



The Effects of Sin upon Human Moral Cognition

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Abstract

This article provides an elaborate defense of the thesis that we have no reason to think that sin has any direct effects upon our moral cognition. After a few methodological comments and conceptual distinctions, the author treats certain biblical passages on humans' evil hearts, the function of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2 and 3, Paul's comments on the moral situation of the Gentiles in Romans 2, and Paul's ideas on the Gentiles' futility of mind as found in Ephesians 4. The most that can be concluded from these passages is that sin has not damaged human moral cognitive faculties to such an extent that they function insufficiently to hold people morally responsible. The author also argues that it is a consequence of sin that humans have knowledge by acquaintance of sin, and that it is only by divine revelation that humans recognize certain morally reprehensible acts, beliefs, and emotions as sinful. Finally, it is briefly argued that we have good reason to think that sin has certain *indirect* effects upon our moral cognition.

Keywords

sin, good, evil, cognition, knowledge, natural law

Introduction

In this article I will give an account of what sin has done and still does to our cognition of good and evil; that is, to our moral cognition. There might be many more cognitive consequences of sin. Perhaps sin also affects our cognition of God, that of ourselves, that of other human beings, that of concrete material entities, and that of all sorts of abstract immaterial entities. Here, however, I will confine myself to the consequences of sin for our cognition of good and evil.¹

¹ For my view on the effects of sin upon our cognition of God, see my "Sin and Human Cognition of God," forthcoming in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. For my view on the effects

This paper is organized as follows. After some preliminary remarks on methodology and terminology, I discuss some biblical statements about the human heart, taking into account that the biblical concept of 'heart' has not merely emotional and existential, but, as is widely acknowledged, cognitive aspects as well. Next, I deal with the Genesis story of the fall of Adam and Eve and especially with the key function of the so-called 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' in this narrative. The name of this tree suggests that sin has (had) certain consequences for our cognitive grasp of good and evil. Is this merely a suggestion, and, if not, what exactly *are* those consequences? I will also examine the idea, often derived from Romans 2, that God has written a natural ethical law in the hearts of human beings and see to what extent this law, given the presence of sin in our lives, still provides us with reliable moral beliefs. Next, I discuss Ephesians 4: 17-19, a passage that resembles Romans 1 in significant respects. Subsequently, I turn to the issue of our cognition of sin itself: what has sin done to our awareness of our sinfulness and our cognition of particular sins of ours? At the end of this article, the reader will find some concluding thoughts.

Preliminaries

In this section I will respectively briefly comment on the methodology that I employ and offer some conceptual clarification of the notions of sin, consequences of sin, cognition, and knowledge.

Methodology. Before turning to more substantial issues, let me say something about the methodology that I employ. My approach will be orthodox in that I will take the canonical books of the Bible to be divinely inspired and authoritative.² Thus, I believe that the Bible contains divine revelation of things that otherwise we would not know.³ For this reason, I will do some biblical exegesis in this paper, but it will be a narrow exegesis in the sense that I do not intend to offer a full-blown exegesis of the text. Rather, I will focus on those parts of it that seem to provide an answer to the question of what we should consider as the effects of sin for our moral cognition. Also, I will not take any official church documents or writings of theologians to be authoritative. Here, I will defend neither of these claims, since I do not have

of sin upon our cognition of material objects, abstract objects, and other people, see my "The Consequences of Sin for Human Cognition of the World," unpublished manuscript.

² Cf. 2 Tim. 3: 16; 2 Pet. 1: 21.

³ Cf. Acts 17: 11; Rom. 15: 4.

space enough to satisfactorily deal with these profound and highly disputed issues. All this does not mean that those who believe that God reveals himself in the tradition of the church cannot agree with the conclusions I draw. Rather, it means that there may be additional theses about the noetic effects of sin that they will be willing to defend. In what follows, I will confine myself to a few biblical passages: Genesis 2 and 3, Romans 2, and Ephesians 4. These seem to be the key texts when it comes to the effects of sin for moral cognition; the few other texts from the Bible that claim or imply something on this topic do not say anything different or additional.

Sin. The word 'sin' can refer to at least two different things that are closely related to each other.⁴ On the one hand, there seem to be *specific sins*, such as sinful words, desires, emotions, and deeds, whether overt or concealed, whether individual (those of some particular human being) or collective (those of, say, a family or a nation). I think this kind of sin can be characterized as follows. First, it is something evil, something contrary to the will or word or law⁵ of God,⁶ something which is not the way it is supposed—supposed by God—to be, a deviation from divine laws or norms.⁷ Second, specific sins have agents as their subjects. This means that a natural evil, such as a devastating earthquake killing several thousands of people, although obviously something evil, is not a sin.⁸

On the other hand, there seems to be the more general situation of being sinful, being in a sinful state, in a word *sin as condition*. Even if at some time

⁴ For the distinction that I make here—that between sin as act and sin as condition—see also Eberhard Jüngel, *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens: Eine theologische Studie in ökumenischer Absicht* (Tübingen: Siebeck, 1999), 78, 97, and Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 102-27.

⁵ Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics), Parts 3 and 4 (Kampen: Kok, 1998), 121-3.

⁶ There are some biblical passages that deal with sin against other human beings rather than sin directly against God (see, for example, 1 Sam. 2: 25, Amos 1, and Mat. 18: 21). I will take it that there are indeed such things as sins against one's fellow creatures, but that these sins are always somehow contrary to the will (norms, laws) of God—which is why they are genuine sins—and, therefore, offensive to God.

⁷ Thus also 1 Jn. 3: 4 and 1 Jn. 5: 17.

⁸ Here, I will not go into the vexing issue of whether someone's doing something of which she believes that it is objectively sinful makes doing that thing a sin, whether or not it is in fact contrary to the will of God. For this issue, see Richard Swinburne, "Original Sinfulness," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 27 (1985), 238, and Cornelius Jr. Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 20.

a human being does not perform certain sins she might have a weaker or stronger inclination to perform those sins and her heart and mind may very well be directed toward evil⁹ or toward her own desires, instead of being directed toward God's will and, thereby, toward the good. According to the Bible, this is not only possibly but actually the case: the very hearts of human beings are corrupted by sin. In this sense, even if one does not continuously perform sinful acts, sin can be ubiquitous in one's life.¹⁰ The apostle Paul even personifies sin (usually ἁμαρτία) by depicting it as our master and as an enslaving power to whom we are subjected.¹¹

In this article, I will not take a stance on the highly controversial issues of whether there has been a historical fall and whether there is such a thing as original sin and/or original guilt. Rather, I will investigate what we should consider as the consequences of sin for our moral cognition, whether they issue from a temporally first human sin or not.

Consequences of sin. By 'consequences of sin' I mean those actualized states of affairs that would not have been actualized if there had not been such a thing as sin (where I take it that there are negative states of affairs, such as, say, one's *not* knowing that God exists).

Now, it seems that we can distinguish between three different kinds of consequences of sin. Rather than attempting to define these three categories, I will, for each category, provide some examples of what have been claimed to be the relevant consequences of sin. First, sin may be taken to have certain *existential* consequences, such as our separation from God, the loss of paradisiacal life, having a strong and inborn inclination to do evil, the loss of free will in spiritual affairs, our bodies' being mortal, and eternal death. Second, sin may be thought to have *affective* consequences. Thus, we often envy our neighbors and friends, we are inclined to hate God, we love ourselves more than our brothers and sisters, and we are sometimes proud, egocentric, and arrogant. Third and finally, sin may have had *cognitive* consequences: we do not know God in the same way as we used to know him, people's knowledge of good and evil has been distorted, and we usually rate our own accomplishments much higher than those of others.¹² Again, I do not claim that sin *has*

⁹ Cf. Gen. 8: 21; Prov. 20: 9; Jer. 17: 9.

¹⁰ Cf. Robin C. Cover and E.P. Sanders, "Sin, Sinners," in David N. Freedman a.o. (eds.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 32-3.

¹¹ See Rom. 5: 21; 6: 12,17, 19; 7: 14.

¹² The distinction between affective and cognitive consequences of sin is also made by, for instance, René van Woudenberg, "Over de noëtische gevolgen van de zonde: Een filosofische beschouwing (On the Noetic Effects of Sin: A Philosophical Survey)," *Nederlands Theologisch*

these cognitive effects. I only want to point out that it is this kind of possible effects that we can rightly consider as cognitive consequences.

These three kinds of consequences are related to and intertwined with each other in several interesting ways, and it is, therefore, hard, if not impossible, to make clear-cut distinctions between them. For example, according to some theologians, the image of God (*imago Dei*), in which human beings were created, has been damaged or even destroyed by sin. But the image of God involves elements from all three categories, and it seems difficult to state to which category each of these elements belongs. However, one should be careful not to conclude from this that really there are no distinctions between them. It does not seem possible to clearly define when day turns into night and *vice versa* or where precisely on the color spectrum blue turns into purple or the other way around, but it would be mistaken to conclude from this that there are no such things as day and night, or blue and purple.

Cognition and knowledge. Cognitive consequences, obviously, concern our cognition. But what do we mean by 'cognition'? I think we can roughly define this term as follows: human cognition is the entirety of human beings' states of mind vis-à-vis the world, both the world inside and the world outside of them. States of mind are such things as, what are called, the three doxastic attitudes: beliefs, disbeliefs, and withholdings, but also wishes, hopes, knowledge, ignorance, suspicions, doubts, understanding, etc. Many of these, such as doubts and beliefs, are often accompanied by certain emotions, and others, such as wishes and hopes, perhaps always. Again, it does not follow from these relations that no distinction can be made between cognitive and affective consequences.

Now, as it seems to me, sin can affect our cognition in at least three different ways. First, sin can have done something (including complete obliteration) to our *cognitive faculties*. By a 'cognitive faculty' I mean a mental mechanism that has a certain input—beliefs, visual perception, bodily sensation, etc.—and a doxastic output; that is, certain beliefs, disbeliefs, or withholdings of both belief and disbelief. Thus, cognitive faculties are such things as one's belief producing faculties that are based on perception, one's grasp of what good and evil amount to, one's ability to know what is sinful and what is not, etc. In this way we might have lost certain cognitive faculties or our cognitive faculties might be damaged, so that false moral beliefs or false beliefs about the nature of God are produced by them. Second, sin might have removed

and perhaps still removes *specific knowledge*, or disbeliefs, or ignorance. In this way we might have lost the belief that God exists, acquired knowledge by acquaintance of good and evil, and perhaps even lost beliefs that we, in our current fallen state, cannot conceive of. Third, it might be that, because of certain affective consequences of sin, our noetic faculties are *directed* toward things that they should not be directed toward, or not directed toward things that they should be directed toward. And this might have significant consequences for the scope of our beliefs.

Now, one of the crucial concepts with regard to our cognition is 'knowledge.' I would think that everyone has some intuitive grasp of what it means for someone to have knowledge, a grasp sufficient for present purposes. What is of more importance in this context than an epistemologically precise analysis of knowledge is the distinction between three kinds of knowledge. First, there is such a thing as *propositional knowledge*; i.e., knowledge that some proposition is true. Knowing that one's wife is at home and that 88 is not a prime number belong to this class of knowledge. Many an epistemologist, though, would agree that, in addition to this one, two other categories of knowledge can be distinguished. First, there seems to be such a thing as *procedural knowledge*—knowledge of how to do something, how to perform some task. Here are a few examples: knowing how to drive a car, knowing how to open a wine bottle, and knowing how to genuinely love someone else. Second, it looks like there is such a thing as *knowledge by acquaintance*—knowing a certain object, whether personal or impersonal. In this way, one can know the triune God, but also one's spouse, and the taste of pomegranates. In discussing the cognitive consequences of sin, it is important to keep these different kinds of knowledge in mind.¹³

Evil Hearts

First, let us pay some attention to certain biblical passages about the evil hearts of humans. The biblical words for 'heart'—*לֵב* or *לִבָּב* and *καρδία*—can be translated as 'heart,' but, depending on the context, also as 'mind' or

¹³ One may object that this distinction cannot properly be applied to the biblical concept of knowledge since the biblical concept of knowledge is much more relational than our modern, purely mental concept of knowledge. I think this objection is mistaken: in the Bible, we clearly find instances of propositional knowledge (e.g., Deut. 4: 35; Ps. 135: 5; Lk. 21: 20; Rev. 3: 17), knowledge by acquaintance (e.g., Ex. 1: 8; Jer. 15: 14; Jn. 4: 10; 2 Cor. 12: 2), and procedural or practical knowledge (e.g., Gen. 25: 27, 1 Sam. 16: 18; Isa. 29: 1; Jer. 1: 6).

‘consciousness.’ This is because the Hebrew concept of the human heart has many different aspects. Generally, words such as לֵבָב and καρδία denote the inner life of a person, sometimes focusing on his or her emotions, sometimes on her virtues or vices, sometimes on her cognitive life, sometimes on the person’s will, and sometimes on the person as a whole.¹⁴

Let me offer some examples in support of this claim. God’s heart can be filled with pain,¹⁵ one should not hate one’s brother in one’s heart,¹⁶ and the disciples’ hearts are filled with grief.¹⁷ Here, one’s heart seems to be the seat of one’s emotions. Next, one’s heart can become proud,¹⁸ wisdom can enter one’s heart,¹⁹ and one’s heart can be pure.²⁰ In such cases, one’s heart seems to be the source or the place of one’s virtues or vices. Also, one’s heart can stand for one’s entire being, as in 1 Samuel 7: 3, where Samuel asks the people to return to the LORD with their hearts, and in 2 Kings 23: 25, where Josiah turns to the LORD with all his heart.

As I already said, there is also a cognitive side to the biblical concept of ‘heart.’ One should fix God’s words in one’s heart,²¹ Solomon asks for a discerning heart,²² the fool says in his heart that there is no God,²³ the poet of Psalms 19 speaks about the meditation of his heart,²⁴ man has plans in his heart,²⁵ in one’s heart (NIV: “thoughts”) one will ponder the former terror,²⁶ one can understand the thoughts of one’s heart²⁷ or think something in one’s

¹⁴ Cf. Alex Luc, Art. “לֵבָב,” in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 2 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 749: “In the OT, the words [לֵבָב and לֵבָבָה; RP] have a dominant metaphorical use in reference to the center of human psychological and spiritual life, to the entire inner life of a person” and Alexander Sand, Art. “καρδία,” in Horst Balz und Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. II (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1981), 616: “κ. [καρδία; RP] meint das Innere des Menschen, den Sitz von Verstand, Erkenntnis und Wille, gewinnt aber auch die Bedeutung von Gewissen.”

¹⁵ Gen. 6: 6.

¹⁶ Lev. 19: 17.

¹⁷ Jn. 16: 6.

¹⁸ Deut. 8: 14; Lk. 1: 51.

¹⁹ Prov. 2: 10.

²⁰ 1 Tim 1: 5.

²¹ Deut. 11: 18.

²² 1 Kgs. 3: 9,12.

²³ Ps. 14: 1.

²⁴ Ps. 19: 14.

²⁵ Prov. 16: 1; 19: 21.

²⁶ Isa. 33: 18.

²⁷ Dan. 2: 30.

heart.²⁸ The disciples doubt in their hearts²⁹ (NIV: “minds”) and the author of Hebrews urges on the readers of his letter to let their hearts be cleansed from a guilty conscience.³⁰ Again, I do not contend that in these cases the word ‘heart’ is used *merely* cognitively. I only claim that in cases like these, there clearly is a cognitive side to the concept of heart.

Now, there are a few passages in the Bible that speak of man’s heart’s being evil, wicked, deceitful, and so on. If there is a cognitive side to the human heart, so one might reason, then these passages may quite well tell us something about the consequences of sin for our moral cognition. I think there are only four passages that are relevant in this regard: (1) “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination (יָצָר) of the thoughts (מַחְשְׁבֹת) of his heart was only evil all the time.”³¹ (2) “The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.’”³² (3) “The heart is deceitful (עָקָב) above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”³³ (4) “For out of the heart come evil thoughts (διαλογισμοὶ πονηροί), murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”³⁴

However, I think these passages do not provide us with any information on the cognitive consequences of sin for our (lack of) moral knowledge. The texts from Genesis 6 and 8 concern immoral behavior (‘wickedness on earth’; see also the immoral kind of behavior described in the mythic passage Genesis 6: 1-4), but Genesis 6: 5 also speaks of man’s *מַחְשְׁבֹת*, that is, his thoughts, his devices, his inventions.³⁵ Apparently, man’s plans, his ideas about what to do and what to undertake, were evil.³⁶ I am not sure whether this falls within the cognitive domain, but it is at least closely related to it and surely it is a consequence of sin. It is, however, *not* a consequence of sin *for our cognition of good and evil*. Rather, it is a consequence of sin for the plans humans make: they sometimes plan to do things that are clearly evil in God’s eyes. This does not tell us anything about our cognition of good and evil. According to

²⁸ Mk. 2: 8; Lk. 5: 22.

²⁹ Lk. 24: 38.

³⁰ Heb. 10: 22.

³¹ Gen. 6: 5.

³² Gen. 8: 21.

³³ Jer. 17: 9.

³⁴ Mat. 15: 19; cf. Mk. 7: 21.

³⁵ Cf. Ex. 35: 33,35; Ps. 33: 11; Isa. 55: 8.

³⁶ Cf. Ps. 94: 11.

Jeremiah, the human heart is עֵקֶב (that is, deceitful, difficult, or insidious). This might contain some sort of cognitive aspect (the subsequent lines are: “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind (. . .)”), but, clearly, it does not tell us anything about our moral knowledge in a sinful world. Finally, according to Mark—and Matthew agrees with him—διαλογισμοὶ πονηροὶ come out of the human heart. Naturally, this is a consequence of sin, but, again, there is no reason to think that these διαλογισμοὶ involve beliefs about what is good or evil. Hence, these texts do not tell or imply anything about the effects of sin upon our moral knowledge.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

One of the few biblical pericopes that seem to explicitly mention cognition of good and evil in relation to sin and the fall is Genesis 2-3, especially where it portrays the so-called ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’ It is a *communis opinio* among biblical scholars nowadays that Genesis 1-3 are not meant as an historical account of what happened at the dawn of the cosmos and at the birth of humanity. It does not follow from this, of course, that these chapters are not intended to convey certain important truths to us. Hence, if there has never been such a thing as a material spatiotemporally located tree of the knowledge of good and evil, this does not mean that Genesis 2 and 3 do not tell us substantial things about what took or takes place when humans sinned or sin against their creator. Let us, therefore, take stock of this intriguing recital and see what, if anything, it teaches us about the consequences of human sin for our moral cognition.

Genesis 1 describes how God creates a world that is very good (טוב מְאֹד).³⁷ Genesis 2 proceeds to explain that there are two trees in the middle of the garden that God has created: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (עֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע).³⁸ Then, God gives permission to Adam and, as turns out later on, Eve, to eat from any tree in the garden they want to, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they eat from this tree, they will surely die. Subsequently, the serpent seduces the woman by saying that Adam and Eve eat from it, their eyes will be opened (וְנִפְקְחוּ עֵינֵיהֶם),

³⁷ Gen. 1: 31.

³⁸ Gen. 2: 9. Given the fact that דַּעַת is the inf. constr. of יָדַע, a better translation would be: ‘the tree of knowing good and evil.’ In what follows I will, for practical reasons, stick with the worn rendering by ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’

and they will be like God in knowing good and evil (יִדְעֵי טוֹב וְרָע).³⁹ Eve looks at the tree and sees that its fruits are desirable for gaining wisdom (לְהַשְׂכִּיל).⁴⁰ As soon as both Eve and Adam have eaten from the tree, their eyes are indeed opened (וּתְפַקְחָנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם), and they realize (וַיֵּדְעוּ) that they are naked.⁴¹ All this is not only Adam's and Eve's perception of what has happened. According to the author of these chapters, after these events, God says that man has become like one of him (literally: "The man has now become like one of us"; פָּאָחַד מִמֶּנּוּ), knowing—or: in order to know (לְדַעַת)—good and evil.⁴²

Now, how should we interpret these passages? What is meant by this (עַץ דַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע) and what, if anything, does it tell us about the consequences of sin for our moral cognition?⁴³ In what follows I will discuss four interpretations, the first three of which have received considerable attention in the literature.

First, one might think of this tree as introducing the knowledge of sexual relations, sexual conscience, so to say, that is, one might interpret the tree as aphrodisiac. In support of this view, its adherents, such as Albert, Greszmann, and Gunkel refer to the fact that right after the fall Adam and Eve realize that they are naked and make coverings for themselves⁴⁴ and to the fact that יָדַע is also widely used to denote sexual relations. Hence, one of the cognitive consequences of sin would be the acquisition of knowledge about sexuality. As I see it, at least four data count against this view. First, as Genesis 2: 24 suggests, it is a normal and good thing for man and wife to have sexual intercourse: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The fact that this statement follows right after Genesis 2: 23 confirms the idea that sexuality belongs to the (good) created order.⁴⁵ Second, several scriptural passages evaluate sexuality

³⁹ Gen. 3: 5.

⁴⁰ Gen. 3: 6.

⁴¹ Gen. 3: 7.

⁴² Gen. 3: 22.

⁴³ This problem is especially hard to solve since—in opposition to the tree of life—no references to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil have been found in the myths of the Ancient Near Eastern people surrounding Israel. Moreover, Genesis 2 and 3 are the only biblical passages in which this tree is mentioned (cf. Theodorus Ch. Vriezen, *Onderzoek naar de paradijsvoorstelling bij de oude Semietische volken* (An Inquiry into the Ancient Semitic Conception of Paradise) (Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen, 1937), 58, 85, 118, 143).

⁴⁴ See Gen. 3: 7; cf. 2: 25.

⁴⁵ These two verses read as follows: "The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

positively as being a divine gift,⁴⁶ this in opposition to eating from the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is clearly presented as an instance of sin. Third, in the story God's commanding Adam not to eat from the tree occurs prior to his creating Eve, which intimates that the knowledge of good and evil that this tree conveys is not knowledge of sexual relations. Fourth and finally, this idea contradicts Genesis 3: 22, where God says: "The man has become like one of us (בְּאָחָד מִמֶּנּוּ), knowing good and evil,"⁴⁷ for God does not have experiential knowledge, i.e., knowledge by acquaintance, of sexual relations, nor do the celestial beings that surround him.

Second, **דַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע** has been interpreted as a merism, expressing some sort of universal, divine, and secret knowledge. According to Wallace, "'good and evil' can best be understood as a merism indicating a comprehensive extent of knowledge which includes various concepts of maturity, with sexual, intellectual, and social implications."⁴⁸ This thesis has also been supported by Von Rad, Vriezen, and Wellhausen. In defense of this view, some of its adherents appeal to Genesis 24: 50, 31: 4, Numbers 24: 13, Deuteronomy 1: 39, 2 Samuel 14: 17, and Jonah 4: 11. Each of these texts includes the expression **טוֹב וְרָע** and is thought to denote some sort of entirety. Those of these texts that make mention of the *knowledge* of good and evil, so they claim, indicate some kind of universal knowledge.

It is Vriezen who has given the most detailed account of this second option.⁴⁹ He starts out by making a distinction between texts in which **דַּעַת** is complemented by an accusative and texts in which it is construed with **בֵּין לְ**. The latter construction can be found in 2 Samuel 19: 35 (**הַיָּדַעַת בֵּין־טוֹב לְרָע**), Jonah 4: 11 (**לֹא־יָדַעַת בֵּין־יְמִינוֹ לְשְׂמֹאלוֹ**) and expresses the ability to distinguish between good and evil.⁵⁰ The former construction can be found in Deuteronomy 1: 39 (**לֹא־יָדַעוּ הַיּוֹם טוֹב וְרָע**) and is a merism expressing universal, mature knowledge. In Deuteronomy 1 knowing good and evil means knowing everything and not knowing good and evil means knowing nothing. In

⁴⁶ See, for example, Gen. 1: 28, Prov. 5: 18,19, pretty much the entirety of Cant, and 1 Cor. 7: 4-5.

⁴⁷ Cf. Gen. 3: 5.

⁴⁸ Howard N. Wallace, "Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life," in David N. Freedman a.o. (eds.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 656-60. Cf. W.H. Gispen, *Genesis*, Commentaar op het Oude Testament, Vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1974), 107-11.

⁴⁹ See Vriezen, *Onderzoek*, 142-8.

⁵⁰ A similar construction can be found in Isaiah 7: 15: "He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right" (**חִמָּה וְדָבַשׁ יֹאכַל לְדַעְתּוֹ מֵאֹס בָּרַע**) (ובָּחֹר בְּטוֹב).

this regard the construction of יָדַע with טוֹב וְרָע is like the construction of יָדַע with 'laying down or getting up' (וּבְקוֹמָהּ וּבְשֹׁכְבָהּ) ⁵¹ or 'small or great' (לְאִי קָטָן אִו גָּדוֹל) (לְאִי יָדַע [...]). ⁵² Other texts, such as Genesis 31: 24, confirm the idea that, in the absence of בֵּין לְ, טוֹב וְרָע can be used as a merism. That the original meaning can be changed in a construction with בֵּין לְ is also true of cognate verbs, such as הִבִּין (normally: 'have insight into'), ⁵³ בָּקַר (normally: 'to look at'), ⁵⁴ שָׁמַע (normally: 'to listen'), ⁵⁵ and רָאָה (normally: 'to see'). ⁵⁶ In 2 Samuel 14: 17 the woman from Tekoa does not appeal to David's ability to distinguish between good and evil because she has already acknowledged that her son is a murderer, but to the fact that the king knows everything (cf. the parallel expression in 2 Samuel 14: 20: לְדַעַת אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר בְּאָרְץ). Also, as Vriezen rightly points out, it is characteristic of the divine being to encompass good and evil. ⁵⁷ According to Vriezen, Genesis 2-3, therefore, has to be placed in the context of magic: man is not allowed to acquire forbidden divine or transcendental knowledge that he does not yet have. ⁵⁸ Hence, the tree of knowledge gives one universal, absolute, divine knowledge. The acquisition of this knowledge yields shame, as in Job 42: 6. ⁵⁹

A version of this second view, adhered to by, among others, Claus Westermann and Gordon Wenham, has it that the relevant knowledge is divine wisdom. And this divine wisdom is a kind of knowledge which man should not aspire to acquire. ⁶⁰

⁵¹ Gen. 19: 33,35.

⁵² 1 Sam. 22: 15.

⁵³ 1 Kgs. 3: 9.

⁵⁴ Lev. 27: 33.

⁵⁵ Deut. 1: 16.

⁵⁶ Mal. 3: 18.

⁵⁷ See Lam. 3: 38, Job 2: 10, Jer. 42: 6, and Isa. 45: 7. For its negation by the godless, see Zeph. 1: 12.

⁵⁸ Cf. 1 Sam. 15: 23; Isa. 47: 7-12.

⁵⁹ Van Selms remarks in this context that man by his fall has come to know his nakedness and that his knowledge will grow without there being, in principle, any limits to his knowledge (see also Gen. 11: 6). That is why God institutes death as a punishment. See A. van Selms, *Genesis*, Vol. 1, *De prediking van het Oude Testament* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1984), 76.

⁶⁰ Cf. Job 15: 7-9; 40; Prov. 30: 1-4; Ezek. 28: 15-17. For this view, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, *Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament*, Vol. 1 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), 334-7, Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 1. (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 63-4, and Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 205-7. Another version of this view has it that the knowledge of good and evil consists in a full possession of mental and physical powers. For this idea, see E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 26.

According to others, this second view is unconvincing, primarily because there does not seem to be a genuine distinction between the use of ידע complemented by an accusative and construed with בִּין לָ. As Oosterhoff, for instance, sees it, the texts that adherents of the second view appeal to are utterly inconclusive in support of the thesis that דַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע is a merism for universal knowledge.⁶¹ The main idea is that in Genesis 3 'to know good and evil' means to choose, to decide, to determine what is good and what is evil. It is true that sometimes ידע means 'to choose', especially if it concerns God's election of certain people,⁶² but, according to Oosterhoff, ידע is also used with this meaning in the context of good and evil: "Let us discern for ourselves what is right" (נִדְעָה בֵּינֵנוּ מֵה־טוֹב).⁶³ In support of the view that ידע sometimes means 'to choose' or 'to elect' Oosterhoff also points to Hosea 13: 5, Amos 3: 2, and the use of γινώσκω in John 10: 27. He especially singles out Isaiah 7: 15,16: "He (the son of the virgin; RP) will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right (לְדַעְתּוֹ מָאוֹס בָּרַע וּבָחֹר בְּטוֹב). But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste." The concepts of good and evil often have an ethical-judicial meaning and are synonyms of 'justice' and 'injustice.'⁶⁴ In response to the question of what, on this interpretation, is meant in Genesis 3: 6 by לְהַשְׁכִּיל, Oosterhoff answers that *hif'il* שָׁכַל means not only 'to gain wisdom' or 'to cause to have insight,' but also 'to prosper' or 'to have success.'⁶⁵

⁶¹ As Oosterhoff sees it, there is no reason to think that in Genesis 24: 50, 31: 24, Numbers 24: 13, and 2 Samuel 14: 17, טוֹב וְרָע is used as a merism, expressing some kind of universal knowledge. In Genesis 24: 50 Laban and Bethuel seem to say that they can say nothing *ad negativum* or *ad positivum*, not that they cannot say anything at all about Abraham's servant's choice in favor of Rebekah. God's word in Genesis 31: 24 does not mean that Laban is not allowed to say anything, but that he is not allowed to subject Jacob to his own will by using kind or unkind words. Numbers 24: 13 suggests not that Balaam cannot do anything, but that he cannot do anything that is either pernicious or salutary for Israel. Nothing in 2 Samuel 14: 17, 20 suggests that these two phrases are meant to express the same idea; David might quite well be like an angel in two different regards. The context even shows that they probably mean something different: moral wisdom in v. 17 (because of David's wisdom with regard to the case of the woman from Tekoa) and insight into the political situation in v. 20 (because of David's insight into the motives of Joab and this woman from Tekoa).

⁶² See Gen. 18: 19; Jer. 1: 5.

⁶³ Job 34: 4.

⁶⁴ Cf. 1 Kgs. 3: 9; Isa. 5: 20; Amos 5: 14-15; Mic. 3: 2.

⁶⁵ Cf. Josh. 1: 7; 1 Sam. 18: 5. For this view, see especially B.J. Oosterhoff, *Hoe lezen wij Genesis 2 en 3? Een hermeneutische studie* (How Do We Read Genesis 2 and 3? A Hermeneutical Study) (Kampen: Kok, 1972). See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. IV (New York:

A fourth and final option would be to say that before their fall Adam and Eve did not have any moral knowledge in the strict sense of the word at all, whereas they did after the fall, or, alternatively, that the fact that humans have moral knowledge, i.e., knowledge that, say, act *X* is morally good, whereas another act *Y* is morally reprehensible, is due to the presence of sin in the world we live in. A line of thought which is close to this claims that sin has brought about human's moral conscience (it might in fact be identical to the former view; it is often not clear what is meant by this thesis). On this interpretation, 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' means just what it literally says: by eating from this tree, one acquires knowledge about what is good and what is wrong. As we will see below, there is some truth to the view that sin has had consequences of our knowledge of at least evil. However, as the above comparison with other passages in which the expression *דעת טוב ורע* occurs show, it is clear that the Hebrew author(s) of Genesis 2-3 did not mean to say that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil literally confers knowledge of moral good and evil. Also, as Marguerite Shuster rightly points out, the narrative presumes that Adam and Eve had moral conscience; otherwise, it is hard to say how they could have been genuinely disobedient.⁶⁶

As we have seen already, the first line of interpretation is seriously wanting. There is, therefore, no reason to think that due to sin man has acquired sexual knowledge, whether propositional knowledge, procedural knowledge, or knowledge by acquaintance. If the third option is correct, it does not seem to imply that the fall had certain cognitive consequences, except for the acquisition of the belief that one should determine for oneself what is good and what is evil (I will return to this below). The second interpretation, i.e., the idea that *דעת טוב ורע* is a merism expressing universal knowledge is quite complex. For, obviously, by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil man did *not* acquire divine universal knowledge (omniscience), nor

Benziger Brothers, 1948), 1857-8 (ST IIaIIae, Q.163, art. 2): "But the first man sinned chiefly by coveting God's likeness, as regards *knowledge of good and evil*, according to the serpent's instigation, namely that by his own natural power he might decide what was good, and what was evil for him to do," John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 118, Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics), Parts 3 and 4 (Kampen: Kok, 1998), 6ff, H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 121, Gerhard Von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis*, Das Alte Testament Deutsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 63, and Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 165-6.

⁶⁶ Cf. Shuster, *The Fall*, 20. The view that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil merely confers moral knowledge is also rejected by Wenham, *Genesis*, 63.

anything like it. One might reply that since the fall humans have *started* to acquire universal knowledge, but that they cannot complete this project, since right after the fall God introduces death as a punishment. This response, however, fails to take notice of the specific non-historical literary genre of the Genesis story of creation and the fall. For was it really the author's intention to put forward the view that the fall into sin consisted (consists) in the attempt to acquire universal divine knowledge and that this at least partly succeeded (succeeds)? Or was his aim, rather, to explain that the first human sin consisted (consists) in the desire to be like God and to warn man that he should not try to commit the same sin by attempting to acquire transcendental knowledge by way of magic? The latter seems to me to be the more plausible interpretation. Hence, the *וְרָע טוֹב דָּעַת* in Genesis 2 and 3 does not tell us much about the cognitive consequences of sin. We can draw the conclusion that the first interpretation of *וְרָע טוֹב דָּעַת* is unconvincing and that the second and third interpretations, both of which are at least somewhat plausible, do not tell us anything about the cognitive consequences of the fall.

Still, there is something about the cognitive consequences for our moral cognition that can be derived from this passage (and others). Assume that there has indeed been a historical fall as a result of a rebellion in time against God which brought about the entrance of sin—a kind of moral evil—in this world. Then, obviously, it is a cognitive consequence of sin that because of sin man came to know sin, i.e., came to be acquainted with the phenomenon of sin. But something similar is true if there has not been a historical fall. Then as well humans are acquainted with moral evil because of the presence of sin. Thus, the fourth view is correct in that, if there had been no such thing as sin, then people would not have known what it is to sin and to be confronted with the sins of others.

Natural Law

In the first and second chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul writes extensively about the moral lives of humans, especially those of the Gentiles (τὰ ἔθνη). Paul describes in some detail the abominable sins committed by humans, mostly illicit sexual activities, in 1: 26,27,29-31 and he goes on to say in 1: 32 that they do these things and even approve of others who do the same, although they know of (or acknowledge, ἐπιγινόντες) God's decree (ordinance, τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ θεοῦ) that those who practice such things deserve death (lit-

erally, 'are worthy of death').⁶⁷ Here, δικαίωμα seems to mean something like God's 'righteous judgment.'⁶⁸ This idea is further developed in 2: 14-15:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

One should realize that this passage follows after a couple of verses, in which Paul states that those who have the law, viz. the Jews, will be judged by the standard of the law, that is, the Torah, while those who do not have the law will not be judged by the Mosaic law. This naturally raises the question of what the basis is on which they are judged and it is in vv. 14-16 that Paul answers this question: the Gentiles are judged by the law—or, more precisely, the work or the requirements of the law, τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου—that is written on their hearts (γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν) instead of the written Torah. What counts is not having the written law in one's possession, but practicing the requirements of the law that are written on one's heart. Only those who keep the law are rewarded or justified (declared righteous); hearing the law is not salvific by itself.

One might ask, however, who precisely these Gentiles are supposed to be. Are they unbelievers or, rather, born again Christians from Gentile origin that do not have the Torah? The answer to this question is crucial for our discussion of the effects of sin for our moral cognition. For, if τὰ ἔθνη are born again Christians, then their moral cognition—the law written on their hearts—need not be an unscathed natural law, but might very well be the knowledge of good and evil restored by the internal healing work of the Holy Spirit.

There are at least two data that seem to count in favor of the interpretation that has it that Paul talks about Christians from pagan origin. First, γάρ seems to link v. 14 to the last clause of v. 13, which says that those who keep the

⁶⁷ Cf. 6: 23.

⁶⁸ δικαίωμα has a whole range of different, but closely related meanings. First, it can refer to the 'requirements of the law'; see τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου in 2: 26 and τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου in 8: 4. See also Luke 1: 6 and Hebrews 9: 1,10. Second, it can mean 'justification,' as it does in Romans 5: 16,18. Third, in Revelation 15: 4 it means God's 'righteous acts' (τὰ δικαιώματά) and in 19: 8 it means the 'righteous acts' of the saints (τὰ δικαιώματα τῶν ἁγίων). In our text, none of these meanings seem to make sense of the text, although its meaning in our text is related to the first and third meanings.

law will be declared righteous, that is, justified. Then Paul goes on to describe the obedience of τὰ ἔθνη, to the law, although it is a law written on their hearts. Hence, τὰ ἔθνη are declared righteous. And, given the rest of Paul's doctrine of justification, this implies that they must have faith in God. If they do not have the written law, they must be Christians from pagan origin. Second, τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν seems to allude to Jeremiah 31: 33 which concerns the people of God's new covenant.⁶⁹ Hence, τὰ ἔθνη denotes Christians from pagan origin. It has been objected to this view that it would be out of place to talk of Gentile Christians doing the law 'by nature' (φύσει). A reply to this might be that this seeming stumbling block can be removed by linking φύσει with ἔχοντα, which it succeeds, rather than with ποιῶσιν. This amounts to reading this phrase as "when Gentiles, who do not have the law *by birth*, do things required by the law." Here, we do not need to take a stance on this issue; both readings are compatible with the interpretation I adhere to.

As Schreiner justly explains, however, the view that τὰ ἔθνη denotes Gentiles rather than born again Christians from Gentile origin is to be preferred for at least four reasons.⁷⁰

First, γάρ rather seems to join v. 14 to v. 13a than to v. 13b. The main idea that Paul puts forward in vv. 14-15 is that, although the Gentiles do not have the written law, they occasionally keep the law and, thereby, are a law to themselves. Vv. 14-15 confirm the thought that the Jews' having the written law is of no salvific advantage to them, for those who do not have the written law, know the law because it is written on their hearts. Hearing the law is of no specific salvific advantage, for so do the Gentiles, although they do not have a written version of the law (and they even keep the law from time to time).

Second, there is no good reason to think that v. 15 is an allusion to Jeremiah 31: 33 (LXX: 38: 33). In the latter text God says that he will put the law in his people's minds (נְתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְקִרְבָּם) and write it *on* their hearts (וְעָלֶי־לִבָּם אֶכְתָּבָנָהּ, LXX: ἐπὶ καρδίας αὐτῶν γράψω αὐτούς) whereas in our verse, Paul says that the *works*, that is, the commands, of the law are written

⁶⁹ This text reads as follows: וְעָלֶי־לִבָּם אֶכְתָּבָנָהּ. LXX (38: 33) renders the last part of this verse as follows: καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίας αὐτῶν γράψω αὐτούς.

⁷⁰ For an elaborate statement of some of the following arguments, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 121-4. See also James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 98ff, and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1996), 149ff.

in their hearts (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν); cf. v. 14: τὰ τοῦ νόμου, **τις ἡ ψυχή**), i.e., the moral things that the Mosaic law requires of them,⁷¹ without making an explicit reference to God's saving work for his people.

Third, it would be unusual to say that Christians from Gentile origin are a law to themselves (ἑαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμος). Christians are able to keep (some) requirements of the law because, as Paul explains, it is the Holy Spirit who enables them to do that (see Romans 2: 26-29; 8: 4). What Paul says fits much better with a view, according to which natural law has been written on the hearts of Gentiles. This is confirmed by Paul's reference to the Gentiles' conscience (συνείδησις), which bears witness (συμμαρτυρούσης). Often it condemns, sometimes it approves the behavior practiced by these Gentiles (that they do not occur in the same frequency is suggested by the placement of the conjunction ἢ καί between κατηγορούντων and ἀπολογουμένων).

Fourth and finally, we should realize that vv. 14-15 give a further explanation of v. 12, in which Paul says that those who sin under the law will be judged (κριθήσονται) by the law, whereas those who sin apart from the law will perish (ἀπολοῦνται) apart from the law. ἀπόλλυμι in Paul usually refers to eternal punishment.⁷² It would be inappropriate for Paul to suggest that Christians from Gentile origin will perish apart from the law.

But more reasons could be added to these four reasons provided by Schreiner. Fifth, the second interpretation is in accordance with Romans 1: 32: "Although they [pagans; RP] know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." Both this text and our text explain that the Gentiles are conscious of certain moral norms. 1: 32 emphasizes the fact that it does not follow from this that they keep the law, whereas 2: 14-15 points out that this knowledge sometimes results in a life which is in accordance with the law. Sixth, according to 2: 9, "[t]here will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the gentile." Vv. 9-10 talk about humanity in general (πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου) which can

⁷¹ It does not seem to make sense of the text to say that the Gentiles kept the cultic or societal laws that are part of the Mosaic law (and the same applies to Christians from Gentile origin).

⁷² Cf. 1 Cor. 15: 18; 2 Cor. 2: 15; 2 Thes. 2: 10. Here, I will not try to untangle the difficulties concerning the relationship between v. 15 and v. 16. My personal view is that v. 15 describes the present situation, whereas ἐν ἡμέρᾳ in v. 16 is an eschatological expression. In v. 16 Paul returns to his main line of thought, but the connection to the preceding verse is somewhat confusing.

be split up in Jews (Ἰουδαίου) and Greeks (Ἕλληνας). The passage on the Gentiles with the laws written on their hearts follows almost right after this. Seventh and finally, in Paul's writings, the plural ἔθνη is often the New Testament equivalent for the Hebrew עַמִּים, and is, therefore, to be rendered as 'pagans.'⁷³ Among the cases in which ἔθνη is evidently used to denote pagans are Romans 1: 5,13, 2: 24, 3: 29, 4: 17, and 9: 24, texts that directly surround Romans 2: 14 (and I would be willing to add that in all other instances of the use of ἔθνη in the letter to the Romans, except for Romans 16: 4, this word is most accurately rendered by 'Gentiles').⁷⁴

What should we conclude from this pericope? First, it is clear from Romans 2 that pagans do have a certain moral knowledge (even a knowledge of God's moral commandments), a knowledge which is sufficient for God's holding them responsible for their (im)moral behavior.⁷⁵ Second, expressions such as φύσει, ἑαυτοῖς εἰσὶν νόμος, τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, and συμμαρτυροῦσης αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως strongly suggest that it is *not* by some sort of divine grace which makes the consequences of sin undone, but simply by nature, by the way they have been created, that they know (at least partly) what is good and what is evil. Third, this passage implies neither that man's knowledge of moral precepts is undamaged and complete, nor that it is damaged and incomplete: it just does not tell us any such thing. As a matter of fact, this text does not tell us anything positive about the moral consequences of sin; it only tells us that sin has not effaced our moral cognition to such an extent that we are completely at loss concerning what is good and what is evil.⁷⁶ It is important to point this out, since according to certain theologians, it is only by divine grace that people still hold true beliefs about good and evil. The problem with this view is that Paul states that the Gentiles are a law to themselves; God's having written his law

⁷³ Thus also Nikolaus Walter, "ἔθνος," in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. I (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980), 925-6.

⁷⁴ For similar defenses of the view that Paul here refers to Gentiles rather than Christians from Gentile origin, see Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999), 64.

⁷⁵ This is also widely acknowledged in several church documents. See, for instance, the Canons of Dordt, III/IV.4.

⁷⁶ As Stephen Grabill rightly remarks, it is also the view of 16th and 17th century Protestant theologians, such as John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Jerome Zanchi, Johannes Althusius, and Francis Turretin, that man's natural human faculties still function sufficiently to discover what is morally good and what is morally evil (cf. Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 49).

on their hearts seems to be a natural constitution. This is why in this pericope Paul makes no reference whatsoever to God's grace.

Futility of Mind

Ephesians 4: 17-19 is another passage which on the face of it might seem relevant for understanding the cognitive consequences of sin. The ideas put forward in this passage are strongly similar to those that we find in Romans 1: 19-32.⁷⁷ The relevant verses from Ephesians 4 run as follows:

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses τὰ ἔθνη both to refer to unbelievers (2: 11, 3: 8) and to Christians from pagan origin (3: 1,6), although in certain cases this distinction is somewhat artificial. In the above passage, however, τὰ ἔθνη clearly denotes unbelieving pagans:⁷⁸ they are separated from the life of God and act in accordance with that.⁷⁹ Now, according to the apostle, these Gentiles act in the futility of their mind (ἐν ματαιότητι τοῦ νοῦς αὐτῶν), they are darkened in their understanding (ἐσκοτωμένοι τῇ διανοίᾳ ὄντες), and they are filled with ignorance (ἄγνοια). These expressions give rise to three questions. First, do these expressions (including words such as νοῦς, διάνοια, and ἄγνοια) tell us something about the *cognitive lives* of pagans? Second, if so, do they say anything about the consequences of *sin* for their cognitive

⁷⁷ Most of these similarities are pointed out by A. van Roon, *De Brief van Paulus aan de Efeziërs* (The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians), *De prediking van het Nieuwe Testament* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1976), 111-2.

⁷⁸ This is also why some manuscripts read τὰ λοιπὰ ἔθνη.

⁷⁹ Cf. 2:3: "All of us also lived among them [our sins; RP] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts." This is precisely what Paul says the Ephesians should *not* do: the Ephesians are taught to put off their old self to be made new in the attitude of their minds (vv. 22-23), they are to live a life of righteousness and holiness which is worthy of God's calling (5: 9,27). The apostle explicitly says: "but among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." (5: 3)

lives? And third, if so, do they convey information about the consequences of sin for the Gentiles' cognition of *good and evil*?

As to the first question, it is widely agreed that νοῦς, διάνοια, and ἄγνοια refer to something at least partially intellectual, epistemic, or cognitive.⁸⁰ νοῦς stands for the thinking spirit. This word has a broad meaning, but it seems to include at least man's mind.⁸¹ διάνοια stands for the discursive mind. Here it is to be understood in contradistinction to the enlightened eyes of the believers' hearts (1: 18).⁸² ἄγνοια stands for culpable ignorance, that is, failing to know something or someone because of one's own fault.

This brings us to the second question. Paul makes mention of the Gentiles' hardening of their heart. Hardening one's heart is a common biblical theme that occurs in such passages as Exodus 7: 13, Deuteronomy 2: 30, 2 Chronicles 36: 13, Daniel 5: 20, and Mark 6: 52.⁸³ The fact that the Gentiles are separated from God is due to their ignorance and their ignorance on its turn is due to their hardening their hearts. Although the hardening of one's heart in the Bible is sometimes brought about by God himself, it is always presented as an instance of sin for which one is accountable.⁸⁴

Hence, it is crucial what these Gentiles are ignorant about, in what regard their understanding has been darkened, and what part of their thinking has become futile. V. 19 describes the immoral behavior of the Gentiles, especially their sexual perversity. This might lead one to the conclusion that the Gentiles' ignorance amounts to a lack of knowledge about what is good and evil. However, there is no reason to think that this passage tells us anything

⁸⁰ Thus, for instance, F.W. Grosheide, *De brief van Paulus aan de Efeziërs* (The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians) (Kampen: Kok, 1960), 70-1.

⁸¹ Thus also T.K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1979), 129: "νοῦς includes both the intellectual and practical side of reason, except where there is some ground for giving prominence to one or the other in particular. Here we have both sides, ἐσκοτωμένοι referring to the intellectual, ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι to the practical."

⁸² As is rightly noticed by Joachim Gnilka, *Der Epheserbrief*, Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 1971), 223.

⁸³ Related to this is the theme of having a stubborn heart; see, for example, Psalm 81: 12, and Jeremiah 3: 17, 11: 8, and 13: 10.

⁸⁴ Thus also Franz Mussner, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagsanstalt, 1982), 134, Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 278, and L. Floor, *Efeziërs. Eén in Christus*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 163.

about pagan *moral* cognition.⁸⁵ The futility or nothingness (ματαιότης) of Gentile thinking might very well concern their worship of idols.⁸⁶ A similar thought can be found in Acts 14: 15: “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things (ἀπὸ τούτων τῶν ματαίων) to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.” ἄγνοια seems to concern God: the Gentiles are ignorant of God,⁸⁷ both propositionally and experientially, they do not know him or, at least, they hardly know anything about him. A similar thought is put forward by Peter when he writes: “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance (ἐν τῇ ἀγνοίᾳ ὑμῶν ἐπιθυμίαις).”⁸⁸ It is clear from the context that in this verse Peter makes reference to the ignorance of his addressees concerning God and his grace in Jesus Christ when they had not heard of it.⁸⁹

Cognition of Sin

Obviously, it is a consequence of the presence of sin in our lives that we are *acquainted with* sin, that is, that we have *experiential knowledge* of sin. If there had not been such a thing as sin, we would not know in the experiential sense what sin is, although, for all I know, we might have known propositionally what sin is. However, it does not follow from this that we, in our *status corruptionis*, know of every thing whether it is sinful or not. Even if our cognition of good and evil has in no way been corrupted by sin, it does not follow that we recognize acts and/or conditions as sinful.

⁸⁵ Pace Lincoln, who fails to substantiate his claim that ματαιότης denotes among others “the emptiness, folly, and ultimate pointlessness that has affected the Gentiles’ faculty of intellectual *and moral perception*.” [italics mine].

⁸⁶ Van Roon, *Efeziërs*, 112, reasons along the same lines.

⁸⁷ Thus also Markus Barth, *Ephesians. Chapters 4-6*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 526, Van Roon, *Efeziërs*, 112, Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 277, Michel Bouttier, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Ephésiens*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1991), 206-7, and Floor, *Efeziërs*, 162-3.

⁸⁸ 1 Pet. 1: 14.

⁸⁹ Therefore, Ephesians 1: 17-18 resembles Colossians 1: 21: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds (ἐχθροὺς τῇ διανοίᾳ) because of your evil behavior.” Here also, there is a serious deficiency in the gentiles’ mind because of a separation from God, which results in immoral behavior. The difference, however, is that the deficiency in the latter text is not merely an absence of knowledge, but an active hatred toward God.

One might, however, lodge an objection against this alleged observation along the following lines. In the preliminaries, we defined sin in such a way that every moral evil is a sin, given the fact that every moral evil is contrary to the will of God. But if that is true, then humans have at least knowledge of *some* sins, viz. those that are morally evil acts. Hence, if our moral knowledge is still intact, we have at least partial knowledge of sin(s). Well, this seems right to me, but it simply does not follow from this that we know that those things are sins. Knowing James, who is Matthew's nephew, does not imply knowing that James is Matthew's nephew (even James himself might fail to know this). Obviously, humans in this world know sins in the sense that they are acquainted with them and, so I would say on both empirical and biblical grounds, whether religious or irreligious, they recognize many of these sins as moral evils. However, that entails nothing concerning the extent to which humans in a sinful state recognize those moral evils as sins, that is, as things that are contrary to the will of God. Hence, the question at hand is: what does sin do to our knowledge of something's or someone's being sinful or not?⁹⁰

The biblical texts most often cited in this connection are Romans 3: 20 and some verses from Romans 7. The former of these reads as follows: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."⁹¹ In the preceding vv. 9-18, Paul has argued that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin in the sense that they are both unrighteous by leading immoral and impious lives, although the latter, in contradistinction to the former, do not have the written law. Therefore, all deserve to be judged and condemned. And in the lines following v. 20 Paul explains that there is righteousness apart from the law, by having faith in Jesus Christ, (or, according to some, by the faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ). By this faith both Jews and Gentiles will be justified. Paul relates that rather than bringing righteousness, it is by the law (*διὰ νόμου*) that we become conscious of or get to know sin (*ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας*).

One might interpret this verse in two different ways. On the one hand, one might say that this passage means that the law reveals sin, either the fact that we are under sin (*ὕφ' ἁμαρτίαν*), as Paul has it in v. 9, or our concrete

⁹⁰ This question, as Gestrich rightly observes, should not be mistaken for the question of whether humans can (fully) understand sin: "Wir haben von der Frage, ob ein Mensch seine eigene Sünde konkret *erkennt*, die Frage zu unterscheiden, ob ein Mensch Sünde *verstehen* kann." (Christof Gestrich, *Die Wiederkehr des Glanzes in der Welt. Die christliche Lehre von der Sünde und ihrer Vergebung in gegenwärtiger Verantwortung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), 196).

⁹¹ Cf. Ps. 143: 2; LXX Ps. 142: 12: *ὅτι οὐ δικαιοθήσεται ἐνώπιόν σου πᾶς ζῶν.*

and particular sins.⁹² On the other, one might contend that, as in 1: 28, 10: 2, Philippians 1: 9, Philemon 6, ἐπίγνωσις is a practical, experiential knowledge in the sense that the law arouses sin.⁹³ An idea similar to the latter can be found in Romans 7: 5,7-8,13:⁹⁴

For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. (...) What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from the law, sin is dead. (...) Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Here, Paul says that the law arouses, provokes, exacerbates, or stimulates (ἐνθρηγῆτο) sinful passions (τὰ παθήματα τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν) and illustrates this by his response to the command not to covet. The idea that the law foments sin is also found in 5: 20a: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase."⁹⁵ Not that the law is sinful in itself; as Paul insists, sin employs the Mosaic law to accomplish its own ends.

I think that we find two distinct ideas in these passages.⁹⁶ On the one hand, we encounter the idea that the law *provokes* sin⁹⁷ and on the other we

⁹² For the former interpretation, see S. Greijdanus, *De brief van den apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Rome* (The Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Congregation of Rome), *Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament* (Amsterdam: Van Bottenburg, 1933), 179. The function of the law to reveal sin has traditionally been called the *usus elencticus legis*.

⁹³ Thus, for instance Heinrich Schlier, *Der Römerbrief*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 101: "Diese Aussage liegt auf derselben Linie wie die von 4,15; 5,20; 7,8; Gal 3:19; 2 Kor 3: 6ff. Das geht an unserer Stelle auch aus dem Zusammenhang hervor. Denn die Aussage, dass niemand aus Leistungen gegenüber dem Gesetz gerechtfertigt wird, wäre durch die Behauptung, das Gesetz lehre die Sünde bloss erkennen, nicht begründet. Dagegen hat es Sinn, zu sagen: Niemand wird durch Gesetzesleistungen gerechtfertigt. Das hat seinen Grund darin, dass das Gesetz das Gegenteil bewirkt. Es lässt die Sünde zur Erfahrung werden, es ruft die Sünde hervor."

⁹⁴ I will keep aloof from many traditional exegetical cruxes, such as the question of whether the subject in Romans 7 concerns the unbeliever or the reborn Christian, since they are not strictly relevant to our purposes here.

⁹⁵ This interpretation can also be found in Greijdanus, *Rome*, 320.

⁹⁶ Cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 366. See also A.F.N. Lekkerkerker, *De Brief van Paulus aan de Romeinen I*, *De Prediking van het Nieuwe Testament* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1962), 297.

⁹⁷ Rom 5: 20a; 7: 5,13.

run into the thought that the law *reveals* sin in the sense that it shows us our sinful state or even particular sins of ours.⁹⁸ The latter point is crucial here. In the above passage from Romans 7, Paul says that he would not have known (ἔγνων) sin apart from the law. By way of example he makes mention of the fact that he would not have known (ἤδειν) what coveting really was apart from the law's command not to covet.⁹⁹ This does not mean that if he had not read the law's command not to covet, he would not have violated the tenth commandment; but rather, that if he had been unaware of this command, he would not have experienced his coveting as something contrary to the will of God (perhaps not even as something wrong).¹⁰⁰ This is what Paul seems to say in 3: 20. ἐπιγινώσκω can refer to experiential knowing, but it never has the meaning of 'to arouse' or 'to provoke.' In Romans 3: 20, the idea seems to be that nobody is justified by doing the law,¹⁰¹ because the law itself shows us that we transgress the law of God, more clearly than if we did not have the law (notice the line of reasoning: by the expression διὰ γὰρ it is clear that the subordinate clause offers the reason for the fact that nobody is justified by the law).¹⁰² We find the same idea in 5: 13: "for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law." And in 4: 15 Paul says that where there is no law, there is no transgression (παράβασις)—which, obviously, does not mean that there was no sin.

The idea that Paul seems to put forward here is that we would not have known that we are sinful and that particular acts of ours are sins if we had not had scripture or, slightly more generally, if we had not had special revelation.¹⁰³ The view that it is only by special revelation that we come to know

⁹⁸ Rom. 3: 20; 7: 7.

⁹⁹ As Schreiner, *Romans*, 366, correctly remarks, there is no reason to distinguish here the meaning of γινώσκειν from that of οἶδα; it is not the case that the former indicates experiential, empirical knowledge, whereas the latter indicates theoretical or intuitive knowledge.

¹⁰⁰ According to Dunn, *Romans*, 379, "[t]he starkness of Paul's description of how the law actually functions should not be weakened to a "being made aware that he covets", but he fails to elaborate a plausible alternative.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Gal. 2: 16.

¹⁰² Cf. Herman Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen* (To the Romans), Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 80, and Schreiner, *Romans*, 169, 172.

¹⁰³ Thus also Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 339, and Haacker, *Römer*, 142. See especially Moo, *Romans*, 210: "Knowledge of sin," on the other hand, does not simply mean that the law defines it; rather, what is meant is that the law gives to people an understanding of "sin" (singular) as a power that holds everyone in bondage and brings guilt and condemnation. The law presents people with the demand of God. In our constant failure to attain the goal of that demand, we recognize ourselves to be sinners and justly condemned for our failures." According to the Heidelberg Catechism it is by (the

our deplorable state *coram Deo* as sinful human beings has also been defended by, for instance, Karl Barth and Eberhard Jüngel.¹⁰⁴ It does not follow from this that if there had not been special divine revelation, we would have lost all or most of our moral knowledge. What *does* follow is that of most sins we would not have known that they are sins and we would not consider ourselves as sinful because we would not be inclined to relate our acts, words, deeds, and being to God, our creator and redeemer (as Paul argues in Romans 1). Hence, knowing sin presupposes a relationship or an encounter with God, issuing in a certain knowledge of God, and given the absence of such knowledge without some special revelation we would not recognize sin as sin.¹⁰⁵

Epilogue

In the second section of this paper, I distinguished three ways in which sin could possibly affect our moral cognition. As we saw, there is no reason to think that sin has taken away or seriously damaged certain moral cognitive faculties or to think that sin has removed or given rise to specific moral beliefs.¹⁰⁶ Biblical passages concerning the evil hearts of humans, Genesis 2 and 3, and Ephesians 4 do not tell us anything about the effects of sin upon our moral cognition. Ephesians 4: 17-19 even implies that sin has not (at least not significantly) impaired our moral cognitive mechanisms. It *is* a consequence of sin that we have knowledge by acquaintance of sin, but in order to know that certain of our acts are sinful, we seem to depend on special divine revelation.

preaching of) the law that we get to know better our sinful state (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 115). Here, I will bypass the perennial question of whether sin is revealed by the law, the gospel, or both the law and the gospel (and in which order). For an extensive treatment of this topic, see Ernst Kinder and Klaus Händler, *Gesetz und Evangelium: Beiträge zur gegenwärtigen theologischen Diskussion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968).

¹⁰⁴ See respectively Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. IV.1: *Die Lehre von der Veröhnung* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1953), 395ff, and Jüngel, *Evangelium*, 79-82.

¹⁰⁵ Thus also Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christelijk geloof. Een inleiding tot de geloofsleer* (Christian Faith: An Introduction to Dogmatics) (Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach, 1973), 204: "Dat wij enige kennis hebben van de atmosfeer van de zonde waarin wij ademen, komt dus doordat wij in de ontmoeting met God een maatstaf van buitenaf aangereikt hebben gekregen. Zondekennis is geloofskennis."

¹⁰⁶ The opposite view is adhered to by a wide variety of theologians. For just one example, see Calvin in *Inst.* II.ii.12.

But what about the third option: has sin distorted our *direction* of thinking, so that we acquire beliefs about moral issues that we should not pay attention to (or at least not to that extent) or so that we fail to acquire beliefs about moral issues that we should pay attention to (or at least more than we do)? I do not find any reason to think so. It may well be that, as a result of sin, we are strongly inclined to focus on the moral obligations others are subject to, without paying any attention to our own moral obligations, so that the former tend to play a much more prominent role in the decisions we make than the latter. If this is true, however, our decisions and, hence, our actions will suffer from the consequences of sin rather than our beliefs about what is good or evil.

Then, should we conclude that we do not have any reason to think that sin affects our moral cognition *in any way at all*? I think we should be careful not to draw this conclusion. A young German boy who is a member of the *Hitler Jugend* and seriously indoctrinated by Nazi ideology, may genuinely believe that Jews are morally inferior to Arians. His belief may well be the result of sin in the sense that he acquired it from Nazi propaganda, which sprouted from deep-seated hatred and jealousy. It may even be the case that one can make oneself acquire or maintain all sorts of false moral beliefs by engaging in a series of sinful actions. If this is the case, however, we should notice that our moral cognition is only *indirectly* affected by sin; what comes first are certain reprehensible desires and intentions and certain sinful actions performed on the basis of those desires and intentions. Hence, the main thesis of this paper should be qualified as follows: there is no reason to think that sin has *direct* effects on our moral cognition, in the way sin may have direct effects on, say, our emotions or our knowledge of God. I cannot think of any philosophical reasons to think the opposite and, as we saw, neither does the Bible provide a reason to disagree with this thesis. What the Bible *does* say is that God holds people accountable for how they lead their lives, since, whether they have the written law or not, God has written his moral precepts in their hearts. That humans know by nature what is good and evil, of course, does not imply that they act in accordance with this knowledge. Nor does it imply that they do not: our knowledge of good and evil is often fruitfully exerted in the spheres of law, economics, politics, ethics, etc.

Let me offer one more comment on the main thesis that I have tried to defend. I do not claim that sin has no direct effects upon our moral cognition. I *do* claim that *we have no reason to think* that it does. Thus, my main thesis is an epistemological rather than an ontological one. It may be that, for example, sin has removed certain moral beliefs, but that there is no way we can

know which those beliefs are. What this means for our attitude vis-à-vis our own moral cognitive faculties is a difficult philosophical and theological issue the treatment of which has to await another occasion.

In this article I have attempted to avoid any substantial comparison with and evaluation of accounts of the effects of sin for our moral cognition that we find in the writings of certain theologians and official church documents. I hope that the above provides a good starting point for such a project.