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Paul Anthony

Abilene Christian University, paul.anthony@acu.edu

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Sex, Sin and the Soul: How Galen's Philosophical Speculation Became Augustine's Theological Assumptions

Paul A. Anthony

Abilene Christian University
Graduate School of Theology, History and Theology

Abstract

Augustine of Hippo may never have heard of Galen of Pergamum. Three centuries separated the two, as did an almost impassable geographic and cultural divide that kept the works of Galen and other Greek writers virtually unknown in the Latin west for a millennium. Yet Galenic assumptions about human sexuality and the materiality of the soul underlie Augustine's signature doctrine of original sin.

Galen's influence was so widely felt in the Greek-speaking east that Christians almost immediately worked his assumptions into their own theologies. Their conclusions thus became the new assumptions that found their way into the library of Ambrose of Milan, Augustine's mentor. Despite the many years and many hands through which they passed, a set of core Galenic ideas – the one-sex theory of gender, the inferiority of female generative ability and the materiality of the human soul – were left virtually intact.

Galen's influence on original sin seems to have been indirect enough to be largely overlooked by scholars. Nevertheless, this paper argues that the bishop from Hippo, whose doctrine has had incalculable effects on Christianity and the world for more than 1,500 years, owes much to the pagan doctor from Pergamum.

Sex, Sin, and the Soul

Galen of Pergamum's prolific work and incisive commentary changed the way the world thought about the human body. His influence extended for more than a millennium, building on the foundation laid by Plato, Aristotle and Hippocrates. His father was an architect, but it was Galen who built the truly impressive edifice – a monument of work that would influence another titan of philosophical thought.¹

Like Galen, Augustine of Hippo drew from numerous strands of philosophy and his chosen field to erect a prolific corpus that remains influential more than 1,500 years after his death.² Three centuries and a seemingly impassible divide between the Greek east and Latin west separated Augustine from Galen, but the latter's reach was so extensive, he bridged time, language and culture to influence Augustine's signature doctrine.

Galen's notions of gender, sex and the soul so radically reshaped the way future generations in the east considered those topics that they became influential pieces of Augustine's thought, as well – and embedded themselves into the doctrine of original sin, itself a fusion of ideas about the nature of sex and the fate of the soul. This connection, though largely unnoticed, remains clear and palpable, as this paper will show.

One Idea About One Sex

Although Galen was foremost a physician, that did not imply a neglect of the philosophical. Indeed, his conclusions about men, women, sex and the soul – built through his interaction with ancient Greek philosophy – laid the foundation for Christian thought on the same subjects, coloring even the modern-day lenses through which we see these issues nearly two millennia later. In a sense, we are all Galenists, adopting the legacy of the Father of Medicine, regardless of whether we intend to do so.

¹ Owsei Temkin, *Galenism: Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1973), 1-3.

² Margaret R. Miles, "Augustine," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (1997), 1:152

Galen's conclusions can be summarized by what Laqueur calls the "one-sex/one-flesh model."³ In this model, most clearly articulated in *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, Galen used the ancient Greek notions of the four basic bodily qualities – hot, cold, wet and dry – to affirm Aristotle's contention that women are less perfect than men, but Galen claimed Aristotle had not carried the argument far enough.

The female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason – she is colder. . . . A second reason is one that appears in dissecting. . . . All the parts that men have, women have, too, the difference between them lying in only one thing, which must be kept in mind throughout the discussion, namely that in women, the parts are within, whereas in men, they are outside.⁴

Galen notes the corresponding shapes of the penis and vagina, scrotum and uterus, and testes and ovaries – arguing men and women therefore have the same reproductive organs, except the woman's is turned outside-in. The reason for the difference, Galen says, is that women's colder temperatures prohibit the organs from developing fully and moving outside the body, a phenomenon he likens to the nonfunctioning eyes of moles.⁵ These two things – the colder temperature and the incomplete development of the reproductive organs – show women to be imperfect versions of men, according to Galen. Instead of being divided by gender, men and women are in fact linked by it.⁶ The argument about heat and cold forms the basis for Galen's theory of gender, with significant ramifications for future Christian thought.

"Heat is nature's primary instrument," Galen argues, and that makes the man "more perfect" than the woman, with obvious benefits for human reproduction: "You ought not to think that our Creator would purposely make half the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutilated unless there be such a great advantage in such a mutilation."⁷

This notion of the essential sameness of the genders marred by the imperfection of the female carried over into the process of conception, as well. Aristotle believed only the male seed played a role in the generative process, something Galen rejected in *On*

³ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1990), 25

⁴ Galen *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* 14.5 (trans. May II.296).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.6 (May II.298).

⁶ Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 26.

⁷ Galen, *Usefulness* 14.6 (May II.299).

Semen, where he affirmed a place for female “semen” in the production of life – but nevertheless held that male semen was warmer, stronger and more perfect. “The female semen should always be ruled and indeed defeated,” Galen wrote, “and the male should prevail over it, so as to exercise by itself control of both kind and similarity.”⁸

In this way, Galen was simply reflecting his culture, where male dominance was linked to social order, and subversion of the established gender roles was tantamount to anarchy. As Lacqueur notes, “The one-sex model can be read ... as an exercise in preserving the Father, he who stands not only for order but for the very existence of civilization itself.”⁹ This had practical effects for the creation of the soul, as well: “Her sperma could not ensoul matter; his could.”¹⁰

It is clear Galen and his contemporaries believed semen did more than simply provide the physical blueprint for the next generation.¹¹ In *Usefulness of the Parts*, Galen posits that semen is borne by the innate *pneuma*,¹² and in *On Semen*, he calls the male seed “not matter only but also power” that “makes the major contribution to the animal’s material principle.”¹³

The *pneuma*, if it’s not the soul exactly, seems to carry many of the hallmarks of it; Galen goes so far as to call it “the first instrument of the soul that resides in the brain, whatever its substance may be.”¹⁴ Comparing the complex looping structure of the brain to those found in the male scrotum and female breasts, Galen argues that just as “Nature”

⁸ Galen *On Semen* 2.2.2-3 (trans. De Lacy, CMG, 163).

⁹ Lacqueur, 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman and Kindred Evidence Also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge, 1954), 119.

¹² Galen, *Usefulness* 14.253 (May, II.288).

¹³ Galen, *Semen* 2.2.15-16 (De Lacy, 164). Galen is honest about the limits of his theorizing. He claims he doesn’t know what is the soul’s substance or whether Plato’s theory of its incorporeal nature was correct. See Luis Garcia-Ballester, “Soul and Body: Disease of the Soul and Disease of the Body in Galen’s Medical Thought,” in *Galen and Galenism: Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, ed. Jon Arrizabalaga, Montserrat Cabré, Lluís Cifuentes and Fernandez Salmón (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002), 124, and Temkin, 87. In the end, Galen appears to punt. This can’t be stated with any more certainty, given how much of Galen’s corpus is missing, the frequency with which he seems to contradict himself, and the difficulty in dating his works that do survive. He seems to feel he’s on firmer ground when he discusses the *pneuma*, which he clearly links to male semen.

¹⁴ Galen *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 7.3.27-28 (trans. De Lacy, CMG, 445).

provided those routes to hold the semen and milk for lengthy periods, so too the “complex labyrinth” of the brain is designed to house the *pneuma*.¹⁵

Galen therefore indirectly describes the soul in a thoroughly corporeal fashion, linking it to the physical semen, brain and *pneuma* of the body. Further, Galen tied the presence of *pneuma* to the body’s “innate heat,” according to Temkin, and described “weakness of the innate heat” as a cause of death. His description of innate heat corresponds to his description elsewhere of semen and the *pneuma*, indicating Galen viewed these three things as closely linked. Temkin argues these are all terms for the soul that a “medical materialist” like Galen would have found palatable.¹⁶

With semen tied so closely to the existence and reproduction of the soul, Galen naturally viewed sexuality and morality through the lens of his medical training – and that of Greco-Roman asceticism. In *On Semen*, Galen argues too much sex weakens the body and draws “vital *pneuma*” from its reserves. Draining the body of semen is actually quite dangerous, he says, because semen is the building block for the solid parts of the body, such as bones, and that “sexual intercourse is especially debilitating.”¹⁷

All of these elements – the essential sameness of the genders with an emphasis on female imperfection, the physical nature of the soul transmitted through the act of reproduction, and the ascetic lens through which to view sexuality and the human body – were highly influential in the ensuing centuries. Laqueur argues they “dominated thinking about sexual difference from classical antiquity to the seventeenth century.”¹⁸ Although Galen’s work was not fully known in the Latin west until about 1000 C.E., Galenism as a set of *medical* and *philosophical* assumptions became the underlying basis for centuries of *theological* thought and a fundamental piece of what Augustine inherited when he converted to Christianity early in the fifth century.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.3.29-30 (De Lacy, 447).

¹⁶ Temkin, 87, 89-90.

¹⁷ Galen, *On Semen* 1.16.25-28, 32-25 (De Lacy, 139-41). Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 54-64, esp. 62, provides the best summary of Galen’s broader ascetic worldview – his use of Stoic notions of self-control to discuss diet and sexuality – and the connection he made between the consumption of food for the regulation of sexual desire. In Galen’s world, sex had a connection to weakness and mortality – not just through the urge to repopulate in a low-lifespan era, but in the actual damage it could do to the human body

¹⁸ Laqueur, 25.

Galen in Cappadocia

Within 150 years, Galenism was the dominant medical philosophy of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. By 400 C.E., the dominant medical assumptions in place east of the Balkans were Galen's.¹⁹ At the same time, Christian asceticism became a powerful force, and at least two of that movement's most forceful advocates featured heavy reliance on Galen's logic and language. Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Nyssa each wrote treatises on the value of purity in the life of the Christian, using the same three themes articulated above: sameness of gender, physical nature of the soul, and an ascetic connection of sexuality to the health of the body.

Basil's treatise remains in some dispute. It was classified as a work of Basil of Caesarea until the early 20th century, and it has yet to be translated into any modern language. Scholars have generally found the work notable for its explicit description of bodily passions and sexual desire, according to Shaw,²⁰ but she argues that behind the sensationalism lies the influence of Galen: "Basil has taken ideas about diet, digestion and sexual function from his medical training and applied them to daily life and training of one who chooses to live in perpetual chastity."²¹

This isn't to say Basil of Ancyra was influenced into asceticism by Galenic thought, but he used a Galenic framework to discuss the physical, sexual and philosophical components of asceticism.²² In fact, Basil all but invokes Galen in describing the creation of gender, speaking of a single "root" divided into male and female. As Shaw describes it:

In order to populate the earth, the Creator placed in the nature of each "fragment" of original being an ineffable desire for union with the other through intercourse. To this the Creator also added the physical pleasure of sexual intercourse and the strong affection felt for offspring. Subordinating the female to the power of the male and "taming" the male by the "pleasure" of the female, the Creator made the

¹⁹ Temkin, 61, 64.

²⁰ Teresa M. Shaw, "Creation, Virginitly and Diet in Fourth-Century Christianity: Basil of Ancyra's *On the True Purity of Virginitly*," *Gender & History* 9, No. 3 (Nov. 1997): 580, though see 593 n. 4 for discussion of provenance.

²¹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 92. For example, Basil's consideration of the link between sexual desire and the human need for procreation, while supported by a pair of scriptures, is little different from Galen's own description

²² *Ibid.*, 184.

male active by nature and the female passive, since she was taken from the male.²³

Basil again cites a scriptural basis for his views, but the creation story has been read through the lens of Galenic thought: “For knowing, as I suppose, that the substance from which she had created animals does not admit of perfect wisdom, Nature by adding a passionate pleasure to the use of the parts gave them in its stead the only thing which they could receive as an incitement to preserve and maintain the race.”²⁴

The male, Basil writes, regains “in his very self, through intercourse, his own member. Thus two out of one and back again to one from two.”²⁵ Much as Galen was careful to leave room for a female role in the procreation process, Basil also does not subscribe to a fully male-dominated sexual theology. To provide the woman with a measure of power, God gave her “the power of sexual attraction over the male,” in Shaw’s words. Basil writes the male is a “prisoner of her pleasure,” and that this power of attracting a male sexually, while not unique only to the female gender, is an ingrained piece of her nature.²⁶

Although they speak different languages theologically – Galen’s naturalistic focus contrasts with Basil’s reliance on the narrative of Gen 1-3 – they both describe the same features: A single gender divided into stronger (male) and weaker (female) components, with a failsafe in place to prevent total domination of the weaker. Basil then follows Galen’s teachings on diet to recommend ways for a committed virgin to diminish her sexual appetite, with the intention that eventually those elements that incite her to lust – and incite men to lust after her – will wither and die. In a remarkable passage, Basil explicitly praises those women who have successfully altered their physical appearance to become more like a man’s. Basil clearly considers this a better, more perfect state in which the woman should live:

Not only will she avoid beautifying herself, she will intentionally obscure her natural beauty. She must “make her look masculine and her voice hard, and in her walk and generally every movement of her body constrain the enticements of

²³ Ibid., 84.

²⁴ Galen, *Usefulness*. 14.2 (May, II.286).

²⁵ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh*, 84.

²⁶ Ibid., 85.

pleasure.” The “form” of the female body, which was made alluring at creation, is made “pure” through virginity and asceticism.²⁷

Basil’s more famous colleague, Gregory of Nyssa, while owing much to Basil’s thoughts on asceticism, also was heavily reliant on Galen. Gregory, in fact, is explicit in urging his readers to “learn everything accurately . . . which those skilled in such [medical] matters have worked out in books” and follows that statement with an in-depth discussion of the human body that closely parallels Galen’s work.²⁸

Gregory “demonstrates considerable medical knowledge,” Corrigan argues, and accepts Galen’s medically based depiction of the soul.²⁹ Gregory would certainly have been familiar with Galen’s one-sex model; indeed, his notion of gender and its relationship to the Genesis story hews even more closely to Galen than even Basil’s. As Brown argues, “He had no doubt whatsoever that the present division of the sexes into male and female formed part of the present anomalous condition of human beings.”³⁰

Indeed, in *On the Making of Man*, Gregory states what Basil merely implied: Sexual differentiation – and therefore sex itself – is a product of humanity’s fall in the Garden of Eden: “Our whole nature . . . is, so to say, one image of Him Who is; but the distinction of kind in male and female was added to His work last” only because God, in his foreknowledge, knew intercourse would become necessary for humanity to procreate in its soon-to-be fallen state.³¹ Gregory, therefore, Christianizes Galen’s one-sex model, turning Galen’s impersonal Nature into the personal God; both created a single gender, now divided in two, with the male more perfect than the female.

Gregory also follows Galenic assumptions about the soul. Although Galen’s speculation was rejected by Christians of his day,³² Gregory adapted it into a more palatable philosophy while hewing closely to the materialist notions of the medic.

²⁷ Ibid., 236.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa *On the Making of Man* 30.1-5 (trans. Wilson, NPNF, 422-23). See also Susan Wessel, “The Reception of Greek Science in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009), 36-37, for more on Gregory’s extensive use of Galen.

²⁹ Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2009), 48.

³⁰ Peter Brown, *The Body & Society: Men, Women & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Columbia, 2008), 293.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Making of Man* 16.18-17.5 (NPNF, 406-07).

³² Temkin, 91.

Gregory not only Christianized Galen's biological assumptions, he did the same for Galen's philosophical ones, as well. As Corrigan argues, "A medical/scientific view of body in soul, ... virtually codified by Galen, comes into new focus because of Christian thinking." The body has its own intelligence arising from its organic nature, Galen argues and Gregory affirms, and the soul is a part of that structure.

Gregory puts an end to any disproportionate primacy of soul over body. Because of his rejection of the pre-existence of the soul, soul-body/form-matter develop together from the beginning in an organic whole-formation that does not subordinate one to the other. ... Gregory's interest in medicine, in which he follows Basil and Galen, helps him explore the interconnectedness of psycho-physical processes in the body.³³

In *Making of Man*, Gregory argues the soul is coexistent with the human fetus and grows with it. Then he describes a "supreme force," housed in the brain, controlling the body. Galen called it the *pneuma*, the "first instrument of the soul," but the men clearly are describing the same thing. Finally, Gregory concludes his argument with this statement: "The seminal cause of our constitution is neither a soul without body, nor a body without soul, but that, from animated and living bodies, it is generated at the first as a living and animate being."³⁴

Gregory, like Galen before him, does not specifically connect creation of the soul to the reproductive act, which would align with the traducianism first articulated by Tertullian in the west, but with such a materialistic view of the soul, he hardly needs to. By tying the soul so closely to the physical human body, Gregory leaves little room for any other explanation. If the body is created via intercourse, so must the soul be.

Crossing the language barrier

Although a wide gap existed between the Greek and Latin worlds within the bifurcated Roman Empire, Gregory of Nyssa's works were not unknown in the west. Indeed, Ambrose, the powerful bishop of Milan and a contemporary of Basil and Gregory, was one of the few Latin-speaking clergy who also knew Greek; his extensive library

³³ Corrigan, 203.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Making of Man* 29.10-30.28 (NPNF, 422-26).

included the works of the Cappadocian ascetics, who influenced his formulation of what Brown calls a “singularly austere spirituality.”³⁵

Ambrose was in fact the product of a pair of ascetic movements – the eastern, to which he had access through his library, and the western, which exerted a more direct influence through the works of Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian and others.³⁶ The interplay between these movements can be seen in the development of Ambrose’s own thoughts about sin and sexuality.

Christians in both east and west increasingly were turning to asceticism as the primary method of restoring the human body to its former paradisiacal state, focusing more intensely on human sexuality and gender differentiation.³⁷ No exception, Ambrose was deeply concerned with the sexual fallibility of humanity and placed a strong, even overriding emphasis on virginity, to the extent that opponents accused him of promoting Manichaeism.³⁸ For Ambrose, the question of sexuality was addressed less through the first three chapters of Genesis than through the first two chapters of Luke. In his commentary on the third gospel, Ambrose hardens a position at which he arrived only slowly³⁹ – and seemingly after engaging with the notions discussed most by the Greek Fathers. Ambrose’s position on two passages of scripture, mixed with the assumptions left him by Basil of Ancyra and Gregory of Nyssa – and by extension Galen before them – led to an extreme asceticism that followed to logical extremes the assumptions he inherited.

First, Ambrose inherited and embraced Origen of Alexandria’s belief in the requirement of a virginal conception for a sinless Christ. But in his commentary on Luke 2:23, Ambrose shifts Origen’s more straightforward reading of the text. The opening of the woman’s womb discussed in the verse, referring to Ex 13:12, appears to refer to the birth of a firstborn son; Ambrose instead sees it as the virgin womb’s reception of male

³⁵ Brown, 346.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

³⁷ Susanna Elm, *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 380-81, puts this most succinctly: “The more the body became the vehicle for salvation, the graver became the concerns regarding its fallibility and corruptibility, made manifest in its sexuality.”

³⁸ David G. Hunter, *Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford, 2007), 203.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

seed for the first time.⁴⁰ The nature of human seed, a focus of the Greek ascetics, is now also the focus of Ambrose, and as he treads this eastern ground, the western bishop joins them in placing a heavy emphasis on the primacy of the male: “For no union with a husband unlocked the secrets of her Maidenhead, but the Holy Spirit poured unstained seed into her inviolate womb. For wholly alone of those born of woman was our Holy Lord Jesus, Who by the strangeness of His undefiled birth has not suffered the pollutions of earthly corruption.”⁴¹

Ambrose applied Galen’s notion of female imperfection and the superiority of male seed to the conception of Christ. Only the male seed could have been powerful enough to transmit humanity’s sinfulness; Mary simply wasn’t strong enough to play a significant role in the creation of her son. With this interpretation in place – that Jesus was sinless because of the purity of the male seed from which he grew – Ambrose turned to Ps 50:7 (“I was conceived in iniquity, and in sins my mother gave birth to me.”) to argue that sexuality itself was the way in which human sin was transferred.⁴² In this way, Ambrose fused eastern and western assumptions into an asceticism of nearly unprecedented severity.

Ambrose was not content to simply argue for human sexuality as a consequence of the Adamic fall, as did Basil and Gregory. Rather, he saw intercourse itself – the implantation of the male seed – as the act transmitting human sinfulness. Although neither Gregory nor Basil developed this idea, it was the logical outgrowth of their philosophy. If the human soul was sinful from birth, as Ambrose believed Ps 50:7 said, and was inexorably joined to the physical body, as Galen, Basil and Gregory posited, then the natural conclusion was exactly the one Ambrose made: that sex transmits the sinful soul, and human sexuality was the cause of Adam’s fall – remaining what Brown describes as an “ugly scar” on the face of humanity⁴³ and transmitting the effects of that fall through generation after generation.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid., 199-200.

⁴¹ Ambrose of Milan *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke 2.56* (trans. Tomkinson, CTOS, 66-67).

⁴² Hunter, 200.

⁴³ Brown, 350.

⁴⁴ E.g., Ambrose *Letter 63* (trans. Beyenka, FOC, 326): “The passions of pleasure are changeable

Origen planted the seeds for conception and birth to be “inevitably associated with a series of ‘stains,’”⁴⁵ but while Origen believed free will could overcome them as the soul became more spiritual, Ambrose – armed with the body-soul concept of Galen filtered through the asceticism of Basil and Gregory – saw a materialist soul that could never recover from the scars with which it had been afflicted.

The final piece

Ambrose’s emphatic asceticism led to an understandably negative view of marriage and its accompanying carnality. Augustine understood Ambrose as leaving no room in the life of a Christian for a sexually active lifestyle, even within marriage.⁴⁶ This stringent viewpoint fit well with Augustine, whose own sexual failings had first driven him to the anti-materialist dualism of the Manichaeans.^{47 48}

So influenced by his personal and cultural background, Augustine also brought to his discussion of sex and the soul the set of assumptions carried from Galen, through the Greek Fathers of Cappadocia and into the preaching of his mentor, Ambrose. Primary among these assumptions were the one-sex model and a materialistic view of the soul. The combination of these premises led Augustine inexorably to the notion that all of humanity was present at the creation – and therefore the fall – of Adam and Eve.

In his discourse on the nature of sin and the soul in *City of God*, Augustine argues humanity “was made one individual,” and that “in the first man ... there existed the whole human nature, which was to be transmitted by the woman to posterity, when the conjugal union received the divine sentence of its own condemnation.”⁴⁹ Likewise, when woman was created through Adam’s rib, the man was weakened when his bone was

and slippery, and are infected, as it were, with the poison of corruption. It is certain, then, that Adam, deceived by the desire of pleasure, fell away from the command of God and from the enjoyment of grace. How, then, can pleasure call us back to paradise, when by itself it deprived us of paradise?” Brown translates “pleasure” here as “sensuality.”

⁴⁵ Brown, 352.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 350.

⁴⁷ Pheme Perkins, “Manichaeism,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (1997), 2:708.

⁴⁸ Lisa S. Cahill: *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge, 1996), 175, notes: “Not only did Augustine stand at a historical point where Christian ambivalence toward sex, and all the social roles which channeled it, was practically unavoidable, his personal experience also positioned him perfectly to reflect and magnify the tension already expressed in the Christian differentiation of celibacy and marriage.”

⁴⁹ Augustine *City of God* 12.27, 13.3, 13.14 (trans. Dods, NPNF, 243-44, 246, 251).

replaced by flesh, while the bone strengthened the woman – echoing the Galenic assumption of the weaker, less perfect female.⁵⁰

Augustine also unquestioningly repeats Ambrose's assumptions about the necessity for male sinlessness in the conception of Christ. Citing Hebrews' argument that Levi was in the loins of Abraham when the patriarch tithed to Melchizedek, Augustine argues all of humanity was in Adam's loins – except Jesus, who was not conceived through male seed.⁵¹ Indeed, Augustine makes his assumption plain: "We must believe that even before her sin, woman had been made to be ruled by her husband."⁵² We see that among the many cultural assumptions Augustine brought to the notion of sex, primary among them were two points Galen had been instrumental in articulating, and which Basil and Gregory had Christianized: The essential singularity of human gender, and the weakness of the female half of that gender.

Likewise, Augustine's work on the nature of the soul itself reveals a familiarity and acceptance of assumptions that owe much of their provenance to Galen's speculation. For example, Augustine could just as well be discussing Galen's *pneuma* when he argues "the soul does not rule its body as God does the universe," but that "it produces breath by its motion and does not make it out of its own substance."⁵³ Later, he argues the soul governs the body by means of light and air, "the two elements that have a kind of resemblance to the spirit"⁵⁴ – the kind of language that serves as a hallmark of the ancient Stoic thought that formed the backbone of Galen's speculation on the soul.⁵⁵

By accepting the Galenic assumption of a materialistic soul tied inextricably to the processes of the body, Augustine found he must accept the creation and propagation of the soul through the same process by which the body is conceived. "It is possible," he wrote in *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, "that God creates both body and soul from the parents: the body from their bodies, the soul from their souls."⁵⁶ Augustine wasn't

⁵⁰ Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 9.18.34 (trans. Taylor, ACW, 2:94).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.20.36 (ACW, 2:124).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.37.50 (ACW, 2:171).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.3.4 (ACW, 2:5).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.19.25 (ACW, 2:19).

⁵⁵ John Hammond Taylor, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Vol. 2 (Ancient Christian Writers 42), 248 n. 42.

⁵⁶ *Literal Meaning* 9.11.19 (ACW, 2:83).

completely convinced at that time, but in the end, he chose traducianism, citing infant baptism⁵⁷ but owing a greater debt than he seemed to realize to the intellectual legacy left by Galen: The soul simply could not be so connected to the body without being generated simultaneously with the body at the moment of conception.

With sexual intercourse playing such a central role in the creation of each soul, it could not help but be central to Augustine's theological focus, as well. Although he staked out more progressive ground on sex and marriage than many of his contemporaries, his views on sex and the physical attraction that precedes it could not help but be negative: "What friend of wisdom and holy joys, who being married ... would not prefer, if this were possible, to beget children without this lust?"⁵⁸

Even as Augustine focused on "lust" as the problem, rather than sex itself, he had difficulty keeping a strict boundary between them. "Lust requires for its consummation darkness and secrecy; and this not only when unlawful intercourse is desired, but even such fornication as the earthly city has legalized."⁵⁹ And although Augustine argued Adam and Eve theoretically *could* have had sex before the fall, he believed God did not authorize it because he foreknew their eventual sin.⁶⁰ In discussing this concept, Augustine reveals a familiarity with the ideas of Basil and Gregory, as filtered through Ambrose. Augustine's evocative description of the moment in which Genesis describes the first sin betrays just how central sexuality was to his view of sin and the soul: "Therefore, 'they ate, and the eyes of both were opened.' Opened to what except to concupiscence for one another in punishment for sin, born of the death of the flesh?"⁶¹

Augustine therefore made lust and untamed sexuality the primary consequences of Adam and Eve's primal sin. When added to the conclusion that the soul is transmitted through the sex act itself, Augustine had "placed sexuality irremovably at the center of the human person," as Brown argues.⁶² The core tenets of original sin were now in place: Everyone is born with guilt from the sin in which they actively participated in the Garden

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 10.23.39 (ACW, 2:127).

⁵⁸ *City of God* 14.16 (NPNF, 275-76).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.7 (NPNF, 276).

⁶⁰ *Literal Meaning* 9.4.8 (ACW, 75).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.31.40.

⁶² Brown, 422.

of Eden, stained through the very act of intercourse that gave them life yet also transmitted the tarnished soul of Adam.⁶³ This was merely the natural conclusion of the philosophical legacy Augustine had inherited. The materialism with which Galen had described the soul and his one-body model of gender had merged almost seamlessly with a Christian ascetical reading of Genesis 1-3, thanks to the work of bishops like Basil and Gregory, who left to Augustine, through Ambrose, a theological-ascetic framework in which sexuality, sin and the soul were inextricably intertwined. After adding his own struggles with untamed sexuality, Augustine covered this framework with the doctrine that would form the basis for western Christianity's beliefs on these subjects for centuries moving forward. Original sin is by no means a simple concept, but key tenets about the origin and transmission of fallen human nature owe much to the philosophical underpinnings summarized first by Galen.

Conclusion

Proving a negative is no easy task; it does not appear Augustine knew Galen's writings directly, though he does pause to "give some consideration to what the medical writers assert but also maintain they can prove" before launching a discussion that sounds very close to the Stoic medical tradition of which Galen was the foremost representative.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, scholars do not seem to link Augustine to Galen.

This oversight does a disservice to Galen's influence as a philosopher and doctor. While certainly the Latin west deprived itself for many centuries of his and other Greek works, Galen's influence was so pervasive as to be inescapable, as the experience of Augustine proves. He may never have even known Galen's name, but much of the bishop's most transformative thinking owes a great debt to the concepts first articulated, summarized or otherwise published by the doctor, then carried through the centuries by Eastern ascetics before influencing the teaching of Augustine's foremost mentor.

⁶³ Jesse Couenhoven, "St. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin," *Augustinian Studies* 36 No. 2 (2005): 359-96, is an excellent summation of the various tenets and Augustine's formulation of them.

⁶⁴ *Literal Meaning* 7.13.20-7.14.31 (ACW, 15).

Moving forward, the influence of Augustine is difficult to overstate. Original sin remains the default position for most Christians, including the Catholic Church.⁶⁵ The bigger concern is whether that influence, especially concerning the church's attitude toward sexuality, has been positive or negative. Augustine "created a darkened humanism that linked the pre-Christian past to the Christian present in a common distrust of sexual pleasure," Brown writes, adding while citing Augustine's *Sermon 51*: "The Christian married couple must 'descend with a certain sadness' to that particular task: for in the act of married intercourse itself, their very bodies spoke to them of Adam's fall."⁶⁶

By tying sex closely to sin, nearly to the exclusion of all other transgressions, Augustine on the one hand perpetuated the biases of his culture and on the other confirmed and expanded them for future generations. The general Christian tendency to focus on Ps 50:7 over and against Gen 1:28, for example, can certainly be traced to the fourth-century impulse to discount sex as anything more than a biological necessity – an impulse that found its most powerful voice in the person of Augustine, with roots spreading back to Gregory and Basil, who adapted and Christianized the ideas of Galen.

⁶⁵ C.J. Peter, "Original Sin: In Catholic Faith and Theology," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 10:777-81.

⁶⁶ Brown, 451.

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