THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS TODAY
THE FACT OF SIN

TO RAISE THE subject of sin is to provoke the interest and usually the humor of everyone; it is also to discover how limited is the range of humor on the subject. People seem compelled to try to be funny about sin, but the jokes are only variations on the theme that sin is fun, and of course that Lust especially is fun. There are some attempts at merriment about Gluttony, and to a lesser extent about Avarice and Sloth, but there the humor begins to falter. No one seems able to take Envy lightly, the thought of Anger is discomfitting, and that Pride is counted a sin causes mainly bewilderment. Everyone is responding differently to the “warm, disreputable” sins and to the “cold, respectable” ones.

But what is interesting is that when people are brought face to face with a sin, such as Envy, to which they are not willing to admit, they turn to look again at the sins, such as Lust, of which they were at first eager to boast. What has happened is that they have been made to confront the idea of sin itself—not of particular sins, lapses in our conduct that may not seem to count for much, but the fact of sin—and it is at this point that one realizes that, even in a secular age, we need to keep the idea of sin. Even the weakness of this statement, if left as it is, is characteristic of our own times. What it half-heartedly says is that, although we may not believe that sin exists, we nevertheless need to keep its shadow, just as we might say that, although we may not believe that God exists, we still need to keep his shadow. We must speak more directly. We sin.
We are not exempt from sinning simply because we do not believe that the willful violation of our humanity is no less a willful violation of our life in God; and even the most irreligious among us can have some idea of what that concept means. When a theologian says that "in each of the sins, a man acts in such a way as to make his relationship to God precarious, frightened, suspicion-laden, deceitful," it is not impossible for the irreligious to understand what he is saying, as they can also understand when he adds that "sin is what a man is compelled to confess to God because his action has placed him in a crisis before God." Certainly if one has no inkling of what he is talking about, one will understand why sin is more than moral evil, why it is commonly described as infidelity, why it has been said that sin is less like the act of a criminal than the act of a traitor. Betrayal and self-betrayal are in the substance of sin, and for the traitor there is rarely a way back. "As you have destroyed your life in this city," says Cavafy in a terrible line, "you have ruined it in the rest of the world."

One does not like to begin on so alarming a note. The prospect at once seems so desolate. One can almost hear the readers closing the book and turning quickly to panaceas that are less exacting. But if it seems so desolate, it can only be because the idea of sin, when we are forced to confront it, at once places its finger on something in ourselves of which we are aware, and of which we do not like to be reminded, when there are so many easier explanations to hand. If we fear what the idea of sin tells us of ourselves, it is because we fear ourselves.

Sin is the destruction of one's self as well as the destruction of one's relationships with others. But the fearfulness of the destruction cannot be grasped unless we realize that the damage is done precisely where each of our natures is organized by some unifying principle that is more than its parts, where there is something unknowable in us, which we nevertheless know to be most completely ourselves and with which we have each to form our own relationship:

*Below the surface stream, shallow and light,  
Of what we say we feel—below the stream.  
As light, of what we think we feel, there flows  
With noiseless current, strong, obscure and deep.  
The central stream of what we feel indeed.*

This is where sin causes its devastation in us, at the very core of our beings, where life's flow is this noiseless, strong, deep, obscure current in us; and if to talk of God helps to reinforce our awareness of how deeply our personalities lie within us, and how severely we violate them when we sin, then the unbelieving may sometimes use His name without taking it in vain. At least we still vaguely understand it.

But in their secularization of everything else, the unbelieving must be careful not to secularize God. He is more than an Idea. He is more than the Word. He is more than Logos. There are too many unbelievers today—many of them even in our temples and churches—who take His name in vain. Perhaps no one sins more outrageously in our age, or is more characteristic of the slackness we tolerate, than the priest and the theologian who reduce God to no more than a concept but insist that they believe enough to remain members of their church or temple. They are making it awkward to be an atheist. Apparently one may now deny the teachings of Christianity—even a teaching as fundamental as the divinity of Christ, as some theologians have done at Oxford in the past year—and yet reserve the privilege of calling oneself a Christian. Why stand outside the doors of the church as an atheist, and think gravely of the falsehoods preached within that one feels compelled to combat, when all the time one could just step inside and in God's own house preach against them in His name? To
deny that God is a Being and reduce Him to a mere concept, a figment of our making, a shadow of Himself, may leave one still a religious man in a trivial way, but it does not leave one a believing Jew or a believing Christian.

These essays are addressed to a secular age by someone who may best describe himself as a reluctant unbeliever. A Christian friend who read the first draft of them said that their accent was one of reverent disbelief. It is not a comfortable position to be in. Certainly it has few consolations. One lives with a hole in one’s life, and the emptiness is ever-present, because one is so aware of it. Yet one cannot just fill it at one’s wish and is certainly not willing to fill it with any flotsam that lies to hand, the wreckage of the beliefs in which one was raised, or of others to which one has leaned. There are those who are unable to believe, and are condemned eventually to hardly the most congenial circle of hell, while those who did not enjoy the opportunity to believe loll about in the relative ease and lack of discomfort of limbo. Perhaps one is among them, willful in one’s refusal of grace, too proud to believe. But even if this is one’s condition, one may still be allowed to say that it is important that we understand that we sin, and that we are able to say that we do. Lack of faith may itself, after all, be evidence of the sin of Sloth.

Sometimes even the unbeliever finds it difficult to talk in any but “religious” terms of that transcendent Other that all of us feel lies beyond the grasp of our everyday senses. We are not insensitive to what are conceived to be the divine attributes—infinity and eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, and unity—at work in creation and in ourselves. And when we attend to the deepest parts of our being, we find that our humanity can in the end only be defined, whether we like it or not, in terms of something that lies beyond it, and that is of deep significance to us.

When we read the views of today’s agnostics or atheists in a magazine such as the Humanist, their picture of human nature seems too dessicated and certainly too mechanical. We are reduced to things of pulleys and levers. Pull this one or that one, and this or that will happen. If many people are today attracted to feeble and unexacting forms of Eastern religions, if they talk trivially of mystical experiences that they pathetically imagine they have had, if astrology has returned as more than a jape in popular magazines and newspapers, it is partly because this shriveled concept of human nature has been found woefully inadequate. These follies are of course no improvement. They are a reaction. But the unbeliever who is modest has the need, and must even be allowed the right, to reach to the insights of his own civilization, not least of its theologies, to express what otherwise he is unable to utter or explain.

Although the sins are abundantly and vividly and, one may say, riotously described in the Old Testament, and although there are dire warnings against them in the New Testament, the idea of sin is preeminently a construction of Christian theology. One is immediately aware of this when one tries to describe any sin individually, searching for the point, to which one must always reach, at which it is clear that more than moral evil is being described. When one thinks of it, this is unavoidable. The definition of sin in Christian theology was part of its tremendous redefinition of human personality over the centuries. Since that redefinition, none other has taken us much further.

In the Middle Ages and even in what we used mistakenly to call the Dark Ages, our concept of human personality was continually expanded by the models, as we would now call them, with which Christian theology went about its work. It was a superb intellectual construction, but it was also a superb imaginative construction, as the vitality of its symbolism testifies in its art and
literature. The idea of sin in general, and of the Seven Deadly Sins in particular, would not have taken so deep or strong a hold if they had not reflected a concept of human personality and its potentialities, both for good and for evil, that was being ceaselessly widened and deepened. In order to conceive the terrible destructiveness of sin, it was first necessary that our whole natures should have been conceived as so rich and intricate that there is something in them that can be terribly destroyed.

We have said that sin is more like the act of a traitor than the act of a criminal. In primitive societies the distinction was not really made. Sinning was the violation of tribal laws and customs. Attention was given to it as an outward act and not an inner inclination. Early societies were concerned mostly with the consequences of individual sins and did not yet have any notion of sin as such, something that lies within us, an ineradicable part of our human natures. We have only to turn to the Greek tragedies to recognize that, however profoundly they searched out human motives and confronted the facts of good and evil, there was something that in the end they did not explore. The evil of men in them is still law-defying. The evil men and women are criminals, who violate the laws of men and gods. But by the time we reach Shakespeare, sin is life-betraying. In his plays we are with traitors, who are unfaithful as well as disobedient. God has become more than his laws, as is of course most obvious in Dante, and although Shakespeare can hardly be described as a Christian writer, one thing that had intervened in the course of the centuries was the Christian vision of man, and it informed his own vision.

The Christian vision had built on another tradition, the story of the tribes of Israel. In the Old Testament the inner inclination to sin is already being explored. If sin is "what a man is compelled to confess to God," that voice is to be found throughout the Old Testament, as in the cry of the psalmist, "Against thee, and thee only, have I sinned," a confession that is made without the threat of divine punishment. It is the cry of a betrayer who repents his treachery. Joseph was thinking of neither divine nor human punishment when his master's wife entreated him to lie with her, and he replied that, since the pharaoh had entrusted him with his household, and kept nothing from him except she who was his wife, how could he do such a great wickedness and sin against God? At this point, the trust he returns to his master and the trust he returns to God have become one and the same; sin is established as an act of infidelity and not only of disobedience, of a traitor and not only of a criminal.

In the Oresteia, when the oracle prescribes that Agamemnon should sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, he does so, and the gods do not intervene to stop him. In the Old Testament, when God prescribes that Abraham should sacrifice his son Isaac, he prepares to do so, but God intervenes and stays his hands. Obedience to the divine will is strong in both stories, but in the Old Testament another factor has entered. To the justice of the gods is added the love of God, and the whole relationship of man with God is radically different. The gods had a destiny for Agamemnon, that he should be punished for the terrible crimes of the house of Atreus, and that destiny must be played out even at the cost of Iphigenia's life. But the destiny of Abraham is left open as the love of God works in him. His intuition of God's will is that Isaac should not be sacrificed, and the question of individual responsibility is at once raised to a different plane; raised with it is the question of sin.

There is still a great deal of legalism in the Old Testament idea of sin. The emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount is very different from that in the commandments that Moses brought down from Sinai. The commandments have been translated into beatitudes. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," is not a
sentence one could read in the Old Testament without a jolt, but by the time we reach it in the New Testament, we have been prepared for it. It is set in the context of the rest of Christ’s life and teaching. Without that example the sentence carries little conviction, for there is no evidence that the meek do or ever will inherit the earth. We have been turned away from a concern merely with our outward acts, to contemplate what lies most deep in our innermost selves, hidden from all but ourselves and God; the corruption that is wrought there by our sinning; the disabling of our whole natures so that we diminish even our freedom as human beings; and the suppression in us—even the unbelievers among us—of all that we may reasonably call divine.

This is a tremendous expansion of our idea of human personality, and when we turn to the great doctors of the early church, we halt at words that are hardly to be found elsewhere. “Penitence is the mourning of man for the sin that he has done,” says St. Ambrose, “and the resolve to do no more anything for which he ought to mourn.” It is we that sorrow at our own sinning and, if we truly are repentant, our contrition “shall be heavy and grievous,” says St. Bernard, “sharp and poignant in the heart.” We do not sorrow at the punishment of God or men, but in ourselves that we have sinned. As St. Augustine said, in the words placed at the head of these essays, Peccatum poena peccati, “sin is the punishment of sin.” There is no other formulation of the problem of human good and evil that so drives us back to our individual responsibility for our choices and to so vital an affirmation of our freedom as moral beings.

The classification of the Seven Deadly Sins had its origins in the monastic movement. “The list was first framed in the cloisters of the Eastern Church,” and in the East it was and it “has always remained essentially a list of the vices besetting the monastic life.” Even if that were all, we could not shrug them off. Perhaps one of the most unexpected facts about the pioneers of the monastic movements is the way in which many of them “plumbed the depths of the human heart in a way rarely equaled since.” But perhaps we should expect it. If one is concerned to escape the temptations of the world, in order to devote one’s life exclusively to the service and worship of God, one is likely to be acutely aware of what those temptations are and of our human frailty in face of them. Monks and nuns have a considerable amount of time in which to contemplate the ways of the world on which they have turned their backs, as well as the longings and temptations by which their flesh and spirit are still encumbered in the cloister and the cell.

One may say in passing that few things are more characteristic of our times than that the choice of monastic life is regarded as evidence of some kind of psychological disorder in those who take its vows. We all have to choose what parts of ourselves we will develop—we cannot be everything that we may be capable of being—but if some people choose to set aside their sexuality we think they are peculiar. Every popular movie about a nun’s life makes it seem as if the novice who decides to leave the convent is healthy-minded, whereas the sisters whom she leaves behind are obviously women who have shriveled the most important part of their beings. Yet there is ample evidence, from their literature over the centuries, that those who have chosen the monastic life, men and women, are at least as fully developed as human beings, and suffer from as few or as many disorders, as those who have remained outside in the world.

Our unwillingness and inability to understand the monastic life extends even to the outside world. We have reached the stage of regarding a virgin as not quite healthy. She is certainly thought to be peculiar. Even some of the propaganda of Women’s Liberation has, in its missionary emphasis on what it thinks of as sexual
liberation, hardly been careful of preserving the reality of sexual choice, which must include the right to choose not to develop one's sexuality, no less if one is a man than if one is a woman. Why should men or women not decide, whether in a monastery or convent or not, that sexual activity is not the expression of their personalities in which they are most interested, or the pursuit to which they are most inclined to devote their lives? The flying nun may soon be thought to be one who performs the sexual act on a trapeze, and the vast contribution of the monastic movement to our civilization be neglected.

It was the ascetic, John Cassian of Marseilles, who introduced the rules of Eastern monasticism to the West, and with them the notion of the (eight) deadly sins. It was not the list as we know it today, but it was later modified by Gregory the Great, and it is Gregory's list that has prevailed. But the idea owes more to the great pope than that. He so defined the sins that they were "able to serve as a classification of the normal perils of the soul in the ordinary conditions of life," and not merely as a list of the temptations that those in the monastic life must resist. In the Middle Ages the perils of the sins were preached intensively, and in England at the end of the fourteenth century, Archbishop Peckham ordered every priest who had the cure of souls to expound "the Seven Deadly Sins and their branches" four times a year "in the vulgar tongue without any fantastical imagination or any manner [of] subtlety or curiosity."

We are fortunate to have such an exposition, eloquently rendered and yet "without fantastical imagination," in the "Parson's Tale" in the Canterbury Tales of Chaucer. Unlike some other representatives of the church in his tales, the Parson was a good and humble man, and Chaucer lets him give a straightforward sermon that is still compelling from start to finish. Its brilliance lies in the way in which the deadly sins are related to our day-to-day life. If it is the greatness of Dante that he lays bare our souls in his exposition of the sins, it is no less the greatness of Chaucer that he lays bare our conduct. Written about eight centuries after Gregory the Great, the "Parson's Tale" is far from being a monastic rule. We are asked to consider the extravagance of our clothing, the greediness of landlords, the richness of our food, the deceit of merchants, the raising of our children, the backbiting of gossips, and much more in the same vein—all of them examples from our ordinary behavior, no less relevant now than six hundred years ago. The vitality of the sermon lies in the fact that it is as forceful a demonstration as one could ask of the light that is thrown on our conduct by the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins. We might be listening with the pilgrims, but still we can find ourselves in his words.

Chaucer puts the sins in the same order as Gregory—to that we will come—but there is something at least as important as the order. The Seven Deadly Sins are "all leashed together," says the Parson; they are "the trunk of the tree from which others branch." This is the answer to those who ask, "Why these seven?" and not others of which they are acutely aware. For of course the others are included, the "branches" of the seven, and the more one explores the traditional classification, the more one finds that, not only is no other classification needed, but that none other will suffice as well. It is the interlocking that matters, the fact that the deadly sins are all leashed together, and it is this that is emphasized in the traditional classification. There are not simply all the individual sins we can count, of which we are guilty in one degree or another, there are these seven capital sins that lie deeply rooted in our natures. Faced by the descriptions of them, we know that we elude none. It becomes less easy for us to claim that, like the curate's egg, we are good in parts, guilty perhaps of Sin One, to some extent of Sin Four and Sin Six, and of course Sin Seven, but innocent of the rest and so, on balance, not all that bad a
person after all. The cunning of this kind of self-absolution is obvious, and what we are forced to do, by the idea of the Seven Deadly Sins, is to try to avoid this shallowness and instead to take responsibility for our whole natures and seek to know them in all their intricateness.

Cruelty, for example, is a sin. But if we think of it only as a sin on its own, it is comparatively easy for us to say that we are not often cruel. Not many of us are torturers, consciously and deliberately cruel to others, in temper or in practice. But if we realize that each of the Seven Deadly Sins can cause us to be cruel, we at once recognize that we are probably cruel more often than we think. We may admit to being avaricious or lustful—such admissions are easy enough to make from time to time—but how often do we stop to think that our Avarice or Lust—like all the rest of the capital sins—is likely to cause us to be cruel? When we look at it in this way, cruelty ceases to be an individual act, which may be explained if not excused by the circumstances; it becomes a deep inclination in us, something of which we are capable in many ways, that has its origins in these strong impulses of our natures.

It is being suggested on all sides today that, in a rather simple-minded way, we may just love each other as we are, without much being expected on either side. But the truth is that there is a great deal of emotional “ripping off”—licensed cruelty—in these easy-going relationships that is ignored. Someone is still likely to get hurt in them, however little may seem to have been asked, because it is difficult to prevent some human feeling from being aroused and so laid open to bruising and pain. People who expect and ask little of others will usually be found to expect and ask little of themselves. They will expect to have to give little, if to giving anything at all. They will in particular not expect to have to correct any of the Pride, or Envy, or Anger, or Avarice, or Gluttony, or Sloth, or Lust, with which they are bound sometimes to hurt the other person. The excuses have been built in too easily: “I expect little of you, you expect little of me; I promise you nothing, you promise me nothing; so neither of us can hurt the other, or accuse the other of hurting.” But if one gazes on such a relationship as it crumbles, as crumble it will, one usually sees that someone has been hurt, although he or she may flippily dismiss the pain to hide the weal across the face, as if the stricken heart may not cry its suffering aloud.

If we do not take seriously our capacity for evil, we are unable to take seriously our capacity for good. Both become little more than coincidences, the result of our genes and our psychology and our environment, for which our responsibility is unclear. Just as we can be little blamed for the evil we do, so we are as little entitled to take credit for the good. The concept of the Seven Deadly Sins has at least this to be said for it: that it does not allow us to compartmentalize our lives, any more than it lets us imagine that we can sin in compartments. It presents us each with the ultimate being that is wholly ourselves, beyond the influence of our genes and our psychology and our environment, for which ultimately and inescapably we are alone responsible. There is something enlivening in this, which reminds us that our lives, to a degree that counts, are always ours to make; that we may still choose to be more whole; that there is more and better in us, on which we can call, than we have so far chosen to become. The understanding that we sin is a summons to life.

It is characteristic of our age that people want to have God but do not want to have the Devil. People are inventing gods for themselves, with what I have elsewhere called their Do-It-Yourself God Kits. But they are gods who do not demand much of them, and they certainly are not gods who punish, although they are called to reward. On the contrary, their gods absolve them from
conflict and doubt, massage them, pat them on the head, and, rather like their parents, tell them to run along, get stoned if they will, pick marigolds, and love. So easy it is to love! But above all they are gods who will not trouble them with the fact of evil. The problems of evil, suffering, and death are not confronted, but evaded and dismissed. The recipes are too easy. Twenty minutes of transcendental meditation, or of mindlessly chanting the name of god, or of simply standing on one's head, and the thing is done: One is again made whole, at peace with the world, with one's fellows, and of course with oneself. Universal harmony has never been offered so cheaply before.

Unfortunately, the Devil is cleverer than any guru. God may move in a mysterious way His wonders to perform, but the Devil moves in ingenious ones to accomplish his victories. He is rather like a hotel burglar, who goes down the corridor trying all the doors, until he finds one that is unlocked. "Resist the Devil," says the New Testament, "and he will flee you." Perhaps he will. But he is not easily locked out; he has too many passkeys. "The Devil is a gentleman," said Shelley, which is interesting as a comment on gentlemen but no less interesting about the Devil, because he often has the most civil manners and comes with impeccable letters of introduction. He was himself, after all, rather well-born, and, like the younger son of a good family who has fallen on bad times, he is very adept at insinuating himself into the best of company. His usual accent in literature, as in The Screwtape Letters, is one of exceptional civility; Screwtape in fact writes very much like a don at Magdalene.

"The Devil's cleverest wile is to convince us that he does not exist," said Baudelaire. This is not as difficult for him as one might suppose, since he is inside us already, and we do not care to look for him there. James Hogg wrote a long unknown, and still little known, novel in the eighteenth century. The Confessions of a Justified Sinner, in which the hero (if he may be called that) encounters a stranger one day, who engages him in conversation and then became his fast friend. This friend materializes from nowhere, as when the two first met, and disappears as promptly and mysteriously. He leads the hero from corruption to corruption, until the final evil-doing and catastrophe, always with the justifications to hand that in the end make "the justified sinner" of the title. He is of course the Devil, encountered not outside the hero, but inside him, materializing when it is opportune, when the resistance to temptation is weakest. The story is full of illuminations, of which perhaps the most pleasing and instructive is the civility with which the Devil addresses the hero, as if gentleman was indeed speaking to gentleman. His address is irrefutable.

We can recognize evil in others, but if we wish to look on the face of sin, we will see it most clearly in ourselves. It cannot always be recognized or measured by its visible consequences. The face of Dorian Gray did not change where it could be seen; it changed only in the portrait in the attic of which only he knew. He could not hide his sin from himself. Sin is our secret from others. Only we know where, and how deeply, it has taken root in us. Although it is a universal presence in the world, although we know that others sin as well as ourselves, every discussion of it must proceed outward from ourselves. We learn more about the nature of sin from St. Augustine in his Confessions than in all the volumes of The City of God. The essays that follow are not confessions, although there are presumably some traces, not all of which one hopes are hypocritical, of one's own acquaintance with sin. They are written from the conviction that, as individuals and societies, we are trifling with the fact that sin exists, and that its power to destroy is as great as ever; from the belief that much of the recklessness and triviality, dejection and faintheartedness, wasting and
corruption, which we now feel around us, in our personal lives but also in our common lives, have their source exactly where we do not choose to look.

"If we say we have no sin," said St. John the Evangelist, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." If we do not acknowledge its presence in us, we abandon such resistance as we might offer, even before the struggle has begun. We leave our door unlocked to the burglar. "An idle man is like a house that has no walls," says the Parson in his disquisition on Sloth; "the devils may enter on every side and shoot at him, he being thus unprotected, and tempt him on every side." This may be the particular evil of Sloth—as our mothers used to admonish us, Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do—but it is also more generally a danger. All too easily, if we do not understand the existence of sin in us, and not just our capacity for sometimes doing sinful things, we leave ourselves as houses without walls. We need to acknowledge that the inclination to sin is at the root of our natures.

If sin seems to us a strong and ominous word, as Karl Menninger puts it, it is worth realizing that, without the notion of it, our situation can seem even more ominous. If we do not acknowledge that the inclination to sin is part of our natures, then why has all our tinkering with ourselves and our societies over the centuries, all our sociologies and psychologies and psychoanalyses, reforms and experiments and therapies, not made our lives more virtuous and more happy than they are? Why do we have the feeling today that we may even be slipping back? If the vast accumulation of our knowledge and sheer ingenuity, our intelligence and energy, have achieved so little in the past, why do we imagine that they can achieve any more in the future? Why is it worth continuing the human endeavor, if we have no inclination to sin in us, and yet are unable to make our lives good and happy? What situation could be more ominous? There have of course been many minds in the modern age, once certain of the power of human knowledge to eradicate or at least lessen our capacity for evil-doing, that have ended only in disillusion and despair. Mind at the End of Its Tether was the last desolate cry of H.G. Wells, and he spoke in turn for both moods of our century—a too-facile hope on the one hand and, in reaction to it, a too-facile despair on the other—until it sometimes seems that we have no ground between that is not shifting and treacherous.

But if we acknowledge that our inclination to sin is part of our natures, and that we will never wholly eradicate it, there is at least something for us to do in our lives that will not in the end seem just futile and absurd, nothing but a willful gesture against the odds. We can try to make sense of evil and, in making sense of it, make sense of our lives, of what we attempt in them. We will not draw up preposterous schemes to make us all at once innocent, only to find that the flowery meadows of the earthly paradise do not spring up around us; neither will we pretend that our evil is the result of some maladjustment in our psychologies or our societies, only to find that when the next adjustment has been made we remain as evil as before. We will recognize that the inclination to evil is in our natures, that its existence in us presents us with moral choices, and that it is in making those choices that we form our characters. We may be given our natures, but we make our characters; and if it is in our natures to do evil, it can and ought to be in our characters to resist it. When we say that someone is a "good man" or "good woman," we do not mean that they are people from whom the inclination to evil is absent, but that they are people who have wrestled and still wrestle with it. We say that they are people of character, and rightly so, because they have formed their characters in the wrestling.

We can engage in the combat. We cannot count the victories. They are few, anyhow, and fragile. What is more,
there are evil ways to resist evil, as when we succumb to self-righteousness, and they are not the easiest of tempters to resist. What counts is the quality of our endeavors. We can know our inclination to do evil, be alert to the subtlety of its stratagems, and contend with it in the right ways. So we form from our natures, which are largely the common condition of our humanity, the individual character that is our own unique creation, making of that character, for we can hardly hope to do more or attempt to do less, something that is more pleasing to others, and more rewarding to ourselves, than otherwise it might have been. If this is not meaning enough for a human life, if this endeavor is to be written off as an absurd gesture that we make between the cradle and the grave, then one wonders what can ever be meant by being human. To contend intricately with the evil that lies intricately in us, to do so in the right ways, and so each to make something of individual worth of the characters that we form—this is enough for a tombstone, even if not for beyond it, and it is also what has brightened, often enough for it to count, the long caravan of mankind across the centuries. We cannot afford to slight the notion that our resistance to our own evil, and the quality of our resistance, are themselves a purpose that makes our lives more than absurd, and that keeps us in touch with the divine.

If we acknowledge the existence of sin at all, we must acknowledge that there is original sin. But the idea of original sin, when it is popularized, and not least when it is secularized, is so abused that we need to be clear about it. One need not follow all of St. Augustine’s interpretations of the Fall in order to recognize how searching is his insistence that our “first parents” were already wicked in themselves before they succumbed to the actual temptation, otherwise “the Devil would not have begun by an open and obvious sin to tempt man into do-

ing something which God had forbidden.” Man had already begun to seek satisfaction in himself and, consequently, to take pleasure in the words of the serpent: “Ye shall be as gods.” We have said something of the same in secular terms: that the evil that we do, and the consequences of it which we can see, are not in themselves our sin, but have been preceded by it. If it helps to make the point, we may even make a verbal distinction: between our sin and our sinning. We may say that our sin is that we are in the frame of mind to listen to the Devil, before we do what he asks of us, while our sinning is that, having listened to him, we do not then resist and so do what he has asked.

The notion that every infant is born sinful is too simple—a statement of flamboyant rhetoric that tells us little—and its simpleness brings it too close to what is most repellent in the Augustinian notion of “original guilt.” As St. Augustine said in a famous passage, “We are all in that one man [Adam], since we all were that one man who fell into sin”; our propagation is therefore “vitiated by sin,” and we are “bound by the chain of death, and justly condemned.” The sheer injustice of this—that original sin should imply our personal guilt before God and make us justly damned by Him, even before we have committed any act of our own—is irreconcilable with any notion of God’s love, and is the kind of perversity that gives St. Augustine a bad name.

The idea of original sin is an attempt to account for the universal presence of sin in the world, in all human beings in every age in every culture. The result of the Fall was a loss of sanctifying grace, and the likelihood of our sinning. We are estranged from God. We are unable to know His will perfectly, and such of it as we can apprehend we cannot carry out completely. It is a tendency to sinfulness that is inherent in man, and these words—“inclination” and “tendency”—are crucial. They help to demystify the idea of sin, when its secularizers seem bent
on mystifying it. Even if we do not share the belief that baptism remits original sin, we can nevertheless understand that, although it leaves us still subject to human disabilities, moral and physical, our free will remains. We may still choose a righteous course or a sinful one, to a degree that counts and in fact makes our lives human. We sin necessarily but willingly, says St. Augustine, in one of those stern and searching apothegms that reach across the centuries. "No one sins because God foresaw he would sin. No one sins unless it is his choice to sin; and his choice not to sin, that also God foresaw." His foreknowledge leaves us still free and therefore moral agents, and although the idea of original sin has been used to justify the various concepts of predestination, Catholic doctrine at least has never fully accepted them, and they need not concern us.

Let us try further to demystify the idea. We cannot at every moment in our lives, and in every occasion that we encounter, consider what we ought to do; we have sometimes to act by habit or out of what we may call intuition. Even when we do have the time and inclination to consider, we find that often we are not sure what we ought to do; the choices are difficult, and there seems to be much to be said on many sides. But even when we have determined what we think we ought to do, we often then fall far short of doing it; we are lazy in our performance, or we get distracted by something else, or we simply cannot summon the will to carry something through. None of this excuses us from trying, both to determine what we ought to do, what is morally demanded of us, whether by ourselves or by God or by some absolute moral standard that we acknowledge, and to do it to the best of our powers. We may not do all that is demanded—even all that we know is demanded—and we may not do exactly what is demanded. But we can do something in response; and to the extent that we try to do it, and then manage to do it, we are moral and free agents, able to choose a (somewhat more) righteous and (somewhat more) acceptable course, even though we will also still necessarily and willingly sin.

We must not be frightened of the idea of original sin. Let us say that it is in the natures of schoolchildren to be lazy and disobedient, that to be lazy and disobedient are "original sins" of schoolchildren—a fact that would seem to have been demonstrated by empirical evidence over the generations and that is confirmed by one's own memories of one's own schooldays. Then we will expect all schoolchildren to skimp their homework from time to time and to defy willfully the reasonable orders of their schoolteachers. This is their "original sin," for which they should be punished but not severely, because such lapses are to be expected. In a sense these lapses are not their fault, and we are not ascribing "original guilt" to them. In fact, we are suspicious of schoolchildren who are never lazy and never disobedient and think with some justification that there is something wrong with their natures. But if the lapses are more than occasional, if the schoolchildren never do their homework, and always defy the authority of their teachers, we are no longer dealing with their "original sin" as schoolchildren, but with an individual sinfulness that ought to carry with it an individual guilt, for which they ought to be appropriately and even severely punished. There are theories of child-rearing to which such an idea is abhorrent, but by most schoolteachers and parents and even most schoolchildren the distinction is understood.

It is much the same with the original sin that lies in us. Our lapses cannot be overlooked—the fact that we sin necessarily and willingly—but neither can we be too oppressed by them. If we are too oppressed by them, it is too easy to decide that there is no health in us, that there is no point in trying to do better, until we pass imperceptibly from the lapses, step by step, to embracing a life of sin, which we have in fact justified. This is particularly the
sin of Sloth. In every account of sin in our literature, this step-by-step progression is noted. The sin is not justified by saying that it is right but by saying that one is helpless not to sin. There are in fact many children who, because their lapses were overlooked and no correction was applied, have then become oppressed by them and decided that they were helpless not to sin. The idea of original sin takes account of our lapses, and helps to explain them, but then still asks that we should find, as human beings who have our free wills, some response to the moral demands made on us, which if not perfect will at least be adequate. It is hard to see what is ominous in that—it could not be more human—and it is a tragedy that the concept has so often been distorted.

A moral demand must be a possible demand, one to which it is possible for those on whom it is made to respond adequately, and we come here to one of the most important considerations that will run through these essays, the relationship of the individual to his or her society. We are not born out of a vacuum, or into one, and we do not live in a vacuum. Our environment and our societies can make it more difficult for us to meet the moral demands that are made on us. They can make it less likely that we choose right and more likely that we will do sinful things. “A perfect life can only be lived in a perfect society,” it has been said. “That is the difficulty of the Sermon on the Mount.” (It is not its only difficulty, one should perhaps add, before one feels too quickly exonerated.) Our sense of the individual responsibility that our inclination to sin imposes on us is so important that we must be careful not to seek any easy exoneration in the actual or supposed condition of our societies. But it is no less true that, to the extent that they make it more difficult for us to choose rightly, they cannot be easily excused either.

Sin is “whatever I do that mars, mauls, inflates, depresses, distorts, or abandons” our humanity, and it can hardly be denied that our societies, as distinct from us as individuals, are capable of doing all these things. A book was published recently with the title Sinful Social Structures, and we need sometimes to think of our societies as sinning. The toleration of avoidable poverty is sinful. It is the sin of Avarice. The glut of foods and goods that we consume is sinful. It is the sin of Gluttony. The exploitation of sex is sinful. It is the sin of Lust. These are partly our own sinning—we are avaricious and gluttonous and lustful—but they are not entirely or only so. A society is not only the individuals who compose it. It has its own life, in its laws and institutions, customs and values, and through them it is able to impose on us. It can incite us to do what we ought not to do, and lull us into not doing what we ought to do. We may be ultimately responsible as individuals, since we could change our societies if we wished, but that they are capable of sinning on their own, even in our name, without our direct participation or approval, is beyond any question. If we neglect the poor, it is not only because each of us is avaricious, not even only because those who manage the economy may be particularly avaricious, but because the economic system itself is founded on Avarice.

If the sins are deadly to us as individuals, they are no less deadly to our societies. The feebleness of our societies, the steady weakening of all social bonds, is in part a consequence of their own sinning. One cannot expect individuals to be attached to their societies and to accept wholeheartedly their social responsibilities, if these societies are themselves perceived to be sinful. Our societies are (in part) what we obey—customs, laws, conventions—even when our obedience does not have to be enforced. Much of our obedience can and should be willing. The pupil who acknowledges the authority of his teacher’s scholarship will be obedient to his teacher’s authority in other respects, believing that it will be for
his own good, even if he cannot see the point of some exercise that the teacher has imposed. He may also simply believe that his teacher deserves to be respected. If a society is to hold together for long, its members must have a similar respect for its authority, and so obey it willingly and not merely under the threat of punishment. But if a society is generally believed to be and to do evil, it cannot hope to kindle such allegiance, and its population will cease to be a citizenry.

The relationship of the individual to his society has seldom been less harmonious than now. The individual should find an inner personal satisfaction in the performance of his social responsibilities. But he hardly finds it today. Equally the society should be able to draw confidently on the spirited participation of all its members in its multifarious endeavors. But it can hardly do so now. The individual uses his society, and society uses the individual: That is today the breadth and depth of the relationship. It is a mutual bargain, not a joint enterprise; and even in the bargain, there is little exchange of trust. It is hard to think of a time in Western civilization when the individual has been so subject to society, yet felt so little attached to it; or when society has been forced to govern so much, but with so little authority to govern at all. The dislocation is so severe that it should tell us that we do not face only a few social problems, which we may meet with yet more feats of social engineering, but are confronted with a breakdown of all sense of mutuality, and not least of any shared understanding of what is meant by "ought," of the obligations that are attached to the rights that are bestowed and protected.

When it is secularized and applied to our relationships with our societies, the idea of original sin is most often used by conservatives. Since we are inherently so wicked, they say in effect, we cannot be trusted with the degree of freedom, least of all the equality of condition in which we might all enjoy this freedom, that we demand so imperiously. This has from the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, the political theology of the National Review, and of course of other conservatives; and what they are doing for secular purposes is once again to transform the idea of original sin into one of original guilt. If man is as inherently doomed to do evil as they say, there is little that society can do but truss him up. The notion that society is a partnership of its members, which will not confine them so much as free them to choose rightly, is not one that the conservative now entertains. There has to be only one backsliding, and he wags his finger and admonishes, "There is the old Adam in man."

To say that our natures are inclined to do evil is very different from saying that we are doomed to do evil. The first is a doctrine of hope and choice, the second a doctrine of despair and abdication. The conservative likes to think of himself as the most faithful of the guardians of society, yet he in fact leaves very little for society to do, very few ways in which it and its members can engage continually and fruitfully in a partnership. The laws and customs of society are to him little more than a moat, thrown round the keep in which those who govern it huddle fearfully, while everyone else is kept outside at a safe distance. The conservative today complains that our societies have no moral warrant. But it is he who reduces the grounds for their moral activity to little more than the suspicion that their citizens are untrustworthy.

It is not the function of essays such as these to prescribe what our societies should be like; or rather they may hint what they should be like, but it is not their function to propose the political or economic structure that seems most likely to achieve that end. "The New Testament, without going into details," says C.S. Lewis, "gives a pretty clear hint of what a fully Christian society would be like." He then says: "If there were such a society in existence and you or I visited it, I think we should come
away with a curious impression. We should feel that its economic life was very socialistic and, in that sense 'advanced,' but that its family life and code of manner were rather old-fashioned, perhaps even ceremonious and aristocratic.” Far from being provocative or paradoxical, these statements come near to a position that is very understandable. There is no reason why a society that is what we call “progressive” in its economic structure should also be what we call “progressive” in its cultural attitudes, why someone who believes in a more equal distribution of goods should also believe in more permissive standards of behavior.

There may have been a short period when this seemed to be so, when it seemed that every institution and symbol of authority was so interwoven with every other, that they all had to be called into question. But in fact those who wish to create an economically more just society—which demands a considerable measure of self-discipline in its members, if an external discipline is not to be imposed with unacceptable severity from the top—cannot welcome the weakening of social bonds that has been the mark of the modern age. Indeed much of what we call “permissiveness” in our societies today is only an extreme form of the very individualism that they wish to combat in the economic realm. There is a dilemma here for both the conservative and the socialist—to use the labels only as shorthand. The conservative wants to encourage individualism in the economic realm but to maintain the authority of institutions and conventions elsewhere in society; the socialist wishes to subdue individualism in the economic realm but again and again finds himself in alliance with those who claim for it in an absolute form in the rest of our lives. As for the liberal, he wavers between the two positions, managing to extract the worst from both of them, which is as much the reason as any, since his “philosophy” has governed our societies for so long, why they are today so weak and purposeless.

Until one or another of them establishes some coherent view that can be applied to the whole society, the relationship of the individual to his society, and of society to the individual, is bound to remain as unharmonious and meaningless as it is today. It is one of the convictions in these essays that, by speaking of our problems in the direct manner that is required when we speak of sinning, it is easier to see where the geological faults in our societies lie. The fundamental question that we should ask of our societies is whether they assist and encourage us to be good; the fundamental question that we should ask of ourselves is whether we wish to be good and encouraged and assisted by our societies to be so. This formulation is simple and old-fashioned; it does not by itself get us very far. But it is interesting, as perhaps these essays will show, how the political issues that we face, questions about our economies and societies, come newly alive when posed in terms of virtue.

We cannot say that sin is confined to the individual. We are to a large extent formed by our societies, and even the most nonconformist among us reflect our social environment and the times in which we live. But we must never stray far from the awareness that it is ultimately always as individuals that we sin, that it is at last alone that we choose to act either that much better or that much worse than we otherwise might. There is in these essays an implicit—at times, an explicit—criticism of psychiatry, of the excuses that it finds for us, and of the shallowness of the adjustments and accommodations that it invites us to make. Its explanations are our substitutes for the idea of sin, and in nothing is this more obvious than in the mirthlessness with which it encourages us to be interested in our lesser disorders, while it frees us from the dark night of the soul in which we must wrestle with our evil.

With a solemnity that can be justified only by the fees
that it extracts, our psychiatry points to the levers and pulleys that we may pull and push inside us, and by these simple exercises make our lives happier and more rewarding. (It is not much interested in whether they can be made more virtuous.) Only an age that does not know how to laugh could take such slight prescriptions so seriously. At least if we recognize that we sin, know that we are individually at war, may go to war as warriors do, with something of valor and zest and even of mirth, for these are usually the most inseparable of companions. But to be told that in our disorders we are only responding to some disturbance in our lives just as others do, that there is a mechanical explanation of our woes that calls for no more than a mechanical reordering of our psyches—this calls for no valor or zest or mirth from us, and these are certainly the last qualities that we associate with our tedious little therapies. Pilgrim’s Progress is a work of high adventure; one can hardly say that of psychoanalytical case histories.

As a result of the habits that psychiatry has encouraged in us, endlessly we scrape over our faults and weaknesses, which we ought to be able to take in good part in others and in ourselves, because we will not acknowledge that the real danger lies elsewhere and deeper. In no other age can people have been so apparently frank and serious about their peccadilloes, and so ready to confess them and publicly flagellate themselves for them at cocktail parties and dinner tables, but always to use these admissions of their disorders as a justification for not then resisting the total despoliation of sin, as if by some miracle of absolution what has been shown to be part of their natures need not then be combated. Mirthlessly and with self-importance, we confess to offenses that we know will be forgiven in order to justify the sin to which we are about to concede; so we give game, set, and match to the Devil, when he has won only an advantage. He finds a chink in our armor, where we have been found weak or at fault, and when he cries, “Aha! You are already lost!” we lay ourselves open to his much greater depredations.

Psychiatry is concerned with our natures, to make the distinction that has been suggested, and not with our characters. It is concerned with the raw materials among which we must sift in ourselves as we make our moral choices, and not with the actual act of moral choice and the kind of effort it asks of us. It therefore leaves us obsessed and intrigued by the raw materials of our natures, but casual and even frivolous in our attention to the kind of moral demands that we must make on them. “One of the Devil’s most effective tricks to waylay us is to pick a fight with us,” Kafka remarked. “It is like a fight with a woman which ends in bed.” He makes us quarrelsome, and the quarrel only reinforces our sense of familiarity with him; he is full of innuendoes, that he knows us and what we are up to, until at last the fight seems pointless and wearying, and we decide that it is futile for us to carry it on or resist any longer. We are ready to concede, because he has robbed us of our perspective, even about ourselves. This is exactly the effect of the habits that psychiatry has encouraged in us. We are put into a state of constant quarrel with and between all the disorders and disturbances in our chaotic raw natures, until at the end of the day we are so wearied and even bored with ourselves that there is no real fight that we will wage.

What it can bring us to—all that these essays are intended to resist—all that is meant by sin—has been summarized by Shirley MacLaine. In an interview with the Washington Post in 1977, she said that “the most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself . . . that the only sustaining love involvement is with yourself.” One gulps and reads on: “When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you’ve been and where you are going, when you look at your work, your love affairs, your
marriages, your children, your pain, your happiness—when you examine all that closely, what you really find out is that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself. The only person you really dress is yourself. The only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do all my life. People always want to know where my drive comes from. Well, all I can say is my drive is what I have to do.”

This is not only self-centeredness raised to self-obsession, but a rationalization for self-aggrandizement. There is in it not a hint of understanding or wishing to understand—of contrition or sadness—that a human spirit has become so vengefully uncaring of anyone or anything other than itself. Other people or other things that one’s own life touches are merely extensions of oneself. So one goes to bed with oneself, a glacier in one’s bed, as W.H. Auden once put it. For there is no understanding either that what is being described is a life that at its core has been reduced to ruins, among which all that can henceforth be enacted is a deathly masquerade. But also in it all and perhaps responsible to some extent for it all, there is again an appalling mirthlessness that must always accompany such self-absorption; in spite of the apparent boldness of the affirmation, there in fact is only a whimpering self-pity. Yet this is only one of many such documents we have today.

The search for one’s “identity” has become so aggravating in our age precisely because the self has been reduced to this pinpoint of self-intimacy, and the bother about one’s own self-in-itself is that it is very like everyone’s self-in-itself. One tries to grasp the individual life in the words just quoted, but it at once crumbles in one’s hand like a fortune cookie, and the fortune that is foretold in them is just as banal as that in the cookie. One cannot ask anything interesting about such a life, whether it has been good or bad, because the only standard by which it is lived is the drive to do “what I have to do.” A life that is self-justifying is one that is uninteresting, because there are no questions one can put from one’s own experience, or from the whole human experience over the centuries, to which the answer will not be given that “I did what I had to do.” One is here at the lowest common denominator that an existence can reach.

Arguing against the kinds of psychiatry that do away with the categories of “good” and “bad,” and saying that he has met a “remarkable number of bad boys,” William Gaylin, professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia, has said recently: “Spare me, therefore, your good intentions, your inner sensitivities, your unarticulated and unexpressed love. And spare me also those tedious psychohistories which—by exposing the goodness inside the bad man, and the evil in the good—invariably establish a vulgar and perverse egalitarianism, as if the arrangement of what is outside and what is inside makes no difference.” But it is exactly an example of this vulgar egalitarianism that we have just been noticing. One of the rewards of knowing and seeing that we can be evil, of acknowledging that individually we sin, and caring whether we do, is that we stand on our own feet on ground we choose and not in a common rut, unique as persons who never were before and never will be again and not merely as common denominators of a psychological or even the human condition, pusillanimous and faint-hearted, with no real taste of what freedom means. It was an English medieval philosopher who spoke of hilaritas libertatis, which may be freely translated as “the alive and delighting enjoyment of freedom,” and one is left wondering if anyone but a Christian could have said it.

A word about the order in which the Seven Deadly Sins are discussed here. The order established by Gregory the Great, maintained throughout the Middle Ages, and