



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Original Virtue”

Genesis 1:26-28, 3:1-5, Luke 15:7

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The Scorpion and the Frog. You probably heard the fable where a scorpion asks a frog for a ride across a river. The scorpion promises not to sting the frog for then both would drown. The frog thinks that is reasonable and lets the scorpion climb on his back. But, half way across, the scorpion stings the frog anyway. The dying frog, asks, **“Why did you sting me knowing what would happen?”** The scorpion replies, **“Couldn’t help it. It’s my nature.”**

What is *human* nature? Listen for responses from these passages from Genesis and Luke.

Genesis 1:26-28:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Genesis 3:1-5:

³ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” ² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said,



'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' " ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die, ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Luke 15:7

⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Original Virtue or Original Sin? At birth, are we more prone to do good or to do evil?

The verses I read from Genesis come from two chapters with two perspective. The verses from Chapter 1 are encouraging about human nature. Humans are created good and are capable, as God's stewards, of taking care of others and the world around us. In short, we are made in "*the image of God*." That is our Original Virtue.

The verses from Chapter 3 are discouraging about human nature. Eve and Adam succumb to temptation and try to claim their own authority over what is good and evil by eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Left to their own devices, they do what is wrong. That is our Original Sin.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? *Which original is original: virtue or sin?* This is the debate not only of theologians but of every academic discipline or social practice that wants to understand human nature. Without supervision and training, are children more prone to kindness or cruelty, to help others or to think of only themselves?

Another way to ask this question is this way: What would happen if children were stranded on an island? Absent the constraints of Law and Civilization, how would they behave?

A 19th century response to that question was offered by R. M. Ballantyne with this novel, *A Coral Island; A Tale of the Pacific Ocean*. The book tells the tale of three British schoolboys marooned on an uninhabited Polynesian island. They band together not only to survive but also to deal with pirates and cannibals who come to visit. This is an *Image of God* story because, when left on their own, these schoolboys rise to the challenge of doing what is right.

A century later, William Golding read this book. Golding was a teacher at a strict British boarding school and he thought Ballantyne got it all wrong. More than an observer of schoolboy behavior, he struggled with his own inner demons. He asked his wife if she thought it was a good idea for him to write a book about stranded schoolboys on an island behaving in the way they would *really* behave. She told him to give it a go, and he did. *The Lord of the Flies* was published in 1954.

This book is often required reading in high school. I had to read it for class and I bet many of you did too. If you did, I bet it has stayed with you because the book is disturbing. This is a sanctuary and not a classroom so I won't go into plot details. I'll just say that the lads marooned on the island without parental supervision *do not* rise to the challenge by banding together to survive and thrive but instead divide into tribes and descend into savagery. This is an *Original Sin* story telling us that without the veneer of civilization- its training, restraints and threats- the world should expect the worst from us. We are born savages who must be trained to behave.



I guess most people side with Golding because that book has sold over 150 million copies. Indeed, for all of the attacks on the *doctrine of original sin* in the modern age-

- Those silly literalists believing there was an actual original sin when Eve and Adam took a bite,
- Those silly Roman Catholics of old who spoke of our being “conceived in sin,” as if sex itself was something dirty and evil is a part of our DNA
- Those silly Protestants of old who spoke of total depravity and liked to say, when they confessed their sins, that “there is no good in us...”

for all the attacks the doctrine of original sin has gotten in the modern age, the idea that on our own we are prone to evil *has been assumed* by most. The majority opinion of most disciplines is that unless we are saved by... well, if not God, at least by Law and Civilization... we are nothing but selfish brutes.

This assumption has been especially strong in the modern age with its experience of two world wars and ethnic cleansing campaigns such as the Holocaust. Since the word of theologians is less trusted in the modern age, it became the goal of “objective” science to prove its own secular doctrine of original sin.

Some of you might remember or read of three famous studies of the 1960s and 70s when behavioral science was coming into its own. Behavioral science was the celebrity academic discipline of many campuses back then. These three famous studies seemed to prove that our natural state is that of a brute.

Again, this is a sanctuary and not a classroom, so I won’t go into any disturbing details. Feel free to read about them on your own.

There was the *Robbers Cave Experiment* of 1965. Boys were taken to Robbers Cave State Park thinking they were going to summer camp. Actually, they were unwitting participants of a study. They were assigned to one of two groups, or tribes, and neither group knew at first that the other existed. They were given their separate and different colored camp shirts, taught different camp traditions and given time to bond. Then, gradually the tribes were introduced to each other. With minimal supervision, they played competitive games. The report by lead researcher, Musafir Sherif, was that they came to see each other as enemies, and violence would have resulted if the study had gone on.

Then there is the *Sanford Prison Experiment* of 1971. Student volunteers were divided into guards and prisoners and locked in the basement of the Sanford University Psychology Department which was made to look like a jail. Left on their own, how would they behave... particularly the guards who were given uniforms and power? The report by lead researcher, Philip Zimbardo, was that the guards, on their own, became increasingly abusive of the prisoners.

And then there is Stanley Milgram and his *Shock Experiment*. In 1961, Milgram paid volunteers to take part in an experiment where they were paired up. One was to be the “*Learner*” who would be asked questions to repeat sequences and the other was to be the “*Teacher*” who would administer a shock if the answer was wrong. With each wrong answer, the voltage was to be



increased. If the Teacher hesitated, a researcher in a lab coat would at first encourage and then *demand* that the teacher increase the shock. In actuality, the Learner was *not* really a volunteer but someone on the research team play-acting and the shock machine was fake. How far would the Teacher go? Milgram reported that the majority went all the way to the limit of 450 volts.

These studies suggest that Golding has us figured out. In a competition between Original Virtue and Original Sin, *Original Sin wins out*.

Only here's the thing. There is mounting evidence that all three of these famous experiments were flawed. Rutger Bregman's book, *Humankind*,¹ provides a convincing summary of evidence that these famous experiments were manipulated to confirm conclusions already drawn by the researchers. Turns out that the researchers, who were supposed to be minimally involved, were *actively* engaged in encouraging results. Even with their interference, the true results were not accurately reported.

For instance, the boys involved in the Robbers Cave Experiment were aggressively encouraged to be competitive and to see members of the other tribe as threats.

In the Sandford Prison Experiment, guards were more kind than was reported. Also, the volunteers who were to be the prisoners were not paid until the experiment was over. They could not drop out unless they *showed* signs of extreme distress. The experiment went longer than they were told and they had final exams to study for. So, they put on a show. The most famous one, Douglas Korbi, whose cries for relief made for the most riveting scene in the resulting documentary, even told his researchers that he “[was being a good employee and having a great time](#).” His admission did not make it into the report (and by the way, Korbi, who seemed broken in the documentary, quickly went on to get his own PhD in Psychology).

With the Shock Experiment, 55% of the volunteer Teachers figured out that the shocks were fake. Of the 45% who thought that the shocks were real, a majority quit when they thought that the experiment was going too far. Of those who believed the shocks were real and still went all the way, interviews showed it was *not* because they were ordered to but because they believed they were serving science and some good would come of it.

Hey, Bregman even has a response to Golding's imagined story, *Lord of the Flies*. He wondered if schoolboys were ever *actually* marooned on an island and, if so, what happened. Lo and behold, he did research and found the underreported-but-fascinating story of six boys who were marooned for 18 months beginning in June of 1965. They were students at a strict, British-style boarding school in Tonga, a South Pacific Island nation. They were prime candidates for proving that Golding had it right. The British might call them “incorrigible.” They ran away from their school by stealing the boat of a fisherman they didn't like and set off on an adventure. They were ill-prepared. Sure enough, nature provided the circumstances of a good adventure story. They got lost, a storm hit, and they found themselves shipwrecked on a deserted island.

So, what happened next? Did they fight? Did they divide into factions?

¹ Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, Back Bay Books: Little, Brown and Company, 2019.



They survived quite well. These boys organized themselves, divided chores, and kept a schedule. For instance, after one of them managed to start a fire using stones and sticks, they took turns keeping the fire aflame. All those months, it never once died out. If an argument broke out, those who argued were sent to different sides of the island to cool off. Then they had to come back, talk it out, and eventually apologize to each other. They built a backgammon court, a bench press, and musical instruments. When a boat piloted by Peter Warner discovered them, they were in remarkable health, and even happy.

So, maybe there is some basic goodness in our nature. I think there is.

In fact, I think there is that both the truths of Original Virtue and Original Sin can be affirmed...

as long as we let Original Virtue be the guide in understanding what Original Sin is really about.

I want to go back to the Shock Experiment. Remember what I said of those who believed the shocks were real and still went all the way to 450 volts: *They thought some good would come of it.* Stanly Milgram was so intent on proving a point, that evil comes of following orders, that he missed what there really was to learn. People can be pushed to do terrible things *if they think that they are serving a greater good.*

And we are more easily convinced that we are serving a greater good if we are encouraged by others. Yes, authorities with titles and uniforms who assure us we're doing the right thing..., but also others around us who agree that we are doing the right thing and encourage us to carry on.

Terrorists who kill and die for a cause have been called monsters and cowards. Actually, studies of how terrorists are enlisted and groomed suggest that most terrorists are normal people in many respects and certainly are not cowards. They are fanatical in the cause of what they consider to be good- fueled by a tribe with righteous leaders and righteous members who encourage evil means to achieve the good end-

- blow up a building to bring attention to what was done at Ruby Ridge and Waco, Texas,
- fly planes into towers to help bring down Western capitalism,
- attack schools to bring an end to educating girls when they should remain home,
- violently storming a capital building to save democracy,
- trashing neighborhoods and destroying public property in the name of civil rights.

Emboldened by leaders and the support of their tribe, virtue defenders wreak destruction in the cause of something believed to be good and worth it.

“I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance,” Jesus said.

No need to repent? Who really believes that... except each one of the 99 who have 98 others around them telling them they have nothing for which to repent? It is not just Adam and Eve who took a bite. Entire tribes, entire movements, entire ideological silos, eat the fruit of the tree and become convinced they alone have knowledge of good and evil. Together, we can encourage each other to do evil by convincing each other that we are doing what is right.



But let's not forget, we can also encourage each other to recognize the evil that in and among us and do better. While our desire to do good can be manipulated, we can't forget that we do have that desire... *to do good*...and do better.

I offer one final story.

George Ferdinand Duckwitz was a Nazi officer in the Gestapo. He had been influenced by Nazi groupthink and he was an anti-Semite who saw so many of the world's problems in "those people."

But he didn't live among the 99. He didn't live in Germany, or Poland, or Austria where so much concerted effort was put into separating Jews, isolating them in ghettos, labeling them as demonic; all in the effort of convincing the masses that the world would be better off without them. Instead, Duckwitz was stationed in Copenhagen. Denmark was a country where the Germans were trying to maintain a fiction that they were willing cooperating with the Danish government. And so, Jews continued to live among Gentiles: no badges, no discrimination, no widespread hatred, and no consensus that they were Denmark's problem.

So, Duckwitz was not prepared for what he learned was to take place on October 2, 2043. And so, on Oct. 1, he crashed a meeting of the Social Democratic Party and, trembling, told them, "[The disaster is at hand.](#)" At 8:00 pm, their Jewish friends and neighbors were to be rounded up, placed in ships, and sent off to a fate unknown.

There was instant panic, which quickly led to a plan.

Well, not *a* plan, but *many* plans because there was no time to coordinate anything. Tens of thousands of Danes worked together-

- businesses and churches worked together-
 - police, government and social clubs worked together-
- and the Jews of Denmark were hidden and helped to escape to Sweden.

The Gestapo agent, stood apart from the 98 others because he realized that he *did have reason to repent*. And this is hard to believe but 99% of those Danish Jews who were identified as sinners by the righteous survived the war.

"[Jesus, we hear you.](#)" We celebrate that one sinner, George Ferdinand Duckwitz, who not only is saved, but seeing the evil of his righteousness, saved so many others.

Original Sin cannot become a cop-out excuse that we can't do better because it is in our nature to do evil. No, it is a reminder that we can do better because that is the way we were created. But Original Sin can be our reminder that in our desire to do better, we can be manipulated to do great harm.

