

ORIGINAL SIN

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Original Sin

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Theology, Christian Philosophy, Religious Studies, Ethics.

1. Core Definition

The doctrine of **Original Sin** defines the state of sinfulness and guilt considered to be inherent in all human beings from birth, derived from the first transgression committed by Adam and Eve--the foundational account known as the Fall of Man. This concept asserts that humanity's nature is fundamentally wounded or corrupted, distinguishing it from specific, conscious acts of wrongdoing known as "actual sins." According to this theological framework, Original Sin is the inherited condition, while actual sins are the inevitable consequence or symptom of that condition.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the innate sinfulness of all people is seen as an outcome of the choice made by Adam and Eve, which led to their being displaced from the Garden of Eden and introduced mortality and suffering into the human experience. This displacement signifies not only a physical separation but a radical break in the intended relationship between humanity and the divine. The resulting state is one of spiritual deficiency, moral weakness, and a strong predisposition toward evil, often termed *concupiscence*.

The concept serves to explain the universal presence of evil and moral failure in the world, addressing the fundamental question of why individuals, regardless of environment or instruction, are naturally inclined toward behaviors contrary to divine law. The doctrine argues that human beings, even infants, are not born into a state of moral neutrality but are already tainted by this ancestral guilt and corruption, necessitating divine intervention for salvation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the narrative foundation for **Original Sin** is rooted in the early chapters of Genesis (the Fall, Genesis 3) and the Apostle Paul's theological interpretation in the New Testament (specifically Romans 5:12-21, which contrasts Adam's death-bringing disobedience with Christ's life-giving obedience), the formal doctrine was systematized much later by early Church Fathers.

The most critical development came from **Saint Augustine of Hippo** (354-430 CE). Challenging the teachings of the monk Pelagius, who maintained that humans are born morally neutral and possess the complete capacity to choose good independently of God's grace, Augustine fiercely argued that Adam's sin transmitted not only moral corruption but also actual guilt (*reatus culpae*) to all subsequent generations. Augustine asserted that because all humanity was seminally present "in Adam" when he transgressed, all inherited a vitiated nature and deserved condemnation. This Augustinian formulation became the defining standard for Western Christianity.

Following Augustine, the doctrine diverged between the Western and Eastern churches. The West (Catholicism and Protestantism) generally adopted a strong emphasis on inherited guilt and the necessity of Baptism to remove this stain. Conversely, the Eastern Orthodox tradition places less weight on inherited guilt, focusing instead on the inherited consequences of the Fall, such as mortality, suffering, and moral weakness (often called *phthora* or disease), while denying that individuals are culpable for Adam's specific sin.

3. Theological Interpretations: Guilt and Corruption

The interpretation of how **Original Sin** manifests hinges on the balance between inherited guilt (imputation) and inherited corruption (concupiscence).

In **Catholic Theology**, Original Sin is understood primarily as the deprivation of original holiness and justice, which Adam possessed before the Fall. The result is *concupiscence*, a persistent, sometimes intense, inclination to sin. While Baptism is held to erase the guilt (the *reatus culpae*) incurred by the sin, the disordering inclination itself (the *fomes peccati*) remains throughout life, providing the moral struggle that characterizes the human condition. Salvation history, therefore, is the process of healing the wounds of this inherited state through grace.

Within **Reformed Theology** (Calvinism and certain branches of Protestantism), the doctrine is often expressed through the concept of **Total Depravity**. This rigorous interpretation holds that Original Sin has corrupted every aspect of human nature--the intellect, emotions, and will--rendering humanity completely incapable of initiating salvation or choosing spiritual good apart from God's irresistible grace. Furthermore, the guilt of Adam's sin is viewed as being legally *imputed* (credited) to all descendants, meaning they are held responsible for the original disobedience itself, placing them under immediate divine judgment from birth.

These differing theological schools illustrate the concept's complexity, ranging from viewing the state as primarily a loss of privilege and subsequent moral illness (Eastern Orthodox) to seeing it as a state of both radical corruption and actual legal condemnation (Reformed Protestantism).

4. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms of Transmission

The defining characteristics of **Original Sin** establish its function as a universal theological principle.

Universality: The doctrine asserts that this sinful condition applies to all human beings born naturally. The only traditional exception acknowledged in Christianity is Jesus Christ, who is held to have been free from the taint of sin. Roman Catholic doctrine also holds the Virgin Mary to have been preserved from Original Sin from the moment of her conception through the special grace of the **Immaculate Conception**, preparing her to bear the Savior.

Inherited Corruption (Concupiscence): This is the spiritual weakness, the disordering of the passions, and the strong inclination toward self-interest and moral evil that plagues even the regenerate. It is the internal battle against temptation that persists even after the guilt of the original offense has been addressed through ritual or faith.

Mechanism of Transmission: Historically, theologians debated the precise manner in which the sin is passed down. The dominant Augustinian view suggests transmission occurs naturally through human generation (procreation), implying a biological or spiritual continuity linking all individuals back to Adam, justifying why the stain is innate rather than learned.

Necessity of Redemption: Because **Original Sin** results in an inherited state of alienation from God and spiritual death, it creates the fundamental need for a divine redeemer. The doctrine thus makes the incarnation and sacrifice of **Jesus Christ** logically necessary for the restoration of humanity.

5. Significance in Christian Soteriology

The concept of **Original Sin** is the linchpin of Christian soteriology (the study of salvation). Without a doctrine asserting inherent, universal sinfulness, the central role of Christ as Savior is undermined.

If humanity were merely imperfect or capable of achieving righteousness through effort, God's grace would be complementary rather than essential. However, because the Fall created a fundamental incapacity for human will to choose the ultimate spiritual good (a state often referred to as being "in bondage" to sin), salvation must be entirely a gift--unmerited grace. The doctrine ensures that salvation remains God's work, not humanity's achievement, thereby glorifying the redemptive act on the Cross.

Furthermore, the means of addressing **Original Sin**, primarily through the sacrament of Baptism, provides a foundational practice for Christian initiation. Baptism is ritually understood as cleansing the individual of the ancestral guilt, incorporating them into the body of Christ, and granting them the grace necessary to combat the remaining effects of corruption throughout life.

6. Philosophical and Ethical Impact

Beyond theology, **Original Sin** has profoundly influenced Western philosophy, political theory, and cultural narratives about human nature.

Philosophically, the doctrine entrenched a pessimistic view of humanity, contrasting sharply with later Enlightenment philosophies (such as those of Rousseau or Locke) that posited the human being as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) or innately good, corrupted only by society. The emphasis on inherent corruption provided historical justification for strict political governance and the need for external authority (church or state) to restrain human wickedness.

Ethically, the doctrine has shaped gender roles and expectations. Traditional interpretations explicitly link the consequences of the Fall--specifically pain in childbirth and subordination--to the initial act of disobedience attributed to Eve. This is the context for the common cultural commentary referenced in the source content: "People often joke that women must be the gender to carry children as a result of the **original sin**." Feminist theologians have consistently critiqued this interpretation, arguing that it unjustly burdens women with responsibility for universal human brokenness and has been used historically to reinforce patriarchal structures.

7. Debates and Criticisms

The doctrine of **Original Sin** remains a frequent subject of theological and philosophical debate, particularly in the modern era.

The most enduring ethical critique centers on the concept of inherited guilt: how can a just and merciful God hold an individual accountable and liable for punishment due to an act committed by ancestors? Critics argue that this violates the principle of individual moral responsibility, wherein each person should only be judged by their own actions. Opponents often cite scriptural passages (like Ezekiel 18:20) that emphasize individual accountability, countering the idea of ancestral guilt.

Challenges also stem from scientific perspectives, particularly evolutionary biology, which posits that moral imperfections and altruism evolved gradually rather than resulting from a singular, historical descent from perfection. The literal reading of a historical Adam and Eve initiating a complete genetic and spiritual shift conflicts with contemporary understandings of human origins.

In response to modern ethical difficulties, many liberal and progressive theologians advocate for a metaphorical or symbolic interpretation of **Original Sin**. They view the concept not as literal inherited guilt, but as a mythic narrative describing the universal human condition of moral brokenness, social alienation, and the tendency for each generation to inherit and perpetuate systems of evil.

Further Reading

[Original sin - Wikipedia](#)

[Augustine of Hippo - Wikipedia](#)

[Total Depravity - Wikipedia](#)

[Soteriology - Wikipedia](#)