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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Fathers on Milton's Evil Thought in Blameless Mind

Evil into the mind of God or Man
May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave
No spot or blame behind.

Paradise Lost, v, 117-19

Adam's reassuring comment on Eve's dream memorably expresses a Platonic element in Christian thought which forms a Philemon's pitcher of quidditative quibblings and disceptatious discriminations that the unslakeable thirst of moral and philosophical speculation has never exhausted. In Christian art, commonly a touchstone of the church's ethical robustness, the concept of the innocent or uncorrupting thought of evil is early portrayed in *psychomachia* and assaults of the Deadly Seven, while in the literature of the post-Reformation era, it is not merely dramatized directly, but also frequently exploited as a means to the reader's total involvement by those writers who have in view the amelioration of the ruined human condition or the fashioning of a gentleman. Central as the notion thus is to art and literature and moral theology, its history is potentially capable of illuminating vast and significant areas of intellectual and cultural endeavour; however, this essay, in studying the doctrine's vagaries as far as Thomas, restricts its aim to supplying the needed patristic background to Milton's concept.¹

Teaching by example, the church from the start sought to lay bare the inwardness of true virtue as the sine qua non of all morality and the arcanum of

1. Relevance of the study to jurisprudence is pointed by the latest discussion of the doctrine of *mens rea* in H. L. A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law* (Oxford, 1968). But, focusing on literature, we may note that the concept illumines the very nature of literary art and particularly of certain necessary mental processes upon which artistic success depends. For instance, the notion underlies satire, in which the invigorating purgation appropriate to that form becomes possible only when the satirist contrives to re-enact imaginatively and compellingly the vice or folly in question, so that the attack is made, not on a shadowy or theoretical enemy, but on a substantial reality, forcefully felt on the reader's pulses. The same principle may also be involved in the catharsis at which tragedy aims. (But cf. the chapter on catharsis in Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: A Social Psychological Analysis* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962], pp. 196-228.)

On the controversy associated with Milton's treatment of the idea, see especially the debate between Millicent Bell and Wayne Shumaker in *PMLA*, 68 (1953), 863-83 and 70 (1955), 1158-1202. Following E. M. W. Tillyard's discussion in *Studies in Milton* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), this is perhaps the most memorable statement of the problem in our time; other recent notable contributions include those of Chambers, Fish, Patrides, Steadman, and Weidhorn.

its own astonishing strength. In this it was at one with the Lord's great principle (Mark 7:21-3) that what defiles is nothing outward, but the enemy within. Not surprisingly, therefore, the original Christian writers were pre-occupied with moral precept and the right ordering of life in the mundane affairs concerning it; the tiny groups of two or three folk gathered together in his name, characteristic of the church in its infancy, seem always to have been regarded more as the objects of pastoral care, no less important according to the fewness of their numbers, than as possible polemicists or apologists eager to sift and discuss the quality of Christian experience. The work of analysis and synthesis was reserved for after ages; meanwhile, it was crucial that the Christian re-engage his beliefs day by day and every moment of the day. To this end the first Fathers bent their best efforts, and in homily and epistle trained up their flocks in the way they should go. Much of the Apostolic Fathers' instruction is of this kind, and already in the catechism of the *Didache* there is nascent evidence of precise and organized moral teaching. Here all the vistas of eternity opened to the Christian are reduced to two: the Way of Life (the embracing of virtue, the eschewing of vice) and the Way of Death (the surrendering to sin, the luxuriating in lust). As the whole duty of man is to walk in the path that leads to perfection, he should abstain from the cherishing of grudges, the keeping of a double mind or a forked tongue, the harbouring of a malicious design against his neighbour. Always he must beware of hypocrisy: he ought never betake himself to prayer with a nasty conscience, nor busy himself with foul thoughts, for from these are blasphemous words engendered. Throughout there is a repeated insistence on mortal thrawnness but, tempering that, an acceptance of human liability and an awareness of the aided spirit's capacity to fight against the limitations of its own nature. 'See lest any man lead you astray from the way of righteousness, for he teacheth thee apart from God. For if thou art able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, thou shalt be perfect, but if thou art not able, do that which thou art able.'² Do the best you can, and no more can be expected of you; but the *Didache* makes plain that what is implied in doing this 'best' is indeed no less than a way of life, a pattern of noble conduct traced by a mind securely set on good.

Only such a heart is inviolable, the Apostolic Fathers believe; for since man is prone to stumble, vicious thoughts must constantly assail him, and each moment of his life he is teetering on the brink of sinful action. And where does merit lie but in the refusal of the mind to accede to those desires it knows to be wrong? The first Christian commentators treat this principle as axiomatic and, following Paul, sometimes represent the noble life as a warfare. The author of the homily known as the *Second Letter of St Clement*, for instance, calls upon his memory of witnessed gladiatorial combats to image the relentless struggle that is the continual lot of the real Christian.³ Hermas, on the other hand, strives to inculcate the necessity of inner cleanliness through

2. *Didache*, 6 (*The Apostolic Fathers*, tr. J. B. Lightfoot, ed. J. R. Harmer [London: Macmillan, 1891], pp. 231f.).

3. Cf. 2 *Clement*, 7 (*The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 88).

imaginative use of allegory. In his vision of Rhoda, the Beatrice-figure who appears on his journey to self-knowledge, the rule emerges that the welcoming breast which plays host to the evil thought is smeared by association; and this idea, although it constitutes for Hermas only a propaedeutic schooling in Christian ethics, becomes a significant motif in the work as a whole.⁴ Tutored by the divine Shepherd, his Virgil, Hermas later learns many of the duties and obligations of the church; but in a sense his moral education, though just begun, is complete by the end of this first vision, for already he has discovered the adamant single-mindedness with which alone the heavenly footman must face the race, and on which, therefore, all else depends.

From the earliest time, then, evaluation of the mind's content was of utmost concern to the moral theologian. Since Christ's kingdom lay within, there was nothing like the quality of a man's thoughts to indicate to himself the nature of his faith, just as that was revealed to others through his actions. The Christian moralist found in this a great advantage. To equate thought with action as the basis of morality not only disclosed at once the postulates on which Christianity rested, but also evinced much of the essence of good and evil. For was it not an empirically verifiable fact that certain thoughts, felt to be evil by some, were by others regarded as good, or at least as amoral? Was there, then, an objective reality for right and wrong, or was there nothing good or bad, but only thinking made it seem so? Hamlet's problem was well defined and discussed by the early Christian writers, who naturally had no doubts at all about the answer; but the issues it raised were capable of serving them well, and above all they brought into focus many general noetic difficulties, the operation of the cognitive process itself, the place of reason and the emotions, and particularly the status of the will. Such matters were not, of course, treated directly or abstractly at the outset, but that they were initially present in the Fathers' minds is certain. In fact, the whole subject of man's innocence or guilt, apart from his agreed share in Adam's ruin, becomes for many of the Fathers the purely pragmatic question of assessing the degree of responsibility for each act, including the act of thought, performed by the human will. As early as the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria makes a mature distinction concerning this in the *Stromata*, when he flatly declares that 'things ... that depend on choice are subjects for judgment ... [but] what is involuntary is not matter for judgment.'⁵

Patristic discussion of man's liability for his own thoughts is usually bound up with two other topics, namely, the origin of the first sin and the Sermon on the Mount. Consideration of the former invariably necessitates resolving the dilemma whether Adam was created perfect or imperfect; for if he was perfect, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern how he could transgress; and if he was imperfect, it is hard to understand how a perfect God could

4. Cf. Hermas, *Shepherd*. Vis. 1, i (*The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 405f.).

5. Clement, *Stromata*, II, 13-14, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Scribner's, 1907-11), II, 361. (This ed. is cited below as *ANF*.)

make any work, far less his own image, inferior to perfection. Somehow a solution has to be worked out, for the case is patently momentous, if the freedom and responsibility of our first parents are to be allowed. Irenaeus, therefore, contending against heresy, offers an eminently sane solution: 'created things must be inferior to Him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But inasmuch as they are not uncreated, for this very reason do they come short of the perfect.'⁶ Yet while this explanation seems logical enough, it lacks the merit of demonstrating man's deficiency as part of God's wisdom and providence, as Clement claims it is, when he argues that man was not in fact made perfect, but only adapted for virtue: 'For they shall hear from us that he was not perfect in his creation, but adapted to the reception of virtue. For it is of great importance in regard to virtue to be made fit for its attainment. And it is intended that we should be saved by ourselves. This, then, is the nature of the soul, to move of itself.'⁷ Naturally every medieval commentator on Genesis has his own opinion on the subject, as the pages of that great repository of exegesis, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, amply testify; but for our purposes the significance of the early patristic debate is the turn it gives to discussion of the extent of human accountability.⁸ If, as Clement irenically suggested, God in his wisdom had made man deficient only that he might be adapted for virtue, it would be a sinning of one's mercies to refuse to acknowledge that the human soul could move of itself, that man was wholly adequate for the winning of virtue, and that he could therefore be rightly praised or blamed, not only for each action, but for the formulation of each thought and desire as well.⁹ Indeed, the only thing on this view for which he remained unanswerable was the material of which his cogitations were composed, because that was often implanted in the mind by external agencies beyond his control. This notion was established early, for it coincided with the church's staunch belief in a world peopled with thousands 'invisibly attending' – contending angels, good and bad, who stood by man to incite him to evil or to urge him to good – and it was tractable to artistic representation as the archetypal Faust-conflict in a number of ways.¹⁰ Origen was sufficiently impressed

6. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, iv, 38 (ANF, I, 521).

7. Clement, *Stromata*, vi, 12 (ANF, II, 502). Clement builds on Irenaeus' view of Adam as childish innocent and his view of human life as a process of moral growth and testing.

8. On the authorship of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, traditionally attributed to Walafrid Strabo, but disputed by modern scholars, see B. Smalley in *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 7 (1935), 235–62, 8 (1936), 24–60, 9 (1937), 365–400; J. de Blie, sj, "L'Œuvre exégétique de Walafrid Strabon et la *Glossa Ordinaria*," *ibid.*, 16 (1949), 5–28.

9. Cf. Clement, *Stromata*, vi, 12 (ANF, II, 502).

10. Christian belief in man's attendant and contending angels is a development from Jewish views of the source of sin. Discernible in Judaic thought are three main strands: (1) The view of man as embodied in Adam, who becomes representative of corporate humanity – an idea taken over by St Paul; (2) adoption of the myth of heavenly beings

by the naïvely dramatic expression of the idea in the *Shepherd* of Hermas to refer to it in his controversial *De Principiis*, where he maintains that certain thoughts are prompted either by good or bad angels. Adducing in support Zechariah's remark, 'And the angel who spoke in me answered' (Zech. 1:14), he points out that Hermas says much the same thing when he holds that every person is attended by two angels: 'Whenever good thoughts arise in our hearts they are suggested by the good angel, but when of a contrary kind, they are the instigation of the devil.'¹¹ But aware of the omnipresent peril of exploiting this truth to dodge our responsibility, Origen insists that what matters is not so much that the human heart is susceptible to the admittance of evil, as that the moral agent has power to harbour or exclude it; hence he is able to affirm that the hard-pressed mind that keeps itself inviolate is altogether blameless.¹²

This emphasis on a person's attitude to the reception of evil is even more forcefully stated by the Fathers in their commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount. In 'hedging the Law,' Christ conjured up a picture of the adulterous heart that provided a striking illustration for those who felt moved to prove the gravity of the iniquitous thought, and patristic interest in the observation, 'And he that looketh so as to lust,' is constant. Clement of Alexandria is followed by Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, and others in showing the sin of intention that is made explicit in the exact phrasing of Christ's statement.¹³ For Clement this comprises ultimate justification for his discrimination of the voluntary and the involuntary; commenting on the text, he holds up Lot's wife as the exemplar who willingly inclines towards evil, and claims that God visited judgment on that woman, changing her into the senseless mass of salt, not to remain in metamorphosis 'a stupid and useless image,' but to remind the individual of his own intention concerning the wickedness of the senses,

associating with the daughters of men to produce an infected race (Gen. 6), a somewhat Gnostic notion; (3) the leaving of the question unresolved by relating evil to the mysterious imagination of man's heart, which 'is evil from his youth' (Gen. 8:21). Of this third element there are a number of traces in early Christian writers, besides Hermas; the development of thought seems to be the assertion of the creation in man of a good spirit to oppose his evil genius. The doctrine of these twin angels is strong, for example, among the Qumran people (cf. G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962], col. iv of the 'Community Rule,' pp. 76-8), as well as among the Eastern sectarians known as the Messalians or Euchites, who practised quietism, stressing the spiritual importance of prayer and ascent of the soul to God. In the Eastern ascetic literature of this nature, written in the fourth and fifth centuries, see especially the *Homiliae Spirituales* attributed to Macarius (Migne, *PG*, 34, 449-820). Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 214ff., on the beginnings of the Hellenistic viewpoint.

11. Origen, *De Principiis*, III, 2 (*ANF*, IV, 332).

12. Cf. *ibid.*

13. Cf. Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 3 (*ANF*, III, 659); Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, XVII, 2, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), x, 116f.; Augustine, *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, I, 12 (*NPNF*, First Series, VI, 15). (This collection will be cited as *NPNF*.)

thereby to 'season and salt him who has the power of spiritual perception.'¹⁴ In view of the complete appropriateness with which God's punishment fitted the crime, it is hardly to be wondered at that the example of Lot's wife became a fast favourite among those who sought to develop the dangers lying in wait for the reckless thinker. As the story had the supreme advantage of unforgettably correlating the spiritual and the corporeal, it was easy to show from it, in Tertullian's words, 'that sins not of *deed* only, but of *will* too, are to be shunned.'¹⁵ It was indeed vital that the lesson be not mistaken. For Christ's remark had surely added a new dimension to the experience of sin: had he not come, not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it? 'In fact, how does the Lord demonstrate Himself as adding a superstructure to the Law, except by interdicting sins of the *will* as well [as other sins]; while He defines not only the man who had actually invaded another's wedlock to be an adulterer, but likewise him who had contaminated [a woman] by the concupiscence of his gaze?'¹⁶ Accordingly, to set before the mind what it is forbidden to perform is in Tertullian's opinion extremely risky; it may lead to the will's approval of the thought, a rash process that certainly deserves censure:

And since the power of the will is such that, even without fully satiating its self-gratification, it stands for a deed; as a deed, therefore, it shall be punished. It is utterly vain to say, 'I *willed*, but yet I *did* not.' Rather you *ought* to carry the thing through *because* you will; or else not to will, because you do not carry it through. But by the confession of your consciousness, you pronounce your own condemnation. For if you eagerly desired a good thing, you would have been anxious to carry it through; in like manner, as you do not carry an *evil* thing through, you ought not to have eagerly desired it. Wherever you take your stand, you are fast bound by guilt; because you have either *willed* evil, or else have not *fulfilled* good.¹⁷

As Tertullian sees it, therefore, the moral life has no place at all for torpor, apathy, or lethargy; it is never supine or negative, but continually struggling, always in jeopardy, perpetually in strain and forever prone to sins of omission as well as commission. Hence his teaching on the culpability of the human mind is absolute and definite: the thought that is evil is *ipso facto* a willed thought, and an act of will is as blameable as a physical act; thus the mind that entertains evil is just as guilty as the body that performs it.¹⁸ And if this doctrine tends to obscure temporarily the possibility that there are infiltrating thoughts, other than willed thoughts, which can be truly designated evil, at least it places the emphasis on the attitude of the thinker, and makes it plain that every man is actually the manager of his mind, if not really the arbiter of its environment.

14. Clement, *Stromata*, II, 14 (*ANF*, II, 361).

15. Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 3 (*ANF*, III, 659).

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.* Cf. Seneca, *Troades*, 291: 'Qui non vetat peccare, cum possit, iubet' (*Seneca's Tragedies*, Loeb ed. [London: Heinemann, 1927], vol. I, p. 144).

18. Cf. Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 3 (*ANF*, III, 659).

Christ's injunction about the lustful heart was obviously an immeasurably potent influence in the lives of the first Christians, and one aspect of its practical effect is apparent in the ancient church's reaction to the theatre of its day. Both Lactantius and Tertullian resolutely set their faces against the shows or spectacles, precisely because they believed that the witnessing of such displays was peculiarly an act of will, no less reprehensible than the immodest participation in them. 'Why,' asks Tertullian in his *De Spectaculis*, '... is it right to look on what it is disgraceful to do? How is it that the things which defile a man in going out of his mouth, are not regarded as doing so when they go in at his eyes and ears – when eyes and ears are the immediate attendants on the spirit – and that can never be pure whose servants-in-waiting are impure?'¹⁹ What made the theatre so insidious was its beguiling dissimulation, its abusive rehearsing of the senses to seduce the soul; consequently, it must not be permitted to man in all his weakness. It was an argument to which the church clung for centuries, and which was to be forcefully restated time and again by the Puritans in their virulent attacks on the stage.²⁰

The boundaries of mind as bailiwick were further defined in the course of the first four centuries by the various heresies that sprang up within the church. If initially Christianity's appeal lay largely in the example of its adherents, a massive appreciation of the faith's tough intellectuality came later through the analyses and clarifications made by those diligent Fathers who had to counter the attacks of Gnostics, Manichaeists and other heretics. At least part of the evidence is the sequel to the work of the Council of Nicaea, convened in 325: Constantine had been primarily concerned with the Arian dispute as a political matter, but the prolongation of the controversy beyond the conclusion of the council, with its progressive comprehension of major issues that alarmingly widened the breach, showed there was infinitely more at stake than ecclesiastical polity.²¹ But respect for the intellectual core of Christianity can be ob-

19. Tertullian, *The Shows*, 17 (*ANF*, III, 87). Cf. also Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 63 (*ANF*, VII, 248f.); Augustine, *Confessions*, VI, 7–8 (*NPNF*, First Series, I, 94f.), on the gladiatorial shows and their effect on his pupil, Alypius.

20. Much of the Puritan aversion to the stage was, of course, based upon a recognizable affinity between drama and liturgy, particularly Anglican liturgy, which was properly regarded as pagan ritual carried into Christianity. The extreme bitterness of William Prynne's attack in *Histriomastix* (1633) is doubtless inspired by his understanding of the religious origin of drama, which he traces in his 'Actus Secundus' to the superstitious worship of pagan gods and goddesses; however, his implacable opposition to visual show, his condemnation of the actors for their 'pompous and stately shows and scenes,' is plainly due to his feeling that such exhibitions are obnoxious sensual sports or incentives to lust.

21. In his famous letter to Alexander and Arius, in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, II, 64–72 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [New York: Christian Literature Company-Scribner's, 1890–1900], I, 515–18), Constantine finds the cause of the dispute 'insignificant,' and suggests the discussion will be merely 'an intellectual exercise.' It ought to be remembered, however, that 'Constantine wrote the letter, not as a theologian, but as an Emperor, which ought in fairness to be reckoned to his credit' (Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. IV [London: Williams & Norgate, 1898], p. 11, n. 3). For contemporary documents, consult J. C. Ayer,

served also in the proliferation of polemical literature that the various debates produced. Undoubtedly Arianism was a virile begetter of the patristic Golden Age, the century of Athanasius, Basil, and Lactantius, which was to culminate in the magisterial work of Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine. Nor is there any question that the church's very continuance greatly hung on the labours of these clear-sighted Fathers, especially Athanasius, who bore the brunt of the fight against Arianism. The real danger of the Arian thrust was its disintegrating zealotry, its bold determination to pluck the heart out of the Trinitarian mystery; for if it were to succeed, and Christ were regarded as not divine, not the uncreate Son of God, co-eternal and co-equal, 'of one substance with the Father,' but simply a created being, then Christianity was as idolatrous as any of the swarming contemporary cults of gods and heroes, and its claim to being the revealed faith was totally invalidated. Clearly, here was a threat that had to be opposed directly. To meet it, the Fathers were constrained to fasten on the aspect of Christ's life that most evidently manifested his uniqueness; accordingly, they took up the doctrine of the virgin birth and elaborated it – not, as traditionally, to offset a docetic view, but rather now to emphasize the Saviour's immaculacy as the incontrovertible sign of his divinity.²²

But reiterated and emphasized as it was, this affirmation of Christ's effulgent superiority had the obverse effect of stressing the vileness of common humanity. Equate sinlessness with the divine, and sin becomes the blush of man's mortality. This orientation was plainly important in moulding the patristic attitude to the evil thought. Quite apart from the doctrine of original sin, which does not in any event receive its definitive statement until a century later in Augustine, although it is actually anticipated here, the constant assumption of the mind's proclivity to corrupt itself inevitably leads to an *ex post facto* acceptance of impurities in even the most impeccable breast. Thus, in Athanasius's moving account of the life of St Anthony, the interest lies, not in the exhibition of an inviolable soul that is predestined to sainthood, but in the portrayal of a heart, continuously vulnerable, that yet maintains its integrity by refusing to surrender all to comfort and the pleasures of the flesh.²³ Given the mind's lack of immunity, it is still well within the creature's capacity to control it; moreover, a person is not to be blamed for being subject to lustful thoughts, but is to win honour for subduing them. This is what Athanasius *A Source Book for Ancient Church History* (New York: Scribner's, 1913), pp. 299ff. On the development of the debate, cf. H. M. Gwatkin, *The Arian Controversy* (London: Longmans, 1908); Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 153–63; Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1959), pp. 106–11.

22. Cf. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 70. The concomitant development of Marian devotion is described in G. A. Wellen, *Theotokos: eine ikonographische Abhandlung über das Gottesmutterbild in frühchristlicher Zeit* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1960), p. 94.

23. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, in *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, tr. E. A. Wallis Budge (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), vol. 1, pp. 9f., memorializes the saint *agonistes*, wrestling against the corrupt thought. Concern with the struggle to subdue the passions is, of course, fundamental to the monastic writers' conception of

believes, and since he compassionately describes how that enviable merit is secured in the case of Anthony, it is neither surprising that his life of the saint was so early popular, nor that it exerted such an enormous influence.²⁴ The same sympathetic note had already been strikingly sounded in Lactantius, who believed that ultimate conquest of the evil thought was the highest reach of the just man, casting him in God's image:

By these steps justice advances to the greatest height. The first step of virtue is to abstain from evil works; the second, to abstain also from evil words; the third, to abstain even from the thoughts of evil things. He who ascends the first step is sufficiently just; he who ascends the second is now of perfect virtue, since he offends neither in deeds nor in conversation; he who ascends the third appears truly to have attained the likeness of God. For it is almost beyond the measure of man not even to admit to the thought that which is either bad in action or improper in speech.²⁵

So universal is the mind's frailty that even the just man, who can readily refrain from every unjust work, sometimes falls an easy prey to the evil remark or the lust of silent thought. However, although it is in the nature of his predicament that man cannot be stainless, the faults of the flesh can be negated by the continual application of the just person's liberality. 'For it is the single work of a man who is wise, and just, and worthy of life, to lay out his riches on justice alone; for assuredly he who is without this, although he should surpass Croesus or Crassus in riches, is to be esteemed as poor, as naked, as a beggar.'²⁶ For Lactantius it is the human condition alone that affords the opportunity to display this bounty; indeed, the mind's propensity to think evilly is but part of the grand design of God's convenience for enabling his creatures to deal justly. The admixture of good and evil in the world is therefore necessary for the cultivation of virtue:

Where, therefore, there are no vices, there is no place even for virtue, as there is no place for victory where there is no adversary. And so it comes to pass that there can be no good in this life without evil ... God placed the subject-matter

apotheosis or deification. Evagrius Ponticus, who profoundly influenced Maximus the Confessor and Cassian, is most emphatic on the spiritual significance of the 'active' life, whose goal is apathy or extinction of the passions; his treatise, *De octo vitiosis cogitationibus*, on the eight divisions of evil thoughts (Migne, *PG*, 40, 1271-8) shows clearly that the soul's progress to perfection involves much more than the encratite life of the coenobium. Cf. Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1968), especially pp. 94ff. See also Eugénie Strong, *Apotheosis and After Life* (New York: Dutton, 1916), and on the related topic of ascetic celibacy, Henry C. Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (London: Watts, 1932).

24. On the general influence of the *Life of St. Anthony*, see James Marshall Campbell, *The Greek Fathers* (New York: Longmans, 1929), pp. 56-8. The work evoked a response from Augustine that culminated in his conversion; cf. *Confessions*, viii, 6-8 (*NPNF*, First Series, I, 121-5).

25. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, vi, 13 (*ANF*, vii, 178),

26. *Ibid.* (179).

of vices in the affections, and that of virtue in vices. For assuredly virtue will have no existence, or not be in exercise, if those things are wanting by which its power is either shown or exists.²⁷

Such a theodicy is one which Milton can turn to profitable account, especially in *Areopagitica*; indeed, he actually employs the metaphor of the garden which Lactantius uses later to assert the natural fruitfulness of the mind's powers.²⁸ Yet the inspiration, while hardly fortuitous, is scarcely remarkable, in so far as the thought of both writers is here quite consonant: what evil exists in the mind is there for the purpose of letting the will perform its function freely, and on the outcome alone depends the award of praise or blame.

One inherent difficulty, however, is that this issue may never be concreted in physical action – an eventuality (not unnoticed earlier by Tertullian) which seriously disturbs Chrysostom. Towards the close of the fourth century the Demosthenes of the day crystallized patristic teaching on the evil thought in his persuasive *Homilies on the Gospel of St Matthew*, where he examines the problem of the individual who may claim that he only looked and desired, but did no evil. His answer is a simple appeal to human experience. Admitting the possibility that one may look once, twice, even thrice, and yet abstain from lust, he asserts that the man who continually does this merely kindles the furnace of his nature, and will assuredly be taken in the end. Such a person is patently guilty before the act or even without its commission, because his trespass consists in the attempt to aspire beyond his station, which is defined by the tendencies of his own nature; his sin is one of pride or self-indulgence. For this reason the man to be condemned is he 'who gathers in lust unto himself; he who, when nothing compels him, brings in the wild beast upon his thoughts when they are calm.'²⁹ Nevertheless, despite the grave danger of bidding the tranquil mind farewell, Chrysostom is happy to acknowledge that there need be nothing wrong with the keen appreciation of woman; and to vindicate that agreeable pursuit, the sprightly exercise of an aesthetic docimasy, he advances the utter precision of Christ's remark, showing by the familiar distinction that he did not prohibit our looking, but only 'that seeing which is accompanied by desire.'³⁰ To be on the safe side, however, he advocates that if a man wishes 'to look and find pleasure,' he really ought to regard his own wife and love her continually, as there is certainly no law forbidding that. In Chrysostom's view, the treacherous nature of spiritual evil is that it often fails to manifest itself materially; it may creep into the fold of the heart and take possession, sometimes without our being fully alive to the happening. Still, there remains a check: the one thing needful is the steadfast mind, against

27. *Ibid.* (180).

28. Cf. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. II, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 514. Milton's debt to Lactantius is discussed in Kathleen Ellen Hartwell, *Lactantius and Milton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929).

29. Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, xvii, 2 (*NPNF*, First Series, x, 116).

30. *Ibid.* (117).

which evil cannot prevail. This becomes the theme of another work, *A Treatise to prove that no one can harm the man who does not injure himself*, in which he analyzes the genesis of Adam's sin to refute the suggestion that the Tempter be mainly taxed for the crime:

What then? some one will say, did he not inflict injury on Adam, and upset him, and cast him out of paradise? No: he did it not, but the cause was the listlessness of him who was injured, and his want of temperance and vigilance. For he who applied such powerful and manifold devices and yet was not able to subdue Job, how could he by inferior means have mastered Adam, had not Adam betrayed himself through his own listlessness?³¹

Just as Lot's wife is for many of the early Fathers the symbol of the yielding soul, so Job is for Chrysostom and others a great type of the unconquerable mind. He is the warrior that every man should wish to be, for by his resoluteness he shut the gates of his beleaguered mind and remained firm in the faith. He is also the emblem of the second Adam, who likewise resisted the corrupting thought and stayed blameless. His example proves to Chrysostom that demons do not govern human affairs, but that man has power within himself to dismiss the devil, if only his intent be right. Examine the cause of every sin, he says, 'and thou wilt find that it is none other than thyself who has sinned. Everywhere there is need of a good intention.'³²

While holding this as true, not all the Fathers agreed with the emphasis. It was all very well to regard Job as the type of Christ, but there was a difference. For although Christ had triumphed in his human essence, the success was yet kenotic, and was not that nature originally unadulterated, the *speculum sine macula*? What the analogy obscured was the plain fact of Job's proneness to yield, his tendency to complain and to turn aside from his righteous purposes. As we have seen, the scrutiny of Christ's divine excellence, to which the fourth-century Fathers were driven by the exigencies of the Arian controversy, threw into high imagistic relief the wretched sinfulness of ordinary man; thereby the mind's susceptibility to the wrong idea was accepted in patristic belief, which condemned or commended as the thought was approved or rejected. But this situation actually germinated its own dissolution. If the heart of man were kith and kind to sin, so that willy-nilly the evil thought often lodged therein, its activity in promoting good was ineffectual, and it was therefore constantly to be blamed for its content. In this way the ground prepared by Athanasius and others produced in Augustine, a century later, the supreme formulation of the doctrine of the fall and original sin. Arguing against Pelagius, Augustine ascribes universal sinfulness to hereditary transmission of sin by natural generation: assuredly we come into the world, not trailing clouds of glory, but wrapped in dank miasmas, which God's grace alone is efficacious to

31. Chrysostom, *That no one can harm the man who does not injure himself*, 4 (NPNF, First Series, ix, 273).

32. Chrysostom, *Three Homilies concerning the Power of Demons*, III, 2 (NPNF, First Series, ix, 192); cf. *ibid.*, I, 1ff. (178ff.).

dispel. This dismal malordering of human nature is the effect of Adam's lapse, and it shows itself in an enervation of the will, which can no longer move freely, but is now bent towards evil. Since so inclined we cannot properly choose without Heaven's stooping to aid us with a gobbet of grace, the laurel is not wholly ours when we win; and not only do we seldom merit praise, but we stand penalized by the ineluctable guilt that is our birthright. In this view, sin does not wait upon the voluntary consent, but exists first by right of the mind's original and gross enslavement.

As might be expected, elaboration of this sombre tenet profoundly affected the concept of human liability for the evil thought. Despite the contradiction involved in the notion of original guilt (for the term 'guilt' is *per se* a personal one, not transferable, and hence predicable only of an individual's volitional act), the doctrine was readily acceptable, chiefly because it was convenient.³³ For who, after all, could decide when lively interest had passed into lust? As soon as the imperfection of human nature was remembered, it became obvious that the lame mind was unfit to judge. Even before Augustine, in fact, it seemed reasonable to infer that the inchoate state of man's soul was itself a sin, hence that even the involuntary entry of wrong thoughts was culpable, and that the deliberating election of evil merely piled Pelion upon Ossa. 'I know that concupiscence is a sin, and by the fact of this knowledge, sins are heaped up,' says Ambrose.³⁴ Indeed, reflecting on the sorry mess of the human constitution, one may well marvel that provision yet remains for the voluntary act, no matter how feckless that act continually proves to be. Ambrose graphically describes the process by which the will is overwhelmed by the concupiscent assault:

But what is worse, frequently the enticement of earthly lusts creeps in and the outflowing of vanities seizes the mind, so that the very thing you want to avoid you ponder and turn over in your mind. To guard against this is difficult for a man; to avoid it altogether is impossible. For our heart is not within our control, and our thoughts suddenly gush forth and confound mind and reason, pulling us in directions other than we purposed, calling us back to secular business, fixing our gaze upon worldly affairs, pressing evil desires upon us, saturating us with blandishments ... For who among so many passions of this body, among so many temptations of this world, can dwell securely and undefiled? The eye looks and the mind's perception is distorted; the ear hears and resolution is shattered; the act of smelling hinders thought; the mouth tastes and brings back reproach; our secret place is touched and lit up with fire.³⁵

33. Cf. the psychopathological view of guilt in Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1936), and 'The Problem of Sin and Salvation in the Light of Psychopathology,' *Journal of Religion*, 22 (1942), 288-301.

34. Ambrose, *De Jacob et Vita Beata*, I, 4 (Migne, *PL*, 14, 604): 'Cognovi concupiscentiam esse peccatum; et hac occasione cognitionis, peccati aera cumulata sunt.'

35. Ambrose, *De Fuga Saeculi*, 1 (Migne, *PL*, 14, 569f.): 'Sed quod pejus est, frequenter irrepit terrenarum illecebra cupiditatum, et vanitatum offusio mentem occupat; ut quod studeas vitare, hoc cogites, animoque volvas: quod cavere difficile est homini, exuere autem impossibile ... Non enim in potestate nostra est cor nostrum, et nostrae

So momentous enterprises turn awry, our best efforts are thwarted, our mind grins like a dog and prepares itself to run about the city. Yet Ambrose is far from yielding up all moral questions in despair; on the contrary, he dares to go so far as to claim that this hereditary amenability to sin need not trouble us unduly, if our wills be stayed on virtue.³⁶

According to Augustine, however, it was precisely a softening of this necessary durable steadfastness that brought about the first human sin. In *The City of God*, he argues that Adam's evil act would never have been done, had not an evil will preceded: Adam, he tells us, fell through pride, which consisted in his spontaneous falling away from the supreme and unchangeable good by elevating himself and living for himself; and therefore, a 'wicked desire ... already secretly existed in him, and the open sin was but its consequence.'³⁷ As soon as the vile idea entered Adam's head, he was in a state of sin, no longer innocent. But Augustine is conscious of the particular problem that had worried Chrysostom, namely the practical difficulty of weighing blame where none is visible, and he notes how advantageous it is that the sin of our first parents should have been extroverted, so that by the commission of an 'evident and indubitable transgression' they might learn to recognize ruin in themselves: 'And I make bold to say that it is useful for the proud to fall into an open and indisputable transgression, and so displease themselves, as already, by pleasing themselves, they had fallen.'³⁸ Now it is perfectly true that this analysis refers to a pristine state of human excellence which sin has not hitherto invaded: Adam's faculties are quite unharmed, his will is free, he is under no compulsion to act as he does; indeed, as related by Augustine, the episode authenticates the belief he has earlier expressed: 'It is not nature, therefore, but vice, which is contrary to God.'³⁹ But what of the fallen state? Logically, it might seem to follow that with the impairment of our nature we are relieved of responsibility for the sway of vice. Augustine simply denies this, pointing out that the business enacted in Genesis is a continuing transaction, and that the actuality of human liability validated in and by the fall is a timeless conception. When, therefore, he comes to discuss sin's meaning for fallen mankind in his treatise, *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, he treats the fall story symbolically:

There are three things which go to complete sin: the suggestion of, the taking pleasure in, and the consenting to. Suggestion takes place either by means of memory, or by means of the bodily senses, when we see, or hear, or smell, or

cogitationes, quae improvise effusae mentem animumque confundunt, atque alio trahunt quam tu proposueris, ad saecularia revocant, mundana in[s]erunt, voluptuaria ingerunt, illecebrosa intexunt ... Nam quis inter tot passiones hujus corporis, inter tot illecebras huius saeculi tutum atque intemeratum servare potest vestigium? Respexit oculus et sensum mentis avertit: audivit auris, et intentionem inflexit: inhalavit odor, et cogitationem impedit: os libavit, et crimen retulit, tactus contigit, et ignem adolevit.'

36. Cf. Ambrose, *In Psalmum XLVIII Enarratio* (Migne, *PL*, 14, 1159).

37. Augustine, *The City of God*, xiv, 13 (*NPNF*, First Series, II, 274).

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, XII, 3f. (227).

taste, or touch anything. And if it gives us pleasure to enjoy this, this pleasure, if illicit, must be restrained. Just as when we are fasting, and on seeing food the appetite of the palate is stirred up, this does not happen without pleasure; but we do not consent to this liking, and we repress it by the right of reason, which has the supremacy. But if consent shall take place, the sin will be complete, known to God in our heart, although it may not become known to men by deed. There are, then, these steps: the suggestion is made, as it were, by a serpent, that is to say, by a fleeting and rapid, *i.e.* a temporary movement of bodies: for if there are also any such images moving about in the soul, they have been derived from without from the body; and if any hidden sensation of the body besides those five senses touches the soul, that also is temporary and fleeting; and therefore the more clandestinely it glides in, so as to affect the process of thinking, the more aptly it is compared to a serpent. Hence these three stages ... resemble that transaction which is described in Genesis, so that the suggestion and a certain measure of suasion is put forth, as it were, by the serpent; but the taking pleasure in it lies in the carnal appetite, as it were in Eve; and the consent lies in the reason, as it were in the man: and those things having been acted through, the man is driven forth, as it were, from paradise, *i.e.* from the most blessed light of righteousness, into death ... just as we arrive at sin by three stages – suggestion, pleasure, consent – so of sin itself there are three varieties – in heart, in deed, in habit – as it were, three deaths: one, as it were, in the house, *i.e.* when we consent to lust in the heart; a second now, as it were, brought forth outside the gate, when assent goes forward into action; a third, when the mind is pressed down by the force of bad habit, as if by a mound of earth, and is now, as it were, rotting in the sepulchre.⁴⁰

The extract has been quoted at length, because it exposes to a remarkable degree the high place Augustine assigns to the element of consent, which he holds to be essential to the completion of any sin, yet which cannot in guilty humanity be other than involuntary, since man of himself is incapable of choosing aright. Augustine grants the illusion of freedom, but in fact delineates an objective ethic that, however rich, leaves little room for personal moral discrimination; and elsewhere he makes this doctrine more explicit in the reduction of the causes of sin to ignorance and weakness, a division which in practice leads to the classification of sins as either mortal or venial.⁴¹ That the unaided human mind can repudiate its own rotten thoughts is thus ultimately for Augustine a flat contradiction.

It is odd, from one point of view, that this should be so. For, as the *Confessions* reveals, the trend of Augustine's thought is an awakening to the consciousness of truth through rigorous application of his personal will. Reflecting on the nature of time, Augustine comes to realize that the insubstantial

40. Augustine, *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, I, 12 (NPNF, First Series, VI, 15f.). See also Augustine on the Stoic and Peripatetic opinion about 'perturbations of mind,' in *City of God*, IX, 4–5 (NPNF, First Series, II, 167–69).

41. Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 81 (NPNF, First Series, III, 264): 'There are two causes of sin, ignorance and weakness; and we need divine help to overcome both' (chapter heading).

mind is neither cribbed nor cabined by time or space, but thus unconfined can with instantaneous bound overleap all bounds of the material present, reaching back through the past by memory, and stretching forward into the future by expectation: 'perchance it might be fitly said, "There are three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future."' These three do somehow exist in the soul, and otherwise I see them not: present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation.⁴² He is now led to see that man's most distinctive feature, the hallmark of his God-image, is the possession of an imaginative faculty that requires for its proper function the use of both reason and will. Through the combined operation of these twin abilities, man can intuitively apprehend the universe as divinely controlled; but the prerequisite to this wished consummation is that he must choose to use his capacity.⁴³ So long as he does, he is acting in obedience to the divine will; whenever he does not, he is violating God's purpose. Since Augustine found in this natural process the clue to his own miraculous salvation, he is persuaded (with a classically Romantic ardour attending the epiphany) of its efficacy for others. Although, therefore, he later insists on the need of grace properly to align the will, he is early aware of the mind's unique virtue to affect itself, and sometimes affirms it within the most seemingly antinomical contexts.⁴⁴

Whatever the difficulties of the Augustinian position, it is certain that much of its strength lay in the practical acceptance of the debilitated mind's inability to carry out God's will. Consequently, from now on it could hardly be other than explicit that man's evil thoughts, uncharitable, selfish, and sensual, were evidence of a sick soul. Incapacitated as the heart thus was, it was futile to plead that an upright motive or a good intention might lie behind the performance of a wrong action; indeed, there were certain acts, such as debauchery and adultery, which by their very nature could not be conceived or formulated by a mind righteously inclined. An age later, Suarez was to genuflect before this latter aspect of Augustinian morality, advancing as an established rule, in his influential *De Legibus, ac Deo Legislatore*, that some evils are proscribed merely because they are wrong without regard to the quality of the heart's permissiveness or the extent of the mind's sanction.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Augustine's opinion of man's inherited disease and of his responsibility for the nastiness

42. Augustine, *Confessions*, xi, 20 (NPNF, First Series, I, 70).

43. On the place of free-will in the concept of imagination, see the discussion of Coleridge's 'Mechanical Fancy and Organic Imagination' in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), pp. 167-77.

44. For instance, in *The City of God*, xiv, 27 (NPNF, First Series, II, 282), he uses a formally logical argument to prove that God's foreknowledge does not preclude human freedom. Given that God foreknows all, He did not foreknow nothing; since He therefore foreknew what would be in the power of the human will, there must be something in the power of the human will. The point is mentioned in John Paul Pritchard, 'The Influence of the Fathers upon Milton, with especial reference to Augustine' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cornell University, 1925), pp. 70f.

45. Cf. *Selections from Three Works of Francisco Suárez, S.J.*, ed. G. L. Williams et al. (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), vol. II, p. 197.

within was solidified and broadcast through the teaching of the Scholastics, whose fashioning of the psychological process was largely derived from the fifth-century Father's account of the trinity in man.⁴⁶ From its peculiar perspective the scholastic eye saw the soul's faculties as a triad of rational, sensible, and vegetative powers, originally harmonious, but now grossly incapable of adequately comporting themselves without the remedial additive of grace – a picture of the natural mind that at first glance seems altogether too exclusive to allow for the innocent thought of evil as a viable concept. But, in its devoted pursuit of the rational, scholasticism concentrated much energy on one aspect that actually implied acceptance of the uncorrupting thought. As Frances Yates has shown, with particular reference to Albertus and Thomas, the Scholastics recommended the practice of 'artificial memory,' which involved, among other things, 'the imprinting on memory of images of virtues and vices as "memorial notes" to aid us in reaching Heaven and avoiding Hell.'⁴⁷ Since the exercise was a part of prudence, it plainly helped to bring out the full significance of moral conflict and moved man to appreciate the chance given by his weakness. And upon that issue the possibility of innocuous evil might be freely acknowledged, and the individual come to see that the wrongful thought was but a discreet feature of reason's training to restore its fitness to separate true from false.

In the twelfth century an awareness of this providential utility is happily present in the moral thought of Abelard. Drawn into the contemporary logicians' debate on universals, Abelard championed the nominalist cause, arguing against the realists that only the particular is real and that the universal is simply a name for a mental image or concept. The stance had a decisive effect on his ethical judgment. Since 'the particular thing is the reality, and individual man is the human centre of moral being and activity,' he claims that 'man is a free individual, rationally and morally autonomous, untrammelled by an inherent relation to general humanity,' a view that naturally controls the current of his thought on the limits of human accountability.⁴⁸ If the early collection of apparent scriptural and patristic inconsistency and contradiction, *Sic et Non*, first hints at his inability to accept that man shares a burden of guilt for Adam's sin, the *Ethica* (significantly sub-titled *Scite Teipsum*) makes the point abundantly clear.⁴⁹ Although man is free of Adam's guilt, he nevertheless shares in the punishment of the original sin; that is why his nature is frail

46. Cf. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, x, 17–18; xv, 8–12; in *Augustine: Later Works*, tr. and ed. John Burnaby (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 87–9, 134–40; Bernard, *Tractatus de interiori Domo, seu de Conscientia aedificanda*, 38 (Migne, *PL*, 184, 546f.; Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, II, 35 (Migne, *PL*, 192, 737).

47. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 60f.

48. *Abelard's Ethics*, tr. and ed. J. Ramsay McCallum (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1935), p. 12.

49. See the discussion in *Sic et Non*, 116 (Migne, *PL*, 178, 1516): 'Quod peccata patrum reddantur in filios, et contra.' Cf. *Abelard's Christian Theology*, tr. and ed. J. Ramsay McCallum (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), p. 101.

and he is prone to sin. But this tendency exists only to be mastered. Not only may the person seek divine aid to order his nature, but the sole guilt he can incur rests upon a wholly avoidable acquiescence in the heart's vicious urges. Abelard develops this belief in the context of Augustine's distinction of the three stages of sin:

When, therefore, temptation is said to proceed through three stages, suggestion, delight, consent, it must be understood that, like our first parents, we are frequently led along these three paths to the commission of sin. The devil's persuasion comes *first* promising from the taste of the forbidden fruit immortality. Delight follows. When the woman sees the beautiful tree, and perceives that the fruit is good, her appetite is whetted by the anticipated pleasure of tasting. This desire she ought to have repressed, so as to obey God's command. But in consenting to it, she was drawn *secondly* into sin. By penitence she should have put right this fault, and obtained pardon. Instead, she *thirdly* consummated the sin by the deed. Eve thus passed through the three stages to the commission of sin.

By the same avenues we also arrive not at sin, but at the action of sin, namely the doing of an unseemly deed through the suggestion or prompting of something within us. If we already know that such a deed will be pleasant, our imagination is held by anticipatory delight and we are tempted thereby in thought. So long as we give consent to such delight, we sin. Lastly, we pass to the third stage, and actually commit the sin.

It is agreed by some thinkers that carnal suggestion, even though the person causing the suggestion be not present, should be included under sinful suggestion. For example, a man having seen a woman falls into a sensual desire of her. But it seems that this kind of suggestion should simply be called delight. This delight, and other delights of the like kind, arise naturally and, as we said above, they are not sinful.⁵⁰

It is surely ironic that Abelard should exploit this mighty Augustinian concept to enunciate a principle that runs counter to teaching about the evil thought derived from the doctrine of original sin. Whereas that opinion holds the mere desire of concupiscence to be a sin, Abelard regards as blameworthy only the consent to the desire. His morality is consequently subjective and particular, where the earlier is objective and universal; in his view, the clue to sin is the agent's intention rather than his moral corruption, since 'what is sinning against anyone but the putting into effect of the evil intention?'⁵¹ The rightness or wrongness of any act is therefore not to be estimated from the deed itself, but is relative to the motive in the doer's mind, for 'God considers not the action, but the spirit of the action'; in apodictic proof of which Abelard instances the case of two men who hang a guilty person, the one doing it from a love of justice, hence dealing rightly, the other moved by resentment for a former injury, hence acting wrongly. 'The action of hanging is the same. Both men do what is good and what justice demands. Yet the

50. *Abailard's Ethics*, pp. 34f.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

diversity of their intentions causes the same deed to be done from different motives, in the one case good, in the other bad.⁵² While conceding that the term 'sin' can be variously interpreted, Abelard still believes that 'properly speaking, sin is the actual *contempt of God*, or *consent to evil*,' and so long as a man withholds his approval of the wrong thought, refusing thus to spit in God's face, so long is he on that account blameless.⁵³

Political considerations aside, it was perhaps inevitable that Abelard's views should produce widespread reaction in the church and bring about his condemnation by the Council of Sens in 1141. The categories of medieval thought were too hard, the faith in original sin too encrusted with layer upon layer of teaching about mortal weakness, for any notion of man's ethical self-control to be favourably received, far less one that ostensibly condoned the doing of the wrong thing for the right reason. Most doctors of the church were content to ratify what centuries of tradition asserted; while admitting the importance of the will in winning virtue, they were disposed in practice to consider it deceptive, agreeing with Bernard of Clairvaux that 'thy will is thy Eve.'⁵⁴ Any theory, therefore, which propounded the tiniest portion of moral independence ran the risk of being caught in the snare of its own major premise; and it was not until a time much later, perhaps indeed not until the age of the Enlightenment, that Abelard's ideas were fully vindicated.

Nevertheless, Abelard's thought may have had a not inconsiderable effect on the course of medieval moral theology. As Ramsay McCallum has pointed out, the Abelardian discrimination of deed and intention is apparently adopted by Thomas 'in treating of human action in its physical and moral implication' in the *Summa Theologica*: 'Every object or end has a goodness or badness which is merely natural and may not imply a moral goodness or badness.'⁵⁵ The same rule, moreover, is evident in 'the practical test of "deliberateness" in judging the degree of guilt in mortal sin.'⁵⁶ But this influence on the development of Thomistic thought is fatally easy to exaggerate, and it remains an open question whether the Angelic Doctor's evaluation of human motive is directly attributable to Abelard. Manifestly of greater significance for Aquinas are classical rhetoric and logic, for these disciplines lead him to deal at first hand with the impact of thought and motive on action. Indeed, it has been argued that, although the *Sic et Non* improved expository technique by giving rules for the dialectical reconciliation of discordants, Abelard's contribution to scholastic method, while decisive, actually proved vastly inferior to that

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 31f. The distinctions involved in 'motive,' 'intention,' and 'mental cause' are analysed in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2d ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966). Cf. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

53. *Abailard's Ethics*, p. 49.

54. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Of Conversion*, tr. Watkin Williams (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1938), p. 19. Bernard's *Letter* 190 to Innocent II was partly responsible for the official condemnation of Abelard.

55. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, 18, 8, and 2, as translated in *Abailard's Ethics*, p. 5. McCallum's valuable introduction also notes the impact of Abelardian thought on the twelfth-century debate on penance and the confessional.

56. *Abailard's Ethics*, p. 35.

yielded by the discovery of the principal writings of Aristotle, particularly the *Metaphysics*.⁵⁷ Now certainly Thomas's interest in Aristotle is constant. Not only does he write a commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but he also makes the fullest use of Aristotelian concepts and terminology to achieve a Christian synthesis of morality: his norm of ethical conduct becomes the Golden Mean, and Aristotelian views on habit are applied to Christian teaching on virtues and grace. Apart from the incorporation of these recognizable elements, there is the pervasive and frequently imponderable assimilation of method, which comes out, for example, in his discussion of whether the received enumeration of circumstances is a fit and proper one:

Tully, in his *Rhetoric* lists seven circumstances, which are contained in this verse: *who, what, where, by what helps, why, how, when*. For we have to consider in acts, who did it, by what aids or means he did it, what he did, where he did it, why he did it, how he did it and when he did it. But Aristotle, in Book III of the *Ethics* adds another, namely, *about what*, which is brought in by Tully under *what*.⁵⁸

As a logician, Thomas is convinced that it is well within the province of the theologian to take account of the circumstances of human acts; consequently, he is always concerned with the amount of deliberation associated with sin.⁵⁹ His definition of the evil thought is a 'sin of lingering delectation' (*peccatum morosae delectationis*), and he holds this description as valid, not from the length of time involved, but from the fact that it is a deliberating reason that lingers:

Delectation is said to be lingering, not from the length of time it remains, but from the fact that the deliberating reason stays about it, and still does not reject it, holding to and revolving with pleasure what ought to have been thrust out as soon as it reached the mind, as Augustine says, *XII de Trin.*⁶⁰

Reason can fail the creature in two ways: first, it can call forth unlawful passions, as when a person deliberately stirs himself to anger or concupiscence; and second, it can neglect to suppress an illicit emotion and cast it out. It is in this latter sense that the 'sin of lingering delectation' may be said to exist in the reason.⁶¹ Actually reason consents to the offence by its refusal to impede it, and this failure renders it guilty, whether it thinks of the eternal law or not.

57. Cf. Martin Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode* (Freiburg: Herder, 1909-11), vol. II, pp. 219f.; Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 61.

58. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, 7, 3: 'Tullius, in sua *Rhetorica*, assignat septem circumstantias, quae hoc versu continentur: *Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando*. Considerandum est enim in actibus quis fecit, quibus auxiliis vel instrumentis fecerit, quid fecerit, ubi fecerit, cur fecerit, quomodo fecerit, et quando fecerit. Sed Aristoteles, in III *Ethic.*, addit aliam, scilicet *circa quid*, quae a Tullio comprehenditur sub *quid*.'

59. Cf. *ibid.*, Ia-IIae, 7, 2.

60. *Ibid.*, Ia-IIae, 74, 6, ad 3: '... delectatio dicitur morosa non ex mora temporis; sed ex eo quod ratio deliberans circa eam immoratur, nec tamen repellit, *tenens et volvens libenter quae statim ut attigerunt animum, respice debuerunt*, ut Augustinus dicit, *XII de Trin.*'

61. Cf. *ibid.*, *sed contra*.

'For when it does consider God's law, it actually scorns it; when in fact it does not think of it, it neglects it by omission.'⁶² Thomas, then, allows in his ethic for the mind's active disavowal of its obnoxious content, a concession to the divine image that seems purely reasonable in view of his higher belief that God in his omniscience necessarily encompasses evil as well as good; but, knowing human nature, he insists that reason is most likely to be deluded, to play with fantastic fires, dancing in the light of a will-o'-the-wisp, dallying with a chimera, and thus ultimately to fail by embracing the evil thought as its own.⁶³ Reason, in short, is prone to be moved and guided by self-love, which Thomas, following Augustine, regards as the genesis of all sin, disrupting the harmony of God's city and raising the chaos of Babylon.⁶⁴

Since they knew well the two cities, all the patristic writers could have agreed with this verdict, despite their differences. As we have seen, the Fathers admitted in practice the notion of the uncorrupting thought of evil, whatever their theoretical opinions; yet, grimly aware of the grave limitations of the fallen heart, they constantly strove to impress the need for continual alertness, and were inclined to feel that the mind enslaved in a Babylonish captivity had earlier become the dungeon of itself, and was for that reason guilty. As the peculiar difficulty lay in deciding at what point the thought of evil actually became sinful, most played safe by condemning the thought absolutely. The history of the idea is thus linked with the shifting concept of human freedom and responsibility. During the course of the first four centuries, historical circumstances compelled the church to stress the individual's answerability; thus the fate of his soul, perhaps even that of the church itself, hung on the quality of his thoughts and awaited the outcome of the choice he had to make. With Augustine's formulation of the doctrine of original sin, the emphasis changed to man's inadequacy and his total inability to choose properly by himself; man's impotence rendering him culpable, concupiscence was the essence of his nature and every thought of evil became sicklied o'er with mechanical assent. In the twelfth century Abelard acutely reversed this standard, maintaining that the person as the centre of activity is morally autonomous, and that what incriminates is not the thought of corruption, but the heart's permission of it. A century later, Thomas Aquinas employed the closed fist of Aristotelian logic to codify an ethic that included both the subjective and objective elements of morality and insisted on the mind's arbitrary rejection of evil, while remaining sceptical about its capability to do so.

What disparity, then, exists between the Fathers' views on the evil thought and the application of their beliefs is in reality no more than the reaction of the normal finite mind before the awesome contradiction of human freedom

62. *Ibid.*, Ia-IIae, 74, 7, ad 2: 'Cum enim cogitat de lege Dei, actu eam contemnit: cum vero non cogitat, eam negligit per modum omissionis cuiusdam.'

63. On the idea of evil in God's mind, cf. *ibid.*, Ia, 14, 10. (Milton's 'God' in the motto from *Paradise Lost* quoted above [v, 117-19] is richly ambiguous, though critical opinion inclines to its denoting 'angel,' as elsewhere in *Paradise Lost* and often in Renaissance literature generally.)

64. Cf. *ibid.*, Ia-IIae, 77, 4.

and compulsion. But supremely consistent in every sphere of the Fathers' thinking, and the sheet-anchor of their practice, is the belief that man has no security from temptation in this life. 'As long as we live in this world,' says Thomas à Kempis, 'we cannot be fully without temptation, for, as Job says, the life of man upon earth is a warfare.'⁶⁵ Since that was so, the main requirement was to fix the soul on God; temptation could do no harm to the mind thus secured, but could plainly show what virtue it contained. This idea, at least as old as Clement and Origen, might modify the attitude to the evil thought, finding in such corruption the seed of good; nor was it overlooked in the turmoil of the Reformation and its immediate aftermath, when the whole problem was examined afresh and Milton's opinion on it further authoritatively informed.

65. *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 13.