

Virtues and Their Vices

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Sloth: Some Historical Reflections on Laziness, Effort, and Resistance to the Demands of Love

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INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary people, scholars and non-scholars alike, think of the deadly sin of sloth as ‘mere’ laziness.¹ In the words of Evelyn Waugh,

[‘Sloth’] is a mildly facetious variant of ‘indolence,’ and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin, is one of the world’s most amiable of weaknesses. Most of the world’s troubles seem to come from people who are too busy. If only politicians and scientists were lazier, how much happier we should all be. The lazy [person] is preserved from the commission of almost all the nastier crimes.²

Similarly, Wendy Wasserstein’s recent book on sloth uses a conception of sloth as laziness and sheer inertia to construct a delightful parody of self-help literature. From the front cover:

With tongue in cheek, *Sloth* guides readers step-by-step toward a life of non-committal inertia. ‘You have the right to be lazy,’ writes Wasserstein. ‘You can choose not to respond. You can choose not to move.’ Readers will find out the importance of Lethargiosis—the process of eliminating energy and drive, the vital first step in becoming a sloth. To help you attain the perfect state of indolent bliss, the book offers a wealth of self-help aids. Readers will find the sloth songbook, sloth breakfast bars (packed with sugar, additives, and a delicious touch of Ambien), sloth documentaries (such as the author’s 12-hour epic on Thomas Aquinas), and the sloth network channel 823, programming designed not to stimulate or challenge in any way.³

¹ Some material from this essay was originally published in DeYoung (2007). It is reprinted here with the editor’s permission.

² Waugh (1962), 57.

³ Wasserstein (2005).

In Harper's 1987 advertising spoofs of the deadly sins, the caption of the ad for sloth read, 'If sloth had been the original sin, we'd all still be in paradise.' Thomas Pynchon concurs: 'Any discussion of Sloth in the present day is of course incomplete without considering television, with its gifts of paralysis . . . Tales spun in idleness find us tubeside, supine, chiropractic fodder, sucking it all in.'⁴ From scholarly to popular accounts of the vice, contemporary culture seems often to associate sloth with laziness, inactivity, and inertia. Looking back through sloth's long history in the Christian tradition of spiritual and moral formation, it is striking how far the contemporary conception departs from sloth's original spiritual roots. Retrieving the traditional definition of sloth will help us see how we now tend to mistake sloth's symptoms for ostensible virtues, and how sloth has more to do with being lazy about love than lazy about our work.

SLOTH AND WORK

The Traditional Conception

The first people to articulate a conception of sloth as a capital vice⁵ were the Desert Fathers of the Egyptian wilderness in the 4th century AD. These monks retreated from the world into the desert deliberately to face what they called 'demons' or 'evil thoughts,' following the example of Jesus's time of temptation in the gospel accounts (e.g. Matthew 4 and Luke 4). The list of evil thoughts set down by Evagrius of Pontus (345–399) included eight members: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sorrow, sloth [*acedia*], vainglory, and pride.⁶ After many years of anchoritic life, Evagrius left behind a written record of the practices and teachings of these desert hermits. In his colorful account of sloth, he describes it in terms of distaste, disgust, sorrow, oppressiveness, and restlessness:

⁴ Pynchon (1999), 84–5.
⁵ Capital vices are defined in the tradition as vices which serve as fertile sources of other characteristic vices. They serve as final causes, orienting the person to a false conception of happiness and organizing patterns of thought, desire, and action around that end. The list of seven (or eight) vices was later designated the seven deadly sins, but this title has a different meaning, since 'deadly' refers to the distinction in Catholic moral theology between mortal and venial sin. Writers on the sins such as Thomas Aquinas deny that every act of a particular vice necessarily constitutes a mortal sin, although the cumulative effect of the vices are to cut one off from God as one's ultimate end. See chapter 1 of DeYoung (2009) for a fuller discussion of the difference.

⁶ The term is from the Greek *a-kedia* (literally, 'lack of care'), but in the Latin and early English the vice is usually referred to as *acedia*, *accidia*, or similar variants.

⁷ See for example, *Thoughts Eight Thoughts*, and *Praktikos* 6 in *Evagrius* (2003). All future references to Evagrian texts are from this volume.

The demon of *acedia* . . . instills in [the monk] a dislike for the place [that is, his desert cell] and for his state of life itself . . . [The demon] joins to these suggestions the memory of [the monk's] close relations and of his former life; he depicts for him the long course of his lifetime, while bringing the burdens of asceticism before his eyes; and, as the saying has it, he deploys every device in order to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium.⁸

Throughout Evagrius's account (only briefly represented here), two things are evident: First, he takes sloth to be an extremely powerful and serious vice, 'the most oppressive of all the demons'; a vice 'accustomed to enveloping the whole soul and strangling the mind.'⁹ It is a serious vice because one's entire commitment of one's life to God is at stake; sloth essentially concerns one's fundamental commitment to one's spiritual identity and vocation. The 'stadium' or gladiatorial arena in the above quotation refers to the metaphorical place where the monk as an 'athlete of Christ' did battle with sin and temptation in order to achieve the tranquility needed for contemplative prayer. To 'leave the cell' or 'flee the stadium' thus signifies an abandonment of one's fundamental calling as a monk. Secondly, because of this subject matter, sloth also qualifies as a spiritual vice. It involves inner resistance and coldness toward one's spiritual vocation and the practices that embody and sustain it. In Evagrius's and Cassian's concatenations of the vices, sloth was on the spiritual end of the chain near vainglory and pride, and opposite 'carnal vices' such as gluttony and lust.¹¹

In the writings of Evagrius's disciple, John Cassian (360–433? AD), we see a shift in emphasis toward the external manifestation of the inner resistance characteristic of sloth. Cassian transplanted desert asceticism into the Latin West, establishing communal forms of monasticism more familiar to us today. Each monk was expected to contribute to the spiritual and physical well-being of the community. Although the Desert Fathers also emphasized the spiritual importance of manual labor, they did not associate it primarily with sloth as Cassian did. Cassian explicitly and extensively discusses the importance of manual labor as a remedy for sloth. Early on in its history, then, sloth picked up its association with physical inactivity and shirking manual labor. Cassian uses language such as 'laziness,' 'sluggishness,' 'sleepiness,' 'inertia,' and 'lack of effort' in his descriptions of sloth.¹² For example, '[Monks] overcome by

⁸ Evagrius (2003), *Praktikos* VI.12.

⁹ Evagrius (2003), 'One hundred chapters,' 12 and 28.

¹⁰ Evagrius (2003), 'One hundred chapters,' 36.

¹¹ Carnal vices have a bodily or material good as their object (e.g. the pleasure of eating or drinking, sensations of sexual pleasure, money—although avarice can be a complicated case); spiritual vices have a spiritual or intelligible good (e.g. honor, excellence, glory, superior worth or rank) as their object.

¹² See also Evagrius: 'Acedia is . . . hatred of industriousness, a battle against stillness . . . laziness in prayer, a slackening of asceticism, untimely drowsiness, revolving sleep' (2003, *On Vices* 6.4). His description in this passage is, however, complicated by other features of the vice that

slumbering idleness and acedia . . . [have] chosen to be clothed not by the effort of [their] own toil but in the rags of laziness. . . [and] have grown remiss as a result of sluggishness and . . . are unwilling to support themselves by manual labor.¹³

Even for Cassian, however, idleness is clearly intended to be symptomatic of the inner condition of one besieged by sloth.¹⁴ In this Cassian's own description echoes what we have seen from Evagrius: 'Once [*acedia*] has seized possession of a wretched mind, it makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell. . . Likewise it renders him slothful and immobile in the face of all the work to be done within the walls of his dwelling.'¹⁵

Cassian's description of physical inactivity or lack of effort is not a condemnation of laziness as such, as shown by the approving summaries of Evagrius's descriptions of *acedia* that frame his own reflections in the *Institutes*. Slothful behavior is seen to be an effect or expression of one's spiritual state. Note that 'the work to be done within the walls of his dwelling' includes both spiritual practices and physical duties done on behalf of the religious community. Shirking this work in any form signals a distancing of oneself from one's identity and investment as a member of a spiritual community bound by its love for God. Mere (physical) laziness would not necessarily be slothful. Rather, shirking one's spiritual duty—whether this involves practices of inner devotion or manual labor on behalf of one's brothers in the monastery—is slothful when it is symptomatic of inner discontent and resistance to the monk's religious identity as a member of the monastic community. Cassian likens the one with sloth to a deserter in an army who has abandoned his loyalties and the cause for which he pledged to fight:

For the adversary [the devil] will the more frequently and harshly try a person who he knows, once the battle is joined, will immediately offer him his back and who he sees hopes for safety not in victory or in struggle but in flight, until he is gradually drawn out of his cell and begins to forget the reason for his profession, which is nothing other than the vision and contemplation of that divine purity which is more excellent than anything else and which can be acquired only by silence, by remaining constantly in one's cell, and by meditation. Thus it is that the soldier of Christ, having become a fugitive and a deserter from his army, 'entangles himself in worldly affairs' and displeases 'him to whom he engaged himself' [quoting 2 Tim. 2:4].¹⁶

accord better with the passage from *Praktikos*: 'hatred of one's cell, an adversary of ascetic works, an opponent of perseverance, . . . a partaker in sorrow' etc. . . .

¹³ Cassian (2000), *Institutes* X.xxi. See also *Conferences* V, in volume 57 of the same series.

¹⁴ In fact, his long discussion of the apostle Paul's words about idleness and work is framed as a 'health-giving remedy' for maladies arising from 'the spirit of acedia.' Idleness is the outer symptom, doing good work and not giving way to idleness is a remedial (and preventative) practice (Cassian 2000, *Institutes* X.vii).

¹⁵ Evagrius (2003), *Praktikos* VI.12.

¹⁶ Cassian (2000), *Institutes* X.iii. Given that desertion was typically punishable by execution, it is easy to see how sloth also developed a reputation for being a mortal sin—one by which one forfeited one's spiritual life.

Both inner and outer manifestations of sloth are thus linked to one's religious commitment and one's attitude toward the demands of the spiritual life. Like Evagrius, Cassian thinks sloth is a serious spiritual vice because it threatens one's fundamental identity as one who has devoted one's life to developing a relationship with God and erodes one's commitment to the religious community formed by that identity.¹⁷

Complicating the account further, sloth's physical symptoms do not always include laziness or inertia. One can avoid putting effort in one's spiritual endeavors both by undue rest (laziness) and by restless escapism (bussiness). 'For the person whom it has begun to conquer, to whatever degree, it either allows to stay in his cell without any spiritual progress, in as it were a state of inactivity and surrender, or drives him out from there and make him, in addition, unstable and feckless.'¹⁸ Over-activity might involve an actual (literal) escape from one's cell: so Cassian exhorts the monk—as a soldier of Christ—not to be 'a deserter and a fugitive'¹⁹ (note again the idea of abandoning one's spiritual vocation) and not to be 'cut down by the sword of sleep or collapse nor to be driven out from the bulwark of the monastery and depart in flight.'²⁰

Besides actual escape, a mind actively engaged in denial and diversion in the form of imaginative fantasy is another form of restless escapism. So Evagrius describes the slothful monk in his solitary desert cell, imagining what a relief it would be to jump out of his cell and flee.²¹ Later, Gregory the Great (540–604)

¹⁷ Originally, *acedia* and the vice of sorrow were distinguished from each other, but linked in the concatenation of vices (Cassian especially subscribed to the view that falling prey to one vice made one susceptible to the next one in the chain). Cassian and Evagrius describe sorrow's cause as excessive attachment to (or insufficient detachment from) worldly desires, pleasures, and possessions. One's religious commitment makes one unable to satisfy or attain these desires, and one feels disappointed as a result. This is the vice of sorrow. (Thus Cassian makes much of total renunciation: the monk cannot keep even a penny of his former fortune when he joins the monastery; this in contrast to the Desert Fathers who were allowed a sub-poverty level of personal possessions to maintain their livelihood—e.g. basket weaving materials.) This sorrow in turn produces resentment of one's religious vocation which now presents itself as the major obstacle to the fulfillment of worldly desires. As such, the vocation and its demands is resented and resisted. This is the vice of sloth. Gregory will later combine sorrow and sloth under the title, *tristitia*, and Aquinas will describe sloth itself as an oppressive sorrow on the basis of this relationship. My account of sloth, based on Aquinas's texts, also maintains the link Evagrius and Cassian first described, with excessive attachment to the 'old self' making commitment to and joy in the 'new self' difficult and distasteful.

¹⁸ Cassian (2000), *Institutes* X.vi.

¹⁹ Cassian (2000), *Institutes* X.xv.

²⁰ Cassian (2000), *Institutes* X.ii–v.

²¹ Evagrius (2003), *Praktikos* VI: 'The demon of *acedia*, also called the noonday demon (cf. Ps. 90:6), is the most oppressive of all the demons. . . First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the day seems to be fifty hours long. Then he compels the monk to look constantly toward the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour, to look this way and that. . . And further he instills in him a dislike for the place and for his state of life itself for manual labor, and also the idea that love has disappeared from among the brothers and there is no one to console him. And should there be

and Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) described sloth's characteristic expression in terms of 'the wandering of the mind after illicit things.'²² One immediately thinks of Pascal's reflections on 'diversion' in his *Pensees* as a modern expression of sloth. For Pascal, as for the earlier Christian tradition, these diversions and distractions are what we fill our lives and minds with to avoid facing the truth regarding who we are and what we are called to be in relationship with God. The external symptoms—laziness and lack of effort or restless activity—share a common root in one's inner restlessness and discontent.

In contrast to sloth's undue rest and/or restlessness, the monk was supposed to have a whole-hearted commitment to God. This whole-hearted commitment led to real rest and peace on the one hand—the counterpart of laziness, which is a false kind of rest—and the willingness to put real effort into one's relationship with God on the other—the counterpart of restless flitting from one thing to another, which is a kind of false or shallow activity.

A Brief History of Sloth

So far, I have emphasized the distance between the ancient view of *acedia* as resistance to one's spiritual vocation and contemporary descriptions of sloth as mere laziness. Nevertheless, we can still see continuity between this vice's Christian origins and contemporary conceptions of it if we trace the change historically. To make a very long story short, what happened was that the concept of sloth was gradually stripped of its association with inner spiritual commitment. As it secularized, what remained (mostly) was its most distinctive and characteristic outer symptom—inertia, lethargy, lack of effort, or laziness.

As an additional complication, however, sloth's second manifestation—restless overactivity—split off and became, in certain respects, a virtue. The secularization of sloth went hand in hand with what I will call the spiritualization of work. What follows is a brief story of how this went.

Sloth was translated and transplanted from its application to desert and monastic settings—with their narrower concept of religious vocation and identity—into the wider culture, first with the popularization of Gregory the

someone who has offended the monk, this too the demon uses to add further to his dislike (of the place). He leads him on to the desire for other places where he can easily find the wherewithal to meet his needs and pursue a trade that is easier and more productive; he adds that pleasing the Lord is not a question of being in a particular place . . . and as the saying has it, he deploys every device in order to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium. Also, in *Eight Thoughts* 6.5 he says: 'The spirit of *acedia* drives the monk out of his cell, but the monk who possesses perseverance will ever cultivate stillness.'

²² Gregory, trans. Parker (1844–1850), 31.45.88ff. Aquinas quotes him as an authority on the matter at ST II-II.35.4.obj and ad 2.

Great's *Moralia* but most intentionally and extensively after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. By the thirteenth century, Aquinas had extended sloth's application beyond those who took religious orders to everyone with the virtue of charity—that is, everyone who had been baptized a Christian. With a little help from certain Reformers, the concept of religious vocation was subsequently extended to apply to *all* forms of work and labor—even household chores and ditch-digging. On this view, diligence in all work could be a sign of one's love and devotion for God (from the Latin, *diligere*, to love). Being industrious was virtuous because the harder you chose to work, the more love and devotion you showed.²³

As the gradual secularization of the modern period infiltrated the workplace, the religious sense of 'vocation' waned. Work began to supplant religious identity as the source of individual identity and worth. As work took on an identity-defining significance, it became the key to meaning and fulfillment. Henry Ford stirringly expressed it this way, 'There is no place in civilization for the idler. None of us has any right to ease. Work is our sanity, our self-respect, our salvation. Through work and work alone may health, wealth, and happiness inevitably be secured.'²⁴

The result for the vice of sloth? Josef Pieper writes:

In popular thought the 'capital sin' of sloth revolves around the proverb, 'An idle mind is the Devil's workshop.' According to this concept, sloth is the opposite of diligence and industry; it is almost regarded as a synonym for laziness and idleness. Consequently, [sloth] has become, to all practical purposes, a concept of the middle class work ethic. The fact that it is numbered among the seven 'capital sins' seems, as it were, to confer the sanction and approval of religion on the absence of leisure in the capitalistic industrial order.²⁵

Laziness is a sign of lack of love and devotion to one's work, where one's career now replaces religion as a source of identity, meaning, and fulfillment. Diligence and industriousness are now virtues essential to a life of self-defined vocation and self-achieved fulfillment. As William May puts it, from the Industrial Revolution until the twentieth century, Western societies 'shared confidence in the redemptive power of work,' although the 'religious significance' with which work has been 'invested' has taken different forms in capitalistic and communist societies.²⁶ Very recently, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* listed discipline first among the virtues necessary for success in

²³ I have already noted connections to laziness in Cassian's account of sloth, but I think there is a larger story to be told about how the concept of sloth evolved toward secularization during the Renaissance, Reformation, and Industrial Revolution up to the present. This history is somewhat speculative on my part, but, nevertheless, I think, a plausible story and one worth investigating further. For a further look at secular and religious views of sloth, see DeYoung (2005).

²⁴ Quoted in McCracken (1966), 29.

²⁵ Pieper (1986), 54.

²⁶ May (1967).

graduate school.²⁷ Diligence also has a common place among the virtues included in 'character building' curricula at all levels of education.²⁸ In a culture devoted to personal success and fulfillment through work, sloth functions in a parallel way to the original conception—the slothful person is a psychological puzzle; she is a person who resists her vocation, even though it is the key to her own happiness.

What should we make of this development in which sloth gets secularized and work gets spiritualized? Because our own work is now the key to fulfillment, and our own efforts procure success, the contemporary virtues of diligence and industriousness in our work can easily arise from the vice pride, in which we idolatrously try to forge our own identity and determine and procure our own happiness for ourselves. In the traditional schema, pride is the primal source of sin and the other capital vices emerge from it as so many branches growing from the same tree, or, to switch metaphors, so many variations on a single theme. Like Augustine's analysis of Roman 'courage' and 'moderation' in *City of God*, many forms of contemporary diligence will thus count as pseudo-virtues from the point of view of those who first named sloth as a vice, because they are ultimately rooted in a self-love and presumption of dominion over our own lives that neither acknowledges nor depends on God. Insofar as we assume our fulfillment to be in our own power to determine and deliver, our character reveals its roots in pride. Insofar as work has become an activity used to deny or neglect our true spiritual vocation, it has become a new form of slothful restlessness. Our brief history reveals a great irony, then: judged by the traditional conception of sloth, today's moral ideal—the 'virtuously' industrious and diligent worker—is just as likely as her lazy counterpart to be in the grip of the vice of sloth and its traditional root, pride.

Unfortunately, this is not just a problem for those with a secular conception of work. These tendencies also bleed into religious life and ministry. If diligence is the measure of love, then the harder one works—this time in religious programs, in ministries, at volunteer organizations, or through acts of charity—the better. Be ants, not sluggards, the proverb-writer warns, and the apostle Paul insists that we work with our hands and eat only what we earn. But all this diligent participation in religious work, ostensibly as a sign of devotion, can also subtly slide into the vice of pride. In pride, we implicitly assume responsibility for creating our own religious identity (as an 'involved church member' or 'one devoted to the ministry') or ensuring that our

²⁷ Benton (2003). Discipline is the first virtue he discusses, and that section begins with the advice to 'work every day if possible.'

²⁸ See, for example, the list in Calvin College's new curriculum. Diligence tops the list; charity is also included later on. To be fair, the list is not meant to be rank-ordered, but it is interesting that in making such lists, diligence obviously springs naturally to mind and has an uncontested place.

own spiritual fulfillment lies safely within our own control, measured by our own standards, and achieved by our own efforts. Our religious activities, even ministry itself, can easily become something more like our own projects than anything like a response to God's love or calling. In this case, we've adopted the secular work model of identity and fulfillment and developed our own prideful, 'Christian' version of it.

As an equally ironic result, religious activities can also function as just one more escapist, diversionary cover-up for the vice of sloth itself, traditionally understood. That is, we can use busy involvement in religious practices and programs to avoid giving ourselves in a real relationship of love with God. Our lives can be filled with church committee work and social groups and fundraisers, but empty of real relationship and worship—perhaps our frantic busyness is a symptom of our lack of desire for God himself and a preference for our own self-made kingdoms. Or worse, perhaps, worship itself becomes more self-entertainment than encounter with God. In these religious contexts as well, then, while busy activities earn moral approval or disguise a lack of serious discipleship, they can cover over the real vice of sloth.

Perhaps, for some, work is not identity-defining. In these cases, laziness may be nothing more than having a little extra time on your hands. It is mere laziness rather than culpable inertia—doing nothing rather than shirking duty; feeling relaxed rather than being apathetic when one ought to feel devotion. No particular moral disapprobation need be attached to this sort of 'mere laziness'; it is no big deal to feel lazy occasionally.²⁹

I do think it reveals the power of the 'diligence-is-devotion' paradigm that plenty of people feel guilty admitting they spent an afternoon off relaxing, even if they cannot explain why all laziness is bad. More importantly, however, our culturally pervasive disparagements of laziness also seem to arise from and further preclude a real understanding of rest (physical and spiritual) and an appreciation for its value, a point we will come back to later. The paradoxical result of the twists and turns of this brief history is that it makes sense for contemporary people to be puzzled about why mere laziness should count as something like a big, bad, deadly sin.³⁰ It also makes sense of why a

²⁹ As Peter Kreeft (1986), 155 once put it, 'Sloth is not just laziness. There are two kinds of laziness, the first of which is only mildly, or venially, sinful, the second not a sin at all. Not working, or not working hard at good and earthly necessary tasks is a venial sin. Preferring the pleasures of resting to the sweat of needed labor is irresponsible and self-indulgent; but it is not the mortal sin of sloth. Sloth refuses to work at our heavenly task. The second kind of laziness belongs to a phlegmatic or slow temperament. . . . It's a lazy afternoon in summer' is a kind of delight, and sloth has no delight. Relaxing is not sloth. The person who never relaxes is not a saint but a fidget.'

³⁰ It should be noted that some people launching this criticism are using the term 'deadly' in an incoherent way: it is often used by secularists and Protestants who don't believe, respectively, in sin and hell or mortal sin. Hence my preference for the term 'capital vice.' See note 5.

sort of idolatrous workaholism—both in secular careers and in Christian ministry—is often honored as a virtue, with laziness its vicious counterpart.

If there were no more to sloth than the sense purveyed by contemporary culture—that is, if sloth is nothing but laziness—it would make sense to drop sloth off the list of seven capital vices altogether, a now-inapplicable remnant of a no-longer-applicable tradition. If, however, we take a more historical view of sloth—in which its relationship to religious vocation has been successfully secularized—we need to face the important question of whether and in what respects we should now understand work, diligence, laziness, and sloth as virtues or vices. The point of learning the whole story of sloth, including its roots in the Christian tradition, is in part to reveal these paradoxes and contemporary moral dangers and to help us sort through them with some healthy, perhaps countercultural Christian wisdom.

There is, however, another side to this project of bringing traditional understandings of sloth to bear on contemporary life. That is, there is another important way the traditional notion of sloth and its symptoms (laziness and restlessness) has diagnostic and remedial usefulness today. The second case I want to make for the retrieval of the traditional conception of sloth and its translation into contemporary contexts requires attention to sloth's relational component and, in particular, its link to love. To make this point, I need to explain briefly Thomas Aquinas's definition of charity, the virtue of love which stands opposed to the vice of sloth.³¹

SLOTH AND LOVE

Aquinas on Sloth and Charity

To understand sloth's link to love, we need to understand the context in which Aquinas gives his account of the vice.³² Unlike many prominent figures in the vices tradition, Aquinas does not organize the *Summa theologiae* around a list of seven virtues and a parallel list of seven vices. Rather, he makes the seven principal virtues the backbone of the *Summa*'s structure, and then includes other elements—the seven capital vices, the beatitudes, the gifts of the Holy

Spirit—wherever they fit among those seven.³³ First, he discusses the theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity (or love)—and then the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. Because the list of seven principle virtues does not correspond to the list of seven (or eight) capital vices, it is an interesting exercise to assess the significance of Aquinas's assignment of each vice to a particular virtue.³⁴ Sloth is the capital vice opposed to the theological virtue of charity—which Aquinas places at the center of his account of the virtues as the 'root and mother' of all others in their true and perfect form.³⁵ Charity (*caritas*, the Latin equivalent for Greek *agape*) has a two-fold act: love of God, its principal act, and love of neighbor for God's sake, its secondary act. Sloth opposes charity's love of God.³⁶ Technically, sloth is defined as a form of sorrow opposed to the main effect of love, which is joy in the presence of the beloved, God, as illustrated in Figure 1, below:³⁷

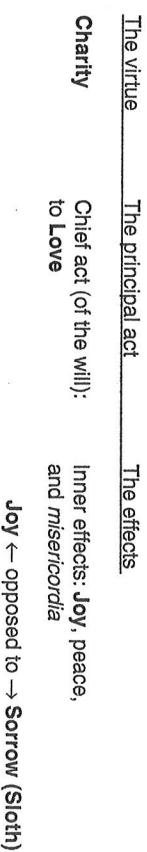


Figure 1

³³ *De Malo* is organized by the vices, in Gregorian order (see Gregory 1844–1850, 31.45.87ff). The different format occasionally leads to different content: for example, Aquinas has a long argument against usury in the question on avarice in *De Malo*, where he argues that usury, as an act of avarice, undermines the strict obligations of justice. In the *Summa*, he opposes covetousness or avarice to liberality (generosity), which is related to justice, but not a strict requirement of it. Both are late works representing Aquinas's mature thought. The treatment of sloth is largely the same in *ST* and *DM*, but only in *ST* is sloth's relation to charity structurally evident, rather than (as in *DM*) simply asserted.

³⁴ For example, just is opposed to chastity, pride to humility, and wrath to patience. None of these are on the list of the seven principal virtues. Sloth is sometimes opposed to perseverance, but Aquinas opposes it to charity; vainglory has no clear opposing virtue, but Aquinas's opposes it to a subsidiary virtue of courage called 'magnanimity.'

³⁵ *ST* II-II.23.8. This means that charity orders all other virtues to its end, love of God. For a more detailed exposition of Aquinas's view of sloth and the interpretive puzzles that arise from it, see DeYoung (2004) and (2011).

³⁶ Envy, the other capital vice opposed to charity, opposes charity's love of neighbor. In the *Summa*, vices are usually organized in Aristotelian fashion according to the virtue they oppose either by excess or deficiency. Rather than defining sloth as a vice of deficiency with respect to love for God, however (*pace* Dante and William Peraldus), Aquinas does not mention the Aristotelian categories at all in his account. It would make sense to downplay them, given that he says that there is no possible excess of charity. Thus all sins and vices are deficiencies of charity in some way or other.

³⁷ The other two inner effects of charity are peace (concord of wills) and *misericordia* (often translated mercy, but something more like sympathy or compassion—fellow-feeling). The friendship of charity is therefore characterized by likeness: of nature—love is a natural inclination toward and delight in what we have an affinity for—Aquinas calls this 'connaturality,' which is marked by joy—of will, which is marked by peace—and of feeling (*sympathos, compassio*), which is marked by *misericordia*.

³¹ See Paul Wadell's chapter on the virtue of charity in this volume for a related discussion.

³² Aquinas's account of sloth generally follows the Evagrius/Cassianic conception of *acedia*. The list of seven deadly sins was originally a list of eight or nine. Gregory the Great organized it into 'the perfect seven' by combining the vices of *acedia* and sorrow and making the vice of pride the root of the seven remaining vices, rather than an additional item on the list. As we will see shortly in his definition of sloth, Aquinas accepts Gregory's combination but calls the vice *acedia* instead of *tristitia*.

For Aquinas, 'sorrow' is a technical term (already used in Gregory, Cassian, and Evagrius), meaning something quite different than simply feeling unhappy. Sorrow, understood as a passion of the sensory appetite, is a response of feeling overwhelmed by a present evil. The sort of sorrow Aquinas uses to define sloth, however, is a movement of the will analogous to, but not identical with (or reducible to), the passion of sorrow in the sense appetite. Slothful sorrow's location in the will explains its opposition to charity, which is also a movement of the will, since Aquinas defines this love as an act of the rational appetite. Unlike the sense appetite, the will does not merely respond to external stimuli, but is capable of deliberate choice and self-direction. The rational appetite can also respond to goods that can be apprehended by reason, such as the good of a relationship or friendship, and is not limited to goods apprehensible by the senses (as is true for the sense appetite).

How does this distinction help us understand sloth? Aquinas means by slothful 'sorrow' a deliberate resistance or aversion of the will not just felt but endorsed or consented to. In one place he even describes sloth as 'detestation, disgust, and horror.'³⁸ What causes this aversion of the will? Aquinas says the object of the slothful person's aversion is 'the divine good in us.'³⁹ This may initially sound somewhat mysterious, but when readers of the *Summa* heard the phrase, 'the divine good in us,' they would have immediately understood it as referring to what Aquinas had just said in the questions on charity: The 'divine good in us' is our participation in God's nature through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit by grace. As he says in his description of charity,

Charity is a friendship of human beings for God, founded upon the fellowship of everlasting happiness. Now this fellowship is due to not natural powers but a gift of grace (as according to Romans 6:23), so charity surpasses our natural capacities. . . . Therefore charity cannot be in us naturally, nor is it something we acquire by human natural powers; it can only be in us by the infusion of the Holy Spirit. Who is the Love of the Father and the Son. *Created charity just is this participation of the Holy Spirit in us.*⁴⁰

Roughly translated, this means that by grace, the Holy Spirit in our hearts makes us like-natured with God. This likeness of nature is the foundation of our relationship with God, which Aquinas calls the friendship of charity. Aquinas's account of the virtue of Christian love for God turns out to be an interesting combination of Platonic participation in the divine nature and Aristotelian virtue friendship, where the friends love each other as persons with the same good nature (or character) as themselves. This friendship constitutes human fulfillment; this relationship of love we have with God is our end and highest good.

So charity is a friendship with God, a love for the one with whom we become like-natured. Sloth is sorrow or resistance to that friendship. Put more technically, sloth is the will's aversion to our 'participation' in God—that is, our resistance to his making us 'like-natured' to him through the Holy Spirit's presence and work within us, and thus our resistance to the friendship and love grounded in that likeness of nature. Charity's joy at our sharing in God's nature, conceived of as our greatest good, is replaced by distaste for and aversion to it as something evil or to be avoided.

Aquinas thus agrees with Evagrius, Cassian, and Gregory the Great that sloth is a spiritual vice, not a carnal one.⁴¹ Sloth's main target is our love relationship with God, in the context of a life in which we take our likeness to God to be our defining identity and loving communion with God to be our main vocation as human beings. The slothful person resists this relationship and the like-naturedness to God that she must accept and cultivate to sustain it. Sloth is *not*, therefore, an aversion to *physical* effort per se; sloth is *not* merely the excessive desire for physical ease or bodily comfort, the way the carnal vice of lust draws us away from God on account of our desire for sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, sloth is still a resistance to effort and a kind of inertia. It is laziness about love for God and what this love relationship requires of its participants. Because we are embodied creatures, and our love and worship for God must also take the form of bodily, outward actions, living out a relationship of love will often take physical form and require physical effort. The key is not to mistake the expression of sloth for its spiritual root.

There is a difficulty with Aquinas's definition, however. A love relationship with God constitutes human fulfillment, and human fulfillment is something we are naturally wired to seek. As Augustine put it, 'our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.'⁴² How then can our will be slothful, shrinking back in aversion from the only thing that can fulfill us as if it were evil?

Aquinas's answer to this psychological puzzle is equally puzzling—at least initially. He quotes the apostle Paul: the slothful person resists human fulfillment 'on account of the flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit.'⁴³ 'The flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit' initially makes sloth sound like a carnal vice again, as if the slothful person resisted her spiritual good because desires for the comforts of the flesh won her over and tempted her away.

Of course Aquinas cannot endorse *that* interpretation of Paul, because he just *denied* that sloth was a carnal vice whose object was bodily pleasure and comfort. What he means, therefore, is what Paul also means: the flesh is not to be equated with the physical body, but instead, the sinful nature, which Paul calls the 'old self.' Likewise, the spirit includes all of our redeemed, regenerated nature. This he calls the 'new self.' Paul's distinction applies to the whole person, in all of her

³⁸ ST II-II.35.2, DM 11.2.

³⁹ DM 11.2.

⁴⁰ ST II-II.23.2.

⁴¹ ST II-II.35.2.

⁴² Augustine (2009), 3.

⁴³ Gal. 5:17, ST 35.3.

bodily and spiritual aspects; he is after the difference between a person enslaved to sin, on the one hand, and a person devoted to God, on the other.⁴⁴

How does this help us solve the puzzle about sloth? Sloth is resistance—not of bodily flesh to spirit—but of the old sinful tendencies and desires and attachments to the new ones we adopt to become more faithful to Christ and like-natured to him. This transformation of the person is nothing but sanctification—the transformation that is the essential work of the virtue of charity. Sloth is a potential problem for human beings, because for us charity has a now-and-not-yet character: consider by way of analogy a married couple who say their vows on their wedding day and therefore are married *now*, but who *yet* have to learn to live out those vows for as long as their lives shall last.⁴⁵ So too with charity: we receive the Holy Spirit both as a present reality and as a process of becoming more and more like-natured to God, the task of a lifetime.⁴⁶

Sloth, then, is resistance to the transformation that God's love gradually works in us and in particular the painful renunciation of the old self, that is, our willingness to let old sinful habits and attachments die and be made new.⁴⁷ The slothful person refuses to accept the demands that a like-naturedness to God and a love relationship with her brings; she refuses the surrender and 'putting to death' of the old sinful self required for her own fulfillment. Sloth is thus rooted in pride, in which we seek happiness and fulfillment not in God but in something else we have chosen, and we seek it on our own terms, with a will resistant, not subject, to God's.

One Scriptural portrait of sloth is the Israelite nation facing the Promised Land.⁴⁸ As slothful, they can't bring themselves fully to accept what their identity as God's own people entails, and so they hang back from the rest and fulfillment promised 'in the land your God has given you.' The land is already theirs according to God's promise, but must yet be seized by further work and battle. When they see the challenges ahead, they too quickly revert back to the comfortably familiar discomforts of their desert wandering, preferring them to a chance at real rest, a chance that comes with a challenge to live fully into their identity as God's chosen people.

So the slothful person prefers slow death by spiritual suffocation to the risks and birthpangs of new life and spiritual growth. Hence the natural connection

⁴⁴ Aquinas makes this distinction in his commentary on Ephesians 4; see also Evagrius (2003), *Thoughts* 39 on Colossians 3.

⁴⁵ *ST II-II.24.3* ad 2 ('grace is nothing else than a beginning of glory in us') and *II-II.24.5*, on the increase of charity. See especially ad 3: 'This is what God does when He increases charity; that is, He makes it to have a greater hold on the soul, and the likeness of the Holy Spirit to be more perfectly participated by the soul.'

⁴⁶ And, Aquinas might argue, more than a lifetime if one counts purgatory. Because sloth is premised on the condition of progressive sanctification over time, angels can't have sloth (*ST I.63.2*)—grace in them is perfected in a single act of will.

⁴⁷ Romans 12: 1–2, Ephesians 4: 22–4, Colossians 3: 9–14.

⁴⁸ See Wenzel (1967), 101.

between sloth and inertia or lifelessness. Garret Keizer puts the point more poetically this way: 'Dead men throw no fits, or it seems they wouldn't. . . . Death hates resurrection. No one likes to be woken from a sound sleep. Where those afflicted by sloth . . . can become most angry is when someone or something—like a dissatisfied spouse—disturbs the tranquility of their sarcophagus.'⁴⁹ Why are the slothful often perceived as apathetic? Perhaps it is safer to try not to feel anything, when the alternative is to feel the unbearable and inescapable tension that comes with refusing to be who you really are.

We can see the main features of the historical conception of sloth from Evagrius and Cassian in Aquinas's account. Evagrius and Cassian agree that sloth threatens one's commitment to one's spiritual vocation; likewise, Aquinas defines sloth as resisting or resenting the indwelling of the Spirit and the supernatural love which is the root of our spiritual life and our vocation to become like-natured to God.⁵⁰

By defining sloth in terms of its opposition to the virtue of charity, Aquinas broadens sloth's application beyond Evagrius and Cassian's accounts to life beyond the monastery. Now *everyone* who has charity—that is, *all* baptized Christians, not just those who have taken particular religious vows—is potentially susceptible to sloth. Anyone with a relationship of love for God is now in principle capable of responding with slothful abhorrence and resistance to the practices that draw us closer to God and affirm our identity and union with him.

In Aquinas's account, sloth's symptoms and effects also remain familiar. Aquinas uses his definition of sloth as oppressive sorrow to explain its typical expression in restless activity on the one hand, and inertia or despairing resignation on the other. Sorrow is the natural reaction to a present evil which seems inescapable.⁵¹ This sort of situation leads to two typical responses, according to Aquinas. First, through distraction and denial, we pretend the evil is not there or try not to think about it. Second, if we cannot avoid thinking about it and we cannot get rid of it, we become depressed,

⁴⁹ Keizer (2002). We should also note the 'trapped' feeling of the sloth person, on Aquinas's view—she can't get rid of natural desire for happiness (she can only suppress it), but she is still insistent on refusing it. Hence his (and Evagrius's) description of this vice as 'oppressive.' Keying off sloth's two main forms—false rest and restlessness, discussed later in the paper—Aquinas also opposes sloth to the commandment to rest on the Sabbath day, because the slothful person turns her back on the joy of charity and refuses to be at rest with the presence of God within her—the latter is Aquinas's interpretation of the commandment. Sloth, then, is our attempt at self-manufactured 'rest' and fulfillment.

⁵⁰ Aquinas thinks of this in terms of the perfection of the *imago dei*. For all these thinkers, this spiritual vocation—being and living in communion with God—is at the core of human identity; it is what we are meant to be and it is what brings us fulfillment.

⁵¹ In the treatise on the passions (making the analogy again to the will), Aquinas defines sorrow as our response to a present evil which seems inescapable (it is present because we are unable to escape it). See *ST I-II.35–38* on the passion of sorrow, and *ST III.35.4* ad 1 and 2; *DM XI.4* on the offspring vices of sloth, which are explained in terms of not being able to endure sorrow.

overwhelmed by helplessness, or paralyzed in despair. The first response gives rise to restlessness, easy pleasure-seeking, and the escapist fantasies of a wandering mind; the second, to inertia, apathy, and despair. Like Eragritus's slothful desert anchorite, Aquinas says the slothful person either stays busy with desperate measures to escape (either in reality or fantasy) or slumps into despair and inactivity.

Being Lazy About Love

Our retrieval of the historical conception of sloth yielded an analysis of contemporary tendencies to glorify diligence in our work, whether this takes a secular or sacred form. Aquinas's take on sloth, however, leads us to ponder slothful aversion in the context of relationships of love. Rather than focusing on laziness—the outer symptom of sloth—we now turn to consider contemporary forms of sloth's inner laziness about the transformational demands of love.

On Aquinas's relational conception of sloth, slothful people want all the comforts of being in a relationship—with the identity, security, love, and happiness that it brings—while ultimately resisting or refusing to let love change them or to make demands of them. They are like a married couple who long for a relationship of unconditional love, but who chafe at the thought of disciplining their own desires or sacrificing themselves in order to maintain that relationship and allow it to flourish. In one of her autobiographical novels, Anne Lamott recounts the words of a wise old woman at her church who told her, 'the secret is that God loves us exactly the way we are *and* that he loves us too much to let us stay like this.'⁵² Those with sloth object to not being able to stay the way they are. Something must die in order for the new self to be born, and it might be an old self to which we are very attached.

In a contemporary translation of Aquinas's relational portrait of the vice of sloth, we would also expect to see something like spiritual sloth's familiar symptoms: on the one hand, resisting or averting our eyes from what loving another person really requires of us—a constant, restless busyness, or diversions that provide escape from facing our true condition; and, on the other hand—when we must face what we cannot bear to acknowledge: that the relationship will require growth or change in character or it will fade and die—we find the same old inertia, oppressiveness, and despair.

The film *Groundhog Day* provides a fictional, but no less truthful, analogue of Aquinas's relational conception of sloth.⁵³ This film illustrates well sloth's opposition to the transforming demands of love, and the effects of the will's

inner resistance to this transformation. The film's depiction of sloth is only analogous to Aquinas's account because it tracks a love relationship between two human beings rather than a relationship between a human being and God.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, I think Aquinas's analysis of sloth offers a fruitful explanation of what goes wrong—and what goes right—in the film's love relationship. *Groundhog Day* is a story about one man's resistance to the demands of love and a lesson on how that resistance can be overcome.

In the film, the main character, big city weatherman Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray), inexplicably gets stuck reliving the same day—2 February, Groundhog Day—over and over again in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Once convinced he is trapped there, smug, self-centered Phil takes advantage of his predicament by living a life of flagrant, hedonistic self-gratification. The main project that keeps him busy in this part of the film is the elaborate seduction of his producer, Rita (played by Andie MacDowell). Phil is attracted to Rita because of her goodness, but he does not, indeed *cannot*, really love her—at least, not yet. Rather than change his own character, he figures out what she wants and then deceptively plays the part, working hard to put up just the right false front—quoting a line of French poetry he memorized overnight, pretending to share her interest in world peace and her taste in ice cream—all the while busily manipulating her into giving him what *he* wants from the relationship. Although she is initially taken in by his schemes, in the end Rita sees through Phil's selfish strategy, and rejects his advances. 'I can't believe I fell for this!' Rita cries at him in anger. 'You don't love me! I could never love someone like you, Phil, because you could never love anyone but *yourself*!' Every date he masterfully engineers to her liking day after day ends with this line and her hand slapping his face.

Rita is right—Phil cannot love anyone but himself. Although at some level he is deeply drawn to her and wants a relationship with her, he cannot wholeheartedly commit to becoming the sort of person capable of and committed to a real relationship of love between them. He wants to stay the way he is. Phil wants Rita's love but is unwilling to become the sort of unselfish person who could sustain a love relationship with her. It is his old self—his selfish sinful nature, in Aquinas's terms—that makes a relationship of love to Rita something he yearns for, but finds impossible to have *on his own terms* without any personal transformation required. Thus Phil is also right to reply to Rita that he doesn't even love himself. For in his present predicament, he alone is responsible for putting obstacles in the way of his own fulfillment—for refusing to be open to real love and its demands on him. Thus his sloth is self-defeating in the same way that Aquinas describes—Phil stubbornly clings to his old self at the expense of love and the fulfillment love brings. But if we *need* love for

⁵² Lamott (1994), 96.

⁵³ Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. 1993, directed by Harold Ramis.

⁵⁴ There is also no mention of grace—the catalyst for transformation is left mysterious.

fulfillment, then resisting what we need to do to be in a genuine relationship of love is to resist our own fulfillment, to choose unhappiness. No wonder Aquinas describes sloth as a willful sorrow. And that is where we now find Phil—in despair.

Unlike his previous busy self, *Groundhog Day's* *Jeopardy* scene matches our stereotypical view of slothfulness. Phil sits apathetically in the Lazy Boy recliner, mindlessly watching a game show on television and drinking himself into oblivion. But from our knowledge of the tradition, we realize that the previous diversionary tactics of using women for pleasure and now this scene of resignation both count equally as expressions of sloth. In his first strategy, Phil attempts the escapist route, and his restless need for one diversion after another attests to his lack of peace.⁵⁵ In the second scene, Phil has no alternative but to face up to his unbearable condition but will not accept the only way out. He now realizes that he can't have a relationship with Rita in his current state of character; nor can he find real fulfillment outside of a relationship of genuine love. He has run endlessly through one entertaining criminal scheme and gratifying sexual exploit after another and found them all empty. But he also refuses to change. And so he is at an impasse. Pinned down in a state of oppressive sorrow, he despairs.

Finally, Phil tries a new tactic. He attempts to change his character—to let the demands of love transform him from selfishness to selflessness. He begins, little by little, to become a person capable of love. Like his earlier deceptive schemes, this takes effort on his part—he eventually earns a medical degree, he takes piano lessons day after day, he studies French poetry, he extends a helping hand to young and old, none of whom can give anything back. Unlike his previous stratagems, these efforts—especially his repeated attempts to save an elderly, homeless man to whom he grows increasingly attached—gradually change his heart. Unlike the old Phil, he is no longer bored and restless, filling time with self-centered diversions and empty pleasures. For this time he does not merely pretend, but really becomes, not just a poet and pianist, but a person who can and will love others. Phil is no longer motivated by the sole desire to get what he wants in his relationship with Rita. Instead, his actions show that he has learned to meet love's demands and give himself up for others. In the end, his changed character not only wins the affection of all the townspeople, but the love of Rita herself. In the end Phil gets, not the selfish, sexual 'fulfillment' he originally wanted, but real rest, both physically (a good night's sleep) and spiritually (contentment and joy in something analogous to Augustine's sense).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ He also attempts suicide (many different ways). It's unclear whether this best manifests despair or a further attempt at escaping despair.

⁵⁶ As he says to Rita, 'No matter what happens tomorrow, I'm happy now....' This comment meets Aquinas's definition of joy as rest in the presence of the beloved.

If sloth were laziness, the only time Phil could be described as slothful is when he sits in his recliner in despair, anaesthetizing himself from reality with Jim Bearn and watching *Jeopardy* in idle apathy. Using Aquinas's view of relational sloth, however, we can see that Phil's energetic efforts to divert and gratify himself in the first half of the film are nothing but a futile attempt to get what he wants *without* having to change himself. This is the same vice of sloth, now manifested in its less obvious, busy form. As Aquinas's account would predict, in both forms we find the slothful Phil unhappy because he is unwilling to live with genuine, sustained relationships of love but is unable to find fulfillment without them.

By the end of the film, Phil has overcome sloth by accepting the demands of love. What marks his lustful attempts at seduction earlier in the film is his substitution of self-centered self-gratification for the gift of himself in love. By the end of the film, when he has won Rita's love, Phil has not only discovered but has also accepted the fact that real love costs us and transforms us. The real work sloth resists, therefore, is not mere physical effort but a change of heart—the kind of change from the old self to the new that love demands of us, and the kind of change that makes us capable of genuine love for others in return.

Groundhog Day can also serve as a model of therapy for the vice of sloth. How could this be so? Evagrius and the other Desert Fathers described the various vices in order to help others learn how to recognize them and combat them.⁵⁷ So for the vice of sloth they offered not only a diagnosis, but also a remedy. The remedy was perseverance, endurance, even courage. For Evagrius, the spiritual discipline needed was called *stabilitas loci*—stability of place, staying put in one's cell.⁵⁸ He said, 'You must not abandon the cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable. Rather, you must remain seated inside, exercise perseverance... Fleeing and circumventing such struggles teaches the mind to be unskilled, cowardly, and evasive.'⁵⁹ In this discipline, the soul should mirror the body. In a nutshell, this discipline

⁵⁷ As Cassian writes, 'Looking at [their struggles] as in a mirror and having been taught the causes of and the remedies for the vices by which they are troubled, [young monks] will also learn about future contests before they occur, and they will be instructed as to how they should watch out for them, meet them, and fight against them.... As is the case with the most skilled physicians, who not only heal present ills but also confront future ones with shrewd expertise and forestall them with prescriptions.... so also these true physicians of souls destroy, with a spiritual conference as with some heavenly medicine, maladies of the heart just as they are about to emerge, not allowing them to grow in the minds of the young men but disclosing to them both the causes of the passions that threaten them and the means of acquiring health' (Cassian 2000, *Institutes* Ixvii). The Desert Fathers, following the Scriptures, make clear that grace and divine power are necessary for this; see for example II Peter 1:3ff.

⁵⁸ See Evagrius (2003), *Eight Thoughts*, chapter 6: for example, 'A light breeze bends a feeble plant; a fantasy about a trip away drags off a person overcome with acedia,' or 'The spirit of acedia drives the monk out of his cell, but the monk who possesses perseverance will ever cultivate stillness.'

⁵⁹ Evagrius (2003), *Praktikos* VI.28.

is about not running away from what we're called to be and do—whether through busyness at work or through imaginative diversions. Instead, we must accept and stay committed to our true spiritual vocation and identity, day after day, year after year, through unexciting times and difficult ones. We must not shrink the demands of our calling, even when faithfulness and growth push us beyond the comfort of the familiar, just as Phil learns to love by staying in Punxatawney.⁶⁰

Applying the wisdom of the desert today, we can see why a culture of busy escapism is spiritually dangerous: it too easily and quickly gives us a way out of this disciplined effort of learning to love. Overcoming slothful tendencies requires us to face up to our own resistance to the demands of our relationship to God, rather than grasping at a way out or a ready diversion any time we start to feel stretched or uncomfortable. This is why love flourishes in a context of lasting commitment, while sloth flourishes in a context of conveniently easy escape. As the Desert Fathers knew, the remedy for sloth is staying the course, resisting the temptation to flee or deny love's demands—in mind and in body. Similarly for any human friendship or relationship of love: there is a certain stability and endurance that sustains it, a commitment which requires us both to submit and to stretch. Sloth prefers the selfish, easy way out.

CONCLUSION

Despite the differences between the traditional conception of sloth as a spiritual vice and the common contemporary reduction of sloth to laziness, aversion to effort is a common thread running throughout sloth's history. What we've discovered is that contemporary usage usually reduces the meaning and scope of 'effort' to mere physical laziness, rather than uncovering its spiritual roots and its links to our relationships of love.

Why is it important to retrieve Aquinas's relational notion of sloth now? Contemporary American culture glorifies activity—both in the form of devotion to work and the constant pursuit of entertainment. If we limit our concept of sloth to an aversion to work or physical effort, we are apt to confuse one of sloth's common symptoms—busy activity, even workaholicism—with virtue. Likewise, if we overlook sloth's inner aversion to the demands of love, we may not recognize the moral and spiritual dangers of our restless distractibility or despairing retrenchment to our relationships. In fact, the two may even be connected, for example, when we use busyness at work as an excuse to avoid

facing the demands of love in our relationships. The historical conception of sloth helps us see how both diligence and diversion can express slothful and prideful resistance to love and its transforming power. For those looking for an easy way out from relationships of love, both human and divine, denial and escapism have never been more ubiquitous and convenient. To stay and face our relational identity and the demands of our spiritual vocation takes effort. In place of our restless evasion of commitment, then, the tradition can teach us both about the real relational work to be done and about true spiritual rest.

With a historical perspective on sloth, we are better equipped to diagnose and remedy self-centered resistance to the demands of love in all its current manifestations, secular or Christian. The tradition thus invites us to hear its definition of sloth as a call not to making a greater human effort to work harder per se, but to accept the personal transformation and serious commitments that our loves and callings require over a lifetime.

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⁶⁰ This is why Aquinas said that slothful people chafe especially at obeying the command to rest on the Sabbath. Spiritually speaking, slothful people are resisting God's presence in them, not resting in that presence. But it is obvious by this point in the argument that people can stay very busy keeping God out of their lives.

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9

A Study of Virtuous and Vicious Anger

Zac Cogley

Getting angry [...] is easy and everyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is not easy, nor can everyone do it (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a27-29).

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I defend an account of an angrily virtuous, or *patient*, person informed by recent research on emotion in empirical and philosophical psychology. I argue that virtue and vice with respect to anger is determined by excellence and deficiency with respect to all three of anger's functions: its involvement in (1) appraisal of wrongdoing, (2) its role as a motivating force, and (3) its communicative function. Many accounts of anger assess it only with respect to one of these functions. Most typically, anger is assessed instrumentally with regard to its role in motivation. As I show, any singular evaluation of a person's anger will ignore important dimensions of anger that bear on virtue and vice: possessing excellence with respect to only one of anger's functions is thus insufficient for virtue.¹ Further, lacking excellence

¹ The approach ends up being broadly Aristotelian in that there are several determinates of angry virtue and vice, but I am not engaged here in Aristotle exegesis. One more caveat: some virtue theorists hold that virtue requires persistence or unity in a person's ability to track and act on relevant considerations across a certain class of situations. Just how much persistence there must be for such activity to constitute virtue is a matter of significant recent dispute. Aristotle holds that an agent acts virtuously only if her choices of virtuous action proceed from 'a firm and unchangeable character' (Aristotle 1985, 1105a34-35) and some contemporary virtue theorists concur (Hursthouse 1999, 136). However, in part because of worries about situational effects on deliberation and behavior—see Merritt, Doris, and Harman (2010) for an excellent recent overview—some virtue theorists are willing to see the relevant dispositions as situationally dependent (Slingerland 2011) or 'frail and fragmentary in various ways' (Adams 2006, 119). In