The Psychology of Sin.

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There are four conditions of the possibility of moral conduct, and therefore of sin. These are (1) the existence of an objective law of which sin is the transgression, or of a moral standard of which sin is the falling short; (2) the awareness of the moral agent, at the time of the occurrence of his activity upon which moral judgment is to be passed, of the bindingness of any such law or standard upon himself; (3) the presence of incentives such as appetite and desire to be motives towards conduct inconsistent with what the law requires; (4) self-determination or freedom to choose between lines of action differing in moral value and to initiate conduct. Of these conditions, the first is a matter of ethics rather than of psychology; no more will be said about it, therefore, in the present article.

Passing, then, to the second, awareness on the part of an agent of the content of a standard and of its claim or obligation upon him, we may say that it is a very important condition because it reveals the distinction between sinfulness proper and moral imperfection: two things which have often been confounded. Thus a human infant, which can recognize no moral standard at all, is not as yet a moral being, and is incapable of actual sin. If we are not prepared to admit this, we must be prepared to attribute morality and sinfulness to the lower animals and even to inanimate objects that are hurtful. We do not, however, attribute sin to such things; and we refrain from doing so because they know, and can know, no better. Mere non-compliance with other people's standards, when one can have none of one's own, does not constitute sin; though it may well imply moral imperfection. Similarly, the adult heathen who is unavoidably ignorant of Christian ethics is non-moral with regard to its laws, however enlightened he be as to other moral standards. It cannot strictly be said of him that he *ought* to satisfy Christian standards of which he can know nothing; such law has no dominion over him. Nor, if he become a Christian, can he rightly condemn his past conduct as sinful because it fell short of the requirements of the higher law that he now knows. 'Ignorance that sins is safe'; provided always that a man be not the culpable cause of his own ignorance—which, however, is a different matter, having no relevance here. Awareness, at the time, of the bindingness of a given law upon oneself is necessary before one can be said to sin against that law.

The third condition leads us from the cognitive to the conative side of experience, from knowledge to appetite and desire. And again it is important to define rightly the relation in which natural impulses, etc., stand to sinfulness. Here, too, confusion has often been made: the raw material out of which sin is constructed has been confounded with the sinful. Psychology, however, dispels the confusion. In the first place, it tells us that instincts and impulses and emotions which prompt us to sinful conduct are both natural and necessary. They are not signs of depravity; nor are they the outcome of abnormality or derangement. They belong to us as God has been pleased to make us. Secondly, they are entirely non-moral in themselves; sin has its ground in the will. It is the will that shapes, not the raw stuff which it shapes, that alone calls for ethical approval or disapproval. And these innate propensities are, further, ethically neutral as to what will be made out of them. They are the basis of the highest virtues just as much as of the lowest vices. And they emerge in us without any consideration as to seasonableness; hunger is just as clamorous when only other people's viands are accessible to us as when we are surrounded by plenty of our own. These appetites and passions, then, are not to be called 'sinful,' though it is out of them that sin is primarily made; they are as non-moral as is a poisonous drug.

Thus we are solicited to act in various ways which conscience must disapprove by mental process which cannot but arise within us, our nature being what it is. For this we cannot be accountable or deemed sinful. God chose to make us by evolution from the lower animals, and the propensities which we share with our brute ancestors are fixed in the race. What is called original 'sin' is not sin but the precondition of sin, the stuff out of which we may elaborate either sin or virtue.

It is only in virtue of this possibility of conflict between appetite and conscience, between higher and lower desires or ends, that morality of the human type—as distinguished from the divine or the angelic—can exist. And hence is to be explained the appearance of sin in the life of perhaps every child of man who attains to moral discretion. Psychology teaches us that when we set about constructing a concept of sin such as shall be of universal application and shall be distinguishable from cognate conceptions such as that of imperfection, we must bear in mind the indisputable facts that man is conscious before he is self-conscious, impulsive and appetitive before he is volitional, and volitional before he is moral.

It is only when these non-moral incentives to action are metamorphosed by the will, or are consented to in the face of conscience, that they constitute sin. Not the existence within us of appetitive tendencies, but voluntary surrender of the self to them, is the essence of sinfulness in its primary forms. All such phrases, therefore, as 'involuntary sin,' and 'unconscious sin' are self-contradictory misnomers; for, as we have now seen, there must be both awareness of obligation and voluntary selection of an impulse towards a lower end when a higher might be followed, before sin can be contracted.

This brings us to the last of the conditions of sinfulness which we have laid down—the freedom of self-determination which distinguishes human conduct from animal behaviour. Without entering into a discussion of what exactly freedom means or how it is metaphysically to be construed, we at least signify by the word the difference between man and automaton, and repudiate the view that we are determined in our actions solely by heredity and environment. Theologians have always been agreed that the will is the sole seat or source of sin; though, as has already been hinted, they have sometimes departed from the implications of that plain and unequivocal statement when they have allowed themselves to speak of an abiding root of sin which we find in us when our moral consciousness first emerges, or of evil which cleaves to us from our very birth. This is a case of the old confusion between sin itself and the non-moral material out of which sin is made by the will, and without which indeed sin could not arise in human beings.

And further, something more than free volition is involved in sinful action. Even voluntary doing of what is objectively wrong is not always sin; there must be volitional *intention*. It is only of intentional conduct that morality, in the strict sense, is predicable. This point has never been more clearly expressed and emphasized than by our Lord. He taught that intention, even if prevented by external causes from being carried into execution in actual deed, is as guilty as its practical fulfilment; and it is conversely implied that unintentional deviation from the moral standard is only the semblance of sin.

For the sake of clearness and simplicity, I have hitherto spoken of our impulsive or appetitive tendencies and of the will separately. But as a matter of fact from the time when we attain to the moral status at its lowest, our 'blind' springs of action cease to be blind; will and impulse become blended. When the will reacts on impulses, these pass into desires or aversions which are, so to speak, self-conscious. We soon learn that appetites, the satisfaction of which is pleasant, can be artificially stimulated and fostered in order to be enjoyed. We can transform hunger into gluttony, anger into rage or vindictiveness, fear into cowardice, and so on. We can transform our old pleasures into displeasures, our hates into loves, and *vice versa*. But there is no need, for our present purpose, to pursue further the intricacies of the developed moral life or to trace the psychology of the more complex forms of sin, in which mental aims and spiritual pride rather than bodily indulgence assume the chief place. The 'matter' of such types of sin is different, but the 'form' is essentially the same, and the psychology of sin, in its essentials, can most easily be studied in the more elementary or primary moral situations such as those to which I have been inviting attention. They are the root out of which all other kinds of sin spring; as another has said, 'hunger and sex are the bed-rock of morals.' Similarly, in this short paper, many other interesting departments of the psychology of sin must be passed over, *e.g.* the psychology of habit, of sinful states as distinct from the isolated sinful acts which alone have here been kept in view; of temptation, which again is sometimes confused with sin; of the decay of the moral consciousness occasioned by sinfulness of life—the 'seared conscience' and the atrophied conscience. I would take leave to refer any who are interested in such subjects, or in others on which recent psychology has thrown further light, to my book,

The Concept of Sin (1912), where the theory of actual sin and practical applications of it to life are discussed.

A few words may be said in conclusion with regard to the two notions of accountability and guilt which, as has been implied in the foregoing remarks, are correlative with sin, and as to which psychology has something important to say. Psychologists have taught us that any process of consciousness can be regarded from two distinct standpoints, viz. (1) that of the subject at the moment when he is having the given experience, and (2) that of another person, or of the same subject at a later time, reflecting on that experience. The confusion of these two standpoints constitutes what has been called 'the psychologist's fallacy,' and we commit it whenever we read our own experience into that of another subject, *e.g.* the child, the savage, the lower animal, as men commonly do. The latter of these standpoints is that of objective science or common knowledge; the former is that of first-hand individual experience, sometimes spoken of as 'subjective.' Now it is plain that moral self-judgment from the subjective standpoint may often be the opposite of the judgment passed from the objective standpoint on the agent of a particular act. An ancient Hebrew whose ethical standard was 'an eye for an eye,' for instance, would approve of himself for an act of lawful revenge; we Christians would condemn such acts as sinful. Hence the terms 'accountability' and 'guilt' have two possible meanings, according as they refer to the subjective and objective standpoints respectively. And if our preceding description of sin be true, it will follow that 'sin' is only correlative with the subjective meaning, as is recognized in Paul's casuistry concerning meats offered to idols. But inasmuch as ethics adopts the other standpoint, theology has generally borrowed its attitude; and this is one cause of the common confusion of sin with imperfection. It is, however, only subjectively apprehended responsibility that is involved in sin and guilt. A man may experience guilt when he is objectively guiltless, and *vice versa*. And this is why the sense of sin—which is no infallible guide to the actuality of objective sinfulness—is no secure starting-point for a concept or a doctrine of sin. Once more, then, psychology has enabled us to get rid of an ancient theological error; and the elimination of the several errors upon which I have touched is not merely a matter of words, or even of correct theory: it should affect religious practice. It should discourage morbid self-examination and exaggerated language concerning sin, the frequent libelling of human nature and the pleasures of sense, and conduce to a true charity towards sinners, devoid of flabby sentimentality.

In the Study.

THE CHRISTIAN YEAR.

Sunday after the Ascension.

Power and its Conditions.

'Ye shall receive power.'—Acts 1[8].

No gift is given by God without man's response. There are conditions. What are the conditions upon which the greatest of all gifts is given, the gift of the Holy Spirit? That is the gift which brings power—power for holiness of life and for successful service. How is it ours?

The *appointed way* is through the gate of prayer and obedience. It is a great step toward getting power when we feel the lack. 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.' A sense of want is the key to the Divine plenty. 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you'; asking, seeking, knocking, all these are but expressions of lack. The Laodicean Church was lukewarm, because it felt no lack, saying, 'I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing.' Take that as a beacon of warning. The sense of need is the soul's answer to God's plenty; the sense of weakness, the first condition of power. 'Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' Paul knew this when he said, 'When I am weak, then am I strong.' The Pharisee felt no lack and received no blessing, but the Publican conscious of his need went away justified.