

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

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The Seven Deadly Sins are also known as *cardinal sins*, deriving from the Latin *cardinalis* (“chief,” “essential,” or “principal”), from *cardo* (genitive *cardinis*), meaning “that on which something turns or depends,” and *cardin* (“hinge of a door, pivot, that on which something turns; thus principal, chief”). In other words, cardinal sins are the chief sins on which all other sins hinge. They are also called *capital sins* (Saunders, 2013), which is derived from the Latin *caput* (“head”).

Preferring the word “vice” rather than “sin” in this context, Thomas of Aquinas wrote, “A capital vice is that which has an exceedingly desirable end so that in his desire for it, a man goes on to the commission of many sins, all of which are said to originate in that vice as their chief source” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 153, 4). The word *vice* is derived from the Latin word *vitium*, meaning “failing or defect.” This meaning of “vice” is similar to the term “defects of character” used in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Evagrius of Ponticus (345-399) was a Christian monk who was one of the most influential theologians in the late fourth-century church. In 375 CE, he developed a list of eight evil thoughts or terrible temptations, from which he believed all sinful behavior originates. The list was intended to serve a diagnostic purpose: to help others identify the process of temptation, their own strengths and weaknesses, and the remedies available for overcoming temptation. Evagrius stated, “The first thought of all is that of love of self; after this, the eight.” The eight patterns of evil thought are gluttony, lust, greed, sadness, *acedia* [despondency], anger, vainglory, pride.

Writing two centuries later (590 CE), Pope Gregory I (“Pope St. Gregory the Great”) revised Evagrius’s list to form the more

commonly known Seven Deadly Sins, in which *acedia* (despondency) and *tristitia* (sorrow) were combined into the sin of sloth; vainglory was combined with pride, and envy was added to the list. The traditional list of capital sins, as specified by Pope Gregory I include pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.

According to the standard list of St. Thomas Aquinas, the seven capital vices are pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth—which are contrary to the seven heavenly virtues. Each of these sins is considered a form of idolatry-of-self, in which the subjective rules over the objective), all of which in some ways are based on a foundational sin of egocentrism. In contemporary psychological terminology, a *major vice* is a behavior, habit, or practice that is generally considered immoral, sinful, or taboo in one’s associated culture or society. A *minor vice* often refers to a character defect, fault, shortcoming, maladaptive personality trait, or an unhealthy habit.

In his book aptly titled *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid*, Robert Sternberg (2002), describes how smart people may be particularly susceptible to certain fallacies in thinking because they have been so rewarded for their intelligence that they lose sight of their humanity. A former president of the American Psychological Association in 2003, Sternberg observed that very smart people—such as professionals, corporate executives, and political leaders—are often very foolish because of flawed thinking. Sternberg (2003, p. 5) uses the term “fallacies in thinking” to describe the blinding effects of egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability. According to Sternberg, *egocentrism* involves taking into account one’s own interests, but not taking into account the interests of others. The fallacy of *omniscience* involves the belief that one knows about everything, when in fact one

may only know a lot about a little. The fallacy of *omnipotence* involves the grandiose belief that one is all-powerful and can do whatever one wants to do. Finally, the fallacy of invulnerability involves thinking that one can get away with anything and, in the unlikely event that one gets caught, thinking that one can get out of it.

In his reviews of cases of professional misconduct, Doverspike (2015, p. 117) has observed, “These fallacies of thinking lead to arrogance, and arrogance leads to ethical slippage.” Within the context of capital sins or vices, fallacies of thinking are akin to character defects that can be one’s downfall. As described by Miranda Twiss (2002), a review of the lives of some of the most evil men in history (e.g., the Roman Emperor Nero, Vlad the Impaler, King John, Ivan the Terrible, Attila the Hun, Rasputin, Hitler, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin) reveals the deadly sins gone rampant. Men have no monopoly on evil. Shelley Klein’s (2003) review provides details of the lives of 15 women—from jealous daughters to Roman empresses—whose crimes span 2,000 years and include torture, serial murder, infanticide, massacre, and murders for gain or to conceal other crimes.

Cardinal sins are as prominent among the religious as they are among secular and political leaders. In *Unholy Popes*, Irish writer Bob Curran (2010) describes 40 perverse prelates who say in St. Peter’s chair. Curran’s review includes accounts of popes who resorted to bribery and racketeering, turned the Vatican into a brothel, murdered their opponents, and seemingly broke as many commandments as possible. The seven deadly sins, which are personified throughout the “outrageous stories of papal misbehavior” (the subtitle of Curran’s book), are not limited to any single religion.

In his research and comparative religious studies, Charles Kimball (2002) describes five warning signs of how any religion can become dangerous. Although every religious tradition has elements that tend toward rigidity, authentic religious truth claims are never as inflexible and exclusive as some of their most zealous adherents insist. The founders of the major world religions—as recognized by their most observant adherents rather than their opponents—reflected humility, compassion, and kindness rather than arrogance, pride, and wrath. Kimball distinguishes between *authentic religious claims*, which are inherent in most religions, and *absolute truth claims*, which can lead to disastrous consequences for all involved. Declaring war “holy” is a sure sign of corrupt religion. At the center of authentic religion, according to Kimball, one *always* finds the promise of peace, which includes both an inner peace for the adherent and a requirement to seek peaceful coexistence with the rest of creation and humanity.

Although the concept on sin may seem archaic by contemporary standards, one need only review a few state licensing board cases (e.g., Ebert, 2006) to see concrete examples of the seven deadly sins in action. Lazarus (2000) described greed as a major source of ethical problems with clients. Haas and Malouf (2005) describe how practitioners may be vulnerable to a number of ethical problems associated with character virtues that are lacking, such as the absence of discretion, integrity, fidelity, or prudence.

The following list includes the Seven Deadly Sins, as well as their synonyms and examples of how they can manifest in our daily lives and work. Some of the examples are taken from observations in academic settings and practices seen in mental health professionals. Listed in what has become somewhat of a standard order, pride is always considered the primary capital sin or vice.

**1. Pride** derives from the Latin *superbia* (pride) or *vanagloria* (vain glory or vanity). Pride involves excessive admiration of oneself. Thomas Aquinas listed vainglory instead of pride—to emphasize that pride is the source of all sin. When someone is completely full of it, honoring only his own will, pride is said to be “complete.” In actuality, a person with complete pride makes himself a false god, and self-worship becomes the worst a form of idolatry. Arrogance is an enemy of spirituality.

- egocentrism
- sense of entitlement
- individualism or “What’s in it for me?” (Kelly, 2002)
- bragging about oneself or putting down others
- engaging in false advertising
- avoiding asking for help from others
- externalization of blame onto others
- inflated sense of self-importance (i.e., narcissism)
- being inflexible, rigid, or stubborn (e.g., “It’s my way or the highway.”)
- absolutistic thinking, such as when one’s beliefs are equated with reality (i.e., “If I think it’s so, then it’s so.”)
- giving advice to someone when it has not been solicited (i.e., “I know best.”)
- judging others (i.e., which assumes an attitude of self-appointed superiority)
- exaggeration of academic degrees or professional credentials
- listing an institutional, professional, or university affiliation for purposes of self-aggrandizement
- accepting testimonials from former clients or patients
- listing on one’s vita or résumé a degree that has not been conferred
- listing on one’s automated signature a degree that has not been conferred
- citing ideas of others without proper attribution or citation (i.e., plagiarism)
- listing vanity board credentials on one’s résumé, website, or Facebook page
- listing a degree that is not in the field of competence in which one is practicing
- Licensing Board examples: incredulity at being investigated, blaming a client for one’s own behavior or misconduct
- Social media example: Instagram

**2. Greed** derives from the Latin *avaritia* (avarice, covetousness). Avarice is “the inordinate love of having possessions or riches” (Prümmer, 1957). It involves an excessive acquisition of money, status, or power. Greed can become an obsession with acquiring, having, or hoarding more—yet more is never enough. Greed can also take the form of being a miser (i.e., not the same as being thrifty) with money or time. It can involve doing only what will benefit ourselves—rather than others. Greed can also make us blind and indifferent to the needs of those who are less fortunate. Greed can distort our attributions, such as when we attribute our fortunes to our own efforts and we attribute the misfortunes of others to their laziness.

In some ways, greed is at the core of the sins of *envy* (the resentful desire to have what others have) and *jealousy* (the resentful desire to exclusively possess something or the fear of losing what you have).

- overbooking appointments in order to increase billable hours
- “padding” supervision log by reporting indirect hours as direct service hours
- diagnosing for dollars (i.e., pathologizing a normal condition as a mental disorder)

- diagnostic up-coding (e.g., diagnosing adjustment disorder rather than a partner relational problem) so that a session will be covered by third party reimbursement
  - diagnostic down-coding (e.g., diagnosing adjustment disorder rather than major depressive disorder) so that a client will continue to come for sessions rather than dropping out due to pejorative diagnosis
  - fraudulent billing (e.g., coding a conjoint session as 60-minute individual psychotherapy session [90837] rather than as 45-minute individual psychotherapy session [90834]) so the 45-minute session will be paid at a higher rate (aka, insurance fraud)
  - fraudulent billing (e.g., coding a conjoint or couple session as 60-minute individual psychotherapy session [90837] rather than as family psychotherapy with patient present [90847]) because 90847 is not a covered benefit (aka, insurance fraud)
  - Licensing Board examples: failure to explain fees in advance, engaging in insurance fraud, overcharging a client
  - Social media example: LinkedIn
- 3. Wrath** derives from the Latin *ira* (rage, anger, rabies). It involves a strong and non-cooperative response to a perceived hurt, provocation, or threat. In contrast to *righteous anger*, which involves perceiving injustice and the desire to restore justice, *wrongful anger* involves “the inordinate desire for revenge” (Prümmer, 1957). In this sense, wrongful anger offends restorative justice by seeking revenge. St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a lay member of the Dominican Order, once observed, “There is no sin or wrong that gives a man such a foretaste of Hell in this life as anger and impatience.”
- self-righteous anger
  - emotional dysregulation
  - aggressive displays of anger
  - maintaining a sense of irritability
  - displaying impatience or hurry-sickness
  - harboring or holding on to resentments
  - certain types of depression (e.g., turning anger inward)
  - acting out a loss of temper (e.g., raising one’s voice in anger)
  - having unrealistic expectations that become premeditated resentments
  - engaging in passive-aggressive behaviors (e.g., not returning emails or phone calls, arriving late to meetings)
  - complaining or gossiping about a person rather than speaking directly to the person
  - displaying irritability or trying to control another person’s behavior
  - Licensing Board examples: being aggressive toward a client (assault), using cursing or profanity with a client
  - Social media example: Twitter
- 4. Envy** (vs. Kindness) is derived from the Latin *invidia* (insatiable desire). It involves a desire of another person’s superior quality, achievement, or possession. In Chapter 6 of *The Conquest of Happiness*, Bertrand Russell (1930) considered envy to be the most potent form of unhappiness. In some ways, the sin of covetousness can include envy (wanting what someone else has) and jealousy (anxiety that someone will take what I have). In this sense, envy involves two people, whereas jealousy involves three.
- (noun) resentful longing aroused by someone else’s luck, opportunities, or possessions

- (verb) desire to have a quality, possession, or other attribute belonging to someone else
- resenting a hard-working peer who earns bonus points or a pay increase
- schadenfreude, or the experience of pleasure or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of the troubles or failures of another person
- engaging in professional gossip by listening to a peer talk negatively about someone who is not present
- attributing a colleague's honest success in a career to dishonest practices
- engaging in slander (oral or verbal) or libel (written or posted comments) about another person
- lodging complaints against others rather than speaking to them directly
- Licensing Board examples: complaints (albeit valid ones) lodged by a specialist in the same area of practice because the other person is more successful
- Social media example: Facebook
- engaging in reaction formation by sexualizing neutral comments of others
- vicarious curiosity in working with sexual trauma patients
- professional voyeurism, which involves seeking information beyond the need to know
- encouraging the confession of sexual secrets, whether in the confessional booth or the psychotherapist's office
- inappropriate hugging or touching of a client or congregant
- covert sexualized thoughts about another person
- overt sexual impropriety
- Licensing Board examples: sexual impropriety which, when involving religious priests or secular priests (i.e., psychotherapists) is the worst form of professional incest
- Social media example: Tinder

**5. Lust** derives from *luxuria* (intense desire) and *fornicatio* (fornication). It is an intense or excessive desire for an object (sexuality, money, power) while already having a significant amount of it. *Luxuria* is based on *want* rather than actual *need*.

- lust is an excessive desire, whose goal is gaining pleasure for oneself, which contrasts to passion, which is intense love, enthusiasm, or excitement directed towards another person or activity
- lust is negative demotivational energy, whereas passion is positive motivational energy
- unrealistic expectation that hedonic pleasures will lead to happiness
- hedonism or “How good does it feel?” (Kelly, 2002)

**6. Gluttony** derives from *gula* (from Latin *gluttire*, “to gulp or swallow”) means over-indulgence and over-consumption of food, drink, or wealth items—particularly as status symbols. It is especially considered a sin—a major vice—if the excessive desire for food causes it to be withheld from the needy.

- eating too much or more than needed
- poor management of body weight
- eating during classes or counseling sessions
- skipping meals, which can be a form of reverse gluttony
- drinking coffee during therapy sessions
- bingeing or purging
- process addictions
- substance abuse
- Licensing Board examples: driving while intoxicated, practicing a profession with a hangover, falsifying or forging a prescription, substance use

- Social media example: Yelp

**7. Sloth** derives from *ascedia* (discouragement) or *socordia* (laziness). Interestingly, sloth is considered to be the only sin of omission. It is a sin of the omission of desire or performance.

- carelessness, negligence, or laziness
- passive dependency on others to do the work or carry the load
- procrastination of assignments or tasks
- indifference to one's commitments, duties, or obligations
- neglecting responsibilities (e.g., not replying to emails, missing meetings)
- citation bias (e.g., confirmation bias rather than critical analysis)
- minimalism or "What's the least I can do?" (Kelly, 2002)
- expectations that others will carry the load or do the work (i.e., committee assignments, group or team projects)
- using secondary sources rather than accessing and reading primary sources
- citation of articles without having read them
- allowing others to do all the work on a group or team assignment
- expecting others to bear the cost of a work assignment that benefits us
- failure to complete reports in a timely manner
- assignment crises (failing to complete an assignment because an "emergency" occurs at the last minute)
- making excuses for not meeting deadlines
- failure to review the literature on a topic
- leaving internship or supervised work setting early
- arriving late to class, internship, or for office appointments
- forgetting an assignment or appointment

- using another person's slide deck rather than developing one's own presentation
- Licensing Board examples: negligence, use of obsolete or out of date tests or therapy methods, forgetting to renew a membership, letting a license lapse, practicing after a license has lapsed or expired
- Social media example: Netflix

## Seven Cardinal Virtues

**1. Humility** is the virtue that provides a counterbalance to the sin of Pride.

- ✓ being humble
- ✓ showing respect to others
- ✓ asking for help from others
- ✓ expressing accurate empathy
- ✓ giving credit where credit is due
- ✓ being flexible and letting go of the need to control others
- ✓ accepting—rather than judging—others
- ✓ practicing anonymity can be a way of cultivating humility
- ✓ showing respect by using a professional's title or rank when referring to the person
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: being respectful of others in authority

**2. Charity (Generosity)** provides an answer to Greed. In the *Book of Wisdom*, it is known as The Common Good.

- ✓ being generous
- ✓ providing pro bono services
- ✓ giving anonymously to charities
- ✓ being generous with time on the clock
- ✓ giving without expectation of return
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: striving for excellence in best practices

**3. Patience** provides an antidote to the sin of Wrath. In the *Book of Wisdom*, this virtue relates to Prudence.

- ✓ being patient
- ✓ letting go of resentments
- ✓ being comfortable with silence
- ✓ waiting and listening attentively
- ✓ showing endurance and forbearance
- ✓ having realistic expectations about time

- ✓ forgiving others without saying anything (unless asked by them)
- ✓ forgiving myself for judging the actions of others
- ✓ allowing others to experience their choices (i.e., loving detachment)
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: avoiding pushing for outcomes

**4. Kindness** is the virtue that can overcome Envy. In the *Book of Wisdom*, this virtue is related to Justice. Kindness has little or nothing to do with being “nice” but it has everything to do with the three Cs of being caring, concerned, and compassionate toward others.

- ✓ being kind
- ✓ being thankful
- ✓ begin thoughtful
- ✓ practicing gratitude
- ✓ showing compassion
- ✓ being grateful for what I have
- ✓ expressing appreciation to others
- ✓ showing empathy and compassion
- ✓ being aware of what I have that I did not earn (grace)
- ✓ being aware of what I do not have to bear (aka, “negative grace”)
- ✓ being fair and impartial with others (justice)
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: speaking in a kind voice, expressing appreciation

**5. Chastity** provides proper boundaries for controlling Lust.

- ✓ being pure
- ✓ being a safe person (e.g., LGBT)
- ✓ providing a safe office environment
- ✓ avoiding sexist language or slurs
- ✓ maintaining clear and firm boundaries
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: respecting proper boundaries)

**Summary**

**6. Moderation (Temperance)** controls the insatiable appetite of Gluttony. In the *Book of Wisdom* 8:7, this virtue is known as Temperance.

- ✓ being moderate
- ✓ maintaining a healthy bodyweight
- ✓ exercising restraint and self-regulation
- ✓ avoiding eating in the office between sessions
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: avoid eating lunch during an oral examination or investigative interview

**7. Diligence** combats Sloth. In the *Book of Wisdom*, this virtue is related to Fortitude.

- ✓ being diligent
- ✓ willingness
- ✓ perseverance
- ✓ showing effort
- ✓ taking the lead
- ✓ displaying initiative
- ✓ admitting a mistake
- ✓ showing persistence
- ✓ keeping a commitment
- ✓ being careful and conscientious
- ✓ making amends when there is a mistake
- ✓ editing and proofing articles and papers
- ✓ Licensing Board example: making amends for mistakes

<b>Vices</b>	<b>Virtues</b>
Pride	Humility
Greed	Generosity
Wrath	Patience
Envy	Kindness
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Moderation
Sloth	Diligence



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### Notes

The Book of Wisdom (aka, the Wisdom of Solomon), is a Jewish work written in Greek and most likely composed in Alexandria, Egypt. It is generally dated to the mid-first century BCE. It is one of the seven Sapiential (“wisdom”) books in the Septuagint (i.e., Greek version of the Old Testament), along with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Song of Solomon), Job, and Sirach. It is included in the *anagignoskomena* (Greek, “those which are to be read” aloud to a gathering) of the Eastern Orthodox Church and it is included in the deuterocanonical books by the Roman Catholic Church. Most Protestant denominations consider it part of the Apocrypha (Greek, “the hidden” [things]), which consists of biblical books received by the early Church as part of the Greek version of the Old Testament, but not included in the Hebrew Bible. The Septuagint was excluded by the non-Hellenistic Jews from their biblical canon.

**Karl Augustus Menninger** (1893-1990), an American psychiatrist and a member of the Menninger family of psychiatrists, founded the Menninger Foundation and the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. Published when he was 80 years old, Menninger came to believe that the term *sin* would be replaced with medical and psychiatric terms such as illness, disorder, and dysfunction. He hypothesized that the moral concept of sin would become increasingly irrelevant and that explanations of wrongdoing would be replaced by rationalizations that excused individual accountability and responsibility. Eventually, the human condition would be explained away as a product of biochemistry and childhood experiences (including trauma). In retrospect, Menninger seems like a psychiatric prophet in his prediction of the biologicalization of morality.

**Father Dominic Prümmer** first published his *Handbook of Moral Theology* in 1921. Translated and edited several times since its original publication, it has served as a reference book for generations of seminarians and confessors.

**Father William Saunders** is pastor of Our Lady of Hope parish in Potomac Falls, Virginia. He is dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College. His article entitled “What are capital sins” was in a column he wrote for the *Arlington Catholic Herald*. With permission from *Arlington Catholic Herald*, the article has been reprinted and is available at the Catholic Education Resource Center (<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/what-are-capital-sins.html>).

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