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**Stephen Mulhall: Philosophical Myths of the Fall**

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## *Introduction*



Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves aprons.

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day; and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God

amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou?

And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?

And the man said, the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust thou shalt eat all the days of thy life; and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou has hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.

And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living.

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Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skin, and clothed them. And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

—Genesis 3

IN *AFTER VIRTUE*, ALASDAIR MACINTYRE suggests that the advent of the Enlightenment disrupted the existing structure of moral reasoning in a distinctive and deeply damaging way.<sup>1</sup> Hitherto, moral principles had functioned as a means of ensuring that human beings fulfilled their telos; they effected a transformation from raw, uncultivated human modes of being to ones in and through which human creatures lived well or flourished, realizing the full potential of their distinctive nature. Since the Enlightenment systematically rejected any teleological forms of understanding of the natural world (for a variety of reasons ranging from the apparently definitive overturning of Aristotelian modes of natural science by those based on more mathematical and mechanical models of the material realm, to the long-established association of such teleological forms of understanding with conservative—even reactionary—moral, political, and religious traditions), it could not make sense of human beings, and hence of morality, in such terms. But then

<sup>1</sup> Duckworth: London, 1981.

it faced the task of trying to find an alternative justification for the basic moral principles it had inherited—principles that deliberately and systematically went against the grain of untutored human nature.

According to MacIntyre's view, invoking the demands of reason was doomed to failure, since rationality in morals (as elsewhere) acquires substance only insofar as it operates within the context of a particular framework of moral concepts and moral understanding—what he calls a tradition; and of course, a fundamental aspect of the autonomy that Enlightenment thinkers sought (both for individual moral and political beings, and for specific spheres of human culture) was precisely freedom from the dead hand of tradition (understood as embodying claims to authority lacking any genuinely rational basis). Hence, once the failure of this project of finding a tradition-free rational grounding for morality became evident, the unfolding history of the West in the aftermath of the Enlightenment became one in which, as the common culture gradually watered down the demanding content of moral principles (bringing morality more into line with human nature as experience presents it, on the grounds that moral principles which demand that we subject that nature to radically transformative cultivation are merely arbitrary impositions from the superstitious past), philosophers gradually came to suspect that morality as a cultural structure was simply an exercise in coercive power (whether by specific cultures, or specific classes, or specific kinds of individual). The only alternative that MacIntyre can see to this Nietzschean vision of a vanishing dimension of evaluation in everyday human life, is a return to Aristotelian—more precisely, to Thomist—thinking, in which the idea of a human telos not only is capable of being made intelligible in the face of everything that the Enlightenment claimed to know, but also can make more sense of the difficulties and confusions confronting other intellectual traditions which lack that concept

than they can make of the difficulties with which Thomism itself must deal.<sup>2</sup>

To worry overmuch about the objective scholarly validity of every claim MacIntyre makes about the central figures of the Enlightenment period and its aftermath would risk missing the main point of his enterprise. For its real starting point lies in the present—in MacIntyre’s sense that we currently view the claims of morality upon us as incomprehensibly demanding. And just as he argues that the individual human self can make sense of her present position, and hence of herself, only through the unity conferred by a narrative showing how she came to occupy it, so MacIntyre’s book as a whole attempts to make sense of our collective moral condition by recounting it as the latest episode in the historical narrative of our culture. And since it is also central to his argument that there can be no perspective-independent account of moral phenomena, we must expect his account of our moral condition to be oriented by his own (first Aristotelian, and later Thomist) moral concepts and resources. In other words, the master narrative of *After Virtue* asks primarily for ethical evaluation—it offers a myth of our origins that must be tested against our current experience, in the name of a morally intelligible future.

But MacIntyre’s own thought also has a narrative structure, that we must—according to his own lights—take into account. It is, I think, undeniable that in the first phase or episode of his recent work, post-Enlightenment thinking is presented as conflating its rejection of certain religious conceptions of the human telos with a rejection of the very concept of a human telos, and thereby as eliminating the option of an Aristotelian

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed elaboration, and critical evaluation, of MacIntyre’s deliberately simplified and dramatic portrait of our present cultural situation, see chaps. 2 and 6 and the conclusion of Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996).

conception of morality that is indebted neither to the Enlightenment nor to its religious enemies. But in the books succeeding *After Virtue* (beginning with *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*), MacIntyre shifts his moral allegiance from Aristotle to Aquinas. In so doing, he not only suggests that the post-Enlightenment liberal tradition that he earlier accused of lacking room for any concept of human flourishing might be better viewed as having, rather, an inadequate conception of it (how, after all, could a tradition with liberalism's weight of historical and social reality ever really have lacked what he himself presented as essential to any coherent moral perspective?); he also implies that the Enlightenment's primary mistake was in fact its rejection of the distinctively Christian inflection of that concept.

Even if we prefer MacIntyre's earlier analysis to his later, we could plausibly argue that, if the Enlightenment is best understood as founded on a certain kind of resistance to the very concept of a human telos, such resistance without doubt originated—and found its most passionate expression—in a resistance to the specifically religious idea of the human telos as involving a relation to God, and of those who fail to fulfil that telos as existing in a state of original sin. The Christian doctrine of original sin is, of course, the subject of multiple interpretations, disputations, and reformulations across two millennia of theological and liturgical conversation and controversy; but at its core is the conception that human nature as such is tragically flawed, perverse in its very structure or constitution. Human beings are not only naturally capable of acting—even perhaps disposed to act—sinfully, but are always already turned against themselves, against the true and against the good, by virtue of their very condition as human. Hence, that sinful orientation will distort and ultimately invalidate any efforts they might make by themselves to alter that orientation; the only possible solution lies in their attaining a certain kind of orientation to the divine. But it is not just that without drawing on transcen-

dental sources they cannot overcome their perversity; it is also that whether or not such resources are available to draw upon is not up to them—it is not within their power to ensure that they get the help they need, for that too is ultimately in the hands of the divine, an aspect of grace.

Such a doctrine patently violates a variety of interrelated and central Enlightenment precepts. It is fundamentally offensive to any conception of morality that places human autonomy at its heart; for it entails that our very ability to orient ourselves toward the good is dependent upon transcendental spiritual sources, and asserts the direct opposite of the liberal understanding of human beings as the self-originating sources of moral value (as Rawls puts his Kantian conception of the matter). For the Christian, we are, if anything, the self-originating source of sin; hence, our only hope of regaining any contact with goodness is by dying to ourselves. It is also offensive to reason—as is evident in the way the Genesis story of the Fall not only posits Adam’s moral responsibility for the deed that constitutes his acquisition of the central precondition for moral responsibility, but also presents what appear to be the constitutive conditions for any recognizably human existence (reproduction, cultivation of the earth, death, even self-consciousness or self-awareness) as modifications—more specifically, as self-inflicted and penal deformations—of our truly human nature.

Perhaps, however, the central source of offence in this doctrine emerges most clearly if we note a distinction drawn by Wittgenstein:

People are religious to the extent that they believe themselves to be not so much *imperfect* as *sick*.

Anyone who is halfway decent will think himself utterly imperfect, but the religious person thinks himself wretched.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. P. Winch (Blackwell: Oxford, 1980), 51.

This distinction bears some elucidation. There are, for example, a variety of ways in which Enlightenment modes of thought might accept a conception of human beings as naturally imperfect. To begin with, and despite a certain accelerating post-Enlightenment tendency to align our moral codes with what we judge a being of our nature might reasonably be expected to achieve, there is nothing terribly challenging to nonreligious forms of thought in the perception that an entirely raw or uncultivated human nature might be morally problematic. Aristotle, for example, provides a well-worked out conception of individual human beings as possessed of potential that they are not capable of realizing except under the right circumstances—with the input of properly educated elders and the culture they maintain—and in the absence of which they will certainly behave in immoral and otherwise damaging ways. But even in the absence of such nonreligious teleological structures of thinking, there can be little to object to from a naturalistic point of view in the idea that the human individual requires the attention and efforts of other human beings if he is to achieve what his natural capacities (and, in particular, his natural capacity to acquire capacities) allow. This, one might say, is simply an aspect of what is distinctive about the species *homo sapiens*; its plasticity, its developmental trajectory, its relations to other members of its species, are simply facts about the specific nature of humans.

Nor need there be anything provocative in the thought that individual human beings, as well as human collectivities, might deliberately and persistently perform immoral actions. Any being capable of doing good must be capable of doing evil; and the apparent benefits to the agent of, say, selfish behaviour (or more generally, behaviour harmful to other humans, as well as other nonhuman beings and indeed the natural world) are evident. One might further come to believe that the fundamental causes of immoral behaviour lie outside the mind and will of those who enact them—say, in the structure of society (in its political, economic, or familial aspects) or that of the natural

world (in its zoological or genetic aspects). Even this need not do any fundamental violence to the Enlightenment conception of human self-sufficiency, since such extra-individual structural influences are themselves humanly comprehensible (identifiable and analysable by such thinkers as Marx, Freud, or Darwin); are in many cases the result of human action; and are, anyway, always in principle open to alteration, or at least amelioration, by collective human action. In short, even if the source of our problems lies beyond the individual wrongdoer, it does not lie beyond the human race as such; and so its resolution also lies within human hands.

In a certain sense, the doctrine of original sin also locates the cause of our problems in human hands (or at least in the first human pair's deeds), but it does so in such a way that the solution to that problem remains necessarily beyond our unaided grasp, and thereby prevents us from thinking of our natural state as merely imperfect in any of the senses outlined above. To put matters slightly differently: in order for us to conceive of divine assistance as essential to our reorientation or redemption, we must see ourselves as standing in need of a particularly thoroughgoing kind of redemption, and hence as presently existing in a particularly thoroughgoing kind of unredeemed state—as enslaved, but enslaved by ourselves (not only not autonomous, but autonomously nonautonomous); as having freely relinquished our freedom and so as having ourselves placed its recovery beyond our own reach.

It is not, perhaps, beyond halfway decent people to see how the public record of what human hands have done (to other humans, to other living beings, and to the planet) in the last century, not to mention more private memories of our own willingness to besmirch what we value despite (even because of) our valuing of it, might come to suggest or even force such a conception of ourselves upon us. But insofar as we do take issue with ourselves in these terms, we cannot think of such perverseness as simply a species of imperfection; or if one wishes

to view our recovery from it as a version of perfectionist thinking, then one must say that it is a recovery from a state in which we go wrong not in some or other particulars but in everything we do, and hence that nothing we initiate can right that wrong unless it is rooted in a moment of passivity, one in which we suffer the supplementation of an essential lack.

Moreover, it is not just the solution to our problem that is beyond us; the same will be true of our sense that we have such a problem to resolve in the first place. For if this conception of ourselves as always already errant before any particular errancy, as basically oriented away from the truth, is something we regard as (at least part of) the truth about ourselves, then we cannot coherently think of it as something that we could have arrived at from our own resources, but rather as attainable only through a relation with a wholly external source of our redemption from that state of untruth—for the Christian, from He who claimed to *be* (not merely to have or to convey) “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” This means that, on the one hand, any such perception of human beings will necessarily be offensive (both morally and rationally) to those who lack the relationship with the divine through which it might be revealed. In the absence of that relationship, such a self-understanding will simply make no sense to them, and those who claim to be attempting to live out that relationship should therefore expect the self-understanding it demands to seem absurd to others. But it also implies that the framework of thought within which this perception of ourselves as sick or wretched makes sense is also one within which it is internally related to a perception of ourselves as capable of being cured, as somehow redeemable even from such a deeply unredeemed state. One might say: to accept such a self-understanding just *is* to relate oneself to the divine, and thus to accept that, for all one’s wretchedness, one is redeemable. The conceptual structure of the Christian doctrine of original sin thus exemplifies with particular clarity—even, one might say, with a kind of perverse extremity—the

MacIntyrean triad of unfulfilled human state, fulfilled human state, and transformative source.

What I want to suggest as a way of orienting the reader for the main business of this book, is that we might think of the three philosophers to whom I shall shortly turn as wanting to preserve a recognizable descendent of the Christian conception of human nature as always already averting us from the relation to truth, comprehension, and clarity that is nevertheless our birthright—hence, as structurally perverse or errant and yet redeemable from that fallen state—but as refusing to accept that such redemption is attainable only from a transcendental or divine source. In other words, these philosophers want to keep a conception of human beings as in need of redemption (rather than, say, improvement or self-realization) and as capable of it, but to relocate the source of that redemption within (or at least on the borders of) the world of human experience. They will neither attenuate their sense of the constitutive depths to which our difficulties must be traced to accord with a more generally secularized conception of the self and its world, nor accept that acknowledging the depth of such difficulties requires the invocation of a divine source to which the self must relate itself and its world if it is to be redeemed from them.

The religious reader will say that to dispense with such a relation to divinity threatens to deprive the interpretative schema—call it the myth—of redemption of its very intelligibility, since the divine is not simply the source of our redemption but also the source of our awareness that we stand in need of it; and she will further say that, as a consequence, the philosopher of redemption will find himself relocating the divinity that he is attempting to banish (perhaps even substituting himself in its place, and thereby instantiating one more version of the hubristic human desire to be God that, on the religious version of the myth, led to our need for redemption in the first place). The secular reader will say that to dispense with such a relation to divinity entails that one reject what is anyway a morally and

rationally incomprehensible conception of the human condition. The philosophers I have in mind will say that since any adequate conception of the human condition leads us inexorably to a conception of ourselves as structurally perverse, and yet we cannot take seriously the idea of a divine source of transformation or rebirth, we must learn to live with a conception of ourselves as essentially enigmatic to ourselves. We stand incomprehensibly in need of redemption, and we are incomprehensibly able to achieve it, through a certain kind of intellectual practice that is also a spiritual practice, and that not only risks but aims to confront and internalize an idea of itself and its practitioners as ineliminably beyond our understanding—a practice of enduring and embodying the human being’s constitutive resistance to its own grasp.

This last formulation may go some way toward accounting for the fact that the three philosophers I propose as committed to this conception of the human come either from the mainstream of post-Kantian German philosophy, or from the apparently inassimilable Austro-German fringes of post-Kantian Anglo-American philosophy. For one way of articulating the common (even if deeply misleading) picture of the divide between (the misleadingly named) analytic and continental modes or dimensions of modern Western philosophy is by specifying the other intellectual disciplines which that mode of philosophizing regards as cognate or other to it; and if analytical philosophers tend to look to the natural sciences, continental philosophers tend to look not only to the humanities and to art, but also to religion. Furthermore, the two (so-called) traditions have a very different attitude to contradiction. Analytical philosophers tend to view the unearthing of a contradiction as demonstrating the untenability of a line of thought or a conception of the world; continental philosophers are more inclined to consider the possibility that the phenomena under consideration are inherently contradictory—that reality (or at least some portion of it, and most commonly the human portion) is

capable of maintaining itself in contradiction to itself, that to do so is in fact the distinctively human way to exist.

The conjunction of these two distinguishing marks of the continental side of the philosophical mind is perhaps most starkly evident in Sartre's early work, according to which the distinctively human mode of being—being for-itself—is what it is not and is not what it is (is essentially not coincident with or identical to itself); and the most fundamental aspect of the for-itself's internal negating of itself is the apparently ineradicable but essentially contradictory human desire to be God (since to be God would mean, incoherently, being both for-itself and in-itself, and thus to desire such an incoherent state is for the human, incoherently, to desire not to be human). What interests me about Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein is that they can be read as in a certain sense exemplifying Sartre's claim—in that, whilst each more or less explicitly aims either to criticize or at least to detach himself from Christian theological horizons, all three in fact engender a conception of the human condition that constantly inclines them to reiterate elements of a distinctively Christian structure of thought. Hence, the basic question to which the following chapters are an attempt to provide, if not an answer, then at least a clearer, more specific articulation of what is at issue in the asking of such a question, is: can one say what the Christian has to say about the human condition as fallen, and yet mean it otherwise?

The argument in the chapters to come is not cumulative, although it is progressive in at least two senses of that term. My reading of Heidegger does not depend upon my reading of Nietzsche, any more than my reading of Wittgenstein is dependent upon its predecessors; it is not necessary for the reader to accept the conclusions of the earlier chapters in order to find acceptable the claims of later ones. In that sense, each chapter can stand alone, although the chapters on Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are likely to be more accessible to those with little

prior acquaintance with the texts under discussion than is the chapter on Heidegger (which is compelled to begin a little further on in the journey through his thought in order to reach the points of interest for this investigation without expanding to the length of a small book). Rather, a different facet or aspect of the doctrine of original sin turns out to be dominant in the inflection of it that I claim to find in each philosopher. In Nietzsche, the central issue is the idea of our fallenness as punishment (more specifically, as self-punishment); in Heidegger, it is the idea of fallenness as embodiedness (more specifically, as mortality and animality); in Wittgenstein, it is the idea of fallenness as transgression (more specifically, as the refusal of limits and the perversions of desire). So, one sense in which my argument is progressive is that each chapter aims to contribute one specific detail to a larger portrait of a certain dimension of the philosophical tradition, as informed by a response to a single doctrine that is itself formed by the internal relations between each such element.

Nevertheless, certain themes or issues do recur across the three chapters and thus provide a more straightforward sense in which my argument is progressive, insofar as their recurrence suggests a certain convergence in the work of these philosophers upon the most suggestive or pertinent dimensions of the doctrine of original sin for their specific cultural moments. Leaving aside the theme that I have already mentioned (that of the human as constitutively enigmatic to itself), three other such recurrences seem of particular interest. They are as follows: the idea of God as nothing (as no thing, a non-entity—hence, the implication that to conceive of him otherwise, as something in particular, is to fall into superstition or idolatry, whether one does so in affirming or denying His existence); the idea of a certain kind of linguistic confusion, an opacity in our life with words, as a marker of our perverseness; and the idea of an unending oscillation between experiencing our condition as a limit and as a limitation—call this the thought that properly

distinguishing the necessary from the contingent is a spiritual as well as a logical matter.

The chapters to come develop such thoughts as I have about these interlocking themes with as much precision as I can muster; so I do not propose to anticipate them here. However, as a way of picking up at least one of those themes, and linking it to a methodological point that may not be obvious to all, I want to conclude these introductory remarks by pointing out that my reading of what the doctrine of original sin involves will be as controversial within the Christian community as my readings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein will doubtless be to those concerned to inherit their thinking. I want, therefore, to highlight a primary source for my particular way of grasping this doctrine by paraphrasing some remarks made by one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms in his consideration of the Genesis story that this introduction begins by citing. For Vigilius Haufniensis, the doctrine of original sin essentially tells us that sin entered into the world by sin; this is not an attempted explanation of individual sinful acts, but rather an expression of the enigmatic fact that no individual sinful act can be explained—that sinful acts presuppose sinfulness, and sinfulness presupposes sinful acts. Some will take this as proof that the Genesis narrative cannot help us to understand the human mode of being; others might take it as proof that in this tale we find as helpful an expression as we might wish for our sense (perhaps intermittent, but surely always recurring) of a constitutive paradox at the heart of the very value on which the Enlightenment stakes its claim to our continued attention: that of human autonomy or freedom. For Haufniensis, the first Adam embodies the irreducible mystery of the way in which human beings endlessly discover themselves to have alienated themselves from what is most properly theirs, to have disowned their existence.