Sin 5: Seven Deadly Sins

The seven deadly sins — known for most of their early history as the seven capital vices — constituted an important schema of sins that was used by Christians for self-examination, → confession, → preaching, and spiritual formation for nearly a millennium. Popular treatments of the seven use "sin" and "vice" as synonymous terms. Technically, however, "vice" is a more specific term than "sin," since it refers only to a character trait, rather than applying to a general human condition ("original sin," "sinful nature"), a specific action ("sins of thought, word, or deed"), or social structures ("institutional racism, a structural sin").

The seven vices can be traced back as far as Evagrius Ponticus (346-99), in his practical guides to the → ascetic life of the desert anchorite. John Cassian (ca. 360-after 430) transmitted it to the Latin monastic tradition, → Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) gave it authoritative status, scholastic theologians systematized it in the 13th century, and it appeared extensively in penitential and preaching manuals after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the most famous of which was the *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* by the 13th-century Dominican William Peraldus. The heptad was widely used in Western Christianity on account of its diagnostic power, memorability, and comprehensiveness.

The seven vices were called principal or capital (from Lat. *caput,* "head") on account of their being the head — meaning principle or source — of many other sins. The term "principal vices" originates in Cassian's writings (*Conferences* 5) and was further explained by Gregory in his widely disseminated *Moralia in Iob.* Authors and illustrators commonly depicted the seven as a tree, with pride as the common root, the seven vices as the main branches, and other sins as their offshoots and poisonous fruit. The organic metaphor emphasized identifying the ultimate source of sin in one's heart and excising it at that level.

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-74) argued that these seven vices were "source sins" because their objects are goods closely affiliated with → happiness, which are then pursued in an excessive or idolatrous way. The vices thus manifest a structure identified by → Augustine (354-430): They are disordered loves — that is, desires for creaturely goods in place or, or in excess of, love for God the Creator (*Conf.* 1.20, 2.5). Furthermore, they are motivated by pride, in which we seek to define the good on our own terms and procure happiness for ourselves (2.6). For example, avaricious people seek in money (a temporal, finite good) the sufficiency and contentment that can be found only in God (an eternal, infinite good), and they depend on themselves to provide that good rather than trusting God to do so. The intensely desirable ends of the seven vices spawn other sins that serve those ends or are the effects of one's excessive pursuit of them. For example, the offspring of avarice typically includes "fraud" and "insensibility to mercy."

The list of vices in its most typical form includes pride. Alternately, on the basis of Sir. 10:15 ("Pride is the beginning of all sin," DV), Gregory named seven other vices, including vainglory, offshoots of pride. However, pride occasionally competed for status as the queen of the other vices with avarice, given the apostle Paul's statement that love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10). The seven are often divided into spiritual vices and carnal vices. Pride, envy, and sloth directly regard spiritual goods like our love for others and God, while avarice, vainglory, and anger concern goods like power, honor, and justice; gluttony and lust, in contrast, have bodily pleasures in view.

There was some variation in the list throughout much of its history. Evagrius included sloth and sadness, vainglory and pride, as well as avarice, anger, lust, and gluttony, for a total of "eight evil thoughts [*logismoi*]." In addition to making pride the root, Gregory added envy and subsumed Evagrian and Cassianic sloth under sadness. Gregory's list was authoritative for hundreds of years but gradually shifted to include pride again, replace sadness with sloth, and drop vainglory because of its similarity to pride. The list in its current form has *pride, envy, sloth, avarice, anger, lust, and gluttony.*

The list is also known as the seven deadly sins, after the 13th-century distinction between mortal (deadly) and venial sin, a distinction denied in Protestant theology. But even theologians whom Catholic theology takes as authoritative, like Aquinas, denied that all these vices always or only have a deadly form and preferred the term "capital vices."

The Christian tradition used the vices to guide self-examination and confession, and a parallel set of virtues to guide spiritual formation and the practice of holiness. The process of casting off vice and cultivating virtue was framed in terms of Paul's distinction between taking off the old → self, or sinful nature, and putting on the new ar self, redeemed and sanctified by → grace (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3: 5-14).

The list of virtues paralleling the vices usually included the seven principal virtues — → faith, → hope, and → love (1 Cor. 13:13), along with pru-

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dence, justice, courage, and temperance (Wis. 8:7). The cardinal virtues were a Greek philosophical inheritance, although Augustine reframed them as kinds of love (*De mor. eccl.* 25.15; → Greek Philosophy). Since the vices were not directly opposed to these seven virtues, however, the two lists were not parallel. Instead, for example, pride was to be countered by the Christian virtue of → humility (as in → Benedict's Rule), and anger overcome by patience or long-suffering (Prudentius, *Psychomachia*). While the virtues had an explicit scriptural basis, the heptad of vices did not, although Cassian tried to assign it a metaphoric one (i.e., the seven tribes driven out of Canaan in Deut. 7:1). Despite its origin in distinctly Christian practices, then, the inability of academic theologians to find a satisfying theoretical or scriptural basis for the list and the shift from a virtue- to a law-based ethics may have been factors in its gradual decline after the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the seven deadly sins continue to capture the popular imagination, as is attested by regular treatments of the topic in both scholarly literature and entertainment culture, up to the present day (e.g., the MTV special *Seven Deadly Sins,* which aired in August 1993).

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Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung

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