

Envy

Exposing a Secret Sin

Mary Louise Bringle

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Introduction: Eating Our Hearts Out

Of all the seven deadly sins, envy alone involves no pleasure.¹ Greed delights in possessions; gluttony, in food and drink; and lust, in sex. Pride revels in its sense of superiority; anger, in its outrage at being wronged and its schemes for punishing wrongdoers. Even sloth, if it can be bothered, derives some small gratification from doing little and aiming low.

Granted, a measure of perverse enjoyment may sneak through the back door of envy in the related emotion of *Schadenfreude*, the petty spite that finds pleasure in another person's distress. But in its front door manifestation, feeling outclassed that someone else has or has accomplished something we have not, envy is no fun at all. The Roman poet Horace claimed that even the tyrants of Sicily could devise no more painful torment than envy—and these were the inventive geniuses who came up with the “brazen bull” as an execution chamber: a life-sized bronze statue inside which condemned persons were locked as fires were set underneath, roasting the poor souls to death while converting their screams into sounds like the animal's bellowing.

If envy is even worse torment than this, why would anyone choose to write (or, for that matter, read) a book about it? The answer, I think, is fairly simple. Insofar as most of us want happiness in our lives, not only for ourselves but also for others, we stand to benefit from learning about the habits that promote human flourishing—and, though less pleasantly, the ones that get in the way. Centuries ago, the tradition of Christian moral theology came up with the rubric of the *seven deadly sins* and their contrasting virtues as a framework for analyzing such habits. Since graduate school, I have been fascinated by mining the riches of this tradition for thinking about challenges to human flourishing in the present.

For the first two deadly sins I submitted to examination, my interest was easier to explain to other people. When I was working on despair—an affiliate of the sin of sloth—colleagues with whom I talked about the project would often say something along the lines of: “Oh, would you like to interview me?” When I was examining gluttony in relation to the current epidemic of eating disorders, women in particular would prick up their ears. As I was writing on these earlier projects, I could keep myself motivated by imagining a person who might venture to a bookstore looking for some resource to help in sifting through personal and theological issues related to depression or diet.

It seems unlikely, though, that anyone would approach the salesperson at such a bookstore with the query, “Say, do you have anything good on *envy*?” But to my mind, the very unlikelihood of the question suggests a problem worth diagnosing. On the one hand, we in the early twenty-first century in the United States are surrounded by a commercial culture that no longer views public envy as a serious concern—indeed, that readily uses provocation to envy as a marketing ploy. On the other hand, we remain sufficiently embarrassed by our own private bouts with this under-analyzed experience that we are minimally apt to own up to it. After all, if I honestly admit that I am envious of a friend’s success, I as much as concede not only my sense of inferiority but also the pettiness of my begrudging spirit. Who would want to do that? Envy thus remains for many of us a secret sin, and it festers in its secrecy.

Such festering gives us all the more reason to draw envy out of the closet, exposing it to the clear light of day. Many of us can surely acknowledge being disturbed by the ugly extremes to which competitiveness-gone-astray drives certain members of our society: financial speculators, compulsive dieters, overly zealous parents at their children’s Little League games. The Winter Olympics in 2014 even took time revisiting, twenty years after the fact, the infamous Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan knee-whack scandal of the 1990s. Thinking somewhat closer to home, we can also acknowledge chagrin at the seemingly chronic dissatisfaction of some of our youth: the malaise among those in affluent circumstances at “having it all and wanting more” (the title of a research paper on global wealth and poverty, published in January 2015 by Oxfam International); the willingness among some in less affluent circumstances to kill another child over nothing more meaningful than a pair of designer running shoes. Closest of all: if we let our eyes become educated to the multiple guises in which envy masquerades, we begin to see how our own

happiness gets soured by feelings of resentment, hankering after what we do not have rather than cherishing what we do.

Such hankering takes multiple forms. The decade of the 1980s in the United States, for example, came to be known in some circles as the “age of greed.” Shortly thereafter, one commentator proposed labeling the 1990s the “age of envy.”² The label never stuck, but there were good reasons behind the proposal—reasons that have, if anything, grown increasingly pertinent over the intervening years. First Baby Boomers and then Generation Xers, both groups reared under relative prosperity, began reaching midlife—and with it, a sobering encounter with nonnegotiable limits. A person who chose not to pursue a certain career path now found it too late to pursue; another who put off having children came to realize that the opportunity had sadly passed. As the health of aging parents began failing, we came to realize that age and ill health would inevitably catch up with us, too. Fluctuating economic challenges through the first decades of the twenty-first century brought on waves of furloughs and “downsizing”—renamed “right-sizing” in an attempt to make it more palatable—and widespread job insecurity. The Generation Y “Millennials,” whom I now teach, face a daunting job market after graduation from college and often do so saddled with crushing debt from loans taken out to finance their education. Is it any wonder, then, that we might nurse bitter feelings over things other people seem to enjoy that we do not? In her insightful analysis of the deadly sins as “glittering vices,” Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung uses precisely this language to sum up envy: it is “feeling bitter when others have it better.”³

Beyond these generational factors, conversation about envy appears particularly timely for a further reason. Every once in a while, the seven deadly sins make a comeback as a topic for discussion—as well as subject matter for tattoos, T-shirts, and the titles of romance novels. From 2003 to 2006, for example, the New York Public Library Lectures in the Humanities published a series of small books on each of the “deadlies,” following in the footsteps of a comparable collection of *London Sunday Times* op-ed pieces from the 1960s. Also around the turn of the twenty-first century, philosopher Robert Solomon compiled a series of essays on the sins under the title *Wicked Pleasures* and humorist Dan Savage undertook to commit each of the sins himself and write about his experiences in *Skipping towards Gomorrah*.⁴ But the titles of the last two works in particular are revealing. In them, as in many of the other popular press renditions, the word “sin” is used with a bit of a sneer, as if the concept itself

were old-fashioned and repressive, a prudish attempt by finger-wagging moralists to keep people from having fun.

In some ways, those of us who consider ourselves to be religious people bring this misinterpretation upon ourselves. As early as the 1940s, Dorothy Sayers gave an address to the Moral Welfare Society of the Church of England titled “The Other Six Deadly Sins.”⁵ It takes little imagination to get her point. Public religious talk about “sin”—perhaps even more now than in Sayers’s day—seems to focus almost exclusively on sex. As happened in the nineteenth century over the issue of slavery, so in the twenty-first, entire denominations are splitting over differing interpretations of a few biblical passages: this time, passages about sexual practices gleaned from scriptural vice lists. But, regardless of how these sexual prohibitions are interpreted, New Testament vice lists are perfectly clear in condemning evil intentions from the human heart (Mark 7:21–23), works of the flesh that contrast with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19–21), and the corruption that comes from ceasing to honor and acknowledge God (Rom. 1:24–31). *Envy* figures in all these lists and deserves at least as much attention from moralists as any sexual practice.

The following chapters supply such attention. Chapter 1, “Envy Appeal,” argues that envy has been “de-moralized” over the past 150 years in the United States as a result of the combined triumphs of the commercial (the rise of advertising) and the therapeutic (the emergence of “feel-good” psychologies). Thus, even though we may still be embarrassed to admit to the feelings of inferiority that motivate our envy of others’ successes, we no longer experience any *ethical qualms* about such feelings. Chapter 2, “Rival Definitions,” works to clarify the ill-understood meaning of the word “envy” itself, exploring the array of invidious passions that were incorporated under the heading of Capital Envy by the deadly sins tradition and then differentiating “envy proper” from related affective states: jealousy, resentment, covetousness, spite, indignation, and Schadenfreude (malicious glee).

Many members of the audience initially targeted by the deadly sins tradition were not literate—a fact that parallels in interesting ways our own “post-literate” (or at least, fast-becoming “post-print”) culture. For such audiences, pictures and stories communicate far more effectively than discursive prose. Thus, chapter 3, “Arresting Images,” explores the ways medieval and Renaissance artists portrayed envy in illuminated manuscripts, frescoes, wood prints, and engravings. In their original day, these images exerted cautionary force. In our own, they still lurk in the background of common figures of speech: “Eat your heart out” (significantly

transformed in our day into a taunt directed at our neighbors, whereas originally it was a description of the self-destructive activity of eating our own hearts); “I’d like to be in his shoes”; “It’s a dog-eat-dog world.” Chapter 4, “Telling Tales,” revisits the stories that once shaped—and might well shape again—our understanding of the deep costs of envious behaviors: from Aesop and Aeschylus, through Dante and Spenser, up to Marlowe’s *Dr. Faust*.

Beginning with fairy tales, another genre of culturally shaping stories, chapter 5, “Spoiled Psyches,” examines ways both popular and academic psychology help us understand the dynamics of rivalry and also questions whether envy is an inevitable part of the struggle for survival (as evolutionary psychologists would have us believe). Chapter 6, “Polis Envy,” acknowledges attempts by some recent analysts to re-moralize envy by naming it as the motivation in a so-called “politics of envy” involved in attempts to bridge income inequalities. Assessing this use of the “envy” label returns to a distinction, broached in chapter 2, between legitimate yearnings for justice and illegitimate begrudging the successes of others.

Ultimately, though, the point of writing about envy moves beyond diagnosis to proposals for healing—the focus for chapter 7, “Redeeming Virtues.” Just as the word “sin” needs to be rehabilitated from a near-obsessive sexual focus, so the word “virtue” also needs reclaiming. Rather than finger-pointing priggishness, virtuous living embodies attitudes and practices that help us flourish as individuals and communities. Spiritual directors of the deadly sins tradition gave suggestions for such habits. Stories of modern-day moral exemplars do so as well, inviting us to rethink our relationships with ourselves, our neighbors, our material environment, and our ultimate context. Once we expose the secret sin of envy to the light, we can begin to cultivate in its place an array of new habits: humility, generosity, simplicity, and gratitude. Such habits not only help us escape from the miseries of envy but, more than this, fill our formerly soured and self-devoured hearts with increasingly abundant living.

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