

Paper Title: “Narrative Tone” in the Discussion of the Christian Doctrine of Sin in Dialogue with Evolutionary Science – Finding a Way Between Demonization and Trivialization

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Abstract:

The Christian understanding of sin entails an anthropology, a certain understanding of human being. The Christian doctrine of sin is connected to the other central anthropological statements of Christian doctrine: creation and redemption. This lecture will be a discussion of the terminology of “narrative tone” in connection with the attempt to find a narrative tone between demonizing pessimism and trivializing optimism in the description of human nature in the Christian doctrine of sin. This will first of all make it possible to understand the basic elements of the Christian narrative of human nature, and secondly it will enable interdisciplinary dialogue with other narratives, which claim to present a complete framework for understanding human beings, their past, present and future. The parameters of demonization / pessimism and trivialization / optimism will enable the different disciplines to compare their general understanding of human nature.

This lecture will present the terminology of “narrative tone”. The concept of narrative tone for this paper is inspired by the terminology found in Dan P. McAdams in his work *The Stories We Live By – Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* from 1993. McAdams concept of “narrative tone” is interesting for theology for several reasons. First of all because of his choice of words such as: “faith in the possibilities of human intention”, “hope” and “daring to believe that the world can be good”, these are words, which are very much affiliated with theological language. Secondly, it is interesting, because the two alternatives, optimism and pessimism, have played a major role in the formulation of the Christian understanding of human nature within the doctrine of sin, albeit under other headlines, and thirdly because the doctrine of sin in itself has been criticised for contributing to a pessimistic narrative tone and thereby contributing to the destruction of healthy human self images.

The Christian notion of “sin” is very complex and what is meant by “sin” is in it self neither agreed upon among different Christian churches nor within the communities of the different churches. But in spite of these differences, there seems to be certain reappearing areas of discussion in the history of the doctrine of sin concerning the image of human nature and the narrative tone used when telling the story of humanity from a Christian perspective. Central theological thinkers, such as Augustin and Martin Luther, find themselves in the middle of a debate concerning the narrative tone in their views of human nature as they are presented within their formulation of the doctrine of sin. A Christian doctrine of sin is primarily a narrative, a story about humanity, from beginning to end. Every theological attempt to rethink the tradition on sin is a contribution to the narrative of Christian anthropology. Theologians are through the notion of sin presenting a narrative of human nature, and these narratives touch upon every aspect of human life, its origin, the powers, which control human beings and the possibilities of transformation.

Biography:

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Paper Text:

1. Narrative Tone:

The concept of narrative tone for this paper is inspired by the terminology found in Dan P. McAdams in his work "The Stories We Live By – Personal Myths and the Making of the Self" from 1993:

"The most fundamental relationship between the personal myths we fashion in adulthood and the first two years of our lives may be expressed in what I call narrative tone. While some life stories exude optimism and hope, others are couched in the language of mistrust and resignation."¹

"An optimistic story can be optimistic because good things happen or because, even though bad things happen, the person remains hopeful that things will improve. Similarly, a pessimistic story can be pessimistic because of a series of misfortunes and bad events, or because good things are given a negative cast. Narrative tone speaks to the author's underlying faith in the possibilities of human intention and behavior. It reflects the extent to which a person dares to believe that the world can be good and that one's place can be more or less secure within it. This belief is prerational, prelogical."²

This narrative is:

"...an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future"³

That is, a narrative which can be seen as a grand narrative, giving meaning and direction to people is structured through three temporal element: 1) the origin of human beings; the past, 2) the current condition for human beings; the present, and 3) the possibility of change: the future.

This basic structure is the framework for the narrative and in order to analyze the narrative tone it is necessary to present how these three temporal elements are understood within a given theory.

Initially the use of the concept "narrative tone" needs some modifications. The use of McAdams concept of narrative tone in this paper does not concern the psychological insights into

¹ McAdams, 1993, 47. From McAdams, D. P., 1993. *The Stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: The Guilford Press.

² McAdams, 1993, 48.

³ McAdams, 1996, 304. From McAdams. D. P, 1996, Personality, modernity and the storied self: a contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry*, 7 (4): 295-321.

the development of the child and the effects on the personality of the adult. I am not addressing the status or use of McAdams work in psychology or other academic disciplines.

Instead the aim for this paper is to transfer his ideas and definitions onto an analysis of the narrative tone in the grand myths and stories about human nature found in different philosophical discourses, primarily theological, in order to relate such theological discourses to the discourses of evolutionary biology. Instead of analyzing personal stories primarily, this will be a discussion of the grand narratives, which are presented through the philosophies of different disciplines. The concept of “narrative tone” is a tool to be able to discuss underlying philosophical frameworks of understanding human nature. All disciplines and their view of human nature entail a certain image of the past, the present and the future, and as such, they present a general narrative, within which individual humans can construct their personal narrative, based in the common narrative of the given religion or scientific worldview. The underlying myths of such discourses of human nature are exposed, when a given thinker presents his or her philosophy or theology, tells the story of human nature so to say. These myths are a part of the underlying assumptions or a general view of human nature present in the given philosophy, scientific theory or theology.

McAdams concept of “narrative tone” is especially interesting for theology for several reasons. First of all because of his choice of words such as: “faith in the possibilities of human intention”, “hope” and “daring to believe that the world can be good”, these are words, which are very much affiliated with theological language. Secondly, it is interesting, because the two alternatives, optimism and pessimism, have played a major role in the formulation of the Christian understanding of human nature within the doctrine of sin, albeit under other headlines, and thirdly because the doctrine of sin in itself has been criticized for contributing to a pessimistic narrative tone and thereby contributing to the destruction of healthy human self images.

This paper will primarily focus on a discussion of the image of human nature presented in some representatives of certain strands of traditional Christian doctrine of sin in comparison with some representatives of certain strands of traditional evolutionary biology. The emphasis will be achieving grounds for a comparison of the different views on human beings within two different discourses or narratives.

2. Demonization and Trivialization:

In the introduction, it was mentioned that both Augustine and Martin Luther attempt to avoid two extreme points of view on human nature in their work. These two points were called: demonization and trivialization. These two positions are present in the debates, which shape the theology of both Augustine and Martin Luther and are as such very influential on the dynamics of the understanding of human nature in western thinking. In relation to McAdams two concepts, demonization and trivialization are the extreme positions of the pessimism and optimism. Demonization is the narrative tone of extreme pessimism found in some presentations of human nature and trivialization is on the other hand the narrative tone of extreme optimism.

In this paper, demonization and trivialization are defined as follows:

Demonization: any notion of human nature, which sees humanity’s origin or foundation as destructive or evil. Humanity is in its natural state or is born evil, egoistical and destructive. The solution lies in somehow retaining or avoiding the original evil and destructive powers of human nature to take over. It is any extreme pessimism, which does not leave any real hope for change or transformation.

Trivialization: any notion of human nature, which presents humanity as fully cable to change its own condition and views human beings as having complete power over themselves, as having a completely free will and as being able to obtain full knowledge of themselves. It is any extreme optimism, which does not face the reality of brokenness in the human condition.

These definitions are very broad and in many ways maybe to simple. But their function in this project is to open up for the possibility to analyze and compare different narratives of human nature. It is important to realize, that the two alternatives are not separate entities, they very often appear together; for example when humanity's ability to use and develop technology is demonized, and humanity's "natural state" is trivialized or romanticized or appear in mixed forms, where the human body is seen as evil and destructive, but the human soul or mind is seen as free and good. Trivialization and demonization often entail a splitting of human being into dichotomies of body-soul, technology-nature, male-female and so on, demonizing one part as inherently evil and trivializing the other as inherently good.

To concretize the two alternative narratives, I will offer the following quotations:

Demonization:

"The perfectly normal infant is almost completely egocentric, greedy, dirty, violent in temper, destructive in habit, profoundly sexual in purpose, aggrandizing in attitude, devoid of all but the most primitive reality sense, without conscience of moral feeling, whose attitude to society is opportunist, inconsiderate, domineering and sadistic. In fact, judged by adult social standards, the normal baby is for all practical purposes a born criminal."

Dr. Edvard Glover 1922.

Trivialization:

"I find children up to the time they are spoiled and flattened out by the culture, nicer, better, more attractive human beings than their elders, even though they are of course more 'primitive' than their elders. The 'taming and transforming' that they undergo seem to hurt rather than help. It was not for nothing that the famous psychologist defined adults as 'deteriorated' children'. Could it be possible that what we need is a little more primitiveness and a little less taming?"

Professor Abraham Maslow, 1949.

These two quotes present how very different the two narratives are and how the discussion primarily centers upon what the foundation for human nature or being is. Is the foundation primarily good or bad? Is the point of departure for the narrative a positive or negative setting? The two quotes also show the pre-rational or pre-logical character of the two positions: the underlying general myth of human nature influences the way the child is perceived.

In the following section I will present how the discussion within the Christian doctrine of sin has been an attempt to avoid both demonization and trivialization as two destructive alternatives to a Christian narrative of human nature. The aim will not be to go into the thoughts of Augustin or Martin Luther in any extensive way, instead it is meant as a presentation of two important cases for investigating the use of the two alternative narrative tones in the shaping of a Christian doctrine of sin and to explore the usefulness of the concept for theological discussions of

the doctrine of sin and to facilitate a comparison with the view of human nature in traditional evolutionary biology.⁴

3. A Christian Doctrine of Sin:

3.1 Augustine:

Augustine developed his teachings on original sin in debate with two different anthropological statements of his time each representing an alternative narrative tone to Augustine's own.

First of all Augustine distanced himself from the Manicheans, a Gnostic group, which had fascinated him in his earlier years. For the Manicheans, the world was not created good and all sin and evil in the world was due to an evil creator of matter. Opposite this creator stands the saving power of light, and humanity is placed in the middle of this battle, with a soul of light trapped in a body of darkness. The goal is to escape this material world and join the power of light. The general narrative tone here is one of despair at the human condition and with a deep mistrust of the natural human life.

In opposition to this, Augustine stresses the monotheistic vision of continuity of one God, who is active from past to present and into the future in his work *De Libero Arbitrio*, on the free will. God is good and almighty and creation is good. The foundation for human nature is in the good creation, where humanity has freedom and a true life. The despair of the Manichean image of human nature is denied on grounds of God's good creation. Humanity is created with a free will and is not created entrapped in evil matter. Augustine also insisted that this goodness of creation was lost in the fall and that after the fall humanity could be described as a *massa damnata*⁵ or a *massa perditiones*⁶, a damned mass, a mass of perdition. Evil and sin is not a part of the Creator or the original creation, but it is a part of the rebellion of humanity against God. Now humanity can do nothing but realize this new "original condition" and hope for God's mercy. Humanity used its free will to turn away from God and is now caught by sin, but this does not alter the fact of the good creation or the goodness of God. His eagerness to stress the goodness of Creator and creation was applauded by another theologian, who quickly became a very important opponent for Augustine.

This other theologian was Pelagius and his followers.⁷ To Pelagius, the idea of original sin and the anthropology of the *massa damnata* were dangerous to the Christian message of hope and transformation, because it pacified people. Pelagius sees Augustine's point of view as containing a pessimistic narrative tone, which is so extreme, that it demonizes humanity. Human beings might as well not even try to do anything good, since their condition is so universally fatal. And there is no motivation to fight sin in the image of the fallen mass. Pelagius instead insisted that humanity is capable of doing something good. Humanity fell into sin, but not to such a degree that they cannot climb back up again. They can and they must. Humanity is not a *massa damnata*,

⁴ For an interesting discussion of the view of human nature in evolutionary biology linked to a Christian notion of sin see Gregory Peterson, *Minding God – Theology and the Cognitive Sciences*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis. In this work, Peterson has a chapter entitled "Whence Original Sin?" p. 151-180. See also John Haught's comments on the theme of "original sin", p. 137-143 in *God After Darwin – A Theology of Evolution*, 2000, Boulder, Westview Press.

⁵ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Liber XIV, Caput XXVI: universa massa tanquam in vitiate radice damnata.

⁶ Augustine, *Sermo*, 26, xii, 13.

⁷ Cf. *De gestis Pelagii* and *Contra epistolas Pelagianum*. From Pelagius himself a *letter to Demetrias* is available. The ideas of Pelagius were officially condemned at a Council in 418.

instead it has a project, which is hard but possible to complete; salvation. Pelagius' theology stresses the importance of the optimistic narrative tone, which will guarantee a positive "faith in the possibilities of human intention and behavior", as McAdams defines it.⁸ If this possibility of human effort is left out, human beings will lose all motivation in their lives and be left as passive victims for the evil in the world.

To Augustine this theology is dangerous. He turned his attention to this problem through the massive work he had already done in connection with these questions.⁹ He stressed his main point; humanity is a *massa damnata*, completely dependent on God for its salvation, and this salvation cannot be achieved by any human means at all. The transformation of humanity, as its creation, is in the hands of the triune God. Each and every human being is in the same situation, when it comes to the relationship with God. All of humanity had the potential not to sin, and stay in the original relationship with God, but all of humanity sinned in the sin of the first humans, and fell accordingly into the new original condition: sin.

Augustine defends his narrative tone of humanity within the limits he encounters in Manichaeism and in the theology of Pelagius: a tone, which is neither identical with extreme pessimism nor with extreme optimism. Instead it is based in an attempt to formulate a more complex understanding of human nature.

Augustine wants to avoid the hopelessness of both alternatives: the pessimistic tone in its demonizing variant portrays human nature as intrinsically evil and hopeless, nothing inside humanity is good in itself; this is not in accordance with the Christian concept of a good creation, and is therefore not an option for Christian thinkers. On the other hand, optimism in its trivializing form contains another kind of hopelessness: the final consequence of Pelagius' thoughts is a moralistic hopelessness, where everyone is left to his or her own abilities and where anyone who feels trapped or weak is told to "try harder". The reality of sin, which means that human beings are caught in themselves, unable to fully see themselves or to fully realize their own motivations, also means that no human being should be left to their own devices in order to "heal themselves". There is a message of a salvation or transformation coming from outside the human ego, and this message is also founded in the message of a good origin of human nature. Augustine attempts to find a middle way, avoiding the hopelessness of either a too pessimistic or too optimistic narrative tone, when telling the story of human nature.

The balance between demonization and trivialization is hard to keep, and it is obvious that Augustine's fierceness in his attacks on Pelagius and the trivialization he represents drives his theological understanding of humanity close to a demonizing image. Because it is important to keep God out of harms way in the quest of the origin of evil and sin, humanity becomes the center of attention. Augustine's understanding of human nature is a part of a complex theology and if this complexity is weakened in any way, the image of humanity becomes very dark. This image of human nature as utterly doomed is a hopeless message unless understood as a part of theological message of creation and grace. Augustine's struggle to maintain the balance may not always have succeeded, and the theologians following him may not have been careful enough to avoid the pitfalls.

Another part of the heritage from Augustine, which has proved insistent and not very helpful through the ages, is the terminology of Pelagianism and Manichaeism, designating trivialization on one hand and demonization on the other. This terminology became very powerful especially in the Reformation and has stayed with most theologians, where Pelagianism designates Roman Catholic theology and Manichaeism designates Lutheran or protestant theology in general

⁸ McAdams, 1993.

⁹ Augustine's work on the free will in his *De Libero Arbitrio* had become an inspiration for Pelagius, and Augustine had to clarify his points of disagreement with Pelagius. These can be found in his *Retractations* on the work.

The use of this terminology is very damaging to any dialogue, as it instantly names the opponent as heretic. Another problem is that those designated with the term often do not have anything in common with the original groups. Therefore it would be productive in many ways if they were replaced by trivialization and demonization, thereby also opening the way for a critical analysis of the narrative of human nature in different theological traditions.

3.2 Martin Luther on the Human Condition

Martin Luther's theological rebellion against the church and theology of his time in many ways circle around the understanding of sin and the human condition.¹⁰ To put it somewhat boldly, one could say that the reformation was spawned by a need to reexamine the understanding of sin and the anthropological statements within it. Where Augustine presented us with the *massa damnata*, Luther's anthropology could be exemplified in the expression *simul iustus et simul peccator*¹¹, "at the same time justified and sinner" – totally both at the same time. Sin is total, but so is justification. Martin Luther's anthropology is based in this understanding of sin as a total condition of humankind. As with Augustine his ideas are presented in a series of battles with alternative narratives of human nature.

First of all, Martin Luther wanted to stress that the individual human person seeking salvation will not be helped through a trivializing image of human nature, which says; "try harder". Only through realizing the totality of sin can human beings see that salvation comes from God. But this salvation does not alter the human condition as under the power of sin in this world. Transformation means that sin does no longer separate human beings from God, but they still live totally under the power of sin in this world and cannot change this situation themselves. Christians live transformed lives in a world where sin is a very real power.

The important sin is original sin, the *concupiscentia*, which is total in every human being and which does not disappear in baptism.¹² Every human being is bound by sin and is held capture by the power of sin to such a degree that they do not even realize it any more. In salvation they are still bound, but now to God instead of Satan, as Luther presents it in his image of human beings as horses, with a rider, who is either Satan or God.¹³

This anthropology and the narrative tone of pessimism on behalf of human free will was a provocation for the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus opted for a more optimistic narrative tone in opposition to Luther, because if there is no free will in the human person, just in some minor degree, there is no possibility for responsibility or any place for human rationality. Humanity must have some abilities to choose and to make rational decisions. Erasmus was not extreme in his views on human free will and he did not claim that human free will was prior to or stronger than the grace of God. But for Luther it was enough to even claim any role of the free will in the relationship to God and transformation. At the same time Luther stressed the goodness of creation and the Creator, but since his main debates concerned the defense of the doctrine of sin as a true presentation of the human condition, it was these elements he put forward with the strongest emphasis. Luther tried to maintain a balance, where the goodness of God was the primary foundation in the tension between creation and sin and between the totality of salvation and the totality of sin in the Christian person.

¹⁰ For this short overview, I am dependent on the discussions of Luther's doctrine of sin in Grane, 1994.

¹¹ Cf. eg. Martin Luther's commentary on the Paul's letter to the Romans. WA 56, 272, 17 for the development of this phrase.

¹² Luther's lectures on Romans, 1515 and on *the Bondage of the Will (De Servo Arbitrio)* 1525, are especially important sources to Luther's understanding of human nature and sin.

¹³ WA 18, 635, *De Servo Arbitrio*.

In Lutheran tradition this complex tension in the *simul iustus et peccator* and the position of lack of free will was strained by one of the students of Luther, Matthias Flacius, who took it so far as to say, that human nature in itself was ruined by the Fall, and that humanity has a whole new nature of sin. The nature of the Devil replaced human nature and humanity was no longer human, but was made up of a new demonic substance. In some ways, Matthias Flacius took the demonizing tendencies in Luther's understanding of humanity to its extreme and talked about human nature in an extreme pessimistic narrative tone.

Martin Luther attempted, as did Augustine, to maintain a balance in his theological anthropology. But his eagerness to hold on to humanity as being completely dependent on God and the wish to avoid any human effort in salvation, he presented an image of humanity bound by sin, which is very close to demonizing human nature. Martin Luther's understanding of human nature is part of a very complex theology, which does maintain the balance between the two alternatives. But this balance can only be possible if all the different elements of this theology are kept into play; human nature was created good, and it was not replaced in the Fall. And God's transformative grace sends human beings back into their lives together with the possibility to act lovingly towards each other.

3.3 The Narrative Tone of the Christian Doctrine of Sin:

The main contribution from both Augustine and Luther in this context is their attempt to present human beings as neither angels nor demons, but as humans. They aim at avoiding both demonizing and trivializing human nature. Trivializing human nature means to claim humanity's self-sufficiency to such a degree, that one overlooks completely the very true and powerful reality of evil and destruction in the world. Here the hopelessness lies in being left alone with the total responsibility for one's own life or in the lack of recognition of the powerless state we find ourselves in sometimes. Demonizing human nature on the other hand is to claim that humanity is utterly corrupted from beginning to end and that there is no hope for anything except maybe the ability to be able to control this evil creature or to escape humanity altogether.

What is the alternative narrative tone, which both Augustine and Luther attempt to hit, which avoids the extreme optimism as well as the extreme pessimism? In my view it is: a realistic pessimism embedded in a hopeful optimism, which holds on to the good foundation of human nature.

In the understanding of human nature presented in the theologies of Augustin and Martin Luther the three temporal elements are presented as 1) the creation of human beings as part of the good God's good creation, 2) the current condition is based in a dialectic tension between the good origin and sin. Human beings currently live under the conditions of sin, universally and totally. 3) The anticipated future, already present now, is God's transforming grace, which through the Son and the Holy Spirit transforms and renews human beings into the lives they are meant to live. This transformation will not be complete until the end of time, that is, the fulfillment is placed in the future, but it is exactly a future present now as anticipated future.

These three elements together form the basic structure of a Christian understanding of human nature, through the dynamic of all three elements, Christian theology has the opportunity to hold on to the goodness of human nature, as well as the very real power of sin and destruction in human lives, without ever losing the message of hope. This "hope dimension" is based in the understanding of the human past and the future, both present now in the current human condition. Christian anthropology entails a hope which transcends the human, but which at the same time is embedded in humanity; creation and incarnation holds onto the hopeful dimension in being human.

In McAdams terminology this transcending dimension is also present, the narrative tone is found in the hope or belief, which does not primarily discuss “my” ability to change everything: “good things happen or because, even though bad things happen, the person remains hopeful that things will improve” – this of course does not and is not meant to cover the theological message of salvation – but it reflects the dimension of hope: “things will change – even though they are bad right now”. This is also what I would call a realistic mix of pessimism and optimism, which is safeguarded from fatalism as well as from naïve optimism and it is an attitude to life which also transcends the individual and places all human beings in a social context, where life happens not just based on individual decisions, but as a dynamic of inner and outer forces.

Inspired by McAdams definitions, one could say that the Christian doctrine of sin is an optimistic narrative, but a realistic optimism based in a relationship with God as the positive foundation of life.

Theology should avoid both the narrative tones in their extremes. The knowledge of the reality of sin and the dependence on God for true transformation avoids trivializing humanity. Creation and salvation as the two powerful acts by God makes it impossible to state that humanity is evil from beginning to end. Augustine and Luther attempt to avoid these two alternatives, but it is obvious that they do not always succeed in avoiding the tendency to demonize in their rigorous work to avoid trivializing. If the two basic statements of good creation and salvation are left out of sight in these two dynamic and complex views human nature, sin is the only statement left, and this causes a demonizing image of human beings. Therefore it is important to see how the doctrine of sin entails an understanding of creation and salvation. A theological understanding of human nature, based in creation, sin and salvation must never trivialize or demonize humanity. Instead it should hold on to a complex view of human nature, where it is never reduced to any of its parts or presented as a fragmented image of humanity where parts of it are glorified and other parts demonized. This challenge to the image of human nature presented in theology is a challenge theologians can bring with them into the interdisciplinary dialogue as a corrective to any view of human nature which presents us with any of these two hopeless alternatives. But the theology of both Augustine and Luther also clearly presents theology with a challenge to avoid the pessimistic tone, which has seemed so often to surface within the doctrine of sin.

In connection to McAdams’ psychology of human development and the narrative tone in their life stories, it is important that theology never presents a narrative of humanity, which drives people into a pessimistic or demonic view of their own humanity.

It will be fruitful for theology to be inspired by McAdams’ idea of narrative tone in the discussion of the image of human nature presented within the doctrine of sin, both as a tool for comparison between different theological models without using outdated terminology, and as a tool for exploring the elements of the Christian doctrine of sin as a special narrative about human nature as a special narrative, which cannot be reduced to other discourses, but which at the same time can go into dialogue with other visions of human nature based on the parameters of demonization and trivialization as the extremes points of pessimism and optimism. The doctrine of sin should be understood as a narrative, as a collection of very different narratives, about human nature, because the doctrine of sin in connection with the dynamics of Christian anthropology: creation, fall, sin and transformation, is “a story we live by” in a very real sense for the Christians.

4. Evolutionary Biology:

The following is only a short tour through some significant elements of traditional evolutionary biology, the socio-biology of E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins.¹⁴ This will of course not be an exhausting or in any way complete or nuanced presentation of evolutionary biology, the purpose of this paper is to facilitate discussion both of the “narrative tone” within different disciplines with an emphasis on presenting a complex and nuanced view of human nature and of the use of the concept of “narrative” tone in interdisciplinary work. Therefore it will not be a discussion of the biology of evolutionary biology in itself, but a discussion of the philosophical elements and the narrative on human nature which is available. The view point of this paper is primarily theological but based in the comparison of different narratives on human nature and the narrative tone within them.

4.1 The Narrative of Human Nature in Evolutionary Biology:

Evolutionary biology provides a framework for understanding human nature, its past, present and future. The basic mechanisms of human nature within this framework are the mechanism of evolution and it is through an understanding of these mechanisms that we shall come to understand ourselves as humans. The main focus is on the past and the present of human beings, but often does the evolutionary biologist or psychologist discuss the future of humanity and how our knowledge of ourselves should assist us in the shaping of this future. The dimension of “hope” or the possibilities of change are taken up as important elements in for example E.O. Wilson’s work.

The faith in the explanatory power of the evolutionary paradigm or narrative is great:

“This book is written in the conviction that our own existence once presented the greatest of all mysteries, but that it is a mystery no longer because it is solved. Darwin and Wallace solved it, though we shall continue to add footnotes to their solution for a while yet”.¹⁵ And: “It’s happened. We have finally figured out where we came from, why we are here and who we are”.¹⁶

It is obvious from these quotes that within the paradigm of evolutionary science there is a claim to explanatory power, when it comes to the understanding of human beings; a claim of being able to not only perform complicated scientific research, but also to present a general understanding of human being, a framework, which supplies us with answers to the age old questions of our existence and being itself. Evolutionary biology supplies a philosophical framework for understanding our lives, a framework based in the scientific research of many and various fields, which can function as a narrative, in the sense of the word used in this paper: the basic narrative about ourselves, with the three temporal elements: past, present and future, which we live by, that is, which we use to guide ourselves, to order our lives by and from which we derive a basic understanding of ourselves. Evolutionary biology provides such a grand narrative with an understanding of human nature, which presents a certain general framework for understanding

¹⁴ It would be interesting in connection with the topic of this paper to discuss the work done by Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson found in Sober and Wilson *Unto Others – the Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, 1998, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, in order to discuss how there is also within evolutionary scientists themselves a debate on how to understand both the destructive and constructive elements in human beings. But this paper will limit itself to a short overview of the traditional socio-biological understanding of human nature, both due to special limitations, but also because the discussion of the traditional socio-biology presents some interesting points of comparison with traditional Christian doctrines of sin.

¹⁵ Dawkins, Richard 1986, p. ix. *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford; Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Betzig, Laura, ed. 1997 xi. *Human Nature*. Oxford; Oxford University Press.

ourselves: a vision of our past, which provides knowledge of our present, and which gives us certain expectations as to what we can anticipate from the future.

Of course evolutionary biology or evolutionary science in general cannot be presented as providing a unified understanding of human nature, since there are many different theories and research results within this field. But it can be said that the narrative of evolutionary biology bases its understanding of the three temporal elements: past, present and future within the mechanism of evolution. The past is seen as the evolution of different species through mutation and selection, the present is seen as a result of a ongoing process controlled by such forces of nature, and the anticipated future is seen with these mechanisms, which we can never set ourselves apart from, although we might be able to transform them into something we find more attractive, such as an increased altruism. But such an anticipated future is very much linked to our understanding and insights into our past and how this past has shaped our present as a species as well as individuals.

This framework is as such universally valid, it covers the whole of the human species, as well as all other biological life, and therefore the claim to explanatory power is a claim to universal explanatory power: the insights of evolutionary biology concern all human beings at all times. The following will be a short presentation of different presentations of the understanding of human nature within certain representatives of evolutionary biology. This will lead up to a discussion of what the “narrative tone” of their implicit view of human nature is and a attempt to relate this to the discussion of “narrative tone” in the Christian doctrine of sin with a special emphasis on discussing the message of hope or the possibility of change within the different narratives.

4.2 “Narrative tone” in Sociobiology:

The term sociobiology, coined by E.O. Wilson, moved the scope of evolutionary biology to cover new territory. Evolutionary theories could explain and deepen our understanding of cultural phenomena. Love, friendships, art, ethics and religion also belonged to the field of biology, and not exclusively to the academic disciplines of the social sciences, psychology, history or theology. In his “Sociobiology; The New Synthesis”¹⁷ and “On Human Nature”¹⁸ Wilson presented a new anthropological vision entailing knowledge on the universality and totality of human beings and was able to say something about the ultimate mechanisms, which created and create human life. Natural selection and mutation lie at the root of all human behavior. We can know ourselves through knowledge of these mechanisms and what they produce.

Another evolutionary biologist, who became very famous for his use of evolutionary science, is Richard Dawkins¹⁹. For Richard Dawkins the surviving unit is the gene and he coined the terminology of the “selfish gene”. This terminology spawned a massive interest and discussion, not to mention resentment and disbelief in many circles, even crossing out of the academic milieu and into the mass media. Dawkins described the genes as “selfish” and meant by that, that genes are the surviving entities, who can only survive or die out, and that everything on other levels are controlled in some way or other by this survival machinery. We as human beings are the genes survival machines.

In their work both E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins show how evolutionary science obviously stresses both the universality and the totality of human nature. They address not only the universal nature of human beings, but also set forward a narrative, which has something to say about the totality of every individual human person. Should we as individuals see ourselves the way

¹⁷ Wilson, E.O., 1975. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Cambridge, Mass; Belknap Press.

¹⁸ Wilson, E.O., 1978. *On Human Nature*, Cambridge Mass; Harvard University Press

¹⁹ Dawkins, 1976.

Dawkins describes us? What are the ethical consequences of such a vision? Are we vehicles for little, material calculators, who make us love, hate, eat and be religious, in order to survive? Through many different scopes, the joint venture of economic game theory and biology, knowledge of kin selection and reciprocity, suddenly human life was described as living out a “stable strategy” and being nothing but the bottles of surviving entities inside us.

The vast interest in the anthropological vision of such people as E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins and others show that they touched something very vital to everyone: human self-understanding and the portrayal of humanity in both its universality and its totality. It is exactly the discussion of the narrative tone in the image of human nature presented in evolutionary biology, which have been one of the key subjects for the debates on socio-biology. Maybe not using the terminology of “narrative tone”, but a discussion of whether socio-biology presents a too deterministic, pessimistic or reductionistic view of human nature. In line with McAdams definition of optimism and pessimism, socio-biology’s view of human nature was deemed pessimistic: it seems to leave no room for human free will, it gives a negative cast to good things, by calling altruism, helpful behavior and cooperation for selfish and egotistical. All these seemingly good things are really, in an evolutionary perspective, selfish, because they serve only the gene itself and they are all strategies for achieving a selfish goal. This has been the view of many critics of socio-biology and evolutionary psychology, where does the possibility of change or transformation lie in such an image of human nature?²⁰ Do the ideas presented by Richard Dawkins not doom people to accept their fate as carriers of selfish genes and not in any way try to change or better their lives or conditions?

In the evaluation of the “narrative tone” of E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins work, it is interesting in comparison to the Christian doctrine of sin to look at exactly this criticism. First of all because the Christian doctrine of sin has been accused of similar flaws; a too pessimistic and deterministic view of human nature, which only serves to dull and prevent people from trying to improve and change their lives. Secondly, it is interesting because the Christian doctrine of sin raises the question of “hope” also mentioned by McAdams in his work: what is the “hope dimension” in the work of E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins? How is the anticipated future, the possibility of change presented within their work?

4.3 The “hope dimension” in E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins:

Although it would seem that much traditional socio-biology only presents us with ongoing workings of the mechanism of evolution from their point of view, where human hopes, dreams, wants and needs all are controlled basically by genes and genetic “interests”, interestingly enough this does not leave out the question of our future. The “future-element” of any grand narrative is also present in socio-biology.

One does not have to look long to find it, because this theme is addressed directly in E.O. Wilson’s “On Human Nature”, chapter 9. The final chapter of the book is simply entitled “Hope”. This chapter takes its departure in the failings of “myths of traditional religion and its secular equivalents”²¹. The loss of these myths has been destructive to human beings, but there is help in sight, a new way of understanding ourselves:

“... a deeper and more courageous examination of human nature, that combines the findings of biology with those of the social sciences. The mind will be more precisely explained as an epiphenomenon of the neural machinery of the brain. That machinery

²⁰ Cf. For example the various contributions to the debate in *The Sociobiology Debate*, ed. Arthur L. Caplan, 1978, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, Cf. p. 259f, and 280f.

²¹ Wilson, 1978, p. 195.

is in turn the product of genetic evolution by natural selection acting on human populations for hundreds of thousands of years in their ancient environments.”²²

Human beings are created through evolution, their minds, their sociality, and their cultures, but the hope, the possibility of transformation lies in the free will of human beings: “Fortunately, this circularity of the human predicament is not so tight that it cannot be broken through an exercise of free will”.²³ Through the new biology, we will be able to understand ourselves and thereby, we will be able to change. Through the knowledge of our past and our present we can understand the true values which lie in our human nature and we can live by a new biological ethics.

“The true Promethean spirit of science means to liberate man by giving him knowledge and some measure of dominion over the physical environment. But at another level, and in a new age, it also constructs the mythology of scientific materialism, guided by the corrective devices of the scientific method, addressed with precise and deliberately affective appeal to the deepest needs of human nature, and kept strong by the blind hopes that the journey on which we are now embarked will be farther and better than the one just completed.”²⁴

This is the hope, which is inherent within what Wilson himself calls “the evolutionary epic”²⁵. Here there seems to be little determinism and instead a complete vision of human nature, not only of its past and its present, what is has been and how it is now, but also a complete vision of an anticipated future. E.O. Wilson presents a narrative, within which human beings can understand themselves and where they can also find a promise of a better world, of transformation and of salvation from what threatens us as human beings.

In Richard Dawkins the hope also lies in the understanding of ourselves as creatures controlled by the forces of evolution and he radically stresses, that the only hope is to fight our natural condition, to try to overcome what we are born as and with: “We have the power to turn against our creators. We alone on earth can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicator”.²⁶ We have to turn against our creators: the forces of evolution, and try to transform ourselves out of our natural condition, if we wish to live altruistically. “Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish (...) anything that has evolved by natural selection should be selfish.”²⁷ The hope of the future lies in the overcoming of our past.

These two ways of expressing the hope dimension of socio-biology or evolutionary science in E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins poses some interesting points of departure for a discussion with the Christian doctrine of sin within the categories of demonization and trivialization.

5. Demonization and Trivialization – The Possibility of Change:

Interestingly, whereas one could expect the traditional socio-biology to be charged with the accusation of demonization of human nature, it becomes obvious in the totality of the narrative they present, that also the accusation of trivialization becomes relevant. Although the past and present of human beings are described in very dark terminology by Dawkins, his hope for the future is based in human abilities. The human intellect and human understanding of its own situation becomes the

²² Wilson, 1978, p. 195.

²³ Wilson, p. 196.

²⁴ Wilson, p. 209.

²⁵ Wilson, p. 208.

²⁶ Dawkins, 1976, p. 201.

²⁷ Dawkins, 1976, p. 3.

basis for change and transformation. The solution to the problem of selfishness as the basic drive in human beings lies within the human sphere itself.

If one says that the Christian doctrine of sin presented through the tradition of Augustine and Martin Luther is an optimistic narrative, but a realistic optimism based in a relationship with God as the positive foundation of life, the evolutionary biology of Richard Dawkins can be seen as a realistic optimism based in the knowledge and ability to use this knowledge by human beings. Both narratives of human nature have a very keen sense of the real power of destruction and evil in human lives and they both are aware of the enormous task that lies in overcoming these destructive forces. But their “hope dimension” differs very much.

The doctrine of sin has often been accused of being pessimistic in its evaluation of human beings, especially when it comes to the view of human free will as found in both Augustine and Martin Luther. But as shown earlier in this paper, the doctrine of sin is not pessimistic: it is part of a narrative of human nature, which says that the past of human beings is with God, the present is guided by God and the future is hopefully anticipated as the transformation of the sinful human being. At the same time this underscores the complete dependency of human being on God. It is in God's will, God's love, that human beings find the framework for their own narratives, all human beings and every individual human being. The dimension of hope, of transformation, the positive evaluation of human beings lies with God, it is in God's eyes that human beings are good creatures and it is through God's grace that human beings are transformed into true humans, who are destined to live together in love. Therefore the doctrine of sin is neither pessimistic nor deterministic, it is a religious anthropology and it has its optimism anchored in God. It is a complex anthropology, which holds on to the three elements of creation, sin and transformation. It represents a framework, within which every human person can understand him or herself and find orientation. As such a framework or narrative, it claims universal explanatory power.

Evolutionary biology, as in the example of E.O. Wilson, also presents a narrative, an epic, which claims universal explanatory power, and which offers a framework, within which every individual can understand him or herself. It is a narrative, which offers not only insights into who we were and who we are, but also a promise of who we are to become. Evolutionary biology has been accused of being deterministic and pessimistic because of the way human goodness was understood as illusions, but in the case of E.O. Wilson his chapter 9 on Hope truly shows, that the determinism isn't designed at hopelessness or meant to be discouraging, actually Wilson expects it to be a liberating epic, which will change our lives and become a new epic, a narrative to live by, for all people. The pessimistic narrative tone in the descriptions of the motivations behind human behavior, the genetic “selfishness” of Dawkins, is not simply a “final judgment” for human beings; it is at the same time the only real basis for change in Dawkins view. Only if we face the reality of what we are is there any hope of change in Dawkins view. In E. O. Wilson's understanding the new biological knowledge is a liberating message: we can understand who we are, and only then can we change. Both E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins underscore how only a “realistic” view of human nature that is a view based on evolutionary science can form the basis of any real hope.

The Christian doctrine of sin also emphasizes the importance of understanding who we are, what our true origin is and what our limitations are, but the source of change, the power of transformation is not based in human will or human effort, but in God's transformation and the human lives, which are lived through this transformation. The pessimism of the doctrine of sin is outshone by the optimism of the narrative of creation and of transformation, both acts by God. The pessimism of evolutionary biology is outshone by the human effort and intelligence, the ability to understand and act upon our understanding.

6. Conclusive Remarks:

In the understanding of human nature presented in the theologies of Augustin and Martin Luther the three temporal elements are presented as 1) the creation of human beings as part of the good God's good creation, 2) the current condition is based in a dialectic tension between the good origin and sin. Human beings currently live under the conditions of sin, universally and totally. 3) The anticipated future, already present now, is God's transforming grace, which through the Son and the Holy Spirit transforms and renews human beings into the lives they are meant to live. This transformation will not be complete until the end of time, that is, the fulfillment is placed in the future, but it is exactly a future present now as anticipated future.

These three elements together form the basic structure of a Christian understanding of human nature, through the dynamic of all three elements, Christian theology has the opportunity to hold on to the goodness of human nature, as well as the very real power of sin and destruction in human lives, without ever losing the message of hope. This "hope dimension" is based in the understanding of the human past and the future, both present now in the current human condition.

In evolutionary biology the three elements are roughly speaking as follows: 1) Human beings are shaped through the same forces of evolution as other biological life, our knowledge of the past is important as a key to understanding how certain behaviors or features could appear in human beings. 2) The current condition is shaped by the forces of evolution. 3) The future is set within certain biological limits, but through our understanding of the forces of evolution in all its aspects, we can participate in these forces and maybe change and alter some elements in our favor.

Our deeper understanding of our selves through evolutionary science will improve our future. In evolutionary science the hope dimension is clearly connected to how the "forces of evolution" are understood. If evolution can only operate through selfish behavior and war, then the original premise of human nature lies within such an understanding and the dimension of hope will be tied to an understanding of our ability to overcome our own natural origin. Such an understanding of the human origins and the powers at work in our current condition will create a very pessimistic image of our selves, which can only be outbalanced by a very strong confidence in our ability to understand and alter our condition in the light of evolutionary science. It is a "hope dimension" based in human efforts and human abilities. It lies in human hands; it lies in the ability for us to understand ourselves, to change in accordance to this understanding.

Both a Christian doctrine of sin and evolutionary science focus on the basic questions of human being: Where do we come from? What drives us? Why are there aggression, violence and destruction in the world? How can we change? Both the Christian doctrine of sin and evolutionary science entail such a philosophical dimension and both present a complete narrative about human nature; grand narratives, which can be used by individuals to guide their lives by and to understand themselves by. The two narratives differ in many ways in their view of the human past, present and future and they obtain their "hope dimension" from very different sources. They both have been accused of being too pessimistic and fatalistic in their understanding of human nature and they both show how they understand their source of optimism and possibility of change.

It is important to be aware of the general narrative tone of the grand stories we live by, so that these narratives do not either end up in a too pessimistic and destructive tone, where there is no hope of change and human beings are held hostage by their own nature, nor in a too optimistic or naïve tone, where the reality of destruction and evil is overlooked or repressed, leaving no real hope of change or maybe even increasing the destruction by utopian dreams of change, which demand harsh means to be realized.

For a theological understanding of human nature the middle way between these two hopeless alternatives lies in the understanding of God as the primary ground for human being, as the foundation and dynamic force in the past, present and future of human beings. Human beings are

not left to struggle with their sinful nature alone and the power of sin is taken seriously as a very real power. Human beings are not left to be held hostage by a sinful nature, which can never be overcome, but neither are they told that sin is something they can overcome on their own. Instead it is God who battles sin through God's forgiveness of human beings. For a theological understanding of human nature based in such a tradition, the dimension of hope can never be placed in the abilities of human beings themselves alone, but must have its origin and force through God. The only true or "realistic" hope for a Christian doctrine of sin can never be set up as a task for humans to undertake alone, it is always a hope based in the primary act of God.

In an evaluation of the differences between the two narratives, a narrative found within the Christian doctrine of sin and a narrative found through traditional socio-biology, the main area of disagreement is therefore, where the true source of hope lies. In a Christian doctrine of sin there has been many struggles to avoid both the hopelessness of trivialization and of demonization: the hopelessness of being left alone with the total responsibility for ones own or the hopelessness in the view that humanity is utterly corrupted from beginning to end and that there is no hope for anything except maybe the ability to be able to control this evil creature or to escape humanity altogether. In traditional socio-biology the theme of hope and possibility of change also have been areas of importance, as they are part of the total narrative of human nature present within sociobiology, but here the hope for humanity is placed solely in the hands of human beings and their ability to understand the message of evolutionary science and act upon them.

The concept of narrative tone facilitates a renewed discussion of the view of human nature presented within very different academic disciplines, philosophies and religions. It opens up for an analysis of the various elements of such view of human beings and makes it possible to compare and discuss across disciplinary boundaries. This paper has aimed at showing how the concept of narrative tone and viewing the narratives of various disciplines on human nature can function as a helpful tool in interdisciplinary work between science and religion.