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Conor M. Kelly

Marquette University, conor.kelly@marquette.edu

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The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin: Additional Insights from Theology and Moral Psychology

Conor M. Kelly

Theology Department, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Abstract

Recent work has improved the understanding of social structures in theological discourse, but ambiguity persists with respect to structures of sin. Here, a revised definition of structural sin reconnects this concept with its theological roots, adding clarity to the nature of structural sin and strengthening the moral weight of the term. Parallels with fMRI research in the field of moral psychology then refine the existing account of the operation of structural sin. Together, these insights aid in the identification of structures of sin and improve efforts to combat their influence.

Keywords

Catholic social thought, common good, moral intuition, moral psychology, neuroethics, social sin, theology of sin

In the last 50 years, Catholic moral theology has given increasing attention to the social dimensions of sin, as work in this journal has regularly noted.¹ This trend has led to the emergence of “structural sin” (sometimes “structures of sin”) as a distinct concept, usually connected to the related language of “social sin.”² Although theologians, bishops conferences, the Roman curia, and popes have all worked to develop the notion of structural sin and to specify its meaning, the Catholic tradition’s historical tendency to identify sin with individual actors has consistently tempered these efforts,³ to the point that much ambiguity still surrounds the concept. For instance, the precise relationship between the categories of structural sin and social sin is often unclear, to the point that the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably.⁴ Such conflation only exacerbates the ambiguity, though, for social structures are but one form of social influence, and a distinct one at that. For the sake of clarity, and in order to pursue a fuller analysis of structural sin, this article will proceed with the assertion that structural sin is a species of the larger genus of social sin, which refers more broadly to all types of social influences that induce individuals to sin.⁵ Thus, theological developments around social sin help to explain elements of structural sin, but a comprehensive account of the latter requires a sustained examination of the species itself as a discrete object. This is a task that theologians have already begun to pursue,⁶ but which still requires further development, especially in relation to the exact nature and operation of structural sin.⁷

In response to this challenge, the present article offers a two-part analysis of the nature and operation of structural sin. The first part, addressing the nature of structural sin, proposes a revised definition for the concept, giving special attention to how this new definition builds upon, and moves beyond, existing accounts of structural sin. The second part elaborates on the operation of structural sin, combining the revised definition’s categories with empirical research from the field of moral psychology to offer a plausible account of the ways structures of sin influence moral agents and yield unjust situations with such enduring power. The end result is a clearer sense of the nature of structural sin and a more detailed account of its operation, which together can make it easier to identify structures of sin and to counteract their deleterious effects.

The Nature of Structural Sin: A Revised Definition

As other scholars have noted,⁸ a complicated intellectual history has led the Catholic Church to its gradual acceptance of the reality and power of structural sin. Key tensions in this history have revolved around the relationship between structural sin and personal sin and the possibility of a sort of independent agency in structures of sin.⁹ On these questions, Kristen Heyer has distinguished a magisterial trajectory, which typically gave greater weight to the personal roots of structural sin, and a liberation theology trajectory, which generally emphasized the independence and extra-personal nature of structural sin.¹⁰ Over the years, these two trajectories have begun to converge, as a comparison of the two “Instructions” on liberation theology by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) reveals. In the first instance (1984), the CDF granted that “there are structures which are evil and which cause evil,” but insisted these “are the result of man’s actions and so are consequences more than causes.”¹¹ In keeping with Heyer’s magisterial trajectory, the congregation clearly placed the onus on the personal agents behind structures in a way that minimized the impact of structures themselves. Two years later, however, after continued dialogue with liberation theologians, the CDF used substantively different language to acknowledge that social structures, “being necessary in themselves ... often tend to become fixed and fossilized as mechanisms relatively independent of the human will, thereby paralysing or distorting social development and causing injustice.”¹² In this case, the CDF’s recognition of structures as “relatively independent of the human will” and as capable of “causing injustice” reveals a closer agreement between the magisterial understanding of structural sin and what Heyer calls the liberation theology trajectory, because the CDF acknowledged the existence and influence of structures in their own right, and not simply as the accumulation of personal actions. Of course, there is not total agreement between the magisterial and liberationist accounts of structural sin, and the distinct emphases Heyer has identified still persist, but as the revised understanding of the CDF demonstrates, there is greater overlap between these two trajectories.

Perhaps the best way to understand the overlap is through the idea of emergence, which insists that simple parts can combine to create a new whole with its own properties and its own reality that are not reducible to the sum of its component pieces.¹³ Some—but not all—sociologists¹⁴ use the idea to argue that once social structures emerge from the individual actions and relations that compose them, the social structures have their own objective reality that cannot be fully understood by analyzing the parts separately from the whole.¹⁵ To the extent that the magisterial and liberation theology trajectories on structural sin have converged, they have done so by agreeing on the emergence of social structures as “entirely new realities”¹⁶ that can and do have influence in their own right. Granted, neither trajectory uses the language of emergence to describe this conclusion, but both share the fundamental idea despite the absence of the word. Significantly, the magisterial understanding forcefully insists that structures of sin still have personal moral agents in the background, so this trajectory would reject what sociologist Dave Elder-Vass calls “strong emergence,” which “denies any possibility of explaining how any given case of emergence actually works,” preferring instead “the relational variant,” which affirms the possibility of explanation.¹⁷ In reality, the liberation theology trajectory would reject strong emergence as well;¹⁸ thus emergence is indeed a point of convergence for the magisterial and liberation theology trajectories. While not absolute—there is still a tendency in liberation theology to stress the causal force of structures of sin and a countervailing tendency in magisterial texts to stress the personal roots of structural sin—the agreement on the emergence of structures of sin and the shared acknowledgment of some degree of causal influence is indicative of a greater affinity between Heyer’s two trajectories.

At a papal level, the emergence-based alignment between the magisterial and liberation theology trajectories has continued to develop. John Paul II, for instance, identified Cold War “ideologies” and economic forces as structures of sin, speaking about the influence of “nations and blocs” and arguing, in an affirmation of the central tenets of emergence, that one needs the concept of structural sin “in order to point out the true nature of evil which faces us with respect to the development of peoples” (*SRS* 36–37). Of course, John Paul II also underscored the links between personal sin and structures of sin, but his structural analysis in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* prompted Gregory Baum to conclude, “John Paul II is aware of the unconscious, nonvoluntary, quasi-automatic dimension of social sin,” particularly, one might say, in its structural instantiations.¹⁹ Although the two subsequent popes have not been as explicit as John Paul II in their reflections on structural sin, neither one has done anything to undermine the magisterial affirmation of structural emergence. Pope Benedict XVI, for instance, referred to “original sin ... in the structure of society” in *Caritas in Veritate*, giving deference to the extra-personal operation of sin in social structures, specifically referencing economic ones.²⁰ Although he did not expressly embrace the language of structural sin, scholars note a continuation of John Paul II’s presentation of the idea rather than a rejection, albeit perhaps with a stronger emphasis on individual responsibility for the creation of these social structures.²¹ Pope Francis, meanwhile, has given clear recognition to the powerful influence of structural forces in moral matters. For example, his condemnation of social and economic inequalities in his first apostolic exhortation spoke of “evil embedded in the structures of a society,”²² and his second apostolic exhortation preserved the synod’s references to the family’s gospel witness in, among other things, “the transformation of unjust social structures.”²³ Of course, none of Pope Francis’s references directly refers to structural sin, but they nevertheless reveal a continuation of the Magisterium’s acceptance of social structures as quasi-independent social influences with potentially sinful implications. At this point, therefore, the magisterial account of structural sin has come to acknowledge, if not explicitly to affirm, the conviction of liberation theologians that structures of sin have their own emergent way of operating in the world that is distinct from the actions of individual moral agents. Exactly what this means, however, has never been addressed by the Magisterium.

In the absence of an official account of the independent operation of structural sin, theologians have gestured at some potential explanations on their own. For a long period, the sociological research of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann was the most frequent resource,²⁴ because their work articulates a dialectical process

between the individual and society that preserves the tension between the personal aspects of structural sin and its independent effects.²⁵ More recently, Finn has argued that critical realist sociology provides the necessary insights to move beyond the general assertions of Berger and Luckmann in order to explain how “social structures emerge from the actions of individuals and require the participation of individuals for their continued existence ... [while also] hav[ing] an independent existence and independent causal effects in the lives of those individuals.”²⁶ Accordingly, Finn has defined social structures as “systems of human relations among social positions,”²⁷ and, following the work of Margaret Archer, he has pointed to causal effects in “the restrictions, enablements, and incentives” built into these systems of human relations that condition an individual agent’s freedom, potentially prompting individuals to make “decisions that might be quite different had this person been facing different restrictions, enablements, or incentives.”²⁸

The turn to the social sciences, and critical realist sociology in particular, is especially illuminating, as this approach offers a robust definition of social structures—the predicate of structural sin—and presents a viable mechanism by which these social structures exert an independent, but not deterministic causal influence.²⁹ Neither the earlier reliance on Berger and Luckmann nor the more recent incorporation of critical realism fully explains the nature and operation of structural sin, however. For instance, Finn’s account is compelling, but even it is still asserted at a general level, presuming more than demonstrating the influence of sinful social structures.³⁰ Further, there is not a lot of specificity in the current theological account of the sin in structures of sin.³¹ There is, however, a way to add detail to this process, indicating what is sinful in structural sin and offering a plausible explanation for why restrictions, enablements, and incentives would actually have a morally significant effect on individual agents. A revised definition of structural sin serves this goal, adopting Finn’s suggestion that theologians should look to critical realist sociology for a fuller account of social structures while also reconnecting sociological insights with theological claims about structures of sin in particular. In addition, this revised definition creates the basis for a stronger connection with contemporary insights in moral psychology, yielding not only a fuller explanation of the nature of structural sin but also a more precise account of its operation as well.

Stated succinctly, the proposed redefinition envisions a structure of sin as *an institution or collective practice that either socially idealizes or economically incentivizes actions seeking exclusive self-interest(s) at the expense of the common good*. Each part of this definition has a theological rationale, and the definition as a whole puts an emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of those social structures that have become structures of sin. In order to elaborate and defend this revised definition, each component requires some explanation.

An Institution or Collective Practice

The revised definition of structures of sin begins with two terms designed to identify the structural aspects of structural sin. The terminology stems from one of the only magisterial documents to define the structures in structures of sin with any precision, the CDF’s 1986 “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,” the same document that recognized the independent operation of social structures. That document referred to structures as “the sets of institutions and practices which people find already existing or which they create, on the national and international level, and which orientate or organize economic, social, and political life.”³² Admittedly, there are limits to this definition. Finn, for instance, criticizes the Magisterium’s account of structures as overly focused on large-scale structures at the expense of small-scale ones like local parishes.³³ The CDF’s language does seem to presume a larger, macro-level analysis by directing attention away from individual institutions and practices, but the CDF’s description is not incompatible with a smaller-scale interpretation of social structures. One can still build a definition of structural sin that at least begins with the available magisterial resources while also attending to this nuance.

Although the close alignment with existing theological language is helpful, the decision to identify structures in terms of institutions and practices is not exclusively a theological one. There is also a social scientific justification for using these terms because they both fit within critical realist accounts of social structures. Finn has already introduced the basic contours of a critical realist notion of structures in this journal and defended the compatibility of critical realist sociology and Catholic theological convictions.³⁴ There are a variety of ways in which critical realists define social structures,³⁵ but generally they all focus on two features: the emergence of structures from constituent parts and the causal properties of the structures that have emerged. Consequently, as one critical realist explains, “the concept of *social structure* refers to *the causal power of specific social groups*.”³⁶ With this definition in mind, institutions and collective practices are sociologically justifiable terms for social structures because they both represent the causal power of social groups.

First, institutions have a direct claim to the idea of structure as the causal power of specific social groups because Elder-Vass, the proponent of this definition, explicitly describes “normative institutions” as a type of social structure.³⁷ In his account, institutions are defined by a set of rules, or norms, that all members of the institution agree to uphold. An institution is thus the form connecting individuals around shared norms. As a result, institutions have causal power because the connected individuals hold one another accountable (or, more accurately, a member of the institution internalizes the idea that his or her fellow members will hold him or her accountable, and therefore chooses to follow the norm in order to avoid the seemingly inevitable consequences of transgressing it).³⁸ In other words, an institution is a structure that emerges from “the existence of social groups that are committed to interacting in support of [their shared] rules.”³⁹ In this sense, institutions reflect the definition of social structures advanced by Finn, which focused on the enablements and incentives enforced by the relations between different social positions. The congruence is readily apparent in the fact that Finn uses the university as the illustrative example for a relational-positional definition of a social structure.⁴⁰ A university is undoubtedly an institution, both in the colloquial sense and in Elder-Vass’s more precise understanding, for as anyone who works at a university can affirm, there are shared rules enforced by common social pressures and explicit sanctions. The language of institutions therefore offers a shorthand way of expressing this type of social structure, adding specificity to a term that is sometimes used intuitively.⁴¹

Institutions are not, however, the only type of social structure; there are other means by which social groups exert causal power and one of the most significant is through shared practices. Critical realists do not tend to define practices as social structures, in part because the typical definition of practices in sociology, derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, is presented in decidedly deterministic terms.⁴² Theologians, however, know that this need not be the case, because the notion of practices found in virtue ethics provides a non-deterministic account of the causal power of practices. More specifically, virtue ethicists claim that practices form an agent’s dispositions (including virtues), and that these dispositions make it easier (and thus more likely) for the agent to act in a particular fashion.⁴³ In essence, this gives practices a causal role in an agent’s action, but it is not a deterministic role because the personal moral agent can always choose to act against her or his dispositions.⁴⁴ If one imagines practices at a collective level and not just an individual one, then the possibility of a collective practice as one form of causal power exercised by a specific social group comes into focus.⁴⁵ In other words, collective practices align with the critical realist definition of social structure and thus serve as a helpful complement to institutions. Further, given the specific understanding of practice derived from virtue ethics, collective practices are not merely a helpful complement to the identification of institutions as a social structure but a necessary one.

The necessity of discussing collective practices alongside institutions is most evident from the well-known description of practices proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Essentially, MacIntyre presents practices as specific activities with internal goods and “standards of excellence” that are established, preserved, and refined over time.⁴⁶ Practices are intimately connected with institutions, but, in MacIntyre’s own words,

“practices must not be confused with institutions.”⁴⁷ Thus, there is a value in defining structures with reference to both institutions and practices. Indeed, a description of structures with reference to institutions alone would fail to fully capture the causal power of specific social groups. Consider one of the illustrations Finn uses specifically to demonstrate the casual influence of social groups: gerrymandered political districts. Finn explains how the engineering of representative districts in the United States for political gain can effectively restrain the choices of individual voters.⁴⁸ One could, potentially, explain this process as a system of relations between social positions, or in institutional terms, but this truncates the analysis of how gerrymandering actually operates. The significance of gerrymandering is not so much the relationship it creates between a voter, *qua* voter, and a representative, *qua* representative, nor about a set of shared norms between voters and their representatives. Instead, the causal significance of gerrymandering lies in the fact that these particular voters are placed in this particular district and not another one. The deciding factor is not the social roles of a voter and a representative nor their institutional link but the practice of dividing districts in a manner that stacks the demographics against one’s political opponents.⁴⁹ In terms of analyzing this and similar social structures, then, it will be more effective, and simpler, to incorporate practices alongside institutions in the definition of structural sin.

For the sake of practicality and clarity, then, the revised definition refers to structures using the same nouns employed by the CDF. This creates consistency with the theological conversation, and more fully captures the various structural influences operating in social life. Granted, the revised definition still amends the CDF’s language. In addition to adopting Finn’s suggestion that the theological evaluation of structures should attend to both large- and small-scale structures—and therefore dropping the CDF’s reference to the national and international level—the revised definition also presumes distinct definitions of the nouns by linking institutions to the work of Elder-Vass and practices to the work of MacIntyre. In addition, the definition also modifies the CDF’s second noun to refer to “collective practices.” This is designed to stress that one of the key distinguishing features of social structures is their social nature. Institutions are normally conceived in this way already, but practices can be individual or collective, and since the critical realist understanding of structures focuses on the causal power of social groups, only a collective practice can constitute a social structure.⁵⁰ Hence, one individual reducing her or his water consumption would not be a social structure in any applicable sense, but a Catholic parish initiating a water fast could be. In this way, the language of institutions and collective practices provides the basis for a refined understanding of social structures.

That Either Socially Idealizes or Economically Incentivizes

In addition to defining social structures, a viable account of structural sin also needs to explain how these structures operate in relation to sinful human actions. This is the point of greatest ambiguity in the existing theological reflections on structural sin. As articulated above, there is widespread agreement that structures of sin have some type of causal influence on the individuals who encounter them, but there is no definitive account of this causal influence. Instead, theologians have essentially offered three theories. First, some theologians have argued that structures of sin principally influence human action through conscience formation, skewing an individual’s perspective of what is right and wrong.⁵¹ Second, some theologians have maintained that structures of sin preserve moral ignorance by obfuscating the immoral consequences of certain actions. Although this has parallels with the first interpretation, they are not the same because those who focus directly on formation of conscience tend to worry about structures of sin promoting erroneous moral conclusions, whereas theologians advancing this second interpretation accentuate the tendency of structures of sin to interrupt the process of moral evaluation by excluding some of the relevant information.⁵² Finally, some theologians have insisted that all social sins, including structures of sin, operate much like original sin to create an environment within which the exercise of free will is conditioned because an agent has fewer, or at least different, options. This conditioning then makes personal sins more likely to occur because individuals find it easier to choose certain kinds of sinful activities.⁵³

These three different articulations of the operation of structural sin are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there is ample space for overlap between each of them. This is fitting, for the causal influence of social structures is a complex process, and the manifestations of sin are similarly multivalent. The most reasonable conclusion, then, is that each of the three descriptions highlights different elements in the operation of structural sin. The best definition of this phenomenon therefore ought to preserve space for all three insights. Helpfully, the revised definition is compatible with all three interpretations. At the same time, it is best understood as an extension and refinement of the third interpretation, because the revised definition appeals to conditioning as the most sociologically persuasive and theologically justifiable account of the tension between personal freedom and structural influence.

In sociological terms, incentives are one of the most important means by which the choices of free agents are conditioned.⁵⁴ Indeed, political scientist Ruth Grant specifically defines an incentive as “a benefit (which need not be monetary) designed as a motive or inducement to action.”⁵⁵ Obviously, monetary benefits are easily identified as incentives, but human beings are not just economic actors, they are also social animals, and so they will respond to both economic and social costs.⁵⁶ When examining the operation of social structures through the lens of incentives, then, one must account for both economic and social influences. Hence, the revised definition refers to structures of sin affecting individual agents either through social idealization or economic incentivization. As a caveat, though, social idealization should not be construed as an absolute term, such that idealization becomes idolization. The claim here is that the chief way structures offer social incentives is through the valorization of certain actions, activities, and ways of life as *an* ideal, not necessarily as *the* ideal. This allows for social idealization to operate in diverse ways to present social rewards of varying degrees for some things and not others. At the same time, social idealization is still a helpful category because the incentivizing force of structural sin goes beyond mere passive tolerance—which could be a form of social sin more generally—to incorporate the more active, and specific, causal power of a social structure.

Alongside this social scientific rationale for attending to both social and economic costs and benefits, there is a theological reason for using the specific language of social idealization and economic incentivization. Long before Catholic theologians began talking about structural sin, Protestant theologians had been giving greater attention to the systemic influence of sin in society.⁵⁷ One Protestant theologian in particular, Walter Rauschenbusch, developed a sustained assessment of the social significance of the doctrine of sin as part of his larger project to connect religious insights with social analysis in support of the Social Gospel movement.⁵⁸ As some Catholic theologians have previously noted, Rauschenbusch’s work offers a variety of parallels for the contemporary concept of structural sin.⁵⁹ In this case, Rauschenbusch’s reflections on the social transmission of sin align well with the current understanding of social sin, providing a theological justification for the revised definition’s language of social idealization and economic incentivization.

Rauschenbusch was emphatically averse to any individualistic conceptions of sin, insisting, “Sin is not a private transaction between the sinner and God. Humanity always crowds the audience-room when God holds court.”⁶⁰ Elaborating on this point, he proclaimed, “sin is essentially selfishness,” and insisted that sin yielded negative social consequences as individuals sought to preserve benefits for themselves through discriminatory social arrangements.⁶¹ Further, he argued that this ingrained selfishness had effects at a structural level, so he condemned “super-personal forces of evil” that “count in the moral world not only through their authority over members, but through their influence in the general social life.”⁶² This assertion was based, in turn, on Rauschenbusch’s conviction that in addition to the traditional account of a biological transference of original sin from parent to child, “sin is [also] transmitted along the lines of social tradition.”⁶³ Using the image of a disease, Rauschenbusch argued that sin could be “socialized” in this fashion both “vertically,” from one generation to the next, and “horizontally,” across society.⁶⁴ Creating a point of contact with the idea of structures of sin, he described sin “lodged in social customs and institutions,” and explained that the socialization occurred when

individuals adopted the “moral judgments and valuations” of the society around them.⁶⁵ Rauschenbusch did not just leave this assertion at the theoretical level, however; he also offered concrete examples. Citing alcohol abuse as a prime example of socialized sin, he maintained that public opinion idealized the consumption of alcohol, even to excess, by organizing social events around drinking, touting the valor of those who could hold their liquor, and glorifying alcohol in literature and music. All these things, he argued, gave the abuse of alcohol a “social authority” behind it, which skewed the consciences of individual members of society, causing them to conclude that there was nothing inappropriate in this socially harmful activity. Thus, Rauschenbusch explained that society’s willingness to “excuse or idealize” a certain negative behavior was one way in which sin was socialized.⁶⁶ To this he added a second process, proclaiming, “the most potent motive for [evil’s] protection is its profitability,” and noting that a sin that provides an income is always difficult to overcome.⁶⁷

Rauschenbusch’s account of the social transmission of sin thus points to two processes by which larger social influences can encourage sinful behavior in individuals. His description of these two methods provides the language for describing the operation of structural sin as socially idealizing and economically incentivizing certain activities. Incorporating this language into the revised definition not only provides a theologically consistent way to talk about the influence of structural sin, but it also opens potential pathways for ecumenical engagement. Further, the language of social idealization accurately captures the way in which an incentive offers a social benefit (or reduces a social cost), adding greater precision to the social scientific insights. For all these reasons, the revised definition describes the operation of structural sin in terms of socially idealizing or economically incentivizing certain actions. Ultimately, for reasons discussed in the final section of this article, the language of social idealization and economic incentivization connects the revised definition most closely with the third theological interpretation of structural sin as a form of conditioning, but it also creates implicit parallels with the first two interpretations, which focus on conscience formation and moral obfuscation. Thus, the language helpfully advances the understanding of structural sin without sacrificing other insights from the broader theological conversation.

Actions Seeking Exclusive Self-interest(s) at the Expense of the Common Good

While identifying social structures and describing their methods of influence are necessary prerequisites for a definition of structures of sin, the real work of the definition lies in the articulation of those features that distinguish structures of sin from other social structures. To that end, the revised definition speaks of structures that encourage actions seeking exclusive self-interest at the expense of the common good. As before, the rationale behind this language is chiefly theological, which is appropriate, since the term “sin” is fundamentally a theological category, despite its varied uses in contemporary discourse.⁶⁸ While the revised definition’s language has parallels with other attempts to define the sinful nature of structures of sin, the aim of the revised definition is to provide a general description of the sin in structural sin that could apply to all its manifestations, not just to a few specific instantiations.⁶⁹ This is, in fact, an advantage of appealing to an explicitly theological rationale for this aspect of the definition.⁷⁰

The theological justification for this part of the definition is multifaceted. First, the theological account of structural sin has given some indication of what makes structures sinful, albeit mostly by contradistinction. For example, John Paul II’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* described the broader category of social sin in opposition to “love of neighbor,” a moral responsibility that included everything from “justice in interpersonal relationships” to preserving “the rights of the human person” and ensuring “the common good and its exigencies in relation to the whole broad spectrum of the rights and duties of citizens” (RP 16). His later encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, narrowed this constellation of concerns in the case of structural sin, insisting, “‘structures of sin’ are only conquered—presupposing the help of divine grace—by a diametrically opposed attitude: a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him” (SRS38). This description points to a

certain kind of selfishness in the operation of structural sin, which aligns with Rauschenbusch's definition of sin, but John Paul II's account adds that the selfishness in structural sin comes explicitly at the expense of one's neighbor. Further refining this distinguishing feature of structural sin, the late pontiff also presented the virtue of solidarity as an essential tool in the moral conversion from structures of sin (SRS 38), prompting one theologian to assert that solidarity is "an antidote to the structures of sin" in a given society.⁷¹ Since John Paul II defined solidarity as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (SRS 38), the juxtaposition between solidarity and structures of sin indicates that the common good is the true victim of selfishness in structural sin.

At the same time, the notion of self-interest as a distinguishing feature of sin has additional support in the broader theology of sin, where pride is often referred to as the root of sin.⁷² Consequently, defining structures of sin with reference to self-interest benefits from this intellectual heritage.⁷³ There are, however, concerns with facilely equating pride (and indeed, self-interest) with sin. The most serious issue, identified by feminist theologians, is that pride, or self-concern, is not necessarily sinful in all cases, such that disparaging self-interest tout court has the potential to discourage the formation of morally legitimate forms of self-love.⁷⁴ To combat this problem, the revised definition locates the sinfulness of structural sin not in self-interest per se, but in the particular form of self-interest that is opposed to the common good.

To some, the opposition of self-interest and the common good might seem tautological, but self-interest and the common good are not inherently adversaries. Here, a theological conception of the common good helps to adjudicate the potential conflict. The Second Vatican Council described the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively and ready access to their own fulfillment."⁷⁵ This notion stresses the social nature of the common good, seen in the public goods of a community that offer individuals (and groups of individuals) opportunities for flourishing that they would not have on their own.⁷⁶ Such a perspective in turn highlights the social nature of the offense involved in structures of sin. Just as importantly, this sense of the common good as a collective good refutes the narrative of an intrinsic opposition between self-interest and the common good. Countering this presupposition is important because there are significant ways in which self-interest and the common good can serve one another. The best example is social capital, the set of non-economic resources created by a tight-knit community that can be used by individuals within that community for productive ends.⁷⁷ This valuable community resource is built on "generalized reciprocity," the assumption that altruistic acts (like watching the neighbor's kids) do not need to be repaid directly because they contribute to social capital in the community as a whole, from which the altruist can later benefit in the future.⁷⁸ In this sense, self-interest aligns with the production of social capital—a shared public good—illustrating that self-interest is not an innate enemy of the common good. Thus, the revised definition says something substantive about the sinful features of structural sin by referring more specifically to the promotion of self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Another related point concerns the inclusion of both self-interest in the singular and self-interests in the plural. This too has a theological rationale, intended to acknowledge Reinhold Niebuhr's famous reminder that self-interest is not unique to individuals but is also present in groups. In fact, his concept of "collective egotism"⁷⁹ asserted that the tendency to seek self-interest was actually stronger in groups, in large part because he argued "the group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual."⁸⁰ Since structures of sin are products of collective action, the revised definition must heed Niebuhr's note of caution, attending to the potentially deleterious effects of self-interest not only in individuals but also in collective organizations. The incorporation of this insight into the revised definition's reference to exclusive self-interests in the plural also acknowledges that one individual might have multiple self-interests (i.e., his or her own and those of his or her groups). Consequently, a social structure that incentivizes an

individual to act against personal self-interest but in favor of the exclusive collective egotism of a group to which he or she belongs is still a structure of sin when this action harms the common good.

The final aspect of this portion of the revised definition is its emphasis on actions. By maintaining that structures of sin encourage actions through their social idealization and economic incentivization, the revised definition preserves the close connection between structural sin and personal sin. The latter is defined by action, as Catholic scholars are quick to attest.⁸¹ Of course, inaction is also a potential source of sin, as the classic distinction between sins of commission and sins of omission highlights. One can still treat sins of omission as an action, however, because the failure to act is itself an action—at least insofar as it has moral weight, for the moral judgment presumes that one could have acted otherwise and did not do so.⁸² The language of actions thus reaffirms the link to both sins of commission and omission, indicating that structures of sin ultimately have sinful effects in the world through the personal sins that they encourage. Maintaining this link is important because this has always been the boundary for the magisterial acceptance of structural sin as a legitimate theological idea.⁸³ The insistence that structures of sin promote actions therefore strengthens the consistency of the revised definition with existing magisterial insights into structural sin, adding another theological rationale for distinguishing structures of sin in this fashion.

With this defense of the reference to actions, every aspect of the revised definition has been treated. As a whole, the definition accurately reflects what theologians and the magisterium have identified as the central aspects of structural sin. The definition of structures as corporate institutions or collective practices balances both critical realist insights into the nature of social structures and the broader emphases of the CDF. The specification of the mechanism of operation in social idealization and economic incentivization adds an ecumenical dimension to the processes that other Catholic theologians have connected with structures of sin. Finally, the reference to actions serving self-interest(s) at the expense of the common good maintains the link between structural sin and personal sin while also emphasizing the social consequences of those sinful acts. The real justification for the revised definition, then, is its theological consistency. This is not an insignificant factor, especially when one considers the temptations to secularize this concept so that it can be employed more readily as a tool of social analysis in a pluralistic society.⁸⁴ While the idea still serves important functions under some of its non-theological guises,⁸⁵ something is nevertheless lost in translation. Specifically, preserving the notion of structural sin as a form of sin underscores its incompatibility with the will of God, offering solace to those who are oppressed by the systemic injustices that facilitate self-interest(s) at the expense of the common good while also prompting those who are complicit in and benefit from structures of sin to do something about them. By underscoring structural sin as a theological concept, the revised definition emphasizes these factors, highlighting the need for conversion in response to structures of sin. The revised definition does more than simply preserve links to existing theological insights, though. It also lays the foundation for new links to the field of moral psychology, allowing this decidedly theological interpretation to open new avenues for an account of how structures of sin function, making them both easier to identify and to oppose.

The Operation of Structural Sin: A More Detailed Explanation

The value of greater insight into the operation of structural sin is most apparent when one considers the moral responsibility agents have to challenge structures of sin. The general consensus is that structural sin ought to be countered with both personal conversion, so that individual agents resist the negative values associated with sinful structures, and social transformation, so that there are fewer sinful structures to warp people's moral values and incentivize harmful actions.⁸⁶ This twofold project is difficult to achieve in practice. The main issue is inertia, which is a profound challenge because, as Jamie Phelps has observed, "Most human beings are resistant to change. Personal change is difficult. Social change is formidable."⁸⁷ Challenging structural sin therefore requires overcoming two distinct types of inertia, the second even more daunting than the first. Although

nothing will fully eradicate this challenge, since it stems from the essence of structural sin, a clearer sense of precisely how structures of sin sustain this inertia will at least aid in the efforts to combat their influence. The revised definition's specification of social ideals and economic incentives offers the basic framework for this task, and when joined to insights from the field of moral psychology, this specification yields a more detailed explanation of the operation of structural sin.

Moral psychology is an interdisciplinary field that attempts to combine the resources of philosophical ethics and empirical psychology to explain the functioning of human moral capacities.⁸⁸ It has developed substantially in the last twenty years, mainly as a result of advancements in technology because the invention of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machines now allows researchers to study the cognitive processes involved in making moral judgments by measuring the progressive activation of different parts of the brain.⁸⁹ Although there are limits to how precise these studies can be,⁹⁰ experiments using fMRI technology have generally revealed that moral judgments are not the result of a strictly rationalistic evaluation of salient features, but that they engage both "reasoned considerations and emotional intuitions" that occur in "cognitive" and "affective" parts of the brain, respectively.⁹¹ This language is potentially problematic, given recent criticisms of the tendency to assume emotions are a-rational and non-cognitive, but some of this can be avoided by capturing the distinction as one between non-affective and affective mental processes.⁹² The crucial insight is that both are involved,⁹³ and the nature of their interactions is what creates insightful parallels for the definition of structural sin just articulated. Specifically, this account of moral judgment provides the means to explain why the idealizing and incentivizing mechanisms of social structures would in fact translate to a causal power capable of influencing individuals in a way that makes them more likely to act in pursuit of exclusive self-interest at the expense of the common good. In the process, the resources of moral psychology also show how the revised definition remains consistent with all three theological interpretations of the causal power of structural sin, especially those that would focus on conscience formation or moral obfuscation and not just the interpretation that relies on conditioning.

Before elaborating the specific contributions of moral psychology for these questions, though, some critical caveats must be acknowledged, because the value of fMRI studies has been challenged on a number of fronts. First, some question the usefulness of fMRI technology in general, noting that the danger of "false-positives" is real and that the complex nature of the brain militates against easy identification of precise brain areas responsible for higher order cognition.⁹⁴ Second, the very design of these studies can contribute significantly to the problems of false positives and misinterpretation because experiments without a carefully delineated task run the risk of measuring brain activities related to other cognitive processes.⁹⁵ Third, even when the risks of false-positives are mitigated and the experiments are designed carefully, the data output from fMRI studies requires significant analysis. In the words of one team of critical scholars, "fMRI scans are highly processed representations of an indirect measure of neural activity," they are not "direct snapshots of the mind in action."⁹⁶ As a result, much depends on the tools one chooses to interpret the data, so the results are susceptible to error as a result of problems in the statistical models or computer algorithms used for interpretation.⁹⁷ These particular concerns are challenges with any studies using fMRI technology, and while careful design can limit an experiment's exposure to these risks, they are engrained in the technology itself and therefore cannot be eliminated entirely.⁹⁸ This observation does not mean that fMRI studies are useless, but only that they have innate limitations, and therefore should be evaluated with a degree of epistemic humility. Practically, one can still use fMRI data, as long as it is contextualized as a best available resource, necessarily susceptible to review and modification in light of new information.⁹⁹ Hence, what is discussed below is not presented as the definitive account of moral judgment; rather, it is offered as the best empirical insight into that process at the moment, and it is linked to the question of structural sin for that reason.

This embrace of epistemic humility is especially appropriate when linking fMRI studies with theological reflection. As theologians are quick to point out, moral psychology and theology are distinct fields with substantively different objects of study and separate competencies.¹⁰⁰ One must not elide them too quickly. Yet this does not remove all possibility for overlap.¹⁰¹ The best approach is therefore to proceed with a degree of caution, acknowledging the differences between moral psychology and theology alongside their particular limits, so that each field can speak from its own expertise. This strategy prevents intellectual hubris and category errors, while still allowing moral psychology's insights into the role of the brain in moral judgment to help with the understanding of theological phenomena whenever these insights illuminate something moral theology cannot. This applies to the specific question of structural sin because moral psychology can help to answer a question that theologians are still debating, namely, how do institutions and practices that incentivize negative behaviors actually result in individual actions that harm the common good? Arriving at this insight, though, requires a closer examination of the fMRI studies.

The original pioneer in the use of fMRI technology to evaluate the function of the brain in moral deliberations was Joshua D. Greene. He and a team of researchers placed subjects in fMRI machines and asked them to provide their moral assessments of "impersonal" and "personal" variations on the "trolley dilemma."¹⁰² An example of each type will elucidate the difference between them. In an impersonal version, a runaway trolley is going to crash into and kill five people who are unable to get out of the way unless the subject hits a switch, which will move the trolley to another track where it will kill one person but save the original five. In a personal version, the runaway trolley is still going to crash into and kill five people, but the subject is now on a footbridge over the track and can only stop the trolley by pushing a large individual off the bridge into the path of the trolley, causing the large person to die but saving the otherwise imperiled five. In general, people are much more willing to affirm the moral legitimacy of the utilitarian judgment (i.e., kill one to save five) in the impersonal version than they are in the personal version, something that Greene attributed to an additional emotional engagement in personal dilemmas.¹⁰³ His conjecture was, broadly speaking, confirmed, as areas of the brain associated with emotion were more active in personal dilemmas than in impersonal ones, although both affective and non-affective processes were involved in each type.¹⁰⁴ This observation was corroborated in subsequent studies, leading to the conclusion that "emotions and reason both matter, but automatic emotional processes tend to dominate."¹⁰⁵ This research has produced two separate, yet not incompatible, explanations of the way in which humans undertake moral deliberations.

The first explanation, developed by Greene himself, is called the dual-process theory. This theory combines the insight that affective and non-affective processes are involved in all kinds of moral judgments with another piece of data from Greene's initial fMRI experiment, specifically that there was a delay in the response times of people who deemed utilitarian judgments appropriate in personal scenarios when compared to those who deemed such judgments inappropriate. Greene hypothesized that the longer reaction time reflected a cognitive conflict between the intuitive judgment of affective areas of the brain—which produced a strong aversion to directly killing another person—and the more rationalistic judgment of non-affective areas of the brain—which abstractly preferred a utilitarian outcome. In support of this claim, Greene and his team found that areas of the brain known to be involved in adjudicating cognitive conflicts were more active in these personal dilemmas than they were in impersonal ones.¹⁰⁶ Greene has concluded, then, that two mental processes—an affective, intuitive process and a non-affective, deliberative process—are involved in every moral judgment, enabling quick deontological reactions in most situations when the two align, but requiring delays for deliberations in order to produce utilitarian judgments when they compete.¹⁰⁷

The most significant feature of Greene's dual-process theory, at least for the effort to explain how structural sin operates, is its assertion that affective intuitions are involved in all moral judgments, even those ostensibly made by non-affective processes exerting cognitive control. This is the focal point of the second explanation of

moral deliberation, the social intuitionist model popularized by Jonathan Haidt. According to this account, affective intuitions are not only involved in every moral judgment, they are ultimately the sole basis of every moral judgment. Non-affective processes may be active, but their main purpose is to provide *ex post facto* rationalizations of the affective intuition, allowing someone to verbally express his or her judgments without actually providing any basis for the judgment.¹⁰⁸

While this argument might seem to entail a world of extreme moral relativism or remarkable moral uniformity—depending on whether one assumes affective intuitions are individual or universal—Haidt has suggested otherwise by claiming that affective intuitions are socially pliable. Thus, the social intuitionist model accepts that rational moral arguments can influence individual moral judgments, but only because exposure to other people’s arguments might cause someone to see a new feature of the moral problem and then to have a new affective intuition. Additionally, people sometimes have multiple and competing intuitions about a particular moral issue, so learning of someone else’s judgment can prompt an individual to overrule an initial intuition with another.¹⁰⁹ In both of these instances, Haidt has argued that the judgments of other people will actually be more powerful than an individual’s own assessment because humanity’s evolutionary history has predisposed people to agree with their social group as a sort of self-protection mechanism.¹¹⁰ One of Haidt’s earlier studies demonstrated this effect in action, showing differences in moral judgments that varied according to location and socioeconomic status, which is consistent with a predisposition to adopt the judgments of one’s social group.¹¹¹ If Haidt is also correct in his assertion that affective intuitions serve an irreplaceable function in moral deliberations, then this predisposition implies ample room for structures of sin to impact personal moral judgments when they idealize and incentivize negative values.

As it turns out, there is evidence to support the idea that affective intuitions are a necessary feature of normal moral deliberation. Certainly, Greene’s fMRI research and dual process theory, which both agree on the initial activity of affective processes, give some credence to the role intuitions play at the start of moral judgments. More convincing arguments come from other research studies, though. In one experiment, researchers manipulated their subjects’ affective intuitions by attempting to manufacture a positive emotional state before asking them to make moral evaluations of the trolley problem. They found that this positive state was associated with a higher likelihood of selecting the utilitarian solution, even in the personal version, suggesting that priming subjects with positive emotions dampened the effect of the normally negative affective intuition.¹¹² Other studies have focused on individuals who have sustained damage to their ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), the affective area of the brain most involved in moral judgments, demonstrating that these people are much less likely to arrive at “normal” moral judgments (i.e., non-utilitarian) in the personal version of the trolley problem.¹¹³ As one study noted, this illustrates that affective intuitions must have an integral role in the process of making moral judgments, rather than arising as a result of those judgments, otherwise people with damage to their affective centers would arrive at the same assessments as those with intact VMPFCs. Additionally, this also demonstrates the social nature of these affective intuitions because damage to the VMPFC is associated more broadly with “striking defects in social emotion.”¹¹⁴

Whether one adopts the dual-process theory of Greene or the social intuitionist model of Haidt, then, there is a general consensus in the field of moral psychology that affective intuitions play a significant and necessary role in moral judgments, and convincing evidence that these intuitions are influenced by social context and interactions. These discoveries are precisely why moral psychology can help deepen the understanding of structural sin, through close affinities with the revised definition. Specifically, because the revised definition pinpoints the operation of structural sin in the social idealization and economic incentivization of certain negative behaviors, it actually depicts a process through which social structures reify a particular society’s moral judgments. After all, idealization and incentivization create rewards for certain actions, informing agents that the social group represented in a given institution or practice is broadly supportive of a particular behavior. In

the case of structural sin, the institutions and practices specifically proclaim a social group's support for the pursuit of self-interest in ways that undermine the common good. Given the evolutionary inclination to ratify the claims of one's social group, these objective reminders of a society's values can be expected to have a suasive impact on the affective intuitions of those who come in contact with them. As affective intuitions play an essential role in individuals' moral judgments, their willingness to accept the intuitions implicit in their surrounding social structures will have a direct effect on the moral judgments they make, solidifying the intuition and promoting the corresponding action.¹¹⁵

Thus, moral psychology joins with the revised definition to plausibly explain why structures that socially idealize and economically incentivize negative actions will actually translate to more instances of those actions in real life. Significantly, describing the process in this way also puts the revised definition in closer contact with other theological assertions about the causal influence of structural sin. Although the revised definition casts the operation of structural sin in terms of conditioning, the links with moral psychology show how this particular type of conditioning would have an impact on conscience formation, potentially through the related process of moral obfuscation. First, Catholic theologians have often insisted that the formation of conscience is not an exclusively individual but rather an inherently social process.¹¹⁶ Through its links to moral psychology, the revised definition proposes that structures of sin exert their causal influence through affective intuitions, which in turn shape moral judgments. This process means that the conditioning effect of structural sin can and will make certain actions more likely (in a descriptive, non-deterministic sense), but only by changing an agent's moral deliberation and judgment. Of course, theologians refer to the process of moral deliberation and judgment as conscience,¹¹⁷ so this means that the revised definition reaffirms the link between structural sin and conscience formation, arguably adding more specificity to that link. At the same time, this understanding also creates overlap with those theologians who have asserted that structural sin exerts its causal power through moral obfuscation, because the structural formation of moral intuitions relays a social group's judgments about moral matters, including that groups' judgments about which matters deserve moral scrutiny at all. Although this second link is more implicit than the first, it at least demonstrates that the revised definition is not inconsistent with the claim that structural sin operates through obfuscation. As a result, the incorporation of insights from moral psychology helps to establish the theological consistency of the revised definition, and not just its explanatory value.

If these benefits were not enough, connecting the revised definition with moral psychology also offers one more substantive contribution, which is especially relevant for efforts to counteract the personal and social inertia that makes structures of sin so difficult to transform. By emphasizing the evolutionary predisposition to confirm the judgments of one's immediate social group, moral psychology reveals that structures of sin do not need to be changed at the highest systemic levels—at least not immediately. Instead, they can, and ought to, be addressed with deference to the principle of subsidiarity. Since the evolutionary predispositions in question were designed for group affinity, the strongest impacts on moral intuitions will come from the closest groups.¹¹⁸ Combating the power of structural sin, then, can begin at the local level, where a small-scale community (such as a parish) can counteract the influence of perverse social ideals and economic incentives by projecting collective support for the common good instead of self-interest. This will create a social group with a different set of values, which can then shape the moral intuitions of the individuals within the community, making it easier for them to resist the detrimental values projected by the sinful institutions and practices around them. As these efforts succeed, the community can then begin to tackle the structures of sin more directly, using collective action to challenge problematic social ideals and economic incentives, or to create alternative "structures of grace"¹¹⁹ that socially idealize or economically incentivize actions that actually serve the common good.¹²⁰ Thus, the insights of moral psychology combine with the revised definition to add great hope to the efficacy of these efforts, since this approach uses the very same traits that make structures of sin so

powerful to thwart their effects. This is, arguably, the real explanatory value of the revised definition, and the real payoff of the connection with moral psychology.

Conclusion

Of course, one of the major assertions of this article is that the ultimate rationale for the concept of structural sin is its practical application as a tool for social analysis and the promotion of change in the real world. As a result, the true test of the revised definition is its applicability to existing structures of sin. By way of conclusion, then, I offer a demonstration of how the revised definition adds to the assessment of environmental degradation, a serious problem that is, by definition, damaging to the common good,¹²¹ and therefore a prime candidate for the revised definition's structural analysis.¹²²

The first point to note is that the United States has historically been one of the worst contributors to this global problem,¹²³ so it is appropriate to analyze this issue with reference to the social structures of the United States. In this context, the revised definition helps to explain why this country has had an outsized effect on the environment. Given its categories, the revised definition calls attention to social ideals and economic incentives that would make it easier for an individual to choose his or her self-interest at the expense of the environmental common good without raising qualms of conscience. There are, unfortunately, ample examples of these ideals and incentives at the structural level in the United States. To focus on a rather mundane illustration, consider the penchant for larger, and thus less fuel-efficient, vehicles in the United States.¹²⁴ Initially, the popularity of excessively large automobiles, like the Cadillac Escalade, was supported by a celebrity-driven idealization that connected ownership of this and other Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs) with higher social status. As media institutions disseminated this narrative, the sales of these polluting machines noticeably increased.¹²⁵ This created a social ideal, but only by presupposing a certain kind of normative relationship between celebrities and ordinary individuals, such that this social benefit was the result of an institution in the terms of the revised definition. At the same time, economic incentives also enabled the purchase of SUVs through the collective practice of treating environmental degradation as a market "externality" that is not factored into consumer costs.¹²⁶ Thus, the revised definition reveals two mutually reinforcing structures of sin that promoted the purchase and use of unnecessarily large vehicles, generating a personal benefit for individual consumers despite the fact that their behavior was detrimental to the shared good of a healthy environment. The insights from moral psychology only expand this assessment, adding a plausible explanation for the fact that these structural incentives translated to individual actions in this way. Further strengthening this assessment is that purchases of new SUVs and other low-efficiency vehicles have actually reduced since a peak in 2004, a shift that coincides with changes in both of the structures identified by the revised definition.¹²⁷

The revised definition thus facilitates a strong structural analysis of the problem of environmental degradation, illustrating the explanatory value of the definition. At the same time, the revised definition also adds another level to this analysis by stressing the theological significance of environmental degradation. First, the revised definition condemns this unjust state of affairs as contrary to God's will, immediately calling attention to the plight of the victims of environmental harm by stressing that their victimization is not a matter of fate, but of structural sin.¹²⁸ Second, the revised definition indicts complicity in these structures, especially the use of these structures for personal benefit, informing the consciences of those who might easily disregard the moral implications of their vehicular choices.¹²⁹ Third, the moral and theological weight of the revised definition also underscores the need for action, prompting complicit individuals to seek ways to change their behavior and encouraging efforts to dismantle the existing structures that facilitate environmental degradation. On this point, the revised definition helpfully indicates the end goal, for its identification of specific structures shows that the most consequential change would be a transformation of market practices to incorporate environmental costs directly, rather than treating them as an externality.¹³⁰ Meanwhile, the insights from moral psychology chart the

course toward this goal, encouraging a grassroots approach that seeks to transform individuals and the local community so that this collective practice can be countered with collective action.

In the end, the real contribution of the revised definition, with its additional insights from theology and moral psychology, lies in its ability to add precision to the understanding of structural sin. By clarifying the nature and operation of structural sin, the revised definition makes it easier to identify structures of sin in the real world, as the discussion of environmental degradation has shown. As a theological tool, the revised definition adds to the urgency of responding to structural sins, generating a call with special appeal to communities of faith, with whom the theological insights of the revised definition should resonate. Indeed, given the results of the fMRI studies, local parishes ought to see an invitation in this account of structural sin not only to challenge the structures of sin they see in the communities around them, but also to strengthen the bonds of their parish community itself. After all, the influence of structures of sin on moral intuitions operates through a social mechanism, meaning that stronger social bonds will have greater persuasive power. While building stronger parishes might be a difficult task, given the contemporary nature of parish life in the Catholic Church (especially in the United States),¹³¹ the account of structural sin developed here shows exactly why this endeavor is so important. By reestablishing the theological roots of structural sin, the revised definition offers a compelling rationale for the transformation of local faith communities into avenues of social grace. Happily, by equipping these communities with a clearer understanding of the nature, operation, and influence of structural sin, the revised definition also provides greater hope for the success of the task it commends.

References

1. For example, Kristin E. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 410–36 at 413–25, doi: 10.1177/004056391007100207; James F. Keenan, "Raising Expectations on Sin," *Theological Studies* 77 (March 2016): 165–80 at 165, 177–79, doi: 10.1177/0040563915620466; Bradford E. Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 207–38 at 222–35, doi: 10.1177/004056390006100201; and Stephen J. Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 597–622 at 615–17, doi: 10.1177/004056398804900401. Of course, the Christian tradition has long acknowledged that individual sins have a social dimension to them. Despite some historical parallels, the recent attention to the social aspects of sin has pushed this concern in new directions, representing a substantial (and ongoing) development of doctrine and not merely a shift in tone. On the historical parallels, see Kenneth R. Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 6 (1996): 183–218 at 186; Maurizio Ragazzi, "The Concept of Social Sin in its Thomistic Roots," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 7 (2004): 363–408 at 364, 381–85; Michael Sievernich, "'Social Sin' and Its Acknowledgment," in *The Fate of Confession*, ed. Mary Collins and David Power, *Concilium*, no. 190 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 52–63 at 52–53.
2. See Christine E. Gudorf, "Admonishing the Sinner: Owning Structural Sin," in *Rethinking the Spiritual Works of Mercy*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova, 1993), 1–29 at 3.
3. The focus on individual action can be seen not only in theoretical reflections on the nature of sin but also in the practice of reconciliation, where individual confession of sins is an essential element of the Sacrament of Penance. Marciano Vidal, "Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?" in *History and Conscience: Studies in Honour of Father Sean O'Riordan, CSsR*, ed. Raphael Gallagher and Brendan McConvery (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1989), 181–98 at 181; Stephen J. Duffy, "Sin," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993), 899–901 at 900.
4. See, for example, John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (May 25, 1995) 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html.

5. Daniel Finn suggests a similar distinction between social sin and “sinful social structures” in his recent work in this journal, although he does not explicitly use the categories of genus and species. See Daniel K. Finn, “What is a Sinful Social Structure?” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 136–64 at 137–38, doi: 10.1177/0040563915619981. While I will preserve the genus and species distinction throughout, I should note that I treat “structure of sin” and “structural sin” as equivalents and use them interchangeably because they typically appear as two linguistic formulations of the same idea.
6. In addition to Finn’s recent article, and Vidal, “Structural Sin,” see also Daniel J. Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 341–57 at 345, doi: 10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01355.x.
7. Indeed, Finn acknowledges that his consideration of sinful social structures represents a “preliminary” analysis that leaves much to be addressed, including how best to determine “which particular social structures are sinful.” Finn, “Sinful Social Structure,” 163.
8. Peter J. Henriot, “Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition,” in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, ed. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Easton Whitehead (New York: Seabury, 1980), 127–44; Vidal, “Structural Sin,” esp. 181–92; Mark O’Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* (New York: Paulist, 1990); Sievernich, “‘Social Sin’ and Its Acknowledgment,” 53–55; Margaret Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications of the Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin,” *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002): 132–52, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2143/lv.27.2.932>; Gregory Baum, “Structures of Sin,” in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical On Social Concerns*, ed. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 110–26.
9. This tension was most evident in the theological development of the concept of structural sin during the papacy of John Paul II, whose *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* gave the first official recognition to the concept of social sin, and whose subsequent encyclicals indicted particular “structures of sin,” even though the pontiff consistently stressed the human agent as the proper referent of sin. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (February 12, 1984) 16 (hereafter cited in text as *RP*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html; John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30, 1987) 37 (hereafter cited in text as *SRS*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html; John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995) 24, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html; John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (May 25, 1995) 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html. See also Adam A. J. Deville, “The Development of the Doctrine of ‘Structural Sin’ and a ‘Culture of Death’ in the Thought of Pope John Paul II,” *Église et Théologie* 30 (1999): 307–25; Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications,” 141–45; James T. Cross, “Communal Penance and Public Life: On the Church’s Becoming a Sign of Conversion from Social Sin,” in *Faith in Public Life*, ed. William J. Colligne (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 284–97 at 286–87. For the varied ways that other theologians have addressed these two tensions, see Vidal, “Structural Sin,” 197; Hormis Mynatty, “The Concept of Social Sin,” *Louvain Studies* 16 (1991): 3–26 at 13–15, doi:10.2143/LS.16.1.2013837; O’Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* 60–61; Baum, “Structures of Sin,” 113; Himes, “Social Sin and the Role of the Individual,” 205–208; Joseph H. McKenna, “The Possibility of Social Sin,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60 (1994): 125–40 at 130–31, doi: 10.1177/002114009406000204.
10. Heyer, “Social Sin and Immigration,” 413–25, esp. 420, 425. A paradigmatic example for the magisterial trajectory would be the treatment of social structures in John Paul II’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, which sought to hedge against the suggestion that “the blame for [sin] is to be placed not so much on the moral conscience of an individual, but rather on some vague entity” like a social structure by insisting, “a situation—or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself—is not in itself the subject of moral acts” (*RP* 16). Meanwhile, a similarly representative illustration

of the liberation theology trajectory would be José Ignacio González Faus's summary of the Latin American bishops' description of structural sin, which ascribes to "the teaching of both assemblies [i.e., the 1968 Medellín meeting and the 1979 Puebla meeting]...this simple circular phrase: *When human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn, make human beings sin.*" José Ignacio González Faus, "Sin," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 532–42 at 537 (emphasis original).

11. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" (August 6, 1984), 4.15, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.
12. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" (March 22, 1986) 74, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html. Of course, the document goes on to stress the continued involvement of human agency in the maintenance of social structures in order to avoid a structural determinism that would all but remove moral responsibility.
13. Finn offers a number of examples to illustrate this concept including water, which emerges from the combination of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom and has distinct properties and a new reality, to the point that one cannot simply understand water as hydrogen plus oxygen. Instead, one must consider water a whole new thing. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 149–50.
14. Margaret Archer identifies an affirmation of emergence as a distinguishing feature separating the schools of the social realists (who affirm emergence) and the structurationists (who reject emergence). Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.
15. Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 25–26, 328; Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 150–51.
16. Smith, *What is a Person?* 31.
17. Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 30.
18. Consider, for example, Jon Sobrino's presentation of the poor as "the trash and offal of humanity, crucified by the structures of the world." He does not leave this at a structural level alone, however, adding, "the poor of this world are not the casual products of history. No, poverty results *from the actions of other human beings.*" Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 30, 31 (emphasis added).
19. Baum, "Structures of Sin," 115.
20. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009) 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.
21. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 136–37; Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 350–52.
22. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013) 59, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.
23. Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016) 290, https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf; One commentator has also argued that "in *Laudato Si'* the concept of 'human ecology' takes the place of 'social structure'—the sociological concept that 'structural sin' presupposes." Matthew Shadle, "Where is Structural Sin in *Laudato*

Si'?" *Catholic Moral Theology* (November 2, 2015), <http://catholicmoraltheology.com/where-is-structural-sin-in-laudato-si/>.

24. O'Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* 41.
25. Berger and Luckmann identify human actions as the source of all social institutions, but they also maintain that once an institution is created, it then exerts an influence on the human subjects who encounter it, constraining and conditioning their subsequent actions. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 48–63, esp. 57–58. For illustrations of how theologians have used Berger and Luckmann's account of the tension see Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," 186–87; Mynatty, "The Concept of Social Sin," 14–15; Henriot, "The Recovery of a Christian Tradition," 130; Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 353–54.
26. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 151; see also 142.
27. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 145, quoting Douglas V. Porpora, "Four Concepts of Social Structure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 19 (1989): 195.
28. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 151.
29. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 143.
30. In his examples, Finn does make a persuasive case for the claim that these restrictions, enablements, and incentives influence behavior, but his account is mainly based on the assumption that agents will act in a particular way in response to conditions on their freedom of choice (namely that they will choose the least costly course of action). His description does not elaborate why individuals act in that fashion, however, which is where new links to moral psychology can assist. See Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 152–54.
31. For instance, although Finn uses developments in the theology of original sin to give some content to the description of a social structure as "sinful," his typology for distinguishing sinful social structures is rooted in political economy rather than theology, and so would still benefit from further theological elaboration (Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 154–62). This is a point he acknowledges implicitly when indicating that more assessment is required to identify the sinfulness of a particular social structure (162–63). Similarly, Daly prefers the language of "structures of virtue" and "structures of vice" precisely because the "sin" in structural sin is ambiguous, and, in his view, better described in dispositional (i.e., virtue and vice) terms rather than action-based (i.e., sin) terms. Daly, "Structures of Virtue," 341, 354.
32. CDF, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation," 74.
33. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 142.
34. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 142–47.
35. Finn (151) focuses on Douglas Porpora's account of structures as the relations between social positions that constrain and enable the agents occupying each position.
36. Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 86 (original emphasis).
37. Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 83.
38. Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 122–25.
39. Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 142.
40. Finn, "Sinful Social Structure," 152–53.
41. Significantly, Elder-Vass also describes organizations as another type of social structure, but he insists that the causal power of this social group lies in the fact that organizations are "fundamentally dependent on social institutions" (145). Although he preserves a distinction between the two, he presents organizations as an immediate instantiation of a preexisting institution. Consequently, the revised definition here focuses on institutions, asserting that more complex social groups, which one might typically identify as organizations (e.g., business corporations), can be understood in light of institutions and incorporated within that type of social structure because the chief means by which organizations

- exert their causal influence is at an institutional level, through the norms they enforce. See Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 145–48.
42. Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 99–108. Chiefly referencing Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).
43. For a succinct description of this process, see Lúcas Chan, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions* (New York: Paulist, 2013), 86–88. Of course, this is a contested interpretation of virtue in a Christian context, as some challenge or even reject the notion that Christians can or should acquire virtues and instead focus on the graced infusion of virtue. See Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, “Virtuous Assent and Christian Faith: Retrieving Stoic Virtue Theory for Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 30 (2010): 117–40 at 119–20, 125–32; William C. Mattison III, “Can Christians Possess the Acquired Cardinal Virtues?” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 558–85, doi: 10.1177/004056391107200304; cf. Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), 72–97.
44. Bonnie Kent, “Habits and Virtues (Ia IIae, qq. 49–70),” in *Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2002), 116–30 at 118–20.
45. In fact, this is essentially what theologians and ethicists assert when they appeal to the moral formation of the church’s liturgical practices. See Christopher P. Vogt, “Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 181–96 at 190–91, doi: 10.1177/0040563915620509.
46. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 187; see also 187–91. MacIntyre offers a number of examples and distinctions to help explain this definition of practices, perhaps the most helpful is this: “Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is” (187).
47. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 194.
48. Finn, “Sinful Social Structure,” 146. In the article, Finn does not use this example when discussing the relational-positional definition of social structures; he employs it only to demonstrate a more general point about the causal power of all social structures.
49. Specifically, the practice of gerrymandering considered in MacIntyrean terms. However perverse it may be, there are standards of excellence in this practice, such that one can distinguish successful from unsuccessful efforts at political gerrymandering.
50. This modification is especially important when adopting a MacIntyrean notion of practice, for MacIntyre notes that all practices are “socially established,” at least insofar as there is agreement on the internal goods sought in the practice and the standards of excellence by which the pursuit of those goods is judged. A collective practice, then, involves a social group in the operation of the practice itself, not merely in the process of setting the parameters of the practice. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187, 191.
51. See, for example, Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” 349–50, 353–54.
52. McKenna, “The Possibility of Social Sin,” 130–32; Heyer, “Social Sin and Immigration,” 423–24. Highlighting the distinction between this interpretation and the focus on conscience formation, Heyer offers an explicit point of contact with Bernard Lonergan’s conception of “scotosis,” which is chiefly about what we do not see at all, not just what we see wrongly. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto, 1992), 214–15.
53. Himes, “Social Sin and the Individual,” 192–93, 209; Finn, “Sinful Social Structure,” 151, 138.
54. Finn depicts the causal influence of social structures using the critical realist language of restrictions, enablements, and incentives, but he goes on to grant in his illustration of the university as a social structure that, in practice, the restrictions and enablements “are perceived by the persons involved as incentives.” In other words, from the perspective of the agents involved, restrictions, enablements, and incentives all get distilled into one category: incentivization. Finn, “Sinful Social Structures,” 153.

55. Ruth W. Grant, *Strings Attached: Untangling the Ethics of Incentives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 37.
56. Indeed, evolutionary theory suggests that the human brain developed largely in response to the challenges of navigating complex social bonds, leading to the conclusion that humans are actually more strongly motivated by social costs and benefits than by economic ones. Victoria K. Lee and Lasana T. Harris, "A Social Perspective on Debates about Free Will," in *Moral Psychology*, vol. 4, *Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2014), 381–96 at 385–89; see also Robert A. Barton and Robin I. M. Dunbar, "Evolution of the Social Brain," in *Machiavellian Intelligence II*, ed. Andrew Whiten and Richard W. Byrne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 240–63.
57. That Protestant theologians would be more attentive to social sin than Catholic theologians is not entirely surprising because Protestant theology has, historically, tended to focus more on sin as a condition (that is, sin in the singular) whereas Catholic theology has, historically, tended to focus more on sins as moral acts (that is, sins in the plural). Since social sin, and even structural sin, is more akin to the condition of sin than it is to individual moral acts, Protestant theologians were in a better position to appreciate this phenomenon. See James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 6–12. On the shift from attending to sins as actions to sin as condition in more recent Catholic theology, see Keenan, "Raising Expectations," 166; Darlene Fozard Weaver, "Taking Sin Seriously," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31 (2003): 45–74 at 49–61, doi: 10.1111/1467-9795.00122.
58. See Robert T. Handy, "Walter Rauschenbusch: An Introduction," in *The Social Gospel in America 1870–1920: Gladden, Ely, Rauschenbusch*, ed. Robert T. Handy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 253–63.
59. Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," 184; Cross, "Communal Penance," 285. Existing references to Rauschenbusch in Catholic conversations tend to focus on his notion of the "Kingdom of Evil" as a systemic force opposed to the realization of the Kingdom of God. This presents a problem for the current account of structural sin because the dualistic nature of Rauschenbusch's Kingdom of Evil contradicts the insistence of Catholic theologians that structures of sin can arise from well-intentioned human actions. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 78, 86–87; cf. Baum, "Structures of Sin," 114.
60. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 48.
61. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 47; see also 46, 55.
62. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 69, 71–72. Unlike the Kingdom of Evil, Rauschenbusch granted that these evil forces might operate in otherwise well-intentioned groups, noting, "organizations are rarely formed for avowedly evil ends" (72).
63. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 60; see also 59; cf. Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.27.
64. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 60, 57.
65. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 60, 61.
66. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 62–63.
67. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 66.
68. See Kenneth R. Himes, "Human Failing: The Meanings and Metaphors of Sin," in *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues; Festschrift for James P. Hanigan*, ed. James Keating (New York: Paulist, 2004), 145–61 at 146; Weaver, "Taking Sin Seriously," 62–63.
69. For instance, Finn proposes one typology for "distinguish[ing] good from bad structures of a specific kind" (158), employing the work of Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson on "inclusive" and "extractive" economic structures. He ultimately concludes, however, that Acemoglu and Robinson's work offers "only one of several possible ways of identifying sinful social structures" (161). Finn, "Sinful Social Structures," 158–62.

70. In contrast, Finn notes that a typology based on the work of economists has problems, including its seemingly rosy view of inclusion in a US economy that is increasingly critiqued for its inequalities and exclusions. It therefore requires additional appeals to theological resources like Catholic social teaching to explain why the extractive structures are morally problematic and not just economically inefficient. See Finn, "Sinful Social Structures," 160–61; cf. Kate Ward and Kenneth R. Himes, "'Growing Apart': The Rise of Inequality," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 118–32, doi: 10.1177/0040563913519045.
71. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 348.
72. See, for example, Augustine, *City of God* 14.12–13, 28; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2, q. 84, a. 2 and 2–2, q. 162; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1 *Human Nature* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 186–203.
73. In addition, other theologians have also presented selfishness as a decisive component of structural sin in particular, adding to the theological consistency of the revised definition. See Peter J. Henriot, "Social Sin and Conversion: A Theology for the Church's Social Involvement," in *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes (New York: Paulist, 1989), 217–26 at 220.
74. The most famous example of this concern is Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100–12, doi: 10.1086/485231. See also Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980); Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Times*, ed. Richard Harries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 46–60; cf. Jodie L. Lyon, "Pride and the Symptoms of Sin," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28 (2012): 96–102 at 99–102, doi: 10.2979/jfemistudrel.28.1.96.
75. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965) 26, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. This general definition of the common good is broad enough to incorporate other theological descriptions of the common good, including John Paul II's generic "the good of all and of each" (*SRS* 38) as well as thicker descriptions that emphasize not only just outcomes in social and political arrangements but also equal access to and participation in the processes that lead to these outcomes. See David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 81–83, 190–202.
76. Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 8–9, 18, 82–83.
77. For example, social capital would include a social network that can help an unemployed individual find a job and the sense of trust that allows one to ask a neighbor to watch the kids while he or she runs a quick errand, avoiding the cost of a hired babysitter. For a good overview, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 18–24.
78. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 134–35.
79. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1:212.
80. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1:208; see also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), xxv.
81. Josef Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2001), 29; Weaver, "Taking Sin Seriously," 48, 63, 68–70; Ragazzi, "The Concept of Social Sin," 376–77.
82. See Jean Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69–70.
83. Thus, John Paul II rejected any account of social sin (the broader category for structural sin) that "contrasts social sin and personal sin ... in a way that leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin" (*RP* 16).
84. The most obvious example is Paul Farmer's repackaging of structural sin as "structural violence." Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 8, 40. Farmer does note the theological roots of the idea, and addresses some of the

emphases and methodologies of liberation theology, but his discussion of the theological significance of sin is limited. See 139–45, 300n12.

85. Farmer uses the perspective of structural violence to highlight the deleterious health effects of economic inequalities and a free market for medicines, among other things. Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*, 145–78.
86. See Heyer, “Social Sin and Immigration,” 413, 431; Sievernich, “Social Sin,” 60; Pfeil, “Doctrinal Implications,” 138; Henriot, “Social Sin and Conversion,” 224–25.
87. Jamie T. Phelps, “Joy Came in the Morning Risking Death for Resurrection: Confronting the Evils of Social Sin and Socially Sinful Structures,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 48–64, at 56. This contains echoes of one of Niebuhr’s major claims about collective egotism, for he asserted that while resistance to self-interest was difficult for individuals, it was virtually inconceivable at the group level. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, xxxi–xxxii, 257–59.
88. Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “Introduction,” in *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993), 1; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Introduction,” in *Moral Psychology*, vol. 1, *The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Christian B. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008), xiii–xiv.
89. Joshua D. Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 118–19.
90. For one thing, fMRI studies obviously require participants to make moral judgments about hypothetical situations in a laboratory environment. Although it is not unreasonable to assume that there would be some overlap between the way one reasons about hypothetical moral problems and the way one reasons about actual moral decisions, it is hardly self-evident that this would be the case, and the extent of this overlap is subject to debate. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 100; Stephan Schleim, “Looking for the Basis of Morality: Brain Research Moves from Helping Hand to Moral Authority,” trans. Francis McDonagh, in *Theology, Anthropology and Neuroscience*, ed. Thierry-Marie Courau, Regina Ammicht Quinn, Hille Haker, and Marie-Theres Wacker, *Concilium* 2015/4 (London: SCM, 2015), 49–62 at 55–56.
91. Joshua D. Greene and Jonathan Haidt, “How (and Where) Does Moral Judgment Work?,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6 (2002): 517–23 at 522, 523, doi: 10.1016/S1364-6613(02)02011-9. Subsequent developments in psychology and neuroscience have only further corroborated this claim. Although neither discipline offers a singular account of the role of emotions in decision-making, both affirm a necessary interplay of what Greene and Haidt referred to as affective and cognitive elements. Jennifer S. Lerner, Ye Li, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Karim S. Kassam, “Emotion and Decision Making,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 66 (2015): 799–823, doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115043; Elizabeth A. Phelps, Karolina M. Lempert, and Peter Sokol-Hessner, “Emotion and Decision Making: Multiple Modulatory Neural Circuits,” *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 37 (2014): 263–87, doi: 10.1146/annurev-neuro-071013-014119.
92. See Neil Levy, *Neuroethics: Challenges for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 80–81; Sabine Roeser, *Moral Emotions and Intuitions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 138–50; Diana Fritz Cates, “Conceiving Emotions: Martha Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31 (2003): 325–41 at 326, doi: 10.1111/jore.2003.31.issue-2. One authoritative thinker on this question, Martha Nussbaum, would certainly challenge the notion that emotions are non-cognitive, but in order to assert that they are properly cognitive in their entirety. In contrast, Cates follows Aquinas to assert that emotions have both cognitive and affective elements. For the sake of clarity, some terminological distinction is necessary in order to describe the claims of the fMRI studies

considered here. The language of non-affective and affective processes is arguably closer to Cates's assertions than Nussbaum's, although there is still space for either interpretation since the distinctions used here do not hinge on a final determination of the nature of emotion. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19–88, esp. 23–36, 56–67; cf. Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2009), esp. 62–79. Additionally, the affective parts of the brain still engage in cognitive processes, in the general sense of “information processing,” so a split between affective and cognitive activities is necessarily artificial. See Joshua D. Greene, Leigh E. Nystrom, Andrew D. Engell, John M. Darley, and Jonathan D. Cohen, “The Neural Bases of Cognitive Conflict and Control in Moral Judgment,” *Neuron* 44 (2004): 389–400 at 389, doi: 10.1016/j.neuron.2004.09.027.

93. This is a point that even critics of fMRI studies, like Appiah, are willing to concede. Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 110–11.
94. Craig M. Bennett and Michael B. Miller, “How Reliable Are the Results from Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging?” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1191 (2010): 133–55, esp. 143–45, doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.2010.05446.x. See also Anders Eklund, Thomas E. Nichols, and Hans Knutsson, “Cluster Failure: Why fMRI Inferences for Spatial Extent Have Inflated False-Positive Rates,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* 113 (July 12, 2016): 7900–7905, doi: 10.1073/pnas.1602413113.
95. Bennett and Miller, “How Reliable Are the Results,” 143, 147–48; Craig M. Bennett and Michael B. Miller, “fMRI Reliability: Influences of Task and Experimental Design,” *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience* 23 (2013): 690–702, doi: 10.3758/s13415-013-0195-1.
96. Alex Garnett, Louise Whiteley, Heather Piwowar, Edie Rasmussen, and Judy Illes, “Neuroethics and fMRI: Mapping a Fledgling Relationship,” *PLoS One* 6 (2011): e18537, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0018537>.
97. Edward Vul, Christine Harris, Piotr Winkielman, and Harold Pashler, “Puzzlingly High Correlations in fMRI Studies of Emotion, Personality, and Social Cognition,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 4 (2009): 274–90, doi: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01125.x; Eklund, Nichols, and Knutsson, “Cluster Failure.”
98. The fMRI studies examined here are certainly not immune to these challenges, but they did incorporate practices, like restoring a baseline in each subject between tests and corroborating results through replication studies, which are designed to increase accuracy and minimize the risks of false-positives. See Joshua D. Green, R. Brian Sommerville, Leigh E. Nystrom, John M. Darley, and Jonathan D. Cohen, “An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment,” *Science* 293, no. 5537 (September 14, 2001): 2105–2108 at 2106, 2108, doi: 10.1126/science.1062872; Greene et al., “Neural Bases,” 391–92, 398–99; cf. Bennett and Miller, “How Reliable Are the Results,” esp. 147–50.
99. There is a parallel here to Jeffrey Stout's description of the justification for moral propositions, for he describes “the dependence of justification on epistemic context,” and suggests that when the context changes, one is more or less justified in holding the same proposition. This allows people to make use of the best available resources, but also obligates individuals to be open to the possibility of revision in light of new information. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 27; see also 28–32.
100. Schleim, “Looking for the Basis of Morality,” esp. 49–54; Elizabeth Hildt, “Brain, Morals and Ethics: What is the Connection?” trans. Della Couling, in Courau et al., *Theology, Anthropology and Neuroscience*, 63–71 esp. 66–68.
101. For instance, Neil Messer has suggested that to the extent that moral psychology's fMRI research questions the adequacy of default modes of moral reasoning, it actually serves a theologically useful function, revealing the limits of human-derived ethics and reiterating the need for a divine referent. Neil Messer,

“Cognitive Science, Moral Reasoning, and the Theological Suspicion of Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36 (2016): 51–68 at 60–61, doi: 10.1353/sce.2016.0018.

102. The use of these quandary problems raises another point of contention for fMRI studies of moral judgments, which is that quandary questions do not accurately reflect the kinds of moral judgments people are forced to make in ordinary life. While this is a reasonable objection, quandary-based fMRI studies like Greene’s are the primary source of empirical data at the moment, and they can still reveal important information about how human beings think through moral issues, even if one must remember that they are only the best available data. See Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 193–98.
103. Greene et al., “An fMRI Investigation,” 2105–2106.
104. Greene et al., “An fMRI Investigation,” 2107.
105. Greene and Haidt, “How (and Where),” 517; see also Joshua D. Greene, “From Neural ‘Is’ to Moral ‘Ought’: What Are the Moral Implications of Neuroscientific Moral Psychology?” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 4 (2003): 847–50 at 847, doi: 10.1038/nrn1224.
106. Greene et al., “An fMRI Investigation,” 2107; Greene et al., “The Neural Bases,” 390–91.
107. Greene et al., “The Neural Bases,” 397–98, 389–90; Joshua D. Greene, “Dual-Process Morality and the Personal/Impersonal Distinction: A Reply to McGuire, Langdon, Coltheart, and Mackenzie,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45 (2009): 581–84 at 581.
108. Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–34 at 818–19, doi: 10.1037//0033-295X.108.4.814.
109. Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail,” 819, 822.
110. Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail,” 821; see also Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog Does Learn New Tricks: A Reply to Pizarro and Bloom (2003),” *Psychological Review* 110 (2003): 197–98, doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.110.1.197. Others have made similar claims about the inherent social malleability of moral intuitions. See James Woodward and John Allman, “Moral Intuition: Its Neural Substrates and Normative Significance,” *Journal of Physiology* 101 (2007): 179–202, doi: 10.1016/j.jphysparis.2007.12.003; Levy, *Neuroethics*, 307–11.
111. Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Koller, and Maria G. Dias, “Affect, Culture, and Morality, or Is It Wrong to Eat Your Dog?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993): 613–28, doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.65.4.613. In the study, Haidt and his research team asked subjects in the United States and Brazil to evaluate “morally dumbfound[ing]” questions, which were especially prone to the influence of affective intuitions because they were highly emotional but caused no identifiable moral harm (e.g., cutting up one’s national flag and using the pieces to clean the bathroom).
112. Piercarlo Valdesolo and David DeSteno, “Manipulations of Emotional Context Shape Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Science* 17 (2006): 476–77, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01731.x. Another study manufactured disgust in connection with particular, non-moral words through hypnosis and then asked participants to morally evaluate cases, some of which included their hypnotic trigger words. The result was a greater level of condemnation for the scenarios involving the words they were hypnotized to associate with disgust. Thalia Wheatley and Jonathan Haidt, “Hypnotic Disgust Makes Moral Judgments More Severe,” *Psychological Science* 16 (2005): 780–84, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01614.x.
113. Michael Koenigs, Liane Young, Ralph Adolphs, Daniel Tranel, Fiery Cushman, Marc Hauser, and Antonio Damasio, “Damage to Prefrontal Cortex Increases Utilitarian Moral Judgments,” *Nature* 446 (April 19, 2007): 908–11, doi: 10.1038/nature05631; Elisa Ciaramelli, Michela Muccioli, Elisabetta Làdavas, and Giuseppe di Pellegrino, “Selective Deficit in Personal Moral Judgment Following Damage to Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 2 (2007): 84–92, doi: 10.1093/scan/nsm001; Joshua D. Greene, “Why are VMPFC Patients More Utilitarian? A Dual-Process

Theory of Moral Judgment Explains,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2007): 322–23, doi: 10.1016/j.tics.2007.06.004.

114. Koenigs et al., “Damage to Prefrontal Cortex,” 908; see also Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail,” 824.
115. Of course, one can expect that the frequency with which an intuition will lead to a corresponding action will fluctuate depending on individual variations of character and predisposition to action in general. See Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail,” 824. In addition, this process must not be construed as deterministic, for there is always the possibility of a Rawlsian “reflective equilibrium,” in which the judgments derived from one’s intuitions are themselves subject to moral scrutiny, potentially sparking a new intuition to overrule the first and to prompt a reversal of the judgment. See *ibid.*, 819, 828–29; Haidt, “The Emotional Dog Does Learn New Tricks,” 197; Levy, *Neuroethics*, 282–86; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 18–19.
116. See Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 136–51; Anne E. Patrick, *Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 35–39.
117. Timothy E. O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 88–93; see also Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 131–33.
118. Evolutionary theorists argue that the driving factor in increases in brain size and complexity came from the unique challenges of maintaining intimate social connections (“pairbonding”). Strikingly, brain evolution in primates further adapted this trend for the maintenance of similarly strong relationships between multiple pairs, such that primates’ social brains are uniquely geared toward protecting in-group affinities and not just mating partnerships. Thus, the reward system in the brain that predisposes individuals to the ratification of other’s moral judgments is geared toward more intimate relationships and groups. Robin I. M. Dunbar, “The Social Brain Hypothesis and Its Implications for Social Evolution,” *Annals of Human Biology* 36 (2009): 562–72, doi: 10.1080/03014460902960289.
119. I borrow this term from Kevin Ahern, who describes “structures of grace in opposition to structures of sin.” Kevin Ahern, *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 130; see also 130–36. Robert Doran discusses a similar idea using the language of “social grace.” Robert Doran, “Social Grace and the Mission of the Church,” in *A Realist’s Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph A. Komonchak*, ed. Christopher D. Denny, Patrick J. Hayes, and Nicholas K. Rademacher (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 169–84 at 177–78.
120. Here one must be careful about the ethical implications of using incentives to encourage certain behaviors. Ruth Grant’s work helpfully parses many of these issues and also spells out three criteria for the ethical use of incentives. Grant, *Strings Attached*, 45–59.
121. Thus, Pope Francis appends the title “What Is Happening to Our Common Home” to the first chapter of *Laudato Si’*, which analyzes ongoing environmental degradations. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015) 17–61; see also 156–58, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
122. Jame Schaefer has examined the issue of environmental degradation through the lens of social sin and found that analysis wanting, preferring a moral category of “planetary sin” to highlight the damage of environmental degradation not only to other humans but to the earth itself. While her more encompassing category is helpful for the promotion of moral conversion, the question at stake here is how to identify more precisely the root causes of this damaging collective action. The revised definition is well suited to this task. Cf. Jame Schaefer, “Environmental Degradation, Social Sin, and the Common Good,” in *God, Creation, and Climate Change: A Catholic Response to the Environmental Crisis*, ed. Richard W. Miller (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 69–94 at 76–81.

123. Bill Blakemore, "Who's 'Most to Blame' for Global Warming," *ABC News* (July 22, 2012), <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/technology/2012/07/whos-most-to-blame-for-global-warming/>.
124. While perhaps mundane, this example is not trivial, as transportation is the second largest component of the carbon footprint in the United States, behind only the production of electricity, and transportation in total accounts for nearly one-third of the US footprint. United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Carbon Dioxide Emissions," *EPA.gov* (May 26, 2016), <https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/gases/co2.html>.
125. Richard J. Newman, "SUV to the Stars," *U.S. News and World Report* 133, no. 14 (October 14, 2002), 44. Sport Utility Vehicles burn an estimated 33 percent more gasoline than standard automobiles. See Steve Vanderheiden, "Assessing the Case against the SUV," *Environmental Politics* 15 (2006): 23–40 at 23, doi: 10.1080/09644010500418688.
126. See Juliet B. Schor, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 67–70.
127. First, the emerging environmental movement, which began to gain traction around 2005, included vocal "anti-SUV" campaigns that turned vehicle ownership into a moral issue, thereby undermining the social incentive. Second, gas prices embarked on a steady rise (in inflation adjusted dollars) from 2004–2008, making the use of low-efficiency vehicles like SUVs less affordable, thereby reducing the economic incentive for their ownership. Sarah Pralle, "'I'm Changing the Climate, Ask Me How! The Politics of the Anti-SUV Campaign,'" *Political Science Quarterly* 121 (2006): 397–423 at 406–407, doi: 10.1002/j.1538-165X.2006.tb00576.x; Tim McMahon, "Inflation Adjusted Gasoline Prices," *Inflation Data* (January 2016), <http://inflationdata.com/articles/inflation-adjusted-prices/inflation-adjusted-gasoline-prices/>; see also US Energy Information Administration, "U.S. All Grades All Formulations Retail Gasoline Prices," *United States Department of Energy* (July 25, 2016), https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=pet&s=emm_epm0_pte_nus_dpg&f=a. On the timeline of the shift in SUV purchases, the best data show that sales of trucks, a category that includes large and small SUVs and other low-efficiency vehicles like vans and pickup trucks, peaked in 2004. Auto Alliance, *Cars Move America: State of the Auto Industry* (2016) 19, http://www.autoalliance.org/files/AA_CarsMoveAmerica_Appendix.pdf.
128. This is an important contribution because the victims of environmental degradation are first and foremost those who are already economically, politically, and socially marginalized. They are less likely to have resources to combat the negative impacts of environmental degradation and those who benefit from harmful environmental activities are less likely to see these populations as the victims of their harmful behaviors. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 16, 20, 25, 29–30, 48–49; Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (New York: Orbis, 1997), esp. 107–13; "Flint Was No Accident," *America* 214, no. 5 (February 15, 2016), 5.
129. By promoting this kind of analysis, the revised definition inherently contributes to the process of "conscientization" that theologians stress is an essential prerequisite to the rejection and removal of structural sin. Henriot, "Social Sin and Conversion," 219; Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration," 430, 431–32; Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," 192–93.
130. One of the simplest ways to do this would be a carbon tax, which adds additional costs to goods and services in a manner that matches the social and environmental costs of those goods' and services' carbon footprints. This, in effect, transforms a market externality into an internal component of the price for all goods and services. Shi-Ling Hsu, *The Case for a Carbon Tax: Getting Past Our Hang-Ups to Effective Climate Policy* (Washington, DC: Island, 2011), 15–17, 27. For a theological defense of this policy as consistent with Catholic social teaching, see Daniel R. DiLeo, "Faithful Citizenship in the Age of Climate Change: Why U.S. Catholics Should Advocate for a National Carbon Tax," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 11 (2014): 431–64, doi: 10.5840/jcathsoc20141129.

131. Julie Rubio explains that today, “Parishes provide spiritual nourishment and social interaction but do not ask much of lay Catholics or play a central role in their lives, and most are comfortable with this arrangement.” Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2010), 198.