

Sin is not just bad choices individuals make

In Romans 7, sin seems to have at least as much agency as Paul does.

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“The focus on the deeds of alleged individual perpetrators,” [writes Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) following [the Justice Department’s Ferguson report](#), “obscures the broad systemic corruption which is really at the root.” He’s not writing explicitly about American understandings of sin, but he could be.

Last week, Damon Linker wrote [a column about sin](#), in the Pauline sense of wanting what's good but doing what's evil anyways. Linker posits that when it comes to the deeper fault lines underneath culture-war-type debates, there are essentially two kinds of Americans: those who believe (with Paul) that sin is real, and though who (with Plato) do not. And this plays out in how we interpret, among other things, criminal behavior:

When someone commits a crime, do your instincts tell you to blame the perpetrator's upbringing, background, education? Do you think that the best form of punishment would involve rehabilitation? Then you are, at bottom, a Platonist who rejects the idea of sinful depravity.

On the other hand, do you tend to blame the perpetrator's actions on a malicious will and presume that, however worthwhile an education might be, it will never eliminate the possibility of evil, because evil is chosen despite knowing what is good and right? And do you therefore think that the best form of punishment is one that imposes suffering for the sake of retribution and deterrence, hopefully to help scare this and other potential criminals away from making similarly bad choices? Then you are, at

bottom, a Pauline believer in the reality of sin.

This either/or way of presenting the two views is overly simplistic. Plato was well aware that teaching virtue can be a challenge (and may often be impossible), just as believers in sin typically think that moral education is extremely important in shaping and strengthening a person's conscience.

But these aren't the only reasons it's an overly simplistic either/or. Linker relies here on the notion that sin is basically an individual choosing to do what they know is wrong. But Romans 7, which he cites, does a lot to complicate such a view.

For starters, the verses he quotes—"I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate..."—don't actually say much about what we *know*, but rather what we *want* and *do*. The knowledge stuff comes in the complex material just before: sin uses Paul's knowledge of the law to get him to do the very thing the law forbids.

More crucially, note where the agency is here. First and foremost, it belongs to *sin*. Sin manipulates Paul. He is a slave to it, to the "sin that dwells within me." It is a power that is greater than his own will to do right.

Which leads us to social and structural sin, the thing most glaringly absent from Linker's binary model. Some might dismiss the very concept as a dodge, as quasi-Christian language for not believing in (personal) sin at all. But you can acknowledge deep sin that is bigger than any one person while also maintaining that individual people sin. (For John Paul II, [the two were inextricable](#).) It just requires you to see sin as not simply bad choices we each make but a powerful force that controls us—both *each* of us and *all* of us.

Which is how I think Paul sees it. Now, this part of Romans is complex even for Paul, with ambiguities and broader purposes and tricky analogies, and I'll leave the deep exegesis to others (some of them [here](#)). I'm just wary of any analysis of sin that starts and stops with an individual's conscious bad choices. That's not enough for Paul. And it offers only a partial lens on, for instance, what or who is to blame when an unarmed black man is killed by police.