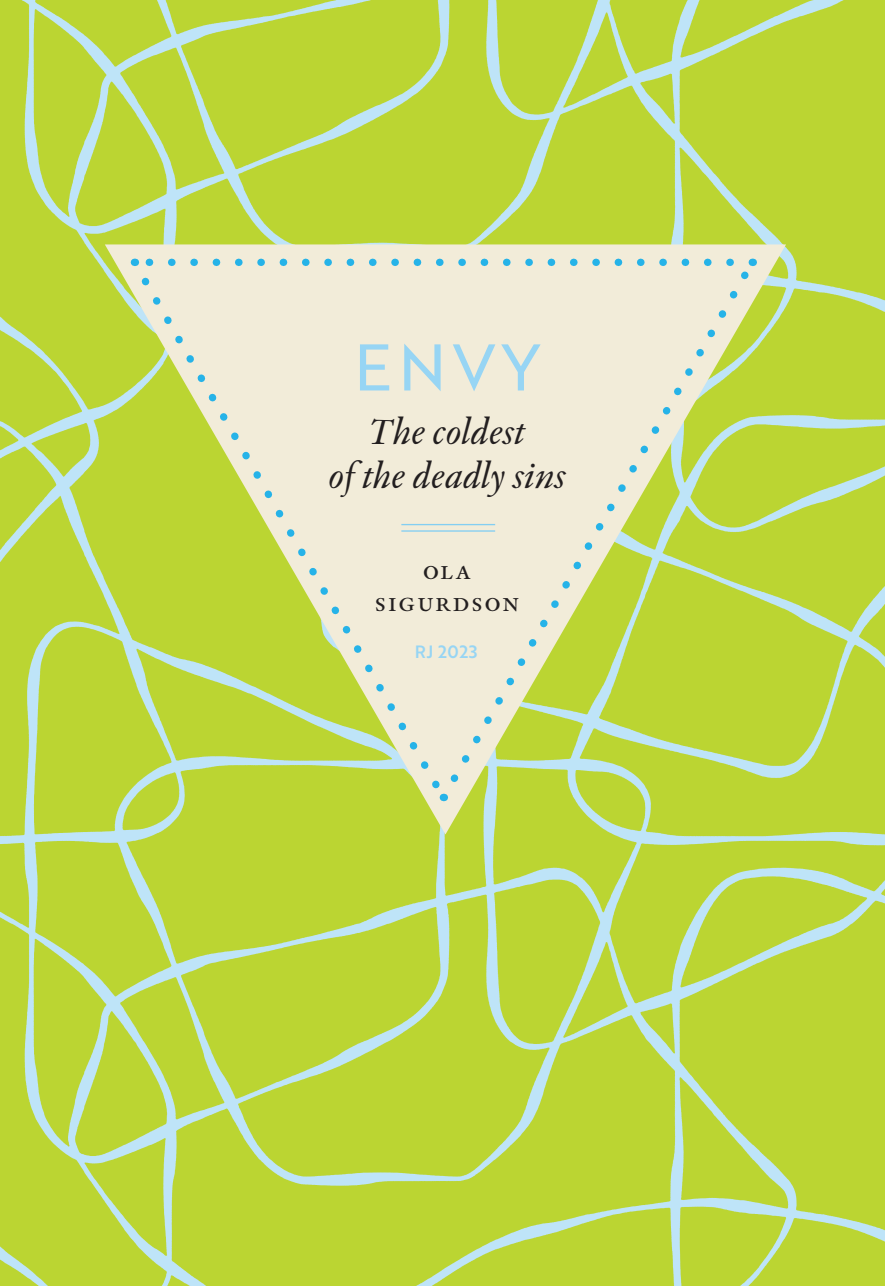
ENVY
The coldest
of the deadly sins
OLA
SIGURDSON
RJ 2023

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OLA SIGURDSON

Translated by Clare Barnes

Riksbankens Jubileumsfond
in collaboration with Makadam förlag

MAKADAM FÖRLAG
GÖTEBORG & STOCKHOLM
WWW.MAKADAMBOK.SE

The Deadly Sins in Our Time
is Riksbankens Jubileumsfond's essay collection for 2023
Editor: Jenny Björkman
Editorial board: Ingrid Elam, Lisa Irenius,
Sven Anders Johansson

ENVY: THE COLDEST OF THE DEADLY SINS

Graphic design: Johan Laserna

A paper edition is available through bookstores (ISBN 978-91-7061-452-1)
ISBN for this volume: 978-91-7061-952-6 (pdf)
ISSN 2000-1029

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Foreword: The deadly sins in our time

Envy, gluttony, greed, pride, lust, sloth and wrath – what is the importance of the seven deadly sins, organised 1,500 years ago by Pope Gregory the Great, in contemporary Sweden? Is devoting seven essays to them really justifiable? After all, we live in one of the most secular societies in the world, a society where hell seems more likely to be the name of a nightclub than a place for sinners. Living out your lusts is not just permitted, it is considered healthy. Letting go, feeling pride, earning money and eating well are also things we value – we treat ourselves, and of course we're worth it!

At the same time, there are indications of a return of morals. The climate crisis and the lifestyle changes that must result from it, increased inequality and people with unimaginable wealth, combined with refugee flows and wars close to Sweden, are contemporary phenomena. They have led to us increasingly talking in terms of morals, at least if we are to judge by the daily press. A simple search of Swedish newspapers shows that the use of the word "morals" has increased tenfold since 2014.

Another sign of the reappearance of morality in public debate is the role played by shame in what is called cancel or call-out culture. There has been an increase in public humiliation, shaming, through the emergence of a new, internet-generated social control. Moreover, online humiliation has become a strategy for various groups to effect change, as a form of modern, shame-driven consumer power. Although most people see dangers in allowing shame to drive public discourse, there are those who argue that it can be a good thing, an effective way of changing people's morals and behaviour.

Good and evil are increasingly referenced in politics, but what some people perceive as good is perceived by others as virtue signalling – and what is that if not pride? Regarding some people as completely shameless can, on the other hand, be seen as part of the same trend. Incidentally, the word shameless was hardly used at all in the early 2000s, but has occurred more frequently since 2014. There are people who argue that we are living in a post-post-political world, a hyper-political era, in which everything is politics and can thus be categorised as good or bad. Involvement is just a click away, but is just as fleeting as love on Tinder. Mass movements die as quickly as they form, and the result is a type of overheated discussion that covers everything but has no depth, which quickly states whether something is right or wrong or good or bad, and where anyone who ends up on the wrong

side of the line can suffer the keelhauling of public opinion.

From this perspective, there is reason to return to the mortal sins and their moral claims. Also, sins and vices are individual; the aim of refraining from sin is personal salvation, not collective change. This emphasis on our own behaviour and our personal morality is symptomatic of the individualism of our time, and the focus on sins thus suits an era that celebrates the ego.

However, the deadly sins have always had an undeniably collective dimension. In 2008, when the Vatican launched seven additional deadly sins, the aim was to adapt them to contemporary global reality and to emphasise the people's social interactions: polluting the environment, morally dubious experiments, bioethical violations, drug abuse, creating poverty, excessive wealth, contributing to social inequality.

It is also worth remembering that the deadly sins are not really about the worst things humans can do, as even in the Middle Ages there were worse things than sloth and lust. Rape and murder were far more serious crimes, but the deadly sins were considered dangerous because they risked enslaving us to our own emotions, destroying our rationality and creating an addiction to the thrill of sin. The deadly sins threatened to consume us. And, like the modern, upgraded deadly sins, the old deadly sins have always referenced the sins and misdeeds that threaten to

tear society apart, and those emotions that threaten to entice us away from the good and the just.

Doesn't this sound urgent? In this essay collection, seven scholars have used their research as a basis on which to tackle a deadly sin, to test the sins' relevance in our time and to discover what they can teach us – about ourselves and about society.

First out is theologian Ola Sigurdson, who not only guides us through the deadly sins in general, but also discusses envy, the coldest of all sins and probably the one we least want to be associated with. As Sigurdson points out, envy also tends to destroy not only the person who suffers from it, but the fabric of society itself. This bears thinking about in a time when envy can be freely expressed on social media.

The editors

The coldest of sins

Envy is the coldest of sins. St. Gregory the Great's catalogue of the classic deadly sins divides them into two types: hotblooded and coldblooded. The former – especially lust, wrath and gluttony – were considered to stem from the body's passions, while the latter – pride, greed, sloth and envy – are examples of states of mind. The former are inflammatory, they set the blood coursing and have a physical manifestation. The latter are more problematic, more cruel, perhaps less enjoyable, as someone pointed out. Cold sins are more difficult to admit to, and perhaps the most difficult is envy. Researchers regularly describe how envy is a difficult subject to research – because no one wants to admit to it publicly. In some cases, sins have almost become virtues in our time, even envy. Nevertheless, pure envy prefers to work invisibly; that's when its cold-blooded temperament is most effective.

Take William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* as one example. Probably, Othello's unfounded but increasing jealousy regarding his wife, Desdemona, is what first becomes apparent. Othello's ensign, Iago, succeeds in

manipulating Othello into imagining that Desdemona has cuckolded him with a captain, Cassio. Finally, Othello smothers her with a pillow. The way that jealousy – the "green-eyed monster" – allows no peace for Othello brings about a deadly result. However, despite the title, it is not Othello who is the centre of the plot, but Iago; he is the one who sets in motion the play's tragic events. And Iago is not jealous, he is envious. He suspects that Othello has been unfaithful with his wife, Emilia, and, at the start of the play, Cassio's promotion to captain, ahead of him, arouses an envy that is the temperament driving the action forward.

Jealousy is not the same as envy: you can be jealous of something that belongs to you, while enviousness related to something possessed by others. Jealousy and envy can be said to be related, but while Othello speaks of his jealousy and eventually acts upon it, Iago hides his envy under a servile and affected willingness to please. Othello's jealousy is presented as the hot-livered sibling of envy, while Iago's envy is effective precisely because of his patience and cold-bloodedness. The envy in Iago is secretive, scheming and happy to stay out of sight. The real iciness in Iago's envy is how, the further the plot goes, the clearer it becomes that he does not want what someone else could give him – his wife Emilia's love, Cassio's promotion, the beautiful Desdemona or Othello's praise – but that he only actively longs for others to lose the

happiness they possess. Iago's envy of Cassio's promotion is somehow understandable in human terms, but this everyday envy gradually corrodes more deeply inside him; it condenses into something we could call resentment, a contempt that is both active and indifferent to the people he must deal with – a contempt that is not directed at anything they have or any specific property they have, but towards their entire life. Somehow, not even his own welfare is the focus of his interest. The others' downfall is more important to him. Envy is a drive towards death, it also devours the conditions of your own existence.

To understand the role that envy plays in people's lives and why it is called a deadly sin, we must also learn how it has been thematised over history, where it is the object of continual interest and constant vigilance. Via history, we can approach how the cold hand of envy still clutches at human existence.

Envy and the history of the deadly sins

In modern times, envy is discussed in its own right, but it is nonetheless characterised by a long history of association with the deadly sins. Even if the concept of sin has been rejected or trivialised in our time, it is striking how what was once a list that aimed to facilitate people's moral soul-searching lives on in conceptions of popular culture. Kurt Weill's "sung ballet", *The Seven Deadly Sins*, with a libretto by Bertolt Brecht, premiered in Paris in 1933 and is still performed on stages around the globe. The music video to the Pet Shop Boys' hit "It's a Sin" from 1987, directed by Derek Jarman, personifies each of the seven deadly sins. David Fincher's *Seven*, from 1995, is one of his darkest and most suggestive films. One kind of high point – or a low one – for their trivialisation was the 2003 launch of seven flavours of Magnum ice creams, named after the deadly sins. The sins recur in popular conceptions of moral philosophy that either want to highlight their current relevance, or to use the concept of the seven deadly sins as an educational approach for presenting other sins that are perceived as more relevant to the

present day. Using the idea of the seven deadly sins in this way, in various artistic or philosophical expressions, is nothing new. They have occurred frequently in literature, art and religious sermons ever since the late Middle Ages. For Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, they structure purgatory, and the concluding story in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Parson's Tale", inventories them carefully. Bearing in mind their lasting significance – albeit in more popular cultures than during the Middle Ages – even in a time that, in our part of the world, has difficulty with the concept of sin, it may be important to ask yourself what is meant by a deadly sin.

The idea that the deadly sins are seven in number comes from the abovementioned St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), who systematised and popularised them. However, their early history stretches much further back, to a more general desire to organise different sins or vices as lists that made it possible to evaluate your and your follow humans' morality. The Old Testament's Book of Proverbs lists seven things (6:16–19) that "the Lord hates":

> haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
> hands that shed innocent blood,
> a heart that devises wicked schemes,
> feet that are quick to rush into evil,
> a false witness who pours out lies
> and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Similarly, Paul uses the epistle to the Galatians (5:19–21) to provide a list of the consequences of humanity's tortuous existence: "sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery, idolatry and sorcery; hatred, discord, jealousy, and rage; rivalries, divisions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like". However, these lists from Judaism and Christianity are not the only ones, rather part of a more general characteristic of Antique culture. Then, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, far earlier than Paul, Aristotle presents the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance and contrasts these – which all represent the golden mean – with eight vices that are deviations from the path of virtue.

In these cases, the point is not the number, but to offer a somewhat systematic list of rules of thumb for what are perceived as sins or vices, rules of thumb with the ultimate purpose of changing how you live your life. A virtue, to use Aristotle's term, is an acquired disposition and, by training to act in accordance with the virtue and thus avoid the shortcomings or exaggerations of the vices – acting bravely rather than cowardly or brashly, to use one example – people cultivate their character and can flourish alongside others. Also, in the Jewish and Christian versions, people will thereby find a place in the Kingdom of God. None of these cases concern an individual ideal for self-betterment, but are about community life in the city-state or religious congregation.

There are differences and similarities between the Jewish, Christian and Antique lists. If the aim and context for the virtue ethics of Aristotle is the city-state, the early Christian movement was more about the coming Kingdom of God. The perception of humanity's alienation from itself and from God was more urgent in the Christian movement than among most of the Antique writers. Meanwhile, Aristotle's teachings on the virtues were integrated into Christian moral teachings, although there was one addition in the form of the "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love. The early fathers of the church were often extremely knowledgeable in their contemporary wisdom. However, one important difference is that the early Christian monastic movement, in its striving for the perfect life, placed a great emphasis on personal soul-searching, spiritual guidance and confession.

As Michel Foucault has demonstrated, the Christian movement came to lay a foundation for a new type of relationship to the self, one involving a deeper experience of self-alienation. An ascetic who strived for a life of wisdom and virtue not only struggled with acquired bad habits in the form of vices or with external evil influences, but also with their internal alienation. Vices were therefore not limited to acquired bad habits, but went deeper than this. As sins, they almost comprised a form of constitutive self-deception that first had to be revealed before they could be remedied; it is the root of sin in the soul

that must be removed for the deeds of the vices to be vanquished. Countering this self-deception thus deals more with struggle than with practice, so there was a need for a more systematic external order to enable soul-searching, an order that could, in pastoral care, support both the confessor's guidance and the penitent's confession – with whose help, a distance could be established to the person's self and its own experience and valuation of itself.

Even if the church fathers and the early monastic movement largely share the moral values expressed by the classical authors, there is still a question of other moral indicators. Moderation, for example, as regards sexual relations, could indeed be as important as previously, but even more important was the tendency to hide your own self, your own duality and alienation, behind virtues as well as vices. The most virtuous person could deceive themself precisely through their virtuousness – as one reason for a self-important overconfidence in their own moral superiority. This change in the relationship to the self laid the foundation for the emergence of what have been come to be called the deadly sins.

The Greek monk and theologian Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345–399 CE) played a decisive role for the Christian tradition in which the seven deadly sins developed. Evagrius studied under some of the best-known Greek theologians of the fourth century, and eventually settled in a monastic community in the Egyptian desert, where

he also wrote an experience-based theology in sentence form. In his *Praktikos*, Evagrios presents – among other things – a typology for eight fundamental impulses that assail us and against which we must struggle so we do not allow them to control us. Here he finds inspiration not only from his theology teachers, but also from pagan and Jewish philosophers.

This list was adopted by John Cassian (c. 360–435 CE) who was active in the monasteries of southern France. He was inspired by the Egyptian monasteries, whose ideas he could convey to the Latinate part of Christianity, because he spoke both Greek and Latin. Just like Evagrius, Cassian speaks of struggle and, in his *Institutes*, he lists eight forms of this: against gluttony, fornication, love of money, anger, sadness, listlessness, vainglory and pride. These vices exercise a tyranny over people's bodies, and their influence must be revealed if it is to be vanquished. Like Evagrius, the concern is not the establishment of generally applicable moral rules, but the presentation of a list of mental impulses that limit a person and their striving for a pure heart and the Kingdom of God. It is significant that both Evagrius and Cassian have a monastic background: the eight fundamental ideas do not deal with abstract teaching about morality, but are an experience-based inventory of barriers to spiritual peace, for the sake of soul-searching. To be able to change yourself, you must first be aware of your condition. For Cassian, envy is a

spiritual vice that he places as part of greed, comprising a poison that consists of fretting about other people's success.

Cassian's significance in the Latin Christianity of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages cannot be overestimated, but the person responsible for a systematic revision of these lists was St. Gregory the Great. It is particularly through him that these teachings have spread in western Christianity, in philosophical and theological reflection and in the culture of the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Gregory, whose personage also united classical education and monastic piety, spoke of seven principal vices: gluttony, lust, avarice, vainglory, melancholy (which is replaced by sloth in some contexts), anger and envy. Envy (*invidia*) is explicitly named. Even if Gregory, like many others at this time, considered pride (vainglory) to be the root of the other six principal sins, envy is also a decisive cause of many sins: "From envy there spring hatred, whispering, detraction, exultation at the misfortunes of a neighbour, and affliction at his prosperity."

In Gregory, we can talk of a more lasting codification of the sins: this is when they become seven, specifically these seven (apart from sloth and melancholy sometimes being switched; in this essay collection it is sloth, sometimes called apathy, that is examined). Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) eventually integrates the seven principal sins into

his moral teachings. Melancholy and envy came to hold a special importance for him, because both these oppose joy in God's creation and the happiness of fellow humans. Envy has many shapes, says Thomas, but it essentially "grieves for another's good". As we have seen, Thomas is not the first and not the last to define envy in this way. In the tradition I have outlined, envy, like that of Iago, is not the desire for something for one's own sake, but is primarily the desire for others to lose something. The most important thing is not that I do well, but that you do badly.

What is sin?

Let's examine sin for a moment. What is sin? What is the difference between a sin and a vice? And what is a deadly sin?

In essence, in Christian theology, sin is a multidimensional alienation, an alienation that cannot be reduced to moral categories. This alienation means that the personal relationship to God has broken, that someone is *incurvatus in se*, "curved in on themself". This turning away from God also corresponds to an alienation from creation, from other people and also from the self, as a being who depends on others. The morally objectionable deeds that are sometimes called "sins" are rather effects or expressions of this alienation, that of the sin itself. This is why a difference is sometimes made between the "sins of commission" and "principal (capital) sins", where the former are the concrete, individual sins that are consequences of the principal sins. The principal sins, or deadly sins as they have come to be called, are the more profound sins that separate humans from God. Envy as a deadly sin should be understood more as fatal interference in a relationship than as a specific action.

The point of ancient Christianity's recurring lists of principal sins is thus rarely to moralise. The Christian authors were just as keen as the classic pagan authors on people striving to be good, but unlike the classical thinkers they did not believe that this striving was enough: pride or self-righteousness could be hidden beneath even the most virtuous deeds. The tree's branches may look healthy, but what good does it do if the trunk is rotten? As a vice, envy can perhaps be trained away, but as a sin it is more stubborn, precisely because the existence of humankind is enmeshed in it, in a way we may ourselves find difficult to describe. When Evagrius, Cassian, Gregory the Great and other theologians present their lists, it is primarily to expose the rotten trunk – or the sin enmeshed with existence, rooted in alienation.

Views on sin have shifted through various eras, from the more optimistic theologians and philosophers who believe that self-driven moral reform is possible and thus tend to identify sins with vices, to more pessimistic opinions that are inclined to regard all attempts at moral reform as doomed to fail. How drastic is humanity's alienation and to what degree can we participate in escaping it? The reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) was one of the more pessimistic ones, as regards humanity's innate ability or moral probity. People can indeed often show certain citizenly decency towards their fellows but, in relation to God, such decency entailed a risk of increased

self-deception. If among almost all ancient Christian theologians there was a focus on alienation in relation to the Antique philosophers, Luther and Lutheranism saw an increased emphasis on humanity's tendency towards self-deception. This meant that lists of sins, of the kind we are discussing here, no longer played a decisive role. Even if they could still offer an occasion for insight into one's own moral failings, they no longer served as a form of methodological guidance.

The individual, concrete sins became of lesser importance once the idea that life itself must be a penance became established. It was not so much that sins such as envy or pride became uninteresting, rather that the context to which these Mediaeval catalogues belonged crumbled away. In the early modern period, the deadly sins partially fell out of use, because the interests of moral philosophy and moral theology focused on subjective intention rather than an objective character: my desires rather than my personal history. Even though ideas about the seven deadly sins remained, especially in Roman Catholic theology, in many places they transformed into a popular cultural conception that lost contact with the theological meaning of the concept of sin, probably as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation.

Is talking about sin still relevant? Naturally, this depends on what you mean. There is an apparent risk that, without a theological horizon, the seven deadly sins may

become something trivial. In the contemporary world, sin is often associated with a somewhat problematic but often banal gluttony. However, the idea behind sin remains, even in contexts that are not expressly theological. Immanuel Kant spoke of humanity's predisposition to evil, with the insight that there is an apparently inherent tendency in humanity to self-alienation and self-deception, that has consequences for our relationship to nature, other humans and ourselves. Even if sin is not specifically used as a concept to talk about this alienation, imagining that a threat to human life and human community is found in humanity itself is still common.

Why is it, as literary critic Terry Eagleton asks, that people constantly and too quickly invest in their own misery? The progress that the human race has undeniably made in so many areas seems to be continually eroded by an irrational destructiveness which we appear unable to suppress. All the barriers to human success in our shared lives, and which theologians regard as one dimension of the broken relationship to God, exist in contemporary society. The concept of sin is one way of talking about what fundamentally damages a person as a relational being. Therefore, it is possible that this concept could, even today, at least be used to talk about more radical faults or problems that exceed any actual moral failings. Such as how, in the climate crisis, we appear to continually act against our better judgement.

Perhaps this is also why discussing the seven deadly sins once again appears relevant to our times. That these are deadly sins and not ordinary, more trivial sins (what were once called sins of commission), probably heightens their seriousness – even from a contemporary perspective.

The birth of ressentiment

Naturally, far from all modern thinkers have been at ease with the concept of sin. One of the most vocal critics of the type of moral thought developed within Christianity was Friedrich Nietzsche, who said that he preferred to philosophise with the hammer. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, from 1887, he attacks what he considers the Christian tradition's emphasis on unselfishness in the form of loving your neighbour. Emphasising moral value as compassion and self-sacrifice is really a way of saying no to life, says Nietzsche – selflessness is not such a noble attitude as it likes to pretend. In actual fact, the valuation of selflessness as good and selfishness as bad comes from a re-evaluation of selfishness, a slave rebellion that aims to rule the previous masters. These masters belonged to a dignified family in which selfishness was expressed a fundamental "yes" to yourself and the world. The unselfish slave morality is instead based on a "no" to the other, it is fundamentally reactive and aims to hold back the masters instead of offering its own moral vision: "Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying 'yes' to

itself, slave morality says 'no' on principle to everything that is 'outside', 'other', 'non-self ': and this 'no' is its creative deed." The slave morality's "no" explains the masters' self-indulgence in moral evil.

In his genealogical investigation of the origin of morality, Nietzsche states that what his own time values as the highest expression of morality – altruism, loving your enemies – originates in hate as an expression of a type of spiritual revenge. More than resistance to concrete injustices, the fundamental issue is that the slaves cannot stand their masters' carefree self-indulgence. Using unselfishness, the great mass of people subjugates not only their masters but also themselves by, in their minds, enacting ideas about "bad conscience", "guilt", "evil", "sin", and the kinds of lists of sins I have talked about above, which Nietzsche calls "conscience-vivisection and animal-torture".

In other words, according to Nietzsche, accepted morality – everything from Judaism, across Christianity and to the modern era's bourgeois morality and its belief in truth – is driven by ressentiment. Nietzsche takes the French word ressentiment and transforms it into a concept. Søren Kierkegaard had already done this in *Two Ages: A Literary Review* in 1846, of which Nietzsche was unaware, but it demonstrates that the idea was of its time. For Nietzsche, ressentiment is a poison or a disease, primarily because it prevents people from finding happiness

in their own actions and instead leads them to comparisons with others' (un)happiness. While an aristocratic person regards others on the basis of themself, a ressentiment-person regards themself on the basis of others. They are, as stated, reactive rather than self-creating. Ressentiment becomes a refined way of oppressing both yourself and others under the fine flag of unselfishness and, from such a perspective, the deadly sins can be understood as a finely honed method for this, yet another form of self-deception. Liberation must, according to Nietzsche, consist in casting off the yoke of ressentiment. It is only then that free self-affirmation is possible.

There can be no doubt that Nietzsche is onto something in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. However, as German philosopher Max Scheler demonstrated in his *Ressentiment* from 1912, this is more of a contemporary diagnosis than an historical insight about the origins of morality. Nietzsche's claim that Christian love is ressentiment-driven is false, says Scheler, because its unselfishness is instead an expression of positive love for God and creation, rather than a reaction to others' unhappiness and a rejection of the world. Instead, contemporary bourgeois morality is the primary expression of ressentiment. Here, believes Scheler, Nietzsche is half correct, but where he is entirely correct is that ressentiment poisons the soul. It has particular virulence in the modern society of the masses, where people are increasingly able to compare

themselves and compete with each other. According to Scheler, powerless envy – the envy that does not desire anything it can achieve, but only things it can never have – is the most terrible envy. It causes ressentiment or, in other words, a type of "existential envy", which does not target anything the other person has, rather their individual existence. In general, ressentiment has a character with which we are by now familiar: not wanting something for its own sake, but only to play itself out against something else. Its effect, as in Nietzsche, is that people deceive themselves about their own happiness.

Differently to Nietzsche, Scheler showed how ressentiment can serve as an analytical instrument for investigating both morality and society, but Nietzsche remains interesting, for many reasons. In this context, it is striking that Nietzsche actually – implicitly – starts with one of the traditional deadly sins, namely envy, and raises it to the secret origin of moral self-deception, despite his emphatic rejection of Christian morality. As regards the emphasis on the human subject's tendency to hide from itself, in some ways Nietzsche does not fall short of the Christian thinkers. Nietzsche coming so close to the religious movements he so forcefully decries can perhaps be regarded as a form of rivalry.

Indeed, it is possible to find elements of ressentiment in several Christian thinkers (as in most other thinkers, including Nietzsche), but in the Christian moral theolo-

gians, as in Nietzsche, there is also a vision of flourishing human life. However, Nietzsche in particular has deepened, rather than replaced, the reflection on envy that stretches back to Antiquity: ressentiment for Nietzsche (and Scheler) is envy that congeals into an attitude to life. Ressentiment is a disease that eats away at those it afflicts, it is a toxin, a death drive, but not only for the individual – it is something that can affect society and its institutions. It is an attitude to life that acts by reacting and whose incentive, as we saw in Iago, is not its own happiness, however unselfish or selfish this may be, but hate and revenge. Ressentiment ventures that we are only equal in our worst qualities. What is important is not that I win, but that you lose, even if I have to die to make it happen.

The envious society

Nietzsche also warned that the levelling of modern society makes it particularly vulnerable to envy. He probably has a point. One of the earliest narratives about envy is the story of how Cain kills Abel, in Genesis 4. Typically, it is a tale of fratricide, based on envy between people who are each other's equals. If so, capitalism and democracy are breeding grounds for envy.

Capitalism, to start with, is founded on competition, and competition often breeds envy between those who succeed and those who do not. Capitalism places the human desire for happiness in an economic system where the unit of happiness is measurable, and thus also comparable – material success. Democracy makes this even worse. The egalitarianism of this political system makes it possible to compare yourself to, in principle, everybody else – particularly if happiness is measured by material success – and if comparability is a factor in the emergence of envy, there are thus many reasons for envy.

Nietzsche is possibly too fixated on the difference between masters and slaves as the root cause of ressenti-

ment, if it is not the absolute differences between people that give rise to envy, but the perceived differences. And these achieve a particular intensity between people who are societally close. The superrich who use private jets for intercontinental flights are not as irksome as a neighbour who buys a new car and posts photos of it on social media. If, on top of these societal reasons for envy, you deny that envy continues to play a role in society, because envy is removed once everyone is equal, we have a fatal combination.

This, at least, is the opinion of Austrian-German sociologist Helmut Schoeck who, in 1966, published one of the most important works on envy in modern times, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*. Here, Schoeck reacted to the socialist societies that believed that envy was vanquished, and the democratic ones that denied its importance. According to Schoeck, envy is a universal phenomenon, but the more this fact is denied, the greater problems it can cause. When envy is repressed, there is a greater risk of it destroying the structure of society than if it is recognised and managed.

Schoeck believes that envy is a universal mental and social fact. The reason for this is perhaps best explained by another theorist, the French literary scholar and philosopher René Girard, and his theory of mimetic desire. According to Girard, people learn what to strive for and what they want by observing what those close to them

strive for and want. He uses the example of how, when a number of identical toys are placed in a room and are more than enough in number for the children in that room, there are often arguments about who gets which toy. Everyone seems to want the same thing. In essence, humans are beings that are always striving for something, but what this is in practice is not determined by nature. Instead, it is socially constituted in a triangular relationship between our own desire, the object of our desire and the other's desire.

This means that the role model for my desire is also a potential rival. Indeed, I learn what is worth striving for at work from my colleagues at the university, but they thus also become my competitors, given the limited availability of desirable research funding. The mimetic desire that gives rise to a mimetic rivalry can degenerate into a mimetic crisis between the rival parties. How this crisis evolves depends on the context but, for safety's sake, I will leave this practical example and be satisfied with saying that for Girard, as for Schoeck, the most important element is to recognise this rivalry exists and not to make it invisible.

For Schoeck, it is not just unavoidable, but also a positive reason for social dynamics: it counteracts the unobstructed concentration of power and promotes innovation. In some ways, envy is a capitalist virtue. But this does not mean that people always benefit; it has to be

tamed somehow. Schoeck says that there have always been methods for reining in the societal impact of envy, holding it within manageable limits, without which it would run amok. Depending on our values, these methods can sound more or less attractive: a functioning legal system; compensatory religious belief; an upper class that is born to govern; ideas of capricious Fortune. What they all share is that they all offer different ways of living with and in an unequal world. Of course, they have often functioned as opium for the masses, but they have also delivered the minimum of solidarity and mutual goodwill that is necessary to avoid societal collapse. Even in modern society, we have to find a way to recognise and live with envy, one that neither denies its existence nor raises it to become a norm. Schoeck's book was written long before the existence of what we call social media, but as far as they function as a form of low-intensity ressentiment machine, they do the opposite of what he believes we really need. There must be institutions that set limits on which comparisons between people are reasonable and positive visions of a life beyond the reach of enviousness.

Schoeck, like Girard, could be called a realist of envy. Attempts to vanquish or suppress it just make it worse. The solution, at least for Schoeck, is a form of dynamic or dialectic balance between its constructive and destructive sides. I believe he is absolutely right – envy is amplified when it is allowed to exist undisturbed in the wings,

hidden behind rationalising excuses about its effects. But don't we have to differentiate between envy and envy or, more correctly, between a form of competition or rivalry that can provide encouragement and a situation in which this rivalry degenerates into envy? It is definitely possible to compete with your colleagues for research funding without wishing them harm. Schoeck, like Girard, has a point about the origin of envy, and how various societal configurations can inspire envy. Rivalry occurs in so many contexts (sport can be understood as a playful form of comparison) where it does not transform into a disease of the soul, that there may be reason to differentiate between different types of envy. Despite everything, the dynamic function of envy in Schoeck is quite active – not passive, disguised and self-destructive as in Iago. However, this is not to say that societal envy does not exist, or that its influence on our society is negligible.

Envy today?

Cain murdered his brother, not a distant master. Iago tricked a general in his own army into jealous madness, not an aristocratic Venetian doge. There is something to envy having a principle of proximity. Your own enviousness rarely stretches outside your private circle. I have never envied how Lionel Messi plays football or how much he gets paid for doing so. It's just not going to happen. Instead, envy most likely thrives in contexts where you work and compete in the same vineyard, making comparison unavoidable.

There is a finite list of prices, stipends, awards, exhibitions and commissions in the arts world. Each artist's access to these is based on individual artistic quality, but also on factors such as fashion, being well placed in relation to the people who distribute these benefits, timing and a little luck. The distribution of prices, stipends, awards, exhibitions and commissions can therefore breed controversy about their allocation and, by extension, rivalry between artists, which can harden and become envy and ressentiment. The reason for this is not that artists are

particularly envious people, but the social system this world comprises, with its almost inevitable exposure to comparison and competition.

If I were jealous of an artist because I am never awarded an artistic prize or asked to exhibit at a vernissage, it would be a delusion, because I have never created a work of art to be celebrated for. However, I am part of the academic world, in which we similarly compete for research funding, prizes, jobs, awards and so on. Even here, supply is limited. It is one thing that it does not need to be as limited as it is, but it is interesting that the academic world is an excellent breeding ground for envy precisely because there is room to hide your envy below the disguise of necessary competition and scientific objectivity. There is no need to deny the value of limited rivalry and a striving for truth to realise how they can also function as a way of hiding personal rivalry between colleagues. The person who actually gets that desirable job is probably more convinced of the system's fairness than the one who did not. This makes it possible to cultivate, deliberately or not, a particular kind of forgetting, one that makes it easy to disregard how there are also continual elements of uncertainty, arbitrariness and all-out conflict in academic assessments. Envy probably thus works mainly in the wings, is perhaps repressed, and thus even more virulent. Meanwhile, a few steps outside of academia are enough to make these battles seem extremely narcissistic.

My point is not that the arts world or academia is populated by people who are particularly prone to envy. Every day, we all come into contact with envy via social media. Contemporary globalisation and digitalisation have led to reduced distances between people, and our interactions have become increasingly easily accessible, so opportunities to compare ourselves to others have increased exponentially. And fast. Seconds after being served the perfect espresso at Gambrinus in Naples, my followers around the globe can witness how much I'm enjoying myself.

We probably all need attention and some form of recognition, and if social media can be described as a machine for harvesting attention, then it is a short step to social media amplifying this need through continual comparisons. Other people's successful exploits pass by in our feeds, beautiful clothes, new cars, wonderful holidays and successful lives – not to mention their thousands of followers. Or at least that's how it looks to us observers, who are all too aware of the failings in our own activities, possessions and lives. So we join in, and compete for others' attention. Like Iago, we can hide our envy, not below a servile attitude but under the publicly presented image of a successful life: my fantastic espresso at a café in Naples in the sunshine. And the stakes will continually increase in this competition for attention, so the machine for harvesting attention will inexorably produce envy, at least as

a by-product. If Nietzsche and Schoeck are correct about how the modern societal levelling make it particularly vulnerable to envy, then social media are now undoubtedly the most vital body in this levelling.

That everybody (I suspect) has envious thoughts now again does not appear especially problematic. It is when envy hides and congeals into ressentiment that the real trouble starts. As psychologist Melanie Klein pointed out in her essay "Envy and Gratitude" from 1957, envy is a destructive impulse that threatens to undermine feeling of love and gratitude, making it difficult to build good, trusting relationships with others and to be thankful for the life you get. Interestingly, Klein also employs a fairly traditional interpretation of envy. She believes its inclusion in the seven deadly sins is not really surprising and quotes Chaucer in agreement: "envy is the worst sin there is. For truly, all other sins are sometime against only one special virtue; but truly, envy is against all virtues and against all goodnesses". Quite simply, envy destroys every opportunity to live a good and satisfying life. It eats away at all our relationships, with both ourselves and those around us, and inhibits creativity. In its destructiveness, it is not just a "no" to yourself but to the whole world. In the final scenes of *Othello*, Iago is taken away to be tortured and Othello dies by suicide; it is entirely logical that the play ends in tragedy when envy has played the leading role. It is more important for you to fail than for me to survive.

No person, no political or religious movement, no social context and no era appears safe from envy. The enduring interest indicates that it is a contemporary reality. Curing it is a complicated matter, particularly given its tendency to hide. Its cunning must be outmanoeuvred. To be managed, envy must first be named, and here the old fathers of the church and their lists were probably not entirely wrong.

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RJ 2023

The Deadly Sins in Our Time

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St. Gregory the Great's catalogue of classic deadly sins stated that envy was the coldest sin, and perhaps it is now the one we least want to be associated with. Envy is a poison that eats away at our relationships with other people; for the person afflicted by envy, the other's loss and unhappiness is more important than their own success and happiness. Wherever there is a chance of rivalry and comparison with others, envy appears, and we see it every day on social media. It is at its most dangerous when it is repressed, when it is not admitted to and dealt with, as then it can destroy the fabric of society by allowing free rein to hate and vengeance.

In 2023, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond is issuing a collection of essays on *The Deadly Sins in Our Time*. Theologian Ola Sigurdson guides us through the history of the deadly sins, from the church's founding fathers to the present day, and places particular emphasis on envy's harmful impact on individuals and society.

RJ 2023: *The Deadly Sins in Our Time*
Riksbankens Jubileumsfond
in collaboration with Makadam förlag

ISBN 978-91-7061-452-1

RIKSBANKENS JUBILEUMSFOND
FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES