

December 2010

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Recommended Citation

Regelsberger, Christina (2010) "An Investigation of Feral Children and Original Sin," *Verbum*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol8/iss1/9>

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An Investigation of Feral Children and Original Sin

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The subject of feral children has often been explored from a variety of viewpoints and angles. Frequently, such topics as education, language acquisition, emotional stability, mental stability and behavioral patterns are reviewed. However, the motive of actions or the inherent tendency of feral children to behave one way or another is often overlooked. The question remains whether feral children (prior to their integration into society), are in possession of original sin. Many maintain that all humans are born with an inherent desire to do evil. However, is it the result of social stimulation or merely an innate propensity to sin? Before such a question can be answered, a short discourse on original sin is necessary. Thus, I intend to explore and discuss the theories of original sin presented by both St. Augustine and Jean Jacques Rousseau. After creating a basis for understanding original sin, case studies of various feral children (including the wolf-girls of India, Genie and Victor of Aveyron) will be reviewed. These case studies will allow analysis of the theory of original sin in feral children. I hope to explore whether feral children possess a sin nature even though they have not been exposed to society and have been living —innocent|| wild lives. Furthermore, I wish to explore what solution or salvation remains for feral children and humanity in general, if indeed humanity is —cursed|| with a sin nature."



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I. St. Augustine on Original Sin

St. Augustine, a theological pillar of the church, was responsible for the initial development of foundational doctrines of the early Catholic Church. This includes the doctrine of original sin which consequently explores the fallen human nature and human freedom. St. Augustine supported the viewpoint that God created humans without blemish, fault or sin. Augustine writes, “For the first free will (*liberum arbitrium*) which was given to humanity when it was created upright (*rectus*), gave not just the ability not to sin, but also the ability to sin” (McGrath 399). Thus, Augustine suggests that man was created as a blank slate which possessed the ability to sin or resist sin. According to the book of Genesis, Adam (and then Eve), made the decision to sin by disobeying God’s commandment to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This marred the blank slate that humankind was originally created with. Thus, the children of Adam and Eve were also implicated and possessed a propensity to sin. Author Mark Cladis writes the following in regard to the Augustinian view of original sin.

Augustine held that humans cannot cure themselves of sin or evil. The disposition to sin – an impaired will unable to order one’s loves properly – is acquired at birth and remains until death...Original sin, simply put, is fatal. It is invasive and, in terms of human effort, irreversible. Baptism can wash away the guilt inherited from Adam, but the will remains disfigured...the central issue is that since Adam, humans are only free to sin. (Cladis 80)

As Cladis writes, the will of humankind remains “disfigured” or stained with a desire to sin. No matter what the degree of our resolve, humankind cannot erase this desire to sin. There exists no remedy. Since no remedy exists, this theory acknowledges that man cannot save himself and is in need of God’s grace and mercy. Thus, Augustine maintained that humankind was created with

free will, and violated free will. Because of this, future generations were/are born with an inclination to continue this violation and are reliant upon God's grace.

II. Jean Jacques Rousseau on Original Sin

St. Augustine held the traditional religious belief of original sin. However, Jean Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher of the Enlightenment period, countered this traditional viewpoint. Rousseau held that at birth, man is naturally good. According to Cladis, Rousseau writes, "That man is a being naturally good, a lover of justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and that the first movements of nature are always right" (Cladis 85). Thus, Rousseau was a proponent of a humankind that naturally sought love and justice. In his book *Emile*, Rousseau delves further into the issue and claims the following: "What makes him [man] really bad is a multiplicity of needs and dependence on the opinions of others" (Rousseau 209). Ultimately, Rousseau suggests that society corrupts man. A man's interdependence and association with other individuals leads to frustrations with relationships, difference of opinions and thus a desire to look out for oneself, which often leads to sin or a tendency to do evil. In essence, Rousseau suggests that original sin is developed as the result of social stimulation. In an effort to explain Rousseau, Cladis writes, "As humans become social, their capacity for morality increases in proportion to their chance of encountering moral evil" (Cladis 89). Rousseau supports the idea that some aspect found within the core of humankind needed to be "activated" in order for man to develop a desire to act out morally. Historically, the Enlightenment period proposed the idea that the solution for humankind lies within knowledge. Thus, Rousseau suggested that man was independent of God's grace and capable of saving himself through so-called "enlightenment." If society causes man to act in a sinful manner, then the resolution lies within the reformation of society. If society were to be better educated (in every sense), then society would hypothetically not challenge individuals with moral evils. Thus, if individuals

were spared the encounter of moral evils, then they themselves would also become reformed and this would remedy man's desire to sin. In summary, Rousseau held that man was naturally good, but that society caused man to sin and that through enlightenment man could save himself.

St. Augustine and Rousseau certainly possessed varying viewpoints on the issue of original sin. In regards to feral children, Rousseau's theory would hold that children of the wild are without sin until they encounter society. As these feral children spend increasing amounts of time immersed within society, their disposition to sin grows. However, Augustine maintains that *all* are in possession of original sin. This is not dependent on location or immersion within society. Then, according to Augustine, feral children do have a propensity to sin even while dwelling in isolation from human society. It is thought that Augustine's theory of original sin is more accurate. In fact, Cladis writes, "Rousseau was increasingly compelled to accept that no revolution or any amount of tinkering with social structures can rid us of our prodigious capacity for hurting ourselves" (Cladis 91). Rousseau was forced to recognize that no amount of resolve or reformation of society could cure mankind from its desire to do evil.

III. Case Study I: Wolf-Girls of Midnapore, India

Missionary Reverend J. A. L. Singh discovered the presence of two wolf-girls when he was asked to eliminate a man-ghost from the border between the villages of Midnapore and Morbhanj in India. Eventually, he adopted these girls into his home and began the process of reintegrating them into society. After only six years of living among the Singh family, one wolf-girl (Amala) died. The other wolf-girl, Kamala, showed remarkable improvement. Singh records her progress in his book entitled *Wolf-children and Feral Man*. Over six years, Kamala mastered walking upright (rather than travel on all-fours), developed a limited vocabulary, expressed feelings and learned to gesticulate. Initially, Singh and his wife observed hostility and a general violence from both girls. "Yet one day, without warning, they suddenly turned and attacked,

biting and scratching him [the baby] hard. From then on, the two girls refused to have anything to do with the little child” (Newton 185). This behavioral observation indicates an important point. Both girls acted violently. Yes, this action may have been a result of self-defense (i.e., they may have somehow felt threatened by the baby). However, the point remains that they acted violently. Whether for reasons of self-defense or not, Amala and Kamala put their feelings and well-being first. In addition, Reverend Singh records the following in his analysis of Kamala: “It appears from the above and other facts that Kamala’s temper was getting modified from the animal idea of pleasure and ferocity to that of human enjoyment or displeasure, resulting in a mild and modified form of conduct” (Singh 89). In contrast to Rousseau’s theory, Singh recounts the improvement of one of the wolf-girl’s (Kamala’s) behavior after eight years of assimilation into society. Rousseau claimed that “An originally good human nature is corrupted by society” (Cladis 84). However, Singh’s experience showed the inverse. Kamala’s general temperament improved as exposure to society increased. Thus, Rousseau’s theory that the tendency of man to do evil/sin nature increases with social interaction is directly refuted in the case study of the Indian wolf-girls of Midnapore.

IV. Case Study II: Victor of Aveyron

Often times Victor of Aveyron is referred to as “the wild child.” In January of 1800, Victor emerged from the woods surrounding the small, French village of Saint-Sernin. The child (thought to be around ten years old) behaved much like an animal. Possessing long, overgrown hair, Victor appeared beastly, disheveled and ultimately wild. Initially, “ownership” and responsibility of the boy shifted various times. Finally, the Guerin family and Doctor Itard made the decision to undertake Victor’s reeducation and care. Dr. Itard wished to fulfill the following five goals in Victor’s reeducation: “1) To give the boy the ability to respond to other people, 2) To train his senses, 3) To extend his physical and social needs, 4) To teach him to speak and 5)

To teach him to think clearly” (Shattuck 77). Often times the implementation or fulfillment of these goals was dependent upon Madame Guerin and Doctor Itard fighting against Victor’s wishes and imposing their will upon his. Naturally, this was done for Victor’s own good. However, Victor repeatedly responded in self-defense that manifested itself through tantrums. Shattuck writes the following:

Among these new joys came outbreak of irritation and anger. Itard noted them down carefully, for he felt that at those times the boy’s intelligence took a step forward and found unexpected strength. He had reacted to something. When Madam Guerin insisted on making him get into a bath he considered too cold, he first flew into a kind of tantrum. (Shattuck 80)

In this case, Victor responded in self-defense (similar to the Indian wolf-girls). Such a response is a mechanism inherent to every human being. Victor responded in such a way to protect himself from a situation that he viewed as displeasing. Slightly cold bathwater would not have a scathing effect on Victor. However, Victor displayed his displeasure through a tantrum in order to defend his desires, wants and needs. Although he may not have known how to express himself in a socially acceptable or even audible manner, Victor did possess the ability to defend himself.

V. Case Study III: Genie

Psychologists often review the case of Genie. Genie, whose real name was Susan, had spent thirteen years of her life locked in a room. She was discovered in 1970 at the age of thirteen. Her parents, particularly her father, had viewed this as a method of protecting their daughter from the evil of the world. However, this so-called “care” or protection quickly developed into abuse. Having spent the majority of her developmental years in isolation, Genie could not walk normally and could not communicate. Genie was removed from this dysfunctional home situation. Psychologists and other specialists worked with her to assimilate her into normal, American society. Genie eventually progressed enough that she to be able to speak, walk and

interact with other normal adults. According to Newton, “She was buried in silence – silently watching, silently scared, and silently crying. Even her wild temper tantrums – when she would flail manically, scratching, striking” (Newton 215). Just as in the case of the Indian wolf-girls and Victor of Aveyron, Genie responded naturally with violence. Once again, this behavior was likely a self-defense mechanism.

VI. Analysis of Case Studies in Respect to Original Sin

The above discussion on original sin and the three case studies presented provide an adequate background for a discussion of original sin as it pertains to feral children. In all the cases presented, the caretakers made an attempt to not invade the “personal space” of each feral child. In the case of the wolf-girls, Reverend Singh initially kept them by themselves alone in a room, so as to not overwhelm them with society. He then introduced other children into their lives. These children functioned as guards and were put in place to watch over Amala and Kamala, but they also functioned as companions for Amala and Kamala. Victor was assimilated into the home of the Guerin family so as to give him the sense of family. Unfortunately, Genie was transferred various times between caretakers. However, her therapists and others working with her never intended to disrupt her life. Despite what occurred in these situations, each feral child improved with exposure to society. This refutes what Rousseau believed about the nature of man. Essentially, Rousseau believed that man was naturally good and eventually became corrupted by society. All of these cases showed the opposite. Each of the feral children’s behavior and overall attitude developed and progressed because of interaction with society. Although none of them may have ever reached the social norm, each feral child made great strides towards social maturity.

As mentioned throughout the case studies each of the feral children (the wolf-girls, Victor and Genie) initially behaved violently. Whether tantrums and other violent behavior were the

result of direct disobedience or self-defense is of little importance. Regardless, all of these feral children displayed a degree of selfishness. Each of them acted in such a manner so as to protect themselves or in more colloquial terms, to look out for “number one.” At this point, a connection to original sin can be made. Original sin, as discussed, is the idea that man is inherently evil. If man is inherently evil, then he is not concerned with the welfare of others but rather only with his own desires. Thus, these case studies and the violent actions of feral children directly exemplify original sin. It can then be concluded that man is in possession of original sin regardless of isolation from society. This aligns with St. Augustine’s theory of original sin and refutes Rousseau’s theory that man was naturally good and that children are born with a desire only for love and justice. For if this were the case, then these feral children would not have responded to their caretakers in violence.

However, if man is naturally sinful then how is the problem of original sin to be resolved? Are we indeed hopeless sinners as St. Augustine suggests? Although Rousseau may have erred when it came to determining whether man was originally sinful, he did understand the need for education. Education is necessary. However, education alone cannot save man. If the human race depends solely on education then nothing will be accomplished. Cladis writes, “Should society offer a better education, for example, this would simply enhance its citizens’ ability to sin in a more erudite or sophisticated fashion; should society curtail poverty, this would simply permit more citizens to sin more affluently. Social engineering alters the range of possible sins, not the sinful condition itself” (Cladis 81). With education comes the improvement of society. If society can understand sin and learn from past examples, then society can better itself. Society as a whole needs to be educated morally and ethically. With true education, comes Biblical education. Biblical education can lend insight to man about sin and causes man to

realize that humankind is dependent upon God's grace. God's grace is needed in order to resolve man's sin nature. Augustine reinforces humanity's need for God's grace. Without God's grace, man is doomed to sin. God's grace is evidenced through his love. As the Christian Scriptures say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). If humanity relies completely on the education theory supported by Rousseau and the Enlightenment, then humanity rejects the grace of God and thus salvation from sin. This leaves humankind doomed to its sin nature. Therefore, a middle ground between Augustinian theory and Rousseau's theory must be reached. While recognizing that education, particularly moral education is paramount, humanity must also acknowledge sin and the need for God's grace.

Through an exploration of St. Augustine's and Rousseau's thoughts on the matter of original sin, it was discovered that the two scholars held varying viewpoints. St. Augustine proposed that man was inherently sinful because of the decision that Adam and Eve made (in Biblical events) to violate free will, disobey and therefore sin against God. According to Augustine, the decision to sin was and continues to be inherited by future generations. Thus humankind is "cursed" with a propensity to sin from which it cannot save itself. In contrast to St. Augustine, Rousseau posited that man is inherently good and is only corrupted by increased exposure to society. However, Rousseau proposed that the solution for humanity lay within the education of society and therefore, the improvement of mankind. The three case studies presented (Kamala, Victor and Genie), illustrated the opposite of Rousseau's theory. First, mankind is not inherently good because all three children exhibited violent behavior initially. This confirms St. Augustine's theory on the sin nature of man. Second, all three subjects improved in behavior and temperament with increased exposure to society. This suggests that

Rousseau's theory was flawed in that aspect. Since all children initially exhibited violence this suggests that man is in possession of a sin nature regardless of exposure to society. This begs the question whether man is doomed to this sin nature since it is inherited, or whether some solution or salvation exists for man. From the research conducted, it can be proposed that the solution for humanity lies within the intersection of Augustinian thought and Rousseau's theory. As Rousseau suggested, society can certainly benefit from education including reviewing past mistakes and the development of moral understanding. However, since man himself is flawed, then education that stems from man cannot be the complete solution. Rather, man must be reliant upon God's grace and mercy as St. Augustine offers. God provides redemption from man's sin nature.

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