

## The deadly sins

Christian Jarrett examines the relevance of the idea of sin to modern life, and introduces a special 'sin week' on the Society's Research Digest blog

The economy crippled by bankers' avarice. Tiger Woods' career sidelined after he played away. Sixty per cent of us predicted to be obese by 2050. Greed, Lust and Gluttony.

Twelve people shot dead in Cumbria last June. A Korean baby left to starve to death last March as her parents browsed the internet. Pop superstar George Michael jailed for driving while high on drugs: 'I am sorry that my pride has prevented me from seeking help before now,' he said. Wrath, Sloth and Pride.

What about Envy? Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, recently extended his 515ft yacht by a few more feet ensuring its length exceeds that of the boat owned by Russian billionaire oligarch Roman Abramovich.

It seems the Seven Deadly Sins are as relevant today as when Pope Gregory the Great listed them in the late sixth century.

So what does contemporary psychological science have to say about these ancient vices?

Envy, pride and wrath are today recognised as emotions with evolutionarily adaptive functions. Envy and pride propel us to seek status and resources, whilst gluttony, lust and greed are related to the unconstrained consumption of food, sex and power. Wrath ensues if our pursuit of any of these ends is thwarted or threatened. Meanwhile, sloth is like the mirror-opposite of the other sins – a lack of motivation and drive. A unifying theme underlying all the sins is insufficient self-control, a failure to rein in the animal within.

### Greed

It may be ugly, but the dogged pursuit of wealth and power is part of human nature. 'Across cultures, research has revealed

about a dozen different kinds of values and goals that all people prioritise to one extent or another,' says social-personality psychologist Tim Kasser of Knox College, Illinois. 'Among these are values for self-enhancement and materialism, which include specific aims for power, wealth, money, status and image.' According to Kasser, it's when people particularly prioritise these values that they are likely to behave in a greedy fashion. For example, he says: 'People who claim that materialistic goals are important compete rather than cooperate, endorse a Machiavellian stance towards interpersonal relationships, and care less about other people's inner experience.'

Materialistic values are fostered by living in a competitive culture that inculcates the idea that wealth and status are necessary to be happy. A revealing 2009 survey by Lara Aknin of hundreds of North Americans found that they massively underestimated the happiness of people on lower levels of income than their own. Kathleen Vohs at Carlson School of Management has shown that the mere thought of money (primed through the unscrambling of money-related sentences) led people to be more selfish and to opt to give less money to charity. More recently, research showed that the sight of money reduced the time people spent savouring a chunk of chocolate.

Another way that materialistic values are triggered is through psychological insecurity. 'Growing up poor or with non-nurturant mothers conduces toward such values,' says Kasser. 'And one study showed that thinking about one's own death – the ultimate in insecurity for many – increased materialistic values and how greedily people behaved in a game.'

Logic suggests that greed can be tackled by confronting its two main causes: competitive and materialistic cultures and psychological insecurity. According to Kasser, we can also seek to promote those values that research has shown oppose materialism and self-enhancement. 'These values, which focus on aims such as growing as a person, love and friendship, and benefiting the community,' he says, 'can act as a counter-weight to greed,



The dogged pursuit of wealth and power is part of human nature

and are known to promote more helpful behaviours in and of themselves.'

### Envy

If greed motivates us to obtain wealth and status, then envy is the emotion that's triggered when another person achieves what we want, and we think they don't quite deserve it. 'Envy, when it is not in its benign form [akin to admiration], occurs when we lack another's superior quality, achievement or possession, and either desire it or wish that the other lacked it,' says Richard Smith at the University of Kentucky, the author of *Envy: Theory and Research*. 'When we envy, we feel inferior, longing, resentment, and ill-will toward the advantaged person.' This latter, hostile feature of envy is particularly key to the emotion. The envious person hopes for those they envy to lose their status or wealth and, if that happens, envy gives way to *schadenfreude*.

It's important to distinguish envy from the related but separate emotion of jealousy. 'Jealousy occurs when a person fears losing an important relationship with another person (or object) to a rival,' says Smith. 'When we feel jealous, we feel fear and anxiety about a possible loss, and suspiciousness and anger over possible betrayal.' Apart from their obvious semantic similarities, envy and jealousy are easily confused because it is precisely those people we envy who are most likely to attract the attentions of the individuals we fear losing.

Studies have uncovered some of the factors involved in the provocation of envy. Similarity is key. Although we may have principled objections, few of us are personally affronted by the riches and achievements of, say, the royal family, but if a close colleague, friend or neighbour gains the promotion or sports car we always wanted, well then envy is likely to follow. John Schaubroeck and Simon Lam showed this similarity principle at play in a 2004 field study in which unpromoted tellers at a Hong Kong bank were most envious of promoted colleagues who they'd earlier rated as more similar to themselves. More envious employees also performed better over the next five months, supporting the idea that envy has an adaptive function.

Other important factors in envy are control and self-relevance. It's when the coveted achievements or possessions of



Feeling ill-will is a key feature of the emotion of envy

another feel as if they are beyond our reach and relevant to our own standing, that we are most likely to feel envious. Consider a 1997 study by Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda at the University of Waterloo. They presented undergrads with a profile of a 'superstar' graduate. For undergrads on their first year, who still had time to scale such scholarly heights, the case-study was inspiring, but for final-year undergrads, for whom their academic fate was largely sealed, the high-flying graduate provoked feelings of inadequacy – a catalyst for envy.

As for coping with envy, a 1988 study based on a survey of *Psychology Today* readers suggested that attempts to ignore the object of envy and to focus on one's own goals helped reduce envy, whilst self-bolstering did not. However, once envy had kicked in, self-bolstering (e.g. reminding yourself of your good qualities) was associated with an envious person experiencing fewer negative feelings.

### Pride

Whereas the success and status of others can provoke envy, pride is what we feel when the success and status are our own. Pride, like envy is a human universal, and is another of the sins considered by psychology to be an emotion. Darwin categorised it alongside states such as vanity and suspicion as a 'complex emotion'. He also anticipated contemporary research showing that the expression of pride – head held high, arms raised – is recognised universally across cultures and by children as young as four. In 2008 Jessica Tracy at the University of British Columbia and David Matsumoto at

San Francisco State University studied congenitally blind Olympic judo competitors and found that they too showed pride in this way, even though they can't ever have seen a pride display by anyone else.

So what is pride for? Whereas envy, triggered by the success of others, is aversive, pride is rewarding and thereby encourages us to persevere for long-term gain – in a sense, helping to overcome sloth. In turn, the expression of pride signals to others that we are deserving of status. Lisa Williams and David DeSteno at Northeastern University tested this idea in a 2009 study in which they provoked pride in participants by giving them false, overwhelmingly positive feedback on their performance at a mental rotation exercise. In a subsequent group version of the task, participants who felt more pride (thanks to the earlier feedback) were rated as more liked by other group members.

Further evidence for the powerful link between pride and impressions of status comes from a 2009 study by Jessica Tracy and Azim Shariff, which used the Implicit Association Test to show that people subconsciously associate pictures of people displaying pride, more than other emotions, with words signifying high status. A further study by Tracy that's in press showed that people perceive a person displaying pride as high status, even when that perception is incongruous with contextual cues, such as that the person is homeless. Similarly, participants were more likely to hire fictional job candidates who displayed pride as opposed to shame, even if the latter had stronger CVs.

So why is pride considered a sin? Psychologists distinguish between authentic pride, which tends to follow success which a person attributes to their own effort, and hubristic pride, which usually follows success attributed to ability. It's the hubristic variety that most likely led to pride being seen as a sin. 'Hubristic pride seems to be "bad for people" in a number of ways,' says Tracy. 'It's associated with all kinds of problematic personality traits – such as aggression, antisocial behaviour, anxiety, shame and narcissism. In a recent series of studies, we found that the experience of hubristic pride directly promotes prejudice against out-group members. People high in hubristic pride also tend not to be well liked by others.' One theory is that hubristic pride may have evolved as a way to cheat others into thinking you're deserving of status,

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without the need for long-term effort and genuine achievement.

Tracy says that although hubristic pride can be pleasurable because it's associated with positive feelings about the self, it tends to stem from a sense of insecurity or defensiveness. 'If people can experience authentic pride instead – perhaps by focusing on genuine, specific accomplishments – they are likely to be better off,' she says. 'Authentic pride is still a highly pleasurable experience, and is associated with a range of adaptive and prosocial personality traits and behaviours. In fact, the experience of authentic pride directly promotes empathy for out-group members and consequently out-group favouritism (the reverse of prejudice).'

### Wrath

Anger is one of the core emotions alongside sadness, fear, disgust and happiness. Its survival function is clear. When a threat to ourselves or our kin is perceived, the activity of the sympathetic nervous system intensifies, the heart races, adrenaline flows, as the body prepares to confront the situation. Anger can be triggered by the other sins, such as intense envy and threatened pride.

The problem today is that anger seems to be provoked all too easily – road rage, air rage, computer rage are part of modern life. In 2008 the Mental Health Foundation published a report 'Boiling Point' calling attention to the links between anger and poor mental and physical health (including heart disease and depression). The report also included a survey that suggested most people believe anger is on the rise.

'Anger is strange,' says Bill Winogron, a clinical psychologist and co-author of CALM – an anger management intervention used in UK and Canadian prisons (see [tinyurl.com/2uqan3w](http://tinyurl.com/2uqan3w)). 'It is very commonly experienced, and disturbs interpersonal relations more than any other emotion. And yet it has no diagnostic code in the mental health "bible", and receives a small fraction of the research attention of anxiety and depression. Most who experience it don't want to change it, yet anger episodes mostly target the angry person's loved ones in their homes.'

Winogron, who now works for the S4Potential consultancy, says that interventions like CALM, which are based on cognitive-behavioural principles, work well. These involve learning how to reduce bodily arousal, social skills like assertiveness and, 'most importantly of all, changing the thoughts and beliefs that focus on perceiving threat, evaluating and



blaming others, the need to oppose and aggress against perceived sources of threat, and revenge.' However, Winogron notes that psychology still has much to learn about problem anger, including: 'factors that aid or block anger's conversion to aggression, the best evidence-based treatments [a limitation of the existing evidence base is that it's largely based on volunteer participants], and the role of genetics and other causative factors'.

Anger isn't all bad. When suitably controlled, there's evidence that a certain amount of anger can be useful, at least in business contexts. In a 2006 study Marwan Sinaceur and Larissa Tiedens at INSEAD found that students in a role-playing context who'd been trained to feign anger achieved more concessions from their partners. Other research suggests this benefit arises because angry people are construed by others as tough negotiators. However, the effect of anger could depend on the cultural context. A study published last year by Hajo Adam and colleagues, also at INSEAD, found that expressing anger led to improved negotiation outcomes for participants hailing from a Western American background, but actually backfired when deployed by participants with an East Asian ancestry.

### Lust

As with anger, the evolutionary function of lust is obvious. Our drive to mate ensures the continuation of the species. As with several of the other sins, lust becomes a problem only when it is unconstrained or aroused by inappropriate targets. In part this is

culturally determined. Although monogamy is widely practised, or at least aspired to, in mainstream Western culture, polygamy is also found globally, from Mormon societies in the United States to Islamic nations like Sudan, where it has been actively encouraged by the President as a way to increase the population. Polygamy is also practised by some of our primate cousins, especially the bonobo chimpanzee.

Harder to explain from an evolutionary perspective, perhaps, is why human lust has come to be relatively controlled. Part of the answer comes from the proposal by anthropologist Helen Fisher at Rutgers University and others that lust forms one of three distinct subtypes of reproduction-related emotion, the other two being passionate love (as in 'being in love' or infatuated with another), and companionate love. According to this account, lust is the basic driver for seeking sexual gratification, passionate love helps us focus our efforts on pursuing a particular mate, and companionate love encourages long-term bonding, which is beneficial for raising and supporting offspring. Without

"The problem today is that anger seems to be provoked all too easily"

passionate love to focus our lustful desires, we'd be forever in a spin, pursuing potential mates in all directions.

Companionate love, meanwhile, helps shift our priorities from procreation to ensuring the survival of our existing offspring.

'Lust is associated with who gets to pass on their DNA into tomorrow,' says

## Seven evidence-based ways to be good

A common theme uniting the majority of the deadly sins is self-control, or more specifically, a lack of it. Whether it's giving in to the temptation of sexual infidelity or to the slothful failure to make an effort now for tomorrow's gain, many of the sins reflect a form of mental submission. Fortunately, psychology research is uncovering a growing number of ways to help us boost our self-control, thereby overcoming many of the sins.

**Learn healthier habits.** Behaviours that are performed automatically, triggered by environmental prompts such as cookie jars and TV remotes, are known as habits, and one secret to becoming less sinful is to acquire healthier ones. This means repeatedly performing a desirable behaviour (e.g. going for a run) at the same time or in the same place, every week or every day. Well, that's the theory. Surprisingly little research has actually been conducted on habit formation as it unfolds. Phillippa Lally at UCL's Health Behaviour Unit bucked the trend last year when she and her colleagues asked 96 participants to keep a daily diary of their success at forming a new healthy habit. The main finding was that the average time it took for a new habit to reach peak automaticity was 66 days – far longer than previous estimates. The good news was that a single missed day had little long-term impact on successful habit formation, although repeated omissions did have a cumulative detrimental effect on the maximum automaticity that was reached.

**Have an energy drink.** Roy Baumeister and his collaborators including Matthew Gailliot of Florida State University claim that willpower has a physiological substrate – namely, blood glucose level. In a series of studies published in 2007 they showed that acts of self-control reduce people's glucose levels and that, in turn, diminished blood glucose is associated with weaker performance on subsequent self-control tasks. Most importantly for the purpose of being less sinful, they also showed that a high-glucose energy drink can recharge willpower allowing people to be more altruistic. For example, participants who took longer over a psychology exam, and whose energy levels were therefore more depleted, went on to offer less money to charity and less help to a classmate who'd been evicted, unless, that is, they'd had a high-glucose lemonade drink after the exam. By contrast, a low-glucose placebo drink had no such beneficial effect on helping behaviour.

**Use your inner voice.** We're all familiar with the little voice in our head that tells us not to be naughty. A 2010 study by researchers at the Toronto Laboratory for Social Neuroscience claimed to show this voice really does play a useful role in self-control. Alexa Tullett's team instructed participants to say the word 'computer' repeatedly with their inner voice thereby preventing it from uttering encouraging words of restraint. Doing this compromised the participants' performance at a concurrent lab test of self-control (the Go/No Go task, which involves withholding key responses on a minority of trials) far more than did a secondary task that merely involved drawing circles. The researchers concluded: '[T]his study provides evidence that when we tell ourselves to "keep going" on the treadmill, or when we count to ten during an argument, we may be helping ourselves to successfully overcome our impulses in favour of goals like keeping fit, and preserving a relationship.'

**Practise self-control.** Willpower is like a muscle – the more you train it, the more powerful it will become, thus helping you to resist the Seven Deadly Sins. For example, in a study published last year Mark Muraven at the University of Albany had a subset of participants spend two weeks practising acts of self-control, such as resisting

eating naughty food. These participants subsequently excelled at a lab measure of self-control compared with their own baseline performance. By contrast, no such improvement was observed among control participants who merely spent the same time completing maths problems (a task which, although onerous, Muraven claims doesn't depend on the ability to resist impulses) or writing about any incidental acts of self-control they'd achieved. This latter condition was included to ensure that it is specifically the practice of self-control that is beneficial not merely spending time thinking about self-control. Also, participants in all groups were told that their activity would boost self-control, so as to rule out mere expectancy effects.

**Clench your muscles.** We tend to associate acts of willpower with people clenching their jaw or fists. Another study published last year showed that this muscular tension isn't merely a side-effect of willpower, it actually helps bolster our self-control. Across five studies, Iris Hung at the National University of Singapore and Aparna Labroo at the Booth School of Business showed that various forms of muscle flexion, from fist clenching to calf muscle tightening helped participants to endure pain now for later benefit (e.g. take more time to read a distressing news story about a disaster in Haiti, which in turn led them to give money to a relevant charity in line with how much the story mattered to them); and to resist short-term gain (e.g. snack food) in order to fulfil a long-term gain of better health. Muscle flexing only worked when participants were already motivated. For example, if long-term health was unimportant to them, muscle flexing made no difference. So flexing appears to augment willpower rather than changing motivations and attitudes. Muscle clenching was also only effective when performed at the same time as an act of will.

**Form if-then plans.** When your willpower levels have been drained by an earlier test, that's when you're most vulnerable to temptation. One way to protect yourself is to form so-called 'if-then' plans. For example, imagine that you wanted to avoid getting angry the next time your boss is overly critical, you could form the plan 'if my boss says my work is amateurish I will recall the time that I won an award' – a thought which will hopefully have a soothing effect. The effects of so-called 'implementation intentions' have been researched in-depth by Peter Gollwitzer at the University of Konstanz. In one recent study he tested students' ability to persevere with anagram tasks after they'd resisted laughing while watching comedy clips, thus leaving their willpower depleted. Those who followed the vague plan 'I will find as many solutions as possible' performed poorly on the anagram tasks as expected. However, willpower depletion had no such adverse effect on students who followed the additional, more detailed plan: '...And if I have solved one anagram, then I will immediately start work on the next!'

**Distract yourself.** If at first you don't succeed, cheat. In Walter Mischel's classic studies of young children's self-control, he found that the kids able to resist cookies and marshmallows for longer periods tended to adopt distraction strategies, such as covering their eyes or singing to themselves. Even our chimpanzee cousins are adept at this, although admittedly in their case it's for greater gain rather than to avoid sin. In a 2007 study Michael Beran at Georgia State University showed that chimps played with toys as a way to distract themselves from a self-filling jar of sweets. The longer they waited before grabbing the jar, the more sweets they'd get. If the jar was out of reach, they didn't play with the toys so much, which suggests they really were using the toys as a form of distraction.



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Fisher. 'It leads to eternal life in the sense that you're spreading your seed on into eternity. So lust is extremely important, and every single culture in the world has rules about who you can and can't have sex with. In fact, my guess is that this is one of the first rules that humankind developed because it is so important to reproduction and the future.' How can lust be curtailed? 'You can castrate a man,' Fisher observes dryly, 'which is usually effective.' In the USA there has also been an increase in Alcoholics Anonymous-style interventions for sex addiction, no doubt in response to the frequent media reports of sex-addicted celebrities. The effectiveness or appropriateness of these groups remains to be seen.

### Gluttony

It's tempting to think the amount that people eat and drink is simply about personal choice. This assumption is reflected in the idea of too much consumption being a sin – gluttony, a woeful lack of temperance born out of poor character. However, psychologists today roundly reject the idea that over-

consumption can simply be attributed to a person's free choice. In fact, so taboo is any suggestion of a link between obesity and gluttony that one British psychologist we spoke to wished to remain anonymous lest his comments be misinterpreted. 'Obesity for the vast majority is not a choice and the implicit social discrimination society attributes to obese individuals would challenge any assumption that an individual would choose to achieve a high weight status,' he said. 'Gluttony may be a deadly sin, obesity most certainly is not.'

According to modern research the amount we consume is heavily influenced by environmental factors including food availability, price and portion size – collectively known as 'obesogenic' factors. In one particularly striking study, Brian Wansink at Cornell University found that people consumed 73 per cent more soup than controls when drinking from bowls that unbeknown to them automatically refilled. And yet these same participants

reported afterwards feeling no more sated than controls, nor did they estimate they had consumed any more than the controls estimated they had.

'Eating behaviour is not a hand-to-mouth pursuit for the modern human,' says the UK psychologist we consulted. 'Eating is implicitly and explicitly intertwined with cognitive, social,

individual, developmental and biological perspectives and legitimate explanations.

Explanations for obesity must

appreciate the quality, quantity and potential availability of particular foods in various yet individually specific environments, matched with the individual's perceptions of appropriateness, time availability, hunger levels and social pressures.'

Indeed, the influence of social pressures on weight gain was revealed by a 2007 study by James Fowler at the University of California in San Diego and

"every single culture in the world has rules about who you can and can't have sex with"

## Seven new deadly sins for the 21st century

**Truthiness.** 'Inspired by Steven Colbert, truthiness is "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true";' says Richard Smith at the University of Kentucky. 'I would call it a sin because its consequences for others, for the community, and for the world are staggering, maybe even apocalyptic. Because of it, we may be going to hell in a hand basket. Consider rejecting the scientific evidence for global warming and its causes.'

However, it would be a curious addition to the seven deadly sins because, arguably, truthiness may be a pathway to the belief in god, depending on one's perspective, of course. It is probably related to sloth, in the sense that one may not be bothered to collect and evaluate the evidence for the validity of one's gut feelings.'

**Iphonophilia:** 'The sin of constantly checking one's smartphone for e-mails/texts/facebook updates, while in conversation with people in the real world,' says Jessica Tracy at the University of British Columbia. 'I'm a big fan of these high-tech devices and how much easier they make our lives, but they certainly raise challenges for live interpersonal interactions.'

**Narcissistic myopia:** Tim Kasser at Knox College, Illinois, says this is the tendency to be short-sighted and self-centred, 'taking whatever

one wants now and forgetting that future generations of humans rely on the current generation to leave them a habitable world'.

**Entitlement:** 'This is the absolutist requirement that all one's egocentric demands for "justice" not only be fully met, but also be of keen interest to the rest of the world, no matter how trivial and inconsequential the injustices, and irrespective of how great the redress of perceived inequity has been to-date,' says Bill Winogron at S4Potential. 'It's a close cousin to what American psychologist Albert Ellis more wittily named "Musturbation".'

**Mobile abuse:** 'Shouting into your cell phone on the bus, or as the curtain is going up at the opera – that happened to me,' says Helen Fisher at Rutgers University. 'I mean where are these people coming from, where is their brain? It is extreme narcissism.'

**Excessive debt:** 'The financial crisis we're in originated partly because of people running up huge debts they couldn't pay,' says Roy Baumeister of Florida State University. 'Politicians and governments also spend beyond their means, creating debts that future generations will be stuck with. If people were mindful of avoiding the sin of excessive debt, both they and society would be better off.'

**Insert your sin here:** We have one vacant spot. Celebrity worship? Saying 'to be honest' all the time, or using 'that's just me, I speak my mind' as an excuse for failing to observe basic social conventions? Have your say by e-mailing [psychologist@bbps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bbps.org.uk) with your letter for publication, or post at [www.psychforum.org.uk](http://www.psychforum.org.uk).



Nicholas Christakis at the Harvard Medical School. They used longitudinal data on obesity and relationships from 12,000 people collected since 1971 as part of the Framingham Heart Study. This showed that if a participant's friend became obese over a given two- to four-year phase of the study, that same participant was subsequently 57 per cent more likely to themselves become obese over the ensuing study phase. These effects were observed regardless of spatial proximity suggesting the effect has to do with beliefs about what body weight (and presumably eating habits too) is considered normal and acceptable in different social circles.

Despite these powerful environmental and social influences, surely some factors related to over-consumption reside in the individual? Neuroscientists have identified brain differences in those who persistently over-eat, including in the dopamine pathways implicated in drug addiction. For example, research by Gene-Jack Wang, chair of the medical department at the US Department of Energy's Brookhaven National Laboratory, has shown that people who are obese have reduced dopamine receptors (the D2 variety) in the forebrain, paired with enhanced activity in the parts of the brain that represent the mouth and tongue.

One theory is that the lack of dopamine receptors could lead obese people to crave compensation for their underactive reward circuits, whilst the enhanced activity in mouth and tongue regions suggests that, for obese people, food may be a particularly powerful source of reward. However, it's important to consider that the causal direction could work backwards – perhaps over-eating leads to changes in dopamine pathways and alters somatotopic representation of the mouth and tongue. Other obesity experts point to the role played by genes. For example, a study published late in 2010 showed that mice with two copies of the FTO gene (associated with obesity in humans) ate more, which caused them to put on more weight.

### Sloth

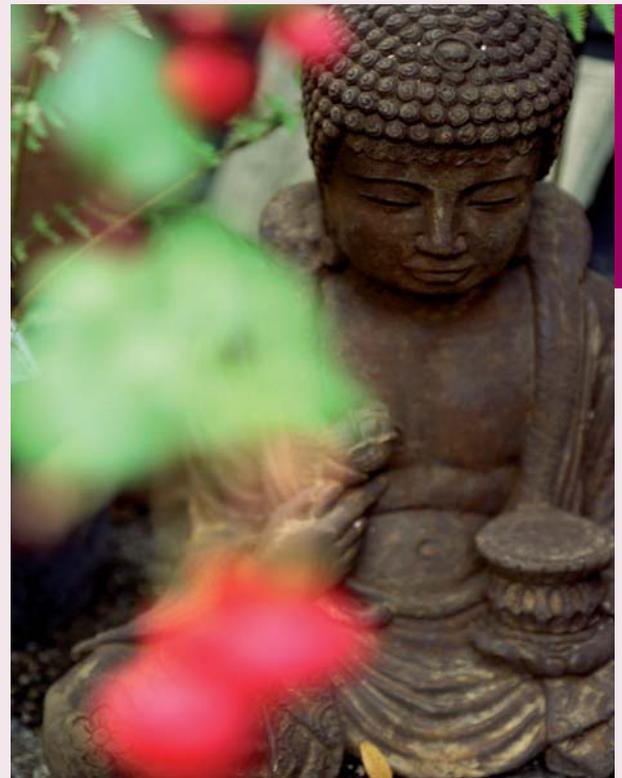
Unlike the other sins, which are largely about excess and disinhibition, sloth reflects a lack of motivation, either intrinsic, extrinsic, or both. Psychologists have been divided as to how to distinguish between these two aspects. One account, which can be traced back to Plato, states that intrinsic motivation is driven by the needs of the mind, whilst extrinsic motivation is driven by the needs of the body. Another argues that intrinsic motivation is when we do something

because it's inherently enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation is when we do something to obtain some other reward. Either way, laziness can be seen as a lack of drive to obtain a potential reward.

Another way to think about laziness is as 'task avoidance'. Rather than failing to respond to a potential reward, task avoidance can be triggered by a fear of failure, perhaps caused by an unrealistic desire for perfectionism. Task avoidance is a habit with long-term repercussions. A 2009 study by Katariina Salmela-Aro and her colleagues at the University of Jyväskylä found that students who avoided work tasks while at university were more likely to be disengaged from their career and suffering burnout 17 years later. 'Those who avoid work have often had previous negative experiences in similar issues they are facing and thus they fear they will again fail rather than succeed, and then it is a self-fulfilling circle,' says Salmela-Aro. 'If you fear you will fail, you start to avoid and thus it easily leads to failure and negative experiences, again kind of a negative circle.'

Closely related to laziness is idleness – doing nothing. Psychologists at the University of Chicago claimed in 2010 that we've inherited an instinct for idleness because our ancestors had to be careful to conserve their energy. Even though we're happier when we're busy, Christopher Hsee and his colleagues said the idleness instinct takes over unless we have a reason not to do nothing. In fact, they even suggested governments give serious consideration to interventions such as ordering the building of pointless bridges, purely as way to lure people out of their idle stupors.

Hsee's team made their claims after a series of lab studies, including one showing that participants were happier if they took a 15-minute walk to return a questionnaire than if they just handed it in as they left the room. The trouble is, given the choice, most participants opted for the lazier return point – it was only when they were



## Sin and religion

The Deadly Sins have changed. In their earliest form, as expressed by the fourth century monk Evagrius, Sloth was missing, with Acedia (Listlessness) in its place, and there was a combined sin of Sorrow and Despair. Pope Gregory ditched Fornication (the precursor to Lust) and added Luxuria, which pertained to extravagance. Over time, Lust regained its place, nudging out Luxuria, and Acedia was trumped by Sloth.

Christianity isn't the only religious tradition to enumerate the forbidden. In the *Bhagavadgītā* Hindu scripture, for example, the Arishadvarga are the six evils that should be avoided: Kama, Krodha, Lobh, Moha, Mada and Matasarya, which correspond to desire, anger, greed, infatuation, pride and jealousy. The Sikh Guru Granth Sahib scripture also lists Five Evils, similar to the Arishadvarga but omitting Matasarya.

Meanwhile the *Sahih al-Bukhari* in Islam recognises The Pernicious Seven: 'associating anything with Allah; magic (akin to witchcraft and sorcery); killing one whom Allah has declared inviolate without a just case, consuming the property of an orphan, devouring usury, turning back when the army advances, and slandering chaste women who are believers but indiscreet'.

One religion for which sin has a different meaning is Buddhism. In part this is because there is no Buddhist deity that sits in judgement of those who transgress. However, there is the list of Ten Precepts – training rules for novice monks – which has echoes of the Seven Deadly Sins, including as it does: refraining from sexual misconduct, praising oneself, aggression and meanness.

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given a specious excuse (the reward of a different, though no more attractive, chocolate bar at the more distant location) that they took the walk.

'People dread idleness, yet without a reason to be busy, they would choose idleness over busyness and be unhappy,' says Hsee. 'However, people will engage

in activity and be busy and happy if they have a reason for doing the activity, even if the reason is specious. Sometimes, people will be happier even if they are forced to be busy rather than idle.' Hsee notes, however, that idleness is not the same as laziness. 'Laziness results from lack of motivation to work,' he says,

'whereas idleness occurs because the person has nothing to do.'

## Conclusion

The original deadly sins were inspired by humankind's perpetual struggle to rise above animalistic instincts and rein in the emotions. It's the occasional success at doing this that makes us human. To postpone gratification today for tomorrow's greater reward. To sacrifice our own needs for the good of others. It's our frequent inability to achieve this level of control that makes the sins as relevant today as they ever were.

Part of the reason we're so prone to sin probably has to do with our tendency to underestimate the strength of our primal drives when we're sated, in what psychologists call a 'cold state'. Loran Nordgren at the Kellogg School of Management showed this in a series of studies in 2009. For example, faced with the challenge of keeping a chocolate bar for a week without eating it (with the snack bar plus cash as a reward), students who'd just eaten tended to make the mistake of picking their favourite snack bar. Of course, this ramped up the temptation and they ended up being less successful at the task than hungry students who took the same challenge, and who, conscious at the time of their gluttonous drives, wisely chose a less tempting snack bar.

'In my view self-control is the "master virtue" underlying almost all others,' says Roy Baumeister at Florida State University, an expert on self-control and the author of *Your Own Worst Enemy: Understanding the Paradox of Self-Defeating Behavior*. 'Each of the deadly sins can be seen as a failure or breakdown of self-control.'

Baumeister's research has shown that self-restraint is like a muscle – the more you use it, the stronger it gets. But it's also a finite resource. On any given day, if you exert self-control in one situation you'll have less left over to triumph over temptation later on.

'Human beings are animals who have managed to create a new kind of social system,' says Baumeister. 'The system (culture) requires them to overcome some of their natural, animal habits, inclinations, and tendencies, so as to follow the rules that enable the system to make life better for everyone. Self-control is a vital faculty for enabling them to accomplish this.'

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## A week of sin and confession

Starting on 7 February, the *Society's Research Digest* blog ([www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog](http://www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog)) will be hosting 'sin week'. This will include seven top psychologists giving a personal and professional perspective on their own sin. We give you a flavour of that here, with **John Sloboda** on wrath.

The main problem with anger, in my experience and as has been observed by experts, is that its expression may not necessarily improve the situation. As Nico Frijda has observed: '...effective interaction with the environment halts, and is replaced by behaviour that is centred around the person himself as in a fit of weeping or laughter, anger or fear. Or interaction with the environment may go on but seems peculiarly ineffective. When someone smashes the dinner plates, the broken plates would hardly seem to be the end result the person had in mind.'

I have tried to bear these wise observations in mind as I have struggled with my fury, sometimes blind fury, with Tony Blair, George Bush, and the MPs and members of Congress who have led Britain and America into the hugely disastrous and destructive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. My fury is doubled because we are a democracy, and so I become implicated in these acts whether I like it or not. No British citizen of voting age can escape responsibility for what has happened. We could have stopped this war. We didn't. We could have voted the Blair Government out of office in 2005. We didn't. So my anger extends to myself, and to all British people and institutions, particularly those institutions of which I have membership, and which failed to act. We collectively failed as a nation, and that failure will haunt generations to come.

The natural tendency in anger is to attack. The attack of an intellectual like myself tends to be verbal. Yet, as we know from studies of bullying, verbal abuse can be deeply wounding. Smashing plates is physically destructive. It is only slightly better than smashing people. And we know only too well that anger that plays itself out in physical violence, be it domestic abuse, public disorder, or war, leads to no good end. Anger against self can lead to depression, self-harm, even suicide. Even direct criticism is often not very productive. There is plenty of research and personal evidence to show that when you criticise someone, they go on the defensive, and harden their position, becoming less, not more, amenable to change.

So here was I, angry about the institutionally sanctioned violence that has been perpetrated in my name, and trying to work out if there is a way of channeling my anger which did not simply add to the damage.

In the height of my despair and anger, in early 2003, I helped get the Iraq Body Count project on the road. At [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org) we document as fully as possible details of civilian casualties in Iraq and the violent events which caused them. Unfortunately, the project is still very active. Although born out of anger, the project was not simply *against* something (the war), it was *for* something. It was for ensuring that each person killed in the war was properly and respectfully recorded and remembered. As time progressed, I and my colleagues at Iraq Body Count became clearer that this recognition was the expression of a fundamental and universal human right, the right to have one's death treated with honour and respect. We accept this right for our own soldiers, but deny it for the civilians that get 'caught in the crossfire'.

And so, over time, we have joined with increasing numbers of organisations around the world who, like us, wish to see casualty recording done better, more comprehensively, and in more conflicts (see [www.everycasualty.org](http://www.everycasualty.org)). There are a few (but still far too few) psychologists thinking about this (e.g. Fischhoff, B., Atran, S. & Fischhoff, N. (2007). Counting casualties: A framework for respectful, useful records. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 34, 1–19). I would still far prefer that there were no wars. But while there are wars, we should ensure that we keep our eyes firmly on the victims, their losses, and their needs. We must know, fully, the human cost of war.

I still am angry, almost every day, but my anger is no longer all-consuming and unproductive, precisely because it has a positive outlet, and a growing community of activists to work alongside. I sometimes ask myself whether I would ever had got involved in this creative work without anger to spur me on. Probably not. So do I, on balance, view my wrath as a deadly sin? I'm not sure it is as simple as that!