



Sin-proneness (1)

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IN THIS SHORT series of articles we want to examine Romans and Paul's personification of sin. If we want to understand more about human nature, then a consideration of Romans 5–8 will yield a great deal. However, this topic has been the subject of controversy, and for this reason our discussion will be analytical in its tone. It is hoped that this approach will be of benefit.

Why is sin so prevalent? Let us take first things first. What is sin? A broad definition would be: *Sin is wrong behaviour*—behaviour that is contrary to God's will (expressed and unexpressed) and contrary to the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Man was created to reflect God's glory, but, as a result of the Fall, this purpose has 'fallen short' and men have sinned.

The desire theory of action

This answers our first question, What is sin? What about our second question, Why is it so prevalent? There are four aspects in our answer: desire, knowledge, the will and temptation; but it is easy to get them mixed up and in the wrong order.

It would seem that sin comes from within man. James has this defining comment: "every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust [desire], and enticed. Then when lust [desire] hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (1:14,15).

A person's own desires are personified as a woman in the Epistle of James, and they give birth to sin. Sin then gives birth to death (*cf.* Gen. 3:16). For example, carnal desires, the desire for power and the desire for wealth are characteristic of life in the world: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 Jno. 2:16).

Such desires express the wants that men have for their lives.¹ Notice, though, a dichotomy in

this analysis; on the one hand there is the basic wanting or desire, and on the other hand there is the *object of desire*. Desire, as a basic human attitude, is natural in itself, and a part of human nature mirrored in angels, who desire to do the will of God, and in God Himself, Who desires only the best for His children. Adam manifested desires before and after he fell.

But desire can be allied to the wrong things. Take this example of the expression of desire in Eve: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit" (Gen. 3:6). Eve desired the fruit of the tree because "it" was good for food, "it" would make one wise, and "it" was pleasant in appearance (note the implicit objective basis of desire). Her desire was directed towards the fruit because she saw desirable aspects in the fruit and the eating of the fruit. On the one hand, therefore, there is her desire, and on the other hand there is the object of that desire, the fruit of the tree and the eating of that fruit.



Figure 1

We can see from Figure 1 that if there are to be objects of desire then there has to be knowledge that there are such objects. I cannot desire something of which I have no knowledge.

James's definition of temptation mentions 'enticement'. It is important to realise that desire and enticement are not two separate mental processes. Rather, 'enticement' is a word that we use to describe certain kinds of desire—desire is

1. Consider the sheer number of wants that are possible today in contrast to the number possible in the past.

the only mental process involved. A person is enticed when he is enticed 'by' something. A person is being enticed when he has a desire for some object and he should not have this desire.

Desires are directed towards 'objects', and these 'objects' of desire could be abstract possessions like wisdom, states like being satisfied of hunger, or objects with aesthetic qualities like beauty. And, of course, there are many sinful objects of desire. Given that desire was part and parcel of man's nature prior to the Fall, and given that there is nothing inherently wrong with desire itself, how has such desire come to be regularly allied with sin? Did God create Adam in the beginning with desires that would be regularly attracted towards sinful objects, or did God change Adam's nature after the Fall so that his desires became *attracted* to sinful objects?

Knowledge

The second element in our explanation of the prevalence of sin must concern knowledge. If I come to know about a range of possible evil actions and objects, then this knowledge *could* become involved in my desires. It was just such knowledge that Adam and Eve acquired by their eating of the fruit.

However, our explanation of sin needs to take more into account than just the *possibility* that desires be allied to knowledge of evil; it is as if there is some law in man that drives him in this direction—an attraction to sin (Rom. 7:23). Some would argue that the mere bringing together of human desire and knowledge of evil in man's mental make-up is sufficient to account for the character of men, but the mere bringing together of desire and knowledge of evil does not account for sin-proneness. The angels have desires and knowledge of evil in their mental make-up, and they do not sin. We cannot say that man's tendency to sin came about *just* as the result of him becoming a knower of good and evil.

Knowledge of good and evil is a precondition for sin,² but the possession of such knowledge in itself does not explain why man's desires become *regularly* drawn away to sin. If we look at [Figure 2](#), we have desire on the one hand, and knowledge of good and evil objects on the other hand; but where does the arrow come from? How did it get into the equation? This is the essential problem; how can we explain man's proneness to sin?

Our desires now become allied to a wide variety of sinful behaviour,³ and this fact generally

presupposes that we know about evil as well as good. It is doubtful, however, that God created Adam and Eve in such a way that their desire was inevitably going to be naturally allied to the sinful object of eating of the forbidden fruit. So it would seem that some change happened as a consequence of the Fall to bring about such a natural alliance.

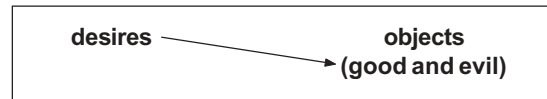


Figure 2

The will

The third element in our explanation of sin concerns the will. Adam and Eve made a conscious choice, and this was an expression of their will. Depending on your perspective, man's will now is either strong or weak. It is strong in the pursuit of all kinds of evil, but it is weak to carry out God's requirements. Much of our sinful behaviour is so woven into the warp and woof of our existence that it is difficult to speak of our making conscious choices of the will all the time. However, there are many times when we do choose the evil course over the good. A failure of our will can account for why our desires become expressed in action (see [Figure 3](#)).

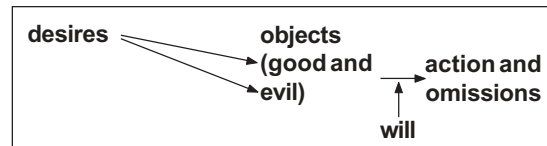


Figure 3

It is doubtful that God created Adam and Eve in such a way that Eve's will was too weak to resist the temptation of the serpent, or that Adam's will was too weak to resist his wrong choice. Rather, it is likely that their will was equally balanced so that their test of obedience was fair. This raises the question as to whether our will is equally balanced *now*, so that we have an even chance of choosing the good over the evil. A positive answer seems doubtful. Was the will of

2. This is true even if the sin is not known to be evil as such.
3. We are drawing our analysis in terms of desire vis-à-vis an *observable outcome*, because this is how Paul presents his analysis of 'sin' in Romans 7.

man changed, therefore, as a consequence of the Fall?

Temptation

The fourth element in our explanation of sin is 'temptation'. This describes the process of our being "drawn away" in our desires as they focus on evil. Why is it that men and women are so often tempted and sin? Adam and Eve were tempted, but this single example does not show that God created them in such a way that they were to be constantly subject to temptations (see Figure 4).

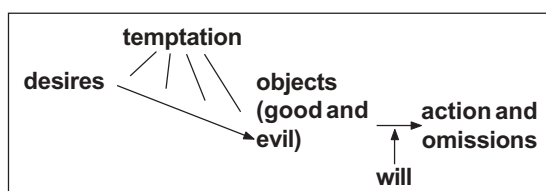


Figure 4

Desire and temptation are not two mental processes. It is clear that 'temptation' is a moral description of certain kinds of desire-object pairs rather than a separate mental process. Whether any naturally occurring desire-object pair is a temptation or not depends on God's moral standards. Thus the desire for the fruit of the forbidden tree (it was good for food, pleasing in appearance) is the same desire that Eve would have had for the fruit of the unforbidden trees—they were good for food and pleasing to the eye. What makes one complex of desire a 'temptation' is God's viewpoint.

One reason why men and women are constantly being tempted is the social environment into which they are born. One way to explain our proneness to sin is to say that it is due to the social environment in which we grow up; it is a kind of social engineering. It could be argued that we are born with a morally neutral nature, and we learn to sin from our forebears and those we encounter. Hence it can be affirmed that, because the practice of sin is so endemic in society, we imitate and succumb to this behaviour in an endemic way.

This explanation presents a 'chicken and egg' situation. It cannot be denied that our social environment has (sadly) a great influence on us. But how did society become full of wickedness? What is there about man's nature that leads to certain kinds of behaviour becoming dominant? When we consider individual human nature

rather than society, we are still presented with the problem of explaining the natural bias towards sin in each one of us. However, this does not mean that our bias towards sin is solely learned behaviour; rather, society may be reinforcing a natural disposition.

The weakness of the 'social engineering' view is illustrated by the questions: How did the widespread practice of sin get started in the beginning? Why were sinful choices constantly being made by the ante-diluvians (and post-diluvians) in the first place? Is it credible to suppose that they were morally neutral, and over the course of time the steady chance accumulation of sinful behaviour resulted in a cascade effect such that children born into society fell socially prone to sin?

Can sin-proneness be explained?

Our analysis of the prevalence of sin has four elements, and it is open to us to explain our proneness to sin using any combination of these elements. We have argued that God would not have created a sin-prone creature in a creation that was declared to be "very good". We are therefore driven to examine the Fall of Man as the event that led to man becoming a sin-prone creature. In examining this event, we might say that, when Adam and Eve acquired knowledge of good and evil, this was the factor that led to them becoming sin-prone creatures; alternatively, we might say that something happened to the nature of human desire or the human will (or both) and this made man a sin-prone creature; and yet again, we might say that only the acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil, coupled with a change to human desire or the human will (or both), can account for man's proneness to sin.⁴

It may seem that there is no way to settle⁵ this issue, but there is. Paul's analysis of sin in Romans, and, in particular, his personification of sin, is a clear explanation of our proneness to sin. This we will examine in the rest of this series.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

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4. God will, of course, change man's nature once again, when He creates in His children a new heart and a new mind (Jer. 31:33).
 5. The issue can also be settled by examining the typology of Genesis 3.