

Original
sin

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Today we focus on the claim that baptism is “for the forgiveness of sins.” If this is true — and is supposed to be a general claim about baptism — then it must be that even very young babies have sins for which they need forgiveness.

But what could these sins be? Presumably they are not owing to anything that the baby did since birth; hence they must be sins of which the baby is guilty at birth.

Understanding this doctrine is, of course, the problem of understanding the doctrine of **original sin**.

Understanding this doctrine is, of course, the problem of understanding the doctrine of **original sin**.

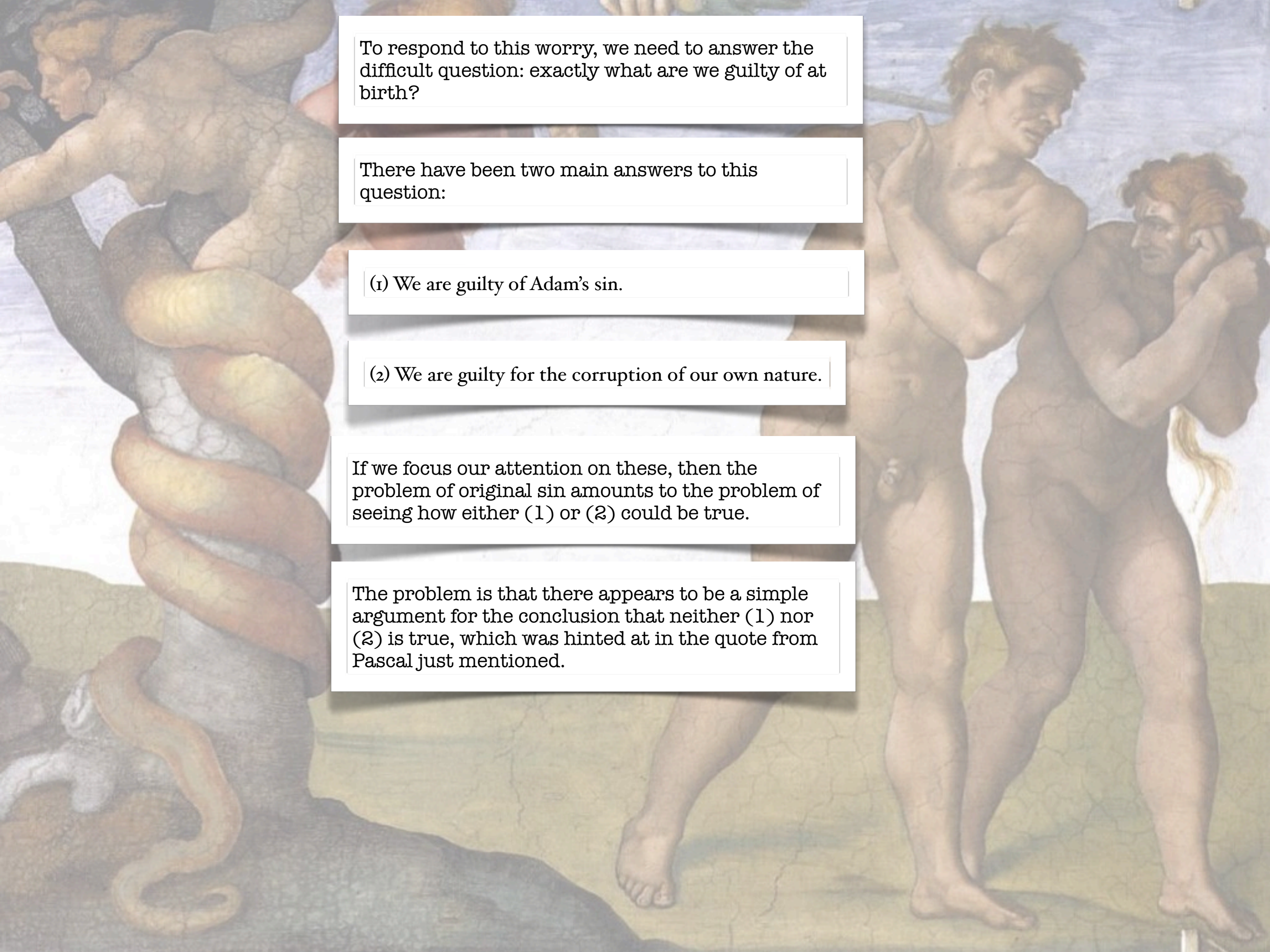
Many have found this to be one of the hardest to accept of all Christian doctrines.

Blaise Pascal put the worry like this:



“For it is beyond doubt that there is nothing which more shocks our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has rendered guilty those, who, being so removed from this source, seem incapable of participation in it. This transmission does not only seem to us impossible, it seems also very unjust. For what is more contrary to the rules of our miserable justice than to damn eternally an infant incapable of will, for a sin wherein he seems to have so little a share, that it was committed six thousand years before he was in existence? Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine...”

To respond to this worry, we need to answer the difficult question: exactly what are we guilty of at birth?

The background of the slide is a faded version of Michelangelo's famous fresco, "The Creation of Adam," from the Sistine Chapel. It depicts Adam lying on the left, reaching for the life-giving spark from God who is reclining on the right. A serpent is coiled around the left side of the image.

To respond to this worry, we need to answer the difficult question: exactly what are we guilty of at birth?

There have been two main answers to this question:

(1) We are guilty of Adam's sin.

(2) We are guilty for the corruption of our own nature.

If we focus our attention on these, then the problem of original sin amounts to the problem of seeing how either (1) or (2) could be true.

The problem is that there appears to be a simple argument for the conclusion that neither (1) nor (2) is true, which was hinted at in the quote from Pascal just mentioned.



(1) We are guilty of Adam's sin.

(2) We are guilty for the corruption of our own nature.

The problem is that there appears to be a simple argument for the conclusion that neither (1) nor (2) is true, which was hinted at in the quote from Pascal just mentioned.

1. If I am guilty for X, then I must have, at some time, had a choice about whether X occurred.
2. I never had a choice about whether Adam would sin.
3. I never had a choice about whether my nature would be corrupt.

C. I am guilty neither for Adam's sin nor for the corruption of my nature. (1,2,3)

It looks like the defender of the doctrine of original sin must reject some premise of this argument.

The doctrine of original sin. One of the following is true:

(1) We are guilty of Adam's sin.

(2) We are guilty for the corruption of our own nature.

1. If I am guilty for X, then I must have, at some time, had a choice about whether X occurred.
2. I never had a choice about whether Adam would sin.
3. I never had a choice about whether my nature would be corrupt.

C. I am guilty neither for Adam's sin nor for the corruption of my nature. (1,2,3)

One straightforward way to respond to this argument against the doctrine of original sin is to just reject premise (1) of the argument, and say that we sometimes guilty for things about which we have no choice. That is one way of understanding the following passage from St. Anselm (quoted in the optional reading from Rea):

If you think it over... this sentence of condemnation of infants is not very different from the verdict of human beings. Suppose, for example, some man and his wife were exalted to some great dignity and estate, by no merit of their own but by favor alone, then both together inexcusably commit a grave crime, and on account of it are justly dispossessed and reduced to slavery. Who will say that the children whom they generate after their condemnation should not be subjected to the same slavery, but rather should be gratuitously put in possession of the goods which their parents deservedly lost? Our first ancestors and their offspring are in such a condition: having been justly condemned to be cast from happiness to misery for their fault, they bring forth their offspring in the same banishment.

Is this sort of analogy enough to make sense of the doctrine of original sin?

Is it consistent with intuitions about the importance of responsibility which drive the free will defense?



The doctrine of original sin. One of the following is true:

(1) We are guilty of Adam's sin.

(2) We are guilty for the corruption of our own nature.

1. If I am guilty for X, then I must have, at some time, had a choice about whether X occurred.
2. I never had a choice about whether Adam would sin.
3. I never had a choice about whether my nature would be corrupt.

C. I am guilty neither for Adam's sin nor for the corruption of my nature. (1,2,3)

Even if there is something to be said for Anselm's point, many would like to have a theory of original sin which was consistent with some version of the idea that we can be guilty only for things we have some choice about.

Let's begin by looking at what people have said about claim (1): the claim that we are guilty of Adam's sin.



Let's begin by looking at what people have said about claim (1): the claim that we are guilty of Adam's sin.

As Rea notes, some surprising claims have been made about this.

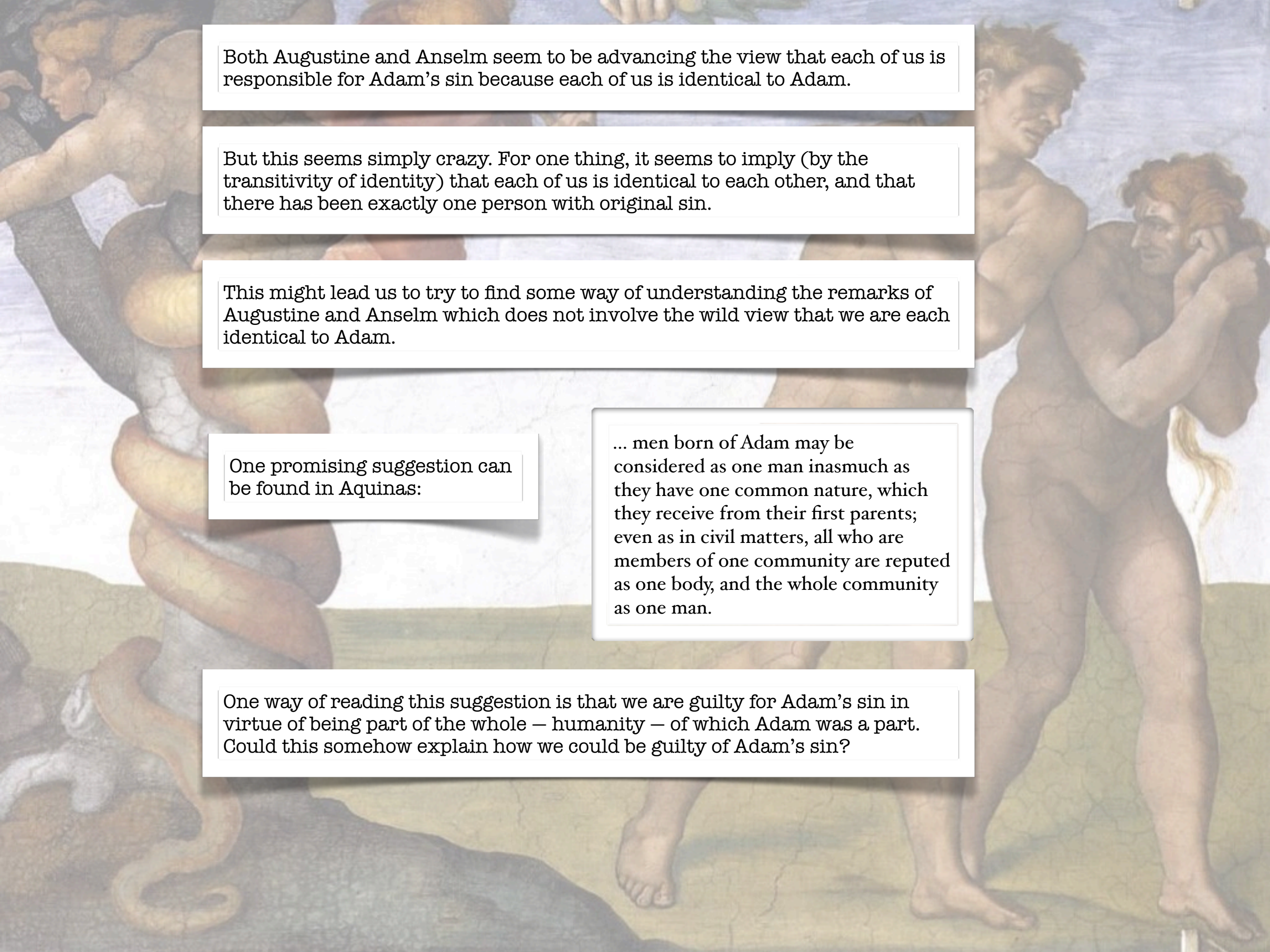
Augustine says:

“By the evil will of that one man all sinned in him, since **all were that one man**, from whom, therefore, they individually derived original sin.”

Anselm says:

“But there is no doubt from what source each and every individual is bound by that debt which we are discussing. It certainly does not arise from his being human or from his being a person ... then Adam, before he sinned, would have to have been bound by this debt, because he was a human being and a person. But this is most absurd. The only reason left, then, for the individual's being under obligation is that **he is Adam, yet not simply that he is Adam, but that he is Adam the sinner.**”

Both Augustine and Anselm seem to be advancing the view that each of us is responsible for Adam's sin because each of us is identical to Adam.



Both Augustine and Anselm seem to be advancing the view that each of us is responsible for Adam's sin because each of us is identical to Adam.

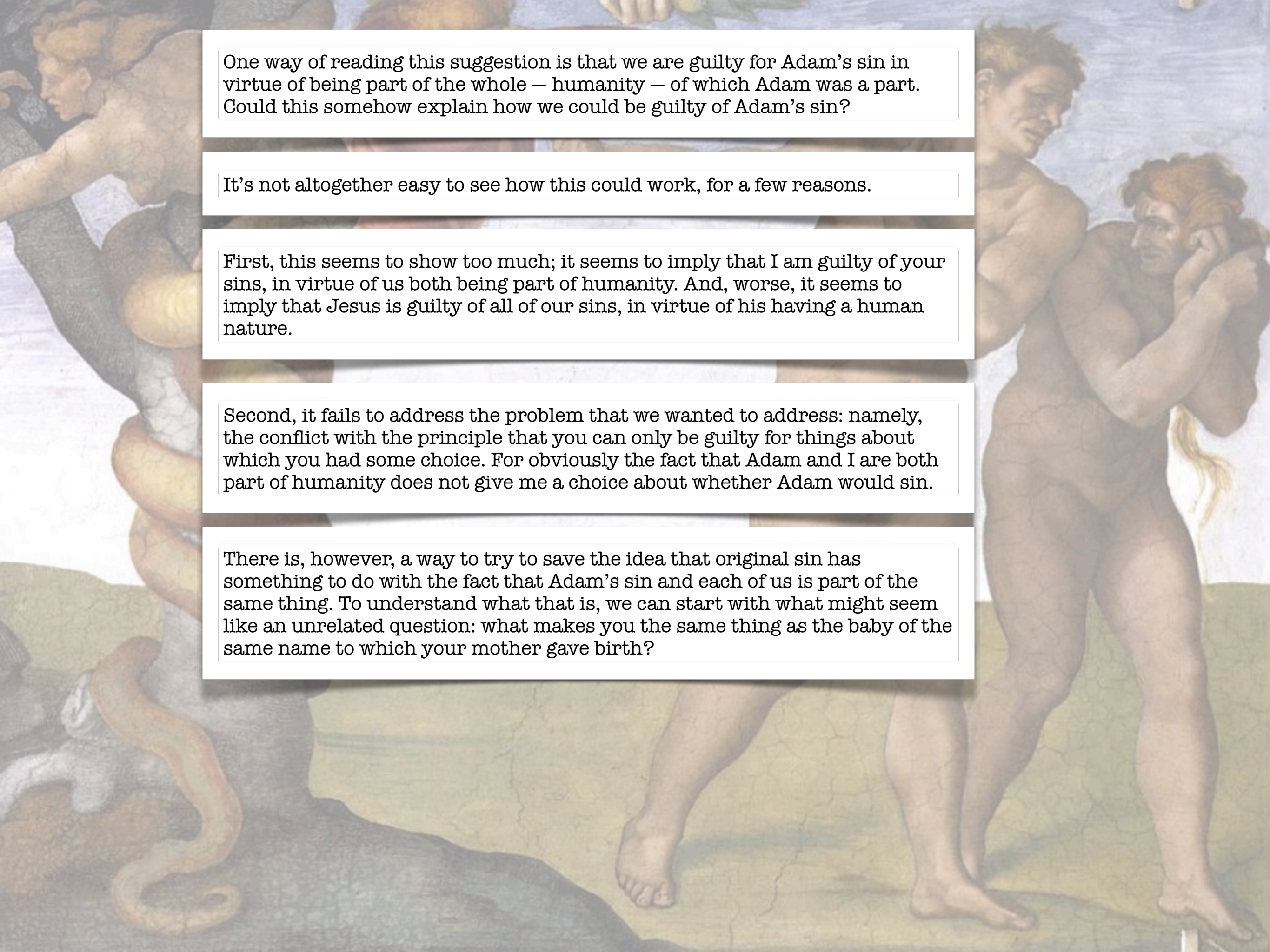
But this seems simply crazy. For one thing, it seems to imply (by the transitivity of identity) that each of us is identical to each other, and that there has been exactly one person with original sin.

This might lead us to try to find some way of understanding the remarks of Augustine and Anselm which does not involve the wild view that we are each identical to Adam.

One promising suggestion can be found in Aquinas:

... men born of Adam may be considered as one man inasmuch as they have one common nature, which they receive from their first parents; even as in civil matters, all who are members of one community are reputed as one body, and the whole community as one man.

One way of reading this suggestion is that we are guilty for Adam's sin in virtue of being part of the whole — humanity — of which Adam was a part. Could this somehow explain how we could be guilty of Adam's sin?

The background of the entire page is a faded, semi-transparent version of Michelangelo's famous fresco, "The Creation of Adam". It shows Adam reclining on the left, reaching towards the right, and Eve on the right, leaning back with her hand to her head. The scene is set in a landscape with a snake coiled around her leg.

One way of reading this suggestion is that we are guilty for Adam's sin in virtue of being part of the whole – humanity – of which Adam was a part. Could this somehow explain how we could be guilty of Adam's sin?

It's not altogether easy to see how this could work, for a few reasons.

First, this seems to show too much; it seems to imply that I am guilty of your sins, in virtue of us both being part of humanity. And, worse, it seems to imply that Jesus is guilty of all of our sins, in virtue of his having a human nature.

Second, it fails to address the problem that we wanted to address: namely, the conflict with the principle that you can only be guilty for things about which you had some choice. For obviously the fact that Adam and I are both part of humanity does not give me a choice about whether Adam would sin.

There is, however, a way to try to save the idea that original sin has something to do with the fact that Adam's sin and each of us is part of the same thing. To understand what that is, we can start with what might seem like an unrelated question: what makes you the same thing as the baby of the same name to which your mother gave birth?

There is, however, a way to try to save the idea that original sin has something to do with the fact that Adam's sin and each of us is part of the same thing. To understand what that is, we can start with what might seem like an unrelated question: what makes you the same thing as the baby of the same name to which your mother gave birth?

Let's focus ideas by thinking about the following three stages in the life of a person, Jane:



Baby



Grade school

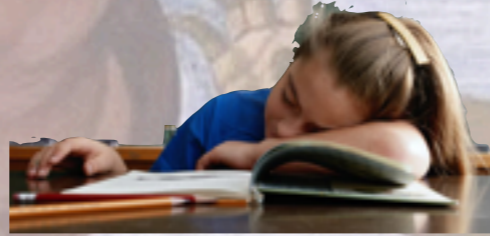


College

Now let's ask: are these three really, strictly speaking, identical? You might think: 'Well, we count them all as the same person, but they are not exactly the same; they are, for example, different sizes, have different opinions and personalities, etc.'

Which one is Jane, then? A natural thought is that Jane is not identical to the baby, or the grade school kid, or the college student; rather, Jane is something like the collection of all three.

Jane =



But now notice something interesting. Despite the fact that college-Jane is strictly a distinct thing from grade-school-Jane, we hold college-Jane responsible for grade-school-Jane's actions. (Or, if this is not obvious, then pick college-Jane and one-day-before-that-college-Jane.)

But college-Jane is of course in no position to do anything about any of the actions of grade-school-Jane. Doesn't this just show, one might wonder, that the first premise of our argument is false after all?

1. If I am guilty for X, then I must have, at some time, had a choice about whether X occurred.
 2. I never had a choice about whether Adam would sin.
 3. I never had a choice about whether my nature would be corrupt.
-
- C. I am guilty neither for Adam's sin nor for the corruption of my nature. (1,2,3)

Well, it depends what "I" stands for — does it stand for a whole person — the collection of all of Jane's stages — or one particular stage?

Jane =



1. If I am guilty for X, then I must have, at some time, had a choice about whether X occurred.
2. I never had a choice about whether Adam would sin.
3. I never had a choice about whether my nature would be corrupt.

C. I am guilty neither for Adam's sin nor for the corruption of my nature. (1,2,3)

Well, it depends what "I" stands for — does it stand for a whole person — the collection of all of Jane's stages — or one particular stage?

Suppose that (as seems plausible) it stands for the whole person. Then premise 1 of the argument is true. But we can see how, if some view of this sort is correct, I might be responsible for Adam's sin.

For what unites the various distinct person-stages pictured above into one single person, Jane?

This is a difficult question — one to which we will return when we talk about the possibility of life after death. Jonathan Edwards answered it as follows:

Jane =



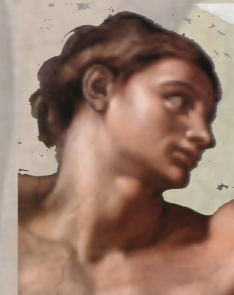
This is a difficult question – one to which we will return when we talk about the possibility of life after death. Jonathan Edwards answered it as follows:

Some things are entirely distinct, and very diverse, which yet are so united by the established law of the Creator, that by virtue of that establishment, they are in a sense one. Thus a tree, grown great, and a hundred years old, is one plant with the little sprout, that first came out of the ground from whence it grew, and has been continued in constant succession; though it is now so exceeding diverse, many thousand times bigger, and of a very different form, and perhaps not one atom the very same...

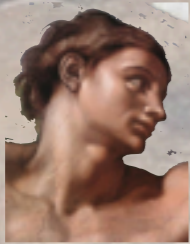
And there is no identity or oneness but what depends on the arbitrary constitution of the Creator; who by his wise sovereign establishment so unites these successive new effects, that he treats them as one ...

Edwards' thought seems to be something like this: the stages of a thing are so different from each other – often having “not one atom the very same” – that the only thing which could make them a single thing is the will of God.

But if this is true, then there is nothing to stop some stage, or stages, of Adam's life from standing in the same relation to, for example, baby-Jane, as baby-Jane stands to college-Jane.



Jane =



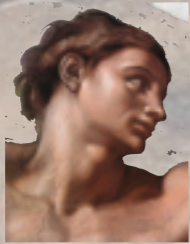
This provides us with a way of making sense of the claim that college-Jane is responsible for the sins of Adam; she's responsible for them in just the same way as she's responsible for the sins of grade-school-Jane.

This also provides the resources for making sense of the puzzling claims from Augustine and Anselm discussed above.

“By the evil will of that one man all sinned in him, since **all were that one man**, from whom, therefore, they individually derived original sin.”

“But there is no doubt from what source each and every individual is bound by that debt which we are discussing. It certainly does not arise from his being human or from his being a person ... then Adam, before he sinned, would have to have been bound by this debt, because he was a human being and a person. But this is most absurd. The only reason left, then, for the individual's being under obligation is that **he is Adam, yet not simply that he is Adam, but that he is Adam the sinner.**”

Jane =



But this does not get rid of the puzzle mentioned above: presumably what goes for Jane also goes for Bob.

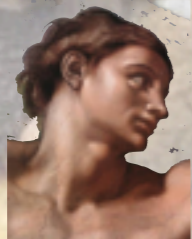


But if it is true that Jane was Adam, and also true that Bob was Adam, doesn't it follow — absurdly — that Bob is the same person as Jane?

Not quite. If we think of a person as a collection of person-stages standing in some special relationship, we still have the possibility that Bob's person stages stand in that relationship to Adam, and that Jane's person stages also stand in that relationship to Adam, but that Bob's don't stand in that relationship to Jane.

Bob =

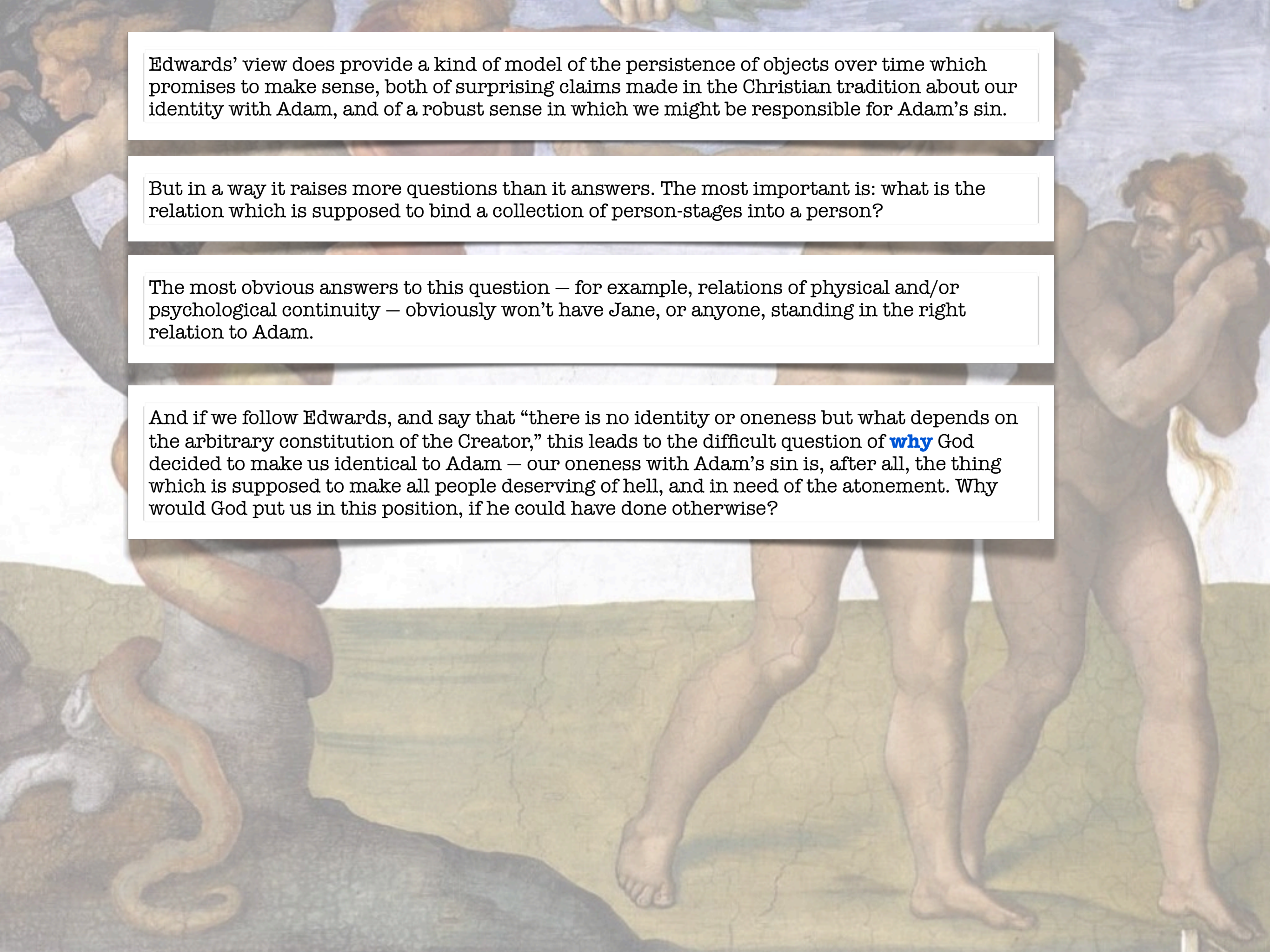
Jane =



But if it is true that Jane was Adam, and also true that Bob was Adam, doesn't it follow – absurdly – that Bob is the same person as Jane?

Not quite. If we think of a person as a collection of person-stages standing in some special relationship, we still have the possibility that Bob's person stages stand in that relationship to Adam, and that Jane's person stages also stand in that relationship to Adam, but that Bob's don't stand in that relationship to Jane.

The situation is analogous to the intersection of overlapping physical objects, like two roads.

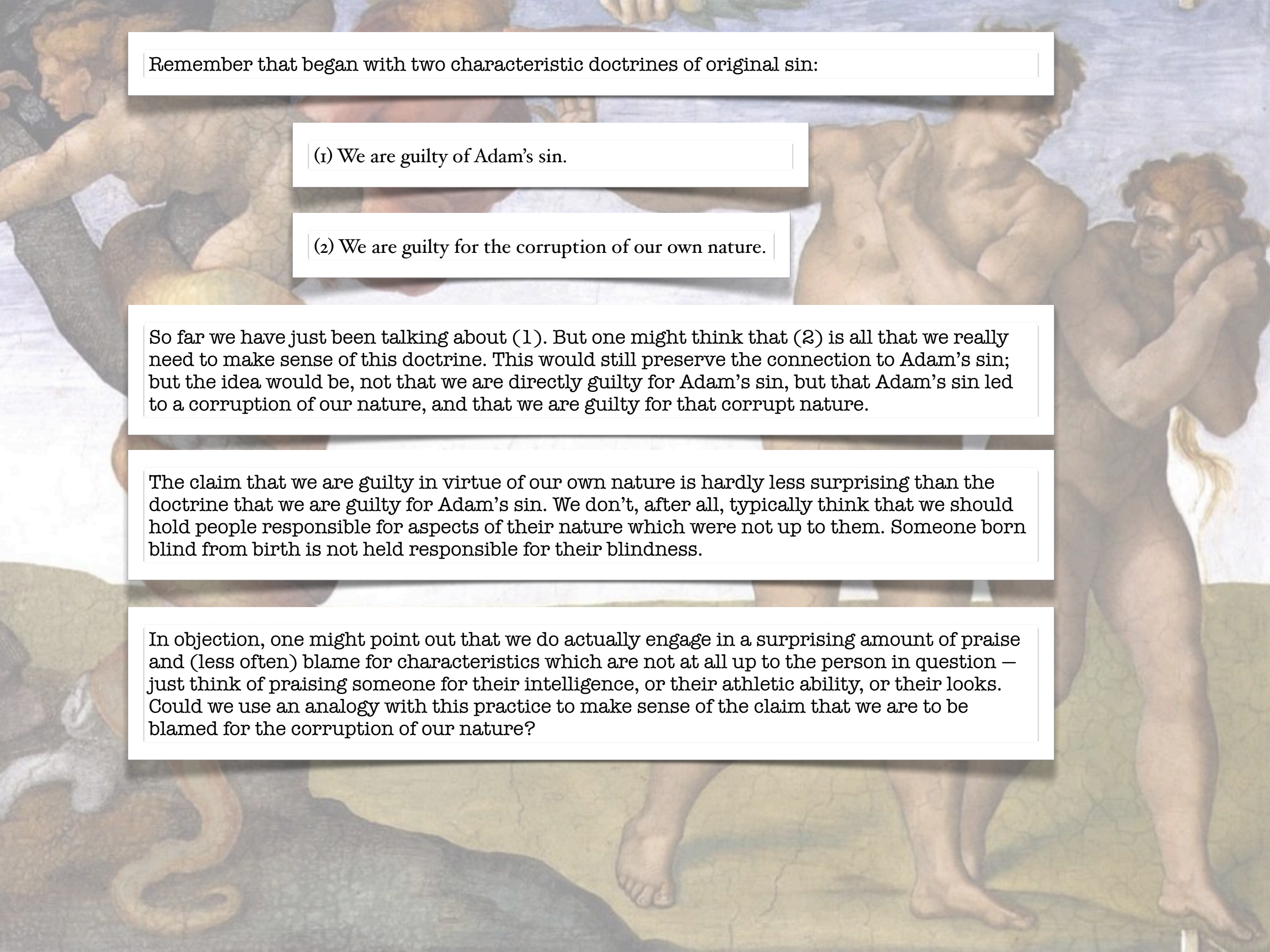
The background of the slide is a faded, semi-transparent version of Michelangelo's famous fresco, "The Creation of Adam". It shows the reclining figure of Adam on the left and the standing figure of God on the right, with the iconic gap between them. The text boxes are overlaid on this image.

Edwards' view does provide a kind of model of the persistence of objects over time which promises to make sense, both of surprising claims made in the Christian tradition about our identity with Adam, and of a robust sense in which we might be responsible for Adam's sin.

But in a way it raises more questions than it answers. The most important is: what is the relation which is supposed to bind a collection of person-stages into a person?

The most obvious answers to this question — for example, relations of physical and/or psychological continuity — obviously won't have Jane, or anyone, standing in the right relation to Adam.

And if we follow Edwards, and say that "there is no identity or oneness but what depends on the arbitrary constitution of the Creator," this leads to the difficult question of **why** God decided to make us identical to Adam — our oneness with Adam's sin is, after all, the thing which is supposed to make all people deserving of hell, and in need of the atonement. Why would God put us in this position, if he could have done otherwise?



Remember that began with two characteristic doctrines of original sin:

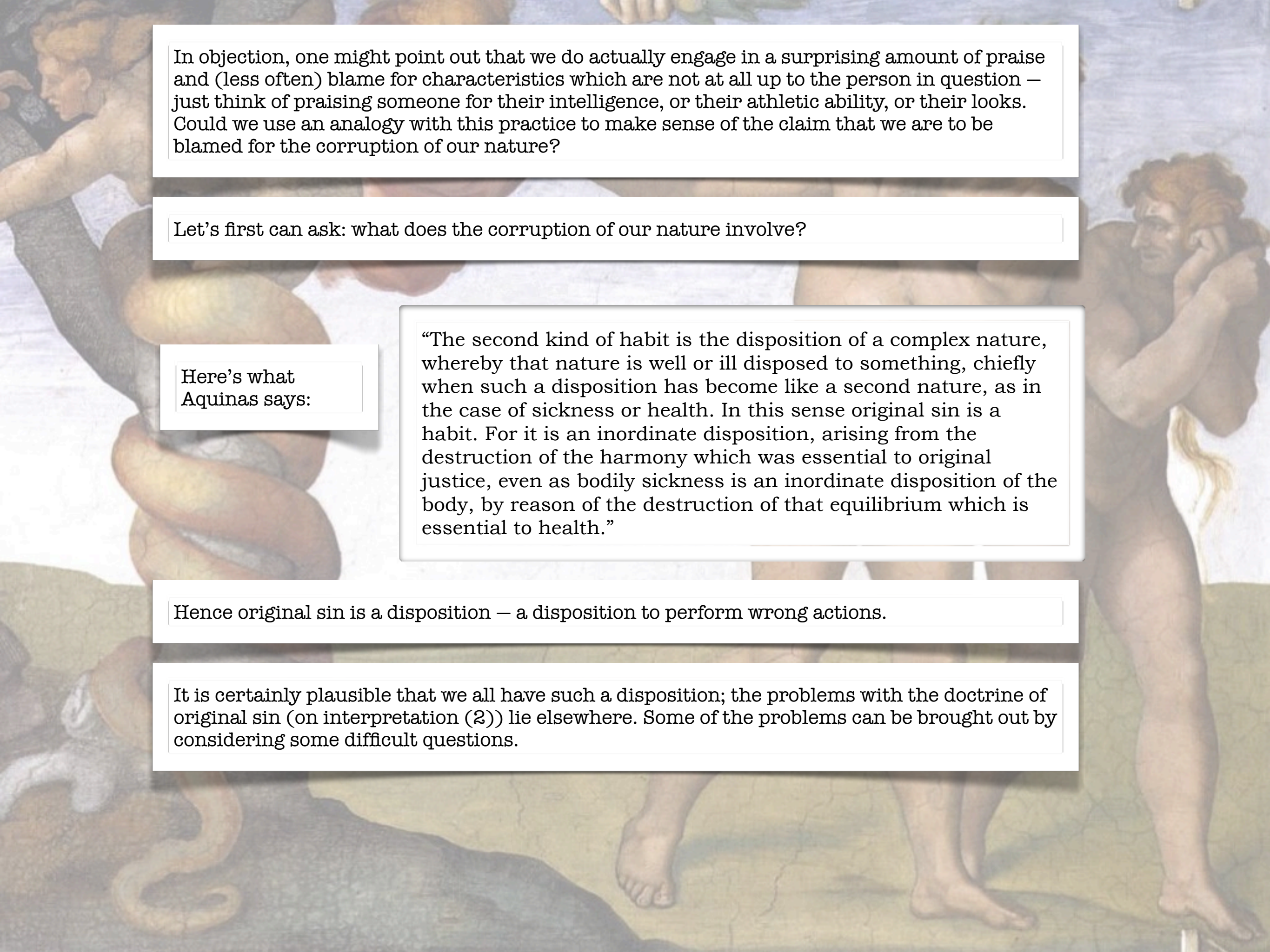
(1) We are guilty of Adam's sin.

(2) We are guilty for the corruption of our own nature.

So far we have just been talking about (1). But one might think that (2) is all that we really need to make sense of this doctrine. This would still preserve the connection to Adam's sin; but the idea would be, not that we are directly guilty for Adam's sin, but that Adam's sin led to a corruption of our nature, and that we are guilty for that corrupt nature.

The claim that we are guilty in virtue of our own nature is hardly less surprising than the doctrine that we are guilty for Adam's sin. We don't, after all, typically think that we should hold people responsible for aspects of their nature which were not up to them. Someone born blind from birth is not held responsible for their blindness.

In objection, one might point out that we do actually engage in a surprising amount of praise and (less often) blame for characteristics which are not at all up to the person in question — just think of praising someone for their intelligence, or their athletic ability, or their looks. Could we use an analogy with this practice to make sense of the claim that we are to be blamed for the corruption of our nature?



In objection, one might point out that we do actually engage in a surprising amount of praise and (less often) blame for characteristics which are not at all up to the person in question — just think of praising someone for their intelligence, or their athletic ability, or their looks. Could we use an analogy with this practice to make sense of the claim that we are to be blamed for the corruption of our nature?

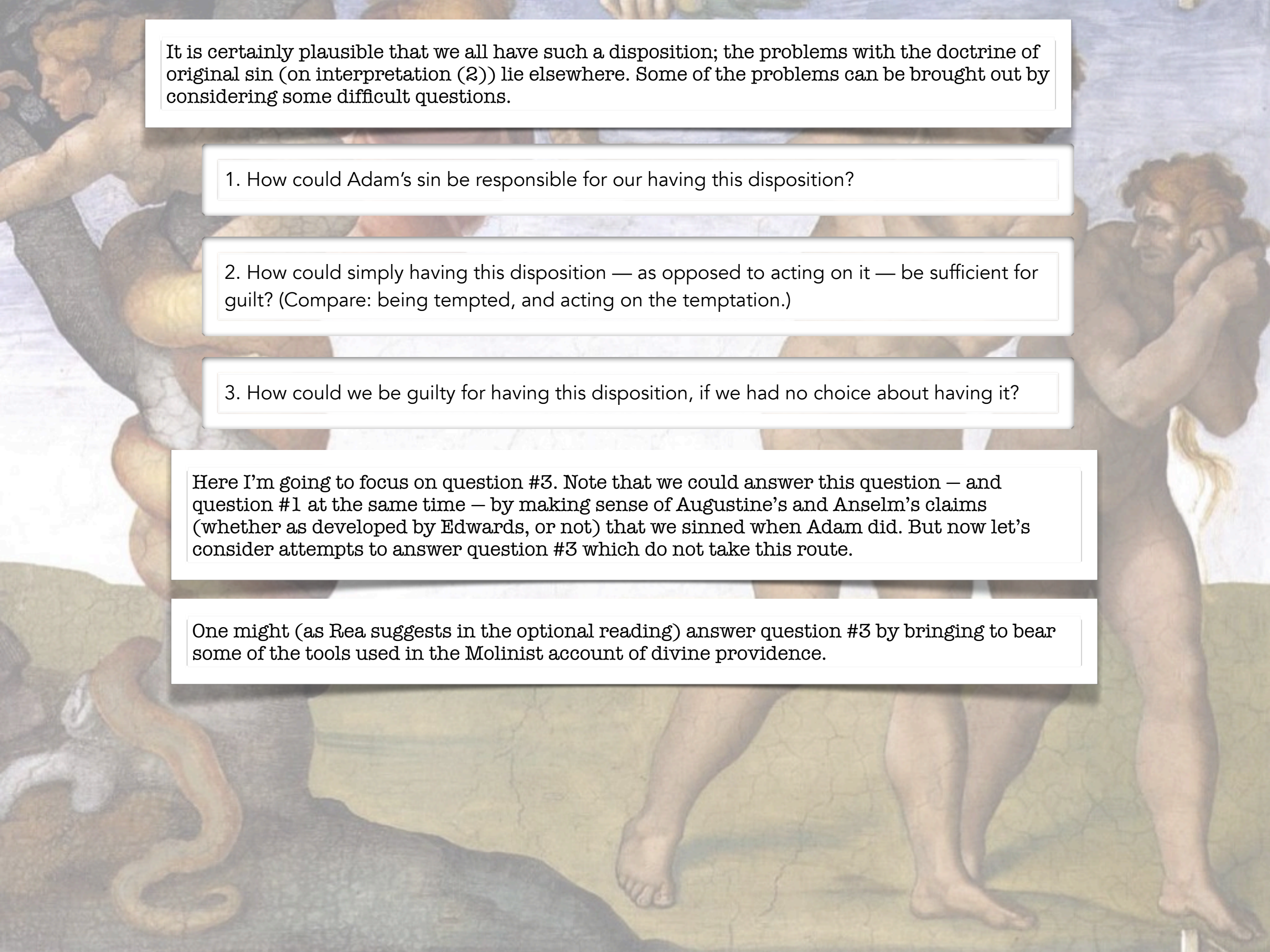
Let's first can ask: what does the corruption of our nature involve?

Here's what Aquinas says:

“The second kind of habit is the disposition of a complex nature, whereby that nature is well or ill disposed to something, chiefly when such a disposition has become like a second nature, as in the case of sickness or health. In this sense original sin is a habit. For it is an inordinate disposition, arising from the destruction of the harmony which was essential to original justice, even as bodily sickness is an inordinate disposition of the body, by reason of the destruction of that equilibrium which is essential to health.”

Hence original sin is a disposition — a disposition to perform wrong actions.

It is certainly plausible that we all have such a disposition; the problems with the doctrine of original sin (on interpretation (2)) lie elsewhere. Some of the problems can be brought out by considering some difficult questions.



It is certainly plausible that we all have such a disposition; the problems with the doctrine of original sin (on interpretation (2)) lie elsewhere. Some of the problems can be brought out by considering some difficult questions.

1. How could Adam's sin be responsible for our having this disposition?

2. How could simply having this disposition — as opposed to acting on it — be sufficient for guilt? (Compare: being tempted, and acting on the temptation.)

3. How could we be guilty for having this disposition, if we had no choice about having it?

Here I'm going to focus on question #3. Note that we could answer this question — and question #1 at the same time — by making sense of Augustine's and Anselm's claims (whether as developed by Edwards, or not) that we sinned when Adam did. But now let's consider attempts to answer question #3 which do not take this route.

One might (as Rea suggests in the optional reading) answer question #3 by bringing to bear some of the tools used in the Molinist account of divine providence.



3. How could we be guilty for having this disposition, if we had no choice about having it?

One might (as Rea suggests in the optional reading) answer question #3 by bringing to bear some of the tools used in the Molinist account of divine providence.

Remember that a key feature of that account was its use of counterfactuals of freedom, like this one:

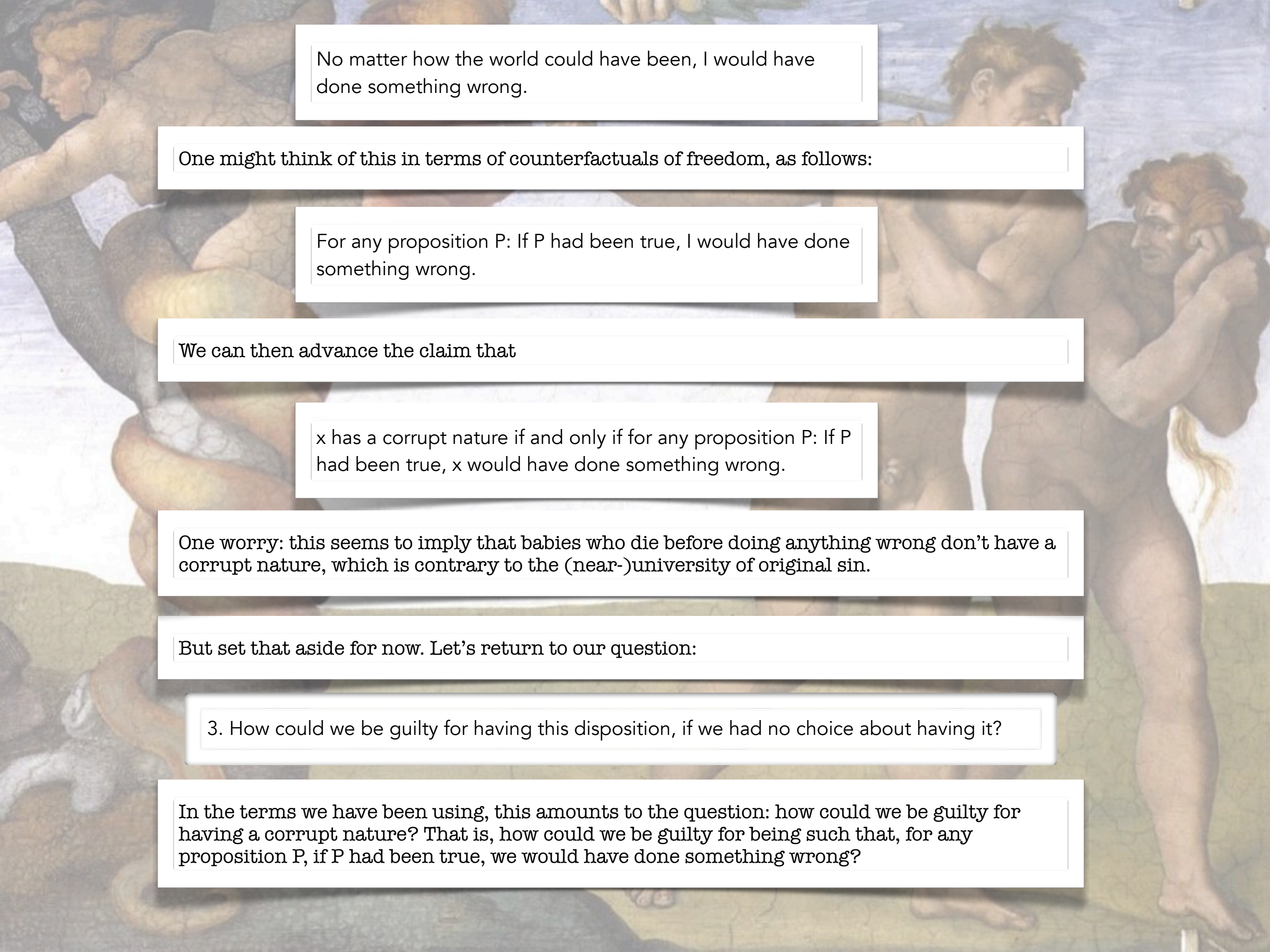
[CF] **if** Jeff were in North Dining Hall, and very hungry, and his only two choices were stir fry and beef stroganoff, **then** Jeff would freely choose the stroganoff.

Now one might give the following characterization of the 'habit' with which Aquinas identifies original sin:

No matter how the world could have been, I would have done something wrong.

One might think of this in terms of counterfactuals of freedom, as follows:

For any proposition P: If P had been true, I would have done something wrong.



No matter how the world could have been, I would have done something wrong.

One might think of this in terms of counterfactuals of freedom, as follows:

For any proposition P: If P had been true, I would have done something wrong.

We can then advance the claim that

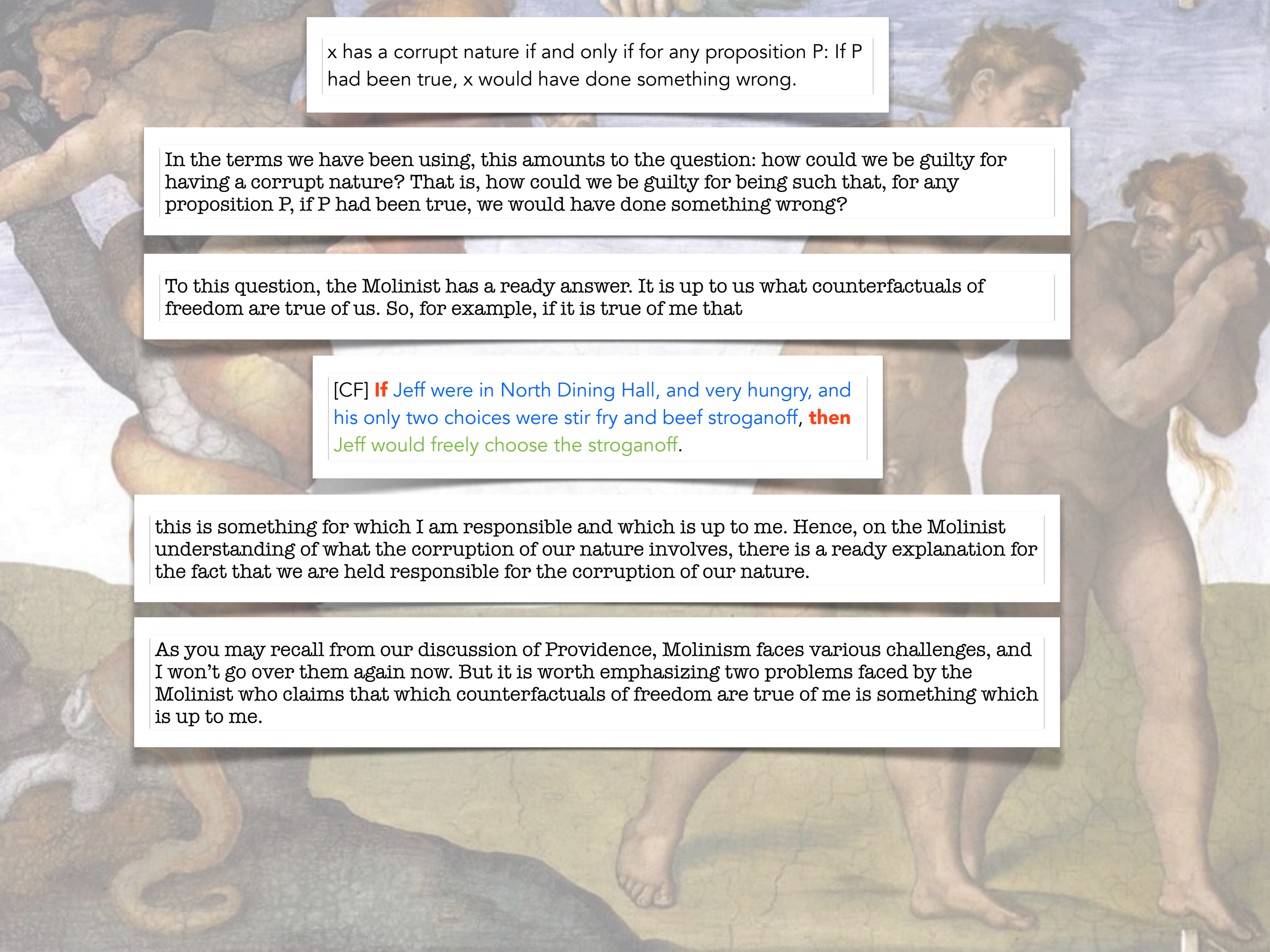
x has a corrupt nature if and only if for any proposition P: If P had been true, x would have done something wrong.

One worry: this seems to imply that babies who die before doing anything wrong don't have a corrupt nature, which is contrary to the (near-)universality of original sin.

But set that aside for now. Let's return to our question:

3. How could we be guilty for having this disposition, if we had no choice about having it?

In the terms we have been using, this amounts to the question: how could we be guilty for having a corrupt nature? That is, how could we be guilty for being such that, for any proposition P, if P had been true, we would have done something wrong?



x has a corrupt nature if and only if for any proposition P: If P had been true, x would have done something wrong.

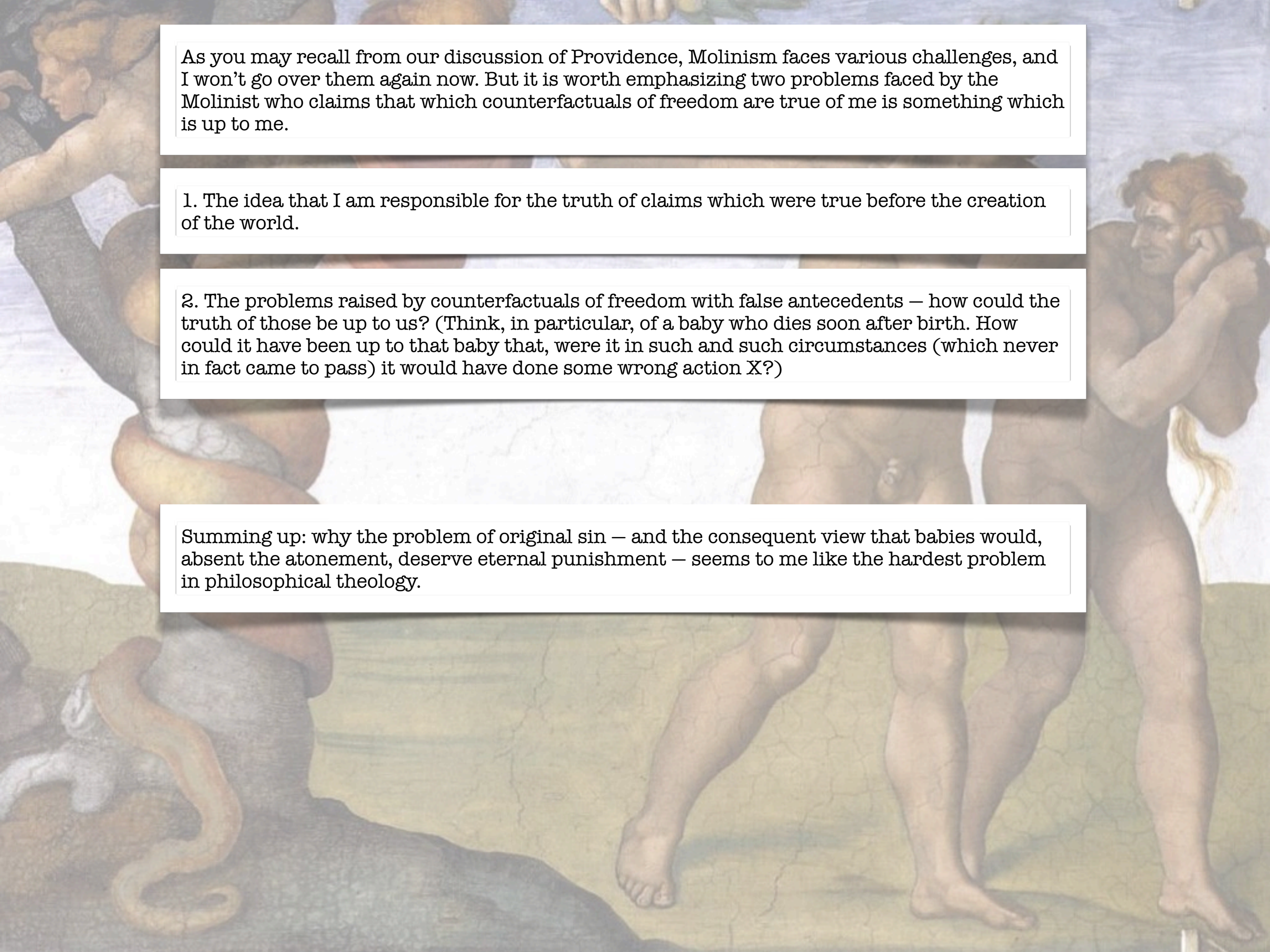
In the terms we have been using, this amounts to the question: how could we be guilty for having a corrupt nature? That is, how could we be guilty for being such that, for any proposition P, if P had been true, we would have done something wrong?

To this question, the Molinist has a ready answer. It is up to us what counterfactuals of freedom are true of us. So, for example, if it is true of me that

[CF] **if** Jeff were in North Dining Hall, and very hungry, and his only two choices were stir fry and beef stroganoff, **then** Jeff would freely choose the stroganoff.

this is something for which I am responsible and which is up to me. Hence, on the Molinist understanding of what the corruption of our nature involves, there is a ready explanation for the fact that we are held responsible for the corruption of our nature.

As you may recall from our discussion of Providence, Molinism faces various challenges, and I won't go over them again now. But it is worth emphasizing two problems faced by the Molinist who claims that which counterfactuals of freedom are true of me is something which is up to me.

The background of the slide is a faded, semi-transparent version of Michelangelo's famous fresco, "The Creation of Adam," from the Sistine Chapel. It shows Adam lying on the left, reaching towards the right, and God reclining on the right, reaching towards the left. The central focus is the gap between their hands.

As you may recall from our discussion of Providence, Molinism faces various challenges, and I won't go over them again now. But it is worth emphasizing two problems faced by the Molinist who claims that which counterfactuals of freedom are true of me is something which is up to me.

1. The idea that I am responsible for the truth of claims which were true before the creation of the world.

2. The problems raised by counterfactuals of freedom with false antecedents — how could the truth of those be up to us? (Think, in particular, of a baby who dies soon after birth. How could it have been up to that baby that, were it in such and such circumstances (which never in fact came to pass) it would have done some wrong action X?)

Summing up: why the problem of original sin — and the consequent view that babies would, absent the atonement, deserve eternal punishment — seems to me like the hardest problem in philosophical theology.