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Sin and the Hacker Ethic: The Tragedy of Techno-Utopian Ideology in Cyberspace Business Cultures

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We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

–John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”

The panacea was virtuality—the reinvention and redemption of society in computer code. They would build us a new Eden not from atoms from bits.

–Nicholas Carr, *Utopia is Creepy*

INTRODUCTION

This article traces the course of idealistic thinking in the “hacker ethic”¹ of the computer industry, with the aim of diagnosing the unfortunate lapses in business ethics that can ensue from idealistic thinking. Facebook sits front and center in this study, simply because they are the biggest target and clearest example of bad ethics. Along the way, we will refer to several other big names in Silicon Valley, but Facebook serves as the archetype to show how idealistic thinking becomes embedded in a business culture, and shapes a controlling narrative based in self-serving ideology.

Idealistic thinking took hold in computing from the beginning, with the first generation of programmers. These “hackers” felt the ineluctable allure of open-ended possibility in cyberspace, inspiring utopian visions of reality and what-might-be. The idealism of the first generation of hackers might seem quaint in comparison with the today’s business culture, dominated by ubiquitous computing, surveillance capitalism, and unquenchable torrents of social media. Nonetheless, that early stream of idealistic thinking still runs strong: it remains a potent force in shaping the ethos of corporate giants like Facebook, Google, Amazon and Twitter, to name a few. This stream of idealistic thinking is so prevalent in Silicon Valley

¹ Stephen Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 27 et passim.

and other bastions of technology that it has earned the moniker, “techno-utopianism.”²

Idealistic thinking becomes tragic when it follows the pattern of a Greek drama—high-minded heroes and heroines, motivated by ethical ideals, or “pathos”, are brought down by the unavoidable conflicts handed them by the real world, represented by fate.³ This is the classical form of tragedy, and it applies to patterns of idealistic thinking rooted in the “hacker ethic.” The ideals, in and of themselves, are admirable—freedom, equity, equality, innovation, and effort, to name a few, all aimed in the direction of human flourishing and eudaimonia. These are noble pursuits. The problem occurs when high ideals harden into self-serving ideologies that do real harm by shutting down judicious, open-minded, self-critical reflection on morality.

Charles Taylor calls these sorts of high-minded, self-contained ideologies, “closed world structures,”⁴ because: (1) they are closed off from outside critiques that might threaten their legitimacy; (2) they operate as worldviews; and (3) they are structured with enough rigor to withstand counterarguments and achieve a sort of self-reinforcing longevity in the marketplace of ideas. In what follows, we shall see how Facebook and other companies provide examples of corporate cultures that bear the markings of, and suffer the demerits of, “closed world structures.”

As an antidote to the ethical lapses that may befall such idealistic thinking, I will argue here that the biblical notion of sin can help diagnosis the problem and suggest corrective measures. Cognizance of the reality of sin leads more realistic, and hence, more ethical, worldviews and narratives. Sin is not easily defined, however, being one of those common biblical words that requires to be understood in the larger context of faith. A well-orbed doctrine of sin is far beyond the scope of a journal article, so for the purposes of this paper, I choose to follow Reinhold Niebuhr’s train of thought—that the essence of human sin resides in egoism, and “the will to power.”⁵ The form of egoism particularly on display in techno-utopian ideology is overreaching arrogance. The Tower of Babel [Genesis 11:1-9] offers an allegory on this core theme. Sin in this sense is seen in the self-aggrandizing potential wrought by the creative power of cyber technology, driven forward by enormous increases in computing power, to inspire developers of our future in cyberspace to see themselves as world makers. As a guide to doctrinal analysis of

² Nicholas Carr, *Utopia is Creepy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), xx.

³ Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel's Aesthetics", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/hegel-aesthetics/> (accessed July 15, 2020).

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 551f.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1960), 11-12.

this particular sin, I shall rely upon Alvin Plantinga's well-structured analysis of sin and its effects in modern society.⁶

Cognizance of sin, guided by theological insight, proves helpful in diagnosing the ethical perils implicit in the idealistic thinking of cyber-technology businesses. This thesis is based on insights into cyber-utopian thinking, Silicon Valley tech culture, the "Hacker Ethic," and theological study of sin—all of which are expanded below. Mere awareness of sin is not a cure-all. Nor is the idea even relevant in many contexts. Nonetheless, awareness of the ways in which idealistic thinking can lead into exploitative use of corporate power, does help to warn against the moral hazards that sprout from ideologies rooted in the otherwise noble ideals of the Hacker Ethic. The value in this analysis, and the payoff, one might hope, will be found in the guidance it offers business practitioners to develop antidotes and practices that might help mitigate the perils of self-serving ideologies. Thus, the conclusion of this paper discusses implications for practice.

Admittedly, theological doctrine is often considered off-limits in the formation of business models and strategic planning. Nonetheless, the lessons to be drawn from the analysis presented here are generalizable, and can be applied in secular contexts for the benefit of good ethics and values in business cultures. The salient point is that simple awareness/cognizance of the reality of sin has a curative effect on idealistic thinking. Of course, sin is not the most appropriate concept in many secular contexts. There is a need to find secular analogs that can help communicate the importance of such awareness. One helpful way to address the problem is to uphold the values of humility, openness and vulnerability, as opposed to hubris. A healthy dose of these attributes can have a desirable curative effect upon otherwise idealistic patterns of thought. These values can also contribute to the longevity of the business and protect against damaging outcomes.

The novel contribution I hope to offer here is to draw a clear and meaningful connection between the theological concept of sin, and the perils of idealistic thinking in business practice, with special attention to the variety of techno-utopian ideology seen in Facebook and other cyber-tech companies.

THE BIRTH AND RE-BIRTH OF [O]UTOPIA

Utopia is, literally, "no-where." It is a mythical fantasy island dreamed up by the fanciful wit of Sir Thomas More, who coined the word as the subject of his 1516 political satire. More's book depicts the imaginary island nation of the Utopians, who have established "the best state of a Commonwealth." Utopia represents the ideal civil society where governance is pure and righteous, communal life is shaped

⁶ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: a Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

by benevolence and virtue, and people dwell together in the warm glow of *eudaimonia*, thanks to the prudence and wisdom of their benevolent leaders. It is idyllic, idealistic, and completely unrealistic.

We hear distinct echoes of More's *Utopia* 500 years later from the poet laureate of the hacker age, Richard Brautigan, in his 1967 poem, "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace"—

"I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky."⁷

Both More's fiction and Brautigan's poem expose the gap between desire for an ideal society and the impossibility of arriving there.

Ou-topia literally means "no-where," or "no place," in More's playful use of the Greek language. More conjoins the adverb οὐ ("not") with the noun τοπος ("place"), then adds the Latin suffix "ia."⁸ [O]Utopia is a pun also, because it could be spelled εὐ-τόπια (*eu-topia*) meaning good, happy, or fortunate place.⁹ Underlying More's humorous wordplay is the serious issue of what the ideal form of a commonwealth might be. This is the question at the heart of More's satire. By exposing the preposterous presumptions undergirding Utopian ideals, More demonstrates that such an idealistic form of life is impossible. It is mere fantasy, the fruit of idealistic thinking.

More's vivid demonstration that Utopia is an unrealistic, unachievable "No-Where" land serves as a parable on the tragedy of idealistic thinking. The ethical principles espoused by the mythical Utopians are admirable. They are based in virtue, equality, equity (except for enslaved captives of war, that is!) and a commitment to the common good.

Similarly, the egalitarian, freedom-loving ideals of the Utopians have been reborn in Silicon Valley tech companies. In and of themselves, the ideals are good. The problem is that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, as the old saw

⁷ Richard Brautigan, "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace," 1967, <http://www.brautigan.net/machines.html> (accessed July 18, 2019).

⁸ George Logan, *Utopia*, by Sir Thomas More, edited by George M. Logan. Translated by Robert M. Adams. 3rd edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 11.

⁹ Logan, *Utopia*, 11.

goes. The reality of sin exposes the error in trusting idealism to set the world aright. In the absence of sin, it might be possible to frame ethics as an exercise in pure reason and rule-making. In the absence of sin, perhaps ethics could become a clinical science. In the absence of sin, it might be possible to measure ethical excellence and performance. The absence of sin however, is an utterly fraudulent presumption. The premises of idealism are false to the extent that they deny this reality, and herein lies the moral of the story—the tragedy of idealistic thinking.

To see how this tragedy plays out in modern-day business cultures, we may look to Silicon Valley, a place rich with fertile soil for idealistic thinking. A hundred years ago the Santa Clara Valley was known as “the valley of the heart’s delight” based on its idyllic climate. It became famous for producing delicious fruits and nuts. Today it is known for a different kind of produce. Technology entrepreneurs thrive in its preternatural soil. Fed by an abundance of intellectual capital, and irrigated by plentiful pools of venture capital, idealistic tech entrepreneurs go to Silicon Valley to invent the future and change the world with their innovations. In 1998, *Wired* magazine referred to a blend of idealistic libertarian ideals and techno-utopian visions as the “California Ideology.”¹⁰

There is indeed a sort of beauty in the flowering creativity of the human spirit on display in Silicon Valley. We see it in the goodness of innovative products designed to serve the greater good.¹¹ There is a natural optimism that inspires and energizes entrepreneurs to bring these new developments to life. The advent of computing technology—in particular, the power of computer code to breathe life into new machines and services—reinforces this sense of optimism. Moreover, business success amplifies the natural optimism of entrepreneurs and encourages a worldview that idolizes the generative power of software, which seems to advance without limit to hold sway in an ever-expanding array of applications, tackling an increasingly complicated set of problems.

The Valley’s ethos has thus grown from deep roots in the optimistic idealism of technological advancement. Business plans tap into these deep roots to conjure utopian visions of the future, and entrepreneurs set themselves on the path of pursuing idealistic aims, reshaping the world as necessary along way in order to remove any obstacles to their growth. No wonder Marc Andreessen, a co-founder of Netscape who is now venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, has said, “Software is eating the world.”¹² From the perspective of a software engineer *cum* venture capitalist, it can look that way.

¹⁰ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 208.

¹¹ Bruce Baker, “Entrepreneurship as a Sign of Common Grace,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 18, no. 1 (2015): 81-98.

¹² Marc Andreessen, “Why Software Is Eating the World”, *Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2011.

However essential technology is to humanity, and however wonderful the entrepreneurial vigor that births it, tragedy lurks in the cracks that betray utopian visions. Before examining a few salient examples of how business ethics breaks down due to idealistic thinking, it will be helpful to develop a theological understanding of why and how the cognizance of sin provides a necessary ingredient in any prescription to cure idealistic thinking in (business) ethics.

THE REALITY OF SIN

Contemporary culture tends to err in the direction of ignoring sin, as though by denying the spiritual reality of good and evil it might be possible to engineer solutions to social and ethical problems. This erroneous thinking does much harm, as C.S. Lewis noted decades ago: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”¹³ Sin is taboo, unmentioned in polite public discourse. Egregious business scandals are explained in terms of psychological failures, fraud and greed, but sin gets scant attention. Plantinga describes well the contemporary climate for ethics in the public square:

Anyone who tries to recover the knowledge of sin these days must overcome long odds. To put it mildly, modern consciousness does not encourage moral reproach; in particular, it does not encourage self-reproach.¹⁴

Sin is a reality to be faced. The power of evil to deceive and destroy is made no less potent by denial of its existence. Whether the disbelief stems from innocent ignorance or determined disengagement makes no difference. Sin is woven into the very fabric of human nature and society. It is a reality that must be confronted if we are to have any hope of arriving at practical wisdom for institutional design and governance in the political economy.¹⁵

Even within the Church sin is mentioned less frequently than in past generations, and in the public square sin has been nearly eradicated from the

¹³ Lewis (1942), *The Screwtape Letters*, ix.

¹⁴ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: a Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), x.

¹⁵ Sigmund Wagner-Tsukamoto, "Ethical Principles of Old Testament Economics: Implications for the Teaching of Business Ethics," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* 3, Article 16 (2015), 22, <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol3/iss1/16> (accessed October 8, 2020). Wagner-Tsukamoto concludes that business ethics based in Old Testament ethics are “non-utopian” precisely because they are “down-to-earth” in nature.

discussion of ethics. As Philip Rieff says in his diagnosis of the modern drift of attention away from the spiritual realm to focus on the material, we have lost “the fear of evil in oneself and in the world... All holy terror is gone.”¹⁶

The problematic challenge of addressing the reality of sin is felt particularly acutely in business, where material wealth and power are dominant. Sin has been effectively dropped from the lexicon of business ethics. Although “greed” is a word still used, it has for the most part lost its religious connotations in business contexts, and has become accepted as a necessary ingredient in economic theories.¹⁷ Greed is nearly a synonym for “avarice,” a deadly sin, and yet greed has been set free from its religious baggage to function as a necessary (albeit perhaps not sufficient) ingredient in “the new science of political economy.”¹⁸

Along with the loss of sin as an element in business discourse, there is the concomitant loss of grace as a necessary ingredient of a healthy, moral economic system. Grace is an inconvenient and unwelcome idea in market morality because it requires the market to turn outside itself to seek moral authority, and this cuts against the grain of modern economic thinking. Rather than seek a transcendent source of morality from outside itself, the market turns inward, and justifies itself on its own terms.¹⁹ An idealistic spirit of trust in market forces rushes in to fill the moral void left when sin and grace are swept away.²⁰ For this reason, MacIntyre deems the new “ethics-of-the-state [and] market” to be “parodies of ethics.”²¹ They lack any basis for trust in universal moral reality. This is a market ethic in which acquisitiveness, *pleonexia*, even becomes elevated to the status of a necessary and admirable character trait.²²

Sin is an inescapable reality, and thus requires attention in real-world ethical thinking.

THE HACKER ETHIC AND TECHNO-UTOPIAN IDEALS

Nowhere perhaps do idealistic visions of business shine brighter than in the tech-centric world of Silicon Valley. It is hard to imagine a spiritual and natural climate

¹⁶ Philip Rieff, *Charisma: The Gift of Grace, and How It Has Been Taken Away from Us* (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 5-6.

¹⁷ Kwok Tung Cheung, "Greed, a Forgotten Vice?," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* 4, Article 10 (2019), <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol4/iss1/10> (accessed October 8, 2020).

¹⁸ Edward Skidelksky, “The Emancipation of Avarice,” *First Things*, May 2011, pp. 33-39, 37.

¹⁹ Harvey Cox, “The Market as God.” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1999.

²⁰ Peter Seele and Lucas Zapf, ““The Markets Have Decided””: Markets as (Perceived) Deity and Ethical Implications of Delegated Responsibility,” *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* 3, Article 17 (2015) <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol3/iss1/17> (accessed October 8, 2020).

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 128.

²² MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts*, 127.

better suited to the rise of idealistic thinking based in the promise of technology to create a better world. Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google gives voice to it: “When I first joined Google I was struck by the fact that it was a very idealistic, optimistic place.” Mr. Pichai is quick however, to inject a dose of realism, admitting that, “Technology doesn’t solve humanity’s problems.” Although Google’s optimism has been “tempered by a sense of deliberation... [and a need to be] more thoughtful about what we do”, he says, “I still see that idealism and optimism a lot in many things we do today.”²³ Margaret O’Mara describes the pattern in Silicon Valley by which the techno-utopian ideals quickly become fertile soil for corrupt practices:

Their breezy confidence about connecting the world, their hubris about the power of engineering, their dazzlingly sophisticated thinking machines: all seemingly had opened the door for bad actors to come in, exploiting networks like Facebook and Twitter and YouTube and, really, the whole of the Internet, driving a divided America even further apart.²⁴

The idealism and optimism that flow through Silicon Valley can be traced back to the foundation laid by tech pioneers who unleashed the magical power of quantum physics to develop silicon computer chips and thereby launch the computers into the mainstream. From their first use in aerospace and military applications, computers have reached into every sphere of life. As cheap computing power has become ubiquitous, the leverage in business opportunities has shifted from hardware to software. If anything, the idealistic, optimistic character of Silicon Valley culture has been reinforced by the rise of software as the big new source of opportunities to “change the world”, and make money in the process. Nicholas Negroponte, founder of MIT’s Media Lab, wrote of this shift in his 1995 bestseller *Being Digital*: “Computing is not about computers anymore. It’s about living.”²⁵

Nicholas Carr refers aptly to the idealistic bent of Silicon Valley culture as, “techno-utopianism.” Carr traces the narrative arc which has led to the dominance of software as the vehicle to carry this techno-utopianism forward:

²³ David Gelles, “Corner Office: Sundar Pichai of Google: ‘Technology Doesn’t Solve Humanity’s Problems’”, *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/08/business/sundar-pichai-google-corner-office.html> (accessed May 9, 2019).

²⁴ Margaret Pugh O’Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (New York: Penguin, 2019), chapter 32. See also Zeynep Tufekci, “The Road from Tahrir to Trump.” *MIT Technology Review*, 2018, *121*(5), 10–17, 13: “The US’s corporate dominance and its technical wizardry in some areas seemed to have blinded the country to the brewing weaknesses in other, more consequential ones.”

²⁵ Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

By the turn of the century, Silicon Valley was selling more than gadgets and software. It was selling an ideology. The creed was set in the tradition of American techno-utopianism, but with a digital twist. The Valleyites were fierce materialists—what couldn't be measured had no meaning—yet they loathed materiality. In their view, the problems of the world, from inefficiency and inequality to morbidity and mortality, emanated from the world's physicality, from its embodiment in torpid, inflexible, decaying stuff. The panacea was virtuality—the reinvention and redemption of society in computer code. They would build us a new Eden not from atoms from bits.²⁶

The power of code to manipulate the world around us—both the physical world as well as the social—gave rise to a new philosophical worldview regarding technology and humankind's place in the cosmos. Steven Levy, in *Hackers*, traces the genesis of this new worldview to the informal camaraderie of the programmer hobbyists who began to play around with personal computing in 1959, well before PCs became commercially available. Their “hacker ethic” espoused “a new way of life with a philosophy, an ethic, and a dream... [They were] slowly and implicitly piecing together a body of concepts, beliefs, and mores.”²⁷

A few years later, in the early 1970s, young engineers at Intel invented the microprocessor chip, which would quickly make personal computing a reality. Lee Felsenstein, a pioneering electrical engineer and self-styled political activist had a dream for “the hacker dream” of making computing accessible to “everyman”. Felsenstein fought “to spread the hacker ethic by bringing computers to the people.”²⁸ He saw the computer as “a living system rather than a mechanical system.”²⁹ The power to create something that felt so alive, is essential to understanding the hacker ethic. This sense of self identity as being a creator and guardian of life is so central to the hacker worldview that Levy has a chapter in his book titled, “Every Man a God”. This sense of having godlike powers inspires dreams of utopia. After all, what's the point of playing god unless you can create a world according to your idea for life? The quasi-religious experience of creative power is accentuated by the rise of AI and robotics, as Robert Geraci (2010, p. 12) notes:

²⁶ Nicholas Carr, *Utopia is Creepy*, xx.

²⁷ Steven, Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, 2010), 27.

²⁸ Levy, *Hackers*, 154.

²⁹ Levy, *Hackers*, 181.

[D]igital utopianism allows the rise of a new technological priesthood; the abolition of hierarchies through peer-to-peer societies would allow a new social structure grounded in computer meritocracy where designers actually ascend into the heavenly ranks as angels or gods. The resource of computer simulations of life have often likened themselves to gods.³⁰

SIN AND THE SIREN SONG OF SELF-REALIZATION

Coders are idealistic about the ability of software to solve problems, disrupt old business models, and deliver what people want, faster and cheaper. Rightfully so. Computers give them power to create new realities. Indeed, some of the most creatively disruptive products, as Steve Jobs liked to point out, are based on delivering what people did not even know they wanted. This puts enormous power into the hands of coders. It is an invigorating and enticing power—a siren song of sorts, with an aphrodisiac effect. Coding requires complete, undivided attention. As if beguiled by a muse, the coder is drawn into an all-consuming relationship with the machine that channels one’s energies into a focused stream of attentiveness to the task of coding:

[T]he effect on the neophyte programmer is electric and Olympian. “Is this feeling of control,” as a coder and Noisebridge, the famous San Francisco hacker space told me. “I was 13, and I had this machine that came to life and would do whatever I said. And when you’re a kid, that feeling is wild. It’s like you have a little universe to control, that you create.”³¹

This power to concoct and control one’s own “a little universe” invokes Niebuhr’s insight that “will to power” sits at the center of sin.³² The root of the problem is self-interest. This is why power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Lord Acton said. For Niebuhr, Christian realism requires that “all factors [be taken] into account, particularly the facts of self-interest and power.”³³ To be aware of sin, or at least the pervasive corruptibility of power, is the

³⁰ Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 12. Cf. Stefan Helmreich, *Silicon Second Nature: Culturing Artificial Life in a Digital World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 83-84, 193.

³¹ Clive Thompson, *Coders: The Making of a New Tribe and the Remaking of the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 14.

³² Niebuhr, *Moral Man*.

³³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 119. It is worth noting that Niebuhr’s Christian realism is not a substitute for biblical

first step toward realism, and thus an antidote to self-serving ideology. In a following section of this paper, I shall refer to Plantinga's "Breviary of Sin" to trace the corruptive effects of sin in techno-utopian ideology.

In psychological terms, this power fuels the human drive toward "self-realization." The creativity of the task confers a sense of identity based in the ability to control and fabricate. Furthermore, coding is by and large an individual task. The glorified role of the coder as a creator of new worlds epitomizes the modern, individualistic image of *homo faber*: "the human person as agent of self-realisation."³⁴ As with so many other forms of creative work, we see here a reflection of the *imago Dei*. Yet the accentuation of self-realization as a basis for identity moves distinctly in the opposite direction from relationship with God. Mark Biddle traces this element of human arrogance back to the original sin of Adam and Eve:

Adam and Eve did not disobey for disobedience's sake, but because they desired the enhanced godlikeness to be gained by disobedience. In their view, the wonder of bearing the image of God was not enough to counterbalance the limitations of human finitude. They wanted to be more than human.³⁵

While there are many other forms of sin, this sense of wanting "to be more than human," stands out in the arrogance of the builders of the Tower of Babel:

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." [Genesis 11:4]

The builders in this story did not sin by having great skill and ambition, but rather by denying their God-given identity and turning away from their relationship with God. They ignored the reality of human limitations, and sought to build their way into heaven, i.e. considering themselves as god(s). This is an archetypal story of self-realization.

To put the creative self at the center of meaning is an act of alienation, a turning away from divine reality (God), and a turn inward to put oneself at the

justice. Even Niebuhr, a strong voice of biblical justice can be faulted for not recognizing all the factors present in the racial injustices of his American context. See: James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011).

³⁴ John Webster, "Justification, Analogy and Action. Passivity and Activity in Jüngel's Anthropology," in *The Possibilities of Theology: Studies in the theology of Eberhard Jüngel in his Sixtieth Year*, J. Webster, ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1994), 106-142, 107.

³⁵ Biddle, *Missing the Mark*, 44.

center, as maker of the world, and definer of reality.³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr describes the central theme of sin this way:

“the will to power ... evident in the human's encounter with creation. The will to power is the inclination of the human creature to try to subjugate its environment (including other persons) ... to place itself at the center of its existence and, in so doing, to arrogate to its personal reality the false status of ultimate reality.”³⁷

Eberhard Jüngel identifies this aspect of sin as overreaching arrogance as the ironic failure at the heart of modern society's great achievements:

“Sin” is, simply put, the hopeless drive to self-realisation: amongst the worst human failures is the desire to realise oneself alone through one's good acts, through one's righteous action—whether it be only legalistic or even moral. The category of self-realisation, which today is used in such an unreservedly positive sense, is more accurately to be thought of as the quintessence of sin, according to the biblical understanding of the matter.³⁸

Jüngel sees the world as haunted by the pseudo-spirituality of *homo faber*—to seek one's identity in work and productivity.³⁹ He critiques the axiom that, “without increased performance, [there is] no increase in the quality of life.”⁴⁰

The culture of coding encourages this sort of self-realization. The coder breathes the spark of life into the machine, and creates a new being, and a new reality, as it were. This act of creation is the gift most celebrated by the idealistic ethos of techno-utopianism. The increasingly potent power of software to shape

³⁶ Biddle, *Missing the Mark*, 19. With reference to alienation, Biddle quotes Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951).

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 11-12. For similar assessments of Niebuhr's theology of sin, see: Martin Luther King, Jr., “Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume II: Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951-November 1955*, Clayborne Carson, Ralph Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994) <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/publications/papers-martin-luther-king-jr-volume-ii-rediscovering-precious-values-july-1951-november> (accessed July 15, 2020). Cf. Mark Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 17-18.

³⁸ Webster, *Justification*, 114.

³⁹ Webster, *Justification*, 114.

⁴⁰ Eberhard Jüngel, “Der alte Mensch - als Kriterium der Lebensqualität: Bemerkungen zur Menschenwürde der Leistungsunfähigen Person,” *Der wirklichkeitsanspruch von Theologie und Religion: die sozialetische Herausforderung, Ernst Steinbach zum 70 Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976), 129-132.

society thus sets the stage for precisely this self-realization that serves as the spine of idealistic thinking about the role of the coders in the computer age.

This overweening pride in the power of coders to shape reality according to self-determined, idealistic goals sets the stage for the rise of “The Hacker Way” as Facebook’s *modus operandi*. Of course, Facebook is not the only tech company to succumb to the idolatry of its own business model. Twitter similarly has sought to dominate its own particular bandwidth of social media, and it has faced similar moral hazards. Twitter co-founder Biz Stone described the feeling of possessing a kind of “superpower” through Twitter, and yet neither he nor his co-founder Jack Dorsey foresaw the “enormous potential of the service for flat-out evil,” according to Clive Thompson, who adds that both he (as an industry insider) and the Twitter founders were “strikingly naïve” about the evil that the Twitter propagated. (Thompson 2018, 308)

The next step in our analysis therefore is to look more closely into the operation of the “Hacker Way.”

THE HACKER WAY: “MOVE FAST, AND BREAK THINGS”

“Our whole culture is we want to build something quickly. ... We have a big belief in moving fast, pushing boundaries, saying that it’s OK to break things. It’s definitely very core in my personality.”

– Mark Zuckerberg⁴¹

In his letter to investors published in Facebook’s public stock offering memorandum, Mark Zuckerberg touted “the Hacker Way,” as embodying the ideals of Facebook’s “culture and management approach”—

We have a saying: "Move fast and break things." The idea is that if you never break anything, you're probably not moving fast enough.⁴²

In many contexts, the idea of deliberately breaking things by acting hastily or haphazardly might seem bad, but not at Facebook. Mr. Zuckerberg promulgates the belief that this is a good thing, and much celebrated. Recent history proves that

⁴¹ Levy, *Hackers*, 393.

⁴² Mark Zuckerberg, “Letter from Mark Zuckerberg,” Form S-1 Public Stock Offering Memorandum, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 1 February 2012. <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1326801/000119312512034517/d287954ds1.htm> (accessed May 13, 2019).

Zuckerberg and Facebook have stayed true to the Hacker Way. *Wired* magazine chronicled the laundry list of Facebook scandals drawn from just a single year in an article titled, “The 21 (and Counting) Biggest Facebook Scandals of 2018.”⁴³ A condensed subset includes these mishaps:

- February 2018: Special counsel Robert Mueller’s indictment of Russian trolls reveals the role Facebook played in Russia’s plot
- March 2018: The United Nations cites Facebook's role in the slaughter of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar
- March 2018: Cambridge Analytica story makes front page news
- June 2018: *The New York Times* broke news that the company shared users’ data with device manufacturers like Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Blackberry.
- July 2018: Facebook tells Congress it had special data arrangements with dozens of companies, including a Russian internet giant.
- August 2018: Facebook shuts down a network of Iranian troll accounts and pages that were posing as US and UK citizens.
- September 2018: The ACLU says Facebook ads let employers favor men over women
- November 2018: A *New York Times* investigation alleges Facebook covered up the Russia scandal and ordered opposition research on George Soros.

The company has violated social norms and broken trust so consistently, that Roger McNamee, an early investor in Facebook, and former mentor to Mark Zuckerberg, has suggested the Facebook mantra might be phrased: “*Move fast, break things, apologize, repeat.*”⁴⁴ He has come to the conclusion that:

[T]he day will come, sooner than I could have imagined just two years ago, when the world will recognize that the value users receive from the

⁴³ Issie Lapowsky, “The 21 (and Counting) Biggest Facebook Scandals of 2018,” *Wired*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-scandals-2018/> (accessed May 13, 2019).

⁴⁴ Roger McNamee, *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 193.

Facebook-dominated social media/attention economy revolution masked an unmitigated disaster for our democracy, for public health, for personal privacy, and for the economy. It did not have to be that way. It will take a concerted effort to fix it.⁴⁵

The consistent pattern of broken trust in Facebook's operations begs the question as to why it has been tolerated for so long, and why it has not yet been reined in to any significant degree. The first reason is, of course, that people want what Facebook provides—a free, enticing, enjoyable experience of connecting with others, and being entertained by newsfeeds and other diversions. Of course, this service is not actually free; rather, there is a price to be paid in terms of ceding personal information, and accepting what the company calls “user engagement” tactics.

The second reason for the lack of reform is that government regulators have been loathe to step in, “afraid of killing the golden geeks.”⁴⁶ The mood on Capitol Hill has recently been turning sour however, due to the continued unabashed market power of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple.⁴⁷ Yet up to the present, Washington has done little or nothing to regulate the power these tech giants have over both customers and advertisers.

The third reason for the unrestrained growth of Facebook's power to manipulate the personal information and newsfeeds of billions of people is due to the streak of idealistic thinking that has nourished the roots of “the Hacker Way.” Facebook employees do not go to work intending to do harm. Like the founders of Google, who touted the motto, “Don't be evil,” they tacitly accept the hacker's manifesto that their code can and should propagate social good. These are by and large idealistic believers in Facebook's potential to do good. As Zuckerberg tells it, Facebook was never intended to be a company, but rather Facebook was “built to accomplish a social mission — to make the world more open and connected.”⁴⁸ In this idealistic vision of mission and method, “moving fast and breaking things” does not connote sinful behavior, which would be anathema to the corporate ideals. Zuckerberg says, “Hacker culture is also extremely open and meritocratic” and while hacking skills “can be used for good or bad,... the vast majority of hackers

⁴⁵ McNamee, *Zucked*, 3.

⁴⁶ Kara Swisher, “The People Screaming for Blood Have No Idea How Tech Actually Works,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/opinion/facebook-google-regulation.html> (accessed May 13, 2019).

⁴⁷ Cecilia Kang, David Streitfeld, Katie Rogers, and Stephanie Saul, “Google and Amazon Are at the Center of a Storm Brewing Over Big Tech,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/business/google-antitrust-investigation.html> (accessed May 13, 2019).

⁴⁸ Zuckerberg, *Letter*.

I've met tend to be idealistic people who want to have a positive impact on the world.”⁴⁹

Cascading reports of the negative impact Facebook has had on the world over the past several years do not seem to have diminished Zuckerberg's commitment to the idealistic thinking that Facebook's business model based on maximum content and maximum connectivity is an inherent good. Although he has declined to answer government questioners in the UK and Europe, he reiterated his optimistic belief in the Hacker Way in the recent congressional hearings regarding privacy concerns and Facebook's role in hate crimes:

“I am optimistic that over a five-to-10-year period we will have AI tools that can get into some of the linguistic nuances of different types of content to be more accurate, to be flagging things to our systems, but today we're just not there on that... Until we get it automated, there's a higher error rate than I'm happy with.”⁵⁰

This statement reveals the ideological presumption that Facebook's problems can be solved by more and better code to bring about the desired future. In other words, the solution to Facebook is more Facebook, driven by more and better AI. According to the *New York Times*, Zuckerberg has “blithely repeated these claims with the media, on conference calls with Wall Street and at Facebook's own events.”⁵¹ The company's rigid defense of this ideology has not abated. Mr. Zuckerberg recently likened his idea of Facebook to “a new kind of force in the world — a Fifth Estate alongside the other power structures of society.”⁵²

Facebook took a promising step in the direction of listening to criticism in 2018 by hiring consultants to conduct an audit of its “civil rights accountability structure.”⁵³ The auditors issued their report in July 2020, concluding that, Facebook's “constrained reading” of its own rules “was both astounding and deeply

⁴⁹ Zuckerberg, *Letter*.

⁵⁰ Dave Gershgorn, “Soonish: Mark Zuckerberg just gave a timeline for AI to take over detecting internet hate speech,” *Quartz*, April 10, 2018. <https://qz.com/1249273/facebook-ceo-mark-zuckerberg-says-ai-will-detect-hate-speech-in-5-10-years/> (accessed October 29, 2018).

⁵¹ Cade Metz, and Mike Isaac, “It's Never Going to Go to Zero,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2019.

⁵² Mark Zuckerberg, Speech at Georgetown University, as reported by Tony Romm, *Washington Post*, October 17, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/17/zuckerberg-standing-voice-free-expression/> (accessed July 15, 2020).

⁵³ Lisa Eadicicco, “Facebook is hiring a civil rights leader, but auditors say that isn't enough and are pushing the tech giant to hire more experts,” *Business Insider*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-civil-rights-leader-job-audit-hire-more-experts-2020-7> (accessed July 15, 2020).

troubling,... hurtling [Facebook] down a slippery slope.”⁵⁴ It would seem the idealistic trust that Mr. Zuckerberg and his leadership team put in code and the utopian ideal of universal connectivity on Facebook’s platform has calcified into an ideology that will be hard to escape.

Mr. Zuckerberg’s idealism may be well-intended, but it is unrealistic. “His focus on code as the solution to every problem would blind him to the human cost of Facebook’s outsized success,” McNamee says. “They continue to believe that there is a software solution to the problem and that it can be successful without changing their business model or growth targets.”⁵⁵ As an example of this belief that Facebook’s platform serves as a foundational good for society, there is this unfortunate statement by Facebook VP Andrew Bosworth:

“Maybe it costs someone a life by exposing someone to bullies. Maybe someone dies in a terrorist attack coordinated on our tools... The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is **de facto** good... It is perhaps the only area where the metrics do tell the true story as far as we are concerned,”⁵⁶

Bosworth later apologized for that statement, but it aptly expresses the assimilation of a noble ideal (freedom of expression) into a self-serving ideology in defense of metrics (i.e. profits), even at the expense of lives. McNamee corroborates this aspect of Facebook’s ideology: “Zuck and his team [believe] that everything they did was right, always for the best, and uncontestedly good for humanity. Humility went out the window. Facebook subordinated everything to growth... If Zuck and the Facebook team noticed that usage of Facebook differs materially from their ideal, they showed no concern.”⁵⁷

It is worth noting that other social media companies have been more circumspect than Facebook when it comes to the need to impose limits on their platforms in order to address concerns over the moral harm that can come from

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Dwoskin and Cat Zakrzewski, “Facebook’s own civil rights auditors say its policy decisions are a ‘tremendous setback’,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/07/08/facebook-civil-rights-audit/> (accessed July 15, 2020).

⁵⁵ McNamee, *Zucked*, 64, 230, cf. 4.

⁵⁶ Ryan Mac, Charlie Warzel, and Alex Kantrowitz, “Growth At Any Cost: Top Facebook Executive Defended Data Collection In 2016 Memo — And Warned That Facebook Could Get People Killed,” *Buzzfeed News*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/growth-at-any-cost-top-facebook-executive-defended-data> (accessed January 8, 2020).

⁵⁷ McNamee, *Zucked*, 78-79.

abusive behaviors. Twitter, Snap and Reddit have all taken steps to limit and label untruthful and hurtful posts.⁵⁸

In the face of the growing public concern over damaging uses of Facebook's platform, and the company's power to manipulate people, markets, and elections, political pressure is building to rein in the abuses.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, several former employees have voiced concerns, but critiques from within have been rare. One exception is the recent admission by Mike Schroepfer, Facebook's chief technology officer, that with respect to abuses like hate crimes, "It's never going to go to zero."⁶⁰ Schroepfer's matter-of-fact realism is a coy, but direct, rebuttal of his boss's idealistic insistence that Facebook can police itself and correct its own problems by deploying more and better AI. AI is the easy answer Zuckerberg has given to answer the problems and deflect calls for regulation.

Several Facebook executives have left the company and voiced criticisms. Chamath Palihapitiya, Facebook's former vice president of growth, gave a speech at Stanford's Graduate School of Business in which he expressed regrets about his time at Facebook, saying, "I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works,"⁶¹ Dipayan Ghosh, also ex-Facebook, explains that Facebook's business model "perfectly suits the function of disinformation operations."⁶² Justin Rosenstein was the co-creator of Facebook's "like" button, the ubiquitous symbol that hooks users' attention and feeds the psychological desire for affirmation. Rosenstein never foresaw the depth of negative side-effects that would spring from his invention. He now has regrets. He makes a case for state regulation of "psychologically manipulative advertising", drawing comparisons to the morality of manipulative advertisements to sell fossil fuel or tobacco. "If we only care about profit maximisation," he says, "we will go rapidly into dystopia."⁶³

⁵⁸ Mike Isaac, "Facebook's Decisions Were 'Setbacks for Civil Rights,' Audit Finds," *New York Times*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/technology/facebook-civil-rights-audit.html> (accessed July 15, 2020). Another cyberspace leader, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, also has called for Facebook to "be held accountable for propaganda on their platform." <https://twitter.com/Benioff/status/1184560764692107270> (accessed October 8, 2020).

⁵⁹ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

⁶⁰ Metz and Isaac, *It's Never Going*.

⁶¹ McNamee, *Zucked*, 147.

⁶² Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott, "Digital Deceit: The Technologies behind Precision Propaganda on the Internet," *New America* (policy paper), January 2018. <https://www.newamerica.org/public-interest-technology/policy-papers/digitaldeceit/> (accessed May 13, 2019).

⁶³ Paul Lewis, "'Our Minds Can be Hijacked' – the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia> (accessed May 13, 2019).

A BREVIARY OF SIN

In order to develop a constructive critique of idealistic thinking it will prove helpful to diagnose the role sin plays in undermining it. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. provides a helpful diagnosis of the progression of sin, to which he refers as a “Breviary of Sin.”⁶⁴ With reference to Plantinga’s book, I shall focus here on three aspects of sin pertinent to the pattern of sin in idealistic business thinking: (1) the effect of sin; (2) the vector of sin; and (3) the pathology of sin. Facebook models all three. With this framework in mind, we can begin to identify the specific nature of reforms and safeguards necessary to confront the problems of idealism, slow the infiltration of sin in the corporate body, and adopt more realistic business models with better moral awareness.

The Effect of Sin: Vandalism of Shalom

Plantinga begins by stating the obvious and crucially important point: “Sin is a religious concept, not just a moral one.”⁶⁵ Indeed, he grasps the nettle of the problem that explains why secular narratives of market economics play as mere “parodies” of ethics. Secular narratives shun transcendent spiritual reality, and thus lack the framework of religious concepts that give theological understanding the rational apparatus to escape the tragedy of idealistic thinking. The semantic field of ethics must encompass transcendence in the values it holds dear, or else concepts such as good and evil, sin and grace, evaporate like mist, as spoke Qoheleth.⁶⁶

The biblical concept of *shalom* is key to understanding the effects of sin. *Shalom* refers to conditions in which holistic relationships move mutually in the direction of righteousness. In the language of biblical narrative, “shalom is God’s design for creation and redemption.”⁶⁷ Sin vandalizes this design. Sin breaks relationships, or reduces them to something less than they could be. This can take many forms. Economic transactions replace covenantal relationship. Manipulation drives out love. Distrust grows. Gamification becomes the rule. Relationships between businesses and their stakeholders go sour. Reconciliation fails to happen.

Since idealistic business rationales lack the religious concepts of *shalom* and sin, they must confront ethical breakdowns on their own terms: that is, in terms of free market economics and the presumption that business success is an unqualified good. In this mode of thinking, every opportunity is ripe for gamification. “Good” and “bad” alike are defined by whether they support or

⁶⁴ Plantinga, *Not the Way*.

⁶⁵ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 12.

⁶⁶ Ecclesiastes 2:26 *et passim*.

⁶⁷ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 13.

subvert the desired outcomes of the business plan. Google's founders ultimately had to abandon their motto, "Don't be evil." It turned out that they lacked the language to speak of their beliefs in a context that could articulate any transcendent truth in judgments of good versus evil. Thus, their business decisions were made on the basis of what seemed best for the company's business plans. The righteousness of relationships was not seen for what it is—as a transcendent foundation for shalom.

Gamification is tragic for business ethics. Being blind to the spiritual significance of shalom, ethical questions are treated like problems that can be fixed by fine-tuning business operations and improving technologies. This is precisely the type of thinking that leads Mark Zuckerberg to believe that the solution to Facebook is more Facebook. After all, it comes down to how well the business can succeed in pursuing its idealistic vision for the world. Shalom in this case becomes replaced by more pragmatic vision statements, e.g. "Making the world more open and connected,"⁶⁸ or "Bring the world closer together."⁶⁹

This worldview has no place for sin, and business success stands in place of shalom. Ethical problems are due not to sin, but rather to transitory "bugs" in the development of the perfect business model or platform. This sort of idealistic thinking places inordinate trust in the goodness of the corporate mission, because it fails to acknowledge the risk of vandalism to shalom. In pursuit of the idealized future, corporate culture is likely to grow insular and to shut out dissenting opinions that might bear witness to the realities of sin:

Convinced of the nobility of their mission, Zuck and his employees reject criticism. They respond to every problem with the same approach that created the problem in the first place: more AI, more code, more short-term fixes. They do not do this because they are bad people. They do this because success has warped their perception of reality.⁷⁰

Charles Taylor has a name for the sort of mindset that emerges from self-referential perceptions of reality: "closed world structures" (CWS).⁷¹ Idealistic views of a business's mission and operations can function like a CWS. A CWS "'naturalizes' a certain view on things,"⁷² accepting the idealistic presumptions of the CWS as merely natural, and self-evident, therefore not open to scrutiny. This shields the cultural attitudes of the business from awareness of ethical lapses, such

⁶⁸ Zuckerberg, "Letter".

⁶⁹ Zuckerberg, "Bringing the World Closer Together".

⁷⁰ McNamee, *Zucked*, 95.

⁷¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 551f.

⁷² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 560.

as the moral hazards that induce and even reward behaviors that harm others while prospering the business. All the while, the business's leaders can presume that their idealistic vision is inherently good.

This is not to say that any business culture dominated by a CWS is necessarily unethical or devoid of spirituality. People are quite adept at constructing personal views that imbue CWS with a sense of spirituality. Taylor describes the thought process by which people intuit spiritual reality.⁷³ Even an extreme rendition of the "Hacker Ethic" can thus permit those beholden to it to experience spiritual reality (to be a "porous self," as Taylor describes it). In spite of intuited spiritual significance in business decisions, ethical problems persist however, because idealistic thinking short-circuits moral deliberation. The inward focus of the CWS dominates discussion. In such cases, "no further steps are taken to flesh out fully a religiously grounded or transcendent argument for the moral limits of markets."⁷⁴

The social media business is particularly susceptible to vandalism of relationships, because the business thrives on its ability to make money from peoples' interactions with one another, and with the platform itself. The self-serving bias of social media platforms to manipulate user behavior can diminish human dignity. Sherry Turkle diagnoses the problem of how social media technology can vandalize shalom:

[W]e transgress not because we try to build the new but because we don't allow ourselves to consider what it disrupts or diminishes. We are not in trouble because of invention but because we think it will solve everything.⁷⁵

Without a religious understanding of the significance of shalom in the spirituality of human relationships, how is this vandalism of shalom to be recognized? This is a problem of tragic import not only for Facebook, but for all social media platforms, and the applications, news sources, influencers and advertisers who use them. Self-referential visions of technology platforms tend to reduce human relationships to data. This is the essence of the surveillance capitalism.⁷⁶

The leaders of Twitter and Zoom have shown that they recognize the problem. Each company has taken steps to reform their practices in order to prevent

⁷³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 137.

⁷⁴ Kevin Brown, "Revisiting the Moral Limits Of Markets: An "Open Take,"" *Christian Scholar's Review*, 2019, XLVIII:2, 147-164, 158.

⁷⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 284.

⁷⁶ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

relational damage.⁷⁷ In doing so they each bear witness to the values of shalom—in the form of right relationships and truthfulness— without the need to invoke religious concepts.

The Vector of Sin: Corruption

Having described the effect of sin as the vandalism of shalom, Plantinga defines corruption as the “dynamic *motif*” of sin.⁷⁸ Corruption is sin-in-action. It is the vector of sin; that is to say, sin moves in this direction—to corrupt. Sin is a movement to distort, pollute, and disintegrate God’s designs,⁷⁹ including corruption of the self.⁸⁰ Plantinga harkens back to Athanasius for the foundational doctrine that “human beings East of Eden corrupt everything they touch.”⁸¹ Regardless of disagreements over the nuances of the doctrine of original sin, Plantinga argues, “the generic doctrine of corruption” accepts the claim that, “even when they are good in important ways, human beings are not *sound*.”⁸²

Brueggemann refers to the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16) as an illustration of animalistic hunger of sin that lurks in the human heart and psyche: “This desire is not a normal human yearning. It is the dark side of life under perversion.” Sin thus plays out in “an animal yearning for destructiveness that will destroy both the victim and the perpetrator.”⁸³ This yearning is woven into families, society and organizations, because people carry this “will to power”⁸⁴ into all relationships. The lesson of Genesis 4:7 is that humans must rule over sin to oppose it. But sin continues to move and exploit human behavior and take on power in relationships, and its force is multiplied when it exploits the strength of organizations.

The doctrine of ever-present corruption shows how idealistic thinking becomes tragic. Ideals may be good and well-intentioned, but they are not immune from the touch of human sin. Ideals are an insufficient moral foundation from which

⁷⁷ Kate Conger and Mike Isaac, Defying Trump, Twitter Doubles Down on Labeling Tweets, *New York Times*, May 28, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/technology/trump-twitter-fact-check.html> (accessed July 15, 2020). Aaron Tilley and Robert McMillan, “Zoom CEO: ‘I Really Messed Up’ on Security as Coronavirus Drove Video Tool’s Appeal,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 2020.

⁷⁸ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 32.

⁷⁹ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 29.

⁸⁰ Cheung, *Greed*, 14.

⁸¹ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 29.

⁸² Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 33.

⁸³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 58.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 11-12.

to make value judgments concerning good and evil, human flourishing, and ultimately, shalom.

Higher aims are lost due to overweening focus on the reductionist aims of idealistic thinking. This is as true of business as of any other sphere of life. Ultimately, the tragedy comes about through the error of confusing ends and means:

Perversion is an ends-and-purposes disease. Most broadly understood, perversion is the turning of loyalty, energy, and desire away from God and God's project in the world: it is the diversion of construction materials for the city of God to side projects of our own, often accompanied by jerry-built ideologies that seek to justify the diversion.⁸⁵

Practical steps to mitigate the corruptive influence of sin depend upon the ability of leaders to acknowledge this reality and be open-minded and humble in the face of criticism. This calls for a posture of humility to recognize the limitations of technology, marketing, and every aspect of stakeholder responsibility. It will require not just admitting mistakes, but also meaningful action in reconciliation, and intentional efforts to address the insufficiency of idealistic thinking to serve the higher aims of human flourishing. These are all the kinds of actions we would wish to see from Facebook and other idealistic business leaders.

The Pathology of Sin: Corruption of the Corporate Body

“Markets leave their mark... To corrupt a good or a social practice is to degrade it, treat it according to a lower mode of valuation that is appropriate to it.”⁸⁶

—Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*

Sin seeps into the corporate body like water through a crack. This is called “institutional sin”, perhaps the most nefarious type of sin that lurks in the shadows of idealistic business thinking. “Sin burrows into the bowels of institutions and traditions, making a home there and taking them over.”⁸⁷ Ashforth and Anand explain how this happens:

Although the beliefs that undergird the ideologies can be used by an individual in isolation, they become far more potent when institutionalized in the collective - when they are a shared resource that all can draw on and

⁸⁵ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 40.

⁸⁶ Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 9, 34.

⁸⁷ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 75.

mutually affirm.... When the corruption is ongoing, these idiosyncratic social constructions tend to become woven into a self-sealing belief system that routinely neutralizes the potential stigma of corruption.⁸⁸

This is why and how an ideology operates as “a self-sealing *system* of beliefs.”⁸⁹ Rationalization is the process that shapes ideals into a self-reinforcing ideology closed off from critical thinking.⁹⁰ We see this in the way the gamification of business metrics seeks to gain advantages from each and every human interaction carried by its platform. To enable human relationships seems like a good thing, of course. This is the gift social media brings to society. Nonetheless, institutional sin is an ever-present danger. There is a sinister undercurrent driven by the motive to monetize users’ attention span, habits and relationships.

Facebook’s now infamous “massive emotional contagion” experiment of 2014, for example, gives witness to how corporate aims corrupt individual ethics. In this experiment, researchers deliberately manipulated users’ newsfeeds to study the effects this would have on users’ emotional conditions.⁹¹ Although we may presume no researcher ever intended to harm anyone by perhaps triggering depression or inciting self-harm, the very concept of the experiment shows a serious lack of respect for the well-being and freedom of the unwitting Facebook users caught up in it.

Here is a parable, in a sense, to illustrate how institutional (or “corporate”) sin evolves. The corporation (a business in this case) uses its power in ways that further its corporate goals. It all seems reasonable to the employees involved in the exercise. After all, they are focused merely on doing their jobs well, satisfying the expectations of management, and serving the corporation. Even though the employees do not set out to harm anyone affected by the corporate power, their conscious actions nonetheless do put other individuals in harm’s way. The corruption in this case takes place at the corporate level:

[S]ocial structures have causal impact on the decisions of agents by means of the restrictions, enablements, and incentives built into the relationships among social positions that constitute those structures. This causal impact is not a matter

⁸⁸ Blake Ashforth, and Vikas Anand, “The Normalization of Corruption in Organizations,” *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 25 (2003): 1-52, 16.

⁸⁹ Ashforth and Anand, “Normalization of Corruption,” 17 [italics in original].

⁹⁰ Ashforth and Anand, “Normalization of Corruption,” 16; see also, Nikolay Dentchev, “To What Extent Is Business and Society Literature Idealistic?” *Business & Society* 48 (2009):1, 10-38.

⁹¹ Adam Kramer, Jamie Guillory, and Hancock, Jeffrey, “Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111:24 (2014): 8788-90.

of determinism, as any agent can ignore opportunities, resist restrictions, or act counter to the incentives the agent faces.⁹²

Thus, sin takes root and grows in the institution, even though the employees wielding the power do not see themselves being morally responsible. After all, it was a corporate action, and the corporation's purposes have strong ideological support. Stepping back to see the unintended ramifications of sin in this display of power, however, we can see how sin gathers momentum, unnoticed perhaps, by harnessing the collective power of the organization. Ideology, even when based on respectable ideals, is thus susceptible to corruption. Self-serving ideologies isolate decision-makers from reality, constrain conversation, and rationalize self-serving decisions. "The people at Facebook live in their own preference bubble", as McNamee shows. "They cannot imagine that the problems that have resulted could be in any way linked to their designs or business decisions."⁹³ As a result, the company never develops the experience of muscles necessary to deal with the problems of sin.⁹⁴ Every time the company encounters a problem, it refers to its default mode of dealing with the problem, and that means sticking to the premises of the idealistic vision. As when Facebook faced the blowback from the exposure of Russian interference, "They rolled out their standard response—deny, delay, deflect, dissemble—expecting the friction to go away."⁹⁵

Not only does institutional sin pervert the function of institutions, but it also corrupts the patterns, norms and habits by which people communicate, infecting whole systems of interpersonal relationships. Institutional sin sows confusion and misinformation. It diverts awareness and intentions away from serving the greater, inherent good of others, in order to serve the apparatus of the business platform.

Social media encourage and enable people to construct structures in cyberspace that echo the desire of the builders of the Tower of Babel to "make a name for ourselves." All the power of the businesses behind the networks is engaged to increase this desire so that the network platform might consume ever larger swaths of their daily lives. This is how the hacker ethic becomes corrupted by business metrics focused on the goal of monetizing users' behavior. As Marc Andreessen says, "software is eating the world."

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Many business leaders bring high ideals into their work. The theological study of sin presented here is not meant to disparage those ideals. The problem lies not with

⁹² Daniel Finn, "What is a Sinful Social Structure?" *Theological Studies* 2016, Vol. 77(1) 136-164, 154.

⁹³ McNamee, *Zucked*, 95.

⁹⁴ McNamee, *Zucked*, 146.

⁹⁵ McNamee, *Zucked*, 146.

the ideals themselves—such as free speech, open access, and universal connectivity⁹⁶—but rather with the blindness and self-protective impulses found in self-serving ideologies.

The good news is that by diagnosing the problem and understanding how sin corrupts the organizational mission and vision, we can be intentional about putting corrective practices in place and cultivating ethical values in corporate cultures. As Plantinga says, “a diagnosis of sin and guilt allows hope.”⁹⁷ Ultimately, the reality of sin and the possibility of hope are intertwined.

High moral aims are sustained not by mere idealism, but rather by repentance from sin and dependence upon grace. For this reason, ideologies tend to fail through unrealistic beliefs about their moral strengths. Utopia is nowhere to be found. True light comes from the source of light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it [John 1:5]. We cannot begin to grasp the meaning of this light until we become aware of the surrounding darkness. Then and only then do we begin to approach the light in the knowledge of its mysterious life-giving power. Only then do we begin to awaken to awareness that grace is the cure. Otherwise, whether we know it or not, we are sin-sick souls without hope. As Plantinga says, hope comes from realizing that, “Something can be done for this malady. Something *has* been done for it.”⁹⁸

But that is faith speaking. How can this religious wisdom be translated into pragmatic action in secular business organizations? The foregoing analysis of the patterns of corruption and vandalism of shalom points to several corrective measures.

First, is the importance of humility in leadership. Leaders who demonstrate humility are able to hear criticism, admit mistakes, and take action. As mentioned above, the CEOs of Twitter and Zoom have done this, even when it meant loss of revenue and limitations upon the maximization of their platform utilization. Humility is a secular value that overlaps strongly with spiritual and religious beliefs.⁹⁹ Humility corresponds to the religious spiritual discipline of confession—a recognition of shortcomings that keeps one grounded, avoids arrogance, and builds healthy community, i.e. shalom.¹⁰⁰ Jim Collins describes humility as an

⁹⁶ Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013).

⁹⁷ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, xii.

⁹⁸ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, xii.

⁹⁹ Denis Collins, “Designing Ethical Organizations for Spiritual Growth and Superior Performance: An Organization Systems Approach,” *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*, 7 (2010): 2, 95-117.

¹⁰⁰ Bruno Dyck and Kenman Wong, “Corporate Spiritual Disciplines and the Quest for Organizational Virtue,” *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 7 (2010):1, 7-29.

essential trait of “Level 5 Leaders.”¹⁰¹ Sadly, humility may not be a “coachable” trait. It does not often come naturally, but rather seems to flow from the heart of one who has experienced what Christians call “conversion.” Still, we can be intentional about rewarding humility when we see it, and leaders can model it. This has a profound effect on corporate culture and moves the organization in the direction of ethical awareness.

As an example of what humility might sound like, we can return to Andrew Bosworth, Facebook’s VP of advertising. In 2020, four years after his more infamous statement quoted above, Bosworth offered a more prophetic word in saying:

“Scrutiny is warranted given our position in society as the most prominent of a new medium. I think most of the criticisms that have come to light have been valid and represent real areas for us to serve our community better. I don’t enjoy having our flaws exposed, but I consider it far better than the alternative where we remain ignorant of our shortcomings.”¹⁰²

This points to another practical action—invite the prophets to speak. Even more importantly, listen to them. Dissenting voices need to be heard if organizations are to avoid ethical lapses. Google, among others, has responded to critiques offered by groups of employees regarding military contracts, collaboration with China, and gender and racial bias. Microsoft president Brad Smith has publicly welcomed employee dissent on the company’s projects. He said, “I don’t think our employees are naïve. I think sometimes they are idealistic. I think the world needs a combination of idealism and pragmatism.”¹⁰³ In order to protect dissenting voices, and overcome peer pressure and fear of retribution, it might help to designate corporate ombudsmen who can give internal criticisms a hearing, and protect those who speak up by keeping sources anonymous where necessary. Another way to encourage critical thinking and avoid blind spots in moral thinking is to bring diversity into program reviews. Where necessary, companies should form teams with diverse membership throughout the organization. This single act alone can do much to thwart exploitation of power. The tech industry realizes it has a need here,

¹⁰¹ James Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001).

¹⁰² Andrew Bosworth, “Thoughts for 2020,” reported in *New York Times*, January 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/technology/facebook-andrew-bosworth-memo.html> (accessed January 8, 2020).

¹⁰³ Nicholas Carlson and Allana Akhtar, “Microsoft’s President Says the Company Welcomes Employee Dissent, And Says Other Tech Companies ‘Don’t Listen to Their Employees Enough,’” *Business Insider*, January 23, 2020.

and many companies are investing time and energy in developing and hiring people from diverse backgrounds. Gender parity also will help a great deal in this regard.

Gamification is a common source of ethical lapses in data-driven business practice. It will help to probe business models, operations, and even compensation and reward structures to seek out instances where metrics may be reductionist: that is, where metrics attempt to quantify that which cannot be quantified—the quality and sanctity of human relationships, freedom from manipulative practices, and the loss of perspective that ensues from not seeing injustices for what they are. To be aware of such intangible values requires a commitment to placing value on qualities and experiences that cannot be treated like mere data to be fed into an algorithm, especially when that algorithm seeks to maximize the financial gain of an organization that has power over people's lives.

It will also help to define and examine corporate missions in terms of transcendent values, and especially, justice for marginalized people. Diversity is helpful in bringing justice issues to light. This is a practical reason for building diversity in hiring, promotion and leadership.

Another way to defuse the moral hazards is to explicitly define ends and means in terms of transcendent spiritual values. This can be done without invoking religious language or doctrines. Human dignity, quality of life, moral agency, equity and justice for the marginalized are widely accepted values in our society. These foundational values can help aim business goals in the right direction, and hold leaders accountable to the overarching vision of shalom.

There is hope for wiser, more ethical use of digital technologies, and not just among the tech companies. In cases where idealistic thinking leads into moral lapses brought on by rationalization of self-serving behaviors, the cure will begin with acknowledgement of the larger reality that is visible in the context of sin, shalom and grace. Soul-searching questions, a posture of humility in the face of a transcendent reality, and moral imagination are necessary to combat idealistic thinking and to maintain a realistic, healthy approach in life. Business is a great place, a real place, to do so.