

Sin & Democracy

“Democracy,” Winston Churchill once observed, “is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Niebuhr would have agreed: though admittedly an imperfect system, democracy works better with the realities of human sinfulness than any other form of government. Niebuhr believed that while times may change, human nature stays the same. And he thought that Christian concept of original sin captured the heights and depths of the human experience—what French philosopher Blaise Pascal called the “glory and misery of man”—in a uniquely effective way.

Original sin describes the self-serving element in our interactions. When a child refuses to share their toy, when we resent the success of our peers, when we do hurtful things to those we love—this all suggests a deep-seated tendency in human nature to manipulate others to our benefit. Niebuhr once quipped that original sin “emphasizes a fact [to] which every page of human history attests.”

This is not to say that humans can’t be good. As beings made in God’s image, we have been blessed with a sense of right and wrong and with the ability to enact good in the world. But ulterior motives seep into even our best actions, suggesting that our self-serving tendencies are too deeply embedded for us to dislodge on our own.

This has direct implications for how we should organize our societies. Original sin implies that human beings tend to misuse power. This means that governments function best when they have mechanisms that prevent any particular individual or group from accumulating too much power. Hence why the democratic system of checks and balances is so important: it plays the interests of the various branches of government against each other such that they hold each other accountable.

Democracy is not without its problems. Checks and balances can be frustratingly inefficient, making democracies slow to respond to political situations that require swift, decisive action. But for Niebuhr, democracy did a better job than any other system of government of protecting human beings from their own worst tendencies. This made democracy the best system of government, regardless of what its flaws might be.

Questions to consider:

What is sin? How does it manifest in our lives? How does it manifest in politics?

Is the system of checks and balances an effective way of coping with our sinful tendencies?
Why or why not?

From Niebuhr’s perspective, how might democracy fit the needs of human nature better than other forms of government, such as monarchy or communism?

-- The Self --

What a contradiction—to be the judge of all things, and yet a worm of the earth.

Humans are paradoxical creatures. On the one hand, they possess seemingly boundless creativity and capacity to understand and shape the natural world. On the other hand, they are subject to the same basic biological constraints as the rest of the animal kingdom: like all other mammals, humans also eat, sleep, eliminate waste, and eventually die.

For Niebuhr, societies function best when they take both aspects of the human paradox into consideration. They must accommodate both the heights and the depths of the human experience—what French philosopher Blaise Pascal called “the glory and misery of man.” Niebuhr argued that Christian language of human beings as both bearing the image of God and subject to the effects of sin was uniquely effective at capturing the full range of human experience. This made it vital to our efforts to think through how to organize society.

Questions to consider:

What do you take Pascal to mean by the “glory and misery” of the human experience?

How do both these facets of human experience manifest in our own lives?

How do we see them at work in society?

Niebuhr Quotes:

On Self as spirit-animal hybrid:

Man is both strong and weak, both free and unbound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching the power of his limits. –Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 181

Man is a creature of nature, subject to its necessities and bound by its limits. Yet he surveys the ages and touches the fringes of the eternal. –“Mystery and Meaning” (MW 761)

The finiteness of human life, contrasted with the limited qualities of the human spirit, presents us with a profound mystery. We are an enigma to ourselves.
–“Mystery and Meaning” (MW 762)

The lion’s desire for food is satisfied when his maw is crammed. Man’s desire for food is more easily limited than other human desires; yet the hunger impulse is subject to the endless refinements and perversions of the gourmand... Man’s coat is never merely a cloak for his nakedness but the badge of his vocation, or the expression of an artistic impulse, or a method of attracting the other sex, or a proof of social position. Man’s house is not merely his shelter

but... the expression of his personality and the symbol of his power, position, and prestige. The houses and raiment of the poor remain closer to the original “natural” requirement; but it is significant that the power to transmute them into something more spiritual and symbolic is inevitably exploited. -CL (MW 389)

On Self as Relational:

Man is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all he is bound to seek the realization of his true nature; and to his true nature belongs his fulfillment in the lives of others. -CL (MW 366)

Human nature is related to the community (in its various levels and extensions) in such a way that the highest reaches of his individuality are dependent upon the social substance out of which they rise and they must find their end and fulfillment in the community. No simple limit can be placed upon the degree of intimacy to the community, and the breadth and extent of community which the individual requires for his life. -CL (MW 382)

-- Sin --

[Major subcategory of the Self]

Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin.

The formula for living a moral life is conceptually quite simple: take responsibility for the things you can control, and let go of the things that you cannot. Figure that out, and you will learn to live in harmony with yourself and with others. And yet, no one manages to achieve this balance. For Niebuhr, this was a consequence of sin.

In Niebuhr’s usage, the term “sin” describes our attempts to control our circumstances and other people to our benefit. And “original sin” describes the failure to trust underlying our control issues. We see this in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. They broke God’s command and ate of the Tree of Knowledge, because deep down they preferred to control their own destinies than to trust God to take care of them—a pattern that we replicate in our own lives.

Yet the Tree of Knowledge was off limits for a reason. The degree of control that we crave would require us to be all-knowing and all-powerful—traits that only God possesses. In our attempts to exert god-like control over our lives, we end up manipulating and hurting those around us. Sins both large and small are ultimately rooted in our control issues. Niebuhr thought that we needed to be honest about our sinful tendencies and their consequences before we could go about the task of improving human relations.

Questions to consider:

What sorts of things do our culture typically regard as “sin”?
Are these things sinful in the sense that Niebuhr means it?

How do control issues manifest in our own lives? How do these issues affect our society?

Niebuhr Quotes

On Manifestation of Sin:

- **Refusal to accept our limits**
 - o Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends to be immortal. That is his sin.
– *Beyond Tragedy*, 28.
 - o Man is both strong and weak, both free and unbound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching the power of his limits (*Nature of Man*, 181).
 - o The ideal of individual self-sufficiency, so exalted in our liberal culture, is recognized in Christian thought as one form of the primal sin. –CL (MW 386)
- **Placing oneself before others**
 - o All human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life.
–NM, 182.
 - o Evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of mankind, of the total order of the world. – CL (MW 361)
 - o *Man, being more than a natural creature, is not interested merely in physical survival but in prestige and social approval. Having the intelligence to anticipate the perils in which he stands in nature and history, he invariably seeks to gain security against these perils by enhancing his power, individually and collectively. Possessing a darkly unconscious sense of his insignificance in the total scheme of things, he seeks to compensate for this insignificance by pretensions of pride. The conflicts between men are thus never simple conflicts between competing survival impulses.* –CL (MW 367)
- **Equating our own judgments with God’s judgment:**
 - o The Christian doctrine of the sinfulness of all men is thus a constant challenge to re-examine superficial moral judgments, particularly those which self-righteously give the moral advantage to the one who makes the judgment. There is no moral situation in which the Pauline word does not apply: “therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things” –NM, 222.
 - o “If any man stand, let him take heed lest he fall” is a warning which is as relevant to bishops, professors, artists, saints, and holy men as to capitalists, dictators, and all men of power. Every one who stands is inclined to think that he stands by divine right. Everyone who has achieved a high form of culture imagines that it is a necessary and final form of culture. It is the man who stands, who has achieved, who is honoured and approved by his fellowmen who mistakes the relative achievements and approvals of history for a final and ultimate approval. –NM, 227

-- Government --

Niebuhr Quotes:

Human nature as basis of government

- Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination for injustice makes democracy necessary. -CL (MW 454)
- Ideally democracy is a permanently valid form of government which does justice to two dimensions of human existence: to man's spiritual stature and his social character; to the uniqueness and variety of life, and to the common necessities of all men. -CL (MW 358)

Democracy

- The preservation of democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. -CL (MW 378)
- Democracy is a method of finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems. -CL (MW 420)

Freedom and Order

- Since the community may more easily become inordinate in its passion for order, as may the various forces in the community in their passion for freedom, it is necessary to preserve a proper balance between both principles, and to be as ready to champion the individual against the community as the community against the individual. -CL (MW 398)

Transcript for clip -- "Sin & Democracy: Government" :

Gaston: So Niebuhr's involvement in the interventionist cause in the early 40's, his founding of Christianity and Crisis as an alternative to the pacifist Christian Century, his incredible desire to see Americans weigh in and join this cause, because really central to his identity in the post-war world. Niebuhr writes these incredibly influential books that are the Gifford lectures that he publishes about the nature and destiny of man, that really sort of gives us a portrait of like why it is that the Christian view of human nature has this ability to explain human experience that is not shared by any other view. So he sees this as the best of possible options. And then in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, he says this is the essence of democracy. The Christian view of human nature gives us access to the sort of need for balance of power, the need for humility, the entire democratic project revolves around a Christian view of human nature. And so you have that sort of movement of these claims into the center of the American discussion of democracy at a time when Europe is in ruins and this country is in a position that it has never been in before. It's a world power that has the responsibilities to decide the fate of the world. And that's a lot of pressure and it's something that Niebuhr is able to help Americans come to term with and to think through in ways that are very compelling.

West: At the time the book was published, varieties of liberal theology were highly influential. And the common denominator of these liberal theologies, tended to downplay the tragic dimensions of the human condition. The ways in which all of us are, in some sense, shot through with greed and envy and resentment. What Christian theologians will traditionally call "sin". So the liberal theologians began...the liberal theologians were claiming that we were on the road to progress, that human beings were perfectible, that there was a possibility of some Utopian society in history. It was a kind of captivity to a highly fashionable, secular claim about what the future could be. Niebuhr comes in

with this tragic sensibility, Augustinian sensibility. He says No, we all have fallen, we all are finite, we all are fallible. There will never be a Utopian society in human history, there will never be paradise in space and time. That we all are corrupt in terms of the choices that we make. So it's not in any way just a matter of good on the one side, evil on the other. The good and evil shut through our souls, there's a civil war taking place on the battlefields of our hearts, each and every one of us, no matter what color, gender, sexual orientation, civilization. And so it's more of an orthodox Christian view, but what he did was he wedded that to a left wing politics. Usually that sort of left wing view is associated with Conservatism. He used that Augustinian analysis, that deep sense of the tragic, he says Look, when it comes to individuals we're corrupt, when it comes to collectivities they are worse. So it's going to be very much about power, it's going to be very much about conflict. And the best we can do as human beings is generate democratic possibilities. Democracy, he says, is an approximate solution to insoluble problems. We're never going to get at the insecurities and fears and anxieties that sit at the center of who we are. We're never gonna eliminate the kind of evil choices that follow from the kind of freedom we have. Of the kind of choices we have in the world. But democracy provides for fallible, fallen creatures, some mechanisms of accountability to keep track of our proclivities towards corruption. Of our evil orientations towards hatred, domination, exploitation, and so forth. And in many ways, I think he's right.

Bacevich: The American form of pride is this conviction that we are innocent, and therefore that, as...an innocent party, we are the injured party. As the innocent party, we are...are motives are not to be questioned. And of course he again pushes back strongly against such...such claims that insisting that No we are not innocent, that we too are subject to the effects of original sin. I mean, as a...Catholic, I have to tell you that his emphasis on original sin to me is...is of enduring importance. That yes, we are all fallen, we too...we in this country, we the people who insist that we came into existence in order to become this city upon the hill, in order to bring perfection to the rest of humanity. No, no, no, we too are not innocent, we too are imperfect.

Hauerwas: What is democracy? Democracy is social and political orders that keep open the possibility of group intensification to balance injustices from other groups. So a balance, a power, is at the heart of democratic societies that keep open new possibilities to make possible the enfranchisement of those who currently without power. He got that from the struggle of the labor unions in Detroit. I mean, that was the kind of conflict that he thought was at the heart of democratic social alternatives.

-- Gender --

Niebuhr's depiction of pride as the root cause of sin aptly conveys the spiritual challenges that confront people in positions of power. But how well does it describe the spiritual struggles of the powerless? More specifically: does it capture the core struggles of women? Or does it overlook fundamental aspects of their experience?

If we see pride—that is, the tendency to put oneself before others—as the most basic form of sin, then the focus of the moral life should be to subdue pride by putting others before oneself. But feminist critics of Niebuhr have pointed out that this approach assumes that human beings have strong egos. While this is often true of men, it is not generally true of women.

Men in our culture are socialized to be assertive: they are praised for taking initiative and encouraged to hone their leadership skills. Women, by contrast, are socialized to focus on what others think of them: they are praised for being personable and are pressured to meet unrealistic beauty standards. These socialization patterns lead to different moral struggles. Whereas men struggle to rein in their

robust sense of self, women struggle to cultivate a sense of self to begin with. If women follow Niebuhr's advice to subdue the ego, they tear down the very thing they need to build in order to be responsible moral agents in the world.

The feminist critique, then, pushes us to nuance our view of original sin. While it continues to be true that sin distorts all of us, the way gender roles function in our society causes these distortive effects to manifest differently. Consequently, men and women—and more broadly, the powerful and the powerless—must adopt distinct strategies for addressing sin's consequences.

Questions to consider:

How are women socialized in our society?
How does this differ from the way that men are socialized?

Do you agree with the feminist contention that gender shapes the moral challenges we confront as individuals? *Why or why not?*

Transcript for clip -- "*Race & Justice: Gender*" : *Pride, Power, and Sin*

Gaston: I think feminist critics of Niebuhr are getting at something that actually is very much the same kind of line that you see in liberation theology's critique of a Niebuhrian perspective which is just this idea that this is a theology that speaks to the predicament of the powerful. And that offers a corrective in the form of this recognition of pride, but doesn't have the same impact for the powerless. Do the powerless need to be reminded of their prideful status? Or do they need to be reminded of the sin of hiding their gifts. Right, do they need to be encouraged in different kinds of ways?

Cahill: His view was that human beings are caught between those two things, nature and freedom. And creating a state of anxiety and anxiety is a state of temptation. The only real way to resolve this is to trust in god and Jesus Christ. But if we try to trust in something different that is sin and we inevitably do that. and the primary form of sin is to trust in oneself. And not god so it's pride, self-interest. What Augustine called the libido dominandi which Niebuhr definitely recognized. That is the lust for domination. You know the attempt to control and dominate other people. So all of those are manifestations of pride. He, he did say though that there's another type of sin that's also running away from a positive reconciliation of this tension and that's what he called sensuality. And that's just immersing ourselves in some of the goods or temptations of, of ordinary life. Often he named those with the usual suspects, sexual licentiousness, drink-in-ness and so on. But he meant something broader by it.

Feminist Critiques

Cahill: So the feminist critique is that for many women the sin, the basic and underlying sin is not pride. It is a, it is the inability and sort of the running away from our hiding from the challenge to have an identity and to really make a difference and to have commitments and plans and principles that one courageously pursues and defends, no matter what the obstacles. So women just to name some of the famous interlocutors Valerie Sabin, Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hanson, Beverly Harrison. They

said that what women need is not to be told that they are excessively proud, the remedy for which is love and self-sacrifice as the men are told. But rather they need to be told not to completely dissipate their own agency through acts presumably of self-sacrifice for other people so women need completely the opposite of vice. And one of the in doing, well first of all I think that that's completely correct. So the feminists critics are right. But there is an enduring question that also arises from all of this that we can see in Niebuhr's writings and in the feminist critique. And it really is how much of human nature is if you will biologically or evolutionarily determined. If humans are not to be seen as completely divided from other species, how many of the characteristics of other mammals or most other mammals do we have. You know do those vary by gender and if so to what degree. Today we have a great you know scientific and also popular interest in neuropsychology. Evolutionary biology, mind brain studies. So I, I think that what Niebuhr is really putting out there is the possibility that there are strong connections between and even limits on, connections between our physiological make up and our agency, identity and freedom. And that the former in some ways constrains the latter. Or maybe a more positive way to put it is, our freedom has certain working materials. And we need to know what those are so that we can construct meaningful human lives. Do those vary by gender? That's a very dangerous thing to say. Because differences universally are used to women's disadvantage and to subordinate women. And limit women's social opportunities and power. Nevertheless I don't think it's a question that feminists can afford to run away from. you know the, the, the challenge is to look at the problem, consider the evidence. Be very critical of illegitimate political uses, particularly those that disadvantage women.

Recommendations for Further Reading

- Federalist 10
- The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness
- "Man's disorder and God's design" (Niebuhr's World Council of Churches address, 1948. Perhaps we can make the audio available on the site).