

Outline the position of Augustine and John Murray on issues concerning original sin which are common to both. Whose position is to be preferred?

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The question at issue between Augustine and Murray is the nature of the union between Adam and his posterity in sin: how do we sin in Adam?

Murray holds to what he calls the representative view: “Adam was the appointed head and representative of the whole race”¹. God constituted Adam as our covenantal head in a federal union.

Murray describes the alternative view, realism, thus: “human nature was numerically and specifically [that is, as a species] one in Adam.... In brief, the position is that human nature in its unindividualized unity existed in its entirety in Adam, that, when Adam sinned, not only did he sin but also the common nature which existed in its unity in him, and that, since each person who comes into the world is an individualization of this one human nature, each person as an “individualized portion” of that common nature is both culpable and punishable for the sin committed by that unity.”².

Although realism is usually thought of as Augustinian, Murray questions the realist reading of Augustine: “Realists ... appeal with confidence to Augustine as a proponent of the realist position. It is not our interest or intent to demonstrate that Augustine did not entertain realist conceptions. It is necessary, however, to point out that the statements of Augustine on this subject, quoted or cited by the proponents of realism, are not conclusive in this connection.”³. Murray rightly emphasises Augustine’s anti-Pelagian concerns: “... the paramount interest of Augustine, as of Calvin, is to deny that it is by *imitation* that the one offence of Adam is unto the condemnation of all and to prove that it is by *propagation* that sin is transmitted from the first man to other men.”⁴.

However, we must agree with Kelly⁵ and Shedd⁶ that Augustine’s realism seems clear enough, as the following quotations show:

“For God, the author of natures, not of vices, created man upright; but man, being of his own will corrupted, and justly condemned, begot corrupted and condemned children. *For we were in that one man, since we all were that one man.... For not yet was the particular form created and distributed to us, in which we as individuals were to live, but already the seminal nature was there from which we were to be propagated;* and this being vitiated by sin, and bound by the chain of death, and justly condemned, man can not be born of man in any other state.”⁷

¹ Murray, p24

² Murray, p24

³ Murray, p29f

⁴ Murray, p30

⁵ Kelly, p363

⁶ Shedd, p35

⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei (City of God)*, 13.14, emphasis added.

“all sinned in Adam on that occasion, for all were already identical with him in that nature of his which was endowed with the capacity to generate them.”⁸

“In the misdirected choice of that one man all sinned in him, since all were that one man, from whom on that account they all severally derive original sin”⁹

Traducianism, the belief that we receive our souls from our parents, is a necessary concomitant of the realist view that we sin in Adam by our nature: since sin is a matter of the soul as well as of the body our souls must have been present in Adam.

It should be noted that Augustine was not a fully committed traducianist. In *Retractations* 1.1.3, he says: “As regards it (the soul’s) origin, by which it comes to be in the body, whether it is from that one man who was first created, when man was made into a living soul (1 Cor. 15:45), or whether in like manner for each individual and individual soul is created, I neither then knew, nor do I know now.”¹⁰

According to Pontifex¹¹, Augustine’s inclination towards traducianism was closely connected to his realism since he saw it as a way of explaining the contraction of the guilt of original sin. Traducianism accounts for the corruption of every individual soul better than creationism since either on the creationist view, God would have to create evil souls or a soul might not fall, options which Augustine cannot countenance.

Augustine also tends against creationism because the text of Genesis describes God as resting on the seventh day, whereas on the creationist view creation would go on throughout the course of human history¹².

An Augustinian realist-traducian view can be further defended from Scripture. In Genesis 2:21f the total Eve, body and soul, seems to have been made from Adam with no separate breathing in of “life” or giving of a “soul”¹³. The Bible can speak of the entirety of body and soul as “flesh” as in John 3:6¹⁴. John 1:13 implies that the unregenerate, body and soul, are born of blood / will of the flesh.¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:22 and Romans 5:12 presuppose humanity’s existence in Adam since only what exists can die / sin¹⁶. Ephesians 2:3 and Galatians 2:15 imply a real and complete nature is inherited from our parents¹⁷.

⁸ Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum* (In the merits and remissions of sin, and on the baptism of infants) 3.14

⁹ *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* (Marriage and desire) 2.15

¹⁰ Quoted in Augustine, *The Problem of Free Choice*, translated and annotated by Pontifex, Mark, p282. See also the discussion of Augustine’s leaning towards traducianism in Kelly, p345f.

¹¹ p280f

¹² Pontifex, p280. See also Gen 2:2; Ex 20:11; Heb 4:4 and Shedd, pp22, 25

¹³ Shedd, p21

¹⁴ Shedd, p22

¹⁵ Shedd, p23

¹⁶ Shedd, p26

¹⁷ Shedd, p26. Shedd, pp23-25 also cites Rm 1:3; Heb 12:9; Acts 17:26; Heb 7:10; Ps 139:15f; Job 10:10; Jer 1:5; Ps 22:9, 10 in support of traducianism.

The Traducianist can also point out that the notion of any existence prior to individual existence is not absurd since all are willing to admit a pre-existing bodily nature which we receive from our parents¹⁸.

Further, as Shedd observes, “The distinction between “nature” and “person” required in Traducianism, is acknowledged to be valid in both Trinitarianism and Christology.”¹⁹

It could be objected against realist-traducianism that it is problematic for the sinlessness of Christ since on this view Jesus’ human soul sinned in Adam. Perhaps the difficulty is alleviated by the miraculous conception of Christ²⁰.

Murray also objects that the realist view cannot explain why only the first sin of Adam is imputed to his posterity and not every sin which he commits before the birth of his offspring²¹. Interestingly, at this point, Shedd, whom Murray calls the most able exponent of realism²², reverts to a representative type argument based on the divine constitution of the probationary state of the covenant of works: “... that it was the transgression of the Eden statute, and not the moral law, that was made the probationary sin by Divine agreement, shows that the personal transgressions of Adam after his first sin would not be imputable even to the non-individualized nature in him.”²³ Perhaps this points towards the desirability of some account of our union with Adam in his sin that draws on the strengths of realism and representation.

In seeking to decide what view of our connection to Adam’s sin is to be preferred, questions of justice are central.

Here realists would seem to be on strong ground. Shedd can argue that: “The first sin of Adam, being a common, not an individual sin, is deservedly and justly imputed to the posterity of Adam upon the same principle upon which all sin is deservedly and justly imputed: namely, that it was committed by those to whom it is imputed. “All men died, because all men sinned,” says St. Paul. Free agency is supposed, as the reason for the penalty of death: namely, the free agency of mankind in Adam. This agency, though differing in the manner, is yet as real as the subsequent free agency of the individual.”²⁴.

For Shedd we are culpable for Adam’s sin since in our unindividualized nature we chose to sin: “... the psychio-physical human nature existing in Adam and Eve had no separate self-consciousness parallel with that of Adam and Eve.... But *existing*, and *acting* in and with these self-conscious individuals, it participated in their self-determination, and is chargeable with their sin....”²⁵.

¹⁸ Shedd, p11

¹⁹ Shedd, p77

²⁰ Shedd, p81f

²¹ Murray, p38

²² Murray, p24

²³ Shedd, p90

²⁴ Shedd, p186

²⁵ Shedd, p192

It would seem that Augustine would agree with this insistence that the will must be involved if sin is to be imputed since he says: “Sin is a matter of the will”²⁶ and: ““original sin is ... from will... because this was transmitted from the will of the first man.”²⁷.

For Shedd: “To impute Adam’s first sin to his posterity merely, and only, because Adam sinned as a representative in their room and place, makes the imputation an arbitrary act of sovereignty, not a righteous judicial act which carries in it an intrinsic morality and justice.”²⁸.

Murray, however, denies the necessity of the involvement of our wills in the sin of Adam. He argues that in the solidaric / corporate relationships in Scripture “moral responsibility devolves upon the members of a corporate entity by virtue of the actions of the representatives.... And it is not valid to insist that vicarious sin can be imputed only when there is a voluntary engagement to undertake such imputation. Corporate relationships exist by divine institution and the corporate responsibilities exist and come to effect apart all together from voluntary engagement on the part of the persons concerned to assume these responsibilities.”²⁹

Murray could have made this case even more strongly by surveying some of the father-son, king-people relationships in Scripture using texts such as Genesis 9, 2 Samuel 21 and 2 Samuel 24. It should also be stressed that if God establishes a covenantal relationship then this relationship will be “real” – God’s decree will have constituted it – rather than it being some “legal fiction”.

The Biblical analogy between the believer’s union with Christ and humanity’s union in Adam is also relevant to assessing how we participated in Adam’s sin.

Murray argues that “On realist premises... a radical disparity must be posited between the character of the union that exists between Adam and his posterity, on the one hand, and the union that exists between Christ and those who are his on the other.... the sustained parallelism militates against any such supposition.”³⁰

Two points may be made in response to this. First, no one suggests that we are related to Christ in exactly the way that we are related to Adam. Second, our union with Christ is not merely representative and a more “realist” account of faith union with Christ by the Spirit could be given.

A stark choice between Augustinian realist-traducianism and Murray’s representation view is not necessary. It seems that a federalist traducianism would preserve the strengths of both positions.

Bibliography

²⁶ Augustine, *Retractationes (Reconsiderations)* 1.15.2, cited by Kelly, p364

²⁷ Shedd, p202f citing Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia (Marriage and desire)* 2.28.2

²⁸ Shedd, p36 also cited in Murray, p24

²⁹ Murray, p35f

³⁰ Murray, p33

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