

Revitalizing the Originals: Reinhold Niebuhr's Original Sin and Original Righteousness in Light of Theology and Science

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Theology and science as a field has made great strides in showing how the best of science can dialogue and enhance religion, and how religion can in fact, contribute something to scientific discourse. There has been phenomenal work done on the subjects of creation, divine action, natural evil, eschatology, and various ethical concerns, but I believe that one area that requires further work is theological anthropology. Theologians and ethicists support an evolutionary understanding of creation, but there at times appears to be an apprehension in exploring what exactly this might mean for our understanding of human nature. My work endeavors to contribute to the field in this way, by placing Reinhold Niebuhr's theological anthropology into conversation with insights from the sciences and the theology and science dialogue.

It is my contention that theology and science makes an ideal conversation partner for Niebuhr because he was already concerned about religious responses to science in his time and his anthropology is constructed in a way that is open to the insights of science. This paper will briefly explore Niebuhr's concern about religion and science, showing how the current field is addressing his concerns, followed by an examination of Niebuhr's anthropology. In particular, I want to focus on his understanding of original sin and original righteousness, and how placing his thought into conversation with the theology and science dialogue might affect his theological anthropology, as well as the implications that might have for theological ethics.

Reinhold Niebuhr's Science and Religion Concerns

Niebuhr criticized Christian thinkers for focusing too much on metaphysics at the expense of justice because they had to contend with science challenging personality. When Niebuhr speaks of personality, he is referring to an understanding of reality that is self-conscious and free, including self-conscious individuals as well as the entirety of creation through God.¹ Science challenges personality in two ways; the first way is that science presents a view of the universe that is impersonal. The laws of physics do not require divine intervention and even though the universe may have been fine-tuned for life, life is rare and accompanied by suffering.² The second way that science challenges personality is through technology. Calling it applied science, Niebuhr argues that humans have compounded the impersonal nature of the universe presented by science through the construction of complex societies. The size of populations and the nature of institutions make human interactions more impersonal, and this complicates ethics because when things are less personal people tend to care less, but even when people feel strongly about something, the nature of society makes it hard to act.³

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion? a Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1928), 6.

² Ibid, 5.

³ Ibid, 5-6.

The threat of the loss of personality is dangerous for Christianity because the universe and individuals are bound together, mutually reinforcing the need for proper action. Niebuhr argues that Christianity needs the assumption that even though the universe may appear to be impersonal and meaningless, that in fact the ultimate end of the universe is ethical. The call to love one's neighbors comes from a love of God, creator of the universe. People also come to seek and know God through their interactions with others, recognizing that personality transcends material value. Metaphysics provides the foundation for ethics, but the former also relies on the other as well.⁴ Niebuhr argued that because it would be too taxing to confront science simultaneously about metaphysics and ethics, the thinkers of his time chose what they believed was the easier of the battles, and focused on metaphysics at the expense of ethics. The answer then is for Christianity to argue against science's overly deterministic claims.⁵

The concerns Niebuhr had regarding the relationship between science and religion also have their place in today's context, but I believe that Niebuhr would be encouraged by the work being done in the theology and science dialogue, and that he would be actively involved in the internal conversation of the field and in trying to clarify public misunderstandings. Science holds a more prominent place in contemporary society than in Niebuhr's time. Niebuhr lamented the determinism of science, but in some ways, things have only gotten worse. Scholars in theology and science, however, argue against the validity of ontological reductionism, and envision how God interacts with God's creation. Ontological reductionism is not science, but a philosophical position built on methodological reductionism. When people appeal to ontological reductionism, they are not appealing to science, but rather scientism. One can still hold the findings of science valid without ascribing to philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality that are outside the philosophical assumptions included in the discipline of science.

The theology and science dialogue also rises to Niebuhr's challenge by tackling the ethical aspects of science and technology in addition to the work in metaphysics. The breadth of ethical issues scholars engage with, as well as the depth of engagement with the sciences, religious institutions, and the public is profound. Scholars in science and religion continue to be on the forefront of ethical issues in science and technology, including theologians and theological ethicists' interest in the transhumanism movement. It is clear to me that the field of science and religion attempts to avoid problems that concerned Niebuhr and provides a fruitful conversation partner.

Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Anthropology

The conversation between Niebuhr and theology and science begins with his theological anthropology. In 1939 Reinhold Niebuhr was the invited speaker for famous Gifford Lectures at Scotland's University of Edinburgh. According to Robin Lovin, what Niebuhr is attempting to do with the lectures that were published as *The Nature and Destiny of Man* [sic], it to compare "classical, Christian, and modern views of human nature, without any attempt to give the Christian view the special status of revealed truth, but with considerable confidence that he can demonstrate that the Christian view offers a more adequate assessment of both human possibilities and human evil than the alternatives."⁶ In his Gifford Lectures, Reinhold Niebuhr

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁶ Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 13.

presents an anthropology that captures the complexity of the human situation. He emphasizes the reality of sin while also calling for the rejection of an historical fall. Niebuhr has an essentialist view of human nature, that is to say that there is a common, universal nature that all humanity shares.⁷

Human nature, for Niebuhr, has two aspects. The first aspect of human nature is humanity's "natural endowments, and determinations," their "physical and social impulses," and their "sexual and racial differentiations, in short," everything that characterizes humans as creatures "embedded in the natural order."⁸ The second aspect of human nature "includes the freedom of" human spirit, "transcendence over natural process and finally" human "self-transcendence."⁹ Both of these elements are important and contribute to Niebuhr's anthropology in mixed ways. Niebuhr argues there is a difference between essential nature "and the virtue of conformity to that nature."¹⁰ This is a crucial distinction for Niebuhr because it allows him to speak about the reality of sin but also keep sin outside of human essential nature. Niebuhr is famous for saying that sin is inevitable but not necessary.¹¹

The perfection of human nature would mean always acting according to human nature. This perfection is expressed differently in the two aspects of human nature. For the first part, the creaturely part, perfection is found in adherence to natural law. Natural law, for Niebuhr, "is the law which defines the proper performance of" human "functions, the normal harmony of" human "impulses and the social relation between" individuals "within the limitations of the natural order."¹² The perfection of the second part of human nature, the transcendent part, are the theological virtues – love, hope, and faith.¹³

When Niebuhr expands on his interpretation of the theological virtues, it becomes clear to me that he is not actually referring to the ethical method of natural law when he speaks of it as the perfection of the first part of human. I believe a better interpretation of Niebuhr's perspective is to see it as a virtue based ethic. The perfection of the first part of human nature could be defined as virtue ethics defines human flourishing. Such flourishing is not divorced from the theological virtues and certainly is influenced by them. When Niebuhr speaks of the harmony of impulses and social relation, he is pointing toward three things in particular:

- (a) The perfect relation of the soul to God in which obedience is transcended by love, trust and confidence ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God");
- (b) the perfect internal harmony of the soul with itself in all of its desires and impulses: "With all thy heart and

⁷ For the sake of simplicity, I will not be entering into the larger conversation about the definition of species. Humans, for this argument, will be limited to the modern species *Homo sapiens*.

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: a Christian Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 270.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 242.

¹² Ibid, 270.

¹³ Ibid, 271.

all thy soul and all thy mind”); and (c) the perfect harmony of life with life: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”¹⁴

Humans, however, are not perfect. Humans act in ways that disrupt the kinds of harmonies Niebuhr discusses.

Niebuhr’s solution to this problem is twofold. The first is that he acknowledges that it is human nature itself that allows for the capacity to sin. Humanity’s self-transcendence provides the opportunity for humans to see beyond their own lives, to see themselves as both subject and object, as to see others as selves like them. It also illuminates finitude, both of the world and of the individual. Humans are created animals, and like all other animals, are subject to contingency. The difference is that self-transcendent organisms are aware of the finite and contingent nature of reality. Niebuhr argues that humans, aware of the contingent nature of life, seek ways to mitigate or overcome these contingencies and in so doing “all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life.”¹⁵ The precursor to sin, for Niebuhr, is anxiety. Humans are aware of the tenuous nature of their existence and this leads them to act in ways to alleviate the anxiety.

Anxiety itself is not sin, for Niebuhr believes that it is possible for anxiety to be a creative, productive force in human life. The dual nature of anxiety is important because Niebuhr uses this kind of argument in other aspects of his anthropology. Humans are anxious because the world has limits and humans have limits, but simply knowing that is the case does not define what those limits are. Niebuhr’s argument that humans “can do nothing and regard it perfectly done, because higher possibilities are revealed in each achievement. All human actions stand under seemingly limitless possibilities”¹⁶ is just as applicable now as it was when he was alive. The seemingly limitless possibilities of human actions are exacerbated in the discussion of sin. The problem is that too often humans deny their finitude and believe that they are capable of completely overcoming the cause of their anxiety on their own. This is why, like Augustine before him, Niebuhr identifies pride as the primary form of sin.

Pride, however, is not the only way that humans can try to deal with anxiety. He also identified sensuality as another form of sin. Sensuality can refer to matters of sexual ethics, and while Niebuhr would likely classify many sexual sins as a part of sensuality, he actually is arguing a different point. Whereas pride is an attempt to control what is beyond control, sensuality is being caught up in the things that can be controlled. It is about avoiding the anxiety that comes from the contingent aspects of life, and focusing, more often than not, on pleasures “such as possessions, food, drink, or TV, and also by withdrawing from activities in a threatening world. We attempt to insulate ourselves and perhaps grow numb. Now the problem is not inordinate self-assertion but rather deficient participation in our many relationships and responsibilities.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid, 288-289.

¹⁵ Ibid, 182.

¹⁶ Ibid, 183.

¹⁷ Douglas Ottati, “The Niebuhrian Legacy and the Idea of Responsibility,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (October 2009): 399-422, 413.

It is tempting to say that since pride is often used by people who have power, sensuality must be the way in which people without power engage their anxiety, but this is an incorrect conclusion. People who have power also employ sensuality due to fear and anxiety. Sometimes it is because people are not sure they can live up to expectations. In other words, people who lack not ability, but confidence “also commit the sin of sloth and laziness where we take refuge in immediate distractions and sensual pleasures to avoid reaching for higher goals or ideals.”¹⁸ People may also be unsure whether they are pursuing the best course of action in a particular situation. Arguing against American isolationism in World War II, Niebuhr believed that to not take part in the struggle against Hitler was “an attempt to avoid the risks and the anxieties of action by renouncing the responsibilities of power.”¹⁹ This position is clearly a part of Niebuhr’s realism. Being unsure, afraid, anxious, or any other number of hesitations, are not sufficient reasons for not acting, and do nothing to lessen culpability.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Original Sin

Although there is certainly more to say about Niebuhr’s theological anthropology, at this point it is more useful to focus on particular aspects of his anthropology in order to achieve a more meaningful dialogue with theology and science. Attention will be given first to Niebuhr’s understanding of original sin. Niebuhr is traditionally identified as thoroughly Augustinian in his approach to sin and original sin, and while he certainly agrees with Augustine on particular points, my reading of Niebuhr places him somewhere between Augustine and the Pelagians. He disagrees with Augustine’s interpretation of scripture, bringing him closer to the Pelagians, but Niebuhr also believes that Augustine and Paul are more capable of addressing the reality of sin in humans.

Reinhold Niebuhr has problems with how Augustinians and Pelagians have wrestled with the doctrine of original sin. The problem, according to Niebuhr, is that original sin is seen as something that is inherited, or if not inherited then inevitable, but it is also seen as not a part of human essential nature, thus maintaining everyone’s accountability for their sins.²⁰ Following Augustine, Niebuhr identifies sin as an issue of the will, but is unwilling to say it is a part of human essential nature. Original sin seems to be a contradiction of free will. Sin is understood as universal, something all humans contend with and succumb to. On the other hand though, if people inherit sin, either from Adam’s sin or from the previous generation, then how can they be held responsible for sinning?²¹ Historically people resolved this problem in different ways, but Niebuhr disagrees with their solutions.

Niebuhr begins with the Pelagian argument “that actual sins cannot be regarded as sinful or as involving guilt if they do not proceed from a will which is essentially free.”²² Niebuhr asserts that what would be considered the “original” aspect of original sin for Pelagians does not arise in the will, but is actually a part of human nature, in the creaturely aspect of human nature. The fall in Genesis is not a part of their understanding of human nature; people are the way they

¹⁸ Richard Crouter, *Reinhold Niebuhr On Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 46.

¹⁹ Ottati, “The Niebuhr Legacy and the Idea of Responsibility” 413.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 242.

²¹ *Ibid*, 243.

²² *Ibid*, 245.

have always been. Niebuhr points out that in his time, liberal thinkers, both Christian and secular, tended to take this position, often identified as the “cultural lag” thesis.²³ The cultural lag thesis is an argument that humanity’s bias toward evil is not in the will. The problem arises from slothfulness inherited biologically, which causes human culture to fall behind when there are advances in technology. Social problems arise in this lag period, when culture is catching up, allowing people to abuse technology or others utilizing these advances.

Cultural lag reduces human responsibility for the bias toward evil, but it also asserts that individuals are responsible for their own actions. Niebuhr argues that what this does is to make every sin a conscious act, a choosing of something evil against what is known to be good. Niebuhr argues that the Catholic doctrine of original sin has more in common with the Pelagian view than the tradition would like to admit, and that the driving force behind such a position is to argue against the notion that human nature is totally depraved because if it was, sin and responsibility would cease to be meaningful.²⁴

Niebuhr then returns to Paul and Augustine because even if he sees inconsistencies in their thinking, he believes that their perspective can do a better job of dealing with the complexity of human nature. For example, Paul identifies that human sin can be conscious but also unconscious, or even a mix of the two.²⁵ The relationship between the actual sin and the inclination to sin is much closer for Paul than for the Pelagians. Niebuhr argues that “the bias toward sin is something more than a mere lag of nature or physical impulse or historical circumstance. There is, in other words, less freedom in the actual sin and more responsibility for the bias toward sin (original sin) than moralistic interpretations can understand.”²⁶ Niebuhr again highlights the importance of anxiety for sin, but denies that sin or original sin can be reduced to anxiety alone. What is understood as original sin is anxiety combined with sin. Temptation is successful because humans have succumb to temptation in the past.²⁷

Niebuhr explores the connection between temptation and sin because he believes that sin is inevitable and its inevitability is linked to temptation. And at the same time, while he believes that sin is inevitable for humans, he argues that humans are not free from the responsibility of their sin. The source of human temptation, Niebuhr says, is within human nature itself. The human capacity for self-transcendence is the culprit. It allows humans to escape the confines of time and nature. This is not evil; in fact, without it humans would not possess freedom and their creativity would be extremely limited. On the other hand, it also provides humans with temptation. Self-transcendence allows humans to not only imagine other possibilities, but it also allows humans to ponder the most likely path for their lives. It reminds humans that they are free, but this freedom is not without its limits, that humans are finite. And yet, humans look at what they have transcended and begin to believe that it might be possible to transcend their finitude.²⁸

²³ Ibid, 246.

²⁴ Ibid, 248.

²⁵ Ibid, 250.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 251.

²⁸ Ibid.

Niebuhr identifies in Christianity what he considers a unique perspective about human nature. Christian thought does not deny that the self is important. What is best for the self, what will fulfill every self the most, is not giving up the self, but aligning one's will with God's will.²⁹ The problem is that this not what humans do. They place their faith in the wrong place, in their own selves, rather than in God. This is done to attempt to alleviate anxiety, but Niebuhr argues that it actually creates more anxiety. People act in ways to secure their place in a contingent world, but on some level realize that the action they are taking distorts the harmony of nature and that the security they desire may in fact not be achieved this way. It is the lack of faith or trust in God that provides the sin aspect of original sin. Anxiety leads to sin when people lack the proper faith in God, what Kierkegaard and other theologians refer to as the sin of unbelief.³⁰ Niebuhr realizes that there is a paradox; this perspective on original sin requires the belief that sin is already present in people's lives. Utilizing Kierkegaard's work, Niebuhr argues that this paradox actually supports why original sin does not absolve humans of responsibility.

Niebuhr argues that responsibility is connected to the guilt that people experience after sinning. People often are able to deceive themselves, but Niebuhr believes that even people who frequently and consistently sin are unable to completely assuage their conscience all of the time.³¹ People are finite, but sin as a disruption of the harmony God intends requires people to overlook their finitude in order to act, and can affect any of the three aspects of harmony, between God and self, between self and other, and within the self, or all of them simultaneously. This can involve denying human finitude in general, trying to change the value of someone or something else, such as prioritizing personal need as greater than someone else's need, or convincing one's self that a desire requires fulfillment beyond what is needed to actually satisfy.

Sin is compounded because not only is the disruption of harmony a problem, but the justification for the disruption is also problematic and the self tries to conceal the justification from itself.³² Some people can be more sensitive to guilt than others, and Niebuhr articulates a position that people who have achieved more morally are more likely to be aware of their guilt, and that the culmination of this process is to identify the limits of freedom itself. It becomes clear to a reflecting individual that no matter how good they have tried to be, there have been times where there has been personal bias, where their own needs or desires have taken a place of central importance contrary to reality.³³ The standard for conduct comes from God, and even if people are remorseful and repent for their previous wrongs, they know they will be unable to keep the self-deception from happening again. Niebuhr believes that both Pelagians and Augustinians have misunderstood the importance of the limits of freedom.³⁴

The Pelagian and Augustinian discussion of original sin is also problematic because this debate led the Augustinians to adopt a literalist position. According to Niebuhr, "[i]n countering the simple moralism of the Pelagians they insisted on interpreting original sin as an inherited taint. Thus they converted the doctrine of the inevitability of sin into a dogma which asserted that

²⁹ Ibid, 252.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 256.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 258.

³⁴ Ibid, 260.

sin had a natural history.”³⁵ While Niebuhr emphasizes the history of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, how Augustine viewed concupiscence as punishment for Adam’s sin and the transmission of original sin through the conjugal act, Niebuhr also points out that there have been plenty of Christian thinkers who did not read the Genesis account of the fall literally, that the story is symbol rather than history. Recognizing that the work of Paul has been used to support Augustine’s interpretation Niebuhr argues that Romans 5:12 does not reference a biological inheritance of sin.³⁶ Niebuhr believes that in order to truly understand how humans can still be responsible for sin when sin for humans is inevitable, one must reject the literalism found in the doctrine of original sin.³⁷ Even if this is done, people will still have problems reconciling these concepts because they are not perceived as rational. Instead, Niebuhr classifies the doctrine of original sin as a dialectic truth. Sin is inevitable, but it is not necessary, and not a part of human essential nature.³⁸ Human nature, however, makes human sin possible. Without freedom, humans would not be able to sin. This is an important distinction and one that must be reexamined in light of developments after Niebuhr’s writing.

Intergroup Preference/Bias and Original Sin

Placing Niebuhr’s understanding of original sin into conversation with the sciences and theology and science starts with his view of the Genesis account of the fall as symbolic. However, I think that conversation is rather standard in the field already, so I would like to focus on looking to human biological history to see whether there is something that could prefigure or lead to original sin. Selfishness is an obvious answer, but I contend that the concept of intergroup preference and in particular the movement from intergroup preference to intergroup bias as a much more fruitful path. I think that intergroup preference/bias presents an interesting case that seems to cohere with much of what Niebuhr articulates in his discussion of original sin.

Intergroup preference is defined as “a bias toward those within one’s group and against those outside of one’s group.”³⁹ That being said, I am not claiming that intergroup preference is universal to all life. There is evidence that intergroup bias appears in rhesus macaques, a species of monkey that separated from the evolutionary tree of apes (and hominids) around thirty million years ago.⁴⁰ While it is possible that intergroup preference could be an example of convergent evolution, independently evolving in separate lineages, it is also possible that this trait was present in a common ancestor and passed on to monkeys and apes. If the latter is the case, then intergroup preference would be universal for hominid evolution, and since original sin is only attributed to modern humans, and possibly closely related hominids, this is sufficient for the task at hand.

In order to determine whether rhesus macaques exhibited intergroup preference, researchers from Yale performed seven experiments with three goals in mind. First they wanted

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 261.

³⁷ Ibid, 262.

³⁸ Ibid, 263.

³⁹ Neha Mahajan et al., “The evolution of intergroup bias: Perceptions and attitudes in rhesus macaques.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 3 (2011): 387-405.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 390.

to know whether macaques distinguish between ingroup and outgroup independently.⁴¹ Then they wanted to know if macaques acted like other primates and relied only on biological traits to sort individuals into categories, or if preferences could be given based on more arbitrary traits, like humans can.⁴² Finally they wanted to determine if members of the ingroup were viewed favorably and members of the outgroup viewed negatively, in other words, does the preference become a bias.⁴³ The results indicate that macaques do indeed differentiate on their own an ingroup and an outgroup. The macaques spent more time looking at the pictures of macaques that were not in their group and to ensure this was not simply because the faces were unfamiliar, the researchers created images of the outgroup that would be more familiar to the test subjects than the images they used from the ingroup, and the results were the same.⁴⁴ They also placed a random object with images and were able to show that macaques were able to identify the images shown with the same object as a group, and exhibited the same behavior, increased attention, to the outgroup.⁴⁵

In order to determine whether there was bias, they created sequences of images where test subjects would be shown series of images of ingroup and outgroup members and positive and negative objects, in this case, images of fruit and spiders respectively. They hypothesized that less time would be spent looking at each series if they were consistent, that is images of ingroup and fruit shown sequentially or the outgroup and spiders shown sequentially, and that if they were shown in an inconsistent sequence, ingroup then spider or outgroup then fruit, there would be no decrease in the amount of time spent looking at the images.⁴⁶ Interestingly, the researchers found that the males did follow the hypothesis and spent less time looking at the consistent sequences, but females did not. This could be, they argue, because male primates are typically more involved in intergroup conflict and aggression.⁴⁷ Further work would have to be done to determine whether that is the case. These end their discussion by stating that human intergroup bias could share an evolution heritage with a number of primate species, based on their results.⁴⁸

The nature of intergroup bias was examined in detail in order to compare and contrast with reflections on the nature of original sin. Niebuhr refers to original sin as anxiety plus sin. Anxiety itself is not sin, though it contribute to the decision to sin. Intergroup bias has better coherence with Niebuhr's understanding of original sin than selfishness does because intergroup bias reflects anxiety and sin. Intergroup preference generates anxiety. Humans, or macaques, are quite capable of identifying who is part of the ingroup and who is not, and those that are not in the ingroup are paid more attention to because there is the possibility there is a threat present. This preference highlights the anxiety that someone who is not a part of the ingroup represents, but it is not until the preference becomes a bias that there is the possibility of sin.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 389-390.

⁴³ Ibid, 390.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 393.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 396.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 398.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 400.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 402.

It is one thing to identify another as part of a different group and worry that their presence could potentially pose a danger, but it is another thing to view that individually negatively simply because they are not part of the ingroup. Even if it is expected that organisms would care more about those closely related to them, this kind of argument does not hold up because humans, and even macaques, are capable of delineating between ingroup and outgroup using arbitrary markers. In the social setting of humans, that means all sorts of group lines can be drawn over biological categories and cultural categories, the possibilities are almost endless: race, gender, religious affiliation, orientation, sports teams, size, politics, aesthetics, geography, language, vocabulary or pronunciation, etc. Selfishness can apply to groups, but often when used in reference to evolution, it is used to describe individual behavior, in order for an organism to pass on its genes. Intergroup bias on the other hand is inherently social; individuals possess this bias, males more so than females, at least in macaques, but the bias itself is built around group membership. This understanding also fits with the attention that Niebuhr gives to the social dimension of sin.

Finally, intergroup bias is related to Niebuhr's understanding of original sin because there can be attention given to responsibility. The question posed is how are humans responsible for sin if it is something they inherit? Niebuhr wants to keep people accountable for sin while still holding to the doctrine of original sin, as well as keeping sin out of human essential nature. Looking to selfishness as a metaphor for original sin cannot hold this distinction. Selfishness, evolutionary speaking, would be helpful, and possibly even responsible, in order to exist and reproduce. If this is passed down from generation to generation, it becomes a part of human essential nature, and raises the question of whether are people responsible if their genes made them do it. Of course, such an argument would be overly deterministic, but appealing to intergroup bias there is room to separate responsibility and essential nature. Intergroup preference is not itself a bad thing, the problem is when preference becomes bias. The problem is that it appears that even the bias could come from a common ancestor with macaques. In order to deal with this issue, I will turn to a final analogy, genetic diseases and genetic predispositions.

Inherited Predisposition

If original sin is understood to be transmitted from generation to generation, and if Augustine viewed this transmission as tied to the conjugal act, there should be no surprise that original sin could be viewed as a genetic defect that is inherited from one's parents. The problem with this kind of argument is twofold. First, it is a reductionist understanding of human nature that reduces human behavior to biology. And a second related problem is that if this were the case, then it would remove the question of responsibility. If humans are determined genetically, and there are genes that code for aggression, violence, selfishness, etc., there is no problem. Humans acting this way would simply be seen as following the natural inclination to reproduce at whatever cost. But even Richard Dawkins, the champion of the selfish gene, says that humans have the freedom to overcome their genes. I would argue that it is better to think metaphorically about the inheritance of original sin compared to a genetic disease.

Typically people are not seen as responsible for genetic diseases they have inherited. If someone inherits the BRCA1 gene and develops breast cancer, that person is not seen to be at fault. Responsibility, however, is not completely gone in the discussion of genetic diseases. One may not be seen as responsible for inheriting a genetic disease, but parents could be viewed as responsible if they transmit a genetic disease to their children. Even one hundred years ago,

people would not have been aware of the mechanism of inherited disease and would be unable to do anything about it. Even now it is possible to not be aware of an existing genetic condition before reproducing. The problem is complicated further because it is possible to not have a genetic disease but still be a carrier for the disease. If two parents who are carriers conceive and the gene follows the classic Mendelian dominant/recessive pattern, then they would have a twenty-five percent chance of the child having the disease, a fifty-percent chance of the child being a carrier, and a twenty-five percent chance of the child neither having the disease nor being a carrier. It could be argued that even without malicious intent, ignorance of a genetic condition does not absolve responsibility.

Genetic counseling and prenatal genetic diagnosis are becoming increasingly used tools to determine whether there are potential problems with a couple wanting to conceive a child. When used in tandem with in vitro fertilization, it is possible to screen embryos for specific inherited diseases before implantation and to move forward with only those embryos that do not have the affected alleles. Even if there are no known conditions in their family history, people trying to have children could get tested. Original sin in this metaphor is something that all humans possess⁴⁹ but not everyone may be aware of it. Not knowing would not eliminate responsibility for passing on intergroup bias, whether it is biologically or through socialization.

On the other hand, there are instances where people do assign responsibility for an inherited genetic predisposition. Type-2 diabetes is an example of a disease that people are seen as responsible for, because it is associated with obesity and the development of both of these can be attributed to poor health decisions by the person affected. An inherited predisposition to these diseases is not seen as an escape from responsibility. In fact, people would argue that if individuals know they have a predisposition to these illnesses genetically, they should be taking extra steps to avoid the risk factors that lead to the development of these conditions, and that if people do not take these steps, they are being irresponsible. Original sin, I would argue, is more like a genetically inherited predisposition than a disease.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Original Righteousness

Placing Niebuhr's doctrine of original sin into conversation with the theology and science dialogue and insights from the biological sciences creates more distance from Augustine's perspective. Asserting beliefs that concupiscence predates modern humans, and the possibility that other hominids may have struggled with original sin first would be problematic for an Augustinian view, but these kinds of arguments could be accepted by a Niebuhrian perspective. Understanding the fall as symbolic, the theological understandings of sin have metaphorical connections to thermodynamics and intergroup preference. There is something about nature and human nature that prefigures a tendency toward sin, and combined with anxiety, leads to the inevitability of sin. Without an historical fall, Niebuhr is unable to turn to the past to find a time where humans were perfect, or when they lived in totally harmony with what God willed. The next task is to explore where Niebuhr identifies original righteousness. Humans were created

⁴⁹ There are Christian traditions that do not believe in the doctrine of original sin, but from a Niebuhrian perspective, original is universal.

good, and part of human nature is creaturely, so the question is whether human biological history provides any insight into original righteousness.

Unlike original sin, I think relating Niebuhr's understanding of original righteousness to human biological history is far more complex and nebulous, in part because his notion of original righteousness is complex and sometimes nebulous. Even though all humans sin, they are also aware that sin is not the way things are supposed to be. People either imagine a time without sin, such as before the fall, or they have an awareness of some kind of moral code that they know they have not been able to uphold.⁵⁰ Sin may not be referenced directly; instead, people may describe it as a cultural problem, such as cultural lag, human institutions not keeping up with human understandings of justice.⁵¹ The distinction between "ought" and "is" has been a longstanding theological and philosophical issue. Niebuhr sees this tendency in humans, to know that things are not the way they should be as a challenge to the notion of total depravity. In other words, Niebuhr is disagreeing with Protestants, usually Calvinists but not exclusively, who argue that the fall has completely tainted human nature and that humans are not capable of identifying the good on their own.

Niebuhr is not denying that humans have been affected by sin, and that even human reason is free of such influence. People are able to convince themselves that their own interest is really what is best for the community. Humans are also in need of Christ, but Niebuhr goes on to say that if people did not have a sense of good and evil already, they would not understand the different vision of life that Christ offers and would not feel the need for the hope Christ offers.⁵²

The reason why it is easy to believe in the total depravity of humans, according to Niebuhr, is tied to the problems surrounding the doctrine of original sin. Theologians, Niebuhr says, want to argue against people who want to dismiss any notion of the fall as simply myth, but in doing so, the tendency is to interpret the Genesis account literally, and see the fall as an historical event. And when working from this position, it is easy to see humans and say after the fall, humans are no longer living in accordance with God's will, therefore human perfection no longer exists, but did previously, before the fall.⁵³ Niebuhr goes on to say that the problem is not only biblical. Stoic philosophers also saw the past as different from their present age, and that humans had existed in harmony and innocence.⁵⁴ Even in individual human development Niebuhr sees a tendency for people to look to the past with fondness. People look at how their lives have turned out and see childhood as a time of innocence, before they knew better. Even with these other sources though, Niebuhr still maintains that a misinterpretation of Genesis is what contributes the most to Christian understandings of paradise and human perfection before the fall, and total depravity afterward.⁵⁵ The problem is compounded by Christian responses to a temporal existence of human perfection prior to an historical fall. Protestants have tended to go too far in one direction and say that the historical fall completely damaged human nature.⁵⁶ On

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 265.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

the other hand, Catholics have viewed human original perfection as something that is not essential to human nature. It was a given by God as a gift, and as a consequence of the fall God took the gift back. What was lost to humans was not essential to their nature.⁵⁷

Niebuhr identifies two aspects to human nature, and each of these aspects has a perfection. There is the creaturely aspect of human nature, which is perfected in the harmony of relationships between self and God, within the self, and between self and others, and the spiritual aspect, which is perfected in the theological virtues, faith, hope, and love.⁵⁸ Faith in God and what God is doing in the world is part of the perfection of human freedom because it alleviates human anxiety. Instead of being concerned with the contingency of the world to the point of turn away from God and toward to the self in order to secure one's place in the world, faith allows humans to trust in God's will and remember that they are finite and unable to solve everything on their own.⁵⁹ Niebuhr views hope as a specific kind of faith. Whereas faith deals with anxiety in general, hope focuses on the future. Humans can envision numerous, even countless, future possibilities, and without hope that the future, including human wellbeing, humans would overcome with fear, or a sense of powerlessness. For this reason, Niebuhr includes belief of the existence of God as a part of human essential nature.⁶⁰

Love is related to human freedom on its own, but also has an aspect that is dependent on faith as well. Freedom needs love in order to connect people to each other. Niebuhr says that the creaturely aspect of human nature alone is not enough to form and maintain community.⁶¹ Humans, because they possess freedom⁶², have distinct personalities and as individuals are isolated from one another. It is possible for humans to be in relationship with other life, human and otherwise, but such relationships will be incomplete without love. These relationships, according to Niebuhr, cannot "do justice to both the bonds of nature and the freedom of their spirit if they are not related in terms of love. In love spirit meets spirit in the depth of the innermost essence of each."⁶³ Love allows the full expression of relationship or community.

Love is what allows humans to see the other as more than object, as subject, and this is where love is dependent on faith as well. If people do not have faith, they are unable to escape looking to their own interests to be open to what love has to offer. Additionally, humans have to be in relationship with God, because without God, spirit meeting spirit would not achieve its potential. Without God, the imagination is limited to what humans can envision love to be. Niebuhr looks to scripture to illustrate his point. The greatest commandment is to love God with everything, and to love your neighbor as yourself.⁶⁴ Loving other is important, but it is placed in

⁵⁷ Ibid, 268-269.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 270-271.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 271.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² While Niebuhr seems to be presenting an argument for human uniqueness based on freedom, I do not think that this would inherently exclude other organisms that had similar capabilities.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 271-272.

⁶⁴ Mark 12:28-33.

the context of love of God, and comes after Jesus' teaching against anxiety.⁶⁵ Niebuhr sees the theological virtues as the necessary foundation for freedom, not an addition to human freedom. Taking them away means that human freedom will cause humans to sin. Humans are sinful and are unable to acquire the theological virtues, but at the same time, they are not given to humans as if though human nature was incomplete without them.⁶⁶

Sin does not do enough damage to human nature where humans are depraved totally; there is still something of essential human nature that challenges humans in their sinful state. This is what Paul is referring to when he says that he does not do what he knows he should and does the things he knows that he should not.⁶⁷ Law is how the essential nature of humans appeals to individual sinful humans. In order to truly know themselves, people have to understand that they do not live up to the law, and that the law they fail to live up to comes from their essential nature.⁶⁸ Conscience, then, plays at least a starting role in relating humans to their essential nature. The law, then, is not something that is completely external to humans, rather it is at the center of who they are. This is what Paul is referring to when he says that the law is written on the heart.⁶⁹ The problem with this is that the specifics of what the law entails can be misunderstood. Consciences can be misled, and as stated previously, humans are very good at convincing themselves that what is best for them individually is what is what the group should identify as what is best. Niebuhr argues that even with these concerns, it is possible, in loving community, to identify the universals of the law of human nature.⁷⁰

The question remains, however, as to where original perfection for humans can be found. Niebuhr uses the analogy of disease in order to argue that an organism that has a disease in part of it is not considered healthy, but diseased. If, for instance, only one organ is affected by the disease, the rest of the body is healthy, but as a whole, the person is not considered healthy. In such cases, health cannot be located in a specific spot in the body.⁷¹ Niebuhr says that the same is true when speaking of humans and sin. All humans sin, therefore all humans are affected by sin, including their natural capacities. Reason is not exempt from the influence of sin, but Niebuhr argues that anything that helps humans remember the harmony of relationships that God intends for life represents health, and while a specific location for it cannot be found, "it is possible to find a locus for the consciousness and the memory of an original perfection."⁷² This memory is rooted in the human capacity for self-transcendence. When humans transcend themselves, they

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 272. Niebuhr does not cite which texts he is directly referring to, so it is difficult to know precisely what text he is referencing. The greatest command appears in all three synoptic gospels as does Jesus' appeal to not worry, but these two things are not found in the same chapter together in any of the synoptic gospels.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Romans 7.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 273.

⁶⁹ Romans 2:14-15.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 275.

⁷¹ Ibid, 277.

⁷² Ibid.

can identify themselves as individuals that are part of a much larger picture, and that as a finite organism, anxiety has caused the self to act in ways that do harm.⁷³

There is a distinction between the memory of original perfection and having that perfection. This memory cannot be equated with obtaining perfection. Such confusion is likely, though, because when looking back on their past actions when they are transcendent, people assume that the reason they can now see that they acted wrongly previously is because they have become better since then.⁷⁴ The problem is that people take their past perspective into account when acting, and use it to justify their own interests. The resulting act is sinful, though Niebuhr admits there can be differing amounts or levels of self-interest and self-deceiving measures in action.⁷⁵ If one must put a temporal location to original perfection, then Niebuhr would say that it exists before action, but action is a very broad term here, referring even to thought and desire. The definition of act in this case is tied to anxiety. When a person acts (or thinks or desires) out of anxiety, the result has been affected by sin. Humans are not aware of this at the moment of action, but once they have acted and transcend the situation, the problem is identified.⁷⁶

Returning to his discussion of the theological virtues, Niebuhr identifies faith, hope, and love as humanity's *justitia originalis*.⁷⁷ The theological virtues are what allows for human freedom and some aspect of them remain with humans, even though they are sinful, and serve as a call to what humans should aspire. In order to identify the specific content of what original righteous asks of humans, Niebuhr wants to clarify the relationship between natural law and *justitia originalis*. Catholic thought has created a strong division between the two, and that original righteousness was lost in the fall but natural justice remains untouched from the fall. Niebuhr argues that the lines need to be blurred between the two and that failing to do so simplifies human nature too much. Human freedom is bound up in the creaturely aspects of what it means to be human and that sin can influence human reason, prohibiting *justitia originalis* from being free from the effects of sin.⁷⁸ Believing that human reason is above the influence of sin allows the law itself to help exercise and spread sin. The way in which this happens is that sin takes something contingent, such as an individual's own circumstances, and universalizes it in reason, contributing to a misunderstanding of what the law requires.⁷⁹

The theological virtues represent the highest degree of harmony in relationships. The perfection of the creaturely aspect of human nature rests in the harmony of relationships between self and God, within the self, and self and the rest of creation. Faith, hope, and love embody what proper communion with God is like. All three theological virtues affect all three sets of relationships. Such a view of human nature identifies humans as both sinful but also aware that they fail to meet the standard that is central to what it means to be human. The result is that in any given moment, humans are aware, even in their sinful state, that as free beings there is a standard to which they are called, and while this standard is understood as law, it is clear that this

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 278.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 281.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

law must transcend the particulars of a given historical or social situation. However, knowledge that the law must transcend the particular does not mean that humans have a clear understanding of what the ultimate law requires, nor does it mean that they will be able to achieve these requirements upon learning what they are.⁸⁰

Original righteousness provides an argument against an overly negative view of human nature like total depravity, but Niebuhr also believes the social gospel movement went too far the other direction, and he asserts that living up to the requirements of original righteousness is very difficult. Love, as the highest expression of original righteousness requires freedom, and while humans are free, it is not an absolute freedom. Additionally, even though humans do have freedom, even if incomplete, they still maintain the legacy of original sin, and even the freedom they have is affected by sin.⁸¹ Humans are finite, and the limits they face, including their particular location in space and time, and these limitations shape how people perceive the needs of others, and also the weighing of their needs and of others. Niebuhr seeks to make the distinction between absolute natural law and relative natural law for the same reasons he softened the distinction between natural law and *justicia originalis*. However, he does not believe they can be collapsed completely, and criticizes utopian thinkers for believing that love can replace justice in history. In a world filled with sin, justice is needed to coerce people into moving toward the requirements of original righteousness.

Appeal to Science Appropriate?

It could be viewed as a mistake, from a Niebuhrian perspective, to look at human biological history for any evidence of human perfection. If original perfection is not chronological, that is not something found exclusively in humanity's past and then lost with an historical fall, then evolution may have nothing to contribute to such an understanding. While at first glance this argument has merit, it does not hold up to closer scrutiny. First of all, the sciences seem to be in consonance with a nonchronological understanding of human perfection. The earlier discussion of the prefiguring of evil and sin in physics and biology suggest a world where there is suffering and the tendency toward selfishness even before humans evolve. If the argument regarding earlier hominid species and original sin predating modern humans can be supported, then modern humans would have evolved in a world that already had sin. In that case, at least for modern humans, it would not be possible to speak of an original perfection chronologically. Niebuhr's position on original righteousness would be supported by such findings, because it would reinforce his argument that the fall should be interpreted symbolically and that there is no time in their history that modern humans existed with perfection.

The second reason why it is incorrect to dismiss looking to the sciences for insights regarding human original perfection is that Niebuhr's softening the distinction between natural law and *justicia originalis* and between absolute natural law and relative natural law makes dialogue with the sciences even more vital. Humans as finite and sinful beings, are affected by sin. Total depravity goes too far, but the limits of human nature as well as the effects of sin affect human thought and action. The memory of original righteousness is not only from God, but elements of it are tied to the creaturely aspect of what it means to be human. While original righteousness cannot be identified in human history, I contend that evolution provides some

⁸⁰ Ibid, 288.

⁸¹ Ibid, 296.

creaturely anchors for the memory of original righteousness. These anchors are not evidence of the attainment of righteousness, but without them I also believe it would not be possible to have memory of original righteousness. In other words, it is possible that there are universal contingents relating to original righteous. For original sin, it was intergroup preference and bias, for original righteousness, a leading candidate is cooperation.

Cooperation

Cooperation is not necessarily a positive thing for all affected parties. There can be an uneven distribution of effort and reward, and it is easy to see how some can cooperate to the detriment of others, such as predation, exploitation, oppression, etc. I am not arguing that altruism can be found in humanity's evolutionary past, but I do believe that humans would be incapable of altruism if they did not have certain tools, namely empathy and concern for others. Intergroup preference and bias show that individuals can look beyond their own interests to the interests to others, but most likely with others that are like them in some way. This expansion of the circle of concern, however, does allow for new possibilities in the imagination. Without a history of cooperation, humans would find it more difficult, if not impossible, to have a memory of an original righteousness that required the kind of love Niebuhr describes. The existence of cooperation in evolutionary history does not serve as a defense of humans or other organisms having obtained righteousness, but it can serve as an example of why humans have a memory of original righteousness.

Cooperation not only occurs between different species, but also between members of the same species. However, cooperation can lead to the "free rider" problem, where individuals receive the benefits of cooperating, but do not engage in cooperative behavior. If those who receive the benefits of cooperation without actually reciprocating are more successful from a reproductive standpoint, it is difficult to imagine cooperation as a lasting strategy. There are ways, however, to punish free riders. Other birds may choose not to groom a bird that did not reciprocally groom previously. Humans, and other primates, are good at identifying the ingroup and outgroup and therefore a form of punishment readily available to them is that of social exclusion. This punishes the free riders and also helps those cooperating because there are fewer individuals that share in the fruits of cooperation.⁸² This is even more likely to be the case if the cost of social exclusion of free riders is low, because if it takes little effort to distance themselves from the free riders and they receive a larger share of the benefits, individuals will identify how exclusion benefits them and participate in excluding.

A punishment of this type is a "self-serving" punishment, and most game theory models other types of punishment, often where the cost of punishing free riders is high.⁸³ Exclusion as a form of punishment, if the cost of excluding is low enough, can be more successful than costly punishments because the individuals excluding can have a higher return than those who try to receive the benefit of cooperation without contributing.⁸⁴ This is even more likely if people are always successful in their attempts to exclude. If it was costly to exclude and the odds of actually

⁸² Tatsuya Sasaki and Satoshi Uchida, "The evolution of cooperation by social exclusion," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 280, no. 1752 (December 2012): 20122498.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

being able to exclude free riders was low, such a strategy would not work, but if exclusion costs are low and success rates for exclusion are high, then contributing and excluding those that do not, will lead to a greater benefit than not contributing and getting excluded. It can be argued that these results only occur when exclusion is “self-serving” and that exclusion in and of itself does not meet the standard of love that the ultimate law requires. I would argue that Niebuhr would never expect human interactions to independently live up to the standard of the ultimate law. Exclusion as a mechanism, however, could contribute to a community that consistently cooperates and shares the benefits of this cooperation. In such a setting, anxiety would be lower and people would be more open to seeing the other as the ultimate law intends, at least the others who cooperate. While cooperation through exclusion seems similar to fairness or justice, and not transcendent love, it could provide a stable environment where people are able to have a stronger memory of original righteousness.

Cooperation appears to coincide with certain physiological changes. Species that cooperate also had relatively low sexual dimorphism between males and females, larger brains, length of weaning increased, and higher shoulders relative to size, all of which are relevant to hominid evolution.⁸⁵ It also likely took time for hominids to be able to hunt larger prey. Increased brain size could have allowed for more complex forms of cooperation to occur, including more complex social structures. Being able to form subgroups that could separate and recombine in multiple ways would promote cooperation and allows hominids to cover more territory, and more or larger prey.⁸⁶ Though the causal relationship is unclear, it is reasonable to assume that cooperation played a role in or coevolved with physiological aspects of hominids that contribute to their mental abilities.

Brain size is not a direct measure of intelligence, however. Just because one species has a larger brain does not necessarily mean it is more intelligent than another species. Neanderthals had a similar size brain, and possibly larger adult sized brains than modern humans, but modern humans are believed to be more intelligent. Intelligence can be an evolutionary expensive trait; the human brain takes far more resources compared to its size than any other part of the body.⁸⁷ Researchers are using artificial neural networks combined with game theory to examine how brains function and possibly developed. Studies suggest that intelligence is selected for when there is more cooperation.⁸⁸ Increases in intelligence, however, lead to differences in the rate of cooperation. Researchers believe this is because intelligence can lead to extremes in cooperation, “where this increase in cooperation due to increased intelligence creates further opportunities for intelligent individuals to engage in mutual cooperation.”⁸⁹ As this happens, the likelihood of a strategy of always cooperating increases, making it also more likely that individuals can take advantage by never cooperating. In other words, intelligence can lead to higher totals in cooperation, but also increased variability of cooperation.⁹⁰ Increases in intelligence allow for

⁸⁵ Ibid, S445.

⁸⁶ Ibid, S448.

⁸⁷ Luke McNally, Sam P. Brown, and Andrew L. Jackson, “Cooperation and the evolution of intelligence,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 279, no. 1740 (June 2012): 3027.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 3030.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 3031.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 3032.

new ways of acting and help making appropriate choices when faced with contingent decisions. Intelligence is often linked to kin selection, but these results suggest that cooperation, and not just cooperation with close relations, is possible and even promoted. Intelligence helps in social interactions, and therefore increasingly complex social structures could place selection pressure on intelligence.⁹¹

Cooperation, discussed thus far, does not constitute morality. Organisms enter into symbiotic relationships, or choose to work with other individuals in their species because they receive benefits. As the analysis of free riders has explained, it is possible for individuals to try and receive the benefits of cooperation without actually cooperating. Likewise, one of the reasons that social exclusion works as a method to combat the free rider problem is that there is an incentive to those who are cooperating to exclude free riders; people cooperating receive a larger portion of the fruits of cooperation if they can successfully exclude free riders. None of this behavior measures up to the ideal that Niebuhr posits in the memory of original righteousness, though I argue that humans would be incapable of having memory of original righteousness without such behavior. Cooperation is a necessary but insufficient element of humanity's memory of original righteousness.

Anthropology Shaping Ethics

Because I am an ethicist and interpret Niebuhr through a virtue ethics lens, I believe that changes to his anthropology will also shape theological ethics that utilize his anthropology. The insights of theology and science lead to a number of changes to a Niebuhrian ethic, but I will briefly mention four. The first two will deal with challenges to virtue ethics. I propose an additional rule to Aristotle's rules for finding the virtuous mean. I also challenge virtue ethics' understanding of genuine friendship in light of original sin and original righteousness. The second set of concerns involves biotechnology. I argue that Niebuhr's concept of sin as sensuality can critique the motivations behind certain uses of biotechnology. Finally I will propose guidelines for biotechnology.

Determining the Virtuous Mean

Aristotle provides three rules for determining the mean of a virtue, between the vices of excess and deficiency. The first is that determining the exact mean and being able to achieve it is very difficult. Therefore, people should overestimate in the direction of the excess or deficiency that is less harmful.⁹² With the virtue of temperance, for example, it is less harmful to have an excess of control regarding the indulging of pleasure than a deficiency, so people should aim to be closer to the excess. People must also be self-aware and have knowledge of the kinds of things to which they are drawn. In someone avoids conflict at all costs, then he or she needs to envision the mean being in the opposite direction.⁹³ Finally, Aristotle argues that pleasure is problematic for everyone. People are drawn to it and avoid pain, and this permeates human

⁹¹ Ibid, 3034.

⁹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 29.

⁹³ Ibid.

reason. This leaning toward pleasure can be seen a predisposition and so people must always suspect that their estimation is failing to take this into account and adjust accordingly.⁹⁴

I believe that in light of Niebuhr's anthropology it is instructive to include an additional rule when determining the mean, taking account for the barycenter. Imagine that for any given virtue the excess and deficiency are spheres, such as the Earth and the sun. The barycenter is the center of mass of the two objects, and so in the case of the Earth and the sun, the barycenter is the point around which both objects actually orbit. This would be the mean, where the masses of the two objects are balanced, but I would argue that the barycenter cannot be the virtuous mean. Instead, it emphasizes Aristotle's rules but also represents more clearly the difficulty in approximating and achieving the virtuous mean.

Aristotle acknowledges that people often have a natural tendency toward either the excess or deficiency of a given virtue, so in order to illustrate the importance of accounting for the barycenter, gravity can be a metaphor for this natural tendency. The virtue of temperance will provide the most pronounced example, since everyone has a strong tendency towards pleasure and avoiding pain. If one imagines the deficiency of temperance, intemperance, is the sun and the excess of temperance is the Earth, then calculating the barycenter shows where the gravitational forces balance one another. The barycenter of the sun and the Earth lies within the interior of sun; the Earth only moves the center of mass slightly. The center of mass cannot be the virtuous mean in such an example, because it would lie far too close to the deficiency of temperance.

Taking into account the barycenter reinforces Aristotle's rules for determining the mean and further illustrates the difficulty of achieving the mean. Clearly, if the center of mass is still within the sun of intemperance, than the virtuous mean must be overestimated toward the Earth of excess temperance. The second rule is being aware of their tendencies, in this case the tendency toward pleasure, means that people need to overestimate the virtuous mean even more toward Earth. This is compounded by the third rule; if all humans are drawn towards pleasure, the virtuous mean needs to be even closer to Earth than the sun. Attention to the barycenter additionally shows that more effort than anticipated is needed to achieve the virtuous mean when it is identified or estimated. In order to move away from an excess or a deficiency, one must fight the gravitational pull of that excess or deficiency and maintain some resistance against that pull in order achieve a stable state. It is not just identifying the virtuous mean, but also determining the effort needed to achieve the mean, and taking into account the barycenter improves both of these estimates.

Challenges to Genuine Friendship

Friendship plays a critical role in virtue ethics. Although there are different types of friendships, Aristotle argues that genuine friendship, or complete friendship, is what is important for morality. Genuine friendships are between equals. Aristotle goes as far to say ideally they live together. I contend that Aristotle's conditions for genuine friendships are too restrictive and ultimately cause methodological problems for virtue ethics. If people only engage in conversation regarding the moral life with people in their ideological ingroup, then at the very least they will have a skewed understanding of the virtuous mean for justice. Friendships of

⁹⁴ Ibid.

pleasure and utility can provide experience of people in the outgroup, but this is insufficient to understand what is owed to others in a moral sense. Genuine friendships for Aristotle exacerbate this problem since he posits that these kinds of friendships involve spending large amounts of time together. When most of one's time is spent with people in their ingroup, increasingly more of their mental and moral focus is aimed toward the ingroup. I argue that this focus leads to what I call ingroup myopia, a nearsightedness where the things that are close are clear but things far away are unfocused. Unlike nearsightedness in vision, though, people may not be able to perceive that people in the outgroup are not in focus and fail to take this into account.

The problem of ingroup myopia goes beyond the virtue of justice, though its other affects are not as easy to identify. In dealing with other people directly justice is able to highlight the problem of ingroup myopia regarding other people. The formation of an ingroup, particularly in humans but also in macaques and possibly other primates, does not have to be based on proximity or familial relation; what unites an ingroup can be completely artificial. Ingroups can form around ideas and ideologies. If someone is raised in a context where they are surrounded by people who share an ideology, they may not be aware that there are other viewpoints. In other words, socialization can be so complete that a person believes it is the only reality. Prudence, using right reason to determine proper conduct, could clearly be affected by ingroup myopia. This influence of ingroup myopia would affect all moral deliberation, making determining and achieving the virtues more difficult.

I am not arguing that people should not form genuine friendships with people in their ingroups. These friendships play a crucial role in connecting people to communities. I am arguing, however, that all of a person's genuine friendships cannot be from their ingroups. Forming genuine friendships with people who are different from one's self provides new insights into how other people think, dream, imagine, value, and act. Genuine friendship takes time, allowing trust to build as differences are explored. These friendships also refocus one's mental and moral attention, like corrective lens for the soul. Eyeglasses provide a restoration of right vision, but only if they are worn, so genuine friendships with others not in the ingroup need to be fostered, polished, and maintained. I argue that in light of original sin and original righteousness, it is possible and necessary for people to form and foster genuine friendships with people outside of their ingroup(s). It is possible because Niebuhr's understanding of human nature has two aspects, and Aquinas' identifies a natural and a supernatural end for humans. Broadly speaking, the *telos* for humanity is flourishing, with the ultimate expression of that for Aquinas manifesting in the beatific vision. Humans will not experience this before death, so while two Christians can will this for one another, the supernatural end cannot be achieved in this life, or of human accord. The natural end, however, can be achieved and humans play a part in this. Therefore, while it may not be possible for a Christian and a non-Christian to will mutually the beatific vision, they can will the natural end of human nature.

Original righteousness backs up this assertion because Niebuhr does not say that only Christians have a memory of original righteousness, but that all humans do. Even though all humans and human reason are affected by original sin, it is still possible for humans of any faith tradition, or even those who reject belief to do good and to remember that things should not be the way they are currently. The memory of original righteousness allows people in the outgroup to have something to contribute in a genuine relationship. People of different ingroups can share

a common object of love, that is the natural end of human nature, human flourishing, and they can offer insight into what the good means to one another.

While I believe it is possible to form genuine friendships with members of the outgroup, I also argue that original sin requires people to do so in order to prevent an impoverished ethic. Forming genuine friendships with people not in one's ingroup provides additional insight into how others see the world, their commitments to one another, the rest of creation, and possibly even their conception of God. As a corrective lens for ingroup myopia, these friendships can help identify known shortcomings of one's perspective, can engender a deeper sense of empathy, and challenge one to develop their character more. People who make the decision to intentionally form these kinds of friendships will have a more robust understanding of what human flourishing means, and be more attuned to the harmony of relationships that Niebuhr identifies as God's will.

Biotechnology

Finally, I would like to address biotechnology. Many scholars identify various pursuits of biotechnology to be emblematic of sin as pride. They would say that humans are choosing to take their own biological nature into their hands and shape it as they see fit, playing God. There has been ample work done on these concerns, however, so I would like to focus on Niebuhr's understanding of sin as sensuality and how engaging with Niebuhr's anthropology might lead to guidelines for the use of biotechnology.

Sin as Sensuality and Biotechnology

I argue that sin as sensuality is just as present, and even precedes pride in the context of biotechnology. Niebuhr makes the distinction between pride and sensuality, and even though he ultimately believes sensuality is related to the love of self that is typified in sin as pride, that sensuality is really about the disruption of the harmony within a person, a disordered soul. A person focuses too much on the pleasures of creaturely life and not on God.⁹⁵ Niebuhr also identifies a tension within sensuality, and each of these aspects are relevant to the discussion of biotechnology, especially the transhumanist quest for immortality. Part of what is sensuality is the reification of the self. Indulging every pleasure to its fullest is a sign of power and an expression of idolatry, something that one is free to do because they have the resources and ability to do so.⁹⁶ Transhumanists certainly fall into such thinking. There is rhetoric of the right to eternal life and inhibiting the pursuit of this right should be criminalized. And while any extension of life that can be achieved now is welcomed, the ultimate goal is to allow people to achieve immortality when they are at their physical peak. Extreme caloric restriction is currently the only known method for drastically increasing one's life, but I am unaware of any transhumanists who are doing this. Immortality, it seems, is less meaningful without total freedom, to engage in any activity that is pleasure. Sensuality appears to be a core aspect of the transhumanist vision of immortality.

The other part of sensuality is escaping the self. The self is anxious and knows that it should not be the center of existence, and looks to alleviate the anxiety through immersion in that

⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 232.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 234.

which is not ultimate. Sex is one of the sins most associated with sensuality, and while sexual gratification can be an example of inordinate self-love, it can also be an escape. The self recognizes that it does not deserve deification, but through sexual activity the self can move the deification to their lover. The self does not feel the anxiety about being the center anymore, but anxiety can still remain because the other is also not the center of existence. In order to quell that anxiety, one can continue to pursue sexual gratification or drunkenness to escape consciousness.⁹⁷

The quest for immortality can be understood as an expression of anxiety. If God is not the center of one's existence, and one does not have faith and hope in God's promise for the future, then the future is full of anxiety. In order to combat this anxiety, transhumanism looks to a post human existence, where there can be confidence in the future, because it is controlled by one's self. The goal of immortality or the post-human existence becomes the center of one's life.

Proposed Guidelines

Biotechnology is neither inherently good nor evil; it is a collection of technologies that can be used for various ends. In order to provide a more comprehensive or systematic answer to whether particular techniques or ends should be pursued, I propose a set of guidelines to aid in moral deliberations of biotechnology. These guidelines will include both necessary conditions as well as prohibitions. Some of the guidelines draw a sharp line between therapy and enhancement where others blur the distinction or ignore it entirely.

Safety

The first guideline is safety. Safety in terms of research subjects and recipients of developed treatments. Although safety cannot be guaranteed in human trials, terminal patients who test experimental treatments should still have safety risks minimized. Safety is not a groundbreaking guideline, all medical treatments should be reasonable safe, and there should be different thresholds of safety between therapy and enhancement. With life threatening diseases there is a greater sense of urgency and more at stake. Especially in the development of treatments, there should be some room for safe risks. Enhancements, however, are likely not life-saving treatments and therefore should require a higher level of safety. There are always risks involved in medical procedures, but elective procedures such as enhancing one's senses, or intelligence, strength, etc., there should be more stringent guidelines in place to protect patients.

Reversibility

The safety standard for enhancements should be reversibility. What I mean by this is that any enhancement that is made, whether it is mechanical or genetic, should be able to be reversed. This addresses concerns about having sufficient knowledge about that is needed to bring about the change as well as minimizing any negative impacts of a particular enhancement. If scientists are able to both increase the spectrum of light that the eye can see, but also restore the eye to its original functionality, I argue this shows enough understanding of the biological or mechanical mechanism of the enhancement. It also allows people to change their minds if the enhancement is not what they imagined it would be. Tattoos are a permanent change to one's body, and there

⁹⁷ Ibid, 240.

is a growing industry around tattoo removal. People believe that they want something, but they may change their mind.

Human/Post-Human Flourishing

Therapies and enhancements should contribute to human flourishing. Therapies that restore health improve the creaturely aspect of human nature and sometimes the transcendent aspect of human nature as well, depending on the condition. Enhancements are permissible as well provided they contribute to human flourishing. If transhumanists accelerate evolution to the point of speciation, where one or more species form, enhancements should also conform to their understanding of flourishing. Flourishing for post-humans would likely be different than flourishing for modern humans because flourishing is tied to anthropology and post-humans could be quite distinct from modern humans in terms of anthropology.

It could be argued that requiring enhancements to contribute to human flourishing is too stringent, that enhancements should not need to be beneficial, just not harmful. In bioethics, two of the fundamental principles are beneficence and nonmaleficence. Nonmaleficence, or not doing harm is far less stringent than beneficence. It is easier to not harm everyone than it is to actively help everyone. In terms of human enhancement, if enhancements that did not contribute to human flourishing but did not hinder it were permissible, the number of allowable enhancements would increase. While I could be convinced over time to weaken this constraint, I believe that initially, at least, that enhancements need to be confined to things that will promote or contribute to human flourishing. If enhancements become more ubiquitous and are safe, an argument from human freedom would likely be sufficient to allow additional enhancements.

Accessibility

With any new kind of treatment, there are questions of social justice. It takes time and money to develop tests and treatments and companies rightfully expect to recoup these costs and generate profit from successful treatments. On the other hand there are people who are in desperate need of these treatments who may not be able to afford them. Companies need to find ways of making gene therapy or other forms of therapy accessible to as many people who need it.

Enhancements raise additional questions of justice because they are not necessary, but their use could provide individuals with additional advantages. Since enhancements would be elective, they would likely not be covered by insurance, allowing only a small subset of the population to afford them. Artificially increasing intelligence or strength could make these people more desirable for certain tasks, possibly increasing their earning potential and increasing income discrepancy. Scholars of distributive justice refer to one's inherited traits as the genetic lottery, and in light of this I would propose a lottery for enhancements until they are affordable to a majority of people.

Longer Lives, Not Immortality

Finally, I would argue that life extension is good, but immortality is not. From a Christian theological perspective, immortality in this life would interfere with the ultimate good of union with God. Spending more time with loved ones and do contribute to human flourishing are goods and should be reasonably pursued, but they are not the ultimate good so there needs to be some

limit placed on how long life can be extended. Humans are finite beings, and doing away with biological death could alleviate some suffering, but would lead to other problems. If everyone alive today could live indefinitely and still be able to reproduce, humans and post-humans would consume all of the resources on this planet, potentially ending all life that is currently known. Such an existence would not be sustainable. Attempting to live forever also represents a lack of faith and hope. Humans have anxiety about death, but attempting to alleviate that anxiety through their own actions, without God, and even contrary to what God desires is the quintessentially definition of sin.

I endeavored to show that Reinhold Niebuhr and the theology and science dialogue are fruitful conversation partners and that changes to anthropology can bring about changes in theological ethics. Even within Niebuhr's understanding of original sin and original righteousness there is room for deeper conversation. Additionally, the changes to Niebuhr's anthropology affect more than just the method of virtue ethics and biotechnology. I am anxious to see what additional insights will come from a sustained dialogue between science and theological anthropology; I expect it to be dynamic, thought provoking, and fulfilling.