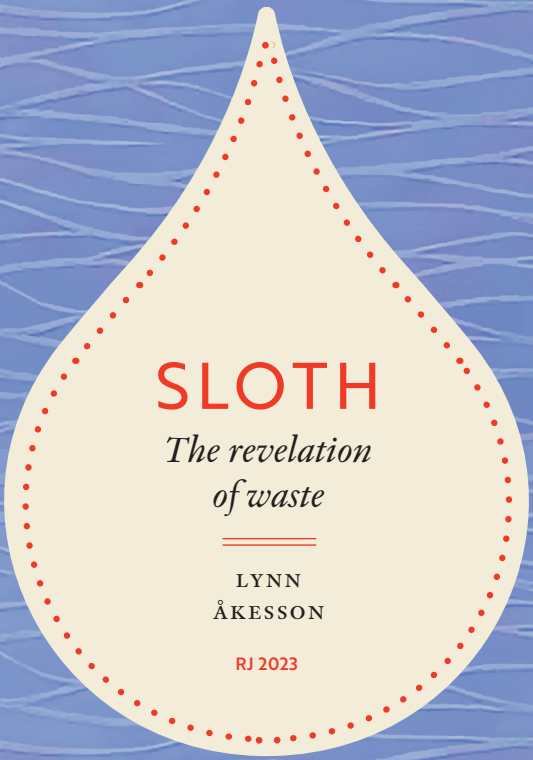

SLOTH

The revelation of waste

LYNN ÅKESSON

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Translated by Clare Barnes

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Foreword: The deadly sins in our time

Envy, gluttony, greed, pride, lust, sloth and wrath – what is the importance of the seven deadly sins, organised 1,500 years ago by Pope Gregory the Great, in contemporary Sweden? Is devoting seven essays to them really justifiable? After all, we live in one of the most secular societies in the world, a society where hell seems more likely to be the name of a nightclub than a place for sinners. Living out your lusts is not just permitted, it is considered healthy. Letting go, feeling pride, earning money and eating well are also things we value – we treat ourselves, and of course we're worth it!

At the same time, there are indications of a return of morals. The climate crisis and the lifestyle changes that must result from it, increased inequality and people with unimaginable wealth, combined with refugee flows and wars close to Sweden, are contemporary phenomena. They have led to us increasingly talking in terms of morals, at least if we are to judge by the daily press. A simple search of Swedish newspapers shows that the use of the word "morals" has increased tenfold since 2014.

Another sign of the reappearance of morality in public debate is the role played by shame in what is called cancel or call-out culture. There has been an increase in public humiliation, shaming, through the emergence of a new, internet-generated social control. Moreover, online humiliation has become a strategy for various groups to effect change, as a form of modern, shame-driven consumer power. Although most people see dangers in allowing shame to drive public discourse, there are those who argue that it can be a good thing, an effective way of changing people's morals and behaviour.

Good and evil are increasingly referenced in politics, but what some people perceive as good is perceived by others as virtue signalling – and what is that if not pride? Regarding some people as completely shameless can, on the other hand, be seen as part of the same trend. Incidentally, the word shameless was hardly used at all in the early 2000s, but has occurred more frequently since 2014. There are people who argue that we are living in a post-post-political world, a hyper-political era, in which everything is politics and can thus be categorised as good or bad. Involvement is just a click away, but is just as fleeting as love on Tinder. Mass movements die as quickly as they form, and the result is a type of overheated discussion that covers everything but has no depth, which quickly states whether something is right or wrong or good or bad, and where anyone who ends up on the wrong

side of the line can suffer the keelhauling of public opinion.

From this perspective, there is reason to return to the mortal sins and their moral claims. Also, sins and vices are individual; the aim of refraining from sin is personal salvation, not collective change. This emphasis on our own behaviour and our personal morality is symptomatic of the individualism of our time, and the focus on sins thus suits an era that celebrates the ego.

However, the deadly sins have always had an undeniably collective dimension. In 2008, when the Vatican launched seven additional deadly sins, the aim was to adapt them to contemporary global reality and to emphasise the people's social interactions: polluting the environment, morally dubious experiments, bioethical violations, drug abuse, creating poverty, excessive wealth, contributing to social inequality.

It is also worth remembering that the deadly sins are not really about the worst things humans can do, as even in the Middle Ages there were worse things than sloth and lust. Rape and murder were far more serious crimes, but the deadly sins were considered dangerous because they risked enslaving us to our own emotions, destroying our rationality and creating an addiction to the thrill of sin. The deadly sins threatened to consume us. And, like the modern, upgraded deadly sins, the old deadly sins have always referenced the sins and misdeeds that threaten to

tear society apart, and those emotions that threaten to entice us away from the good and the just.

Doesn't this sound urgent? In this essay collection, seven scholars have used their research as a basis on which to tackle a deadly sin, to test the sins' relevance in our time and to discover what they can teach us – about ourselves and about society.

In this essay, ethnologist Lynn Åkesson writes about sloth, as seen through the prism of rubbish and waste. Over the centuries, sloth, as both indifference and sheer lethargy, has characterised humanity's approach to waste management. But today's kitchen middens can be downright dangerous for future generations and if we are to deal with these toxic mountains of rubbish, we also need to deal with our slothfulness. We cannot continue to sweep our rubbish under the carpet or to look indifferently away.

The editors

The imprint of spilth

How we humans manage our waste could be understood as a manifestation of sloth, one of the seven deadly sins – or at least our initial impulse, to drop it where we are standing or walking. Archaeological and historical studies testify to how waste was disposed of close to settlements, in backyards, on the streets. A Danish word for piles of household waste, "kökkenmödding" – the kitchen midden – is a good expression that tells us a lot about what it is.

This text will not delve into historical insights, but it may be worth remembering how, for a long time, a stench of rotting garbage combined with that of leaking latrines, sewers and the faeces of roaming domestic animals, forming the scent trail that characterised the residential areas of towns and villages. This world of scent was vividly described in Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume*, set in the poor quarters of Paris in the eighteenth century.

In the 1930s, journalist Ludvig "Lubbe" Nordström travelled around the Swedish countryside and was shocked by the sanitary conditions he encountered, describing them in a series of radio reports and his book *Lort-Sverige*

("Dirty Sweden"), both from 1938. Those of us who were around in the 1960s remember how all sorts of rubbish was thrown out of car windows or the way that shallow inlets were used to wash cars, which were simply driven into the water. In 1962, a "Keep Nature Tidy" campaign was launched; this was the model for the Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation, which was founded in 1983. To this day, schoolchildren still go litter picking every term. The foundation's website offers materials that can be ordered for all school age groups and also encourages adults to participate. In 2022, a record number of people – 789,950 – signed up for the litter picking days.

Like the other deadly sins, sloth appears to possess an inherent attraction. As soon as you start scratching at the thin veneer of culture and civilisation, the deadly sins start jostling for attention. Lust, envy, gluttony – they all need holding off, discouraging, educating away. There is an eternal struggle against all that has tempted and continues to tempt humanity. Chaos and decay are the threats lurking behind the mental walls built to keep sins at bay. In the case of rubbish, the threat is also physically tangible.

This text examines the consequences and conditions of sloth through the lens of waste management, and is built around three themes. The first is about hiding and forgetting, a familiar technique for distancing ourselves from waste. The second builds on this to address the notion

that, ideally, waste and waste management should be someone else's problem, obligation or responsibility. The third theme deals with the opportunities and limitations posed by technology, as well as with the emotion's cultural rationality.

Hide and forget

Traditionally, each deadly sin was associated with an animal, perhaps for educational purposes, so it was easier to remember what the sin dealt with.

The donkey is the beast of sloth. Undeservedly, you might think, given its industriousness. After all, the donkey is a beast of burden, struggling over rough terrain with heavy loads on its back. Here, however, the associations should lead to the idea of the stupid donkey – certainly also undeserved, but tenacious. One Swedish example is that of *Karlssons klister*, a brand of glue that still features a donkey on the tube, despite the link between the glue and the donkey no longer being obvious. The old advertising slogan, which basically said "Everyone uses Karlsson's glue, except me, because I'm a donkey" has long since vanished.

The donkey's stupidity is relevant because the Latin term for sloth, *acedia*, has other meanings than purely physical laziness; they refer to a lack of concern for others, a lack of empathy, to passivity, apathy, indifference, a spiritual and intellectual languor. In relation to rubbish and

waste management, we can state that poor waste management is stupid, an intellectual indolence worthy of a donkey.

Nevertheless, humanity's paths are edged with piles of waste. These are not always present and visible in the same way as in mediaeval towns, but are gradually being moved out of the nearest settlement, to rubbish dumps, waste pits or to fields as soil improvers, and now even to other continents. The slothful perspective that can be applied here is that if it cannot be seen, it does not exist.

Still, what has been hidden away has an amazing ability to tug at our coattails. The knowledge that something is hidden over there, behind there, down there, is an eerie background chord, the threat that it will rise again to haunt us. The hidden comes to light again, when old industrial land will be developed or an estate disposed of; buried barrels of chemical waste or diaries with unpleasant contents must be dealt with, physically and emotionally. It is difficult, if not impossible, to erase every trace of dangerous activities or liaisons. If nothing else, time reveals old sins and idle practices.

The theme of the hidden has a given place in art; art is good at exposing abstruse reality, both figuratively and literally. Garbage and waste are therefore rewarding materials for artistic works that encourage the observer to reflect on the state of things and to take action – the opposite of sloth. One such work was an installation by

the artist duo Gunilla Bandolin and Monika Gora, aptly named "Vår tids kökkenmödding" ("Our Time's Kitchen Midden"). This was intended as an installation in a public space in Falkenberg in 1997, a contribution to the *Sculptura 97* sculpture exhibition, but it met resistance.

One element of the installation was a waste disposal building, filled with rubbish and placed in the town square. The other element was a pit or shaft in the town's rubbish dump, from where the rubbish had been taken. Altogether, the aim of the work was to show the links between the square and the dump, between the marketplace and the waste site, with a section of the dump being moved back to the town centre. The idea was for the audience to be bussed between the square and the dump, witnessing the actual hole made in the dump and so reuniting what had been consumed and then thrown away. The artists explained their intentions: "The dump is one of the most meaningful images of our time. It compresses our sense of shame about the past and encompasses our anxiety about the future. The dump is also a place that unites us as social beings."

It did not go well. Irritated residents wrote angry letters, and some did not stop there. The building in the square was burned to the ground before it could be completed, so the waste that had been transported there was erased once and for all. Naturally, this drew attention to the work far beyond Falkenberg, attention that the

vandals could hardly have wished for. It must also be said that other residents were concerned about the arson, submitting petitions to the municipality in support of freedom of expression, under the heading: "'We are deeply concerned about the sabotage of *Sculptura 97* in Falkenberg. We condemn these deeds, which are reminiscent of a dark time in twentieth-century history."

The fire in Falkenberg raises many issues. Why were the vandals so angry, so provoked? One issue deals with the old, boring question of what art really is, and with the equally boring populist distinction between the cultural elite and "ordinary" people. However, in this case it is not unimportant that it was also about rubbish, about rubbish in the wrong place. The consumption practices of sloth were challenged when consumption's footprint, in the form of garbage, was suddenly made visible – and in a prime location at that, in the town square. Taking the bus to a landfill and encountering more waste, more of the downside of consumption, had even less appeal.

At that time, the EU's Waste Framework Directive did not yet exist. Launched in 2008, this lays down a waste hierarchy that allocates prioritised stages to waste management. The first of these is prevention, which means that waste should be prevented from occurring, as far as is possible. This is followed by preparing waste for reuse, then recycling and then recovering energy from waste. The final stage is disposal, or landfill. So, when the kitchen

midden invaded Falkenberg's town square back in 1997, any interrogation of consumption or reminding people of its downsides was even more controversial. In addition to the disgusting act of displaying rubbish, the anger it caused may also reflect anger at the questioning of ordinary choices and habits. Change is difficult when the other option is abstinence. Produce less waste, drive less, don't fly, don't eat meat… The principle of sloth is to let everything continue as it always has, as this requires no effort. But art continues to be provocative. Works in which waste plays a leading role discuss the spoiling of the oceans, polluted land and air, and living conditions in which the absence of clean water and sanitation causes suffering and death.

Also, it must be said that the principle of sloth in relation to waste is not only a problem for households, as individuals are not the only ones who are lazy and do not separate their waste. Quite the opposite. The really large amounts of waste are found in the construction and mining industries. The construction industry's jumbled approach to leftovers and demolition waste has long been the norm, simply because it is easier and cheaper to throw everything in the same container rather than separate it.

The sins of the industrial era haunt the present. One and a half centuries of unthinking dumping and burying are only temporarily hidden and forgotten. The toxic remnants of industrial emissions, large and small, lurk in

water and soil. In many ways, the way that early industries, municipalities and hospitals dealt with waste is reminiscent of households' kitchen middens, but these middens are so much bigger and so much more detrimental to the environment. Much of this behaviour was surely due to ignorance and convenient ideas about the infinite capacity of water, land and air to swallow waste.

However, some cases are deliberate strategies that testify to an indifference to people and the environment. These strategies can also be linked to another deadly sin: greed. One example of what can happen when financial gain trumps all responsibility is what is usually called Sweden's first environmental scandal: BT Kemi's burial of toxic chemicals on an industrial site in Teckomatorp, Skåne. The story begins in 1965, when the production of herbicides similar to Agent Orange, made infamous during the Vietnam War, moved into an old sugar factory. Before long, fish and plants were injured or dying due to leaks and discharges into the river Braån. By the early 1970s, some local residents were protesting against this and the repulsive smell that emanated from the factory site. Others chose to turn a blind eye; instead, they were mostly angry at people who complained and thus jeopardised jobs at the factory.

There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, lawsuits and fines, but mostly a wait-and-see attitude from the municipality, based on the hope that the company would take action,

but eventually modest, almost symbolic, clean-up efforts were initiated. Petitions from complaining Teckomatorp residents were ignored, threats from the factory management stopped newspaper articles from being published, and cases of illness and even death were hushed up. In 1977, the company went bankrupt and in 1979 the factory building was blown up. Environmental legislation in the 1970s was barely worthy of the name and the statute of limitations was just two years. No one could be held liable.

The arduous clean-up process began in 2007, when rusty barrels were dug up and poisoned soil was transported to Germany for environmental remediation. In 2020, the clean-up of the factory site itself began, with the hope that work would be completed early in 2022. This has not happened. A new remediation technique, in which steam at 300°C is used to "vaporise" the toxins in the soil, failed. Now, almost fifty years after the first toxic barrels were exposed, the clean-up of Teckomatorp is once again in limbo, and so far the price tag for taxpayers is 50 million euros.

The behaviour of hiding and forgetting, out of indifference and sloth, greed or ignorance, may seem – to return to the symbolic animal of sloth – donkey-like in its stupidity. After all, what is hidden nevertheless exists.

At a distance

As a strategy, distance can be regarded as another slothful way of managing waste, one that also has deep historical roots. People who deal with rubbish have been given a separate status among the poor. This is still the case in some parts of the world, as well as in the sense that waste tends to be transported from richer to poorer areas, nationally and globally. Historically, the people who dealt with waste were often stigmatised, shunned, dangerous. They included the executioner's servant, who was also the knacker. The title of nightman, used from the Middle Ages until the early twentieth century, made it clear that latrines and rubbish should be emptied and collected after dark, so as not to embarrass ordinary citizens. In farm cottages, an integral part of the construction was used to mark a distance from nightmen, beggars and tramps; this was the "stackarebjälken", which is documented from at least the eighteenth century. This was a sturdy beam that ran straight across the room a few paces from the door, making the boundary physical – outcasts were welcome to this point, but no further.

Relocated to our time and our part of the world, allowing untouchable people into your kitchen may instead feel like a lack of distance and boundaries, an unthinkable intimacy. The distance to the unwanted is now signalled far beyond the doorstep, in a wider geographical area. The concept of NIMBY, "not in my back yard", illustrates a need to draw boundaries against things that everyone knows is necessary, but would rather not be involved in or have close to them. These could be wind farms, residential homes for people with special needs, all kinds of urgent construction projects – as long as they are not located in my neighbourhood – and they may also involve rubbish.

In the early 2000s, Karlskrona Municipality was planning a new thermal power plant, which would have garbage as one of its fuels. Protests quickly arose from the residents of Rödeby, a village close to an existing waste facility where there were plans for expansion. Information about modern combustion technology, meetings and discussions were all in vain; the project had to be abandoned, the thermal power plant was run on biofuel and rubbish continues to be transported for combustion elsewhere in Sweden. The same thing had happened in the neighbouring municipality of Ronneby a year or so earlier, where a waste combustion plant was stopped.

In a broader perspective, even greater distancing is apparent when garbage from the rich world finds its way, legally or illegally, to countries in which labour is cheap

and environmental legislation is non-existent. This means that people somewhere else are doubly affected by Western consumption, both through the waste caused by the products' manufacture and when they are discarded. This is where the indifference and lack of empathy inherent to sloth can be useful – you don't have to care about what happens somewhere else.

If you want to learn more about the extent of waste, waste streams or comparisons between countries' waste production and management, the EU's *Eurostat* database is invaluable. This provides a basis for comparing GDP with the amount of waste generated, as well as which EU states receive waste. The dishonourable epithet of "the dirty man of Europe" does the rounds of member states and builds upon parameters that include emissions, waste volumes and inadequate recycling. Swedish Waste Management's presentation of *Eurostat's* waste statistics shows that Sweden generally has a good position, with 479 kg of household waste per person per year in 2005 and 431 kg in 2020, below the EU average of 505 kg. Swedish citizens' household waste actually approaches that of European countries with a low GDP, while our neighbour, Denmark, tops the list with 845 kg of household waste per person in 2020. There is therefore no simple correlation between prosperity and waste production, and waste statistics, like all statistics, must be carefully analysed. This is also true for waste streams in the EU. A few years

ago, for example, rubbish exports were fairly unidirectional – from EU countries with a high GDP to countries with a lower one. More recently, this has become more nuanced, with countries such as Sweden now also receiving waste for combustion in efficient power plants that require certain volumes to function optimally.

However, even if, as in Sweden, there is strict legislation for waste management, things go wrong surprisingly often. Indifference, by which we mean sloth, is found among shady companies that have been given municipal or other contracts for waste management – and which then simply ignore the rules. One way of circumventing the regulations on electronic waste, for example, is to classify it as second-hand goods instead, so allowing it to be exported. Other ways are completely illegal and rely on smuggling electronic waste out of Europe to Asia and Africa where, on smouldering rubbish dumps, people burn plastic off it to access valuable metals. Crime has an uncanny ability to follow in waste's footsteps, perhaps because of a general reluctance to deal with rubbish or understand where it goes.

However, the following examples come from Sweden. The companies are not named here due to ongoing legal proceedings. One of them is suspected of committing serious environmental offences around the country between 2015 and 2020, including burying or dumping large amounts of waste. In November 2019, a fire started

in a huge rubbish dump in Kagghamra, which this company was responsible for. The fire was difficult to extinguish and continued smouldering for several months, causing air pollution that affected local residents.

Another example from 2018–2019 involves contractors who, rather than recycling batteries, dumped their toxic contents on fields in places such as Kumla, Örebro and Eskilstuna. This scandal has an aspect that is particularly demoralising, as the batteries mostly came from the red battery bins used by households for properly sorted waste, intended to avoid environmentally hazardous emissions, instead of them just throwing batteries in kitchen bin.

Further investigations have shown that the two examples above are linked, that the same people were active in these companies. One common strategy is that these types of companies are connected, but change names and owners to make themselves untouchable. One good example of this comes from Trelleborg, where responsibility for a mountain of rubbish moves from company to company, while the rubbish itself, unsorted construction waste, has remained in place since 2020. The same company has other branches throughout Skåne. Plasterboard, crushed bricks and concrete have been dumped on sports fields, prime arable land or places of high natural value.

Legal loopholes make this kind of crime possible. During the time it takes to investigate and enforce liability, the companies change owners, go bankrupt, hire gate-

keepers. In the Skåne case, for example, the companies were transferred to a convicted fraudster in Borås, then to a drug-abusing teenager in Blekinge, then onward to someone else. The business idea is simple: rubbish that needs to be dealt with produces easy money. The clever thing is that the companies take the money, but leave the rubbish for someone else to clean up. The real criminals maintain a safe distance, both from the waste and from the law.

Of course, there are small-time crooks who utilise the same strategy. These include everyone who chooses to dump bags of rubbish, old refrigerators or de-identified car wrecks on forest roads, verges or industrial sites. In short, in all sorts of places where the landowner ends up with the hassle of dealing with this rubbish, which is when things can get really tricky. Issues of property rights (to the rubbish) have to be reconciled with landowners' rights to their own land and with issues relating to environmental offences. This whole process is characterised by a remarkable lack of action, in which the rubbish and wreckage fall through legal loopholes and can thus long be left where they are.

From this perspective, sloth is about distance, literally and figuratively. By placing responsibilities and obligations elsewhere, waste becomes someone else's problem. It is hard not to glimpse sloth in all those who are keen to subcontract work, but who rarely check up on the compa-

nies they deal with when it comes to waste management. Instead, it is the media, with the help of private individuals, who have assumed the task of scrutinising and investigating and drilling down through the garbage.

Cleverly, the deadly sins have positive mirror images, the seven virtues. This tension between sin and virtue may seem old-fashioned, but it helps give us a clearer view of what these polarities mean, and to reflect on how there may be a sliding scale between the equally ambiguous and perhaps unmodern concepts of good and evil. The opposite of sloth is diligence, *industria*. In this context, adding a few more deadly sins and their counter-virtues is justified: greed's counterpart is generosity, *liberalitas*, and envy's counterpart is kindness, *humanitas*. In discussions about distance and the inherent indifference of sloth, the three virtues of diligence, generosity and kindness together provide further clarity through their absence. None of them are found in the mean and idle behaviour of getting others to clean up what I believe should not be in my backyard.

Technology and shame

Not only do the deadly sins have a symbolic animal and a counter-virtue in their educational toolbox – each has also been assigned a demon.

Sloth's demon is Belfagor or Belfigor, Belphegor, Beelphegor – the name has several different spellings. Like the industrious donkey, Belfagor's meaning has a puzzling link to sloth. Belfagor can be roughly described as the demon that helps people make discoveries and inventions.

One could ask why this is a problem, and how it can be linked to sloth. The descriptions, however, include stories about how Belfagor seduces people by suggesting ingenious inventions that will make them rich – the fault here would be that this also makes them lazy and indolent.

Some accounts say that to satisfy Belfagor, in exchange for inventions and other riches, his followers must pledge him their souls, a common trope when dealing with the devil. But, and this is where we approach waste, the price of satisfying Belfagor may also be that you have to defecate in front of him! One frequent depiction shows him

sitting on a throne made of planks, like a privy, holding up his tail and looking generally repugnant.

As a demon, Belfagor is not really famous, and he is more elusive than his fellow demons associated with the other deadly sins: Lucifer, Mammon and Beelzebub. Sloth is also perhaps a more elusive sin, with a less definite position on the scale of good and evil than greed or pride, for example. However, like other demons, Belfagor appeals to the imagination and has given his name to death-metal bands, characters in manga and other comics, an opera, literature and drama. He is the protagonist of Machiavelli's novel *Belfagor arcidiavolo* ("Belfagor the Archdemon"), also known as *Il demonio che prese moglie* ("The Demon Who Took a Wife"), written in the early sixteenth century. The demon's characteristics and associations with a range of sins also depend on the tradition in which he, or sometimes she, appears: Jewish mysticism, Christianity or an Oriental tradition. The motif of a devil/demon who marries a human belongs to the latter tradition and appears, for example, in the collected stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The link to sloth is found in the Christian tradition.

Keeping this excursion to the demonic realm in mind, we could ask whether something can be learned here, in relation to rubbish, waste and sloth. Yes, perhaps in the sense that overconfidence in technology and inventiveness – as in the stories of Belfagor – leads to sloth. If the

technology of the future will solve the problems of the present, why bother changing your lifestyle? This technological optimism can be heard in the climate debate, with some political and other groups cluelessly and conveniently asserting the primacy of invention, rather than searching for tools to achieve real change. Naive technological optimism does not solve anything, it just postpones the problems. There are plenty of examples of technologies that fail to deliver; the steam treatment of contaminated soil in Teckomatorp is just one, and the issue of dealing with nuclear waste in the future looms over our present demand for power supplies. However, and this is important, technology has unequivocally improved all kinds of waste management. Technology should not just be used as a free pass for continued slothful behaviour.

The list of technologies and inventions to deal with past and present sins can continue ad infinitum: plastics captured from the oceans, refined combustion technology, bacteria that eat oil spills, technologies that transform worthless waste into valuable materials and recovers metals, textile fibres, digested sludge, deposit schemes for recycling. The way that waste is increasingly seen as a resource to be reused first and recycled second is a very positive trend. Still, the best thing, of course, would be that it does not occur at all, that waste is minimised in accordance with the first priority of the waste hierarchy.

Zero waste is unachievable, but striving towards it may provide guidance and be valuable in itself.

In everyday life, it is essential that waste management systems are simple to understand, easy to access and cheap to use. The actual collection of rubbish must be based on the principle of sloth. If disposing of sorted recycling is complicated, there is a great risk that people will not sort their waste. If waste disposal costs money, landowners risk having to accept rubbish bags and car wrecks along forest roads. The motto "doing the right thing should be easy", which is often used in the context of waste, deserves to be kept up to date.

The desire to do things properly is also fairly high when it comes to household waste in Sweden. Compared to refraining from all kinds of consumption, source separation is a relatively simple piece of environmental action – as long as it is not too complicated. There is definitely room for improvement; one source of irritation is packaging composed of different types of material, causing questions about whether these materials should be separated or whether the packaging should be sorted as one or the other. The packaging often lacks information about how it should be sorted and different sorting principles may apply to imported products. Another irritant can be the difference between packaging and materials, where it may seem illogical that a plastic toy cannot be sorted along with plastic packaging. There is also a trend towards sort-

ing in material streams and having municipalities, not the packaging industry, deal with materials separated by source. Of course, not everyone agrees that separating product from packaging is problematic; some years ago, in an exasperated letter to the editor, one reader argued that anyone who cannot tell the difference between a ladies' bicycle and a tin can should not be allowed to vote.

Modern residential areas now plan for convenient waste management from the outset, which includes places for bulky waste that people can access without needing to use a car. There may be underground rubbish storage, allowing more attractive outdoor environments. Waste management in older residential areas is also being re-invigorated. There is no lack of original solutions, such as in Malmö, where a horse and cart collects rubbish from traffic-restricted residential areas that are not accessible to garbage trucks. It is important that waste sorting is not just a matter of rules and regulations. Inspiring, entertaining examples can do just as much, or more, good.

Then there is rubbish that can be embarrassing to expose, no matter how clever the solution. Rubbish and waste are revealing, and some rubbish may be inappropriate for public display. This is not necessarily a matter of sloth, which is why leftover medicines can end up in the sewerage system or among combustibles, and used sex toys wrapped in newspapers can end up in the paper recycling. The staff who work at recycling centres or in sorting

operations have seen it all, such as the two stuffed lions in the container for combustibles in Bunkeflo, Skåne. The living animals are worse off, and are often found in the vicinity of recycling centres. They are frequently half-dead or dead kittens but, as in Stenungsund, Bohuslän, there could also be one dead and one living python. This indifference to the suffering of animals is, if anything, an illustration of sloth as a mortal sin.

It would be a mistake to think that people have only a technical rationality and technical attitude to waste. Rubbish and dirt, disorder and litter are instead culturally coded and socially stigmatised. Therefore, emotional rationality must also be considered in the construction of an infrastructure for waste. What is considered disgusting and unclean changes with time and location, and these are strong cultural forces that need to be understood and used constructively if people are to be convinced about any kind of waste management. Take smells, for example. Unlike the sweeping scent trails of historical environments, there is now a fear of all kinds of odours – household rubbish, sweat, toilet smells. Therefore, it needs to be explained again and again that sorted food waste quickly starts to smell bad if it is stored in closed containers like a plastic bucket with a lid, or if the brown paper bag of food waste is put in a plastic bag before being thrown away, destroying the food waste fraction. A strong emotional desire to counteract, at any price, the culturally dishonourable smell of garbage at

home, thus technically results in the opposite: a rapid and smelly decomposition process or ruined recycling.

Shame is perhaps the driver of culture that most challenges sloth. The UK's Environment Agency began listing the worst environmental offenders in its "Hall of Shame" web portal, to encourage change and sometimes prosecution. Obviously, being at the top of that list is not good for a company's branding. In Sweden, and targeting the sins of individuals, words put together with "shame" (*skam*) first became familiar through the use of *flygskam* – flight shame. It was included in 2018's list of new Swedish words, and was quickly followed by other shame concepts, such as "plastic shame" or "clothes shame". Once people start feeling ashamed of consuming non-essential travel, producing plastic or textile waste, or of smelling of sweat or garbage – behavioural change can happen rapidly. Options that were previously obvious and convenient may be abandoned in favour of those that generate fewer emissions and less waste. This may also mean recycling or reusing, practices that were taken for granted before the era of mass production and cheap goods.

Waste has a moral dimension. The comments field or letters to the editor are a good gauge of morality when it comes to waste and opinions about right and wrong. As an individual, is it right to boo someone who throws a whole box of plastic rubbish into the recycling container for corrugated cardboard? This question was the subject

of a lively debate sparked by Hanna Hellquist's column in the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper, in September 2022. Opinions were divided. Some people felt there was an absolute obligation to speak up, while others were more hesitant. Would such a garbage sinner care about being reprimanded, when this misconduct occurred openly and despite the angry glares of witnesses? Perhaps the person in question was distracted or stressed and inadvertently made a mistake? Perhaps the person who spoke up would be threatened? The important element in this story may be that the sinner apparently knew it was wrong to throw plastic among the corrugated cardboard, and that the bold and defiant stares at observers were probably either a way of hiding the shame of a wrongdoing or a challenge to collective normality.

Source separation and trips to recycling centres have become part of everyday waste management. This requires that the initial slothful impulses are abandoned, but also that it has been organised to make it simple and easy to do the right thing. Of course, it is a bad thing if the demon of sloth is lurking in the reeds, tempting us to indifferently pass on the responsibility for waste management to technical solutions and future generations. Even technological innovations with the best of intentions can have unforeseen negative consequences but, if technology interacts with insights and behavioural change, in the best case it can lead to something good.

In defence of the sins

All the practices of sloth, as they have been expressed in this text, can be summarised as keeping waste at a distance – not dealing with it, transferring its management and the liability to others, hiding and forgetting, putting the rubbish out of sight.

But is this also a deadly sin? Yes, in the literal sense, when poorly managed waste poisons, damages and kills plants, animals and people. And in a figurative sense, when sloth paralyses both the imagination and the ability to act. Nor are the practices of sloth very effective when it comes to waste. What has been hidden has an uncanny talent for showing up again. Rubbish from the past haunts the present and demands attention. There is little point to exporting the problem, even to the other side of the world, when the consequences of air and water pollution have a global impact.

Science entails questioning, examining issues and problems from every angle. According to the humanistic research tradition's way of problematising and relativising, this text could also have included a section in defence of

sloth. It could have discussed sloth as a counterpoint to overconsumption and the hamster wheel of work. For a researcher, refining the meaning of concepts without also highlighting their opposites, concepts that may also seem outdated and invalid in a modern context, is unfamiliar. Sin and virtue, good and evil – what is their place in a secularised age?

However, because the concept of a deadly sin is old-fashioned and strangely rigid when used in its strict, negative sense, it is also fascinating to apply it to something as trivial as modern waste management. The links between past and present find new paths when seen through the keyhole of deadly sin. Perhaps there was wisdom in designating some behavioural deviations as deadly sins, a wisdom that contemporary society could learn from?

Perhaps the list would benefit from being upgraded and adapted to the present, but the sins we already have go a long way. Wisdom lies in recognising that they exist, that they follow in humanity's footsteps. They cannot be eradicated, but they can be counteracted. Every time we sort our household rubbish, every time schoolchildren pick up litter, every time the media exposes garbage sinners, then sloth and indifference are thwarted. This is good.

Riksbankens Jubileumsfond: promotes, inspires and participates

Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ) is an independent foundation with the goal of promoting Swedish research in the humanities and social sciences. The foundation was established through a resolution in the Swedish Riksdag in 1964, when a donation from Riksbanken (the Swedish Central Bank) was approved and the statutes adopted. RJ's establishment was part of the tercentenary celebrations of the world's oldest, still operating, central bank. These celebrations also included the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel and the bank building on Brunkebergstorg, Stockholm. By establishing a foundation, the Riksdag and the Riksbank hoped to benefit a pressing national cause: scientific research linked to Sweden.

For more than fifty years, the foundation has promoted research in the humanities and social sciences.

In 2022, total funding for research and collaboration amounted to more than SEK 500 million. Hundreds of researchers in these disciplines have received grants for conducting research, building infrastructures and networks, establishing new contacts and participating in conferences and seminars, as well as in public debate.

RJ 2023

The Deadly Sins in Our Time

Editor: Jenny Björkman

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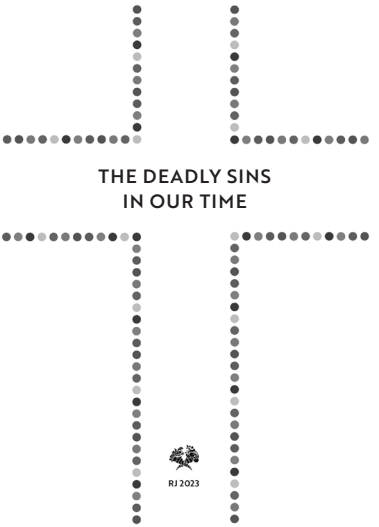

Someone who throws away their rubbish on a street-corner or in a ditch is guilty of sloth. This may appear harmless, but seen through the lens of waste management, sloth soon develops into a deadly sin that harms other people's lives and health. Hiding and forgetting waste has always been a practice with potentially disastrous consequences; buried containers full of toxins will eventually start to leak.

Transporting waste to countries where cheap labour sorts rubbish in inhuman conditions moves the problem further away, but does not mitigate the sin. And too much faith in technology's capacity to transform garbage into gold risks exacerbating sloth.

In 2023, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond is issuing a collection of essays on *The Deadly Sins in Our Time*. Ethnologist Lynn Åkesson provides examples of how our relationship to waste is characterised by sloth, showing with painful clarity that we cannot continue to sweep our rubbish under the carpet or to look indifferently away.

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