

# Power, Possibility, and Personal Agency: What Should Ethics Know of Sin?

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## Abstract

One striking feature of apocalyptic readings of Paul—and the Protestant dogmatics that follows after such a Paulinism—is the ‘widescreen’ portrayal of Sin as Power. This account stresses the ‘three-agent drama’ of salvation and the bondage of human persons to anti-God forces. It resists moralising interpretations of human sins in favour of a starker moral cosmology. In this way, it seems to leave ‘ethics’ and ‘freedom’ in suspension. Contrast the approach of the moral theologian Oliver O’Donovan. Here, sin is a case study in the difference of perspectives between dogmatics and ethics. Dogmatics, ‘making sin exceedingly sinful, quickly resorts to apocalyptic largeness of scale’. Ethics is concerned instead with ‘possible’ sins. It describes sin in phenomenological rather than ultimate terms—something to be avoided in the next moment of free agency. This article distils the theological commitments each intends to secure, observes what each risks, and seeks to determine what is at stake. It draws them together in a synthetic moral ontology, but also looks further, to an integrative account that can inform moral discernment. To this end, the final section observes how subsequent work in Pauline studies converges with discussions about structural sin in Catholic social thought.

## Keywords

sin, apocalyptic, Oliver O’Donovan, Catholic social thought, John Webster, moral theology, Christian ethics, Beverly Gaventa

## Introduction

One striking and influential feature of recent ‘apocalyptic’ readings of St Paul has been the ‘widescreen’ portrayal of Sin as a Power.<sup>1</sup> This account is exemplified in the work of

1. The literature within and about the apocalyptic Paul continues to multiply. I cannot wade into discussion of definitions here but am pleased to direct the reader to a learned, irenic, and

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Beverly Gaventa, and its wide resonance displayed in the popularising presentation of Fleming Rutledge and the reception history surveyed by Lisa Bowens. Moreover, the apocalyptic interpretive sensibility concerning sin has not remained simply the preserve of biblical scholars but has begun to receive doctrinal elaboration in a Protestant systematics that finds a dramatic gospel ontology in such cask-strength Paulinism (so, for instance, the dogmatics of Philip G. Ziegler). Such a widescreen view encompasses a ‘three-agent drama’ of salvation—the cast of characters being God, human creatures, and inimical powers—and therein stresses the real bondage of human persons to anti-God forces. As such, it resists what it sees as merely moralizing interpretations of human *sins* in favour of a starker moral cosmology. In this way, it may comport well with theology’s turn to the social and structural manifestations of sin, but can seem at first glance to leave ‘ethics’ and ‘freedom’ in suspension.

Contrast, then, the approach to Sin and sins of the major Anglican moral theologian Oliver O’Donovan. O’Donovan’s recent reflections on the theme treat it as a case study in the difference of perspectives between dogmatics and ethics. The dogmatician, ‘making sin exceedingly sinful, quickly resorts to apocalyptic largeness of scale’, but the moralist is to be concerned instead with ‘possible’ sins to be avoided in the next moment of free action.<sup>2</sup> Such a phenomenological focus can yield a compelling portrayal of sins as mis-steps in the pilgrim’s journey that is the moral life. But for the sake of elucidating individual moral agency it can seem to bracket, reductively, the wider referents of sin-talk, leaving the ethic of freedom doctrinally (and perhaps sociologically) underdetermined.

These two approaches, each a ‘live’ option in contemporary Protestant theology, clearly sit at quite an angle to each other—at least as positioned in the compressed manner above. In this article, I seek first of all to distil the theological commitments each view intends to secure, observe what each risks, and try to determine what is at stake. Our two views can, I suggest, be harmonised to a point; I entertain the suggestion that David Kelsey’s account of Sin and sins might help us to get them on the same map. In that sense, they could be co-ordinated as ultimate and proximate descriptions within an integrative account of what John Webster called ‘moral ontology’. Yet to what extent is a coherent ‘map’ of sin possible, or desirable? A more precisely ethical question also remains: how might such a theological metaphysics of morals concretely inform the faithful practice of ethical imagination, deliberation, and accompaniment? In the third section, then, I venture a skein of tentative responses to the question ‘What should Christian ethics know of sin?’ To do this, I propose we recruit insights won out in subsequent discussions within Pauline studies, and in debates about structural sin in Catholic social thought. In fact, these two separate avenues of reflection can be shown to converge in some helpful ways.

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theologically astute new companion which establishes the key issues in short compass: Jamie Davies, *The Apocalyptic Paul: Retrospect and Prospect* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022).

2. Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 82–83.

## Apocalyptic Theology and the Power of Sin

While we could look to the work of J. Louis Martyn, Martinus de Boer, or others, it is an essay by Beverly Gaventa, ‘The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans’, that seems to me the clearest statement of the apocalyptic school’s perspective.<sup>3</sup> Gaventa observes the sheer quantity of sin-talk in the epistle to the Romans, against which preponderance she finds the relative disinterest of prominent commentators troubling. Paul’s language concerning sin is extraordinarily dynamic: his narration sees sin coming into the world, increasing, exercising dominion, producing, reviving, and dwelling. Yet interpretations such as those of Stanley Stowers and Troels Engberg-Pedersen, she points out, ‘consider sin strictly as a feature of human activity or human experience’.<sup>4</sup> For them—as more recently, for Emma Wasserman—we ought to read the cosmological language as metaphorical, and see Paul as addressing moral-psychological questions of inner struggle with the passions and desires.<sup>5</sup> While for Gaventa this is true, so far as it goes, of the early chapters of the epistle, an anthropocentric perspective is insufficient when we consider the book as a whole:

The difficulty arises when we notice that Paul does not confine his comments about sin to human behaviour, to sin as misdeeds, omitted deeds, even to perverted thoughts and plans. Instead ... sin is Sin—not a lowercase transgression, not even a human disposition or flaw in human nature, but an uppercase Power that enslaves humankind and stands over against God. Here, Sin is among those anti-God powers whose final defeat the resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurates and guarantees.<sup>6</sup>

For Gaventa, Paul is not simply anthropomorphising or personifying an aggregation of human acts, nor deploying a mere literary device. What is needed is a view of Sin and its effects as located within ‘the apocalyptic struggle that forms the wide-screen version of Romans’.<sup>7</sup>

This is not, she argues, to suggest that sins as human moral transgressions are uninteresting to Paul, rather to recognise that the burden of his argument as the epistle progresses is to show how they ‘demonstrate the workings of Sin’s power’.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, the conscription and complicity which characterise the human condition illustrate a ‘resume of

3. Published as ch. 9 of Beverly Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), and previously as ‘The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Toward a Widescreen Edition’, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* (2004).

4. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 126.

5. See, e.g., Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Emma Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War: Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

6. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 127.

7. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 128.

8. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 134.

Sin's accomplishments', a situation that demands decisive action of a kind quite beyond forgiveness. With an eye on contemporary ecclesial avoidance of sin-talk, Gaventa writes that we need 'something entirely other than a Jesus who allows people to improve themselves by following the example of his good behaviour'.<sup>9</sup> What is at stake is nothing less than genuine captivity and deliverance: 'Sin cannot be avoided or passed over; it can only be either served or defeated'.<sup>10</sup> The liberation of human agents, then, is a wholly divine prerogative. 'Paul's Romans shows us that the battle against evil is not fought by reducing it to a laundry list of transgressions and trying really hard to avoid them ... Evil is God's own enemy'.<sup>11</sup>

Something like this basic account is shared among exegetes who are operating with the apocalyptic frame.<sup>12</sup> A widely read version is that of the Episcopal preacher and theologian Fleming Rutledge, whose presentation of sin in her exposition of *The Crucifixion* portrays it as related to both responsible guilt and—as Gaventa—alien power.<sup>13</sup> For Rutledge, where Christian expression has often offered an explanation of sin as individual 'bad deeds' or 'bad choices', in Paul the picture is different: 'Sin is a Power holding our lives in thrall'.<sup>14</sup> If, as Derek Nelson writes in *What's Wrong with Sin*, for 'a very long time in the history of most Western theology, sin has been easily localisable in the distorted will of the individual sinner', then the apocalyptic panorama offered here situates the anthropological issue against a much larger horizon.<sup>15</sup> The domain of sin is not only the self, but the very cosmos. It is precisely this scope that is attractive to Rutledge and others, for they find the cosmic language of Sin as Power to be possessed of expansive explanatory potential, especially in relation to the experience of sin's shaping agency from outwith the self. As with liberation and feminist treatments of social sin, the apocalyptic account has gained a hearing especially among those dissatisfied with the apparent individualism and petty moralism of more commonly peddled 'Western'—read, perhaps, narrowly pietistic or psychologised—doctrines of sin.

A further noteworthy example of this cosmological account's wide resonance is found in the work of Lisa Bowens. Bowens, a Pauline scholar who has published an interpretation of 2 Corinthians in an apocalyptic key, has also written a major volume of reception history entitled *African American Readings of Paul*.<sup>16</sup> Here she draws attention to the apocalyptic commitments of many interpreters in this broad tradition, who 'considered

9. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 131.

10. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 131.

11. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 136.

12. I leave aside, here, the more complex discussions about the place of the law, or about who is speaking about what experience in Romans 7.

13. Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), ch. 4, 'The Gravity of Sin', here at p. 168.

14. Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 176–77.

15. Derek R. Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin: Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 2.

16. Lisa M. Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle: Paul and Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), and Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

the cosmological feature of Paul's theology to be important because they, like Paul, believed in a supernatural world filled with God, angels, Satan, satanic beings, and the Holy Spirit'.<sup>17</sup> But more particularly, she writes,

the apostle's emphasis on sin as a power resonates with some of the interpreters ... for they see the cosmic nature of sin creating systemic injustices in the nation. Against one of the dominant understandings of their time, in which sin was seen as merely personal, between an individual and God, these interpreters recognized that sin was not just individual but social as well.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly for our purposes in this article, Bowens reflects on the implications for responsible human action:

While they take up a cosmic understanding of sin and evil, these interpreters do not allow it to negate human agency in the struggle for liberation. God and Satan are powers, albeit unequal, but human beings still have agency and will have to give account for their actions in this life.<sup>19</sup>

This somewhat vexed question of the freedom of the moral subject in a world picture where the real action can seem to take place quite above our heads is one that needs taking up in any theology and ethics that would wish to follow (to any degree) in the wake of an apocalyptically inflected soteriology.

As I have alluded to, as well as an 'apocalyptic school' of Pauline interpretation, we can now speak of an associated 'apocalyptic turn' in systematic theology—a development testified to by the inclusion of a chapter on 'Apocalyptic Theology' in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (2022).<sup>20</sup> This turn finds sharpest theological articulation in the dogmatics of Philip Ziegler, and indeed a key component of Ziegler's project is a doctrinal elaboration of the 'three-agent drama' and, within it, the cosmic power of Sin. Ziegler's quest for a hamartiology shaped by Scripture has increasingly taken in reflection on the role of the figure of the devil (as synecdoche for the anti-God powers) and his defeat.<sup>21</sup> But Ziegler has also sought to set the stage for an apocalyptic theological ethics, contemplating 'the matter of the Christian moral life in

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17. Bowens, *African American Readings*, p. 229.

18. Bowens, *African American Reading*, p. 230.

19. Bowens, *African American Readings*, p. 230.

20. Wesley Hill, 'Apocalyptic Theology', in Michael Allen (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 315–29. See also Davies, *The Apocalyptic Paul*, pp. 57–72.

21. Philip G. Ziegler, "'Bound Over to Satan's Tyranny": Sin and Satan in Contemporary Reformed Hamartiology', *Theology Today* 75.1 (2018), pp. 89–100. We must, as in early Reformed theology, deal with the devil, because 'the New Testament witness thoroughly entangles talk of human sin with talk of Satan' (p. 90). See also Ziegler, 'The First and Final "No": The Finality of the Gospel and the Old Enemy', in P. Ziegler and K. Dugan (eds.), *The Finality of the Gospel: Karl Barth and the Tasks of Eschatology* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 193–213.

relation to the apocalyptic gospel of God's grace'.<sup>22</sup> This involves consideration of metaethical issues like the place of law—and the radically historicised place of the 'natural law'.

In one essay, on 'The Adventitious Origins of the Christian Moral Subject', Ziegler turns our attention directly to the theme introduced with Bowens above: the drama of human freedom as contextualised and qualified by the Pauline vision of sin and salvation. The essay goes on to engage with Calvin's theology of depravity and regeneration, but it begins with a distillation of Martyn's late essays, which advance, for Ziegler, 'a perceptive and persuasive account of the status of the human being as moral agent within Paul's evangelical testimony'.<sup>23</sup> Paul, says Martyn, breaks radically with the standard 'Hellenistic' descriptions of the moral life as comprised of 'moments of decision in which human agents are presented with a choice between two ways, exhorted to choose the better of the two, and then, in an exercise of freedom, do in fact so choose'.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, in Paul's vision, 'human moral subjectivity is decisively superintended in the first instance by the suprahuman powers of Sin, Death, and "the Flesh"'.<sup>25</sup> In this moral drama 'as it actually exists', the question is not so much 'what human moral agents do' as that which has been, is being, and will be done to them—including their conscription by Sin and deliverance over to the Flesh.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, in this 'moral grammar' we are 'remote from any scenario in which rational human agents know and freely choose between ethical possibilities undisturbed from without'.<sup>27</sup> So far, so bleak for ethics, and distinctly unpromising in terms of prospects of moral deliberation that can in any meaningful sense be called 'free'. But perhaps puncturing our blithe optimism about human agency is exactly the impact the apocalyptic school is trying to make here.

Mercifully, though, that is not the end of the apocalyptic drama, even as it is the most prominent tableau. Martyn—and Ziegler—go on to show how 'the plight of cosmic captivity' is 'disrupted and overcome by God's own coming in the salutary power of his creative grace'.<sup>28</sup> This redemption, truly *liberation*, entails the reconstitution of the person as moral actor:

nothing less than "new creation", in which the enslaved and incompetent human agent is remade in the image of the crucified Son by the gift of the Spirit. There appears, in short, a new human

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22. Philip G. Ziegler, *A Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 139.

23. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 140.

24. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 140.

25. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 141.

26. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 141.

27. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 141. To be clear, Ziegler does find a place for the more 'forensic' motifs in St Paul, for the significance of human moral guilt. For him, thinking along with Ernst Käsemann and Karl Barth, this register certainly can be deployed, as nested within the cosmological apocalyptic register.

28. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 142.

agent “in Christ”, one wrenched free from the “body of death” and knit together into the “body of Christ”, the church.<sup>29</sup>

Not too much more is said in these texts about the consequent shape of renewed moral nature, and nothing—so far as I can see—about how moral reasoning, unmade and then remade, might relate to the classical structure of deliberation Martyn so sharply opposed to Paul’s moral vision. There are some indications of what such discernment might involve: ‘the task of accounting for the inspired hearing of the concrete commandments of the God of the gospel amid everyday life’.<sup>30</sup> Besides this intriguing gesture to divine command, Ziegler later offers a depiction of the life of discipleship as the ‘Spirit-driven struggle’ that ‘embraces both an inward mortification of the old Adam and an outward insurgency against the powers of the age’.<sup>31</sup>

Now, the lack of a more extended treatment of moral deliberation might be attributed to the nature of the topographical exercise, the sort of thing pursued by dogmatics rather than ethics as such. But I think there is more to it than that. For Ziegler, a ‘properly evangelical theological ethics should ... be fully suspended from soteriology’.<sup>32</sup> This has implications for what is and is not worth reflecting on:

we win very little purchase on the question of human moral subjectivity by reflecting directly on the essential features of our creaturely nature as such, on reason and will as formal structures of our enduring human essence. Set within the history of our making by the serial advents of sin and grace, such features of human reality have very little telling moral valence.<sup>33</sup>

On Ziegler’s account, human persons may well be, once again, set on their feet as moral agents; or, better, won over to service of the Lord of liberty in place of the thralldom of the lordless powers. But we should not imagine that our moral nature or our moral reasoning is unconditioned, a stable thing, ‘this side’ of the drastic deliverance of Christ’s victory, in a world yet still marked by the effects of the dominion of Sin.

Where have we got to? We have briefly canvassed a few examples I take to illustrate a series of convictions shared across apocalyptic interpreters. On this view, any Christian notion of ‘ethics’ must be relativised by the gospel’s announcement of human plight—the bad news within the good. Sin is an unavoidable factor, and an account of the moral life that wants to go through rather than around St Paul cannot proceed as though it does not know about the problem. For one thing, it cannot presume upon the moral subject as modernity’s autonomous, buffered self.<sup>34</sup> Clearly critics will worry, much as with social and structural approaches, that this kind of account of sin does not merely constrict but

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29. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 142. Ziegler writes, building now on Calvin’s account, that the ‘Spirit casts light on darkened reason and liberates unfree wills by seizing back the human subject and breaking the necessities of its fallen nature’ (p. 149).

30. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 151.

31. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 199.

32. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 151.

33. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 151.

34. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

undermines any credible notion of human freedom and personal responsibility.<sup>35</sup> If taken in isolation, the language of bondage to external powers does surely risk passive resignation, or worse, despair. Yet, crucially, what looks to be—and, frankly, *is*—an essentially pessimistic anthropology is but a penultimate presupposition of a dramatic story in which human beings are graciously caught up in the advent and triumph of God in Christ. While on this view human moral thought and action are situated within a narrative of futility and captivity, the Christocentric and just so participatory soteriology which is its climax means that it does not seem to be deterministic in the final instance. This is especially clear where the renewing power of the Spirit within Paul's moral vision is brought more robustly into view. To sum up: apocalyptic theology and the Power of Sin—for ethics, the bark is fierce, but it is probably worse than the bite.

We turn next, however, to a theologian whose concern to vouchsafe the space, time, and selfhood for responsible moral deliberation leads quite intentionally to a circumscription, within Christian ethics, of the kinds of claims made by the apocalyptic school.

### Oliver O'Donovan and the Possibility of Sins

There are a number of texts across the extraordinarily wide-ranging production of Oliver O'Donovan that we might go to for an account of sin. But it is his latest substantial treatment of the topic that, at least at first glance, produces an arresting impression of contrast with the signal convictions of the apocalypticists. I will focus here, then, on a small selection of passages from O'Donovan's recent trilogy, *Ethics as Theology* (2013, 2014, 2017). These volumes represent a major contribution to contemporary theology, and—in ways that readers are still pondering—a recalibration of the earlier fundamental moral theology represented by *Resurrection and Moral Order*.<sup>36</sup> They are also finely wrought; even, as Clare Carlisle describes the first book, labyrinthine.<sup>37</sup> So I isolate these passages, insofar as I do, with some trepidation. To pull on just one thread here threatens to do harm, in a literary and conceptual sense, to a densely woven tapestry. Nevertheless, to put O'Donovan's thought into conversation with other voices, we must do just that.

The discussion of sin in volume 1, *Self, World, and Time*—a volume designed to serve as an 'induction' to O'Donovan's project—provides the programmatic parameters in relation to which subsequent meditations upon specific sins are pursued. These variations on the theme are distributed across volume 2, *Finding and Seeking*, and volume 3, *Entering into Rest*, and comprise contemplation of sins against self, world, and time,

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35. From within New Testament scholarship, see Colin D. Miller, with a foreword by Stanley Hauerwas, *The Practice of the Body of Christ: Human Agency in Pauline Theology after MacIntyre* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014). On wider modern worries about sin-talk in this respect, see Alastair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 20.

36. For some initial and limited suggestions, see Samuel Tranter, *Oliver O'Donovan's Moral Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020).

37. Clare Carlisle, 'Cry for Wisdom', *Times Literary Supplement* 5837 (2015), p. 28.



that is, against faith, love, and hope.<sup>38</sup> But while it self-consciously sets the terms for the later performances, the first volume's account of sin in fact arises indirectly; O'Donovan turns to the topic to illustrate his wider convictions about the distinction between the angles of vision proper to dogmatics, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other. He returns to the theme in *Finding and Seeking* to recapitulate the argument, so I will draw on those passages here, too.

Sin, then, is a case study in the difference in disciplinary perspectives, and is so fittingly because of a perennial 'duality' in the idea of sin itself, 'apparent since Augustine made the distinction of "original" from "actual" sin':

the one the basis for our radical guilt before God, the other the effect of our humdrum day-to-day temptations. There is a third-person and a first-person point of view. As an objective reality, sin is a universal truth about mankind, a generic disunity with creation and a solidarity in refusal of the good. But sin is also experienced as a subjective reality, and in this light it presents itself as "trial", a danger "crouching at the door" of every practical endeavour, but not a necessity, since to believe it so would be to renounce all responsibility for it.<sup>39</sup>

Dogmatic theology, it follows, often observes sin from the third-person point of view. Just so, it 'has stressed the *impossible universality* of sin, its significance as the defining qualification in the mis-relation between mankind and a holy God'.<sup>40</sup> But the task of moral theology is to speak of sin in the first-person, perceiving 'its *possible contingency* ... a horizon continually to be recognised and refused in each action that we undertake'.<sup>41</sup> The dogmatician's interest is in sin as "'original", i.e., located in the origins of our agency, and since sin is where human beings *necessarily* start from, it is also "radical", i.e., bound up with our membership of the human race'.<sup>42</sup> It is not particular: 'Circumstantial and temperamental differences in human sin are not of much interest to dogmatic theology ... Sin lies behind us, and can safely remain a "mystery"'.<sup>43</sup>

The two approaches are, O'Donovan wants us to think, complementary: 'two moments in a dialectic relation'.<sup>44</sup> He also specifies that relation: 'Moral Theology, always speaking in second place and after the dogmatic theologian has finished, views sin not as a presupposition but as an open possibility'.<sup>45</sup> But, in seeking to secure ethics' proper vocation of comprehending and accompanying moral action, he is sensitive to the way in which a strongly dogmatic view can obscure the decisively *ethical* dimension:

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38. Doubt, folly, anxiety. And indeed, though the details of why need not detain us here, because O'Donovan circles around to address love's finality, there is a further, fourth sin-against: pride.

39. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, pp. 82–83.

40. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 83. All italics in quotations in this essay are original.

41. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 83.

42. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 17.

43. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, pp. 17–18.

44. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 83.

45. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, p. 18.

The dogmatician, making sin exceedingly sinful, quickly resorts to apocalyptic largeness of scale. Sin is the refusal of God and goodness, Satanic and ultimate. Man's petty "no" to God is deepened by the Incarnation into a demonic "no", and sucked into the slipstream of the Antichrist. This is very fine, and every theologian will need at some point to follow this journey *via* the wastes of sin and the midnight sun of God's will in Christ to the pole where good and evil have their final confrontation. But a problem arises when the polar expedition has laid no plans for coming back. If and when sin grows large in its scope, it assumes a demonic unity which forewarns of the flood at the end of time; but what are we to say about the many small streams of sin, the meanness of deficiency, the weakness of opportunity let slip, the inadequacy co-possible with every God-given possibility, which comprise what Paul called "grieving the Spirit"?<sup>46</sup>

St Augustine, O'Donovan says, serves as a guide. The Bishop of Hippo 'did not make the mistake of confining sin to protology and eschatology', but 'was alert to the New Testament Epistles, where the discussion of sin often looks in two directions: to protological definitions ... taking sin back to a radically false position *vis-à-vis* the world and its creator' and 'to broad phenomenological surveys ... tracing the ways sin fans out in the variety of forms it assumes in the world'.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, our speech about sin 'must retain an exploratory, undefined character, for it is only as we discern the path of discipleship that we discern the ramifying possibilities of losing our way that lie open before our feet'.<sup>48</sup> Ethics may offer classifications, but must recall that these are 'no more than heuristic'.<sup>49</sup> 'Discernment of temptation' cannot be done in advance, but rather 'on the ground' in relation to a particular 'cultural context'.<sup>50</sup> And ethics 'is not to classify the failures as though they were *something*, but to mark their position as one might warn of a hole in the road by drawing a white circle around it'. Why? Because 'sin is a form of evil, and evil has no being, only a failure'.<sup>51</sup> Still, 'that does not leave nothing for Moral Theology to do':

The underlying structure of sin corresponds to the underlying structure of action, and its recurrent and necessary forms can be, at least, illustrated, the possibilities which open from them

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46. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, pp. 83–84. A perhaps surprising comparison here might be Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002). As Nelson writes (*What's Wrong with Sin*, p. 122): 'Gebara employs a strict phenomenological method, explicitly indebted to Paul Ricoeur and implicitly to Edmund Husserl, to bracket out consideration of the overarching concept of Evil temporarily, the better to remain concrete in her analysis of evils'.

47. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 84.

48. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 84.

49. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, p. 19.

50. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, p. 19.

51. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, p. 15. Here he is in fact drawing on Maximus the Confessor. It is, of course, not the burden of this article to sort out exactly how a realist metaphysics of anti-God powers can comport with an essentially classical account of evil as privation of the good! But that is an important subtext to what is explored here.

pointed out. It can provide a framework within which our own and others' temptations may be intelligently discerned.<sup>52</sup>

So much for a sketch of O'Donovan's core claims about the division of labour in the discourse of sin. A hasty reading might lead one to assume that O'Donovan's focus upon agency as 'the exercise of freedom'<sup>53</sup> and on the individual moral actor—which is, we might say, properly *personalist*—would crop the dimensions of his depiction of sin. Such a zoomed-in view of the moral life might seem to leave out of shot the kinds of social or structural setting that have come so strikingly to the fore in recent theology, in favour of what Anna Rowlands describes as 'a solely individualist metaphysics of sin'.<sup>54</sup> But that is not the case here. We will in fact find O'Donovan attentive, as a thoroughgoing Augustinian, to the relational and political ramifications of sin. In *Ethics as Theology* and elsewhere, he offers perceptive phenomenological characterisations of 'social evil'. As he writes in *The Ways of Judgment*: 'In a social description of sin we are taken beyond the idea of a particular agent's distorted acts to the distorted relations which constrain the possibilities of acting'.<sup>55</sup>

Still, O'Donovan's concern is generally not, in the terms of John Donne, 'that sin, where I begun', but rather 'that sin, through which I run'.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, O'Donovan's ethic also derives much scriptural inspiration from St Paul—including Romans and Galatians, perhaps the two key texts for apocalyptic theology, and including the portions of those epistles which are not obviously paraenetic. But I wonder if his moral theology as a whole might be thought to draw its principal scriptural imaginary from the 'way' of Psalm 119, and in keeping with this wisdom text and its guiding motif, his account of sin here is of the misdeed as the *path wrongly taken*.<sup>57</sup> Sins are those misadventures in which, as the Prayer Book memorably has us confess, we have 'erred and strayed'.<sup>58</sup>

In sum: for O'Donovan, ethics should know sin primarily as a personal *possibility*. But this is not to say he has privatised the concept, rendering it interior without remainder. He

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52. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, p. 19.

53. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, p. 13.

54. Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), p. 107.

55. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 81.

56. I think O'Donovan is quite right in bracketing from ethics, for the most part, the aetiological and genealogical questions faced by the doctrine of original sin—say, about evolution or transmission. I am agnostic about the extent to which precision about the relative priority in absolute terms (ontologically, historically, systematically) of sin as human transgression, Sin as cosmic power, etc., would enhance a picture of the ethical situation of the agent. But asking the question about the relation of these factors in more immediate terms seems to me quite necessary.

57. See, among other examples, Oliver O'Donovan, 'Scripture and Ethics', *Anvil* 24.1 (2007), pp. 21–29, and now O'Donovan, 'Augustine's Treatment of the Great Psalm', *Augustinian Studies* 53.2 (2022), pp. 131–52.

58. O'Donovan may remind the apocalyptic school that portraying the moral life in terms of its choices between different ways is not simply 'Hellenistic', but scriptural. Perhaps we might also consider the *Didache*.

is a moral realist, and even in his new turn, from *Resurrection and Moral Order* to 'Pentecost and Moral Agency',<sup>59</sup> the awakening to one's freedom as a moral subject is still portrayed in dialogue with the givens of created order—and concomitantly the distortions of social and political life. In O'Donovan's theology, ethics' first-person view is not about navel-gazing, but about looking faithfully for my next move in the world, one only I can take, ventured in step with the Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

To this point, we have taken soundings from two contemporary theological sensibilities which seem, at first hearing, to each play loudest the other's quiet notes. To be sure, they share a theological analysis of the relation between the ultimacy of sin and the possibility of human agency: both recognise that a thoroughgoing reckoning with the sense in which sin is 'before' human action can raise questions for the way we think of our freedom to act. It might be possible to tidy away the differences by reference to O'Donovan's own account of disciplinary divisions of labour—if these are ships passing in the night, it is because they are supplying different ports. But they also undeniably seem to express essentially juxtaposed convictions about what this all means for ethics, and so, taking the positions as they stand, any harmonising will not be so easily done. O'Donovan is concerned to procure and preserve the space needed for responsible moral deliberation, over and against a trend that ethics is absorbed without remainder 'into the theological construction of reality'.<sup>61</sup> The apocalyptic school is at pains to keep depictions of human nature and freedom responsible to the chastening reality claims of scriptural theodrama. Ethics, on O'Donovan's view, is to know of the sins that lie ahead; for apocalyptic theology, such knowledge comes too late, because Sin, writ large, is a power to be located prior to any notion of free personal action. The problem is not the possibility of going astray, but the prevenient reality of being held captive. What would it look like, then, to attempt to bring these two more-or-less salutary commitments together—to construe them as together informing the Christian imagination of the world within which we act, and the persons we are as moral actors?

## What Should Ethics Know of Sin?

As we seek to integrate the two sensibilities, we can do so in several different ways. We could attempt to map them as different kinds of description, one concerning the ultimate or ontological plane, and the other the penultimate or existential.<sup>62</sup> As an exercise of systematic theology, we might harness the framework of David Kelsey's theological

59. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. xii.

60. I have interpreted 'first-person' view here as generally singular, but there would be a rewarding further reflection on approaching sin-talk in the first-person plural: the possible sins which face us as a community. Actually, this focus might help us navigate some of the inevitable tension felt between individual agency and 'third-person' structural/social constraint. It is also amenable to fittingly ecclesial elaboration.

61. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. viii.

62. This language comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Ultimate and Penultimate Things', in *Ethics*, DBWE 6, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009).

anthropology *Eccentric Existence*, which sets out explicitly to characterise both *Sin* and *sins* in relation to each facet of its account of humanity as defined in relation to God's economy.<sup>63</sup> For Kelsey, these levels of description—of ultimate and proximate contexts for human being—allow us to see both *Sin* and *sins* in terms of mis-response to God's gracious relating to create, reconcile, and draw to consummation. Crucially, this captures the dimension of 'against-God-ness' that identifies all sin in its deepest theological sense.<sup>64</sup> Because of the economic patterning of Kelsey's account, such characterisations also allow him to elaborate phenomenologically on each facet of *Sin* and each modality of particular *sins*.<sup>65</sup> Again, this is, as Joy Ann McDougall notes, not a 'catalogue of actual sins', but an evocation of how 'the distortions of sin' are both personally implicating and 'manifest in public and social practices'.<sup>66</sup> Kelsey's theological snapshots of sin could be fruitfully compared to O'Donovan's accounts of sins against faith, hope, and love. Moreover, Kelsey's account of *Sin* in relation to eschatological consummation itself draws directly on the apocalyptic reading of St Paul, while the tenor of his account of humanity and *sins* in relation to creation owes much to the wisdom literature.<sup>67</sup>

To stay at a certain level of abstraction for a moment, we could say that the cosmological picture emphasised by apocalyptic theology might furnish part of what John Webster often called a 'moral ontology', setting the scene of the 'moral field'.<sup>68</sup> In terms of the dialogue I am seeking to develop as regards sin in particular, a recent study by Matthew Croasmun might offer a way forward. In *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans*, Croasmun has sought to traverse interpretive divides by venturing a multi-level reading of *Sin* and *sins* that deploys the notion of 'emergence' from the philosophy of science.<sup>69</sup> If we can see how cumulative powers emerge from

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63. David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). In this sense, we could say that sin is a 'distributed doctrine', precisely in its nature as derivative from—parasitic upon—the good gifts of God.

64. The phrase is from R. Derek Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 17.

65. I would also think that Kelsey's intention to describe practices in relation to our proximate end (creaturely flourishing) and our ultimate end (God) could in those terms be drawn into conversation with Thomistic moral theology, though their ways of correlating nature and grace may be different.

66. Joy Ann McDougall, 'A Trinitarian Grammar of Sin', *Modern Theology* 27.1 (2011), pp. 58–59.

67. To be clear, in my own account, beyond the limited use of the labels as conventional for different scriptural genres, I do not mean to oppose the 'apocalyptic' to 'wisdom'. There is very interesting work being done about 'sapiential apocalyptic' by scholars like Alexandra Brown and Grant Macaskill. See Davies, *The Apocalyptic Paul*, for sources and reflections.

68. John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1–2. See also Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (London: T&T Clark, 2004). For analysis, see an article by O'Donovan himself, 'John Webster on Dogmatics and Ethics', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21.1 (2019), pp. 78–92.

69. Matthew Croasmun, *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). There is an interesting further question here about the relative

human agents and in turn exert downward causation upon them, he argues, then we can nimbly avoid the demand that we interpret references to sin in Paul as *either* an external power or discrete acts of moral transgression. Instead, we can perceive sin as at once a matter of individual moral responsibility, a feature of human social structures, and—emerging from and supervening upon these—a cosmic tyrant. What is perhaps particularly interesting in relation to our theme is that Croasmun sees the two powers in Paul, the ‘Body of Sin’ and the ‘Body of Christ’, to ‘exercise dominion through the control of the moral reasoning of members of its body’.<sup>70</sup> Croasmun’s emergentist sketch of sin and its connections at personal, social, and cosmic levels could be thought especially amenable, then, to a move which sees apocalyptic cosmology as a contributor to Christian moral ontology.<sup>71</sup>

I am not competent—and it is not the concern of this article—to adjudicate exegetical details.<sup>72</sup> But tracking these developments with a constructive theological end in mind, the ‘either/or’ demanded by much biblical studies is less of a pressure, and it seems altogether easier to paste the insights of these various readers of Paul into a generously constructed collage informed both canonically and doctrinally.<sup>73</sup> Such cartography of the metaphysics of morals is surely valuable in its way, though I cannot pursue it any

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metaphysical extent of Croasmun’s ambition in connection to the strong realism of Websterian ‘moral ontology’. What is at stake in the difference between the claims that (i) Paul’s way of speaking has plausibility, in view of a (bottom-up?) phenomenologically alert attention to the kinds of agential impressions of suprahuman entities we encounter, and, (ii) we are given in Scripture a ‘top-down’—even ‘God’s-eye view’—endeavour of accounting for the way the world is?

70. Croasmun, *The Emergence of Sin*, p. 177.

71. Beyond Pauline scholarship, see Jamie Davies’s compelling reading of the book of Revelation along similar lines: ‘Revelation 12–13 and “Systemic Evil”’, in H. Paynter and P. Hatton (eds.), *Attending to the Margins: Essays in Honour of Stephen Finamore* (Oxford: Regent Park College Press, 2022), pp. 193–206.

72. Joseph Longarino expresses reservations that Croasmun’s exegesis ‘outpaces the texts’ in claiming that references to sin in Romans 1–8 show the dominion of sin exceeding ‘enthralment to the passions’. Nevertheless, he regards Croasmun’s claims as constructively plausible, ‘a valid extension of Paul’s claims’. Longarino, ‘Apocalyptic and the Passions: Overcoming a False Dichotomy in Pauline Studies’, *New Testament Studies* 67.4 (2021), pp. 582–97, p. 583 n. 7. The authors I discuss in this article, as with all interpreters working within or in conversation with the apocalyptic Paul school, seem to a greater or lesser extent to imagine the task of exegesis to be helped rather than hindered by familiarity with theological concepts, perhaps in particular those provided by Karl Barth. I do not regard that as something, in itself, to be regretted, though I can imagine plenty of *Neutestamentler* might. And for a scholar like Croasmun, the project is not just about perceiving Paul’s theology of sin aright as a matter of interpretive veracity, but exactly because of its potential to illumine contemporary states of affairs. His example of systemic racism is to the point.

73. Saying this, I am aware that the attraction of the apocalyptic reading, for some, is its ability to disturb complacent ‘both-and’ thinking. But to my mind the more convincing interpretations of, say, the relationship between Romans 1–4 and 6–8, focusing on the ‘hinge’ of chapter 5, are those which are in themselves integrative. See Jamie Davies, ‘The Justice and

further in a direct way here. But there are at least two reasons to think that this iconographic representation only takes us so far in terms of our topic. First, dogmatically speaking, we should not think that sin and its manifestations ought to be coherent.<sup>74</sup> And second, we need to press further into what, as O'Donovan convincingly demonstrated, is a pressingly *ethical* question with dynamism and integrity of its own.<sup>75</sup> To that end, we need not simply to see how ontological and moral perspectives can be laid satisfactorily next to each other, or the existential-anthropological nested as a microcosm within the cosmological, but precisely to ask how scriptural and doctrinal claims about sin's shaping of reality should factor into the practical discernment of human action.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, to its critics, apocalyptic theology has already got us quite a long way. Ziegler's holistic description of why the apocalyptic idiom might be 'uniquely adequate to discerning the realities of our age' demonstrates its ability to render theologically intelligible a range of experiences that are essential subject matter for moral thought:

A soteriological discourse that speaks of our captivity, complicity, and gracious liberation into the hands of another genuine and genuinely philanthropic Lord—that discourse is able to illumine how it is that we are, in fact, played by powers, structures, and systems of all kinds (political, technological, etc.), subjected to effective discursive and disciplinary regimes (which, having been conjured by us as the outworking of sin, now prosecute us with a kind of “downward causation” all their own), and moved by unfathomable drives and obscure impulses, both psychological and social, all of which amounts to so many modes of repudiation of God's grace and freedom.<sup>77</sup>

What we need to do is to press this account a step further, moving even more into the realm of the moral life as lived. O'Donovan's contribution may come close to meeting us from the other side, charting the moment of deliberation as we face possible sins, informed but not overdetermined by the 'well-focussed protology' that 'equips us with certain perennial points of reference'.<sup>78</sup> But perhaps we need to press his account a

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Deliverance of God: Integrating Forensic and Cosmological in the “Apocalyptic Paul”, *Currents in Biblical Research* 21.1 (2022), pp. 338–48.

74. This insight, in its Barthian form, is reflected in Douglas Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020). But one wouldn't need to extend this, as he does, to claims about the incoherence of 'forensic' and 'cosmological' patterns of thinking sin and salvation that are surely interwoven rather than opposed in Paul's own account.

75. On the limitations of map-making motifs and moral ontology, see Brian Brock, 'Discipleship as Living with God, or Wayfinding and Scripture', *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 7.1 (2014), pp. 22–34.

76. In terms of the exegetical debate, then, we can take appreciative note of efforts to go beyond the putative Bultmann-Käsemann impasse, but for ethics even the integrative achievements will only serve as more accurate scene-setting.

77. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, pp. 28–29.

78. O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, p. 83.

step further, too, urging that the ‘journeys of thought’ between doctrine and circumstance be made more frequently, and that ethics be less pre-emptively guarded against dogmatics’ deterministic potential, and more open to its scoping of moral space.<sup>79</sup>

Taking this line of exploration forward, let me briefly note five areas of enquiry, and therein, tentatively, five things I think ‘ethics should know of sin’. My hope is that they can be seen as mutually illuminating angles of analysis.

### *External Force and Personal Reality*

First, we need to think about action in a way sensitive to both sin as external force and sin as personal reality. Here we can learn much from joining conversations about structural sin, persons, and action largely taking place within Catholic social thought and moral theology. These discussions were initiated by the ‘imaginative shift in moral focus’ made by theologians of liberation, who urged that theology no longer atomise the ‘individual perpetrator of sin and the operations of conscience’, but rather see ‘sin as a social reality, embedded in social structures and mediated through social encounters’.<sup>80</sup> Yet this leaves unanswered questions about the agential status of structures, and the attribution of responsibility and culpability.<sup>81</sup> As David Cloutier writes: ‘Christian ethics is in need of bridge concepts that enable a better, more precise conversation between traditional discussions of individual agency (practical reasoning, *phronesis*, etc.) and large, expanding literatures in social ethics and political theology’.<sup>82</sup>

Cloutier’s own proposed solution here is in part a turn to critically realist sociology, with its more dynamic and supple account of the interrelation of personal agency and structures. It can assist us by observing how agents enter ‘into given positions, with pre-

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79. O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 89. This may also entail hearing doctrinal accounts with a little less regard for any pre-conceived commitments to the kind of freedom presumed by ‘Moral Thought’ as such. See Samuel Tranter, *Oliver O’Donovan’s Moral Theology: Tensions and Triumphs* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 205–20.

80. Rowlands, *Politics of Communion*, p. 96.

81. Nelson states the challenges precisely in *What’s Wrong With Sin?* Here, important questions also remain about culpability and responsibility, and we must be careful not to affect the eclipse of the individual. To return to Donne, he may reflect the classical tradition of original sin when he asks forgiveness not just for ‘that sin, through which I run’, but also ‘that sin where I begun / Which was my sin, though it were done before’. But in this enquiry, I am concerned more with how that which ‘were done before’ should be thought to condition my experience of agency, not just apprise the ascription of culpability. And it should be possible—in fact, must be necessary—to seek to identify factors determinative of human action, without becoming deterministic all the way along. On this, see perceptive treatments in Ian McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

82. David Cloutier, ‘Sociological Self-Knowledge, Critical Realism, and Christian Ethics’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.2 (2021) pp. 158–70, at p. 159.



existing restrictions, enablements, and opportunities'.<sup>83</sup> We are presented with a nuanced account of the factors embedded in the space in which we act, without overreaching into a thoroughgoing determinism: 'While an agent must recognise these, they are never determined by them; the agent still faces choices, but only ever in relation to them'.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, while 'structural forms and cultural ideas shape and constrain agents ... agents act amidst these structural positions and ideas in reflexive ways that can reinscribe or modify them'.<sup>85</sup> Part of mature moral reflection, then, is what Alasdair MacIntyre has lately called 'sociological self-knowledge', a kind of agential reflexivity that sees 'how this location provides both perils and possibilities for their agency'.<sup>86</sup>

We might parallel these developments in Catholic social thought that explore *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture*<sup>87</sup> with the New Testament scholarship of Susan Eastman, author of *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology*.<sup>88</sup> Within a broadly apocalyptic account of Sin and sins, Eastman takes up dialogue with ancient philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology, to explore how human persons, as 'embodied and embedded creatures', are 'enmeshed in and constituted by' the complex relational matrices that make us who we are.<sup>89</sup> This supports Paul's 'global and radical' diagnosis, 'exempting no one from the deadly powers of sin and death'.<sup>90</sup> But it also allows us to see how he provides for human persons a 'new relational matrix, the social body of Christ'.<sup>91</sup> If Gaventa did, after the sobering rendition of Sin's effects, win through an affirmation that 'being free from the power of Sin means the gospel actually does change human lives', then here Eastman takes the next step in showing some of the ways in which that transformation might take place.<sup>92</sup> To be sure, this will not be neatly linear, and ethics must also know of what Simeon Zahl has described in terms of the affective struggle of 'non-transformation'.<sup>93</sup> What will be

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83. Cloutier, 'Sociological Self-Knowledge', p. 165.

84. Cloutier, 'Sociological Self-Knowledge', p. 165.

85. Cloutier, 'Sociological Self-Knowledge', p. 164.

86. Cloutier, 'Sociological Self-Knowledge', p. 165. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

87. Daniel K. Finn (ed.), *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

88. Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

89. Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, p. 117.

90. Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, p. 125.

91. Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, p. 125. For a convincing deployment of Eastman and Croasmun's analysis in a reading of 1 Corinthians, see Alexandra Brown, 'Letters from the Battlefield: Cosmic Sin and Captive Sinners in 1 Corinthians', in Nijay K. Gupta and John K. Goodrich (eds.), *Sin and its Remedy in Paul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), pp. 63–80.

92. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, p. 132.

93. Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). On sin, see pp. 153–63.

critical as these enquiries develop will be the necessary modesty about the limited explanatory range of sociological or psychological accounts.<sup>94</sup> As Alastair McFadyen argued in *Bound to Sin*, the challenge is not—or not only—to render theological sin-talk amenable to non-theological accounts of pathology, but to show how its peculiar theological referent is irreducible to other languages of wrongdoing, and concretely makes a difference.<sup>95</sup>

### Particular Sins

Second, while such ethics must know of the mutual conditioning and emergence of personal sin and social sin, ethics must also know something—and it will only be something—of *sins* in their particularity. This knowledge of particular sins should clearly itself take in the social and relational. Within the wider scriptural *ressourcement* of moral theology, we do well to attend to the biblical texts' presentations of the symptoms of sin—think, for instance, of the recurrent prophetic characterisation of them as disregard for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in our midst. The contemporary correlate of this concrete determination is the lesson taught by liberation theology. As Rowlands puts it: 'The dispossessed—as the primary material victims of this sin—become the “experts-by-experience” in matters of structural sin and thus its primary teachers.'<sup>96</sup> But even to understand social sins in their particularity, ethics must also know the personal. Brian Hamilton rightly suggests that we must 'think about structural sin as inhering not just in policies or institutions of social roles but also in the embodied habits of knowing and willing the good that constitute human agency itself.'<sup>97</sup>

Here, as we turn to the nature of the moral agent, the classical inheritance of Christian ethics—richly developed in patristic and ascetic thought, for instance—may not be construed as a threat, as per some apocalyptic interpretation, but a source of insight. Within the Pauline scholarship, we see this in what Joseph Longarino characterises as the 'moral philosophical interpretation of Paul.'<sup>98</sup> It will be evident already that this is contested ground. As we have seen, apocalyptic interpretations of Sin as extrinsic Power are often designed precisely to oppose exegetes whose comparative work on classical moral psychology sponsors accounts in which sin 'is not a reality extrinsic to the human person but rather a cipher for action and the passions, with the latter being understood as a force intrinsic to human flesh that tends towards sin.'<sup>99</sup> Whatever the merits of the exegetical migration of the doctrine of sin from theological cosmology to moral

94. On this, see persuasively Theo Hawksley, 'How Critical Realism Can Help Catholic Social Teaching', in Finn (ed.), *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Cultures*, pp. 9–18.

95. McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*.

96. Rowlands, *Politics of Communion*, p. 94.

97. Brian Hamilton, 'It's in You: Structural Sin and Personal Responsibility Revisited', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.3 (2021), pp. 360–80, at p. 361.

98. Longarino, 'Apocalyptic and the Passions'. The same could be said of Miller, *The Practice of the Body of Christ*.

99. Longarino, 'Apocalyptic and the Passions', pp. 585–86. Longarino's point in the article is to mediate to some degree between the two interpretations, by showing the ways in which the

psychology—one I think I cannot countenance *tout court*<sup>100</sup>—the detailed study of scriptural elucidation of misdirected desires and malformed dispositions is clearly something ethics needs to hear.

The turn to the person and character is a feature of ethics' retrieval of traditional accounts of virtue, too. Within it, we might notice a subsidiary trend we can call the return of the seven deadly sins. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung's *Glittering Vices* demonstrates the potential.<sup>101</sup> Together, this inheritance funds a diagnostic taxonomy or 'breviary of sin.'<sup>102</sup> Clearly, it should not be casuistically overdetermined or closed to fresh insight and revision. And we must learn from feminist theologies especially that our moral imaginaries—including our operative lists of virtues and vices—are linguistically and socially constructed in ways that will tend to hide certain real sins from view, and cast neutral or even good acts, dispositions, and social arrangements as sinful, simply because they sit at odds with those who hold power. These reminders of social embeddedness and the need for reflexivity are salutary, and a constant discipline; sin warps our perception of ourselves, others, and the world, including our perception of sin itself. Nevertheless, this crucial acknowledgement should spur us on to refine rather than abandon our working descriptions. For, if classical traditions of moral and ascetical theology are to be credited, then wisdom is found in knowing just enough of the phenomenology of sins so as to range against them, with pastoral discrimination, the various remedies found in the medicine chest of Christian teaching.<sup>103</sup>

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moral-philosophical reading can preserve the sense of sin's prevenience and radicality that the apocalyptic readers have wanted to highlight.

100. Whatever the debate about Romans, from the perspective of moral theology we have to reckon with arguably less contestable texts like Ephesians 6:12. There what we are reading is surely not merely strong poetry about practice, and probably not even merely a 'weak' claim about the emergence of sin as purely epiphenomenal and derivative in relation to human sins. Meanwhile, to keep in view the perspective that 'our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood'—rather 'against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic power of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places'—may be a powerful antidote to the inevitable disillusionment of social gospel projects which become too invested in visible signs of historical progress. To not grow tired of doing the good, perhaps we need to know that the bad derives in some way from *beyond* the immanent frame, even as it takes up residence within it. (And just so with the overcoming of sin, which comes from without even as it is made effective within.)
101. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020).
102. See Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).
103. See Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Christopher Beeley, *Leading God's People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). If it is to do this kind of work with empirical (by which I mean real-life) credibility, contemporary Christian ethics will need a robust moral psychology. Here we might engage again with Catholic moral theology. See, e.g., Steven J. Jensen, *Sin: A Thomistic Psychology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018). Among the proliferating

## Acts

The social, the personal—we could leave it there. But third, there is the level of investigation which looks not to the structural, social, or biographical determinants of action, but to *acts* themselves. Within Christian ethics, as Darlene Fozard Weaver's persuasive book *The Acting Person and the Christian Moral Life* demonstrates, the turn to languages of sin as social and relational has led to a neglect of the analysis of moral acts. She argues that this neglect is a kind of overreaction to the transgressions-fixed casuistry which, it is said, went before.<sup>104</sup> As regards Pauline hamartiology, Simon Gathercole may be thought to press an analogous point, urging interpreters not to sideline 'forensic' categories and their focus on sins as acts of human transgression by foregrounding only the cosmological.<sup>105</sup> For now, let us note that in respect of the evaluation of acts as sins, O'Donovan's deontological instincts serve his analysis well, in a context where Christian ethics has instead foregrounded longer-form narration of virtue, as well as social analysis.

Perhaps Christian ethics' evident requirement to work on a few fronts as it wrestles with the multiple manifestations of sin shows not only that it needs to be informed maximally by the whole canon of Scripture and the breadth of Christian doctrine, but also that in doing so it discovers the need to embrace a plurality of moral theories.<sup>106</sup> To seek a clear-eyed view of the moral field in terms of sin's pernicious presence is to be aware that sin can do many things as it unravels God's good creatures. Among them: sin forms intentions; shapes dispositions; calcifies into vicious characteristics; issues in in acts harmful to neighbour and self and ultimately against God; shapes societies and the kinds of lives possible within them; and ramifies in all manner of biographical and historical consequences.

## Moral History

Fourth, in keeping with these developments, if ethics is to take O'Donovan's concern seriously, there is a need to show how moral ontology illuminates the warp and weft of moral history. O'Donovan does not go in for them much himself, but narrative and empirical modes of enquiry within Christian ethics hold some potential in this respect. At their best, they make no claims for exhaustive phenomenological coverage or encyclopaedic breadth. Instead, the aim of such 'psychologically and socioculturally realistic' accounts

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Protestant Thomisms, one interesting attempt at synthesis of Thomist moral reasoning with evangelical commitments—in fact, one patterned in lots of ways self-consciously after O'Donovan—is by the late Daniel Westberg: *Renewing Moral Theology: Christian Ethics as Action, Character, and Grace* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

104. Darlene Fozard Weaver, *The Acting Person and the Christian Moral Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).
105. Simon J. Gathercole, "'Sins" in Paul', *New Testament Studies* 64.2 (2019), pp. 143–61.
106. See, e.g., Jesse Couenhoven, 'Against Metaethical Imperialism: Several Arguments for Equal Partnerships between the Deontic and the Aretaic', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38.3 (2010), pp. 521–44. Any holistic and pastorally helpful description of sin will involve a toggling between perspectives, exegetically, dogmatically, and, in this sense, ethically.

(as Michael Banner calls for in *The Ethics of Everyday Life*), is to render intimate portraits of humanity that test the explanatory power—or otherwise—of theological categories regarding sin, and expand the moral imagination.<sup>107</sup> The goal is to display, with loving attention to the texture of actual human lives, the way that persons can be in all kinds of ways captive, or complicit, struggling to be free, or deliberating towards acts that are good.

O'Donovan is cautious about the absorption of moral theology into the social sciences, but his own vignettes and analogies already move in the direction of narrative exemplification.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, as Luke Bretherton argues, 'the addition of an ethnographic moment as a complement to the other moments O'Donovan sets out is a poultice against mystifications and generalisations based on anecdote.'<sup>109</sup> Neither is this endeavour so very far away from the concerns of the apocalyptic theologians. Their interest in the soteriology—and, within it, the hamartiology—of the approach is owed not only to such motifs' hermeneutic capabilities in relation to the text; it also stems directly from their conviction that these concepts bear wide-ranging heuristic potential in relation to life in the present age. As Ziegler writes, apocalyptic categories can be 'thought of as crucial tools of faith's historiographical discrimination.'<sup>110</sup> And apocalyptic theologians, when they address the reader not simply as a fellow interpreter of contested Pauline texts but as a subject with a life to live in today's world, very often turn to historical episodes, moral exemplars, and literature or the arts to exfoliate the practical purchase of their cosmology.<sup>111</sup> Further pursuit of this work is a task for another day, and to that end we might school ourselves on modes of reflection that model such enquiry—pursued for many decades in womanist theology, for example.<sup>112</sup>

### The Second-Person View

Finally, Christian ethics should be able to say something not simply about the interior landscape of the 'first-person' view of sin, as that which is a possibility for *me*; or

107. Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The notion of 'testing' is explained in McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*.

108. O'Donovan sets up 'the statistical columns of the social sciences' as the other temptation in contemporary ethics, alongside absorption into 'a dogmatic theology newly confident on Trinitarian or sacramental foundations'. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, p. 8.

109. Luke Bretherton, Book Review, Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27.3 (2014), pp. 365–69, at p. 367.

110. Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, p. 29.

111. See, e.g., Beverly Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), esp. ch. 1, 'When in Romans... Watch the Horizon'; Brown, 'Letters from the Battlefield'.

112. See, e.g., Delores S. Williams, 'A Womanist Perspective on Sin', in Emilie M. Townes (ed.), *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), and especially M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

about the illuminating potential of the ‘third-person’ view of sin, as supervening power and systemic/social force; but about sin from the ‘second-person’ view, where one is invited to offer moral advice or guidance *to another*. Again, O’Donovan is a wise companion as we imagine this task—consider the rich discussion of these topics in *Self, World, and Time*. And, after all necessary caveats against misuse of the vocabulary, a sober, apocalyptic metaphysics of the ‘inimical’ powers and their defeat can inform the practice of discerning pastoral accompaniment, too. Such a backdrop is, of course, treated as a presupposition rather than a problem in most global expressions of Christianity, as Esther Acolatse demonstrates.<sup>113</sup> Surely it also was throughout most of Christian history. But at this point let me sum up what we have discussed so far.

## Conclusion

In a formal sense, this article has sought to advance in one focused way the implications of apocalyptic theology for Christian ethics,<sup>114</sup> and to extend into wider conversation, with reference to a single theme, the insights of O’Donovan’s moral vision. So much is left unaccomplished: not least, because ‘not all is Paul’ (and we have not even surveyed all of the epistles); because Christian ethics is beholden to the whole canon as authoritative; and because it reads the scriptures in the company of the tradition. But I hope this article has also made a little material progress on the question of ethics’ knowledge of sin. If it has done so only by locating the two positions apparently at odds, then synthesising them on common ground—ground in fact already partly occupied by quite a few integrative thinkers—then that is not, in itself, an original advance. Yet if these intramural (and ecumenical) interactions are rarer than they should be, then I hope this limited exercise indicates the kind of generative conversations that others might join.

It would be a theological and a moral mistake, however, to leave our question there. There is one final, and utterly crucial, thing that ethics should know of sin. This is the one commitment that provided the strong logic of Karl Barth’s hamartiology, namely, that sin is a ‘grace dependent concept’ (Serene Jones).<sup>115</sup> Sin is a powerful surd in creation which is seen in truth only retrospectively, in its overcoming by God in Christ, and in the

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113. Esther E. Acolatse, *Powers, Principalities, and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa and the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). Might one of the places in which Pentecostal and charismatic lived theology can contribute to contemporary systematic and moral theology be just here, in the doctrine of sin? Croasmun’s contribution to Pauline studies is, I think, motivated by a similar commitment. Relatedly, while I cannot pursue it in any detail here, this cluster of questions around sin and agency would surely be illuminated by a more thorough-going engagement with non-Western theologies.

114. For one set of diverse engagements in this vein, see the essays in the special issue ‘Apocalyptic Theology and Christian Ethics’ of *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.4, ed. Michael Mawson and Samuel Tranter.

115. See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), ch. 5. On Barth, see Matt Jenson, ‘Barth on Sin’, in George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), pp. 197–206.

everyday conviction, deliverance from, and healing of sin wrought in our lives by the Spirit. Brian Brock puts it well, in a way that perhaps most of our interlocutors could say 'Amen' to—and with this I will close: 'Without God's constant forgiveness, we do not see our sin; and without the exposure of our sins and our repenting of them, we remain in the deadening byways down which other gods have enticed us.'<sup>116</sup>

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116. Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 293.