

THE POWER OF ENVY

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My little green book on ENVY by Joseph Epstein (Oxford, 2003) recounts this joke. An Englishwoman, a Frenchman and a Russian are given a single wish by a witch. The Englishwoman says that a friend of hers has a charming cottage in the Cotswold and she would like a similar cottage, with the addition of two extra bedrooms and a second bath. The Frenchman says that his best friend has beautiful blond mistress, and he would like such a mistress himself, but a redhead instead and with longer legs and a bit more in culture and *chic*. The Russian, when asked what he would like, tells of a neighbor whose cow gives a vast quantity of the richest milk, which yields the purest butter. "I want that cow," the Russian tells the witch, "dead." (page 21f)

Not to be outdone, the Slovenian psychoanalyst, philosopher and social critic, Slavoj Žižek tells the folktale of the Slovenian peasant who high in the mountains stumbles upon a witch. She says to him, "I will do to you whatever you want, but I warn you, I will do it to your neighbor twice!" The peasant, with a cunning smile, asks her: "Take one of my eyes!" [VIOLENCE, page 225, fn 15]

The power of envy to disrupt human relationships has been not just the subject of jokes and folktales, but long the concern of religious leaders.

Apparently the Vatican got wind that I am preaching on the topic today. Just this past week they released a study on gender differences of the Seven Deadly Sins. Priests take notes as they listen during confession, providing the data for the study. The BBC headlines it report, "Two sexes 'sin in different ways.'" The top two sins men report are 1) lust and 2) gluttony. For women, 1) pride and 2) envy.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7897034.stm>

The BBC does not report what priests talk about when confessing, though it does report the Pope confesses his sins once a week. Lust? Gluttony? Benedict is older than I and I know lust abates as we age. For me, even while I am writing sermons, I have to watch out for gluttony. Nothing like a nice piece of warm buttered toast to reward progress on my sermon. Mmmm. My doctor has told me I need to lose weight.

The study lists the seven deadly sins as men deal with them, as Lust, gluttony, sloth, anger, pride, envy and greed. Sloth is an interesting one, as some take it to mean just laziness. But the theological definition is. "disengagement and not getting involved." Could sloth be just a sense of either sadness or world weariness?

I have to manage my anger at times.

Pride is a difficult issue, as maintaining a healthy self-esteem is necessary, but egotism and narcissism are unpleasant, especially in others. As for envy, I am less and less of the school that thinks the boy with the most toys wins. Greed has never had much pull for

me, wanting sufficiency, not abundance. According to the study, women were not subject to greed, but to avarice. I wonder what happened there. And given that greed is lower on the male list than on the female list, why is it that Bernie Madoff and Allen Stanford are big names in the meltdown? Ken Lay? Looks like a male club to me.

The list of the Seven Deadly sins, including envy, is traditional Christian teaching. A Buddhist might look at these differently. Buddhism teaches the stilling of desire. Buddhist teaching begins with the Four Noble Truths. The Second Noble truth teaches the origin of suffering:

The origin of suffering is attachment to [the] transient, the lack of understanding our mind is attached to impermanent things. The reasons for suffering are desire, passion, ardor, pursuit of wealth and prestige, striving for fame and popularity, in short: *craving* and *clinging*.

<http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/fourtruths.html>

Buddhism, then, puts the problems in the list of deadly sins right up front. First thing to understand says Buddhism. The Judeo Christian heritage isn't so clear. In fact, what got me to wondering about envy is why it is the only deadly sin addressed in the Ten Commandments. Say for the moment Buddhism's Four Noble Truths and Judea-Christianity's Ten Commandments are of equal importance in their traditions.

The Commandments are about behaviors:

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

The only one that explicitly addresses one of the deadly sin's reads, "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour." Nothing about pride, gluttony.

Envy is a dangerous emotion, as our opening stories dramatized. Today, instead of not coveting your neighbors donkey, we would say, don't covet your neighbor's Cadillac Escalade. Coveting, envy disrupts relations.

When I was growing up, Lynn, Massachusetts was a company town, General Electric. The men in the family worked for GE. My uncle was mid-level management. He always drove a Buick. One of the first things he did when he retired was buy a Mercedes Benz. He'd long wanted a Mercedes. Both he and my aunt also worked real estate, so money was no object. But driving a car better than your boss's was not a good idea, he told me.

The green book on envy says most simple tribes live in terror of being envied. They worried about the reactions of their fellow tribesmen, of neighboring tribes. There is then a quote from one Helmut Schoeck, "Nearly all superstition can be found to derive its

dynamic from this particular anxiety about envy, and may be interpreted as a system of ritual environmental control directed at envy.” [Page 34]

In other words, envy may not be your problem, something you experience, but your neighbor’s envy may be your problem. This really comes out in the Ten Commandments. The first several Commandments underscore what we find in much of the Old Testament, that the God of the Old Testament is a jealous God. In the Book of Exodus one of the Commandments reads, “You shall not bow down to [other gods] or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,”

This is the place to speak of the difference between envy and jealousy. Epstein correctly tells us that “one is *jealous* of what one has, *envious* of what other people have.” (Page 4) Jealousy is often thought of negatively, that one perhaps should not be jealous of one’s partner. Certainly excessive jealousy may lead to unreasonable attempts to control loved ones. But is it not reasonable to be jealous of one’s good name? One is jealous of one’s dignity, one’s civil rights and should fight for them. But envious? That is more secretive, likely only to come out when stumbling upon a witch in some hidden mountain pass.

Jealousy expresses a fear of loosing what we have. Envy reveals a fear of not getting what we want, more malignantly, the fear that what we desperately want just isn’t going to be ours. A sense of impotence may drive the more secretive forms of envy, as we saw in the stories of the Russian and the Slovene who did not seek to improve their own lives, but destroy their neighbor’s. The Buddhist might point out that envy, along with lust, gluttony, and greed are particular forms of desire, which as attachment to things, is bound to bring us suffering. Intensifying desire, as with envy, only intensifies our suffering.

One thing which caught my eye about the Vatican study on gender difference about envy was a line about the new list of deadly sins. Yup, new sins:

The revised list included seven modern sins it said were becoming prevalent during an era of "unstoppable globalisation".

These included: genetic modification, experiments on the person, environmental pollution, taking or selling illegal drugs, social injustice, causing poverty and financial greed. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7897034.stm>

While these do concern me, sins? More significantly, I am struck by the fact that this new list is different from the old list with envy and lust. These new ones are about behaviors. The old list is about distortions of your soul. One is about things visible, the other about invisible motions of your heart.

I’m not sure this is the time to be swept away by concern with technological innovation. A little more help exploring the mystery of the soul is needed. Perhaps this is why novelists and literary figures such as Joseph Epstein are popular. We need help sorting

out our felt responses to advertisements on the TV, as well as our emotions to our neighbors and the ever changing options challenging our children.

It seems to me that television ads assume I am an envious creature. Is my primary motive keeping up with the Jones? My neighbor? A **New York Times** blogger on the economy recently wrote

Envy is not just a deadly sin, it is also an emotional reality. My colleague Erzo Luttmmer finds that middle-income people who live around the rich are significantly less happy than middle-income people who have [poorer neighbors](#). Today's new fashion for frugality may reflect an awareness that showing off one's prosperity imposes emotional costs on others.
<http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/17/if-you-got-money-its-time-to-spend-some/?hp>

Apparently for most Americans envy is a prime motivator. Hopefully frugality will be something other than a fashion. As long as frugality is a matter of imitation, it's not really frugality but fear driven, as with my uncle who drove a Buick as long as he wanted to keep his job at GE.

We cannot innovate our way out of our hearts; no science will free us from the disruptions of the soul. Desire and its distortions in envy, greed and what we each add to our personal list are part of our human make up. As Epstein said in our reading, we cannot be sure if envy is part of human nature. The list of deadly sins suggest it is, and the Buddhists assume that disciplined practice is needed to still, quiet desire, envy being but one symptom.

Perhaps it is an intimation of pride we think we do not have negative emotions. We would like to think we do not have any negative emotions. We quickly forget our road rage, how we might want to run off the road the jerk who almost just sideswiped us. We are more ready to experience joy than sadness, but sadness is just as real.

We prefer positive emotions, perhaps because we hesitate to share with others our negative feelings, fearing that they will enjoy our fall. Pleasure in the unhappiness of others is its own form of envy, called *Schadenfreude*. When pleasure is found in Britney Spear's boyfriend troubles, it's *Schadenfreude*. As Jackie Gleason's comic character, Ralph Kramden said, "How sweet it is!"

Lest we risk giving excuse to our friends, we hide our negative emotions, even from ourselves. But sadness, fear, confusion, anxiety, as well as those on the official lists, are real. However feelings are not facts. What we do with our feelings is what makes for facts.

When the witch comes to us, offering us a wish, what we choose is what becomes fact. Do we feed the negative, or feed the positive? Are we committed? Do we maintain our good attitude? Those witches offer us a choice each day as to how we will respond to our

friends, our neighbors, and to our higher selves. The more self awareness, the more self-acceptance we have, the better our judgment with the witch's wish.

An old Rabbinical story:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. Now as it happened, one of the brothers lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family. One day, the single brother thought to himself: "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly,. I have only myself to care for, but my bother has children to feed." So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to see that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?" So every night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night the brothers met each other halfway between their two houses, suddenly realized what had been happening, and embraced each other in love. The story is that god witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, "This is a holy place -- a place of love – and here it is that my temple shall be built." And so it was. The holy place, where God is made known, is the place where human beings discover each other in love. [Ernest Kurtz, *THE SPIRITUALITY OF IMPERFECTION*, Bantam, 1994; page 9]