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The Concept Of Sin



Synopsis

In ordinary conversation, including among the "educated", the word "sin" rarely gets mentioned except when one is trying to be coy or facetious. As Thomas Mann once said, "sin" is nowadays "an amusing word used only when one is trying to get a laugh". But this small work will interpret sin in its true -- that is, serious -- meaning. What will emerge from its analysis is the discovery that the concept of sin can still serve to unlock the mystery of existence, at least for a thinking that wants to press down to the very foundations. Needless to say, such an effort will require a kind of "mining energy" of an archeologist of ideas who knows how to recover what was once known (or at least suspected) from time immemorial but has now been forgotten. But Josef Pieper does more than bring to bear on this issue his famous powers of excavation; he also makes meaningful the concept of sin to the ways of thinking and speaking of our time. Readers of his work already know Pieper as an extraordinarily fitting master in this art of making "the wisdom of the ages" a living reality today. And in this work he brings Plato, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas into a living dialogue with T. S. Eliot, Andre Gide, even with Jean-Paul Sartre. As he shows in this powerful work, none of these writers leaves any doubt that the fact of sin is central: It is the willful denial of one's own life-ground, a denial that alone rightly bears the name of "sin". Paradoxically, this reality is both willed and yet also pre-given, that is, both adventitious and yet somehow innate to our existence -- a paradox which, next to the mystery of existence itself, is the most impenetrable mystery of all.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: German --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This is an slim book by the great German Thomistic philosopher Josef Pieper as translated by Father Edward Oakes. Oakes' explanation of how he manages to go from noun heavy but littered with "digestif" connectives German to English is very interesting. Oakes also acknowledges that he has added a quote from Milton's Paradise Lost, which probably exceeds his brief as translator, but doesn't intrude all that much into Pieper's text. Pieper offers a Thomistic meditation on sin. He starts with the observation that the concept of sin has become a thing to joke about, rather than a serious matter of existence. And, yet, sin is correlated with guilt ("man simultaneously infringes against the divinely established norm by, in Hartmann's words, becoming guilty "before the forum of his own conscience and of his values. According to the unclouded testimony of human tradition, this is precisely what constitutes the essence of "sin.") (p. 15.) Sin is a human act that "misses the mark," but the "mark" is not established by man. Every sin is a willed and intentional missing of the mark. (p. 41.) Every sin is contrary to reason and nature. (p. 35.) "Nature" does not mean - as so many people think - "what animals do," but human nature. Pieper observes: >>> In other word's man's nature can virtually be identified with his creaturely status: his being a creature - his coming into the world without his consent - defines his innermost essence. Everything, therefore, that man can do as a self-aware, consciously deciding essence is based on, and necessarily already presupposed by, what he is by nature. And here "nature" means not just the earliest and first endowment (nature in the sense of "by birth") but also the permanent norm. > And even if this judgment of conscience, objectively considered, is in fact not the best, even then it still obligates us for so long as there is no other higher authority [Instanz] to speak against it. Even if I am determined to direct all my decisions expressly according to the will of God, it is still my knowledge and the judgment of my conscience in which alone the will of God comes into view for me. And "if reason erroneously (errans) says something is God's command, then the demand of reason can no more be disregarded than can God's command." "Every act of the will is simply and always wrong insofar as it does not agree with reason - whether this be in error or not."

It is unclear whether it is the German or the English translation that is at fault here, but if you are interested in reading Pieper, you may want to start somewhere else. Pieper is someone I enjoy immensely. He is very readable, is good at making concepts easy to digest, and tends to be very accessible for some who wants to get their feet wet in Thomistic philosophy. This volume was the opposite in every respect. The translator's introduction would lead the reader to believe that he a

number of liberties in translating. It is unclear whether the translator committed sabotage, but the English is cumbersome and many of the sentences go on for several lines. It takes the skill of an investigative journalist and logistician to decipher some of the passages. I have enjoyed other works by Pieper translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Sister Mary Francis McCarty, and Lothar Krauth. Two personal favorites are LIESURE THE BASIS OF CULTURE and HAPPINESS AND CONTEMPLATION.

As usual Pieper delivers some keen and penetrating insights into the nature of sin. However, I was disappointed upon finishing it because it raised questions for me that weren't answered or it didn't directly address the questions that originally motivated to read the book in the first place. Reading Pieper is always a learning experience for me - I just wish this book were twice as long as it is.

That the reality of sin and its effects is not solely a Christian idea is one of Pieper's key points in this book. He draws heavily from the ancient Greeks, as well as from the East, and from modern authors, who all illustrate how the concept of sin, and even the distinction between mortal and venial sin, is something which is found throughout human experience. He develops these concepts, and furthermore touches on specifically Christian elements to the understanding of sin and redemption. However, this book provides many insightful approaches to pondering the reality of sin.

A bit overly abstruse, and seems to take pages to say something that could be said in a few paragraphs.

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