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Author(s): Alasdair MacIntyre

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Sin Returns To Sociology

by ALASDAIR MacINTYRE

The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil. By Stanford M. Lyman. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978. x + 329 pp. \$12.95.

The Seven Deadly Sins Today. By Henry Fairlie. Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978. viii + 216 pp. \$10.00.

What would it require to restore the concept of evil to the place that it once had in Western traditions? I raise the question concerning the *concept* with no doubt that the *facts* which make it imperative to possess an adequate concept are as evident and central in the life of the modern world as in any of its ancient or medieval predecessors. What we lack by and large are adequate ways of thinking and speaking about evil, and inadequacies of thought and speech are always also inadequacies of action. Thus the present age is perhaps no more evil than a number of preceding periods; but it is evil in one special way at least, namely, the extent to which we have obliterated and have had obliterated for us a certain consciousness of evil.

This lack of consciousness becomes strikingly apparent in the contemporary modes of instant indignation and denunciation; it is marvelous how often the self-appointed spokesmen of the right and the good do not seem to have noticed the vices of pomposity, untruthful exaggeration, and self-righteousness. They had their predecessors, as acute observers from St. Augustine to Robert Burns noted; but it was left to our time for what had been an eccentric vice of individuals to become a dominant social mode.

The question of the *concept* of evil is thus important; and it is clear at once that we generally lack an adequate concept

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE is University Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at Boston University.

and therefore understanding of evil because we lack any adequate concept of good. Sins and vices are forms of falling away from virtues and goods; and weaknesses in our understanding of sins and vices are always thus signs of defects in our understanding of virtues and goods. Lust and gluttony are defective with respect to the good of pleasure; sloth is defective with respect to the good of rest on sabbaths and holidays; treachery is defective with respect to the goods of loyalty and obedience; and so on. If then we do not adequately understand lust, gluttony, sloth, and their companion vices and sins, it must be because at some time in the past we lost our grasp of what is a good or *the* good for man and what are the virtues through the cultivation of which such a good or goods can be attained. We must have suffered in the past some period of historical catastrophe, minor of course in relation to that Fall which brought evil into the world, but major with respect to cultural change.

Any inquiry into the nature of evil that does not attempt, first, a philosophical inquiry into the nature of good and secondly, an historical identification of what occasioned our contemporary inadequate consciousness of evil is self-condemned to frustration. Henry Fairlie's *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* fails on both counts and confirms my thesis by being for the most part an uninteresting book, rescued by a few acute observations. Stanford M. Lyman's *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil*, however, which also fails on the first count, although not so completely on the second, is nonetheless a book of absorbing interest and importance. It is important not to stint on the praise of Lyman's book. However, it is necessary to remark that while Fairlie—who has nothing very interesting to say that has not already been said better elsewhere—writes a plain, straightforward prose which invites the general reader's initial attention. Lyman tries to deal with far too much, rambles from topic to topic, and too often strikes an uneasy compromise

between addressing the general reader and attempting to convince his professional sociological colleagues. But these flaws are perhaps the inevitable result of Lyman's having undertaken so large, so original, and so important a task. For he aspires to do nothing less than to reform sociology by reintroducing the notion of the seven deadly sins as crucial, explanatory, and descriptive categories.

Lyman's method is to begin with a preliminary definition of each sin, to trace in a history that is both highly selective and what he himself calls "meandering" the changing understanding of that sin, to look at the ways in which something occurs that he calls "the sublimation of the sin," and finally to look at what the sin amounts to when presented in dramatic terms—a procedure which owes much to his previous book (written with Marvin B. Scott) *The Drama of Social Reality*.

So, for example, sloth is initially defined as a medieval English translation of the Latin *acedia* and it is said that "Mentally, *acedia* has a number of distinctive components of which the most important is affectlessness, a lack of any feeling about self or other, a mind-state that gives rise to boredom, rancor, apathy, and a passive inert or sluggish mentation." Sloth and its related and contrast terms are then pursued through the pages of various early and medieval Christian writers, the Cabala, Freud, Shakespeare, Homer, Simmel, Robert E. Park, and Max Weber's account of the Protestant ethic—in that order. The dramatic presentation of *acedia* is introduced by discussions of topics as various as the death-causing despair which afflicted some nineteenth-century Oceanic peoples, Camus' novel *L'Etranger* and Nechayev's *The Catechism of the Revolutionist*, but mainly consists in an analysis of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. This summary suggests the danger to which Lyman's method is always apt to fall victim—that of submerging the reader in a sea of ill-assorted detail. But what is remarkable is the extent to which he succeeds instead in creating the effect of a collage,

a patterned array of insights. Both failure and success spring from the same source, an attempt to recast a huge mass of sociological material in the light thrown by the notions of sin and evil. What is the importance of this attempt?

It puts the notion of human character with its virtues and vices back at the center of sociology. I say "puts back" rather than "introduces," because some of the key notions of the founding fathers of sociology—such notions as those of *anomie*, bureaucratization, alienation, and rationalization—invoke a not always fully explicit reference to moral character and its fate in modern social structures. The subsequent history of sociology marked a movement away from this starting point; so much so that Ralf Dahrendorf in his famous essay on *Homo Sociologicus* argued that the sociologists had constructed an account of the social world whose neutral deterministic character excluded from view their own moral purposes and intentions. Dahrendorf took himself to have discovered a necessary and ineliminable feature of the condition of sociology; one implication of Lyman's argument is that Dahrendorf simply made a mistake about the limits of sociological inquiry.

It is therefore all the more a pity that Lyman should, by neglecting the character of the good and the virtues, make it difficult to understand the precise impact of his argument at certain points. Consider the vice of avarice or greed. In the ancient and medieval worlds it was widely held that acquisitiveness for its own sake is always a vice. Yet what is in those worlds regarded as an almost pathological trait later becomes a driving force of capitalism. And here Lyman writes: "But greed is also a source of good. Sublimated as the ethical imperative to follow an earthly calling diligently and to live frugally and piously, it became the basis for modern capitalism and the central cultural impetus in the Occident." My problem here is to understand what Lyman means. If avarice is at the heart of capitalism, even if sublimated, how can capitalism be good? If capitalism is really good, why do we take it that what is at its heart is avarice, even in a sublimated version? Why does Lyman think capitalism good? The reason why such questions are so puzzling is that Lyman has never given us an account of the good and so we do not know in what way each sin is to be understood as defective

in respect of some good.

Fairlie is much more convincing on this particular topic. He sees clearly that contemporary defenses of a free market are defenses of all those vices which flow from a free market economy. But as so often throughout his book he spoils a good case by petulance and shrillness. His tone is that of a cross grandparent on a wet Sunday afternoon who has had one martini too many at lunch. Consider the following: "The university teacher used to be modestly and even ill paid, but he was ambitious to teach well and, teaching well, he stood high in the respect of others and in his own self-respect. He even had the respect of his pupils. Now he is well paid; in most cases, grossly overpaid; he does not teach well; and he enjoys little respect from others, and if honest with himself has even less self-respect. He has little authority in the classroom, in the university as a whole or in the wider community, and he is gnawed by the sneaking suspicion that he is a charlatan. . . ." This silly diatribe of ill-informed generalizations gives us good reason to doubt Fairlie's credentials for

writing about sin. But even if he had been less incompetent, his project would have been in the same difficulty that besets Lyman.

For without any adequate account of goods and virtues the question of how the variety of ways of being defective in respect of goods and virtues ought best to be classified cannot hope to receive a satisfactory answer. Moreover, without any adequate theological prologue the question of why we should speak of sins—a notion which presupposes some breach of a divine law—rather than simply of vices remains unanswered as well. Consequently the question of whether or not the categories embodied in St. Gregory the Great's table of the seven mortal sins—implicitly recognized in the titles of these two books—are the appropriate categories for a contemporary discussion of evil is left unexamined.

Both books then fail to some degree; but within the limits imposed by that failure Lyman scores a number of signal successes and places us all in his debt. Fairlie does not.

Having Children

Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood.

Edited by Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979. 362 pp. \$5.95.

William Ruddick and Onora O'Neill introduce this collection of essays with the observation that "Philosophers have written very little about families," and speculate about why that is so. A number of likely possibilities are suggested—from the childless and solitary lives of great philosophers to the relegation of the family to women's sphere—but they neglect one explanation that accounts for the previous indifference and the growing interest.

Thus a speculation of my own: The family has come loose from its moorings in religion and culture; this has happened

suddenly and for large numbers of people, at least in our own society. Creating and maintaining families has become a voluntary activity: it is no longer a given of adult life. Thus questions of justification, legitimation, choice, become central both to individual men and women thinking about marriage, child-bearing, and child raising, and to policy makers wrestling with issues of control and allocation.

Clearly, the ensuing confusion makes the subject of the family more interesting to the philosophically inclined. Add to this the ripening technology for controlling not only the size of populations, but also the quality, and the subject becomes hard to resist; it is ready-made for those particularly concerned about rights and obligations, coercion and freedom.

Having Children provides a balanced liberal view of public policy issues like population control, abortion, adoption,