personal, although it is also personal. And therefore any personally sinful human being is both responsible and a victim."[433] A new understanding of victimhood begins to emerge within this specific construal of the relation between personal and social sin. Individual human sinners who perform acts of personal sin are also victims due to the way that structures of sin blind and condition them; they also need to be freed from

[431] María Teresa Dávila, 'The Option for the Poor in *Laudato Si'*: Connecting Care of Creation with Care for the Poor', in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything is Connected*, ed. by Vincent J. Miller (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), pp. 145-159 (p. 150).
[432] María Teresa Dávila, 'A Liberation Ethic for the One-third World: The Preferential Option for the Poor and Challenges to Middle-class Christianity in the United States' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, 2007).
[433] González Faus, pp. 197-198.

the sinful situation. As Sobrino affirms, these sinful realities *need* individual sinners, without whom they would cease to exist: They need "particular agents" to "cause particular offenses," in whom "the great sin takes particular shape, and the idols are personalized."[434] Hence, to remain in existence, the sin objectified in social structures or institutions needs to "configure the life of both oppressors and oppressed"[435] in such a way that personal sin is prolonged or caused by these situations. Sobrino often uses the language of enslavement; he asserts that individual sinners are enslaved by sin and thus need to be liberated from the sinful situation, as well as from themselves.[436] Drawing from Sobrino's theology, Heyer concludes that "both institutions and ideologies created and sustained by persons and persons shaped by institutions and ideologies are guilty of sin and therefore in need of transformation."[437] She applauds the inclusion of an unconscious and involuntary dimension in Sobrino's account of social sin; a dimension which, she asserts, holds "considerable potential for unmasking the ideological and subconscious dynamics at play" in modern unjust situations.[438] More remains to be done, however, in discerning *how* social sin comes to blind and condition us in this way, particularly concerning the role which cultural, linguistic, and symbolic systems play in this collective blinding. This is a lacunae which could potentially be filled by Judith Butler's theory of the 'constitutive sociality of the self.' Their theories regarding how unjust societies and situations can shape consciousness may help us to further discern how social sin shapes human living and acting in the world. Butler's thought will be the focus of chapter four.

Thus, in the liberationist account of sin, structural sin has the power to condition human behaviour through being the cause of new sin or continuing and prolonging personal sin.[439] The individual sinners caught up within sinful situations are simultaneously both sinners and victims. This acknowledgement of victimhood, however, should not lead to a 'sin levelling' whereby all people are regarded as equally sinful without recognition that some participate in these sinful situations in more serious and grave ways. The phrase 'we're all sinners' is regularly used amongst Christians, usually in an attempt to end attitudes of hypocrisy, judgement, and

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[434] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 62.
[435] Ellacuria, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 184.
[436] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy,* pp. 58-59, 63, 65, 93, 100.
[437] Heyer, 'Social Sin and Immigration', p. 422.
[438] Ibid., pp. 420-422.
[439] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 154.

condemnation, and thus with a good intention. The phrase is problematic, though, in that it often masks gross inequalities and serves to justify or excuse oppressors from their sinful behaviour: 'We are all sinners, and so we must regard and treat both oppressor and oppressed as the same.' Sobrino rejects any account of a "total historical symmetry between the poor and the nonpoor" in terms of wickedness and holiness. He argues against such a symmetry on the basis that "[t]he poor are those who have (almost) all the powers of this world arrayed against them."[440] Thus, within liberation theology, the language of victimhood is not used to suggest that all people are equally victimised by the system and that all must be approached primarily with compassion and solidarity rather than condemnation and criticism. Liberation theologians do not use this language to reject any hierarchies of sin. Neither do they excuse the sinner from any accountability or blame for their actions and choices. Rather, the language of victimhood is used to acknowledge the belief that we are *all* in need of grace; we are *all* in need of liberation from the sinful situations which come to shape and configure our lives in ways that are beyond our control, both oppressor and oppressed, victim and perpetrator. It is also used to express the idea — evidenced in the historical reality of Latin America — that the individual person is not, and cannot be, the sole cause of sin and injustice, and thus cannot alone be at fault. As Ellacuría writes:

> Structures manifest and actualize the power of sin, thereby causing sin, by making it exceedingly difficult for men and women to lead the life that is rightfully theirs as the daughters and sons of God […] It causes sin by presenting obstacles to the dynamism of the Reign of God among human beings.[441]

2.5 The Poor as Mediators of Christ's Salvific Grace

González Faus, Sobrino, and Ellacuría do not present fatalistic accounts of sin, despite contending that human freedom and agency is conditioned by it. Instead, these theologians argue that it is possible for humans to overcome sin and any societal forces

[440] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 74.

[441] Ignacio Ellacuría, 'Aporte de la Teología de la Liberación a las Religiones Abrahámicas en la Superación del Individualismo y del Positivismo,' manuscript of an address to the Congress of Abrahamic Religions held at Córdoba, Spain, in February 1987, pp. 10-12, as cited by Jon Sobrino, 'Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology' in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology,* ed. by Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 350-388 (p. 355).

compelling them to sin. In doing so, they retain the Christian hope in transformation and reconciliation. Unlike John Paul II, however, this ability to resist sin is not rooted in any notion of the inviolability of human freedom or conscience. Rather, it is rooted in an account of grace:

> [R]evelation asserts that sin as human beings' radical failure is not their ultimate potential — that for the sinner, too, there is good news, a future open to possibilities — and it expresses this now in terms of salvation, now in terms of forgiveness or redemption.[442]

Thus, a life free from sin is (theoretically) achievable, but only through the salvation effected through God's action in history. This means that true repentance from sin is dependent upon the gift of God's communication and grace: "Conversion, then, is not a Pelagian affair, but an enabled one."[443] According to these liberation theologians, humans need to receive God's revelation and grace to even comprehend what sin is and how to repent from it. Because of sin's blinding effects on the human person, one should not presume that we already adequately know what sin is and how to recognize it. Rather, Sobrino argues that "in order to know what sin is and what to do about it, one must be actively open to what God says of sin and does about sin. One must be open to the surprise that this may entail."[444] Thus, liberation theologians contend that even recognition of sin is impossible without God's grace and revelation; it requires a graced way of seeing and knowing.

So where can we find God's presence and grace today? For liberation theologians, it is the victims of structural sin who are the locus of God's presence in history. As we have previously seen, they interpret this divine presence christologically: the poor in Latin America are the continuation of Christ's presence in history. Sobrino regards the poor and oppressed in Latin American as crucified peoples: "From a Christian point of view, God himself makes himself present in these crosses […] the crucified people are the actualization of Christ crucified, the true servant of Yahweh."[445] Moreover, not only are the poor, dispossessed, and marginalised the location of God's presence, they are also mediators of God's grace

[442] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 89.
[443] Ibid., p. 92.
[444] Ibid., pp. 88-89
[445] Ibid., p. 51. See also pp. 78, 97, 99. See also Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, pp. 71 and 75.

and forgiveness.[446] This is because, for Sobrino, the divine presence in history renders it salvific. As Rafael Luciani explains: “This salvific dimension of history […] is the result of the presence *in actu* of God in this history. In Latin America, this divine presence is understood not in generic terms but in a concrete manner in the figure of Christ himself.”[447] Thus, because the poor are the continuation of Christ’s historical presence in the world today, they are also the location of Christ’s salvific grace and revelation. As Jorge Costadoat asserts, for Sobrino, “[s]alvation depends on Christ, and it is the ‘crucified peoples’ who make Christ's crucified body present in history […] By incorporating Christ into history, the poor sacramentally mediate his salvation.”[448] Sobrino uses the phrase “bearers of salvation” to refer to this sacramental mediation of salvation by the poor and oppressed.[449] Hence, historical reality is not merely a place of sin and death, but also a place of grace. In this way liberation theologians retain the fundamental Christian hope as recorded in scripture that where sin is found, grace abounds all the more.[450] As Sobrino writes, “Latin America is a place of sin but also a place of forgiveness. Sin abounds, but grace is more abounding.”[451]

Thus, just as we can only know what sin is through the person of Jesus Christ, similarly we can only come to identify social sin through the contributions of the poor and oppressed. The Christological and salvific presence of divine grace within the poor enables their oppressors and the rest of humanity to recognise their sin. The poor are the light which makes it possible to overcome sin’s blinding effects. As Sobrino explains: “The poor are *bearers of truth.* By virtue of what they are, they offer light to the world of abundance, so that this world might see its own truth and thus be able to move toward all truth.”[452] Luciani writes that, for Sobrino, “these victims are the bearers of a soteriological dimension because they bring salvation to human beings as a light that unmasks the lies and the dehumanization that exist in the world.”[453] Both Sobrino and Ellacuría use the metaphor of an inverted mirror to clarify this. They argue

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[446] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 101.
[447] Luciani, ‘Hermeneutics and Theology in Sobrino's Christology’.
[448] Costadoat, ‘Central Themes in Sobrino's Christology’.
[449] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 53.
[450] See Romans 5:20. All quotations from the Bible in this thesis use the New Revised Standard Version translation.
[451] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 67.
[452] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 60.
[453] Luciani, ‘Hermeneutics and Theology in Sobrino's Christology’.

that the poor of Latin America, and indeed all the crucified peoples around the world, act like "an inverted mirror which the First World, on seeing itself disfigured, comes to know itself in its truth, which it otherwise seeks to hide by every means possible."[454] Sobrino concludes that it is the "light that comes from the poor" which enables higher income countries to overcome their sinful blindness.[455] This overcoming of blindness is what enables our recognition of sin, and hence, ultimately, our repentance. Thus, Christ's presence among the poor renders them principal agents of salvation; to be healed of our sinfulness and brokenness we must first *receive* the gifts of grace which the poor have to offer us. We must listen before we act. Indeed, Sobrino affirms:

> The poor, then, are the concrete historical mediation of God's forgiveness that is acceptance. And if it is true that, on the basis of forgiveness, the recognition and acknowledgement of one's own sin becomes possible, and strength is gained for a practice contrary to sin, then what this says is that today, as well, we have the possibility of recognizing the sin of the world and deciding on its eradication.[456]

This account decentres the individual sinner, and privileged individuals from higher income countries, as the principal actors in conversion and liberation. The ability to repent from sin is a gift which is given from outside of oneself, rather than something achieved by the sinner: It is graced encounter with the victims of sin which enables conversion and repentance. Agency and power are shifted from the oppressor to the oppressed. Moreover, our salvation is worked out in and through our interactions with others. God, therefore, does not bring about salvation apart from human agency and outside of history. Rather, within this account of grace, God works in and through creaturely realities to secure our salvation and heal us from sin. There is, therefore, a non-competitive relation between divine and human agency.

Consequently, predicated on a Christological account of grace, liberation theologians maintain that it is possible for humans to know and attain the good. They do not foreclose the possibility that humans can transform sinful situations due to this presence of divine grace within the world. There is, therefore, a dialectical understanding to the human situation: humans are both enslaved by sin *and* offered

[454] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, p. 60.
[455] Ibid., p. 61.
[456] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy,* p. 99. See also p. 56.

the gift of freedom through grace; they are simultaneously shaped by both sin and grace. This dialectical understanding of the human condition is aptly summarised by González Faus: "Humans are beings infected by evil, almost identified with it; *at the same time* they are also beings enveloped in goodness and grace, called by it, and its seeds are sown in the deepest depths of their humanity. Both aspects belong to Latin American spirituality's most vivid experience."[457] Thus, within this particular account of social sin, sin thoroughly shapes human living and acting in the world. It is not, however, the only force which does so; with every instance of sin, divine grace is also present, calling us to conversion and gifting humanity with the strength needed to repent. Liberation theology's account of social sin has vast implications for our theological anthropology and self-understanding as sinful, but graced human beings caught up within wider communal situations of both sin and grace.

2.6 The Ecclesial Model of Response

This account of the relation between the personal and social aspects of human sinfulness leads these thinkers to offer a different ecclesial model of response than John Paul II. As we saw in the last chapter, the solution offered by the Pope is to appeal to the conscience of individuals. Hence, there is a priority placed on moral suasion, over and above the need to transform any disordered cultural, economic, or political structures. This contrasts with Ellacuría's conclusion that, to truly confront sin, the task of integral liberation *must* include an overcoming of "the structures of sin and *not just sinful intentionality*."[458] Christian praxis must seek to transform the socio-economic and political structures which sustain and perpetuate poverty, injustice, and oppression and which cause human harm and death in a variety of ways. Liberation theologians bring action for social justice to the heart of the Christian faith and our vocation to resist sin. Differences in emphasis regarding the centrality and priority of personal sin therefore leads to significant disparities concerning Christian praxis. As we have seen, due to the blindness which sin creates, moral suasion alone is not sufficient to effect true conversion and repentance. Instead, there needs to be an experience of graced encounter with the victims of social sin. Moreover, to truly effect change, it is not enough merely to focus on the conversion of individuals without an

[457] González Faus, p. 195.
[458] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 43. Emphasis mine.

effort to also transform unjust social structures.[459] Hence, the lived experience of the victims of sin needs to be at the centre of social concern and action, and the ideologies and social structures which perpetuate blindness need to be transformed.

2.7 Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter we have seen how liberation theologians present a significantly different account of social sin to John Paul II, particularly concerning the meaning and scope of the concept. They offer a specifically theological account of why the disordered social structures in Latin America can properly be called sin: they are contrary to the will of God, are the cause of human harm and death, and can be considered "idols to whom the dignity of human life is sacrificed."[460] These theologians do not limit the language of sin to a moralistic discourse, and hence their theologies can help towards the development of a compelling theological account of social sin. Thus, despite being a contextual theology with a specific emphasis on pastoral concern for the Church in Latin America, we can see how the theology of sin presented by liberation theologians has relevance beyond the specific context it was written from and for.

What is pertinent within the thought of these theologians is their contention that, due to the necessary inclusion of God within definitions of sin, there is an indefinability to sin which means that all the language we use to describe sin is analogous. Thus, there can be no one exclusive, definitive, or conclusive definition for sin. Instead, these theologians offer a multitude of theological metaphors and definitions which can be used. This means that we need to be flexible in our theological sin-talk: Our understanding of sin must always remain open to correction and critique. We must be receptive to God's self-communication and revelation in history; to what God is saying and doing about sin in present reality. To do this, one needs to remain open to an experience of graced encounter with the victims of sin within history; we need to allow them to heal us of our sinful blindness and enable recognition of sin, thereby illuminating any errors in our theologies of sin. Indeed, the strength of the liberationist account of sin is in its methodology and the Christology

[459] It would also be impractical and unreasonable to assume that every single person on the planet can be appealed to in such a way that they convert and refrain from sinning or cooperating with unjust situations, especially without a radical transformation of culture and socio-economic system.
[460] Ellacuría, *Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation,* p. 184.

which underlies it; how it places the experience and perspective of the poorest and the marginalised at the centre of theological discernment on sin. As Anna Rowlands summarises, within liberation theology there is "a determined shift in standpoint, situating the experience of the most marginalized, dispossessed and victimized as the vantage point for narrating the social dimensions of sin and salvation."[461] It is this recognition of our blindness — and the subsequent conclusion that our theological reflections on sin have to be done in solidarity with the poorest and most oppressed and marginalised within our particular social and historical contexts — which is the greatest gift that liberation theology can offer the task of developing a compelling theological account of social sin.

Thus, González Faus, Ellacuría, and Sobrino bring us closer towards answering the question: What is sin, and why can social structures, situations, or cultures be called sin within a Catholic theological framework? What these theologians do not do, however, is explicitly and systematically demonstrate why their theological accounts of structural sin are in creative, but faithful, continuity with the pre-existing Catholic tradition. This is due to the specific concerns and methodologies of these theologians; as we have already seen, the concern to explicitly, systematically, and comprehensively evidence how their developments are faithful to pre-existing theological beliefs is not their priority. Hence, their specific configurations of social sin do not fully resolve the issues which arose as a consequence of John Paul II's critique, despite taking us significantly further towards a compelling theological account of social sin. Further work remains to be done on (1) discerning why it is in faithful, but creative, continuity with the pre-existing Catholic tradition to condemn disordered social structures, situations, or cultures as sin, and (2) demonstrating why John Paul II's critique and subsequent reconfiguration of the concept of social sin is discontinuous with pre-existing doctrines and beliefs. To do this, one would need to show that, within the pre-existing Catholic tradition, the idea of sin is not limited to describing immoral acts for which one can be found morally culpable. One would need to show that there is precedent within the tradition for expanding the concept of sin beyond exclusive focus on immoral acts and attitudes, and hence that the liberationist account of 'social' or 'structural' sin is in faithful continuity with the pre-existing

[461] Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), p. 105.

tradition. Using the language of liberation theology, therefore, there is a need to demonstrate that God's revelation within present reality is not contrary to pre-existing truths of faith, but rather that this historical self-communication is the hermeneutical key to truly understanding pre-existing beliefs which may have been forgotten, distorted, or underdeveloped within the tradition. González Faus has already identified one pre-existing doctrine within the Catholic tradition which can help us to do this; he writes that, "[i]f it is theologically legitimate to speak of original sin, it is also legitimate to speak of structural sin."[462] This is because original sin cannot be defined as "the fruit of a free and responsible decision by each person."[463] He does not, however, explore the Catholic doctrine in any depth to evidence or validate this claim. Hence, in the next chapter we shall explore the traditional doctrine of original sin to discern whether it puts into question the orthodoxy of a theological account which limits the definition of sin to a freely willed, immoral human act. Indeed, traditional accounts of original sin can further aid us in our discernment of what constitutes a distinctively Catholic theological account of sin.

In this chapter, we have also seen how liberation theologians ground their account of the relation between the personal and social aspects of human sinfulness in their theological anthropology of human persons as historical realities who are configured, in part, by their socio-temporal locations and the historical social forces and structures they inhabit. Humans are not autonomous and never act independent of any social conditioning factors. Cultural and socio-economic structures can blind individuals in such a way that sinful ways of acting and behaving become regarded as normal, justifiable, or even necessary. Thus, within a situation of social sin, the human person may be configured by sin so that they are conditioned to act in certain ways prior to any individual choice. It is in this way that one's freedom and agency can become constrained and conditioned by sin. Sinful situations therefore shape and configure our lives in ways that are beyond our control, both oppressor and oppressed, victim and perpetrator. This account of the blindness which sin creates within the human person begins to develop a theology of sin whereby sin has the power to shape one's interiority and subjectivity — much more than John Paul II allows for — by shaping one's worldview. Using the language of Weaver, therefore, we can say that

[462] González Faus, p. 199.
[463] Ibid.

social sin seems to operate not just around and on, but also in the human person.[464] There is less of a separation between the person and the social situation they are part of, that is, between the interior and the exterior. As Heyer aptly concludes: "If the magisterial understanding of social sin remains primarily personal or interpersonal, sin as blindness denotes a transpersonal sense of sin."[465]

More discernment is needed, however, concerning *how* social sin comes to blind and condition us in this way, particularly the role which cultural, linguistic, and symbolic systems play in this collective blinding. Moreover, although these theologians begin to hint at a more nuanced account of how we are formed as acting and deliberating subjects through interaction with socio-political and economic structures, more thinking remains to be done concerning the way culture contributes towards the constitution of the self through the formation of worldview, affect, will, and desire. Due to the immediacy of the poverty, death, and suffering caused by neoliberal consumer capitalism in Latin America, it is understandable that these theologians focus specifically on sinful economic and political structures.[466] Their accounts of social sin, however, could be developed further through closer analysis of the cultural social forces and norms which underlie and sustain these structures, and which contribute towards the social constitution of the personally sinful self. It is my belief that feminist social theorist Judith Butler can help develop the account of social sin in this way. This will be the focus of chapter four.

Moreover, a new understanding of victimhood begins to emerge within this specific construal of the relation between personal and social sin. Individual human sinners who perform acts of personal sin are also victims due to the way structures of sin blind and condition them; they also need to be freed from the sinful situation. Moreover, the freedom to repent from this sin is not an inherent part of the human

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[464] Weaver, p. 54.

[465] Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders*, p. 44.

[466] González Faus himself admits that liberation theologians have focused their understanding of social sin almost exclusively on economic structures, writing that: "Liberation theology has recovered [the Johannine notion of the sin of the world], even though it may be said that it has formulated it almost exclusively in terms of economic structures (a logical procedure given the enormous cry for the most basic human necessities lacked by the great majority of Latin Americans)." See González Faus, p. 198. Similarly, in his introduction to the book of essays on liberation theology he edited, Sobrino acknowledges that liberation theologians should expand their analysis to include other forms of cultural oppression: "We ought to take up and consider in depth the various kinds of oppression, not only the socio-economic versions, but also those perpetrated in the areas of culture, ethnicity, religion, women, children, and nature." See, Jon Sobrino, 'Preface' in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology,* ed. by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. vii-xi (p. ix).

condition but can only be achieved through grace — specifically that grace which is mediated through the victims of structural injustice, namely, the poor, oppressed, and marginalised. Without this divine presence within history, it seems that humans do not possess the awareness, self-determination, or efficacy necessary to overcome the blindness which sin creates. Therefore, González Faus, Sobrino, and Ellacuría's accounts of the way sin impacts human living and acting in the world differs significantly from John Paul II's. They are nevertheless able to safeguard the belief that it is possible for humans to know and attain the good through their Christology and account of grace. This enables them to avoid presenting a fatalistic account of the human situation. The possibility that humans can transform sinful situations is not foreclosed due to this presence of the divine effecting conversion and transformation within history. The human person remains open to transcendence and transformation. Moreover, this recognition of victimhood does not absolve human persons from any sense of individual responsibility for sin. As we saw, guilt for sin is not correlated with a modern moralistic understanding of culpability; one can be found accountable without the critical freedom and awareness necessary for moral culpability. Thus, their accounts of social sin can arguably be regarded as staying in creative fidelity with the tradition of Catholic social teaching and John Paul II's concerns, despite presenting a significantly different account of why structures can be called sin, and how this sin impacts human living and acting in the world. They remain attentive to some of the Pope's core concerns.

Moreover, underlying these theologians' accounts of social sin, we can perceive some suggestions towards a kind of 'becoming' within their theological anthropology: human selfhood is dynamic, rather than static, and therefore, so too is history.[467] Creation is not yet finished. This means that humans, and history, are both capable of developing in such a way that they either conform to God's will or contradict it by obstructing its actualisation within history. Thus, like John Paul II, these theologians' suggestions towards a more dynamic understanding of the human person present us with opportunities for further reflection on a more dynamic and social account of human selfhood and its relation to sin.

[467] See also Dornan, p. 222.

3. Continuing the Conversation: Insights from Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent

Christian thinkers throughout the millennia have reflected on humanity's historical condition vis-à-vis God, and the language of sin is central to these reflections. The notions of social sin we have previously examined have all been developed by thinkers who situate themselves within the Catholic tradition. Their theologies are a creative rethinking of various aspects of traditional Catholic teaching on sin. Catholicism, therefore, has a rich and varied tradition on sin which can potentially help shed light on the issues we have identified so far. As we previously saw, John Paul II does not present a fully satisfactory theological account of what sin is and how it impacts human living and acting in the world. Moreover, although liberation theologians take us significantly further towards a compelling theological account of social sin, their theologies do not fully resolve the issues which arose as a consequence of John Paul II's critique. Further work remains to be done on (1) discerning why it is in faithful, but creative, continuity with the pre-existing Catholic tradition to condemn disordered social structures, situations, or cultures as sin, and (2) demonstrating why John Paul II's moralistic interpretation of social sin is discontinuous with pre-existing doctrines and beliefs. Delving deeper into the pre-existing tradition, therefore, will take us further towards addressing some of these salient issues.

It is beyond the scope of this study to present the whole history of the idea of sin within Catholic thought. This chapter will instead examine some of the key points which have arisen within the Catholic tradition regarding one particular teaching on sin, that is, the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine is significant because it has the potential to challenge purely moralistic accounts of sin, as theologians such as Alistair McFadyen and Rudi A. te Velde have argued.[468] Moreover, both John Paul II and liberation theologians draw on this doctrine at various points in their writings. González Faus writes that, "[i]f it is theologically legitimate to speak of original sin,

[468] See Rudi A. te Velde, 'Evil, Sin, and Death: Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin', in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* ed. by Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 143-166 <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.2307/j.ctvpj7g49.13>, (pp. 143-144), where he writes: "From the perspective of modern moral theory, based on human autonomy and individual responsibility, the idea of original sin is likely to be rejected as some sort of relic from a 'dark' religious past, which lacked a genuine moral conception of sin and guilt." See also te Velde, p. 152 and McFadyen, pp. 14-42.

it is also legitimate to speak of structural sin."[469] He does not, however, explore the Catholic doctrine in sufficient depth to evidence or validate this claim. Hence, in this chapter we will explore the traditional doctrine of original sin to see if it can aid us in our discernment of whether the reality of sin should, or should not, be limited to that of a free, self-determined, and personal act of the will. Within this doctrine, is sin defined by a modern notion of moral culpability? Are freedom of choice and the capacity for self-determination prerequisites for the attribution of guilt? Through my analysis of two seminal writings on original sin from the corpus of Catholic thought, I will show that the doctrine of original sin does indeed present a challenge to moralistic theologies of sin. This chapter will also explore what other key themes emerge within the orthodox Catholic tradition on original sin. This, in turn, will help shed light on the nature and reality of sin in general.

The two bodies of thought we will examine in this chapter are the writings of Thomas Aquinas and the documents of the Council of Trent. As I noted earlier, Thomas Aquinas is an important figure for the Roman Catholic Church. His thought has significantly influenced Catholic social teaching and Catholic theology more broadly. His account of original sin written in the 13th century had a significant influence on the decree on original sin written at the Council of Trent. There are other prominent theologians within the Catholic tradition who had a significant influence on the theologies of both Trent and Aquinas, most notably St Augustine. The reason I have chosen to explore Aquinas, rather than Augustine, however, is because there is a complicated history of interpretation concerning Augustine's theology on sin; his writings played a prominent role for both Protestant *and* Catholic interpretations of salvation and sin within the Reformation. As we saw earlier, many thinkers regard the decree on original sin generated in 1546 at the Council of Trent's fifth session to be one of the most important documents on original sin in the Catholic tradition.[470] Moreover, as I previously noted, one of the main purposes of the Council was to clarify the Church's teachings in response to challenges posed by Reformation theologians.[471] Thus, both Aquinas and the documents of the Council give us deeper insight into the

[469] González Faus, p. 199.
[470] Lombardo, p. 143. See also Vandervelde, pp. 32-33.
[471] Lombardo, p. 143.

Catholic tradition's particular understanding of original sin, with its distinctive emphases, and indeed sin more generally.

In this chapter, therefore, I shall outline their particular theologies of original sin. In the course of doing so, I will identify some of the contributions which these bodies of thought can make towards the development of a Catholic theological understanding of what sin is and how it impacts human living and acting in the world. We shall first look at what emerges in each body of thought concerning their definitions of original sin — that is, what is it? — before going on to explore how we can be considered guilty for this sin that we did not individually commit. We will then examine the effects of original sin on human life and agency within their respective writings, before finally discerning why they can maintain the belief that human freedom is not altogether destroyed by sin. Consequently, I will move back and forth between Aquinas and Trent throughout the chapter on a thematic basis.

3.1 A Disruption to the Moralistic Narrative: Original Sin

3.1.1 Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin

Throughout his various writings, Thomas Aquinas presents a multitude of different definitions of sin. For example, he refers to it as that which is against human nature and reason; that which is contrary to the will of God and eternal law; that which constitutes a turning away from, or rejection of, God; and that which is an offense against God.[472] Perhaps the most explicit definition of sin which Aquinas presents, however, is in the *Prima Secundae* of his *Summa Theologiae.* Here Aquinas writes: "As has been said, sin is nothing else but a bad human act."[473] Here it is possible to read John Paul II as remaining in continuity with Thomas' thought when he argues that sin is always a human act: "Sin, in the proper sense, is always a personal act, since it is an act of freedom on the part of an individual person."[474] It is interesting to note, however, that Aquinas' definition of sin as a human act occurs within the context of his broader exploration of moral theology, specifically the moral categories of *peccatum* (the religious category of sin) and *vitium* (the Aristotelean category of

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[472] See for example, 1a2ae. 71, 6; 1a2ae. 71, 2, ad 4; 1a2ae. 71, 6, ad 4; 1a2ae. 73, 1; and 1a2ae. 71, 6, ad 5.
[473] 1a2ae. 71, 6.
[474] RP, §16.

vice).[475] Thus, although he presents what could be regarded as a definitive moralistic account of sin, this definition occurs, as te Velde notes, within a specific "systematic framework", namely, that of "the moral consideration of human acts."[476]

When we delve deeper into Aquinas' theology, however, we find that, for him, the story of sin is more complicated than a mere moralistic understanding of sin can account for. Even within the context of St Thomas' treatment of moral theology, he already begins to develop a wider theological understanding of sin. After presenting this definition of sin as "nothing else but a bad human act," Aquinas immediately complicates this definition by drawing on Augustine to further distinguish between the "material" and the "formal" elements of sin:

> Accordingly, St Augustine includes two things in the definition of sin: one pertains to the substance of the human act and is, as it were, the material element of sin, i.e. 'word, deed or desire'; the other pertains to the nature of evil and is the formal element of sin, i.e. contrary to the eternal law.[477]

Thus, although the material element of sin is a human act, nevertheless here Aquinas presents a formal, and necessarily theological, understanding of sin which is potentially wider in scope than just encompassing human acts: it is that which is contrary to the eternal law. In other words, it is that which is contrary to the will and "mind of God."[478] Moreover, Aquinas later defines sin, not just as a bad human act, but as "a disordered human action"[479] which finds its cause in the human will. A human act is disordered precisely because it "does not meet the standard for human behaviour," a standard which is subject both to human reason and the eternal law.[480] Hence, a person sins when they act in ways contrary to reason and the divine will. To understand *why* humans sin and *why* we will and act in ways which are disordered, though, one needs to understand Aquinas' theological anthropology, particularly his understanding of original sin and its consequences on human nature.

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[475] Te Velde, p. 144 and p. 150. See also Eileen Sweeney, 'Vice and Sin (IaIIae, qq.71-89)', in *The Ethics of Aquinas,* ed. by Stephen J. Pope (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), pp. 151-168 (p. 152).
[476] Te Velde, p. 144.
[477] 1a2ae. 71, 6.
[478] 1a2ae. 71, 6.
[479] 1a2ae. 75, 1.
[480] 1a2ae. 71, 6.

To understand the significance of original sin for the human person in Aquinas' thought, one must first understand his concept of original justice. He argues that, prior to the Fall, humans existed in a state of original justice. This state of original justice meant that humans lived in a condition of harmony: one's reason, namely one's mind and will, was perfectly subjected to God; one's body was perfectly subjected to one's soul; and one's lower powers were subject to one's higher powers.[481] Thus, in the words of te Velde, in Thomas' thought, the human person was able to live "in harmony with God, with himself, and with his body."[482] Indeed, Aquinas writes that in the state of original justice "the lower powers of the soul [were] held harmoniously under the control of reason" and "the whole body was subordinated to the soul without any defect."[483] Moreover, because one's lower powers — that is, one's sense appetites, irascible appetite, and emotions — were perfectly subjected to one's reason, and because one's reason and will were perfectly subjected to God, Thomas argues that humanity was able to live in a state of moral rightness and justice in conformity with the will of God: "through the gift of original justice the spiritual part in man had perfect hold over the inferior powers of the soul, while it itself was perfected by God as being subjected to him."[484] It is from the will's submission to God in the state of original justice, therefore, that all human acts were enabled to have God as their final end, and humans were enabled to act in perfect conformity with the divine will and their human nature. He writes: "the whole order of original justice lay in man's will being subjected to God. This subjection first of all and chiefly was through the will, to which belongs the moving of all the other powers to the final end."[485] Humans were thus able to act in ways which conformed to our wellbeing, as these acts were capable of being rightly ordered toward the ultimate good and humanity's fulfilment, namely, perfect happiness in knowing and loving God.[486] For Aquinas, goodness is achieved through activity which contributes towards the fulfilment and perfection of our created nature and who we are ultimately called to be, that is, creatures who imitate the divine by

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[481] 1a. 95, 1. See also T. C. O'Brien, 'Appendix 8: Original Justice', in St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* ed. by T. C. O'Brien and others, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-1981), XXVI: *Original Sin (1a2ae. 81-5),* ed. by T. C. O'Brien (1965), pp. 144-153 (p. 144).
[482] Te Velde, p. 157.
[483] 1a2ae. 85, 5.
[484] 1a2ae. 85, 3. See also te Velde, p. 158.
[485] 1a2ae. 82, 3.
[486] See Joseph Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 101.

knowing and loving the Triune God.[487] Hence, in the state of original justice, the human person was able to "refrain from sinning, both mortally and venially. For sinning is nothing else but departing from what is according to nature, and this man could avoid when his nature was intact."[488]

This capacity to submit one's reason and will to God's will was not, however, a natural human ability. Rather, according to Aquinas, this submission was caused by a supernatural gift of grace. Thus, the harmony which characterised the state of original justice — a harmony whereby there was no disorder between the different aspects of the human person's powers and humans were able to live their lives rightly ordered towards God as their true end — was a result of grace:

> Now it is plain that submission of body to soul and lower powers to reason was not by nature; otherwise it would have persisted after sin […] From this it is plain that that primary submissiveness in which the reason put itself under God was not something merely natural either, but was by a gift of supernatural grace.[489]

As Wawrykow explains: "It is grace that was responsible for this original harmony, not only of the person before God, but within the person, and of the person with various others."[490] Moreover, Aquinas writes that this grace was "divinely bestowed" not just upon the first humans, but upon "all human nature in the first parent."[491] Every human person, therefore, would have inherited this state of grace as a result of inheriting human nature from their parents.

This supernatural ability to submit our will and reason to God, however, was lost as a result of the first sin of Adam. In Genesis the first human Adam is depicted as committing the initial act of sin against God by disobeying God's commandment. According to Aquinas, God withdrew the supernatural gift of grace enabling this submission to the divine as a punishment for Adam's sin.[492] It is this privation of grace which constitutes the state of original sin. Moreover, all humans now inherit this state of privation from Adam. Indeed, just as we would have inherited original justice from

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[487] See 1a2ae. 3, 8; 1a2ae. 1, 8; and 1a. 62, 1.
[488] 1a2ae. 109, 8.
[489] 1a1ae. 95, 1.
[490] Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, p. 101.
[491] 1a2ae. 81, 2.
[492] See, for example, 1a2ae. 82, 1-4. See also 1a2ae. 91, 2 and 1a2ae. 17, 9, ad 3.

our parents, now we inherit its lack.[493] Thus, human nature lacks the justice and supernatural submission to God which it possessed prior to the Fall. We do not, however, experience original sin merely as a state of privation. Instead, Aquinas writes that our human nature is damaged and injured as a consequence of the first sin.[494] He uses various analogies of woundedness, illness, and sickness to depict the consequence of Adam's sin on human nature. The privation of grace and original justice we inherit, therefore, leads to a "wounding of nature."[495] This is because, as a result of the Fall, "all of the powers of the soul" — that is, one's reason, will, irascible appetite, and concupiscible appetite — "are in a sense lacking the order proper to them."[496]

There are four wounds which afflict human nature as result of the privation of original justice: the wound of ignorance, the wound of malice, the wound of weakness, and the wound of concupiscence. As a consequence of the privation of original justice, human reason is now deprived of "its direction towards truth," and thus human nature now has a "wound of ignorance."[497] Presumably, this is because the human person has now lost their ability to submit their reason and will to God, who is the ultimate Truth.[498] Similarly, the will is now "deprived of its order towards good"; hence, human nature has a "wound of malice."[499] Again, this would seemingly be because God is the ultimate Good.[500] Humans have lost their ability to naturally orient their wills and actions towards God as the good to which they are ultimately striving. Although we are never naturally oriented towards evil in Aquinas' thought, nevertheless, we are unable to naturally orient ourselves towards the ultimate Good — that is, God — due to our reason and will no longer being subject to God. We shall explore this idea in further depth later in the chapter. Aquinas also affirms that human nature now has a "wound of weakness." This is due to "the irascible appetite" now being "deprived of its ability to face the difficult."[501] Similarly, "the concupiscible appetite" is now "deprived of its ability to temper the pleasurable." Thus, human nature also has a

[493] 1a2ae. 81, 2.
[494] 1a2ae. 81, 2.
[495] 1a2ae. 85, 3.
[496] 1a2ae. 85, 3.
[497] 1a2ae. 85, 3.
[498] See Joseph Wawrykow, 'Grace', in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas,* ed. by Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 192-221 (p. 195).
[499] 1a2ae. 85, 3.
[500] Wawrykow, 'Grace', p. 195.
[501] 1a2ae. 85, 3.

"wound of concupiscence."[502] It is in these ways that human nature can be said to be wounded as a consequence of original sin: "these four are the wounds inflicted upon all human nature by reason of the sin of the first parents."[503]

Aquinas depicts the woundedness of human nature which constitutes the state of original sin as fundamentally a state of disorder. In Thomas' words, it is "a disordered disposition." This disordered disposition follows from "the dissolution of that harmony in which original justice consisted." He uses the analogy of bodily illness and writes that the state of original sin is similar to "a kind of disordered disposition of the body, upsetting the balance in which good health consists."[504] Aquinas therefore concludes that "in original sin there is privation, the lack of original justice, yet along with this there are the disturbed powers of the soul. Thus, it is not pure privation, but also a corrupt habit of sorts."[505] Te Velde explains that, for Aquinas, this means that humanity inherits an "inability to preserve the right order between the parts of human nature in the actual exercise of life."[506] Indeed, the body is no longer subject to the soul, as it is now prone to pain, sickness, and death; moreover, the passions — what we might call emotions or feelings — are no longer perfectly subject to one's reason and will. As we previously saw, in the state of original justice the harmony that the first humans experienced within themselves — with their bodies being perfectly subject to their souls, and their passions subject to reason — was a consequence of their wills and reason being subject to God: "the whole order of original justice lay in man's will being subjected to God."[507] Once the ability to subject one's will to God is taken away due to the privation of grace, everything becomes disordered within oneself. Aquinas concludes that this leads to a spoiling or corruption of nature: "the goodness of nature is spoiled by the disordering of man's nature, when his will is no longer subject to God; for once this order is taken away, the consequence is that the whole nature of the sinful man becomes disordered."[508] As I shall show later, this disordered disposition of human nature significantly shapes and limits human acting in the world. Philip McCosker explains that now, not only do we need God's grace to

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502 Ibid.
503 Ibid.
504 1a2ae. 82, 1.
505 1a2ae. 82, 1, ad 1.
506 Te Velde, p. 159.
507 1a2ae. 82, 3.
508 1a2ae. 109, 7.

submit our reason and will to God's will, just as we did before the Fall in the state of original justice, but we also need God's grace to heal our corrupted and disordered natures, so that we can "overcome the effects of the corruption of sin" on human nature.[509] Unlike prior to the Fall, therefore, we are now in need of what McCosker describes as "God's medicinal action in us to cure us and lead us back to himself."[510] In other words, we need to be healed of our woundedness by the divine physician.

There are differences of opinion among scholars, however, concerning the precise extent to which original sin affects human nature within Aquinas' thought. This is because Aquinas himself is not entirely clear on the subject; his writings can be interpreted in different ways. T. C. O'Brien bases his interpretation on the idea that the state of original sin is a state of privation. He concludes that because this privation is a privation of original justice, which was a gift of divine grace, it does not take away anything natural to human nature: "Original sin, then, is not the privation of anything strictly proper to human nature. What is taken away is grace itself and with it those perfections of man's natural physical and moral being which depended upon grace in original justice."[511] Human nature after the Fall, therefore, is just "itself, left to itself."[512] The disorder experienced with regard to the body no longer being subject to the soul, and the passions no longer being subject to one's reason and will is just what happens when human nature is left to itself without the added perfection of grace and original justice. He explains: "Original sin is not the addition of a positive inclination to moral evil; it is the loss, the lack of the supernatural endowment that would have restrained the sources of moral defect in man."[513] The disorder suffered by humankind after the Fall, including the wounds of nature previously discussed, is what happens when human nature is left "open to its own defects"[514] without grace. Hence, O'Brien

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[509] Philip McCosker, 'Grace', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Summa Theologiae,* ed. by Philip McCosker and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 206-221, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139034159.017> [accessed 8 October 2021]. He also writes: "In our actual case of natures corrupted by sin we still need God's initial gracious movement, but also need God's healing grace to overcome the effects of the corruption of sin, that our natures 'may be healed' (109.3*corp*)."
[510] Ibid.
[511] O'Brien, 'Appendix 8: Original Justice', p. 152.
[512] Ibid.
[513] Ibid.
[514] T. C. O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', in St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* ed. by T. C. O'Brien and others, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-1981), XXVI: *Original Sin (1a2ae. 81-5)*, ed. by T. C. O'Brien (1965), pp. 154-161 (p. 158). See also Cornelius Ernst's explanatory remark in a footnote of his translation of 1a2ae. 109, 2 where he argues that "for St Thomas, though he never insists on this view in this and following articles, the original state of intactness of man's nature before the

concludes that "the evaluation of the sin should be seen to leave human nature fundamentally intact."[515]

One could indeed interpret Aquinas' thought in this way. We can find evidence for it in the *Summa Theologiae*, particularly in question eighty-two of the *Prima Secundae* where Aquinas writes:

> While it may be true that some bent towards disordered activity is a consequence of original sin, it is not true that it follows directly from original sin, but rather indirectly, in so far as original sin removes the restraint of original justice, which kept disordered impulses in check; thus also a tendency towards physical malfunctioning may follow as a side effect from organic disease.[516]

His reference to the "restraint" of original justice keeping "disordered impulses in check" does seem to imply that, without the gift of original justice, human nature left to itself would inevitably fall into disorder. This, therefore, appears to support O'Brien's argument. Moreover, in the context of discussing the reason why certain bodily organs do not obey reason, Aquinas explicitly states that "original sin consists in human nature being left to itself by the withdrawal of the supernatural gift which God had bestowed on man's creation."[517] This again seems to support O'Brien's conclusion that "original justice preserved man from defects stemming from nature itself because of its 'composition'" and therefore that "the preventive power of original justice points to an innate defectibility in man's moral powers."[518]

Aquinas' regular use of the analogy of bodily illness to depict the state of original sin, however, potentially adds some tension to this narrative. Indeed, O'Brien's argument does not seem to do justice to Aquinas' frequent references to the wounding and spoiling of human nature as a result of original sin and the subsequent

Fall was itself an effect of sanctifying grace; without it man's nature would have been in fact disordered, though not culpably as it now is because of the Fall." See Cornelius Ernst, 'Introduction, Notes, Appendices and Glossary', in St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* ed. by T. C. O'Brien and others, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-1981), XXX: *The Gospel of Grace (1a2ae. 106-14)*, ed. by Cornelius Ernst (1972), p. 74.

[515] O'Brien, 'Appendix 8: Original Justice', p. 153. He further writes: "By respecting the existential determinations of the divine economy St Thomas preserves the truth that the essentials of human nature remain even under original sin."

[516] 1a2ae. 82, 1, ad 3.

[517] 1a2ae. 17, 9, ad 3.

[518] O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', p. 157.

need for our natures to be healed by God.[519] He discusses this corruption in the context of speaking about humanity's need for grace. He writes: "Consequently, human nature, dissipated by the act of sin, is no longer intact but spoiled, as was said above; and so by itself can be restored neither to the good connatural to it, nor still less to the good of supernatural justice."[520] According to Aquinas, if human nature was "intact", it would be able to restore itself to "what is fitting and proportionate to it."[521] However, because it is now corrupted, it cannot even restore itself to its *connatural* good without the help of divine grace. This suggests that the privation of original justice, whereby human will and reason are no longer perfectly subject to God, leads to a corruption of human nature beyond that of just pure nature left to itself. Of course, one could interpret Aquinas' writing here as referring merely to actual sin, as opposed to original sin, when he says that human nature is "dissipated by the act of sin."[522] Indeed, Aquinas does not seem to clarify which type of sin he is referring to in this specific article. The natural good he discusses, therefore, could merely be a reference to the "good of nature which is the inclination to virtue" which he elsewhere explains is "lessened by the fact of a person's sinning."[523] However, his reference to the disorder caused by the loss of the human will's subjection to God's in connection with this spoiling of the natural good suggests that he is speaking about original sin.[524] Moreover, the way he describes human nature as no longer being "intact", but instead "spoiled" due to "the act of sin" suggests that he is referring to Adam's first act of sin, as it is only prelapsarian human nature which he describes as "intact" or perfect.[525] Indeed, earlier in the same question Aquinas uses the language of 'intact nature' to refer to Adam's nature as compared to ours post-Fall: "Man's nature can be considered in two ways: firstly, in its intactness, as it was in our first progenitor before sin; secondly, as it is spoiled in us after the sin of our first progenitor."[526] The distinction between 'intact' and 'spoiled' nature, therefore, is a distinction between prelapsarian and postlapsarian human nature. This suggests that human nature after the Fall is not

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[519] See for example 1a2ae. 109, 3. See also 1a2ae. 109, 2 and 1a2ae. 109, 7.
[520] 1a2ae. 109, 7, ad 3.
[521] 1a2ae. 109, 7, ad 3.
[522] 1a2ae. 109, 7, ad 3.
[523] 1a2ae. 85, 1.
[524] See 1a2ae. 109, 7 where he states: "The goodness of nature is spoiled by the disordering of man's nature, when his will is no longer subject to God; for once this order is taken away, the consequence is that the whole nature of the sinful man becomes disordered."
[525] 1a2ae. 109, 7, ad 3. See also 1a2ae. 109, 2.
[526] 1a2ae. 109, 2.

just "itself, left to itself"[527] as O'Brien seems to argue, but is instead damaged beyond what is natural to it as "the goodness of nature is spoiled."[528] Moreover, as we shall see later, this spoiling of human nature leads to an inability of fallen humanity to will and accomplish all the good which is proportionate to our nature by our "natural endowments."[529] This good, however, is something we would have been able to achieve ourselves had we remained in the state of intact nature.[530]

Contemporary scholars such as Eileen Sweeney offer a different interpretation to that presented by O'Brien and more in line with the ideas we have been presenting so far. She argues that, for Aquinas, humanity has never experienced a state of pure nature, whereby human nature is just 'left to itself' so to speak. This is because human nature is damaged by sin due to the Fall; hence Thomas' repeated use of the language of illness and woundedness to depict this state.[531] She writes: "What is strange about Aquinas's view is that a purely 'natural state' of humankind has strictly speaking never existed; before the fall nature had a kind of supernatural strength, and, after that, nature is somewhat, though not radically, depleted."[532] She concludes that, for Aquinas, "[t]he present condition of humankind is a fall from the integrity of nature."[533] Despite this corruption or damage of nature, though, it remains fundamentally good. Thus, it maintains its integrity even after original sin.[534] This integrity, however, is still less than the full perfection experienced in the state of original justice. Sweeney explains that "although original justice is lost by the fall, the principles of nature (though not the ability to carry through with them) are intact after the fall."[535] This interpretation of Aquinas' thought — that is, that human nature is depleted and therefore a fall from its full integrity, and yet still fundamentally good — seems to be faithful to Aquinas' own writing. Indeed, he writes that, after the primary sin of Adam, human nature is

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[527] O'Brien, 'Appendix 8: Original Justice', p. 152.
[528] 1a2ae. 109, 7.
[529] Ibid.
[530] Ibid. See also McCosker, p. 210.
[531] Sweeney, p. 158. See also 1a2ae. 82, 1 where Aquinas writes that "an analogy [for original sin] is found in bodily illness, a kind of disordered disposition of the body upsetting the balance in which good health consists. Likewise, original sin is called a *sickness of nature.*"
[532] Sweeney, p. 158.
[533] Ibid.
[534] Ibid., p. 159.
[535] Ibid., p. 158.

corrupted, yet it is “not wholly spoiled so as to be deprived of the whole good proper to nature.”[536]

Perhaps there is a reason why Aquinas seems to present different, seemingly contradictory, emphases at various points throughout his writing. One potential interpretation is that he is attempting to maintain a balance between two beliefs. First, he is particularly concerned to safeguard belief in the goodness of human nature; this could be why he contends that the state of original sin is fundamentally a state of privation. As O’Brien himself asserts: “the evident misery of man’s plight in the world has frequently led to the position that original sin means the utter depravity of human nature. Man’s moral indigence has been seen not merely as the loss of sanctifying grace, but as a complete incapacity for good on the part of his natural moral faculties.”[537] It is this alternative view, where the deprivation and incompetency of humanity is so emphasised that the goodness of human nature is lost, which Aquinas is rejecting in his account. Thomas’ concern, therefore, is perhaps not so much to argue that human nature is left unharmed by original sin, but rather that, despite being harmed, and, to some extent, spoiled by sin, the goodness of human nature is not destroyed. Humans do not inherit a “natural moral depravity” whereby they are naturally and deterministically inclined to evil as a result of original sin.[538] Nevertheless, Aquinas also has a concern to maintain another central belief of faith, namely, that humanity remains in need of grace and salvation due to sin. This, perhaps, is why he seems to present different emphases at different points; he wants to emphasise different beliefs at various times. Sometimes his desire to assert our need for grace due to sin’s corruption of human nature takes precedence, whilst at other times he seems to want to safeguard belief in nature’s goodness to such an extent that it almost seems to contradict the former concern. Through this account of sin and grace, therefore, Aquinas attempts to hold two Catholic emphases in tension: the first is the need for a positive conception of human nature, including human freedom and our ability to do the good; the second is the belief in our utter dependence on God’s grace and our inability to save ourselves through our natural capacities alone. As McCosker writes:

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[536] 1a2ae. 109, 2.
[537] O’Brien, ‘Appendix 9: Fallen Nature’, p. 154.
[538] I appropriate the phrase “natural moral depravity” from O’Brien, although we use the phrase to signify slightly different realities. See O’Brien, ‘Appendix 9: Fallen Nature’, p. 159.

> Thomas is always keen to avoid the twin dangers of any form of Manichaeism (a dualistic devaluation of the material and creaturely) or Pelagianism (an optimistic over-confidence in the abilities of humans to save ourselves without divine aid), by always emphasising *both* the full integrity, goodness, and freedom of human nature and creation, *and* the ubiquity and constant need for grace.[539]

Thus, evidence can be found within Aquinas' thought to support both strands of interpretation, both O'Brien's and Sweeney's. It is unclear whether the tensions between these two interpretations can easily be reconciled. Indeed, the precise extent to which human nature is affected by original sin is not clear within Aquinas' thought. In other words, it is unclear whether human nature is merely 'left to itself' and its natural capacities due to the withdrawal of grace, or whether it is wounded and spoiled beyond what is natural to it. Personally, I am more sympathetic towards Sweeney's interpretation of human nature being "somewhat, though not radically, depleted"[540] as a result of original sin. Nevertheless, what is clear within Aquinas' thought is that the state of original sin we are born into leaves us disordered within ourselves; our bodies are no longer subject to the soul, and our passions are no longer perfectly subject to our reason and will. Nonetheless, our natures remain fundamentally good. We will examine how this interior disorder significantly impacts our freedom, agency, and historical condition vis-à-vis God later in the chapter. As we shall see, this inherited condition leads humanity to act in disordered ways. Before that, though, it would be prudent for us now to examine the Council of Trent's understanding of original sin to show that some key themes intersect with the account presented by Thomas Aquinas.

3.1.2 The Council of Trent on Original Sin

The Council of Trent does not present a theology of original sin as systematically or comprehensively as Aquinas. The Council's aim was not so much to explore this theological idea in depth, but rather to safeguard the doctrine from what it perceived to be doctrinal and theological error. In the course of doing so, however, it necessarily clarifies some of the core beliefs to do with the doctrine of original sin from a Catholic

[539] McCosker, pp. 209-210.
[540] Sweeney, p. 158.

perspective. Thus, the documents of the Council can aid us in our discernment of what constitutes a distinctively Catholic theological account of sin.

For the Council, there are two main aspects the doctrine of original sin refers to: First, the primal act of sin by the first man Adam as depicted in the Genesis story; second, the condition or state of original sin which humanity inherits from Adam by propagation.[541] So, according to the ecumenical Council, what characterises this inherited condition or state? The decree teaches that the whole of the human race now shares in the same bodily suffering, physical infirmities, deprivation of holiness and justice, and even death which came to afflict Adam as a consequence of his sin.[542] Adam's condition is "transmitted" into our own. Indeed, the Council decrees that after Adam's sin, he "immediately lost the holiness and justice in which he had been constituted."[543] As a consequence of this, all of humanity are now born "unjust" and "contract through him, when they are conceived, injustice as their own" due to being his descendants.[544] Although the Council does not go into further detail about what lost holiness and justice they are referring to, this seems to be a reference to the idea of original justice and humanity's loss of it as a punishment for original sin.

What is significant is that it is not only the effects of sin which humanity inherits, rather we also inherit *sin itself*. The Council contends:

> If anyone asserts that the transgression of Adam injured him alone and not his posterity […] or that he, being defiled by the sin of disobedience, has transfused only death and the pains of the body into the whole human race, but not sin also, which is the death of the soul, let him be anathema.[545]

This canon, for the most part, is a direct reiteration of the second canon of the Council of Orange which convened in 529.[546] One of the main contributions of these councils to the development of the Church's doctrine of original sin, therefore, is their

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[541] Lombardo, p. 144.

[542] The idea that humanity inherits a deprivation of holiness and justice seems to draw from a Thomistic interpretation of original sin as the privation of grace and original justice. See also Vandervelde, p. 35 and Lombardo, p. 145.

[543] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* trans. by H. J. Schroeder (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), pp. 21-23 (p. 21), §1.

[544] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* trans. by H. J. Schroeder, pp. 29-42 (p. 31), chapter III.

[545] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', pp. 21-22, §2.

[546] Vandervelde, pp. 22 and 35.

specification that sin itself is passed onto the whole human race, not merely its effects or punishments.[547]

In the Council of Trent this point is again reiterated in the context of discussing the importance of infant baptism. In the decree concerning original sin, the Council emphasises the necessity of baptism as a remedy for sin in infants. By doing so, it implicitly provides a further clarification on the reality of original sin, and, indeed, sin more generally.[548] The Council explicitly asserts that infants, despite being unable to commit any personal sins themselves, are still in need of the sacrament of baptism due to their inheritance of original sin.[549] They are said to need this sacrament "for the remission of sins, in order that in them what they contracted by generation may be washed away by regeneration."[550] It is through the grace conferred in the sacrament that the "guilt of original sin is remitted."[551] Thus, for the Council, sin is present in these children through no personal fault or activity of their own. Further, one is found *guilty* of sin prior to any individual choice or act of freedom. Hence, guilt for sin is not defined by a modern notion of moral culpability; guilt is not attributed only to those who have the necessary consciousness, knowledge, and freedom of will to make a truly free choice between good and evil. Additionally, in this conception of original sin, sin, properly speaking, is not limited to a free act. Rather, underlying this notion of original sin is an implicit acknowledgement that sin can be understood as a culpable and guilt-inducing state or condition which a person inherits involuntarily. Within the doctrine of original sin promulgated by the Council of Trent, there is a pre-personal inheritance of both sin and guilt. Thus, some key themes emerge from both Aquinas and Trent concerning the doctrine of original sin. For both, original sin is a state which all of humanity contracts due to being descendants of an original sinner. Sin, therefore, does not seem to be limited to a freely willed and self-determined act on the part of each individual, but can be understood as a disordered state we inherit which wounds one's nature and causes disorder within oneself.

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[547] Ibid.
[548] Ibid., pp. 36-37.
[549] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', pp. 22-23, §4.
[550] Ibid., p. 23, §4.
[551] Ibid., p. 23, §5.

3.1.3 John Paul II and the Catechism of the Catholic Church: Continuity or Disruption?

The understanding of sin presented so far in the works of Aquinas and Trent is particularly significant in light of the conception of original sin presented in the *Catechism of Catholic Church* published under John Paul II's papacy. The Catechism states that original sin is only called sin "in an analogical sense."[552] According to the Catechism, original sin cannot properly be called sin precisely because it is not an act which one commits, but rather is a state that one contracts.[553] Thus, following the magisterial documents of John Paul II's papacy, underlying this account of original sin is the idea that sin, properly speaking, is a free act of the will. This teaching of the Catechism can therefore be regarded as constituting a break from the, albeit implicit and indirect, teaching of the Council of Trent on the true and proper nature of sin in original sin. Indeed, we read in the texts of the Council that:

> If anyone denies that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is conferred in baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted, or says that the whole of that which belongs to the essence of sin is not taken away, but says that it is only canceled or not imputed, let him be anathema.[554]

Of course, one may be able to argue that the Catechism is remaining faithful to the teaching of Trent. One could do this by interpreting the passage quoted above to refer to personal sin alone when it speaks of "the whole of that which belongs to the essence of sin." Even if the above passage is interpreted in this way, however, one would still have to contend with the issue that in an earlier section the text declares that "if anyone asserts that […] [Adam], being defiled by the sin of disobedience, has transfused only death and the pains of the body into the whole human race, but not sin also, which is the death of the soul, let him be anathema."[555] Moreover, the Council later goes on to discern which realities cannot properly be called sin; original sin is not included within this. We read in the text that the disordered desires which remain in the baptised even after their baptism and which provide an incentive to sin, namely "concupiscence," are not properly speaking sin. It asserts: "This concupiscence, which the Apostle

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[552] CCC, §404.
[553] Ibid.
[554] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', p. 23, §5.
[555] Ibid., p. 22, §2.

sometimes calls sin, the holy council declares the Catholic Church has never understood to be called sin in the sense that it is truly and properly sin in those born again, but in the sense that it is of sin and inclines to sin."[556] It is significant, therefore, that the Council does not write that original sin cannot also be called sin truly and properly, but rather repeatedly uses the term 'sin' to refer to original sin unproblematically and without qualification. Thus, according to Trent, one can inherit guilt and sin prior to any conscious personal action or exercise of freedom. The Catechism's interpretation of original sin, therefore, risks undermining the Tridentine belief in the non-personal inheritance of sin and guilt within the doctrine of original sin. Moreover, John Paul II's understanding of sin as only properly being sin when it is a freely willed, self-determined act also seems to contradict this central teaching on original sin.

3.2 Humanity's Historical Condition vis-à-vis God: Original Sin, Guilt, and Culpability

3.2.1 Aquinas' Dilemma

As we have just seen, the documents of the Council of Trent conclude that, at birth, all are found guilty of original sin. This guilt is remitted through the sacrament of baptism. It asserts this belief as a truth of faith, with no further qualifications or explanations needed. For Thomas Aquinas, however, this traditional belief — that is, that all of humanity are found guilty before God for original sin — presents slightly more of a dilemma and complication which requires further explanation.

Like the documents of Trent, Aquinas does uphold this idea of humanity's guilt. For him, it is a core aspect to the doctrine of original sin that one simultaneously inherits sin *and* culpability: "It is basic that according to the Catholic Faith we are bound to hold that the first sin of the first man passes to posterity by way of origin."[557] Humanity as a whole is in a collective state of fault as a consequence of the sin of Adam.[558] This belief, however, seems to be in tension with Aquinas' understanding of the necessary relation between culpability and voluntariness: "a person is blamed and

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[556] Ibid., p. 23, §5.
[557] 1a2ae. 81, 1.
[558] See 1a2ae. 81, 1 where he writes: "That the son shall not bear the sin of the father means that only if he shares in the fault is he punished for his father's sin. This is the case before us, because the fault itself is passed on by way of origin from father to son, somewhat as actual sin is by bad example."

rendered culpable inasmuch as he voluntarily does a disordered act."[559] In the context of talking about the causes of what we might call 'personal sin,' Aquinas argues that that which lessens voluntariness, lessens the sinfulness of one's activity. For example, when one commits a disordered act due to an ignorance which has weakened one's judgement, the voluntariness of this act is lessened as this ignorance militates against "the nature of the will which was made to be moved freely by the judgement of reason."[560] In this case, one's culpability for sin is lessened due to a lack of knowledge. Aquinas demonstrates this link between voluntariness and sin again when he uses the examples of sickness, force, and fear. We may act in disordered ways because we are ill, or because we are afraid, or because of some external force. When we are forced to act, however, or when we act primarily because of sickness or fear, these external causes have interfered with "the free movement of the will" necessary for voluntariness.[561] Hence, one's culpability for the disordered acts one commits whilst under this influence is lessened, as is the sinfulness of these acts. It is important to note, though, that within these examples, although internal and external influences lessen the gravity, sinfulness, and culpability of one's act, they do not completely remove its sinfulness. Nonetheless, te Velde reminds us that within Aquinas' thought "one should never lose sight of the moral principle that it is one's own voluntary consent that makes one's act an act of sin."[562] One's will needs to be the cause of an act for it to be considered sin. This is why Aquinas concludes that "if the act is entirely involuntary it is not sinful at all."[563] It is unclear, though, in what instance one's act could be regarded as entirely involuntary in Aquinas' thought. It seems that if one's will is moved through the judgement of one's discursive reasoning process, as opposed to pure instinct, then there is always a voluntary dimension to one's act, despite any exterior influences one may encounter.

This understanding of the necessary connection between voluntariness and culpability, however, seems to create a tension with the traditional belief in humanity's collective culpability for original sin. Aquinas himself admits this: "It would appear that the very fact of acquiring a defect by way of origin rules out culpability, since by

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[559] Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. by Jean Oesterle (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 29, question 1, article 4.
[560] 1a2ae. 73, 6.
[561] 1a2ae. 73, 6.
[562] Te Velde, pp. 151-152.
[563] 1a2ae. 73, 6.

definition fault must be voluntary."[564] The original sin we inherit does not have its origin in our individual and personal wills; it cannot be regarded as an act which we voluntarily commit. How then can Aquinas justify the traditional belief that we are culpable for original sin prior to any personal, voluntary activity or will of our own? In *On Evil* — a work which was written around the same time as the *Prima Secundae* of the Summa[565] — Thomas uses the analogy of a political community to depict how one can be found guilty of original sin.[566] Aquinas argues that an individual human person can be regarded in two ways: First, as a singular and particular person; second, as "part of a community."[567] Thus, an act can be attributed to a person when they personally act through their own free choice. An act can also be attributed to that same person, however, when the community they are a part of acts. In this second case, the act is not personally committed by that individual's own free choice, but rather is "done by the whole community or the majority of the community or by the head of the community, just as that which the ruler of the state does the state is said to do."[568] We can attribute a communal act to an individual person, therefore, insofar as that person is a member of that community which acts. This is possible because "such a community of men is regarded as one man, such that different individuals appointed to different offices are as it were different members of one natural body, as the Apostle manifests in regard to the Church in I Corinthians 12."[569]

For Aquinas, we can regard original sin in a similar way. Humankind is a single unity due to our shared human nature; we are regarded as one community and therefore one body.[570] Hence, when Adam willed and voluntarily sinned, all of humanity are thought of as sharing in Adam's intentional act. Thus, the original voluntary act of sin can be attributed to each human person insofar as they share in human nature, and hence are considered part of the human community:

> All who are born of Adam can be considered as one man by reason of sharing the one nature inherited from the first parent, even as in political matters all

[564] 1a2ae. 81, 1.
[565] T. C. O'Brien, 'Appendix 7: Sin Caused By Origin', in St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* ed. by T. C. O'Brien and others, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-1981), XXVI: *Original Sin (1a2ae. 81-5)*, ed. by T. C. O'Brien (1965), pp. 133-143 (p. 137).
[566] Aquinas, *On Evil,* p. 168, question 4, article 1.
[567] Ibid.
[568] Ibid.
[569] Ibid.
[570] See also, te Velde, p. 155.

belonging to one community are reckoned to be like one body, and the whole community like one person […] So then the many men descending from Adam are, as it were, many members of one body.[571]

Aquinas also uses a bodily analogy to further explicate this idea; just as the act of a hand can be considered voluntary, not because the hand itself willed it, but because of the will of the "soul" or mind which first sets the hand in motion, so too the sin one inherits is not voluntary by reason of one's own personal will, but "by reason of the will of the first parent."[572] Aquinas argues:

> Hence, the murder which the hand commits should not be imputed as sin to the hand, as though the hand were considered to have its own life isolated from the body, but inasmuch as it is part of a human person and moved by the principle which first sets human actions in motion. So too the disorder which is in an individual man, a descendent of Adam, is not voluntary by reason of his personal will, but by reason of the will of the first parent who through a generative impulse, exerts influence upon all who descend from him by way of origin, even as the will of the soul moves bodily members to their various activities.[573]

It is through Adam's will, therefore, that we can be found guilty of original sin. As te Velde explains: "The will of Adam, as the head of humanity, is the principal will of the collective human 'self,' the will which extends itself somehow in the 'we' of historical mankind."[574] According to Aquinas, original sin cannot be attributed to the human person when considered in isolation as a unique and singular human being, but rather can only be attributed to an individual when they are considered as a sharer in human nature. In other words, they need to be considered in terms of their relationality to the historical human community they are a part of: "original sin is the sin of the individual person only because he receives human nature from the first parent."[575] Te Velde further elucidates:

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[571] 1a2ae. 81, 1.
[572] 1a2ae. 81, 1. See also te Velde, p. 156.
[573] 1a2ae. 81, 1.
[574] Te Velde, p. 159.
[575] 1a2ae. 81, 1.

> [Aquinas] emphasizes the crucial point that the culpable character of original sin cannot be accounted for as long as human individuals are considered purely in themselves, isolated from the fact of belonging, through being born of human parents, to the collectivity of historical mankind. In other words, the idea of original sin presupposes a concept of a "we" in a morally relevant sense, prior to the individual moral agent.[576]

This is significant for our purposes because, as te Velde explains, Aquinas is not "inclined to restrict moral fault to the individual person, independent from that person's belonging to the body of humanity."[577] Aquinas' account of how we can be found culpable for original sin disrupts the individualistic, moralistic narrative of sin and guilt. Te Velde concludes: "Although there is no guilt in the proper sense of the word outside the dimension of the voluntary, Aquinas nevertheless avoids a moralistic account of original sin, in which the essential distinction between actual and original sin is somehow obscured."[578]

Within the thought of both Aquinas and the Council of Trent, sin and guilt is present in the individual descendants of Adam prior to any free, voluntary choice or activity of their own. This is why Aquinas argues that "newly-born babies are brought to baptism as needing to be cleansed from some infection of sin."[579] For both Thomas and Trent, guilt for sin is not defined by a modern notion of moral culpability. In other words, guilt is not attributed only to those who have the necessary consciousness, knowledge, and freedom of will to make a truly free personal choice between good and evil. Aquinas, however, presents this belief far more systematically. Indeed, for Aquinas, sin still has to be related to voluntary activity as its cause if it is to be properly considered sin, albeit not necessarily one's own personal action. He writes: "Even the cause of original sin is an act, namely, the actual sin of our first parent."[580] Thus, a key Catholic theme on sin seems to emerge from the writings of Aquinas and the Council of Trent. Using my own terminology, underlying these notions of original sin is an implicit acknowledgement that sin, properly speaking, can be understood as a *culpable*

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[576] Te Velde, p. 163.
[577] Ibid., p. 155.
[578] Ibid.
[579] 1a2ae. 81, 1.
[580] See Aquinas, *On Evil*, p. 47, question 2, article 1. Aquinas also uses the example of sins of omission to demonstrate this. See Aquinas, *On Evil,* pp. 45-47, question 2, article 1.

and *guilt-inducing* state or condition which a person inherits prior to any conscious personal will or voluntary act of their own.[581] Additionally, one cannot be found guilty of a sin which one did not willingly commit, except insofar as one is regarded as part of a wider human community.

3.3 The Effects of Original Sin on the Human Person: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Through our analysis of the writings of Trent and Aquinas so far, we have seen some key themes emerging concerning the nature of sin. Moreover, we have begun to explore how these key texts understand the role of sin in shaping humanity's historical condition vis-à-vis God, that is, by putting humanity in a collective state of guilt. We will now identify some of the key themes which emerge from these two seminal writings concerning the effects of original sin on human agency. First, we will examine the theology of Aquinas, followed by that presented by the Council of Trent.

3.3.1 Thomas Aquinas

So, for Aquinas, how does the state of original sin affect human acting and being in the world? Does it impact our ability to act morally, or attain the good? The good news is that human goodness can never be completely destroyed by sin. For Aquinas, humanity's natural inclination towards virtue cannot ever be destroyed by sin: "Because he is rational, it belongs to man to act in accord with reason, which is to act virtuously. For sin to cause man to cease to be rational is impossible, since he would then no longer be capable of sinning. It is not possible, then, that this good be totally taken away."[582] Aquinas does admit that this inclination towards virtue can be lessened through actual sin, that is, what we might call 'personal sin.'[583] Even in the instance of actual sin, however, it can only be diminished in its capacity to attain its goal. Crucially, for Aquinas, original sin as a privation does not positively incline the will to evil, nor does it add anything extra to the soul or its powers.[584] Rather, even in its corrupt state, the human will still desires the good of the human person as discerned through reason, although it can be mistaken about its good due to the wound of

[581] See also te Velde p. 151.
[582] Ia2ae. 85, 2.
[583] 1a2ae. 85, 1. See also 1a2ae. 85, 3.
[584] See also O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', p. 157 and O'Brien, 'Appendix 8: Original Justice', p. 152.

ignorance: "since the object of the will is the good, or at least the apparent good, the will is never attracted by evil unless it appears to have an aspect of good about it, so that the will never chooses evil except by reason of ignorance or error."[585]

Moreover, the consequences of original sin do not mean that humanity is unable to attain any happiness, fulfilment, or good in this lifetime without grace. It is possible for individuals to achieve some happiness insofar as they appropriately use, develop, and perfect their natural capacities as far as they are able.[586] According to Aquinas, humans are rational creatures. Hence, exercising our intellect by acting in accord with our reason enables us to progress closer towards the fulfilment of our natures as rational creatures.[587] When humans do this, we are acting in accord with the divine intent, and thus partly fulfilling our vocations, that is, what we were created to do. Human goodness therefore lies in performing activities which we discern through the use of our reason to be in accordance with human happiness and our good. It is in this way that we perfect human nature as far as we are able according to our natural capacities. There are penultimate goods and ends that we remain capable of achieving even in our fallen state. Aquinas concludes that:

> [M]an's happiness or felicity is twofold […] One is proportionate to human nature, and this he can reach through his own resources. The other, a happiness surpassing his nature, he can attain only by the power of God, by a kind of participation of the Godhead.[588]

Humanity, therefore, remains capable of achieving some natural goods within this lifetime without the need for grace.

The human capacity to achieve all the natural good, however, is impaired by original sin. Moreover, without grace humanity is unable to avoid sinning entirely in this lifetime.[589] As we saw earlier, original sin as privation means that one lacks the right orientation of the will towards God and the inner harmony of self which characterised humanity's condition in original justice. Thus, humans are unable to pursue all the good proportionate to their nature because, for Aquinas, "to love God

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585 1a2ae. 77, 2.
586 See also Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 158.
587 See also Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), p. 231.
588 1a2ae. 62, 1.
589 1a2ae. 109, 8.

above all things is natural to [the human person] and to every nature."[590] In what Aquinas calls "the state of intact nature" — that is, human nature as it was before Adam's original sin and the Fall — humans referred "[their] love of [themselves], and likewise [their] love of all other things, to the love of God."[591] Through their natural capacities they were able to love God more than themselves and above all things. Due to the corruption of original sin, however, the human person "falls short of this in the desire of [their] rational will."[592] Without God's healing grace, therefore, the wounds of nature remain and the human person instead "pursues a private good" without referring this private good to the love of God or the common good as its end.[593] Hence, we find ourselves habitually turning away from God as our final end and the ultimate unchangeable good, and instead are inclined to pursue lesser changeable goods.[594] As Aquinas writes:

> From the will's turning away from God, then, the disorder in all the other powers of the soul followed. So then the lack of original justice subjecting the will to God is what is formal in original sin. Every other disorder in the various powers of the soul is like what is material in original sin. The disorder to the other powers of the soul is chiefly noticeable in an unruled turning to goods that pass away, which disorder can be designated by the term 'concupiscence'. So then original sin materially is concupiscence, yet formally it is the lack of original justice.[595]

Thus, there is a propensity within us to pursue transient goods excessively.[596] Indeed, Aquinas writes that "some bent towards disordered activity is a consequence of original sin." He immediately complicates this understanding, however, by arguing that this inclination does not follow "directly from original sin, but rather indirectly, in so far as original sin removes the restraint of original justice, which kept disordered impulses in check."[597] We have already seen how this could potentially create a tension within Aquinas' thought. Here it seems that original sin does not positively

[590] 1a2ae. 109, 3.
[591] Ibid.
[592] Ibid.
[593] Ibid.
[594] See also Sweeney, p. 158, and O'Brien, 'Appendix 8: Original Justice', pp. 152-153.
[595] 1a2ae. 82, 3.
[596] See also Sweeney, p. 158, and Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, p. 143.
[597] 1a2ae. 82, 2.

incline individuals towards acting in this way; disordered action does, however, remain a consequence of it. Without grace, therefore, humanity turns towards these goods as goals in themselves rather than as penultimate goods which are means to achieving the final end.[598] Turning towards these goods as final ends in themselves is inordinate. This is because, as O'Brien explains, it is "out of proportion to the whole order of moral wellbeing,"[599] the proper end of which is the happiness and perfection of humanity achieved by fully knowing and loving God. Indeed, for Aquinas, human actions are good when they enable us to progress towards the fulfilment of our nature by becoming who we were created to be, that is, rational creatures who imitate the divine by knowing and loving the Trinity.

It seems, therefore, that after the Fall and without the help of grace, humans find themselves with a propensity towards sin precisely because of this inclination towards disordinate action. This is because, for Aquinas, sin "is not a total absence of perfection, but an action lacking order."[600] Thus, "every sin consists in the pursuit of some passing good that is inordinately desired."[601] Consequently, within Aquinas' framework — although he does not explicitly write this — even when one pursues and achieves natural goods, one could still be regarded as sinning when one does not will this good as a penultimate good and hence as a means to achieve one's ultimate good and final end — that is, happiness in the activity of loving God — but rather erroneously pursues it as the total fulfilment of human happiness. Thus, when one pursues a good of nature, such as that which is needed to sustain the body, or when one pursues things such as money or apparel,[602] but does not pursue these goods in the correct order of the hierarchy of goods — i.e. as final ends in themselves, rather than as penultimate ends which help the person to achieve happiness found in loving God — one is regarded as sinning.[603] We can now see why Aquinas asserts that "an inordinate desire for good is the cause of all sin."[604] Evidence for this interpretation

[598] See also Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, 'Thomas Aquinas', in *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, ed. by Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (London: T&T Clark, 2018), pp. 199-216 (pp. 204-206).
[599] O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', p. 159. See also Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, p. 143.
[600] 1a2ae. 72, 1.
[601] 1a2ae. 72, 2.
[602] 1a2ae. 77, 5.
[603] 1a2ae. 88, 3. See also 1a2ae. 88, 3 for the sinfulness of pursuing as an ultimate end which is not love of God.
[604] 1a2ae. 77, 5.

can also be found in other areas of the Summa. For example, in the context of speaking about the necessity of grace, Aquinas writes:

> Now it is by the end that all human acts ought to be regulated […] [S]ince man's reason is not entirely subject to God, the consequence is that many disorders occur in the reason. For when man's heart is not so fixed on God as to be unwilling to be parted from Him for the sake of finding any good or avoiding any evil, many things happen for the achieving or avoiding of which a man strays from God and breaks His commandments, and thus sins mortally.[605]

Without the grace necessary to heal human nature from its woundedness, it would seem to be impossible for humanity to avoid sin in this lifetime. As O'Brien contends:

> The principal handicap is man's natural inability to make the fundamental option of moral life, the decisive choice of God as the ultimate end for human nature […] Unless he is effectively set on the true end of moral life, the source of all right activity, man will set up other final ends, objectives which appeal to one side or other of his nature, but out of proportion to the whole order of moral wellbeing, that is the happiness of the whole man. This will block the acquisition of moral virtue; as a consequence there will be moral obscurity and distortion in his moral judgements, and failure to reach the more abstract truths about his own destiny.[606]

Thus, Aquinas concludes that humans are unable to rise from sin without the help of divine grace:

> Natural good is corrupted, inasmuch as man's nature is disordered by man's will not being subject to God's; and this order being overthrown, the consequence is that the whole nature of sinful man remains disordered […] the order of nature can only be restored, i.e. man's will can only be subject to God when God draws man's will to Himself […] And thus in order that man rise from sin there is required the help of grace.[607]

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[605] 1a2ae. 109, 8.
[606] O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', p. 159.
[607] 1a2ae. 109, 7.

As we previously saw, another consequence of original sin is that humanity inherits a lack of harmony among the powers of the soul. Thus, in this way too humanity can be regarded as hindered in its capacity to attain the happiness and good which is proportionate to its nature. This is because the passions are no longer perfectly subject to human reason; therefore, "inordinate movements of the sensitive appetite cannot help occurring."[608] This is another reason why Aquinas can affirm that humans now have a proclivity towards sin: "by reason of [the Fall] human nature is now defective so that we are all prone to sin."[609] Due to this disorder between the lower and higher powers of the soul, Aquinas even argues that venial sin becomes unavoidable in this lifetime even with the help of divine grace:

> [I]n the state of corrupt nature man needs grace to heal his nature in order that he may entirely abstain from sin. And in the present life this healing is wrought in the mind — the carnal appetite being not yet restored […] [so] man cannot abstain from all venial sin on account of the corruption of his lower appetite of sensuality. For man can, indeed, repress each of its movements (and hence they are sinful and voluntary), but not all, because whilst he is resisting one, another may arise, and also because the reason is not always alert to avoid these movements.[610]

In conclusion, the disordered disposition of original sin does not lead to a moral impotence, as we retain the inherent capacities of nature; our will remains inclined to the acquisition of virtue. Humanity is able to attain some goods that lead to a natural good for humankind without sanctifying grace. Nonetheless, this capacity is diminished by the wounds of original sin and needs to be healed by grace in order to perfectly fulfil the requirements of the natural law. Although humans are not directly inclined to evil, nevertheless original sin does have a negative impact on human moral capacities. As Aquinas concludes:

> [I]n the state of corrupt nature, man falls short of what he could do by his nature, so that he is unable to fulfil it by his own natural powers. Yet because human nature is not altogether corrupted by sin, so as to be shorn of every natural good, even in the state of corrupted nature it can, by virtue of its natural

[608] 1a2ae. 109, 8.
[609] 1a2ae. 80, 4.
[610] 1a2ae. 109, 8.

> endowments, work some particular good, as to build dwellings, plant vineyards, and the like; yet it cannot do all the good natural to it, so as to fall short in nothing; just as a sick man can of himself make some movements, yet he cannot be perfectly moved with the movements of one in health, unless by the help of medicine he be cured.[611]

Original sin thus limits our moral capacities in two ways: First, as O'Brien explains, we are "deprived of right moral direction"[612] in that our reason and will are no longer subjected to God. Hence, we are no longer oriented toward the Trinity as our final end and ultimate good. Second, we inherit a disordered nature which underlies the historical enactment of our freedom.[613] We cannot perfectly fulfil the good natural to our nature due to this. Hence, we are all prone to sin, and are unable refrain from all venial sin in this lifetime even with the help of divine grace. This means that human freedom is qualified and limited in this lifetime due to a state of sin which did not originate from ourselves when considered as individuals, and which we, as individuals, did not personally will. As te Velde asserts, due to this we find ourselves impotent; we "constantly stumble over our own impotence to do the good and to live according to God's law."[614] Moreover, as we saw earlier, this state is something we are considered guilty of, despite being born into it. We are still found culpable for any disordered acts of sin which result from this distorted disposition of nature. Te Velde aptly summarises that, for Aquinas, "[m]an is guilty of this 'disorder,' this inability to realize his freedom according to the moral order of justice and love, by reason of the will of Adam."[615] Thus, sin impacts human living and acting in the world in terrible ways. As Wawrykow writes:

> Aquinas' point is that sin brings tremendous disruption — to the human self, inasmuch as the lower self because of sin is at war with the higher self, with the reason; to the human self before God, inasmuch as the person refuses and rebels against the will of God. Because of sin, then, even with regard to the good that is natural to the human person, the person will need grace.[616]

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[611] 1a2ae. 109, 2.
[612] O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', p. 154.
[613] Te Velde, p. 159.
[614] Ibid.
[615] Ibid.
[616] Wawrykow, 'Grace', p. 194.

Despite earlier arguing that original sin as privation means that human nature is merely left to itself after the Fall, even O'Brien concludes similarly. He writes:

> [I]n the *Summa* the moral infirmity of man's fallen state is described in terms of his need for healing grace […] This reliance upon grace is a measure of the damage inflicted on human nature by its loss. For grace is thus seen to be necessary to man not only if he is to be raised to share in divine life, but also if his own human life is to be healed, and his incapacity to reach its moral goals is to be remedied. That such aid is required indicates how man's moral powers are debilitated with regard to values proper to human nature itself.[617]

Crucially, therefore, we are dependent on grace to be able to will and do the good, to repent from sin, and to avoid sin.[618] Moreover, like the Council of Trent, Aquinas regards the sacraments as the privileged location to encounter this salvific and healing grace, particularly the sacrament of baptism.[619] He asserts: "Just as the sin of Adam passes to all who are begotten of him corporally, so also the grace of Christ passes to all who are begotten of him spiritually by faith and baptism and this not only to remove the sin of the first parent but also all actual sin and to lead them to glory."[620] To be healed of our woundedness from sin, one needs to receive the grace mediated through the sacrament of baptism.

3.3.2 The Council of Trent

It will benefit us now to explore what the Council teaches regarding humanity's inheritance of the consequences of Adam's sin. This will enable us to gain a clearer idea of whether the Catholic tradition argues for or against the idea of sin's inevitability. It will also help us to discern whether it is always possible for humans to achieve the good, and if so, how. In other words, to what extent does sin impact human living and acting in the world according to Tridentine thought? In short, the Council

[617] O'Brien, 'Appendix 9: Fallen Nature', pp. 154-155.
[618] See also McCosker, p. 210, where McCosker helpfully complies the various reasons why humanity needs grace within Aquinas' thought: "Thomas affirms that we need grace to know the truth (109.1), to will and do the good (109.2), to love God (109.3), to fulfill the commandments (109.4), to merit eternal life (109.5), to prepare for grace (109.6), to rise from sin (109.7), to avoid sin (109.8), to do good or avoid sin after grace (109.9), and to persevere in grace (109.10)."
[619] See Olivier-Thomas Venard, 'Sacraments', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Summa Theologiae,* ed. by Philip McCosker and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 269-288, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139034159.021> [accessed 9 June 2022].
[620] 1a2ae, 81, 3.

concludes that, alongside original sin, humans inherit a deterioration of their bodies and souls, and a weakening of the physical and psychological powers which accompany these. One of the psychological powers humanity finds hindered by original sin is free will. The sixth session of the Council on the theme of justification is significant in this regard. In this session, the Council asserts that:

> [S]ince all men had lost innocence in the prevarication of Adam, having become unclean, and, as the Apostle says, *by nature children of wrath,* as has been set forth in the decree on original sin, they were so far *the servants of sin* and under the power of the devil and of death, that not only the Gentiles by the force of nature, but not even the Jews by the very letter of the law of Moses, were able to be liberated or to rise therefrom, though free will, weakened as it was in its powers and downward bent, was by no means extinguished in them.[621]

All of humanity have become servants to sin. Moreover, humans are unable to free themselves from this condition through their natural powers.[622] The Council does not, however, attribute to sin the power to fully destroy one's free will. At the end of the decree, the Synod contends that, "[i]f anyone says that after the sin of Adam man's free will was lost and destroyed, or that it is a thing only in name, indeed a name without a reality, a fiction introduced into the Church by Satan, let him be anathema."[623] Nonetheless, the first quotation does suggest that sin affects one's freedom and personal agency. The Council describes free will as being "weakened" in its power and "downward bent." Following the logical corollary of this idea, then, perhaps we can say that sin has the capacity to weaken and constrain human agency and freedom. Further, in the case of the unbaptised, this capacity is not a mere potentiality, but an actuality. As we saw through the Tridentine reflection on the sacrament of baptism, however, it is not merely sin which acts upon the human person. Rather, the salvific grace of Jesus Christ is also operative within the world and has been offered to humanity in the sacrament.[624] Thus, both sin and mediated grace are

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[621] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', pp. 29-30, chapter I.
[622] See also Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', p. 22, §3, where the document states that the original sin we inherit cannot be taken away by the "forces of nature," but only through the salvific work of Jesus Christ.
[623] Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning Justification', in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* trans. by H. J. Schroeder, pp. 42-46 (p. 43), canon 5.
[624] See Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', pp. 22-23, §3-5.

present influencing the shape and direction of human history, although not deterministically so, and, it seems, not without the involvement of human agency and choice, and thus, some level of free will.

What does this mean, though, for the human achievement of the good? It is clear throughout the decree that there is a priority of grace in this regard. Indeed, the Synod states that:

> If anyone says that divine grace through Christ Jesus is given for this only, that man may be able more easily to live justly and to merit eternal life, as if by free will without grace he is able to do both, though with hardship and difficulty, let him be anathema.[625]

Thus, following the Council of Carthage where Pelagian teachings were condemned in 418,[626] the Tridentine decree portrays grace as a necessity for the human ability to live justly. Pelagius suggested that a sinless life is theoretically possible through one's free will and nature, even prior to, or independent of, any redeeming or salvific grace.[627] He suggested that the gift of grace is instead merely an aid to what is achievable by nature and sheer will. According to the Council of Trent, however, grace does not merely *help* us to live justly. Rather the Synod suggests that grace is in fact *enabling* this; it makes possible our transformation from sinners into saints through the grace of justification. It is unclear, however, whether the Council would endorse the idea that humanity is incapable of doing *any* good without redeeming grace, or whether it is merely condemning the idea that *justification* is possible without it. It appears that one could interpret the text in such a way that it presents a Thomistic account of the human ability to naturally achieve some good without grace. On the other hand, it is also possible to read Trent as affirming that the source of our freedom to do good is not one which originates from us, but rather is always dependent on God's gracious activity in the world.

Another theme in the Council's decrees which can perhaps shed further light on this issue is the idea of concupiscence. The Council defines concupiscence as an "inclination to sin" which lingers in the baptised, even after their baptism. The Synod

[625] Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning Justification', p. 42, canon 2.
[626] Vandervelde, p. 21. See Vandervelde, pp. 32-38, for a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between these councils.
[627] Ibid., p. 10.

simultaneously states, however, that Christians receive the grace necessary to resist concupiscence through the sacrament of baptism:

> [T]his holy council perceives and confesses that in the one baptized there remains concupiscence or an inclination to sin, which, since it is left for us to wrestle with, cannot injure those who do not acquiesce but resist manfully by the grace of Jesus Christ; indeed, he who shall have *strived lawfully shall be crowned*.[628]

This suggests that, after baptism, sin is not an inevitability for Christians. On the contrary, the grace received through this sacrament enables resistance of sin. Concupiscence remains in the baptised, and they remain tempted by it, however one needs to consent to it for it to lead one to sin. For those who have not received baptism, however, their ability to resist this incentive to sin seems far less likely. We might infer from the Council's teaching, therefore, that it is possible for humans to live a sinless life. This sinless life would be dependent on the grace of Jesus Christ mediated through the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of baptism, without which sin remains unavoidable. This interpretation seems to be supported in other decrees of the Council. Indeed, when speaking about the necessity of the sacrament of penance, the Synod writes:

> If in all those regenerated such gratitude were given to God that they constantly safeguarded the justice received in baptism by His bounty and grace, there would have been no need for another sacrament besides that of baptism to be instituted for the remission of sins.[629]

Moreover, the Council later contends that, "[i]f anyone says that the commandments of God are, even for one that is justified and constituted in grace, impossible to observe, let him be anathema."[630] This again suggests that it is theoretically possible for humans to avoid all further sin and fully conform themselves to God's will if they co-operate with the gift of grace they received in baptism. In this theoretical case, therefore, there would be no need for the sacrament of penance. The Council does qualify, however, that God set up the sacrament so that humans could be given an

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[628] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Original Sin', p. 23, § 5.
[629] Council of Trent, 'The Most Holy Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction', in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* trans. by H. J. Schroeder, pp. 88-99 (p. 88), chapter I.
[630] Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning Justification', p. 44, canon 18.

opportunity to repent, be forgiven, and have their sins remitted, because God knew that humans would again fall into sin. Perhaps, therefore, there is an implicit belief that, although it is theoretically possible for humans to refrain from sin following their baptism, nevertheless this has not happened historically. Thus, the sacrament of penance remains necessary.

This interpretation — that it is theoretically possible for humans to live a fully sinless life following baptism — seems to create tension with a later canon of the same session. Indeed, the Council states: "If anyone says […] that [a man] can during his whole life avoid all sins, even those that are venial, except by a special privilege from God, as the Church holds in regard to the Blessed Virgin, let him be anathema."[631] This seems to be in direct contradiction to what is insinuated in the quotations we just examined. In this canon, it seems that one is unable to avoid all sins in one's lifetime, even after receiving the grace communicated through baptism.

Perhaps, however, these two seemingly contrasting beliefs are not as disharmonious as first appears. The key might lie in the Council's distinction between venial and mortal sin. The Synod asserts that one can classify acts of sin into two categories: mortal and venial. Mortal sins are those serious and "deadly" sins whereby one loses the grace of justification which one had previously received from one's baptism. The Council writes that if a person commits such a sin, they are "cut off from the grace of Christ."[632] Venial sins, on the other hand, are those 'less serious' sins which we commit "more frequently", and which do not lead to us being "excluded from the grace of God"[633] and made unjust. Significantly, when the Council speaks about mortal sins, it explicitly states that one is gifted with the ability to refrain from committing such sins through the grace received in baptism.[634] We might infer from this, therefore, that it is only mortal sin which we are able to resist following baptism. This would put the Council in a theological position similar to Aquinas concerning the inevitability of sin. The Synod also proclaims that, unlike with mortal sins, it is not

[631] Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning Justification', p. 45, canon 23.
[632] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', p. 40, chapter XV. It is important to note, however, that one can receive this grace again when one participates in the sacrament of penance. Through the sacrament one receives the grace necessary to be healed and reconciled with God. See Council of Trent, 'The Most Holy Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction', pp. 88-94, chapters I-V.
[633] Council of Trent, 'The Most Holy Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction', p. 93, chapter V.
[634] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', p. 40, chapter XV.

necessary for Catholics to confess venial sins when participating in the sacrament of reconciliation. This, perhaps, is why it is possible for the Council to affirm that, theoretically, it should be possible for individuals to never need the sacrament of penance for the remission of sins after receiving the grace conferred in baptism. This, therefore, could also be why the Council can contend that a person cannot avoid all sins during their lifetime, whilst simultaneously maintaining that one is able to refrain from sin through grace; one is able to abstain from mortal sin, but not venial sin.

Thus, the sacrament of baptism is crucial for the Council of Trent's understanding of how sin impacts human life and agency. It is the grace mediated through this sacrament which confers healing and justification,[635] thereby enabling both resistance of mortal sin and human achievement of the good. Without this divine offer of salvific grace, though, it seems that sin would have a devastating impact on human life; humanity would be unable to avoid committing mortal sins and would remain in a state of injustice and guilt before God. It is unclear, however, whether one can live a completely sinless life even after baptism, never even committing venial sins. There seems to be evidence within the Council's decrees which support multiple interpretations. Following our investigation, however, it seems most likely that the Council would contend that it is not possible for individuals, even those who are baptised, to fully avoid all sin throughout their lifetimes.[636] Thus, it seems that sin has a significant impact on human life and agency; even after the grace conferred in baptism, human freedom and agency is tainted by original sin to such an extent that one is unable to refrain from committing venial sins.

Hence, some key themes emerge from both Aquinas and Trent on the effects of original sin on the human person. Indeed, it seems that the state of sin we are born into disorders humanity's interior life to such an extent that, without grace, one would be living in a state of injustice throughout one's life. As te Velde concludes:

> The Christian doctrine of original sin claims that the whole of mankind has actually sinned in the person of Adam. It implies a factual claim about the moral condition of historical mankind, and it even contends that no one, by reason of original sin, is able to refrain from sinning. In contrast to

[635] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', p. 33, chapter VII.
[636] Except by a special grace, as the Church professes happened with Mary.

> Pelagianism, Catholic faith teaches that it is no longer in our power not to sin.[637]

Original sin thus has the capacity to constrain one's agency and freedom to do the good, live justly, and resist sin, thereby shaping the direction of history, although neither the Council nor Aquinas explicitly follow the logical corollary of their ideas in this way. This is not a dystopian or apocalyptic determinism, however, as humanity are offered the opportunity to heal due to the salvific grace of Jesus Christ which has been offered to humanity in the sacraments. What is important to note, therefore, is that one cannot have a Catholic theology of sin without a corresponding theological understanding of grace and its effects on the human person. For both Aquinas and the decrees of Trent, it is impossible to speak about sin and its impacts on humanity without also speaking about God's salvific response to it. As we saw in the previous chapter, this is a theme which also emerged in the thought of liberation theologians. Hence, sin is not the only force or legacy which acts upon the human person in history.

3.4 Human Freedom, Grace, and the Possibility of Repentance

We have already seen how, for both Aquinas and Trent, grace is necessary to overcome the effects of original sin on the human person. Moreover, in this lifetime, we will never be fully healed of our woundedness from sin, with our freedom and agency remaining constrained in some ways.[638] Nevertheless, both Aquinas and the Council maintain that the human person remains free. So, we will now further explore some potential reasons why these thinkers can maintain this belief that human freedom is not altogether destroyed by sin.

3.4.1 Aquinas on Temporality

As we have seen, Aquinas concludes that we are not able to completely avoid sinning in this lifetime. How then can he claim that humans always remain free? To understand this conclusion, we must open ourselves to the possibility that St Thomas' definition of freedom may not be one we are familiar with in modernity, that is, moralistic in emphasis, but rather is a theological definition. In other words, human freedom may not consist in self-determination and the ability to do whatever one wills without any

[637] Te Velde, p. 152.
[638] See also Wawrykow, 'Grace', pp. 194-195.

external influence. Instead, the human person may be considered free because they always retain the possibility of repentance from sin. This possibility is predicated upon Aquinas' theological account of grace as we have already seen, but it is also based on his theological anthropology of humans as fundamentally temporal creatures. As te Velde explains, Thomas' thought on this matter is laid out within the context of his exploration of fallen angels: "Aquinas' exposition of the moral state of the angel functions as an illuminating contrast to the human condition of freedom in time, a freedom which makes a history of salvation possible."[639] Te Velde further elucidates:

> For humans there still is time in life, that is, time for contrition, repentance, penance, and reconciliation. As long as life endures, there remains the possibility of a new beginning. Thus, for human beings, who exist in time, a history of salvation is possible. The way of human freedom through history remains open and undecided with respect to "eternal punishment" or "everlasting life."[640]

For Aquinas, human rationality is temporal. Knowledge develops and grows over time and thus humans come to discern the truth and the good through a "rational-discursive process."[641] This means, ultimately, that humans can come to change their minds, and hence repent of their sinful acts and wrong choices. As Aquinas himself writes:

> [The human] mind becomes subject to change: we have to reason from one point to another, and so a way remains open to us of reaching one or another of opposite conclusions. And so it is that the human will attaches itself to any object in a changeable way, as being able to abandon it and turn instead to its contrary; whereas the angel's will cleaves to its object in a fixed unchanging way. […] Hence it is commonly said that while a man's free will is able to alternate between contraries both before and after choice, an angel's is able so to alternate only before choice.[642]

Perhaps, therefore, it is because of this ability to change our minds that we can think of the human person as free. Human freedom is rooted in the human person's ability

[639] Te Velde, p. 149.
[640] Ibid., p. 148.
[641] Ibid., p. 149.
[642] 1a. 64, 2.

to repent and change over time due to humanity's temporal locatedness within a history of salvation and grace. As te Velde explains:

> Because of rationality, humans have the moral capacity of disengaging themselves from their evil acts, of feeling remorse, and of trying to better their lives. The freedom of the angel consists in its single choice for or against God; the freedom of man, on the contrary, is a freedom in history, in which he is offered the divine chance of redemption and restoration.[643]

<u>3.4.2 Co-operation with Grace</u>

Going beyond what the Council of Trent and Aquinas explicitly state, we can infer from their writings that human freedom and repentance from sin is not only dependent on God's salvific action but also on human agency and co-operation. This is because, for both these thinkers, grace is mediated. Even in the case of baptism, the grace mediated through this sacrament is conferred onto the human individual through the co-operation and agency of other humans, for example the local priest, one's parents, and one's Church community. The grace which enables human freedom, therefore, is fundamentally a social reality which is mediated and received through one's sociality and communal life. In the case of baptism, grace is mediated through a religious ritual of one's social life; a ritual which necessarily requires the co-operation of other humans and the wider Catholic community, as well as the resources of the natural world. The sacrament of reconciliation is also mediated through the co-operation of human agency in a similar manner through the role of the priest in hearing confession.

Moreover, the Council explicitly asserts that humans are not rendered merely passive recipients of grace. The co-operation of one's free will and agency is essential, not only to help mediate grace to others, but also to receive it for oneself:

> If anyone says that man's free will moved and aroused by God, by assenting to God's call and action, in no way cooperates toward disposing and preparing itself to obtain the grace of justification, that it cannot refuse its assent if it

[643] Te Velde, p. 149.

wishes, but that, as something inanimate, it does nothing whatever and is merely passive, let him be anathema.[644]

Thus, there is a role for the human will and powers in the attainment of the good and capacity to resist sin. A voluntary reception of grace is required, particularly when preparing oneself for, and participating in, sacraments such as the sacrament of penance.[645] There is an essential co-operation between the divine and the human which must take place for humanity's successful achievement of the good and resistance of sin.[646] Aquinas also presents a similar understanding of the need for human co-operation with grace. As McCosker explains, through his theology of grace, Aquinas is attempting "to safeguard the integrity of created nature and its actions, precisely by underwriting those with his understanding of God's transcendence such that it does not displace but rather enhances the natural, such that God and creature can be co-operators in grace, indeed even friends."[647] McCosker concludes that individual human persons are "enabled to also be graced movers alongside God"[648] by helping to "make others graceful before God."[649]

3.5 Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this chapter we have been exploring some of the key themes which emerge from the Catholic tradition on original sin. We have used the theologies of Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent as particular case studies to aid us in this task. As we have seen, upon first reading Aquinas seems to present a moralistic account of sin as being merely a bad human act which one voluntarily, and thus willingly, commits through one's use of reason and free will. Through our exploration of Thomas' account of the effects of original sin on humanity, however, we have seen how his theological account of sin is more complicated than this. One of Aquinas' definitions of sin is

[644] Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning Justification', pp. 42-43, canon 4. See also Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', pp. 31-32, chapter V, and Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning Justification', p. 43, canon 9.
[645] Council of Trent, 'Decree Concerning Justification', p. 33, chapter VII. See also Council of Trent, 'The Most Holy Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction', pp. 88-99, chapters I-IX, and Council of Trent, 'Canons Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of Penance', in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* trans. by H. J. Schroeder, pp. 101-104, canons 1-15.
[646] Although it is unclear how this relates to the baptism of infants and new-borns.
[647] McCosker, p. 220. See also Wawrykow, 'Grace', p. 197 for a more technical understanding of how the human person can be understood as co-operating with grace in Aquinas' thought.
[648] McCosker, p. 214.
[649] Ibid.

indeed “a disordered human action”[650] which finds its cause in the human will. However, humans will and act in ways which are disordered, and hence contrary to reason and the divine will, precisely because they are born into a disordered state, condition, or disposition of sin which precedes any of their individual voluntary acts, but which nevertheless qualifies the human capacity to attain the good and resist sin apart from grace. For Aquinas, therefore, one needs to understand his theological anthropology, particularly his understanding of original sin and its consequences on human nature, to properly understand his account of sin as a disordered act. One should not regard his comments about sin as a moral act in isolation from his wider theological understanding of sin.

Within both the Tridentine and Thomistic account, original sin is regarded as an inherited state, albeit, for Thomas, a state of privation. This state preconditions one’s agency and freedom, in that one is hindered in one’s ability to attain all the good and resist sin due to it. Moreover, one is found culpable for this disordered state of sin prior to any voluntary activity of one’s own when considered as an individual. Thus, through their respective accounts of original sin, both Aquinas and the Council present a disruption to the moralistic narrative of sin. For them, the reality of sin is not limited to an act, but can also be regarded as a state of privation or an inherited condition. As te Velde summarises, fundamental to the traditional doctrine of original sin is the belief that human nature has “contracted a culpable defect.”[651] It is important to note, though, that for Aquinas this disordered state has to be related to a voluntary act and will as its cause if it is to be properly considered sin, albeit not necessarily one’s personal will considered apart from the wider community one is a member of. Moreover, one cannot be found guilty of a sin which one did not willingly commit, except insofar as one is regarded as part of a wider human community.

Consequently, exploring the tradition in this way has taken us further towards discerning what sin is, and how it shapes human acting and living in the world. Through our explorations of these writings, we have seen that, within a properly Catholic theological understanding of sin, the language of sin is not limited to describing a free, self-determined, personal act of the will. Nor is the attribution of guilt equated to a modern notion of moral culpability. Moreover, the state of original

[650] 1a2ae. 75, 1.
[651] Te Velde, p. 143.

sin always already preconditions one's agency and freedom. These theological accounts of sin challenge the very foundations upon which modern moralistic discourses on sin stand. As González Faus aptly identified, there is indeed precedent within the Catholic tradition for expanding the concept of sin beyond exclusive focus on immoral acts and attitudes for which we can be found morally culpable. Hence, it could be argued that the liberationist account of 'social' or 'structural' sin remains in faithful continuity with the pre-existing tradition. Hence, moralistic accounts of sin, such as that presented by John Paul II, are, perhaps without realizing, incompatible with some major aspects of the Catholic tradition. Moralistic theologies of sin actually undermine the traditional belief in the non-individualistic inheritance of sin and guilt within the doctrine of original sin.

As we saw at the end of chapter one, though, there are aspects of John Paul II's thought which suggest that an alternative construal of social sin may be possible. These facets could potentially be used to develop an alternative Catholic theological account of social sin. The traditional resources we have explored in this chapter, therefore, could be used to further develop this alternative understanding of human freedom and sinfulness. Indeed, the Pope's dynamic account of the human person as being in a process of becoming could usefully be expanded upon by drawing on Aquinas' understanding of human temporality and its significance for our freedom. Going beyond Aquinas, perhaps we can use this understanding of humanity's "freedom in time"[652] as a resource to develop a more nuanced Catholic construal of freedom and its relation to sin, as well as a more dynamic understanding of human selfhood and the human condition which compliments that presented by liberation theologians. Human freedom could be considered as dynamic, rather than static, precisely because of our temporal locatedness within salvation history.

Further, both Aquinas and Trent's account of the operation of grace within history can similarly be drawn upon to complement this idea of human freedom and becoming. As we have seen, due to the presence of mediated grace within history, there is the possibility that humans can achieve some form of the good, repent from sin, and even avoid mortal sin, in this lifetime. This possibility, however, is utterly dependent on grace and humanity's co-operation with it. Indeed, it seems that humans

[652] I appropriate the phrase "freedom in time" from te Velde. See te Velde, p. 149.

can still be considered free due to this possibility of repentance. Perhaps we can go further than what Aquinas and Trent explicitly write, though, by arguing that this possibility of repentance is always open for humanity due to our temporal locatedness within a history of salvation and grace. There is, therefore, an essential co-operation between the divine and the human which must take place. This is particularly evident in the sacraments, whereby grace is conferred onto the human individual through the co-operation and agency of other humans. Thus, there is precedent within the Catholic tradition to support liberation theology's understanding of graced encounter. Indeed, humans are not rendered merely passive recipients of grace. The co-operation of one's will and agency is essential, both to help mediate grace to others, and also to receive it for oneself. This theological understanding of grace can help us to discern sin's impact on human life and agency. It can also help us to speak about freedom in the context of a world where sin is present influencing the shape and direction of history. It has the potential, therefore, to aid us in our task of developing a theological account of social sin which is not fatalistic.

Moreover, Aquinas' clarification of how we can be found culpable for a state or condition of sin which did not originate from ourselves, but which we nonetheless find ourselves implicated in, is useful for the development of the idea of social sin. Indeed, guilt for original sin cannot be attributed to a person when they are considered in isolation as a unique and singular human being. They can, however, be found culpable in terms of their relationality to the historical human community they are a part of.[653] Furthermore, in order to remain faithful to the pre-existing Catholic tradition on sin, human agency needs to be the cause of a situation for it to be considered sin. As te Velde concludes: "Like any other sin, original sin results from human freedom in a way that remains ultimately inexplicable to us."[654]

It is my contention, however, that one cannot equate original sin with social sin. Although the doctrine of original sin has helped develop our understanding of how sin can shape human living and acting in the world, the specific way original sin does this is not to be wholly and uncritically transferred into a theology of social sin as if the two terms are interchangeable. As we have seen, original sin is regarded as being transmitted to us through our very natures leaving us internally disordered. It seems to

[653] See also te Velde, p. 163.
[654] Te Velde, p. 150.

impact our lives in this way regardless of any unjust social structures or cultures we encounter. As we saw in the last chapter, though, the idea of social sin presented by liberation theologians could be developed further. I suggested that one could do this through closer analysis of the cultural social forces and norms which underlie and sustain social structures, and which contribute towards the social constitution of the personally sinful self. It is unlikely that the doctrine of original sin can help develop the idea of social sin in this way. It would benefit us now, therefore, to explore contemporary resources to see how they can aid us in this discernment of how we are formed as acting and deliberating subjects through interaction with sinful socio-political, cultural, and economic structures. This will enable us to further understand how social or structural sin impacts our lives and agency. In the next chapter, therefore, I shall explore Judith Butler as a particular dialogue partner to help address the salient issues we identified in chapters one and two that have not been fully answered by these Catholic resources on original sin.

4. Human Vulnerability and the 'Constitutive Sociality of the Self': Rethinking Social Sin in Dialogue with Judith Butler

As we have previously seen, John Paul II's definition of social sin requires that there be a neat distinction between the freely willed — and therefore morally culpable — act of an individual, and the social conditions within which that act takes place. His distinction between the personal and the social inhibits his definition from moving beyond a mere analogous and derivative formulation. As we saw in chapter one, the Church's official teaching lacks a more nuanced account of the acting individual as an embodied, historical, relational, and communicative being. A properly theological reflection on the significance of this reality would greatly benefit our understanding of social sin. Contemporary thought, particularly within queer theory, presents a more nuanced understanding of the relation between the personal and the social which complicates this question of agency and freedom. As we identified in chapter two, although liberation theologians take us further towards a more nuanced understanding of how social structures form us as acting and deliberating subjects, more thinking remains to be done here. Their accounts could be developed further through closer analysis of the cultural social forces and norms which underlie and sustain these structures, and which contribute towards the social constitution of the personally sinful self. This chapter will argue that queer theory is a valuable resource which can be drawn upon to help us develop the idea of social sin in this way. In one way or another, contemporary thinkers within queer theory present a constructivist, rather than essentialist, theory of identity; they argue that human selves, namely one's consciousness, will, desires, and agency, are formed through others and through the historical and social contexts in which they are located.[655] We can therefore draw upon these thinkers to contest the notion which underlies John Paul II's account of sin, that is, that the source of individual actions is a self-generated will and decision which is independent or transcendent of one's concrete social, material, and historical

[655] Andrew Prevot perhaps best characterises the difference between essentialist and constructivist theories of identity. He writes that, for constructivist theories, "identity is about how bodies, selves, and social groups are formed through discourses, practices, and material and symbolic fields and flows of power." Essentialist theories of identity, however, argue that certain identity markers such as one's race or one's gender are "an intelligible or biological form of being that has found concrete expression." That is, these identity markers are ontological; they are natural and pre-exist any cultural interpretations of what it means to be Black or a woman. See Andrew Prevot, 'Theology and Race: Black and Womanist Traditions in the United States', *Theology,* 2.2 (2018), 1-79 (p. 4).

situatedness. In other words, just as there is no social without the personal, similarly there is no personal without the social. Queer theory can be drawn upon to help further discern the relation between the personal and the social.

In this chapter, I shall begin with a brief introduction to queer theory in general. Following this introduction, the chapter will explore Judith Butler's account of the "constitutive sociality of the self"[656] in much greater depth. Indeed, it is my contention that Butler's theory of subject formation can serve as a helpful resource to constructively develop Catholic Social Teaching. I shall elucidate various aspects of their thought, such as: the fundamental interdependency, vulnerability, and sociality of embodied human life; the 'constitutive sociality of the self'; the complex relation between social norms and the formation of agency and subjectivity; and the violent effects of cultural norms. Butler's theory of subject formation provides a nuanced account of the individual human actor, as well as the relation between the personal and the social, which can help further develop the idea of social sin. The chapter will also identify those areas of Butler's thought which have already been drawn upon by Queer Theology in various ways. At the end of the chapter, however, I shall identify three specific examples of theologians who have used a theory of the 'constitutive sociality of the self' — either Butler's or a different conceptual framework that is nonetheless similar to Butler's own — to develop a contemporary theological understanding of sin. This will enable me to demonstrate how Butler's ideas, or similar theories, have already been used to reinterpret the idea of sin. I shall also briefly indicate why none of these attempts satisfactorily provide a Catholic theological understanding of social sin. The chapter will conclude by demonstrating how theologians could utilise Butler's thought to enrich a Catholic theology of social sin.

4.1 Introduction to Queer Theory

Although the literature which makes up the canon of queer theory is neither monolithic nor homogeneous, queer theorists have reflected at length on how the epistemological, linguistic, and ontological assumptions of a culture or society can undergird oppressive forms of domination, hierarchy, and exclusion.[657] They analyse the oppressive and violent effects of cultural norms, and the power relations undergirding

[656] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 19.
[657] Brandy Daniels, 'A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?: Queer Theory & Apophaticism', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 64.2-3 (2013), 108-117 (p. 110).

the construction of these norms, particularly within heteropatriarchal societies. Queer theorists explore how dominant norms of gender, the body, sexuality, or the human in general — norms which present themselves as 'natural' or 'true' — actually "reflect and reproduce certain relations of power that foreclose and/or oppress difference."[658] As Brandy Daniels states, a central contribution of queer theory is therefore its critique of "ontological categorization and epistemological certitude as key sites of oppression."[659] This leads queer theorists such as Judith Butler to argue that normative notions of gender problematically marginalize, oppress, and exclude certain people: "[These norms] establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression,"[660] hence "the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality."[661] It does this by setting the limits for what can be regarded as real, right, true, good, or intelligible.[662] Queer theorists therefore argue that, not only are these foundational categories of the human, gender, and sex the *effects* of specific power relations, but they also *cause* violence — in cultural, symbolic, and physical forms — against persons. As Geoffrey Rees contends, they do this by enforcing the worth and valuation of certain "imaginations of intelligible personal identity" and by "[stunting] the formation of alternative imaginations of intelligible personal identity."[663] Normative notions of gender, sexuality, and the body are used as instruments of oppressive power. As Daniels explains, queer theorists therefore dedicate themselves to "critically reflecting on and posing challenges and alternatives to normativity."[664] Indeed, according to Butler, a key task for scholars is

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[658] Brandy Daniels, 'On Ambivalence and (Anti-)Normativity (or, Theology as a Way of Life?)', *Political Theology*, 19.8 (2018), 689-697, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1520833>, (p. 691). There is also a point to be made here clarifying that just because a norm is a human, cultural construct which is produced, and reproduced, through relations of power, this does not necessarily mean that it is not true. Nor, on my reading, would Judith Butler argue thus. For a parallel argument see Brandy Daniels, 'Grace Beyond Nature? Beyond Embodiment as Essentialism: A Christological Critique', *Feminist Theology*, 24.3 (2016), 245-259 (p. 249).

[659] Daniels, 'A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?', p. 109.

[660] Judith Butler, 'Preface (1999)', in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. vii-xxviii (p. xxv).

[661] Ibid., p. xxiv.

[662] Ibid, pp. xxiv-xxv.

[663] Geoffrey Rees, 'Is Sex Worth Dying For? Sentimental-Homicidal-Suicidal Violence in Theological Discourse of Sexuality', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 39.2 (2011), 261-285, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23020029> [accessed 14 October 2019], (p. 261).

[664] Daniels, 'On Ambivalence and (Anti-)Normativity', p. 691.

to “question common sense, interrogate its tacit presumptions and provoke new ways of looking at a familiar world.”[665]

One of the key contributions of the discipline is its examination of how particular norms and ideals, and the power relations undergirding them, discipline and produce subjectivities. As Daniels states:

> While queer theoretical reflections […] represent a diversity of (hotly debated) constructive proposals, what locates the diverse discourse under the same umbrella is its critical attention to (1) how subjectivity is formed, and thus disciplined, by power; (2) how that disciplining formation circulates through norms and ideals.[666]

Queer theorists examine how culturally constructed norms form identities, and one’s very selfhood and subjectivity, in ways that conform to the norm — or deviate from it with punitive consequences[667] — thereby leading to a complicity with, and active contribution to, heteropatriarchal domination. It is through the production of subjectivities constituted through cultural norms that social situations which marginalize certain types of people are produced and maintained. On the basis of this, one cannot think about the acting individual without attending to the social constitution of that individual’s agency and subjectivity. In more simplified terms, queer theory reveals to us the wide variety of factors which shape us as acting individuals.[668] It also provides a language for us to articulate the idea that individual sinful acts, or even individual human selves, cannot be addressed without also attending to the wider social and historical context which is so fundamental in the constitution of that very act and subjectivity. Hence, I shall now examine Judith Butler’s account of subject formation in more detail to show how their theory of the “constitutive sociality of the self” can provide a more nuanced account of the

[665] Judith Butler, ‘A “Bad Writer” Bites Back’, *The New York Times*, 20 March 1999, section A, p. 15 <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/20/opinion/a-bad-writer-bites-back.html> [accessed 12 June 2022]. Quote also found in Daniels, ‘On Ambivalence and (Anti-)Normativity’, p. 695.

[666] Brandy Daniels, ‘Chrononormativity and the Community of Character: A Queer Temporal Critique of Hauerwasian Virtue Ethics’, *Theology and Sexuality*, 23.1-2 (2017), 114-143 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2017.1341208> (p. 121). Although Daniels is referring to queer theorists who reflect on temporality in particular, her explanation in the quote above can be expanded to describe queer theory in general.

[667] Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), 519-531, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893> [accessed 14 November 2019], (p. 522).

[668] Brandy Daniels, ‘A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?’, p. 113.

individual human actor, and therefore provide a resource which can be draw upon to constructively develop our understanding of the relation between the personal and the social.

4.2 Judith Butler on Interdependency and Vulnerability

Judith Butler is a feminist queer theorist who examines the ways heteropatriarchal power prevails in society. Butler does this predominately through an examination of how gender norms operate. In their later works, however, they expand their research topics to include issues of race and norms of the human in general. Throughout their many writings on diverse topics such as gender, terrorism, and subjectivity, Butler both implicitly and explicitly develops a theory of subject formation which leads to a constructivist understanding of identity. Through this theory, Butler not only identifies that the culture one inhabits can influence one to act in harmful ways, but also that the culture or social world one inhabits is actually the precondition for one's very agency: "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose."[669]

How did Butler come to this conclusion? Butler's thesis concerning the social constitution of individual agency is derived from the distinct account of the human which they present. Butler posits that interdependency, sociality, and impressionability are ineradicable dimensions of the human condition. The dependency of the human person follows from what Butler terms the "fundamental sociality of embodied life."[670] From birth we have a physical dependency on others due to our corporeality which means that, even prior to the formation of our will, we have no choice but to be reliant on others.[671] This dependency is perhaps most evident as infants, when we are dependent on our parents or primary caregivers to protect, nurture, and care for us in our growth as individual human beings. Butler expounds:

> [W]e are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself and, by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others: this conception means that we are vulnerable to those we are too young to know and to judge and, hence, vulnerable to violence; but also vulnerable to another range of

[669] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 3.
[670] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 28.
[671] Ibid., p. 26.

> touch, a range that includes the eradication of our being at one end, and the physical support of our lives at the other.[672]

The very conditions of our embodied life therefore constitute us as profoundly relational and interdependent beings. We are dependent on others for our physical wellbeing and development. Thus, the conditions necessary for our existence constitute our selves as "social phenomenon[s] in the public sphere."[673]

According to Butler, however, we are not dependent on others merely for our bodily wellbeing; our individual human subjectivities — the ways we think, feel, desire, and will — are also formed through our relationality and sociality. We are "formed within the crucible of social life."[674] In other words, our subjectivities come to bear the imprint and trace of others.[675] Butler beautifully writes that the ties which we as humans have to one another "constitute what we are" and "compose us."[676] Butler presents relationality as both a historical and ongoing fact of our formation as individual selves:

> I may wish to reconstitute my "self" as if it were there all along, a tacit ego with acumen from the start; but to do so would be to deny the various forms of rapture and subjection that formed the condition of my emergence as an individuated being and that continue to haunt my adult sense of self with whatever anxiety and longing I may feel now. Individuation is an accomplishment, not a presupposition, and certainly no guarantee.[677]

Butler therefore presents a theory of 'the constitutive sociality of the self': At every moment we exist as relational beings, and it is this very relationality which constitutes the formation of our subjectivity. Going slightly beyond Butler's own terminology, this means that our very desires, wills, values, and worldviews are dependent on our socialization with the others we encounter, and hence are produced by our social and communal lives. Moreover, for Butler, this impressionability and dependency does not

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[672] Ibid., p. 31.
[673] Ibid., p. 26.
[674] Ibid.
[675] Ibid.
[676] Ibid., p. 22.
[677] Ibid., p. 27. See also Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) pp. 8-11 where Butler writes: "The 'I' comes into sentient being, even thinking and acting, precisely by being acted on in ways that, from the start, presume that nonvoluntary, though volatile field of impressionability."

end as we leave childhood. There is a permanent fluidity and permeability to human selfhood: We are continuously forming ourselves and being formed by those human others we encounter. In other words, we are in a constant state of becoming. Human selfhood is dynamic, rather than static. Therefore, at every moment we are radically dependent, both on each other and the social world we inhabit, for our emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing.

This account of the human leads us to acknowledge, as Butler does, that humans are fundamentally vulnerable. First, we are vulnerable physically: Due to our dependency on others for our physical development and bodily wellbeing, we are left open to exploitation and harm.[678] This dynamic between dependency and vulnerability is perhaps most visible in infancy, however, aspects of this corporeal vulnerability remain with us for the rest of our lives.[679] As Butler writes, we have a "primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human."[680] They further contend:

> Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies — as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.[681]

For Butler, therefore, this corporeal vulnerability is fundamental to being human.

What I am interested in, is how this theory of the "constitutive sociality of the self" can be developed beyond an acknowledgement of corporeal vulnerability to also account for the ways that our very selves and subjectivities are vulnerable to being shaped in ways that harm both ourselves and others. Although Butler does not explicitly develop the language of vulnerability in this way, it builds upon their contentions regarding the interdependency, permeability, and fluidity of human

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[678] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 7.
[679] For example, certain viruses are spread from person to person through contact; even as adults, therefore, we are reliant on other people's health to maintain our own physical health and wellbeing. Viruses, such as COVID-19, make clear to us the fact that our lives are radically interdependent, and therefore also vulnerable and precarious.
[680] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. xiv.
[681] Butler, *Precarious Life,* p. 20.

selfhood. Moreover, it is implicit in their conclusions: "I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control."[682] From a theological standpoint, we can develop this idea of vulnerability beyond Butler to argue that as humans we are vulnerable to being formed through our interactions with others in ways which oppose God's will for us. Indeed, as Butler acknowledges: "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch and to violence, and *bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of these as well*."[683] Our subjectivity is vulnerable to being formed in ways which lead us to become agents and instruments of violence, or, using my own theological language, to become agents of sin.

This reality of interdependence and vulnerability invites us to rethink our understanding of responsibility; to think through the ways we hold collective responsibility for the emotional, psychological, and physical lives of one another. Butler expands upon this idea, writing that not only are we constituted and shaped by the others we encounter, but we also impinge upon others in turn, forming their subjectivities in ways that are beyond our power to control: "[We are] invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well, and in ways that are not fully in [our] control or clearly predictable."[684] This leads Butler to affirm that we have a "collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another."[685] I would take this further, however, and, using the language of Catholic social teaching, argue that due to the fundamental solidarity of the human race — evident in Butler's account of subject formation — we also have a collective responsibility for the psychological, spiritual, and emotional lives of one another. As Butler asserts: "I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the Other; if I do, I have taken myself out of the relational bind that frames the problem of responsibility from the start."[686]

4.3 Social Norms and the Formation of Subjectivity

According to Butler, we are not merely constituted socially through the other humans we encounter. These human others are always already formed by a broader and shared

[682] Ibid., p. 46.
[683] Ibid., p. 26, emphasis mine.
[684] Ibid., p. 27.
[685] Ibid., p. 30.
[686] Ibid., p. 46.

cultural context which they mediate to us. Every action or desire of the other is therefore a negotiated reaction to the cultural conventions and social norms in which they are historically situated:

> We do not negotiate with norms or with Others subsequent to our coming into the world. We come into the world on the condition that the social world is already there, laying the groundwork for us. […] My reflexivity is not only socially mediated, but socially constituted. I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me.[687]

These social norms, cultural conventions and values are situated outside of oneself in a cultural situation, and hence are not created by any single person. They therefore sustain a "temporal and spatial field of operation" which surpasses any one person's temporal lifetime, and hence are not of any one person's making.[688]

What exactly are norms, though, and why are they so crucial in the formation of subjectivity? For Butler, norms govern our notions of reality.[689] Butler argues that we should not regard norms as rules, or laws, although they can lead to those. Instead, drawing upon Foucault, Butler states that: "The norm is a measurement and a means of producing a common standard."[690] Norms therefore provide the criteria by which we judge things to be true, real, intelligible, and good. They provide the criteria for recognition, legitimation, and validation. They govern which actions and opinions are recognised, valued, and deemed acceptable within the public realm. Therefore, we should consider norms as the "implicit standard of *normalization*" that operate "within social practices."[691] For example, norms of gender form us in ways which lead us to make assumptions regarding what constitutes a 'normal', 'real', or 'good' woman, or a 'natural' or 'ordered' sexuality.[692] As Butler affirms, "we live, more or less implicitly, with received notions of reality, implicit accounts of ontology, which determine what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which kind will not."[693] Butler further explains that social norms provide "the aims and aspirations that guide us, the precepts by which we are compelled to act or speak

[687] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 32.
[688] Ibid., p. 15.
[689] Ibid., p. 214.
[690] Ibid., p. 50.
[691] Ibid., p. 41.
[692] Ibid., p. 214.
[693] Ibid.

to one another, the commonly held presuppositions by which we are oriented, and which give direction to our actions."[694] Norms therefore govern which actions and activities are considered acceptable or unacceptable for us predicated on our gender. They govern "the social intelligibility of action."[695] For example, in certain cultures it is regarded as socially acceptable for cis-gendered men to have bare torsos in public, whereas this kind of behaviour would be considered unacceptable for a 'good' or 'normal' woman. Hence, norms come to constitute the self by shaping one's worldview and habits of thinking in this way. They also lead us to feel particular emotions and thus have a role in shaping our affections and desires:

> Norms impress themselves upon us, and that impression opens up an affective register […] Norms act on us from all sides, that is, in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways; they act upon a sensibility at the same time that they form it; they lead us to feel in certain ways, and those feelings can enter into our thinking even, as we might well end up thinking about them.[696]

Using different terminology to Butler, therefore, we can say that norms are not only situated outside oneself in a cultural situation, but they also come to live *within* oneself and *within* the others that one encounters through the shaping of worldview, thought, and affection. Norms become the frame by which we see the world and the means by which we interpret and judge what we see. Moreover, norms impress upon us certain feelings and desires, not only when we conform to them, but also when we deviate from them. Using a simplistic example, we can say that gender norms dictate to us whether we should have feelings of like, dislike, or attraction towards certain types of clothes, hobbies, or persons based on the so-called 'truth' of our gender identity and sex. We may also desire to look a certain way in accord with a normative notion of what a beautiful or ideal woman looks like. We may feel a sense of pleasure or validation when someone calls us beautiful. Even if we deviate from these norms, we may experience feelings of anxiety or discomfort, or feel a sense of freakiness, abnormality, or shame due to our behaviour or looks.[697] In both cases the norm is impressing itself upon oneself, forming one's subjectivity and leading one to feel and act in certain ways even when we actively choose to deviate from that norm. As Butler

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[694] Ibid., p. 206.
[695] Ibid., p. 41.
[696] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 5. See also Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 15.
[697] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 70.

argues, "being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it."[698] Using a different example, certain norms regarding what constitutes a good, upstanding, and safe citizen versus what constitutes a dangerous person may lead us to feel certain ways when walking down a dark street with a person of a certain ethnicity, religion, or race, or a person wearing certain types of clothing, or speaking in a particular accent. Feelings of nervousness, suspicion, or discomfort may instinctively and involuntarily impress themselves upon us with accompanying physical and visceral bodily reactions: our heartrates may quicken; our palms might sweat. In *Precarious Life* Butler also examines how norms regarding who is considered dangerous can lead individuals, and even whole nations, to think and act in ways which do violence to certain marginalized groups of people due to the way they reinforce racist, classist, or Islamophobic stereotypes, worldviews, feelings, and actions.[699] We shall go on to explore this idea in more detail later, but for now hopefully these quick examples have illustrated some of the ways norms can form subjectivity through the shaping of affection and desire.

Hence, because our affections and desires are formed in this way, notional knowledge alone is not enough to transform unjust social situations such as patriarchy and racism. Queer theologian Linn Tonstad has also drawn upon queer theory to argue that notional knowledge is insufficient to effect social change. She argues that it is not enough merely to *know* that our actions and thought patterns are the result of contingent processes and are therefore not determined by an immutable nature. To truly effect change, she argues that:

> Our recognition that things could be otherwise [needs] to alter or destroy our investment in the way things are, the way our selves are formed at the deepest levels within heteronormativity, patriarchy, racism, and so on. […] Knowing that [heteronormativity, patriarchy, and racism] live within us doesn't end their hold on us […] because we *aren't* self-transparent, rational, autonomous individuals.[700]

Tonstad follows a similar line of argument to myself, arguing that heteropatriarchy and racism live within us and constitute a part of us, even if we become a victim to

[698] Ibid., p. 42.
[699] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 77.
[700] Tonstad, p. 71.

them.[701] She uses this understanding to argue that we need to have a notion of continual conversion: "acting to break their hold on the world by reshaping it and oneself, one's being in the world, and the social, economic, and political systems that these powers foster, remains a lifelong project that starts anew each day. It is never complete or finished."[702]

According to Butler, therefore, not only are we socially constituted by the others whom we depend upon, but we are also simultaneously formed by the shared social and cultural context in which we are located: "I am affected not just by this one other or set of others, but by a world in which humans, institutions, and organic and inorganic processes all impress themselves upon this me who is, at the outset, susceptible in ways that are radically involuntary."[703] Hence, following Foucault, Butler contends that social norms do not just act upon a pre-existing subject, influencing their decisions and actions in ways which may have been otherwise. Instead, these norms shape and form that very subjectivity.[704] Although we do not choose social norms, they provide us with the horizon "for any sense of choice that we have."[705] As Butler affirms: "There are social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all."[706]

There is, however, an irreducible complexity and ambiguity in attempting to discern the specific relation between cultural norms and subject formation. As Butler affirms:

> We tend to make a mistake when, in trying to explain subject formation, we imagine a single norm acting as a kind of "cause" and then imagine the "subject" as something formed in the wake of that norm's action.[707]

The point is not that we can neatly trace the specific sequence of events which led to the formation of our selfhood — and therefore also our acts — through the identification of an originating norm which is the single cause of said subjectivity. Rather, as Butler contends, "norms tend to arrive in clusters, interconnected." They

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[701] Ibid.
[702] Ibid., pp. 71-72.
[703] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 7.
[704] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 41.
[705] Ibid., p. 33.
[706] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 525.
[707] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, pp. 5-6.

"act on us from all sides, that is, in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways."[708] Hence, we can never fully or neatly narrate the formative history of one's subjectivity, and pinpoint exactly where it emerged historically as this particular self. There is an irreducible opacity, ambivalence, and unknowability of the self to itself, at least in part: "I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others. In this sense, I cannot know myself perfectly or know my 'difference' from others in an irreducible way."[709] As I shall elucidate further later, we can therefore never fully recount the originating cause of an individual act, at least in a way which neatly distinguishes between one's own agency, the social conditions in which one is immersed, and the formative influence of the human others one encounters.

4.4 The Violent Effects of Social Norms

Butler affirms that we need norms for the formation of our agency and subjectivity. We need them "in order to live, and to live well."[710] For example, we rely upon normative notions of what an "I" even is, as well as what it means to be an "us" or to be related to someone. Norms also help us discern what a just world looks like, or what it means to be 'healthy' or 'safe' or 'kind'. We draw upon norms of justice and nonviolence in the pursuit of becoming a good person or a peaceful society. Norms, however, can also constrain us "in ways that sometimes do violence to us, and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose."[711] Thus, going slightly beyond what Butler explicitly writes, not only are we vulnerable to exploitation and harm due to our dependency on human others, but, because we are also dependent on our shared social and cultural world for the formation of our consciousness and subjectivity, we are also vulnerable to being formed by it in ways which are exploitative or harmful. In other words, our impressionability leaves our cognitive, affective, and volitional powers vulnerable to being misshapen by our social environments, in ways that harm both ourselves and others. Or, to use my own theological language, we are vulnerable to being formed in ways that are contrary to the divine will for our, and the whole community of life's, flourishing. Butler states:

[708] Ibid., p. 5.
[709] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 46.
[710] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 206.
[711] Ibid.

> I am not only already in the hands of *someone* else before I start to work with my own hands, but I am also, as it were, in the "hands" of institutions, discourses, environments, including technologies and life processes, handled by an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human. In this sense, "I" am nowhere and nothing without the nonhuman.[712]

As we previously noted, norms of gender can form us in ways which lead us to make assumptions regarding what constitutes a 'real', 'normal', 'good', 'healthy', or 'ideal' woman. These norms can therefore exclude and do violence to those who deviate from this normative notion of a what a 'true' or 'ideal' woman is.[713] For example, Tonstad argues that "poor women are called indecent or undeserving if their lives don't conform to heterosexual, middle class ideologies of sexual behaviour."[714] This attribution of indecency is predicated on a heteronormative, patriarchal, and theological notion of what the good or ideal woman is. Queer theology draws upon Butler — and queer theory in general — to examine how theological categories, dogmas, and norms which present themselves as natural or true can "become touchstones for judging and organizing people."[715] Tonstad argues: "The 'reality' of the solidified category or concept becomes the standard by which other, actually real realities (people and their messy lives) are judged unreal, or insufficient, or imperfect."[716] Queer theology is thus committed to revealing, challenging, and transforming theological norms — of gender, sexuality, the body, or the human — which constitute what Butler would term a 'violent circumscription of reality' by organizing and valuing the lives of human beings by their relation to heteronormativity; thereby leading to people who are made "theologically and socially indecent."[717] This commitment leads Colby Dickinson and Meghan Toomey to argue that: "The infinitely diverse God of love and mercy calls us to interrogate and upend the presumptions, normative structures and identities that we inherited from the ever-elusive, constantly evolving 'system' of power that overshadows our existence," particularly those normative structures which are "erroneously and irreverently

[712] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p.7.
[713] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 214.
[714] Tonstad, p. 76.
[715] Ibid., p. 78.
[716] Ibid.
[717] Ibid., p. 100.

justified by misuse of the Christian God."[718] Although neither myself nor Butler would argue that *all* norms should be completely upended or rejected, nevertheless, we must be always open to the interrogation and revision of theological norms which cause harm.

Thus, norms can form our subjectivities in ways which lead us to *do* violence or harm to those who deviate from them. For example, normative visions of the human shape our understanding of what makes a human being, as well as how human beings ought to be.[719] Butler argues, therefore, that certain normative notions of the human can affect violence against certain groups of people. Butler explains: "normative conceptions of the human [...] produce, through an exclusionary process, a host of 'unliveable lives' whose legal and political status is suspended."[720] They explore this idea through the concept of 'grievability': When a person deviates from a normative notion of what a human being is or *ought* to be, they are often regarded as less grievable in the collective psyche of a society, if they are considered grievable at all. In other words, their deaths do not provoke our grief, sadness, or anger on a collective level. For example, if someone is severely disabled, or fat,[721] or homeless, or a criminal, or a drug addict, or an illegal immigrant, or a soldier fighting on the opposite side of a war, people may not regard their deaths as being particularly sad or worthy of note; they might even celebrate such a death. This is because these people either do not conform to a normative idea of what a human being is — for example, if one considers a human being as a rational, conscious, responsive agent then this may exclude people who are severely disabled or comatose — or they do not conform to a normative idea of what a human being *ought* to be — for example, people living with homelessness, criminals, terrorists, drug addicts, or so called 'enemy soldiers.' To

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[718] Colby Dickinson and Meghan Toomey, 'The Continuing Relevance of "Queer" Theology for the Rest of the Field', *Theology and Sexuality*, 23.1-2, 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2017.1341210>, (pp. 13-14).
[719] Tonstad, p. 68.
[720] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. xv.
[721] I use the term 'fat', rather than overweight or obese, to gesture towards the fat activism movement which seeks to challenge and reject the social discrimination and stigma 'fat' people face due to their bodies. This movement has reclaimed the word 'fat' and attempted to change its meaning from signifying something negative or pathological, to using it in ways which elicit pride and acceptance of 'fat' bodies. The intersectional field of 'fat studies' has also emerged within academia and the research sector in recent years. See, for example, Bethan Evans and Charlotte Cooper, 'Reframing Fatness: Critiquing "Obesity"', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. by Anne Whitehead and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 225–241. See also, *Fat Studies in the UK*, ed. by Corinna Tomrley and Ann Kalosky Naylor (York: Raw Nerve Books, 2009).

expand upon one of these examples, the death of someone who is fat may not be regarded as equally grievable as someone who is regarded as 'in the peak of health' due to a slimmer or more muscular body. Their bodies do not align with the normative notion of 'the human body' nor the normative idea of what a human being ought to be. Fat people are widely regarded as being lazy, gluttonous, unhealthy, ugly, or ignorant. Thus, their deaths are often regarded as less grievable because 'they had it coming.'

Once a person or a group of people are found to be less grievable, their lives are not afforded the same protection, respect, and care that they might otherwise expect. Butler argues that norms of the human form subjects who think and act based on this normative conception of what constitutes a grievable human life and what does not. Individuals are led to support certain legal, political, medical, and economic practices as acceptable because of this. Cultural contours of the human therefore have structural and political effects. They underlie policy, law, and economic and political decisions regarding which lives need to be protected. Butler concludes:

> Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as "grievable."[722]

Norms of the grievable human form people in ways which do violence to those who are not regarded as within the parameters of what constitutes grievability. Political, legal, and economic decisions are made, supported, and accepted predicated on the notion of which lives should, or should not, be protected.

This normative conception of the grievable human is also linked to cultural frames for thinking about who is deemed dangerous; namely, if someone is deemed more dangerous, then they are regarded as less grievable and hence as less deserving of legal and political protection. Butler uses the example of North America to depict this. They explain how normative notions regarding what constitutes a dangerous person within the collective American psyche has led to concrete ways of thinking and

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[722] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 32.

acting which have done violence to certain groups of people. For example, Butler argues that these norms have led to a widespread "license to brand and categorize and detain on the basis of suspicion alone" regardless of whether criminal acts have actually occurred.[723] Due to the complex racial dynamics at play in post-9/11 America, Butler contends that these norms regarding what constitutes a dangerous person have led to a widespread occurrence of racial profiling within the US:

> We have already seen it at work in racial profiling, in the detention of thousands of Arab residents or Arab-American citizens, sometimes on the basis of last names alone; the harassment of any number of US and non-US citizens at the immigration borders because some official "perceives" a potential difficulty; the attacks on individuals of Middle Eastern descent on US streets, and the targeting of Arab-American professors on campuses.[724]

Butler writes that, within the collective consciousness of the US, terrorists and extremists have slid into associative relationship with all Islamic people, and even to some extent all dark-skinned people, especially those who are Arab, as they are "taken to be Islamic."[725] Due to this association, these peoples are deemed dangerous and hence are stigmatized. Non-Arab individuals within the US are formed by these normative conceptions in such a way that they receive a "license for prejudicial perception," as well as a "virtual mandate to heighten racialized ways of looking and judging in the name of national security."[726] In this context the normative notion of the grievable human makes use of a racial and "ethnic frame" for conceiving of who deserves legal and political support, and who, because they are deemed dangerous and therefore ungrievable, do not require this same protection.[727] This normative notion of the dangerous — and hence ungrievable — person also undergirds the concrete practice of indefinite detention. Using examples of those people who are indefinitely detained in prisons such as Guantanamo Bay, Butler argues that norms can affect violence against people in this way. Hence, although vulnerability is a primary and constitutive aspect of all human life, nonetheless Butler contends that not all people can be considered equally vulnerable. There are concrete and social ways in which

[723] Ibid., p. 76.
[724] Ibid.
[725] Ibid., p. 77.
[726] Ibid.
[727] Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.

vulnerability is distributed; "differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others."[728] Indeed, primary vulnerability "becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions."[729] Hence, one way vulnerability is socially distributed is through the production and maintenance of normative conceptions of the human.

Going beyond Butler, this racial and ethnic frame for conceiving of who is dangerous — and therefore less grievable — is also evident within the context of the UK. Black British theologian Anthony Reddie has written about his experiences being searched and detained by airport security due to racial profiling.[730] Moreover, it has been documented that Black people have a higher likelihood of being stopped and searched by police in the UK.[731] These actions underscore the idea that people with darker skin tones are 'other' and more dangerous than the normative British citizen, that is, a law-abiding white person. Their bodies do not align with the normative notion of who is considered safe. Due to this notion of 'the dangerous non-white person', Black and Brown communities are offered less protection, dignity, and rights than white people. Indeed, more regularly than not, white people are regarded as 'innocent until proven guilty' and are therefore less likely to be subject to stop and searches by police or detention and monitoring by airport security. Writing about his experiences being questioned and detained by British immigration officers while trying to leave and then return to the UK, Reddie reflects that the "rights and dignity [of Black and Asian people] to gain lawful entry into this our own country is brutally assaulted."[732] Black and Asian people are subject to disproportionate levels of suspicion and detention by British officers and officials due to a myriad of prevailing societal

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[728] Butler, *Precarious Life,* p. xii.
[729] Ibid., p. 29.
[730] Anthony Reddie, 'Politics of Black Entry into Britain: Reflections on Being a Black British Person Returning to the UK', *Political Theology,* 8.1 (2007), 83-95.
[731] According to data provided on the Government's website published on the 27 May 2022, between April 2020 and March 2021 in England and Wales, "there were 7.5 stop and searches for every 1,000 white people, compared with 52.6 for every 1,000 black people […] 17.5 stop and searches per 1,000 people with mixed ethnicity, and 17.8 per 1,000 Asian people." See <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/stop-and-search/latest#by-ethnicity> [accessed 12 June 2022]. See also Vikram Dodd, 'Black People Nine Times More Likely to Face Stop and Search than White People', *Guardian*, 27 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/27/black-people-nine-times-more-likely-to-face-stop-and-search-than-white-people> [accessed 12 June 2022]; and Diane Taylor, 'Black Boy in Stop and Search '30 Times' Accuses Met Police of Racist Profiling', *Guardian*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/15/black-boy-in-stop-and-search-30-times-accuses-met-police-of-racist-profiling> [accessed 12 June 2022].
[732] Reddie, p. 84.

norms.[733] These norms undergird concrete practices in policing, as well as in immigration policy and practice.[734]

We can now see in a more concrete way how the normative assumptions of a culture or society can undergird oppressive forms of domination, hierarchy, exclusion, and injustice. This is why Butler can contend that normative notions of the human or gender problematically operate as a "violent circumscription of reality" which affects violence, both symbolized and physical, against persons.[735] Normative notions of the human, gender, sexuality, and the body are therefore incredibly effective instruments of oppressive power by forming subjectivities in ways that have concrete political, legal, medical, and economic effects.[736] Queer theologian Linn Tonstad presents a parallel argument. Tonstad draws upon queer theorists, including Butler, to assert that "the normative subject is […] a destructive fiction that plays a role in the unjust distribution of social goods."[737] She argues that it is dangerous for Christian theologians and ethicists to produce normative theological visions of the human being, especially when using such a vision to ground the basis for claims to a human dignity which must be respected and fostered. She writes:

> Investing in normative visions of humanity inevitably means distinguishing between the dignified, rights-having, loving individual, and the undignified, rights-violating, unloving individual who threatens the social, political, or theological order within which the former individual gains recognition […] The lofty language of dignity and rights often has the effect, in practice, of *denying* dignity and rights to those who don't fit the vision of the human that such language assumes.[738]

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[733] Ibid, pp. 85-94.
[734] Ibid., p. 94. For an analysis of norms of 'the dangerous black person' within the context of the US, see Laurie Cassidy, 'Hip Hop and the Seditious Reinvention of the Dangerous Black Man', in *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance,* ed. by Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy and Margaret Pfeil (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 117-139. See also Laurie Cassidy, 'The Myth of the Dangerous Black Man', in *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration,* pp. 89-115.
[735] Judith Butler, 'Preface (1999)', in *Gender Trouble*, p. xxiv.
[736] One example of an unjust effect of a norm within the medical field is that the medical diagrams used to demonstrate how various rashes or symptoms of disease appear on the skin are more likely to be modelled on white skin tones. This hinders a medic's ability to identify symptoms on darker-skinned patients. See, Trisha Kaundinya and Roopal V. Kundu, 'Diversity of Skin Images in Medical Texts: Recommendations for Student Advocacy in Medical Education', *Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development*, 8 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F23821205211025855>.
[737] Tonstad, pp. 63-64.
[738] Ibid., p. 69.

Thus, again we can see that, in Butler's account, humans are fundamentally vulnerable. We are dependent on the wider social and cultural world we inhabit for recognition that we are a grievable human life that is worthy of protection. Because we are dependent on this social recognition for protection, however, we are left open to exploitation and harm when we deviate, or are excluded from, that normative conception of what constitutes a grievable human life.[739] Moreover, going slightly beyond what Butler explicitly writes, not only are we vulnerable to becoming a victim to violence, but, because of our dependence on these norms for the constitution of our agency and subjectivity, our subjectivities are also vulnerable to being shaped in such a way that we *do* violence both to our own being and that of others. In other words, we are vulnerable to being formed in a way which leads us to accept and reproduce certain norms, worldviews, and practices that do violence to other people. From a theological standpoint, therefore, we can develop this idea of vulnerability beyond Butler to argue that as humans we are vulnerable to being formed by social norms in ways which oppose God's will. As previously noted, Butler does acknowledge that humans are at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of violence due to our impressionability.[740] Our subjectivity is therefore vulnerable to being formed in ways which lead us to become agents of violence, or, using my own theological language, to become agents of sin. For example — again going slightly beyond what Butler explicitly writes — one becomes an agent of violence even by accepting and reproducing a sense of freakishness, guilt, shame, or self-hatred due to one's deviance from normative notions of what it is to be, for example, a grievable human, or a true woman, or an intelligible sexuality, or a valued opinion in the public sphere. Or, as mentioned earlier, we can become agents of violence even by involuntarily feeling a sense of fear or suspicion toward those who society deems potentially dangerous predicated on their ethnicity, race, class, colour of skin, outfit choice, or religious belief. By reproducing these socially constituted affections, we reproduce the normative notion that these affections rely upon to exist. Thus, we become agents of violence against both ourselves and those others whose subjectivities come to be formed through our reproduction of these norms in this way. By reproducing these norms, we are also arguably made complicit in the unjust legal and political decisions

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[739] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 7.
[740] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 26.

which are justified on the basis of these norms, for example, the practice of indefinite detention and the racial profiling evident in many police stop and search actions and at airport security. From a theological standpoint, therefore, we can develop this idea of vulnerability beyond Butler to argue that as humans we are vulnerable to being formed by social norms in ways that are contrary to the divine will for our, and the whole community of life's, flourishing.

4.5 The Complex Relation Between Social Norms and Individual Agency

Does this vulnerability automatically lead us to become agents of violence? A further explanation of the way norms can be said to act, or impress themselves upon us, is needed to answer this. In this next section, therefore, I will argue that Butler's theory of subject formation is not a type of social determinism. To demonstrate this, I will first lay out in further detail Butler's understanding of the complex relation between social norms and individual agency.

Throughout her diverse writings, Butler explains that norms, cultural conventions and values can only persevere to the extent of their embodiment in the daily social practices of individuals: "systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices."[741] Cultural conventions and social norms — such as those which underlie gender and race relations — can only persist through "the concrete and historically mediated acts of individuals."[742] Thus, norms have a "spatial and temporal dimension" which is inseparable from "how they form what they act upon."[743] In other words, they are inseparable from the human subjectivities and acts which they condition and produce. As Butler argues:

> The norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life. The norm has no independent ontological status, yet it cannot be easily reduced to its instantiations; it is itself (re)produced through its

[741] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 522.
[742] Ibid., p. 523.
[743] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 5.

> embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts.[744]

In other words, the relationship between cultural norms and the formation of human subjectivity is not unilateral. Cultural values and social norms are the product of individual acts, are reproduced in and by human acts, *and* are the very condition of possibility for those acts. Thus, in Butler's words, the personal is political; both because one's subjectivity is conditioned by the shared social and cultural structures in which one is situated *and* because one affects and structures these social arrangements in turn.[745] Butler concludes:

> For feminist theory, then, the personal becomes an expansive category, one which accommodates, if only implicitly, political structures usually viewed as public. Indeed, the very meaning of the political expands as well. At its best, feminist theory involves a dialectical expansion of both of these categories. My situation does not cease to be mine just because it is the situation of someone else, and my acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the situation of my gender, and do that in various ways.[746]

Like John Paul II, therefore, Butler can be drawn upon to underscore the importance of attending to the acts of individuals in the creation and sustenance of unjust social situations. We can use Butler's conclusions to argue that social sin can only persist to the extent of its embodiment in personal sin, that is, in "the concrete and historically mediated acts of individuals."[747] Butler, however, goes beyond this and, using the example of gender, affirms that even personal acts are never fully autonomous or individual. This is because of these acts' necessary relation to the cultural conditions which spawned them:

> The act that embodied agents *are* inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed, *wear* certain cultural significations, is clearly not one's act alone. Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender, but that one does it, and *that* one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter. […] The act that one

[744] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 48.
[745] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', pp. 522-523.
[746] Ibid., p. 523.
[747] Ibid.

> does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. […] Understood in pedagogical terms, the performance renders social laws explicit.[748]

Furthermore, Butler's theory of the 'constitutive sociality of the self' does not displace the subject's agency as irrelevant to the formation of subjectivity. It is through our *personal engagement* and *personal interaction* with human others and social norms that our subjectivity is formed, and agency enabled. One's agency and personal action are not rendered useless, despite Butler's contention that the self is formed by social, cultural, and discursive powers prior to any voluntary action of its own. In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler draws upon Foucault to expound upon the reflexivity of human acts. The human self is not just passively formed by human others and the social discourses in which it is immersed, otherwise this would be a deterministic account of human formation. Rather, the human self contributes to its own formation through engagement with these others and social discourses. Indeed, Butler affirms that the subject is not merely an "effect" of discourse, but rather that the subject also "forms itself"[749] in ways which are not determined. Thus, not only are personal agency and action crucial to the production and maintenance of social and cultural situations, as we previously saw, but personal agency and action are also essential to the formation of one's own subjectivity and selfhood. In other words, when a person repeatedly acts in a certain way — based upon their personal interactions and negotiations with the social, historical, and cultural discourses and norms that this person encounters — they form themself into the sort of person who acts in that way: Personal acts still constitute the identity of the actor. Using Butler's own example, when one repeatedly acts how one feels one should act according to one's gender — predicated of course on a pre-existing normative and discursive notion of what a woman or man is, and potentially also a deeply ingrained sense of the gender that one is based on one's historical formation, one's lived experience with one's body, and one's personal negotiation with a wide variety of norms over time — one *becomes* that gender; one forms oneself into the kind of woman or gender one is acting as.[750] Our

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[748] Ibid., pp. 525-526.

[749] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 17.

[750] In recent years Butler has suggested that they want to clarify and revise certain aspects of their theory of performativity; Butler states that it is an error to interpret this theory as suggesting that one arbitrarily chooses one's gender, but rather that, as a result of one's interactions and negotiations with historical and societal norms over time, one can develop a "deep-seated sense" of the gender that one is.

acts therefore effect reality in a very real way. It is this idea which becomes commonly known in queer theory as Butler's theory of performativity. Moreover, as Rosine Keltz explains, it is the repetition of our language and acts in various situations and contexts which makes it so that the speech-act "produces the phenomena it regulates and constrains."[751] She asserts: "Understanding materiality and language as complexly interrelated allows Butler to emphasise the role language plays in moulding social reality, without denying the importance of embodied existence."[752]

This work of self-making, however, always takes place "within the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject."[753] Moreover, these socially shared codes, prescriptions, and norms are imbued with power and therefore delimit what will be considered "an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme

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Consequently, one repeatedly thinks and acts according to this sense in such a way that it becomes "a powerful social and historical reality." In this way, one could still regard personal agency to be crucial to the formation and development of one's gender, whilst also acknowledging that it is not an arbitrary personal choice that one decides on a whim, but is something "deep-seated", and for many people, unchangeable. Moreover, Butler clarifies that, according to this theory, although one's gender is "historically formed", this does not mean that it is "fake" nor freely chosen; it is real. (See Judith Butler and Owen Jones, *Feminist icon Judith Butler on JK Rowling, trans rights, feminism and intersectionality*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXJb2eLNJZE> [accessed 21 July 2022]. See also Cristan Williams and Judith Butler, 'Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate Interviews Judith Butler' <https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-performance-the-transadvocate-interviews-judith-butler_n_13652.htm> [accessed 21 July 2022].) Thus, even if one would want to take a more conservative view on gender, and assert that it is something fixed, innate, and unchangeable, one could potentially still do so whilst also acknowledging that the way one's gender comes to expression, in both public and private, is a result of one's personal negotiations with cultural norms which both constrain and assist us. For example, one could have a deep sense that one is a girl or woman, but the precise way one dresses, talks, and acts as a girl or woman is a result of one's exposure to, and negotiation with, the social norms one encounters regarding what it means to be a girl or woman. Hence, even if one disagrees with Butler's earlier more radical conclusions regarding gender and performativity, one could still use aspects of this theory to understand the ways we are formed, and form ourselves, into the 'types' of women, men, and people we become. Moreover, we can use this theory of performativity to understand other social realities and identity markers. For example, if one lives in Britain, one might have a deep sense of being British; this sense is a result of one's personal interactions with one's social community and cultural norms regarding what it means to be British and what it means to have a nationality, history, and country. One forms oneself into a British person through one's activities as a result of interactions with these norms, for example, by applying for citizenship or a passport, by speaking a certain language or having certain regional accents, by supporting particular sports teams, by having a typically 'British' sense of humour, or by using colloquial terminology. In this sense, one might argue that being British is performative, in that it becomes a real social reality for the person and a fundamental identity marker, and yet it is not innate or pre-determined. Indeed, there are many people born in Britain who do not consider themselves British, and there are people born and raised elsewhere who come to regard themselves as British.

[751] Rosine Kelz, *The Non-Sovereign Self, Responsibility, and Otherness: Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Stanley Cavell on Moral Philosophy and Political Agency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 60.

[752] Ibid., p. 57.

[753] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 17.

of things."[754] As Butler concludes: "There is no making of oneself (*poiesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujettisement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take."[755] The particular way that various subjects will act or form themselves in relation to a norm or social injunction, however, is neither homogeneous nor determined. Instead, one's context sets the stage for the subject's reflexivity, which necessarily occurs in relation to an imposed set of norms which govern the social intelligibility of the subject's acts and selfhood.[756] There is, therefore, a negotiation which takes place between subjects and social norms whereby the subject "negotiates an answer to the question of who 'I' will be in relation to these norms." Indeed, Butler affirms that "in this sense, we are not deterministically decided by norms, although they do provide the framework and point of reference for any set of decisions we subsequently make."[757] They conclude:

> The norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity; one invariably struggles with conditions of one's own life that one could not have chosen. If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. This ethical agency is neither fully determined nor radically free. Its struggle or primary dilemma is to be produced by a world, even as one must produce oneself in some way.[758]

Expanding upon the above example, therefore, when a person is born and a medical professional pronounces 'it's a girl', this discursive and linguistic act sets the stage for that person's act of self-making; this young person will then be treated as a 'girl' by wider society, which will then either lead the young person to act how a 'normal', 'true', 'natural', 'good' girl is expected to act — for example by walking, talking, dressing, and playing as a 'girl' should — or they will deviate from this societal expectation and norm with punitive consequences.[759] Either way, these personal acts

[754] Ibid.
[755] Ibid.
[756] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, pp. 41-42.
[757] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 23.
[758] Ibid., p. 19.
[759] For a further explanation of how the verbal pronouncement of "it's a girl" becomes a "performative speech-act" which effects social reality within the thought of Butler, see Kelz, pp. 59-60.

and choices are only conceivable in reference to the norms of gender which preceded them.

In an early essay on performative acts, Butler uses the analogy of theatre to further illustrate this point. They use this analogy to clarify their abstract theory in more concrete terms, in particular the complex interplay between social norms and individual agency in the formation of gender identity:

> As a public action and performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend. The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.[760]

Hence, as we previously identified, we can never fully or neatly narrate the formative history of one's identity and subjectivity, and pinpoint exactly where it emerged historically as this particular self. There is an irreducible opacity, ambivalence, and unknowability of the self to itself, at least in part. We can also never fully recount the originating cause of an individual act, at least in a way which neatly distinguishes between one's own agency, the social conditions in which one is immersed, and the formative influence of the human others one encounters. Underlying Butler's diverse writings, there is an assumption that an "act" is that which is "both socially shared and historically constituted," as well as "performative."[761] In her book *Senses of the Subject*, Butler expands upon this tension between (1) the idea that norms condition our subjectivity and (2) the sense that it is our own agency which is the source of our acts. They conclude that "the task is to think of being acted on and

[760] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 526.
[761] Ibid., p. 530.

acting as simultaneous, and not only as a sequence."[762] Butler therefore challenges a sequential understanding of cause and effect.

Queer theologians have drawn upon this idea of the unknowability of the self and the lack of transparency of the self to itself. Linn Tonstad draws upon queer theory to espouse that:

> It's not the case that some human beings are self-possessing, self-determining, autonomous subjects and others are not. In reality, all human beings experience loss, lack, and fragmentation. We all live and form ourselves within contexts we did not choose, in dependence on others.[763]

She asserts that queer theology should not ignore "the ambiguities of human existence, the ways in which our lives and their consequences are neither transparent to us nor fully within our power to determine."[764] Geoffrey Rees similarly draws upon this notion of the unintelligibility of human selfhood due to its dependency on others. He does this to reclaim the connection between original sin and human sexuality.[765] He argues that, after the Fall, our human selfhood became unstable and unintelligible to itself due to our alienation from God. Human sexuality in a postlapsarian world thus becomes an attempt by humans to achieve an intelligible, whole, complete, and transparent self. This attempt to achieve wholeness apart from God through sexuality constitutes a denial of our involvement in sin and the repercussions we face due to it.[766] According to Rees, wholeness, stability, and intelligibility of the self can only be achieved by God and completed in the eschaton: "the desire for personal intelligibility [is] a problem of disordered human relationship with God that no human efforts can resolve."[767] Thus, "the necessary dependency of intelligible personal identity is finally dependency on God."[768] He concludes:

> Scripture tells the story of oneself by God that fills the gap exemplified in Judith Butler's observation: "My account of myself is partial, haunted by that

[762] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 6.
[763] Tonstad, p. 63.
[764] Ibid., p. 47.
[765] See Geoffrey Rees, *The Romance of Innocent Sexuality* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011); and Rees, 'Is Sex Worth Dying For?', pp. 261-285. For a short, but concise summary of Rees' thought, see Tonstad, pp. 121-124.
[766] Tonstad, p. 122.
[767] Rees, 'Is Sex Worth Dying For?', p. 282.
[768] Rees, *The Romance of Innocent Sexuality,* p. 152. See also, p. 198 and p. 287.

> for which I can devise no definitive story." […] God alone is the only reliable narrator of intelligible personal identity. God alone can speak the unerring truth of the self.[769]

Therefore, as Tonstad aptly summarises, "Rees's solution is to accept one's own sinfulness and responsibility for it, along with giving up any dream of an achieved intelligibility in a fallen world."[770]

For Butler, the formation of our subjectivities is not a singular, definitive event. We are not merely the effects of "prior or more powerful forces."[771] We do not enter into a social world which forms us once and for all into a complete and finished person who subsequently acts on the basis of that prior formation. In other words, it is not as if our subjectivity is formed in childhood, through relationality and social context, after which there is a static and unchanging core of a person which is unchanged by all subsequent encounters. Rather, according to Butler, there is a constant fluidity and permeability of the self which is continuously forming itself and being formed by that which it encounters and interacts. Our subjectivities are therefore constituted in time and are fundamentally temporal: "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[772] Even once we have been formed as thinking, feeling, and acting individuals, norms continue their work of conditioning and forming us.[773] Butler expounds:

> I am not formed once and definitively, but continuously or repeatedly. I am still being formed as I form myself in the here and now. And my own self-formative activity – what some would call "self-fashioning" – becomes part of that ongoing formative process. I am never simply formed, nor am I ever fully self-forming. This may be another way of saying that we live in historical time or that it lives in us as the historicity of whatever form we take as human creatures.[774]

There is, therefore, a continual constitution and formation of the subject in time. This happens through the person's inhabitation of, and interaction with, the continually

[769] Ibid., p. 167.
[770] Tonstad, p. 123.
[771] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 11.
[772] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 519.
[773] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 5.
[774] Ibid., p. 6.

evolving organizations of power within social norms, relations, and institutions, as well as the person's continuous acting in response to them.

Consequently, Butler's theory of subject formation is not a deterministic account of social conditioning. The idea that the subject is continuously being constituted, and forming itself, within a nexus of various relations, organizations of power, and norms leaves open the possibility of the subject being formed in a multitude of different ways. As Brandy Daniels states, for Butler, "the continual constitution of the subject is precisely where one can find imaginative political possibilities."[775] Contrary to deterministic accounts of social conditioning, therefore, within Butler's theory of subject formation, it is possible to reject and transform certain norms. Butler argues, however, that such a rejection "can happen only by the intervention of countervailing norms."[776] Moreover, this is possible only because "the 'matrix of relations' that forms the subject is not an integrated and harmonious network, but a field of potential disharmony, antagonism, and contest."[777] As previously noted, Butler affirms that "norms tend to arrive in clusters" which "act on us from all sides, that is, in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways."[778] This human capacity to negotiate between various norms is of course dependent on a prior formation of subjectivity and agency; a capacity which is not, therefore, autonomous or separable from the relations and norms which precede the formation of our subjectivity. Thus, as Butler affirms, the human capacity to resist violent norms is still dependent on the presence of norms. We need norms in order "to know in what direction to transform our social world."[779] It is thus through formative interaction with various others and norms that one's ability to rethink, rework, or transform violent norms is enabled. Hence Butler's theory of subject formation does not equate to a form of social determinism.

Going beyond Butler, therefore, perhaps we can say that it is through the presence of contradictory norms, and through the human capacity to negotiate between these norms, that we are able to shape ourselves in ways which conform to the divine will. For example, norms of justice and values such as the preferential option for the

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[775] Daniels, 'Grace Beyond Nature?', p. 257.
[776] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 9.
[777] Ibid.
[778] Ibid., p. 5.
[779] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 206.

marginalized often contradict with norms and values associated with excessive individualism or neoliberal consumer capitalism. All these cultural attitudes, however, can be present in one society at the same time, and, indeed, can form us simultaneously. Using a simplistic example, young women from the United Kingdom have been socialised within a Western patriarchal, consumerist society to think that their happiness partly depends on what they look like, what they wear, and what they own. This is based on a normative notion of what a successful, desirable, or ideal woman is. The more fashionable or beautiful one is, the happier and more successful one will be. So, this makes women *want* to buy clothes and beauty products that are on trend for the cheapest price or bargain. As we saw in chapter two, however, within the culture of fast fashion as it currently exists, garment workers around the world are often paid very little in poor and unsafe working conditions. Norms of the human and the human vocation offered by Catholic teaching, however, offer a countervailing narrative which provides a point of resistance. A different kind of success is presented; people are not judged based on their looks or possessions, but rather on what they have done for their neighbour, and whether their actions demonstrate a preferential option for people who are marginalised or who live in poverty. These countervailing norms and narratives offer a point of resistance. Although one may still experience feelings of desire towards buying fast-fashion — due to one's formation by beauty norms — nevertheless, the person-centred values and worldviews offered by many Christian norms form us in ways which enable us to resist these urges and look for alternative practices. The 'good' person is one who promotes and works for social justice; one who does not participate in a system which causes suffering to one's brothers and sisters in the garment making industry around the world. Thus, one can be formed by the current cultural values of individualism, consumerism, self-advancement, and self-gratification, but, due to the presence of countervailing norms in the world, also be enabled to resist this formation and even attempt to transform these norms and oneself.

As a slight aside, Butler's point regarding the necessity of norms to direct our lives is important for any theological appropriation of her thought. The point is not to disregard all normative conceptions; nor to reject any possibility that these norms might, in some sense, be true. Brandy Daniels argues that Butler's theory that truths are socially constructed does not necessarily eschew truth as a concept, nor does it call

for an eradication of universal claims.[780] Butler's point is rather to show how norms are social constructions, configured within relations of power, which effect reality by shaping and constructing truths with the potential of doing violence to people. Both Daniels and Butler contend, therefore, that we should approach norms which are presented as 'truth' and 'universal' with suspicion. This attitude towards any norm which is presented as certain reflects an acknowledgement that they are not static and fixed truths which perfectly reflect the Truth of God, human beings, and the universe, but rather that they are human interpretations of the world which constantly shift and alter meaning. This is important for our own study, as any theological account of sin has to define itself in relation to some normative theological notion. As Tonstad remarks: "intrinsic to the very concept of sin is that things ought to be otherwise than they are, that the world ought to be or could have been or will be radically (in some sense) different from what it is."[781] This sense of the world being otherwise than it ought to be is dependent on a normative conception of the way things should be. Such a normative conception, however, will never perfectly reflect the Truth of the world for reasons I shall explain further below. Instead, such normative conceptions are a human attempt to seek understanding of the Truth and live it out in our daily lives. Even those norms which we confess to be true within the Catholic tradition were handed down orally from the early apostles. They were passed on socially from generation to generation through stories which were recited and eventually written down. Jesus' teachings, including the norms of justice, goodness, and the human which have come to shape Catholic social teaching, would have originally been taught socially among groups of people who embodied and cited these norms in their daily lives. These norms would have been altered, and their meanings shifted, through this embodiment, particularly when these social groups encountered various other cultural norms and societies. Thus, even divine revelation must be understood and interpreted socially by humans in the insufficient human language. In light of this, a task for theologians is to constantly interrogate theological norms, and to reshape them when they inevitably fail to live up to the Truth — due to the ultimate insufficiency of human language and knowledge — thereby producing unintended negative effects.

[780] Daniels, 'Grace Beyond Nature?', p. 249.
[781] Tonstad, p. 117.

It has been argued, therefore, that the appropriation of Butler's work by Queer Theologians can be regarded as staying in continuity with the Christian apophatic tradition. Brandy Daniels contends that queer theology's hermeneutic of suspicion is a continuation of the traditional insistence on the inadequacy of human knowledge and language to properly depict God, and hence ourselves and our world:

> This epistemological emphasis on the inadequacy of human knowledge and language to describe God shapes also how we speak about *ourselves*, the human that is made in the *imago dei*. Thus, one can begin to see how a queer theoretical position is an apophatic one, through its deconstruction and eschewal of categorization and assertion of incoherent subjectivity.[782]

If we build on the example used above by Daniels, within a Butlerian perspective, Christian norms of the human cannot properly depict or define the full truth of humanity because these norms are social constructions which constantly shift and alter depending on their different embodiments by unique people in various times and places. In theological terms, however, we might add that we can never properly depict the full truth about the human because it is fundamentally beyond human understanding to perfectly know what it means to be the *imago Dei.* This is due to the insufficiency of human knowledge and language. As social beings, though, we create norms to help bring us closer to understanding what being a 'human being' made in 'the image of God' means. These norms help guide the way we relate to one another. We should, therefore, always approach theological norms with suspicion — that is, recognising that they are human constructions which are prone to failure — so that, when they fail to live up to the full truth of the human being with negative effects, we are open to their alteration.

This is not to say that there is no role for the Holy Spirit in guiding and protecting the Church in this regard, nor to say that the Church can have no claim to authority; to the contrary, I would argue that it is precisely *because* of our belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit that we can have faith that this journey of embodiment, citation, discernment, and revision of norms will lead us ever closer towards the Truth, albeit never fully understood or encapsulated in this lifetime. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore the implications of this position for our understanding of

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[782] Daniels, 'A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?', p. 116.

the Church's authority, doctrine, and tradition. Indeed, this is not the focus of this thesis. Perhaps, however, some provisional thoughts on the topic would be useful. It might be possible to regard the Catholic Church and its tradition in this way; over the course of its long history of theological discernment, and guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit, it has always been moving towards ever greater understanding of the Truth, with theological norms, traditions, rituals, and doctrine slowly shifting, developing, and altering meaning over time in ways that are continuous, but creative. In this way, perhaps we can confess ecclesial norms and doctrines to be true, and still draw on the wisdom of our apostolic tradition as a source of authority, whilst still remaining open to the revision and alteration of particular norms and doctrine when they cause harm. Moreover, if we follow the conclusions of the liberation theologians we explored in chapter two, God's revelation through the historical person of Jesus Christ as documented in scripture is supplemented by Christ's continuing revelation and self-communication within history through the oppressed and marginalised. This self-communication is the hermeneutical key we can use to better understand the faith; it helps illuminate any errors in our theologies and traditions. Thus, God's historical and continual revelation through Jesus Christ can become the standard or criterion against which theological norms are judged. Following the conclusions of liberation theologians, therefore, we can judge norms based on their effects, that is, whether they cause harm, violence, and death. If they are found to do so, then they can be considered contrary to God's will for the community of life's flourishing. Even with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and divine revelation, however, the theological norms and proclamations of the Church will fail to wholly capture the full Truth of humanity, creation, and the divine — due again to the insufficiency of human language and knowledge — and so we must always be open to the interrogation and revision of ecclesial norms and doctrine based on our continually evolving understanding of God's self-communication within history.[783] This conclusion also has implications for

[783] As previously mentioned, however, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore the implications of this position for our understanding of the Church's authority, doctrine, and tradition. There are, however, many unresolved issues arising from this theological position. For example, further discernment is needed regarding how this belief relates to the Catholic teaching of papal infallibility. Perhaps, though, we might be able to reconcile these beliefs by suggesting that, when the Pope is guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to speak in *ex cathedra* under the strict conditions necessary for papal infallibility, the Pope cannot err in so much as there will always be an aspect of the Truth to this proclamation. Due to the weakness of human language and knowledge, however, we may not fully understand or accurately interpret the truth this declaration is conveying. Moreover, no proclamation will ever be able to wholly capture the full truth of humanity, creation, and the divine. Thus, our

ecclesiology; it means that we should regard ourselves as simultaneously both already the Catholic Church *and* on a communal journey of *becoming* the holy Catholic Church. We are on a journey of becoming what we are; a journey which is never fully complete or perfected in this lifetime.

Daniels argues that it is important to take an apophatic stance as theologians. She draws upon theologians Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller to depict how "ontological categorization and epistemological certitude" can become "key sites of oppression."[784] She uses their language of idolatry and "mastery over divine mystery", as well as Butler's language of "epistemological imperialism", to depict what happens when one does not interrogate prevailing norms or universalising identity categories, but instead regards them as certain and foundational.[785] To demonstrate what a queer apophatic theoretical position could offer theological thought, she quotes Boesel and Keller when they argue that apophaticism "targets our false knowledge, the idols formed in our confusion of the finite with the infinite."[786] In this case the 'idols' Daniels is referring to are not just false beliefs about the divine, but also the "reification" of certain harmful "classifications of identity"[787] which oppress people; for example, normative notions of what it means to be a woman, black, poor, disabled, or even just human.

Going back to why Butler's theory of subject formation does not equate to a form of social determinism, however, we can say that more fundamentally, it is the very condition which makes possible our conforming to norms, conventions, and cultural practices which also lays the groundwork for our resistance to them;[788] namely, Butler's account of the human which we began with. It is because of the fluidity and impressionability of human selfhood — a selfhood which is always in a

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interpretation and understanding of the content within infallible declarations must also remain open to correction, critique, and development. Perhaps this approach could also be applied to defined dogmas of the Church. Further discernment remains to be done here, however, as this is not the focus of this thesis.

[784] Daniels, 'A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?', p. 109.

[785] Ibid., pp. 116-117.

[786] Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, 'Introduction', in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. by Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 1-21, (p. 5). See also Daniels, 'A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?', p. 117 where she uses this quote.

[787] Daniels, 'A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology?', p. 109.

[788] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 217.

"mode of becoming" — that there is always "the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise."[789] Butler affirms:

> Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification — depending on their interactions — and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future [...] The body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation.[790]

Moreover, because norms only exist to the extent of their embodiment in the daily and repeated practices of individuals, this leaves open the possibility that individuals can alter or transform norms. Using the example of gender, Butler argues: "To the extent that gender norms are *reproduced*, they are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation."[791] They further state: "[Norms] are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins its citational practice. One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation."[792] Norms are not static, fixed concepts, but rather are constantly changing and evolving realities. This is precisely due to their dependence on reiteration and reproduction through the actions of individuals; individuals who are uniquely constituted through their various interactions within a myriad of differing and conflicting norms and human others. Thus, no one specific practice of performativity by an individual will perfectly reiterate and reproduce another's practice; nor will it ever perfectly repeat or reiterate the regulatory norm. There will always be a variation on the norm as a consequence of our individual embodiment of it. Hence, "the norms that govern reality" are both "reproduced *and* altered in the course of that reproduction."[793] As Amy Hollywood explains:

> The gaps and fissures in [the] citational process — the ways in which repetition both repeats the same and differs and defers from it — mark the multiple sites

[789] Ibid.
[790] Ibid.
[791] Ibid., p. 52.
[792] Ibid., p. 218.
[793] Ibid.

> on/in which the contestation of regulatory norms occurs. Butler grounds resistance not in bodies or materialities external to systems of regulatory discourses and norms but in the processes of resignification through which body subjects are themselves constituted […] it is the reiterative nature of the practice that opens the door to resistance and ensures that repetition of norms is not fully determinative of body subjects.[794]

Christina K. Hutchins similarly argues that Butler's theory allows for the possibility of free — that is, undetermined — agency because of its emphasis on the necessity of repetition:

> To be constituted in discourse is not necessarily to be determined by discourse. Though inscription is relational and societal, and though iteration happens under and through the force of prohibitions, there is nonetheless a self-creativity or agency possible *in the activity of varying the repetitions*.[795]

It is Butler's very understanding of *how* norms come to constitute and form us, therefore, which shows how her theory is not a deterministic account of social conditioning. Norms can only exist and condition us to the extent that they are cited and repeated in the acts and discourses of individuals in the community. We are able to transform and resist norms due to this; through our repetitions which inevitably vary from the norm, we alter it, and so we can come to see that the norm is not static, but changeable. Hence, as Claudia Schnippert concludes: "Resistant agency and possibility of change are located in [the] temporal promise that, in ongoing reiteration, a shift can occur, altering the available grid of norms and how they are networked with other norms."[796]

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[794] Amy Hollywood, 'Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization', in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. by Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 252-275 (p. 252). See also, Hollywood, p. 269. See also, Karen Trimble Alliaume, 'Disturbingly Catholic: Thinking the Inordinate Body', in *Bodily Citations*, ed. by Armour and St. Ville, pp. 93-119 (p. 115) where Alliaume writes: "it is only in the constant repetition of the norms that constrain us that bodies materialize and that 'subjectivity,' 'agency,' or 'choice' appear. The citation of the norms that materialize us is always already a condition of our resistance but provides the possibility of their citation to other effects. Because we cannot cite these norms in such a way as to make them wholly present or known, the norms are in fact 'known' only in and through their citations."

[795] Christina K. Hutchins, 'Unconforming Becomings: The Significance of Whitehead's Novelty and Butler's Subversion for the Repetitions of Lesbian Identity and the Expansion of the Future', in *Bodily Citations*, ed. by Armour and St. Ville, pp. 120-156 (p. 133).

[796] Claudia Schnippert, 'Turning On/To Ethics', in *Bodily Citations*, ed. by Armour and St. Ville, pp. 157-176 (p. 163).

This, however, is an aspect of Butler's thought which could be developed further. Their theory does not satisfactorily question how some people are able to recognise the injustice of certain norms or collective habits of thinking, whilst others do not. Further, where do the countervailing norms which allow us to think differently originate from? A theological account of grace, particularly the Catholic understanding of the historical mediation of grace, can perhaps help develop their theory through a theological lens. As we have seen in the previous chapters, Catholic theologians profess that it is only through grace that humans are able to recognise sin and resist its influence. Within a Christian worldview, though, it is possible to regard God's grace as being *always* present in creation leading humanity to Godself and away from sin. Moreover, grace can also be mediated through other people and through institutions such as the Church. Liberation theologians affirm that the victims of structural injustice mediate Christ's salvific presence to us. Contemporary Catholic theologians such as Roger Haight have taken these ideas further by developing a theology of social grace. Haight argues that any institution can be a mediator or sacrament of grace when they are just and life-giving, that is, when organisations are "dedicated to the nurture and care of human life."[797] He writes: "Any group, institution, organization, or society may be considered social grace insofar as it is concerned with human life and enhances the common good."[798] He concludes: "When the influence of these structures urges self-transcendence in the service of other human beings, the institutions in question may be considered objective channels of God's grace."[799] Due to this divine salvific presence, human society is not doomed to violence and injustice through a fatalistic determinism. The foundational Christian belief in the divine offer of grace safeguards against a purely deterministic theory of subject formation through violent norms. Read through a theological lens, one's capacity to recognise and resist violent norms is dependent on the operation of grace within the world, that is, the grace mediated through the other people, cultures, and norms we encounter which exemplify virtue. Through the operation of grace within history, and through Christ's salvific presence in the world, there will *always* be various Others, cultures, and countervailing norms which are life-giving, and which

[797] Roger Haight, 'Sin and Grace', in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2 vols (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), II, pp. 75-141 (p. 130).
[798] Ibid.
[799] Ibid., p. 131.

can form us in ways which correspond to the divine will. The sociality and malleability of our selves safeguards the possibility that we can be changed. The presence of mediated grace safeguards the possibility that we can be shaped in such a way that we are able to recognise and resist violent norms, transcend sinful situations, repent, and know and choose the good. The impressionability of our selves makes possible our formation through graced Others and norms in ways which conform to God's will. As Tonstad aptly states: "Humans are not fixed and static, and neither is God's storyline with human beings."[800] Butler's theory of the sociality and malleability of the self, understood through a theological account of grace, can therefore safeguard against a purely fatalistic and deterministic account of sin and violence as inevitable.

This is not to say that all people, or all norms, or all institutions offer grace. The Christian belief in God's universal salvific will does suggest, however, that grace will always be available for human beings. Moreover, it is possible from a Catholic perspective to regard the created world as being infused with grace; creation mediates God's presence to us.[801] Viewing creation through this lens leads one to confess that grace is always available through the created world we live in. This, perhaps, is another way to articulate the belief that the Holy Spirit is always available in any time and any place: where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. No person is beyond reach of God's salvific love, grace, and mercy.

4.6 Butler's Theory of the Acting Individual

It is now possible to see how Butler's theory of subject formation can help us to develop a more nuanced account of the individual human actor, and therefore the relation between personal and social sin. Any acting individual exists, at every moment, as a person in relation and as a being located within specific social situations. The matrix of power relations which constitute these contexts, and which live both within and without the human subject, forms the human person continuously at every

[800] Tonstad, p. 103.

[801] See, for example, Pope Francis, '*Laudato Si*'' (May 24, 2015), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> [accessed 18 July 2022], §100. Francis writes: "The very flowers of the field and the birds which [Jesus'] human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with [Jesus Christ's] radiant presence." See also LS, §221 where the Pope asserts that every "creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us" and that "Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light."

moment. As Butler aptly concludes: "At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a 'you'; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally."[802] It is this matrix of relations which forms oneself and one's agency. Thus, Butler presents us with a distinct theory of the acting person:

> No one acts without first being formed as one with the capacity to act […] what we call "independence" is always established through a set of formative relations that do not simply fall away as action takes place, even though those formative relations sometimes are banished from consciousness. […] The "I" comes into sentient being, even thinking and acting, precisely by being acted on in ways that, from the start, presume that nonvoluntary, though volatile field of impressionability."[803]

We are, therefore, always both acted on and acting: "Acted on, I act still, but it is hardly this 'I' that acts alone."[804] Butler further expounds:

> The distinction between passivity and activity is not quite stable and cannot be. Acted on, animated, acting; addressed, animated, addressing; touched, animated, and now sensing. These triads are partially sequential and partially chiasmic.[805]

Butler's theory of the 'constitutive sociality of the self' leads to a more dialectical understanding of the relation between conditions and acts, the personal and the social, and the internal and the external, as that which is neither unilateral nor unmediated. One cannot speak of an acting and deliberating subject without acknowledging the social conditions within which acting takes place and which condition, and even make possible, all free-willed action. There are no purely self-generated or autonomous acts of will.[806] Social conditions enter into an individual's very formation so that, although "conditions do not act in the way that individual agents do [...] no agent acts without them."[807] Conditions are therefore presupposed in every freely willed action: "as a given temporal duration within the entire

[802] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 45.
[803] Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, pp. 8-11.
[804] Ibid., p. 16.
[805] Ibid., p. 15.
[806] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 15.
[807] Ibid., p. 11.

performance, 'acts' are a shared experience and 'collective act.'"[808] We should therefore think about personal action as an "acting in concert" and an acting in accord.[809] This is why Butler critiques those modern moralistic positions which assume that "the individual is the first link in a causal chain that forms the meaning of accountability."[810] Going beyond Butler, one can say that the historical, cultural, and social context one lives in already conditions every enactment of human freedom, and hence every possible act of sin on the part of an individual. We also, however, cannot speak of social conditions without acknowledging the individual and collective acts which these social conditions rely upon to exist. Thus, we also cannot speak of social sin without acknowledging the personal acts of individuals.

There are aspects of Butler's theories, however, which could benefit from further development. Some of these have already been identified through our exploration of their writings so far. Another aspect of their thought which could benefit from further elaboration, though, is Butler's idea that our material bodies are also dependent on cultural and social conditions for their development and formation. Butler's thought on this matter can be found when they discuss the violence which has been done to material bodies as a result of gender norms.[811] Butler uses the examples of certain intersex infants and David Reimer; individuals who historically had been forced to undergo so-called 'corrective' surgical operations and experimental psychological or hormonal treatments to align their bodies with normative notions of gender and sex. These medical practices — which were often administered to children who could not offer their consent — have caused much suffering and harm, as well as a mutilation of their bodies.[812] Their bodies bear the physical marks of the violence cultural norms can cause. As Butler writes about the case of Reimer: "The norms governing what it is to be a worthy, recognizable, and sustainable human life clearly did not support his life in any continuous or solid way."[813] Social and cultural

[808] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 525.
[809] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 1. See also Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 15.
[810] Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 15-16.
[811] See Butler on the intersex movement and the case of David Reimer in Butler, *Undoing Gender,* pp. 55-74. See also Gerard Loughlin, 'Being Creature, Becoming Human: Contesting Oliver O'Donovan on Transgender, Identity and the Body' <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/being-creature-becoming-human-contesting-oliver-odonovan-on-tran/10214276> [accessed 12 June 2022].
[812] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, pp. 63-65.
[813] Ibid., p. 74.

conditions, therefore, not only affect an individual's personality through the formation of subjectivity, but they can also affect a person's physical or biological development.

Butler also gestures towards this reality — that is, that material bodies are socially formed — through their account of bodily dependence and vulnerability.[814] More could be said on the matter, however, particularly in light of the recent research done into environmental racism. For decades research has shown how a mother's behaviour can impact the foetus' development in the womb, in both positive and negative ways. There is, therefore, no formation of any part of a person's selfhood, not even one's material body, physical health, mental development, or biological instincts, without a social community which enables and limits this growth. This dependence on social conditions for one's bodily and mental wellbeing is evidenced tragically in the case of environmental racism and poverty. Environmental racism is a term which refers to the reality that environmental hazards and pollution disproportionately affect black and minority ethnic communities.[815] As Harriet Washington explains: "marginalized minority ethnic groups have increased exposure to environmental pollution."[816] This pollution has been found to cause significant health problems, and even death. This is the case particularly in higher income nations such as the USA, Canada, and the UK. According to Washington:

> African Americans who earn US$50,000–60,000 annually – solidly middle class – are exposed to much higher levels of industrial chemicals, air pollution and poisonous heavy metals, as well as pathogens, than are profoundly poor white people with annual incomes of $10,000. The [racial] disparity exists across both urban and rural areas […] Black and minority ethnic people are

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[814] See also Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2021), pp. 198-199. Butler explicates: "The skin is, from the start, a way of being exposed to the elements, but that exposure always takes a social form […] Thus, the basic questions of mobility, expression, warmth, and health implicate the body in a social world where pathways are differentially paved, are open or closed; and where modes of clothing and types of shelter are more or less available, affordable, or provisional."

[815] Luke Cole and Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 10. ProQuest ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/durham/reader.action?docID=2081629> [accessed 15 June 2022]. See also Michael Mascarenhas, *Where the Waters Divide: Neoliberalism, White Privilege, and Environmental Racism in Canada* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012). ProQuest ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/durham/detail.action?docID=979594> [accessed 15 June 2022].

[816] Harriet A. Washington, 'How Environmental Racism Fuels Pandemics', *Nature,* 581 (2020), 241 <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01453-y> (p. 241).

> also more likely to live in 'deprived' areas that are closer to sources of industrial pollution – from lead-tainted water in Flint, Michigan, to nerve gas, arsenic and polychlorinated biphenyls in Anniston, Alabama.[817]

Moreover, studies have shown that Black communities in London are disproportionately more likely to be exposed to higher levels of air pollution, including dangerously high nitrogen dioxide levels, than neighbourhoods with high proportions of white people.[818] As a study conducted by D. Fecht and others has shown: "Substantial inequalities in air pollution exposure […] exist for areas with high proportions of ethnic minorities, even when area level deprivation is taken into account."[819] This could be for a variety of reasons, but is likely due to the proximity of homes to traffic-related pollution. Washington describes the negative impact that exposure to high levels of air pollution can have on a person's health: "Greater exposure to air pollution has long been tied to shorter life expectancy. It can exacerbate heart diseases, trigger hypertension and compromise immune systems."[820] Similarly, in Canada, it has been argued that the proximity of industrial waste sites, landfills, and heavy industry to predominately black neighbourhoods and indigenous reserves has led to a variety of health inequalities, such as higher rates of cancer within these communities, as well as irregularities in birth rates due to a polluting of the water, land, and air.[821] These higher levels of exposure to pollution are often a result of systemic inequalities, that is, they are a consequence of political and economic decisions, as well as policies, which disadvantage black and ethnic minority people; for example, the political decisions which allow industrial chemical facilities to be built near black neighbourhoods or on indigenous land, or the environmental policies which fail to introduce enough measures to control or limit the levels of traffic-related pollution in urban and inner-city areas. As we saw earlier, norms of grievability play

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[817] Washington, p. 241.

[818] Adam Vaughan, 'London's Black Communities Disproportionately Exposed to Air Pollution – Study', *Guardian,* 10 October 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/10/londons-black-communities-disproportionately-exposed-to-air-pollution-study> [accessed 15 June 2022].

[819] D. Fecht et al., 'Associations Between Air Pollution and Socioeconomic Characteristics, Ethnicity and Age Profile of Neighbourhoods in England and the Netherlands', *Environmental Pollution*, 198 (2015), 201-210 (p. 209).

[820] Washington, p. 241.

[821] See Ingrid R. G. Waldron, *There's Something in the Water: Environmental Racism in Indigenous and Black Communities* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2018). See also Leyland Cecco, 'New Bill Aims to Force Canada to Tackle 'Systemic' Environmental Racism', *Guardian,* 22 June 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/22/canada-bill-government-environmental-racism> [accessed 15 June 2022].

a role in economic and policy decisions such as these; these underlying norms dictate whose lives are considered more worthy of protection from environmental hazards, and whose are not. Consequently, due to one's positionality in the social world — a positionality which is dictated by various factors including one's geophysical location, one's race, and one's class — one could find oneself exposed to social and environmental conditions which harm one's bodily development and health, as well as one's mental wellbeing and development. The social, environmental, economic, and political conditions one is born into have the ability to shape, and cause harm to, one's material body as well as one's subjectivity. Both bodies and subjectivities can bear the marks of cultural violence.

4.7 Queer Theology and Theological Appropriations of Queer Theory

Throughout the chapter so far, I have identified ways theologians have already drawn upon Butler's thought, specifically the proponents of Queer Theology. On the whole, however, queer theologies have not drawn upon Butler's thesis for an understanding of sin. Perhaps this lack of engagement with the concept of sin is because, historically, the language of sin has been used against those who express non-normative forms of sexuality and gender. As Tonstad notes, many queer, trans, and non-binary people have experienced exclusion, condemnation, and even persecution within religious communities due to this language. Historically they have been condemned as sinners.[822] Thus, sin is regarded as an "alienating or even meaningless language" which is thoroughly "negative and stigmatizing."[823] Perhaps it is because of this history that queer theologians have focused more on offering critical readings of the tradition's depiction of sin; demonstrating how these theological notions have led to violence against certain groups of people. There have not been many attempts by queer theologians to provide reparative readings of the traditional account of sin, that is, to show how a theological account of sin can help illuminate the human condition.[824]

There are, however, a few notable exceptions to this. As we saw earlier, Geoffrey Rees draws upon queer theory's notion of the dependency and

[822] Tonstad, pp. 120-121.
[823] Ibid., p. 121.
[824] The concept of reparative reading was made prominent by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-151.

unintelligibility of human selfhood to claim that original sin is a useful idea for understanding human sexuality. He uses this argument to conclude that it is only in God that one can achieve intelligible personal identity.[825] Another theologian who attempts to develop the idea of sin using a theory of the social constitution of the self is James Alison. Alison, however, does not engage directly with Butler's work or queer theory. He draws upon a different conceptual framework, that is, René Girard's idea of mimetic desire, as well psychologist J. M. Oughourlian's later development of Girard's theory.[826] Nevertheless, it is worth briefly recounting Alison's thought to demonstrate how he uses a different theory of the 'constitutive sociality of the self' to develop the theological notion of sin.

Alison uses Girard's theory to argue that it is through the imitation of Others, particularly when we are infants, that our identities and personal consciousness' are formed. Within Alison's thought, not only do infants imitate gestures, sounds, and language, they also imitate the very desires of the Others they encounter. It is through this imitation of desire that our selves are constituted. Alison affirms: "We are constituted as human beings by receiving physical being, a sense of being, gestures, memory, language, and consciousness through being drawn into imitation of others. Mimesis is therefore interior to the constitution of humans and not merely something external added on to an already independent being."[827] Similar to Butler, therefore, Alison presents relationality not only as a fact of the human condition, but also as the absolute condition for the very possibility of personhood: "It is our relationality to others that introduces us into being human, and that being-related-to-others works mimetically."[828] Alison concludes that the other is "the condition of possibility of any given self."[829]

For Alison, whenever an individual wills or desires, this very act of willing or desiring is dependent on the desires and wills of the others who preceded and formed it. Hence, we never make a choice independently; what we want and how we choose are dependent on the ways we have been formed, through imitation of others, to want

[825] See Rees, *The Romance of Innocent Sexuality,* and Rees, 'Is Sex Worth Dying For?', pp. 261-285. Tonstad also presents a helpful summary of Rees' argument, see Tonstad, pp. 121-124.
[826] James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 9 and 27.
[827] Ibid., p. 12.
[828] Ibid., p. 28.
[829] Ibid.

and choose in certain ways. Alison claims: "At any given moment in which a human wills or desires, that will or desire is utterly shot through with the other which is anterior to the formation of the will. That is to say, we are constitutionally heteronomous."[830] Human identities, therefore, are unstable structures which are "changeable", "malleable", and "other-dependent."[831] As Alison himself admits, this means that many of those desires and behaviours which constitute our selfhood can be formed in such a way that we find ourselves "wounded, inadequate", and "violent."[832] Thus, our will and desire can be distorted in ways contrary to our good and that of others.

Like Butler, Alison makes the connection between our being constituted by others to our being constituted by the cultural situation in which we are located. He writes that the other who forms us is a "social, historical and physical other."[833] Humans are, therefore, fundamentally a cultural reality precisely because to be human means "being-constituted-by-another."[834] He concludes: "There is no such thing as a purely "natural" human being; it is not as though we are first a biological or natural reality and then, later, become a cultural reality. All human beings are, from conception, always a cultural reality."[835] As we saw earlier with the example of environmental racism, the socio-economic, cultural, political, and environmental conditions that one is conceived in always already form the human individual even in the womb, to both positive and negative effects. There is no 'natural' or 'biological' human without the social. There is, therefore, also no human without the cultural. Going back to Alison's own argument, then, one's cultural and historical location is crucial in the formation of the self and "continues to run our lives through the way in which our desire and our consciousness is cast."[836] As Alison affirms, "the human being is a completely historical being" because each of us is "thrown into a world where it is precisely the concrete, historical, contingent acts and occurrences which constitute and form each person."[837] As we have seen, however, this formation can be distorted in ways which are violent. In other words, in ways contrary to the divine will.

[830] Ibid., pp. 40-41.
[831] Ibid., p. 30.
[832] Ibid., pp. 32-33.
[833] Ibid., p. 42.
[834] Ibid., p. 283.
[835] Ibid., p. 279.
[836] Ibid., p. 222.
[837] Ibid., p. 42.

Hence, if one finds oneself in a situation where the cultural values and worldviews of a society are opposed to the will of God, then, because humans are "constitutionally mimetically interindividual", this means they are formed in ways which negate God's will for them. As Alison contends: "the moment a human culture of distorted desire is formed, this will automatically mean that every human brought into being is formed from within, from the moment of conception, by distorted desire."[838] This almost deterministic or fatalistic account of human formation apart from Christ's salvific action, therefore, is one area where Alison differs from Butler.

Alison again diverts from Butler when, following Girard, he affirms that this mimetic desire is rivalistic and violent; it is a "victim-related mimetic desire."[839] The mimesis which constitutes the formation of our desire, and therefore our very selves, is an "acquisitive mimesis";[840] that is, an imitation which sets people up against one other as rivals. Desire, at least in practice, is always competitive.[841] He explains this competition as "wanting to have what the other has *instead of* the other; wanting to be what the other is *instead of* the other."[842] Alison further describes Girard's theory of rivalistic mimetic desire as: "The desire whereby I imitate the desire of someone else for an object and so enter into rivalry with that person for the object."[843] The formation of our subjectivities, therefore, has historically *always* led to a conflict between oneself and the other one imitates. Moreover, this conflict requires a resolution and Alison argues that this resolution has historically *always* been resolved through the scapegoating and consequent expulsion of an Other. This act of violence against a scapegoat "unites" the rivalistic members of a community "at the expense of a victim."[844] It enables these community members to forget that they themselves are also rivals. In this way, peace and social order is established. The social constitution of our selves is therefore brought about through violence, rejection, and competition: "Violence obviously ensues from this acquisitive mimesis, and it is how desire works in every human, from tenderest childhood onward."[845] Thus, according to Alison's Girardian conception of the formation of desire: "All desire is triangular, and is

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[838] Ibid., p. 297.
[839] Ibid., p. 38.
[840] Ibid., p. 18.
[841] That is, prior to one's incorporation into Christ's ecclesial community.
[842] Ibid., p. 18.
[843] Ibid., p. 13.
[844] Ibid., p. 15.
[845] Ibid., p. 18.

suggested by a mediator or model. This imitative desire leads to conflicts, which are resolved by a group's spontaneous formation of unanimity over against some arbitrarily indicated other who is expelled or excluded, thereby producing a return to peace."[846]

According to Alison, this violent expulsion – or even murder – of a scapegoated victim is historically how human culture developed: "the very constitution of human culture is shot through with violent mimesis. All human sociality is born thanks to the victim, and particularly, to ignorance of the victim(s) that gave it birth."[847] The constitution of human consciousness through one's culture is therefore *always* linked to the victim produced by mimetic violence: "All infants are born into a world where the very desire that constitutes what comes to be their consciousness is already rivalistic, formed by the process of the constitution of culture."[848] Therefore, according to Alison's Girardian account of subject formation, our very beings are, from the very moment of our conception, "structured by violence and death."[849]

Alison does argue, however, that this theory of rivalistic mimetic desire is not predicated on an ontological account of the human person as necessarily formed through violence. He contends that: "the constitution of human self-consciousness is not *in principle* a conflictual reality."[850] He immediately follows this statement, though, with the affirmation that, despite this, human self-consciousness has historically *always* been constituted in this way, that is, through a rivalistic and 'acquisitive mimesis.' Thus, despite his contention that, in principle, the constitution of selfhood and subjectivity is not always conflictual or rivalistic, nevertheless, historically it has always been so. Alison therefore presents a universalist account of the formation of individual human subjectivity and human culture in violence.[851] There is a primacy of violence and conflict in his account. Every single human person, and all the diverse cultures and societies of the world, are constituted in this particular way: "we are all always already locked into the other which forms us in a relationship

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[846] Ibid., p. 10.
[847] Ibid., p. 16.
[848] Ibid., p. 17.
[849] Ibid., p. 21.
[850] Ibid., p. 39.
[851] See for example, Alison, pp. 30 and 39.

of acquisitive mimesis, that is, in a relationship of violence which springs from, and leads to, death."[852] Moreover, he affirms that "all human communities [...] are based on violent expulsion [...] And, for this reason, the whole of human culture is ultimately self-destructive, since its foundations depend on its being divided against itself."[853] To state that *particular* cultures and subjectivities are formed in this way would perhaps be a more convincing argument than to say that *all* cultures and *all* persons throughout human history have been constituted through violence and expulsion.[854] As I shall explain further in a moment, it is for this reason that I will not be drawing upon Girard or Alison's theories for my own constructive developments of the idea of sin.

Moreover, within Alison's account it seems that it is an automatic reaction for the human child to regard the subject of imitation as a rival. It does not seem that the child first has to be *taught*, through imitation, to regard one's subject of imitation in this way. Implicit within Alison's thought — although he might refute this — there seems to be a genetic or instinctual account of rivalistic mimesis. This is evidenced when he writes:

> We grow up, in short, conflictual little animals, with a *built-in mechanism* for shoring up our fragile identity, for producing security and order, both as individuals and in groups. We learned this while we were building our "I," and as we continue to build it. We try to expel the "other" who is our rival. Our "I" is in fact built on that expulsion [...] As if by magic we know, as small children, how to strengthen our group: by finding someone weak to cast out, someone against whom we can all be. [...] This is our condition. This is what we start with, living on the brink between a wisdom which enables us to recognize where we have come from, and a self-deception, an exacerbated unknowing, which binds us further into violence toward ourselves and others, a violence in which we are all ineluctably constituted.[855]

Alison brings this idea of rivalistic mimetic desire into dialogue with the traditional teaching on original sin. He argues that the doctrine refers to this sphere of

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[852] Alison, p. 44.
[853] Ibid., p. 159.
[854] This argument parallels a similar critique which John Milbank made of René Girard. See, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 395-398. ProQuest ebook Central.
[855] Alison, p. 31. Emphasis mine.

primary human violence. For human consciousness to first come to be, there would have been a first conflict between rival beings within the first generation of humans. Consequently, this will have led to the first collective murder of a scapegoat to secure peaceful sociality.[856] This murder provided the foundation for human subjectivity, culture, and sociality to be developed. All subsequent human subjectivities and cultures will then be formed through rivalistic mimesis and violence. It is this constitution in rivalistic desire which we need to be saved from, as it is this constitution which leaves us "fatally headed toward death, our own and that of those we victimize."[857] It is this fundamental structure of human existence — that is, that the human being is "constituted in distorted reciprocity leading to victimization"[858] — that, for Alison, constitutes original sin. In Alison's own words: "[original sin] describes the universal human distortion of desire toward death within an interdividual, or mimetic, understanding of human psychology."[859] Sin, therefore, "has to do with relational disturbances which lead to violence among the whole community."[860]

For Alison, this fundamental structure of human life was not necessary. Human selfhood and culture could have come about in a different, more peaceful way, and yet it didn't. As Alison writes, however, "we cannot imagine what it would have been like to be a human to whom death is not an interior reality, something that moves us from within, since we have no possible access to such a reality except for Christ."[861] Moreover, this primary murder of a victim must have been so important and fundamental to the development of that first human culture that all the diverse cultures, societies, and peoples of the world since then have been structured and shaped by that same model of distorted desire leading to death – that is, prior to Christ's establishment of a new culture within His specific ecclesial community. As Alison writes, the originating act of violence must have "shaped every aspect of that distinctively human culture (to match the completely pervasive nature of concupiscence)."[862] Indeed, as a result of this primary reality of distorted relationality, every aspect of the human

[856] Ibid., pp. 130-131.
[857] Ibid., p. 145.
[858] Ibid., p. 146.
[859] Ibid., p. 156.
[860] Ibid., p. 137.
[861] Ibid., p. 256.
[862] Ibid., p. 245.

person is distorted. It is this reality which Alison believes is concupiscence. Alison writes:

> Every dimension of the human being – intelligence, sexuality, will power, affectivity, memory, way of being involved in history, sense of time, consciousness, and conscience – is radically distorted in all of us. And it is distorted because the whole cultural reality of being human has not only formed us in some exterior manner, but it has formed the very parameters of our consciousness from within, bringing us into being humans marked by the parameters of death.[863]

We are only able to recognise and resist this reality through membership in Christ's ecclesial community, that is, through "our incorporation into the coming into being of that new creation, whether by baptism or desire."[864]

Like Butler, therefore, Alison's theory of mimetic desire contests the idea that culture merely shapes us externally by presenting obstacles or opportunities for those within it to freely navigate. Rather, Alison argues that culture also forms us from within by shaping our very habits, desires, and consciousness. The drastic and radical nature of this theory means that any sinful act on the part of an individual is *always* the result of a prior distorted relationality and cultural context. It seems, however, that Butler's account of 'the constitutive sociality of the self' provides a better resource to help us develop the idea of social sin. Alison's theory of subject formation through "the violent nature of desire" and the "resolution of that violence in a form of victimage"[865] as a universalist phenomenon leaves me unconvinced. It does not seem to do justice to the rich diversity of the various human cultures which have existed across the globe throughout history. Nor does it seem to do justice to the rich variety of — sometimes conflicting — norms and people *within* particular cultures. As we saw, for Butler, each person is uniquely formed through their personal interactions with a variety of different, conflicting norms and others. No one person's subjectivity and consciousness will be identical to another's due to this. Alison, on the other hand, presents a sweeping theological generalisation of every human culture throughout history — except for the ecclesial culture initiated by Christ — as being fundamentally

[863] Ibid., p. 222.
[864] Ibid., p. 221.
[865] Ibid., p. 27.

and inevitably structured by violence and death. Alison's theory seems to lead to an account of human nature as fundamentally violent; a conclusion which clashes with the traditional insistence in Catholic teaching that human nature remains fundamentally good, even with the corruption of original sin. Indeed, despite his claim that this human reality of violence and death was not necessary — and hence not ontological — the entirety of the human person is now structured by this distortion including one's physical material reality, one's nature, one's sexuality, one's affections, and one's biological instincts. As we saw in the previous chapter, though, Aquinas seems concerned to maintain the belief that humans do not inherit a natural moral depravity whereby they are naturally or deterministically inclined to evil or violence as a result of original sin.[866] Humans still have an orientation towards virtue and the good, even though the corruption of original sin leads them to pursue this desire in disordered ways leading to sin. Within Alison's account, however, there seems to be a primacy of violence over peace and human fellowship.[867] This precedence of violence, conflict, expulsion, and death seems to create a tension with traditional Catholic insistences that human nature is good. Moreover, Alison focuses on a more linear sequence of the formation of our selves: it is something we receive as infants through imitation, and which subsequently shapes all our thinking, acting, and desiring.[868] Butler, however, focuses more on the continual constitution of our selves through our personal interactions with a myriad of different, and sometimes conflicting, others and social norms. Butler also places more emphasis upon our own agency in the formation of our subjectivities, as well as in the continual formation of the social context we are a part of. Thus, in my opinion, Butler's account of the relation between the social and the personal is a more useful resource to help develop the notion of social sin.

There is one theologian outside of queer theology who draws upon poststructuralist thinking — including Butler's theory of performativity and Michel

[866] Ibid., p. 159
[867] Although Milbank does not evaluate Alison's work directly, my critique of Alison here does parallel a criticism Milbank makes of other thinkers, including René Girard whose theories significantly influenced Alison's thought. Milbank criticises those secular and Christian social theories which do not present a vision of the "ontological priority of peace to conflict." (See Milbank, p. 367.) Milbank argues that, within a Christian worldview, peace should be regarded as a "primary reality" and denies that there is an "always preceding violence." (See Milbank, p. 429.) He predicates this belief in the primacy of peace in the Christian doctrine of creation. (See pp. 440 and 442.)
[868] For Alison, this is, of course, prior to our encounter with Christ and the Church.

Foucault's understanding of the "disciplinary and productive effects of power"[869] — to develop a theology of sin. Margaret D. Kamitsuka is a protestant feminist theologian who brings postmodern theorists into dialogue with Kierkegaard to reinterpret the Christian idea of sin. Kamitsuka draws upon Butler's theory of performativity and their analysis of the social constitution of agency to conclude that:

> Agency is not defined in terms of a core self prior to cultural and linguistic structures to which one might attach certain attributes (e.g., will, intention, freedom); rather, agency is constituted in a process of negotiating multiple cultural discourses about such attributes.[870]

This account of the acting individual leads her to reconfigure the idea of sin:

> If selfhood is constituted and reconstituted performatively, and if sin (very formally) is some kind of action or attitude impeding one's relationship with God, then sin poststructurally speaking would be the self engaging in discursive relations in distorted ways that impede godly performativity.[871]

She argues, therefore, that humans sin in one of two ways: either a person excessively cooperates with the disciplinary power which circulates through normalizing discourse or a person cooperates with this power in a way which is culpably underdeveloped. What she means by the first — "undue cooperation with a disciplinary power"[872] — is that one is found guilty of sin when one unduly or excessively cooperates with normalizing regimes to maximise the benefits and pleasures that one receives from this cooperation. The examples Kamitsuka uses to depict this type of sin suggest that, for her, one can sinfully cooperate with good or neutral normalizing regimes, as well as oppressive ones. Thus, one sins against God even when unduly cooperating with good normalizing regimes, as what originally should have been regarded only as "a relative good" turns into "the supreme good."[873] She writes: "Not only is the relation among relative goods disordered, but what should be the supreme good (allegiance to God) is supplanted by another allegiance."[874] It

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[869] Margaret D. Kamitsuka, 'Toward a Feminist Postmodern and Postcolonial Interpretation of Sin', *The Journal of Religion*, 84.2 (2004), 179-211 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/381210> [accessed 25 November 2019], (p. 181).
[870] Ibid., p. 191.
[871] Ibid., p. 192
[872] Ibid., p. 193.
[873] Ibid., p. 193.
[874] Ibid.

would be possible to take Kamitsuka further here and argue that this type of sin becomes a form of idolatry, as one is disproportionately orienting one's life toward a relative good instead of God. Kamitsuka, however, does not draw on the language of idolatry. Additionally, Kamitsuka argues that this undue cooperation can lead to destructive actions and attitudes towards other people, thus also becoming "a sin against one's neighbor."[875] She uses the example of patriotism, arguing that the normalizing discourse of patriotism, when cooperated with in an extreme and undue way, turns what should be a relative good, the love of country, into a xenophobia which has negative effects on others.[876] It also supersedes one's allegiance to God as the supreme good one prioritises in one's life. The actions and attitudes which result from this undue cooperation impede one's relationship with God in this way.

It seems that Kamitsuka does not consider the normalizing discourse of patriotism as an example of sin on its own; nor are all people cooperating with this discourse sinning. Rather, one individually sins when one *unduly* and *excessively* cooperates with it in the way described above. However, for her, one can also unduly cooperate with what one might call 'bad' or 'oppressive' normalizing discourse. She writes that women can be regarded as sinning when they unduly cooperate with "patriarchal power/knowledge."[877] Going beyond Kamitsuka, another example of this might be when a white person supports systems, structures, and normalizing discourses which uphold white privilege. One might support these by either not challenging them, or by fostering racist stereotypes, or by voting in a particular way, all to maximise the privileges one receives as a white person. For example, we have already seen how suspecting black men of being dangerous, or of criminal activity, purely because of their skin colour, accent, or way of dress, fosters the normalizing discourse of the dangerous, criminal black person. This, in turn, maintains the presumption of white innocence. Thus, by cooperating with systems, structures, and normalizing discourses which uphold white privilege, a person maximises the personal benefits they can receive as a white person. In the course of doing so, however, they cooperate in the oppression and disadvantage of black and minority ethnic communities. This allegiance to the maintenance of white privilege and racist ideology could arguably been seen as supplanting one's allegiance to God. This is because one

[875] Ibid., p. 193.
[876] Ibid.
[877] Ibid., p. 195.

fails to heed God's commands to love one's neighbour as one should and demonstrate a preferential option for the marginalized. One therefore prioritises one's comfortable and secure lifestyle as a white person over loyalty to God; thereby sinning against both God and neighbour.

Within this first instance of sin, however, it seems that Kamitsuka is still working with the assumption that sin requires a modern notion of moral culpability. Thus, if sin is to be attributed to an act, there needs to be a morally accountable agent behind it who freely and willingly chooses to cooperate with the disciplinary power. It seems for her that choice is necessary for attribution of sin: "One can choose to submit unduly to a normalizing regime."[878] Using our own example from above, therefore, one would need to consciously choose to support racist norms — to maximise the personal benefits one receives from such a choice — for it to be sinful. Kamitsuka argues that one can choose not to allow the benefits associated with cooperating with norms to lead one to cooperate excessively in a way which is "destructive to self and others."[879] According to Kamitsuka, one can do this because we all have "the choice to broaden [our] discursive relationality."[880] Thus, when one does not do this, but instead unduly cooperates with the unjust norm, then it is a choice which one can be found culpable for. Therefore, it is sinful. If one has no choice in the matter, but rather is forced to cooperate, then one has not sinned.

The second type of sin which Kamitsuka presents, that is, "underdeveloped cooperation with disciplinary power,"[881] happens when one has the choice to develop and form oneself through interaction with good normalizing regimes which can prevent one from sinning but does not. Again, Kamitsuka is operating here with an assumption that culpability for sin equates to the notion of accountability within a modern moralistic framework. For this second type of sin, she argues that underdeveloped cooperation with alternative norms and discourses is "an agential choice, resulting in a sin against others."[882] The underlying assumption here is that if one does not have the opportunity to engage with countervailing norms, or if one is prevented from interacting with these norms in some way, then one is not guilty of sin

[878] Ibid., p. 194.
[879] Ibid., p. 194.
[880] Ibid., p. 194.
[881] Ibid., p. 194.
[882] Ibid., p. 196.

even if this lack of interaction leads one to act in ways which do violence to oneself and others. To demonstrate this second type of sin, Kamitsuka uses the example of a mother who cooperates with a norm of patriarchal authority by telling her misbehaving children to "wait until [their] father gets home."[883] Within Kamitsuka's framework, this mother is found guilty of sin. She fails to cooperate with norms which "specify the importance of maternal as well as paternal authority"; norms which she would have encountered through her social interactions with, for example, "school officials, social service agencies" or "church pastors."[884] This mother has had opportunities to interact with norms which challenge patriarchal normalizing discourses – norms which would, therefore, enable her to resist patriarchal authority – yet she chooses not to. Kamitsuka states:

> This example also illustrates sin against God, if one sees inadequate development of her own power and authority as stunting her ethical and spiritual development. With the exception of, for example, a battered wife or a woman whose own childhood might have been one of abuse that thoroughly scarred her, one can speak of a morally accountable agent who has the ability to widen and more fully develop her parental performativity in relation to other dominant and insurrectional discourses, thus enabling her to care for both herself and her children with the proper exercise of power.[885]

In this example, the mother sins against God and others, such as her children, through her culpably "underdeveloped cooperation with disciplinary power,"[886] that is, her lack of engagement with the alternative norms available to her which would have enabled resistance to patriarchal norms of authority.

Kamitsuka's attempt to define a twofold typology of sin narrowly and precisely, however, runs the risk of 'domesticating' or 'trivialising' sin; it risks becoming an attempt to present sin as something which can be fundamentally understood and hence controlled. Further, her assumption that culpability for sin equates to the notion of culpability within a modern moralistic framework risks undermining the belief in the non-personal inheritance of sin and guilt within the

[883] Ibid., p. 195.
[884] Ibid., p. 195.
[885] Ibid., p. 196.
[886] Ibid., p. 194.

doctrine of original sin. As we saw in the previous chapter, a central aspect of the doctrine of original sin is that one inherits guilt, accountability, and sin prior to any conscious personal action, choice, or exercise of freedom.[887] Sin is not always the result of an independent, conscious agential choice on the part of each individual human. Kamitsuka could have pushed her ideas further in this article by first exploring what sin is. Is it an act caused by a self-determining moral agent whose ability to freely choose is determinative of the presence, or not, of sin? Or is it an act which distorts humanity's relationship with God regardless of whether one consciously chooses to do so? Further theological reflection on what the definitive features of sin are within the Christian tradition would have been helpful. Similarly, within her essay, Kamitsuka focuses primarily on developing the notion of 'individual sin' through dialogue with Butler and other poststructuralist thinkers. She does not explore why the normalizing regimes and disciplinary powers which effect violence in Butler's thought can also be considered sin. She does, however, acknowledge that structural oppressions are types of 'social sin' and argues that the concept of 'social sin' is important for any theological discussion on sin.[888]

Finally, it would not be appropriate to uncritically adopt all of Kamitsuka's conclusions for our development of the notion of social sin within Catholic social thought because Kamitsuka develops the notion of sin through a particular protestant theological lens. For example, she takes for granted sin's inevitability[889]; a conclusion which could be contested within Catholic thought which maintains that, due to the operation of grace within history and mediated through the sacraments, humans can become free to choose the good and resist some sin in this lifetime. Not all sin is therefore inevitable. Her interpretation of this inevitability leads her to a conclusion similar to that of Alison's, namely, that the inevitability of human sin is not predicated on an ontological account of the human person, but rather on the historical consistency of human practices: "Historically, to some degree, every discursive performance has fallen short and will inevitably fall short of God's goodness and glory."[890] For a Catholic account of sin more nuance is needed; while it is confessed that a person cannot completely refrain from sinning in this lifetime, nevertheless, some sins are not

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[887] For a parallel argument, see McFadyen, pp. 16-18.
[888] Kamitsuka, p. 188.
[889] Ibid., p. 197.
[890] Ibid., p. 198.

inevitable, but are able to be resisted through co-operation with the grace received in baptism. Nevertheless, her attempt at bringing poststructuralist thinkers, including Butler and Foucault, into dialogue with theological thought on sin is admirable. Her essay provides a useful resource to demonstrate how one could appropriate Butler's thought for the development of the theological notion of sin. Her thought is also helpful in exemplifying two different ways a person might be regarded as cooperating with social sin, that is, by (1) excessively cooperating with it in an idolatrous or harmful way, or (2) by failing to cooperate with alternative norms, discourses, and social structures which would enable resistance. Further, she does briefly hint towards how one may use poststructuralist thought to further develop the relation between personal and social sin in a way which parallels the arguments I have made in this chapter so far:

> In a poststructuralist framework, there is no private self untouched by power; there are only subjects negotiating societal and interpersonal disciplinary structures. By emphasizing how the subject is constructed in relation to power regimes, the dichotomy of the personal/subjective versus the societal/objective is avoided.[891]

Although the idea of social sin needs to go beyond excessive focus on individual perpetration, Kamitsuka convincingly draws attention to the need for theologians to not lose sight of individual sin, or, indeed, the individual "self who sins", within broader theologies of sin.[892]

4.8 Concluding Thoughts

Thus far, there have been no fully satisfactory Catholic theologies of sin which have drawn upon Butler's theory of human vulnerability and the 'constitutive sociality of the self.' So, what could Butler's theories bring to theological discussions on sin? As I have indicated throughout the chapter, Butler's account can help us constructively develop the theological anthropology underlying theologies of social sin. It can help us to discern how disordered social situations – that is, those which are contrary to the will of God by perpetuating violence and harm – impact human living and acting in the world. As we have seen, Butler's theory leads to a more dialectical understanding

[891] Ibid., p. 210.
[892] Ibid., p. 188.

of the relation between the personal and the social, the internal and the external. Due to the fundamental sociality and interdependency of embodied life, the human self is socially and historically formed. It is therefore through interaction with human others, cultural norms, and social institutions that our individual consciousness is shaped. This social world is the very condition of possibility for one's agency and subjectivity. We are unable to know, reason, will, act, or desire independent of our situatedness in particular relationships, histories, and cultures. It is therefore on the basis of our formation as acting and deliberating subjects through interaction with social others, norms, and cultural worldviews that we are enabled to make choices between good and evil. Hence, our basic cognitive, affective, and volitional powers are vulnerable to being misshapen by the social situations in which we are immersed. Therefore, not only are we vulnerable to becoming a victim of violence, but, because of our dependence on others and norms for the constitution of our agency and subjectivity, our very selves are also vulnerable to being shaped in such a way that we *do* violence. In other words, we are vulnerable to being formed in a way which leads us to accept and reproduce certain norms, worldviews, and practices that do violence to other people and ourselves. Further, we have also seen that, for Butler, the relationship between cultural norms and human subjectivity is not unilateral. Cultural values, social norms, and communal practices are the condition of possibility for personal acts, but they are also the product of individual acts, and reproduced in and by human acts. Individuals effect and structure these social arrangements in turn.[893] One's personal acts and desires affect reality. The personal is thus so intimately bound up with the social that we cannot properly speak of one without the other, nor can we ever neatly and fully separate the two. Just as there is no personal without the social, similarly there is no social without the personal. Like John Paul II, therefore, Butler underscores the importance of attending to the acts of individuals in the creation and sustenance of unjust social situations.

Butler's account of human vulnerability and the "constitutive sociality of the self" can help develop our understanding of how social sin impacts human living and acting in the world. Indeed, we can use it to suggest that there is a liminal nature to sin, as every occasion or act of sin is *always* both profoundly personal and profoundly social. There is an intractable ambiguity and complexity within the idea of social sin

[893] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', pp. 522-523.

— particularly in its relation to personal agency — which cannot be neatly answered nor defined. Because of our interdependency as a species — an interdependency which is reflected in the permeability and fluidity of our selfhoods — we are vulnerable to being harmed by one another; our very selves and subjectivities are vulnerable to being shaped in ways which harm both ourselves and others. We are, therefore, vulnerable to being formed through our interactions with others and social norms in ways which oppose the divine will for our, and the whole community of life's, flourishing. In other words, our subjectivities are vulnerable to being formed in ways which lead us to become agents and instruments of sin. Every act of sin on the part of an individual is always the result of an inherently social, historical, relational, communicative, and located self which has always already been conditioned by sin. Sin is never merely personal or social; it is always both, albeit to different degrees in different situations. There is always a wider communion of sin which we all participate in.

The term 'social sin', therefore, should not be used just to describe an exterior situation or social structure 'out there' which we know to be contrary to God's will, but rather should depict the all-pervasive power of historical human sinfulness to shape our very subjectivities, as well as the social structures in which we live, in ways contrary to the divine will. The idea of social sin presents us with an idea more theologically profound than just the identification of structural injustice; it depicts the power of collective human sinfulness to shape our lives in a fallen (yet graced) world in ways which distort our relations to God and one another. Sin is therefore more aptly depicted as a state, rather than a particular act. The sinful act is always a symptom of an ever-greater collective state of sin. The sinful act, however, is simultaneously the very condition for this state of sin's existence. As we saw with Butler, social norms and situations can only exist to the extent of their embodiment in the particular acts of individuals. A situation of social sin is always produced and reproduced by the personally sinful acts and desires of individuals, albeit never an act or desire which is fully self-determined or autonomous. As we saw in the last chapter, there is precedent within the Catholic tradition to call these socially formed acts and desires sin because sin is not limited to freely willed, purely self-determined acts. There is, therefore, a necessarily dialectical relation between personal and social sin. Hence, it would be redundant to attempt to articulate a 'solution' to the 'problem' of social sin whereby

we can neatly differentiate between freely made conscious sinful choices and the influence of social situations.

Thus, like the liberation theologians we explored in chapter two, a new understanding of victimhood begins to emerge through dialogue with Butler. Individual sinners can also be considered victims of this wider disordered state of sin. Again, however, this acknowledgement of victimhood should not lead to a 'sin levelling' whereby all people are regarded as equally sinful without recognition that some participate in sinful situations in more serious and grave ways. Nor should it excuse the individual sinner from any accountability for their actions and choices. Rather, this language of victimhood should be used to emphasise that *all* need grace; we are *all* in need of liberation from the sinful situations which come to shape and configure our lives in ways that are beyond our full control, both oppressor and oppressed, victim and perpetrator. In a similar strand of thought, Kamitsuka notes that Butler's theory enables us to avoid the danger of presenting a sharp binary between the sinner and the sinned against; it challenges any presentation of oppressed people purely as spotless victims, and of oppressors as alone having sinned or contributed to the sinful situation.[894]

As I noted earlier in the chapter, this reality of interdependence and vulnerability also invites us to rethink our understanding of responsibility: to think through the ways we hold collective responsibility for the physical, emotional, and psychological lives of one another. We previously saw that, for Butler, not only are we personally formed by others, but we also form the lives and subjectivities of others in turn.[895] This fundamental solidarity of humanity means that we have a collective responsibility for the spiritual and sinful lives of one another. We are not only responsible for our own sinful acts; we are also collectively responsible for the sinful acts of others, the sinful communities we are members of, and the sinful situations we find ourselves involved in. This understanding of collective responsibility has precedent within the Catholic tradition. In the previous chapter we saw that, for Aquinas, guilt for original sin could not be attributed to a person when they were considered in isolation as a unique and singular human being. They could, however, be found culpable in terms of their relationality to the historical human community

[894] Kamitsuka, p. 180.
[895] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 27.

they are a part of. Thus, there is a precedent for there to be a collective dimension to accountability for sin, even when this sin is not fully within one's power to control, because of one's relationality and situatedness.

There is a danger here, however, that this notion of collective responsibility could lead to a shaming or punishment of individuals based purely on their membership in certain sinful communities, nations, or institutions. There are numerous examples throughout history of the destructive ways the notion of ancestral sin, or 'sins of the father,' have led individuals and families to be ostracised or unfairly punished in harmful ways. The question we need to ask ourselves, therefore, is how we can move beyond attitudes of blame and shame whilst still recognising accountability. We need a way to recognise our collective responsibility in a way which does not lead to the ostracization or marginalisation of others. Indeed, the notion of collective responsibility should instead commit us to questioning how we, as a collective, can hold ourselves accountable for creating the right conditions for the whole community of life's flourishing in accord with the divine will. It should also lead us to ask how we, both individually and collectively, can appropriately recognise and repent from the ways that we have contributed to the sinful, disordered social conditions which have led to more sin. Collective responsibility should orientate us towards attitudes of accountability, repentance, conversion, and recompense, rather than blame or shame. In one way or another, we are all found accountable for the sinful failings of our society and communities, albeit to different degrees in different situations.

An appropriate ecclesial response to the presence of social sin will therefore have to include appeals for both the personal conversion of individual hearts *and* societal change. Moreover, this work for societal change needs to go beyond that emphasised by liberation theologians in chapter two, that is, the challenging and dismantling of socio-economic and political structures such as neoliberal capitalism and colonialism. This is because sin, violence, and death are also perpetuated at the cultural level of norms and discourse. As we have seen, social norms and discourse play a vital role in the formation of our subjectivities. They have the potential to shape our desires and affections in ways contrary to the divine will, thereby leading us to commit acts of sin and to reproduce situations of social or structural sin. This attention to the role of desire and affection has been absent from the accounts of social sin we

previously explored. If, as I am suggesting, we regard unjust or violent cultures as sin, then Butler's thought can help us to understand *how* this type of sin impacts human living and acting in the world; it shapes our worldviews, affections, actions, and desires in distorted, violent ways which lead us to harm ourselves and others. Moreover, Butler's thought can also help us to discern what shape our conversion and repentance from this sin might take. Indeed, notional knowledge alone is not enough to transform sinful social situations such as heterosexism, patriarchy, and racism. Rather, what is also needed is a conversion of our very desires, affections, and will. What is needed, therefore, is not only the transformation of socio-economic and political structures, but also the transformation of social norms and cultural discourse, as well as individual hearts and minds.

Using Butler's theory in this way also enables us to develop a non-fatalistic account of how social sin impacts human living and acting in the world. Due to the fluidity and impressionability of human selfhood, there is a continual constitution and formation of the person in time. This happens through the person's inhabitation of, and interaction with, the continually evolving organizations of power within a variety of social norms, relations, and institutions, as well as the person's continuous acting in response to them. This leaves open the possibility that the human person can be formed in life-giving ways such that they are enabled to recognise and resist social sin. As I previously argued, through the operation of grace within history, there will always be various Others, cultures, and countervailing norms which are life-giving, and which correspond to the divine will. The impressionability of our selves makes possible our formation through graced Others and norms in ways which conform to God's plan. Bringing Butler's theory of the sociality and malleability of the self into dialogue with a theological account of grace enables us to safeguard against a purely fatalistic and deterministic account of sin and violence as inevitable. Transformation, liberation, and repentance are possible. The human situation is dynamic and changeable, both for good and bad.

It is possible to regard this Butlerian account of the human person as being in creative continuity with John Paul II's thought on the sociality of human existence, goodness, and sin. Indeed, Butler's explicit account of human becoming could perhaps be used to further understand and develop the idea of 'becoming' implicit within the Pope's thought. As we saw at the end of chapter one, there is an underlying

anthropology within John Paul's writings which presents a more dynamic and social understanding of the human condition: Human selfhood is in a constant process of becoming oriented either towards, or away from, fulfilling one's divine vocation, that is, to be the image and likeness of the divine. Moreover, as we previously discovered, for the Pope, this vocation cannot be achieved individually. The human good cannot be accomplished merely through the isolated efforts of one individual. The process of 'becoming' is, therefore, a thoroughly social affair. Gerard Loughlin notes that this Butlerian idea of human 'becoming' corresponds with other aspects of Christian thought as well.[896] In traditional Catholic teaching, humans are *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, created by God out of nothing. Thus, Loughlin argues that, because of our createdness out of nothing, "[w]e have no being of our own, so must become what we are to be."[897] He draws upon an idea similar to that of John Paul II's, that is, that this mode of 'becoming' is intimately linked to the traditional belief that humanity is made in the *imago Dei.* Loughlin writes: "But as creatures who are made in the image of God, which is to say – for Christian thought – in the image of the image of God, Jesus Christ, and so we are called and given to union with God, to reflect God to God. This is what it is to be human; and becoming human is what we are given to be as creatures of God."[898] We need to become what we are, namely, creatures who are called to reflect God to God by being the image of Christ in the world. This theme of human 'becoming' is a key thread which, in one way or another, has run through many of the Catholic theologies we have examined so far. Indeed, the liberation theologians we explored in chapter two also gesture towards a dynamic account of human selfhood. This suggests that the idea of human 'becoming' is a fruitful basis on which to develop a Catholic account of social sin.

Furthermore, Butler's thought provides an interesting lens through which to interpret, and further develop, the Pope's theology of social sin. As we saw in chapter one, for John Paul II, there is a fundamental sociality to human goodness in this lifetime; one person's goodness, or indeed a whole community's goodness, lifts up the rest of the world with them. There is, however, what he calls a "law of descent," whereby one person's sinfulness drags down their entire social and ecclesial

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[896] Loughlin, 'Being Creature, Becoming Human'.
[897] Ibid.
[898] Ibid.

community.[899] The Pope's imagery of 'dragging down' suggests that when one person sins, we are all affected in such a way that we too become sinners or sinful, although the Pope does not go so far as to explicitly suggest this himself. Drawing on Butler's theory of human vulnerability and the 'constitutive sociality of the self' enables us to understand *why* every individual's actions affect others, for better or for worse, due to human solidarity. Butler's theory can help explain why there is a fundamental sociality to human goodness and human sinfulness; why, in the Pope's words, there is a "communion of sin" we are all a part of.[900] Just like human goodness, human sinfulness can also be regarded as a fundamentally social and dynamic process. Butler's thought presents to us one way to discern why and how this is so.

More thinking remains to be done, however, in understanding how Butler's theory of the 'constitutive sociality of the self' can be reconciled with traditional Catholic teachings on original sin, natural law, and the natural inclination of humanity towards virtue and the good. The doctrine of original sin as interpreted by Thomas Aquinas teaches us that individuals inherit a disordered human nature. Such teachings raise questions of Butler's theory: Is it true that our selfhoods are wholly socially constituted? Are there any 'natural' or 'disordered' inclinations which impact us prior to socialisation? Perhaps it is possible to reconcile Butler's theory with these traditional teachings. As we saw with the case of environmental racism earlier in the chapter, social conditions not only affect an individual's personality through the formation of subjectivity, but they also impact a person's physical or biological development. Indeed, infants can inherit genetic diseases, genetic predispositions, and teratogenic disorders from their parents whilst still in the womb.[901] As we saw with environmental racism, health disorders can also be caused by the wider environmental, economic, and political situations one is born into. We are often dependent on our social communities and wider society for access to healthy food and safe drinking water, for support when health crises occur, and even for the maintenance of safe, unpolluted, and uncontaminated environments in which to live, grow, and develop, including the air one breathes. There is, therefore, no formation of any part of a

[899] RP, §16.
[900] Ibid.
[901] See for example, <https://www.newcastle-hospitals.nhs.uk/services/clinical-genetics-service/information-for-healthcare-professionals/routine-referrals/preconception-counselling/teratogenic-drugs/> [accessed 18 July 2022].

person’s selfhood, not even one’s material body, physical health, mental development, or biological instincts, without a social community and environment which enables and limits this growth. Thus, what one might call one’s ‘nature’, biology, reason, or the instincts resulting from one’s nature are, in fact, just as dependent on one’s relationality and sociality for their existence and formation. One’s ‘disordered nature’ due to original sin, therefore, could also be seen to be a result of one’s relationality and the wider social state of sin one is born into. Similarly, the graced communities we are born into can orient us toward virtue and the good. Catholic teaching on humanity’s inclination towards virtue and the good is perhaps meant to indicate this reality. Indeed, one’s ability to reason, to discern between good and evil, and to choose the good and develop virtue, is dependent on one’s social community for various reasons: First, one’s bodily and neurological development is enabled by primary caregivers. Second, one’s mental development and education is also enabled, supported, or limited by one’s interaction with wider society, cultures, and norms. Thus, the Catholic confidence in reason and conscience can be maintained to a certain extent because of the presence of graced communities in history, such as the Church, which enable individuals to be oriented towards the good through education and formation of conscience in life-affirming ways. Perhaps humans can be regarded as always being open to goodness, virtue, and transcendence due to this. More thinking remains to be done, however, regarding whether it is possible to reconcile a Catholic account of natural law with this understanding of human vulnerability and ‘constitutive sociality of the self’. Is there a contradiction between the position we have derived from Butler and the traditional Catholic commitment to a belief in natural law? Such a project is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis.

Conclusion

We began this thesis by exploring how the language of sin has been absorbed into the popular cultural imagination — often for humorous or comedic purposes — thereby trivialising its reality as a serious human plight. Sin-talk has also been irresponsibly misused by Christian organisations and individuals throughout history — including the Catholic Church — in ways which result in serious harm and violence; it has been weaponised to create a culture of blame and shame which marginalises and ostracises whole communities of people. Using the language of sin in this way has potentially distracted us from the reality of sin in the world. This has led to a cultural and theological confusion about what sin is. As we have seen throughout the thesis, however, sin is an insidious reality which is completely contrary to the divine will for the world. It distorts humanity's relation with God, with one another, and with the rest of the created world. It disorders our interiority in such a way that we become perpetrators of violence against both ourselves and others. It causes harm, and even death, to the human person and the whole community of life. As we saw with the case of original sin in chapter three, sin can take the form of an individual human act, an inherited defective state of nature, or a disordered communal situation. This understanding of sin — which emerged through our exploration of the rich wisdom which the Catholic tradition offers on this subject — disrupts the modern moralistic narrative of sin. It disrupts the contemporary cultural imagination that sin is merely an individual act — typically related to sex, shame, and condemnation — which one freely chooses to perform. According to Catholic insight, there is a broader theological understanding of sin: it is that which is contrary to the divine will by causing violence, harm, and death. It is therefore an offence to God.

Nevertheless, due to the necessary inclusion of God within this definition, there is a certain indefinability to sin which means that all the language we use to describe sin is analogous. The descriptions provided above, therefore, are not exclusive nor complete. There can be no one definitive or conclusive definition for sin. We can, however, talk about sin and have some limited knowledge of it. The reasons for this are twofold: First, because of divine revelation which reveals sin to us — including that ongoing revelation and grace mediated through other people, particularly the oppressed and marginalized victims and survivors of sin — and

second, because of sin’s concrete effects which are visible in human history. Thus, a multitude of theological metaphors and definitions for sin are needed, including those provided above. This means that we need to be flexible in our theological sin-talk: Our understanding of sin must always remain open to correction and critique. We must be receptive to God’s self-communication and revelation in history; it is important that we attend to what Christ is saying and doing about sin in present reality. To do this, one needs to remain open to encounter with the mediators of grace within history; we need to allow Christ to heal us of our sinful blindness and enable recognition of sin through them. This will illuminate any errors in our theologies of sin and lead us ever closer towards the Truth, albeit never fully understood or encapsulated in this lifetime.

Using this broader theological understanding of sin, therefore, is it possible to call social structures, situations, and cultures sin within a Catholic theological perspective? The short answer is yes; that is, when they are contrary to the divine will, distort our relationality or interiority, or cause harm, violence, or death to the human person. As we have seen, within a traditional Catholic theological account of sin, sin is not limited to a free, self-determined, personal act of the will. Nor is the attribution of guilt equated to a modern notion of moral culpability. There is precedent within the Catholic tradition for expanding the concept of sin beyond exclusive focus on immoral acts and attitudes for which one can be found morally culpable. Hence, the liberationist idea that disordered social structures, situations, and cultures can properly be called ‘social sin’ or ‘structural sin’ is faithful to the pre-existing tradition.

As we saw with the case of original sin, however, these communal situations and social structures do need to be related to human agency and will as their cause if they are to be properly considered sin — albeit not necessarily a freely self-determined will considered apart from the wider community one is a member of. As we saw with Butler, though, all social situations, cultures, norms, and structures rely on the acts of individuals for their existence. There are no cultural norms, worldviews, or social structures — not even those which present themselves as ‘natural’, ‘true’, or ‘just the way things are’ — which exist outside of the co-operation of human agency, will, and desire. With the social so intimately bound up with the personal in this way, we cannot properly speak of one without the other, nor can we ever neatly or fully separate the two. There is no social without the personal. Cultural norms, worldviews, and social structures only exist to the extent of their embodiment in the daily and repeated

practices of communities and individuals. This application of Butler's social theory to our own developing account of social sin ensures that our theology remains faithful to the pre-existing tradition regarding the relation between human agency and sin; there are no instances of social sin — that is, disordered social structures, communal situations, or cultural norms which are contrary to the will of God by perpetuating violence, harm, and death — without human will and agency being at the root of their existence. A situation of social sin is always produced and reproduced by the personal acts and desires of individuals, albeit never an act or desire which is fully self-determined or autonomous. There is, therefore, a necessarily dialectical relation between the personal and social dimensions to human sinfulness.

In regard to the question of how sin impacts human living and acting in the world, through our investigations we have discovered that sin is, fundamentally, a communal human plight which we are all bound up in in different ways. We are all victims of a wider collective state of sin, even those of us who are the most serious perpetrators of sin. Indeed, in the last chapter we presented some conclusions regarding how we might regard sin as shaping the human situation. Due to the essential interdependency, relationality, and vulnerability which underlies embodied human life, there is a fundamental sociality to human sinfulness; there is a "communion of sin" we are all a part of.[902] Our personal subjectivity and interiority, therefore, is vulnerable to being distorted by this communal situation of sin. The individual self who sins is always a symptom of an ever-greater collective state of sin. Due to our vulnerability and 'the constitutive sociality' of our selfhoods, therefore, we are formed by sin in ways which lead us to personally harm both ourselves, others, and the whole community of life — albeit in different ways depending on our personal circumstances and relations, our social, cultural, and political positionalities, and our geographical and spatiotemporal locations. Thus, the idea of social sin signifies the all-pervasive power of historical, collective human sinfulness to shape our very subjectivities, as well as our social environments, in ways contrary to the divine will. Sin has the potential to obstruct humanity's dynamic and social process of becoming who we are called to be; it orientates us away from the fulfilment of our vocation, that is, to be more and more the image and likeness of the divine.

[902] I have appropriated the phrase 'communion of sin' from John Paul II. See RP, §16.

The modern preoccupation with discerning how to locate moral culpability within a theology of social sin is a distraction from the true purpose of theological sin-talk. It is my contention that the purpose of sin-talk is to enable us to identify, repent from, and transform those acts and situations — rooted in human agency — which are contrary to the will of God. Nevertheless, as I have shown, it is possible to maintain a sense of individual responsibility and culpability for sin whilst still acknowledging that a situation of sin is not fully within an individual's power to control. Further, using Butler, Aquinas, and the Council of Trent as dialogue partners, we were able to expand the scope of responsibility for sin to acknowledge our collective responsibility for the human situation; for the complex and often unrecognised ways we contribute towards the constitution of the sinful acts of others, the sinful communities we are members of, and the sinful situations we find ourselves involved in. By ensuring that we can retain a sense of individual responsibility for sin — even for those sins we are unable to fully control — we remain faithful to two of John Paul II's underlying concerns regarding the idea of social sin: first, that a sense of individual accountability for sin is maintained, and second, that the sacrament of reconciliation retains a central and important role in the life of the Church. Although the groundwork has been laid for the centrality of the sacrament of confession to be maintained, more thinking is needed regarding how it fits into this overall picture of humanity's communal sinfulness.

Further, we have also seen how our constructive developments safeguard the belief that humans can know and attain the good in this lifetime. We have been enabled to develop a non-fatalistic account of how social sin impacts human living and acting in the world. We did this by drawing on various thinkers such as Butler and the Catholic theologians we explored throughout the thesis. Salvific grace will always be present within history; there will always be various Others, cultures, sacraments, and countervailing norms which mediate grace, particularly those oppressed and marginalised human others who are the primary victims of sin and a locus of Christ's salvific presence on earth. God offers Godself in history in this way. Moreover, due to the fluidity and impressionability of human selfhood, we can be formed in life-giving ways by these mediators of grace such that we are enabled to recognise, resist, and repent from sin. Hence, we can be formed, and transformed, in ways which correspond with God's plan, as too can the sinful situation. In the words of Pope John

Paul II, humans can "move towards truth and goodness."[903] The grace which enables human freedom is a social reality which is mediated and received through one's sociality and communal life. This is how we should understand human freedom. Humans can be regarded as free because there is always the possibility for us to repent and achieve the good due to our spatiotemporal locatedness within a history of salvation and grace. There is the possibility that, by collectively co-operating with grace, we can change ourselves and our situation. The possibility that humans can transform sinful situations is not foreclosed due to this presence of the divine effecting conversion and transformation within history. Human freedom is dynamic, rather than static; it is a freedom in space and in time. The graced sociality and temporality of embodied human life therefore enables the human selfhood's process of becoming to be oriented towards the fulfilment of one's vocation, that is, to become the image of Christ in the world. Further, history can also be transformed in such a way that it reflects God's will and the Kingdom of God. History is dynamically open, both for good and for ill. Transformation and transcendence are possible. By drawing on a theological account of grace and salvation, and supplementing it with Butler's theory of the sociality and malleability of the self, we are able to safeguard against a purely fatalistic and deterministic account of sin and violence as inevitable. The human situation is dynamic and changeable, both for good and bad. Perhaps this is another way of understanding the Catholic belief that humans can achieve the good because of both the redemptive influence of Christ *and* the fundamental goodness of human nature. The constructive developments we proposed in this thesis can therefore be regarded as staying in creative fidelity with Catholic social teaching and Pope John Paul II's thought. This is because we have remained attentive to the Pope's core concerns to do with the idea of social sin: we have avoided presenting a fatalistic account of the human situation; we have safeguarded a sense of personal accountability for sin; and we have set the groundwork for the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation to be upheld.

Further questions, however, remain to be explored beyond those identified in the last chapter. This particular rendering of social sin deserves to be further studied through an ecclesiological lens. What implications does this theology have for the Church's self-understanding? Indeed, if all of humanity is in a collective, communal

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[903] CA, §38.

state of sin that has both social and structural manifestations, then is the Church — as a social community with distinct structures, hierarchies, and cultural norms — also in a state of sin? Can it be simultaneously structurally holy and structurally sinful? Does participation in the culture, rituals, and liturgical life of the Church form our selfhoods in ways that perpetuate sin, as well as virtue? This is a particularly pertinent question in light of recent scandals regarding clerical sexual abuse and the systems of cover-up that took place, as well as recent conversations regarding the culture of clericalism and racism within the Church. This theology of social sin may help shed light on some of these contemporary issues. Moreover, questions begin to emerge regarding what practices need to be put in place to facilitate humanity's conversion and repentance from this state of sin; how can we evolve the communal and liturgical life of the Church so that it supports this conversion?

It would be a mistake to keep separating and trying to define different types of sin — such as 'personal sin', 'social sin', 'structural sin', and even 'cultural sin' — as if they were not all manifestations of the same situation of sin which humanity finds itself tragically embroiled in, with each 'type' of sin playing a constitutive part. Sin is sin, and typologies of sin can distract us from this reality. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the language of 'social sin' or 'structural sin' continues to disrupt the cultural imagination that the only "real" type of sin is 'personal sin'. Further, it would be beneficial for theologians to continue to explore how sin has specific structural and cultural manifestations in society; that is, how specific social structures and cultural norms perpetuate violence and harm thereby sustaining humanity's wider situation of sin. Thus, it may at times be useful to strategically distinguish between 'structural sin', 'social sin', and 'personal sin' to further these two purposes. Nevertheless, one should always acknowledge that all these "types" are, fundamentally, sin. Moreover, just as there is no personal without the social, neither are there any structures — be it social, economic, political, legal, or medical — without both the social and the personal dimensions of human existence. Thus, one cannot talk about the structural dimensions of sin without also recognising the wider social, cultural, and personal aspects of human sinfulness.

This thesis has not fully resolved the issues which arose regarding the concept of social sin in the twentieth century. This has not been its aim. Instead, the intention was to explore how one might enable the Catholic Church to begin to think differently

about this language. This study sought to open our minds to how one might use the language of sin to better understand the human situation and its plight. Through this thesis, we have tried to discern how Catholics might better speak about a world where both sin and grace are present influencing the shape and direction of human life and history. This has enabled us to begin exploring how such a situation might be rectified or confronted, that is, what the proper ecclesial response to this situation of sin might be. We have done this by drawing on Catholic and secular thinkers whose thought has the potential to constructively develop Catholic theological and social thought on this topic. Moreover, this study of social sin has revealed far-reaching implications not just for hamartiology or Catholic social teaching, but also for theological anthropology in general. Ultimately, we have found that the idea of social sin presents us with an idea more theologically profound than just the identification of structural injustice; it depicts the power of collective human sinfulness to shape our lives in ways which harm our relations with God, one another, and the rest of the created world.

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