THE FIRST AND THE SECOND ADAM

Reflections on James Wetzel's Reformulation of a Doctrine

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ABSTRACT

James Wetzel offers a philosophical reformulation of the doctrine of original sin In this response I explore the subtleties of his account and question whether his reformulation has not lost something crucial—the connection of original sin and God's grace enacted in Jesus

JAMES WETZEL HAS WRITTEN A COMPLEX and probing essay offering what he terms "a philosophical reformulation and defense of the doctrine of original sin" (Wetzel 1995, 3) I will attempt, first, to explore the vision of human nature that emerges in his essay, and, second, to ask whether he has accurately described his undertaking as a reformulation of a (Christian) "doctrine " I think that something important to the doctrine has been lost along the way That, of course, does not make his essay any less worthwhile or insightful as a philosophical examination of a deeply puzzling aspect of human nature, but it does raise questions, far beyond my capacity to answer, of what it might mean to reformulate a doctrine

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Wetzel wants to jettison any notion that our sinful condition is inherited (not just, I take it, the Augustinian notion that it is inherited via biological propagation) He does not, therefore, want to explain our bondage to sin by appealing to a Fall of our first parents, nor does he find any such explanatory urge in the third chapter of Genesis Instead, he seeks to disclose through philosophical analysis the truth that to be responsible is to know oneself as already guilty with a burden of guilt inherited from no one Whereas critics of original sin often argue that we can be guilty only when we are responsible or accountable for our deeds, the kernel of truth Wetzel finds in the doctrine is that guilt precedes responsibility Being responsible means knowing oneself as already guilty

Such a view is paradoxical, of course, and Wetzel goes to work to dispel at least some of the bewilderment it may engender. He uses Immanuel Kant to develop a picture of the human person as morally divided between propensities toward good and evil and as needing to take responsibility for this divided self. Without at least being drawn toward what is good—being receptive even if not fully responsive to its lure—we would not be moral agents at all. To will evil for its own sake with no sense of any contrary tug, to be diabolical, is really to suffer the loss of agency—to become a thing. Just as we could lose our agency through external constraints that compelled even our willing (not just the limits within which we willed) and turned us into a thing, so also the loss of all internal constraints upon the doing of evil makes us into things that are totally unable to respond to what is good.

There are, of course, other reasons why we might not respond to what is good. We might be torn by conflicting impulses and give in to what we know to be bad. Or we might mistakenly, out of ignorance, do what is bad, thinking it good. In neither of these cases, however, are we entirely unreceptive to the good. They differ, therefore, from diabolical action, which we can hardly conceive to be "action" at all.

The argument to this point offers an intriguing vision, and it helps one to see what the horror of hell would be. To be in hell means to have become a thing, to have lost moral personality. The terror of it is not that one might suffer forever, but that one would have lost forever the possibility of being human—lost, to use language Wetzel does not, the end for which we are created. But now, if we are drawn by Wetzel's argument, will we not have difficulty describing the opposite of the limit case of hell? Would we not also lose agency—lose our humanity—in heaven? If we suppose that in heaven we would do the good automatically, without consciousness of any contrary incentives, have we begun to picture heavenly bliss as "thinghood"?

Here Susan Wolf's asymmetry thesis comes to the rescue. It is true that in heaven we would be irresistibly motivated to do what is good. It is also true that we cannot be held responsible for an irresistibly motivated *evil* act—cannot be held responsible because at that point we are no longer an agent but a thing. But it is not true that agency is lost when we are irresistibly motivated to do not what is evil but what is good. Although our natural impulse toward symmetry might lead us to suppose that the cases are parallel, they are not. Responsible agency requires only that we be able to feel the lure of the good, that we be receptive to its lure even if not always fully responsive to it. When we experience contrary incentives toward good and evil but choose what is evil, we are receptive to the good. When we do what is evil while supposing it to be good, we are receptive to the good. And

when without feeling even the tug of any contrary incentive we do what is good, we are receptive—and, in this case, fully responsive—to the good However, when we are drawn only to what is evil, we have lost our moral humanity Whereas hell is the loss of our humanity, heaven is its full realization

Although I have put the argument into terms that are not always Wetzel's, I think it is still recognizably his case, and it offers a penetrating picture of what it means to be a morally responsible human being Responsibility, it turns out, always includes a sense of guilt for wrongdoing, a recognition of division within the self Seeing this, however, we can no longer explain why we did evil The more we come to recognize and acknowledge our guilt, the less intelligible our action becomes to us How could the lure of evil really have conquered the lure of the good? Or how could we have been so blind as to think good what we now clearly see to be evil? But there it is We were divided, we were blind, we are guilty We cannot shift the responsibility for this to anyone else, we can only acknowledge its truth The insight here is not unlike C S Lewis's suggestion that we imagine what might happen if

> a very badly brought up boy is introduced into a decent family They rightly remind themselves that it is "not his own fault" that he is a bully, a coward, a tale-bearer and a liar But, however it came there, his present character is nonetheless detestable [T]hough the boy is most unfortunate in having been so brought up, you cannot quite call his character a "misfortune" as if he were one thing and his character another It is he—he himself—who bullies and sneaks and likes doing it And if he begins to mend he will inevitably feel shame and guilt at what he is just beginning to cease to be [Lewis 1962, 85–86]

The more fully we become capable of rational, responsible agency, the more surely we become aware that we bear a burden of guilt If we try to deny our responsibility for such guilt, we are forced to pretend that we are one thing and our character another If we can no longer explain why we did evil, that is a sign of moral progress, but it does not itself make us whole

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Thus far I have tried simply to emphasize the rich complexity of Wetzel's argument To the degree that his depiction of moral agency persuades us, he has gone some way toward describing human beings in terms similar to that of the Christian doctrine of original sin That is, he has given intelligible expression to a vision of agents who act freely but whose wills are in bondage in the sense that their very abil-

ity to act freely and responsibly testifies to the moral evil that has them in its grip Nor can they describe their condition simply as misfortune or fate They have to acknowledge themselves as responsible and perverse

I do not intend, however, to ask whether the argument persuades I am myself persuaded on a number of points—for example, that free will does not require alternative courses of action that to come to know ourselves as responsible involves the acknowledgment of a guilt already there I am less persuaded at other points—for example, that Wetzel can really make good on the asymmetry thesis, though I would be happy to see him succeed Nor am I always certain that he is actually offering an argument that should persuade us rather than a vision which, if unpacked sufficiently, might simply grasp us But I set aside these questions in order to turn directly to the claim that he is offering a reformulation of the *doctrine* of original sin

Has anything important been lost? A doctrine, after all is not a philosophical argument It is a teaching of the church, and it stands not on its own but in relation to other doctrines —in relation to all the articles of faith Wetzel himself is, of course, clear about one thing that has been lost, since he has deliberately jettisoned it The already present burden of guilt that we discover through his analysis of moral agency is a burden "we have inherited from no one" (4) He is right to note that the Genesis story does not provide an explanation for the emergence of evil in a creation declared good Evil is already present (through the serpent) in the Genesis story, and the first evil will is simply an eruption, a surd, in the creation Therefore, Wetzel writes, "[t]he search for an original rebel, who saw the light and then turned from it, is a futile one, the human part is not to find the creator of darkness, but to acknowledge the darkness that has made its claim upon what humans create" (4–5)

Wetzel offers us a penetrating and often persuasive account of the perversity of moral agents, but it remains chiefly an account of individual agency What the notion of inherited sin and the search for an original rebel carried, in addition, was the sense that *humanity* was fallen—that in the sin of our first parents we, too, were implicated and had gone astray If we believe in all seriousness that the human self is social to its very core, then the fact that the first evil will is inexplicable need not mean that ours is also Thus, Austin Farrer writes

> Our humanity itself is a cultural heritage the talking animal is talked into talk by those who talk at him, and how if they talk crooked? His mind is not at first his own, but the echo of his elders The echo turns into a voice, the painted portrait steps down from the frame, and each of us

> becomes himself Yet by the time we are aware of our independence, we are what others have made us We can never unweave the web to the very bottom, and weave it up again [Farrer 1961, 102]

Thus, the transmission of sinfulness involves imitation, but an imitation that goes far deeper than we, in our Pelagian moments, wish to concede Before we stand on any neutral ground, able to choose among exemplars or to reject all in favor of our own ideals, our character has begun to be formed and the orientation of our will established This is not simply our misfortune—as if we were one thing and our character another It is our very being

I have difficulty discerning this communal dimension of original sin in Wetzel's reformulation Does this matter? It matters, I think, for original sin as a doctrine, as one of the church's articles of faith, connected inseparably to the still more essential language of grace We might start by reminding ourselves of Jaroslav Pelikan's claim that the development of the teaching of original sin was influenced by the life and practice of the church, and that one of the most formative influences was the practice of infant baptism (Pelikan 1971, 286ff). What came first in the church's life was the practice of offering baptismal grace What came second was the understanding that, because such grace was needed, the humanity in which the infant had a part must be fallen

Remembering that, we may be moved to wonder whether Genesis 3 is the biblical passage with which to begin when pondering the doctrine of original sin In Romans 5, St. Paul writes of what we might call original sin, but he is not attempting to offer an explanation of our bondage to sin His theme is Christological, that grace abounds in Christ "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous . Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5.19–20) It is no accident that original sin is a Christian and not a Jewish doctrine Paul speaks of what we may call original sin in order to be able to tell the story of Jesus, in order to speak of grace That central thrust Augustine saw clearly "Now, whoever maintains that human nature at any period required not the second Adam for its physician, because it was not corrupted in the first Adam, is convicted as an enemy to the grace of God " (Augustine 418/1948, 643) The story Christians tell about human life is a story intended to necessitate and present Jesus, so that one may say, as Paul does in 2 Corinthians (5 14) that "one has died for all, therefore all have died " That story is of a creation good in the sense that finite creatures need not have been alienated from God, then a fall from that goodness, a disordering of love so deeply affecting

our nature that it becomes a condition from which we cannot free ourselves and into which every human being is socialized in the very process of becoming a self, and finally, redemption and deliverance of humanity through God's re-creating act in Jesus, who treads Adam's path backwards and unweaves the web to the very bottom

Perhaps Wetzel's reformulation can make a place for this, even if I have not seen it His account is, after all, a complex one I would be more confident, however, were I more certain of his claims in the final section of the essay He concludes the penultimate section with the words "At the source of all sin is moral blindness The fuller story of responsibility for sin will have to address responsibility for the blindness" (21) If the closing section of his essay is intended to address that responsibility, however, I found in it little help or hope Wetzel claims—as I noted earlier—that, once we acknowledge our guilt, our past behavior will become unintelligible to us Once we are no longer blind, we will have difficulty explaining how we could once have been We will be forced to acknowledge our guilt and to confront the mystery of our person

This acknowledgment of guilt "would be masochism if the aim were to invite retribution, but the aim is to remove the veil of nature from evil and return moral struggle to the realm of will" (23) Is that, finally, what Wetzel offers us? A call to moral struggle? I cannot think so, since so Pelagian a call would surely be an inadequate solution to the mystery of moral personality uncovered by his analysis We are in need of some kind of grace, and evidently we receive it from each other The work of liberation from our bondage takes place as we "offer to one another the vision of integrity we lack as isolated individuals" (24) and in this way release each other from our burden of guilt through mutual forgiveness

Is this grace enough? A vision of integrity offered from one crooked talking animal to another? Does Wetzel seek a wholeness that could issue in full and free forgiveness from a human nature that his own analysis shows to be less than whole? Although I would be glad to be corrected and reassured, I suspect that he does

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