

Virtuous Living: A Prospectus

Have you ever wondered what our life together would be like without the seven deadly sins?

I'm afraid our free-market capitalist economy would totally collapse! In his *Fable of the Bees*, Bernard Mandeville observed centuries ago that private vice makes for public virtue. Which is to say, avarice keeps the economy going. Along with envy, aka keeping up with the Joneses, and gluttony, over-consumption. Take away wrath and our current military budget would shrink drastically. Spending on jails, prisons, and courts would be slashed, both because crime would plummet and because revenge would no longer fuel societal responses.

That leaves pride, sloth, and lust. It's hard to figure what an absence of lust would mean, but surely a lot more than the demise of the porn industry and adult bookstores. Take away sloth and everybody would presumably be more industrious, and more productive, but there would be a whole lot less to accomplish in order to satisfy human needs and desires. I imagine we'd have to invent all sorts of new activities to enjoy.

That leaves pride, the chief of all sins in the Christian lexicon. I don't think the disappearance of pride would eliminate the desire for excellence, but it would mean that we don't get our kicks from thinking we're somehow better than others. Competition, if it survived, would be more a form of self-improvement, never a means of self-congratulation. Doing one's best would matter, doing better than the other guy or gal would not.

We live in a society that acquires way too much, consumes way too much, eats way too much, fights way too much, boasts way too much. But isn't it fun! Wouldn't it be a drag to live in a virtuous world?

Seriously, I don't condone our state of affairs, and I wouldn't eschew morality or virtue for the sake of a robust economy. Rather, I marvel that we haven't yet destroyed ourselves, given how much time, effort, and money we devote to "deadly" pursuits.

And there are real costs, especially to those who aren't very skilled at playing the game, or simply lack opportunity because all their resources are spent on daily survival.

Whenever you next have some leisure time, think about what it would be like if we could banish the seven deadly sins. The elimination due to irrelevance of most television, internet, and printed advertising alone would be almost heavenly!

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