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Up for Discussion

An Anthropological Interpretation of Sin

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Abstract. The paper deals with the problem of the source of human sinfulness. In this connection, James G. Frazer's and Erich Fromm's conceptions are considered. The author believes the sinfulness of humans is ultimately in their mortality.¹

The version of James G. Frazer

In his study *Folklore in the Old Testament* (1918), J. G. Frazer presented an interesting idea (part I, chapter II): »The gist of the whole story of the fall appears to be an attempt to explain man's mortality, to set forth how death came into the world« (Frazer 1988, p. 16).

In his opinion, by planting the tree of life in Eden and not prohibiting its use, God apparently intended to give man the option of immortality, but man missed his chance by electing to eat of the other tree, which God had warned him not to touch under pain of immediate death.

In this connection, Frazer presupposed that the forbidden tree was really a tree of death, not of knowledge, and that the mere taste of its deadly fruit, quite apart from any question of obedience or disobedience to a divine command, sufficed to entail the eater's death. He believed that in the original story there were two trees, a tree of life and a tree of death; that it was open to man to eat of the one and live forever, or to eat of the other and die; that God, out of goodwill towards his creation, advised man to eat of the tree of life and warned him not to eat of the tree of death; and that man, misled by the serpent, ate of the wrong tree and so forfeited the immortality which his benevolent Creator had designed for him.

According to Frazer, »this hypothesis has the advantage of restoring the balance between the two trees and of rendering the whole narrative clear, simple, and consistent« (Frazer 1988, p.

¹ Papers that are »Up for Discussion« look from a perspective at a topic or subject which is interesting though unconventional and provoking. The idea that according to Fromm mortality is declared to be the cause of sin contradicts at a first glance to the biblical notion where mortality is a consequence of sin or guilt. Gifted with self-consciousness and imagination human beings are able to make their own decisions and also wrong decisions. But that human beings are mortal, they share, according to Fromm, with all living beings, because life cannot be passed on otherwise than by dying and coming into being. Hence mortality is an impact of life and it may be doubted that mortality is the source of human sinfulness.



17).

To my mind, the hypothesis about »the original story« with a tree of life and a tree of death in the garden is rather arbitrary. But even if the story of those two trees was true, Frazer's reconstruction of the biblical fall of man looks unconvincing.

Erich Fromm on sin and forgiveness

Let us appeal to another author. Erich Fromm in his last book *To Have or To Be?* (1976a) remarked that the biblical story of the Fall of man can be interpreted in two ways, since it contains authoritarian elements but also those allowing human liberation. In its classic concept in Jewish and Christian theological thought, »sin is essentially identical with *disobedience* toward the will of God«. This is quite apparent in the commonly held source of the first sin, Adam's disobedience (Fromm 1976a, p. 97).

To live in a society, people must learn to fear authority. However, this fear is not enough of a safeguard for the proper functioning of the state; »the citizen must internalize this fear and transform obedience into a moral and religious category: sin« (Fromm 1976a, p. 98). In Fromm's discourse, »people respect the laws not only because they are afraid but also because they feel guilty for their disobedience« (ibid.) This feeling of guilt can be overcome by the forgiveness that only the authority itself can grant. The conditions for such forgiveness are: the sinner repents, is punished, and by accepting punishment submits again.

For Fromm, »sin in the conventional theological and secular sense is a concept within the authoritarian structure«, and this structure belongs to the *having* mode of existence. Our human center lies not in ourselves but in the authority to which we submit. We *have* a leader (secular or spiritual) in whom we *have* faith; »we *have* security [...] as long as we *are* – nobody«. We live »in the mode of having to the degree that we internalize the authoritarian structure of our society« (Fromm 1976a, pp. 98–99).

Fromm believes that sin has an entirely different meaning in the non-authoritarian structure, which is rooted in the *being* mode. This other meaning, too, is implied in the biblical story of the Fall and can be understood through a different interpretation of that story.

According to Fromm, God had put Man into the Garden of Eden and »warned him not to eat either from the Tree of Life or from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil«. Seeing that »it was not good that Man should be alone,« God created Woman. Man and Woman should become one. Both were naked, and »they were not ashamed«. This statement is usually interpreted in terms of conventional sexual mores, which assume that, naturally, a man and a woman would be ashamed if their genitals were uncovered. But this hardly seems to be all the text has to say. On a deeper level, this statement could imply that although Man and Woman faced each other totally, they did not, and they even could not feel ashamed, for they did not experience each other as strangers, as separated individuals, but as »one« (Fromm 1976a, pp. 99–100).

This pre-human situation changes radically after the Fall, when Man and Woman become fully human, i.e., endowed with reason, with awareness of good and evil, with awareness of each other as separate beings, with awareness that their original oneness is broken and that they



become strangers to one another. They are close to each other, and yet they feel separate and distant. They did not reach out to each other in love; they perhaps desired each other physically, but physical union does not heal human estrangement. That they do not love each other is indicated in their attitude toward each other: Eve does not try to protect Adam, and Adam avoids punishment by denouncing Eve as the culprit rather than defending her (Fromm 1976a, p. 100).

Fromm asks the main question: »What is the sin they have committed?« And he answers: »To face each other as separated, isolated, selfish human beings who cannot overcome their separation through the union of the act of loving. *This sin is rooted in our very human existence*« (ibid. – my italics – N.O.). In Catholic theology the state of complete separateness and estrangement from each other, not bridged by love, is the definition of »Hell.« There is but one way to save ourselves from this hell: to leave the prison of our egocentricity, to reach out and to *one* ourselves with the world. If egocentric separateness is the cardinal sin, then the sin is atoned for in the act of loving. »Since the sin of separateness is not an act of disobedience, it does not need to be *forgiven*. But it does need to be *healed*; and love, not acceptance of punishment, is the healing factor« (Fromm 1976a, p. 100.)

In this interpretation of the biblical story, the scholar proceeds from his conception »to have or to be«. However, we may not agree with all his conclusions. For instance, he writes: God warned Man in Eden »not to eat either from the Tree of Life or from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil« (Fromm 1976a, p. 99). At the end of the paragraph »Sin and Forgiveness« you find this commentary on the story of the Fall: »there God is afraid of the power that man and woman would exercise if they ate of the fruit of both trees« (Fromm 1976a, p. 101).

Firstly, Fromm makes a factual mistake.² According to the Bible: »And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, «Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die»« (Gen. 2:16–17). As one can see, God gave the man His permission to eat »of every tree of the garden«, including the tree of life, except only for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Frazer regarded the fruit from the tree of life as able to grant immortality to the first people, and the danger to them could come from the other tree.

Secondly, God created man in His *own* image, according to His likeness. So He was hardly afraid of the oneness of man and woman and of their potential power. On the contrary, God blessed them and said to them, »Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it [...]« (Gen. 1:28); »Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was very good*« (Gen. 1:31).

In his earlier research, *You Shall Be as Gods* (1966a), Fromm also considered the biblical story of the Fall. One of his main ideas: man is God's potential rival. In the second chapter »The Concept of God« the following explanation is presented. Man could become God *if only he* were to eat from the tree of knowledge and from the tree of life. The fruit of the tree of knowledge

² This is a very strange mistake. For example, in his first book *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm accurately represents the biblical situation: »Man is forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil« [Fromm 1994: Chapter II].



gives man God's wisdom; the fruit of the tree of life would give him God's immortality. Encouraged by the serpent, Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge and thus take the first of the two steps. God feels threatened in His supreme position. He says: »Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. He must not be allowed to put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever« (Gen. 3:22). In Fromm's opinion, to protect Himself from the emerged danger, God expels man from Paradise and thus prevents him from taking the second step toward becoming God – eating from the tree of life (Fromm 1966a, pp. 21–22). In other words, God gets rid of man as His competitor.

On the one hand, these words of God allow us to speak of Him as of a jealous God who did not want to admit a human power equivalent to His own. However, God never warned man »not to eat from the Tree of Life«, only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was under the divine prohibition.

On the other hand, in these words one may see God's concern regarding the condition of Eden where chaos would reign if the life-mortal creature by the name of Man began to eat from the tree of life and to live there forever. The contradictory unity of life and death is inadmissible for the Paradise being. At its core, Paradise cannot permit the mortal principle that would inevitably destroy it.

At the very beginning God warned man that he »shall surely die« on the day when he eats of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And God was right: the man who has known good and evil, i.e., his own life-mortal nature, had immediately to die for Eden. The expulsion of the first people from Eden was predetermined by this knowledge and their contradictory essence.

God expels Adam and Eve not to prevent their transformation into God, but because the mortal people should live on the earth, and not in Eden; there is no place for mortal creatures in Eden; there is no death in Eden, which the immortal blessed ones inhabit. Guarding the way to the tree of life, the biblical cherubim and flaming sword protect humans from their empty, unfeasible desire to find paradisiac, unearthly immortality. Adam and Eve could have stayed in Eden if they had begun to eat the fruits from the tree of life but not tasted the forbidden ones from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In the fifth chapter, »The Concept of Sin and Repentance«, Fromm notes that the Bible does not consider man either good or evil, but endowed with both tendencies. In his opinion, »it is very significant that in the story of the 'fall' the Bible never calls Adam's act a sin« (Fromm 1966a, p. 125).

Fromm's subsequent discourses on sin and repentance are rather interesting. He points out, regarding the words which are mainly used in the Old Testament for sin, that the most important term for »to sin« is *hata*. The root of this word in biblical Hebrew is »to miss« (a goal or the road); for instance, »He who makes haste with his feet misses« (Prov. 19: 2. – In *The Holy Bible* of 2017 this idea is presented as follows: »And he sins who hastens with his feet« (Prov. 19: 2). In short, »to sin is to miss (the road)« (Fromm 1966a, p. 132). It is more than ignorance or error, more than erroneous thought; it is wrong action, the will applied to a wrong aim. Yet to sin is human, almost unavoidable, nothing to be depressed by.

Further, Fromm explains that the meaning of sin as missing the right road corresponds to the



term for »repent«, which is *shuv*, meaning »to return«. While the verb is used in this sense in the writings of Hosea (3:5; 6:1; 7:10), Jeremiah (3:7, 12,14. 22), Amos (4:6. 8–11) and others, the noun *teshuvah* (»return«) is not used in the sense of repentance in the Bible but only in the later Jewish tradition. »A man who repents is a man who <returns>. He returns to the right way, to God, to himself« (Fromm 1966a, p. 133.). Just as sinning is not an indication of corruption, nor a reason for sadness or guilty submission, *teshuvah* (»repentance«) is not the attitude of the meek sinner, blaming himself for his transgressions and prostrating himself. There is little of a sadistic superego or of a masochistic ego in the Jewish concept of sin and repentance.

Fromm relates this phenomenon of repentance to his idea that »man is free and independent. He is even independent from God« (Fromm 1966a, p. 133). To my mind, the author assumes an exaggeration in the last sentence: man cannot be independent from God as from his own essence; or: man cannot be independent from his own essence which is God in him.

But here our main question is as follows: what impels a human to sin, i.e., »to miss the road«? What is the last, ontological cause of sin?

Human nature and its sinfulness

Now I would like to suggest an interpretation of human sinfulness, proceeding from my conception of secular (philosophical) theology (Omelchenko 2010). We believe that God is being, life, good, love, beauty, truth; and the devil is non-being (nothing), death, evil, hatred, ugliness, falsehood. God and Satan, being and nothing, life and death, good and evil, love and hatred, beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood are too opposite principles of the human nature and cosmic order.

In my view, death is the source of the human sinfulness so how, for Heidegger (2004, p. 253), »Nothing is the source of negation, not the other way about.« Death is the final, inalienable human sin, which however is committed daily. *Human sinfulness is rooted in one's mortality*. We may not know it, but we nevertheless have, so to speak, latent sinfulness. For example, newborn babies are sinful because they are mortal. Infant sinfulness consists in one's beginning to die in the first moment of one's life.

People commit sins when their deeds serve death, i.e. the devil. But they already sin by the fact that they die. Humans inevitably and fatally die, and herein lies their objective, inescapable sin. Mortal human nature cries every minute of its permanent sinfulness. Our basic sin is that we die hopelessly and without ceasing; we are living and at the same time we are dying. In other terms, the truth that 'a living being is dying' means: a living being is committing a sin, a living creature includes the mortal, or the sinful principle.

If death is a natural process for humans, so are their sins natural too, i.e., are derived from death. Therefore, good and evil (sin) are the qualities of human nature. So to encourage good and to condemn evil is to support life and to reject death. The unfading greatness of humans consists in their constantly pushing death away from themselves, holding it at a distance. The saying 'courage is the patience in danger' seems to be true. In other words, courage stands in opposition to death.

In our interpretation of the biblical story of the fall of man, we proceed from the postulate



»The Bible is the home of God-Being«; this means that the objective essence of being was printed in the Book. So it is important what *had been* eventually *told* in the text.

In my view, the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil gave the first people the awareness of their vitality and mortality. For Frazer, »it is true that man is not said to have been created immortal and to have lost his immortality through disobedience; but neither is he said to have been created mortal« (Frazer 1988, p. 16). However, the behavior of the humans in Eden allows us to conclude that they had been created mortal but just didn't know it; and so they had a latent sinfulness which became apparent after eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, i.e., from the tree of the knowledge of one's vitality and mortality. Their eyes had been opened to the real position which was unknown to them until that moment. With the new knowledge, a genuine life-mortal nature of the human creation was discovered. Adam and Eve could then stay no longer in Eden, where there was no place for death; or, they had died for Eden. Such an outcome allows us to suppose that – sooner or later, with the serpent or without it – they would eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge; this action would be stimulated by their life-mortal nature. The first people couldn't *not* eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge; such is human nature: to acknowledge the world and oneself.

»So when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate« (Gen. 3:6). Here it is said the woman was the first who ate the fruit from the forbidden tree which would »make one wise«, and then she gave the same fruit to her husband. In that case the biblical wife appears not as 'the foolish woman who trusted the serpent-tempter', but as a brave and sagacious woman in whom human nature was most clearly manifested, in particular the human aspiration for cognition in spite of any threats, dangers, and obstacles.

Adam and Eve were naked, but they did not know about that; the man and his wife were mortal, but they did not know about that. When they were sent out of the garden of Eden, God did not change their nature but only increased their grief. The first people had originally mortal nature, and they were invited to eat of the tree of life, but they chose the tree of the knowledge, according to their primordial nature.

There is no place in Eden for the sinners, they have died for Eden but found the earth life. Eve became »the mother of all living« (Gen. 3:20) also because she was really the first person who recognized good and evil, knew about human vitality and mortality, and opened the eyes of her husband and all people on the earth to those truths. What can be more noble and more beautiful than this woman's position?! The woman herself defined this status through her actions; and Adam expressed his consent to them, calling his wife's name Eve, that is, 'life'. The first woman was the first who invited her husband and humankind to knowledge in which life is as well.

By the way, God looks like the benevolent Creator; after disobedience of the man and his wife, He »made tunics of skin, and clothed them« (Gen. 3:21). God did not want the humans to know the bitter truths about them, about their mortality; that is why He encouraged Adam and Eve to eat the fruits of all the trees, including of the tree of life. In such an Eden, the first



people would never know about their mortal nature and the evil connected with it. They would eat the fruit from the tree of life and live forever, but in ignorance regarding their genuine life-mortal nature; they would not know that they could commit good and evil because of this dual nature, that life gives birth to its values, which are to be strengthened and developed by the people themselves, since nobody can do this instead of them. This is the difficult path – to be the human. But it is the path of the human, not of the innocent Eden creature eating in leisure the fruit of the tree of life. Adam and Eve had chosen the human way.

So what was the knowledge of good and evil which God thoroughly concealed from the human? In my version, good is life, and evil is death. The first people were mortal, but they did not know this until they ate fruit from the tree of knowledge. To know good and evil means above all to understand that the human has the life-mortal nature.

What is the original sin? According to my interpretation, *the original sin is that Adam and Eve as the first people were originally mortal*. And this sin came to be known to them after the eating of the forbidden fruit. This sin cannot be exhausted, just as it is impossible to cancel the mortal nature of the human. However, the original sin would be forgiven if the people gained immortality.

»Cursed is the ground« (Gen. 3:17) for Adam's sake. The curse is that the sinful people live on the earth. »So all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died« (Gen. 5:5). By the way, this is a good perspective for present and future generations: the human beings will not gain immortality on the earth, but they are apparently able to live for 930 years.

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