

Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve:
Original Sin and the Evolution of Sexual Difference



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*This project is dedicated to my parents—
Steve and Carol Loumagne.
You were the first “sticky webs of connection”
to form me in the knowledge that love and grace
are more powerful than sin and death.*

Thank you.

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*Megan Loumagne
Ash Wednesday, 2019
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Short Abstract

Since the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, there has been much scholarly interest in developing a coherent synthesis between the doctrine of original sin and scientific accounts of human origins. Despite the significant interest in integrating theories of evolution with a doctrine of original sin, there has been comparatively little effort devoted to reexamining original sin in light of information about the evolution of *Homo sapiens* as sexually differentiated, even though the doctrine has carried implications for gendered relationships since its earliest formulations. This project fills this gap in scholarly literature by developing an interdisciplinary conversation between evolutionary biology, New Feminist Materialism, and theology in order to articulate a way of thinking about original sin that takes seriously the nature of *Homo sapiens* as continually evolving in sexually differentiated ways. By engaging with developments in evolutionary theory and biological information about sexual difference, the project aims to cultivate a sense of wonder at the diversity and explosive unpredictability of human biology, a value for the role of creativity in the human participation that partially shapes our ongoing evolution, and humility about the extent to which we can predict and control the future of the evolution of our species. The biological investigations in this project illuminate the interdependencies that define creaturely life, the persistent entanglement of nature and culture, the centrality of desire to human identity and behavior, and the role played by biology in the transmission of sin. These biological insights confirm some of Augustine's anthropological intuitions. In the second half of the project, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* is juxtaposed with New Feminist Materialism in order to develop a framework for a Christian Feminist Materialism that sees

material life as evolving, generative, and “imbued with activity;” but also as simultaneously infected with sin and saturated with the divine.¹

¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, and Power* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2005), p. 8.

Long Abstract

Christian thinking about sin and sexual difference have long been entangled. This thesis begins by providing an overview of the history of the doctrine of original sin in its ecclesial expressions and its entanglements with conceptions of sexual difference. The notion of a primal sin in the Garden of Eden has led to philosophical and theological speculation about what it means to be differently sexed. For example, Søren Kierkegaard argues in his *Concept of Anxiety* (1844) that, given that Eve was deceived first, we can infer that women are “by nature” weaker, more sensuous, and more prone to anxiety.² This movement from an interpretation of the Fall narrative in Genesis to an assumption about the meaning of sexual difference is common throughout the history of philosophy, theology, literature, and even science. The perception that women are “by nature” more emotional, more sensuous, and more connected to the biological realm, while men are more rational and connected to the spiritual realm continues to exert influence in both explicit teaching and popular perception in our time, within the Church and beyond it. The doctrine has, therefore, since its earliest conceptions, involved thinking through the details of lived materiality in sexed bodies. This overview in the first chapter of the history of ecclesial expressions of the doctrine and its entanglements with notions of sexual difference is followed by analyses of three contemporary contributions to reworking the doctrine by John Haught, James Alison, and Raymund Schwager in order to demonstrate the need for more theological reflection on sin in light of current information about human origins and the evolution of sexual difference.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte, Princeton University Press, Princeton: New Jersey (1980), p. 64.

Chapter two begins with an analysis of the relevant features of Augustine's life that illuminate the context in which he elaborated his thinking about original sin and sexual difference. This is followed by an exposition of the set of interrelated doctrines that comprise Augustine's teachings on original sin in the context of the broader range of his thought. Augustine has significantly shaped Christian thinking about sexual difference as well, so this chapter explores these aspects of his work, including the way in which the category of "woman" serves as a key intersection for symbolic associations of *scientia*, *concupiscentia*, sexuality, sin, and salvation in his thought.³ While critiquing aspects of Augustine's legacy in shaping Christian thinking about sex and sin, this chapter seeks a partial retrieval of Augustine, particularly his focus on the role of desire in human life and sin, his interest in the biological effects and propagation of sin, and his reliance on the motif of "unity."

From Augustine, the thesis turns in chapter three to a critique of aspects of Augustine's thought in a more contemporary key. Valerie Saiving's article "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" (1960) is arguably the most pervasively influential treatment of the relationship between sexual difference and sin. Saiving critiques a tendency she perceived in Christian theology to define sin as pride and dominating self-assertion. She argues that this description of sin does not adequately encompass "women's experience" or the temptations that are particular to "the feminine character structure."⁴ This chapter analyzes Saiving's argument, and it illuminates the anthropological context that shaped her thought. It concludes by arguing that although Saiving's article was a crucial early feminist contribution to the project of understanding the relationship between sin and sexual

³ Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writing on Women*, London: Darton, Longman, & Todd (1995).

⁴ Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960), p. 101.

difference, her theology of sin and sexual difference is impoverished by its lack of engagement with evolutionary biology, and also by its failure to incorporate insights from the greater Christian tradition. This chapter on Valerie Saiving concludes Part One of this thesis, which explores key historical developments in theological approaches to sin and sexual difference.

Part Two of this project establishes three contemporary resources to develop a renewed theology of original sin and sexual difference, namely, the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, and New Feminist Materialism. Chapters four, five, and six each give an overview of one of these resources, followed by an assessment of what they can each contribute to theological thinking about sexual difference and original sin if they are brought into conversation with one another. They are all brought together into the construction of a new theology of original sin and sexual difference in chapter six.

Chapter four, then, turns to Darwin as an example of an early contribution to evolutionary theory. It argues that Darwin is still helpful for understanding evolution and sexual difference, although some of the details of his theories have been superseded by new information. While in many ways Darwin contributed to reifying simplistic stereotypes about the passivity and inferiority of women, and the deleterious effects of these aspects of his thought must not be minimized, his work also contains emphases that contradict and undermine the patriarchal structures he partially reinforced. From Darwin, the chapter turns to recent developments in evolutionary theory including the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, Epigenetics, and Niche Construction. These developments trouble a strict nature-culture dichotomy, which is helpful for a reconstruction of the doctrine of original sin insofar as the doctrine assumes a unity of the human species and a sense in which sin is an "inherited"

aspect of human life. This more dynamic or symbiotic relationship between nature and culture also has relevance for sexual difference as it undermines both the “essentialist” approach to sexual difference, as well as a postmodern tendency to view sexual difference as purely a social construction. This chapter also explores some of the latest contributions to thinking about the biology of sexual difference. These developments reveal the ways in which biology and culture work together to shape human desire, and this insight has implications for both sin and sexual difference. Reflecting on new information from evolutionary theory and the biology of sexual difference demonstrates the reality that we are constituted through networks of relationships, all the way down to the molecular level, and so any understanding of sin and sexual difference must situate the individual “I” as a negotiation of the “we” that constituted and continues to sustain it. This relational view of creaturely life supports Augustine’s insight that the human person is inherently social from birth, and that the human race is fundamentally united.

Chapter five examines John Paul II’s *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (1979-1984) as a key text that investigates the nature of sexual difference in light of original sin. After providing an overview of the central insights from the text and its appropriation by a group of Catholic thinkers who describe themselves as “New Catholic Feminists,” the chapter highlights insights from the *Theology of the Body* that should be critiqued, appreciated, or radicalized. It argues that while there are serious problems with John Paul II’s thinking about sexual difference and sin, there remain insights from his project that can helpfully contribute to rethinking sex and sin in a post-Darwinian context. The chapter also argues that John Paul II’s work provides important critiques to New Feminist Materialism, even as New Feminist Materialism challenges aspects of his thought. John Paul

II and the New Feminist Materialists can be mutually corrective to one another, and this is demonstrated in chapters five and six. Chapter five concludes by arguing that John Paul II is helpful in his conception of the human person as called to love and communion, as infected—but not totally corrupted—by sin, and as dignified along with the rest of the material world by the event of the Incarnation.

Chapter six draws from the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, and New Feminist Materialism in order to articulate a renewed understanding of original sin and sexual difference that is informed by biology, gender theory, and theology. It begins by providing an overview of key themes expressed in New Feminist Materialism, followed by analyses of the contributions of two New Feminist Materialists who are particularly relevant for this project—Elizabeth Grosz and Anne Fausto Sterling. Elizabeth Grosz contributes a feminist retrieval of Darwin and his theory of sexual selection in her monograph *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, and Power* (2005), as well as a creative engagement with metaphysics and ontology in her monograph *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (2017). She portrays creaturely life—including sexual difference—as a dynamism of nature and culture and an endless process of becoming, and she rejects reductive forms of materialism. Anne Fausto-Sterling likewise strives to undermine dichotomies between “nature” and “nurture” and she posits instead a “systems” approach to gender and sexual difference. Her work on the dynamic development of desire is also useful for understanding both the recalcitrance of sin and the evolution of sexual difference.

After analyzing New Feminist Materialism, the chapter integrates the contributions of Grosz and Fausto-Sterling with insights from the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and

John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* to construct a framework for a theology of original sin and sexual difference. This articulation of original sin avoids reducing the doctrine to biological imperfection, or conversely, abstracting it into the spiritual realm in a way that neglects attention to the material implications of sin. It demonstrates that the effects of sin and its propagation involve every aspect of being human, all the way down to the biological. This view of the symbiosis of nature and culture that forms us as human beings allows for an understanding of original sin that sees humans as both victims and perpetrators of sin, and further, it embeds an understanding of human sinfulness in the context of the rest of the natural world, acknowledging the interdependence of creation. This chapter also addresses the possibility of embracing process theology such as that expressed by Catherine Keller, but ultimately argues that process theology does not provide an adequate metaphysical grounding for materialism.

This understanding of original sin and sexual difference maintains a central focus on the role of desire in the constitution of the human. This focus on the role of desire also provides a means of integrating this understanding of original sin with the realities of sexual difference. An appreciation for the multiple biological and social processes involved in the formation of the sexually differentiated person undermines a doctrine of original sin that would see sin as manifested in stable and unified male and female bodies, but it also resists the neglect of the materiality of sexual difference found in many postmodern accounts that focus solely on sinful social structures. When sin becomes codified in structures, this has a profound shaping effect on biological processes, and likewise, the biological then contributes to future developments of the cultural. Indeed, in light of information revealed by the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, it becomes problematic to conceive of “nature” and

“culture” as separate categories. The thesis concludes by arguing that sin can thus manifest in different sexed ways, but these manifestations can never be categorized into fixed notions of “female sins” and “male sins.” We might predict potential tendencies for different gendered sins based on our recognition of the legacy of patriarchy that continues to exert shaping power over the evolution of sexual differences, but these tendencies must always be held tenuously in light of the unpredictable and open-ended nature of human beings in a state of continual evolution. While the potentialities of human material life are constrained by sin, they are also open to the dynamisms of grace at work in a world “charged with the grandeur of God.”⁵ The thesis concludes with a summary of its central insights in order to indicate some implications for future thinking about soteriology, Christology, Mariology, and ecclesial practices.

⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gods-grandeur>, Retrieved on 8 April 2017.

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Introduction

*Let it begin, let Adam in
Step one: original sin
Underneath the leaves, Adam found Eve
Both of them found something sweet under the apple tree
Then it was over, roads divide
Step two: learning how to lie
Let me ask a question to present day
How the hell did Eve end up with all the damn blame?⁶*

--Sara Bareilles

The concepts of original sin and sexual difference can both evoke intensely emotional reactions. They both elicit, in the words of James Alison, “a huge depth of feeling.”⁷ They are emotional topics because they are deeply personal, and they strike to the core of who we understand ourselves to be as human beings, particularly in the West. It is the contention of this thesis that the process of reflecting on original sin and sexual difference, and specifically thinking about them *together*, is essential for understanding the human situation as we find it in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this project insists that Christian reflection on original sin has always contained sexed contours, though these have not always been made explicit, and so this thesis is contributing to a conversation that has been persisting for centuries of Christian history. The spectres of Adam and Eve hover over our perceptions of what it means to be differently sexed creatures. Despite some resistances in the present age to notions of both original sin and meaningful sexual differences, this project aims to demonstrate that both can provide essential insights that help to “make sense” of (without comprehensively

⁶ Sara Bareilles, “Armor,” *Amidst the Chaos* (2019), Epic Records, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Uj2QyBJVc>, retrieved on 23 February 2019.

⁷ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p.1.

explaining) some of the features of human life in the West in the twenty-first century, especially the stubborn persistence of inequality, poverty, environmental degradation, and the pernicious patterns of sexual violence and abuse that have been uncovered by the #MeToo movement.⁸ To this end, the project marshals resources from a variety of places—Augustine, feminist theology, evolutionary biology, John Paul II, and a new group of feminist philosophers known as the New Feminist Materialists—to develop a multi-tiered analysis of original sin and sexual difference that is grounded in both the material and theological truths of creaturely life as revealed by a variety of disciplines. Ultimately, it develops a framework for a Christian Feminist Materialism that is rooted in the Incarnation and that sees all of material reality as saturated with the presence of God, even as it is constantly in motion and marred by sin.

In order to develop this framework for Christian Feminist Materialism, the project begins in the first chapter by examining conciliar articulations of original sin. It notes the surprising lack of development in the church’s formal expression of the doctrine since the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, despite numerous contributions on the part of theologians to updating the doctrine in light of evolutionary biology. This chapter also examines some of the early entanglements of the doctrine with Christian thinking about

⁸ #MeToo is a movement started by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006. The hashtag #MeToo went viral on the internet through social media platforms in October of 2017, and has been used as a means by which individuals can share their stories of surviving sexual violence of various forms. *Variety* magazine states that in a period of 24 hours in October 2017, twelve million people shared their stories of surviving sexual violence followed by “#MeToo,” and half a million people shared their stories on Twitter within the same period. Those numbers have continued to grow since that period last October, according to *Variety*. Burke describes the #MeToo movement by stating, “Everyday people—queer, trans, disabled, men and women—are living in the aftermath of a trauma that tried, at the very worst, to take away their humanity. This movement at its core is about the restoration of that humanity” (Tarana Burke, “#MeToo Founder Tarana Burke on the Rigorous Work That Still Lies Ahead,” *Variety*, <https://variety.com/2018/biz/features/tarana-burke-metoo-one-year-later-1202954797/#respond>, retrieved on 7 October 2018).

sexual difference. The chapter concludes by analyzing three influential theological contributions to rethinking original sin in light of evolution by John Haught, James Alison, and Raymund Schwager. While appreciating some of their insights, it notes their lack of reflection about the implications of the doctrine for theologies of sexual difference, and their reifying of a nature/culture dualism that the Christian Feminist Materialism developed in this project reconstrues.

Chapter two examines Augustine's thinking about original sin and sexual difference. It highlights some historical and personal factors that influenced his understanding of both original sin and sexual difference, and it provides overviews of his approaches to both topics. This chapter argues that certain aspects of his thinking about original sin such as his emphasis on the unity of the human race, his view that sin impacts human life all the way down to the level of biology, and his focus on the centrality of desire to human life can be coherently retrieved for a Christian Feminist Materialist approach to original sin and sexual difference, without accepting all of the details of his understanding of the issue. While emphasizing that within the context of his time Augustine held relatively positive views about desire, the body, marriage, and the possibility of women to image God, the chapter argues that Augustine's thinking about the sexed nature of sin is inadequate and in need of reconsideration in light of updated information from contemporary philosophical, theological, and biological approaches to sexual difference.

After briefly noting other key developments in theological understandings of original sin and sexual difference after Augustine, chapter three of this project analyzes Valerie Saiving's article entitled, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" (1960). While Saiving did not address the question of original sin, she critiques traditional Christian concepts of sin

through the lens of sexual difference, and her contribution, while flawed and limited, remains one of the most frequently cited articles in feminist theology.⁹ Thus, her influence remains pervasive today, even as her thought has been critiqued and expanded upon, especially by key voices from womanist and Latinx theological approaches. She is thus a crucial interlocuter for this project. While Saiving is often cited, her work has not been sufficiently read in the context of the anthropological sources that shaped her thought. “The Human Situation,” is an interdisciplinary project that integrates the work of prominent anthropologists of her time (Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict) with theology. Her contribution is thus also important for this project as it is an example of an early effort in feminist theology to consider sin and sexual difference from the perspectives of both science (anthropology) and theology. Since the scientific information that shaped her conclusions about the sexed nature of sin has evolved significantly since the 1960s, Saiving’s conclusions about “masculine and feminine sins” are not wholly embraced by this project. Yet, in its imperfection, “The Human Situation” reveals signposts that will help structure the development of a contemporary theology of sex and (original) sin.

Chapters four, five, and six establish three resources to shape the emphases of a Christian Feminist Materialist approach to original sin and sexual difference—namely, the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, and New Feminist Materialism. Chapter four argues that although aspects of his understanding of evolution and sexual difference have been supplemented or superseded, Darwin remains an important

⁹ Mary Bednarowski comments on Saiving’s article in her monograph *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1999), p. 16), “I am not hesitant to estimate that three-fourths of all the books of women’s religious thought I’ve read mention this article.”

figure for reconceptualizing both original sin and sexual difference. The chapter argues that he is also a fruitful resource for Christian Feminist Materialism in his troubling of the dichotomy between nature and culture, and his rendering of human life as subject to the flux and flow of natural and sexual selection. From Darwin, the chapter turns to developments in Epigenetics, Niche Construction, and biological approaches to sexual difference in order to illuminate the entanglement of nature and culture, the centrality of desire to creaturely life, and the interconnected and interdependent reality of material life on this planet. These insights from evolutionary biology will be brought forward into dialogue with theology in order to reconsider original sin and sexual difference.

Chapters five and six juxtapose John Paul II's *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (1979-1984) with New Feminist Materialism in order to allow this unlikely pairing to be mutually corrective to one another in order to contribute to a framework for a Christian Feminist Materialist approach to original sin and sexual difference. John Paul II's construal of the binary complementarity of men and women is problematic for Christian Feminist Materialism for a variety of reasons explained in chapter five. However, his insistence that the Incarnation dignifies the sexed body as a site of divine revelation, and his sustained exercise of reading the language of the sexed body through the lens of inherited sin provide important correctives for New Feminist Materialist approaches to sexual difference. On the other hand, New Feminist Materialism—especially as expressed in the works of Elizabeth Grosz and Anne Fausto-Sterling—can help to render John Paul II's understanding of sexual difference more open to the insights of evolutionary biology, and thus more appreciative of the plasticity and diversity of sexually differentiated traits expressed in the world.

New Feminist Materialism can assist theology in developing an appreciation for the creative playfulness manifested in material life. It can also help to inculcate a disposition of wonder at the ongoing production of novelty found in the world, as well as humility about the extent to which we can know the meaning or future of our materiality with certainty. Theology can offer to New Feminist Materialism a more adequate metaphysical grounding for materialism that sees materiality as permeated with, and held together by, God. The thesis draws from these two divergent bodies of thought—John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* and New Feminist Materialism—in order to move beyond the limitations of each toward the development of a Christian Feminist Materialism. Within this Christian Feminist Materialism, inherited sin is understood as a nearly universal feature of creaturely life that provides an important conceptual tool for understanding the recalcitrance of disordered familial, economic, environmental, and societal relationships. This inherited sin can refract through our bodies in sexually differentiated ways, although given the complexity and plasticity of sexual difference, it is not possible to create permanent categories of “masculine” and “feminine” sins. The thesis concludes by indicating potential future trajectories for Christian Feminist Materialism—especially in the areas of soteriology, Christology, Mariology, and corporeal spiritual practices.

Methodology

The interdisciplinary nature of this project requires some preliminary notes on its methodological assumptions, particularly in reference to the understanding of the relationships between anthropology and Christology, feminism and science, and theology and science that provides the foundation and motivation for this project. The doctrine of original sin has been a place of heightened tension between science and theology since the

Enlightenment.¹⁰ On the one hand, the doctrine of original sin is not a scientific thesis; it is meant to communicate a theological truth about the state of humanity in relation to God, the rest of creation, and to the church. The doctrine of original sin is intended to fit coherently with doctrines of Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. Indeed, sin is only fully comprehensible when viewed in light of Christology.¹¹ Thus, in an important sense, the doctrine of original sin is not something that depends upon verification from the natural sciences in order to be “true.” However, it is a misperception that the doctrine of original sin is incompatible with evolutionary biology, and in fact, recent developments in evolutionary biology have provided theologians with important new opportunities for reflection upon the ways in which the biological is involved in perpetuating human sinfulness. For example, evolutionary biology can illuminate much about the workings of the affective realm of human life, and this is helpful for theologians reflecting on sin, since sin involves various distortions of desire. Additionally, new information from epigenetics about inherited trauma adds new contours to Christian thinking about the transmission of sin. While this thesis does not explain original sin solely in scientific terms, especially since science cannot account for a theological category such as “sin,” it aims to take advantage of an important opportunity to use these developments in evolutionary biology to demonstrate in the contemporary age the persistent coherence of the doctrine, its continued relevance for Christian life, and the ways in which theological thinking about sin is not in competition with scientific discoveries about

¹⁰ As Stephen Duffy notes, “The doctrine of original sin had been debated from the time of Augustine, but with the Enlightenment it began to undergo total eclipse” (“Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” *Theological Studies* 49, no. 4 (1988): p. 605).

¹¹ In light of this, this project would be more thorough if it included a developed Christology, however, given the focus of this thesis on original sin and the reality of space constraints, this will have to be completed in a later volume.

what it means to be human, but can incorporate biological insights productively, while also offering further depth to biological discourses about human nature. In a sense, the project seeks to remove stumbling blocks for Christians who also care about knowledge revealed by the natural sciences, and to refute the idea that evolution somehow “disproves” original sin.

In terms of the relationship between scientific discourses and feminism, it must be noted that feminists and feminist theologians have been historically reluctant to integrate insights from biology into thinking about gender. The reason for this is the historical reality that science has been used as a weapon against women, people of color, and other minorities. Science, like all disciplines, is vulnerable to being co-opted by the powerful and used to justify the exclusion and oppression of the less dominant.¹² As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues,

Nineteenth-century scientists constructed the so-called lower races, wo/men, the sexually deviant, the criminal, the urban poor, and the insane as biological ‘races apart.’ Their differences from the white male, and their likeness to each other ‘explained’ their lower position in the social hierarchy.¹³

History provides us with ample examples of this, and so for good reason, feminists have resisted the authority wielded by the “scientific” realm and have played an important role in questioning its supposed objectivity. This thesis does not undermine or negate this important legacy of feminist critique, but rather, it draws from New Feminist Materialism to demonstrate a way for feminists to use the valuable insights that scientific discourses have to

¹² As Londa Schiebinger argues in her monograph *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, “science is not value neutral but participates in and continues to support human knowledge that is highly gendered” (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006, p. x).

¹³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), p. 6.

offer, while continuing to bring to light the ways in which science has its own limitations, biases, and agendas that can never be completely eradicated under the guise of objectivity.

This thesis presumes as its foundation that the natural sciences and Christian theology should not be viewed as conflictual disciplines, nor are they completely independent from one another.¹⁴ Instead the model of engagement expressed in this thesis is one that seeks, to a certain extent, an integration of the disciplines, while respecting their different sources, starting points, and methodologies. The pursuit of this integration is driven by both theological and pastoral commitments. The theological commitments motivating this interdisciplinary work include a doctrine of creation that affirms the natural world as a site of revelation of God, who is its source and loving sustainer, as well as a belief in the unity of truth—a unity which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, “resists homogenization and relishes diversity.”¹⁵ And thus, in the language of *Gaudium et Spes*, “if methodical investigation within every branch of learning is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God.”¹⁶ There have been many positive statements about the possibilities of interaction and mutual edification between the natural sciences and theology in the writings and speeches of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis, as

¹⁴ Ian Barbour outlines four different models of engagement for theology and science in his 1990 Gifford Lectures. These include conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. (Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1990, 77-105). Other helpful resources are John Haught’s *Science and Religion* (New York: Paulist, 1995), Niels H. Gregersen and Wentzel van Huyssteen’s *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Del Ratzsch’s “Science and Religion,” in Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Peter Harrison’s *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), and Alister McGrath’s *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

¹⁵ John Paul II, “Message to the Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory.”

¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, §36, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Retrieved on 12 November, 2017.

well as in Church documents like *Gaudium et Spes* and *Laudato Si'*. The Vatican has even invested significant time and resources into engaging with contemporary developments in science to rethink particular teachings like the doctrine of original sin and theological understandings of divine action. However, this enthusiasm for engaging with the natural sciences has not been extended in the same way to receiving developments in the biological sciences that might influence theological understandings of what it means to be sexually differentiated creatures. Indeed, in the *Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (Inter Insigniores)* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1976, the Vatican takes a more dismissive stance towards the natural sciences. In acknowledging that the sacramental role of the priest depends upon a theological understanding of sexual difference, the document states “The human sciences, however valuable their contribution in their own domain, cannot suffice here, for they cannot grasp the realities of faith: the properly supernatural content of these realities is beyond their competence.”¹⁷ Here the natural sciences are not engaged at all, but rather are dismissed entirely as a source for theological reflection because of their inability to “grasp the realities of faith.” Enthusiasm from the Vatican is thus inconsistently expressed towards the natural sciences, and there has been relatively little attention paid to the biology of sexual difference in Catholic magisterial teaching, and this remains an emerging field of inquiry within Catholic theology as well.¹⁸ More work is needed then to engage theologically with what the

¹⁷ *Inter Insigniores* (1976),

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

¹⁸ While it remains an emerging field within Catholic theology, there have been several significant contributions. For examples, see Lisa Cahill’s *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), Margaret Farley’s *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), *Sex and Gender: Christian Ethical Reflections* (Washington DC: Georgetown University

natural sciences reveal about the material realities of biological sexuality, and this thesis seeks to contribute to that effort.

The pastoral reason for this integration stems from the reality also expressed by Pope John Paul II that our society remains one that is significantly shaped by insights from the natural sciences. As the former Pope states, “Christians will inevitably assimilate the prevailing ideas about the world, and today these are deeply shaped by science. The only question is whether they will do this critically or unreflectively.”¹⁹ Western societies remain largely influenced by the perceived authority of the natural sciences, and thus the Church has a pastoral responsibility to respond to the pressing questions of our time in terminology that will be intelligible to the people living in it, which for our particular historical moment necessarily must include engagement with scientific information. Additionally, a theology of being human should take into account as many aspects of human life as possible—including the biological constitution of humanity. A theological anthropology that is not engaged with the biological runs the risk of being too abstract and divorced from the material realities of human life. Discerning the meaning of sexuality and biologically sexed bodies, and re-considering the doctrine of original sin constitute some of the most complex tasks in our time given the multitude of conflicting messages received concerning these issues. The complexity and import of these questions are only compounded by their deeply personal nature as well. We need, then, a theological anthropology that is both biologically and

Press, 2017) edited by Mary Jo Iozzio and Patricia Beattie Jung, or Todd A. Salzman’s and Michael G. Lawler’s *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008). Additionally, while not exclusively Catholic, the volume edited by Patricia Beattie Jung, Aana Marie Vigen, and John Anderson entitled, *God, Science, Sex, Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010) is an excellent example of a sustained interdisciplinary examination of sex and gender.

¹⁹ John Paul II, “Message to the Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory.”

theologically informed to express the meaning of our sexed bodies and the doctrine of original sin in a language that can be received in this particular historical moment.

Before concluding this introduction, a clarifying note about language is required. Since at least the 1960s, feminists have made a distinction between “sex” and “gender,” with “sex” referring to, in the words of Gayle Rubin, “the biological raw material of human sex and procreation,” and “gender” referring to “the socially imposed division of the sexes.”²⁰ Sex has been associated with the realm of biology, and gender with culture or social construction. Without delving into the entire history or the variety of contemporary understandings of these terms, this thesis is informed by developments in evolutionary biology and New Feminist Materialism that undermine a strict nature/culture dichotomy. It is one of the central tenets of this project that these realities are interpenetrating and constantly entangled. Because of this, I primarily use the term “sexual difference” as a means of referring to the nature/culture hybridity that shapes the development of sex/gender differences.

²⁰ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), p. 165.

Part 1: Historical Developments in Theologies of Sin and Sexual Difference

Chapter 1: Evolution of a Doctrine

*“What for some is a self-evident truth about human nature is for others a leftover from the paleontology of yesteryear. Almost all would say that original sin has something to do with Adam and Eve, but it is by no means apparent why it should have anything to do with us.”*²¹

--James Alison

The doctrine of original sin has traditionally been expressed in terms of a historic “fall” caused by human fault from an ideal state of perfection to one of disorder and alienation. For example, as former Pope John Paul II describes in his *Message for the XXIII World Day for Peace*, “Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve destroyed the existing harmony by deliberately going against the creator’s plan.”²² According to traditional articulations of the doctrine, the culpability of Adam and Eve was then passed on to all of humanity because “the whole human race is in Adam,” with varying degrees of specificity provided about what it means exactly for the “whole human race” to be “in Adam.”²³ The doctrine has received intense criticism since its earliest formulations in Augustine’s time, but censure of the doctrine has been especially intense since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859, coupled with the development of a historical-critical consciousness that diminished the credibility of a literal interpretation of the Genesis creation account. In the context of these developments, as Stephen Duffy notes, the doctrine began to appear incoherent, and “riddled with contradictions.”²⁴ The Enlightenment period through the

²¹ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, p. 1.

²² Pope John Paul II. “Message for the XXIII World Day for Peace” (1 January, 1990), §518, from *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Jacques Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 2000), p. 207.

²³ Catechism of the Catholic Church (7 December, 1992), §523c, from *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*.

²⁴ Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” p. 607.

beginning of the twentieth century was marked by optimism about the possibilities for humanity. What was once considered “evil” that had been brought into the world by an ancient human sin, began to be viewed by many as simply an inevitability of the evolutionary progression of the world that would someday be resolved by biological progress.²⁵ As Duffy notes, “with the Enlightenment . . . Many ceased to view evil as a religious or theological problem. It was simply a problem of personal psychology and/or human social arrangements. Its remedy would be intelligent human response, not the invocation of divine aid.”²⁶ A further concern with the doctrine that has developed especially since the inception of feminist theology in the 1960s is its implications for gender relations and understandings of sexual difference. Some expressions of the doctrine have historically reflected an implicit gender dualism that implies male superiority, and as Tatha Wiley has argued, “a denial that women possess the image of God fully as persons, and the assumption that male privilege and rule is the divinely guaranteed order of creation,”²⁷ and the doctrine has been used at various points in history to justify the silencing and subjection of women.

The optimism towards human possibility that characterized the Enlightenment has since been shattered by the horrors of human evil demonstrated by two world wars, Auschwitz, the Gulag, ISIS, and various other catastrophes of human violence that have

²⁵ Given the brevity of this chapter, it is not possible to do justice to the complexity and diversity of views regarding human nature that existed during the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, while optimism regarding human capabilities fueled the rapidly expanding fields of science and technology during these years, Kant’s notion of “radical evil” as fundamental to human nature and Calvin’s understanding of the “total depravity” of humanity both continued to exert significant influence, thus problematizing any attempts to offer a simple description of the period as either “optimistic” or “pessimistic” in regards to human nature.

²⁶ Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” p. 606.

²⁷ Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), p. 156.

occurred during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.²⁸ After these devastations, it is no longer sufficient to describe human evil simply as the imperfection of an evolving species that will eventually be remedied by the progress of evolution. Human wickedness and the suffering caused by it far exceed the wastefulness and pain built into natural selection processes. Furthermore, as scientific inquiry has progressed, evolution has been found to be less linear in its trajectory, diminishing humanity's hope in its ability to achieve salvation through continual biological progress.²⁹ As the world now seeks an anthropology that accounts for our "disconcerting experience of evil as a grim constant," the doctrine of original sin holds new poignancy in terms of contributing to a theological anthropology for the contemporary age.³⁰ There have been several promising attempts to revise traditional articulations of original sin, which is no small task, as the doctrine has far-reaching implications for anthropology, ecclesiology, Christology, and eschatology. However, despite the fact that the doctrine has carried implications for gender and sexual difference since its earliest formulations, there has been relatively little scholarly work exploring this connection, and even less to analyzing the intersection of the three areas of sin, evolution, and gender. Some feminist theologians have explored the concept of sin from within an evolutionary

²⁸ As Piet Schoonenberg has noted, "No doubt the optimism of the 19th century, which saw industrial and social progress mainly as an enchanting future, has given way to an experience of the 'human condition' and human failure which has become a sort of obsession in philosophy and above all in the novel, the theatre and the cinema" (*Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner, New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 1580.

²⁹ Celia Deane-Drummond supports this point as she states in *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), "Teilhard [de Chardin] was influential in inserting his portrait of human beings into a wider history of the cosmos as such and other hominins in particular, but his understanding of human evolution still bears the marks of one who assumed a somewhat linear trajectory to *Homo sapiens*," and furthermore that although he offered many important contributions to the dialogue between theology and science, his scientific work has since been "superseded," pp. 7-8.

³⁰ Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited," p. 606.

framework as part of their larger theological projects, however, these insights have not been significantly extended into questions of gender and sexual difference. This chapter provides a brief overview of the evolution of the Church's understanding of the doctrine of original sin. It does not seek to be a comprehensive account, but will simply provide a picture of the trajectory of the doctrine in order to indicate areas requiring further theological engagement. It also explores three recent contributions to reworking the doctrine by John Haught, Raymund Schwager, and James Alison in order to assess the current status of the doctrine, and to demonstrate the need for more theological reflection on sin in light of what we know about human origins and the evolution of sexual difference.

1. Ecclesial Articulations of the Doctrine of Original Sin

“In Adam's sin all human beings lost their
natural power for good and their innocence.”³¹

--*The Indiculus* (between 435-442)

The first conciliar decree regarding original sin came from the Council of Carthage in 418 CE, during the time Augustine of Hippo was a bishop. The council sought to respond to the arguments of Pelagius, a British monk and theologian, and one of Pelagius' associates, Celestius. Pelagius disagreed with Augustine's view on original sin because he believed it rendered sin inevitable for humanity, and thus diminished both human freedom and the need for moral effort.³² Additionally, Pelagius opposed Augustine's view that all of humanity

³¹ *Indiculus*, §239. From *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 199. This document was probably a redaction made by a disciple of Augustine's. As Jacques Dupuis notes, “this document is a summary of the doctrine of grace, based on papal pronouncements, the decrees of African councils which had subsequently received papal approval, and the Church's faith as expressed mainly in her liturgy.” (Dupuis, p. 798).

³² Wiley, p. 67. The views of Pelagius certainly deserve more development and nuance than can be given here. Augustine's views on original sin are developed in more detail in the next chapter.

contracted original sin through human procreation. Rather, he believed sin was learned by imitation. Celestius encountered trouble with the Magisterium for his belief that death is natural and not a result of the sin of our first parents.³³ The Council of Carthage affirmed the teaching that humans by nature share in the sin of Adam, although it did not embrace Augustine's belief that original sin is transmitted through procreation. The Council also affirmed that death is not a "necessity of nature," but rather, is a punishment for sin.³⁴ In 529 CE, the Second Council of Orange reaffirmed the solidarity of humanity with Adam, as well as the result of original sin as the complete vitiation—though not complete corruption—of human nature, including the impairment of human freedom.³⁵ As James P. O'Sullivan notes in a recent article, the Second Council of Orange "reinforced and clarified the teachings of Carthage," and "maintained against lingering Pelagianism that original sin had changed both body and soul, and against Augustinian extremists, that the change in free will was a diminishment rather than a destruction, but that grace is indeed required for both faith and good works."³⁶ After the Second Council of Orange, there was not another conciliar pronouncement on the doctrine until the Council of Trent in 1546 CE.

While the Councils of Carthage and Orange clarified the Church's position on original sin, it was not until the Council of Trent in 1546 that the doctrine became dogma.³⁷ The Council of Trent was responding to the Protestant reformers, especially Martin Luther,

³³ Wiley, p. 72.

³⁴ The Sixteenth Council of Carthage (418), §501, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 199.

³⁵ The Second Council of Orange (529), §504-505, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 200.

³⁶ James P. O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-examining Original Sin in Light of Evolutionary Science: The State of the Question," *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1083 (2016).

³⁷ Wiley, p. 88.

who had collapsed the church's earlier distinction between original sin and concupiscence. Luther conflated them into one disorder that he believed constituted original sin and afflicted humanity even after baptism, thus expressed by his notion of "*simul justus et peccator*."³⁸ Trent was therefore particularly interested in affirming the sacramental role of baptism in healing the wounds of original sin. They summarized and reaffirmed the Church's teachings on the doctrine that had been defined at Carthage and Orange, and highlighted the fact that "the same merit of Christ Jesus is applied to adults and children alike through the sacrament of baptism."³⁹ The council also emphasized the distinction between original sin and concupiscence, noting that concupiscence remains after baptism, but original sin is healed.⁴⁰ Trent is also distinctive in excluding Mary, the Mother of God, from the curse of original sin.⁴¹ Trent was the last council to explicitly discuss the doctrine of original sin, and thus its proclamations continue to exert pervasive influence particularly on Catholic understandings of the doctrine. At Vatican II in 1962, while *Lumen Gentium* does mention the doctrine of original sin as part of the comprehensive vision of the "divine plan of salvation,"⁴² it does not address the doctrine at length. As James O'Sullivan has noted, the official position of the Catholic Church in the contemporary era remains much the same as it was at the conclusion of the Council of Trent in 1546.⁴³ In terms of its conception of human origins and creation, the Catechism of the Catholic Church does not reference evolution at all, and on the question

³⁸ Ibid, p. 90.

³⁹ The General Council of Trent, Fifth Session, Decree on Original Sin (1546), §510, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 202.

⁴⁰ Ibid., §512.

⁴¹ §513.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ O'Sullivan, "Catholics Re-examining Original Sin in Light of Evolutionary Science: The State of the Question," p. 658.

of original sin, it simply summarizes the doctrine of Trent. As O’Sullivan notes, “This is somewhat surprising given that most advances in biblical interpretation have been accepted by the Magisterium, and given the positive attitude expressed toward evolution, particularly during the pontificate of John Paul II.”⁴⁴ Because of the reluctance of the Catholic Church to update its thinking about human origins and original sin in light of evolution, the Catechism vacillates awkwardly between “sometimes describing the biblical language as symbolic and sometimes seeming to accept it as historical fact.”⁴⁵ This awkwardness will be revealed again later in this thesis in its analysis of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*.

2. The Sex of Sin

*“You are the devil’s gateway:
You are the unsealer of that tree:
You are the first deserter of the divine law:
You are she who persuaded him whom the devil
Was not valiant enough to attack.”*⁴⁶

--Tertullian

Traditional articulations of the doctrine of original sin have not been kind to women. As the above quotation from Tertullian demonstrates, the notion of a primal sin and historical “fall” has been used by some theologians to blame women for the entrance of sin into the world. Following the quotation above, Tertullian argues that in being deceived by the serpent, women destroyed the image of God—man—and caused Jesus Christ to have to die.⁴⁷ Irenaeus says similarly, “Having become disobedient, [Eve] was made the cause of death, both to

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. I.I. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>. Retrieved on 05/02/14.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

herself and to the entire human race.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, the doctrine has ecclesial implications in that it has historically been used to justify male domination and the silencing of women. One classic example of this is found in 1 Timothy, in which the author states, “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”⁴⁹ John Chrysostom elaborates upon this in one of his homilies when he states, “They [women] will show submission by their silence. For the woman taught the man once, and made him guilty of disobedience, and wrought our ruin.”⁵⁰

The blaming of Eve for “the fall” has only been exacerbated by a history of biased Scriptural interpretation, as Julie Faith Parker demonstrates in her article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. As she notes, almost all of the ancient textual witnesses that are available—with the exception of the Vulgate—include the Hebrew word meaning “with her” in their iterations of Genesis 3:6, the verse that describes Eve’s eating of the fruit. This suggests that the final redactor of Genesis meant to indicate that Adam was present with Eve as she ate the fruit, which would implicate Adam in the sin. Yet many English translations omit “with her,” which suggests a level of autonomy to Eve’s act that was not intended by the final redactors.⁵¹ Thus, a biased literal interpretation of the *Genesis* account, and the belief in a historical “fall” of the human race has been used to justify misogyny and the subordination of women. As

⁴⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. III.22. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103322.htm>. Retrieved on 05/02/14.

⁴⁹ 1 Timothy 2:12-14. New Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁰ John Chrysostom, “Homily IX,” *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, On the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans., “by members of the English Church,” Oxford: J.H. Parker (1813), p. 70.

⁵¹ Julie Faith Parker, “Blaming Eve Alone: Translation, Omission, and Implications of עמה in Genesis 3:6b,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 4 (2013).

Tatha Wiley notes, the doctrine expresses a naturalization of male superiority and female inferiority, and “a denial that women possess the image of God fully as persons, and the assumption that male privilege and rule is the divinely guaranteed order of creation.”⁵² Traditional expressions of the doctrine have been largely detrimental to the full humanity and flourishing of women.

3. A Doctrine Crashing Down

“Obviously, the shaking of the scriptural foundations by critical consciousness brings the received doctrine of original sin crashing down.”⁵³

--Stephen Duffy

The doctrine of original sin has been controversial from the moment Augustine began to extensively develop it. Pelagius and Celestius broached early theological concerns with the doctrine that were answered definitively by the councils of Carthage and Orange. When Martin Luther challenged it in the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent responded dogmatically. Yet the most devastating criticisms of the doctrine have emerged during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries with the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, the eventual widespread acceptance of evolution as the most credible account of human beginnings, and the development of historical-critical consciousness in Biblical hermeneutics. Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin constitutes the beginning of a serious theological reconsideration of the doctrine of original sin within the Catholic Church. As Jerry Korsmeyer describes, Teilhard was “the first Catholic churchman to be totally caught

⁵² Wiley, p. 156.

⁵³ Duffy, p. 608.

up in the concept of evolution,” which Teilhard thought was “the key to all human understanding.”⁵⁴

In his essay, “Fall, Redemption, and Geocentrism,” Teilhard critiques the notion that suffering and death came into the world as a result of human sin by noting that, first of all, “Thousands of centuries before a thinking being appeared on our earth, life swarmed on it, with its instincts and its passions, its sufferings and its deaths,”⁵⁵ and secondly, “There is no first Adam.”⁵⁶ Despite the dogmatic claim from the Council of Trent that Adam was “the first man,” “transgressed God’s commandment,” and “drew upon himself the wrath and indignation of God and consequently death,”⁵⁷ Teilhard describes suffering and death as “the price that has to be paid for progress”⁵⁸ in an evolutionary world; and evil, he argues, while losing “nothing of its poignancy or horror,”⁵⁹ is “*a natural feature*” of this world.⁶⁰ Thus, salvation in Teilhard’s schema is the final fulfillment of evolution through the immanent working of “Christ-the-Evolver,”⁶¹ who bears the weight of an imperfect world and will lovingly gather it to himself in completion at the end of time. Teilhard argues that evolution has abolished the need to find a “culprit,” for the presence of evil. Rather, evil and “sin,” are elements of imperfection in a developing world.⁶² While Teilhard engaged extensively with evolutionary developments as he reconsidered the doctrine of original sin, he does not

⁵⁴ Jerry D. Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science*, New Jersey: Paulist Press (1998), p. 58.

⁵⁵ Teilhard De Chardin, “Fall, Redemption, and Geocentrism,” *Christianity and Evolution*, New York: Harcourt Brace (1971), p. 38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵⁷ *The General Council of Trent*, §1511.

⁵⁸ De Chardin, p. 41.

⁵⁹ De Chardin, “Christology and Evolution,” *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 82.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶¹ De Chardin, “Christianity and Evolution: Suggestions for a New Theology,” *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 181.

⁶² De Chardin, “Christ the Evolver,” *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 149.

comment on the evolution of human beings as sexually differentiated, nor does he explore the possibility that sin—or for him, evolutionary imperfection—might manifest in different gendered ways.

While the Vatican has not issued a dogmatic declaration on original sin since the Council of Trent, it did respond to the developments proposed by Teilhard and others during the 1960s. In 1966, Pope Paul VI summoned a symposium in order to “take stock of the present state of exegetical studies and of the natural sciences, as anthropology and paleontology, with regard to the original condition of the human being.”⁶³ He encouraged theologians to address emerging problems with the doctrine of original sin in light of evolution, but he also set firm boundaries regarding the limits of such investigations. In his address to theologians present at the symposium, Paul VI states that they are not to accept any explanations of original sin “which start from the presupposition of polygenism which is not proved, and deny that sin which Adam, the first man and the figure of the future Adam, committed at the beginning of history.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, he notes that the faithful must continue to believe that Adam, the first parent, caused the “loss of the holiness and justice in which he was constituted.”⁶⁵ Pope John Paul II mentions the sin of the “first Adam” in various documents of his papacy. Most significant, however, is his signature on the Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio*” *Ad Tuendam Fidem* in 1988 that affirms the doctrine of original sin as articulated by the Council of Trent as a truth “divinely revealed,”⁶⁶ and to be placed in the

⁶³ Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 205.

⁶⁴ Pope Paul VI. *Address to Theologians at the Symposium on Original Sin* (1966), §516, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 205.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Commentary on Ad Tuendum Fidem* (1998), §11, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 214.

same category with the articles of the Creed, the Christological dogmas, and the Marian dogmas.⁶⁷ The Magisterium has demonstrated consistent reticence to consider valid any development in the doctrine of original sin that denies an original human pair and a historical “fall.”

Though Teilhard’s proposal was not well received by the Vatican, it represents an important moment in the development of the doctrine of original sin. As the doctrine became increasingly unbelievable through the beginning of the twentieth century, Teilhard’s proposal was a valiant effort to make the Christian faith intelligible to what he saw as an increasingly secularized world. However, the theory proposed by Teilhard that human evil will be transcended via evolution is no longer tenable, and indeed, theories about how evolution works have developed significantly since Teilhard’s time. A new articulation of the doctrine is needed that will retain what is essential the doctrine, while incorporating the insights of evolutionary theories, but that will also acknowledge “evolution’s victims”⁶⁸ and the unfathomable excess of human suffering in the world that Edward Schillebeeckx describes as “the scarlet thread by which this historical fragment is recognizable as human history.”⁶⁹ Further, more thorough engagement is needed about the intersection of evolution, sin, and conceptions of “natural” sexual differences, since the doctrine has been entangled with notions of gender and sex since its earliest articulations.

⁶⁷ Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, p. 214.

⁶⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (1990), p. 294.

⁶⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experiences in the Modern World*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx, Vol. VII, London, New York: Bloomsbury, T & T Clark (2014), p. 718.

4. A Doctrine Resurrected

*“This doctrine is at the same time a stumbling block for Christians and non-Christians alike and yet brings an enormous depth to the understanding of our human condition.”*⁷⁰

--Benno Van den Toren

After Teilhard’s early efforts to recast the doctrine of original sin in light of evolutionary theory, there have been many contributions to the resurrection of this foundational doctrine. While key thinkers such as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Jurgen Moltmann, and others have suggested new directions for the doctrine, I focus on three compelling recent contributions that I see as emblematic of major movements (although as will be noted, none of them reflect on the entanglement of the doctrine with notions of sexual difference and gender)—John Haught’s development of the doctrine in *God after Darwin*, and Raymund Schwager’s and James Alison’s appropriations of René Girard’s mimetic theory to explain the doctrine in *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation* and *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, respectively. After summarizing their contributions, I analyze their work in terms of the possibilities they present for an adequate rearticulation of the doctrine of original sin.

5. John Haught’s *God After Darwin*

In *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, John Haught argues that for many Christians, original sin is “the most difficult religious teaching to square with Darwinian evolution.”⁷¹ Haught rejects the existence of a primordial couple and a historical fall as

⁷⁰ Benno van den Toren, “Original Sin and the Coevolution of Nature and Culture,” *Finding Ourselves After Darwin: Conversations on Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Stanley Rosenberg, Michigan: Baker Academic (2018), p. 173.

⁷¹ John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Colorado: Westview Press (2008), p. 146.

obviously irreconcilable with evolutionary theory, and inconsistent with the mythic genre of the creation account in Genesis.⁷² He then describes original sin as “a systematic turning away from God by human beings.”⁷³ Noting that this is more superficial than informative, Haught then suggests a way of conceiving of the doctrine within what he calls his “aesthetic-evolutionary”⁷⁴ perspective. This perspective is grounded in his appropriation of Teilhard’s depiction of the cosmos as a “still unfinished, imperfect universe.”⁷⁵ Within this imperfect universe, Haught believes there are various “strong pressures,”⁷⁶ some of which have been culturally inherited, for humans to be indifferent to “God’s creative cosmic aim of maximizing beauty.”⁷⁷ Sin, for Haught, is discord or monotony. Thus, he argues that theologies that are overly concerned with order can actually contribute to sin by creating uniformity and monotony, rather than embracing diversity. For Haught, original sin is not a vitiated human nature that is propagated biologically, but rather, it is the culturally inherited “intractable situation that has come to prevail as a result of the human family’s persistent indifference to its creative mission in the cosmos.”⁷⁸ Original sin resides in culture and not biology for Haught. Furthermore, Haught argues that the ideal lies not in a mythic past, but rather, in the “Absolute Future” that evolution is heading toward. Haught believes this allows for a greater sense of “adventurous openness of the future,”⁷⁹ and prevents the obsessive search for a scapegoat upon whom to place the blame for the imperfect world. An articulation

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

of the doctrine of original sin that involves a historic fall or biological propagation is, for Haught, “obsolete and unbelievable.”⁸⁰ Haught does not engage with questions of sexual difference, or the ways in which the evolution of sexual difference may potentially impact the “intractable situation” of human sinfulness in his work.

Despite being published in 2008, Haught’s book reflects much of the optimism about evolution for which Teilhard has been heavily critiqued. He emphasizes the beauty and cooperation found in evolutionary processes, but also acknowledges that an evolutionary world is one that is naturally imperfect, and that there is beauty in this imperfection.⁸¹ As he notes, this way of approaching the realities of life is a healthier and more sustainable approach to the world than endlessly striving for perfection or seeking to regain an ideal time in the past that humanity ruined by sin. Haught’s perspective contributes to a hopeful expectation of the eschatological fulfillment of the “Absolute Future,”⁸² as well as cultivating creativity as humans seek to participate in the divine plan of maximizing beauty in “vital multi-formity.”⁸³ Socially, Haught’s approach to theology and the doctrine of original sin has the potential to break down hierarchical distinctions created to establish “order,” in favor of a diversity that vanquishes the “evil of monotony.”⁸⁴ This approach bodes well for those who have been oppressed by hierarchical distinctions, including women, who have historically been associated with lower levels of being “naturally” requiring the headship of men, who have been associated with higher levels of being.⁸⁵ Additionally, his rejection of the literal

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸² Ibid., p. 149.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 147.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Many feminist theologians would support this move by Haught. Note for example Rosemary Radford Ruether’s statement that, “An ecological-feminist theology of nature must rethink the whole Western

interpretation of the *Genesis* account seeks to free women from the association with Eve, and the subsequent blame for bringing evil into the world.

However, Haught's project is not without theological problems. As mentioned above, in a Teilhardian spirit, he expresses optimism about the linear progression of evolution toward the eschatological fulfillment of the "Absolute Future"⁸⁶ that fails to account for the ambiguity of evolutionary "progress," as well as "the myriads of faulty developments, and the victims of this process."⁸⁷ While it is true that evolution is beautiful even as it is messy, it also produces great suffering and waste in both the animal and the human realms. Additionally, Haught's understanding of sin, and original sin, as failures to contribute to God's cosmic aim to "maximize beauty"⁸⁸ does not adequately capture the reality of human agency and complicity in evil, as well as the pervasiveness of evil. The horrors of global terrorism, genocide, and other catastrophes of human evil require a more robust conceptual infrastructure than Haught's notions of sin as "persistent indifference"⁸⁹ or failures to maximize beauty. Additionally, in locating sin in culture rather than biology, Haught reinforces a nature/culture binary that has since been undermined by developments in the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, which we discuss in more detail in chapter four. While Haught's contribution to a post-Darwinian understanding of original sin holds promise, especially as an early attempt to adjust the doctrine to account for insights from evolutionary theory and to address the ways in which the doctrine has contributed to distortions of

theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being" (*Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, p. 86).

⁸⁶ Haught, p. 149.

⁸⁷ Moltmann, p. 287.

⁸⁸ Haught, p. 146.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

understandings of gender, the many gaps and unanswered questions in his work present significant problems for his account of the doctrine of original sin.

Other significant contributions to reconstructing the doctrine of original sin in light of evolution have emerged from theologians attempting to integrate the theories of René Girard about acquisitive mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism into theological re-articulations of the doctrine. There has been much enthusiasm from students of Girard about the possibilities for Girardian thought to offer explanatory power and new relevance and credibility for the doctrine of original sin.⁹⁰ For example, James Alison suggests that “Girard will rescue Augustine’s insight” on original sin by providing a more credible interpersonal anthropology as opposed to Augustine’s (supposedly) “radical act of appropriation of the self and a negation of the self’s intrinsic alterity.”⁹¹ I examine two contributions to the effort to use Girardian thought to explain original sin—Raymund Schwager’s monograph, *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation*, and James Alison’s *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*. Schwager, a Jesuit priest and friend of René Girard’s, died in 2004. The English translation of his book was published posthumously in 2006. James Alison is a Catholic theologian and former Dominican priest who has spent much of his life living in Latin America. I briefly summarize Girard’s mimetic theory here, since both Schwager and Alison depend upon it in their works.

⁹⁰ Note also the foreword to James Alison’s book *The Joy of Being Wrong*, in which Sebastian Moore states that Alison via Girard has “discovered the meta-anthropology for our time, an anthropologically and psychologically credible version of original sin” (p. x).

⁹¹ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, p. 297.

Girard suggests that all human desire is “desire according to the desire of the other.”⁹² Human beings, he argues, are wired for mimicry. This mimicry is pre-conscious. Desires are not spontaneous, but rather, are learned from observation of the desires of the “other.” As Alison summarizes, “humans are exceptionally finely prepared imitating bodies for whom imitation . . . is the normal conduit through which we acquire language, gesture, memory, and empathy, and so receive ourselves as ourselves.”⁹³ According to Girardian thought, every human is born into interconnected webs of relationships that construct and interiorize identity. Thus, the human self is “a real but malleable construct which is a symptom of the way this body has been brought into being and is held in being by the relationships which preceded it.”⁹⁴ Relationality and imitation are constitutive of personal identity. Mimetic desire is not intrinsically violent, but often becomes rivalrous and subsequently violent.⁹⁵ These rivalries tend to lead to expiatory acts of violence via the scapegoat mechanism. As Girard notes, a scapegoat is created whenever “two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters.”⁹⁶ Girard posits mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, and the tendency to create scapegoats as fundamental to human anthropology and culture.

⁹² René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company (2000), p. 33.

⁹³ James Alison, “Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self,” London: (2007), <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/pdf/eng50.pdf>, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ For a nuanced account of common misunderstandings of Girard, see Chelsea Jordan King’s “Girard Reclaimed: Finding Common Ground between Sarah Coakley and René Girard on Sacrifice,” in *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 23 (2016), pp. 63-73.

⁹⁶ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, p. 12.

6. Raymund Schwager's *Banished From Eden*

Schwager begins his appropriation of Girard in his 2006 monograph entitled *Banished from Eden* by extending mimetic theory into his Scriptural exegesis, particularly his interpretation of Genesis. He suggests that the primal sin was “acquisitive imitation” because, as he notes, “What seduces Eve is not the fruit as such, but the fruit the serpent designates as desirable.”⁹⁷ While imitation is not intrinsically a sin, in fact it is constitutive of human identity, Schwager distinguishes between true mimesis and “covetous imitation.”⁹⁸ Thus, he sees the first sin as a type of perverse imitation. He says, “Sin begins with a counterfeit imitation of God that engenders rivalry.”⁹⁹ This primal sin led to subsequent disturbances in human relationships.¹⁰⁰ Schwager argues that the Genesis account possesses both a mythic character and, he speculates, perhaps it suggests a “historical nucleus” referring to some early point in human history.¹⁰¹ Additionally, Schwager argues that original sin is more than a singular event, and it extends into the very structures of human society.¹⁰² He affirms the notion of solidarity with our original evolutionary predecessors through his understanding of human anthropology as radically interconnected. In a highly nuanced sense, Schwager argues, original sin is passed on through procreation because, “Humans who are ‘born of woman’ are so deeply bound to one another through reproduction and birth that uncleanness too is passed on through the communication that is disturbed from the very beginning.”¹⁰³ For Schwager, it is impossible to speak of human nature apart from reference

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 33.

to the human “other,” and thus he blurs the line between human reproduction and imitation, describing procreation as a “comprehensively understood process of communication and imitation.”¹⁰⁴ He develops his notion of human identity as simultaneously active and receptive, distinct and radically interconnected.¹⁰⁵ Finally, salvation for Schwager lies in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus who sacrificed himself and “allowed himself to be hit by the collective violence of his enemies,”¹⁰⁶ and who, upon his resurrection, initiated a new community that presents an alternative mimetic option to the typical human history of rivalry and violence. Christians are thus called to follow the example of Jesus in being supernaturally non-violent and self-surrendering. As he states, “the non-violent surrender of one’s life includes a supernatural calling and capacity. Only through self-giving can we move beyond our own deep striving.”¹⁰⁷

7. James Alison’s *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*

James Alison focuses on developing a theological anthropology and soteriology in light of Girard’s mimetic theory. To do this, he turns his gaze to the apostolic witness found in the Gospels in order to argue that Jesus Christ shared a similar type of anthropology to the one put forth by Girard. As he states, “There is a revelatory anthropology present in the Gospel texts, and it is an anthropology of mimetic desire.”¹⁰⁸ Following his exegesis of key Gospel texts, he develops his notion of the “self” as a malleable construct always in relation to the others that are forming it, in contrast to the “mentalist picture of the human as

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁰⁷ Schwager, *Banished from Eden*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁸ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, p. 25.

bequeathed us by Descartes, Kant, and the epigones of the Enlightenment.”¹⁰⁹ Both Schwager and Alison depend upon this relational ontology to craft their understandings of anthropology and original sin. Alison is particularly keen to emphasize that the doctrine of original sin is a derivative doctrine that depends upon Christology and soteriology for its explication. He is hesitant to postulate any type of “originating event” for the emergence of human consciousness, and suggests that it lies only within the realm of the hypothetical, but he ultimately argues that the hypothesis of an original event is “necessary to describe human being,” and thus he argues along with Girard that the originating event of human consciousness was likely one of intraspecies violence culminating in a murder.¹¹⁰ From this hypothesis, he develops his Christology which portrays Jesus as the ultimate self-surrendering victim who reveals the corruption of the scapegoat mechanism. Jesus possessed to the highest degree what Alison describes as the “intelligence of the victim,” a type of creative understanding of the human condition in relation to God. According to Alison, Jesus then passed on this “intelligence of the victim” to the first apostles after his resurrection. Salvation, argues Alison, is synonymous with appropriating this same “intelligence of the victim” that was embodied by Jesus.¹¹¹

Both Schwager and Alison blend a Girardian gloss on Scripture with considerations from both the Catholic tradition and human experience. In their shared emphasis on the radically interconnected nature of human identity, they offer compelling theories that retain the possibility for humans to exist as both victims of sin and as culpable for sin. This allows

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 84.

for an appropriate acknowledgement of human agency in evil, while also noting that humans are born into an imperfect world that creates victims. Both Schwager and Alison construct notions of original sin that are directly oriented toward Christology and ecclesiology, and also informed by the natural sciences.

There is much to be celebrated about both Alison's and Schwager's creative proposals in their ability to integrate Girardian insights into Christian theology, however both also contain significant lacunae and raises a host of unresolved theological problems. They are both overly celebratory of "self-surrender" as a form of redemptive human action, which is indicative of their broader failures to address questions of gendered differences in sin. Self-surrender and self-giving are not intrinsically virtuous, and can be potentially pathological and disordered impulses. Schwager and Alison both fail to consider the ways in which the exhortation to self-surrender is received in different gendered ways. As Valerie Saiving notes in, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," "woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness."¹¹² Liberation theology has shown us that not only women, but also other racial and sexual minorities have historically been expected to surrender to the point of pathological self-abnegation, and neither Schwager nor Alison acknowledge the possibility of a holy self-love or a holy revolt against unjust violence. Salvation lies in non-violent surrender for the Girardian. Alison not only advocates for uncritical self-surrender to violent oppressors, but he even borders on expressing a romantic obsession with victimhood and the special "intelligence of the victim," as he phrases it. He argues, for example, that Jesus revealed the "self-giving toward

¹¹² Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960), p. 108.

victimization” that is allegedly present in the Father, and this “self-giving toward victimization” is supposedly what humans are called to in the process of their redemption.¹¹³ This type of language is abysmally unaware of the ways in which this theology can be (and has been) used in abusive ways in the history of the Christianity, and it raises serious questions as to the appropriateness of the entire project of the Girardian theologians.

Furthermore, because of their heavy dependence on Girard, Schwager and Alison are vulnerable to the same criticisms that have been raised against Girard, especially the tendency to over-emphasize the role that violence plays in establishing culture, thereby minimizing other more positive forces of cooperation and group bonding that also contribute to the development of culture. Mimetic theory is given too central a place in terms of explaining human behavior, to the exclusion of other contributing forces. A final critique of the Girardian approach to original sin questions whether Schwager and Alison offer an appropriately metaphysical account of sin, or if, in seeking to elucidate the concrete manifestations of sin in human relationships they collapse sin into a human issue with no metaphysical implications and no particular need for a divine remedy.¹¹⁴

8. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to sketch a brief overview of the evolution of the Church’s understanding of the doctrine of original sin and to indicate areas requiring further development from theologians. It examined the ways in which the doctrine has been codified in the teachings of the Church, and it noted that the doctrine has had very little modification

¹¹³ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, p. 99.

¹¹⁴ This critique was raised in a recent dissertation by Thomas Kryst at The Catholic University of America entitled, “Interpreting the death of Jesus: A comparison of the theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Raymund Schwager” (2009).

within the official teaching of the church since the Council of Trent. This was followed by an exploration of recent contributions to reworking the doctrine by John Haught, Raymund Schwager, and James Alison in order to demonstrate the need for more theological reflection on sin in light of what we know about human origins, and even more urgently, in light of information about the evolution of sexual difference. Information from the natural sciences is constantly being updated, and thus there is constantly new material being provided for theological consideration. While science does not determine theological directions, theology seeking to be grounded in the world as we actually experience it will do well to consider new developments. In light of the dearth of constructions of original sin appropriately addressing questions of gender and sexual difference, a new contribution is needed that will effectively incorporate these concerns.

Chapter 2: Augustine on Original Sin and Sexual Difference

*“Of all that was done in the past, you eat the fruit, either rotten or ripe.
Here upon earth you have the reward of the good and ill
That was done by those who have gone before you.”¹¹⁵*

--T.S. Eliot

While it is not accurate to say that the doctrine of original sin originated with Augustine, his is the earliest and the most persistently influential systematic articulation of it, and as Tatha Wiley notes, his influence on the church and its thinking about sin has been “incalculable.”¹¹⁶ As a result of his persistent interest in developing a theology of sin, Augustine has suffered from a variety of criticisms regarding not only his theological method and conclusions, but also his character and motivations. For example, a text from 1911 accuses Augustine of being, “par excellence a penologist” because “the diseases of sin interest him more than the remedy,”¹¹⁷ and in a more contemporary monograph, the author accuses Augustine of being a child abuser who legitimizes violence done in the name of religion.¹¹⁸ Yet in spite of these attacks and various attempts to dismiss the relevance and coherence of the doctrine of original sin, the violence and suffering of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have shattered humanity’s confidence in the linear upward progression of evolution and raised new anthropological questions which have prompted theologians to seek an account of humanity that is, as Stephen Duffy argues, “adequate to our disconcerting experience of evil as a grim

¹¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*, New York: Harcourt Brace (1950), p. 101.

¹¹⁶ Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*, (2002), p. 56.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Allin, *The Augustinian Revolution in Theology*, London: J. Clarke (1911), p. 129.

¹¹⁸ Donald Capps, *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press (1995), p. 33.

constant, appropriate to the Christian tradition, and sensitive to the problems that led to a loss of credibility for the classical doctrine [of original sin].”¹¹⁹ Thus, there has been a recent renewal of interest in possible retrievals of Augustine’s thinking on original sin in light of the complexities of our time.

Augustine has also significantly shaped Christian thinking about gender and sexual difference, as well as assumptions about the ways in which gendered behaviors might be related somehow to the sins of our first parents. As Kim Power argues, any theologian hoping to understand the history of Christian thinking about gender and sexuality and the influence of this history on contemporary struggles around these questions, “must turn to Augustine’s system of thought, which was the distillation of the fourth-century debates over the place of sexed and gendered being in creation.”¹²⁰ As with his approach to original sin, Augustine’s thinking about the meaning of sexual difference was significantly shaped by the cultural, philosophical, geographic, political, and biological context of his time, as well as by his method of Biblical exegesis. While Augustine’s influence on Christian perceptions of gender has been problematic in many ways, as will be shown in this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that when placed alongside some of his contemporaries like Jerome and John Chrysostom, as Elizabeth Clark has argued, Augustine expresses “*relatively*—prosexual, promarital, and proreproductive theories.”¹²¹ He also argued against some of his contemporaries for the ability of women to image God, although as we will see, even the way in which he seeks to defend the ability of women to image God has problematic implications.

¹¹⁹ Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited,” p. 606.

¹²⁰ Power, *Veiled Desire*, p. 5.

¹²¹ Elizabeth A. Clark, “Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (1989), p. 25.

Additionally, feminist theologians like Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Daphne Hampson have critiqued the prevailing tradition of Augustinian interpretation that sees Augustine as identifying pride as the fundamental sin. These feminist theologians argue that this view of sin is androcentric and fails to adequately portray the distinctive ways in which women sin that cannot be captured by terms like “pride” or excessive self-assertion. Augustine’s understanding of the nature of pride and its relation to sin will thus also be discussed in this chapter.

Despite the fact that there are significant limitations and problems with elements of Augustine’s thinking about both original sin and sexual difference that require either elimination or significant alteration, this chapter argues that some of the key elements of his understanding of the doctrine, his interest in expressing how sin infects the human person all the way down to the level of the biological, his insight into the role of desire in human life, and his insistence upon emphasizing the unity of humanity via the notion of the *massa peccati*, provide important resources for rethinking the doctrine in a post-Darwinian age.¹²²

This chapter begins by placing Augustine in the context of the various intersecting forces that would have likely had an impact on his thinking about both original sin and gender in order to help explain some of the particular emphases of his thought. These intersecting forces include his rejection of the dualistic ideas of Manicheanism, his battles with Pelagius,

¹²² The *massa peccati* is the “lump of sin,” which as Pier Franco Beatrice argues, is a “kind of shapeless sin-infected substance, in which man is formed from birth and which comes to constitute a congenital and defining element of his physical and moral structure.” Beatrice argues further that the *massa peccati* “holds a truly central place in the thought of Augustine,” and further that the notion of the “lump” was prominent in Manichean thought, although it gets significantly reworked by Augustine to fit more cogently with Christian beliefs. Additionally, Beatrice notes that “there are other documents, all from the East, that would lead us to believe there was a certain diffusion, especially oral, of the metaphor of the mass of dough or lump in both doctrinal and liturgical language, indeed from the earliest days of the church” (*The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian sources*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 50-54).

Caelestius, and Julian of Eclanum, as well as some of the dynamics of his personal relationships that likely impacted his thinking.¹²³ The chapter then turns to an exposition of the key elements of Augustine's understanding of original sin in order to place the doctrine within the context of his larger body of work and to show how the doctrine reflects the central concerns of Augustine's theology and the coherence of his thought in his persistent use of the motif of unity, which has its foundation in the simplicity and unity of the Triune God who exists in perfect *harmonia*. The notion of the unified Triune God who grounds all of existence and lovingly ordains the ordered patterns of the material world through the workings of Providence provides the ontological underpinnings for his conceptions of both sin and salvation. The final section of the chapter examines the implications of Augustine's thought on original sin for his understanding of sexual difference. Augustine's thought reflects many assumptions of his time, and we cannot justly criticize him for failing to reflect twenty-first century sensitivities to questions of gender and sexuality. However, much of his thinking on these issues continues to exert significant influence on assumptions about sexual difference in both ecclesial and non-ecclesial contexts, and this influence must be illuminated in order to discern which aspects of his legacy are still helpful and appropriate for our time.

¹²³ As Beatrice argues, "Augustine, for his part, the highly authoritative spokesman of African and western tradition, makes the case very forcefully that human generation is corrupted by sexual concupiscence, which is the vehicle of the sin contracted from Adam and a sin itself (*reatus concupiscentiae*). In stating these theories, which are so characteristic of his thought on original sin, Augustine is re-echoing with great fidelity a very ancient doctrine that came down to him through the enduring folk and liturgical tradition of Latin Christianity, African in particular, which was deeply permeated with elements of encratite origin" (*The Transmission of Sin: Augustine and the Pre-Augustinian sources*, p. 261).

1. Augustine in Context

*“Non ego finxi originale peccatum
quod catholica fides credit antiquitus.”*¹²⁴

-Augustine

There are a multitude of contextual factors that might have influenced the development of Augustine’s theology. This section does not attempt a comprehensive account of the many complexities of Augustine’s historical context, which was, as Peter Brown notes, “an age of rapid and dramatic change;”¹²⁵ rather, it aims to briefly describe a few of the most salient cultural and personal dynamics that can provide insight specifically into Augustine’s theology of original sin and his understanding of the meaning of sexual difference.¹²⁶ While Augustine’s views should not be reduced to products of his time period or his personal history, understanding some of the dynamics that likely shaped his thinking can help contemporary readers to read him charitably, and to understand some of his emphases that might strike us as peculiar. This section aims to cultivate an awareness of the “otherness” of Augustine’s time period and writings, which is helpful for discerning the relevance of his thinking for our own time. It highlights the influence of Augustine’s Manichean history on his thinking, his battles with the Pelagians, his approach to Scripture, and some of the dynamics of his personal relationships, particularly with women.

¹²⁴ Augustine, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia*, 2.12.25. “It was not I who invented original sin; the Catholic faith has believed in it from ancient times.”

¹²⁵ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, New York: Dorset Press (1967), p. 9.

¹²⁶ Due to space constraints, I cannot provide an in-depth overview of all of the varied understandings of “the fall” and “original sin” that existed in fragmentary ways in the tradition before Augustine that would have also influenced his thinking. Augustine saw his articulation of original sin as in continuity with figures like Cyprian, Jerome, and Ambrose. Tatha Wiley provides a helpful account of the references to “the fall” and “original sin” in major figures in the tradition before Augustine in her monograph *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*, pp. 37-55.

Augustine and Manicheanism

As a young man, Augustine was a “Hearer” among the Manichees for about nine years.¹²⁷ Founded by Mani in what is now Iraq around 240CE, Manicheanism had spread widely throughout the Roman Empire by 270CE, and Augustine encountered Manichaean missionaries in Carthage at the age of twenty. Manicheanism, according to Roland Teske, taught a “universal dualistic gnosis that explained the human predicament in terms of a metaphysical materialism cloaked in a highly imaginative myth.”¹²⁸ The central tenet of Manicheanism was that the world was created by two “uncreated principles” of good and evil, or light and darkness. Mani taught that good and evil were once separate but came into conflict, resulting in some of the good being imprisoned in the evil. This imprisonment of the good in the evil was the cause of the human experience of inner conflict between body and soul. Mani taught that the soul was “literally a particle of divinity imprisoned in the dark and evil body.”¹²⁹ This dualism led to the belief that humans are not culpable for evil deeds because these deeds were committed by the evil principle that imprisons every human. It is thus the evil principle manifest in the body that bears the guilt for evil deeds while humans remain sinless.

The teachings of the Manichees were persuasive to Augustine, and, for a time, their dualism provided Augustine with a somewhat satisfactory answer to the problem of evil. The Manichees believed that the human “baser nature” would eventually be “split off and shoved

¹²⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 46.

¹²⁸ Roland Teske, Introduction to Augustine’s *On Genesis: Two books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the literal interpretation of Genesis, an unfinished book*, trans. by Roland Teske, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 84, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press (1991), p. 7.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

away . . . defeated and wrapt (sic) up, all in a big, separate lump, as if in an eternal prison,”¹³⁰ freeing the soul from the body’s evil influence. The Manichees taught that one must ultimately escape the evil body in order to be liberated from distress, conflict, and pain. This allowed Augustine to see his unruly sexual desires, his passions, and the weaknesses of his body as consequences of the evil body that imprisoned his good soul, and to identify his true self with his spiritual and “good” nature, thus assuaging any guilt he felt about his sexual behavior. As Brown notes, “Augustine as a Manichee could enjoy the very real consolation, that for all his intense ambition, his disquieting involvement with his concubine, the pervasive sense of guilt that came so often to cloud his relations with his mother, at least the good part of him remained, throughout, unsoiled.”¹³¹ Augustine explains in the *Confessions* that he felt profoundly attracted to this teaching of the Manichees since it gratified his pride to be free from blame for his faults. As he states, “For it still seemed to me [when he was a Manichee] ‘that it was not we that sin, but that I know not what other nature sinned in us.’”¹³² One can see that from a young age Augustine was already fixated on questions about evil, guilt, the passions, and materiality that would later be so central to his theological development. The Manichees also taught a form of metaphysical materialism in that the good and evil principles were conceived of as two physical masses with endless extension. Augustine notes that this caused him to think of God as a “bright and immense body” and of

¹³⁰ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 50.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹³² Augustine, *Confessiones*, V.10.18. Adhuc enim mihi uidebatur non esse nos, qui peccamus, sed nescio quam aliam in nobis peccare naturam et delectabat superbiam meam extra culpam esse et, cum aliquid mali fecissem, non confiteri me fecisse, ut sanares «animam meam, quoniam » peccabat «tibi », sed excusare me amabam et accusare nescio quid aliud, quod mecum esset et ego non essem.

himself as “a piece of that body.”¹³³ Even after he left the Manichees, he struggled to think of God as anything other than a “vast corporeal mass,” since he thought that “anything not a body was nothing whatsoever,” which also led him to regard evil as a substance for much of his young adult life.¹³⁴

Augustine eventually became disillusioned by Manicheanism, partly because the Manichees rejected scientific truths that Augustine knew to be valid, and partly because Augustine felt he could “make no progress” in Manicheanism as the Manichean understanding of the “good” was an essentially passive one.¹³⁵ When Augustine raised his concern with the discrepancies between their teachings and his own scientific observations, Augustine recalls that they were unable to answer the questions that he raised, and he was “ordered to believe, and yet it corresponded not with those rules acknowledged by calculation and my own sight, but was far different.”¹³⁶ This incongruity troubled Augustine, and began to diminish his confidence in their teachings. Eventually, at the age of twenty-nine, Augustine would abandon the Manichees, and continue his search for truth, but the questions about evil, guilt, the passions, and materiality that initially attracted him to the Manichees would remain with him as he entered more deeply into the Catholic faith under the influence of Ambrose. Additionally, a charge sometimes leveled at Augustine by his political enemies was that he remained heavily influenced by Manicheanism, so his work should be read in the context of his need to defend himself against the accusation of being a Manichean heretic. His rejected

¹³³ Ibid. IV.31. sed quid mihi hoc proderat putanti, quod tu, domine deus ueritas, corpus esses lucidum et immensum et ego frustum de illo corpore?

¹³⁴ Augustine, *Conf.*, V.10.19-20.

¹³⁵ Ibid., V.10.18. See also Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 58-59.

¹³⁶ Ibid., V.3.6. Ibi autem credere iubebar, et ad illas rationes numeris et oculis meis exploratas non occurrebat et longe diuersum erat.

Manichean history provides context for his understanding of creation as *ex nihilo*, and evil as deprivation or the absence of good. Augustine will argue, against the Manichees, that the material world is good since it is created by God, and that evil must have no substance, since everything that exists is good. Neither the material world nor evil are rivals to God, according to Augustine.¹³⁷

Augustine and the Pelagians

The second contextual factor that significantly shaped Augustine's thinking about original sin is his series of conflicts with the Pelagians—Pelagius, Caelestius, and Julian of Eclanum. Arriving in Rome in 410 CE, Pelagius and his disciple Caelestius were both respected men of high moral character.¹³⁸ While it was the teachings of Pelagius that caused the controversy, it was Caelestius who eventually became the most outspoken opponent to Augustine's teachings about baptism and original sin, and was the "true organizer of the Pelagian party and the man of action on the missionary and propagandistic level."¹³⁹ Later, it was Julian of Eclanum, a classically trained Biblical scholar, who would become the primary figure to systematize Pelagianism and work endlessly as a supporter of the movement. Augustine's ongoing battles with Pelagianism led him to gradually become more entrenched in his positions on the biological transmission of original sin than he perhaps would have been otherwise, and he also gradually developed a "steadily increasing harshness of

¹³⁷ See William Mann, "Augustine on Evil and Original Sin," in *God, Belief, and Perplexity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016), pp. 77-85.

¹³⁸ Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin*, p. 15.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

exposition” on the matter as he defended what he viewed as the orthodox position on the transmission of sin.¹⁴⁰

The teachings of the Pelagians were rooted in the emphases in Pelagius’ teachings on the *bonum naturae* (goodness of nature), the definition of sin and the impossibility of its being transmitted, and the importance of human free choice. The Pelagians thought it was theologically reprehensible to locate sin in human nature because that view could imply that God is ultimately the cause of sin as the creator of human nature. Instead the Pelagians argued that every infant is born in the same state that Adam and Eve existed in before the Fall, free of sin and guilt, and with a free will. The Pelagians, especially Julian of Eclanum, also argued against original sin on the basis of the definition of sin. Sin, Julian argued, could not be a nature or a substance, since all natures and substances are created by God.¹⁴¹ Julian argued further in Aristotelian terms that if sin is not a substance, it is an accident, and therefore cannot be transmitted since accidents cannot be transmitted from one substance to another. Julian accused Augustine of preaching Manicheanism because of what Julian saw as a deep pessimism about sex, reproduction, and materiality in Augustine’s conception of the biological transmission of original sin, and the Manichean notion that sexuality and reproduction come from the devil because bearing children leads to further imprisonment of souls in matter.¹⁴² Sin, then, according to the Pelagians, is not passed on biologically through reproduction, but instead is learned through imitation, and can become habitual. For the Pelagians, sin is not an inherited condition, but rather, sin occurs through specific acts

¹⁴⁰ Gerald Bonner, “Anti-Pelagian Works,” *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini, Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing (1999), p. 41.

¹⁴¹ Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin*, p. 32.

¹⁴² Bonner, “Anti-Pelagian Works,” p. 45.

directed by the human free will. This led some of the Pelagians to take the position on infant baptism that the sacrament was not necessary for the forgiveness of sins, but was necessary for “divine adoption and spiritual elevation.”¹⁴³ Other Pelagians suggested that infant baptism forgave sins that the infants had somehow voluntarily committed in the early moments of their lives. Augustine, and eventually the Catholic church, rejected these views on human nature, the transmission of sin, and both Pelagian theories about the purpose of infant baptism, and reaffirmed the truth of the doctrine of original sin at the Council of Carthage in 411CE. While the church did affirm the truth of original sin, it did not embrace every aspect of Augustine’s teaching on its biological transmission. Augustine would continue to struggle throughout the rest of his life to convincingly argue for the biological transmission of original sin while also defending himself against accusations of Manicheanism by maintaining the goodness of materiality, sex, and reproduction (within the proper context of marriage), as well as affirming the nature of evil as a deprivation and not a substance. The historical reality of Augustine’s polemical conflicts with the Pelagians is thus an important formative influence on the development of his thinking about original sin.

Augustine and Scripture

The third contextual factor to mention that holds relevance for understanding Augustine’s thinking about both original sin and sexual difference is his dependence upon and approach to Scripture. References to Scripture permeate Augustine’s writings, and they clearly played a formative role in the development of his theology. The creation and fall stories in Genesis were especially important for Augustine’s understanding of the meaning

¹⁴³ Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin*, p. 15.

of sexual difference, the proper order of creation, and the fall of humanity, and Augustine's preoccupation with Genesis resulted in at least five attempts at interpretations of the text over the course of his life.¹⁴⁴ In his earliest attempt to interpret the Genesis narrative in *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* (388/389 CE), he emphasized the many possibilities for a figurative or "spiritual" interpretation of Genesis, but his later attempts especially in *De Genesi ad Litteram* (415CE) and in *De Civitate Dei* (426 CE) moved in the direction of what Augustine referred to as a "literal" interpretation of the text. Additionally, in his *Retractationes* (426-427), Augustine expresses regret about overemphasizing a figurative interpretation of Genesis.¹⁴⁵ He states further his intention to interpret Genesis as "an account of historical reality and not in an allegorical sense," although he also argues that the text can still have allegorical and figurative meanings along with a literal meaning.¹⁴⁶ He was careful to note that one should not be overly dogmatic about the interpretation of "matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision."¹⁴⁷ He argues further that different interpretations "are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received," and "we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines our position, we too fall with it."¹⁴⁸ If a text cannot be interpreted literally without descending into absurdity, he suggests that one should adopt a figurative or allegorical interpretation. This insight of Augustine's is particularly relevant for interpreting the Creation and Fall narratives in the context of a post-Darwinian world that has rendered a

¹⁴⁴ Teske, Introduction to Augustine's *On Genesis: Two books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the literal interpretation of Genesis, an unfinished book*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Katherin A. Rogers, "Adam and Eve," *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁶ Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and equivalence: the nature and role of woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*, Kampen: Kok Pharos (1995), p. 15.

¹⁴⁷ *De Gen*, I.37.

¹⁴⁸ *De Gen*, I.37.

literal understanding of these texts impossible, as will be discussed further below. It is, furthermore, sometimes difficult to ascertain what Augustine meant by the term “literal,” and there is some evidence to suggest that he may have also changed his mind about the meaning of the term over the course of his life.¹⁴⁹ Augustine sometimes uses the term “literal interpretation” to refer to the exegete’s discernment of the author’s intention, as well as sometimes using it to refer to historical events, or to the “plain sense” of the text, which could also be figurative.¹⁵⁰ In any case, it is important to emphasize that Augustine’s understanding of a “literal” interpretation of Scripture significantly differs from contemporary usages of that term, and it almost certainly would not have been synonymous with a *prima facie* reading of the text. While Augustine’s ambivalence and evolution of thought in terms of his approach to Scripture can be frustrating for students of his work who are looking for a systematic hermeneutical framework, the evidence of Augustine’s struggling with Genesis over a lifetime is perhaps more useful and instructive for us than a perfectly tidy and consistent treatment of Genesis would be. By leaving us with false starts, reversals, unfinished commentaries, Augustine presents us with an example of a theologian allowing himself to be undone by Scripture. He submits to its complexities and puzzles over it for a lifetime, and this is surely one of the invitations posed by a text as complicated as the Genesis narrative. Augustine’s non-linear movements through Genesis remind us of the provisional nature of all interpretations of Scripture, and of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work to make the text come alive in different ways at different times.

¹⁴⁹ Teske, Introduction to Augustine’s *On Genesis: Two books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the literal interpretation of Genesis, an unfinished book*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ I am grateful to Prof. Carol Harrison (University of Oxford) for this insight.

Augustine and Women

The fourth contextual factor likely to have exerted significant influence on Augustine's theologies of both sin and sexual difference and the many ways in which sin is entangled with sexual difference involves Augustine's relationships with the women in his life, and particularly with his mother Monica. In addition to Monica, Augustine's romantic partner for more than thirteen years who was also the mother of Augustine's only son, Adeodatus, was a significant female figure in Augustine's life. Despite Augustine's descriptions of himself as tormented by uncontrollable lust, he remained faithful to his companion for over thirteen years, though they were not legally married. Furthermore, it is apparent from Augustine's way of speaking about this companion that he was genuinely attached to her. When she was forced to leave him because of objections to the suitability of the marriage, Augustine recalls, "The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart which was deeply attached was cut and wounded; and left a trail of blood."¹⁵¹ This example reveals the depth of the emotional attachment that Augustine felt towards some of the women in his life, and it provides important context for some of Augustine's teachings on women. However, it must be noted, as Elizabeth Clark argues, that the texts available to us for gathering information about the women in Augustine's life are part of the "literary production" shaped by Augustine himself. They are literature rather than straightforward historical documents. We do not have any accounts from the women themselves, or even reports from multiple sources that we might use to balance out the inevitable biases of a son writing about his mother and his lover, and so we have no

¹⁵¹ *Conf.*, VI.15.25.

“pure and simple” depictions of these women.¹⁵² As Clark argues, “we deal, always, with representation.”¹⁵³ However, we can discern faint outlines of these women embedded in the “socio-linguistic” framework of the text.¹⁵⁴ The purpose in this section, then, is not to reduce Augustine’s theological statements to specimens for psychoanalysis, but rather, to acknowledge that every human’s theoretical statements about the nature of reality are impacted by their history of personal, emotional, familial, and sexual relationships, and Augustine is no exception. Augustine could not escape his own affective history as he constructed his theologies of the nature of sexual difference, so understanding some of the people who would have shaped this history, in whatever limited way we can, is essential to understanding the meaning of his teachings.

Monica, Augustine’s mother, was arguably the most significant female relationship in Augustine’s life. As Anne-Marie Bowery notes in her review of the secondary literature about Monica, there are a range of judgments made about the role of Monica in Augustine’s life, with perhaps an unfairly high percentage of the literature interpreting Monica as a suffocating and domineering figure in Augustine’s life who hounded and nagged him to the point of exasperation.¹⁵⁵ Carl Levenson, for example, argues, “Monica gives, wants only to give, and suffocates her son with her gifts.”¹⁵⁶ In a recently published monograph, Stephen Greenblatt argues, “Monica had taken whatever was blocked or unsatisfied in her relationship

¹⁵² Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Church History* 67, (1998), p. 31.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁵⁵ Anne Marie Bowery, “Monica: The Feminine Face of Christ,” *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, ed. Judith Stark, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press (2007), p. 71.

¹⁵⁶ Carl Levenson, “Distance and Presence in Augustine’s Confessions,” *Journal of Religion* LXV (1985), p. 505.

with her husband and transferred it to her son.”¹⁵⁷ Augustine supplies some evidence to support the depiction of Monica as the over-bearing matriarch, and also perhaps to support some Freudian readings of his relationship with his mother, especially early in the *Confessions*. He recalls Monica’s orchestration of many aspects of his life such as his education, his faith, and his potential romantic partners, and he sometimes uses bridal imagery to speak of his relationship with Monica.¹⁵⁸ He comments at one point in the *Confessions* that Monica’s excessive love and desire for him was “of the flesh (*carnale desiderium*).”¹⁵⁹

Yet, Monica re-emerges later in the *Confessions* in a more positive light, indeed as one of the most compelling and spiritually influential relationships of Augustine’s life, and his favorable portrayal of Monica undermines any simplistic reading of Augustine as anti-woman. Monica plays a central role in bringing about Augustine’s conversion to the Catholic faith, and Augustine describes Monica as both a second Eve, and an image of Mary.¹⁶⁰ Monica also famously shared with Augustine a shared mystical vision that Rebecca West has described as “the most intense experience ever commemorated,” in which they ascended beyond the temporal realm to touch the eternal.¹⁶¹ Augustine, recalling the experience, says “while we spoke [of eternal Wisdom], longing for her and straining for her with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we touched her.”¹⁶² The description of a shared experience of a breathless moment of transcendence and spiritual ecstasy depicts Monica as

¹⁵⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam & Eve*, London: The Bodley Head (2017), p. 90.

¹⁵⁸ *Conf.*, V.8.15.

¹⁵⁹ *Conf.*, V.8.15.

¹⁶⁰ Bowery, “Monica: the Feminine Face of Christ,” *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, p. 74.

¹⁶¹ Rebecca West, *St. Augustine*, London: P. Davies (1933), p. 91.

¹⁶² *Conf.*, IX.10.23. et dum loquimur et inhiamus illi, attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis.

in a position of a spiritual companion and equal. There is no sense in Augustine's recollection of this story of him viewing the feminine experience of mystical transcendence as any less profound than his, and there is nothing in his writings to indicate that he ever shared such a profound spiritual moment with any of his male companions. So, despite Augustine's statements in later in *De Genesi ad Litteram* that women were created primarily for child-birth and that men make better companions, it seems that this was not actually congruent with Augustine's recollection of his own life, and this is an unresolved tension that is important to keep in mind when interpreting Augustine's teachings on sexual difference and the role of women.¹⁶³

With this contextual backdrop of Augustine's relationships to the Manicheans, the Pelagians, the Scriptures, and significant female figures from his life illuminated, the thesis moves now to an overview of Augustine's teachings on original sin and sexual difference as explicated in some of the key works in his corpus.

2. Theological Explanation and Development

A key insight for understanding Augustine on original sin is that his development of the doctrine is not monolithic, but rather, it is a set of interrelated doctrines that are, as Jesse Couenhoven notes, "each capable of independence, and possibly in tension with the

¹⁶³ *De Gen.*, IX.5.9. "Now, if the woman was not made for the man to be his helper in begetting children, in what was she to help him? She was not to till the earth with him, for there was not yet any toil to make help necessary. If there were any such need, a male helper would be better, and the same could be said of the comfort of another's presence if Adam were perhaps weary of solitude. How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together? Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children."

others.”¹⁶⁴ This insight is helpful as it prevents naïve oversimplifications of Augustine’s thought, and also provides greater possibilities for the retrieval of his thought insofar as it precludes a total dismissal of his articulation of the doctrine because of problems with what may be only one element of it. Examination of Augustine’s early development of his understanding of original sin in *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione et de Baptismo Parvulorum* (411 CE) as well as his later articulations of it in *De Genesi ad Litteram* (415 CE) and *De Civitate Dei* (426 CE) reveal three key elements to his thinking on the doctrine. The first is his understanding of the first sin of Adam and Eve, or the “primal sin”; the second is the effect of the sin on the original human pair; and the third is the continual effect on all of humanity through our biological descent from Adam and subsequent shared culpability through the biological transmission of original sin.¹⁶⁵

There is some development in Augustine’s thought regarding the “primal sin”¹⁶⁶ of Adam and Eve. In *De Pecc Mer* Augustine speaks of the primal sin in terms of disordered desire leading to disobedience.¹⁶⁷ He states that Adam and Eve “did not wish to accept the divine teaching to remain obedient.”¹⁶⁸ The Latin word that he uses is “noluerunt,” which combines “nay” and “volo.” *Volo* means “to will, to wish, to want.” This has both rational and affective connotations. While this sentence in *De Pecc Mer* is sometimes translated as

¹⁶⁴ Jesse Couenhoven, “St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 36 (2005), p. 360, and *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology*, New York: Oxford University Press (2013), p. 46.

¹⁶⁵ While I agree with Couenhoven that Augustine’s notion of original sin is a “handful of doctrines,” I don’t wholly appropriate Couenhoven’s list of the “affiliated body of five doctrines,” because it doesn’t precisely reflect my own exegesis of the texts, although there is some overlap between my list and Couenhoven’s.

¹⁶⁶ This term is used by Couenhoven in “St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” p. 363.

¹⁶⁷ Augustine, *De Pecc Mer*, II.35.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. Posteaquam illi primo homines, uir unus Adam et ex illo Eua uxor eius, accepto dei praecepto seruare oboedientiam noluerunt, iusta eos poena ac debita consecuta est.

“they chose to disobey,” which implies a rational choice, a decision made after reviewing the evidence; Augustine use of “noluerunt” (they did not wish) connotes something more complex.¹⁶⁹ He identifies the sin of our first parents as being about something more in the realm of the affective and the body, as well as involving the rational. The significance of Augustine’s use of *volo* will be discussed in greater detail below. Augustine also notes that the “devil maliciously persuaded”¹⁷⁰ Adam and Eve to disobey, so in some way the primal couple was victimized, however, this does not diminish their culpability in Augustine’s eyes. He consistently affirms throughout his writings that obedience is the most fitting form of worship of God, and further, that it is to humanity’s advantage to be obedient since it would be harmful for humans to disobey God.¹⁷¹ Rightly ordered desire is longing to obey the commands of God, which leads to flourishing, but failing to desire obedience to God’s commands leads to sin and sickness. In *De Civ* and in *De Gen*, while he does continue to emphasize disobedience as central to the primal sin, he also describes with more detail the deeper underpinnings of the primal sin. In *De Gen*, he suggests that curiosity might have been the initial impetus to disobedience. The curiosity of the first couple was “stirred up and made bold” (*audax curiositas mota est*) by the serpent, and this led them to transgress the commandment.¹⁷² While the longing to know is not intrinsically sinful for Augustine, he tends to speak of curiosity in terms of an “inordinate desire for knowledge,” an “excessive, unregulated intellectual appetite for things other than God,” or as the “lust of the eyes

¹⁶⁹ I am grateful to Prof. Graham Ward for this insight during a supervision session at Christ Church, Oxford in 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. malignam diaboli persuasionem.

¹⁷¹ *De Civ* XIV.12, *De Pecc Mer* II.35.

¹⁷² *De Gen*, XI.31. Ubi enim ad transgrediendum praeceptum audax curiositas mota est, auida experiri latentia, quidnam tacto uetito sequeretur, et noxia libertate habenas prohibitionis rumpere delectata, probabilius existimans non esse mortem, quam timuerant, secuturam.

(*concupiscentia oculorum*).¹⁷³ The implication with the use of the word *mota* is that the man and woman were provoked and set into a disorderly motion. The use of the passive form connotes something being done to the first couple, rather than an active choice on their part. The stillness and *harmonia* of their resting in union with God was disturbed, and this early internal disturbance adumbrates the later consequence of their sin, which Augustine will describe as a new, disordered, “movement of concupiscence” that they experience after they cast their eyes on their bodies.¹⁷⁴ Their curiosity made them “eager to experience the unknown, to see what would follow from touching what was forbidden, finding delight in taking a dangerous sort of liberty (*noxia libertate*) by bursting the bonds of the prohibition.”¹⁷⁵ The notion of a deceptive liberty that actually enslaves is a recurrent theme in Augustine’s thought as he attempts to describe temptation and sin. Eagerness, finding delight, failing to desire to obey, being stirred up and made bold—these are words attempting to capture the powerful pull of the affective realm on the human person. These desires bypass and undermine rational processes of deliberation and choice.

In *De Gen*, he posits that the woman’s “love of her own power” and “proud presumption of self,” and the man’s affection for the woman and his fear that she would be unhappy and unwell if they became alienated from one other combined with their joint curiosity and led to the primal act of disobedience.¹⁷⁶ This suggestion that it was the woman’s

¹⁷³ N. Joseph Torchia, “Curiosity,” *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, pp. 259-260. Torchia notes further that “In Augustine’s defense of Genesis, the serpent which tempted Eve is a personification of the curious disposition which he perceived in his Manichean opponents: earthbound and focused on the lowest level of creation, they wish to penetrate ‘deep and dark’ questions of a temporal nature (Gn. Adv. Man. 1.23.40; 2.18.27),” p. 260.

¹⁷⁴ *De Gen*, XI.31. In sua membra oculos iniecerunt eaque motu eo, quem non nouerant, concupiuerunt.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., XI.30. Quando his uerbis crederet mulier a bona atque utili re diuinitus se fuisse prohibitos, nisi iam inesset menti amor ille propriae potestatis et quaedam de se superba praesumptio, quae per illam temptationem

prideful love of power and the man's excessive tenderness towards the woman that led them to sin is an interesting inversion of later post-Enlightenment assumptions about the sexually differentiated nature of sin that would depict pride as the quintessential masculine sin, and excessive enmeshment in relationships and laxity because of emotional attachments as typically feminine sins. We discuss this more in the next chapter when we assess the work of Valerie Saiving on this issue. In *De Civ*, Augustine speaks of Eve's naïve gullibility that prompted the serpent to tempt her first, rather than of her prideful love of power.¹⁷⁷ Both of these interpretations of the gendered nature of the primal sin reflect Augustine's assumptions about the proper ordering of nature, and his view of sin as a disruption and perversion of the created order. He argues that even before the fall, the woman's nature was such that it was proper for her to be "ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him."¹⁷⁸ However, before the fall, this hierarchical relationship was governed by the bond of love, and only after the fall became more like a slave and master. This natural hierarchical ordering of the male ruling over the female is even more necessary after the fall, Augustine argues, because if it is not maintained, "nature will be distorted even more, and sin will be increased."¹⁷⁹ Augustine, then, depicts the gendered behaviors that led to the primal sin as disordered and against nature. This will be discussed in more depth in the section below that

fuerat conuincenda et humilianda?; XI.42. noluit eam contristare, quam credebat posse sine suo solacio contabescere, si ab eius alienaretur animo, et omnino illa interire discordia, non quidem carnis uictus concupiscentia, quam nondum senserat in resistente lege membrorum legi mentis suae, sed amicali quadam beniuolentia, qua plerumque fit, ut offendatur deus, ne homo ex amico fiat inimicus.

¹⁷⁷ *De Civ.*, XIV.11.

¹⁷⁸ *De Gen.*, XI.37. Neque enim et ante peccatum aliter factam fuisse decet credere mulierem, nisi ut uir ei dominaretur et ad eum ipsa seruiendo conuerteretur.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Possunt itaque coniuges per caritatem seruire inuicem; sed mulierem non permittit apostolus dominari in virum. hoc enim viro potius sententia dei detulit et maritum habere dominum meruit mulieris non natura, sed culpa; quod tamen nisi seruetur, deprauabitur amplius natura et augebitur culpa.

examines Augustine's understanding of sexual difference. Disruptions and disordered loves were already set into motion then, even before the transgression of the commandment to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil had taken place.

According to Augustine, the sin of pride (*superbia*) is the underlying malady that transcends sexual difference and infects both Adam and Eve. He says of Eve in *De Gen*, "Although her sex is different from Adam's, her pride is the same."¹⁸⁰ While he primarily uses *superbia* when he speaks of pride, he nuances his understanding of pride at times in *De Gen* by using *tumor* (swelling/distention) instead of *superbia*. He says, "*Primum esse et maximum vitium tumoris ad ruinam sua potestate velle uti, cuius uitii nomen est inoboedientia*" (The fundamental and greatest sin is the swelling by which one desires to have independence to his own ruin, and the name of this sin is disobedience).¹⁸¹ Because of the context, *tumor* is usually translated as "pride" in the English translations of this section of *De Gen*, however, Augustine's decision to use *tumor* rather than *superbia* is indicative of his tendency to think about sin in biological imagery. Pride is a swollen tumor, a distorting distention that causes confusion and blindness, and leads one to destruction and disobedience. He argues later in *De Gen* that pride is "destructive self-love" and a turning away from the pursuit of the common good.¹⁸² Augustine's use of *potestate velle* is instructive here as well. *Velle* is from the root *volo*, meaning, as mentioned above, "to wish, to want," and *potestate* could also be translated as "power" or "strength." Pride is the perverted desire to be powerful in one's own right, instead of "clinging to Him and remaining turned to Him of whom it is

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., XI.25.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., VIII.6.

¹⁸² Ibid., XI.15.

said, *But it is good for me to adhere to God*, and to whom it is said, *I will keep my strength turned towards thee*.¹⁸³ Augustine argues that just as the man was instructed to cultivate and tend to the earth, so God cultivates the humans when they live in dependence upon God. God is the immutable source of goodness, and God cultivates goodness in humanity as long as humanity “does not depart from God.”¹⁸⁴ By abiding in God, humanity is “justified, illuminated, and made happy” by the God who lovingly tends to us as works of art.¹⁸⁵ To sin then is to be blinded by the swelling tumors of pride, and to depart from the source of goodness and happiness in order to strive for these things through one’s own strength.

In *De Civ*, Augustine is mostly consistent with his understanding in *De Gen* of the nature of the primal sin. He says, “the evil act—that is, the transgression of eating the forbidden fruit—was done by human beings who were already evil.”¹⁸⁶ He emphasizes that their eating of the fruit was the result of the corruption of their desires. He says, “They [Adam and Eve] would not have arrived at the evil act had an evil wish (*voluntas mala*) not preceded it. Moreover, what but pride (*superbia*) can have been the beginning of their evil wish?—for ‘pride is the beginning of sin.’ And what is pride but an appetite for a perverse kind of elevation?”¹⁸⁷ The use of *voluntas* in this section of *De Civitate Dei* is significant because Augustine might have also used *arbitrium*, and both are commonly translated as “will.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Ibid., VIII.12. Inhaerentes ei et in ea conversione, quae ad illum est, permanentes, de quo dicitur: «mihi autem adhaerere deo bonum est», et cui dicitur: «fortitudinem meam ad te custodiam».

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ *De Civ* XIV.13.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Non enim ad malum opus perueniretur, nisi praecessisset voluntas mala. porro malae voluntatis initium quae potuit esse nisi superbia? Initium enim omnis peccati superbia est. quid est autem superbia nisi perversae celsitudinis appetitus?

¹⁸⁸ I am grateful to Prof. Graham Ward for making this point in a supervision session at Christ Church, Oxford in 2017.

However, even though they are often translated with the same English word, *arbitrium* comes from the root *arbiter* (judge), which connotes a process of rational decision making based on evidence, while *voluntas*, stemming again from *volo*, is related to wishing, desiring, and loving—something much richer and more bodily and affective than a cognitive process of examining evidence or a right disposition of the mind. John Rist agrees that “will” is a “popular if inaccurate representation of the Latin *voluntas*.”¹⁸⁹ *Voluntas* has a rich philosophical history, and it is essential to see Augustine’s nuanced use of it in the context of the Stoic usage with which he would have been familiar.

For the Stoics, *voluntas*, or its closest relative in Greek, *prohairesis*, would have been understood as a “settled capacity and determination of the reason to make judgments about wanting to do right, and to form and want to persist in moral (i.e. rational) intentions and rational decisions,” thus moral goodness is “no more than to behave in accordance with right reason.”¹⁹⁰ This notion of “right reason” for the Stoics is more than simply a cognitive process since it also involves desire, but the emphasis is primarily on a right disposition of the mind. In contrast to this Stoic understanding of *voluntas* or *prohairesis*, for Augustine *voluntas* involves processes all the way down to the deepest movements of love and hatred in the human heart. It is not what we think, but what or who we love, that determines who we are as humans for Augustine. *Voluntas* in Augustine’s thought, Rist argues, does “some of the work of the word and concept ‘eros’—the love of the good and the Beautiful, and the

¹⁸⁹ John Rist, “Faith and Reason” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2001), p. 31.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 33-34. Sarah C. Byers diverges from Rist on the relationship between *voluntas* and Stoicism in Augustine, although she agrees with Rist that the Platonic *eros* has a central role in Augustine’s use of *voluntas*. Cf. Sarah C. Byers, “The Meaning of ‘voluntas’ in Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 37 (2006) for Byers’ discussion of *voluntas* and the Stoic notion of *hormê*.

perversions of that love. Hence, we should not be surprised that *voluntas* is often interchangeable with *amor* and in its perfect form identified with it: that is, as the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹¹ The corruption of Adam and Eve was fundamentally about a twisting and a perversion of love—a love that includes cognition, but that also extends deep into the realm of the erotic and the affective. This is, again, gendered for Augustine. He argues at one point that women are stronger in affection (*affectu*), or love, in comparison to men, which is why Mary Magdalene was the first eyewitness of the resurrected Christ.¹⁹² After the crucifixion, the disciples left Jesus, but Mary was determined to stay close to Jesus. Augustine says, “*Illi minorem curam habuerunt, fortiores sexu, sed minores affectu.*” The disciples, though members of the “stronger sex,” had less *curam* (care) and less affection than the woman. Mary’s strength in affectivity motivated her to search for Jesus with greater intensity and *lacrimis*, or “with tears.”¹⁹³ Augustine interprets Mary Magdalene here in a symbolic way as “woman” (*mulier*), or as an image of women generally. Thus, he argues that Mary Magdalene’s intensity of affection stemmed from her membership in the sex of Eve. She sought after Jesus, the source of life, because of her unity with Eve who had previously in Paradise brought ruin and introduced death. Being stronger in love is no small thing since, for Augustine, love “determines the Christian virtues” and is also the attribute of the Holy

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹² Describing the early moments after the resurrection, Augustine says that while the male disciples (“the stronger sex”) left, “mulier [Maria] stetit, et coepit corpus Iesu lacrimis quaerere, coepit ad monumentum plorare; *illi minorem curam habuerunt, fortiores sexu, sed minores affectu.* mulier plus quaerebat Iesum, quia ipsa prior in paradiso perdiderat Iesum: quia per illam mors intrauerat, plus uitam quaerebat. et tamen quomodo quaerebat?” (*Sermones Moriniani ex collectione Guelferbytana*, XIV). My thanks to Jenny Rallens for her input on my translation of this passage, and for her expertise in capturing some of the nuances in Augustine’s Latin.

¹⁹³ One is led to wonder if Augustine’s belief in the greater affectivity of women, and the image of Mary Magdalene searching for Jesus with tears was shaped in any way by his memory of his mother Monica weeping and praying for his conversion, or of his recollection of her Dido-like weeping on the shore as his ship departed for Rome (*Conf.*, V.8.14-15).

Spirit.¹⁹⁴ Augustine does not elaborate upon this notion of female superiority in love in much depth, and so we are left to wonder what implications he might have drawn from this notion for a theological understanding of sexual difference. It is consistent, however, with his general understanding of women as closer to the realm of desire and men as closer to reason.

For Augustine, then, the primal sin is described in terms of the primal couple's curiosity being provoked such that they were set into agitated motion, and the swelling tumor of their pride resulted in disordered appetites for autonomy and elevation that led to their transgression of the divine commandment. Augustine's emphasis on pride as the primal sin and the beginning of all sin, and his understanding of the nature of pride will be important for thinking about the gendered nature of sin in coming chapters. Also significant for later thinking about the gendered implications of his depictions of sin is his emphasis on the fact that the primal sin was not caused by having a body made of flesh. Rather, it was caused by the desire of the primal couple to be their own foundation instead of abiding in a state of dependence on God, which highlights the relational violation at the core of the primal sin. Additionally, Augustine attributes the ability of the primal couple to fall to their nature as created *ex nihilo*. "Only a nature created out of nothing could have been perverted by a defect," he says, and "though the existence of the will as a nature is due to its creation by God, its falling away from its nature is due to its creation out of nothing."¹⁹⁵ To sin, then, is to move toward the nothingness from whence we came, but to which we can never fully return.

¹⁹⁴ John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1994), p. 119.

¹⁹⁵ *De Civ.*, XIV. 13.

In terms of blame for the primal sin, Augustine expresses some ambivalence. On the one hand, he states in *De Civ* that Adam, and thus all of humanity, fell into sin “per feminam,” or through the woman.¹⁹⁶ Yet he also notes in *De Pecc Mer* that the first human pair was united in one flesh, making the primal sin actually Adam’s fault because “the woman came from man.”¹⁹⁷ This blaming of Adam is thus not necessarily motivated by an attempt to portray Eve in a more positive light, rather it reflects Augustine’s appropriation of the view of gender of his time period which would have seen the male as the naturally superior to the female, and thus more culpable for sin.¹⁹⁸ As Charles Wood notes, this move downplays Eve’s responsibility “by implicitly denigrating her capacities.”¹⁹⁹ In other places, Augustine also emphasizes the union and subsequent shared culpability of the first pair. While he blames Adam and Eve for the primal sin, he locates the origin of sin itself in the devil, “the father of lies,” and thus, he argues “sin began with him.”²⁰⁰ He says in *De Gen*, “sin came from the devil through the woman to the man.”²⁰¹ This suggests a certain victimization of Adam and Eve by the devil leading to the primal sin and also highlights the woman’s role in ushering sin into the world and causing the fall. However, although Augustine consistently blames the

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, XIII.14. Omnes enim fuimus in illo uno quando omnes fuimus ille unus, qui per feminam lapsus in peccatum.

¹⁹⁷ *De Pecc Mer*, I.21.

¹⁹⁸ As Kim Power notes, “His [Augustine’s] was a hierarchical universe, built by the divine Architect to an incorporeal plan . . . those more naturally endowed with wisdom, rationality, and creative fertility held the responsibility for their inferiors, both to care for their needs and to control their passions. Thus God ruled the cosmos, humanity ruled the animals, man ruled the woman, and soul ruled body. This order was justified by the biological and philosophical tenets which argued that the superior formation of males in the womb endowed men with a form more ordered, a mind more rational, and a power more (pro) creative—the human counterpart of the creative power of God” (*Veiled Desire*, p. 215).

¹⁹⁹ Charles Wood, “The Doctor’s Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought,” *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 56, no. 4 (1981), p. 714.

²⁰⁰ *De Pecc Mer*, I.21.

²⁰¹ *De Gen*, XI.34. Peccatum autem a diabolo per feminam usque ad virum.

devil, he remains firm in his belief that Adam and Eve were free to not sin.²⁰² Whether or not we are inclined to affirm the existence of a real malevolent being called “the devil,” the notion of the existence of forces working against God’s will for humanity’s flourishing can be a helpful way of expressing the fact that sin is both active and passive—we are both victims and perpetrators, and this has been true since the beginning.

The second component in Augustine’s understanding of original sin is the effect of the primal sin on Adam and Eve. Augustine’s thinking on this issue reflects his preference for interpreting the Genesis narrative literally as an account of something that actually happened in history, however, as discussed in the context section above, Augustine’s understanding of the term “literal” should not be simplistically conflated with a modern definition. A further caveat that Augustine makes in terms of interpreting Genesis literally is that we must not anthropomorphize God such that we conceive of God as acting in a creaturely way in creating the world. Rather, Augustine understands God’s power as working through “the natural tendencies in living creatures and through the ministry of His angels.”²⁰³

In terms of the effect of the primal sin on the first couple, the first effect was the introduction of eventual physical death to the first humans. Augustine believed that although Adam and Eve were mortal before the Fall, they were not subject to aging and death because they continually ate from the Tree of Life, and also because they were abiding in God, the source of life.²⁰⁴ As he says in *De Gen*, “everything made by Him exists in Him, because He

²⁰² *De Civ*, XIV.13. Much more could be said concerning Augustine’s view of human freedom as constituted by participation in the divine life, as opposed to the ability to pick from multiple options.

²⁰³ John Hammond Taylor, S.J., introduction to *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine of Hippo, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J., New York: Newman Press (1982), pp. 10-11.

²⁰⁴ *De Pecc Mer*, II.35.

rules and holds all.”²⁰⁵ Thus, if they had not sinned, they would not have had to endure death, but because they sinned, they became “bound to the necessity of dying.”²⁰⁶ The punishment of death included physical death, but also “the ruin of the second death,”²⁰⁷ by which Augustine means spiritual death or separation from God. Their sin began by their own turning away from the source of life, goodness, and strength, and after they transgressed the commandment, Augustine says in *De Gen* that they were “interiorly deserted by the grace which they had offended by pride (*superbia*) and arrogant love of their own power.”²⁰⁸ In a sense, Adam and Eve were given what they perversely desired, which was independence from God, but since God is the source of life, strength, and being, they were deprived of these things when they turned away from God towards non-being. Again, Augustine uses biological terminology to describe this as he notes that after the transgression of the commandment, they immediately “contracted a disease which would bring death.”²⁰⁹ Since God is the immutable source of goodness, and humanity by its nature is mutable, it can only remain good by remaining in God. Augustine argues further that Adam and Eve’s human nature became “vitiated and changed.”²¹⁰ This notion of the *natura vitiata* is a central feature of Augustine’s anthropological insight. He argues that “nature” can be understood in two different senses—both as the original and blameless human nature before the fall and also as the postlapsarian condition into which we are all now born.²¹¹ As Beatrice notes, “what

²⁰⁵ *De Gen.*, II.6. Ergo in illo sunt ea, quae per illum facta sunt, quia regit et continet ea.

²⁰⁶ *De Civ.*, XIII.3. Obstringeretur necessitate moriendi.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, XIII.14.

²⁰⁸ *De Gen.*, XI.31.

²⁰⁹ *De Gen.*, IX.10. Morbum quendam, quo morentur.

²¹⁰ *De Civ.*, XIII.14.

²¹¹ Beatrice, *The Transmission of Sin*, p. 38. Beatrice argues, “Augustine sought to make a clear distinction between his position and that of the Manichees, for whom *natura* and *vitium* were two coincident realities.

belongs to us now is not the true original nature of man . . . The nature that is transmitted to each person at birth is not healthy anymore, but needs a physician. Our nature is now a *natura poenalis* and in this sense a *natura vitata*.”²¹² An important nuance is that Augustine does not think that human nature became completely corrupted or evil because of original sin, since this would diminish the goodness of God’s creation that remains fundamental to humanity despite the vitiation caused by sin. Despite the damage caused by human sin, we can never return to nothingness. Something completely evil would cease to exist, since, in Augustine’s thought, evil has no substance.²¹³

One of the other crucial effects of the primal sin was the arrival of concupiscence. Technically, concupiscence is not sinful, it is a general word that Augustine uses for desire, along with many other words like *cupiditas*, *adpetitus*, *appetitus*, and *voluntas*. Although concupiscence is not sin in itself, Augustine thinks that it leads to sin because it can cause a rebellion of the body against the mind, which should rule over the body. He speculates that before the fall, if sexual intercourse occurred, it was accomplished without “an appetite for carnal pleasure” (*non haberent adpetitum carnalis voluptatis*).²¹⁴ He envisions this as a perfectly orderly activity, with the lower parts acting in complete obedient submission to the higher, rational elements. He suggests that before the fall, Adam and Eve would “move the members by which their offspring are generated in the same way that one commands his feet when he walks, so that conception would take place without passion (*ardore*).”²¹⁵ Again, this

Therefore, as they saw it, the creator of the former must also be the creator of the latter”, p. 40. For Augustine’s discussion of human nature c.f. *Retr* 1.9.10 and 1.14.7.

²¹² Ibid., p. 39.

²¹³ *De Gen.*, XIII.14. “Evil is not a substance: the loss of the good is what we call evil.”

²¹⁴ Ibid., IX.10.

²¹⁵ *De Gen.*, IX.10. eo nutu inperarent membris, quibus fetus exoritur, quo pedibus, cum ambulatur, ut neque cum ardore seminaretur neque cum dolore pareretur.

view at least partially stems from Augustine's understanding of the providential ordering of nature, such that God "subjects all creatures to Himself," and the hierarchical ordering flows all the way down, with corporeal creatures subjected to the spiritual, the irrational to the rational, the earthly to the heavenly, the female to the male, and the weak to the strong.²¹⁶ Sexual intercourse before the Fall, in the eyes of Augustine, would have "never disrupted the order maintained by a will ever focused on God."²¹⁷ This anxiety about the unruliness of sexual desire may have also been a result of Augustine's own history of difficulty in controlling his sexual appetite.

In Adam and Eve, Augustine argues, after the fall, human desires began to rebel so that "the flesh (*caro*) began to lust against (*concupiscere adversus*) the spirit,"²¹⁸ rendering their internal lives fraught with "turbulent and conflicting emotions" (*perturbaretur et fluctuaret affectibus*).²¹⁹ The result of their sin was that they "lost the stability of the life in which they were created."²²⁰ Their fellowship with God and each other, and their internal integrity, became disrupted and divided. The movements and rhythms of life were set into a disorderly pattern. Sexual desire, *concupiscentia*, began to rule over the rationality of the mind. Augustine's emphasis on the primary role of concupiscence in causing sin has led some scholars to argue that it is more accurate to identify concupiscence rather than pride as the fundamental sin in Augustine's schema, since essentially concupiscence caused pride to arise

²¹⁶ Ibid., XIII.23. Subdit primitus omnia sibi, deinde creaturam corporalem creaturae spiritali, inrationalem rationali, terrestrem caelesti, femineam masculinae, minus ualentem ualentiori.

²¹⁷ Power, *Veiled Desire*, p. 215.

²¹⁸ *De Civ*, XIII.13. Coepit caro concupiscere adversus spiritum.

²¹⁹ Ibid., XIV.12.

²²⁰ *De Pecc Mer*, I.21.

in the original couple.²²¹ Thus, Augustine describes the effects of the primal sin on Adam and Eve primarily in terms of illness, death, alienation, ignorance, unruly desires, and instability. Through his persistent use of somatic language to describe the effects of sin, Augustine portrays the physical and the spiritual as inextricably intertwined, and so sin distorts the created world, even at the level of biology. Sin maps onto the body, and so healing must as well.

The third, most central, and most controversial aspect of Augustine's doctrine of original sin is his notion of humanity's biological union with Adam that renders all humans inheritors of original sin and culpability. However, although Augustine is often maligned as having invented this notion of biologically inherited sin, there is some evidence to suggest that he was in fact articulating a view that had been circulating in Italian and African Christian communities from the early centuries of Christianity and was already quite prominent in the church by the fourth century.²²² I agree with Couenhoven's assessment that this notion of "inherited sin" is the "conceptual core" of Augustine's doctrine of original sin.²²³ Augustine states, "what he [Adam] himself had become . . . he reproduced in his offspring"²²⁴ because "man the parent is that same thing as man the offspring."²²⁵ Augustine depends upon his belief in a first single pair of humans who produced the entire human race to develop his doctrine of original sin. Concupiscence leads to the ongoing transmission of sin since unruly libidos lead to sexual activity, which (often) results in procreation. He uses metaphorical language

²²¹ Beatrice states, "According to Augustine, concupiscence constitutes the essence of original sin," *Transmission of Sin*, p. 65.

²²² Beatrice, *Transmission of Sin*, p. 9.

²²³ Couenhoven, "St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin," p. 360.

²²⁴ *De Civ*, XIII.3.

²²⁵ *Ibid*.

of illness to describe the way in which all of humanity now possesses original sin as a result of Adam and Eve's primal sin. For example, he says that all have been "afflicted by the disease of original sin."²²⁶ Yet again, the crucial point for Augustine is not simply that all humans are born wounded and weakened by sin, but that all humans are born *culpable* for sin because of sharing in the lineage of Adam. As he says in *De Pecc Mer*, original sin is "sufficient reason for condemnation"²²⁷ even if there are no personal sins added to the disease of original sin contracted at birth. Here we see the importance of the notion of the "massa peccati," or the "lump of sin" that makes up the material of human nature. As Beatrice argues, "on account of our birth through carnal generation, which links us unavoidably to the mortality that became our lot with the first sin, we all form a kind of sludge or mass of clay, which symbolizes our deep-seated sinful makeup (*massa luti quod est massa peccato*)."²²⁸ Thus, the primal sin of concupiscence that caused a prideful desire for elevation and an act of disobedience resulted in death and alienation for all of humanity, and the incorporation of all of humanity biologically into Adam's guilt and punishment emerge as the central facets of Augustine's doctrine of original sin.

²²⁶ *De Pecc Mer*, I.23.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, I.15.

²²⁸ Beatrice, *Transmission of Sin*, p. 50.

3. Original Sin and Augustine's Theological Priorities

*"The destruction of original sin makes grace stand out even more clearly."*²²⁹

---Augustine

While Augustine is widely known for his articulation of the doctrine of original sin, and in spite of the accusation that "the diseases of sin interest him more than the remedy,"²³⁰ he has also earned the title of "Doctor Gratiae" (Teacher of Grace).²³¹ Augustine's primary theological interests extend beyond original sin into Christology and ecclesiology. Indeed, he is far more interested in "the greater and more wondrous grace of the Savior,"²³² and the "Mother Church" who "offers them [infants] her maternal heart and lips so that they may be initiated in the sacred mysteries,"²³³ than he is in the intellectual consideration of the doctrine of original sin as an end in itself. Rather, the doctrine is an avenue through which Augustine can discuss what he is most passionate about—the grace of Christ manifested in the Church. Couenhoven notes, "The medicine of Christ, provided in the hospital known as the church indicates the nature of the disease."²³⁴ For Augustine, sin is only interesting insofar as it more fully illuminates the grace of Christ.

This orientation of the doctrine of original sin toward the grace of Christ is manifest in *De Pecc Mer* in which Augustine argues that believing in original sin prevents the development of pride—which, as we have seen, he locates as fundamental to sin—as well as

²²⁹ *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*, II.47.

²³⁰ Allin, *The Augustinian Revolution in Theology*, p. 129.

²³¹ Roland J. Teske, S.J., Introduction to *De Pecc Mer*, p. 22.

²³² *De Civ*, XIII.4.

²³³ *De Pecc Mer*, I.38.

²³⁴ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 54.

inculcating love and gratitude for the death of Christ. He says, “as long as no living person is found righteous in his sight, we will always owe a debt of gratitude to his mercy, and by holy humility we will be healed from that first cause of all sins, that is, from the swelling pride (*tumore superbiae*).”²³⁵ Without the doctrine of original sin, Augustine believes that humanity will continually reenact the primal sin of Adam and Eve in choosing to act according to their own selves, rather than in dependence on God.²³⁶ Acknowledging our diseased condition allows believers to become oriented by grace to Christ, the ultimate antidote for the disease. Additionally, Augustine juxtaposes the passivity with which infants contract original sin with the gratuity of the grace of Christ in order to demonstrate that the grace of Christ given freely surpasses the curse of original sin that was also, in a sense, “given freely.” He says, “Thus we have contracted from Adam, in whom we have all sinned, not all our sins, but only original sin. But from Christ, in whom we are all justified, we obtain forgiveness not only of that original sin, but also of the other sins which we have added to it.”²³⁷ Human beings contract original sin by birth as participants in the “*massa peccati*,” according to Augustine, and subsequently, they add personal sins to the disease of original sin. The grace of Christ is more powerful than the infection of original sin in that it remedies not only original sin, but also the added personal sins. Augustine’s famous question—“What do we possess that we have not received from another?”²³⁸— can thus be seen as “a rhetorical question that directs our attention to the dynamics of agency at work in both sin and grace.”²³⁹

²³⁵ *De Pecc Mer*, III.23.

²³⁶ *De Civ*, XIV, 3.

²³⁷ *De Pecc Mer*, I.16.

²³⁸ Augustine. *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green, New York: Oxford University Press (1997), *Preface*, p. 6.

²³⁹ Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin*, p. 51.

Augustine's doctrine of original sin is oriented toward demonstrating the gratuity and abundance of the grace of Christ in order to inculcate love and gratitude in the hearts of believers.

A further aspect of Augustine's theological interest in the grace of Christ is the way in which that grace is given to humanity through the sacraments of the Church, particularly through baptism. This sacramental priority of Augustine's constitutes the central theme of *De Pecc Mer*, in particular, as well as Augustine's greater theological project. For Augustine, humans receive grace and healing when they are united with the body of Christ, which is the Church, through baptism. The disunity caused by original sin is remedied by each person being joined to the unity of Christ through the sacraments. As he states, Christ "became obedient unto the death of the cross . . . so that, by the dispensation of his grace filled with mercy, he might bring to life all those of whom he is the head, when they have become members inserted into his body,"²⁴⁰ and it is only through baptism that humans are "incorporated in him as his members."²⁴¹ Augustine depicts redemption as occurring when humans are saved from the "massa peccati" through a rebirth via baptism that occurs without the "humiliating mechanism of sexual intercourse."²⁴² Augustine's belief that grace comes only through incorporation into the Church as the body of Christ motivates his commitment to infant baptism and provides crucial contextual information for understanding his doctrine of original sin. If one is not with Christ, one is with the devil, in the thought of Augustine. As he states, "there is no middle ground."²⁴³ Belief in original sin provides an impetus to

²⁴⁰ *De Pecc Mer*, I.39.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Beatrice, *Transmission of Sin*, p. 70.

²⁴³ Ibid., I.55.

incorporate a person into the body of Christ through baptism as soon as possible, even when the person is still an infant, so that the child can receive the “medicine of grace”²⁴⁴ at the earliest possible moment. Thus, Augustine’s understanding of original sin is oriented toward his theological priority for grace as manifested in Christ through the sacraments of the Church.

4. The Motif of Unity in Augustine’s Theology

Augustine expresses his doctrine of original sin by using a theme that is prevalent throughout both his writing and preaching, and provides cohesion to his work—namely, the motif of *unity*. His persistent emphasis on unity is rooted in his doctrine of God and it holds together Augustine’s various theological emphases and also connects those emphases to his pastoral concerns. Augustine’s fixation on unity is rooted in his Trinitarian commitments, which insist upon the equality and consubstantiality of the three persons, which he develops at length in *De Trinitate*. As he states in Book 1 of *De Trinitate*, “The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality.”²⁴⁵ In addition to their ontological unity, Augustine argues that there is a unity of will between the Father and the Son through the love of the Holy Spirit. As Luigi Gioia notes, the “unity of love in the Holy Spirit provides the content of the metaphysical notion of unity of essence or consubstantiality.”²⁴⁶ This notion of the nature of God as a unity of divine love shapes Augustine’s understanding of the disease of sin as well as its remedy. Sin is that which

²⁴⁴ *De gratia Christi*, I.9.

²⁴⁵ *De Trin.*, I.7, Pater et filius et spiritus sanctus unius substantiae inseparabili aequalitate diuinam insinuant unitatem.

²⁴⁶ Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2008), p. 130.

divides and scatters, and salvation is accomplished by becoming united with the unified Christ, who is the perfect unity of the divine and the human. As Gioia argues, in Augustine's thought, "Christ alone is 'the one' (*unum*) who can heal the scattering effects of sinfulness . . . through love and faith we adhere to 'the one' Christ, the Mediator through whom we are reconciled with God, and are able to cling to the One, enjoy the One and remain forever one."²⁴⁷ The unity of God is the starting point, then, for Augustine's diagnosis of the disease of sin.

Examining his development of the doctrine of original sin reveals the motif of unity in each of the three central elements of the doctrine. In the first element, Augustine describes the primal sin as concupiscence that spawns pride, which leads to a disobedient act that was fundamentally a violation of unity. Before the primal sin, Augustine notes that "the love of the pair for God and for one another was undisturbed, and they lived in a faithful and sincere fellowship which brought great gladness to them."²⁴⁸ Prelapsarian existence, according to Augustine, was defined by the unity of the first human pair with each other and God, which made them happy. The primal sin occurred when Adam scorned his union with God and Eve, and "turned towards himself,"²⁴⁹ which rendered his being "less complete than when he clung to Him who exists supremely."²⁵⁰ The sin of Adam was a refusal to cling to another. It was the sin of forsaking unity with others in order "to exist in oneself."²⁵¹ To choose to exist in oneself rather than in union with God and others is, according to Augustine, to choose

²⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 125-126.

²⁴⁸ *De Civ*, XIV.10.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., XIV.13.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

annihilation. It is, “not immediately to lose all being, but it is to come to nothingness.”²⁵² The source of Being is God, who is also perfect unity, thus to separate oneself from God is to tend towards nothingness and to become divided. Thus, Augustine posits relationality and interdependence as constitutive of human existence, and the primal sin as rejection of this necessary unity.

Augustine’s dependence upon the motif of unity is further demonstrated in his description of the second element of the doctrine of original sin—the effects of the sin on Adam and Eve. As mentioned above, Augustine believes that the primal sin rendered Adam and Eve subject not only to physical death, which is a separation between the soul and body at the time of death, but also to, “the ruin of the second death,” by which Augustine means separation from God.²⁵³ Thus, the first effect of the primal sin was disunity in two distinct aspects of human existence—intra-human disunity and separation from God. Adam and Eve’s choice to violate their union with God brought about the consequence of more disunity. Furthermore, besides the two-fold separation of death, Augustine argues that the primal sin caused an internal lack of unity within the first couple. After the primal sin, he says Adam’s “flesh began to lust against the Spirit,”²⁵⁴ and his nature became “discordant.”²⁵⁵ Augustine expresses this internal discordance when he describes his own state before his conversion. In the *Confessions*, he notes that before Christ, he “was tossed about and split, scattered and boiled dry,”²⁵⁶ and that he “was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself.”²⁵⁷

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid., XIII.12, 14.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., XIII.13.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., XII.28.

²⁵⁶ *Conf.*, II.2.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., VIII.22.

Thus, the effects of the primal sin on Adam and Eve were division and disunity, which were then passed on to all of humanity.

The third element of the doctrine of original sin—humankind’s solidarity with Adam—is the clearest example of Augustine’s dependence upon the theme of unity. He argues that all humans are united in Adam, and furthermore, that God intentionally arranged this unity “in order to show mankind how highly he prizes unity in a multitude.”²⁵⁸ Humans were created as fundamentally interconnected in order to emphasize God’s desire for humanity’s unity. All humans are bound together not simply by “similarity of nature,”²⁵⁹ but also by “the affection of kinship.”²⁶⁰ Augustine believes this truth about our nature implies an ethical imperative for all to seek unity, heal division, and to have special reverence for the unity of the marriage bond. As he states, it is by “remembrance of that first parent of us all”²⁶¹ that all humans should “be admonished to preserve unity among their whole multitude,”²⁶² and should remember “how dear the union between a man and his wife should be.”²⁶³ Thus, the third key element of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin displays Augustine’s dependence on the motif of unity to explain the human situation and to indicate how humans ought to act in light of our origins.

Augustine’s dependence on the motif of unity is also foundational to his Christology and his ecclesiology. Christ is the supreme source of healing for those fragmented by sin. He praises Christ in *Confessions* by saying, “You gathered me together from the state of

²⁵⁸ *De Civ*, XII.23.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, XII.22.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, XII.28.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided.”²⁶⁴ The only way to be healed of the disease of original sin, in Augustine’s thought, is to be gathered together into Christ’s perfect unity of divinity and humanity, and this is a Trinitarian event as we are united to Christ and the Father through the love of the Holy Spirit. As Gioia notes, just as the Father and the Son are united through love in the Holy Spirit, “so Christians are reconciled—become ‘one’—with the Father through the love of Christ’s sacrifice (let us remember that love is the essence of sacrifice) and become one with each other through the same love poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”²⁶⁵ Augustine states, “all who need to be transformed and raised up must come together into the unity of Christ.”²⁶⁶ He praises Christ by saying, “I flow together to merge into you. Then shall I find stability and solidity in you.”²⁶⁷ The disordered movements of curiosity and concupiscence are made stable in Christ. In contrast to the “poisonous solidarity”²⁶⁸ of the “*massa peccati*” in which humanity existed in Adam that brought death to all, incorporation into Christ is solidarity in unity that leads to participation in the life of the unified God. In “Christ the Physician,” the perfect unity of the Trinitarian God is united to humanity, so that humanity can become reunited to God, live in communion with others, and be internally reconciled.²⁶⁹ Thus, the motif of unity that Augustine depends upon to develop his notion of original sin also features prominently in his Christology.

As healing from the fragmentation of sin is found in Christ, the sacraments hold supreme importance for Augustine as the means of incorporation into Christ. His

²⁶⁴ *Conf.*, II.1.

²⁶⁵ Gioia, *Theological Epistemology*, p. 126.

²⁶⁶ *De Pecc Mer*, I.60.

²⁶⁷ *Conf.*, XI.39.

²⁶⁸ Duffy, p. 616.

²⁶⁹ *De Pecc Mer*, I.23.

ecclesiology is based on his belief that Christ makes no distinction between the Church and his own body.²⁷⁰ To communicate the depth of the unity between Christ and the Church, Augustine uses language typically used to depict the unity of the marriage bond. The Church and Christ, he says, are “no longer two, but one flesh.”²⁷¹ To be in the Church is to be in Christ himself. One seeking integration, communion, wholeness, stability, and unity ought to turn to the Church to be baptized into Christ, the unified one. The motif of unity is foundational to Augustine’s ecclesiology as well.

Finally, as the motif of unity provides coherence to Augustine’s anthropology, Christology, and ecclesiology, it extends his thinking into the realm of ethics and pastoral concerns. His homilies display a consistent emphasis on the importance of the unity of the Church. In a sermon for the feast of the Nativity, Augustine notes that Christ made us one so that in the Church we may be, “bound together by the pleasing fetters of unity.”²⁷² In a sermon for the feast of the Epiphany, Augustine metaphorically interprets the Magi and shepherds who came to visit Jesus at his birth in order to emphasize that there ought to be reconciliation between Jews and Christians.²⁷³ And finally, Augustine exhorts his congregation to “cling together with most constant affection,”²⁷⁴ which recalls his language from the *City of God* describing Adam’s primal sin as a failure to cling to God.²⁷⁵ Because Christ is the perfect unity of divinity and humanity, and because those incorporated into Christ are healed of their internal division and alienation and reconciled to God, this implies an obligation to pursue

²⁷⁰ Ibid., I.60.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Augustine, “Sermon 185,” *Sermons on the Feast of the Nativity*, p. 9.

²⁷³ Augustine, “Sermon 199,” *Sermons for the Feast of the Epiphany*, p. 60.

²⁷⁴ Augustine, “Sermon 200,” *Sermons for the Feast of the Epiphany*, p. 66.

²⁷⁵ *De Civ*, XIV.13.

unity within the Church. Augustine consistently exhorts his congregations to this end. This motif of unity that is a key explanatory mechanism for Augustine's doctrine of original sin via the notion of the "massa peccati" also connects this doctrine to his other theological priorities, which also bridges his theology to his pastoral practice and ethical concerns.

Despite the fact that there are limitations and problems with elements of Augustine's thinking about original sin, especially, as we will see, in his understanding of sin as gendered, there remains much that is useful from his account. His interest in the way that humans are shaped by sin, all the way down to the level of the biological, his view of desire as central to the movements of human life, and his insistence upon the notion of a unified humanity via the motif of the *massa peccati*, provide important resources for rethinking the doctrine in greater dialogue with evolutionary biology.

5. Augustine on Sexual Difference and Sin

Augustine has been one of the most significant influences on Christian thinking about the meaning of sexual difference and the gendered nature of sin. As Kim Power suggests, Augustine's "resolution of the fourth-century debates about the significance of sexual difference and its place in creation has been perceived as the dominant voice in the Christian discourse of sexuality."²⁷⁶ As we have already seen, Augustine's language about sin throughout the corpus of his works is entangled from the beginning with gendered language, assumptions, and connotations. He clearly accepts to a large extent the cultural and biological frameworks of his time that viewed women as physically inferior to men and as appropriately

²⁷⁶ Power, *Veiled Desire*, p. 5.

subordinated to men because of their nature.²⁷⁷ A woman ruling over a man would be the symbolic equivalent of the lower faculties of the bodily desire ruling over the higher faculty of reason, thus resulting in disorder and loss of *harmonia*. However, on the other hand, Augustine is more generous to women than were many of his contemporaries, and there is much ambiguity and ambivalence in Augustine's portrayal of the relationship between sin and sexual difference. This section examines the key texts that provide insight into Augustine's understanding of the gendered nature of sin with the purpose of demonstrating, first, how persistently entangled the concepts of sin and sexual difference are in his thinking, and second, to critically analyze his thought in terms of its possibilities for a retrieval of his thought for a theology of sin and sex in our time.

Augustine frequently uses representations of women and femininity as ways of referring to fallenness and sin, yet this is counterbalanced by a swing to the opposite extreme in his frequent use of idealized feminine imagery to describe "the eschatological paradise in which he, and all faithful Christians, will find union with God."²⁷⁸ Women and femininity symbolize both the disordered pleasures that tempt humanity away from God, and also eschatological union with God. Augustine has been much derided by feminists for his depiction of women as closer to the material realm in contrast to men who supposedly exist closer to the realm of mind/spirit, as well as for the aspects of his thought that express suspicion of desire, (especially female) bodiliness, and sex. Indeed, as Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, he argues that "those parts of the female body that have to do with sex and

²⁷⁷ E. Ann Matter, "Women," *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, p. 887.

²⁷⁸ Felecia McDuffie, "Augustine's Rhetoric of the Feminine in the Confessions: Woman as Mother, Woman as Other," in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, p. 98.

childbirth will be transformed, so they become 'fitted to glory rather than to shame'," although the meaning of this phrase is not entirely clear.²⁷⁹ It is likely, as Edmund Hill notes, that Augustine accepted the commonplace of his time that "the sexual act itself" is something impure, but it is also true that Augustine in many ways softened this commonplace through his teaching that the corruption of sex is a result of sin rather than being something intrinsic to it by nature.²⁸⁰ His understanding of women as closer to the realm of bodiliness, affectivity, and desire implies that women are intrinsically more sinful since sin is cast in terms of disordered desire for Augustine, and yet conversely, it seems that women are closer to salvation as well in their superior strength of affectivity and love as depicted in the example of Mary Magdalene seeking for Jesus after the crucifixion. Additionally, he argues against some of his contemporaries in favor of the notion that women are capable of imaging God in their rational souls.²⁸¹ However, this defense of women is again counterbalanced by a linguistic and metaphorical framework in which he uses Adam and Eve as analogies for the masculine and feminine to describe dimensions of the human mind, and to argue for the necessity of "masculine" rule over the "feminine" elements of the human mind.

In *De Trinitate*, Augustine describes the two functions of the rational human soul as *sapientia* (wisdom) and *scientia* (knowledge or skill). As Kim Power notes, although both words are linguistically feminine, and elsewhere within the Christian and Judaic traditions, *sapientia* or heavenly Wisdom is depicted as a feminine figure, Augustine argues that

²⁷⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexuality, Gender, and Women," in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, p. 63.

²⁸⁰ Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, 2nd ed., ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, New York: New York City Press (1991), p. 325.

²⁸¹ Note Augustine's statement in *De Trinitate*, "what was made to the image of God is the human nature that is realized in each sex, and it does not exclude the female from the image of God" (XII.3.10).

sapientia is analogically masculine, while *scientia*, or knowledge of the temporal realm is analogically feminine.²⁸² He uses the figures of Adam and Eve in order to explain that just as Eve was created as an assistant for Adam, so *scientia* exists as a helper for *sapientia*, and must be ruled and subdued by *sapientia*, because *sapientia* is concerned with higher things such as the contemplation of God.²⁸³ The feminine *scientia* is concerned with temporal matters and cannot image God unless it is united with masculine *sapientia*. Importantly, Augustine argues that both *sapientia* and *scientia* are present in every human mind regardless of a person's sex, and it seems that his motivation in doing this was, ironically, to try to defend the notion that women could image God against certain interlocutors who argued otherwise, and also in the face of what seemed obvious from the inferior physical constitution of women (based on the received medical information of his day). In order to defend woman's ability to image God, Augustine argues that sexual difference is only in the body and not in the mind or soul. As he says in *De Gen*, "Now the expression, in His image, can apply only to the soul, and the expression, male and female, can be properly understood as referring only to the body."²⁸⁴ For Augustine, the mind and the soul have no sex, and therefore, since women also have *sapientia*, in their rational souls they could also image God. While Augustine's defending of the woman's ability to image God is certainly praiseworthy, and despite his protestations that he was using the concepts of masculine and feminine analogically, in his association of the masculine with *sapientia* and the feminine with

²⁸² Power, *Veiled Desire*, p. 135, and Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XII.5.

²⁸³ *De Trin*, XII.3, and also XII.25 in which Augustine states, "si ergo haec est sapientiae et scientiae recta distinctio ut ad sapientiam pertineat aeternarum rerum cognitio intellectualis, ad scientiam uero temporalium rerum cognitio rationalis, quid cui praeponendum siue postponendum sit non est difficile iudicare."

²⁸⁴ *De Gen*, XII.35.

scientia, he was reinforcing the cultural dominance of the male, and also reinforcing the stereotype that women are closer to nature, closer to bodiliness, and thus more vulnerable to the perversions of fleshly concupiscence. In arguing that sexual difference is only in the body, Augustine perpetuates a two-substance dualism and the impression that somehow the personal and sexual history of a body has no relation to the life of the soul. Also, as John Rist notes, Augustine “apparently never considered whether a soul designed and habituated to look after a male body might be different from a soul looking after a female body,” and in a contemporary context we might raise further questions about the relationship between a non-binary or intersex body and the soul.²⁸⁵

The next aspect of Augustine’s thought worth mentioning in terms of his thinking about sin and sexual difference is his understanding of concupiscence. As has been noted above, technically, for Augustine, concupiscence is not sinful. It is a general word that he uses for desire. However, concupiscence leads to sin because it causes a rebellion of bodily desires against the mind, which should rule over it, according to Augustine. His language about concupiscence is often expressed in feminine terms. He describes concupiscence as both the “daughter of sin” and the “mother of the sins of men.”²⁸⁶ His decision to speak about *concupiscentia* in feminine terms might be simply a result of the feminine gender of the word in Latin. However, as shown above, there are examples of Augustine intentionally applying feminine words like *sapientia* explicitly to males, and so there is precedent for Augustine expanding feminine words to refer to males as well, and so the decision to speak of

²⁸⁵ Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, p. 120.

²⁸⁶ *De nupt conc.*, 1.27. Ex hac carnis concupiscentia . . . tamquam filia peccati et, quando illi ad turpia consentitur, etiam peccatorum matre multorum quaecumque nascitur proles originali est obligata peccato.

concupiscentia only in feminine terms is notable. He also explicitly identifies the feminine, and the woman with concupiscence in *De opere monachorum* when he states, “What therefore, in one person are mind and concupiscence (for the one rules, the other is ruled, the one dominates and the other is subdued), that in two human beings, man and woman is represented according to the sex of the body.”²⁸⁷ We see then in Augustine an assumption that the feminine and the female sex are associated with desire, which, if it is not ruled and dominated by the higher order faculties and the higher order gender, will gain the upper hand and lead one to sin. Sin, then, for Augustine, is differently gendered in that the woman is more likely to sin, to be the cause of sin, and to lead the man to sin because of her closer proximity to the temporal and fleshly realm. However, the feminine nature as stronger in affectivity, desire, and love is sometimes construed as giving the woman an advantage in terms of potential for salvation because the woman’s weakness makes her more keenly aware of her need for Christ, and thus motivates Mary Magdalene’s intense and tearful seeking for Jesus. Also, to be stronger in love is to be stronger in virtue, according to Augustine, and so perhaps in this sense woman, though technically the “weaker sex,” is stronger because of her “weakness.”

6. Conclusion

Despite the fact that there are limitations and problems with elements of Augustine’s thinking about original sin, especially in his understanding of sin as gendered and his association of woman (*femina*) with concupiscence and sinfulness, there remains much that is useful from his account. His interest in the way that humans are shaped by sin, all the way down to the

²⁸⁷ *De opera monachorum* 32.40.

level of the biological, his view of desire as central to the activities of human life, and his insistence upon the notion of a unified humanity via the motif of the *massa peccati*, provide important resources for rethinking the doctrine in a creative integration with evolutionary biology in the twenty-first century as the Neo-Darwinian “modern synthesis” is undergoing something of a transformation. The possibilities for retrieving aspects of Augustine’s approach to original sin are developed in more depth later in this thesis.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ While this project is not primarily historical in nature and so it cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the historical reception and development of Augustine’s thought, it is important to note that theologians after Augustine made important contributions to Christian thinking about original sin and sexual difference as well. Anselm, for example, in his *Cur Deus Homo* (1094-1098 CE), conceptualizes of sin in terms of a debt owed to God, and original sin as a deprivation of original justice. Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae* (1485 CE), draws from both Anselm and Augustine and speaks of original sin also in terms of a deprivation of original justice, and the transmission of original sin as occurring by means of humanity’s shared nature with Adam. Original sin was a central issue for Martin Luther and the Reformers as well, with Luther collapsing the distinction between original sin and concupiscence articulated by the Church before him, and he argued that the Christian remains a sinner after baptism. This history is discussed at length in Tatha Wiley’s *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*. In terms of developments in theologies of sexual difference, Aquinas is significant as well. Influenced by Aristotle, Aquinas speaks of women as a “defective and misbegotten,” (although in terms of God’s intention to create woman she is “not misbegotten, but included in nature’s intention as directed to the work of generation,” according to Aquinas) and therefore rightly subordinated to men (*Summa Theologiae*, q.92. a. 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm>). A thorough overview of major developments in philosophical and theological thinking about sexual difference can be found in Prudence Allen’s three-volume work *The Concept of Woman* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997-2016).

Chapter 3: “The Human Situation”—Sin and Sexual Difference in 1960

*“For the temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man . . . they are out-growths of the basic feminine character structure, and have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as ‘pride’ and ‘will-to-power.’ ”*²⁸⁹

--Valerie Saiving

Valerie Saiving’s article “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” published in 1960 in the *Journal of Religion*, is arguably the most pervasively influential treatment of the relationship between sexual difference and sin. In the article, Saiving critiques a tendency she perceived in the Christian theology of the time, particularly as manifested in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Anders Nygren, to define sin as pride, dominating self-assertion, and “will to power.” She argued that this description of sin was androcentric and did not adequately encompass “women’s experience” or the temptations that were particular to “the feminine character structure.”²⁹⁰ Saiving’s article was groundbreaking, and is considered by many to be the beginning of feminist theology. The pervasive influence of the article might be surprising, given that it was originally written in 1958 as a seminar paper in a graduate theology course while Saiving was struggling to balance her responsibilities as a single mother and a doctoral student at the University of Chicago Divinity School.²⁹¹ However, besides being one of only two articles written by women published in the *Journal of Religion* in 1960,²⁹² the most probable reason for the broad reception of “The Human Situation” is the

²⁸⁹ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960), p. 109.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Saiving describes the context in which the paper was written in a interview that was subsequently published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* under the title “Conversation with Valerie Saiving” (Vol 4, no 2, 1988), p. 101.

²⁹² Rebekah Miles, “Valerie Saiving Reconsidered,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1 (2012), p. 82.

fact that an editor of *Time* magazine commented on the article in the June edition of *Time* in 1960.²⁹³ Decades later in an interview, Saiving reflected on the popularity of “The Human Situation” and remarked “You have no idea how powerful *Time* was, how it was the real voice of America.”²⁹⁴ *Time*’s highlighting of Saiving’s article gave it global visibility that would normally have been impossible for a female theologian in her time, and Saiving reported receiving letters of support and gratitude from women around the world.²⁹⁵ I examine Saiving’s work in depth here, since even though the article was written more than half a century ago and is relatively brief, it continues to be one of the most frequently cited sources in the twenty-first century for theological reflection on sin and sexual difference.²⁹⁶ Because of its sustained influence, it deserves careful analysis and evaluation.²⁹⁷

This chapter reexamines Saiving’s foundational work of theological engagement with questions about sin and sexual difference in order to adumbrate a framework for a contemporary approach. Analyzing Saiving’s article is helpful because it provides an opportunity to examine both theologies of sin and anthropological approaches to gender and

²⁹³ “Religion. Male & Female Theology,” *Time*, June 27, 1960, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,827700,00.html>.

²⁹⁴ “Conversation with Valerie Saiving,” p. 110.

²⁹⁵ Saiving remarked, “I got so many letters from all over the world, from Pakistan, European countries, and of course from all over the United States. Many of the people who wrote me said, ‘Oh, I was so glad to find that you were saying what I was feeling, but couldn’t put into words.’” Ibid, p. 110.

²⁹⁶ Mary Bednarowski comments on Saiving’s article in her monograph *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1999), p. 16), “I am not hesitant to estimate that three-fourths of all the books of women’s religious thought I’ve read mention this article,” and Rebekah Miles notes in “Valerie Saiving Reconsidered,” “I have yet to find an article mentioned more frequently,” p. 79.

²⁹⁷ Although Saiving does not discuss the category of “original sin” in her article, and original sin is the major focus of this thesis, her work is still absolutely crucial for this thesis because of the ways in which she permanently shifted the conversation in theology about the relationship between theologies of sin and sexual difference. Her work also provides an important historical example of a theology of sexual difference that attempts to integrate information from the sciences (namely, psychology, biology, and anthropology). This is important background information for understanding the ways in which biology and anthropology have developed since the 1960s, and therefore the ways in which theologies of sexual difference might now evolve as well in light of this new information.

sexuality, as well as one attempt to integrate them from a particular historical moment—the 1960s. This will bring to the fore some of the fundamental issues at stake in this discussion—both scientific and theological. This chapter thus begins by analyzing Saiving’s original argument in depth, since despite the fact that her article is frequently cited, it is often not read in enough detail to capture the nuances of her thinking. It then turns to analysis of the anthropological data that shaped Saiving’s work. Despite the fact that there have been numerous articles and at least one monograph written examining her work, so far none of them have situated her project within the context of the anthropological sources that she relied upon to make her arguments. This is a significant gap in scholarship since Saiving’s approach to sexual difference cannot be adequately understood apart from reference to the works of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Saiving admitted this much in an interview in 1988 when she stated, “There is really nothing original in this article [“The Human Situation”] except to apply what Margaret Mead said to theology. I got the basic idea of the differences between male and female experiences from Mead.”²⁹⁸ Reflecting on Saiving’s use of cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis will provide insight into her methodological assumptions, and will demonstrate some of the predominant approaches from this period to characterizing the roles of nature and culture in establishing human identity. This will lay a foundation for understanding contemporary developments on the question of the relationship between nature and culture which we discuss in chapter four. Analyzing the anthropological data from the 1930s that shaped Saiving’s thought in the 1960s is also useful for providing a critical historical example of some of the risks inherent to the task of exploring the role that

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

biology plays in establishing human traits and behaviors, and it provides context for the historical reluctance of feminist thinkers to utilize insights from the natural sciences.

After analysis of the broader source material that influenced Saiving's thought, the chapter then turns to an examination of the reception and popular critiques of Saiving's article, taking into account a fact that has been raised by Rebekah Miles in "Valerie Saiving Reconsidered" but deserves further attention, which is that Saiving changed her mind later in her life on several aspects of her original argument. It is important to highlight the ways in which she changed her mind in the interest of doing justice to Saiving, but also because her later shifts in thinking are significant for new theological constructions on sexual difference and sin. Her later reconsideration of her work reflects an awareness of some of the significant developments in both gender theory and theology that had taken place in the years since her article was first published, and some of the implications these developments would have for her argument. The chapter concludes by arguing that although Saiving's article was a crucial early feminist contribution to the project of understanding the relationship between sin and sexual difference, her theology of sin is impoverished by its lack of engagement with evolutionary biology, and also by its failure to incorporate insights from the greater Christian tradition, which could have equipped it with a more robust metaphysical infrastructure. "The Human Situation" floats unmoored with neither adequate biological grounding nor connection to the metaphysical realm. However, in its incompleteness, "The Human Situation: a Feminine View" provides signposts for constructing a contemporary analysis of the relationship between sexual difference and sin—one that will be rooted in the material realities of the evolutionary history of our species and also located within a more robust metaphysical framework with reference to the broader Christian tradition.

1. Valerie Saiving on Sex, Sin, and Love

*"I am no longer as certain as I once was that when theologians speak of "man,"
they are using the word in its generic sense."²⁹⁹
--Valerie Saiving*

Saiving begins her argument about sin and sexual difference by identifying herself as both a student of theology and a woman. She notes that the juxtaposition of these assertions might elicit surprise from some readers, and that it could imply that she thinks her sexual identity has bearing on her theological views, and this suggestion is exactly what will form the crux of her argument. The first movement of her argument is to claim that there is a "widespread tendency" in the theology of the time to describe "man's predicament," or humanity's fundamental orientation to the world, as one predominantly marked by "separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it," and subsequently, to identify sin with prideful self-assertion and separation, and love with selflessness, total self-giving, and union.³⁰⁰ Saiving argues that the theologians who were popular in the 1960s described the human condition mainly in an existentialist key as that which is universally characterized by anxiety that stems from human freedom and results in each human's "individuality and his essential loneliness."³⁰¹ Human freedom within this framework is depicted in terms of the ability to exist above natural processes, to imagine possibilities, to make choices, and to exert power over natural structures. In the article she mentions Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders

²⁹⁹ Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," p. 100.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 101.

Nygren as particularly exemplifying this way of characterizing the human situation, and in a later interview she notes that she had in mind the work of Paul Tillich as well.³⁰²

This portrayal of the human condition as one fundamentally marked by isolation, loneliness, freedom, and anxiety, lends itself to particular understandings of sin and love, according to Saiving. Freedom, though it is the source of human “historical and cultural creativity,” is always accompanied by a certain level of anxiety and fear about one’s own survival, and this anxiety is the root of the temptation to sin.³⁰³ Sin, then, for these theologians, stems from the self’s need to manage its anxiety about its separateness.³⁰⁴ It accomplishes this by “magnifying its own power, righteousness, or knowledge.”³⁰⁵ Anxiety about separateness leads to the development of a *libido dominandi*, or an “imperialistic drive,” to bridge the perceived distance between the isolated self and others “by reducing those others to the status of mere objects which can then be treated as appendages of the self and manipulated accordingly.”³⁰⁶ Sin as stemming from anxiety, loneliness, and isolation, and leading to a desire to increase one’s own sense of power by dominating others was the theological account

³⁰² “Conversation with Valerie Saiving,” p. 100. One thinks here of Tillich’s assertion that “Man is essentially ‘finite freedom’; freedom not in the sense of indeterminacy but in the sense of being able to determine himself through decisions in the center of his being. Man, as finite freedom, is free within the contingencies of his finitude. But within these limits he is asked to make of himself what he is supposed to become, to fulfill his destiny” (*The Courage to Be*, Yale University Press (2000), p. 52), or Niebuhr’s statement that “Man’s freedom to transcend the natural flux gives him the possibility of grasping a span of time in his consciousness and thereby of knowing history. It also enables him to change, reorder and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby to make history” (Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. Vol. II, Human destiny: a Christian interpretation*, Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press (1964), p. 1).

³⁰³ “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” p. 100.

³⁰⁴ Recall Tillich’s statement in his famous sermon entitled “You are Accepted”—“Sin is separation. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. And separation is threefold: there is separation among individual lives, separation of men/women from themselves; and separation of all people from the Ground of Being (God). This three-fold separation constitutes the state of everything that exists; it is a universal fact; it is the fate of every life . . . Separation which is fate and guilt constitutes the meaning of the word ‘sin’ . . . Existence is separation! Before sin is an act, it is a state” (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1949).

³⁰⁵ “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” p. 101.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

prominent in Saiving's time that she viewed as inappropriately androcentric. The cost of misrepresenting the nature of sin is high since, according to Saiving, it is always entangled with theological conceptions of love.³⁰⁷ Love and sin, she argues, are "mutually interrelated concepts."³⁰⁸ Love is the opposite of sin, and is the only solution to the reality of human sinfulness. When sin is portrayed as excessive self-assertion, love is consequently described in terms of selflessness, relatedness, complete self-giving, unconditional forgiveness, and total receptiveness to the other.³⁰⁹

From this summary of the prominent theologies of sin and love of her time, Saiving continues her argument by introducing the category of sexual difference as a means by which to interrogate the universality of these theological positions. Since men historically were the only ones constructing theological accounts of sin and love, she argues, theology was biased towards reflecting male experiences. As she notes, "There are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience," and feminine experience, she suggests, "reveals in a more emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men."³¹⁰ She argues that these aspects of feminine experience are not adequately encompassed by the theologies that describe sin as dominating self-assertion and love as self-giving. As will be discussed in more depth below, a popular criticism of Saiving has been that she utilizes an overly simplistic and binary account of

³⁰⁷ I find this pairing surprising on Saiving's part, since sin is usually juxtaposed with grace.

³⁰⁸ "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," p. 101.

³⁰⁹ This can be seen again in Tillich's "You are Accepted" when he states, "In the light of this grace we perceive the power of grace in our relation to others and to ourselves . . . We experience the grace of being able to accept the life of another, even if it be hostile and harmful for us, for, through grace, we know that it belongs to the same Ground to which we belong, and by which we have been accepted" (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*).

³¹⁰ "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," p. 101.

gender, but note that the statement above is careful to avoid a facile dichotomy between the experiences of men and women. Indeed, Saiving reflects an understanding of the complexity of sexual difference that is perhaps even ahead of her time when she argues later that we can no longer make “hard-and-fast distinctions between the potentialities of men and women as such,” because as she states, “the twentieth century has witnessed the shattering of too many of our traditional conceptions of sexual differences for us any longer to ignore the tremendous plasticity of human nature.”³¹¹ Thus, while Saiving does reflect an understanding of sexual difference as basically binary, she also affirms theoretically that there is a great deal of fluidity between the sexes within the binary, such that the potentialities of each remain open and unpredictable. However, for Saiving in the 1960s, this fluidity and unpredictability does not extend to the realm of the biological. Rather, she refers to “purely biological” sex differences, and argues that “every distinction between the sexes *above the physiological level* is purely arbitrary,” thus suggesting a fixity and stability to biological sexual difference, and dichotomy between nature and culture.³¹² For Saiving, the fixity of biological sexual difference is most clearly demonstrated in what she views as the central reality of sexual difference, which is that “in every society it is women—and only women—who bear children,”³¹³ and further, that it is usually women who are closest to infants and young children, thus exerting the strongest formative influence on their development.

After suggesting that all sex differences except for the “purely biological” ones are arbitrary and based on the culture in which one is raised, Saiving turns to cultural

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 102.

³¹² Ibid., p. 102, [emphasis mine].

³¹³ Ibid., p. 103.

anthropology to substantiate her claims. She relies on three sources in particular to do this—Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (1934), Margaret Mead’s *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), and Mead’s later work *Male and Female* (1950). As she acknowledges later, Mead exerted the strongest influence on her thinking. The anthropological insights, theories about sexual difference, and historical background of Benedict and Mead are analyzed in more detail in the next section, but in terms of Saiving’s developing argument, she uses these three sources to ground her arguments about sexual difference, which will then shape her approach to theologies of sin and love. She first uses Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* and Mead’s earlier work *Sex and Temperament* in order to highlight the relativity and culturally conditioned nature of sex and gender ideals. Saiving uses this notion of the culturally conditioned nature of the male and female sex roles in order to support her theological point that we must not make rigid determinations about the “potentialities” of men and women as such, including their potentialities for sin and love, because studies of various cultures like those studied in *Patterns of Culture* and *Sex and Temperament* demonstrate that these potentialities are flexible and fluid, and only loosely related to biology. According to Mead’s *Sex and Temperament*, some cultures view women as naturally aggressive and dominating while the men are viewed as suitable for childcare and nurturing, and in other cultures these stereotypes are reversed.³¹⁴ After positing that non-physiological differences between the sexes might be completely arbitrary based on anthropological data, Saiving then turns to Mead’s later *Male and Female* to take the argument in a different direction.

³¹⁴ Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, London: Routledge & Sons (1935), p. 279.

According to Saiving, Margaret Mead's central research question changed over the course of her career from "Are character differences between the sexes the result of heredity or environment, of biology or culture?" which shaped her work in *Sex and Temperament*, to "Are there certain basic similarities in the ways in which men and women in every culture have experienced what it means to be a man or to be a woman?" which shaped her work fifteen years later in *Male and Female*.³¹⁵ Saiving suggests that Mead answers the latter question in *Male and Female* in the affirmative, and then uses this insight in order to suggest that, despite the arbitrary embellishments imposed by cultures, there remains, in Saiving's words, a "substratum or core of masculine and feminine orientations which, if too drastically contradicted by the superstructure, may threaten the very existence of the society and its members."³¹⁶ Saiving refers to these core male and female orientations as "biocultural differences."³¹⁷ The biocultural sexual difference that has the most significant formative influence on humans, according to Saiving, is the fact that it is only women who bear children, and further, that usually it is women who exist in closest relationship to infants and young children, thereby shaping their earliest life experiences and orientations.

The early closeness of male and female infants to a woman is significant for the subsequent processes of differentiation of the infants, and these processes of differentiation have lasting and opposite effects on the character traits of males and females. Drawing from Mead's insights in *Male and Female*, Saiving argues that the earliest messages given to a young female about her sexual identity are that she will become a mother like the woman

³¹⁵ "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," p. 103.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

who birthed and cared for her, that she already is a woman who needs only to wait for the maturation of her body which will unfold naturally in time, and that her femininity is stable and unquestionable. Saiving affirms here the notion that women are fundamentally “closer to nature” than men because of these automatic bodily changes over time.³¹⁸ The process of differentiation for a male child is different, more complex, and more anxiety producing. The earliest messages given to a male about his sexual identity are that he is not the same as the primary care giver, that he is not yet a man but must *become* a man, and that becoming a man involves not simply waiting for bodily maturation that will happen naturally, but requires accomplishing demonstrations of strength or potency determined by the culture. “Becoming a man” is not something automatic and bodily. It is a tenuous and fragile achievement that is never permanently secured, according to Saiving.³¹⁹

These early messages are only reinforced as life goes on, Saiving argues, since the female’s life is “punctuated and authenticated” by automatic bodily processes like menstruation and menopause, and the male’s life lacks these “dramatic, once-for-all, physical signs of his masculinity.”³²⁰ As Saiving argues, “The man’s sense of his own masculinity, then, is throughout characterized by uncertainty, challenge, and the feeling that he must again and again prove himself a man.”³²¹ The woman, therefore, according to Saiving, becomes habituated to a certain amount of passivity based on her biological experiences, while the male is taught continually that he must act, and this incessant demand for performance

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 105. Marjorie Suchocki also identifies Saiving’s affirmation of women’s greater closeness to nature as an unfortunate concession on the part of Saiving to the problematic frameworks of Niebuhr and Tillich that she (Savings) is striving to critique (The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology, New York: Continuum (1995), p. 42.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid., p. 105.

inculcates a basic anxiety in males that is not shared to the same extent by females. This anxiety within the male is a burden, but it also spurs his drive for achievement and self-actualization. Saiving argues that this pressure to perform and to achieve authentication of masculinity that begins early in life for men fuels much of the male creative drive, and that males may even suffer from a fundamental “womb-envy,” or a jealousy of female biological fecundity that also further drives their need for creative accomplishment.³²² While there are benefits for women in being “closer to nature,” Saiving argues that the drawbacks to this position are that a woman may feel herself in a type of bondage to her physiology that a man does not feel, and given the repeated experience of waiting on passive biological events to happen to her, the woman will likely struggle to develop a strong drive toward self-actualization.

Based on her understanding of these “biocultural differences” between men and women, Saiving then argues that a society has a great deal of latitude in establishing societal norms and may choose to set ideals for gender roles that are unrelated to, or that even contradict, the biological “substratum” of these basic male and female experiences. However, she warns that straying too far from these fundamental biocultural differences puts the continuance of the species at risk, and is therefore unwise even though it is possible.³²³ She argues, then, that while there can be a great deal of fluidity between the genders in terms of temperament and character structure, each individual’s felt sense of sex membership that was formed by early experiences of differentiation from a (usually) female caregiver remains an ineradicable and influential force that shapes his or her general orientation to life. Thus, while

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid., p. 106.

she argued early in the article that the potentialities of men and women are open-ended and unpredictable, and that it is ill-advised to make “hard-and-fast distinctions between the potentialities of men and women as such” because of the plasticity of human nature, she ends up endorsing a type of biological essentialism that is basically binary in nature and that is anchored in the central features of female reproduction.³²⁴ For Saiving then, the biological is portrayed as fixed and predictable, and the cultural expression of male and female roles is somewhat appropriately—but not necessarily—rooted in these certainties.

From this portrayal of the nature of sexual difference, and of the divergent orientations to life of males and females, Saiving moves to develop what she describes as more “realistic” theologies of sin and love that take these sexual differences into account.³²⁵ She suggests that this is an essential task because although the modern period, by which she means the time period from the Renaissance to the beginning of the twentieth century, was a “masculine age par excellence” in that the structures of society “emphasized, encouraged, and set free precisely those aspects of human nature which are peculiarly significant to men,” the masculinity of society was beginning to be replaced by a more feminine orientation in the 1960s.³²⁶ This increasing “feminizing of society,” according to Saiving, meant that the sinful tendencies of that society might look different than they did in the modern era.³²⁷ The modern era catered to the interests of men, and it raised their anxieties and heightened their insecurities, she argues. The emphases of the period were on production, technological development, competition, and domination of nature. A byproduct of this was a diminution

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 107.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

and devaluing of the traditional roles of women—namely, child birth and caring for the home. The hyper-masculinity of the cultural situation in the modern period, Saiving argues, are reflected in the theologies of sin and love expressed by Niebuhr, Tillich, and Nygren, and must be adapted in light of the changing nature of society. A more feminized society would be more likely to sin in feminine rather than masculine ways, thus a greater understanding of “feminine sin” is crucial for understanding the changing human situation.

The inadequacies of the theological portrayals of sin and love that were predominant at the time, Saiving argues, were being revealed by an emerging group of women who had been educated alongside men and were taught to believe in equality between the sexes. These women developed the ability, through experience and education, “to transcend the boundaries of a purely feminine identity” in order to “stand closer to the juncture of nature and spirit than was possible for most women in the past.”³²⁸ Saiving suggests that these women were expressing more traditionally male character qualities such as a strong need for self-differentiation, challenge, and adventure, but were also refusing to renounce their sexual identity, and were continuing to view themselves as feminine despite their transcendence of traditional feminine roles. As Saiving notes, “They want, in other words, to be both women and full human beings.”³²⁹ However, in spite of their education and their successful development of self-differentiation and creativity, Saiving suggests that after marriage and giving birth to children these women were eventually forced to acknowledge the “real differences” between the masculine and feminine situations and the “deep need of almost every woman” to “surrender her self-identity and be included in another’s ‘power of

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 107.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

being.”³³⁰ The experience of having a child forces a woman to be excessively giving of herself because it is necessary for the child’s survival and well-being, and of course most women, Saiving argues, also give of themselves excessively because of their love for their children. The child is totally dependent upon the mother, and the experience the mother has of a totalizing, “self-transcending love” for the child is both gratifying and draining. Saiving notes that the mother learns “that a woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God.”³³¹ And at this point, Saiving states most clearly her understanding of “feminine sin” that she argues was not adequately captured in the writings of Niebuhr, Tillich, and Nygren.

Feminine sins are not described as such because they are restricted only to women, or because women cannot sin in other ways, but rather, “feminine sin” is sin that stems from what Saiving understands to be the basic feminine character structure that is shaped by biological realities and early experiences in infancy and childhood. Since this basic feminine character structure is significantly formed by biological experiences of passive waiting and by cultural expectations of total self-giving, Saiving suggests that the feminine character is prone to:

triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossip sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdeveloped or negation of the self.³³²

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., p. 109.

Saiving argues that every natural tendency of the female character can turn out to be either a virtue or a sin. For example, while the woman's "closeness to nature" can be a source of confidence and surety that the male does not have access to, it also has the potential to make the woman sinfully complacent and resigned. The feminine character is, in the words of Saiving, "precisely the opposite of the masculine," and because of this divergence in tendencies and orientations, theological accounts of what it means to be human and what it means to sin and to love, must take this difference into consideration in order to accurately represent reality.³³³ Failing to account for sexual difference in the construction of theology can actually exacerbate sinful tendencies, according to Saiving. For example, describing sin solely in terms of pride and self-assertion might cause a woman to stifle her desires to rise above passivity and complacency for fear of being accused of being sinfully dominating. For a woman who has a "biocultural" predisposition towards total self-giving to the point of self-negation, describing the process of redemption in terms of union, unconditional forgiveness, and self-sacrificing love might encourage sinful self-abnegation. Given what Saiving sees as the increasing feminization of society, she argues that it is absolutely crucial to update theologies of sin in order to reflect the sexually differentiated ways it is sometimes manifested. For, as she states, "a feminine society will have its own special potentialities for good and evil, to which a theology based solely on masculine experience may well be irrelevant."³³⁴ And with this statement, Saiving concludes "The Human Situation: A Feminine View."

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid., 111.

Later in this chapter, we discuss the reception of Saiving's thought with reference to the major critiques of her article and the ways in which she later changed her mind. However, before examining the reception of the article and the development in Saiving's thought, we turn now to the anthropological sources that shaped Saiving's thinking about sexual difference and her subsequent suggestions about doctrinal development in light of her understanding of the data from these sources. Analysis of the work of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead provides insight into the state of anthropology in the 1930s-1960s and into approaches to sex and gender from this time. This will set the foundation for later analysis of contemporary anthropological and biological data on questions of sexual difference. Reflecting on not only the emphases, but also on the significant silences in the anthropological data from this historical period (the 1930s-1950s) is also helpful because it demonstrates some of the risks inherent to attempts to use biological data to discuss difference, and it provides essential historical background information for understanding feminist resistance to utilizing information from scientific disciplines.

2. Cultural Anthropology, Sexual Difference, and "The Human Situation"

*"Are not sex differences exceedingly valuable, one of the resources of our human nature that every society has used but no society has as yet begun to use in full?"*³³⁵

--Margaret Mead, Male and Female

Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead were prominent figures in the field of cultural anthropology in the 1930s-1950s, and while their works have been critiqued for various reasons, their writings are still considered "reform texts" that were foundational to the

³³⁵ Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, Penguin Books, 1970, pp. 8-9.

establishing of the discipline of anthropology.³³⁶ Both Mead and Benedict were mentored by Franz Boas, a German-American anthropologist considered by many to be the “Father of American Anthropology.” Benedict and Mead were significant contributors to the popularizing of Boas’ work promoting the relativity of cultural practices and disputing the concept of “racial types” that had added fuel to the eugenics movement in the early 1900s, and both were also influential scholars in their own rights.³³⁷ Benedict and Mead, from all accounts, had an exceptionally close relationship and were in frequent dialogue about their research, but they also diverged in important ways throughout their careers. The dissonance in their thought is perhaps one of the factors contributing to a certain ambivalence reflected in Saiving’s thinking about sexual difference, since she drew from the works of both Benedict and Mead in “The Human Situation.”

3. Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*

Saiving mentions Benedict’s work only briefly in “The Human Situation” when she says, “It was Ruth Benedict—who in *Patterns of Culture* stressed the relativity of the character ideals held by various societies and the inability of science to account for their diversity on a

³³⁶ Lois W. Banner, “Mannish Women, Passive Men, and Constitutional Types: Margaret Mead’s *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* as a Response to Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*,” *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003), p. 833. Margaret Mead’s work has been particularly controversial since the publication in 1983 of a critique of her research by anthropologist Derek Freeman that damaged Mead’s reputation. Freeman argued that Mead had been deceived by the Samoan people she was researching, and that her subsequent anthropological insights were deeply flawed and naïve. Since Freeman’s critiques were published, there has been considerable effort made by others to rehabilitate Mead’s credibility, including a book by Paul Shankman entitled *The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009). For an overview of the debate and its impact on the field of anthropology, see Doris T. Chang’s “Reading Sex and Temperament in Taiwan: Margaret Mead and Postwar Taiwanese Feminism” (*NWSA Journal* 21, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this thesis and the credentials of this author to adjudicate that controversy, and the salient point for this chapter is simply to provide insight into anthropological approaches to questions of sexual difference in the 1930s, and then to illuminate how those insights were incorporated into Saiving’s theology of sin.

³³⁷ Anne Maxwell, “Modern Anthropology and the problem of racial type: the photographs of Franz Boas,” *Visual Communication* 12, no. 2 (2013), p. 123.

biological basis.”³³⁸ Indeed, according to an early review, Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* was primarily a project attempting to import “the theory of relativity into the study of social anthropology.”³³⁹ Benedict was critical of what she viewed as an unhealthy preoccupation in her field with Western institutions, achievements, and civilization, the tendency to consider Western cultural habits as normative, and the danger that this approach would lead to “nationalism and racial snobbery.”³⁴⁰ She used her study of three different “primitive civilizations” in order to demonstrate her theory that different cultures are oriented around various “patterns” of behavior directed towards specific ends that are equally valid across the cultural spectrum. She suggested that a culture should be viewed like an individual with relatively consistent patterns of thought and behavior, and she used the categories of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” that she adopted from Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* to characterize the dominant tendencies of various cultures.³⁴¹ She argued that the three cultures she researched—the Zuni, the Dobu, and the Kwakiutl each had “different goals toward which their behavior is directed and which their institutions further,” and that “these ends and means in one society cannot be judged in terms of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable.”³⁴² Benedict cited the tendency to think of one’s own cultural patterns as a reflection of an “ultimate and universal sanity” as the reason for the difficulty in viewing other civilizations as equally valid.³⁴³

³³⁸ Saiving, “The Human Situation,” p. 102.

³³⁹ “Patterns of Culture,” *Nature* 136, no. 3435 (1935), p. 322.

³⁴⁰ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, London: Routledge (1934), p. 9. Benedict states, “It is the inevitability of each familiar motivation we defend, attempting always to identify our own local ways of behaving with Behavior, or our own socialized habits with Human Nature” (*Patterns of Culture*, p. 6).

³⁴¹ Kimberly Engber, “Anthropological Fictions: On Character, Culture, and Sexuality in the Work of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Virginia Woolf,” *Prospects* 30 (2005), p. 375.

³⁴² Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, p. 206.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Though she has been described as a strict cultural determinist, and Benedict does indeed express a strong belief that culture is the most significant force influencing human behavior, she also indicates willingness to allow for some complexity on the question of the relationship between culture and nature at various points in *Patterns of Culture*.³⁴⁴ She argues early in the book, “bodily form, or race, is separable from culture, and can for our purposes be laid to one side except at certain points where for some special reason it becomes relevant.”³⁴⁵ Here, in contrast to contemporary theories on race that would see categories of race as purely cultural constructs, Benedict associates race with the biological, but then downplays the role of biology in establishing human customs and behavior. Biology is for the most part “irrelevant” for understanding human behavior, she argues.³⁴⁶ As she states, “it has been vigorously contended that traits are not culturally selected but biologically transmitted. According to this interpretation the distinction is racial, and the Plain Indians seek visions because this necessity is transmitted in the chromosomes of the race,” but she rejects any form of biological determinism. She argues instead that the biological theories seeking to explain human behavior via the mechanisms of evolution or genetics have never been given “a firm scientific basis.”³⁴⁷ Benedict views the biological aspects of human life as plastic and malleable to the pressures of culture. Most people, she argues are “shaped to the form of their culture” because of the “enormous malleability of their original endowment.”³⁴⁸ Biology, for Benedict, has a negligible effect on human behavior, and any effect that it might

³⁴⁴ Banner, “Mannish Women, Passive Men, and Constitutional Types: Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* as a Response to Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*,” p. 846.

³⁴⁵ Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, p. 15.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 217.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 215-216.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

appear to have is just as likely to be a culturally ingrained tendency that has become so automatic that it appears to have its origin in innate tendencies produced by biology.³⁴⁹ Thus, on one reading, she does seem to be straightforwardly a cultural determinist. However, Benedict does also acknowledge that biology likely plays a small role in shaping human customs, and notes that “cultural interpretations of behavior need never deny that a physiological element is also involved.”³⁵⁰ Thus, although Benedict primarily focuses on the role of culture in shaping human behaviors, she would likely have resisted being described as a strict cultural determinist because she acknowledged that biology does in some small way interact with cultural pressures, but also because she did not believe that human behavior was totally determined. Rather, she argues that societies produce certain social tendencies and “characteristic courses” that most humans follow, but she argues that it would be a mistake to consider these to be static laws or fixed types.³⁵¹

Benedict’s insistence that biological factors play only a miniscule role in establishing cultural differences was probably due, at least in part, to her awareness of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany at the time in which she was writing *Patterns of Culture* in the 1930s, as well as to her awareness of the increasing levels of racism and nationalism in certain sectors of the globe. Having been mentored by Franz Boas, an anthropologist described as “the greatest academic antiracist writer of the age,” Benedict was dismayed by the ways in which

³⁴⁹ As Benedict states, “We cannot discover by introspection or by observation of any one society what behavior is 'instinctive,' that is, organically determined. In order to class any behavior as instinctive, much more is necessary than that it should be proved to be automatic. The conditioned response is as automatic as the organically determined, and culturally conditioned responses make up the greater part of our huge equipment of automatic behavior,” Ibid., p. 15.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 217.

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 220. See also her statement that “No anthropologist with a background of experience of other cultures has ever believed that individuals were automatons, mechanically carrying out the decrees of their civilization,” p. 234.

scientific theories were being co-opted by the Third Reich in order to justify Aryan supremacy, and thus she would have been understandably reluctant to suggest any potential causal links between biology and human behavior.³⁵² As Lois Banner notes, the era in which Benedict and Mead were writing was one in which scientists knew that genes and hormones partly determined body processes, but they did not know many details about how these biological factors operated, thus there were a variety of theories being postulated at the time.³⁵³ A prominent psychologist of the 1920-1930s named Ernst Kretschmer of Marburg, Germany developed a theory that argued that manic-depressive disorder “correlated with individuals with stocky bodies” and that schizophrenia correlated with “long and lanky or tall and muscular individuals,” and that these types could be applied to individuals in general as a personality classification system. Kretschmer had explicitly denied the applicability of his theory to race classification, but his theory was ultimately one used by the Nazi regime to support their propaganda about white supremacy.³⁵⁴ Margaret Mead reflected later in 1968 that “The Nazi period was a deterrent to research on race differences . . . The belief was that research on any kind of difference that might be innate was liable to be misused.”³⁵⁵ Although Benedict’s exclusion of consideration of the biological in her study of human behavior should not be simplistically attributed to a fear of misuse of her theory by white supremacists and Nazis, the realities of life in 1930s must certainly have had a significant impact on her approach to questions about human nature.

³⁵² Banner, “Mannish Women, Passive Men, and Constitutional Types,” p. 850.

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 851.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 852.

³⁵⁵ Margaret Mead, “Introductory remarks,” in *Science and the Concept of Race*, ed. Margaret Mead, Theodosius Dobzhansky, Ethel Tobach, and Robert E. Light, New York: Columbia University Press (1969), p. 3.

Benedict's downplaying of the role of biology is manifest not only in her approach to race, but also in her conclusions about sexual difference and identity, which will be of particular importance for understanding Benedict's influence on Saiving. In comparison with the work of Margaret Mead, Benedict says relatively little about sexual difference, which explains why Saiving will later rely more heavily on Mead's work than she does on Benedict's. In terms of sexuality and sexual difference, Benedict expands her view of the cultural relativity of human behavior in order to include the mores of courtship, marriage, and heterosexuality. She argues that heterosexual marriage is not a natural feature of human life, but rather, that it is a practice that is impressed upon humans in certain cultures because of the "major drives" of that culture, and that it is one of many occasions "in which we follow our traditional obsessions."³⁵⁶ She describes the homosexual person as a deviant from the norms of Western society, but denies that this is due to any dysfunction on the part of the homosexual. Rather, as she argues, "those who function inadequately in any society are not those with certain fixed 'abnormal' traits, but may well be those whose responses have received no support in the institutions of their culture."³⁵⁷ The lack of support from societal structures, and the stress of being perceived as inadequate or perverted, she argues, places a strain upon the homosexual that diminishes his or her flourishing. Few people, she argues, "can achieve a satisfactory life unsupported by the standards of the society," and further, "the adjustments that society demands of them would strain any man's vitality, and the consequences of this conflict we identify with their homosexuality."³⁵⁸ For Benedict, then,

³⁵⁶ Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, p. 226.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 250.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 245.

homosexuals exist as individuals with a distinct identity, and the task for any society is to seek greater tolerance and acceptance of the “equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence” that might be found in it. As will be discussed below, Mead agrees with Benedict’s cultural relativism, but ultimately diverges from her on other issues like sexual identity and the role that biology plays in human behavioral practices.

4. Margaret Mead—*Sex and Temperament* and *Male and Female*

Mead and Benedict met in an anthropology class at Barnard College in 1922 in which Mead was a student and Benedict, fifteen years older than Mead, was a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant in the class. Sharing a mentor in Boas, they developed an exceptionally close personal and professional relationship, and remained in dialogue over the course of their respective careers.³⁵⁹ Mead treats the subject of sexual difference more directly and extensively than Benedict does, and she disagrees fundamentally with Benedict on questions about sexual identity and homosexuality. Mead’s *Sex and Temperament* was published just a year after Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* and can be viewed, at least in part, as a response to *Patterns of Culture*. By the time *Male and Female* was published in 1950, Mead’s thought had evolved considerably and was increasingly at odds with Benedict’s, more so than it was in 1935 in *Sex and Temperament*. Both *Sex and Temperament* and *Male and Female* were influential in shaping feminist thought and political movements, as well as anthropology in the 1930s-1960s. For example, Betty Friedan relied heavily upon Mead’s *Sex and Temperament* to write *The Feminine Mystique*, a classic work of second-wave feminism, and

³⁵⁹ Banner, “Mannish Women, Passive Men, and Constitutional Types,” p. 833.

of course, both *Sex and Temperament* and *Male and Female* significantly impacted Saiving's thinking on sexual difference, as we discuss further below.

Beginning with Mead's earlier work, at some points in *Sex and Temperament*, she seems to agree with Benedict's thesis that humans are completely moldable to the shape of a particular culture. As she notes, "We are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions."³⁶⁰ But at other points she suggests that biology may produce certain innate temperamental tendencies. For example, she states, "Let us assume that there are definite temperamental differences between human beings which if not entirely hereditary at least are established on a hereditary base very soon after birth. (Further than this we cannot at present narrow the matter)."³⁶¹ She then suggests that these temperamental differences become embodied in the "character structure" of adults, and then eventually become the "clues from which culture works, selecting one temperament, or a combination of related and congruent types, as desirable, and embodying this choice in every thread of the social fabric."³⁶² Here, then, she seems to hint at a somewhat active role for biology to play in the shaping of human culture, as opposed to Benedict's portrayal of the biological as passive and malleable raw materials to be shaped by culture. For the early Mead, biology is the foundation from which culture takes "clues." This inclusion of the possibility of hereditary differences in temperament is already a divergence from Benedict in terms of a willingness to speculate about biology. It is as far as Mead is willing to go on the biological question in *Sex and*

³⁶⁰ Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, p. 280.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

Temperament, but her interest in biology does not end there. As Lois Banner notes, Mead was interested in biology from early in her career, but felt she did not have the necessary scientific knowledge to equip her for biological investigation.³⁶³ This changed, however, when Mead befriended and eventually married Gregory Bateson, scientist and son of renowned geneticist William Bateson. In addition to the influence of Bateson, Mead befriended Earl Engle, an endocrinologist with extensive knowledge about the complexities of “sex hormones,” and both Bateson and Engle would contribute to her thinking about sexual difference in preparation for writing her later *Male and Female*.³⁶⁴

Like Benedict, Mead chose to study three different “primitive societies” in *Sex and Temperament*—the Arapesh, Mundugumor, and the Tchambuli, all of which were located on the island of New Guinea. However, unlike Benedict, Mead studied them not only to understand the workings of culture in general, but specifically to investigate the question of “to what degree temperamental differences between the sexes were innate and to what extent they were culturally determined,” and furthermore to “inquire minutely into the educational mechanisms connected with these differences.”³⁶⁵ After observing the dynamics between the sexes in each of the three cultures in New Guinea, Mead argues that though she began the study sharing the general belief of her society that there was a “natural sex-temperament which could at the most only be distorted or diverted from normal expression,”³⁶⁶ her research revealed that any attempt to connect temperament with physiology simply could not be supported by data. The Mundugumor people, for example, had an identical notion of what

³⁶³ Banner, “Mannish Women, Passive Men, and Constitutional Types,” p. 846.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 847.

³⁶⁵ Mead, *Sex and Temperament*, p. 164.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., p. xxii.

constituted a “natural” temperament for men and women. She argues that all Mundugumor people, regardless of sex, were expected to be “violent, competitive, aggressively sexed, jealous and ready to see and avenge insult, delighting in display, in action, in fighting.”³⁶⁷ She found that the Arapesh tribe rejected any notion of natural temperamental or personality difference based on sexual characteristics, but in contrast to the Mundugumor people, the Arapesh were, as a whole, “inherently gentle, responsive, and co-operative, able and willing to subordinate the self to the needs of those who are younger or weaker, and to derive a major satisfaction from doing so.”³⁶⁸ Among the Arapesh, men were expected to be as nurturing and oriented towards child-care as the women were. The Tchambuli were the one tribe out of the three she studied that did believe in natural temperaments associated with biological sex, but their beliefs about natural temperaments were the exact inverse of those found in Western societies. The Tchambuli women were expected to behave in ways traditionally associated with masculinity in Western culture, while the men were expected to follow the behaviors associated with Western notions of femininity. Based on these observations, Mead offers a “very definite conclusion” that if it is possible to have the characteristics traditionally associated with one sex set up as the pattern of behavior for the opposite sex, or to eliminate behavioral sex differences altogether as with the Arapesh and Mundugumor, then “we no longer have any basis for regarding such aspects of behavior as sex-linked.”³⁶⁹

However, in *Sex and Temperament*, Mead expresses some nascent concerns about attempts to neutralize sex differences in human culture. She suggests that once societies

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 279.

accept that most behaviors typically understood as naturally “sex-linked” are actually socially prescribed, they have three options. The first option, she argues, is to “standardize the personality of men and women as clearly contrasting, complementary, and antithetical, and to make every institution in the society congruent with this standardization.”³⁷⁰ The benefit of this response is the clarity of the social roles it provides, but the cost is the possibility that various potential gifts of men and women might not fit within the rigidly defined binary, and will thus be wasted. Some women may have abilities that are not related to the care of children and the home, and some men may have abilities that are domestic, and both of these would be lost in such a rigid structure. As she notes, “There can be no society which insists that women follow one special personality-pattern, defined as feminine, which does not do violence also to the individuality of many men.”³⁷¹ Thus she sees the social benefit of the binary prescription of personality based on biological features of sexual difference, but she thinks it is not worth the cost. She argues as well that the rigidly defined binary might lead to an increase in “inversion” or homosexuality, since a person not fitting the standardized characteristics of masculine and feminine might mistakenly label themselves a homosexual. As she states, “the fact that it is necessary to feel not only like a member of a given society in a given period, but like a member of one sex and not like a member of the other, conditions the development of the child, and produces individuals who are unplaced in their society.”³⁷² Here Mead diverges from Benedict in her belief that homosexuality does not constitute a distinct identity. She argues instead that the label of “homosexual” or “invert” is mistakenly

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 311.

³⁷¹ Ibid., p. 313.

³⁷² Ibid., p. 304.

applied to those with temperamental characteristics that don't fit into society's overly rigid binary system. As Lois Banner notes, "in *Sex and Temperament*, Mead looked favorably on societies without homosexuality. She described the Arapesh as being without any "psychosexual maladjustment"—by which she meant homosexuality as identity."³⁷³ Mead will complicate her view on the gender binary and also on homosexuality later in *Male and Female*, but suffice it to say that she saw one of the major liabilities of a society deciding to institutionalize sexual complementarity in the form of a strict binary being the likelihood of it producing more individuals identifying as homosexuals and thus failing to procreate.

The second option Mead suggests is for society to assume that men and women are completely malleable and to "cease to make any distinction in the approved personality of both sexes."³⁷⁴ While this option would perhaps provide more individual autonomy, she worries that the cost of choosing this option would be a loss of "complexity" in society that would be too great to make the increased autonomy worth it. Abolishing differences between the sexes "involves social loss," she argues, since "just as a festive occasion is the gay and more charming if the two sexes are dressed differently, so it is in less material matters."³⁷⁵ Mead argues that it is an over-simplification that sacrifices depth and imagination to completely dismiss the existence of sex differences. Through cultural acceptance of sex differences, she argues, "the whole plot of personal relations is made more elaborate, and in many ways more rewarding."³⁷⁶ Thus, she views as unsatisfactory the decision by a society

³⁷³ Banner, "Mannish Women, Passive Men, and Constitutional Types," p. 840.

³⁷⁴ Mead, *Sex and Temperament*, p. 313.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

to institutionalize a sex binary, but also the impulse of more radical societies to abolish sex differences altogether, so she argues for a third way.

The third option that Mead envisions for a society seeking to elaborate the meaning of sex differences, and the one that she posits as the most fruitful path, is to move beyond classification by sex and race in order to make room for “many and divergent temperamental endowments.”³⁷⁷ She describes classification by sex or race as “superficial,” and suggests that the task for modern society is to replace the patterns of behavior prescribed for men and women with patterns of behavior most congenial to individual talents and potentialities. This is the extent of her prescriptive work in *Sex and Temperament*, and she does not resolve the apparent tension between her desire to retain some understanding of the meaning of sexual difference in society with her argument that classification ought to move beyond sexual characteristics to consider other types of character traits. She becomes more specific later, however, in *Male and Female*, with the development of her theory of “constitutional types.”

In 1945, Mead gave the Jacob Gimbel lectures on Sex Psychology, hosted by Stanford University and the University of California, San Francisco, and these lectures formed the basis of what would eventually become *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*. Originally published in England and the US, the book was an immediate bestseller.³⁷⁸ Mead’s purpose in the book, in her words, is to use her years of field work comparing different cultures to examine differences between the sexes in order “to suggest ways in which we, as a civilization, may make as full use of women’s special gifts as we have of

³⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 319.

³⁷⁸ Uta Gerhardt, “Margaret Mead’s ‘Male and Female’ Revisited,” *International Sociology* 10, no. 2 (1995), p. 197.

man's, and in so doing develop forms of civilization that can make fuller use of all human gifts."³⁷⁹ This purpose statement reveals Mead's basically binary approach to sexual difference based on what she sees as the "essentials in maleness and femaleness with which every society must reckon, and regularities as well as differences," and she argues that these essentials are rooted in the complementary nature of the reproductive roles of men and women, which Mead sees as central to human identity.³⁸⁰ This is again a significant departure from Benedict, and it provides the primary source material for Saiving's approach to theologies of sin in "The Human Situation." Consistent with her approach in *Sex and Temperament*, Mead sees the interpretation of gender roles and beliefs about "natural" sex-based temperaments as products of cultural patterning, but she is more willing to suggest theories about the ways in which the biological experiences of men and women shape their behaviors in *Male and Female* than she was in her earlier work. While she is already more biologically oriented in her later work, in the preface to the reprint of *Male and Female* that Mead wrote fifteen years after its initial publication, she expresses regret at not incorporating insights from Darwinian evolutionary theory and genetics into her considerations of sexual differences.³⁸¹ Thus it's possible that Mead may have been somewhat aware of the coming "biological turn" that would take place in feminist thinking of the late twentieth and early

³⁷⁹ Mead, *Male and Female*, p. 30.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 51. As she states, "Whatever the elaborations during learning, the adult sex act itself remains a complementary act; the male enters, the female is entered, however much these anatomical fundamentals may be overlaid and distorted," p. 89.

³⁸¹ She stated, "I would, if I were writing it today, lay more emphasis on man's specific biological inheritance from earlier human forms and also on parallels between *Homo sapiens* and other than mammalian species. I believe I under-estimated the fruitfulness of comparisons between human beings and birds, for example, where the importance of vision, the requirements of shelter, and two parents for the care of the young provide more than a pretty figure of speech for explaining facts of life to children," Ibid., p. 17.

twenty-first centuries, but she was not able to adequately integrate this new information into her thinking about sexual difference before she died in 1978.

Mead strives to achieve a balance in *Male and Female* between valuing binary sex differences insofar as they are demonstrated in what she views as the basic rhythms of the body, or the “immediacy of the human body plan,” and at the same time, promoting her theory of “constitutional types” which seeks to expand notions of difference along continuums other than sex and race, and to allow for more fluid expressions of temperamental and vocational differences between men and women.³⁸² Rather than support what she viewed as the political trend of her time, which was to seek to abolish all differences between the sexes, Mead argues that, “A one-sex world would be an imperfect world, for it would be a world without a future. Only a denial of life itself makes it possible to deny the interdependence of the sexes.”³⁸³ Instead of denying differences between the sexes, Mead argues that the differences should be accepted as ineradicable and necessary for the continuance of the species, and then carefully explained and modeled for children so that every child may grow up to feel “at home” in his or her sex, or, to use her term, achieve a solid sense of “sex membership.”³⁸⁴ Thus, while she does not use the contemporary distinction often made between “sex” and “gender,” with “sex” referring to biological factors

³⁸² Ibid., p. 72.

³⁸³ Ibid., p. 331.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 29. As she states, “Because we are mammals, and male and female mammals at that, we have limitations, and we must know them, provide for them, keep them safely in our habits, if not continuingly and boringly in our minds. There are certain things that men cannot do because they are men, and women cannot do because they are women: begetting, conceiving, carrying, bearing, and suckling the next generation are divided differently. As the bodies of the two sexes develop, to be ready for their different roles in reproduction, they have basic needs, some of which are shared, some of which are different even in little children. All through our lives, the fact that we are creatures who are made not only to be individuals, but to continue the human race, is a persistent, unavoidable condition that we must meet,” p. 41.

and “gender” referring to the interpretation of biology that is at least somewhat culturally relative, Mead does anticipate this development in her acknowledgement of the possibility that there may be dissonance between one’s biological configuration and one’s “felt sense” of sex membership. She views this dissonance as undesirable since it could lead individuals to mistakenly identify themselves as homosexuals, which would distance humans from their procreative roles and responsibilities to contribute to the continuance of the species. Rejecting the notion that one could be “naturally” or innately a homosexual, Mead suggests instead that every human has a “bisexual potential,” and she speculates that this natural bisexuality “may be physiologically evoked by abnormalities in the process of individual maturation” or “sociologically invoked by rearing boys with women only, or segregating boys away from women entirely, or by prescribing and encouraging various forms of social inversion.”³⁸⁵ In this development of her theory of innate bisexuality, the influence of Bateson and Engle can be seen in her conjecturing about the role of hormones in establishing one’s sexual preferences; although she qualifies her speculations as being merely hypothetical at this point, since, as she states, “the most careful research has failed to tie up endocrine balance with actual homosexual behavior.”³⁸⁶ Since every person has an innate bisexual potential according to Mead, the affective experience of stable sex membership as male or female must be inculcated in each individual, and this leads Mead to introduce her theory of constitutional types as a means of expanding the categories of sexual difference to be less restrictive and thus less likely to alienate and cause “inversion.”

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

Instead of having only two standardized continuums by which humans measure levels of masculinity and femininity, Mead argues that masculinity and femininity should be measured along varied continuums within specific types of people defined by other features like body hair, height, and frame size. As she argues, “The slender little man without beard or muscle who begets a whole brood of children would not then seem such an anomaly, but could be regarded as the masculine version of a human type in which both sexes are slender, small, and relatively hairless.”³⁸⁷ Mead argues that categorizing humans in this way would allow for a greater diversity of expressions of masculinity and femininity that would more adequately accommodate the range of human biological configurations, but would still maintain the basic binary of male and female that is necessary for reproduction. Broadening the categories of “constitutional types,” Mead argues, would mitigate the problem that arises when a child of one sex has stereotypical traits of the other sex and is forced to lose a stable sense of his or her sex membership, and may potentially become a transvestite or an active homosexual, both options considered by Mead to be “sex failures.”³⁸⁸ Ultimately, Mead envisions a future in which the categories for types of males and females are expanded sufficiently such that “men and women can feel at home with their own bodies, and at home in their relationships with their own sex and with the opposite sex.”³⁸⁹ Though in this context Mead is striving to affirm a form of biological essentialism, her introduction of the importance of “feeling at home” in one’s sexed body as a consideration in achieving a stable

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 137.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 140. She states later, “The insistence on limiting a two-sex potentiality to one sex results in the terrible tragedies of wrong definition of one’s own sex in the man who becomes a homosexual because of the way in which society defines his desire to paint or dance, or in the woman who becomes a homosexual because she likes to ride horses, or use a slide-rule,” p. 337.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

sexual identity will be of continued relevance in contemporary debates about gender and sexuality, as will her acknowledgement that patterning of sexual behaviors are useful “social fictions.”³⁹⁰

Though she is interested in expanding the categories of “male” and “female” to include continuums within different “constitutional types” that would largely relativize “sex-linked” behavioral traits or vocational destinies, Mead is more explicit in *Male and Female* than she was in her earlier work about accepting the limitations of what she views as ineradicable binary biological sex differences. This is due to her focus on the mammalian nature of the human species, and the need for the sex binary for reproduction. As she states, “If any human society is to survive, it must have a pattern of social life that comes to terms with the differences between the sexes.”³⁹¹ She thus spends a significant amount of time elaborating upon the cultural and temperamental implications of the female biological experience of passively waiting to naturally receive one’s womanhood as opposed to the male experience of having to continually strive for the achievement of masculinity, which of course has relevance for Saiving’s arguments in “The Human Situation.”

It was Mead’s earlier *Sex and Temperament* with its emphasis on the cultural relativity of sex differences that would be primarily adopted by the feminist liberation movement of the 1960s via Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, with *Male and Female*

³⁹⁰ Mead states, “Social fictions are useful and worth respecting, and that relations between the sexes need some kind of patterning to protect those who participate in them,” Ibid., p. 324. This anticipates Judith Butler’s notion of gender patterning as “cultural scripts.” For Butler, gender is “a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief,” although of course Butler believes these scripts ought to be resisted and subverted rather than bolstered. Cf. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury, New York: Columbia University Press (1997), p. 415.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 161.

and its emphases on the usefulness of the “social fictions” rooted in the complementary and binary nature of reproductive roles receiving significantly less political attention. However, it is *Male and Female* that had the most profound influence on Saiving’s thinking in “The Human Situation.” The next section examines the reception and critiques of “The Human Situation,” as well as the significant areas of development in Saiving’s later thinking. Just as Mead would later lament her lack of integration of insights from Darwin and evolutionary theory, thus hinting at the trajectory of feminist thinking about sexual difference in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Saiving later expressed a similar awareness, though neither women were ultimately able in their lifetimes to do more than hint at what it would mean to incorporate insights from Darwin and evolutionary theory into explorations of sexual difference, and for Saiving, theologies of sin.

5. Conclusion: Reception, Analysis, and Development of “The Human Situation”

Despite its brevity, Saiving’s article is complex and multi-faceted, and it raises more questions than it answers, likely due at least in part to space constraints. While her article has been pervasively influential and is still frequently referenced as a source for understanding the relationship between sin and sexual difference, it has suffered from significant critique since its publication. Some of the criticisms leveled against the article were later acknowledged and accepted by Saiving a few years before her death in 1992, but she never articulated how her theology of sin ought to be altered in light of these critiques. One of the most crucial critiques of her article is that she assumes but does not provide justification for her assumption that “experience” plays an important part in shaping theological constructions, thus raising fundamental questions about what is meant by the term “experience,” and how it ought to be integrated with other sources of theological data like

tradition and Scripture in theological developments. Reception of Saiving's article also raised questions about the universality of her understanding of "women's experience," as her conception of gender was not integrated with reference to other important factors that shape identity like class and race.³⁹² This is a problem that plagued much of early feminist theology, and led to criticisms from black and Latina theologians in particular that feminist theology primarily reflected the experiences of white, academic, middle-class women, but didn't accurately reflect women's experiences who lived outside these categories. In this sense, the work is clearly a product of its time, as Saiving later acknowledges. She states in a later interview,

even limiting my article to American culture, a lot of things I say here may not be true of subcultures in our culture-of poor whites, or of black people or Chicanos. What I say comes out of not only the middle class, but the white middle class . . . what I know now that I don't think I understood then is that the class and the race you belong to are absolutely crucial in determining how you experience the world.³⁹³

Furthermore, as Kathryn Greene-McCreight has argued, the attempt to define "women's sins" and "men's sins" runs the risk of reifying sexual stereotypes and binary thinking that most feminists seek to overcome.³⁹⁴ This does not negate the importance of reflecting theologically on the ways that sin might manifest in different gendered ways, but it does mean that this reflection must take into account the various complexities and intersecting forces involved in producing sex differences.

³⁹² Susan Thistlewaite has argued in her 1989 monograph *Sex, Sin, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White*, "without a historically accurate definition of what it means to be female in different racial, class and sexual role definitions, Saiving's contribution to understanding 'sin for women' is misleading" (New York: Crossroad, 1989, p. 79).

³⁹³ "Conversation with Valerie Saiving," p. 111.

³⁹⁴ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "Gender, Sin and Grace: Feminist Theologies Meet Karl Barth's Hamartiology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, no. 4 (1997).

Saiving's use of anthropological sources raises questions of method as well. What is the relationship between theology and other disciplines? Saiving suggests that theology must be updated in order to reflect changing data about sexual difference from the field of anthropology, but she provides no theoretical infrastructure to frame her interdisciplinary engagement beyond this, nor does she give a theological rationale for incorporating information from other disciplines into theological developments. Should theology take information from scientific bodies of knowledge into account, or should theology and science be considered "non-overlapping magisteria"?³⁹⁵ Is the relationship between theology and scientific disciplines one-directional, with theology always on the receiving end of the latest insights of science, or does theology provide data to scientific disciplines as well?

Furthermore, on the question of whether or not gender is binary and rooted in biology, Saiving is confusing in her ambivalence, and reflects some of the tensions between Benedict and Mead on this issue. On the one hand, she expresses optimism and excitement about the dissolution of "hard and fast distinctions" between the potentialities of men and women as such, and she speaks with admiration about the new women of the 1960s who transcend the traditional female roles, who want to be "both women and full human beings," and who "stand closer to the juncture of nature and spirit than was possible for women in the past."³⁹⁶ However, on the other hand, Saiving expresses concern that although it is possible to

³⁹⁵ Stephen Jay Gould describes the concept of "non-overlapping magisteria" when he says, "The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for starters, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the arch clichés, we get the age of rocks, and religion retains the rock of ages; we study how the heavens go, and they determine how to go to heaven," (Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html).

³⁹⁶ Saiving, "The Human Situation," p. 107.

establish cultural ideals of femininity that are far removed from the woman's procreative role, this is ill-advised as it may be detrimental to the continuance of the species. Here she clearly reflects the concerns developed in Mead's *Male and Female*. Besides being unwise, Saiving seems to suggest that encouraging women to distance themselves from procreation would be contrary to the natural desires of women themselves as she references the "deep need of almost every woman" to "surrender her self-identity and be included in another's 'power of being.'"³⁹⁷ This is just one example of an ambiguity in Saiving's thought about the relationship between nature and culture in establishing gender norms, and perhaps the ambivalence reflects the struggle of Saiving's own life in trying to balance life as a graduate student with her life as a single mother. Is this "deep need of almost every woman" for self-surrender a necessity of her identity as female that is rooted in her biological receptivity, or is it an arbitrary culturally inculcated gender ideal that might be eradicated with different education? Saiving softens this idea later in 1988 when she states in reference to the idea that every woman experiences the need to be included in another's "power of being" that "On the psychoanalytical side, Helene Deutsch affirms that this need is part of the essential character structure of women. I wouldn't say that exactly. Maybe I was saying it then, but I wouldn't say now that all women experience this," but she does not clarify further.³⁹⁸ While she cites Ruth Benedict and the early work of Margaret Mead to note that gender ideals are highly relative and usually only loosely related to biology, she also cites the later Mead in order to suggest that many of the tendencies of men and women are unavoidable and ineradicable because they are rooted in biological fixities.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

³⁹⁸ "Conversation with Valerie Saiving," p. 100.

An additional point of confusion is related to the fact that Saiving occasionally uses a phrase of Mead's—"sex membership"—to discuss gender identity, and she reflects Mead's same uncertainty about the nature of this "felt sense" of one's gender identity. Here both Mead and Saiving express a nascent phenomenology of gender in their suggestion that the felt sense of one's "sex membership" is something tenuous that needs to be carefully developed in children and that can be accepted or rejected by an individual. However, they also appear to view this "felt sense" of gender identity as permanently rooted in biological fixities. Saiving and Mead present the body as a unified and coherent locus of meaning, while the psychological identification that one develops in relation to this bodily coherence is something to be learned and achieved, for both men and women. Saiving and Mead, then, are in some ways ahead of their time and anticipate later developments of gender theorists like Judith Butler in their recognition that attainment of stable gender identity involves more than just biological factors; it also requires psychological internalization of the meaning of the biology that is highly dependent upon culture, and thus it is possible that there might be dissonance between one's bodily sex and the feeling of one's own gender identity. More recently, Gayle Salamon complicates this further by emphasizing the ways in which a "felt sense" of gender identity is largely a function of the memory. The "body schema," she argues, "relies for its coherence on a vast storehouse of past impressions, sensations, fantasies, and memories," and thus, any appeal "to the "vague material" of the unmediated body is unable to settle the question of bodily materiality, since this "vague material" is always the precipitate of a psychic relation between body and world.³⁹⁹ Thus, it seems that a "felt sense"

³⁹⁹ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, New York: Columbia University Press (2010), p. 34.

of sex membership, far from being a simple process of developing inferences from the objective materiality of the body, is a multi-faceted process involving intersecting biological, psychological, and cultural dynamics. How, then, are we to understand the nature of the relationship between one's "felt sense" of gender identity and one's biology? This will be examined later in this thesis when we analyze the contributions of biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling.

As the next few chapters of this project demonstrate, the difficulties in understanding the meaning of the body are only deepened when recent developments in evolutionary biology are incorporated into the discussion, since these developments emphasize the dynamism, unpredictability, and novelty inherent to evolutionary processes, as well as the changes in levels of sexual dimorphism in humans over time.⁴⁰⁰ Additionally, although Saiving emphasizes the supposedly "natural" biological passivity of women, and from this acceptance of "natural" passivity draws conclusions about feminine tendencies to sin, more contemporary studies of evolution have revealed with increasing clarity a history of male bias in scientific research that has contributed to widespread assumptions about female passivity, while neglecting the ways in which female initiative contributes to human evolution.⁴⁰¹ This raises questions then about how theologians should now think about sexually differentiated bodies as they shape doctrine, particularly doctrines of sin, as well as

⁴⁰⁰ For example, as Maryanne L. Fisher, Rosemarie Sokol Chang, and Justin R. Garcia note, "the physical record shows an increase in female but not male body size since the origin of the *Homo* line" (*Evolution's Empress: Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 5).

⁴⁰¹ Again, as noted in *Evolution's Empress*, "Evolutionary behavioral research has been misled due to assumptions of women as docile in mating, and has too often neglected topics such as mothering, female alliances, female aggression, female physiology, female intrasexual competition, and women's role in human evolution at large . . . Much of the scholarship pertaining to women and evolution has been directed toward what happens *to* women rather than how women actively influence and are fully part of human evolution" (*Evolution's Empress*, pp. 2, 5).

raising questions about the extent to which the biological is fixed and predictable as a source of meaning. Saiving hints at an awareness of these developments in her 1988 interview when she states,

What we have learned is that almost nothing is possible for men that is not possible for women and vice versa. You might want to ask, what about a man inseminating a woman and a woman gestating? Maybe even those are not absolute . . . Some feminist theorists say that even the biological aspects of maleness and femaleness are not in the final analysis absolute. For example, some feminist theorists have argued that women are oppressed because they bear children. So they propose that maybe we should try to work out some way that science can allow us to produce children without their gestating in the mother's womb. I don't think that is a very good idea myself, but it is an illustration of what is meant by no absolute givens.⁴⁰²

Thus, toward the end of her life, Saiving clearly understood the trajectory of gender theory in terms of questioning the certainty of biological givens, but she never had the chance to integrate these developments into her theology of sin. How might Saiving's theology of sin have been different if she had incorporated the view that "natural" biological sex differences are not fixed certainties, but are evolving, emergent, and in a continuous dialectic with cultural pressures? It is from a position of taking Saiving's questions seriously that these critical questions are raised, and expressing them here is for the purpose of contributing to a deeper and more expansive treatment of the initial questions that drove Saiving's provocative beginning.

⁴⁰² Saiving, "Conversation with Valerie Saiving," p. 102.

Part 2: Contemporary Resources for Rethinking the Doctrine of Original Sin and Sexual Difference

Chapter 4: Shall These Bones Live? The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and the Biology of Sexual Difference

*And God said
Shall these bones live? shall these
bones live? And that which had been contained
In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:
Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honours the Virgin in meditation,
We shine with brightness.⁴⁰³*

-T.S. Eliot

Introduction

Bones are sexed. They are frequently cited as decisive examples of natural, biological, and binary sex differences.⁴⁰⁴ Research journals, popular medical literature, and ad campaigns from pharmaceutical companies selling hormone replacement drugs all perpetuate the narrative that women have weaker bones than men, and are therefore more at risk of developing osteoporosis.⁴⁰⁵ One reason for viewing bone density as an incontrovertible “natural” difference between men and women is the fact that rapid bone thinning tends to happen during the time that women are going through menopause and their estrogen is declining. Since “estrogen codes in most people’s minds as a quintessentially female molecule,”⁴⁰⁶ this leads to the twin assumptions that estrogen loss causes thinning bones, and

⁴⁰³ T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980), p. 61.

⁴⁰⁴ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 - Sex and Gender,” *Signs* 30, no. 2 (2005), p. 1498.

⁴⁰⁵ “Osteoporosis is a condition of skeletal fragility whereby depleted bone mass and compromised bone structure weaken bone to such an extent that fractures occur from minimal trauma. One in five men and one in two women in the UK > 50 years of age will suffer an osteoporosis-related fracture in their lifetime.” C.A. Bailey and K. Brooke-Wavell, “Exercise for optimizing peak bone mass in women,” *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 67, no. 01 (2008), p. 9.

⁴⁰⁶ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 - Sex and Gender,” p. 1508.

since estrogen is female, bone thinning is primarily a women's issue. Bones are "raced" as well. "Black" women have stronger bones and less risk of developing osteoporosis than "white" women, according to much of the medical literature.⁴⁰⁷ The frequent assumption and expression of these "facts" in clinical practice, medical journals, and popular culture reifies racial and sexual differences. The data, however, is less straightforward than it seems, and focusing on the specific example of bone health is a useful route into understanding the ways in which nature and culture are entangled to such an extent that a strict dichotomy between them is impossible. Bones reveal our societal organization, our histories, our religion, and our myths, as much as our genes. This view of the complexity of material processes challenges reductionist approaches to human nature, and the increasing appreciation for this complexity that is beginning to appear in scientific and philosophical discourses is rich with possibilities for creative dialogue with theological approaches to anthropology. We return to the topic of bones at the conclusion of this chapter.

The first aim of this chapter is to synthesize the information revealed by the natural sciences that will be relevant for a theological consideration of what it means to be humans who are sexually differentiated beings, with evolutionary histories, embedded in an ongoing process of evolution that involves the constant interplay of both genetic and environmental factors. This chapter re-examines the questions that perplexed Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Valerie Saiving in the 1960s about the roles played by biology and culture in shaping human nature and sexual difference, and it does this with the most up to date

⁴⁰⁷ "The age-adjusted prevalence of osteoporosis and the rate of hip fracture are lower in Black women than in White women in the United States." *Bone Health and Osteoporosis: A Report of the Surgeon General*, Rockville, Md: US Dept of Health and Human Services, 2004.

information that is available from the natural sciences. While many ambiguities remain, and there is more work to be done to understand the relationship between nature and culture, the development of fields like epigenetics, developmental biology, and some streams of thought within the discipline of neuroscience have been able to shed new light on these complexities that should be integrated into theological approaches to understanding what it means to be human. The chapter begins then by providing a brief history of developments in evolutionary theory from Darwin's *Origin of Species* to the more recently articulated "Extended Evolutionary Synthesis." In addition to examining Darwin's legacy in terms of the history of evolutionary theory, the chapter also argues that Darwin has played a key role in shaping Western thinking about the biology of sexual difference, and the chapter will illuminate the complexities of this influence. Despite the impact that Darwin has had on Western assumptions about sexual difference, this has rarely been taken into account in theological treatments of gender and sexual difference, and so this chapter makes a contribution to filling this gap in the theological literature.⁴⁰⁸ From this engagement with the works of Darwin, the chapter turns to some of the most recent developments in evolutionary theory with the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, and in particular, the biology of sexual difference. Contemporary developments in the biology of sexual difference have troubled some fundamental dogmas that have long shaped the scientific literature on the biology of sexual difference. The chapter lays the groundwork for the next two chapters in which I develop a

⁴⁰⁸ Prudence Allen's three-volume set entitled *The Concept of Woman* provides a particularly striking example of the tendency in theological treatments of sex and gender to omit reflection on the influence of Darwin. In this series, Allen attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of Western philosophical and theological approaches to the concept of woman, beginning with Greek philosophy in volume one and finishing with postmodern approaches to gender in volume four. Darwin is not mentioned in the series. This observation is meant not as a criticism of Allen's work, but merely as an example to support the point that the influence of Darwin has not been sufficiently incorporated into theological treatments of sex and gender.

framework for a theological anthropology that will be grounded in the evolutionary dynamism of our species, and that takes into account the multiple intersecting processes at work to shape us as differently sexed and gendered human beings, but that also extends beyond reflection on the biological. This will provide the necessary groundwork for subsequently examining how this anthropology becomes disrupted by sin, how this relates to human origins, and how this potentially manifests in different sexed ways. A theological anthropology that is not engaged with the biological runs the risk of being too abstract and divorced from the material realities of human life. Discerning the theological meaning of sexuality and biologically sexed bodies constitutes one of the most complex tasks in our time given the multitude of conflicting messages received concerning these issues. The complexity and import of these questions are only compounded by their deeply personal nature as well. We need, then, a theological anthropology that is both biologically and theologically informed to express the meaning of our sexed bodies, and the reality of our participation in a history of “inherited sin,” in a language that can be received in our time, and to begin to construct this we turn first to Darwin.

1. Darwin and Evolution

“Darwinism” is a term that has become laden with confusion and baggage in our time, especially with the rise of the “New Atheists” and the reductionist science that they label “Darwinism.”⁴⁰⁹ In response to the version of Darwinism espoused by the New Atheists, there has been a significant effort in recent years to rehabilitate Darwin and to counter claims that his theories are intrinsically atheist and anti-religion. Without rehashing material that has

⁴⁰⁹ The term “New Atheists” refers to Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett.

already been covered more thoroughly by others, this section delineates the strands of thought posited by Darwin regarding the evolution of species that will be the most relevant for the arguments of this thesis regarding human anthropology and sexual difference.⁴¹⁰ Understanding what Darwin contributed to scientific understandings of being human in the 1800s will bring into sharp relief the significance of the recently developed Extended Evolutionary Synthesis. Revisiting Darwin's articulation of evolution will also help to illuminate the possibilities for feminist and theological retrievals of his thought, despite the fact that he has frequently been portrayed as an enemy to both religion and women.

Darwin did not invent the notion of biological change occurring over time. This idea can be discerned even as far back as Greek philosophy.⁴¹¹ Darwin's unique contribution was to posit the "common descent of all living organisms" and that evolutionary change occurred through processes he termed "natural and sexual selection."⁴¹² He primarily focuses on natural selection in the *Origin of Species* (1859), only briefly mentioning sexual selection.⁴¹³ He discusses sexual selection in greater detail in his less well-known monograph *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). His understanding of sexual selection is discussed in the next section. In terms of his theory of natural selection, Darwin states his conclusion in the following way:

I am fully convinced that species are not immutable; but that those belonging to what are called the same genera are lineal descendants of some other and generally extinct

⁴¹⁰ Especially helpful resources in this regard are Conor Cunningham's *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get it Wrong* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010) and Alistair McGrath's *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁴¹¹ Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Müller, "Elements of an Extended Evolutionary Synthesis," in *Evolution—the Extended Synthesis*, eds. Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Müller, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2010), p. 5.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, ed. Gillian Beer, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2008), pp. 68-70.

species, in the same manner as the acknowledged varieties of any one species are the descendants of that species. Furthermore, I am convinced that Natural Selection has been the main but not exclusive means of modification.⁴¹⁴

Natural selection, according to Darwin, is a process that “acts only by the accumulation of slight modifications of structure or instinct, each profitable to the individual under its conditions of life,” and it works continually on organisms to ensure that they are adapted to their environments.⁴¹⁵ The most well-adapted organisms have the highest chance of survival and reproduction. Through reproduction, beneficial variations in species are passed on to the next generation, and so species gradually adapt over long periods of time. It was not until the fifth edition of the *Origin of Species* that Darwin introduced the phrase “survival of the fittest” to describe the processes of natural selection.⁴¹⁶ Darwin developed his theory of natural selection and inherited variation without any knowledge of genetics, and despite the refusal of later interpreters of his theory to consider the possibility that variation could arise from interactions between the organism and the environment, Darwin himself expressed openness to the idea.⁴¹⁷ To explain the inheritance of acquired traits, Darwin relied upon a theory known as “pangenesis” in which hypothetical “gemmules” are produced by cells in an organism, and these “gemmules” determine the organisms’ traits. As McGrath summarizes, “Each cell of an organism, and even every part of each cell, was understood to produce gemmules of a specific type . . . These were able to circulate throughout the body and enter the reproductive system. Every sperm and egg contained these hypothetical

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

⁴¹⁶ Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea*, p. 21.

⁴¹⁷ Pigliucci and Müller, “Elements of an Extended Evolutionary Synthesis,” p. 5.

gemmules, and they were thus transmitted to the next generation.”⁴¹⁸ Darwin’s theory of pangenesis was highly speculative and not able to be verified at the time, and so his inability to provide a convincing understanding of inheritance remained a vulnerability of his newly articulated theory of natural selection.

2. Darwin and Sexual Difference

*“Adam and Eve provided the script, the images, and the template for Western ideas about gender until Darwinian evolutionary theory challenged their very existence and made it possible for women and men to imagine alternative origins and a whole new range of gendered possibilities.”*⁴¹⁹

--Kimberly Hamlin

On his five-year journey aboard the HMS Beagle that began in 1831, a young Charles Darwin would often spend the evenings reading his favorite book, and the only book he brought aboard the vessel to read for pleasure—Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Remembering his journey on the Beagle, Darwin commented, “Milton’s *Paradise Lost* had been my chief favorite, and in my excursions during the voyage of the Beagle, when I could take only a single small volume, I always chose Milton.”⁴²⁰ The book was so important to him, in fact, that he had lengthy portions of it memorized, and he even had a tiny pocket sewn into his coat for the purpose of carrying his pocket-sized edition of the epic poem.⁴²¹

This poem that dramatized the Biblical story of the Fall of Adam and Eve and also proposed an interpretation of the gendered nature of that Fall occupied a place of prominence

⁴¹⁸ McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine*, p. 152.

⁴¹⁹ Kimberly Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women’s Rights in Gilded Age America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2014), pp. 1-2.

⁴²⁰ As quoted in Charles Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Vol. 1*, Ed. Francis Darwin, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2087/2087-h/2087-h.htm>, retrieved on 12 March 2019.

⁴²¹ Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women’s Rights in Gilded Age America*, p. 4.

in Darwin's mind, which would turn out to be ironic since his theories of natural and sexual selection would undermine traditional understandings of both the Fall of humanity and the meaning of sexual difference.⁴²² His theory of natural selection challenged the notion of a special creation of individual species that remain largely unchanged over time, and his theory of sexual selection ushered in a dramatic shift in thinking about sexual difference. Instead of drawing from the Biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve to understand the divine meaning of sexed human nature, Darwin placed human sexuality within the flux and flow of the rest of the evolving natural world.⁴²³ Sexual dimorphism—to be male and female—within Darwin's framework is an evolutionary adaptation that humans share with many other animals. Since this dimorphism is also the result of ongoing evolutionary processes, this means that it is a dynamic rather than static and fixed feature of human life. Additionally, as we explore in more detail below, since taste and preference are involved in the processes of sexual selection, the future of sexual dimorphism is also rendered unpredictable within Darwin's framework. Since Darwin's depiction of sexual dimorphism in many ways challenged traditional interpretations of sexual difference that were based on the Genesis

⁴²² For helpful analyses of Milton's understanding of the gendered nature of the Fall of humanity see especially *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004); Marcia Landy, "Kinship and the Role of Women in Paradise Lost," *Milton Studies*, Vol 4 (1972); Barbara Lewalski, "Milton on Women—Yet Again," *Problems for Feminist Criticism*, ed. Sally Minogue, New York: Routledge (1990); Shannon Miller, *Engendering the Fall: John Milton and Seventeenth-Century Women Writers*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2008).

⁴²³ This is not to imply that Darwin intentionally sought to undermine religious faith. It seems, in fact, that the opposite was true---Darwin saw his theories as potentially reconcilable with the notion of a Creator, although it appears that he stopped short of considering himself a religious believer. Note his statement, "My judgement often fluctuates ... In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an Atheist in the sense of denying God. I think that generally (and more and more as I grow older), but not always, that an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind" (*Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 3 volumes, ed. Francis Darwin, London: John Murray (1887), volume 1, p. 304). For a detailed discussion of Darwin's faith and his understanding of the relationship between his theories and Christianity see Alister McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology*, The 2009 Hulsean Lectures University of Cambridge, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell (2011).

narrative, he has sometimes been perceived as a figure antagonistic to theological understandings of sexual difference. However, this chapter and the ones following it argue that Darwin does not need to be viewed as a threat to theological approaches to sexual difference. On the contrary, he should be viewed as offering a great gift to theological anthropology, and even to feminist theology. Many feminists have viewed Darwin as an enemy, and as someone whose ideas must be overcome in the pursuit of women's flourishing. Because of some of his characterizations of the typical qualities possessed by male and female creatures, some have even described him as "intrinsically anti-feminist."⁴²⁴ As we will see, there are indeed grounds for viewing him as a figure who has contributed to the subordination of women and people of color. However, Darwin's work was also a source of liberation for women in his time, and the process has begun of retrieving the neglected tools that Darwin's theories provide for subverting the relations of domination that have existed between the races and the sexes.

Darwin is most famous for his theory of natural selection, which we discussed in the preceding section. Less well known and understood, however, is his theory known as "sexual selection," a theory that he viewed as distinct from, but related to, natural selection. Although Darwin viewed sexual selection as just as important as natural selection for understanding the dynamics of species evolution, Mary Jane West-Eberhard and others have argued that there was a remarkable amount of "sexual selection amnesia" among evolutionary biologists since the time of Darwin (with important exceptions) and until the 1970s, and a "nearly

⁴²⁴ Cf. Fiona Erskine, "The Origin of Species and the Science of Female Inferiority," in *Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, eds. David Amigoni and Jeff Wallace, Texts in Culture Series (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 100, and Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, and Power* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2005).

complete blackout of the theory” during the development of the modern synthesis in the mid-twentieth century.⁴²⁵ One of the earliest and most persistent critics of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection was Alfred Russell Wallace, a contemporary of Darwin’s. Wallace and other critics of the theory argued that what Darwin considered to be “sexual selection” was actually just natural selection. As Richard Prum argues, Wallace believed that “all beauty provides a rich profile of practical information about the adaptive qualities of potential mates.”⁴²⁶ In other words, critics of sexual selection theory during Darwin’s time and today argue that what seem like aesthetic factors driving mate choice in various species are actually utilitarian indicators of health and “good genes.” This interpretation of the dynamics of mate choice fits more cohesively with the modern synthesis since it emphasizes an organism’s unconscious drive to perpetuate its own genes, and it bolsters the position of natural selection as the all-encompassing meta-theory. However, as the modern synthesis is now being nuanced and expanded in important ways in our time, there has been a renewal of interest among evolutionary biologists in the dynamics of sexual selection.

Darwin viewed sexual selection as an essential companion theory to natural selection because he thought that it could help to explain the presence of features that persist in species but do not have obvious advantages in terms of helping the species compete for survival. He was puzzled by traits that make some organisms less efficient, more noticeable to predators, and less able to disguise themselves, and thus seem like they would not be favored by the

⁴²⁵ Mary Jane West-Eberhard, “Darwin’s Forgotten Idea: The Social Essence of Sexual Selection,” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 46 (2014), p. 504. She identifies R.A. Fisher in his *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (New York: Dover, 1930) and Julian Huxley’s “Darwin’s Theory of Sexual Selection and the Data Subsumed by it, in the Light of Recent Research” (in *The American Naturalist* 72, 1938) as important exceptions to the “sexual selection amnesia” of the mid-twentieth century.

⁴²⁶ Richard O. Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin’s Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World—And Us*, New York: Anchor Books (2018), p. 33.

processes of natural selection. A frequently cited example of a feature that would seem to disadvantage an organism but that persists in the species is the plumage of the male peacock, which perplexed Darwin greatly.⁴²⁷ As Cordelia Fine summarizes, “if a primary goal of your life is to avoid being eaten by another animal, then a large eye-catching, wind-dragging, feathered rear sail is not an asset.”⁴²⁸ Darwin referenced the theory of sexual selection only briefly in the *Origin of Species*, since he decided to not address the subject of human evolution extensively in that text. However, in the final pages of the *Origin of Species*, he foreshadowed his eventual move to apply his evolutionary theories to humans when he noted that one day “light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.”⁴²⁹ He finally developed his theory of sexual selection in his text *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871.

If natural selection was a theory about competition for survival, Darwin saw sexual selection as a theory about competition for reproductive success and access to suitable mates. He describes sexual selection as “the advantage which certain individuals have over other individuals of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction.”⁴³⁰ Although scientific understandings of sexual selection and appreciation for the role of female agency have advanced significantly since Darwin’s time, as we will see in the next section, in his

⁴²⁷ Darwin expressed his confusion about traits that cannot be explained by the normal processes of natural selection in a letter to Asa Gray. He writes, “I remember well the time when the thought of the eye made me cold all over . . . now small trifling particulars of structure often make me very uncomfortable. The sight of a feather in a peacock’s tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick!” (*The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*, ed. F. Darwin, New York: Dover Publication (1958), p. 244).

⁴²⁸ Cordelia Fine, *Testosterone Rex: Unmaking the Myths of Our Gendered Minds*, London: Icon Books (2017), p. 30.

⁴²⁹ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, p. 359.

⁴³⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1981), p. 256.

early articulation of the theory, sexual selection is phrased in androcentric language as “a struggle between the males for possession of the females.”⁴³¹ Darwin theorized that sexual selection works primarily in two ways, either through “contests of attractiveness” or “contests of strength,” or in other words, either through courtship or battle.⁴³² As Darwin understood sexual selection, a male could find reproductive success either by wooing a female or by defeating his rivals for the female in combat. He suggests that features such as “weapons of offence and the means of defence possessed by the males for fighting with and driving away their rivals—their courage and pugnacity—their ornaments of many kinds—their organs for producing vocal or instrumental music—and their glands for emitting odours” are likely the result of sexual selection pressures since they serve only to “allure or excite the female.”⁴³³ He proposed then that traits like the plumage of the peacock that seemed to be otherwise maladaptive could persist in being transmitted to the next generation simply because they were perceived as attractive by females. These seemingly detrimental traits could ultimately provide an advantage in making it more likely that the male would win the favor of the female and thus be able to reproduce. Darwin thought that the processes of natural selection and sexual selection—the competition to survive and the competition to reproduce—were constantly intersecting and overlapping and thereby fueling the movements of evolution, but he speculated at one point that success in reproduction could, in the long term, be even more important than success in an individual organism’s ability to survive. He states, “the advantages which favoured males . . . leaving numerous progeny, are in the long run greater

⁴³¹ Ibid., p. 260.

⁴³² West-Eberhard, “Darwin’s Forgotten Idea: The Social Essence of Sexual Selection,” 503.

⁴³³ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 258.

than those derived from rather more perfect adaptation to their conditions in life.”⁴³⁴ He seems to indicate surprise at his own conclusion when he states in *Descent of Man*, “It could never have been anticipated that the power to charm the female has sometimes been more important than the power to conquer other males in battle.”⁴³⁵

While many of Darwin’s conclusions about the nature of being male and female bolster stereotypical Victorian assumptions about the sexes, Darwin did acknowledge in *Descent of Man* that these two main elements of sexual selection—male combat and female choice—could sometimes be reversed. He notes that in certain species there seems to have been a “double or mutual process of sexual selection” on males to choose females and females to choose males, but he thinks this mutual selection is uncommon since males, in his view, face greater pressure from sexual selection than females.⁴³⁶ The picture that Darwin paints of the nature of masculinity and femininity suggests that males are passionate, competitive, and promiscuous, while women are discriminating, passive, and coy. “The male,” he argues, “is the more active member in the courtship of the sexes.”⁴³⁷ The female, on the other hand, is “coy” and “requires to be courted.”⁴³⁸ Because Darwin thought that sexual selection exerts more pressure on males than on females, he theorized that sexual selection had favored the development of male superiority over females in physical size and intellectual ability. According to Darwin, even if there are a few exceptions, within most species it is the males who are forced to evolve superior traits so that they will be selected

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p. 279.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., p. 277.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 273.

for mating and reproduction, whereas females have much less pressure to develop advanced intellectual abilities and physical strength since the choice of mates generally lies with them. Darwin thought that this accurately described the situation of humans. As Angela Saini summarizes, Darwin thought that women are “literally *less evolved* than men.”⁴³⁹ Indeed, in the *Descent of Man* he argues, “The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than women can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and the hands.”⁴⁴⁰ This led him to conclude, “Thus man has ultimately become superior to woman.”⁴⁴¹

Darwin confirms but also nuances this view in a personal correspondence with American feminist Caroline Kennard. After hearing a talk in which Darwin was cited as a scientific authority supporting the view that by nature women are inferior to men, Kennard wrote to Darwin personally to confirm that this was an accurate representation of his views.⁴⁴² Darwin responded to her inquiry in a way that reveals the complexity of his thought on this issue. He writes,

The question to which you refer is a very difficult one. I have discussed it briefly in my ‘Descent of Man’. I certainly think that women though generally superior to men [in] moral qualities are inferior intellectually; & there seems to me to be a great difficulty from the laws of inheritance, (if I understand these laws rightly) in their becoming the intellectual equals of man. On the other hand there is some reason to believe that aboriginally (& to the present day in the case of Savages) men & women were equal in this respect, & this wd. (sic) greatly favour their recovering this equality. But to do this, as I believe, women must become as regular ‘bread-winners’ as are men; & we may suspect that the early education

⁴³⁹ Angela Saini, *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong—and the New Research That’s Rewriting the Story*, London: Fourth Estate (2017), p. 14.

⁴⁴⁰ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 327.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 328.

⁴⁴² Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 13579,” accessed on 22 January 2018, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-13579.xml>.

of our children, not to mention the happiness of our homes, would in this case greatly suffer.⁴⁴³

These quotations from Darwin help to explain why he has been largely either dismissed or critiqued by feminists. Here he reflects the Victorian attitudes towards sexual difference in which he was steeped—women belong in the private sphere and men should be the active bread-winners, and meddling with this arrangement will have potentially deleterious effects on society. Additionally, though he does view women as superior to men in “moral qualities,” and he believes that women are equipped with “greater tenderness and less selfishness,” he theorizes that this stems from female “maternal instincts,”⁴⁴⁴ which romanticizes femininity, and as many feminists have argued, essentializes a woman’s character based on her capacity for maternity. However, it should also be noted that this quotation reveals Darwin’s belief that—even though it is unlikely and undesirable—what we consider to be typical traits and behaviors of the sexes could potentially be reversed if societal structures supported it. Here again we see Darwin placing human nature within the flux and flow of evolutionary processes.

Darwin’s beliefs about the nature of sexual difference resonate with some Catholic magisterial statements about sexual differences between men and women. Recall, for example, Pope Paul VI in his *Address to Women* given at the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. He argues, “women have always had as your lot the protection of the home, the love of beginnings and an understanding of cradles,”⁴⁴⁵ and “[women] know how to make

⁴⁴³ Ibid., “Letter no. 13607.”

⁴⁴⁴ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 326.

⁴⁴⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Second Vatican Council Closing Speech*. Given on December 8th (1965), <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul06/p6closin.htm>. Retrieved on March 22, 2014.

truth sweet, tender, and accessible.”⁴⁴⁶ This description of women is then accompanied by directives to women to, “aid mankind in not falling,” “reconcile men with life,” “hold back the hand of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization,” and finally, to “save the peace of the world.”⁴⁴⁷ Pope Paul VI seems then to also agree with Darwin’s assessment of males as burdened with the “natural and unfortunate birthright” of being rivalrous, competitive, and plagued by “ambition which passes too easily into selfishness.”⁴⁴⁸ While this understanding of femininity is overly simplistic, it also fails to adequately account for paternal tenderness, nurturing, and investment in offspring. It also seems to not consider the reality that in many species, including primates, the nurturing and care of the young is shared equally by the males and the females, a fact that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.⁴⁴⁹ Much of the new science of sexual difference challenges these deeply held assumptions in both scientific and theological discourses about what it means to be male and female.

One important contextual factor that should be noted in the interest of understanding Darwin’s interpretation of sexual difference is his understanding of inheritance. As he states in the response to Caroline Kennard above, his view of the likelihood that women could become the equals of men in intellect and physical stamina is rooted in how he understands the “laws of inheritance” to work. Recall that Darwin did not have any knowledge of genetics, and that much of his theorizing on inheritance was highly speculative. This led him to express a peculiar theory in *The Descent of Man* that traits that were developed in adulthood would

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 326.

⁴⁴⁹ Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, p. 43.

be transmitted only to offspring of the same sex, whereas qualities developed by an organism during childhood could be potentially transmitted to offspring of either sex.⁴⁵⁰ If this were true, it would mean that the qualities developed in an organism in response to sexual selection pressures in adulthood would get passed on to the offspring of that same sex, which would lead, for the most part, to a constant reinforcement of the status quo in terms of sexual dimorphism. This faulty understanding of how the mechanisms of inheritance worked is why he expressed to Caroline Kennard that women achieving equality with men in intelligence and physical stamina would be very unlikely to be achieved because of the “great difficulty from the laws of inheritance.”⁴⁵¹ Darwin’s views on sexual difference must be interpreted and judged within the context of his time, and in light of the biological information that was available to him. His legacy in terms of shaping Western assumptions about sexual difference is flawed, but it is not beyond retrieval. Similarly, the impact of his thought on Western conceptions about race should also be discussed and placed in context.

Although the purpose of this project is to explore the intersections of Christian thinking about sin and sexual difference in particular, it is impossible to ever fully disentangle thinking about gender from the dynamics of thinking about race. It must be acknowledged that Darwin’s thinking about evolution and sexual selection involved theorizing about race as well, and that his work and subsequent interpretations of his work have been significant in shaping Western attitudes about race. The history of the reception of his theories have also involved racial dynamics. For example, many of the early feminists who eagerly embraced Darwin’s evolutionary thinking appropriated his theories for the purposes of advancing the

⁴⁵⁰ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 279-280.

⁴⁵¹ Darwin, “Letter no. 13607.”

position of white women, and often explicitly in order to position themselves as the equals of white men to the exclusion and subjugation of people of color. Louise Michele Newman argues this point in her 1999 monograph *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*.⁴⁵² Newman argues, "Social-Darwinian theories encouraged and enabled the development of ideologies concerning white middle-class women's emancipation that emphasized (white) women's specific role as the "conservators of race traits" and the "civilizers" of racial and class inferiors."⁴⁵³ Because of the racist elements in some of these early American feminist texts, and because of the ways in which evolutionary thinking was also appropriated by proponents of eugenics and white supremacy, some scholars have been skeptical about the value of returning to Darwin as a resource for thinking about human biological difference.

While we recognize now the problematic way in which evolutionary theory was appropriated by early American feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in order to entrench white privilege, other scholars have pointed out that these women were expressing views about race that were generally accepted in their time. Just as we cannot expect Augustine, who lived in the fourth century, to express twenty-first century sensitivities to issues of sex and gender, it would be equally unrealistic to expect early feminists living in the nineteenth century to transcend their historical situation, as desirable as that would be in terms of drawing from their theories now. It is inevitable that each of us will suffer from specific blind spots based on our historical and cultural location. It will be left to the

⁴⁵² Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999).

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

generations that follow us to correct our mistakes and hopefully read us with charity, and so we should strive to do the same with those who preceded us. In regards to the possible liabilities of returning to Darwin's theories of sexual selection in the twenty-first century, it should be noted, as Kimberly Hamlin does, that sometimes Darwin's theories about human evolution were conflated with those of Herbert Spencer—who was an explicit proponent of “social Darwinism.”⁴⁵⁴ But what did Darwin himself think about race, and how did he speak about it in *The Descent of Man*?

Darwin affirms a theory in *Descent* called “monogenesis,” which posits that all humans have descended from a common ancestor, or in Darwin's vernacular “a common progenitor.”⁴⁵⁵ The more popularly accepted view in his time was that different races emerged from different ancestors and therefore should be seen as distinct species. This theory was known as “polygenesis.”⁴⁵⁶ Polygenesis was sometimes used to offer “scientific” support to slavery. Darwin examines the arguments in favour of polygenesis in *Descent*, but ultimately argues that it is more likely that humans share a common ancestor, and thus all races should be considered part of the same species. He argues in *Descent* that “the most weighty of all the arguments against treating the races of man as distinct species, is that they graduate into each other . . . and it is hardly possible to discover clear distinctive characters between them.”⁴⁵⁷ Darwin thought that humans with different racial characteristics had more in common with each other than they had differences. He notes that one can “hardly fail to be deeply impressed with the close similarity between the men of all races in tastes, dispositions,

⁴⁵⁴ Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution*, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁵ Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 31.

⁴⁵⁶ Hamlin., *From Eve to Evolution*, p. 19.

⁴⁵⁷ Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 226.

and habits,” and that the races seem to have “similar inventive or mental powers.”⁴⁵⁸ He even sees the possibility of common spiritual intuitions and beliefs among humans of different races in light of archaeological evidence of the widespread practice of humans burying their dead.

He theorizes that the divergent aesthetic qualities borne by humans were the result of sexual selection—or in other words, that different colors of skin and shapes of body exist because of the diversity of tastes and preferences of humans. Each race, he suggests, has its own “standard of beauty,” and so the different bodily qualities that become associated with different races could be attributed to the fact that humans have diverse preferences and tastes, and are attracted to a wide variety of physical traits. Rather than reifying white supremacy, Darwin relativizes the attractiveness of different racial qualities and characteristics. He notes, for example, that Europeans are attractive “according to the European standard of beauty.”⁴⁵⁹ The standard of beauty found outside of Europe might be different, but is neither superior nor inferior—it’s just different because humans tend to like different things, and our culture largely shapes what we like. Additionally, he theorized that aesthetic tastes could be inherited from one generation to the next, which he thought explained the persistence of similar bodily characteristics that distinguish one race from another. As Grosz argues, “Darwin suggests that it may be precisely the sexual appeal or attractiveness of individual racial variations, however slight they may have been to begin with, that explains the historical variability and the genealogical emergence of racial differences.”⁴⁶⁰ Adrian Desmond and James Moore

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 233.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 356.

⁴⁶⁰ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 23.

argue in their 2009 monograph entitled *Darwin's Sacred Cause* that it was actually Darwin's objections to slavery and his abhorrence of white supremacy that fueled his decision to write *The Descent of Man*.⁴⁶¹ There is hierarchical language in *Descent*, like when Darwin refers to the "lowest savages," and "civilised nations" versus "barbarians," but again this would have been the acceptable language of his time, and fit within the broader intention of his work to emphasize the similarities between humans of different races and their common lineage, it becomes difficult to support an interpretation of Darwin as racist or as someone who sought to subjugate or dehumanize people of color. The truth seems to be exactly the opposite.

As we have seen, there is indeed much to critique about Darwin's understanding of sexual difference, and as we will see, both his theories about inheritance and the dynamics of sexual selection have been corrected and expanded by subsequent research. Additionally, his thought was appropriated by some to provide scientific support for the notion of the "natural" inferiority of women and people of color. However, the view of Darwin as "intrinsically anti-feminist" or anti-woman is untenable upon closer reading and when he is placed in historical context. Evidence from his personal correspondences suggests that Darwin was willing to consult women on scientific matters, that he was polite and respectful to the women with whom he corresponded, that he often encouraged female scientists who wrote to him to get their work published, and that he supported women's education.⁴⁶² It should also be noted that while Darwin's ideas about the "natural" inferiority of women and people of color have been used to dehumanize and subjugate them, feminist thinkers in his

⁴⁶¹ Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery, and the Quest for Human Origins*, London: Penguin Books (2010).

⁴⁶² Cf. a helpful overview of Darwin's correspondences with women at <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letters/correspondence-women>.

time also eagerly adopted his evolutionary framework, particularly in the United States. As Kimberly Hamlin argues, “a generation of freethinking feminists, socialists, and pioneering sexologists all counted Darwin as an intellectual ancestor in the struggle for women’s emancipation.”⁴⁶³ For though he believed that women were inferior intellectually and physically, he also provided a framework for a revolutionary rethinking of sexual difference. He depicts sexual difference as a biological feature of human life that is shared with other animals and that is continually in process and open to change, just like other evolutionary adaptations. In Darwin’s work, the dynamics of sexual dimorphism are rendered unstable because of their dependence upon the processes of sexual selection, and thus, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, “the turbulent, disturbing, erupting indeterminacy of sexual attraction and pleasure.”⁴⁶⁴ Darwin reminds us that the future of sexual difference is not totally fixed or determined by genes or natural selection. Rather, it is subject to influence by the flux and flow of desire and aesthetic taste. Organisms are not simply constrained by the workings of natural selection and the drive to preserve their own genes. Instead, we are agents in the ongoing processes of our own evolution. Though he thought it unlikely, and probably undesirable, that females would ever achieve equality with men in intellect and physical strength, Darwin also allows for the possibility that, given the right circumstances, females could perhaps become equal to males in intellect and physical strength if their opportunities, habits, and lifestyles were changed. He states, “In order that woman should reach the same standard as man, she ought, when nearly an adult, to be trained to energy and perseverance,

⁴⁶³ Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women’s Rights in Gilded Age America*, p. 3.

⁴⁶⁴ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 197.

and to have her reason and imagination exercised to the highest point.”⁴⁶⁵ Here, in a dramatic shift away from the previously hegemonic view of sexual difference as static, divinely ordered, and revealed through the figures of Adam and Eve in Genesis, the nature of sexual difference is characterized by mutability, possibility, and an unknown future.

We have begun to see how Darwin, in his theory of sexual selection (despite his own explicit intentions) provided feminists and women generally with a great gift by helping to shift societal thinking in the direction of recognizing human nature as in some continuity with other animals and the rest of the natural world, thereby chipping away at entrenched human/animal and nature/culture binaries and hierarchies. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, his depiction of human biological life as fundamentally defined by “dynamic, collective, change” also rendered any present relations of domination in individuals or species “precarious and necessarily historically limited.”⁴⁶⁶ Through Darwin’s theories of natural and sexual selections, it became possible to see the subjugation of women as not the destiny determined by their immutable biological situation, but instead, to see biological processes themselves as potential sources of cultural and social transformation.⁴⁶⁷ Not only was the Darwinian framework appropriated early on by feminists in Darwin’s time, one journalist from the early twentieth century went so far as to claim that “the women’s movement is a product of the evolutionary science of the nineteenth century . . . it is modern science which, by giving us a new view of the body, its functions, its needs, its claims upon the world, has

⁴⁶⁵ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 329.

⁴⁶⁶ Grosz, *Time Travels*, pp. 36 & 29.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

laid the basis for a successful feminist movement.”⁴⁶⁸ It should be noted, however, that the majority of the early feminists who eagerly embraced Darwin’s work to support their efforts to empower women were overtly atheists, and they saw Darwin as providing a means by which to throw off the constraints of what they viewed as the oppressive force of religion in society.⁴⁶⁹ For many feminists, evolution is the pathway to freedom from the legacy of Eve. It remains to be seen how Darwin might also provide gifts for feminist theological thinking about creation, sin, the body, and the nature of sexual difference.

3. The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis

As we have seen, Darwin believed that all living creatures descended from common ancestors and that natural and sexual selection were the primary drivers of evolutionary change.⁴⁷⁰ According to Massimo Pigliucci, Darwin “flirted with” the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who argued that environmental factors could cause changes in an organism, and that these adaptations caused by the organism-environment interaction were transmittable to future generations—a process evolutionary biologists now refer to as “soft inheritance.”⁴⁷¹ Though Darwin was open to “Lamarckism,” it fell into disrepute within scientific circles. The rejection of Lamarckism became only more entrenched when almost a century after *The Origin of Species* was published the principles of genetic inheritance discovered by the Augustinian friar and scientist Gregor Mendel and Darwin’s principles of natural selection were combined

⁴⁶⁸ Floyd Dell, *Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism*, Chicago: Forbes and Company (1913), p. 44.

⁴⁶⁹ Kimberly Hamlin’s work in *From Eve to Evolution* explains in detail the biographies of some of the key women who were quick to appropriate Darwin’s work for feminist causes. It is also worth noting that most current feminists who embrace Darwin as an emancipating figure for women are also overtly atheists.

⁴⁷⁰ Pigliucci and Muller, “Elements of an Extended Evolutionary Synthesis,” p. 5. See also E.V. Koonin, “Towards a Postmodern synthesis of Evolutionary Biology,” *Cell Cycle* 8, no.6 (2009), p. 1.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

into a unified theory. It was a group of “mathematically oriented biologists” in the early twentieth century including Ronald Fisher, J.B.S. Haldance, and Sewall Wright, who first demonstrated that Darwin’s theory of adaptation through natural selection could be combined with Mendelian genetics into a unified theory that explained how adaptations occur and are transmitted in living organisms.⁴⁷² The process of integrating, expanding, and adapting the theories of Darwin and Mendel continued through the theoretical work of scientists like Theodosius Dobzhansky, Ernst Mayr, George Simpson, G. Ledyard Stebbins, and Bernhard Rensch. Then, in 1942, Julian Huxley published his *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*, and the phrase “the modern synthesis” became the most common shorthand way of referring to evolutionary theory in the twentieth century.

Proponents of the modern synthesis have emphasized the following principles: random mutations cause genetic variations in species, populations evolve by “changes in gene frequency brought about by random genetic drift, gene flow, and especially natural selection,” and most genetic variations have “individually slight phenotypic effects so that phenotypic changes are gradual.”⁴⁷³ Recall that a *genotype* is the genetic “information” that an organism carries within its genome, and a *phenotype* is the composite of an organism’s observable traits—including its behaviors, the shape of its body, its development, and its biochemical properties. The modern synthesis is a “gene-centric” theory, and it continues to occupy a place of prominence in the public imagination, particularly because of the influence of people like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett—scientists who also write for a popular audience. Central to the modern synthesis have been both the belief that all inherited

⁴⁷² Pigliucci and Muller, “Elements of an Extended Evolutionary Synthesis,” p. 6.

⁴⁷³ Douglas Futuyma, *Evolutionary Biology*, Sunderland MA: Sinauer (1986), p. 12.

variations can be expressed in terms of genetic differences, and the rejection of anything that seems “Lamarckian,” or that would postulate a theory of “soft inheritance.”⁴⁷⁴ Within this framework, genes came to be portrayed as the masterminds of evolutionary change, as if genes possess some form of agency and organisms are at the mercy of their given genomes.⁴⁷⁵ Metaphorical language describing the genome as a “blueprint,” or genes as “information,” became pervasive. By way of example, note Richard Dawkins’ statement that “What lies at the heart of every living thing is not a fire, not warm breath, not a ‘spark of life.’ It is information, words, and instructions. If you want a metaphor, don’t think of fire, sparks, and breath . . . think about information technology.”⁴⁷⁶ The modern synthesis taught that “information” moves in a one-directional way from DNA to RNA to proteins, which suggested that the genotype determines phenotypic outcomes, including determining not just the morphology, but also the behaviors of an organism. If this were true, it would mean that analysis of a given genome should yield relatively accurate predictions about the bodily constitution and behaviors of the organism possessing that genome. This view of living beings as determined by their genetic makeup led to some overly simplistic theorizing about human behavior that suggested there might be “genes for” various human characteristics and

⁴⁷⁴ Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, “Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance,” in *Evolution—the Extended Synthesis*, eds. Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Muller, Cambridge: MIT Press (2010), p. 137.

⁴⁷⁵ As an example, note Dawkins’ claim “Now they swarm in huge colonies, safe inside gigantic lumbering robots, sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by torturous indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control. They are in you and me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way, those replicators. Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines” (Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press (1989), pp. 19-20).

⁴⁷⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co (2018), p. 159.

behaviors (homosexuality, depression, alcoholism, adultery, etc.) that functioned without being influenced by environmental influences.

This focused attention on the role of genes in evolution has been helpful in many ways, and it has contributed to massive innovations in the field of evolutionary biology. Further, the strategy of reducing an organism to its smallest parts in order to explain it is a common one, as neuroanthropologist Terrence Deacon notes, in “almost all fields of science.”⁴⁷⁷ However, when it comes to living organisms, it is a mistake to attempt to understand them by examining their genes as if they are isolated entities because while all creatures are indeed composed of smaller “parts” (genes), these parts are not properly analogous to machine parts since the parts that compose a physical organism “may not have properties that can be described without reference to other features of the whole they compose.”⁴⁷⁸ Problems with the way that the modern synthesis characterized the relationship between genes and phenotypes began to emerge in the last half of the twentieth century and have now become more widely recognized as it has become more clear that the functioning of genes is largely context-dependent. Indeed, organisms with identical genotypes frequently develop non-identical phenotypes.

There is a growing appreciation for the fact that constituent elements of an organism, such as genes, are formed by and function within systems over time, and that they can only be properly understood from within their given contexts, and this is what the “Extended Evolutionary Synthesis” seeks to emphasize.⁴⁷⁹ Genes have many possible phenotypic

⁴⁷⁷ Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*, New York/London 2013, p. 84.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ As Stephen Jay Gould notes: “Bodies cannot be atomized into parts, each constructed by an individual gene. Hundreds of genes contribute to the building of most body parts and their action is channeled through a

effects, and the ones that ultimately manifest are largely dependent upon environmental factors.⁴⁸⁰ Furthermore, phenotypes are “plastic,” which means that a phenotype produced by a specific genotype can also change in response to its environment, and it seems that these accommodations to the environment may also be heritable through a phenomenon called “genetic accommodation.”⁴⁸¹ A common example of phenotypic plasticity and genetic accommodation in the biological literature is that of hypoxia tolerance. When “lowland inhabiting” humans ascend to higher altitudes, they typically experience a range of “plastic responses” to the change in altitude such as rapid increases in breathing and heart rate, and the suppression of some normal functions like digestion. As lowland humans become acclimatized to higher altitudes, their bodies exhibit “increased production of erythrocytes, capillaries, mitochondria, and aerobic enzymes, and reduced stroke volume” as a means of dealing with hypoxia, or a lack of sufficient oxygen in the arterial blood.⁴⁸² In contrast, human groups who have lived for generations in high altitudes seem to have genetically adapted to their environment by developing hypoxia tolerance, or “genetic accommodation” of the originally plastic phenotypic responses of the lowland humans. These genetic adaptations mean that the hypoxia tolerance is no longer a “plastic response” to the environment, but it

kaleidoscopic series of environmental influences” (S.J. Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History*, New York: Norton (1992), p. 91).

⁴⁸⁰ It is important to note that some genes are “monomorphic,” meaning they generally do not vary in terms of how they are expressed from one person to the next. For example, monomorphic genes lead to humans having two eyes situated on the front of their face. Other genes, however, have “polymorphisms” [technically speaking, they have “two or more different possible alleles (alternate forms of a gene)”], which means that these genes can create genetic variation among humans (different eye or hair color, personality tendencies, etc.). Cf. Rachel H. Salk and Janet S. Hyde, “Contemporary Genetics for Gender Researchers: Not Your Grandma’s Genetics Anymore,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 36 (2012), p. 397.

⁴⁸¹ Cf. Kim Sterelny, “Novelty, Plasticity, and Niche Construction: The Influence of Phenotypic Variation on Evolution,” in *Mapping the Future of Biology: Evolving Concepts and Theories*, ed. Thomas Pradeu, Anouk Barberousse, and Michel Morange (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

⁴⁸² Carl D. Schlichting and Matthew A. Wund, “Phenotypic Plasticity and Epigenetic Marking: An Assessment of Evidence for Genetic Accommodation,” *Evolution* 68, no. 3 (2014), p. 658.

becomes a trait that is “constitutively expressed” within that people group.⁴⁸³ For example, people living in Tibet breathe faster and have “higher cerebral blood flow, but have significantly lower oxygen saturation.”⁴⁸⁴ Human groups occupying regions of the Andes Mountains in South America have oxygen saturation levels and breathing rates similar to lowland groups, but they have adapted by developing increased oxygen carrying capacities in their red blood cells. Amhara and Oromo Ethiopians exhibit similar genetic adaptations that allow them to tolerate hypoxia. The similar trajectory of these evolutionary adaptations at divergent points on the globe also provide an example of evolutionary “convergence” that challenges the characterization of evolution as random by some proponents of the modern synthesis.⁴⁸⁵ There is not, then, a one-directional movement of causation from DNA to the phenotype, but rather, as Evan Thompson notes, “The causal chain between DNA sequences and phenotypic characteristics is too indirect, complex, and multifaceted for there to be any robust one-to-one relationship between them. Hence, no phenotypic characteristic can be said to be ‘coded for’ by DNA sequences.”⁴⁸⁶ Adding even further complication is the fact that “roughly 42%” of the human genome is composed of what are called “retrotransposons,” and these retrotransposons are capable of “inserting new sequences of bases into a chromosome.”⁴⁸⁷ This means that not only is the expression of a gene often unpredictable and undetermined by the genome, the genome itself is not fixed. Genetic variation exists among

⁴⁸³ Ibid., p. 662.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 658.

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, “Genetic Variation: Blind, Directed, Interpretive?” in *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2014), pp. 76-106.

⁴⁸⁶ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of the Mind*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2010), p. 181.

⁴⁸⁷ Salk and Hyde, “Contemporary Genetics for Gender Researchers: Not Your Grandma’s Genetics Anymore,” p. 397.

different humans, but also within the same human over the span of a lifetime. This significantly complicates previous understandings of the role of genes as determinants of an organism's traits and behaviors. Genes do not determine phenotypes on their own, rather, recent developments in evolutionary biology emphasize “the role of constructive processes in development and evolution and reciprocal portrayals of causation,” and these new emphases constitute the “Extended Evolutionary Synthesis.”⁴⁸⁸

“Epi (above)-genetics” is a term used to describe “heritable changes in the expression of genes that are not dependent on changes in an organism's DNA.”⁴⁸⁹ The idea captured by epigenetics is that parents pass on more than just their genes—they also pass on “molecular switches,” or cues for how genes should be expressed. Epigenetic changes typically happen within an organism because of contextual influences that could include intra-organism factors like specific enzymes or hormones that would provoke gene expression or silence it, and contextual influences can also include factors outside the organism like parent to offspring interactions, social learning, symbolic communications, and the changes that an organism makes to its own environment or to the environments of other organisms.⁴⁹⁰ Developments in epigenetics indicate that the changes in patterns of an organism's gene expression in response to environmental factors leave “epigenetic signatures,” or marks, on the genome, and that these marks can be inherited. For example, some studies on the offspring of Holocaust survivors indicate that, in addition to the environmental and cultural

⁴⁸⁸ K. Laland, T. Uller, M. Feldman, K. Sterelny, G. Muller, A. Moczek, E. Jablonka, J. Odling-Smee, “The extended evolutionary synthesis: its structure, assumptions and predictions,” *Proceedings Of The Royal Society B-Biological Sciences* 282, no. 1813 (2015), p. 1.

⁴⁸⁹ Eva Jablonka, “Cultural Epigenetics,” *The Sociological Review* 64 (2016), p. 46.

⁴⁹⁰ Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, “Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance,” p. 144.

elements that might have an impact, these offspring are also born with alterations to their biological stress response systems that reflect similar epigenetic signatures to the ones developed by their parents who endured the initial trauma, and that these inherited epigenetic signatures may leave them more vulnerable to experiencing negative effects of stress.⁴⁹¹ In the words of one leading researcher in this area, some people “have a lot more to overcome because their biology has given their condition a firmer reality,” especially members of human groups who have endured extensive prolonged trauma.⁴⁹² While epigenetics provides insights into how trauma can persist biologically for generations, it also provides reasons for hope since resilience and healing are also partially inheritable. “Biological and molecular healing” can also be passed on to future generations via the mechanisms of epigenetics.⁴⁹³ Developments in epigenetics also have implications for the biology of sexual difference.

Sex traits and behaviors resulting from the expression of particular genes can be influenced by epigenetic factors. As Cordelia Fine notes, environmental forces “(like prenatal and postnatal stress, drug exposure, rearing conditions, or maternal deprivation) interact with sex in the brain in complicated and non-uniform ways.”⁴⁹⁴ Throughout the course of life there are “hundreds of these interactions between sex and environment,” and these interactions impact different aspects of the brain that influence a person’s expression of sexed characteristics and behaviors.⁴⁹⁵ For example, one study of lab rats found that high levels of

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Mallory E. Bowers and Rachel Yehuda, “Intergenerational Transmission of Stress in Humans,” *Neuropsychopharmacology* 41 (2016).

⁴⁹² Rachel Yehuda, interview with Krista Tippett entitled “How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations,” recorded July 30th, 2015. Transcript available at <https://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-yehuda-how-trauma-and-resilience-cross-generations/>.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, p. 90.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

testosterone in the urine of male newborn rats evoked a greater amount of anogenital licking by their mothers than the female newborns received.⁴⁹⁶ It was then discovered that this extra licking was directly related to the development of sex differences in the brain regions responsible for mating behaviors in the rats. As Fine summarizes, “the mothers’ behavior is an integral part of how male rats’ brains and behavior develop differently from females.”⁴⁹⁷ While this example is about rats and not about humans, it illustrates the point that sexed characteristics and behaviors in organisms are not a straightforward result of a genetic “blueprint,” but rather, these sexed characteristics and behaviors result from a complex interplay of genes, environment, parental interactions, and a plethora of other influencing factors.

An area of study related to epigenetics is the theory of “niche construction.” Changes to environmental “niches” that organisms make (beavers building dams, humans constructing cities, birds building nests, etc) subsequently impact the selection pressures operative within that specific niche, which then impact upon the development of organisms within the niche, and these organisms then impact the environmental niche again in a dynamic reciprocal loop of causation that is referred to as “niche construction.”⁴⁹⁸ In 1959, C.H. Waddington suggested that animals choose and modify their environments, and that through these processes they alter the selection pressures affecting them and their offspring. Again, in 1983, R.C. Lewontin theorized that organisms “construct” environments “out of the bits and pieces

⁴⁹⁶ Celia L. Moore, “Maternal contributions to the development of masculine sexual behavior in laboratory rats,” *Developmental Psychobiology* 17 (1984), pp. 347-356.

⁴⁹⁷ Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, p. 96.

⁴⁹⁸ For further reading about niche construction see F. John Odling-Smee, Kevin N. Laland, and Marcus W. Feldman, *Niche Construction: The Neglected Process in Evolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), as well as Thomas C. Scott-Phillips et al., “The Niche Construction Perspective: A Critical Appraisal,” *Evolution* 68, no. 5 (2014).

of the external world.”⁴⁹⁹ The theories of Waddington and Lewontin have been further developed, and they are now classified as theories of “niche construction.” Niche construction emphasizes that all organisms “through their metabolisms, movements, behavior, and choices, partly create and partly destroy their environments. In doing so, they transform some of the selection pressures in the environments that subsequently select them.”⁵⁰⁰ The past is always with us since environments transformed by organisms are passed on to future generations, and this inheritance of environments with modified selection pressures is called “ecological inheritance.”⁵⁰¹ Our ancestors bequeath to us not only genes, but also ecological “niches.” While niche construction theory broadens how we think about inheritance, it also reveals a more dynamic process of evolution that renders organisms active participants in evolutionary processes rather than passive victims of their genotype. This will have implications for theological anthropology, as we will see in the next chapter.

Phenotypic plasticity combined with genetic accommodation, epigenetics, and niche construction are considered elements of the “Extended Evolutionary Synthesis,” and this synthesis is a movement away from the gene-centered and deterministic picture suggested by the modern synthesis. It seeks a richer and more complex account of the interactions between genes and environments across the life span of individual organisms, species, and species across generations. It shows the nuanced interplay between nature and culture, and the impossibility of ever separating these realities. Culture is shot through with nature, and nature is always already cultural. On the one hand, the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis reveals

⁴⁹⁹ John Odling-Smee, “Niche Inheritance,” in *Evolution—the Extended Synthesis*, eds. Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Muller, pp. 175-176.

⁵⁰⁰ Odling-Smee, “Niche Inheritance,” p. 176.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

anew that organisms are shaped by forces and environments that they do not entirely control, and of which they are not always even aware. It expands our understanding of the complexity of the ways in which our biological and cultural pasts are always part of us—all the way down to the level of our genes and the various possibilities for their expression, as well as in the ecological niches that surround us. The persistence of the past into the present means that some begin life with “more to overcome,” biologically and culturally. On the other hand, the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis also reveals that organisms are not only inert and passive entities acted upon by evolutionary forces. Rather, as Darwin’s theory of sexual selection that was discussed in the previous section argued, organisms also impact the environments and other organisms around them, thereby shaping the direction and pace of evolutionary movement. In the words of one niche construction theorist, “organisms must be active as well as reactive.”⁵⁰² Through our active living in the world, through our aesthetic tastes and romantic loves, our dreaming and our longing, through our religion and our habits, we constantly mediate and adapt the world we have received from those who have gone before, and we shape the biological and cultural world that will be passed on. The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis is changing how we think about what it means to be humans embedded in an evolutionary milieu, and the dynamic picture it paints has relevance for how we think about the notion of “inherited sin” and the meaning of sexual difference.

4. The New Science of Sexual Difference

Though Darwin’s theory of sexual selection was long neglected by evolutionary biologists, there were two landmark scientific papers that seemed to confirm his conclusions about the

⁵⁰² Ibid., p. 178.

“nature” of males and females. The first paper was by botanist and geneticist Angus John Bateman in 1948. Bateman used a series of experiments with the mating behavior of fruit flies to demonstrate that “there is nearly always a combination of an indiscriminating eagerness in the males and a discriminating passivity in the females.”⁵⁰³ Bateman’s conclusions supported Darwin’s notions of the more “eager” or passionate and competitive nature of males, as well as the greater force of sexual selection upon males. The second important paper was authored by Robert Trivers in 1972. Trivers’ paper “Parental Investment and Sexual Selection” examined Bateman’s experiment from twenty-four years earlier and supported it through the additional notion of “parental investment.” Trivers argued that evolution inclines females to be less passionate and more “choosy” because they have more to lose if they get stuck with a disadvantageous partner since females have a limited number of eggs to fertilize while men have “a lot of sperm with nowhere to go.”⁵⁰⁴ Beyond just their limited number of eggs, females (particularly mammals) tend to invest more time and energy into nurturing the fertilized egg until it becomes eventually a baby, and then nurturing the child until it reaches a point of independence. This greater investment on the part of the female means she is motivated to choose a high-quality partner and has nothing to gain from being promiscuous, while the male’s low parental investment and high sperm count provides him with an evolutionary drive to be promiscuous.⁵⁰⁵ Darwin’s theories seemed once again to be confirmed.

⁵⁰³ A.J. Bateman, “Intra-Sexual Selection in *Drosophila*,” *Heredity* 2 (1948), p. 365.

⁵⁰⁴ Trivers as quoted in an interview Saini, *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong—and the New Research That’s Rewriting the Story*, p. 123.

⁵⁰⁵ Robert L. Trivers, “Parental Investment and Sexual Selection,” in *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man*, ed. Bernard Campbell, Chicago: Aldine (1972), pp. 136-179. My summary of developments in sexual selection theories was aided by Angela Saini’s and Cordelia Fine’s monographs cited above.

These fundamental notions about the biological nature of being male and female that were expressed early on by Darwin and then supported by Bateman and Trivers have continued to be championed by some scientists and psychologists studying biological sex differences up to the present day.⁵⁰⁶ However, as interest in the dynamics of sexual selection gains momentum as the modern synthesis is expanded, the last few decades have seen an influx of new studies challenging the conclusions of Darwin, Bateman, and Trivers. For example, in 2007, evolutionary biologists Brian Synder and Patricia Gowaty sought to reexamine and replicate Bateman's original experiments from the 1940s with updated information and technology. They found many serious problems with Bateman's original data, among them the fact that Bateman established his conclusions about male promiscuity and competition and female choosiness by focusing on the results of only two out of his six experiments—coincidentally, the two experiments he highlighted were the ones that most supported his claim about sex differences. When Synder and Gowaty combined the insights of all six of Bateman's experiments, they argue that Bateman “could have claimed the first evidence for a benefit of polyandry (i.e. promiscuity) for females.”⁵⁰⁷ Unfortunately, most of the research after Bateman relied on the data that he himself presented, and so discussions of

⁵⁰⁶ For examples of contemporary expressions of Darwin, Bateman, and Trivers' views on sexual difference see Larry Cahill's “Equal ≠ the same: sex differences in the human brain,” *Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science* (2014), p. 5, and psychologist Gijsbert Stoet quoted in J. Elgot, “We Can't Force Girls to Like Science,” *Huffington Post*, July 12, 2014, retrieved on 8 May, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/07/12/girls-science_n_5580119.html.

⁵⁰⁷ Brian F. Synder and Patricia Adair Gowaty, “A Reappraisal of Bateman's Classic Study of Intrasexual Selection,” *Evolution* 61, no. 11 (2007), p. 2463. Other helpful discussions of Bateman include the following: Donald A. Dewsbury, “The Darwin-Bateman Paradigm in Historical Context,” *Integrative and Comparative Biology* 45 (2005); Zuleyma Tang-Martinez, “Rethinking Bateman's Principles: Challenging Persistent Myths of Sexually Reluctant Females and Promiscuous Males,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53 (2016), and *Feminist Approaches to Science*, ed. Ruth Bleier, New York: Pergamon Press (1986).

sexual selection continued to propagate the myth of male promiscuity and competition and female passivity.

In addition to the critical work done by Synder and Gowaty, there have been other key contributions in the scientific literature regarding the biology of sexual difference that further challenge traditional scientific dogmas about what it means to be male and female. For example, despite the claims of Darwin, Bateman, and Trivers about the stable nature of females as “choosy” and males as “promiscuous” because of the difference in the cost of reproduction for each, Donald Dewsbury and others have argued in recent decades that males are more selective than has been acknowledged to date by evolutionary biologists, and that ejaculation and reproduction incur “nontrivial costs” for males that should be taken into account when considering their sexual behaviors.⁵⁰⁸ Dewsbury argues that despite the traditional claims that males produce “unlimited numbers of gametes and are selected to distribute them among all available females on a ‘hit-and-run’ basis,” in practice, “sperm, semen, and behavioral factors limit the number of females that the males of any species can inseminate.”⁵⁰⁹ Human and non-human males do not produce unlimited sperm, and other limitations like female choice and the costs of courtship mean that we should expect males to instinctually exhibit “choosiness” rather than rampant promiscuity. Dewsbury concludes, “There is ample evidence that males can and do discriminate among females, mating preferentially with some females.”⁵¹⁰ This applies to human and non-human species. As

⁵⁰⁸ Donald Dewsbury, “Ejaculate Cost and Male Choice,” *The American Naturalist* 119 (1982), p. 601. Dewsbury argues, “Males are limited with respect to the number of ejaculates they can deliver and the time required to restore depleted reserves. Because ejaculates are a limited resource, prudence would be expected in the allocation of ejaculates to females” (p. 607).

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 601-602.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., p. 605.

Cordelia Fine summarizes, species as diverse as the stinkbug, the bucktooth parrot-fish, and the marsupial mouse all demonstrate a high cost of reproduction for males and thus, unsurprisingly, also reveal male practices of “chastity” and choosiness.⁵¹¹ In addition to the biological forces that might impel both males and females to demonstrate discrimination in partner choice, it is becoming more apparent as well that popular assumptions about men “naturally” desiring to have multiple sexual partners and finding monogamy to be a burden are also myths reflecting little about the realities of the sexual preferences of actual men. Note, for example, that the 2003 British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) which randomly sampled more than twelve thousand people between the ages of 16-44 found that, for both men and women, the majority identified their ideal relationship as being a sexually exclusive one with one partner.⁵¹² The notion that males are “by nature” more prone than females to promiscuity and infidelity because of the lower cost to them of reproduction appears to be an inaccurate narrative that perhaps reveals more about the wishful thinking of proponents of the theory than the sexual behaviors of actual human and non-human males.

Another key voice contributing to the challenging of Bateman’s findings is primatologist and anthropologist Sarah Hrdy. Through her work with primates—the closest evolutionary cousins to humans—Hrdy has contributed groundbreaking research detailing the dynamics of female competition, aggression, promiscuity, and also cooperation in nature. For example, in *The Langurs of Abu: Female and Male Strategies of Reproduction*, she

⁵¹¹ Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, p. 41.

⁵¹² *The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* (NATSAL), <http://natsal.ac.uk/natsals-12/results-archived-data.aspx>, Table 8.1.

argues that the females within a species of monkey known as “langurs” in northwestern India were habitually promiscuous because male langurs would attack the infants of unfamiliar females, but not the infants of females they had mated with.⁵¹³ Female promiscuity, in this case, offered a survival advantage for a female and her offspring. She notes in the 2009 edition of her monograph *The Woman Who Never Evolved* that anthropologists have become aware of populations in both traditional and modern human societies in which similar patterns have emerged of mothers using sexual relationships with multiple men in order to secure provisions and protection for their children.⁵¹⁴ The level of promiscuity that is practiced among members of a particular sex, Hrdy argues, is dependent upon not just on one’s “essential” nature, but rather, on one’s “ecological, demographic, historical, and . . . immediate endocrinological circumstances and the various options open.”⁵¹⁵

In Hrdy’s more recent monograph *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, she argues that humans are unique in their development of what she calls “cooperative breeding.”⁵¹⁶ Through her studies of the !Kung people living in the Kalahari desert, the Hadza in Tanzania, and the Efé people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Hrdy describes the phenomenon of cooperative breeding, which simply means that, unlike with primates, human offspring do not stay constantly attached to their birth mothers. Rather, it is accepted practice to have grandparents, other family members, and even close friends play parental roles. She calls these other figures “alloparents.” Cooperative breeding,

⁵¹³ Sarah Hrdy, *The Langurs of Abu: Female and Male Strategies of Reproduction*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1977).

⁵¹⁴ Sarah Hrdy, *The Woman That Never Evolved*, 2nd Edition, London: Harvard University Press (2009), p. xxii.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., p. xxiii.

⁵¹⁶ Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*, Cambridge: Belknap Press (2009).

Hrdy argues, is a significant factor shaping human “pro-social behaviors.”⁵¹⁷ She argues that the prevalence of “cooperative breeding” among humans indicates, contra Trivers, that our way of understanding “parental investment” must be expanded beyond the traditional dogma that the investment primarily comes from the birth mother. Additionally, she argues, our assumptions about an innate “maternal instinct” must change as well. A person’s responsiveness to infants, she argues, “is to a large degree acquired through experience—through both the experience of nurturing and the experience of being nurtured.”⁵¹⁸ Furthermore, even something as central to being male as the hormone testosterone is widely variable depending on contextual factors. Testosterone levels are, in the words of Cordelia Fine, “inextricably intertwined with the individual’s history and subjective experience,” rather than existing as an incontrovertible example of biological sexual difference.⁵¹⁹ A 2011 study found that testosterone levels in males significantly decreased in fathers, and especially fathers who invested time tending to their offspring.⁵²⁰ This leads one to wonder how the “nature” of masculinity might be altered in the long term if societal expectations regarding the care of children encouraged men to be the primary caregivers. This is not to say that there are no statistical or meaningful differences in the biology of being male and female, or that these differences don’t matter. Sex matters greatly in terms of impacting human behaviors. It is simply to point out that biological sexual difference is plastic and is continually being influenced by contextual and cultural factors. Both males and females possess impulses to

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p. 290.

⁵¹⁹ Fine, *Testosterone Rex*, p. 143.

⁵²⁰ Gettler, McDade, Feranil, Kuzawa, Longitudinal evidence that fatherhood decreases testosterone in human males, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108 (2011), pp. 16194-16199.

nurture and capacities to empathize, but the extent to which these capacities develop or atrophy can be largely influenced by culture and social roles.

These have been just a few examples of how scientific information about the nature of sexual difference and sexual selection has been evolving in recent years. The salient point for this chapter is to show the broad diversity of sexual characteristics and behaviors at play in the natural world in order to challenge simplistic narratives about the nature of sexual difference, and the possibility of different gendered sins. This is not to say that there are no stable biological differences beyond genitalia in human beings, but it is to suggest that the story is more complicated than the received dogmas about “natural” female passivity and choosiness, and male activity and promiscuity. As Hrdy summarizes, in the most recent scientific literature,

Female animals are viewed as highly variable creatures, sometimes monandrous, more often polyandrous, sometimes nurturing or cooperative, other times competitive, destructive, and as likely as their male counterparts to strive for status in the spheres that matter to them. For better or worse, they are wide open to Darwinian selection.⁵²¹

There is a great amount of plasticity in the behaviors associated with sexed bodies, and culture is always entangled with nature such that there are no “purely natural” sexual characteristics that exist independent from cultural influence. West-Eberhard argues that “Of all the major transformations in the history of life, the evolution of sex is the most enigmatic.”⁵²² The assumption held by both Augustine and Darwin about the “natural” inferiority of women that justified their subordination seems to have been largely shaped by

⁵²¹ Hrdy, *The Woman That Never Evolved*, p. xviii.

⁵²² Mary Jane West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution*, Oxford: Oxford University (2003), p. 630.

the cultural frameworks of their respective time periods, and so deserves to be examined anew in light of new information. Within a Catholic context, the Magisterium has shifted in recent years from speaking about women in terms of “natural” subordination in favor of the language of “complementarity,” such as the type developed in Pope Saint John Paul II’s *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, which is discussed later in this thesis.⁵²³ However, the plasticity of the biology of sexual difference and the broad range of the expression of sexed traits and behavior found in the natural world problematizes any straightforward understanding of the ways in which men and women are “complementary” to one another, beyond the relatively stable categories of primary sex organs. I include the modifier “relatively” when referring to the stability of the primary sex organs because while these have remained statistically stable in the history of our species, we cannot predict the ways in which the human race will continue to evolve in terms of our sexed characteristics, especially in light of the rapid developments in technologies related to human reproduction. Augustine’s assumptions (and ours) about the gendered nature of sin must be rethought in light of this influx of new information about the nature of sexual difference.

5. Conclusion

To understand how some of the received dogmas regarding the biology of sexual difference are now being challenged in light of greater consideration of the dynamic relationship between genes and environment, and to conclude this chapter, let us return to the example of bone health, which we discussed in the introduction. Much of the traditional research concerning sex and race differences in bone strength and risk of osteoporosis is

⁵²³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Boston: Pauline Books and Media (2006).

riddled with methodological problems. The first issue is that while categories of sexual difference are ubiquitous as considerations in medical research studies, the terms “sex” and “gender” are rarely defined in these studies, and are sometimes used interchangeably. This is significant because of the ways in which medical information is seen as authoritative and shapes cultural conceptions of “natural” race and sex differences.⁵²⁴ While many within the humanities since the 1970s have differentiated between sex and gender, with sex referring to biological characteristics, and gender referring to sociological or cultural interpretations of biological sexual differences, the medical community has not reached consensus on the relationship between the terms. Confusion over terminology impacts the questions shaping the initial approach to the research, the choices about who qualifies as participants in medical studies, and the subsequent communication of the results. In 2001, the Institute of Medicine reported, “There is an inconsistent and often confusing use of the terms sex and gender in the scientific literature and popular press,”⁵²⁵ and Anne Fausto-Sterling argues, “Many medical texts use the terms [sex and gender] interchangeably, while some scientists apply the term *gender* to the study of nonhuman animals.”⁵²⁶ The same problem of ill-defined terms plagues studies on race and bone health. Fausto-Sterling notes, “when a biomedical researcher uses the term ‘race,’ he or she may intend any of number of meanings.”⁵²⁷ For example, researchers

⁵²⁴ There are also financial and social justice ramifications of the race and sex stereotypes enforced by medical research studies. For example, the commonly held belief that “black people” have less lung capacity than “white people” means that a baseline norm for lung capacity for “black people” has been established that is 10-15% lower than the baseline norm for “white people,” thus making it necessary for a “black” person to be sicker than a “white” person before they can qualify for insurance coverage in the United States for lung-related issues. (c.f. Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Race,” *Social Studies of Science* 38, no. 5 (2008), pp. 659-660).

⁵²⁵ Executive Summary of the Institute of Medicine Report, “Exploring the biological contributions to human health: does sex matter?”, *Journal of Women’s Health & Gender-Based Medicine* 10, no. 5 (2001), p. 438.

⁵²⁶ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 - Sex and Gender,” p. 1498.

⁵²⁷ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Race,” p. 660.

typically use the category of race in one of three ways. One approach is to seek to be “race-neutral” and group populations according to particular genetic markers.⁵²⁸ Another approach is to categorize “race” in terms of “geographical ancestry;” and the third approach is to use “self-identification, a social act” as a means of measuring one’s belonging within a certain racial group.⁵²⁹ Often researchers will adopt one of these interpretations of “race” but not make explicit which one, which is problematic given the fact that the chosen definition of race being used will drastically change the meaning of the results of a study aiming to examine racial differences in populations. Despite all of this confusion and ambiguity over the meaning of “race,” the popular perception remains that “being white” is a risk factor for developing osteoporosis, even though this black-white divide did not apply when Africans from Gambia were compared to British Caucasians.⁵³⁰ Medical concerns intersect with social, political, and ethical ones as the medical community shapes conceptions of who is “at-risk” and who is not, and thus which populations ought to have greater access to disease-prevention information, drugs, and therapy.⁵³¹

⁵²⁸ Alexandra Shields, Michael Fortun, Evelyn M. Hammonds, Patricia A. King, Caryn Lerman, Rayna Rapp, Patrick F. Sullivan, “The Use of Race Variables in Genetic Studies of Complex Traits and the Goal of Reducing Health Disparities: A Transdisciplinary Perspective,” eds. Norman B. Anderson, Kim J. Nickerson, *American Psychologist* 60, no. 1, (2005), p. 80.

⁵²⁹ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Race,” p. 660.

⁵³⁰ A 1995 article in *Calcified Tissue International* states, “Black women have higher bone densities than white women,” and later, “Higher bone mineral density in American blacks as compared with whites has been found throughout the lifecycle.” J. Aloia, A. Vaswani, J.K. Yeh, E. Flaster, “Risk for Osteoporosis in Black Women,” *Calcified Tissue International* 59, No. 6, (1995), p. 415. For a comparison of Africans (Gambians) with British Caucasians see B. Dibba, A. Prentice, M.A. Laskey, D.M. Stirling, and T.J. Cole, “An investigation of ethnic differences in bone mineral, hip axis length, calcium metabolism and bone turnover between West African and Caucasian adults living in the United Kingdom,” *Annals of Human Biology* 26, no. 3 (1999), p. 229, which concludes, “This study revealed few ethnic differences that could account for the disparity in osteoporotic fracture rates between Africans and Caucasians, with the possible exception of anatomical differences in the hip.”

⁵³¹ This is not to imply that there is anything sinister or intentionally deceptive happening in the world of medicine, but it simply reveals the limitations and the liabilities inherent to categorizing and studying people based on sex and race.

In addition to the confusion over terminology demonstrated above, a further problem exists in the pervasive narrative that declining estrogen “causes” bone thinning. This is a reductive over-simplification that manufactures a perception that women as a universal category are more at risk of developing weak bones by virtue of something intrinsic to the female body apart from environmental factors. Weak bones are often presented as a destiny determined by genes, when the reality is much more complex. While this approach to osteoporosis simplifies the solution—which is to give at-risk women hormone replacement drugs, or, in the future, to potentially edit their genes so as to eliminate this liability—it obfuscates the reality that bodies are always embedded within various environmental, cultural, and social contexts that shape biological processes and that these contexts are reciprocally shaped by biology. For example, bone health is impacted by genetic factors, but also by “functional adaptation,”⁵³² which simply means that bones become stronger or weaker depending on how they are used. Disuse or a small amount of consistent strain contributes to bones weakening, whereas strain that is varied in levels of intensity can contribute to bones becoming stronger. The amount of strain regularly placed upon a given individual’s bones can be influenced by a myriad of intersecting factors including exercise habits, socio-economic position, forms of employment, and geographical location.

Furthermore, while estrogen is one factor influencing bone health, the hormonal situation is also more complicated than it seems. As Fausto-Sterling notes, at least “three major hormone systems acting both independently of one another and through mutual influence regulate bone formation and loss,” and “two of these operate at times through the

⁵³² Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 - Sex and Gender,” p. 1507.

brain and the sympathetic (involuntary) nervous system.”⁵³³ The fact that the brain plays such a significant role in regulating bone development means that emotional factors like stress may also influence bone health.⁵³⁴ Diet also impacts significantly upon bone health and is largely shaped by cultural and social mores, including gender norms. Note, for example that “27 percent of US teenage girls (compared with 10 percent of adolescent boys) who think they weigh the correct amount are nevertheless trying to lose weight.”⁵³⁵ Long-term dieting, and for some, the onset of diseases like anorexia nervosa have debilitating cumulative effects on bone health, and these risk factors impact some more than others based on social location, or in theological terms, based on the extent to which one is a victim of structural sins like racism and misogyny. Thin bones, then, are not a biological inevitability for women (and “white” women more than “black” women) because of fixed, genetic, sexual or racial differences. Rather, bones develop differently “over the lifecycle as a response to specific lived lives.”⁵³⁶ Genes certainly play a role, but more important than a specific combination of genes is “when during the lifecycle and in which cells and tissues particular genes act or fail to act.”⁵³⁷

This does not mean that there are no significant differences in bone health between various populations or individuals, or that there is no possible way to group these differences meaningfully, but it does show the problems that arise when nature and culture are not understood as always inextricably intertwined. Differences in bones exist, but they must be

⁵³³ Ibid., p. 1508.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., “The Bare Bones of Race,” p. 678.

⁵³⁵ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 - Sex and Gender,” p. 1515.

⁵³⁶ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Race,” p. 658.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 678.

understood, as much as possible, within a framework that can account for the complexities of the various entanglements of biological and cultural systems that work together to produce bodies. As the products of both nature and nurture, “humans literally embody—via processes which necessarily involve gene expression—the dynamic, social, material, and ecological contexts into which we are born, develop, interact with, and endeavor to live meaningful lives.”⁵³⁸

Bones speak. They are witnesses to history; and while the stories they tell might be about differences in human bodies, they reveal to us not biological certainties, but rather, the ways in which even something as fundamental as the infrastructure that holds us upright eludes facile reduction. The example of osteoporosis is useful for illuminating the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between genes and environment that is continually at work to propel human evolution. “Culture” and “nature” are indivisible, and “nature” cannot be reduced to dead matter that culture exploits or to a bundle of genes that is subjected to the mindless mechanisms of evolution. Rather, culture is “a partner in producing body systems commonly referred to as biology,”⁵³⁹ and nature is active as a shaping force of culture. This revitalized concept of human evolution and the “nature” of sexual difference departs from the obsession with genes and mechanistic metaphors that have so defined the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The revolutions and reformations happening in evolutionary biology and the biology of sexual difference are rich with possibilities for integration with theologies of (original) sin and sexual difference.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., p. 676.

⁵³⁹ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1 - Sex and Gender,” p. 1516.

Interlude

We transition now from our immersion in the material and biological intricacies of human life to an integration of the insights we have gained into a theological exploration of the meaning of the human person as sexed and as participating in a history of inherited sin. Here we develop an understanding of the meaning of the sexed body that integrates its biological dynamism with its nature as called by God and saturated with theological meaning. As we will see in this chapter, reflecting on the dynamics of evolution—the material forces that move around and through us—provides us with essential information to be integrated into a theology of sexed bodies, and it will also assist us in considering anew the legacy of our inheritance of sin. We are in search of a theological anthropology that is at once a theology of sexual difference, and at the same time, a theology that is able to account for the woundedness that infects and distorts creaturely life.

This project aims to avoid two different pitfalls that can arise in the quest to understand the meaning of our bodies. For some with a propensity to defer to science as the ultimate authority, there is a temptation to terminate investigations into the meaning of human life at the level of biology, and to give material investigation an inappropriate ultimacy. On the other hand, theologians are perhaps more prone to making the opposite mistake. Reacting against reductionism and scientism, we create romanticized and disembodied theological anthropologies that fail to take seriously our nature as biological creatures and that also fail to appreciate the radical way in which the Incarnation has

definitively rendered the material world the site of divine communication.⁵⁴⁰ This results in theological statements about humanity that feel dissonant, or that explain human life in a way that does not reflect the complexity of life as we know it on a daily and a visceral level, and so fail to be transformative. This project has sought, on the one hand, to bring a renewed focus on the biology of sexed bodies to theology, and to evoke a sense of wonder at the complexity and explosive unpredictability of material reality. On the other hand, it does not terminate its reflection on the sexed body at the level of biology, but seeks to understand the body in light of its theological meaning as well.

Our investigations into the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and the biology of sexual difference revealed many insights that will be crucial to keep in mind as we turn to a theological reflection on humanity. We pause here momentarily to review where we have been before we press on with the task of developing a new framework for a theology of sexual difference and original sin. We have seen the incredibly diverse panoply of sexed characteristics and behaviors found in species throughout the natural world, and have come to appreciate the reality that these characteristics are to a large extent mutable and plastic. The environmental niches we have inherited and in which we live intersect with our bodies in reciprocal feedback loops to such an extent that many of what seem like our most intractable traits are rendered highly variable and adaptable. Indeed, our uncanny ability to adapt to our circumstances is part of what has enabled our species to evolve to its current

⁵⁴⁰ Alister McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell (2008), p. 15. McGrath states, “God’s decision to inhabit the material order in and through the incarnation affirms its God-bestowed—though not inevitable or automatic—capacity to reveal the divine.” Additionally, Ian Barbour defines scientism as the belief that “the scientific method is the only reliable source of knowledge” (Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?*, New York: Harper San Francisco (2000), p. 14).

state of complexity. However, it is not only that cultural and environmental forces shape our materiality, as if our bodies were passive, exerting no agency. Rather, the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis has revealed the circular and dynamic causal relationship between the biological and the cultural. Our bodies are mutable in response to environmental factors, however they can also be stubbornly recalcitrant, and in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, they are also able to “facilitate and make possible cultural existence and social change.”⁵⁴¹

Our biological investigations have revealed as well that this flux and fluidity of sexed traits is a reality that is not limited to only non-human species. Within the history of our own species we observe a great deal of change over time in our sexually differentiated traits at the biological level as well as variation in how these traits are interpreted. Every aspect of our sexed bodies, from hormones to behaviors, is adaptable to environmental factors, which problematizes any attempts to “essentialize” sexual differences. Contrary to some popular assumptions about Darwin that portray him as both a sexist and a racist, we learned as well that Darwin can actually be a helpful resource for feminist theologians seeking to dismantle oppressive hierarchies and simplistic binaries. The fundamental processes of evolution work to further these goals, as Darwin demonstrated. With his theory of natural selection, Darwin dismantled the animal/human binary and reminded us that to be human is to be subject to a variety of natural forces that continue to shape us to this day, and it is also to share an evolutionary history with non-human species. We are inextricably interconnected with the rest of the natural world, and we are perennially a species in motion. To be human is to be mutable and adaptable. The phenotypic traits we display now are not the same as those of

⁵⁴¹ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 14.

our ancestors and they will not remain the same in the future. What is needed now is a theological anthropology that will equip us to welcome the unknown future of our species with hope.

With his theory of sexual selection, Darwin helps us to see that the movements of evolution are not completely constrained by the forces of natural selection, but rather, the future of our species is fundamentally unpredictable and non-linear because human sexual attraction is mercurial and varied. Darwin helps us to see the critical role that desire plays in human life. We are desiring creatures, and our desires confound constraint and prediction. While Darwin, as a man of his time, perceived the forces of sexual selection as providing biological evidence of the superiority of males over females, and of the nature of males as competitive and aggressive and females as passive and nurturing, he also acknowledged from the beginning that these states were mutable and capable of being reversed if the cultural conditions were altered. Though he thought it unlikely that women would ever be able to become the biological and intellectual equals of men, he refused to create permanent categories for what might be possible for the sexes. Rather, he insisted on viewing human sexuality in the context of its participation in the flux and variability of the greater natural world of which humans are a part. In this way, Darwin permanently changed the conversation about the “nature” of sexual difference.

This project has sought then to turn to Darwin and to the realm of evolutionary biology, but not for the reasons one might expect. Rather than using biology to bolster notions of fixed and permanent sexual differences, as some have done in the past, we turn to Darwin to argue the exact opposite. As evolutionary biologist Marlene Zuk argues, “Contrary to

popular belief, biology does not set limits, it demolishes them.”⁵⁴² Darwin and subsequent developments in evolutionary biology reveal the plastic and mutable nature of every aspect of human life. Biology and materiality are not only adaptable to the movements of culture, they are also sources of upheaval and change. This unveiling of the biological forcefulness but also instability of sexually differentiated traits must impact our theological reflection on the meaning of the sexed body. While reflecting deeply on the biology of being human has the potential to lead to a reduction of the human to biology, if we affirm the “unity of truth,” then we must not craft theologies of sexual difference that are inconsistent with what we know from the biological sciences.⁵⁴³ In terms of theological development, we must go beyond biology, but we must not divorce ourselves from the realities of our bodies if we seek to develop theologies that reflect the diversity and complexity of human life, and the ways in which the materiality of our bodies has the ability to “astonish, to invent, to transform.”⁵⁴⁴

We turn now to the construction of a biological-theological account of the human body as sexed that is cognizant of the ways in which our history of participation in “hereditary sin” impinges upon our sexual lives and relationships. The notion of “original sin” continues to carry immense explanatory power for the human situation in the twenty-first century. While sin will not have the last word, we must face the reality of its pervasiveness and recalcitrance in order to create a realistic picture of creaturely life in the 21st century.

⁵⁴² Marlene Zuk, *Sexual Selections: What We Can and Can't Learn about Sex from Animals*, London: University of California Press (2002), p. 21.

⁵⁴³ Drawing from the insights of Thomas Aquinas on this subject, John Paul II states in *Fides et Ratio*, “The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning . . . It is the one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend, and who reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §34. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html, retrieved on 23 November).

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

Chapter 5: John Paul II, New Catholic Feminists, and the *Theology of the Body*

1. A Theology of Sex and Sin after #MeToo



The 21st century has provided new and myriad examples of the ways in which sin reverberates through our sexually differentiated bodies. In the context of the United States and the United Kingdom, terms like “toxic masculinity” and “#MeToo” have become commonplace features of discourse. In 2018, there were revealed, almost daily, new stories from survivors of sexual assault, intimidation, and harassment—from neighborhoods and schools, the entertainment industry, USA gymnastics, and from Washington DC in the confirmation hearings for a Supreme Court Justice. Churches have not emerged from these days of reckoning with clean

⁵⁴⁵ Erik Ravelo, “Los Intocables,” <https://www.tfod.in/art-design-articles/7042/-the-untouchables--by-erik-ravelo>, retrieved on 2 March 2019.

hands either. Indeed, some of the most heartbreaking and harrowing tales of perverse, systemic, and violent sexual abuse of children, and the attempts to cover up those abuses, emerged from the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report in August of 2018.⁵⁴⁶ Grief and anger at these revelations has metastasized as other reports like it continue to emerge from around the world—Chile, Germany, Ireland, and elsewhere. The piece of artwork marking the beginning of this chapter—“Los Intocables” by Cuban artist Eric Ravelo—that depicts a child crucified on the back of a priest captures with poignancy the depth of anguish and outrage felt by many in response to these reports. “Los Intocables” makes a profound theological statement about sin. Our personal and collective illness has calcified to such an extent that those who are the most innocent and vulnerable, those who should be “los intocables” (the untouchables), are the ones made to suffer the most. And a deeper evil—they are victimized by those who were called to act *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. The untouchables have been crucified at the hands of those tasked with representing the Crucified One. The persistent deluge of stories from victims that has been unleashed in the past year has shattered any illusions of moral progress we might have entertained in regards to the human species. Human life continues to be plagued by the sickness of systemic sin, and the disease is causing profound suffering and diminishment of human dignity.

The phenomenon of #MeToo that has exploded in 2017 and 2018 has brought the dysfunctions and the disturbances present within us to the forefront of the cultural consciousness of the West in a new way. This has had the added effect of revealing as well the immense suffering caused by these distortions. Our theologies and our catechesis have

⁵⁴⁶ The results of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report can be found at <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/report/>. Retrieved on 7 October 2018.

clearly failed to equip us with a convincing and transformative understanding of our sexed bodies and the meaning of sexual relationships. Reading the signs of our times invites us into deeper awareness of the relational neglect and exploitation that continue to plague our species, and it calls us to take up anew the perennial questions of the meaning of human life, including the most fundamental questions about the meaning of our bodies as sexed.

Every generation must engage in its own reflection on the meaning of the body in light of the specific questions and concerns that define that time period. The specifically sexual nature of the suffering revealed in the 21st century demands that we develop a theology of human life that marshals the resources of multiple disciplines in order to consider humanity in its material and metaphysical complexity. We are biological creatures, but we are also more than the sum of our biological parts. The human situation in the 21st century also requires that we consider anew the sexually differentiated nature of human life in the context of our history of participation in the legacy of inherited sin. Again, this will require the integration of information revealed by the natural sciences and insights from the theological tradition. We manifest the symptoms of our collective illness in unique ways based on the particularities of our bodies, and the particularities of these bodies are the result of inherited biological and cultural processes, as well as environmental niches, which were formed long before us and which we inherited. In part, our sickness has been a result of biological forces and environments that we do not control, and of which we are not always even aware. However, we also constantly mediate and adapt the world we have received from those who have gone before, and we shape the biological and cultural world that will be passed on. Thus, we are not completely at the mercy of our bio-cultural worlds, but we also

mold our world as active agents. A theology of sex and sin must be able to articulate this agential dynamism.

In order to develop a theology of sex and sin that is both scientifically engaged and theologically robust, we bring together two unlikely sources to draw what is useful from each, to allow their juxtaposition to be mutually corrective of each other's limitations and shortcomings, and from this juxtaposition to move forward to an integration that ultimately transcends both. We first examine one of the most persistently influential theological treatises on the sexually differentiated body, and one that also considers at length the nature of sexual difference in light of original sin—the former Pope John Paul II's *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. John Paul II was a pope who was beloved by many Catholics, and his lengthy discussion of the theological meaning of masculinity and femininity has had an immense impact on not only academic theology, but it also has played a significant role in shaping the lay imagination as his work has been widely read at the popular level and is used as a resource in “Pre-Cana” workshops (mandatory catechesis for engaged couples planning to get married in the Catholic church). Additionally, his theological anthropology as expressed in his formal lectures, the *Theology of the Body* monograph, and his other pastoral letters and encyclicals, inspired a new movement of Catholic feminists who describe themselves as “New Catholic Feminists.” The New Catholic Feminists and others who have embraced the *Theology of the Body* articulated by John Paul II have done so in part because of their perception that his theological anthropology provides a credible diagnosis of, and response to, a variety of contemporary social ills including the lingering effects of the sexual revolution on sexual behavior and norms, Cartesian dualism,

“postmodern” feminism, and relativism.⁵⁴⁷ The New Catholic Feminists describe themselves as responding to the call by John Paul II for a new style of feminism which “rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination,’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society.”⁵⁴⁸ Because of the sustained and pervasive influence of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, it will be useful to examine his thought—and its appropriation and development by the New Catholic Feminists—in depth here. The theology of the sexed body proposed in this project is developed in conversation with John Paul II’s contribution, appreciating and carrying forward some of its insights, while challenging or radicalizing others.

The second resource we draw from in the development of a constructive theology of sexual difference and sin is a movement in feminist theory known as “New Feminist Materialism.” I juxtapose John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* with New Feminist Materialism in order to develop a theological anthropology that can move beyond deconstruction and critique without reverting back to traditional categories that are overly simplistic and inconsistent with information from the biological sciences, and are thus no longer adequate. New Feminist Materialists engage in philosophical reflection on the material and biological realities of human life, but far from being a return to modernism, New Feminist Materialism is, as Stacy Alaimo argues, “a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either.”⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁷ C.f the introduction to *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, p. 24.

⁵⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html, §99.

⁵⁴⁹ *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2008), p. 6.

The *Theology of the Body* articulated by John Paul II and accepted by many Catholics needs the disciplined commitment to the material and to the biological that is offered by the New Feminist Materialists. Serious attention to the biological and the material can helpfully destabilize the former pope's depictions of human sexual difference as binary, static, and eternal. It would enable his *Theology of the Body* to integrate the reality of the mutability, unpredictability, and plasticity of human life, including human sexual difference. On the other hand, the approach of the New Feminist Materialists suffers from an inadequate metaphysical framework to ground its understanding of the material, and their claims could be radicalized and extended beyond what the New Feminist Materialists are currently willing to imagine were they to be rooted in a theology of the Incarnation. In this way, the New Feminist Materialists could benefit from some of the insights from John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Additionally, the New Feminist Materialists often express an overly optimistic view of the possibility of the material forces of evolution facilitating human liberation and progress, and their portrayal of the movements of human becoming could be helpfully tempered by a theology of sin. Each, then, on their own, offers an incomplete depiction of human life as differently sexed, but when brought together, the New Feminist Materialists and John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* can provide us with helpful tools to construct a theology of sex and sin after #MeToo.

2. John Paul II's *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*

*"The fact that theology also includes the body should not astonish or surprise anyone who is conscious of the mystery and reality of the Incarnation. Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . I would say, through the main door."*⁵⁵⁰

--John Paul II

Originally a series of 129 lectures given by John Paul II between the years of 1979 and 1984, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* was eventually translated, edited, and released in the form of a monograph. This section highlights seven key tenets of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. It then explains how his thought should be critiqued and radicalized for a renewed theological anthropology.

a. The body as biological and sacramental reality

In his theological anthropology, John Paul II develops a theology that takes the sexed body seriously as a sacramental reality, or as a visible sign of divine grace. While his aim is to develop a theology of sexual difference, he affirms throughout the work that this theology is not meant to contradict what the biological sciences reveal about the truth of sexed bodies. Indeed, John Paul II was a pope famous for his encouragement of integration of the disciplines, and especially of theology and science. Rather, he seeks what he describes as a more complete understanding of the truth that extends beyond—but still encompasses—the somatic realities of human sexuality. The sciences must be valued for the contributions they can make to our knowledge of what it means to be differently sexed, but we must not assume that the meaning of our bodies is determined solely by what the natural sciences reveal, he

⁵⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Boston: Pauline Books (2006), p. 169.

argues. A theology of our sexed bodies must progress, he states, “through all the single elements of contemporary science,” but theologians are called to develop a more “integral” approach to understanding the human person that rebukes the contemporary tendency towards “partial conceptions [of humanity] that dwell on one or another aspect of the *compositum humanum*.”⁵⁵¹ While drawing insights from the natural sciences can be instructive, he argues, it can also lead to temptations to elevate what is only a “partial truth” about the human person to the level of the whole truth, and on the basis of this partial truth to make “proposals and practical suggestions for human behavior” or to make the human person “an object of certain technologies” in a way that diminishes the God-given human ability to be a responsible subject with the power to determine his or her own actions.⁵⁵² Throughout his *Theology of the Body*, then, John Paul II expresses at times appreciation for the natural sciences, at other times suspicion, and consistently a desire to “go beyond” the insights provided by the natural sciences about the truth of being a creature who is differently sexed.

b. The “spousal” meaning of the body

In a quest to understand human origins in a theological key, John Paul II engages in a sustained reflection upon and exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis. Through this exegesis he seeks to unveil the “extraordinary nature of what is ordinary.”⁵⁵³ He argues that he intends to elucidate the “whole truth” of the human body as male and female. This whole truth, he states, is “the simple and pure truth of communion between the persons.”⁵⁵⁴ He argues that to

⁵⁵¹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 168.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., p. 138.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

be human is to be at once a solitary figure before God, but at the same time, it is to be a creature whose body reveals its nature as called to communion with others. We find the meaning of our bodies, he argues, only through the process of reciprocal self-giving and in the experience of being received by another. The somatic structure of the human reveals what John Paul II describes as the “spousal” meaning of the body, which, he argues, is “the power to express love.”⁵⁵⁵ While, on the surface, his terminology would seem to indicate that the meaning of the body can only be found in marriage, it is important to note that he interprets “spousal” as the capacity to give and receive love, and this can be expressed, he argues, in a variety of different life states, including marriage, celibacy, and in “many kinds of human suffering.”⁵⁵⁶

c. “Original innocence”, nakedness, and sexual difference as gift

Reflecting on the origin myths found in Genesis, he argues that before the Fall and expulsion from the garden, the man and the woman experienced both the homogeneity and the sexual difference of their bodies as a source of joy. Their “original nakedness” and lack of shame, he argues, revealed their mutual trust and their belief that their bodies would be welcomed by the other as a gift. The primal couple in a state of innocence had no suspicion or distrust of the other, and so they were naked and without shame. Before the arrival of sin, they perceived the other as created by God in a unique and unrepeatable way—each of them was a creature willed by God for its own sake, but also for unity and communion. The original couple also delighted in their shared humanity reflected in the similarity of their frames when compared with the rest of the animal kingdom. John Paul II argues,

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 363.

Despite the diversity in constitution tied to the sexual difference, somatic homogeneity is so evident that the man, on waking up from genetic sleep, expresses it immediately when he says, ‘This time she is flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones. She will be called woman because from man has she been taken’ (Gen 2:23).⁵⁵⁷

The joy reflected in Adam’s exclamation at the sight of Eve reveals that delight in beholding another is our “original” and most fundamental emotion, according to John Paul II. Prelapsarian original innocence, then, according to the former pope, was characterized by the ability of the primal couple to recognize the “spousal” meaning of the body in its capacity for love, to perceive the other as a gift from God, to reach out to another in trust, to experience reciprocal self-gift and radical acceptance of the other, and the ability to welcome another completely in his or her uniqueness. The original innocence of the first couple was made possible by grace, which enabled the first man and woman to live the truth of their humanity as reciprocal gift.⁵⁵⁸ The lack of shame of the first couple was the result of their being “united by the consciousness of the gift” and of their awareness of the spousal meaning of their bodies.⁵⁵⁹ Through their embodiment and especially through the sexual nature of the body as male and female, John Paul II argues, “man becomes a visible sign of the economy of Truth and Love which has its source in God himself.”⁵⁶⁰ The Genesis narrative reveals an additional insight into the theological meaning of the human body, according to John Paul II—the body is meant to be generative. Sexual differentiation is “ordered to an end,” which he argues is biological procreation.⁵⁶¹ Indeed, he states that it is only through biological motherhood and

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 158.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., p. 147.

fatherhood that a human can come to understand the full meaning of masculinity and femininity. Our somatic nature as differently sexed finds its deepest fulfillment only by bearing fruit in the form of biological children, according to John Paul II. He states, “man stands, as male and female, with the consciousness of the generative meaning of his own body: masculinity contains in a hidden way the meaning of fatherhood and femininity that of motherhood.”⁵⁶² Sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, he argues further, is the means by which the unity of the man and woman is placed “under the blessing of fruitfulness.”⁵⁶³

d. Original sin, shame, and sexual difference as opposition

While the central aim of John Paul II’s proposal is to articulate a theology of masculinity and femininity, he develops this in light of his belief that humanity has lost its state of original innocence. The doctrine of original sin is a fundamental facet of his theological anthropology. He speaks of “hereditary sin” and the “inheritance of the first fall,”⁵⁶⁴ at times implying that this is a Fall that happened at a particular historical moment. He argues that we participate in a history of sin, and this history of sin has diminished our ability to perceive the theological meaning of our sexed bodies and it has distorted relations between the sexes. To understand the meaning of sexed bodies, he argues, thus requires reflection on the legacy of the sins of our first parents.

His reflections on the primal sin and its effects are anchored in the experience of shame, and his reflection on shame is one of the most compelling aspects of his theological

⁵⁶² Ibid., p. 166.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., p. 147.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 160, 169.

anthropology. He affirms repeatedly throughout his *Theology of the Body* that human experience is a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge for theology. Shame, he argues, emerged after the primal sin of the first couple, and it shook “the very foundations of their existence.”⁵⁶⁵ This shaking of the foundations of their existence held immediate implications for their experience of their bodies as sexually differentiated. The Genesis narrative indicates that after their disobedience, “the eyes of both were opened, and they realized that they were naked; they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”⁵⁶⁶ Before the arrival of sin, the sight of the naked body of the other was a source of joy, and the other was accepted as a unique and unrepeatable gift from God. The sexually differentiated body was interpreted as a sign of its capacity to give and receive love, or in other words, of its calling to communion. Before sin, the woman was naked before the man and she believed without difficulty that she would be accepted and welcomed by him, and vice versa. After sin, nakedness evoked neither delight nor trust, but instead, it produced shame, fear, and distrust. This shame, the former pope argues, manifested as doubt about the identity of the other and the self as a gift. Communion between persons is created by mutual acceptance and welcome. Shame creates a barrier to communion because it creates distrust of the other, such that a person is rendered unable to believe that he or she will be truly welcomed in the whole truth of who they are. Instead of reciprocal self-gift and acceptance, after the first sin, the first couple experienced “reciprocal shame that compels them to cover their nakedness.”⁵⁶⁷ Shame leads to the concealment of the body—the visible sign of both sexual difference and shared

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 178.

⁵⁶⁶ Genesis 3:6.

⁵⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 180.

humanity. In this way, the former pope argues, “the original shame of the body (“I am naked”) is already fear (“I was afraid”).”⁵⁶⁸ After the first sin, the man and woman filled with shame experience for the first time the fear that they will not be accepted and welcomed by the other. Their shame and fear lead them to conceal themselves, which causes a disintegration of authentic communication between the man and the woman and initiates a history of tumultuous and troubled relations between the sexes. The somatic difference between the sexes, the former pope argues, became “abruptly sensed and understood as an element of the mutual opposition of persons” rather than as a symbol of their calling to communion.⁵⁶⁹ The sight of the sexually different other no longer evoked the sense of “this is the flesh of my flesh.”⁵⁷⁰ The “original certainty” that the sexed body would lead to intimacy was replaced by fear that the sexed body would instead present an obstacle to genuine communion.⁵⁷¹

e. The “threefold concupiscence”

The former pope describes a “three-fold concupiscence” that emerged in the postlapsarian couple. He draws this notion of a “threefold concupiscence” from 1 John 2:16 which states “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not from the Father but is of the world.”⁵⁷² In the introduction to the English translation of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, the editor adds an interesting note about the former pope’s terminology for the concepts of desire, lust, and concupiscence, which as we have

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁵⁷⁰ Genesis 2:23.

⁵⁷¹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 184.

⁵⁷² 1 John 2:16.

seen in the context of Augustine's thought, can be quite complex terms with many layers of intended and unintended meanings. He notes that in the original Italian version of the text, John Paul II uses "lust" (*lussuria*) only four times, along with six instances of "lustful" (*libidinoso*) and eleven of "libido."⁵⁷³ He much more frequently uses the term "desire" (in Italian—*desiderare* or *desiderio*).⁵⁷⁴ However, in English this has mostly been translated as either "lust" or "concupiscence" in order to indicate what the translators assumed that John Paul II meant to communicate, which is that desire is not evil in itself. Rather, only lustful or acquisitive desire should be called sinful. Indeed, in the English translation the concern of the translators to convince the reader that John Paul II only means to condemn sinful desire is further revealed by the frequent additions in brackets of the word "reductive" to many of the former pope's references to desire. For example, one section of the *Theology of the Body* reads as follows, "In our last reflection, we said that Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount directly refer to [reductive] "desire" born immediately in the human heart."⁵⁷⁵ The word "reductive," since it is in brackets, is importantly not found in the original Italian text of *Theology of the Body*, but it is rather a moment (and these moments are frequent in the text) in which the translators and editors have added an interpretive gloss to prevent the reader from reading John Paul II as having a pessimistic view towards desire in general.⁵⁷⁶ The

⁵⁷³ Michael Waldstein, Introduction to *Theology of the Body*, p. 34.

⁵⁷⁴ My examination of the Italian edition of *Theology of the Body* confirmed Waldstein's description of the more prevalent use of "desiderare" and "desiderio" in comparison with "lussuria" and "libido" (cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Uomo e Donna Lo Creò: Catechesi Sull'amore Umano*, Roma: Città Nuova (2009).

⁵⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 175.

⁵⁷⁶ The Italian text states, "Durante l'ultima nostra riflessione, abbiamo detto che le parole di Cristo nel discorso della montagna sono in diretto riferimento al desiderio che nasce immediatamente nel cuore umano" (*Uomo e Donna Lo Creò: Catechesi Sull'amore Umano*, Roma: Città Nuova (2009), p. 121).

validity of this interpretation of his theology of desire by the translators and editors is discussed in greater detail below.

John Paul II defines concupiscence as a “lack” that “plunges its roots into the original depth of the human spirit.”⁵⁷⁷ This lack arises from the primal couple’s decision to break their covenant with the Creator God, from the subsequent cessation of the primal couple’s complete “participation in the Gift,” and from their alienation from the love of God that was the source of the original gift. The first couple ceased to draw from the power of the Holy Spirit in order to express the spousal meaning of their bodies and to live in communion with one another and with God.⁵⁷⁸ The threefold concupiscence to which the former pope refers (the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life) that defines human life after the primal sin has a variety of effects. Concupiscence brought turbulence and disquiet to the internal lives of the original man and woman, and it also brought discord to their relationship. After the first sin, a “constitutive fracture” and a “fundamental disquiet” occurred in the inner realities of the first couple.⁵⁷⁹ This fracture, he argues, was fundamentally a shattering of the original unity of the spiritual and the somatic in the first humans. Concupiscence led the first humans to experience for the first time the sense of inner turbulence and conflict between the interior person and the body. This recalls Augustine’s articulation of the effects of original sin as disordered movement that disrupted the *harmonia* of the primal couple, and as rebellion of the body against the mind which should rightly rule over it that we discussed in the chapter on Augustine. This interior imbalance is also sexual in nature. John Paul II argues that

⁵⁷⁷ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 178.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

concupiscence caused the body to begin to feel like a “constant hotbed of resistance” against the spirit, and the human person lost his or her ability to rule over the desires of the flesh.⁵⁸⁰

The inner turbulence and unruliness caused by concupiscence led the primal couple to feel shame about their bodies and their sexualities and to experience detachment from the true integral meaning of their bodies, according to John Paul II. Instead of “perennial attraction” and love for one another, the original couple began to experience “the lust of the flesh” towards the other, which manifests in a lustful gaze, or the “lust of the eyes.” Concupiscence caused the primal couple to begin to view each other’s body as a potential “terrain of appropriation,” diminishing their ability to perceive the other as a unique and unrepeatable gift from God to be accepted and welcomed in his or her totality. The sexed body became reduced in the eyes of the other to a tool for the satisfaction of sexual urges, instead of being viewed as an invitation to genuine communion through mutual self-gift and acceptance. The mutual lustful gaze of the first couple caused them to distrust each other and to hide their sexed bodies. The pope also argues that the third element of the “three-fold concupiscence”—the “pride of life”—could be seen primarily in this shift in perception of the meaning of the other’s body. Sex no longer existed for communion and unity, but for domination and possession.

f. The sexually differentiated nature of the Fall

According to John Paul II, the disruption in sexual relations caused by sin and concupiscence manifested in sexually differentiated ways, revealed in God’s statement to the woman in Genesis 3:16. He says to the woman after the first sin, “Your desire shall be for

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

your husband, and he shall rule over you.”⁵⁸¹ John Paul II argues, “the man is the one for whom shame, united with concupiscence, was to become an impulse to “dominate” the woman.”⁵⁸² He argues that men experience more intensely than women the impulse to dominate, and he mentions that human history has demonstrated that women suffer more than men from the effects of domination—namely, diminishment and marginalization.⁵⁸³ This bears some resemblance to Valerie Saiving’s previously discussed understanding of masculine sin as the tendency to develop an excessive, dominating self in contrast to feminine sin as the tendency toward self-negation or erasure. John Paul II, however, is less clear on his understanding of the specifically female way in which concupiscence manifests. He argues that the woman experiences an “insatiable desire for a different union,” but the meaning of this phrase is not clear from the text.⁵⁸⁴ He also states, without elaboration, that the woman experiences an analogous impulse to dominate that can “precede the man’s desire or even attempt to arouse it and give it impetus.”⁵⁸⁵ He seems then to believe that there is a specifically female way in which concupiscence after the Fall manifests, but he does not articulate the details with clarity, and he insists that the man is the one who primarily experiences the effects of the Fall as a disordered desire to dominate.

This greater emphasis on the effects of the Fall on the man may be a result of the former pope’s view that it was primarily the responsibility of the man from the beginning to be “the guardian of the reciprocity of the gift and of its true balance.”⁵⁸⁶ He argues that in the

⁵⁸¹ Genesis 3:16.

⁵⁸² John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 188.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., p. 192.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 188.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

state of original innocence it was the man's "special responsibility" to welcome the woman first and to ensure that their relationship was defined by a "mutual, two-sided exchange."⁵⁸⁷ The reciprocity and mutuality of the relationship depended more on the man than it did on the woman, according to John Paul II. The implication of this interpretation of the sexually differentiated nature of the Fall is that the man was punished more profoundly than the woman because he bore more responsibility for their moral well-being.

g. The human call to communion

While John Paul II argues that it is essential to read the language of the sexed body in light of our history of participation in inherited sin, he affirms throughout his theological anthropology that the human calling to communion is a deeper and more fundamental truth than the reality of our being accused by our shared history of sin. Our calling to love and communion is deeper than the "threefold concupiscence." He rejects the notion that the sinfulness of humanity reveals "ontological evil as a constitutive attribute of the human body."⁵⁸⁸ Rather, sin is the result of a loss of original innocence. This loss has obscured for humanity the true meaning of the body as "spousal," or as capable of giving and receiving love. This loss, however, is only partial. The damage is not total, nor has it rendered humanity beyond repair. Furthermore, it is incomplete to only view the human heart with suspicion because of the reality of concupiscence. We must also strive to perceive the human person in light of the truth that each is "called with effectiveness" by God, and in this calling we rediscover the meaning of the human body.⁵⁸⁹ In the deepest caverns of the human heart are

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 221.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 224.

not only urges to dominate and impulses to possess the other, but also “the deep need to preserve the dignity of the reciprocal relations that find their expression in the body,” as well as the yearning to give and receive love.⁵⁹⁰ In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the former pope argues, we can relearn how to live according to the true “spousal” meaning of the human body and according to the “ethos of redemption.”⁵⁹¹ Through the experience of redemption in Christ, the human person receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables him or her to live life in a genuinely new way. This is not a return to “original innocence,” but is a new orientation that looks toward the future redemption of humanity, which the resurrection of Christ anticipates.⁵⁹² Receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit enables the human person to “receive himself anew as a gift from God.”⁵⁹³ This redemption, he argues, is also cosmic, because the entire cosmos has been impacted by the sins of the human race and so must also experience redemption.⁵⁹⁴

The Incarnation is central to John Paul II’s theological anthropology in that, he argues, “in Jesus Christ the human body became the body of the God-Man,” which initiated “a new supernatural elevation in every human being.”⁵⁹⁵ In order to grasp the complexity of the truth of humanity, and particularly of human nature as differently sexed, he argues, we must be able to hold together these twin truths: we participate in a history of inherited sin that has caused us to experience impulses to use our sexual relationships as opportunities for domination and possession, and yet, at the same time, the deeper truth communicated by our

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 225.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., p. 224.

⁵⁹² Ibid., p. 231.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., p. 248.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

sexed bodies is that we are called to reciprocal self-gift and acceptance, love, and communion. The ability to live in a way that is consistent with our deepest truth is both a gift and a task. We receive power to live the spousal meaning of our bodies from the Holy Spirit, which is a gift. However, we must also engage in a “pedagogy of the body” that will enable us to subdue and transform our desires away from expressing the unruliness of the threefold concupiscence toward functioning in accordance with the true spousal meaning of the body. This training of the body depends upon a spirituality of the body that perceives the true meaning of the body in its sexually differentiated nature. This training is also eschatologically oriented as it anticipates the future of redeemed humanity in which there will be “perfect participation of all that is bodily in man and all that is spiritual in him.”⁵⁹⁶

3. John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists

As adumbrated in the introduction to this chapter, John Paul II’s theological anthropology, and particularly his *Theology of the Body*, inspired a new generation of Catholic intellectuals who aim to fulfil his call to develop a feminism which “rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination,’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society.”⁵⁹⁷ New Catholic Feminism has been rejected by most professional Catholic feminist theologians, and I largely agree with the critiques expressed by others, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, and Tina Beattie, who find the movement inadequate and problematic as a theological anthropology.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 274.

⁵⁹⁷ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html, §99, retrieved on 27 November 2018.

⁵⁹⁸ Cf. Tina Beattie, *The New Catholic Feminism: Theology, Gender Theory and Dialogue*, New York: Routledge, (2006); Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Women in Christ: Toward a new feminism,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005); Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, London: Bloomsbury (2015).

However, as Ruether, Schüssler-Fiorenza, and Beattie argue as well, it is important to engage seriously with the assertions of the scholars in this movement since their perspective likely reflects that of many lay women who populate Catholic parishes, who have absorbed John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, and who may feel anxious about or resistant to more progressive forms of feminism.⁵⁹⁹ This chapter aims to demonstrate that many of the critiques levelled by the New Catholic Feminists against postmodern forms of feminism are valid, but that ultimately John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* on its own does not offer the liberating and faithful alternative that they seek.

The New Catholic Feminism is developed primarily in two sources. The first source is a 2004 collection of essays edited by Michele Schumacher entitled *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, and the second is a three-volume set published during the years of 1985 and 2017 entitled *The Concept of Woman* by Sr. Prudence Allen. The *Women in Christ* volume is a collection of contributions by Catholic scholars working internationally within a variety of academic disciplines. As Rosemary Radford Ruether affirms in her review of the collection, "The contributing scholars have a deep and broad knowledge of the Western philosophical and Christian theological traditions and impressive international credentials, European, Latin, and North American."⁶⁰⁰ The contributors to the volume are critical of postmodern gender theories and secular feminist discourses that have been embraced by some feminist theologians. The New Catholic Feminists are particularly critical of the

⁵⁹⁹ As Tina Beattie notes, the *Women in Christ* collection "serves as a reminder of the extent to which many Christian women, far from being converted by feminism, are actually alienated by its claims and arguments" (*The New Catholic Feminism: Theology, Gender Theory and Dialogue*, p. 34).

⁶⁰⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women in Christ: Toward a new feminism," p. 687.

feminist theological contributions of Ruether and Schüssler-Fiorenza. For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues in her essay within the collection that the works of “dissident Catholic feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza” begin with the “sexual liberation of women, grounded in the right to abortion, and extend to women’s ordination to the priesthood,”⁶⁰¹ and that the work of these “mainstream feminists” threatens to “leave as little of orthodox Catholicism standing as secular feminists have left of mainstream Protestant churches, respect for marital fidelity, and the two-parent heterosexual family.”⁶⁰²

As an alternative to what she views as the obliteration of sexual difference and “natural” roles for men and women caused by secular feminism and postmodern Catholic feminists, Fox-Genovese heralds the work of Edith Stein as a fruitful resource for Catholic feminists. Stein, Fox-Genovese argues, demonstrated that “woman’s nature differs from that of man in important ways,” especially in the woman’s “greater propensity to nurture human persons and the earth”⁶⁰³ and “special vocation for the care of life, which requires a measure of self-denial and self-abnegation.”⁶⁰⁴ Fox-Genovese’s essay, in particular, presents the “nature” of sexual difference as binary, static, fixed, and knowable, and the essence of femininity as nurturing, self-sacrificing motherhood.

Fox-Genovese is perhaps the most polemical viewpoint represented in the volume, however many of the other contributors share her view of the meaning of sexual difference.

⁶⁰¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Equality, Difference, and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism,” in *Women in Christ: toward a new feminism*, ed. Michele Schumacher (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004, p. 300).

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., p. 310.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 304.

For example, Michele Schumacher's essay in the volume critiques "traditional Western (and more 'academic') feminism"⁶⁰⁵ for annihilating nature by positing sexual difference and gender as purely social constructs, and argues that this mindset is "fundamentally nihilistic, since it assumes I am intrinsically a cipher signifying absolutely nothing."⁶⁰⁶ In contrast to "secular" approaches to nature and sexual difference, she champions a "metaphysical approach" that points to "a fixed nature that provides the fundamental base, the determined foundation, from which the human self is realized through his (*sic*) actions."⁶⁰⁷ This leads her to posit that there is one human nature that "necessarily exists in one of two modes or 'expressions:' the female mode and the male mode."⁶⁰⁸ While Schumacher presents herself as "strictly opposed to biological determinism,"⁶⁰⁹ and claims to be arguing against fixed dualisms in favor of the "dynamism of human existence,"⁶¹⁰ she ultimately depends upon a dualism—that of male and female "modes" of expression—in order to build her constructive argument, and presents the dynamism of nature as fixed permanently within these two eventualities.

As Ruether notes in her review of the volume, "It is questionable whether the term 'complementarity' transcends the problem of dual natures the authors seek to avoid . . . despite their claims, [the volume] veers toward such polarization, with women ever defined in terms of mothering and self-giving capacities."⁶¹¹ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza responded

⁶⁰⁵ Michele Schumacher, "The Nature of Nature in Feminism, Old and New: From Dualism to Complementary Unity," *Women in Christ*, p. 19.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶¹¹ Ruether, "Women in Christ: Toward a new feminism," p. 689.

to the volume as well in her *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (2015). She argues that the New Feminists “engender a Right-Wing Roman Catholic wo/men’s movement in support of the Vatican’s Christological-ecclesiastical anti-wo/man politics.”⁶¹² Schüssler-Fiorenza posits further that the notion of sex/gender as a complementary binary rooted in a fixed ontology of nature is a construct that has been erected in order to bolster male ecclesial power and the exclusion of women from the priesthood. She sees the “New Feminists” as complicit in “kyriarchial ideology (sic)” that oppresses and excludes.

A second expression of the “New Catholic Feminism” is Sr. Prudence Allen’s formidable three-volume *Concept of Woman* series that was published between the years of 1985-2017. Allen contributed two essays to the *Women in Christ* volume discussed above, and she has spent more than twenty-five years researching the history of philosophical and theological approaches to the concept of woman. Her three-volume tome argues for what she describes as “integral gender complementarity” which draws heavily from John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*. Allen summarizes “integral gender complementarity” in the following way:

The crucial factor in integral gender complementarity is that a woman and a man are considered as two separate and complete human individuals who are equal in dignity and worth and who have philosophically significant differences. They are not fractional beings who together make up one being. Instead, they are two whole human beings who, together, synergetically generate more than just the sum of themselves.⁶¹³

⁶¹² Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, London: Bloomsbury (2015), p. xxv.

⁶¹³ Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation 1250-1500*, Vol.2, Part 1, William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan (2002), p. 18.

Allen argues that this view of “integral gender complementarity” is based on data from the biological sciences, human experience, and revelation. Her aim is to describe sexual difference in a way that reflects “how a real woman or a real man is in the world.”⁶¹⁴ While she acknowledges that there are exceptions to the biological sexual binary, she does not seem to view these as theologically significant since, as she states, “exceptions do not destroy the rule” [that human exist “usually or always” as male and female].⁶¹⁵

The *Women in Christ* volume and Allen’s *Concept of Woman* are helpful in their identification of some key failures in postmodern feminism and in their insistence on the need for a robust theology of nature and deeper reflection on the materiality of sexual difference. They are also valuable in that they give voice to a more conservative perspective that represents those Catholic women who are present in the church who may sometimes feel alienated by progressive feminism. As with John Paul II, they importantly insist that the human body is saturated with theological meaning, and that the materiality of the body is valuable as a source of insight about the meaning of sexual difference. They remind us that to be embodied is to be oriented towards relationship with another, and further, that humans are not only relational, but have been created by God in and for love. These are valuable emphases.

The “New Catholic Feminists” claim to be returning feminist theology to a more robust concept of “nature” that is rooted in John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, and they share John Paul II’s beliefs about the “unity of truth” and the possibility of mutual enrichment among the academic disciplines since the natural realm is revelatory of the divine. However,

⁶¹⁴ Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Search for Communion of Persons 1500-2015*, Vol 3 (2017), p. 18.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., p. 416.

by relying as much as they do on John Paul II's thought, they doom themselves to share his pitfalls as well. These shortcomings are analyzed below. As with John Paul II, the New Catholic Feminists desire to bring back to feminism a focus on experience, and they critique the "disengagement from the body" and the "omission, reduction, and minimalization of the body" found in much contemporary philosophy and feminism. Yet, the only "feminine experience" they bring to bear on the discussion is motherhood—both spiritual and physical.⁶¹⁶ Like John Paul II, they engage with no contemporary research on the biology of sexual difference. Furthermore, Sr. Prudence Allen, in her massive tome describing developments in Western philosophical and theological approaches to the concept of woman from Greek philosophy to postmodernity astonishingly fails to mention Darwin or evolutionary biology at all. A final problem with the New Catholic Feminists to mention here is that the tone of their writings, especially in the essays found in the *Women in Christ* volume, is frequently polemical and incendiary. As Tina Beattie has noted, the volume contains many "inaccuracies, insults, and distortions," especially in its attempts to discredit both Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.⁶¹⁷ This is unfortunate since the New Catholic Feminists raise a valuable point in their insistence that the concepts of nature, ontology, and sexual difference must continue to inform Catholic theological anthropologies.

⁶¹⁶ Hanna Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, "Gender Difference: Critical Questions Concerning Gender Studies," *Women in Christ*, p. 8.

⁶¹⁷ Tina Beattie, *The New Catholic Feminism*, p. 25.

4. Radicalizing John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* and New Catholic Feminism

There is much to appreciate about John Paul II's *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, as well as the work of the New Catholic Feminists, and some of their insights will be refashioned and carried forward in this project. However, the shared assumptions that shape their theological anthropologies also have significant limitations that must be challenged.⁶¹⁸ Further, there are aspects of their thinking that, if true, have much more radical implications than they are willing to acknowledge. Some of their insights could be extended further than they allow—they could be set free to be more expansive and more transformative. This section, then, appreciates, rebukes, and radicalizes John Paul II's work.⁶¹⁹ It presses deeply into his theological anthropology and imagines what it would be like for it to be even more appreciative of the biology of sexual difference, even more inclusive of the embodied experiences of human beings, and even more committed to the profound importance of the Incarnation for understanding the theological meaning of sexual difference. This section is organized according to the seven central theses of the *Theology of the Body* that were explained above.

a. The body as biological and sacramental reality

To ground his claims in the *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II appeals to human experience, to his exegesis of the first three chapters of Genesis, and occasionally, to “contemporary

⁶¹⁸ Charles Curran has also made significant contributions to critiquing John Paul II's moral theology in general, but also his *Theology of the Body* in *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, Washington DC: Georgetown Press (2005).

⁶¹⁹ Because the New Catholic Feminists rely so heavily on the work of John Paul II in their theological developments, I focus in this section primarily on critiquing and radicalizing John Paul II, mentioning the New Catholic Feminists only occasionally. This is done with the understanding that the critiques of John Paul II also apply to the New Catholic Feminists.

science” to bolster his arguments about the binary and complementary nature of sexual difference. Indeed, he argues throughout his work that it is important for theologians to benefit from all that contemporary science has to offer in terms of understanding the human person as differently sexed. He argues, “the rooting of the teaching proclaimed by the Church in the whole Tradition and in divine revelation is always open to the questions raised by people and also uses the instruments most in keeping with modern science and today’s culture.”⁶²⁰ While he warns that theologians must be careful to go beyond what the biological sciences can reveal about the sexual aspects of human life, and further, that theologians should not emphasize one truth revealed by the sciences at the expense of a more integrated picture of the human person, he views the integration of truths revealed by the different disciplines as an important goal to strive for in theological developments. This fits consistently with his arguments in other works as well, such as his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* in which he states,

The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning . . . It is the one and the same God who establishes and guarantees the intelligibility and reasonableness of the natural order of things upon which scientists confidently depend, and who reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁶²¹

On another occasion, he argues in favor of developing a “common interactive relationship” between science and theology in which “each discipline retains its integrity and yet is radically open to the discoveries and insights of the other.”⁶²²

⁶²⁰ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 446.

⁶²¹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §34. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html, retrieved on 23 November.

⁶²² John Paul II, “Message to the Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory,” in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, S.J., and George V. Coyne, S.J. (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), <http://www.inters.org/John-Paul-II-Coyne-Vatican-Observatory>, retrieved on 23 November.

It is surprising, then, that he does not do more than vaguely appeal to “contemporary science” to bolster his claims about sexual difference. Like the New Catholic Feminists, he does not mention evolution at all in the *Theology of the Body*, and thus he does not acknowledge that our bodies have evolutionary histories and remain embedded in ongoing processes of evolution that will impact the future of our sexual differences. This is surprising since John Paul II spoke favorably about evolution, and he supported efforts to rethink key doctrines, such as the doctrine of original sin, in light of developments in evolutionary theory. He also does not cite or refer to any specific scientific studies in his *Theology of the Body*. Sexual difference is portrayed ever in terms of a fixed binary that reflects the “eternal feminine (*das Ewig-Weibliche*)” and “the eternal masculine.”⁶²³ His theological approach to masculinity and femininity is impoverished by his failure to seriously pursue his own stated goal of integrating insights from a diversity of disciplines. Additionally, if he and the New Catholic Feminists actually believed, as they are both at pains to argue, that the human person is not a dualism of body and soul, but rather that the human person is a “soul/body composite unity,”⁶²⁴ then shouldn’t the fact that the human is a biological creature immersed in the flux and flow of ongoing evolutionary processes of becoming substantially impact how we understand the nature of the human soul? In other words, if a human person is a composite unity of body and soul, then we should expect that the processes experienced by the body will impact the personality, interior life, and soul of the person as well. To believe that the body is the product of evolutionary processes that are ongoing—which is what the biological sciences demonstrate—and to affirm that the person is a body/soul unity, means that one

⁶²³ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 209.

⁶²⁴ Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Search for Communion of Persons 1500-2015*, p. 11.

cannot assert a static notion of gender/sexual difference without reifying the very soul/body dualism that the former pope and the New Catholic Feminists denounce.

This critique simply asks John Paul II to accept the implications of his own teaching. He and the New Catholic Feminists are correct that reflection on the human body in its “actual structure” as it is experienced in the world should form the basis of theological anthropologies.⁶²⁵ However, reflecting on the “actual structure” of the human body in the world must surely involve acknowledgement of the body’s participation in evolutionary processes. Without acknowledging the evolutionary history and ongoing development of human biology, how can the “actual structure” of the human body in its sexual difference be adequately characterized? This leads us to a reflection on another aspect of John Paul II’s methodology—which is his appeal to “human experience” to ground his theological claims about sexual difference. He argues correctly that “in the interpretation of the revelation about man, and above all about the body, we must, for understandable reasons, appeal to experience, because bodily man is perceived by us above all in experience.”⁶²⁶ Experience is a fundamental aspect of coming to understand the meaning of the body. He argues further, “our human experience is in some way a legitimate means for theological interpretation and, in a certain sense, it is an indispensable point of reference to which we must appeal.”⁶²⁷ Again, this point is even truer than he imagines. We ought to take human experience seriously in the construction of new theologies of the body, but the experiences taken into consideration must extend beyond those of fertile heterosexual married couples or vowed religious celibate

⁶²⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶²⁶ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 123.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

people, which are the two categories of people whose experiences John Paul II primarily reflects upon in his *Theology of the Body*.⁶²⁸

b. The “spousal” meaning of the body

One of the most profound elements of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is his assertion that the human body, in its nature as sexed, signifies the human ability to give and receive love, as well as its calling to communion with others. This fundamental theological insight into the meaning of the human body is surely true for all bodies, and not only normatively sexed ones. John Paul II speaks only of the human body as male and female or the “two reciprocally completing ways of being a body” without taking into account the multiplicity of ways of being a body reflected in the “actual structure” of social relationships in the world.⁶²⁹ The New Catholic Feminists make the narrowness of this view even more explicit. Sr. Prudence Allen, for example, states, “By ‘sex’ I mean one of the two kinds of human beings, male or female. The classification by sex considers the whole human being, from the perspective of his or her chromosomal, biological, anatomical, and physiological characteristics.”⁶³⁰ John Paul II makes a similar statement in his apostolic letter from 1998 entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem* in which he states that the Creator has decided that “the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man.”⁶³¹ Allen and John Paul II do not

⁶²⁸ Additionally, as Lisa Cahill notes, *Theology of the Body*, even as it argues for equal dignity between men and women, still presents motherhood as “women’s most important vocation” which can lead to “an unnecessary and unequal division of male and female personalities and roles, with women more than men assigned to the home and parenthood,” and so this theology fails to “advance the full dignity and equality of women—or of men” (“Catholic Feminists and Traditions: Renewal, Reinvention, Replacement,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34, no. 2 (2014), p. 31).

⁶²⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶³⁰ Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Search for Communion of Persons 1500-2015*, p. 5.

⁶³¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §1. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html, retrieved on 23 November 2018.

take into account the significant amount of variation in physiological characteristics present in the “real bodies” of differently sexed humans. Describing sexed human persons in terms of a binary of male and female is to embrace “gender reality,” Allen argues. To deny sexual difference or to expand conceptions of difference beyond the binary is to succumb to what she describes as “gender ideology.”⁶³²

One would think that striving to integrate the embodied experiences of “real” human people would reflect more of the bodily diversity actually present in the real world. The implication of Allen’s and John Paul II’s position is that reflecting theologically on the experiences of intersex or other non-normatively sexed people is to engage in “ideology” out of a desire to avoid or obfuscate the “reality” of the gender binary. However, if some people in the world (even if that percentage is small) are biologically intersex, why are their experiences not significant for theological anthropologies? As biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling argues, “It has long been known that there is no single biological measure that unassailably places each and every human into one of two categories.”⁶³³ John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is impoverished by his failure to adequately take into account the reality of sexual diversity in the world and to integrate information from the natural sciences on this issue.

Thus, John Paul II’s point about the “spousal” meaning of the body, or the nature of the body as capable of giving and receiving love, is yet another aspect of his *Theology of the Body* that is fundamentally true, but that could also be more expansive than he allows, more

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “Why Sex is Not Binary: The Complexity is more than cultural. It’s biological too” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/opinion/sex-biology-binary.html>). Retrieved on 3 November, 2018.

grounded in the material lives of human persons, and more integrated with information from evolutionary biology.

c. “Original innocence”, nakedness, and sexual difference as gift

Another key element of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is his interpretation of the original nakedness of the primal couple in Genesis as a sign of their mutual trust that they would be welcomed by the other in the totality of their personhood as a unique and unrepeatable gift. They were able to act in a reciprocally self-giving way because they did not experience shame or fear. They trusted that their bodies—and specifically their bodies as differently sexed—would be welcomed by the other and would lead them into genuine communion with each other. Sexual difference for the original couple, according to John Paul II, was a pathway to communion and not a symbol of opposition.

However, if we accept the evolutionary origins of our species, which John Paul II expresses a willingness to do in other texts, then we must also accept that there was no original couple, nor was there a historical state of prelapsarian “original innocence.”⁶³⁴ It might be the case that he intends the term “original” to indicate something fundamental about human nature, and not something chronologically prior to our current state. However, this is not at all made clear in his text. On the contrary, without any caveats or acknowledgement of the incoherence of positing an age of pre-Fall perfection, he speaks throughout the

⁶³⁴ In his 22 October 1996 “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: On Evolution,” John Paul II describes evolution as “more than a hypothesis”, and furthermore, he states, “I am delighted with the first theme which you have chosen: the origin of life and evolution—an essential theme of lively interest to the Church, since Revelation contains some of its own teachings concerning the nature and origins of man. How should the conclusions reached by the diverse scientific disciplines be brought together with those contained in the message of Revelation? And if at first glance these views seem to clash with each other, where should we look for a solution? We know that the truth cannot contradict the truth” (<https://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp961022.htm>, Retrieved on 6 November 2018).

Theology of the Body of both an “original innocence” and a loss of this innocence. Theological anthropologies in a post-Darwinian age, in order to be meaningful, must incorporate the reality of our evolutionary origins into their constructions of the meaning of the human body as sexed, and into constructions of the meaning of “original sin.”

A further problem with John Paul II’s interpretation of “original nakedness” as a sign of mutual trust and an invitation to delight in the body of the other as a unique and unrepeatable gift is that its narrowness as it is articulated within his framework undermines its meaningfulness. By stating that “the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man,” and by failing to accept the reality that there are intersex people in the world, and further, that every body ultimately resists categorization within a simplistic binary, John Paul II establishes a theological anthropology that, in the end, affirms only the “normatively” sexed body (whatever that is) as a “unique and unrepeatable gift from God.”⁶³⁵ It is ironic that in this way his theological anthropology performs what he describes as a postlapsarian distortion—namely, the failure to welcome the body of the other, in its totality, as a gift from God and an invitation to communion. By insisting, in spite of all of the evidence to the contrary, that the nature of human sexual difference is a binary, John Paul II re-performs the distorted way of relating of our first parents—as understood within his framework—after their loss of innocence. The non-normative body is viewed with suspicion and distrust. This creates the conditions for the “non-normatively” sexed person to experience their own body as a source of shame, and the result of this is fear, hiding, and loss of communion.

⁶³⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §1.

d. Original sin, shame, and sexual difference as opposition

As adumbrated above, postlapsarian existence, according to John Paul II, remains distorted by sin. The loss of the original innocence of the first couple has led to distorted relationships between the sexes. He argues that the noetic effect of the Fall is the loss of the ability to perceive the theological meaning of the sexed body, and that this has rendered our sexual lives wounded by shame, fear, and distrust. We now struggle to believe that our bodies will be accepted in their totality by the other as a gift, and so we hide, and thus communion is hindered. Sexual difference becomes a source of conflict rather than a means to union.

It is indeed true that we can only understand our sexual lives and relationships in light of our participation in a history of sin. As we will see later in this chapter, this history of sin is not a metaphysical concept that is somehow divorced from our bodies and our material lives. Rather, the effects of sin reverberate through our bodies all the way down to the cellular level. In this way, John Paul II's insistence that we read the language of the sexed body through the lens of original sin is compelling, but again, it does not go far enough. Insights from the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis such as those revealed by developments in epigenetics and niche construction theory have provided us with important tools for understanding how we can reconceive the notion of "inherited sin" in a post-Darwinian age. There is a sense in which sin is indeed "inherited" biologically, except that the biological must not be conceived as somehow divorced from the cultural. We carry the wounds and the traumas of our ancestors in the very infrastructure of our bodies, and this affects the totality of our lives together, including our sexual relationships. On this point, then, John Paul II's insights about sin could be bolstered by insights from the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology.

An additional insight from John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* that is accepted and brought forward in this project is his thesis that one of the effects of original sin is that sexuality has become a realm of human life that is often associated with shame and fear. Because of our participation in a history of sin, we struggle to believe that, in the totality of our personhood, we will be accepted as a gift by others, and so we hide. Shame is a facet of human life that can, at times, play an important role in human social life, but that also has the potential to diminish human flourishing and cause the development of pathologies. While shame and fear can be destructive features of human sexual life, the pervasiveness of sin also means that sometimes there is reason to be fearful of others since humans can be violent and exploitative of one another.

e. The “threefold concupiscence”

John Paul II's interpretation of the effects of original sin as concupiscence reflects influences from both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (who was also influenced by Augustine). Aquinas conceived of “original sin” largely in sympathy with Augustine's treatment of the topic, but he also reflects Anselm's rendering of original sin as a deprivation of original justice, with “original justice” understood as the right ordering of the human person. As Aquinas says in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, “human nature was established in its first beginning so that the inferior powers were perfectly subject to reason, the reason to God, the body to the soul, and God was by His grace supplying what nature lacked for this arrangement.”⁶³⁶ Original justice,

⁶³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.6. Ut enim supra dictum est, sic natura humana fuit instituta in sui primordio quod inferiores vires perfecte rationi subiicerentur, ratio Deo, et animae corpus, Deo per gratiam supplente id quod ad hoc deerat per naturam. <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles4.htm#50>, retrieved on 13 November.

then, is the submission of human reason to divine wisdom.⁶³⁷ Aquinas argues that humanity was meant to propagate this state of original justice, but in turning our reason away from God, we instead propagate a deprivation or a lack.⁶³⁸ All of us, he argues, by participation in the human race are inflicted with this deficiency. He says, “Thus, too, this kind of defect which is in others as a consequence from the first parent still has in others the essentials of fault so far as all men are counted as one man by participation in the common nature.”⁶³⁹ Because we share a common human nature with our first parents, according to Aquinas, we share in the deficiencies of that nature. As Bauerschmidt notes, “Aquinas downplays (but does not eliminate entirely) the role of lust in sexual intercourse, focusing more on the unity of the human race.”⁶⁴⁰ However, this distinction between Aquinas and Augustine should not be pushed too far since, as I argued earlier, Augustine’s works also reflect a significant focus on the theme of unity, and on the unity of the human race in particular.

In this framework shaped by Aquinas and Augustine, then, John Paul II speaks at length about the disordering of desire that every human inherits in a postlapsarian context. He emphasizes the nature of concupiscence as a “lack” that brought fragmentation and discord—both personal and social—to the original humans and their descendants. The flesh, he argues, now rebels against the spirit, and we have lost our ability to rule over the desires of the body. We are tempted now to view the body as a means of satisfying our sexual urges

⁶³⁷ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Thomas Aquinas” in *T&T Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark (2016), p. 203.

⁶³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.6.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Bauerschmidt, “Thomas Aquinas,” 204. Aquinas states, “original sin is not the sin of the person, except inasmuch as the person received his nature from his first parent, for which reason it is called the ‘sin of nature.’” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, I-11q 81a1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2081.htm>, Retrieved on 17 Nov 2018.).

rather than as a pathway to genuine communion with another. Our disordered desires manifest in sexual relationships defined by domination and possession rather than love and intimacy.

While he denies that he is Manichean and he is careful to note that the “perennial attraction” between the sexes is necessary and good, the majority of John Paul II’s discussions of desire in the *Theology of the Body* are preoccupied with warnings against possible abuses and perversions of desire, and with urging the faithful to master or subdue the desires of the flesh. Love, he argues “is not able to realize itself in the truth of the language of the body except through mastery over concupiscence.”⁶⁴¹ He does spend two pages (out of 547) discussing the possibility and eventuality of human erotic desire that has been “weighed down by the concupiscence of the flesh” being transformed in light of the “ethos of redemption.”⁶⁴² It is a shame that this section is so brief in the context of his entire treatise on the body, since he argues persuasively that the “erotic” is also a gift from God, and that when it is combined with ethical living, it can lead us to the true, the good, and the beautiful. “Eros” and “Ethos” must meet in the human heart, he argues, and when this happens we experience the fullness of the gift of the erotic. He argues that we achieve this “union of Eros and Ethos” through perseverance in developing the virtue of chastity and by continually seeking to understand anew the spousal meaning of the body. While it seems that John Paul II is willing to affirm the goodness of desire in theory, because of the frequency with which he condemns desire in the text, the overwhelming impression left on the reader is that desire is a mostly nefarious aspect of human life that should be dominated and subdued. In this way, he

⁶⁴¹ *Theology of the Body*, p. 434.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

ultimately communicates a much more negative conception of desire than either Aquinas or Augustine, since both of them have more developed notions of the central role played by desire in the economy of salvation. Furthermore, as we discussed in the chapter on Augustine, the language of desire as a dangerous force to be mastered and subdued has a long history of gendered baggage, since women have long been associated in Western thought with desire and bodiliness. This gendered baggage is perpetuated by John Paul II's choice to describe postlapsarian women as especially prone to "insatiable desire."⁶⁴³ Thus, mastering and subduing desire has often entailed dominating and subduing women.⁶⁴⁴ John Paul II's treatment of desire perpetuates many of the destructive gendered connotations found in the tradition without the corresponding positive treatments found in the traditional sources of the role that desire plays in the economy of salvation.

f. The sexually differentiated nature of the Fall

John Paul II's treatment of the sexually differentiated nature of the Fall is consistent with many others found in the history of theological interpretations of Genesis. While his interpretation seems, at first glance, to be more severe against men and more generous to women, its diminishing of the woman's culpability for the Fall comes with a cost. The lessening of the woman's responsibility for her share in the primal sin implies a diminishment of her capacities, and it infantilizes her by placing the responsibility for her morality on the man. Ironically, this has the effect of sacralizing the man's rule over the woman, in spite of the former pope's arguments that the man's domination over the woman is a sinful distortion

⁶⁴³ Ibid., p. 188.

⁶⁴⁴ Recall Augustine's statement, "What therefore, in one person are mind and concupiscence (for the one rules, the other is ruled, the one dominates and the other is subdued), that in two human beings, man and woman is represented according to the sex of the body" (Augustine, *De opere monachorum*, 32.40).

of desire. Is it a sinful distortion or a God-ordained order of nature? John Paul II is ambivalent. It is interesting that he argues in the *Theology of the Body* that the emphasis in Genesis on the responsibility of the man over the woman was probably at least in part a result of “the social marginalization of women in the conditions of the time [at which Genesis was written].”⁶⁴⁵ Yet even as he acknowledges the sinful patriarchal conditions that shaped the portrayal of the roles of women and men in the Hebrew text, he nevertheless insists “there is a truth [in the man’s responsibility for the woman] contained in it that has its own weight independent of specific forms of conditioning due to the customs of that determinate historical situation.”⁶⁴⁶ This again leaves the reader confused as to the former pope’s position on the subordination of women. On the one hand, he denounces it as a sinful result of the Fall. He declares, “Love excludes every kind of submission by which the wife would become a servant or slave of the husband, an object of one-sided submission,”⁶⁴⁷ and extols the virtues of mutual submission. Yet, on the other hand, he sometimes implies that the woman’s subordination is part of the divine order of nature. Indeed, he argues later, “The husband is above all the one who loves and the wife, by contrast, is the one who is loved.”⁶⁴⁸ Here again, he reinscribes the historical association of men with activity and women with passivity. While on the surface this may seem to be a sentiment that is generous to women since it places more responsibility for sin on the man, it ultimately diminishes the full humanity of women by infantilizing them and placing them under the man’s spiritual care. In his ambivalence, John Paul II embodies the tensions regarding the status of women latent within

⁶⁴⁵ *Theology of the Body*, p. 192.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 334.

the greater Christian theological tradition—a tradition that at times affirms the radical equality of all in Christ, but that also has persistently sought to silence, subdue, and dominate women.

g. The human call to communion

One of the most important arguments made by John Paul II, and one that is carried forward in this thesis is his privileging of the human call to communion over our participation in a history of sin. Our nature as called by God to communion and love is the most profound and fundamental truth about what it means to be human. As he, Aquinas, and Augustine all argue—the damage done to humanity by the legacy of sin is only partial. We have not been completely corrupted. If we were, we would simply cease to exist. In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, we can recover the truth of our bodies as sites of divine invitations to love and communion, and we can begin to transform the distortions that continue to plague our personal and collective lives. To this end, theology ought to inform a pedagogy of the body. The Incarnation, as John Paul II argues, has made the human body the body of the “God-Man,” and in doing so, it has elevated all of human bodily life to the level of theological significance.⁶⁴⁹

John Paul II compellingly posits that the Incarnation is the theological foundation to his *Theology of the Body*.⁶⁵⁰ However, once again, the narrowness of his approach diminishes its meaningfulness. His treatment of the Incarnation as the basis for a renewed focus on the body neglects the very figure through whom the Incarnation was wrought—Mary. This

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 252.

⁶⁵⁰ Recall John Paul II’s statement: “The fact that theology also includes the body should not astonish or surprise anyone who is conscious of the mystery and reality of the Incarnation. Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . I would say, through the main door” (Ibid., p. 169).

neglect of the female body through whom the Incarnation of Christ occurred is representative of his thoroughgoing masculinist focus that consistently fails to do justice to the diversity of bodies present in the world. He is correct that the Incarnation has rendered the material world the site of divine communication. However, to identify as sacramental only certain types of bodies, and to forget the significance of Mary, is ultimately to diminish the truly radical impact of the Incarnation. In this way, John Paul II once again would benefit from the work of the developing area of feminist theory known as “New Feminist Materialism,” which can help us to appreciate the diversity, fluidity, and agency of material life.

5. Conclusion: *Theology of the Body* through a New Feminist Materialist Lens

This engagement with John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* and New Catholic Feminism has sought to demonstrate that while these theological anthropologies are limited and at times problematic, nevertheless, many of their intuitions—if refashioned beyond the narrowness of their framework—could provide a foundation for a renewed theological anthropology that will be more adequate in the face of contemporary questions about the meaning of sexed bodies and our participation in a history of sin. The next section aims to demonstrate that New Feminist Materialism can assist us in key ways in this process of radicalizing John Paul II’s thought. In turn, it argues that aspects of John Paul II’s framework can provide important correctives to inadequacies in New Feminist Materialist thought. These two systems of thought—a traditional Catholic theological anthropology and New Feminist Materialism—are decidedly opposed in many ways. However, by juxtaposing them we can glean what is useful from them and allow them to be mutually correcting to one another, thereby moving beyond the limitations of each into a revitalized theological anthropology.

Chapter 6: New Feminist Materialism and a Theology of Sex and Sin After #MeToo

*“Biology does not limit social, political, and personal life: it not only makes them possible, it ensures that they endlessly transform themselves and thus stimulate biology into further self-transformation.”*⁶⁵¹

--Elizabeth Grosz

This chapter introduces key themes expressed by New Feminist Materialists, focusing in particular on the contributions of two scholars—Anne Fausto-Sterling and Elizabeth Grosz.⁶⁵²

I focus on the contributions of Fausto-Sterling and Grosz because of the particular relevance of their work for questions addressed in this project. For example, Elizabeth Grosz has written extensively on the possibilities for a feminist engagement with Darwin and his theory of sexual selection, and on the implications of evolutionary theory for reconsidering the nature of sexual difference. She has also articulated, more explicitly than other New Feminist Materialists, an approach to metaphysics and ethics in her most recent monograph entitled *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*. Fausto-Sterling is likewise relevant for this project because of the central focus in her work on the development of desire, and because of her articulation of a systems approach to understanding sex and gender that incorporates reflection on both biological and cultural factors that shape the evolution of

⁶⁵¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, Durham and London: Duke University Press (2004), p. 1.

⁶⁵² Anne Fausto-Sterling does not explicitly identify as a “New Feminist Materialist,” however, I include her in this category because her work largely fits in with the project of New Feminist Materialism. For example, she states on her personal website that the goal of her work as a biologist and gender theorist is “to restructure dichotomous conversations—inside the academy, in public discourse, and ultimately in the framing of social policy—in order to enable an understanding of the inseparability of nature/nurture” (<http://www.annefaustosterling.com/biography/>, retrieved on 29 November 2018).

human sexual differences. This chapter identifies the most salient contributions of Fausto-Sterling and Grosz for a Christian theological anthropology before bringing together the insights of the New Feminist Materialists with those of John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists in order to develop a way of rethinking original sin and sexual difference. The chapter also assesses the integration of New Feminist Materialism with process theology by scholars like Catherine Keller and Susan Hekman. While there is much to appreciate from process theology, and it has many affinities with New Feminist Materialism, the chapter argues that it does not ultimately provide an adequate metaphysical grounding for materialism.

1. New Feminist Materialism—General Themes

New Feminist Materialism is an emerging stream of thought within feminist theory that has arisen as part of a broader “material turn” occurring in a variety of disciplines. It has arisen in the context of new global challenges manifesting material effects such as worsening environmental degradation, violence against indigenous people and people of color, the mobilization of massive populations of migrants and refugees, and the ongoing marginalization of women and other sexual minorities. Instead of a one-directional focus on the violent material effects of corrupt cultural systems, or the ways in which cultural systems constrain and discipline formations of selves, New Feminist Materialists combine this mode of analysis with an equal interest in the ways in which “nature punches back.”⁶⁵³

In response to earlier iterations of feminism that privileged investigation into the roles played by language, discourse, and power in the construction of identities, New Feminist

⁶⁵³ *Material Feminisms*, p. 7.

Materialists are appreciative of the insights from these earlier feminisms, but they also call for renewed attention to the agency of matter, and to the ways in which creaturely life is dependent upon and immersed in materiality.⁶⁵⁴ The penchant for deconstruction that typified postmodern forms of feminism in the wake of Derrida and Foucault is valued and largely embraced by the New Feminist Materialists. However, they also view this tendency towards deconstruction as incomplete.⁶⁵⁵ New Feminist Materialists argue that in their efforts to combat problematic biological essentialisms, postmodern feminists failed to attribute any agency to the material realm in forming social and political realities, thereby reifying a dualism in which matter is regarded as inert and passive to be written upon by the active shaping forces of mind and culture. As Samantha Frost notes, “feminists have been more comfortable with denaturalizing nature than with what we might call ‘deculturalizing culture’—or admitting that matter or biology might have a form of agency or force that shapes, enhances, conditions, or delimits the agency of culture.”⁶⁵⁶ Depicting bodies as passive products of power and discourse via the “well-worn path of critique” has led to a neglect of investigation into the lived materiality of bodies, engagement with scientific sources, and reflection on the importance of corporeal practices, according to the New Feminist Materialists.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁴ Samantha Frost notes, “‘new materialist’ work challenges the linear models of causation that underlie constructivist analyses of the ways power shapes subjects and objects of knowledge” (“The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, H.E. Grasswick, ed., Dordrecht: Springer (2011), p. 69).

⁶⁵⁵ Foucault, for example, argued that power, not biology, should be the primary object of analysis, since sex and sexuality have been “organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 155.

⁶⁵⁶ Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” p. 76.

⁶⁵⁷ *Material Feminisms*, p. 4.

While New Feminist Materialism is not monolithic, their writings typically share the following features: extensive engagement with the natural sciences—especially quantum physics and evolutionary biology, an acknowledgement of the nature of matter as active and generative, and a commitment to taking seriously the “material details of everyday life.”⁶⁵⁸ For example, Anne Fausto-Sterling exhorts feminists to “accept the body as simultaneously composed of genes, hormones, cells, and organs—all of which shape health and behavior—and of culture and history.”⁶⁵⁹ Rather than solely interrogating the ways in which discourse and power relations shape bodies (how “culture” becomes “nature”), New Feminist Materialists use developments in evolutionary biology to foreground the ways in which material forces possess their own fecundity and agency. Matter, they argue, “acts, creates, destroys, and transforms.”⁶⁶⁰

This “biological turn” that is expressed in New Feminist Materialism is developed within the context of an evolutionary framework that sees nature as emergent and evolving, and always already entangled with the cultural. The biological body “involves open systems,” and thus a one-directional analysis of cultural effects on the body is not sufficient, according to New Feminist Materialists.⁶⁶¹ New Feminist Materialists refigure the concept of nature so that it is no longer portrayed as the opposite of culture, but rather, is seen as culture’s “underlying condition.”⁶⁶² In light of this entangled relationship between nature and culture,

⁶⁵⁸ Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press (2010), p. 7.

⁶⁵⁹ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1—Sex and gender” 2005, p. 1495.

⁶⁶⁰ Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, New York: Fordham University Press (2018), p. 1.

⁶⁶¹ Gill Jagger, “The New Materialism and Sexual Difference,” *Signs* 40 (2015), p. 322.

⁶⁶² Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, and Power*, 7. She states further, “Instead of a reduction of culture to nature, as performed by sociobiological explanation, where culture is nothing but the direct and unmediated expression of a directive, even normative (genetic or instinctively given) nature, I am interested in

Elizabeth Grosz argues that we need a new “complex and subtle account of biology if it is to be able to more adequately explain the rich variability of social, cultural, and political life.”⁶⁶³ New Feminist Materialism draws from evolutionary biology and quantum physics as important resources for re-conceptualizing materiality, but it also rejects reductive biological determinism such as the type proffered by sociobiology, or a notion that matter can ever be separated from the social and the cultural. To be human is to be a biological creature, but it is also to be more than biology. The biological always contains an excess, and this excess includes meaning, ideality, culture, and history. New Feminist Materialist engagement with science, then, is not for the purposes of justifying the humanities with science, or to position science as a source that is more authoritative than others. Rather, as Karen Barad notes, the purpose of engaging with science in a New Feminist Materialist mode is “to understand the scientific as always already shot through” with the cultural in a way that undermines the privileging of the former over the latter.”⁶⁶⁴ Given the entanglement of scientific, philosophical, and cultural ways of knowing, New Feminist Materialism strives for a multi-tiered analysis of reality that more adequately captures the complexity of creaturely life.

The material and biological forces in the world impose real constraints upon human becoming since our materiality is often recalcitrant. However, while the reality of these constraints must be acknowledged, according to New Feminist Materialists, when viewed within an evolutionary framework, the possibilities provided by materiality are more

the way in which nature, composed of the biological and material, organic and inorganic systems that sustain life, incites and produces culture, that is, the ways in which the biological enables rather than limits and directs social and cultural life,” p. 43.

⁶⁶³ Ibid, p. 13.

⁶⁶⁴ Karen Barad, “What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments,” *Entangled Words: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, p. 70.

significant than its limitations. The biological, while never completely unbounded, is also the realm of flux, plasticity, transformation, and “generative surprise.”⁶⁶⁵ Culture does not write upon nature in a one-directional way, but rather, nature is presented here as alive, energetic, and formative of human and non-human life, and so nature and culture work together in continuously intersecting feedback loops. This recasts nature as an active agent that is entangled with culture, thereby undermining the nature/culture dichotomy altogether.

Though their philosophical starting points and conclusions significantly diverge, New Feminist Materialists actually agree with many of the critiques of postmodern thought expressed by the New Catholic Feminists. For example, Susan Hekman (a New Feminist Materialist), while affirming that language is a significant force that shapes reality, laments the narrowness and the restrictive nature of the “linguistic constructionism of postmodernism,” a complaint voiced by the New Catholic Feminists as well.⁶⁶⁶ Hekman and the New Catholic Feminists also both argue that ethics are central to feminist thought since feminists seek greater justice for the marginalized—especially women—and therefore, a rejection of absolutes is counter-productive to and inconsistent with feminist aims.⁶⁶⁷ New Feminist Materialists share the desire expressed by many feminist theologians to work towards greater justice for those traditionally on the margins of society. Some of the New Feminist Materialists, including Elizabeth Grosz, also call for a greater openness to

⁶⁶⁵ Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, and Power*, p. 18.

⁶⁶⁶ Susan Hekman, “Feminist New Materialism and Process Theology: Beginning the Dialogue,” *Feminist Theology* 25 (2017), p. 205.

⁶⁶⁷ As Cahill argues in *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, “Without some essential unity of human moral experience and common recognition of values, virtues, and vices, social criticism in the name of justice would be impossible,” 33. See also the review of feminist theologies by Susan Ross, Elizabeth Johnson, and Mary Catherine Hilker, which argues that “feminist theologies may be pluralist in nature but they are united by a shared passion for justice for women” (“Feminist Theology: A Review of Literature,” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), p. 330).

metaphysics, which echoes the approach of the New Catholic Feminists in the *Women in Christ* volume discussed in the previous chapter.⁶⁶⁸ While the ways in which they conceive of metaphysics are often incompatible with the commitments of many theologians, this renewed interest in metaphysics should be celebrated by feminist theologians, since it represents a greater openness to theological categories of analysis. Furthermore, New Feminist Materialists reject overly simplistic dualisms, and they argue for the importance of seeing the human subject as constituted by relationships—both emphases shared by the New Catholic Feminists and John Paul II as well. Finally, the New Feminist Materialists, the New Catholic Feminists, and John Paul II agree that the biology of sexual difference should be of central importance for understanding the meaning of sexual difference. However, their conclusions about what the biology of sexual difference reveals radically diverge. However, it should be noted that their disagreements are not simply equally valid differences of opinion. Rather, the New Feminist Materialists actually engage with biological information relevant for understanding the biology of sexual difference, while the New Catholic Feminists and John Paul II do not.

New Feminist Materialists, then, agree with many of the critiques of postmodern thinking expressed by John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists, and they even agree on some of the directions for productive ways forward. However, as subsequent analysis will demonstrate, the New Feminist Materialists are more successful than John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists at engaging with and integrating scientific information, and they develop more adequate alternatives to dualistic thinking. In these ways, the New Feminist

⁶⁶⁸ Hekman, “Feminist New Materialism and Process Theology: Beginning the Dialogue,” p. 206.

Materialists offer important insights to theologians. On the other hand, the New Feminist Materialists could benefit significantly from the theological notions of sin and Incarnation articulated by John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists. We turn now to an examination of the contributions of Elizabeth Grosz and Anne Fausto-Sterling. This is followed by an assessment of the possibilities and challenges inherent to the task of integrating New Feminist Materialist insights into theological anthropology. From there, we assess the ways in which the New Feminist Materialists and John Paul II with the New Catholic Feminists can be mutually corrective to one another.

2. Elizabeth Grosz: Darwinism, Sexual Selection, and the Limits of Materialism

“I am interested here in an extramaterialism, in the inherence of ideality, conceptuality, meaning, or orientation that persists in relation to and within materiality as its immaterial or incorporeal conditions.”⁶⁶⁹

-Elizabeth Grosz

Elizabeth Grosz is a professor of Gender and Sexuality, Feminist Studies, and Literature at Duke University. She is a key contributor to New Feminist Materialism, and she draws from a wide-range of philosophical sources in her work. For the purposes of this project, her feminist retrieval of the works of Charles Darwin, and particularly, her reflection on his theory of sexual selection are particularly salient. Additionally, her 2017 monograph, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*, is relevant for our purposes as well as she aims in that work to develop an “incorporeal” framework for materiality that addresses some of the conceptual limitations of reductive forms of materialism. In doing so, she renders New Feminist Materialism more open to theological insights into creaturely life.

⁶⁶⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*, New York: Colombia University Press (2017), p. 5.

a. Darwin, Sexual Difference, and Sexual Selection

In her analysis of the history of philosophical thinking about nature and culture, Grosz acknowledges the history of gendered baggage associated with these terms. Forgetfulness or fear of nature/materiality, as well as hostility to nature/materiality are evident within the Western philosophical tradition, she argues, “in both the desire for the domination of nature and in the control of men over women.”⁶⁷⁰ The proper response from feminists should not be to seek to dissociate women from the concept of nature since this will only reinforce a deeply flawed framework. Instead, the task for feminists is three-fold: to develop a revitalized understanding of nature in order to emphasize the reality that the natural, the biological, and the material are “imbued with activity, with their own forces and unpredictabilities,” to reconceptualize the notion of culture in order to emphasize its continuity with and dependence upon nature, and finally, to undermine the nature/culture distinction altogether.⁶⁷¹ Darwin and evolutionary theory are key to accomplishing these tasks for Grosz.

As part of her project of reinvigorating feminist philosophical engagement with the material as a corrective to some of the shortcomings of the “linguistic turn,” Grosz turns to Darwin as a fruitful resource for reconceptualizing the concepts of biology, ontology, and sexual difference. Darwin, she argues, provides a framework for affirming the continuity of nature and culture. Nature and culture should not be seen as “dichotomous or oppositional” forces, but rather, as mutually dependent and intersecting realities.⁶⁷² By illuminating the nature of *Homo sapiens* as permanently in continuity with the rest of the natural world,

⁶⁷⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, “The Nature of Sexual Difference: Irigaray and Darwin,” *Angelaki* 17, no.2 (2012), p. 75.

⁶⁷¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, and Power*, p. 8.

⁶⁷² Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, Durham: Duke University Press (2011), p. 31.

Darwin demonstrated that there is no overcoming of nature or transcending nature in the development of culture. Rather, she argues, “the cultural is always already natural . . . Darwin has demonstrated that culture resides within rather than beyond nature.”⁶⁷³ Nature is not a point of departure that is then left behind upon development of the more sophisticated innovations of culture. Instead, nature should be seen as the source of productivity and creativity that continually informs and permeates cultural developments. She argues that we must recapture an awareness of nature as a “dynamic force of self-differentiation or emergence,”⁶⁷⁴ and as “evolving, as alive, as subject to upheaval and transformation . . . construed as unpredictable and open-ended, as a form of perpetual becoming.”⁶⁷⁵ Nature also always contains culture, and so Grosz argues that in order to adequately depict reality we must correct our tendency to think in terms of oppositions.

In addition to providing a framework for undermining the dichotomy between nature and culture, Darwin also reconfigures the notion of ontology, according to Grosz. She defines ontology as “the philosophical analysis of what exists, what is, and what might be.”⁶⁷⁶ Darwin’s elucidating the reality of all of creaturely life as enmeshed in the ongoing workings of evolutionary processes transforms the notion of ontology away from connotations of stasis and essence to that of “ceaseless becoming.”⁶⁷⁷ After Darwin, creaturely life becomes defined in terms of “dynamic, collective, change.”⁶⁷⁸ Being is replaced by becoming, essence by existence, and stasis by dynamism. The nature of the human as in a state of continual

⁶⁷³ Grosz, “The Nature of Sexual Difference,” p. 77.

⁶⁷⁴ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 49.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

transformation entails that we can never know our own nature in a comprehensive way, that every attempt to essentialize or categorize humanity will be incomplete and provisional, and that the future of our species cannot be predicted with certainty.⁶⁷⁹ Nature is, therefore, the realm of flux, creativity, unpredictability, wonder, and “generative surprise.”⁶⁸⁰ This is a non-reductive retrieval of Darwin’s theory of evolution oriented towards reinvigorating feminist reflection on the possibilities contained within the “natural” world. Evolution does not create blueprints, but rather, it creates possibilities for life to be different than what it has been previously. Our evolutionary development is not completely unrestrained since it emerges from what has come before and is in some ways limited by the evolutionary past, but yet, we are impelled forward into an unknowable future by the processes of natural and sexual selection. The human is both a preservation of the past and a “dissipation,” she argues, since “the present dissipates its force in producing a future which differs from it.”⁶⁸¹ The evolutionary past prefigures and provides resources for the present to draw from in order to develop the future in unique trajectories. Grosz argues that the past is also a dynamism and not a stasis since it is always being utilized, harnessed, and “revivified” in novel ways in the present.⁶⁸²

Central to Grosz’s non-reductionist and non-essentialist notion of ontology as ceaseless becoming are the reality of sexual difference and the process of sexual selection. She contends that sexual difference is an ontological and ineliminable aspect of human life that drives the endless proliferation of difference. Sexual difference is bodily difference, and

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁸² Ibid., p. 181.

so it involves genital differences, but it cannot be reduced to genital differences. Sexual difference is given, but it is also “lived, created, invented.”⁶⁸³ Darwin, she argues, “insists that sexual bifurcation, the division of species into (at least) two sexes, is an evolutionary invention of remarkable tenacity and value, for it multiplies difference *ad infinitum*.”⁶⁸⁴ The multiplication of differences inherent to the processes of evolution is excessive, aesthetic, and artistic, she argues. It exceeds what is necessary for survival. Sexual, racial, and other types of differences produced by the processes of natural and sexual selection make life “more enjoyable, more intense, more noticeable and pleasurable than it would otherwise be.”⁶⁸⁵ Grosz actually agrees with John Paul II that sin (in the form of patriarchy for Grosz) has caused us to view sexual difference as a relation of opposition. However, she views ideologies of sexual complementarity—and sexual sameness—as products of patriarchy as well.⁶⁸⁶

Grosz argues, drawing from the insights of Luce Irigaray, that the viewing of sexual difference as opposition is the result of the male forgetfulness of his origin from (and thus continuity with) the feminine (mother), a forgetfulness that arises as a defense mechanism to cope with the awareness of the nature of his own birth as an “unrepayable burden of obligation” to the feminine that is “repressed and covered over through phallic privilege.”⁶⁸⁷ The forgetfulness of nature and the material is also a result of men failing to acknowledge that there are “multiple worlds” in the form of different morphologies that shape different

⁶⁸³ Grosz, “The Nature of Sexual Difference,” p. 73.

⁶⁸⁴ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, p. 104.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶⁸⁶ Grosz, “The Nature of Sexual Difference,” p. 72.

⁶⁸⁷ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 70.

perceptions and ideas. Man's depiction of himself as neutral "citizen, subject, soldier, philosopher" divorces him from the particularity of his sexed body, perpetuates the "illusion of his disembodiment," and it also generates the necessity of making women "other" by restricting them to nature and bodiliness, and subsequently depicting nature as something to be overcome or mastered.⁶⁸⁸

Rather than a binary relationship of opposition, Grosz draws from Darwin in order to argue that sexual difference is ultimately "indeterminable" and is a process that is always already "differentiating itself," becoming more than, and different from, what it was previously.⁶⁸⁹ Also in agreement with John Paul II, Grosz argues that sexual difference should not be eliminated, but should be a continual source of wonder and joy. She draws from Darwin's theory of sexual selection in order to ground her notion of sexual difference as the ongoing proliferation of beautiful, pleasurable, and excessive (in the sense of more than is necessary for survival) differences. Contrary to claims by sociobiologists, sexual selection cannot be collapsed into natural selection, she argues.⁶⁹⁰ Sexual selection, though it can result in reproduction which benefits survival, cannot be reduced to reproduction alone. She argues that Darwin understood the gratuity and open-endedness of sexual selection in a way that is not reflected in the writings of his contemporaries or his successors.⁶⁹¹ Sexual selection, in Darwin's schema, is not only oriented to the promotion of fitness. Rather, it involves the principles of attraction, appeal, creativity, beauty, desire, and taste, which are unpredictable and always defying containment. Sexual selection is more akin to art and aesthetics than it is

⁶⁸⁸ Grosz, "The Nature of Sexual Difference," p. 76.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁶⁹⁰ Grosz, "The Nature of Sexual Difference," p. 81.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

to science and measurement. It both assists and undermines natural selection.⁶⁹² She argues that sexual selection could be understood as the “queering of natural selection, that is, the rendering of any biological norms, ideals of fitness, strange, incalculable, excessive.”⁶⁹³ Thus, Grosz conceives of sexual difference as an “indeterminable” ontological reality, and as an ongoing source of endless other differences that characterize human life and render it more beautiful, artistic, and pleasing. Through the open-ended, spontaneous, and unpredictable processes of sexual selection, evolution becomes surprising and non-linear in its trajectories.

b. The Limits of Materialism

In her most recent monograph, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (2017), Grosz discusses the limits of materialism, and she develops an “incorporeal” framework for materiality that addresses some of the conceptual limitations of reductive forms of materialism. She articulates an understanding of ontology that is also oriented to the ethical/political in that she investigates not only “what is,” but also, “what might be,” with the purpose of bringing about a future that looks markedly different from the present.⁶⁹⁴ Ontology, for Grosz, is somewhat of a slippery concept as she defines it sometimes as “ceaseless becoming,” and other times as involving “beings but also becomings.”⁶⁹⁵ Ontology, she says, refers to “what is real, what exists in this world.”⁶⁹⁶ Yet, she argues, ontology also refers to what *might be* in the future. Ontology is thus concerned with what is

⁶⁹² She argues, “Sexual selection, while conforming in the long run to the principles of natural selection, nonetheless may exert a contrary force to the pure principle of successful survival, for reproductive success cannot be rendered equivalent to mere survival, though it requires it to operate” (Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 22)

⁶⁹³ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, p. 132.

⁶⁹⁴ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

real, although what is real is not necessarily able to be fully known by us.⁶⁹⁷ Her interest in ontology leads her to posit a notion of “the ideal,” a reality which is immanent to, and not separable from, materiality, but the ideal also cannot be reduced to materiality. Materialism depends upon ideality, she argues, but it also produces it.⁶⁹⁸ Her understanding of ontology is therefore significantly different from characterizations of ontology as defined by stasis or essence. She argues that ontology is necessarily connected to ethics since ontologies shape our values and thus help us to determine our ethical priorities. She seeks, then, through her exploration of ontology, a way of understanding “the good life” in terms of a “generous and productive collective existence—lives that resist oppression, coercion, and prevailing social constraints—that enhance and produce values, that expand social and collective existence and the lives of nonhuman things.”⁶⁹⁹ On the other hand, she also argues that she seeks to create an ethics “without norms, without prescriptions,” and *with* “the will to power” and “an orientation to the future.”⁷⁰⁰ The limitations and inconsistencies in this view of ethics are discussed in a subsequent section in this chapter. She develops her creative onto-ethical framework through the construction of a genealogy of others who have pursued non-reductive investigations into questions of ontology and ethics. Included in her genealogy are the following: the Stoics, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Gilbert Simondon, and Raymond Ruyer.

Grosz constructs her genealogy with the intention of demonstrating the existence of a consistent pattern of thinking in the Western philosophical tradition about the concept of

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 261.

the “incorporeal,” which she describes as “the direction or trajectory that orients a movement of concepts or thoughts, that constitutes the possibility of a process of understanding, that enables the creation of a philosophy or a work of art as an emergence from and an entwinement with a material order.”⁷⁰¹ Within this framework, she critiques reductionism and forms of thoroughgoing materialism. She notes that she does not do this to develop an anti-materialism, but instead, to produce a more robust understanding of the material itself, and of the immaterial conditions that make materiality possible. She argues that “without ideality, a plan, a map, a model, an ideal, a direction, or a theme, materiality could not materialize itself.”⁷⁰² Thus, she argues, a notion of the incorporeal is required in order for there to exist a coherent materialism. The incorporeal allows the material to be meaningful, and to signify, according to Grosz. Despite the need for this incorporeality, we must not succumb to dualism, she argues. Materiality and incorporeality are not two separate and irreconcilable entities, nor should they be collapsed into a singularity. Instead, they coexist and integrate with one another, all the way down to the molecular level. This should also not be equated with Aristotle’s hylomorphism, since in Grosz’s framework, form is not privileged over matter, but rather they coinhere while still remaining distinct.

She aims to develop a path beyond dualism or monism—perhaps even via a “dualist monism”⁷⁰³—that avoids the problems inherent to each in her quest to “think materiality and ideality together.”⁷⁰⁴ In this way, she aims to develop in tandem with New Materialism, a

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., p. 250.

⁷⁰² Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., p. 249.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

“new idealism” that appreciates the perpetual entanglement of the ideal and the material.⁷⁰⁵

Idealism is necessary, she argues, to facilitate communal bonds between people and to render the material world open to coherence and meaning, and ultimately, to ethics. In her rendering of the material world as infused with the ideal, all the way down, Grosz renders even the most microscopic particles “goal-oriented.” In *The Incorporeal*, she argues, “The very existence of our own goals and intentions makes clear in an incontestable manner that we ourselves are oriented to the future . . . We should assume no less of our material components, the organs and tissues, the molecular and atomic movements and processes that compose our bodies.”⁷⁰⁶ Ideality, purpose, meaning, and incorporeality, stretch all the way down to the smallest elements of human life, according to Grosz. The mutual inherence of materiality and incorporeality, she argues, renders human life “more than human but less than other-worldly.”⁷⁰⁷

As I discuss further below, much of what Grosz seeks to establish in her examination of the limits of materialism has a quasi-religious tone, and she admits as much when she notes that ideality is viewed by some “in religious terms, through the connective and creative relations to a creator God conceived as the external force of coherence and direction of the world.”⁷⁰⁸ However, she intentionally distances herself from any association with religion, instead arguing that ideality should be thought of as the “material constitution of an ordered world” in which things and events have meaning “through their own modes of order and organization, without the need to invoke an independent God who exists separately from the

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 13. She sees this “new idealism” as non-Cartesian, non-Hegelian, and non-Platonic.

⁷⁰⁶ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 252.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

world.”⁷⁰⁹ At the conclusion of the monograph, she argues that it is a mistake to locate incorporeality and ideality in a divine being, and argues instead that we should develop a notion of a “terrestrial divinity of the orders and complexities, the self-forming properties of this world.”⁷¹⁰ She does not consider other options in terms of conceptions of God that might fit more cohesively with her approach, such as the type of process theology developed by Catherine Keller (who explicitly engages with New Feminist Materialism in her work). I discuss Keller’s engagement with New Feminist Materialism below.

c. Conclusion

Through her feminist retrieval of Charles Darwin’s insights about evolution, and especially regarding sexual difference and sexual selection, Grosz provides important insights for understanding the nature of human life as a dynamism of nature and culture, and as continually immersed in the biological world that is imbued with agency and activity of its own. Grosz’s disciplined engagement with Darwin’s work brings to the fore the fact that human life is not defined by stasis, but rather, it is totally immersed in an evolutionary milieu, which means that it is in a state of continual transformation and becoming. We cannot know ourselves in fullness now, nor can we predict with certainty what we will become. Human nature always exceeds our ability to categorize and contain it. Grosz also illuminates an important point that is developed further in the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling below, which is that the human is a moment of dynamic history. In other words, we are a synthesis-in-perpetual-motion of the past, which continues to shape us, and the future, which we are constantly hurtling towards. In the present, we find ourselves both limited and empowered

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., p. 252.

by our evolutionary past, which we carry in our bodies. We harness and revivify this past that lies within us in order to develop surprising and unpredictable future trajectories for our species.

Grosz also illuminates the nature of sexual difference as an ontological, but indeterminable and ineliminable, feature of human life that propels the ongoing proliferation of difference. She enables us to appreciate that sexual difference is an aspect of human life that is given, and not totally within our control, but that it is also partially “lived, created, and invented.”⁷¹¹ Sexual difference, as an evolutionary feature of the world, is always in the process of becoming different than it was in the past, in unknown and surprising ways that elicit wonder and joy. Grosz brings a philosophical and feminist perspective to the biological information about sexual selection discussed in the previous chapter. Her recognition of desire as central to the workings of sexual selection, and as a factor that renders sexual selection non-linear, artistic, and spontaneous, is helpful for our ongoing quest to understand the role of desire in the framework of a theological anthropology of original sin and sexual difference.

Finally, Grosz’s identification of the limits of reductionist materialisms, and her attempt to begin to develop a framework for the “incorporeal” will provide some additional useful points of contact with theology, despite the fact that Grosz resists explicitly religious readings of her work. In her development of an onto-ethics, and in her approach to the nature of human life and sexual difference, the insights of Grosz can be both appreciated and challenged when brought into conversation with theology. Before we begin this integrative

⁷¹¹ Grosz, “The Nature of Sexual Difference,” p. 73.

discussion, we examine one final representative of New Feminist Materialism—Anne Fausto-Sterling.

3. Anne Fausto-Sterling: Dynamic Systems Theory and the Development of Desire

“When we invoke formulae such as . . . innate versus learned, genetic versus chosen . . . nature versus nurture, normal versus deviant, the subtleties of human behavior disappear.”⁷¹²

--Anne Fausto-Sterling

Anne Fausto-Sterling is the Nancy Duke Lewis Professor Emerita of Biology and Gender Studies at Brown University. She founded the Science and Technology Studies Program at Brown, and she has published extensively on the importance of Dynamic Systems Theory. In particular she has sought to bring this dynamic systems approach to inform conversations about sex/gender differentiation in child development. Fausto-Sterling has also engaged in extensive public discourse on issues related to sex and gender, intersex people, the nature/nurture debate, homosexuality, and race and gender in science. She has written for many popular level sources, in addition to her extensive scholarly contributions. For the purposes of this project, her challenging of the nature/nurture dichotomy, her dynamic systems approach to understanding human life, and her investigations into the physiological development of desire are especially relevant.

⁷¹² Anne Fausto-Sterling, “Frameworks of Desire,” *Daedalus* 136, no. 2 (2007), p. 47.

a. Dynamic Systems Theory and Sex/Gender Development

The body, Fausto-Sterling argues, is a “collection of systems found within the world.”⁷¹³ She posits that the body is an entity that exists “in the middle.” Our bodies are “sustained within the world, responding to it, but also reshaping it.”⁷¹⁴ Understanding the body as collection of systems that are constantly integrating new information, and that fluctuate in their stability and coherence, she argues, renders the notion of predisposing biology or determinative culture nonsensical. We are born into complex webs of influences that are impossible to untangle into fixed “essences.” Culture is always already biology, and vice versa. Embodiment, in this framework, is a multi-tiered collection of processes that shifts and adapts over the course of a lifetime. Bodies and behaviors cannot be reduced to genes, hormones, or social constructions. She argues that we should view differences between humans not as fixed characteristics, but rather as traits that have emerged as the result of “a dynamic interplay between body and experience.”⁷¹⁵ Our bodies and behaviors are in part shaped by the genetic, epigenetic, and environmental legacies of those who came before us, but they are also continually adapting over the course of a lived life in responses to choices we make and the influences of those around us who help to shape our environments. Fausto-Sterling argues that studying the relationships between interacting systems such as “the macro system of human history and evolution, to the meso level of individual experience and behavior, down to the micro world of genetic regulation within individual cells” demonstrates that it is

⁷¹³ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Dynamic Development of Gender Variability,” *The Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 3, (2012), p. 404.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, Cynthia Garcia Cole, Meaghan Lamare, “Sexing the Baby: Part 2—applying dynamic systems theory to the emergences of sex-related differences in infants and toddlers, *Social Science & Medicine* 74, no. 11 (2012), p. 1693.

impossible to account for physiological differences through nature or nurture as isolated entities.⁷¹⁶ It is time, she argues, to abandon the notion of a nature/nurture dualism and to establish new models for understanding human life that more adequately account for the multiple interacting systems that cohere in each of us. Her approach reflects the biological turn of New Feminist Materialism and it also reflects the updated view of evolutionary processes articulated via the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis.

Fausto-Sterling describes Dynamic Systems Theory in terms of four key concepts. The first concept is that “behavior, engaged in over time, influences nervous system structure.”⁷¹⁷ For example, statistically it appears that parents tend to interact in different patterns with newborn sons than they do with newborn daughters. These differences include things like affectionate touch, frequency of verbal communication, and tone of vocalization.⁷¹⁸ Some of these differences in parental-infant interactions emerge even while the child is still in the womb.⁷¹⁹ These parent-newborn interactions, when they are continuous over time, shape the nervous system of the infant, and this contributes to all manner of later differences in biological characteristics and behaviors that can come to be perceived as “innate.” Affectionate touch from caregivers, which is again often performed differently by parents depending on the sex of the baby, contributes to an infant’s ability to learn to regulate temperature, to sleep, and to self-soothe. It also lowers newborn levels of stress hormones and metabolism, and it contributes to healthier immune function. Skin-to-skin contact, argues

⁷¹⁶ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Race,” *Social Studies of Science* 38, no. 5 (2008), p. 676.

⁷¹⁷ Fausto-Sterling, Cole, Lamare, “Sexing the Baby: Part 2,” p. 1693.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1696.

⁷¹⁹ Fausto-Sterling argues, “Even during the last weeks of uterine life, fetuses can perceive gender outside the womb . . . Gender is never absent. There is never a point at which it begins” (“The Dynamic Development of Gender Variability,” p. 413).

Fausto-Sterling, is also “essential to the embodiment of emotions and the development of self.”⁷²⁰ Thus, in this first concept within Dynamic Systems Theory, we see the persistent entanglement of biology and culture.

The second principle of Dynamic Systems Theory, according to Fausto-Sterling, is the notion that “behaviors and other physiological states are softly assembled.”⁷²¹ A “softly-assembled” behavior is one that is relatively, but not permanently, stable and that provides a foundation for experimentation and potential development of other “softly assembled” behaviors. These “softly assembled” behaviors and states are also influenced by environmental inputs. For example, they can be reinforced or discouraged by parental reactions. Fausto-Sterling reports that mothers “stress male infant musculature more, stimulate and arouse males more and look more at their male infants,” which may be caused by the fact that male babies in general cry more and sleep less.⁷²² Thus, she argues that again nature and culture are impossible to separate since physiological states might prompt some behaviors which are then “softly assembled” and either rewarded or discouraged by caregivers.

The third principle of Dynamic Systems Theory, according to Fausto-Sterling, is the fact that “the body integrates perception, action, and cognition.”⁷²³ She reports that babies in the womb and after birth are inundated with sensory information, which causes the nervous system to expand and develop rapidly. “Through its sensory and motor abilities,” she argues,

⁷²⁰ Ibid., p. 408.

⁷²¹ Fausto-Sterling, Cole, Lamare, “Sexing the Baby: Part 2,” p. 1696.

⁷²² Ibid., p. 1697.

⁷²³ Ibid.

“the exterior layers of the body bring the world into the central nervous system.”⁷²⁴ Experiences and social interactions collide with the explosive expansion of neural branching and connectivity, as well as chemical signaling happening within the developing nervous system of the baby. All of this activity influences the development of the brain’s “limbic system,” which, she notes, “integrates emotional states with stored memories of physical sensations.”⁷²⁵ These processes influence later abilities to make social connections, develop self-awareness, regulate emotions, and make interpretations about experiences of pleasure and attraction. This plasticity does not end with infancy, but rather, it continues throughout the development of a life. Thus, Fausto-Sterling argues, “far from being destiny, anatomy is dynamic history.”⁷²⁶ Our bodies give us clues about our ancestors, our parents, our homes of origin, our social contexts, and our habits, but since they are constantly integrating new sensory data and inputs (partly due to choices that we make), they also defy predictability.

The fourth principle of Dynamic Systems Theory as expressed by Fausto-Sterling is what she describes as a “new respect for individuality.”⁷²⁷ She argues that biologists and gender theorists alike should be interested in the question of “how large group differences emerge over time from a starting point of large individual variability but small group differences.”⁷²⁸ Newborns exhibit vast amounts of individual variability in behaviors, brain sizes, and motor functioning that cannot be easily grouped according to a binary system. However, the degree of variability in these elements diminishes as infants grow up and they

⁷²⁴ Fausto-Sterling, “The Dynamic Development of Gender Variability,” p. 405.

⁷²⁵ Fausto-Sterling, Cole, Lamare, “Sexing the Baby: Part 2,” p. 1697.

⁷²⁶ Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1—sex and gender,” *Signs* 30, no.2 (2005), p. 1511.

⁷²⁷ Fausto-Sterling, Cole, Lamare, “Sexing the Baby: Part 2,” p. 1698.

⁷²⁸ Ibid.

are more easily categorized according to stereotypical sex differences as they age. Fausto-Sterling suggests that studies in human differences within Dynamic Systems Theory should focus on a variety of individual factors such as genetic makeup, prenatal development, nutrition, parental stress and patterns of engagement, and birth trauma to understand the development of differences over time.

Each element of Dynamic Systems Theory supports Fausto-Sterling's aim of eliding the distinction between nature and nurture in order to develop a more helpful model for understanding human differences. She is especially interested in applying this model to questions of sex/gender and race in order to destabilize our notions of stable and natural sex/gender and racial differences. While earlier forms of feminism have also sought to destabilize the notion of "nature" as fixed and biologically determined, they often sought to achieve this by ignoring or dismissing biological information and focusing on the ways in which science is rife with racist and masculinist biases. Fausto-Sterling, Grosz, and other New Feminist Materialists are, instead, reclaiming the discipline of biology and other scientific disciplines as tools for feminist thought. Fausto-Sterling argues that earlier forms of feminism contributed in many ways to reifying sex differences by creating a dichotomy between "sex" and "gender," with sex used to refer to biology, and gender used to describe all other differences.⁷²⁹ In failing to see how biology and culture, and thus sex and gender, are always entangled, she argues that feminists created a framework that allowed scientists

⁷²⁹ Fausto-Sterling argues, "When the feminist second wave burst onto the political arena in the early 1970s, we made the theoretical claim that sex differs from gender and that social institutions produce observed social differences between men and women (Rubin 1975)." "The Bare Bones of Sex: Part 1—sex and gender," p. 1493.

and medical doctors to use the concept of natural sex differences to inappropriately expand the explanatory power of sex into:

arenas we firmly believed to belong to our ally gender. Hormones, we learn (once more), cause naturally more assertive men to reach the top in the workplace . . . Rape is a behavior that can be changed only with the greatest difficulty because it is wired somehow into men's brains . . . [and] The relative size of eggs and sperm dictate that men are naturally polygamous and women naturally monogamous. And more.⁷³⁰

It is not enough, she posits, to deconstruct the effects of cultural and historical systems of patriarchy. Instead, she argues for a "life-course systems approach to the analysis of sex/gender."⁷³¹ Accomplishing this requires feminists to accept that the genes, hormones, limbic systems, cells, and organs found in the body play a role in shaping individual and group behaviors, but also recognizing that biology intersects at all times with environmental and social forces as well.

In addition to examining questions of race and sex, Fausto-Sterling brings her Dynamic Systems approach to bear as well on the question of the development of gender identity in a way that helpfully illuminates the multi-layered complexity involved in the process of establishing a stable sense of one's own gender over the course of a lifetime. She argues that gender identity, as many other facets of human life, is "a product of the coupling of critical systems."⁷³² As a product of multiple interacting systems, gender identity is not a fixed feature of human life. Rather, the coherence of the systems that produce gender identity can fluctuate in stability, even at times falling into disarray. She argues, "When the components cohere tightly, gender identity is stable. When the elements cohere poorly, the

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

⁷³¹ Ibid., p. 1516.

⁷³² Fausto-Sterling, "The Dynamic Development of Gender Variability," p. 405.

system becomes chaotic.”⁷³³ Gender identity is the achievement of a subjective self that has woven together an integration of perceived social elements of “masculinity” and “femininity” into a regular pattern over time. Many postmodern feminists have argued this point as well. Fausto-Sterling expands upon this notion, however, by contributing the additional argument that this weaving together of social constructions is also a thoroughly biological process. Gender identity, she argues, “partly lies inside the body—in the shape of sensitivities, desires, preferences, and interests.”⁷³⁴ The materiality of the body shapes the process of gender identity development in an active way, even as the body is also shaped by the social constructions of gender swirling around it. A felt sense of gender identity emerges in concert with an ongoing integration of input from physiological factors such as hormones, genes, embodied feelings about one’s genitalia, and patterns of “pleasures and repulsions,” especially towards styles of dress and play. However, as we have seen, these physiological factors are always already cultural as well.⁷³⁵ Thus, in Fausto-Sterling’s schema, gender is sexed and sex is gendered from the beginning, such that these concepts cannot coherently be separated.

b. The Development of Desire

As the final section of this chapter elucidates, many aspects of Fausto-Sterling’s work described above are helpful for our development of a biological-theological approach to original sin and sexual difference. However, her insights into the dynamics of desire are especially relevant for our purposes given the centrality of desire to the evolution of sexual

⁷³³ Ibid., p. 406.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., p. 407.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., p. 406.

difference via sexual selection (as we saw in the previous chapter) and to the development of a sense of stable gender identity. Because of its centrality to human life, desire also plays a fundamental role in sin, human flourishing, and in the economy of salvation. It will be crucial, then, to have an appropriate framework for understanding the development of desire in human life.

In a move consistent with her tendency to view human life through the lens of Dynamic Systems Theory, Fausto-Sterling describes desire as a developmental process, rather than as a permanent state.⁷³⁶ She rebukes academics of all stripes who have allowed themselves to become trapped in oppositional frameworks in their attempts to explain human life. Becoming obsessed with oppositions leads researchers to “ask the wrong questions,” she argues, which means that many important nuances are lost or obscured.⁷³⁷ Understanding desire in its fullness requires acknowledgement of the many components that cohere together to produce states of desire with varying levels of stability in the human person. The levels of organization involved in the development of desire range from “the subcellular to the sociocultural,” she notes.⁷³⁸ She reflects the emphases of the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis in her placing the influence of genes squarely in the middle of a matrix of causal influences. Gene expression is a “reaction to a particular environment or experience,” she argues.⁷³⁹ Genes should not be considered “causal” agents in any linear or straightforward way. She emphasizes as well the centrality of neural plasticity to the development of desire. As we develop from infants to adults, our brains grow as well, and our nerve cells “make and

⁷³⁶ Fausto-Sterling, “Frameworks of Desire,” p. 50.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*

lose and remake and stabilize multiple connections in response to experiences and behaviors,” which helps us to understand how we come to experience embodied desires.⁷⁴⁰

Embodied memories are central to the experience of desire. As we discussed above, sense experiences influence the development of the brain’s “limbic system,” which, Fausto-Sterling notes, “integrates emotional states with stored memories of physical sensations.”⁷⁴¹ Repeated experiences or behaviors cause our bodies to, in a sense, “memorize” feelings. Particular pleasures, repulsions, longings, and desires, especially if they are frequent, become incorporated into the body. She describes this incorporation as desires becoming “sedimented in the body,” such that they become resistant to change.⁷⁴² These “sedimented” desires and feelings become habitual and thus unconscious. This is one way of explaining the relative stability of phenomena such as gender identity and sexual orientation, and we might extend this to also help explain our experiences of the intractability of some distortions of desire like racism and sexism. Dynamic systems can be “self-stabilizing,” she argues.⁷⁴³ Though they are not impermeable to change—quite the opposite is the case, as we have seen—both gender identity and sexual preference tend to be very stable processes in the vast majority of people, she argues.⁷⁴⁴ However, there are a multitude of factors, including physiological, psychological, hormonal, and social that can cause these systems to destabilize and become “chaotic.”⁷⁴⁵ Usually the system will restabilize after a period of integration, and after this

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ Fausto-Sterling, Cole, Lamare, “Sexing the Baby: Part 2,” p. 1697.

⁷⁴² Fausto-Sterling, “Frameworks of Desire,” p. 55.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁴ She notes, “Sexual preference, while not necessarily a permanent feature of a person’s psyche, is very stable, as the failure of many decades of efforts to ‘cure’ people of same-sex desire shows” (Ibid.).

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

restabilizing, desires may remain the same as they were before the destabilizing, or they may change.

Though desire is often unconscious and habitual, Fausto-Sterling argues that through the human capacity for story-telling and self-reflection, we can make desire at least partially a feature of our conscious thought as well, and this making conscious of the previously non-conscious can “in turn modify incorporated knowledge,” or influence the ongoing sedimentation of various desires.⁷⁴⁶ This description of the development of desire helps to illuminate the complexity of desire as, on the one hand, a series of systems that we inherit based on processes of incorporation and sedimentation that happen long before we are consciously aware, and thus, are largely out of our control. On the other hand, we can, she argues, partly shape the development of desire by our choices of repeated bodily practices and social influences, and we can intentionally strive to become more aware of the sedimented desires within, which is one way of also contributing to their ongoing development and adaptation. Much of the workings of desire depend upon processes that are out of our control, however, we are not passive recipients of our inherited desires. Rather, we participate actively—without having complete mastery over them—in shaping the future directions and developments of our desires. Biology, she argues, is not “permanence,” and social construction does not entail complete plasticity.⁷⁴⁷ Biology is both recalcitrant and plastic, and social construction can be determinative even as it is alterable.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

c. Conclusion

The insights of Anne Fausto-Sterling provide us with essential tools for understanding human life, and for developing a theology of sex and sin. Through her elaboration of Dynamic Systems Theory, we begin to perceive the complexity of humanity as collections of intersecting systems that develop over time in response to experiences that are out of our control, and also in response to choices that we consciously make. The systems that cohere to shape our behaviors, physiological traits, and internal senses of self can fluctuate in their stability, sometimes becoming chaotic before restablizing on “substantially new plain[s].”⁷⁴⁸ Our bodies are entities that exist “in the middle” of complex webs of influences that we both receive and actively shape. This elides the dichotomy between nature and nurture—biology and culture are always already entangled with one another—and it makes it impossible to “fix” any feature of human life as part of a human “essence,” except perhaps the human tendency to fluctuate and change. As Fausto-Sterling argues, this does not mean that there is no meaningful stability in human morphology, identity, gendered behaviors, or sexual differences—stability in these processes is typical actually, and they are often stubbornly resistant to attempts at modification. However, given the precarious nature of the balance of the systems that cohere to produce this stability, we should not be surprised by the reality that, over the course of a lifetime, they can become unstable and subsequently reoriented in novel ways. Fausto-Sterling’s insights on desire also help us to appreciate the centrality of desire, and the “sedimentation” of desire as stored memories of past pleasures and repulsions, to human identity. Desire is also a collection of cohering physiological, social, and

⁷⁴⁸ Fausto-Sterling, “The Dynamic Development of Gender Variability,” p. 407.

psychological systems that develop over time. It is shaped at various levels from the sub-cellular all the way up to the cultural. Desire is a phenomenon that confounds human attempts at control and mastery. It is something we receive, but we can also participate in its ongoing development through repeated corporeal practices, self-reflection, and the shared narration of our lives with one another.

4. New Feminist Materialism as a Resource for Theologies of Sex and (Original) Sin

We turn now to assess the possibilities and limitations inherent to the task of drawing from New Feminist Materialism as a resource for a theology of sex and sin. In this section, I suggest four ways in which New Feminist Materialism can contribute to the development of theological anthropologies—especially theologies of sex and (original) sin. This assessment of the contributions that New Feminist Materialists can make to theology is followed by a discussion of how New Feminist Materialism could benefit from greater engagement with theological sources, including John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* and the New Catholic Feminists.

a. Creaturely life as dynamic and “in between”

The insights from chapter four regarding developments in the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and the biology of sexual difference, combined with the work of the New Feminist Materialists, helpfully illuminate the nature of creatures as negotiating a variety of “in between” places as sites of historical dynamism. This approach to thinking about creaturely life more adequately avoids the various dualisms that at times entrap John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists, despite their intentions to avoid dualisms. For the New Feminist Materialists, the human exists “in the middle” of nature and culture—every person is a

collection of dynamic fluctuating physiological, psychological, social, and other systems that achieve various forms of coherence and stability over the course of a lifetime. Thus, the New Feminist Materialists can assist theologians in more adequately characterizing what Michele Saracino refers to as “our hybrid reality.”⁷⁴⁹ We must begin to develop frameworks in theology for portraying “the plural and enmeshed qualities of human existence—in other words to claim its hybridity” in order to have theological anthropologies that reflect that complexity of creaturely life, and the New Feminist Materialists provide some tools to accomplish this task.

Additionally, the New Feminist Materialists illuminate the nature of the body as both a memorial to the past and a site of development that is open to the future. New Feminist Materialism and the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis provide important tools for conceptualizing creaturely life as a blend of “givenness” and construction (both social and individual). They enable us to recognize that causation is not linear, but is, rather, “complex, recursive, and multi-linear.”⁷⁵⁰ They demonstrate that every creature exists in the midst of a matrix of “interdependencies,” and thus they work against the myths of both essentialism and determinism, but also the fantasies of autonomy and self-creation.⁷⁵¹ We are constrained by our bodies, our ecological niches, our evolutionary pasts, but these very constraints are also the means of their partial overcoming. As Jane Bennett notes, humans are always “in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections.”⁷⁵² Our bodies

⁷⁴⁹ Michele Saracino, “Moving Beyond the ‘One True Story,’” *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder*, eds. Susan Abraham and Elena Procario-Foley, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, (2009), p. 10.

⁷⁵⁰ Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” 71.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁵² Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004), p. 365.

are products of an accumulation of events, forces, and processes in our evolutionary past that we do not control. We carry in our bodies the effects of choices made by our ancestors, the effects of traumas and triumphs they experienced, and the influences of the families and communities in which we were raised. On the other hand, as we have learned from both Grosz and Fausto-Sterling, the past we carry within us is not static, but it is constantly providing resources that we use in the present to develop new behaviors and trajectories, both for us as individuals, for our communities, and for our species. As Catherine Keller argues, “endless becoming does not signify the unlimited expansion of any entity. Becoming unfolds within the constraining and sustaining contexts enfolding any individual . . . Yet limit functions not as container but as skin, permeable membrane.”⁷⁵³ These insights into creaturely life are helpful for both theologies of sex/gender and theologies of original sin.

Locating the body as a site “in between” the past and the future means that our sexed traits always remain in some continuity with what has come before. Much of what our bodies look like in terms of bodily sexual differentiation is the result of inherited genetic, epigenetic, hormonal, and environmental influences. Additionally, our subjective sense of identification with the bodies we live in, and our ability to feel at home in our bodies, are also in large part the result of integrating childhood experiences, embodied memories, and sedimented desires that we did not choose and which we cannot alter by sheer willpower. In many crucial ways, we do not make ourselves who we are. Rather, we receive our identities from others. However, since both sexual difference and gender identity are, to a certain extent, lived and developed over the course of a lifetime, and since we constantly draw from the resources of

⁷⁵³ Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, New York: Routledge (2003), p. 225.

the past to develop the new, sexual difference and gender identity will also continue to develop in a myriad of unpredictable, surprising, and sometimes unexpected ways. The approach to sexual difference of the New Feminist Materialists expresses an appreciation for both the recalcitrance and the plasticity of the materiality of sexual difference. Since, as they emphasize, sexual difference is a biological reality that is immersed in the flux and flow of the evolutionary world, it cannot be depicted in terms of stasis and essence without reifying a soul/body dualism, and this is the crucial mistake made in the theological anthropologies of John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists. While it is tempting to reduce sexual difference to binary categories defined by seemingly obvious male and female sex organs, this obfuscates the complexity of the various interrelated factors—“chromosomal, genetic, anatomical, gonadal, germinal, endocrine (hormonal), [and] psychological,” as well as representational and cultural—that intersect to produce sexual difference in human bodies.⁷⁵⁴ The stability, knowability, and predictability of the meaning of sexual difference as manifested in human bodies is further complicated by the reality of significant alterations in levels of sexual dimorphism over time in the history of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*.⁷⁵⁵ The internalization of a stable gender identity is at least equal in complexity to the development of biological sexual difference.

New Feminist Materialism helps theologians develop an appreciation for the material dynamism and complexity of sexual difference, as well as the multi-layered processes through which humans come to understand the meaning of our bodies in dialogue with

⁷⁵⁴ Deborah Rudacille, *The Riddle of Gender: Science, Activism, and Transgender Rights* (New York: Pantheon, 2005) p. 10.

⁷⁵⁵ See Dean Snow’s “Sexual Dimorphism in European Upper Paleolithic Cave Art” (*American Antiquity* 78, 2013, p. 757) for insight into the evolutionary development of sexual dimorphism in humans and pre-humans.

cultural norms. These insights from the New Feminist Materialists can assist theologians in creating more expansive categories for thinking theologically about the nature of sex/gender. New Feminist Materialism also brings renewed attention to the ways in which biology (as nature/culture dynamism) can be a source of liberation, renewal, and transformation. The dynamism of sexual difference and the multiplicity of causal influences shaping its development also remind us to be circumspect about the extent to which we can understand the nature of sexual difference. As Frost argues, this requires us to develop,

epistemological and political humility in the face of the organic and inorganic world: an acknowledgement of the impossibility of full and definitive knowledge and a corollary surrender of the teleological assumption that we might possibly, at some future point, achieve full mastery over ourselves and the world around us.⁷⁵⁶

The meaning of our bodies will always exceed our comprehension and defy our abilities to categorize and contain them, and this is a gift for theology in that it opens up our theologies of sexual difference and gender to uncertainty and wonder. As Keller notes, “in their material entanglements, in their intra-active complexity, they [bodies] ‘decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/Will not stay put. They refuse to remain the knowable, predictable, or controllable subjects of each other.’”⁷⁵⁷ We must be more diligent in our cultivation of communities capable of epistemological humility, openness to wonder and surprise, and willingness to embrace uncertainty in the face of the unknown future of sexual difference in the species *Homo sapiens*. Evolutionary biology and New Feminist Materialism give theology a great gift in their demonstration that the elements of life we might be tempted to consider basic, simple, fundamental, and knowable are ineluctably mysterious. The difficulty

⁷⁵⁶ Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” p. 79.

⁷⁵⁷ Catherine Keller, “Tingles of Matter, Tangles of Theology,” *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, p. 13.

with a concept such as “nature” is that it feels so *natural* and therefore so un-mysterious. It requires an intentional and disciplined effort to allow the familiar to become strange to us again.

In addition to contributing to new theologies of sexual difference/gender, the reality of the body as a dynamic space “in between” can also assist us in rethinking the theological notion of sin as “original” or “inherited.” From the moment of conception, we are formed within a dynamic matrix of biological and social/cultural forces. As both Grosz and Fausto-Sterling have argued, there is no time at which the biological is not also cultural, and there is no “pure nature” that is later influenced by culture. Rather, from the moment we begin to exist, we receive biological and cultural inheritances that contribute to our flourishing, but that also “infect” us with biases, traumas, prejudices, and injustices that originated long before our choosing. As Keller notes,

I did not choose my ancestors’ slaveholding, my nation’s aggressions. Yet such preconditions have shaped, privileged and deformed “me”—like a contagious disease, as Augustine would say (yes we are all connected). If one earthling falls into alienation, into greed, into domination—that sin will infect its relations and this in part constitute all who follow. A relation is a repetition: recapitulation.⁷⁵⁸

In this sense, sin is “original” to each of us since there is never a time at which we are able to escape the formative power of the culture/nature dynamism of evolution. Additionally, in a qualified sense, we can argue that sin is propagated “biologically,” if we again affirm that biology and culture work as a synergy in the human subject.

This approach to original sin rejects the suggestion made by some—such as Philip Hefner and Patricia Williams—that sin arises from “nature,” or is simply a theological way

⁷⁵⁸ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 80.

of describing the destructive influence of some aspects of our biological inheritance.⁷⁵⁹ For example, Patricia Williams argues, “human beings are self-interested, selfish, and conflicted because of their general genetic makeup.”⁷⁶⁰ It likewise rejects the suggestion made by others that sin is transmitted only through cultural inheritance and not biology. For example, although he affirms that recent developments in evolutionary theory undermine the nature/culture divide, and he affirms the “deeply enculturated nature of human existence,” Benno Van den Toren nevertheless argues that “current evolutionary theory rather unexpectedly provides a new theoretical framework that helps us deepen our understanding that human sinfulness is *not part of human nature* yet is unavoidably inherited from our parents and from the communities in which we are raised.”⁷⁶¹ Thus, for Van den Toren, “cultural socialization,” and not biology, is the mechanism for the transmission of sin. This is a curious reifying of the nature/culture dichotomy on his part, despite his acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the nature/culture dualism. This project presses deeper into the synergy of nature and culture and insists that we can never separate these realities, and so sin is transmitted through a matrix of influences both “cultural” and “biological,” although the deeper point to acknowledge is the inadequacy of frameworks dependent upon a nature/culture dualism for explaining the origins of sin. Indeed, as Fausto-Sterling and Grosz have demonstrated, human culture and socialization are thoroughly biological developments, and human biology is permeated and shaped by human culture.

⁷⁵⁹ Philip J. Hefner, “Biological Perspectives on Fall and Original Sin,” *Zygon* 28, no 1 (1993), pp. 77-101.

⁷⁶⁰ Patricia A. Williams, “Sociobiology and Original Sin,” *Zygon* 35, no 4 (2000), p. 799.

⁷⁶¹ Benno van den Toren, “Original Sin and the Coevolution of Nature and Culture,” *Finding Ourselves After Darwin*, pp. 176 and 179, (emphasis mine).

Augustine's notion of the unity of the human race described earlier in this thesis is therefore only affirmed and expanded by the insights of the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and the New Feminist Materialists. We are united with not only our own species, but with all of the created world and all that came before us, all the way down to the level of the most fundamental processes that shape us. As Michele Saracino argues, "Interdependence carries over to the relations among creatures. Human beings are dependent on all the plants and animals of the earth, and the earth is vulnerable to the actions of all creatures."⁷⁶² One way then in which we can retain a notion of "original sin" in the twenty-first century in light of all that we know about the dynamic interplay of nature and culture in evolution is to see the human person as a product of an evolutionary past that continues to exert causal influence, as an entity shaped by multiple interacting systems, with a certain degree of agency, but not unbounded possibility, with our agency always already limited and shaped by the matrix of interdependencies in which we live. The past decisions made by our ancestors, our early childhood experiences, and the biological forces that came before us—the sinful and the good and everything in between—are always with us, although we are also not completely determined by these histories. One does not need to subscribe to Augustine's belief in an original human pair from whom the entire race biologically descended in order to affirm the notion of 'inherited sin' and even inherited culpability.

The New Feminist Materialist framework transforms our conceptions of "agency" and "the self." They render untenable any conceptions of sin and culpability that are framed with reference to the human person as a free and autonomous "I." The various "sticky webs of

⁷⁶² Saracino, "Moving Beyond the 'One True Story,'" p. 13.

connections”⁷⁶³ that form each of us also entangle us in various ways in immense “webs of reciprocity in evil” that we cannot escape through our own efforts.⁷⁶⁴ Yet, as we have seen, this matrix of causal influences that forms our “self” also includes as one factor our own active decisions and choices, and so we can also—to a certain extent—make choices for good or for ill. As Keller states, “We go along, we do not resist, we seek to secure our existence. The repetitions become habitual, often compulsive, carried along by global patterns of assumption—economic, sexual, racial, religious. Amidst these structures, our agency may be unconscious. But it is never simply absent.”⁷⁶⁵ A New Feminist Materialist framework helps us to develop a notion of sin that accounts for the wide array of influences, forces, and systems that collide to influence human behavior, and to resist the temptation to think of culpability in a simplistically individualistic sense. Indeed, Grosz argues that it is more accurate to describe creaturely life in terms of excessive agency rather than a lack of agency. She states,

Subjects, groups, do not lack agency; on the contrary, they may, perhaps, have too much agency, too many agents and forces within them, to be construed as self-identical, free, untrammelled, capable of knowing or controlling themselves. This is not to claim that subjects are not free, or not agents, but that their agency is mitigated and complicated by those larger conditions that subjects do not control.⁷⁶⁶

We are radically interconnected and interdependent, even across species, and all the way down to the molecular level. The Enlightenment conception of the human person as an autonomous ‘I’ that has caused so much difficulty for the notion of sin as inherited is now

⁷⁶³ Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter,” p. 365.

⁷⁶⁴ Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness,” p. 616.

⁷⁶⁵ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 80.

⁷⁶⁶ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 6.

being transformed by a greater appreciation for the embeddedness of the human species in the evolutionary world, and the complexity and diversity of the processes that shape human consciousness and identity. In this light, Augustine's notion of 'inherited sin' and his dependence on the motif of unity present helpful resources for reconsiderations of the doctrine of original sin in the twenty-first century as we seek to understand our histories of suffering and triumph. As Stephen Duffy has argued, "before being able to choose," we are, "merely by being historically situated," inextricably caught in conflictual and sinful structures that shape us.⁷⁶⁷ In our unity with one another, we share our culpability and restoration, our sickness and healing. Keller is thus correct in her argument that sin is thus "discreation, that is, creaturely relations that deny and exploit their own interrelations."⁷⁶⁸ In the context of this thesis, we would extend Keller's insight to say that sin is not only a denial or exploitation of creaturely relations, but that the concept of sin also describes pathology in the ways in which we relate to God. As Alistair McFadyen argues, "the language of sin carries an inbuilt reference to God, naming the pathological as the denial of and opposition to God."⁷⁶⁹

b. The Centrality of Desire

As we have seen from the analyses of the works of Augustine and John Paul II earlier in this thesis, reflection on desire is central to some of the most influential theologies of original sin and sexual difference in the Christian tradition. Although it is not accurate to say that either Augustine or John Paul II are anti-woman, anti-body, or anti-sex, it remains true that within

⁷⁶⁷ Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness," p. 616.

⁷⁶⁸ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 80.

⁷⁶⁹ Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, New York: Cambridge University Press (2000), p. 11.

the context of their writings, desire is frequently depicted as a force to be dominated by “reason,” women are associated with “insatiable desire” and sensuality, and men are associated with rationality.⁷⁷⁰ While Augustine perpetuated a hierarchical framework in which desire is rightly subjugated to reason, and women are rightly subjugated to men, John Paul II speaks in terms of “complementarity” between men and women rather than hierarchy. However, in the end, their conclusions about desire, sin, and sexual difference are quite similar. While John Paul II argues in favor of the fundamental equality of men and women, he also, as we discussed in the previous chapter, describes complementarity in terms of the “natural” role of the man as active and responsible for the woman’s well-being, and the woman as naturally passive and receptive. John Paul II also depicts desire in more negative terms than Augustine. This is reflected in the fact that John Paul II barely mentions the potentially positive role that desire can play in human life such as leading one into deeper relationships with God and others. When insubordinate desire is the cause of sin, and women are associated with desire as they are in works of Augustine and John Paul II, the result is that women begin to be viewed as the causes of sin, and thus, as deserving of domination, silencing, and containment.

Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, more recent developments in theories of sexual selection, and the insights of the New Feminist Materialists affirm the view expressed by Augustine and John Paul II that desire is central to human life and behavior. Theories of sexual selection illuminate the reality that desire is fundamental to the ongoing evolution of sexual difference. Sexual selection demonstrates that the non-linear and unpredictable

⁷⁷⁰ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 188.

movements of desire that motivate mate selection produce the wide diversity of bodily traits present in the world. Thus, while the unruliness of desire has often been viewed negatively or with suspicion by theologians, sexual selection theory helps us to appreciate the nature of desire as unpredictable and uncontrollable, since its unpredictability is the source of the production of a vast array of diverse physical traits. The future of sexual difference is not totally fixed or determined by genes or natural selection. Rather, it is subject to, in the words of Grosz, “the turbulent, disturbing, erupting indeterminacy of sexual attraction and pleasure.”⁷⁷¹

It is, therefore, inadequate to depict desire as a force to be “mastered” and subordinated to “rationality.” Indeed, within a New Feminist Materialist framework, the dichotomy between “reason” and “desire” is challenged altogether. Human intellectual processes are always entangled with desires. Darwin, and the retrieval of Darwin by Grosz, help us to perceive “desire” as a powerful force that propels human becoming and produces novelty and diversity. This does not mean that desire can never become distorted or sinful, but it does mean that we must acknowledge the necessity, productivity, and goodness of desire, and find a new way of engaging with desires that moves beyond the framework of mastery, domination, and subjugation. A better approach is to think in terms of attending to, noticing, and working with the forcefulness of our desires, and perhaps at times even making efforts to nurture them to become even more vibrant.

Anne Fausto-Sterling’s work also helps to unveil the complexity of the dynamic development of desire, and the extent to which desire, and sedimented memories of desire,

⁷⁷¹ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 197.

establish our identities as sexed and gendered. Sedimented and unconscious desires, while not permanently determinative, exert strong influences over our behavior and self-understanding. Fausto-Sterling's insight that desire is a force that is both given and constructed can contribute to a framework for understanding original sin and sexual difference. Her illumination of the means by which desire becomes sedimented helps to explain the recalcitrance and relative stability (but not permanence) of destructive individual, familial, and societal desires. Desires related to sex and gender are not the only desires that can become sedimented. Rather, destructive desires such as the desires to dominate or possess others, to exclude and alienate, to enact violence and to be cruel can also become sedimented in individuals and groups. Fausto-Sterling's work illuminates how deeply ingrained into our bodies desires become, and thus, they are not easily uprooted and transformed. We cannot shift them solely through our own efforts, especially because so many of the desires that drive us are unconscious. However, her work also reveals that we can play a role in making our unconscious desires conscious, and we can participate in the ongoing development of the trajectory of our desires. Fausto-Sterling shows once again that agency is multi-tiered—we exist enmeshed in multitudes of “sticky webs of connections” and a “matrix of interdependencies” that shape us for good and for ill, but we also play a role in constructing ourselves.⁷⁷²

c. Rigorous engagement with scientific discourses

The New Feminist Materialists engage more extensively with the natural sciences, and are more successful in achieving the “common interactive relationship” between philosophy,

⁷⁷² Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter,” p. 365.

theology, and the natural sciences that was called for by John Paul II than he himself is, and so they provide a model for theological engagement with the natural sciences, especially when it comes to issues related to sex and gender. While there are many theological projects that successfully integrate theology with scientific discourses, there are very few that demonstrate an integrated approach to sex/gender questions and that engage thoroughly with both science and theology. The biological essentialism expressed by John Paul II and the New Catholic Feminists is not actually very connected to biology. Truly retaining a central focus on biology when constructing theologies of sexual difference and gender requires using the very best information from evolutionary biology to inform this engagement. Rather than providing simplistically binary categories for sex, biology opens up feminist analysis to the mystery and flux of the materiality of sexual differentiation. Indeed, deeper engagement with the biological via theories of developmental adaptation reveal, in the words of Mary Jane West-Eberhard, a senior scientist in this field, that “Of all the major transformations in the history of life, the evolution of sex is the most enigmatic.”⁷⁷³ The New Feminist Materialists help us to appreciate the reality that the biology of sexual difference is not defined by a simplistic and static binary, but rather, it is marked by variety and plasticity. They demonstrate a method through which feminist theologians can re-engage with the resources of the hard sciences without losing the valuable role that feminism has historically played in critiquing the ways in which science is vulnerable to being co-opted by the powerful to serve various political agendas. New Feminist Materialists provide a model for retaining an intense

⁷⁷³ West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution*, p. 630.

focus on the materiality of body in philosophical and theological developments, without essentializing the body.

d. The importance of corporeal practices

A key emphasis of the New Feminist Materialists is the importance of the embodied activities of everyday life for the ongoing evolution of identities and agencies. They affirm again some of the developments revealed by the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, such as those of niche construction theorists, who have illuminated the ways in which organisms actively shape their ecological niches. Daily activities and habits of organisms shape the selection pressures in environments that subsequently select organisms. The small, mundane, bodily practices we participate in are pivotal in shaping the trajectory of evolutionary processes.

Fausto-Sterling has shown as well that the regular patterns of interaction between caregivers and infants plays a critical role in an individual's psychological and physiological development. The development of a myriad of different biological characteristics and behaviors in individuals are shaped by small, repeated, corporeal practices such as play and affectionate touch. Fausto-Sterling has described how repeated experiences or behaviors cause our bodies to "memorize" feelings. These memorized feelings then become incorporated into the body and shape one's sense of self. While sedimented desires often become largely unconscious and resistant to change, it is possible, Fausto-Sterling argues, to make our unconscious desires conscious through intentional rituals such as story-telling and practices of self-reflection, and so we can play a part in directing the development of our desires.

The insistence of the New Feminist Materialists on the importance of corporeal practices in shaping desires, identities, and behaviors is another element of their thought that

is helpful for theological reflection on sex and sin. It can assist theologians in developing an appreciation for the role of creativity in the elaboration of sexual difference and gendered behaviors. Sexual difference is a reality that is both materially constrained but also in a continual process of evolution, and humans participate actively in its ongoing elaboration through our corporeal habits and practices. Sexual difference is a material and evolutionary force “through which we work but which we do not control, which we cannot rise above” but which nevertheless, directs us “toward the possibilities of change.”⁷⁷⁴ Or as we might say in a more theological vernacular—creation is both a gift and a task, and this can be a source of joy and wonder. To be a biological creature is to have to accept at times the material constraints of our embodied forms, to live within limits. However, we participate actively in the ongoing processes of the natural world, including the evolution of our sexual differences, through our repeated corporeal practices. God’s creation of the world is a continual process of becoming, a continual proliferation of difference that is sustained by the presence of God but also influenced by the dynamic energy of human beings. Life is an “incessant teeming, an ongoing movement to be more, to be other, to be beyond what is,”⁷⁷⁵ and so, both a feminist materialist and a feminist theologian can affirm that “we must live in the world artistically.”⁷⁷⁶ The New Feminist Materialists can help theologians to appreciate the ways in which our collective, ecclesial, and individual bodily habits and practices play roles in the shaping the unpredictable future of human sexual difference.

⁷⁷⁴ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 89.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

In terms of contributing to theologies of sin, the New Feminist Materialist focus on corporeal practices helps illuminate the ways in which repeated daily practices can sediment destructive desires in individuals and societies. It also affirms the theological insight that liturgies and rituals are fundamental to human life, and that we can intentionally make efforts to use rituals to shape our desires according to principles of love, selflessness, solidarity, and other Christian virtues. Liturgies and spiritual practices can provide structured spaces in which people can become more attuned to their desires, can make their unconscious desires conscious, and can also work to redirect destructive desires. Thus, the New Feminist Materialist emphasis on the importance of corporeal practices finds some consonance with John Paul II's insistence that it is not only theologies of the body, but also "pedagogies of the body," that are needed.⁷⁷⁷

e. Conclusion

The *Theology of the Body* articulated by John Paul II and embraced by the New Catholic Feminists needs the disciplined attention to the biological that is offered by the New Feminist Materialists. Serious attention to the biological can helpfully render more complex and expansive John Paul II's depictions of human sexual difference as binary, static, and eternal. It would enable his *Theology of the Body* to integrate the reality of the mutability, unpredictability, and plasticity of human life, including human sexual difference. Additionally, the New Feminist Materialist integration of scientific discourses into their philosophical constructions, especially their incorporation of insights from the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis, more adequately achieves the goal of developing a "common

⁷⁷⁷ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 274.

interactive relationship” between science and the humanities that John Paul II espoused as an ideal, but which he failed to embody in his own theological anthropology.⁷⁷⁸

The sustained integration of information from evolutionary biology would impact John Paul II’s theology of original sin as well in that it would require the transformation of the notion of a historical “Fall” of humanity that shapes his reflections on human life. Accepting the implications of evolutionary theory entails accepting that there was no “prelapsarian” state of sinlessness on earth, there was no primal couple from which the entire human race descended, and there was no single originating sin. If, then, we are to affirm a notion of “original sin,” it must be in a highly qualified sense, not in a literal sense. Sin is “original” in the sense that it is a universal feature of human life, it forms part of the “ambiguous mix of preconditions” that shapes each of us.⁷⁷⁹

In addition to challenging the notion of a historical fall and a single originating sin, the insights of the New Feminist Materialists on the nature of desire challenge John Paul II’s depiction of desire as a problematic force to be mastered and subdued. Desire is a crucial feature of human life that shapes our identities and behaviors, but it can never be “mastered,” especially since many of our desires are unconscious. Even if it were possible to totally subdue desire, the New Feminist Materialists help illuminate the reality that this would diminish creaturely flourishing. Vibrant desire is essential to almost every area of life considered important by humans—love, relationships, meaningful work, the production of

⁷⁷⁸ John Paul II, “Message to the Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory,” in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, S.J., and George V. Coyne, S.J (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), <http://www.inters.org/John-Paul-II-Coyne-Vatican-Observatory>, retrieved on 23 November 2018.

⁷⁷⁹ It would perhaps be better to say that sin is “almost” universal, given that the church affirms that both Christ and Mary were born without original sin. “Ambiguous mix of preconditions” is from Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 80.

works of art. Furthermore, the unruliness and unpredictability of desire play important roles in the ongoing processes of sexual selection, which are central to the movements of evolution. Our inability to be completely in control of the direction and shape of our desires is not something to be lamented, even though it has the potential to be a source of suffering. Recognizing the nature of desire as excessive and eruptive reminds us that we do not make ourselves who we are through our own autonomy and self-determination. Rather, much of human life is learning to become attentive, awakening, to what we have received from others, including our desires—for good or for ill, and then working with and through our desires to continue to evolve in ways that promote flourishing.

From this examination of the contributions of Elizabeth Grosz and Anne Fausto-Sterling, and the possibilities of integrating New Feminist Materialist insights into theological anthropology, we now turn to an assessment of the ways in which John Paul II with the New Catholic Feminists and other theological sources can offer helpful correctives to New Feminist Materialism.

5. New Feminist Materialism and Theological Anthropology

Despite the fact that there are many aspects of New Feminist Materialism that offer potentially fruitful insights to theology, it would be a mistake to imply that New Feminist Materialism can be integrated seamlessly into Christian theology without significant areas of incompatibility and tension. This section identifies some of these areas of incompatibility, in addition to highlighting three areas in which John Paul II (and other theologians) could offer useful correctives to limitations or inconsistencies in New Feminist Materialism. The

conclusion of this chapter brings together the insights of John Paul II and the New Feminist Materialists to develop a framework for developing a theology of sex and sin after #MeToo.

a. Metaphysical Grounding for Materialism

The first area of incompatibility is reflected in the name “New Feminist Materialism.” Most of the New Feminist Materialists are atheists, despite their generally more open posture to theological and metaphysical categories of analysis. Their desire to avoid invoking the divine results in the processes of “life,” particularly in the writings of Grosz, being imbued with an almost magical ability to transform and direct the movements of evolution. However, this is done without any openness to the possibility of a divine presence in the world, or a providential ordering of nature. Yet, the question arises of whether or not, despite every explicit intention, Grosz succeeds in eliminating the divine from the material world, or if she simply gives it another name, such as the mysterious and wonderful creative energy of “life” or “ideality.” Where a New Feminist Materialist would attribute the forward movements of transformation within evolution to the vague agency of “life,” a feminist theologian would, without necessarily ascribing to a view of divine intervention that overrides the processes of evolution, suggest that God is somehow involved in the movements of evolution, holding these processes together in love, and that it is God who provides the “incorporeal conditions” for materiality that Grosz seeks in *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*.

One reason for Grosz’s rejection of the possibility of God in her work is her assumption that to affirm a divine being is to necessarily embrace the notion of, as she describes, “an independent God who exists separately from the world,” or a “creator God

conceived as the external force of coherence and direction of the world.”⁷⁸⁰ She rejects this concept of God because it establishes a dualism between ideality and materiality. This characterization of God as an “independent” being who is “separate” from the world, however, is not at all reflective of the concept of God affirmed by the Incarnational theologies of John Paul II, Augustine, or feminist theologians working within the Catholic tradition. In the framework of John Paul II, the divine is that which became flesh, thereby bringing materiality into theology “through the main door.”⁷⁸¹ Materiality, he argues, is a gift in which its “fullness and deepest dimension is determined by grace, that is, by participation in the inner life of God himself.”⁷⁸² Further, he posits that Christ, by his Incarnation, “united himself with each man (sic).”⁷⁸³ Material reality is thus “capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God.”⁷⁸⁴ In this Incarnational theology, the material has its existence only through the divine; it is saturated with and held together by the divine. Note Augustine’s depiction of the God-world relationship in *Confessions*:

If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker lest, in the things that please you, you displease him. If souls please you, they are being loved in God; for they also are mutable and acquire stability by being established in him. Otherwise they go their own way and perish. In him therefore they are loved; so seize what souls you can to take with you to him and say to them, ‘Him we love; he made these things and is not far distant.’ *For he did not create and then depart; the things derived from him have their being in him.*⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁸⁰ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 13.

⁷⁸¹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 169.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁷⁸³ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §8, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html, retrieved on 10 Feb 2019.

⁷⁸⁴ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 347.

⁷⁸⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.12, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1991), p. 63, emphasis mine.

This is not to say that creation is a “piece” of God, since God does not have a material body. However, it is to say that God does not exist in rivalry with the world, outside the world, or “above” the world. As Rowan Williams notes, the world is “a limited and fluid whole that is not God, yet is saturated with God.”⁷⁸⁶ Thus, the notion of a divinity who is “separate” from the material world is one that would not be recognizable to John Paul II or Augustine. Rather, for them, the material world is so imbued with God that it is “sacramental.” This deepens the New Feminist Materialist claim that human life is defined by “hybridity” by extending hybridity to also acknowledge the “constant exchange between the sacred and the everyday.”⁷⁸⁷ Augustine’s and John Paul II’s understanding of the Incarnation that shapes their view of creation could thus provide a potent resource for New Feminist Materialists, like Grosz, who are in search of an “incorporeal” grounding to provide meaning and direction to the material world, and a framework to conceive of “the mutual inherence of materiality and incorporeality.”⁷⁸⁸ Indeed, in Christ is the hypostatic union of the human and the divine natures, and thus Christology could provide a conceptual model of this mutual inherence that Grosz seeks.

Besides atheism, the other most common approach to theology among New Feminist Materialists is to embrace process theology. This is reflected in the writings of Susan Hekman, for example. Hekman is a New Feminist Materialist who argues that New Feminist Materialism opens up new possibilities for engagement between feminist philosophers and theologians, but only if the theology being engaged with is process theology since she argues

⁷⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*, London: Bloomsbury (2016), p. 75.

⁷⁸⁷ Saracino, “Moving Beyond the ‘One True Story,’” p. 13.

⁷⁸⁸ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 14.

that traditional theologies that focus on substance and being are hopelessly androcentric.⁷⁸⁹ Hekman states that within a framework informed by process theology, “everything is in flux: there are no enduring substances but only processes of becoming.”⁷⁹⁰ Within this framework, God is included in these processes of endless becoming as “creative activity rather than passive matter, by evolutionary becoming rather than changeless enduring. He is an in-the-world being who intervenes selectively in world processes.”⁷⁹¹ Catherine Keller supports the integration of New Feminist Materialism and process theology as well in her work as a process theologian who has incorporated New Feminist Materialism into her theological developments. In 2017, for example, Keller edited a volume of essays with Mary-Jane Rubenstein entitled *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*. Like Hekman, Keller finds the sovereign God of traditional theism unsatisfactory. The Christian tradition promotes, she argues, a picture of a “biblical lord of great if somewhat unpredictable power” and an “immutable, unilateral All-Power clothed in the attributes of a single male Person (or two; or . . .).”⁷⁹² This God is “a bully God, a blustering warrior” and “a detached omnipotence.”⁷⁹³ She argues instead for a process metaphysic in which “becoming is not outside of God nor God outside of becoming.”⁷⁹⁴ This is a God who is vulnerable and enmeshed in “potentialities of an indeterminate creativity.”⁷⁹⁵ She sees this concept of God as subverting the distant, cold, immutable, male God of classical theism with its alleged accompanying “legitimation of domination” in favour of the “tehomitic deity” who is

⁷⁸⁹ Hekman, “Feminist New Materialism and Process Theology: Beginning the Dialogue.”

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 200.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., p. 201.

⁷⁹² Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, pp. 15-16.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 164 and 181.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 226.

“enmeshed in the vulnerabilities and potentialities of an indeterminate creativity.”⁷⁹⁶ The “tehomitic deity” does not dominate or control, but rather lures, persuades, and “suckles.”⁷⁹⁷

There are attractive features of Hekman’s and Keller’s notion of God as endless becoming, including its promotion of more stereotypically feminine qualities that could offer an important corrective to the male-centric Judeo-Christian theological tradition. Additionally, its valuing of creativity, exploration, and process over perfection, control, and order is compelling.⁷⁹⁸ However, the cost of this revision to the orthodox concept of God is not worth the potential benefits, and there are other ways of achieving the ends hoped for by Hekman and Keller by working within the concept of God expressed by figures like Augustine, John Paul II. The main inadequacy with the notion of a God of “endless becoming” is that it does not actually provide an adequate conceptual grounding for materialism. Even Grosz acknowledges that, “Without ideality, a plan, a map, a model, an ideal, a direction, or a theme, materiality could not materialize itself.”⁷⁹⁹ The collapse of God into material processes of becoming fails to adequately account for the reality that God is not a creature like us. There is an infinite *difference* between God and the material world, even while the material world is permeated with the presence of God, and so it is able to reveal something about God. To be in motion, in flux, and in process, are features of creaturely life that reveal God to us through their difference from that which defines divine life.⁸⁰⁰ This does

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 226 and 230.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 226.

⁷⁹⁸ Isabelle Stengers offers a new and engaging analysis of Whitehead in her *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts* (trans. Michael Chase, London: Harvard University Press, 2011). Another approach to original sin from a process theology perspective is Marjorie Suchocki’s *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

⁷⁹⁹ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 12.

⁸⁰⁰ Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 67.

not entail, despite the claims of Keller and Hekman, that we therefore affirm the notion of a “distant,” “separate,” or “unaffected” divinity who has no intimate relation to creation. Rather, as discussed above, the God described by Augustine and John Paul II is the source of everything that exists, and thus, creation exists “in” God. This God became incarnate in Christ, and far from being “unaffected” by creation, took on the sufferings of creation in order to be united with everything that is genuinely human. Indeed, as Augustine argues, God is “more inward to me than my most inward part and higher than my highest.”⁸⁰¹ However, it is important to retain as well the transcendence of God, even as we affirm God’s immanence. As Rowan Williams argues, “God could not (logically) be simultaneously the cause of a whole interlocking system and a member of it, and so we can never talk of features in common between God and the world.”⁸⁰² God is not one process among other processes of becoming, but is, rather, the source and foundation of all processes, and thus the guarantee of their coherence and meaningfulness. As Williams continues,

For there to be a world, a limited whole, there must be coherence, a convergence on stability, though it is a stability that continues to alter and reinvent itself at every moment, as time advances: there is not question of ‘imposing’ anything from ‘outside’ or ‘above,’ since there is no above or outside the universe in the sense of a rival system acting casually on it from a competing position.⁸⁰³

There is continuity in the world by virtue of the relationship of creation to Creator. This continuity enables us to know and speak of God, albeit imperfectly and only analogically. However, there is also always a fundamental discontinuity between God and the world in the sense that God is not a process in the world like other processes. Without a notion of a loving

⁸⁰¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, III.6.11.

⁸⁰² Williams, *On Augustine*, p. 67.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

Creator who sustains and is intimately present to the processes of nature, but who also ultimately transcends them, it becomes difficult to share the optimism of Keller and the New Feminist Materialists about the future of evolution and the transformative potential of material processes.

b. A Concept of Systemic, Inherited Sin

The optimism about “process” and “becoming” that is expressed by Keller and the New Feminist Materialists brings us to another area in which John Paul II (and others) could offer a helpful corrective to New Feminist Materialists. A notion of sin, and even (in the qualified sense discussed earlier in this chapter), a notion of “inherited” sin, would temper the optimism expressed by some of the New Feminist Materialists, including Grosz, about the possibility of the ongoing movement of material forces leading to the transformation of oppressive and corrupt structures. Recall that Grosz speaks of “a fleeting humanity whose destiny is self-overcoming,” and the power of “Life” which “magnifies and extends matter and matter in turn intensifies and transforms life.”⁸⁰⁴ The evolutionary movement of materiality, she argues, “opens up feminist and other political struggles to what is beyond current comprehension and control, to becoming unrecognizable, becoming other, becoming artistic.”⁸⁰⁵

Grosz has no conceptual grounding within her framework to affirm anything more than the fact that the world is in flux, and that this sometimes produces novelty and diversity. She views the instability and “ceaseless becoming” of the world as a hopeful reality that ensures that everything that is subordinated, marginalized, and oppressed is only this way

⁸⁰⁴ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, pp. 24 and 39.

⁸⁰⁵ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 5.

temporarily. She is right to assert that the processes of becoming may potentially lead humanity to “becoming other and becoming artistic.” However, with only the resources of materialism, we have no assurances that the processes of becoming will lead to greater flourishing or liberation. Indeed, they may simply lead to new and different forms of oppression. A robust notion of systemic, “inherited” sin develops an appreciation for how persistent and recalcitrant sinful structures can be. Sedimented distortions and “discreations” are not easily uprooted.⁸⁰⁶ A belief in human sinfulness and the need for redemption that is expressed within the theology of John Paul II would temper some of the unbounded enthusiasm for the processes of nature that is present in New Feminist Materialist writings. A concept of sin is an essential element of a realistic description of the situation of creaturely life in the 21st century. As John Paul II argues, inherited sin strikes at the foundation of all of human existence, and so we cannot understand ourselves adequately without including a notion of inherited, systemic sin, although sin also does not have the final word in terms of determining the meaning of human life.⁸⁰⁷

c. A Value for Norms

A further area of tension between New Feminist Materialists and theologians is the issue of the value of norms for human behavior. New Feminist Materialists like Grosz and Fausto-Sterling emphasize the nature of human materiality as open-ended flux and “generative surprise,” and rightly affirm the beauty of this unpredictability and possibility for change and novelty. Indeed, in emphasizing the agency and fluidity of natural processes, Grosz laments the fact that “human products and practices—institutions, languages, knowledges” restrain

⁸⁰⁶ Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 112.

⁸⁰⁷ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 235.

and limit natural processes and attempt to “contain them, to slow them down, to place them in the position of retrospective reconstruction in the service of life’s provisional interests.”⁸⁰⁸ Grosz advocates for an “ethics without norms, without prescriptions, but with an orientation to the future, the force of conatus, the will to power, planes of immanence . . . all directing themselves toward the pull of the infinite, the infinity of future material and conceptual forms.”⁸⁰⁹ This is again an optimistic, and perhaps even naïve view—that somehow, without any prescriptions or norms for behavior, without any training of the desires, material processes will increase the level of “enhancement of life”⁸¹⁰ that contributes to liberation and develops “a good life and a generous and productive collective existence—lives that resist oppression, coercion, and prevailing social constraints.”⁸¹¹ Grosz provides no conceptual framework for discerning what constitutes a “good” or “generous” life, and her conception of the goal of ethical life as summated in “resisting oppression and coercion” leaves much to be desired.

Theologians, including John Paul II, could pose useful critical questions to this view. While institutions, including religious ones, do deserve to be critiqued for at times imposing unjust restraint and or inappropriately restrictive norms upon human impulses and behaviors, religion has also played a key role in curbing some of the destructive potentialities of “natural” human impulses. As Lisa Cahill argues, “Our biological inheritance furnishes us both with tendencies to selfishness (self-interest) and the capacities for empathy and altruism.

⁸⁰⁸ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 42.

⁸⁰⁹ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 261.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

Culture and morality build upon and channel the assets and liabilities that nature provides.”⁸¹² Furthermore, categories for behavioral norms can serve to actually further the feminist resistance to autonomy as well as the hope for a greater sense of interconnectedness and relationality. A shared understanding of ethical norms contributes to the possibility of a harmonious collective life, which would be consistent with the goals of both New Feminist Materialist and theologians. Indeed, John Paul II offers a much more robust conception of the purpose of human ethical life as facilitating not just “relationality,” but rather, the deeper reality of *communion*. As he argues, the deepest truth of human materiality is its revelation of “the simple and pure truth of communion between persons.”⁸¹³ Within his framework, we see that an enhanced life for ourselves and others is achieved not by simply striving to be “not oppressive,” but by cooperating with the movements of grace in order to kenotically give of oneself to others, and by then being received by the other as a gift. Furthermore, John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* could help to move the conversation from the New Feminist Materialist celebration of desire to the deeper goal of love. The New Feminist Materialists could likewise help John Paul II to perceive the reality that desire can lead us to love, and thus does not need to be subdued and dominated. There is, therefore, certainly further work to be done in determining the right balance between celebration of the explosive flux of human materiality and the rightful restraint of certain impulses, but New Feminist Materialists and theologians can offer mutually enriching insights to one another in the service of this goal.

⁸¹² Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, p. 94.

⁸¹³ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 146.

6. Conclusion: *Theology of the Body*, New Feminist Materialism, and A Theology of Sex and Sin After #MeToo

In the past two chapters, we have sought to develop an understanding of the meaning of the body as sexed that integrates the reality of the body's biological dynamism with its history of participation in systemic, "original" sin, and with its nature as called by God to communion. We have brought a renewed focus on the biology of sexual difference and on developments in the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis and New Feminist Materialism to theology in order to evoke a sense of wonder at the complexity and explosive unpredictability of material reality, to highlight the unruliness and centrality of desire to the ongoing movements of evolution, to draw from biologies of desire to understand the recalcitrance of sedimented desires, and to highlight the critical importance of corporeal practices for shaping the future trajectories of evolution. However, we have also insisted that this investigation be coupled with reflections on sin, on the concept of God, and on the nature of the God-world relationship. John Paul II and the New Feminist Materialists have formed an unlikely pair of sources that have nevertheless offered limited but mutually corrective positions that have enabled us to develop a theological anthropology of sex and sin in the era of #MeToo.

The #MeToo movement, with its deluge of stories from victims of sexual harassment and violence, has, sadly, confirmed some of the central tenets of this thesis: namely, that we cannot understand the meaning of our bodies as sexed, nor can we understand the current state of relations between the sexes without reference to our shared participation in a history of systemic sin that has shaped these bodies and relations. Since we are united and connected all the way down to the most fundamental elements of life, none of us can escape being

infected in various ways by the contagion of sin. The pervasiveness of the revelations of sexual violence shatters once again any illusions of upward evolutionary moral progress that some might have entertained, and it demonstrates again the stubborn persistence of sedimented desires. If the intractability of sin is not taken seriously, an important opportunity provided by the #MeToo movement will be missed. As Mary Beard notes, “it may be more difficult than we imagine to convert a hashtag into practical action. In my gloomier moods, I fear that we may end up looking back to Me Too as the glorious herald of a change that never really happened, even if things never quite went back to what they were before.”⁸¹⁴ While #MeToo has played a role in partially unveiling the extent of the sickness that infects human societies, uncovering the disease will not automatically enact healing. John Paul II and the New Feminist Materialists have each provided us with tools to help us understand our current situation, and have each contributed to illuminating a way forward beyond #MeToo.

The New Feminist Materialists have helped us appreciate the fact that we are, to a large extent, shaped by histories and forces that we did not choose and which we cannot control through our own efforts. They help us to see that causation is plural and nonlinear. The dysfunctions and “discreations” that have led to the #MeToo movement were not definitively caused by one thing. Rather, histories of sedimented distortions of desire with many varying levels of agency and complex intersections of factors have coalesced to produce the situation of habitual and systemic violence and abuse uncovered by #MeToo. A theological vocabulary, such as that offered by John Paul II, enables us to name this violence as “sin.” Every human is simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator, although not necessarily

⁸¹⁴ Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto*, London: Profile Books LTD (2018), p. 99.

in equal amounts. As we have learned from epigenetics, even at the biological level, “some people have a lot more to overcome” than others.⁸¹⁵ The New Feminist Materialists also enable us to see that while John Paul II and Valerie Saiving are correct in their assessment that it is currently the case that abuse in the form of exploitation and domination is predominantly (but not exclusively) perpetrated by men against women and other sexual minorities, given the instability and ongoing evolution of sexual difference, we cannot predict definitively how this will develop in the future.

The New Feminist Materialists have also shown us that we also cannot hope to achieve transformation through mastering, dominating, or subduing “desire” to “reason.” The sedimented distortions and dysfunctions that have contributed to the epidemic of sexual violence exposed by #MeToo will not be eradicated or revolutionized solely through an influx of more information, or more pleading with people to try harder to be well-behaved. Repeated corporeal practices, liturgies, and habits that help to “make the unconscious conscious” will play important roles in effecting transformation, but John Paul II and Augustine have helped us to see that, ultimately, we cannot transform ourselves by force of will or by cooperating with the processes of becoming inherent to evolution. Rather, it is only through the experience of redemption in Christ that the human person receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables him or her to live life in a genuinely new way. Receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit enables the human person to receive herself anew “as a gift from God.”⁸¹⁶ Transformation is, therefore, both a gift and a task. The Holy Spirit enables us to live in a genuinely new way, however, this is not a magical transformation. “Pedagogies of the

⁸¹⁵ Rachel Yehuda, “How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations.”

⁸¹⁶ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 248.

body”—individual, familial, societal, and ecclesial—will also be necessary to reorient our desires toward love and away from domination or possession. This is not a “mastering” of desire, but rather, a redirecting and a renewal of desire. John Paul II has also helped to cultivate our hope for not only life “enhancement” or freedom from oppression, as suggested by Grosz, but for the even more radical achievement of genuine communion with others and with God in a unity of love. Our sexual differences can be sources of conflict and opposition as the #MeToo movement has revealed, but John Paul II reminds us that they are also sacramental signs of the truth of our calling to self-giving, acceptance, and communion.

Finally, both the New Feminist Materialists and John Paul II provide us with reasons to resist despair and to cultivate hope in the face of the overwhelming uncovering of diseased social relations facilitated by the #MeToo movement. The emphasis in the works of Grosz and others on the unstable and precariously constituted nature of all of creaturely life reminds us that no dominating group, no sinful structure, will remain forever. As Grosz argues, “Neither power nor resistance has ongoing stability or a pre-given form . . . In Darwin’s work too, there is a sense in which the domination of individuals or species is precarious and necessarily historically limited.”⁸¹⁷ Since the material world is defined by mutability, we know that things will continue to change and evolve, and that the biological realm provides its own resources to evoke development and transformation. However, this would be a shallow hope without the deeper assurance provided by a theological framework that posits God as the source of all being, and as the one who holds all things together in love. The Incarnational theology of John Paul II posits that Christ’s joining of the human and the divine

⁸¹⁷ Grosz, *Time Travels*, p. 29.

renders the material world definitively the site of God's presence and activity. In Christ, materiality is joined to divinity.

Furthermore, if we correct John Paul II's admittedly male-centric notion of Incarnation with a Mariological orientation, we gain even more reason to have hope for the eventual redemption of the material world and the healing of all violent creaturely relations such as those revealed by the #MeToo movement. A heightened attention to Mary is not a distortion of Christology, but rather, as Aaron Riches argues, "the Jesus-Mary relation is so integral to the Incarnational fact, and therefore to a coherent Christocentrism, that a Christology without a full Marian account fails to be Incarnational in any meaningful way."⁸¹⁸ It was in the female body of Mary that the Spirit formed the hypostatic union of the divine and the human, and it was through Mary's labor that Christ became incarnate in human history. The human nature of Christ is given to him from the biological inheritance of Mary. She is the "exemplar of adoptive filiation," and the "first in the order of grace of the Spirit's adoption of human beings into the *communio* of adoptive filiation."⁸¹⁹ Mary was the first among humans to find perfect communion with Christ in love. She became united to him by the "grace that flows backward from the Cross."⁸²⁰ Through this grace she consented to suffer with Christ, to empty herself as he emptied himself, and to thereby achieve communion with him. Her communion with Christ in love is a foreshadowing of the destiny of all creaturely reality. Our hope, then, does not lie primarily in the forward progress of evolution to heal our

⁸¹⁸ Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (2016), p. 24.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

diseased sexual relationships. Our salvation lies only through the way of the Cross, and by union with that grace which flows backward from it.

*“Nor did You, Lord, when You walked in the world, despise women; rather, You always, with great compassion, helped them. And You found as much love and more faith in them than You did in men. Among them was Your most blessed Mother, and through her merits . . . we merit what, because of our offenses, we do not deserve. Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us? Since the world’s judges are sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women they do not hold suspect. Yes, indeed, the day will come, my King, when everyone will be known for what he is.”*⁸²¹

--Teresa of Avila, The Way of Perfection

⁸²¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection* in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. 2, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Washington DC: ICS Publications (1980), III.7.

Conclusion: Toward a Christian Feminist Materialism

“This is the logic of the Marian way. . . Here the paradigm of creaturely freedom perfectly embodies the logic according to which the root of immanence is grounded in the gift of the transcendent freedom of God himself, the One in whom the creature lives and moves and has her being.”⁸²²

--Aaron Riches

While there have been significant theological efforts since the 19th century oriented toward reconciling Christian thinking about original sin with insights from evolutionary biology, there has not been an equal effort devoted to reexamining the sexed contours of the doctrine in light of relevant information about the biology of sexual difference. This project contributes to filling this gap in the scholarly literature. In bringing together insights from evolutionary biology, New Feminist Materialism, Augustine, and John Paul II, it has developed a theological anthropology that integrates analysis of the body's sexed, material dynamism with reflection on its history of participation in inherited sin. It argues that the body is dynamic, continually evolving in different sexed ways, infected by sin, yet also saturated with the divine. It is constrained by the past, but also utilizes the past to develop resources for the future. The ongoing development and evolution of the body invites creative participation on the part of humans, and also encourages us to remain circumspect about the extent to which we can ever claim to understand comprehensively the meaning of our bodies as sexed, predict the future of the evolution of our species, or create permanent categories of “feminine” and “masculine” sins.

⁸²² Aaron Riches, “Deconstructing the Linearity of Grace: The Risk and Reflexive Paradox of Mary's Immaculate Fiat,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 2 (2008), pp. 184-185.

Given that both sin and sexual difference involve biology, this project has included reflection on the most up-to-date information from the biological sciences. It insists that a notion of “original sin,” understood as systemic, inherited sin, remains crucial for understanding creaturely life in the twenty-first century. Developments in the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis such as epigenetics and niche construction offer support for the notion that sin is, in a sense, “inherited” and inescapable. Augustine’s anthropological insights about the unity of the human race, the fact that biology plays a role in the transmission of sin, and that desire is central to human identity are all affirmed by these developments in evolutionary biology. We are interconnected, interdependent, and constituted by various webs of connection that have forming power over us, which we did not choose. As Augustine argues, our unity with one another (and this can be extended beyond Augustine’s framework to also include our interconnectedness with all creatures) is so profound that it is more than a similarity of nature—it is a bond of kinship.⁸²³ We belong to one another, and thus the notion of “original sin” provides a crucial framework for perceiving the reality that sin is not only manifested in discreet, individual, conscious acts, rather; it permeates our ecological niches, our interrelations, and our “sedimented desires.” This project locates sin in neither “nature” nor “culture,” but argues that nature and culture are inseparable, entangled forces that shape creaturely becoming. As Serene Jones argues, sin “inhabits us just as we willingly inhabit it.”⁸²⁴ This biological/cultural hybridity of creaturely life also significantly impacts the development and incorporation of desires, which

⁸²³ Augustine, *De Civ*, XII.22.

⁸²⁴ Serene Jones, “Companionable Wisdoms: What Insights Might Feminist Theorists Gather from Feminist Theologians,” *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward, Malden: Blackwell Publishers (2005), p. 301.

shape our tendencies to sin and our evolution as sexually differentiated. We are born into infected relationships and structures that form us all the way down to the molecular level and refract through our sexually differentiated bodies.

Developing a theology of sex and sin that is attuned to both biology and theology has required the development of a theology of matter that sees matter not as providing the raw, passive materials to be shaped by culture, but rather as agential and generative in its entanglements with culture. The work of the New Feminist Materialists was thus read through an Incarnational lens so that matter is not just imbued with activity and creativity in its own right, but is created by God, lovingly sustained by God, and permeated with God's presence, without collapsing the infinite difference between God and the world. This theology of matter rejects process theology, as God's transcendence of the material is necessary for its existence, coherence, and meaning. God transcends materiality without being "separate" from it. In Christ, materiality is brought into union with the divine, and so it has become sacramental, and a privileged site for divine revelation.

This project establishes a foundation for the development of a Christian Feminist Materialism that can be used as a generative framework for reexamining other areas of Christian theology in a way that is attuned to the material/biological insights from the natural sciences and the theological resources of the Christian tradition. I discuss this in more depth below. This Christian Feminist Materialism is grounded in the Incarnation, and as chapter six adumbrated, its understanding of the Incarnation is developed in a Mariological (as well as a Christological) key. Indeed, Christology and Mariology are intrinsically interconnected, and as I argued in chapter six, a robust Mariology is necessary for a complete Christology. However, the Christological implications for theologies of matter have been much more

extensively developed in the theological literature than the Mariological implications. Mary is essential for understanding the nature and trajectory of creaturely life, and as Aaron Riches argues, she is “the first in an immaculate-series: she reveals the creature caught up in the intra-trinitarian life of prayer, which is the eschatological destiny of the church.”⁸²⁵ As we discuss below, while Mariology is rich with possibilities for a Christian Feminist Materialist engagement, this must be accomplished while simultaneously disentangling her from patriarchal distortions.⁸²⁶

Questions for Further Research

1. Soteriology

The first theological area of inquiry for which this project raises questions for further research is soteriology, which is also intimately connected to the next areas for further development—Christology and Mariology. This project has explored the disease of “original” sin that has infected creaturely life on this planet, and the possibilities of this sickness refracting through our sexually differentiated bodies. In doing so, it has illuminated the reality that thinking about sin is incomplete unless it is done in the context of reflecting on salvation. Indeed, since the earliest expressions of Christian thinking about original sin, the doctrine has been oriented toward illuminating the grace of salvation, the fulfillment of human nature in Christ and Mary, and the importance of the role of the church in the economy of salvation. As Tatha

⁸²⁵ Riches, “Deconstructing the Linearity of Grace,” p. 193.

⁸²⁶ There has already been significant feminist engagement with Mariology that has helped immensely in the project of freeing Mariology from its patriarchal contours, but none to my knowledge draw from New Feminist Materialism in the service of this goal, and so this remains a currently unexplored avenue of research. Ruether’s *Mary: the Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977) was an early and significant contribution. More recent contributions include Elizabeth’s Johnson’s *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of the Saints* (London: Continuum, 2004), Julia Kristeva’s short piece entitled “Stabat Mater,” (in *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1, 1985) and *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, London: T&T Clark International, 2005).

Wiley notes, “The idea of original sin first arose as an answer to this very question of redemption. For early church theologians, the burning question was not about the character of evil but of the need for Christ.”⁸²⁷

Since this project has argued that sin is transmitted through the distorted formative movements of a nature/culture dynamism that shapes every aspect of our personhood, all the way down to the molecular level such that it is inescapable, this elicits the need to develop a corresponding theology of salvation as healing.⁸²⁸ Given that sin deeply impacts our materiality, this entails an understanding of the healing of salvation as also a thoroughly material process. In an understanding of soteriology within a Christian Feminist Materialism, grace must permeate our corporeality even more profoundly than sin. Developments in epigenetics provide some imagery for this, as we learned in chapter four of this project that just as trauma and the effects of sin can be biologically transmitted through generations, so can healing.⁸²⁹ This means that we create small moments that reflect our eschatological destiny every time we are empowered by grace to transmit healing to the generations that come after us by working towards more just and loving sexual, racial, ecological, familial, and economic relationships. In the words of the poet Wendell Berry, we can “practice resurrection.”⁸³⁰ There could be more theological reflection on this notion of “epigenetically transmitted” healing. We are not saved *from* our materiality but *through* it. This means that

⁸²⁷ Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*, p. 4.

⁸²⁸ Sin is nearly, but not completely, “inescapable,” since neither Christ nor Mary suffered from the distortions of original sin.

⁸²⁹ Rachel Yehuda, “How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations,” recorded July 30th, 2015. Transcript available at <https://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-yehuda-how-trauma-and-resilience-cross-generations/>.

⁸³⁰ Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” retrieved on 16 March 2019, <https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>.

just as sin refracts through our sexually differentiated bodies, potentially wounding us in sexually differentiating ways, so the healing of salvation must involve sexually differentiated contours. The resources developed in this project provide a framework for conceptualizing this process so that sexual difference is taken seriously as a material reality, but it is also understood to be relatively plastic, such that we cannot create impermeable categories for “masculine and feminine sins” and thus “masculine and feminine manifestations of redemption,” even if there may be some consistent patterns as a result of shared evolutionary histories and societal shaping.

In addition to prompting further research questions related to the sexually differentiated nature of salvation, the portrayal of sin in this project also requires a notion of salvation as a communal rather than an individual reality. Just as we share a poisonous form of solidarity in sin, so we must share solidarity in our restoration. Moreover, just as the effects of sin permeate all of creaturely reality, including other species and our ecological niches, so salvation must include the restoration and healing of all of creation. The unity of creation as described by Augustine that is so fundamental that it becomes a bond of kinship entraps us in shared sinfulness and culpability, and so it must likewise envelop us in a shared salvation.

Finally, as desire has been fundamental to Christian thinking about sin, and it is also central to the work of the New Feminist Materialists, a soteriology developed to companion this Christian feminist materialist approach to sin should also investigate the nature of salvation as the culmination and transformation of desire. There has been significant reflection on this topic in the Christian tradition, but new insights from evolutionary biology and New Feminist Materialism could enrich this existing literature by illuminating the physiological development of desire in the body. Since, as we learned in chapter six of this

project, desire is formed through the intersection of biological and cultural dynamics, and desire is often stable without being permanent, so the transformation of desire must also involve these same processes. This understanding of desire as “sedimented” but not static has illuminated the recalcitrance of sin, and so this framework could also help to provide a means for considering the pathways to a salvific upheaval and reorientation of desire according to God rather than sin.

2. Christology and Mariology

Just as the sickness of sin has sometimes been characterized in sexed categories in reference to the figures of Adam and Eve, health and salvation have also been depicted in sexually differentiated ways within the Christian tradition via the figures of Christ and Mary. Feminist theologians have frequently pointed out the troubling fixation apparent in traditional theological discourses on the maleness of Jesus as somehow central to his identity as the Savior of humanity. They have critiqued the ways in which the maleness of Jesus has deified masculinity and been used as justification for excluding women from ordained ministry and authority in some ecclesial settings.⁸³¹ Similarly, feminist theologians (as well as philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir) have protested the use of Marian doctrines to perpetuate stereotypes about the passivity and receptivity of women and the role that Mariology has played in romanticizing female virginity and submission. Ruether rightly asks, “Is Mary a liberator for women, or is she more a tool of male power over women?”⁸³² The problematic gender dynamics contained within some renditions of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden

⁸³¹ This is expressed in the oft-repeated phrase from Mary Daly, “If God is male, then the male is God” (*Beyond God the Father*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, p. 19).

⁸³² Ruether, *Mary: The Feminine Face of the Church*, p. 12.

of Eden seem to be only exacerbated by the redemption narrative of Christ as the second Adam, and the submissive, receptive Mary as the second Eve. Many of these dysfunctional and oppressive gendered messages contained within traditional Christologies and Mariologies have been identified already in feminist theological contributions, but there remains much more work to be done to discern a way forward in the construction of a feminist soteriology freed from the misogyny implicit within some earlier expressions of it, and this will involve reconsiderations of both Christology and Mariology.

This project on sin has thus laid the groundwork for further exploration of some of the gendered baggage contained within doctrines of salvation in Christian theology, and it paves the way for the process of constructing a feminist understanding of salvation as including the healing of all of creaturely reality. The emphasis within New Feminist Materialism on the agency and creative forcefulness of materiality provides useful resources from which to recast Mary not as the passive receptacle transformed by the active male Christ, but rather, as a receptive but also active and agential collaborator with God's plan of salvation. Through reflection on the person of Mary, we can expand the theology of matter that has been initiated by this project, since in Mary we perceive a crucial example of God empowering a creature to contribute actively to the workings of salvation. In her corporeality, Mary, through grace and the Holy Spirit, becomes the means by which divinity enters the world. As Riches argues, "the persona of the Logos truly receives his particular human nature *ex Maria*; indeed, he allows his human particularity to be constituted in its specificity by her flesh, by her humanity, by her concrete genealogy and by the history of her people," and so

“the divine Son is human only to the extent to which he receives himself *ex Maria*.”⁸³³ In a sense, Jesus is thus a passive receptacle to Mary’s formation of his human nature. Moreover, the destiny of Mary in her adoption as a child of God, perfected by grace, and united in communion with the divine foreshadows the eschatological future of all material life, and thus she extends the effects of the Incarnation in a crucial way such that it necessarily involves the union without blending of materiality with divinity. In a revitalized Mariology and Christology through the lens of New Feminist Materialism, we can develop a dynamic and reciprocal model of receptiveness and agency between Christ and Mary, and thus between humanity and divinity, although always with the caveat that material causation emerges from and is empowered by grace. Yet, this material causation imbued with grace is endowed with its own fecundity, activity, and force.

Renewed approaches to Christology and Mariology are necessary because of the power of these symbols to shape gendered human behaviors and relationships. There have been many theological developments bringing together Christology and evolutionary theory in recent years, but none of these combine theological reflection on Christology and evolution with a theology of sexual difference or with a consideration of Mariology. Additionally, since New Feminist Materialism is still a relatively new philosophical development, there has been very little theological engagement with it at this point, despite the fact that there are a significant number of potentially fruitful areas of integration between New Feminist Materialist insights and feminist theology.

⁸³³ Riches, *Ecce Homo*, p. 224.

3. Liturgy, religious practices, and “pedagogies of the body”

As both John Paul II and the New Feminist Materialists have argued, formation (of various sorts) is fundamental to human life—for good or for ill. Formation can be engaged in actively or experienced passively, but regardless, it shapes our ability to lead flourishing lives. John Paul II argues that we need not only theologies of the body, but also “pedagogies of the body.”⁸³⁴ To be an embodied creature is both a gift and a task, and the regular, repeated, habitual actions we engage in shape our development and our ability to flourish. From a Christian perspective, this might be described in terms of “discipleship” or “spiritual formation.” As Graham Ward argues, “The contents of the faith are the start of a biblical, liturgical, and ecclesial formation led in and through a life of embodied practices all of which can be summed up in prayer.”⁸³⁵ From a New Feminist Materialist perspective such as that of Elizabeth Grosz, this formation by material and cultural forces should be oriented toward enabling us to lead lives that are not oppressive, and that are “generous and productive.”⁸³⁶ Anne Fausto-Sterling, with her focus on infant and child development, illuminates the reality that physiological and cultural formation begins from the moment of conception, such that we never exist apart from the forming influence of others. Her work on the dynamic development of desire also reveals that while the sedimentation of desires often occurs through the passive enduring of forces beyond our control or consciousness, we can also partly shape the ongoing trajectory of our desires through active choices and repeated practices.

⁸³⁴ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 254.

⁸³⁵ Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 117.

⁸³⁶ Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, p. 4.

Fausto-Sterling only mentions self-reflection and story-telling as potential corporeal practices that can help to make unconscious desire conscious, but there could be further theological engagement from within a Christian Feminist Materialist framework that investigates the role of liturgy and religious practices in the corporeal formation of desire. Feminist theologians are particularly poised to offer this type of reflection as they are more likely to be immersed in communities of religious and liturgical practices than feminist theorists. As Serene Jones argues,

Feminist theorists have left behind their grounding communities, have jumped over the issue of emancipatory visions, and now find themselves stranded on the island of theory, with only the academy to talk to. For all its faults, feminist theology has not lost touch with the communities and the normative traditions that inspire its eschatological yearnings.⁸³⁷

While at times ecclesial settings can be painful places for feminist theologians yearning for the greater flourishing of those who have been marginalized, these communities do provide an infrastructure that can be instrumental in facilitating formation through corporeal practices that leads to this greater flourishing. Certainly not all formation in ecclesial settings is conducive to the greater flourishing of the parishioners, and some formation can contribute to their diminishment. However, there remains the potential in ecclesial communities to offer a “pedagogy of the body” to unearth and illuminate sedimented desires that are sinful, and to reorient these desires towards greater love and justice as a response to the love and justice manifested in the life of Jesus and His Mother.

There remain many questions that could not be addressed in the context of this project, as New Feminist Materialism and recent developments in evolutionary biology have

⁸³⁷ Serene Jones, “Companionable Wisdoms,” p. 298.

produced a host of new insights into material life that are ripe for theological engagement. This project has sought to highlight a few possibilities for integrating these insights with Christian theology. However, there remain many more avenues that could be explored, and indeed, given the inclination of materiality on this planet to persistently produce novel forms of life, it will no doubt continue to surprise and delight us by evoking new questions.

*Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,
And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.*

*The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.*⁸³⁸

--T.S. Eliot

⁸³⁸ T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), p. 128.

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