

MMMYEZ: Stewie and the Seven Deadly Sins

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Stewart Gilligan. The youngest member of the Griffin family. He's crabby, he's rude, he's selfish. He can be violent and even homicidal. Why is this *enfant terrible* so funny? Well, why is anything funny? There are two opposing theories of humor. According to one, we laugh at the absurd because we know that it's not true. According to the other, we laugh at the absurd because we know that it *is* true. Stewie certainly is absurd. Taking a traditional view of infancy, according to which babies are sweet innocents, one might suppose that he provides evidence for the first theory of humor. But the little Griffin actually vindicates the second theory: his humor depicts reality, only dimly recognized.

I cite as my primary authority for this thesis St. Augustine, 5th-century philosopher and church father. Augustine is responsible for inventing the famous Doctrine of Original Sin, according to which we are all born with evil in our hearts. It may seem strange to take seriously such an ancient author with such an obnoxious claim, especially given that he also holds the dubious honor of being the first in history to document the phenomenon of musical farting.¹ We have to remember, however, that the Doctrine of Original Sin is the only successful answer to a very disturbing question. If there is a God, then why does he let the innocent suffer and die? Answer: no one is innocent. We either accept this answer, or we admit that there is no God.

Independently of its theoretical role in propping up the teetering edifice of Christianity, the Doctrine of Original Sin is grounded in personal experience. In his *Confessions* Augustine memorably tells the Tale of the Pear Tree. One night, when he was just a boy, he and



a bunch of friends snuck into the neighbor's orchard and climbed a pear tree. The pears were beautiful and would no doubt fetch a good price at the market. Not being hungry, but wishing to wreak havoc, the boys snatched every last piece of fruit off the branches, tossing them into a nearby pig sty. Bearing his soul years later as an adult, Augustine swears he was evil from day one.

How many of us have repressed similar memories? I myself would never have recalled viciously biting my best friend at the tender age of three had my older sister not taken it upon herself to remind me at regular intervals throughout the next thirty years. [Cut away to scene of author as preschooler, teeth clamped on neck of red-headed boy. Boy screaming, flailing arms. Sister standing nearby; looks, points, laughs.]

Stewie is evil. Worse still, no one else seems to notice or care. His mother Lois has an epiphany, but only in a dream soon forgotten ("Mr. Griffin Goes to Washington"). Frightening as this situation is, it is an accurate depiction of the modern-day family. We are all in collective denial that our little darlings are rotten to the core. The Middle Ages may have been backward in some ways, but at least they knew the truth about children, and treated them accordingly.

In the Middle Ages, the notion of the Seven Deadly Sins emerged, first proposed by St. Gregory the Great in the 6th century, then elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th, and finally popularized by Geoffrey Chaucer and Dante Alighieri in the 14th. Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Avarice, Anger, Envy, and Pride: together they provide a simple framework for cataloging our transgressions. The medievals illustrated the Seven Deadlies with relish, developing standard symbolic representations for each. For example, lust is typically represented by a goat or a cow – who knows why.

At any rate, Stewie Griffin single-handedly illustrates all seven Deadlies so masterfully it would have made the medievals weep. Let's examine each in turn.

1st: Lust

Lust is an intense or unrestrained sexual craving. According to Aquinas, lust is wrong because it leads to all sorts of disorderly conduct, such as fornication, masturbation, adultery, incest, rape,



homosexuality, and bestiality.² Aquinas does not discuss proper conduct toward vegetables or minerals. Although many moderns would question his insistence on throwing so many interesting activities out with the bath water, we can all grant that sexual cravings can certainly be problematic. [Cut away to scene of author alone in her kitchen at eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning, eyeing a banana.]

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was the first to theorize infant sexuality. According to his account of the Oedipal Complex, every boy falls in love with his mother and comes to view his father as a rival for her love. Subconsciously wishing to marry his mother, he subconsciously wishes to kill his father until he learns to identify with his father and finds someone else who resembles his mother to marry. Needless to say, our bawdy little monkey makes Freud look like a charming sentimentalist. He hates his mother with diabolical intensity (evident, for example, in his web page address, “killlois.com,” his email address, loismustdie@yahoo.com, and in the refrain he teaches his friend Eliza Pinchley, “The life of the wife is ended by the knife”); meanwhile, Stewie barely tolerates his father, “The Fat Man,” with resigned disgust.

Given that his hatred has universal orientation, we should not be surprised to find his sexuality equally indiscriminate. Reflecting on his conflict with his mother, he muses, “I sometimes wonder if all women are this difficult. And then I think to myself, ‘My God wouldn’t it be marvelous if I turned out to be a homosexual?’” (*Untold Story*). Stewie’s teddy bear, Rupert, who is his best friend and an obvious projection of his own subconscious, is gay. On the other hand, Stewie seems to swing the other direction as well. For example, he kills time at a funeral assessing the female turnout one by one like a true connoisseur. “I’d do her, do her, wouldn’t do her, . . . lose the pigtails and we’ll talk” (“Mr. Saturday Night”). And on the third hand, when drunk, Stewie crosses the species line, enthusiastically slurring “You’re sexy!” to Brian the dog. Perhaps it was not just a matter of simple grooming Stewie had in mind when, dead sober, he asked Brian to shave his coin purse (*Untold Story*).

We know in any case that Stewie exhibits the physical signs of lust. For example, when he accidentally sees a group of cheerleaders changing in their locker room, he murmurs, “It appears my wee-wee’s been stricken with rigor mortis” (“Peter Griffin: Husband, Father, Brother?”). Likewise, upon hearing Lois instruct Meg in the art of



revenge, he remarks, “All this talk about eye-gouging has gotten me all frisky! No, really, I’ve got half a pack of Roloids in my diaper” (“And the Wiener Is”). Moreover, he discovers autoerotica in the swimming pool – “Helloooo Mr. Water Jet!” (“He’s Too Sexy for his Fat”); he experiments with transvestitism in front of the bathroom mirror – “Look at you there. You’re a filthy girl, aren’t you?” (“Emission Impossible”); and he is already showing signs of fetishizing. “I smell a messy diaper. God, why does that turn me on?” (“Lethal Weapons”).

Despite the fact that his imagination is active in every direction, Stewie never actually gets much action. In fact, he meets his future self at the age of thirty-five only to find that he is still a virgin (*Untold Story*). Nevertheless, lack of doing does not make for lack of wanting. “Oh, Cupid, hath thou pierced me with thine sweet searing arrow. Stomach, cease thy lustful quake” (“Dammit Janet”). Stewie has a dirty stomach and a dirty mind; this alone makes him guilty of the sin of lust.

2nd: Gluttony

Gluttony is an excess of eating or drinking. It seems like the official sin of America given that we are the fattest country in the world. According to Thomas “The Ox” Aquinas, however, who was well known to be able to wine or dine any other monk under the table, gluttony is not necessarily a deadly sin. If you die without divine forgiveness for a deadly or “mortal” sin, you have an irreparable defect in your soul and therefore cannot be admitted at the gates of heaven. A venial sin, in contrast (from the word *venia*, meaning pardon), is corrected the moment it is ceased, and therefore does not impede eternal life. Eating and drinking to excess is venial unless it causes you to disobey God’s commands.³ [Cut away to scene of Aquinas eating liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.]

There is no doubt that Stewie loves food. One might be tempted to call him a gourmand rather than a glutton. He delights in obscure delicacies such as Sunny D, kitty litter, and paste. “I say, Rupert, this paste is quite delicious. It’s almost worth the bowel obstruction” (“Fore, Father”). And his ability to appreciate the pleasures of the palate seems to exceed that of most, as is evident in his reaction to



blueberries – “Oh, oh my G . . . oh, that’s better than sex!” (“Love Thy Trophy”) and fig newtons – “OH GOD! THERE’S AN ORGY IN MY MOUTH!” (“The Story on Page One”).

But Stewie is not above using his appetite for nefarious purposes. For example, he fakes an orgasm over one of Lois’s dinners just to make it harder for Chris to suffer through his diet (“He’s Too Sexy for His Fat”). He often uses food to control people. “I say mother, this hotdog has been on this plate for a full minute and it hasn’t cut itself . . . By all means take your time!” (“Peter, Peter, Caviar Eater”). Finally, he can be a dangerous drunk, such as the time a belly full of Mai Tai helps him incite O. J. Simpson to murder his wife (“Peter Griffin: Husband, Father, Brother?”).

But the most condemning evidence of Stewie’s gluttony emerges when Lois makes a futile attempt to wean him from breast milk. “Those jugs are mine until all the milk dries up. Then you can have the remains!” (“I take thee, Quagmire – Tonight”). Weaning undeniably brings out the antichrist in children. Have we not all witnessed it? Augustine did, and it was the first clue that eventually led him to the Doctrine of Original Sin. Augustine writes: “Thus, the infant’s innocence lies in the weakness of his body and not in the infant mind. I have myself observed a baby to be jealous, though it could not speak; it was livid as it watched another infant at the breast.”⁴

Stewie is Augustine’s poster boy. When Lois refuses to unbutton, he goes so far as to jump another woman’s breast, handily knocking her infant out of the way. The look on his face is enough to send chills down American Dad’s spine. Clearly Stewie is a glutton’s glutton.

3rd: Sloth

For all his faults, no one can call Stewie Griffin a couch potato. His apocalyptic schemes keep him quite busy and push him to impressive heights of ingenuity. The only time he displays a textbook case of laziness is when he becomes so fat that he is reduced to a listless torpor, unable even to successfully insult an innocent passerby (“He’s Too Sexy for his Fat”). True, S. G. does have a penchant for television and would no doubt throw a fit if we neglected to call him when *Kojak* starts. One almost feels, however, that he would be a better person if he engaged in such harmless pursuits more often.



If sloth were reducible to indolence, then our tiny hero would be off the hook, disqualified from the claim to perfect corruption. Yet sloth is not reducible to indolence. In fact, St. Gregory originally used the Latin term *tristia*, meaning sadness, for this sin, and, according to Thomas Aquinas, the relevant meaning of sloth is “oppressive sorrow.” Sloth is the vice that opposes the virtue of joyful charity.

Pouting? Yes.

Aquinas asserts that if you pout about something good, your act is evil in itself, but even if you pout about something bad your act is evil in its effect. Aquinas surveys various effects of pouting that have come to be known as the Daughters of Sloth: despair, faint-heartedness, sluggishness, spite, bitterness, malicious indignation, wandering after unlawful things, idleness, drowsiness, uneasiness of the mind, curiosity, loquacity, restlessness, and instability.⁵

With this analysis, it becomes evident that Stewie is thoroughly guilty of slothfulness after all. He regularly pouts about good things. He was inconsolable, for example, when he discovered that he was unable to play the asphyxiation game because his football-shaped head was too big to fit in a plastic bag (“Breaking Out is Hard to Do”). Even more importantly, Stewie is the undisputed heavyweight world champion master of one of sloth’s daughters, namely, malicious indignation. Malicious indignation occurs when you lash out at someone who has offended you. Stewie is very sensitive about his infant status and does not appreciate being reminded of it. His malicious indignation is often directed against Lois. For example, when Lois says Stewie can’t help Chris with his math homework because he’s “just a baby,” Stewie responds, “And you’re a regular Rhodes scholar. Where was it you graduated from again? The University of Duh?” (“When You Wish Upon a Weinstein”). Lois always tries to speak gently to Stewie, in one instance asking, “Why don’t you play in the other room?” But to Stewie, her tone is inexcusably condescending. He replies, “Why don’t you burn in hell?” (“Death Has A Shadow”). Lois often tries to compensate for Stewie’s joyless apathy. When she makes a card for Peter from Stewie, Stewie interprets her actions in the worst possible light. “Did you forge my name? How dare you! Is this backwards ‘S’ supposed to be cute? I’m going to crap double for you tonight!” (“A Picture Is Worth 1,000 Bucks”). Moreover, when sufficiently provoked, Stewie also strikes out with malicious indignation at complete strangers:



Man on airplane: Oh great, I always end up sitting next to a damn baby.
Stewie: What? What did you just say?
Lois: Stewie, stop fussing.
Stewie: Not now, Lois. [Slaps man on head] Hey big man, turn around. If you've got something to say, say it to my face! Oh, you can't hear me now. That's it. I was going to watch the movie, but forget it. For the next five hours, you're my bitch. Wahhhhhhh!
(“Brian Does Hollywood (2)”)

This last example epitomizes Stewie's special brand of sloth. He pouts so intensely, and so aggressively, that he is willing to sacrifice lazy pastimes to do it.

4th: Avarice

Avarice is reprehensible acquisitiveness, an insatiable desire for wealth. Stewie's greed does not come out very often, but when it does, it is a humdinger. In the episode “Brian Doesn't Have Stewie's Money,” Stewie goes gangsta when Brian is unable to pay back some money he borrowed. Enough said. You just have to see it to believe it.

5th: Anger

Anger is a strong feeling of displeasure or hostility directed toward some real or supposed grievance. Given that we defined malicious indignation, one of the daughters of sloth, as lashing out against someone who has offended you, we may wonder whether there is really any difference between these two sins. Being the crowned prince of anal retentive classification, Aquinas informs us that the essential differentiating feature of anger is revenge.⁶

Aquinas actually has a lot to say in favor of vengeance, arguing in good medieval fashion that it is an integral component of justice. Given that the God of the Old Testament is Mr. Hard-Ass-Scowl-Face-I'll-Get-You-Little-Turds, it would not be prudent for anyone, much less someone vying for sainthood, to be overly critical of anger. But Aquinas seems so bent on glorifying it that one begins to wonder whether it should really be considered one of the Seven Deadlies. [Cut



away to scene from *Sesame Street*. Boxed screen showing seven kids, each engaged in one of the seven deadly sins. Singing: One of these kids is not like the others. One of these kids just doesn't belong. Can you tell which kid is not like the others, by the time I finish my song? Did you guess which kid was not like the others? Did you guess which kid just doesn't belong? If you guessed this one is not like the others, then you're not a ding dong . . .]

Nevertheless, revenge can be just as evil as anything else, especially in the chubby little mitts of Stewie Griffin. In *The Untold Story*, Stewie learns that going to hell involves servicing Steve Allen in a red hotel room. This preview of his fate prompts him to lament his hateful nature. But Brian corrects Stewie: he's not hateful, he just needs to control his anger. Brian is right; in this moment we approach genuine insight into Stewie, who of course represents humanity as a whole. From the very beginning, deep down inside, we are all pissed off to be here instead of someplace better.

Just like in real life, however, on the show no one (other than the alcoholic dog) recognizes the truth. This is never more evident than when Stewie takes violent revenge against Peter ("you tottering, femme-sucked dewberry!") for eating his graham crackers.

Dr. Kaplan: Now, Stewart, I want you to take this Mommy doll and this Daddy doll and show me how they act together.

Stewie: Yes. Very well. All right. [*In the voice of the male doll:*] "You see, Margaret, after twenty odd years of marriage, your curious indiscretions no longer please me." [*In the voice of the female doll:*] "Really? And I suppose you think I enjoy hanging onto those hammocky deposits of gin sugars you call buttocks?" [*Noticing Dr. Kaplan writing something on his notepad*] What was that? What did you just write there? Give me that! [*Reading:*] "Insecurity? Gender confusion?" I'll give you something to write about! [*Goes wild*] Look at me! I'm insane! I'm Martin Lawrence on a bender!

Dr. Kaplan: Mr. and Mrs. Griffin, does Stewart have a history of aggression?

Lois: No. Hitting Peter is the first violent thing he's ever done.

Stewie: Technically, the first act of violence was that time bomb I left ticking in your uterus. Happy 50th birthday, Lois!

Dr. Kaplan: It's obvious that your son is learning this behavior from someone.

("Lethal Weapons")



Appropriately enough, the “expert” is totally clueless. Stewie is not insecure, he does not suffer from gender confusion, and he is not learning his violent behavior from someone. Stewie was born with a chip on his shoulder.

6th: Envy

Envy is the resentful desire for another’s advantages. Today, fancy pants scholars like to make a hairsplitting distinction between envy and jealousy, but we won’t bore ourselves with that here. To be honest, I’m getting kind of sick of Aquinas’s mumbo jumbo too. The bottom line is, we have all experienced the ravages of the green-eyed monster. [Cut away to green-eyed monster, lying in a shaft of sunlight; preening himself, stretches modestly; looks up: “What?”]

Stewie’s envy is revealed the two times our wee hellion falls in love. In the first instance, when he goes gaga over his babysitter, Liddane, he is livid to find out that she already has a boyfriend, Jeremy. Ready to pounce, he is dragged away, kicking and screaming:

Ha! I got your hat! Take that hatless! Go back to the quad and resume your hackey sack torney. I’m not going to lie down for some frat boy bastard with his damn Teva sandals and his Skoal bandits and his Abercrombie and Fitch long sleeved open stitched crew neck Henley, smoking his sticky buds out of a soda can while watching his favorite downloaded *Simpsons* episodes every night. Yes, we all love Mr. Plow! Oh – you’ve got the song memorized do you? So does everyone else! That is exactly the kind of idiot you see at Taco Bell at one in the morning, the guy that whiffed his way down the bar skank ladder. If he wants to throw hands I’ll throw hands . . .

Refusing to give up on Liddane, Stewie locks Jeremy in the trunk of Brian’s car. Two weeks later, when Stewie remembers that Jeremy is still in the trunk, he notes the consequences with grim satisfaction: “Yeah, he’s dead” (“8 Simple Rules for Buying My Teenage Daughter”).

In the second instance, Stewie falls in love with his daycare classmate, Janet. It turns out, however, that she just wants Stewie’s cookies and dumps him when she finds a different supplier. Not realizing that he has been used, Stewie is so jealous of the new boyfriend that he



retaliates by trying to make Janet jealous in turn. He asks another daycare classmate, Melinda, to pose as his new girlfriend:

Stewie: Oh, hello, Janet. Yes, you know Melinda. Yes, it seems she's – What did we figure out, dear? Was it one? No, two. Yes, she's two weeks younger than you. Just look at that butt! That is a tight butt! [*Janet shows no interest*] Damn! Not even a second glance! [*Turning on Melinda*] This is what you call “dolled up”? Listen, why don't you save yourself years of sexual ambiguity and get fitted for a pair of Doc Martens and a plaid flannel shirt? (“Dammit Janet”)

Stewie is not a graceful loser in the game of love. Nothing brings out his jealousy more – except sibling rivalry. When Lois and Peter decide to try to have another child, Stewie is beside himself.

Another baby? But . . . but I'm the baby. Why the deuce would they want to replace me? My, my cheeks are pinchable, my bottom is smooth, my laugh is heartwarming. Aha ha ha ha ho ho ho! What's that? I certainly am not overreacting! What the devil do you think happened to Bobby when they added cousin Oliver to the Brady bunch? (“Emission Impossible”)

Although he vows to fight his spermatazoic brother to the death, he changes his mind when he learns that the new Griffin could be an ally in his war against the world. This establishes that, although Stewie is subject to envy, one-upmanship is not as significant in his personal eschatology as pride.

7th: Pride

St. Gregory maintains that the severity of the Seven Deadly Sins can be ranked in accordance with the order we have followed – Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Avarice, Anger, Envy, and Pride – Lust being the least vicious and Pride being the Queen of the Vices. Pride is unreasonable or inordinate self-esteem and is often considered the root or origin of all evil. It transformed the archangel Lucifer into the demon Satan, it puffed up Adam and Eve to their ultimate demise, and it regularly takes its toll on high school prom court nominees across the country. [Cut away to scene of author as high school student calmly



explaining to the principal why she wishes to be taken off the prom court list. Principal baffled, suspicious, alarmed, angry; demanding to know what is this Foo cult and its polymorphous power?]

For medieval philosophers such as Augustine, as well as philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1926–84) who dabble in medieval studies, pride is all about power. Just to show what good sports we are, we should allow ol' Aquinas to get in one last word about pride. He asserts that it is “characteristic of pride to be unwilling to be subject to any superior.”⁷ Hmmmmmm . . . Does this make you think of anyone in particular? Is he small and pink, with slicked back hair fuzz and an outrageously pretentious British accent?

Stewie Griffin has a serious god complex; it is the not-so-hidden psychological motivation behind his quest for world domination. Although you can hear the ambition in his voice even when he is talking about his diaper, he occasionally expresses it more explicitly. Lois asks Stewie to say “hi” to the new neighbor, Officer Swanson. Ignoring her, Stewie declares “You will bow to me!” (“A Hero Sits Next Door”). Stewie does not so much think of God as a rival but as a mentor. As his piecemeal religious education progresses, he become increasingly enamored with the idea of stepping into God’s shoes. Enjoying Bible stories much more than Barney, he ruminates: “Yes, I rather like this God fellow. He’s very theatrical, you know, a pestilence here, a plague there. Omnipotence. Gotta get me some of that” and later: “Oh! I love God. He’s so deliciously evil” (“Holy Crap!”). There is no doubt that this tyrannical tyke fully plans to rule the world.

Are we ready for Stewtopia? What would it be like? There would be pancakes for breakfast every morning and Raffi would be played on every radio station. Broccoli would not exist. Pickles and sprinkles would be used exclusively for composting. There would be kitties but no dogs. If there were swimming pools, they would be only ten inches deep. But there would be plenty of disco dancing with sunshine and farts for everyone.

Bring it on, baby. It’s likely to be better than what we’ve got now.

Conclusion

I conclude that Stewie Griffin makes us smile, not because he is a fictional impossibility, but because he portrays the truth about



children that we daily repress. He makes a legitimate claim to utter depravity because he commits all seven of the Deadlies with panache and verve unequaled by Nero himself. It might be objected that Stewie has moments of pure goodness. Needless to say, it would require a whole other essay to identify such alleged instances and show one by one why ulterior motives cancel them out. In my view, only one moment in the entire history of the show has potential to redeem the Mini Rocket Man. In “The Tuckers,” while Peter and Lois are MIA, Brian and Stewie have to take responsibility for the household, becoming temporary parents for Meg and Chris. When Chris is mistakenly accused of a crime committed by another boy, it is up to Brian and Stewie to go to the boy’s house to speak with him and his father. It just so happens, however, that the boy in question is Jake Tucker, whose face is upside down. Before going in, Stewie reminds Brian not to call attention to the boy’s affliction. Although he agrees, Brian slips mid-sentence saying that something needs to be done for Chris because, “this whole situation has just turned his whole life upside down – face.” Stewie is mortified. As he slowly turns toward Brian in disbelief, the expression on his face is poignantly compelling. Is it just annoyance? Or is it scandalized decency? If it is decency, then I take back everything I’ve said. It is no big deal to sin from time to time if you are a fundamentally decent person.

Come to think of it, forget about everything I said regardless. What happens in this essay stays in this essay.

NOTES

- 1 Yes, it’s really true. See St. Augustine, *On the City of God*, 14.24.
- 2 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Question 154, www.newadvent.org/summa/315400.htm.
- 3 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Question 148, www.newadvent.org/summa/314800.htm.
- 4 St. Augustine, *Confessions* Book 1, chapter 7, www.sullivan-county.com/id3/confessions/augcon1.htm.
- 5 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Question 35, www.newadvent.org/summa/303501.htm.
- 6 He writes that “avoidance of good on account of an attendant evil occurs in two ways. For this happens either in respect of one’s own good, and thus we have ‘sloth,’ which is sadness about one’s spiritual good, on



account of the attendant bodily labor: or else it happens in respect of another's good, and this, . . . if it be with recrimination with a view to vengeance, it is 'anger.'" St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 84.4, www.newadvent.org/summa/208404.htm.

- 7 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 84.2, www.newadvent.org/summa/208402.htm.

