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Structures of Virtue and Vice

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Abstract

The paper argues for new concepts in theological ethics: structures of virtue and structures of vice. The Catholic tradition's development of the 'structures of sin' in the 1970's and 80's was a significant contribution to magisterial teaching. However, this concept should be updated in light of the trajectory and concepts of post-Vatican II theological ethics. The article proceeds in two parts. Part one recapitulates the development of the concept of structures of sin in the Catholic tradition from the Second Vatican Council to Pope Benedict XVI's recent social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*. Part two reflects on the findings of part one, and proceeds to define and defend the concepts structure of virtue and structures of vice. These related concepts more accurately capture the moral nature of social structures. Social structures have the capacity to produce just or unjust outcomes, and to play a significant role in the character formation of persons. Therefore, the structures of virtue and structures of vice are offered as insightful ways of discussing the moral status of social structures.

Keywords

Justice, Sin, Structure, Vice, Virtue

The sin-inducing effects of economic, political, and social structures have been a topic in theological ethics for over forty years. A diverse group of scholars have addressed the issue, including Latin American liberation theologians, popes, and American and European moral theologians. Collectively these thinkers articulated a new concept; the structures of sin.[1] While this concept is a valuable addition to theological ethics insofar as it helps to elucidate institutional sinfulness, it is in need of updating. In particular, it needs to be situated

[1] See Marciano Vidal 'Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?', in Raphael Gallagher and Brendan McConvery, eds., *History and Conscience: Studies in Honour of Father Sean O'Riodan, CSsR* (NewYork: Gill and Macmillan, 1989), pp. 181–198.

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within the larger field of contemporary Catholic ethics. Currently the concept does not bear the marks of significant developments within Catholic ethics post-Vatican II: the renewed focus on positive moral growth, and the retrieval of virtue as a central ethical methodology.[2]

In order to incorporate the insights of virtue ethics into a moral evaluation of social structures this article proposes and develops the concepts of structures of virtue and structures of vice. The article defends the thesis that the structures of virtue and structures of vice are more accurate than 'structures of sin' in capturing the moral quality of social structures. Part one of the article recapitulates the theological development of the structures of sin. The second part defines, and argues for the concepts of structures of virtue and structures of vice.

The Development of 'Structures of Sin'

The seeds for a social analysis of sin and its effects were present in the church's first social encyclical, *Rerum novarum.* Following the classical political tradition, Pope Leo XIII insisted that society's purpose is to make men virtuous.[3] However, industrialization, coupled with breakdown of the guild system led to the poverty of the masses, and "a general moral deterioration." Leo proposed that civil society once was lifted up to better things by Christian values, and that again society could be cured by a return to Christian institutions.[4] The connection between human virtue and social institutions was at the core of Leo's argument for the construction of a more just economy. Just economic institutions, he reasoned, would help to form virtuous persons.

The general connection between society, and human action and character largely went undeveloped in the church until Vatican II. Margaret Pfeil notes that some of the council fathers explicitly rejected the use of the concept of "social sin" in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*.[5] Instead, the Council made sporadic, but important, mentions of the moral influence of

[2] See James Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: Fundamental Moral Theology at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century', *Theological Studies* 67 (2006), pp. 99–119, at p. 111. See also Gerard Mannion, "After the Council: Transformations in the Shape of Moral Theology and 'the Church to Come'", *New Blackfriars* 90 (2009), pp. 232–250.

[3] Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary* Heritage (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), pp. 14–39, at p. 27.

[4] Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, p. 22.

[5] Margaret Pfeil, 'Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin', *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002), pp. 132–152, at p. 134.

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society.[6] *Lumen gentium* called the laity to "remedy the institutions and conditions of the world when the latter are an inducement to sin, that these may favor rather than hinder the practice of virtue."[7] Likewise, *Gaudium et spes* noted that society had the potential to both strengthen authentically human qualities and the potential to induce persons to sin.[8] The council clearly maintained that the social order profoundly influenced moral agents, for better and for ill.[9] Society, therefore, should create conditions conducive to the practice of virtue and the concomitant formation of the common good. Vatican II marked a developing focus on the moral importance of society and its influence on the moral character of the person.

Latin America and the Situation of Sin

Still, while the church's social encyclicals and council documents provided the seeds for a theory connecting social structures and human character and action, it was the flowering of Latin American liberation theology that produced the first substantive treatment of this relationship. The 1968 Medellin Conference of the Latin American bishops was the landmark event in the institutional genesis of liberation theology. At Medellin the bishops condemned the 'sinful situation' in Latin America. This was the first magisterial articulation of the concept of structural and institutional sin. Personal sin, they argued, was crystallized in unjust social structures. The bishops explicitly named these impersonal social structures as sinful.[10] In the second paragraph of the conference's final document, the bishops underscored the structural nature of many sins in the Latin American context. "To all of this must be added the lack solidarity which, on the individual and social levels, leads to the committing of serious

[6] Marciano Vidal argues this point in 'Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?', p. 183. Maurizio Ragazzi provides a helpful summary of magisterial use and development on the social and structural nature of sin. See his 'The Concept of Social Sin in its Thomistic Roots', *Journal of Markets and Morality* 7 (2004), pp. 363–408.

[7] *Lumen gentium*, in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co, 1996), pp. 1–95, at chapter II, no. 36.

[8] "When the structure of affairs is flawed by the consequence of sin, man, already born with a bend toward evil, finds there new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace." *Gaudium et spes*, in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co, 1996), pp. 163–282, no. 25.

[9] See Anthony J. Carroll, SJ, 'Church and Culture: Protestant and Catholic Modernities', *New Blackfriars* 90 (2009), pp. 163–177, at pp. 164–169.

[10] Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council: Conclusions* (Bogata: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970), I: 2.

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sins, evident in the unjust structures which characterize the Latin American situation."[11]

The solution to the situation of sin present in Latin America involved both conversion and structural change. The bishops understood conversion and structural change as interwoven. "The uniqueness of the Christian message does not so much consist in the affirmation of the necessity for structural change, as it does in the insistence on the conversion of men which will in turn bring about this change. We will not have a new continent without new and reformed structures, but, above all, there will be no new continent without new men, who know how to be truly free and responsible according to the light of the Gospel."[12] Neither conversion, nor structural change was found to be sufficient. While both conversion and structural change were affirmed, the bishops prioritized conversion. They maintained that the point of departure for moral transformation began with personal conversion. Personal conversion subsequently produced structural change.

Justicia in mundo, the 1971 document of the Synod of Bishops, provided both further reflection, and ecumenical appropriation of the concept. There the bishops wrote of social structures which created systematic barriers to charity.[13] These structures were overcome through an education in justice, in which the Christian was enabled to both critique her society, and militate against the manipulative aspects of society.[14] The bishops argued that the liturgy and the sacraments were the primary practices by which an education in justice was accomplished. The sacraments of baptism, penance and the Eucharist were named as practices that formed just persons and their communities.

Gustavo Gutierrez's groundbreaking work on liberation theology, *A Theology of Liberation*, also published in 1971, drew on Medellin and further developed the social nature of sin. In language that closely resembled that of the Synod, Gutierrez argued that the entire political and economic system of Latin America was sinful because it was characterized by the breach of friendship between persons, and God and neighbor.[15] While he focused on the institutional aspect of structural sin, Gutierrez also underscored that human agency produced these structures. "An unjust situation does not happen by chance; it is not something branded by a fatal destiny: there is human

[11] Ibid., I: 2.

[12] Ibid., I: 3.

[13] Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justicia in mundo*, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary* Heritage, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 288–300, at p. 290.

[14] Ibid., p. 296.

[15] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), pp. 100–01.

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responsibility behind it."[16] The structural nature of sin subsequently emerged as a central idea within the broad movement of liberation theology.[17] The concept captured the sinfulness and violence caused by social structures. The oppression and exploitation of Latin American peoples was exposed as systematically present in institutions and the persons formed by those institutions.

The Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, held at Puebla, Mexico in 1979, marked another significant development of the concept. The Puebla document broke little new conceptual ground. However, the importance of the conference's final document was the frequency that the bishops referred to the structural aspects of sin. Throughout the final document the bishops underscored the connection of the poverty and oppression experienced by millions on the continent to the economic, social, and political structures that were put in place by the powerful. The bishops decried the institutionalized situation of sin that reigned in Latin America. The specifically cited the sinful cultural "mechanisms that are imbued with materialism rather than authentic humanism."[18] They argued that the structurally rooted materialism of Latin America was sinful because it created and sustained poverty and injustice. Echoing Medellin the bishops proclaimed that sin was both personal and structural.

The bishops observed that structural sin profoundly influenced personal moral development. "Culture is continually shaped and reshaped by the ongoing life and historical experience of peoples; and it is transmitted by tradition from generation to generation."[19] The bishops warned that the culture that was transmitted could either inculcate authentic values or disvalues; it could promote just structures or unjust structures. In light of the influence of culture and social structures on the development of individual persons, the bishops maintained that individual conversion was necessary and primary, but insufficient. Social structures also needed to be transformed in order to mitigate the deleterious effects of Latin American society.[20] The

[16] Ibid., p. 102.

[17] For example, Archbishop Oscar Romero often wrote and spoke of 'institutionalized violence,' 'structures of sin' and 'social sin.' See Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), pp. 68, 143, and 183.

[18] *Evangelization in Latin America's Present and Future: Final Document of the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate* in *Puebla and Beyond*, ed. John Eagleston and Philip Scharper, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), no. 1264.

[19] Ibid., nos. 385–396.

[20] Ibid., nos. 436–438. See also no. 362. There the bishops write, "Evangelization should penetrate deeply into the hearts of human beings and peoples. Thus its dynamism aims at personal conversion and social transformation."

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bishops proposed that the transformation of persons and structures should transpire through an infusing of evangelical values into Latin American society.

> The church calls for a new conversion on the level of cultural values, so that the structures of societal life may then be imbued with the spirit of the Gospel. And while it calls for a revitalization of evangelical values, it simultaneously urges a rapid and thoroughgoing transformation of structures. For by their very nature these structures are supposed to exert a restraining influence on the evil that arises in the human heart and manifests itself socially; and they are also meant to serve as conditioning pedagogical factors for an interior conversion on the plane of values.[21]

This marked a significant development in the bishop's approach to structural sin. They proposed that Gospel values could transform society. These values were intended to have a dual effect. First, they were to transform the systemic injustices within Latin American society. Second, these structures were to function pedagogically. They were to convert Latin American persons to lives of justice.

John Paul II and Structures of Sin

Pope John Paul II often wrote of the structures of sin, but three texts, in particular, are important for the development of the concept. While the pope referred to "sinful structures" in his opening homily at Puebla,[22] his most extensive treatment of the concept was found in his 1983 apostolic exhortation, *Reconcilatio et paenetentia*. *Reconcilatio et paenetentia* also marked the most systematic magisterial treatment of the topic. The document afforded the pope the opportunity to respond to various articulations of the concept of structural sin that he found to be less than doctrinally accurate.[23]

Paragraph sixteen of the exhortation established three central points. First, all sin was personal. Only moral agents can be the subject of moral acts. Thus, while the person may be "influenced" by external social factors, she was still a free moral agent. Responsibility for sinful action, therefore, rests with the person, not the social structure. Second, "social sin" had three legitimate, on one illegitimate, meanings. According to John Paul, the concept of social sin rightly communicated the fact that every sin that affected others insofar as it "drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole

[21] Ibid., no. 438.
[22] Ibid., no. 185.
[23] Pfeil, 'Magisterial Uses of the Language of Social Sin', p. 140.

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world."[24] The "law of descent" was opposed by the "law of ascent," by which good actions inspire the human community. Furthermore, social sins were those directly against one's neighbor. These actions contradicted the law of love, the common good, and the virtue of justice. Finally, there was a category of analogical social sins. These sins existed between human communities. Blocs of nations and social classes were named as the principle actors here. Again, these collectives functioned analogically as agents, and therefore, their "social sins" were likewise analogical.[25] The pope asserted that these social sins ultimately provided a moral challenge to the consciences of the individual moral agents that comprised the community.

Third, the pope concluded paragraph sixteen with a condemnation of any definition of social sin that "contrasts social sin and personal sin." He noted that such a dichotomy enervates, and possibly destroys the concept of personal sin, and replaces it with a theory of sin that was reduced to structurally determined social guilt and responsibility. In his condemnation the pope provided one final insight into the nature of social sin. He noted that social sin was "the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins." This point was developed in greater depth in the 1987 social encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*.

Because of its greater degree of ecclesial authority, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* firmly established the structures of sin in the Church's social teaching. The encyclical presupposed the definition of social sin presented in *Reconcilatio et paenetentia*. *Sollicitudo* also closely followed The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's (CDF) *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. Originally published a year prior to *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, the instruction tempered the Church's earlier critique of aspects of liberation theology.[26] In its response to the liberationists' development of structural sin, the CDF defined the concept of social structure. The definition reads:

> These are the sets of institutions and practices which people find already existing or which they create on the national and international

[24] Pope John Paul II, *Reconcilatio et paenetentia*, no. 16. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html (accessed December 1, 2008).

[25] The analogical nature of social sin is reminiscent of the Church's teaching on original sin. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* remarks that "original sin is called 'sin' only in an analogical sense: it is a sin 'contracted' and not 'committed'-a state and not an act." http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.html (accessed March 25, 2009).

[26] See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation', in Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 461–497, as well as the Congregation's earlier instruction on liberation theology, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'", in Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 393–414.

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> level, and which orientate or organize economic, social, and political life. Being necessary in themselves, they often tend to become fixed and fossilized as mechanisms relatively independent of the human will, thereby paralyzing or distorting social development and causing injustice. However, they always depend on human responsibility; human beings can alter them, and they are not dependent on an alleged determinism of history.[27]

This definition filtered into John Paul's thinking and enabled him to further refine the meaning of a sinful structure. *Sollicitudo rei socialis* referred to the "structures of sin," instead of "social sin". Like John Paul's definition of "social sin", "structures of sin" placed the locus of moral responsibility in the person. Furthermore, this modification of language enabled John Paul to explicitly engage the structural aspects of injustice. He defined structures of sin as: "The sum total of negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to further it, gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome."[28] For the pope individual sinful acts created both culturally normative modes of being and acting and impersonal social institutions that subsequently influenced the actions of other moral agents.

Unlike *Reconcilatio et paenetentia*, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* proposed an antidote to the structures of sin: solidarity. Solidarity was named as the virtue by which the structures of sin were "conquered." It constituted a "diametrically opposed" attitude to the structures of sin insofar as it directed the person to commit herself to the common good.[29] In addition, it could only take hold in a person with the aid of divine grace. In naming solidarity as the corrective to structures of sin John Paul further illumined the concept. Like solidarity, structures of sin were moral attitudes, akin to vices, that were willingly appropriated by the agent, from the society.

John Paul's inclusion of the law of ascent in *Reconcilatio et paenetentia* and solidarity in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* were important additions to the tradition's theory of structures of sin. The introduction of these positive correlative concepts better reflected the spirit of moral theology post-Vatican II. These concepts attuned the agent not only

[27] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation', in Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 461–497, at p. 484.

[28] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, in David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), pp. 395–436, at no. 36. See *Gaudiam et spes*, no. 25, quoted above in note eight. See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation', in Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary Heritage*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 393–414. See nos. 14 and 15.

[29] Ibid., no. 38.

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to avoid evildoing, but also to strive to do the good. Of special interest for the current study was the pope's use of the language of virtue in his definition of solidarity. Unfortunately, John Paul did not flesh out the relationship of structures of sin and the virtues. Thus, one is left with the mere suggestion that virtues overcome the structures of sin.

Four years later the pope promulgated *Centessimus annus*. Therein John Paul described how human persons were formed by the structures of sin in their society.

> Man receives from God his essential dignity and with it the capacity to transcend every social order so as to move toward truth and goodness. But he is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth. The decisions which create a human environment can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realization of those who are in any way oppressed by them. To destroy such structures and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience.[30]

Here again the pope's use of the concept was primarily in the context of personal moral formation. The pope maintained that social structures educated the agent in the true and the good. Sinful structures drew persons from the true and the good. The human agent remained free, but was conditioned, primarily through education, by his the structures of his society. For example, in a society of institutional racism individual moral agents were 'conditioned' to be racist. In fact, in such a society the consciences of those individual moral agents will be formed to assent to the perceived 'rightness' of racism.

The 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* marked John Paul's final significant development of the concept. The passage below is noteworthy because a certain level of agency was ascribed to society.

> It is at the heart of the moral conscience that the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, with all its various and deadly consequences for life, is taking place. It is a question, above all, of the individual conscience, as it stands before God in its singleness and uniqueness. But it is also a question, in a certain sense, of the "moral conscience" of society: in a way it too is responsible, not only because it tolerates or fosters behavior contrary to life, but also because it encourages the "culture of death", creating and consolidating actual "structures of sin" which go against life. The moral conscience, both individual and social, is today subjected, also as a result of the penetrating influence of the media,

[30] Pope John Paul II, *Centessimus annus*, in David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), pp. 439–488, at no. 38.

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> to an extremely serious and mortal danger: that of confusion between good and evil, precisely in relation to the fundamental right to life.[31]

Notice the modified focus of the passage. *Evangelium vitae* heightened the profile of the moral quality of the social structure. For the first time John Paul ascribed moral responsibility to a non-moral agent: "the moral conscience of society." He qualified this claim with the Latin *quodammodo*, translated, "in some way." The pope indicated that certain societies created structures that worked against the good of life. Insofar as a society freely created these structures it functions like a moral agent, and therefore, has a kind of moral responsibility.

In keeping with previous papal statements, the passage showed an awareness of the role of social structures in forming the consciences of individual moral agents. The pope maintained that the individual conscience could not be understood when abstracted from the society's conscience. The individual conscience was formed, in part, by the conscience of the society. This formation was mediated through social structures, such as the 'culture of death.'

The conceptual development from *Reconcilatio et paenetentia* to *Evangelium vitae* was likely grounded in John Paul's experience of the western world's creation of a "culture of death." John Paul realized that structures had the capacity to consistently produce unjust outcomes, and to profoundly condition the person's moral development. Unfortunately, John Paul did not elaborate on how, and to what extent, culture acts. He did not explain the qualifier *quodammodo*. John Paul's final word on the subject did not clarify his position, bur rather, only created further ambiguity.

Pope Benedict XVI and Structures of Sin

The recent promulgation of Pope Benedict XVI's first social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, makes possible an evaluation of his use and understanding of the moral nature of social structures. The pope has

[31] Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, no. 24. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html. (accessed January 10, 2009). The original Latin reads: "*Ipsa in intima morali conscientia perficitur Dei hominisque sensus obscuratio, multiplicibus suis perniciosisque de vita consecutionibus. Ante omnia cuiusque conscientia in medio ponitur, quae una et non iterabilis sola Dei in conspectu stat* (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes* no. 16). *At agitur quoque ratione quadam de societatis 'conscientia morali'; ipsa quodammodo est responsalis non modo quia tolerat vel consuetudinibus vitae adversantibus favet, verum quia et 'mortis culturam' alit, quippe quae ipsas 'structuras peccati' adversum vitam efficiat et confirmet. Conscientia moralis, tum personalis tum socialis, etiam ob instrumentorum socialis communicationis praepotentes virtutes, pergravi mortiferoque periculo hodie subditur: permixtionis scilicet boni malique, quod attinet ad idem fundamentale vitae ius.*"

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referred to the structures of sin once during his pontificate, while quoting his predecessor.[32] *Caritas in veritate* neither includes the phrase 'the structures of sin' nor any of the derivative phrases that have been employed in the tradition.[33] In fact, the word sin is found only three times in the entire encyclical.[34]

Following John Paul, Benedict recognizes that 'instruments' can produce harmful effects. And, he at least nominally recognizes that social structures can be permeated with sin when he recalls that "The Church's wisdom has always pointed to the presence of original sin in social conditions and the structure of society."[35] However, Benedict hesitates to offer a substantive moral judgment of impersonal instruments, institutions, or structures. Instead, his moral focus is trained on the individuals who create and sustain certain instruments and structures. In a passage that betrays Benedict's understanding of the ethical nature of impersonal structures he writes,

> Admittedly, the market can be a negative force, not because it is so by nature, but because a certain ideology can make it so. It must be remembered that the market does not exist in the pure state. It is shaped by the cultural configurations which define it and give it direction. Economy and finance, as instruments, can be used badly when those at the helm are motivated by purely selfish ends. Instruments that are good in themselves can thereby be transformed into harmful ones. But it is man's darkened reason that produces these consequences, not the instruments per se. Therefore it is not the instrument that must be called to account, but individuals, their moral conscience and their personal and social responsibility.[36]

Throughout the encyclical there is a similar pattern of thought. The pope argues for the development and use of ethical structures, mechanisms, and institutions, while concomitantly underscoring that individuals create these realities.[37] An emergent theme of the document is the limits of social structures, and the priority of individual agency,

[32] The only usage of the concept by Pope Benedict XVI that I could find is located in 'The Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the Sixteenth World Day of the Sick', January 2008. "Mysteriously united to Christ, the one who suffers with love and meek self-abandonment to the will of God becomes a living offering for the salvation of the world. My beloved Predecessor also stated that: 'The more a person is threatened by sin, the heavier the structures of sin which today's world brings with it, the greater is the eloquence which human suffering possesses in itself . . .'." http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/sick/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20080111_world-day-of-the-sick-2008_en.html (accessed August 1, 2009).

[33] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate.* http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html. (accessed July 7, 2009).

[34] Ibid., no. 34.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., no. 36.

[37] Ibid., nos. 42 and 68.

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in securing integral human development.[38] Here Benedict's thought contrasts to a degree with the Bishops at Medellin and Puebla, and even with that of the later John Paul.

Two provisional conclusions can be made concerning Benedict's influence on the development of the concept of structures of sin. First, while Benedict has continued to employ many of the concepts of his predecessor (solidarity is used 40 times in *Caritas in veritate*) 'the structures of sin' has been functionally abandoned, but not rejected. Second, Benedict has stunted the trajectory of papal thought that pointed to a moral analysis of impersonal social structures, and instead has reasserted the emphasis on the moral agents who create and sustain these structures.

An Argument for Renewal

The concept of structural sin, and its variants, has enjoyed a prominent place both in liberation theology and in the magisterium's social teaching. After having been the subject of intense and rapid development in the 1970's and 80's, the concept has stagnated recently. This is not to claim that the concept has fallen out of theological use. In fact, the recently published proceedings from The First Conference of Catholic Ethics in the World Church shows that the structural aspects of sin continue to have a particularly strong resonance among theologians from the global south.[39] However, as I argue below, the concept has yet to be situated within the contemporary ethical landscape. Therefore, an updated version of the concept is needed.

A precondition of this renewal is a more rigorous sociological analysis of the interplay between social structures, and personal moral character and human acts. Sociologist Michael Landon argues that the emergence of the concept of social sin in liberation theology was predicated on presupposed, and largely unarticulated social theories.[40] If the concept of structures of sin is to have resonance in the twenty-first century it must be able to articulate the social theories that it presumes. As evidenced above, the church's social teaching has traditionally recognized the dialectical relationship between social structures and personal moral character. However, this recognition has remained superficial. The incorporation of the language and

[38] Ibid., nos. 11 and 20.

[39] See, for example: Humberto Miguel Yáñez, 'Opting for the Poor in the Face of Growing Poverty', in Linda Hogan, ed., *Applied Ethics in a World Church: The Padua Conference* (New York: Orbis, 2008), pp. 13–20; and John Chathanatt, 'An Ethical Analysis of Globalization from an Indian Perspective', in Linda Hogan, ed., *Applied Ethics in a World Church: The Padua Conference* (New York: Orbis, 2008), pp. 21–31.

[40] Michael Landon, 'The Social Presuppositions of Early Liberation Theology', *Restoration Quarterly* 47.1 (2005), pp. 13–31.

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concepts of thinkers such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann would enable the tradition to more precisely define the moral nature and influence of structures and institutions. Berger's and Luckmann's theory of social and personal formation helpfully describes this complex relationship. In *Social Construction of Reality* Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that there was a dialectical process by which society and persons were formed.[41] Berger summarized the argument: "Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world . . . objectification is the attainment by the products of this activity of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the re-appropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness."[42] Notice that the bishops at Puebla and John Paul articulated a similar understanding of the moral formation of both culture and persons within a culture. Berger, the bishops, and the pope understood that in the process of externalization human persons were agents who constructed society and culture. The process of objectification was the movement from individual agency to the creation of a cultural-structural reality, such as consumerism. Finally, internalization constituted the agent's formation by the structures of her culture. That is, the agent was a living embodiment of a culture's values insofar as her character was formed by the culture within which she lived. Berger, echoing Aristotle and Aquinas, noted that social structures formed a "second nature" in the person.[43] Again, the Latin American bishops and John Paul discussed the moral influence of culture in similar terms.

Social structures must be scrutinized ethically because their profound effects on the lives of persons. Structures have the capacity to systematically promote the human good, the common good, and human happiness, or frustrate the realization of these goods. Furthermore, they have the capacity to form the moral character, and the conscience of the individual agent. Human persons are habitual creatures, and thus, acquire a second nature, or a set of characteristic habits of action. The free moral agent has the capacity to resist his given culture's structures, and alter these structures through

[41] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

[42] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*: *Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 4.

[43] Ibid., p. 6. See also: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library Classics, 2001), book VII, 10, 1152a; and Thomas Aquinas, quoting the aforementioned Aristotle passage in *Summa theologiae.* 5 vols. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, reprint, (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), I–II 53.1, ad 1; 57.5; and 58.1.

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externalization.[44] Still, the objectified structures of any society will continually exert influence and pressure on the agent. In John Paul's language, sinful structures present "obstacles which are difficult to overcome." Insofar as structures play a role in the moral formation of persons they play a role in the person's movement to, or from, God and neighbor.

Foremost in the moral analysis of social structures are questions of virtue and vice. Does a social structure produce just outcomes? Does an institution or instrument promote the common good? What kinds of persons does a given society cultivate? Are persons invited to habituate to justice, courage, temperance, mercy, and love? Any evaluation of these character-forming structures will draw on the long tradition of virtue ethics.

Because culture plays such a significant role in the formation of an agent's moral character one must ask whether "structures of sin" is sufficiently conceptually rich. As noted above, John Paul's advertence to the virtue of solidarity as the means to "overcome" and "conquer" the structures of sin is instructive.[45] It suggests two important points. First, the structures of sin do have a positive correlative concept. Second, that concept is a virtue.

Structures of Virtue and Structures of Vice

Before the argument for structures of virtue and vice is developed, it is necessary to define a few concepts. A structure is an institution, a practice, a value laden narrative, or a paradigmatic figure that people find already existing or which they create on the national and global level, and which orientates or organizes economic, social, and political life. Once objectified, structures tend to become fixed and fossilized as mechanisms relatively independent of the human will, thereby promoting or paralyzing social development and causing either justice or injustice.[46]

[44] See *The Social Construction of Reality*, pp. 60–61; and *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 4.

[45] Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, nos. 37–40.

[46] This definition is largely taken from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation.' I have amended the definition to capture what I find to be the fullness of social structures. I have expanded the definition so that it can accommodate positive social structures that promote the human good. The Congregation's definition of structures reads as follows: "These are the sets of institutions and practices which people find already existing or which they create on the national and international level, and which orientate or organize economic, social, and political life. Being necessary in themselves, they often tend to become fixed and fossilized as mechanisms relatively independent of the human will, thereby paralyzing or distorting social development and causing injustice. However, they always depend on human responsibility; human beings can alter them, and they are not dependent on an alleged determinism of history.", p. 484.

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Structures of virtue has a twofold definition. First, virtuous structures are those objectified social structures that in some way consistently function to promote the human good and human happiness. In the language of the Puebla document, these are mechanisms and institutions that are well-springs of justice. Second, these structures are the socially rooted moral habits willingly internalized by moral agents that consistently prescribe the human good, the common good, good moral character, and human happiness. Structures of vice are the social structures that in some way consistently function to prevent the human good, the common good, and human happiness, and, the socially rooted moral habits willingly internalized by moral agents that consistently prescribe sinful human acts, and produce human unhappiness.

The twofold definition of these terms recognizes the twofold functioning of social structures. Berger's language is again helpful. The first part of the definition recognizes the objectified nature of social structures. Social structures are impersonal mechanisms and institutions that function in their own right. While they are continually created anew by human agents, these structures attain a level of objective reality independent of their human creators. It is this objective reality that is morally evaluated. Insofar as structures attain an objective status, and insofar as they function *quodammodo*, these structures can and should be morally evaluated. Social structures are analogous to moral agents, and therefore can be said to have a certain moral character. At Medellin the Latin American bishops said as much when they condemned the 'unjust structures' that functioned throughout their continent.

The second part of the definition articulates the formative nature of social structures. When internalized, these structures not only influence the person's actions, but further, they shape a person's moral character. Recall that the Catholic social tradition, beginning with Leo, including the bishops at Medellin and Puebla, and through John Paul, maintains that social structures have a pedagogical function. The Latin American bishops noted that structures imbued with Gospel values facilitated individual conversions. John Paul argued that while a person can transcend his social order, he is conditioned by it, and educated within it. Thus, a society marked by unjust institutions and conditions is a society that induces persons to lives of sin, and vice. In such a society heroic moral effort is required in order to avoid the acquisition of vices.[47] In sum, the concept of structures of virtue

[47] "Ignorance of the common good goes hand in hand with the exclusive and sometimes excessive pursuit of particular goods such as money, power or reputation, when viewed as absolutes to be sought for their own sakes: namely as idols. This is what created the 'structures of sin', all those places and circumstances in which habits are perverse and which demand proof of heroism on the part of all new arrivals if one is

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and vice refer to two loci of moral analysis: the social structures themselves; and the moral agents that form social structures, and are formed by participation in social structures.

The structures of virtue and vice constitutes an important development of the concept of the structures of sin for two reasons. First, the language of virtue and vice more accurately describes the reality of the so-called structures of sin. Recall the structures of sin listed in the writings of the Latin American bishops, Gustavo Gutierrez, John Paul II, and others. These authors name injustice, egotism, pride, materialism, selfishness, and shortsightedness as structures of sin. Yet, the aforementioned structures of sin are more accurately described as vices. They are character traits, not actions. For example, injustice is not an action per se, but instead, is a vice which produces discrete moral acts which are often sinful. This is not merely semantics, but a conceptual development. The language of virtue attunes the moral tradition to the fact that structures both function in characteristic ways, and cultivate a certain moral character in individuals.

Second, virtue has been, and is once again, the dominant language of the Catholic moral tradition.[48] However, the structures of sin neither includes, nor evokes, a positive correlative concept. The structures of sin is a concept better suited for the moral manuals than it is for twenty-first century theological ethics. The focus of the manuals was individual human acts, and sin.[49] As a result, during the reign of the manuals Catholic moral theology was preoccupied with isolated acts of sin. The most prominent English language manual of the first quarter of the twentieth century succinctly captures the purpose of moral theology. "In moral theology we abstain as a rule from treating of what concerns perfection; it is our task to distinguish between what is sinful and what is not, for the use of the confessor in the sacred tribunal of Penance."[50] The manuals maintained a narrow focus on moral pathology. Thus, they lacked a substantive treatment of beatitude, virtue, and, in fact, any reference to "doing the good." The concept of structures of sin unintentionally continues this truncated perspective.

to avoid acquiring such habits." See *Cor Unum* 'World Hunger, A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity', no. 25. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_corunum_doc_04101996_world-hunger_en.html (accessed August 12, 2009).

[48] Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: Fundamental Moral Theology at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century', p. 111.

[49] See, for example, Thomas Slater, *A Manual of Moral Theology* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1908). Servais Pinckaers provides helpful commentary on reductive nature of the moral manuals in *Sources of Christian Ethics*, Sr. Mary Thomas Nobel, O.P., trans., (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1995), chapter 11.

[50] Slater, p. 119.

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The structures of virtue remedies this error by situating the concept in framework of virtue, with its rich tradition, and its ability to describe and prescribe moral excellence. For this reason, the structures of virtue resonate with the theological ethics of Thomas Aquinas. The concept provides a bridge between Aquinas's foundational study of the virtues and contemporary studies in ethics that focus on social, economic, and political structures. Finally, this updating conceptualizes the positive role of social structures in moral formation. As explained above, the Catholic social tradition affirms the need for virtuous social structures in order for the building up of the common good. The tradition also affirms that virtuous social structures inculcate and facilitate the person's acquisition of the virtues.

Conclusion

This article has argued for new concepts in theological ethics; the structures of virtue and the structures of vice. These concepts capture the moral character of institutions, as well as socially embedded character traits of individual agents. Furthermore, these concepts avoid reductionism to either an anthropological individualism or deterministic structuralism. In this way these concepts find a natural home in the Catholic tradition insofar as they preserve both free moral agency, and the formative moral effects of human communities and cultures.

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