

# Understanding Sin: Suggestion and Pleasure



Timothy Flanders

In my last piece on this topic a few people pointed out to me a glaring omission. Here I will attempt to remedy this and briefly discuss a few crucial distinctions that we must keep in mind.

## **Suggestion to Sin**

In the last piece, we discussed sources of scrupulosity in pride. While it is true that pride is a strong factor, it is also true that there can be other sources of this malady. Let us consider the seven stages of sin broken down this way:

1. Suggestion
2. Pleasure
3. Consent
4. Act
5. Habit
6. Slavery
7. Spiritual Blindness

Here we will focus on the first three steps. The first step, suggestion, bears upon the distinction between Original Sin and actual sin. Original Sin is a condition, not a moral action. It refers to a darkened intellect, a weakened will, and an inclination to evil. In order to be healed from this wound, all men need the grace of God through Our Lord Jesus. But the crucial point to seize upon here is that a suggestion to sin, stemming from our fallen condition, is not an “actual sin.” In other words, there is no need to go to confession for suggestions to sin. By contrast, as the Baltimore Catechism says: “Actual sin is any willful thought, word, deed, or omission contrary to the law of God” (Question 52).

The crucial difference is in an action of the will. Suggestions to sin are not actions of a man’s will, but happen to him without involvement of his will. We will return to how the will is involved below.

What is the nature of these suggestions? Suggestions are thoughts, emotions, and inclinations that are internal. These are known as *logismoi* among the Greek Fathers. There are three places they come from: the world, the flesh, and the devil. In particular in our flesh, wounded by Original Sin, psychological factors like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder can create an overwhelming inclination toward scruples.

## Healing from Evil Thoughts

There are many factors that can help heal a soul from evil thoughts. One aspect is what we put into our imagination. Evil suggestions can be mitigated by a strict discipline of praying the rosary every day, practicing mental prayer every day, and restricting all evil images (like movies) as much as possible. This helps keep your imagination focused on the things of God and helps to heal this faculty of the pollution of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Especially if you are a man struggling with a severe psychological condition, this healing may take years. But persevere, brother, for our Lord has given His infallible promise: *Come to me, all you that labor, and are burdened, and I will refresh you* (Mt. 11:28).

Another crucial point here is that emotions can also be suggestions to sin. For example, a sudden flare of anger may arise in you and be overwhelming. But still, if your will has not yet acted, you have not sinned. You must learn over time to moderate your emotional life. Emotions arise from our sensual appetites, and Original Sin causes our sensual appetites to overwhelm our souls. As we grow in virtue, we must learn to govern our emotional life with our intellect and will. Again, this takes time.

Additionally, on the level of sensual appetites, it is crucial to fast. The reason is that it curbs our concupiscible appetite, which is attached to impurity, clouding our intellect. St. Thomas observes that the vice of folly, which is opposed to wisdom, is caused primarily by sins of the flesh (S.T. II-II q46 a3). Therefore, fasting can moderate

this sensual appetite, and this also gives great help to healing a darkened intellect.

But most of all, frequent reception of Holy Communion is essential. In this great sacrament, our venial sins are cleansed. In this we also place our trust in the Lord's power and not our own. Overcoming these difficulties requires the cessation of trusting in ourselves and turning all of our trust to God. On the level of suggestions to sin, we must have the humility to see ourselves as disordered but to trust that God is infinitely greater than our worst evil. By ourselves we are sinners, yet with God we can become holy. Scupoli says these two truths — distrust of self and trust in God — are the foundation of the spiritual life (*Spiritual Combat*, ch. 2).

## **Pleasure**

We next move to the second stage of sin, and this is where the distinctions become difficult. This is because under Original Sin, it is difficult to distinguish in our minds when we examine our conscience. This is why, especially with scruples, we must trust in God and not primarily our own intellect when examining our conscience.

Pleasure is something more complex, because we may say pleasure can be found in different faculties and powers of the human soul and body. On the one hand, there is a certain pleasure intellectually, as when a man sees a beautiful array of stars and marvels. This intellectual

pleasure is an immediate apprehension by the intellect of beauty and does not involve the will.

There is also a sensual inclination to pleasure, such as when a man who is hungry sees and smells a delicious plate of his favorite food. His concupiscible appetite is immediately inclined to this pleasure. Still, his will has not yet acted.

In these two examples, we introduce suggestions into our intellect that are not necessarily suggestions to sin. As I emphasized above, even evil suggestions are not actual sins. What makes a sin a sin is always an action of the will. Prummer, following St. Thomas, defines a willful act as “that which proceeds from an internal source of action accompanied by knowledge of the end sought” (20).

So we first have the intellectual pleasure we mentioned, as well as the sensual pleasure inclination. What happens next is that your will makes a choice. You may choose to turn toward the pleasure or turn away. In other words, by our will, we may choose to *continue* to have this pleasure or not. If the pleasure is in something good, then the choice to indulge it is also good. But if that pleasure is in any way evil, then taking pleasure is also evil. As St. Thomas observes, “pleasure in a good action is good and in an evil action, evil” (ST Suppl. q49 a6).

Summing up what we have said so far, the Doctor of Moral Theology explains it this way:

The suggestion is the first bad thought that is presented to the mind: this is no sin, but, when rejected is an occasion of merit. “As often,” says St.

Antonine, “as you resist, you are crowned.” The delectation takes place when the person stops, as it were, to look at the bad thought, which by its pleasing appearance, causes delight. Unless the will consents to it, this delectation is not a mortal sin; but it is a venial sin, and, if not resisted, the soul is in danger of consenting to it: but, when this danger is not proximate, the sin is only venial. (Sermon XLVII)

Thus, the action of the will enters in at the pleasure stage of sin. Here is where we may commit a venial sin by “entertaining” an evil thought: choosing to continue to have pleasure in something sinful. We must note here that St. Alphonsus also states that if this pleasure is against purity, it is not venial, but mortal, since these pleasures lead immediately to consent by a proximate danger.

## **Consent**

Recall that a willful act includes an action of the will and knowledge of the thing sought. Prummer then makes the following distinction: “if the knowledge is intellectual the voluntary act is perfect; if it is sense-knowledge the voluntary act is imperfect” (20). By this we may distinguish between willful pleasure and willful consent. In the former, a soul simply chooses to have more sensual pleasure — normally venial, unless it is against purity. In the latter, he moves his intellect to intentionally pursue this pleasure — this may cause a mortal sin, depending on the gravity of the thing sought. That is why consent is the

final internal stage of sin, which immediately leads to the first external stage: act. This is why our Lord connects the internal sin of adultery with the external, and the internal sin of murder with the external (Mt. 5:21).

In a man's labors under scruples and Original Sin, it is crucial that a soul seek and find a knowledgeable confessor in order to untangle these distinctions to bring clarity and peace to his mind. If no good confessor can be found, seek the support of a spiritually mature and charitable friend. Read the spiritual classics, and practice mental prayer. When tempted to despair, pray the Act of Hope continually. Persevere in prayer, and God will grant you rest from your enemies in due time.

Who can understand sins? from my secret ones cleanse me, O Lord:

And from those of others spare thy servant. If they shall have no dominion over me, then shall I be without spot: and I shall be cleansed from the greatest sin.

And the words of my mouth shall be such as may please: and the meditation of my heart always in thy sight. O Lord, my helper, and my redeemer. (Ps. 18:13–15)

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# Scrupulosity: Pride Disguised as Virtue



Timothy Flanders [August 26, 2019](#)

Prummer defines scrupulosity as “a state of groundless fear rather than the judgment of a sound mind” (no. 144). He identifies the signs of scruples: an excessive anxiety about previous confessions, protracted accusations of irrelevant details, stubbornness that refuses to accept the decisions of the confessor. Scruples affect a soul devoted to God and sensitive to offending Him. Take heart, brother: many saints have struggled as you do.

But know the truth: scrupulosity is the trick of the Devil, who takes your sin and casts fear into your heart. He says you are unforgivable, or that you are such a sinner that you are beyond God’s mercy. Thus, it is often tied with the sin of despair, which is a sin against hope. He even causes you to feel a pleasure, causing you to think this is virtuous. But this is pride.



Why is it pride? Because the tribunal of God says, “I absolve you from your sins.” But you refuse the tribunal of God. You are imagining a tribunal that is higher than God. Who are you to judge God’s own judgment of you? “Be you humbled under the mighty hand of God” (1 Pet. 6) — both in His punishments and His mercies. Do not pridefully exalt yourself above Almighty God. You are not above or beyond God’s mercy, for God’s mercy has been applied to you. Our Lord Jesus shed His Precious Blood to merit for you this mercy. Do not scorn His sufferings on the pretense that you are unworthy. Yes, you are unworthy. But God has made you worthy by the Blood of Jesus Christ.

### ***Scrupulosity Is Trusting in Self and Not in God***

As Scupoli says, the foundation of the spiritual life is distrust of self and trust in God (*Spiritual Combat*). Scrupulosity uses pride to reverse this. It pridefully refuses God’s mercy and causes a soul to trust more in its own thoughts and deliberations than in the power and mercy of God. Besides the pride regarding confession, scrupulosity also manifests itself in a paralyzing anxiety about sin. Scruples causes a man to agonize over the question: did I sin? Was this a sin? Am I sinning?

Stop trusting in yourself. Get out of your head. You are trusting in yourself to know the answer. Instead, follow this strictly and shun every other anxiety:

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you with this prayer: *Come Holy Spirit, enlighten my mind,*

*that I may know the sins that I have committed either by thought, word or deed, and give me the grace of true contrition.*

2. Think as objectively as possible: did I sin? If necessary, ask a trusted friend. A good, objective guide is Prummer. Do not take more than five minutes on this. Set a timer if you need to.
3. Now be silent before God and truly listen. Do not take more than two minutes on this. God will show you the sin, or He will be silent.
4. If you have sinned, immediately use this as an occasion for humility (see below). If He is silent, trust in Him.

This method is based on trusting in God's mercy. God "will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4), and again, "every one that shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32). Trust in these promises from God. If He is silent, trust that you have not sinned, and continue as before. If you have sinned, He will show you, because He desires your salvation.

### **Use Every Fall for Humility, Not Pride**

If you have fallen into sin, the demons will rush at you to cast fear and anxiety into your heart. Instead of succumbing to their pride and despair, humble yourself.

Recognize your utter dependence upon God's grace to overcome this, and pray, in the words of Scupoli:

WHEN YOU REALIZE that you have been wounded by sin, whether through weakness or malice, do not lose your courage or become panic-stricken. Turn to God with a great and humble confidence saying: "See, O Master, what I am able to do. When I rely on my own strength, I commit nothing but sins."

Meditating on this, recognize the extent of your humiliation and express to our Lord your sorrow for the offense committed. With an unperturbed heart, indict your vicious passions, especially the one that has occasioned your fall, and confess: "O Lord, I would not have stopped at this had not Your goodness restrained me."

Give thanks to God, and more than ever give to Him the complete love of your heart. What generosity on His part! You have offended Him, and, despite this, He extends His hand to prevent another fall (*Spiritual Combat*, ch. 26).

The Enemy wishes to make you fall, and then by scrupulosity to increase your pride and blindness and reliance on yourself. Reject his machinations. If you fall, use the occasion for a greater humility and greater dependence upon God. Your sin was caused by trusting in yourself. Turn your trust away from yourself, therefore, and trust in God. *You must thank God that He has prevented a greater fall.* Maintain your peace, and run to confession.

## **Despair is a Sin against Hope**

St. Thomas defines despair as a sin against hope. Despair is “conforming our mind to a false opinion about God” (ST II q10 a1). Another name for a false opinion about God is a heresy. What is this false opinion? It is that God will refuse pardon to the repentant sinner. On the contrary, St. Thomas quotes Ez. 18:23: “I desire not the death of the sinner, but that he should be converted, and live.”

Therefore, you must ask God to strengthen the virtue of hope within you. Shun despair by praying the Act of Hope until you believe these words through and through: “O God, relying on Thy almighty promises and the infinite merits of Christ, I hope to obtain remission of my sins and everlasting happiness with Thee. In this hope I intend to live and die.”

**Fear and anxiety are from the demons. Peace is from union with God.**

It vital to understand that God does not cast paralyzing fear or anxiety into your heart. This is the work of demons. This fear causes you to focus on yourself and trust in your own wisdom. True fear of Lord is the beginning of true wisdom because it brings forth humility. Humility causes a man to focus on God and distrust Himself. Therefore, reject all paralyzing fear and anxiety as from the demons. Utilize sacramentals and trust in God’s power and not your own. Realize that anxiety is evidence of attachment to creatures, and renounce all

attachments and love suffering. Know that peace is the fruit of charity, which is union with God (ST II-II q29 a3). Strive with all your energy to maintain your peace, because this means maintaining your union with God. Peace will come after much suffering. “Cast thy care upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee: he shall not suffer the just to waver for ever” (Ps. 54:23).