

# The Ancestral Sin is Not Pelagian

Parker Haratine  
University of St. Andrews

**ABSTRACT:** Various thinkers are concerned that the Orthodox view of Ancestral Sin does not avoid the age-old Augustinian concern of Pelagianism. After all, the doctrine of Ancestral Sin maintains that fallen human beings do not necessarily or inevitably commit actual sins. In contemporary literature, this claim could be articulated as a denial of the ‘inevitability thesis.’ A denial of the inevitability thesis, so contemporary thinkers maintain, seems to imply both the view that human beings can place themselves in right relation to God as well as the Pelagian denial that all require Christ’s work to attain this right relation to God. This article demonstrates that the Ancestral Sin, along with a denial of the inevitability thesis, is neither Pelagian nor Semi-Pelagian. I show that the doctrine of Ancestral Sin denies (Semi-)Pelagianism in various ways. I show that, for Ancestral Sin to entail (Semi-)Pelagianism, one must commit to several assumptions, each of which is plausibly deniable and none of which Orthodox thinkers affirm.

**KEY WORDS:** Ancestral Sin, Augustine, Pelagianism, Inevitability of Sin, Original Sin, Orthodox

## 1. Introduction

Various thinkers are concerned that the Orthodox view of Ancestral Sin does not avoid the age-old Augustinian concern of Pelagianism (e.g., Crisp 2020; Madueme 2020). After all, the doctrine of Ancestral Sin maintains that fallen human beings do not necessarily or inevitably commit actual sins. In contemporary literature, this claim could be articulated as a denial of the ‘inevitability thesis.’ A denial of the inevitability thesis, so contemporary thinkers maintain, seems to imply both the view that human beings can place themselves in right relation to God as well as the Pelagian denial that all require Christ’s work to attain this right relation to God. This article demonstrates that the Ancestral Sin, along with a denial of the inevitability thesis, is neither Pelagian nor Semi-Pelagian. I show that the doctrine of Ancestral Sin denies (Semi)Pelagianism in various ways. I show that, for Ancestral Sin to entail (Semi-)Pelagianism, one must commit to several assumptions, each of which is plausibly deniable and none of which Orthodox thinkers affirm.<sup>1</sup>

I shall proceed by detailing the doctrine of Ancestral Sin and the theses salient to the present discussion. I then detail the core thesis of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism and locate the concern of non-Orthodox thinkers. After locating the concern, I demonstrate that the Ancestral Sin is neither Pelagian nor Semi-Pelagian.

Several clarifications are in order. First, when I write that ‘all humans stand in need of Christ’s atoning/saving work’ to ‘have faith’ or ‘be in union with God’ or ‘to stand in right

---

<sup>1</sup> For present purposes, I am using the views of Eastern Orthodox theologians as representative of what I will call the ‘Orthodox Church.’ It is beyond the scope of this article to address the Oriental Orthodox Church and its relation to the Eastern Orthodox Church.

relation to God,' such statements do not require a particular view of atonement or salvation. Rather, for this article, I use these as general phrases that may be filled in with a particular theory of atonement or view of salvation and union with God. The important kernel to keep in mind is that there is a *universal* need for Christ's 'work' to 'have faith' or 'be in right relation or union with God.' Of course, this universal need must be understood to exempt Christ and possibly Adam, Eve, and Mary Theotokos. Second, rather than merely focusing on the historic position of Pelagius, I will address Pelagianism from a doctrinal perspective. As such, my concern is not to accurately represent a historic author but a group of doctrinal concerns. Third, the present argument is a limited defense. I do not claim that Ancestral Sin is superior to other doctrines or that it is the fact of the matter. And I do not claim that a denial of the inevitability thesis is correct in every respect. Rather, I argue that a denial of the inevitability thesis does not lead to Pelagianism and that Ancestral Sin when properly understood entails the falsity of Pelagianism. Along the way, I offer some independent reasons to believe these claims to show that the Ancestral Sin is not implausible.

## 2. The Orthodox Doctrine of Ancestral Sin

The Ancestral Sin is somewhat enigmatic to non-Orthodox thinkers, not least because it is different in some of its language and substance from an Augustinian doctrine of original sin. In this section, I shall detail the doctrine of Ancestral Sin and focus on several features salient to the present argument. To avoid confusion (and because I expect at least a handful of the readers will be non-Orthodox), I will contrast my exposition of the Ancestral Sin with a generic Augustinian account of original sin.<sup>2</sup>

The Ancestral Sin maintains that the state of sin is an "injury and corruption" that fallen human beings suffer (Romanides 2002, 87). While Adam and Eve<sup>3</sup> were uncorrupted, their decision to sin caused them to fall away from the divine life. Death, in this view, is a disease or illness that is not God's punishment for disobedience, as some iterations of an Augustinian view would maintain (Couenhoven 2016, 192). Rather, the disease of death is a natural consequence of the failure to be in proper relation to the divine life. This falling away involves both losing divine grace as well as acquiring the corruption and disease of death.

The Ancestral Sin affirms that, before the fall, human beings were in a state of relative perfection (Romanides 2002, 155; Ware 1963, 223). While humans' being made in God's image means that humans are made in a certain way and with certain capacities (e.g., free will and relationality), humans' being made in God's *likeness* means that human beings are made to attain perfection in union with God and consequently be free from self-interest. In contrast, an Augustinian (or, more generally on this point, a non-Orthodox) view of original sin roughly maintains that human beings were made in a state in which their capacities were actualized and in which they were more fully in union with God. This state is sometimes referred to as 'absolutely perfect' in contrast to 'relatively perfect,' and it is a state from which the first humans fell when they committed the first sin. The Orthodox Church instead affirms that

---

<sup>2</sup> The forthcoming sketch of an 'Augustinian' view is a foil to better understand the Ancestral Sin. As such, the sketch is generic and does not capture the nuances or differences of what contemporary thinkers who stand in this broader tradition will maintain. For more on these views, cf. (Stump 1985; Rea 2007; Quinn 2010; Crisp 2019b; McCall 2019).

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will use the names 'Adam' and 'Eve' as conceptual placeholders that can be relevantly filled out, for example, with two historic individuals, a primordial community, etc.

Adam and Eve were perfect in capacity, though not in actuality. Once Adam and Eve sinned, the fall involved the mortal wound of the enemy, Satan, who caused Adam and Eve to become corrupted and lose the immortality that they had possessed at that time. The first humans thus lost “the life-giving grace of the Holy Spirit and became dead of soul” (Romanides 2002, 158).

Because of this lack of grace and the distance from the divine life, there is a tendency toward death and evil and a tendency to self-preserve selfishly (Romanides 2002, 165). This Ancestral Sin, bequeathed to future humans by their ancestors, is the root of all further acts of sin (acts of sin are called ‘actual sin’, as opposed to ancestral or original sin). The death and corruptibility manifest in disordered passions and desires. The Ancestral Sin, as the name has it, claims that there is a mysterious unity between all human beings, and because of this unity, all human beings are born with the disease of death. There is a web of cosmic disorder and sin into which each human being is born, a cosmic disorder that resulted from the first sin and Satan. Part of this means being born in the dominion of Satan. Part of this means being born with ‘desire,’ which is being born into a state of having desires that compel and entice one to act sinfully. This is called concupiscence in the West and ‘desire’ in the East (Ware 1963, 228). The claim that there are disordered desires does not amount to the claim that any human being is totally depraved, as some versions of Augustinianism would have it (e.g., Calvin 2008).

Prominently, the Ancestral Sin claims that we inherit this disease from our forefather Adam. While such a view does not precisely detail the nature of such a union of humanity, it neither affirms nor denies the Augustinian idea of seminal transmission of sin. Additionally, such a view neither affirms nor denies the thesis that sin is socially transmitted (for example, cf. De Cruz and De Smedt 2022). It should be noted, nevertheless, that Ancestral Sin is more straightforwardly compatible with the latter claim that sin is at least in part socially transmitted (Swinburne 1989, 143). In either case, the doctrine of Ancestral Sin simply claims that we as human beings are born into a web of our ancestral relations and sin and have a disease of death. The thinkers are content to call this unity between Adam and his offspring mysterious.

The Orthodox view of Ancestral Sin denies any idea of original guilt, either for Adam’s actual sin or for the inherited corruption. Some Augustinian views of original sin, in sharp contrast, maintain either that all fallen humans are personally guilty for Adam’s sin, or are guilty of the inherited corrupt nature (McCall 2019, 153–76; cf. Vorster 2022; Madueme 2021). The Ancestral Sin has no inkling of the doctrine of original guilt—human beings are only guilty by virtue of their actual sin, and human beings retain free will by virtue of being made in God’s image. While human beings still retain free will, this freedom is restricted. As Timothy Ware puts it, human beings inherit Adam’s “corruption and mortality, but not his guilt: they are only guilty in so far as by their own free choice they imitate Adam” (Ware 1963, 229).

We thus come to one of the main claims of concern: a fallen human being is not under any necessity to commit actual sin. While fallen human beings are bent towards sin, fallen humans are not bound to sin. As Andrew Louth remarks, “This way of looking at our ingrained tendency to sin does not deprive human beings of free will, although to seek goodness under such conditions is a matter of unremitting struggle” (Louth 2020, 86). This claim would seem to be problematic. For, if a human is not bound to sin, then it would seem to follow that it is possible for such a human to commit only good actions (however improbable) and thus be blameless. Below I will examine different ways to understand ‘good action,’ especially whether there is a difference between a morally good act and an act that can merit salvation. Louth is aware of this concern from some non-Orthodox thinkers. He succinctly remarks, “Those who endorse original sin find this analysis inadequate: it seems to leave open the possibility (even if totally exceptional) of someone living a blameless life” (Louth 2020, 86).

To put the issue in contemporary terminology, Ancestral Sin denies the ‘Inevitability Thesis’:

IT: Necessarily, any fallen human being will inevitably commit at least one act of sin.<sup>4</sup>

There is interesting recent work on IT, for example, on how one should understand the term ‘inevitable’, and whether or not IT is compatible with libertarian views of free will (Loke 2022; Timpe 2023). I will pass over this work because it is not entirely relevant to the present discussion; however one understands the term ‘inevitably’ in these discussions, the doctrine of Ancestral Sin denies IT because it affirms the opposite: possibly, a fallen human being can avoid sinning for their lifetime. This is the case, even if this is highly unlikely given the engrained inclination to sin.

The denial of IT by Ancestral Sin worries some. It would seem to imply that certain fallen human beings can do good (i.e., not sin), and thus, in some significant sense, either place themselves in right relation to God or at least initiate this process of faith. To become clear about this concern, one must be clear about Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism.

### 3. Pelagianism and the Concern of non-Orthodox Thinkers

To articulate this concern, I shall detail the relevant aspects of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism.<sup>5</sup> I will produce a synopsis of two relevant positions as a way to articulate the group of doctrinal concerns as opposed to the historic thinker’s positions.

#### 3.1 Pelagianism

Pelagianism denies the residual impact of Adam’s primal sin or the fall on any human nature to the extent that this fallenness meant future humans were bound to commit acts of sin. Thus, whatever the probability of a human living a life free from sin, it was at least possible that a human permanently avoided sin. Additionally, Pelagianism equates this possibility of avoiding sin with placing oneself in right relation to God. We can formalize this as follows:

*Pelagianism* (PL): (i) Adam’s sin affected only Adam and did not affect his progeny such that, (ii) humans are not bound to inevitably commit personal sin and, possibly, (iii) humans can lead good lives pleasing to God and thereby place oneself in right relation with God.

Notice several aspects of this definition. The first tenet amounts to a denial of the doctrine of original sin. As Pelagianism sees it, the doctrine of original sin means that humans are stunted in their ability to act freely. Furthermore, the primal sin is not something for which

---

<sup>4</sup> This thesis has also been articulated as follows by Franks (2012, 358): “Necessarily in a world tainted by original sin, (a) every human subsequent to Adam and Eve is born in a condition such that it is inevitable that she sin (given that she performs at least one morally significant action), but (b) it is not inevitable that she sin on any given occasion” (cited in Timpe 2023, 8). For present purposes, Franks’ articulation does not affect my argument.

<sup>5</sup> For overviews of these issues, cf. (McCall 2019, 280–300; McFarland 2016). It must be noted that the majority of Pelagius’s teachings and positions are found in Augustine’s writings, and it is often difficult, consequently, to hone down a refined system of Pelagius’s thought. For the canons of the Council of Orange, cf. *DS*, 370-397.

Adam's progeny can stand responsible because they did commit the primal sin. Thus, to preserve human freedom, moral responsibility, and moral progress, Pelagianism denies that humans inherit this sinful condition. Notice that, if humans do not inherit original sin, one loses a universal basis on which to claim that humans are born in a condition from which they need to be saved and healed. Therefore, PL denies a main basis for the universal need for salvation.

The second tenet amounts to the claim that, possibly, a human being can avoid committing actual sin. To translate this into 'possible worlds' language, there is some possible world in which a human avoids committing actual sin. This does not amount to a statement about probability.

Next, notice two aspects of the third tenet. First, the third tenet entails the following: it is not the case that, necessarily, all persons stand in need of Christ's work for salvation. (McFarland 2016, 306) Unlike the first tenet's mere denial of a possible basis, this amounts to a denial of the universal need for Christ. This would be quite drastic. After all, if it is not the case that all humans stand in need of Christ's work, it would seem that the Gospel is lost. Second, as Augustine and others see the matter, the third tenet is entailed by the second. That is, if a person can avoid sinning and commit a morally good act (PL (ii)), then (so Augustine and others reason) it would simply follow that a human can earn salvation (PL (iii)).<sup>6</sup>

Moving along, we come to Semi-Pelagianism:

*Semi-Pelagianism* (SP): Possibly, human persons are able, without grace, to commit morally good actions and thereby initiate (though not achieve/obtain/complete) the process of coming to faith and being in union with God.

In contrast to PL, SP is compatible with the claim that Adam's progeny are born with original sin. Moreover, SP denies that human beings can have faith and save themselves on their own or by their own means without qualification. SP is milder and only claims that human beings can initiate this process without God's prevenient grace. SP also, consequently, places a high premium on freedom of the will. For, if a person can commit a good action that initiates the process of faith, then so too can that person avoid sin on this occasion. Notice that both PL and SP deny that actual sins are inevitable. Finally, notice that SP does not specify a difference between a morally good act and a salvation-making act (it also does not maintain they are co-extensive).

While SP does not deny the claim that all stand in need of Christ's work (like PL), SP does deny that, necessarily, salvation is completely unmerited, a gift bestowed to human beings that is unprompted whatsoever by human works. And this would seem problematic. Before I show that the Ancestral Sin does not require PL or SP, I will detail the concern according to some contemporary authors.

### 3.2 The concern of non-Orthodox thinkers

Some non-Orthodox thinkers are concerned that Ancestral Sin requires either PL or SP. As enumerated above, Ancestral Sin denies that fallen individuals will inevitably commit some actual sin. It is this claim that is of central concern. If, as Ancestral Sin claims, someone can

---

<sup>6</sup> The present construal of PL is a conjunction with three conjuncts—a denial of one of the conjuncts is sufficient to deny the entirety of PL. One might nevertheless construe this as a disjunctive claim with three disjuncts.

possibly avoid committing any actual sin, and this means either that such an individual can live a blameless life or commit a morally good act that unites him with God, then this would seem to require the Pelagian claim that not all stand in need of Christ's atoning work.

I shall detail two distinct concerns. The first concern goes something like the following. A human being stands in need of Christ's saving work only if that human being commits an actual sin. All humans need Christ's saving work to be in good standing with God. Thus, for all humans, each human must commit an actual sin. Call this the *Inevitability of Sin* concern. To avoid confusion, this concern is not the above thesis, IT. Rather, the *Inevitability of Sin* concern is a concern over a denial of IT. When I refer to the thesis, I will use 'IT'; when I refer to the concern, I will write the '*Inevitability of Sin* concern.'

The second concern goes something like the following. Any morally good act is sufficient to place one in good standing with God. All humans need Christ's saving work to be in good standing with God. Thus, no human can commit *any* morally good act. Call this the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern.<sup>7</sup>

There might be nuances to each concern or a combination of these two concerns. For example, one might augment the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern by maintaining that the presence of any single actual sin negates the efficacy of any morally sufficient act. Thus, the new concern would go like this: a morally good act is sufficient to place a human in good standing with God *unless that same human commits an actual sin*. Since all stand in need of Christ's work to be in union with God, each person must commit at least one actual sin, as this negates the efficacy of the morally sufficient act. Alternatively, one might also say that a single morally good act is not sufficient to achieve this outcome, but a lifetime of morally good acts is sufficient to place one in right standing with God. Thus, the concern would be not about a single act, but a lifetime of acts. This iteration would temper the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern.

Regardless of the different combinations and iterations, the *Inevitability of Sin* and the *Morally Sufficient Act* concerns are roughly the two basic concerns about Ancestral Sin. Consider some standard examples.<sup>8</sup> In a recent chapter, Tatha Wiley writes the following:

What scared Augustine about Pelagius's view was that if a person *could be righteous*—if a person could *avoid* sinning—then there would be no absolute necessity for Christ. The fundamental Christian proclamation (that is, that all humankind needs Christ's forgiveness of sin) would be false. (Wiley 2020, 114)

Wiley's interpretation of Augustine indicates the *Inevitability of Sin* concern. Notice that Wiley equates avoiding sin with being righteous in her clarifying remark. Wiley thus maintains the

---

<sup>7</sup> The concern is maximized in its present form. The concern echoes the position of some reformed thinkers, such as John Wesley and Calvin. For Wesley, cf. (McCall 2019, 289–99). For Calvin, cf. his doctrine of total depravity in (2008). See especially 2.I.10; 2.II, *passim*, 2.III.1-6. For Calvin's slight of the Greek fathers who maintain that fallen humans still have freedom of will to not sin, cf. Calvin, 2.II.4. Moreover, McCall (2019, 306–11) defends this idea of total depravity. McCall does clarify that total depravity leaves some room to say that human beings can do good before other humans (308), though he later affirmatively quotes Kathryn Tanner in *Christ the Key* who maintains that all human actions, even when pursuing finite goods, are "ruined" and "done in the wrong way." (310) While the concern is maximized and few thinkers may state that a *single* good act suffices to unite us to God, thinkers will maintain similar sentiments: either, that no acts can be good, or, that a sinless life is a righteous life. The former is clear from the presently cited thinkers, while the latter is clear from forthcoming discussion.

<sup>8</sup> These following thinkers are not outright arguing or claiming (so far as I am aware) that Ancestral Sin is Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian. Additionally, some of these thinkers' positions would simply entail that Ancestral Sin is PL or SP, even though they do not directly discuss the doctrine.

following conditional statement: if a human does not commit actual sin (i.e., is righteous), then that human does not need Christ's forgiveness of sin. Notice as well that, for Wiley, an absence of any actual sin is equated with being righteous. This position at least implies that a lifetime of morally good or neutral acts could suffice to put one in union with God. Thus, while Wiley forthrightly states the *Inevitability of Sin* concern, her position implies a tempered iteration of the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern.

Andrew Loke affirms something similar. In his recent monograph, Loke critiques Wiley's view and instead writes the following:

the affirmation of the truth of the fundamental Christian Proclamation that all humankind needs Jesus Christ as saviour and his forgiveness of sin does not require the claim that all humans *could not* avoid sinning at the very beginning of their existence; it only requires the claim that all humans (except Christ) *would not* avoid sinning. (Loke 2022, 147, my italics)

Loke aims to have an account of the inevitability of sin that is consistent with a libertarian understanding of free will. For this reason, he critiques Wiley's above remarks and argues that there is a distinction between necessity and inevitability. Putting aside the nuances of Loke's account for present purposes, notice that Loke subscribes to a version of the *Inevitability of Sin* concern. While Loke would augment this concern to maintain that actual sin is only inevitable, rather than necessary, the upshot is the same: A human being requires Christ's saving work only if that human being inevitably (though not necessarily) commits an actual sin.

There is no significant difference between the structuring of the claims. Wiley phrases the conditional in the following manner, 'if a human does not commit actual sin (i.e., is righteous), then that human does not need Christ's forgiveness of sin.' And Loke phrases the conditional in the following manner, 'If all humankind needs Jesus Christ's forgiveness of sin, then all humankind will inevitably commit actual sin.' Leaving aside the differences of inevitability vs necessity, these statements are logically equivalent—Loke's conditional is the contrapositive of Wiley's conditional (and vice versa). Thus, we have, 'If you need Christ's forgiveness of sin, then you have committed actual sin (i.e., are not righteous).' And this is the *Inevitability of Sin* concern.

While Wiley and Loke only express the concern that denying IT is Pelagian, they are concerned about Ancestral Sin by implication. Other authors state this concern explicitly in the context of the doctrine of Ancestral Sin. For example, Oliver Crisp, commenting upon a chapter written by Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth, writes the following: "The problem is, Louth never really addresses this objection to his position head on. He never explains how the Orthodox doctrine of Ancestral Sin can avoid the traditional Augustinian objection that it leaves conceptual room for the existence of someone that is, for all practical purposes, without sin" (Crisp 2020, 148). Crisp regards it as worrisome that someone could possibly live a blameless life because he does not inevitably or necessarily commit any actual sin. Crisp's concern can be summarized as follows: If a human does not commit an actual sin, then that human is blameless (i.e., a human is blameworthy only if he commits an actual sin).<sup>9</sup> Again, this is the *Inevitability of Sin* concern.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Crisp holds the inevitability thesis (IT) elsewhere. For example, (Crisp 2019a, 150; 2022, 163–64).

<sup>10</sup> Like Wiley, Crisp appears to equate having a life in which one avoids actual sin with being blameless before God. This would be the tempered version of the morally sufficient act concern.

While other authors maintain the *Inevitability of Sin* concern about the Ancestral Sin, the above suffices to show the core of the concern and that it is well and alive (for more examples, cf. (Madueme 2020, 138–39; Timpe 2023; McFarland 2016, 306)).<sup>11</sup> Above I also showed that Wiley’s equation of a sinless life with a righteous life implies at least a tempered version of the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern. While the above authors do not explicitly express the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern in its maximal form, it is arguably latent. For the above authors assume that a life without actual sin, and thus a life in which an agent only commits either morally neutral or good acts, can place one in right standing with God. And this is an iteration of the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern.

#### 4. The Ancestral Sin is neither Pelagian nor Semi-Pelagian

To show that a denial of the inevitability of sin does not require PL or SP, I shall provide two arguments. I will first address the *Inevitability of Sin* concern.

First, actual sin is not necessary to need Christ’s atoning work. Recall that actual sin is an act of sin as opposed to inheriting a state of sin (original sin) or being caught in a web of sin (Ancestral Sin). If a human being stands in need of Christ’s work only if he commits an actual sin, then it follows that a lack of actual sin implies there is no need for Christ’s work. Since the consequent of a conditional is a necessary condition for the antecedent, it follows that a denial of this consequent entails the denial of the antecedent. To use a mundane example, one could say that an individual has a glass of lemonade only if she has a drink. If she does not have a drink, it follows that she does not have a glass of lemonade. Similarly, if actual sin is necessary for Christ’s atoning work, then a lack of actual sin implies there is no need for Christ’s atoning work.

But this couldn’t be right—surely, those who have not committed actual sins require Christ’s atoning work. For example, infants, young children, and the severally mentally disabled all would seem to classify as needing Christ’s atoning work, even if they have not committed actual sin (yet or at all). If these individuals are not capable (yet or at all) of committing actual sin and *do* require Christ’s work, then it follows that actual sin cannot be a necessary condition for requiring Christ’s atoning work.

As it turns out, those who would adamantly maintain the *Inevitability of Sin* concern must subscribe to PL. For, if actual sin is a necessary condition for standing in need of Christ, and there is a class of individuals who have not yet committed actual sin, then it follows that there is a class of people who do not require Christ’s atoning work. The problem with the *Inevitability of Sin* concern is not that it maintains that all people will inevitably commit some sin (i.e., IT). Rather, the problem with the *Inevitability of Sin* concern is when it claims that an inevitable sin is *required* to need Christ’s atoning work. But when combined with the plausible assumption that infants (*inter alia*) have not committed actual sin, this move amounts to a denial that all humans need Christ’s atoning work—as we saw above, this is Pelagian.

---

<sup>11</sup> Madueme, for example, writes in response to the same essay by Louth that, if we are to not belittle the necessity of Christ’s work and universality of all being sinners, then “it must be our inherited corruption that makes sinning inevitable” (2020, 139). While McFarland expresses this concern as well, he also acknowledges that, for the reasons under discussion, Augustine also maintained that original sin was sufficient to stand in need of Christ’s salvation. While Timpe does not defend IT, he assumes it is true for the purposes of his article and does not question its need.



Can Ancestral Sin supply the relevant basis to avoid this problem? That is, does Ancestral Sin provide a way to say that those who have not committed actual sin still need Christ's atoning work? Yes. Ancestral Sin can provide two bases, the latter of which arguably does the trick on its own. First, all fallen humans are born into a web of ancestral sin which distorts individual desires and relations to others. Second, all fallen humans inherit a disease of death and a wound of sin (cf. section II). While the former may emphasize the problem of inheritance and social relations, the latter can be construed in terms of an ontological problem. While each of these might be able to provide a basis, the latter one arguably does the trick on its own because it establishes an inherent condition that can work with some limit cases. For example, if a couple were to abandon their child on a deserted island and the child were to miraculously grow to be an adult, one could more clearly maintain that the child exhibits the inherent, ontological condition as opposed to being in a web of social relations. This is not to say that the now-abandoned child necessarily lacks the social relations required to be in the web of ancestral sin, but it is to say that the inherent condition is more obviously present in such a case. Therefore, Ancestral Sin maintains the claim that all fallen humans, regardless of actual sin, need Christ's atoning work (Louth 2020, 84–89).

As Timothy Ware maintains, sin by itself (i.e., being born into a state of sin), is a barrier that blocks one from union with God. Even though a human can do actions that are pleasing to God without justifying the individual before God, no effort on the part of humankind alone will suffice to overcome this barrier (Ware 1963, 229–30). In other words, Ware affirms that, for Ancestral Sin, the condition suffices as a basis to require Christ's atoning work. To foreshadow, he also affirms that a morally good act does not justify or place an individual in right relation with God.

Notice what the Ancestral Sin does *not* claim. The Ancestral Sin does not claim that the inherited state alone (the disease of death and wound of sin) is necessary to need Christ's work. If this were the case, then Adam and Eve (or whatever primordial community before the fall) would not need Christ after their first sin. After all, if 'being inherited' is a necessary property of the inherited sin, then this property of the Ancestral Sin would only obtain for their progeny. But this is not a problem for Ancestral Sin. Rather, Ancestral Sin would maintain, if one could put it so succinctly, that a person requires Christ's work if either he inherits the ancestral sin or commits an actual sin.<sup>12</sup>

At this point, recall that PL denies that all fallen humans require Christ's work to be in right relation to God. Because Ancestral Sin affirms that all fallen humans have this need regardless of actual sin, it follows that Ancestral Sin denies PL.<sup>13</sup> The foregoing addresses an important aspect of the *Inevitability of Sin* concern.

---

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say, however, that inheriting a state of ancestral sin makes one *blameworthy*. Rather, it would seem that the Orthodox Church, because the Ancestral Sin is a disease and wound, can consistently maintain that those who stand in need of Christ's atoning work are not blameworthy but rather need his work to be healed.

<sup>13</sup> When the argument is put in such a stark format, one might question whether non-Orthodox thinkers can also supply a relevant basis for the universal need for Christ. Indeed, they can supply this basis and often claim that inheriting the state of original sin supplies just this basis. What is at stake, however, is not whether non-Orthodox thinkers can supply this basis, but whether a denial of the inevitability of some actual sin means that one denies the need for Christ's atoning work. If non-Orthodox thinkers maintain that original sin alone is sufficient to need Christ's salvation, then only on pain of contradiction can they maintain the claim that actual sin is required for needing Christ's atoning work. For this reason, the *Inevitability of Sin* concern, the concern that people may be blameless before God if they do not necessarily commit actual sin, is unfounded.

What about the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern? Granted that Ancestral Sin affirms the universal need for Christ's salvation, can a person live a morally good life and thereby unite himself to God (PL) or initiate this process of having faith and uniting himself to God (SP)? This is a legitimate concern. After all, Ancestral Sin allows for the possibility that a person may live a life free from actual sin (however improbable). And it would seem that this opens the door back open to PL or SP. For such a lack of actual sin would seem to mean that the individual can commit a morally sufficient act and either unite himself to God or begin such a process without grace.<sup>14</sup>

For this concern to go through, at least three assumptions would all have to be the case. As I argue, however, it is plausible to deny each of these assumptions. Furthermore, Orthodox theologians deny them. First, one could assume that a morally good act is equivalent to a salvation-making act. Call this salvation-making act a 'righteous act.' If these two kinds of acts are equivalent, then it would seem to follow that a fallen human could gain good standing with God by committing a morally good act (i.e., a righteous act).

This is not what Orthodox theologians would maintain though. In his overview work of the Orthodox Church's teachings, Timothy Ware maintains that good works can be pleasing to God without *justification*, that is, without justifying individuals and placing them in right relation to God (Ware 1963, 229). Thus, though some acts can be pleasing to God, it does not necessarily place one in right standing with Him.<sup>15</sup>

What does it mean for a morally good act to be different from a righteous act? Minimally, the latter is initiated and gifted by God and is sufficient (somehow) to establish union with God. This is sufficient to classify these two types of acts as distinct because of the differentiating characteristic. One does not need to fill out the remaining characteristics for the two to be distinct.

In addition to the stated position, there are a couple of good independent reasons to believe that morally good acts are not the same as righteous acts. First, the good works of the faithful can be considered to be morally good acts without being considered righteous acts (i.e., salvation-making acts). After all, once saved or 'in right relation' to God, it would follow that no action would be a righteous act in the specified sense. But surely, the person in right-relation to God can do morally good acts (i.e., good works). So, it follows that a righteous act is not necessarily a morally good act.

Second, the Biblical text refers to states of being unclean and sinful (states which not all persons could prevent),<sup>16</sup> in addition to distinguishing between intentional and unintentional sins.<sup>17</sup> If it is the case that a certain individual can be sinful and not have committed the act or have the ability to prevent it, and if it is the case that morally bad acts are *acts* over which a person has some sort of ability to prevent, then it would follow that there are states of sin that

---

<sup>14</sup> It doesn't really, because a denial of one of the three conjuncts of PL is sufficient to deny the entirety of PL as construed above (see fn. 6). Nevertheless, the concern is still legitimate because one could simply construe PL as three disjunctives and thus treat each independently as worrisome.

<sup>15</sup> While one may elaborate more on what it means to be justified before God, remember that the present article remains silent and allows for multiple explanations about how to fill out the accounts of atonement and salvation.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Leviticus 4:3-12 discusses a case in which the high priest sins and brings guilt upon the people. Moreover, there is a close connection between impurity (e.g., postpartum impurity in Leviticus 12) and sin (e.g., for (unknowingly) touching the carcass of an unclean animal in Leviticus 5:1-13), for the same simple sacrifice was used to expiate the sin or ritual impurity. For more on this, cf. (Gane 2022), especially section 4.3.3. For more on sin as it relates to impurity, cf. (Ashfield 2021). Also, cf. (Loke 2022, 33-41; Adams 1991). Other states could include attitudes or disposition, for example, being angry with one's brother (Matt. 5:22).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Numbers 15:22-31.

do not coincide with moral wrongdoing. Now, assuming that there is a general symmetry between moral wrongdoing and morally good acts and between being righteous and being sinful, it follows that righteous acts are not co-extensive with morally good acts. So, given the above two arguments, it is plausible to deny that morally good acts are equivalent to righteous acts.

Moving along, we come to another assumption. Even if a morally good act were equivalent to a righteous act, one would have to assume that there are no further impeding conditions between God and humankind. Only then would a righteous act suffice to place one in right relation to God. However, I think we can plausibly deny this assumption and instead affirm that there are further impeding conditions between God and humankind. As I showed above, Ancestral Sin maintains that there is a problem, the inherited sin and disease of death, that must be overcome regardless of actual sin or other good deeds. Analogously, suppose I already owe you a thousand dollars. Now suppose that you pay twenty dollars for my lunch at some further point, and I reimburse you twenty dollars for the lunch. I am still indebted to you for the original thousand dollars despite my fully reimbursing you for the lunch.

One could also consider an analogous argument from Anselm of Canterbury to reaffirm the idea of an impeding condition.<sup>18</sup> Anselm maintains that human beings owe it to God to honor him in all of their actions. In failing to fulfill this obligation, human beings dishonor God and fail to glorify God. After an individual sins (i.e., fails to fulfill the obligation or pay this debt (*debitum*)), one cannot establish right relation to God simply by acting correctly. Rather, one must also make up for the additional debt of dishonor. Of course, one might take issue with the concept of honor under the suspicion that it is reducible to a feudal concept.<sup>19</sup> While it is contestable that honor is a feudal-bound concept, one could simply replace honor with glory or love and the analogy would still go through. It is thus plausible to believe that there is an impeding condition; if there are impeding conditions, then a single act does not always establish right relation to God.

There is a third assumption that one would have to make for Ancestral Sin to entail PL or SP. Even if a morally good act could establish (or begin to establish) right relation to God, one would have to assume that prevenient grace is not operative in such acts. And nowhere, to my knowledge, would the doctrine of Ancestral Sin or the Orthodox Church more generally deny the prevenient activity of God in these situations. On the contrary, the Orthodox Church teaches that salvation is synergistic, meaning, achieving a state of right relation to God requires the participation of both God and humankind.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Ancestral Sin would seem to affirm prevenient grace with respect to morally significant acts, and thereby deny both PL and SP. Specifically, in denying this assumption the Ancestral Sin denies SP and PL (iii).

To take stock of this section: I argued that the denial of IT does not entail PL or SP. Rather, I showed quite the opposite: the concern ‘that an actual sin is necessary for requiring salvation’ entails ‘Not all human beings need Christ’ when conjoined with the plausible assumption that infants (among others) have not committed actual sin—this is equivalent to Pelagianism. Next, I argued that the *Morally Sufficient Act* concern is unfounded. The concern requires several assumptions to all be the case, each of which the Orthodox Church denies and are independently plausible to deny. Because all of the assumptions must be true for Ancestral Sin to be (Semi-)Pelagianism, merely denying *one* of the assumptions is sufficient for

<sup>18</sup> For Anselm’s characterization of debt, cf. *Cur Deus Homo*, I.11.

<sup>19</sup> For a classic overview and rebuttal of this in the thought of Anselm, cf. (McIntyre 1954).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the following resource: <https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/original-sin-vs-ancestral-sin>.

the Ancestral Sin to deny (Semi-)Pelagianism. The Orthodox Church does not merely deny one, however—it arguably denies all of them! For these reasons, the Ancestral Sin is neither Pelagian nor Semi-Pelagian.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I argued that the Ancestral Sin is neither Pelagian nor Semi-Pelagian. While the Ancestral Sin denies the inevitability of actual sins (IT), such a denial does not mean that one can save oneself or begin the process of having faith on one's own. I have not presently argued that Ancestral Sin is the fact of the matter. Moreover, I did not claim that one could deny the inevitability of sin without further theological problems—there may well be other theological motivations for IT. Nevertheless, I argued that a denial of IT does not result in PL or SP. Furthermore, I showed that Ancestral Sin denies and entails the falsity of PL and SP. It follows from the foregoing that, if Ancestral Sin is the case, then both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism are false.

## References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1991. "Sin as Uncleaness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Philosophy of Religion): 1–27.
- Ashfield, Mike. 2021. "Five Problems for the Moral Consensus about Sins." *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 90: 157–89.
- Calvin, John. 2008. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Couenhoven, Jesse. 2016. "Augustine." In *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin.*, edited by Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber, 181–98. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Crisp, Oliver D. 2019a. *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press.
- . 2019b. "On Behalf of Augustinian Realism." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 35 (2): 124–33. <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.2019-0098>.
- . 2020. "A Moderate Reformed Response." In *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, edited by J.B. Stump and Chad Meister, 140–49. Spectrum Multiview Books. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- . 2022. *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- De Cruz, Helen, and Johan De Smedt. 2022. "Schleiermacher and the Transmission of Sin: A Biocultural Evolutionary Model." *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 7 (2). <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v7i2.65763>.
- Franks, W. Paul. 2012. "Original Sin and Broad Free-Will Defense." *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2): 353–71. <https://doi.org/10.5840/pc201214230>.
- Gane, Roy E. 2022. "Sacrifice and the Old Testament." In *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. University of St Andrews. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/SacrificeandtheOldTestament>.
- Loke, Andrew Ter ern. 2022. *Evil, Sin, and Christian Theism*. Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies. New York, New York: Routledge.

- Louth, Andrew. 2020. "An Eastern Orthodox View." In *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, edited by J.B. Stump and Chad Meister, 78–100. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Madueme, Hans. 2020. "An Augustinian-Reformed View." In *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, edited by J.B. Stump and Chad Meister. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- . 2021. "Mea Culpa: An Apology for Original Guilt." *Mid-America Theological Review* 32: 7–34.
- McCall, Thomas H. 2019. *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.
- McFarland, Ian A. 2016. "Original Sin." In *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, edited by Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber. New York: NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- McIntyre, John. 1954. *St. Anselm and His Critics*. Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable LTD.
- Quinn, Philip L. 2010. "Sin and Original Sin." In *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn, Charles Taliaferro, and Paul Draper, 614–21. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rea, Michael C. 2007. "The Metaphysics of Original Sin." In *Persons: Human and Divine*, Pp 319-356. Oxford University Press.
- Romanides, John S. 2002. *The Ancestral Sin*. Translated by George S. Gabriel. Ridgewood, N.J.: Zephyr.
- Stump, Eleonore. 1985. "The Problem of Evil." *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (4): 392–423. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19852443>.
- Swinburne, Richard. 1989. *Responsibility and Atonement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Timpe, Kevin. 2023. "The Inevitability of Sin." *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 7 (2). <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v7i2.65953>.
- Vorster, Nico. 2022. "Guilt Concepts in Reformed Doctrines on Original Sin." *Journal of Reformed Theology* 16: 246–68.
- Ware, Timothy. 1963. *The Orthodox Church*. Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Wiley, Tatha. 2020. "A Reconceived View." In *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, edited by Chad Meister and J.B. Stump, 101–24. Spectrum Multiview Books. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.