

SLOTH: CONTEMPORARY CANDIDATES

Introduction:

Contrary to typical practice this **quiz** about sloth will come at the outset of the talk instead of the end. As a way to deal with the **stereotypes** of sin, I'll ask you to identify two Presidents alluded to in quips made about them during their times.

Two Presidents: William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge

What I would like to do this morning is **trace a path** from contemporary notions of sin through at least one of the UU principles (inherent worth and dignity) -- offering my opposition to that principle -- setting it into some sort of balance, in passing, to propose some better options of sins for today -- hypocrisy comes to mind -- and moving to sloth in particular, asking whether there aren't some ready to hand versions awaiting us on that path, uncovered with the assistance of another perennial virtue, self-examination.

Foundation: Liberal religion has thrown out with **the bathwater of 'sin'**, the baby, the bathtub, and ripped out the plumbing. In its denial of evil it finds itself handicapped in its assessment of the contemporary world. It is able to understand neither humanity, nor its place in the world. Without a profound grasp of human evil it will remain irrelevant, even when notions of 'original sin' have been discarded.

UU principle in doubt

The first principle of UUism, and of liberal religion in general, is affirmation of **the inherent worth and dignity** of every person. "We believe in" is our recitation. I **disagree**; this is an imbalanced and crude assessment of our natures. And I hope my argument will lend substance to this disagreement.

Current concepts

Recent years have seen a mild resurgence of interest in these seven deadly one: OUP has published a book length series, for example. Increased interest in these

seven is illustrated in JG Millspaugh's article of 2007 (CLF Quest), in which he lists **some current UU sins**: wanderlust (keep moving), hypocrisy, intellectualism, stinginess, pollyannaism, egotism, and irrelevance. In view of our topic, sloth, the failure to engage evils is most related, **pollyannaism**. What's remarkable about his list – sin 'lite' – is how ubiquitous to many religious practices today these are: think of hypocrisy, egotism, irrelevance, wanderlust. A sort of blind optimism seems to fit our situation, which can range in a faith in scientific or moral progress to a focus on the positive elements within the circle of our community. One **weakness of liberal religion** is surely to think it is **only** some persons who are evil, capable of evil.

Questions: contemporary candidates

My purpose today is partly to **pose questions**, using the now archaic concept of the sin of sloth to elicit potential stand-ins more telling of the times we live in. Those stereotypes are no longer, if ever, nearly adequate to the matter.

The last revision of my discussion on the sin of sloth was written during a week-long volunteer trail crew on the iconic Colorado Trail – not a place where sloth is evident or even thought about. What it does bring to mind is the common and contrary imagery of American life, that of overwork, not under work; any notion of laziness of any form runs counter to the fact and the ideology of our national tendency to work harder and longer (to what purpose?)

Let's question ourselves about these possibilities, these slothful look-alikes.

Self-satisfaction, self-righteousness

Adherents of liberal religion find it facile to point out the inconsistencies and inexplicable self-righteousness of other religious practitioners, but direct the gaze inwardly – not so often or so tellingly. Do we fit that description?

Tolerance

It may be that our myriad self-deceptions today stand in for sloth: pleading ignorance, claiming victim status, appropriating righteousness or moral cleanliness – these are far more prevalent than we would admit. Turn now to the easy tolerance of don't ask, don't tell; don't ask who is my neighbor, don't tell how I have treated her. I'm OK, you're OK; but we're not. That we are OK is an end point, not a starting point, an ideal or goal. Are we too quick to respond, 'don't be judgmental?'

Entertainment-mind

Tuning out is easily understood, confronted with the overload of social and personal issues. You each can give ready examples, and I will leave you to elaborate. Can the pursuit of entertainment, distraction, diversion, through film or music or game playing or spectatorship, be an invitation to a sloth-like existence?

Cynicism, defeatism

There seem to be two – at least – kinds of cynicism: the one typified by the politician who, despite other convictions, tells his constituency what it wants to hear, and the other, exemplified by the constituent who has surrendered any hope in the political system, refusing involvement out of a deep hopelessness. The latter defeatist attitude seems closer to sloth than the former, although the two share a broad kinship as modes of disengagement, as loss of hope.

Victimization

In each of these candidacies, let us place ourselves in an ethical stance, asking whether we personally place ourselves in the situation, not whether we see this positioning in others. If one sees oneself as a victim, ask first whether this is an easy mindset, a means to avoid responsibility for one's action.

Retreat within oneself

. . . 'the sin of sloth is a state of dejection, giving rise to torpor of mind, feeling and spirit ' states Henry Fairlie, longtime social critic at The New Republic. Most of the recipes of the human potential movement and self-actualization schemes are prescriptions of emotional and spiritual sloth, he claims. We are turned inward to **delight in our own experiencing**. The most monstrous falsehood is the belief that the individual can find fulfillment or salvation in nothing other than his or her own self, denying that we are members one of another. He goes on to lament that most people will not willingly surrender themselves to some cause or calling or someone else valued beyond their own selfish gratification. Too many spiritual exercises or devotional practices are ways of isolation. Fairlie's rant may be excessive – he centers most of what he finds wrong about late twentieth century America in California – but he raised the issue of 'cheap' spiritual practice, or practices masquerading as spiritual which service only to self-satisfaction. Do we substitute a cheap psychology in the place of self-examination? Another candidate for contemporary sloth?

Indifference

Indifference seems a likely candidate. When we remain unaffected by the plight of a neighbor, by a famine in Sudan, by a monsoon in Myanmar – these are examples of common occurrences – what is happening? Are we distracted by more immediate concerns? Are we fatigued by the torrent of events that demand our finite attention? Do we willfully turn away, or do we fail to grasp the demand through (relative) ignorance, lack of familiarity? Do we mute the demand like an unwanted television advertisement?

In a rare case indifference is a pattern of existence, a 'life style', but in most instances it appears to be the outcome of other, more fundamental

urges or traits – ignorance, ennui, fatigue. In the end, though, indifference may serve as a stand-in for sloth, bears resemblances to it, overlaps with it.

Our culture is so bent on the tendency not to accept claims at face value, but, to (over)interpret their hidden or secret meanings, resulting in a social indifference to those claims. Our **obsession with suspicion** with motives parallels our prevalent indifference in the face of suffering of others, especially distant others. It is easy for us to remain skeptical bystanders; and we must ask whether the perspective of spectator doesn't approximate that of perpetrator.

So, then, we've elicited indifference, interior retreat, victimization, cynicism, entertainment, tolerance, self-satisfaction, in a very quick overview.

Themes among these candidates

What are the themes that resonate with our possibilities, our sloth look-alikes? Perhaps self-deception, nonresponsibility, irresponsibility? Avoidance of involvement? Disengagement? Sin today has been described by others: banality, hypocrisy, failure of self-criticism, toleration. Not to worry?

Virtues:

Are there modern virtues that might correspond to these?
Strength of courage? Self-examination? Prophetic voice?

The counterweight to defeatist attitudes about social justice, for example, is moral outrage. Here 'outrage' connotes the ethical aspect of an 'anger', in reaction to social evils; a deadly sin 'anger' as a virtue in context.

Summary: human evil

Evil is **not an inviting subject**, at least not in the sense of most of the presentations in this series. Its contemplation tends to evoke pity, or anger, or fear, or suspicion of curiosity, titillation, schadenfreude. Yet these unpleasant emotions should not deter us. For evil, whatever its nature, or its place in our interior selves may be, is a **formidable obstacle** to human well being. If we care about humanity – return to those principles – **we must face evil**.

Then, we ought to bring a solid sense of human evil, or our limits, our finiteness, but also our **universal capacity for evil doing**, to the center of our liberal faith: in no other way can we proceed toward an honest search for truth and meaning. Without this central (self)-understanding we cannot pursue personal integrity and/or social justice. Our guides, our prompts, our exemplars in this 21st century understanding will not be the **tortured list makers** of early monastic practice, but post-Enlightenment artists and writers and heroes: Jean Paul Sartre, Pablo Neruda, William Golding, Paul Celan, Hannah Arendt, Reinhold Niebuhr, Susan Neiman, Soren Kierkegaard, Zygmunt Bauman, Eugene O'Neill, Arne Vetlesen, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Arthur Miller. Add your own names.

Again, the recognition of human evil will encompass the spectrum of evils – greater or lesser – and, in distinction from medieval lists, will include those evils we engender **collectively**. Evil is not (only) a solitary enterprise, and ethics is not an activity of isolated individuals, despite the awareness that moral decisions are always in the first instance, choices of single ethical agents. All of the possible varieties of sloth mentioned are collective and social phenomenon.

What I have proposed is a sort of **thesaurus** of sloth, seeking, if not precisely synonyms for the word, clusters or families of meanings and resemblances of the concept, then asking what evils underlie these clusters, what relationships to human evil they suggest to us. Finally, we asked what commonality resides in these precipitates of meaning: indolence, laziness of body, of mind, of spirit, and

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we urged an understanding of our universal humanity that acknowledges human evil. Finally, did we raise some questions?