

Ing. Minds 7/18/14
Social Center

From The Economist
6/14-20/14
Pick Rochester

What is the deadliest sin?

THE BIG
QUESTION

The original septet has been with us for aeons. But which is the worst sin today? **Will Self**, **Aminatta Forna** and five others take their pick



ENVY

by Richard Holloway

Writer, broadcaster and former Bishop of Edinburgh

In the Greek New Testament the word used for sin is a term from archery – *hamartanein* – meaning “to miss the mark”. We aim to do the right thing, gain a positive end, even if it’s only some sort of pleasure, but our arrow veers off and instead of the bull’s eye we hit someone in the field beyond. In other words, our mistakes are usually misdirected attempts at the good rather than intentional pursuit of the bad. There is one exception to this positive understanding of sin: envy.

Every other sin offers some gratification, if only in its early stages, but envy is an empty and desolating experience from beginning to end. It is the meanest sin in the book, which is why few people ever own up to it. François de La Rochefoucauld captured its joyless secrecy in 1665: “We often pride ourselves on even the most criminal passions, but envy is a timid and shame-faced passion we never dare acknowledge.” Gore Vidal wrote that whenever a friend succeeded a little something in him died; for him it was not enough to succeed – others had to fail. Vidal’s spleen captures both aspects of envy: sorrow at another’s good and satisfaction at another’s misfortune.

The most obvious symptom of envy is malice. However witty and entertaining you may find their skilful dismembering of the reputations of others, you can be certain that the malicious person is being eaten alive with envy at another’s success or celebrity. Behind many a bitchy comment there lurks a troubled and dissatisfied heart. And since envy is a sin between friends or equals, another of its symptoms is hypocrisy, acting pleasure in another’s good fortune when you actually feel gut-clenching pain. It shows in the tightness of your smile and the shadow behind your eyes as you dredge up your congratulations from a well of bitterness.

Is there any remedy? Two steps can help. The first is to acknowledge its presence and admit our own meanness of spirit. The other step is to recapture our capacity for sharing the joy of others. It is not what John Donne said, of course, but it is nevertheless true that another’s good also increases me – so rejoice!

PRIDE

by Will Self

Novelist

Pride is so much a part of every one of us that we can’t see how deadly it is – it inheres in our very self-consciousness, and has metastasised through the body politic. The opposite of pride – or so it’s said – is humility, but of course we’ve all met those Uriah Heeps whose ever-so-‘umbleness is nothing of the sort.

False pride is present in any hierarchy. “Most men can withstand adversity,” Abraham Lincoln said, “but if you want to test a man’s character give him power.” It’s a test that all men and women fail, for everyone – once in a position of power – succumbs to



the sin of pride. It’s impossible to see how power can be exercised without pride, since to consider yourself capable of directing the hearts and minds of others is, ipso facto, to embrace the notion that you are superior to them. Since most power is gained arbitrarily, this is never demonstrably the case.

In the modern economy pride is paramount. “Because I’m worth it” was the advertising slogan for L’Oréal products until the mid-2000s; the phrase then morphed into “Because you’re worth it”, and now it’s “Because we’re worth it”. Each transition corresponds to a still greater equation of the commodity with self-worth, but such an idea not only endorses pride, it actively encourages it. Ours is an economic system founded on proud commodification and the commoditisation of pride.

Civilisation is grouted with pride: it is the very glue with which its edifice has been raised. I would argue that pride is the foundational sin, going before the long fall that we are still enduring. All other sins – including murder – are mere peccadillos compared with the monstrosity of pride. While you can perfectly well be proud without being avaricious, or slothful, or covetous, it’s impossible to transgress in these ways without first being proud. The Big I-Am, King Baby, Me-Me-Me – this is the true trinity of the modern psyche; this is the three-personed god we have made of ourselves.

I’m not simply talking here about a preserve of neurotic psycho-babbling, but the very basis of who we now are. Identity politics is the extension of pride to the most arbitrary of characteristics – ethnicity, sex, sexual identity. And when we’ve ceased being proud of such chance things we can become proud of “strength” with which we “fight” cancer and other diseases. Our culture is now so saturated with pride that we believe we have agency at a molecular level.

INGRATITUDE

by Ann Wroe

Writer and obituaries editor of *The Economist*

Some sins have no season. We are as likely to be angry in November as to lose our rag in March; as prone to envy the man with the Porsche, the tan >

> and the blonde on his arm in April as in June. There is, though, something autumnal about greed, apple-cheeked and wheat-crowned, purpled knee-high in grapes; something summery in sloth, as the hammock creaks in the fly-drowsy heat; and more than a tickle of spring in lust, as birds pair and the sap rises.

Among these, ingratitude is winter, the worst of seasons. Shakespeare is our authority:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude...

He exaggerates, we may feel. The incidents seem trifling. After the dinner party, no note is sent. (Well, you were busy, and the dinner wasn't that elaborate.) The solicitous e-mail gets no reply. (Again, you're busy, and don't feel like chatting.) A driver gives way to you at a place where there is no clear priority; you don't acknowledge him. A fellow pedestrian steps into the road for you, or holds a door; you breeze on by. On holiday, you give your smallest and most worthless coins to the woman who has carefully cleaned your room. The stropky teenager rails at the parent who scraped and saved for her. Commuters swarming in a London street never once raise their eyes to notice the splendour of a winter dawn.

No blood is spilt in any of these cases. Nothing is stolen. No one's life is ruined. The prick of pain passes soon enough. Yet a tiny seed of ice has been sown, formed of arrogance on one side and, on the other, a sense of worthlessness. That ice spreads, and creeps into the veins and crevices of life: so that on the next occasion the door is not held, the room is cleaned carelessly, the car does not give way and the e-mail is never sent. As the opportunity for kindness is ignored, so the chance of reciprocal kindness, in the form of thanks, never comes to be. What is never given can never be repaid.

Ingratitude is the frost that nips the flower even as it opens, that shrivels the generous apple on the branch, that freezes the fountain in mid-flow and numbs the hand, even in the very act of giving. It is a sin of silence, absence and omission, as winter's sin is a lack of light; a sin against charity, which otherwise warms the heart and, in the truest sense, makes the world turn.

GREED

by Jesse Norman
Conservative MP

In the year 2000 the great bull run on American stocks and shares juddered to a halt. Three years later, markets were still in the doldrums. Yet Richard Grasso, the CEO of the New York Stock Exchange



— a non-profit company — was awarded a "golden parachute" of \$187.5m. After endless legal suits and counter-suits, he kept the money on a legal technicality. He is a modern archetype of the sin of greed.

Greed is the desire to have more. More than you have already, more than you need, more than your neighbour, your friend, your brother or sister. It is often the desire to have what belongs to others: jealousy is a kind of greed, not a kind of envy.

Greed can be individual or collective, but it is always dissatisfied, always selfish. In its most extreme form it is pure ego, seeking to abolish any distinction between self and other. The world becomes not an object of wonder, inquiry or joy, but something to be absorbed, exploited, conquered. Lust can be a greed for sex, but greed's selfishness makes it indiscriminate in its objects. You can be greedy for wealth, status and power, or just for sugar. What corrupts is the desire: for St Paul, it was not money but the love of money that is the root of all evil.

But greed is no dummy. On the contrary, it has a cover story, and it's a doozy. Who wouldn't be greedy for friends, or ideas, or books? And aren't we humans naturally creatures of fear and greed? Isn't greed the basic driver of capitalism, and so of wealth and prosperity? How could markets work if not through the restless human desire for profit? Isn't greed good?

To which the answer is this: that the soul needs love and loyalty, respect and restraint, truth and trust; that markets are not mathematical abstractions but artefacts which need ethics, rules and law to be effective; and that the arid economic obsessions of today truncate our vision of human possibility. It is the givers, not the takers, whom we admire.

GLUTTONY

by Aminatta Forna
Novelist and professor of creative writing

For me, gluttony trumps sloth. In the hotel where I'm staying I am lured from my bed by the thought of Arbroath smokies for breakfast. By the time break- >

fast is over, I will have begun to plan dinner. I run to keep my weight in check – in other words, I run to eat. More than a fifth of British and American adults are obese, but gym membership stays high. We get fat or we work the fat off. But we can't seem to stop eating.

I have written often about the sins of the fathers, the failures of previous generations to foresee or prevent calamity. What will be our generation's greatest shame? Surely it is our immense gluttony: food photographed like porn, celebrity cooks, supermarkets stuffed with imported foods, forced out of season.

We, the middle classes, dress up our gluttony as refinement: we are not gluttons, but gourmets. Choice is the byword of the modern glutton. The vegan and the vegetarian, dining on goji berries and red quinoa, quaffing soy lattes made with Ethiopian Yirgacheffe coffee beans, are no less gluttonous despite their robes of moral superiority.

I spend time in west Africa where choices are fewer. In our family village most people are subsistence farmers and meals are shared and eaten from the same dish. Off the coast nearby, Japanese factory trawlers heave tonnes of fish from the ocean, leaving little for local fishermen. In west Africa, when a spendthrift loses his fortune, we say: "He ate it." Future generations will look back at us, across the empty seas and the rainforests razed to make way for yet more cattle, ask what happened to the earth and say: "They ate it."

SLOTH

by Camila Batmanghelidjh

Founder of Kids Company, supporting vulnerable children
We all suffer from moments of duvet apathy, when we can't get it together to lift ourselves out of bed. In small doses sloth is survivable. But on a national scale it can be lethal. Perhaps the contemporary word for sloth would be "complacency": the condition in which we don't aspire to greater things. I'm not talking about material enhancement, but a inner lack of ambition or responsibility for yourself and for others – a lethargy of the spirit.

We are all part of a community and each of us needs to play our part. Sloth is forgetting that your actions have an impact on others. Once you erode that sense, your own quality of life is affected as well.

The sin of sloth is not caring, not noticing, not doing. It is because of sloth that some 3.5m children are living in poverty in Britain and 1.5m children are being abused or neglected. Of course parents should take care of their children and put their needs first. But there is no excuse for political sloth, the way one government after another has failed to protect kids against significant harm. Children don't vote, they can't pay for lobbyists and they don't write erudite ar-

ticles, so their needs are often forgotten.

This situation can be repaired. As a society we need to find ways to reduce the threat in children's lives and increase their opportunities to form attachments. Maybe our political leaders don't recognise sloth – an apathy doing murder to the soul. Children would not choose it. Neither should we.

LUST

by Robert Guest

United States editor of *The Economist*

Lust is the deadliest sin. Not lust for sex; lust for power.

The desire to dominate our fellow human beings is innate. You see it among young children. Three-year-olds boss around their younger siblings, shoving them, grabbing their toys, ordering them to act as the pet dog or Egyptian slave in a game of make-believe.

Some adults are just as bad, though usually more subtle. Some bosses force interns to run personal errands for them, just because they can. Some managers build empires rather than better products. Some petty officials flex their bureaucratic muscles because they find it deeply, sinfully pleasurable to bend others to their will. In some countries they grow rich by making ordinary citizens' lives so miserable that people bribe them to lay off.

Since the most powerful organisations in the world are governments, politics naturally attracts those who most crave power. And if history has taught us anything, it is that lust is only ever satiated temporarily. Stalin was not content to be master of a vast empire; he wanted to command his subjects' thoughts as well as their actions. He punished the slightest hint of dissent with imprisonment or death.

Twentieth-century totalitarian leaders amassed power on a scale that past emperors could not have imagined. Communism failed because Karl Marx never understood how corrupting and intoxicating power can be. Constitutional democracies are built on a sounder understanding of human nature: we build checks and balances to restrain our leaders.

Democracy is always imperfect, and always in need of repairs. But it is preferable to all other forms of government because it is built on a simple insight: that we, the people, should constantly tighten the binds that tie our masters. Some of them, of course, might enjoy it. ■



HAVE YOUR SAY

Which sin gets your vote?
Read more in the article
and make your vote
count. Or Question.

