

# THE ROOTS OF DESPAIR

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung

**Abstract:** This paper is an exploration of the Thomistic vice of despair, one of two vices opposed to the theological virtue of hope. Aquinas's conception of despair as a vice, and a theological vice in particular, distances him from contemporary use of the term "despair" to describe an emotional state. His account nonetheless yields a compelling psychological portrait of moral degeneration, which I explain via despair's link to its "root," the capital vice of sloth. Cases in which sloth and its offspring vices progress into full-fledged despair raise interesting issues about whether and how despair might be remediable. I conclude by considering puzzles regarding despair's disordered effects on the intellect and will and weighing three possible means of remedying it.

My purpose in this paper is to understand despair—despair, that is, in its technical Thomistic sense, as a vice opposed to the theological virtue of hope. Aquinas's conception of despair as a vice, and a theological vice in particular, distances him from contemporary use of the term "despair" to describe an emotional state. Nonetheless, his account yields a compelling psychological portrait of moral degeneration and raises interesting issues about whether and how despair might be remediable. In this paper, my focus will be to explain despair's link to its "root," the capital vice of sloth. The conclusions I draw will thus be my attempt to reconstruct Aquinas's view of the connection and character of these two vices.

By way of preliminaries, I should be clear that I will not attempt to offer a comprehensive account of the vice of despair, and while I will be drawing from the questions on the passions in the *Summa theologiae* (discussed by Aquinas at *ST* 1–2.40), his work there will chiefly serve to illuminate despair as a vice.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, I should note that my task is made difficult

---

<sup>1</sup> *Summa theologiae* (1948) (hereafter *ST*), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican unless indicated otherwise. The Latin critical edition of all Aquinas's works cited in this essay can be found at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/>.

I will only hint at connections between Aquinas's account to Kierkegaard's account of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1983) (another extensive treatment of despair as a vice by a Christian thinker), and will forego making connections to other philosophical accounts of despair, for example, those of twentieth-century existentialists. I leave the exploration of these connections as a further task and extended application of the project I undertake here.

by the paucity of texts on the vice of despair in Aquinas's work. My focus will mainly be on the *Summa theologiae*, with a nod to the *Disputed Questions on Evil*. In *ST*, there is one question on the vice of despair (and one on presumption) in the questions on hope.<sup>2</sup> In that discussion, there is one article on the relationship between despair and sloth. There is also one article at the end of the question on sloth (*ST* 2–2.35) on the same relationship. Lastly, there are a few sentences on despair in the question on the irascible passions of hope and despair in the questions on the passions (*ST* 1–2.40 of qq. 22–48). So the account of the relationship between sloth and despair I offer may best be viewed as a sympathetic and imaginative attempt to fill out an account which Aquinas at best sketches in outline.

I first briefly consider Aquinas's account of despair as a vice opposed to hope by way of deficiency. Next I will explain the general structure of the relationship between pride, the capital vices, and their offspring. With that background in place, I will turn to the specific case of despair as an offspring vice of the capital vice of sloth. This will require explicating what sloth is and why the tradition associated it with certain offspring vices, including despair. From there I will construct a Thomistic account of sloth's degeneration into a particular kind of despair. I will conclude by considering what this account implies about the curability of those with the vice.

## 1 Situating Despair among the Passions and Virtues

Although I am not discussing despair as a passion, it will be useful to see what Aquinas says about despair in the questions on the passions, because his account of the virtues and vices intentionally builds on the moral psychology he articulates in his discussion of the passions. Hope and despair are an opposed pair of irascible passions. According to Aquinas, the irascible power of the sensory appetite is directed toward "arduous or difficult" goods (*ST* 1–2.23.1). Irascible passions thus have a complex object, namely, a good or evil toward which one's attractions and aversions are complicated by some difficulty attending its attainment. So Aquinas defines hope's object as a future good which is difficult but possible to obtain (*ST* 1–2.40.2 and 2–2.17.1), while the object of the passion of despair is the same future good, now construed as so difficult as to be impossible to obtain (*ST* 1–2.40.4).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Q. 20 of the questions on the theological virtue of hope: *ST* 2–2.17–22. In the *Sentences Commentary* (1929) his main topic is whether despair is a sin against the Holy Spirit, and in the *Disputed Question on Hope* (in Aquinas 2005) his remarks about despair are considerably more brief; hence my focus on the *ST* as a representative text, especially regarding the question of the connections between the virtues and vices. His remarks on despair as a passion in other texts parallel his discussion in *ST* 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> The objects of the passions are specified not as they are in themselves but according to the subject's *intentiones*. For an outline of Aquinas's cognitivist theory of the emotions (and by analogy, of the will's affections), see, for example, King 2012, 214–216.

Whereas hope is an energizing passion,<sup>4</sup> one that moves its possessor to strive for the desired good even if this means overcoming difficulty, Aquinas describes the passion of despair as a dampener of desire and activity. It is an appetitive response to an attractive good that looks impossible to attain—or at least whose attainment looks sufficiently daunting as to deflate significantly one’s desire to try, even to the point of complete resignation.

Turning to Aquinas’s discussion of the virtues and vices, I will first briefly outline despair’s relation to the virtue of hope (*spes*). Despair (*de-speratio*) is a vice of deficiency opposed to the theological virtue of hope.<sup>5</sup> Presumption is the vice of excess opposed to hope on the other extreme. Neither vice, however, should be understood as a straightforward deficiency or excess of hope itself (either the passion or the virtue).<sup>6</sup> Rather, hope’s distinction from its opposing vices is defined in terms of possibility. In the case of the theological virtue, the future good to be attained with difficulty is union with God (human beings’ supernatural end), which can only be reached with God’s assistance.<sup>7</sup> Both despair and presumption close off the possibility of attaining this arduous, as-yet-unattained good. They do so by treating this good as something other than a *possible* good. In presumption, the appetite stands toward the future good as if that good had been already attained or is somehow otherwise secured; despair’s appetitive stance, on the other hand, treats the future good as closed off forever, as wholly unattainable now and always. In both cases, the will “rests” in a false end, rather than being inclined and moved toward an end not yet reached. Those with presumption or despair orient themselves toward the

<sup>4</sup> See [Cates 2009](#), 150: the one with hope “finds it invigorating to rise to a challenge” and approaches the object “with high energy”; and [Miner 2009](#), 226–227: “hope promotes activity.” As I will show later, sloth that gives rise to despair is defined as a kind of sorrow, which is characteristically inimical to initiative, movement, and energy (hence the perennial confusion of sloth and laziness). See Aquinas’s discussion of “torpor,” the fourth species of sorrow, in *ST I–II* 35.8.

<sup>5</sup> The closest candidate for a natural or acquired virtue of hope, for Aquinas, is the virtue of magnanimity (*ST* 2–2.129–133). For an excellent treatment of that topic in relation to hope, see [Miner 2009](#), 226–227. For a fuller treatment of the virtue of hope and its practices of resistance against despair, see [DeYoung 2014](#).

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas offers a tricky application of the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean. Technically, one cannot have too much hope in God, according to the meaning of hope as a theological virtue (not, say, as a passion, the case in which the doctrine of the mean was originally meant to apply); rather, one can have the wrong relationship to the object of hope, made possible on the side of excess by one’s overestimation of and over-reliance on God’s power and mercy. In other words, it is presuming too much of God to count on him to assist even sinners who refuse to repent. See *ST* 2–2.17.5.3m, 21.1, and 21.2.2m.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas describes this sort of hope as *ex-spectatio* (*ST* 1–2.40.2.1m, 2–2.17.1, and 4): literally, looking outside oneself to another whose assistance is essential to believing in the possibility of one’s attainment of it and also one’s actual obtaining of it. Thus hope has a double object: one hopes to attain God (the ultimate end) with God’s assistance (the means to that end). Hope already attains God as means, and at the same time still stretches forth *via* his assistance to attain Him as end. In the *Disputed Question on Hope*, he describes the same distinction in terms of hope’s formal and material objects (q. 1, *resp*).

good as if the will's movement toward or away from that good has already reached its term,<sup>8</sup> whereas those with hope have appetites still inclined toward the good as possible, but not yet fully realized or possessed.

Following Josef Pieper (1997), one could put the same point about the two vices opposed to hope in anthropological terms (92–93, 128–129 *inter alia*). Both despair and presumption trade on a misjudgment that the human person is no longer in the *status viatoris* (i.e., on the way to one's ultimate end, but not there yet). More accurately, both despair and presumption involve a stance or disposition of the *will* consonant with this misconstrual. The “not yet” state of being is the human condition in this life: union with God is something yet to strive for, something not yet completely in hand. In presumption, one counts oneself as already one of the eternally blessed; in despair, one counts oneself already among the damned (*ST* 2–2.18.2–3).<sup>9</sup> These disordered orientations of the appetite imply that the assistance which is hope's good object is either no longer (or not ever) necessary or unobtainable; hence the presumptuous and despairing do not long for it. To the vicious person, desiring God's assistance—a good needed to attain one's ultimate end and future good (and one still needed throughout the rest of one's life) which is difficult but possible to obtain—seems pointless.<sup>10</sup>

One might object to Aquinas's characterization of the presumptuous person in the following way. One who is presumptuous is certain that she will attain her end, although she still conceives of that end as future. So her mind and will take a position of “rest” with respect to that good, on the assumption that its attainment then is secure even now. This account is not consistent with Aquinas's descriptions of the will's relation to present and future goods. There are two movements of the will with respect to the good: one is desire (i.e., longing, seeking, yearning for) and one is delight (i.e., resting in a good already possessed).<sup>11</sup> As long as the good is not actually (or fully, or permanently) present, the stance of the will toward it must be one of longing or desire. The difference between presumption and hope, therefore, does not consist primarily in the degree of cognitive certainty about one's attainment of an end.<sup>12</sup> After all, on Aquinas's account, the hopeful one also possesses certainty (for should she continue to hope and

<sup>8</sup> This must be conceived of in terms of Aristotelian-Thomistic actuality and potentiality, not logical axioms about what is necessary also being possible. The text confirms this reading, for what is “possible for us” or “possible with God's assistance” refers to the capacities of the relevant agent, whether human or divine. I will return to this point in [section 5.1](#).

<sup>9</sup> If despair itself is the terminus, the progression toward despair should not be counted as despair itself, but only a movement of the will toward such a disposition or stance.

<sup>10</sup> The despairing one's stance toward the goodness of this assistance is something I will discuss at more length in [section 5.1](#).

<sup>11</sup> In *ST* 1–2.26.2, Aquinas also discusses the will's initial delight in a good presented to it by the intellect as something pleasing or suitable to the person (*complacencia* as a kind anticipatory *fruitio*).

<sup>12</sup> On hope's relation to faith's certainty, see *ST* 2–2.18.4 and the *Disputed Question on Hope* art. 3.4m.

strive for her supernatural end, with God's help, she is assured of God's assistance in helping her reach that end: see *ST* 2–2.18.4). The difference depends, rather, on whether the will is best characterized as striving for or resting in the good it loves. Based on this distinction in various moments of the will's movement toward a good, one can characterize both despair and presumption as types of false rest. They are attempts to shut down further movement toward a good as if it were fully and actually present (or permanently unavailable and absent), when it is still in fact future—something to be desired and toward which one must continue to move.

Perhaps a more intuitive way to understand the one who presumes or despairs is by analogy, an analogy I will return to when explaining despair's rootedness in the vice of sloth. Think of the relationship between the human person and God as similar to a marriage relationship between two human beings. Imagine a marriage in which one spouse decides that since her spouse is stuck with her permanently anyway, she can just let herself go, not invest anything in the relationship, take advantage of his unconditional love and vow, and behave selfishly, and so on. This would be someone whose will is in a presumptive stance toward the long-term future goodness of the marriage. Likewise, a despairing stance is one in which the spouse also does not invest anything in the marriage, neglecting to pour any emotional investment or effort into it, because she assumes the marriage as doomed to failure from the start. It is striking that on both “extremes,” the vices result in the same behavior—a lack of striving toward (and desire for) the future good of the marriage's success as future and as possible, either because it is presumed to be already in hand or despaired over as impossible to attain.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 Despair and Other Vices

In the questions on the theological virtue of hope, Aquinas initially frames despair's relationship to hope *via* the traditional Aristotelian schema of the virtues as means between extremes, although here (as with the other theological virtues) this schema undergoes significant modification by Aquinas. However, despair can also be described by means of its relationship to sloth, one of the capital vices. Sloth is one of the seven capital vices, each of which is itself rooted in pride and each of which generates additional vices which are its characteristic progeny. I want to explore just such a connection between sloth and despair in what follows.

In Aquinas's treatment of the capital vices, drawn from John Cassian and Gregory the Great, the vices are characterized as habitual dispositions which function as the sources or fountainheads of other vices, taking *caput*

<sup>13</sup> In both human and divine friendship, of course, the distinction between the “now” of longing and the “not yet” of delight is not exclusive; I have simplified the account here for the sake of depicting the main features of a typical presumptive and despairing stance. See [section 3](#) on the vice of sloth for a fuller discussion of how the love of charity is both already present and not yet perfectly fulfilled in this life.

in the metaphorical sense of “head” (*ST* 1–2.84.3; *Disputed Questions on Evil*, q.8, art. 1 [in Aquinas 2003], hereafter *QDM*). Hence their original designation as “capital” or “principal,” rather than as “deadly.”<sup>14</sup> The vices are pictured by Cassian and others as a tree, with pride serving as the root (and also trunk) of the seven vices, each capital vice forming a main branch of the tree, and the fruit (i.e., the offspring vices) of each capital vice growing from the main branches.<sup>15</sup> In *QDM* and *ST*, Aquinas takes his lists of the capital vices’ progeny directly from Gregory.

Why single out these seven as exceptionally fertile sources of sin? Aquinas analyzes the capital vices as final causes: they have as their objects certain end-like goods, which function as simulacra of true human fulfillment.<sup>16</sup> The offspring vices naturally arise as one orients one’s life around these goods; they are either means to these ends or as the characteristic effects of such an orientation. Aquinas thinks that desire for false substitutes for happiness, if unchecked, will lead one to disregard God as one’s final end and to eschew his directives for flourishing in favor of one’s own independent attainment of whatever one’s preferred substitute might be.<sup>17</sup> Hence the capital vices’ rootedness in pride.<sup>18</sup>

As a capital vice, sloth follows this pattern. It is rooted in pride and produces its own characteristic offspring vices. Aquinas follows Gregory in

<sup>14</sup> The tradition of the capital vices as found in John Cassian and Gregory the Great is taken up by Aquinas in both *ST* and the *Disputed Questions on Evil*, qq. 8–15. John Cassian (1997) casts the eight vices (including pride) as *principia vitia* (*Conferences* V.2; in the *Institutes* (chapters V–XII) they are called “the eight principal faults” or “spirits”; see Cassian 1997 and 2000) and Gregory the Great calls them *vitia capitalia* (*Moralia in Iob* 31.45.87–91, PL 0620C-0623C).

<sup>15</sup> Cassian (1997) uses the tree metaphor, along with that of a spring and its tributaries in *Conferences* V.10. There is some controversy in the tradition and in Aquinas about in what sense pride is the root (see *QDM* q. 8, art. 2).

<sup>16</sup> I am reading this as an Augustinian move (see Augustine 2009, II.vi), but there is precedent in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999) Book I, chapters 4–5 [1095a15–1096a10] as well (hereafter *NE*).

<sup>17</sup> When this process is deliberate and the habit is so well entrenched that one would openly disobey God to obtain these goods the vices take their mortal, or deadly, form.

<sup>18</sup> To take one example, the capital vice of avarice takes as its false conception of happiness the self-sufficiency that wealth promises to provide. Avarice’s offspring vices are characteristic marks of a life devoted to this ultimate end, for example, one’s willingness to acquire and hold onto wealth at the expense of harm to others (hence, the offspring vice *insensibility to mercy* or *hard-heartedness*). The avaricious person is willing to engage in deceitful and violent means to increase his wealth (hence the progeny *fraud*, *falsehood*, *perjury*, and *violence*); he is not satisfied until he gets enough—an impossible task (hence the *restlessness* characteristic of the avaricious person); and he is even willing to engage in *treachery* in order to increase his current wealth. Cassian eloquently argues that this is Judas’s sin in his discussion of the vice of avarice; see Cassian 2000, Book VII, chapter 23. For Cassian, the limit case of avarice is one in which one completely reverses the order of means and ends, making the people one loves the means to serve the attainment of wealth, rather than acknowledging wealth to be a means with which one can serve those one loves.

naming despair as one of sloth's progeny.<sup>19</sup> My next tasks will be to trace the relationship between pride, sloth, and despair, with a view to explaining why despair arises from sloth, and to examine the type of despair that emerges from this degenerative process of moral malformation.

### 3 Reconceiving Sloth

I turn first to explain this capital vice in more detail, partly because sloth is such a misunderstood vice, and partly because Aquinas's account, while largely in agreement with the traditional conception originally articulated by the desert fathers of Egypt in the fourth century AD, adds to their account sloth's specific opposition to the theological virtue of charity.

Sloth (Latin: *acedia* or *accidie*) is often characterized in terms of apathy and laziness. Indifference and lack of activity corresponds to the original Greek term, which means lack of care (*a-kedeia* or *akedia*). Sloth's nature as a peculiarly Christian and theological vice led many people past and present to frame sloth primarily or solely as a disposition to shirk one's spiritual duties, most obviously, prayer and worship. Aquinas's account, however, analyzes these external marks of sloth as symptoms of an underlying condition, symptoms which may in many cases be misleading.

According to Aquinas, sloth itself concerns a specific spiritual good and the stance of the human will toward it. The "interior divine good" Aquinas marks as its object is a human being's sharing in the divine nature by the work of the Holy Spirit: "Therefore charity can be in us neither naturally, nor through acquisition by the natural powers, but by the infusion of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son, and participation of whom in us is created charity" (*ST* 2–2.24.2; see also *ST* 2–2.23.2.1m, 23.3.3m and 1–2.62.1). Rather than producing joy over this good within, as the virtue of charity does, sloth is an attitude of "sorrow" (a form of aversion in the will) toward it.<sup>20</sup> Hence the opposition of sloth and charity.

Sloth can get a foothold in human beings because their relationship with God is both a present reality and a work in progress. Like a vow of marriage or a religious vow, one is from the first moment already committed to a relationship with another, and one's identity is marked by that commitment; and yet one must still make good upon a lifetime of growth and living it

<sup>19</sup> The list of offspring vices from Gregory's *Moralia* includes malice, spite (or rancor), faint heartedness (or pusillanimity), sluggishness in regard to the commandments, wandering of the mind after unlawful things, and despair (*ST* 2–2.35.4. obj.2 and 2m; *QDM* q. 11, art. 4).

<sup>20</sup> Sorrow here is a technical term in Aquinas, one that, like despair, does not match ordinary usage today particularly well. In the questions on the passions, Aquinas designates joy or delight (*gaudio*, *dilectio*) is happiness over the presence of a good, while sorrow is unhappiness over the presence of an evil (note that the object is rejoiced in or sorrowed over as perceived as good/evil by the agent). These two passions represent the two basic movements of appetite (whether sensory or rational), namely, attraction and aversion, both of which depend on the agent's construal of the object. In *QDM* q.8, art. 3 and q. 11, art. 1, however, Aquinas makes it clear that he is referring not to passions but to analogous movements of the will.

out, knowing that one's identity will be further formed and transformed by that process. Charity—the union of human beings with God, their true ultimate end—is in this sense both already and not yet. When God indwells a human being now by the Holy Spirit, this present participation in the divine nature is ordered toward a more complete and final union.<sup>21</sup>

Seen in the context of its opposition to charity, then, the slothful person's will is resistant not to work or care as such, but to that person's true identity and vocation in relationship to God, with all the demands on the person that relationship of love brings with it over the long course of a lifetime. Initially, the slothful person may still find appealing the idea of like-naturedness to God, especially in view of the benefits that it brings—human flourishing foremost among them. Gradually, however, she becomes more and more unwilling to accept the full commitments that such an identity and relationship bring with it, especially when they require a slow, daily death of the sinful nature or when faithful practice or ritual gradually grinds into a tedious daily routine. What often begins as an episode of tiresomeness extends into a progressive pulling away from the oppressiveness of the commitment and an acceptance of the distance created thereby. The process comes to fruition in a deliberate resistance on the part of the will to anything that makes one aware of the relationship or its demands on one, and yields what might otherwise be a puzzling traditional description of sloth in terms of “dislike, horror and detestation” or “distaste . . . disgust [and] . . . repugnance” (*ST* 2–2.35.3; *QDM* q. 11, art. 2–3). Sloth is a willful, escalating aversion to God's presence in oneself and one's participation in his nature. As I have argued elsewhere (see *DeYoung* 2004b), it is best understood as resistance to the demands of friendship with God. This feature will be essential to explaining its connection to despair.

Part of the difficulty with understanding sloth as a vice, and much more so a capital vice, is that Aquinas defines it as “sorrow” over one's participation in the divine nature, that is, as an aversion from something perceived as an evil.<sup>22</sup> He has already defined the capital vices as final causes, directed at some fulfilment-like end that in turn motivates one to engage in other vices that are the means to that end or the fruit of trying habitually to attain it. How is sorrow supposed to be a final cause? One ordinarily thinks of final causes as goods (i.e., objects that cause

<sup>21</sup> Perfect union is possible only in the next life (*ST* 1–2.5.3). Aquinas calls charity the love of friendship (*amor amicitiae*), and says that it is based on the communication of God's nature to human beings, which makes them like-natured to him; this likeness of nature is the ground of any virtue friendship (*ST* 2–2.23.1).

<sup>22</sup> “Sorrow is not a distinct vice, insofar as someone shirks a distasteful or burdensome work, or sorrows on account of any other cause whatsoever, but only insofar as one is sorry on account of the Divine good, which sorrow belongs essentially to sloth; since sloth seeks undue rest insofar as it spurns the divine good” (*ST* 2–2.35.4.3m). This particular sorrow is not the passion of sorrow, but rather a stance of the will.

desire).<sup>23</sup> Aquinas explains that aversion from something (perceived as) evil can motivate someone as an end, just as desire for some good can function as a final cause (DeYoung 2011). Nevertheless, the primary psychological character of sloth is best explained as living with an evil that feels unbearable and causes sorrow, and being motivated to get out from under it, rather than being reoriented to some specific alternative good.<sup>24</sup>

## 4 Sloth's Offspring Vices

### 4.1 Avoidance and Attack<sup>25</sup>

How does sloth's unbearable sorrow lead to its offspring vices? Aquinas divides sloth's progeny according to a progression from strategies of avoidance to strategies of attack. The strategy of avoidance sub-divides into avoidance by neglect and avoidance by distraction-seeking or escapism. I will explain each of these in turn.

The first strategy, avoidance by neglect, moves the slothful person away from spiritual goods that cause her sorrow, that is, *away from* the things that her supernatural end requires. Hence the offspring vice, *sluggishness (torpor) regarding the commandments*, where "the commandments (*praecepta*)" name the ordinary rules one must follow to perform actions that are the "means" necessary to maintain a relationship with God. The commandments for Aquinas are precepts of justice, and offenses against justice are mortal sins, actions that cut one off from union with God. These "ordinary" precepts or commands serve as a sort of moral threshold for Aquinas; they are things which anyone must do (or refrain from doing) in order to remain in relationship with God. The slothful one need not (intend to) disobey these precepts outright; rather, her avoidance tends to take the form of neglect, apathy, and omission.

She may also neglect extraordinary acts to which her commitment to God might call her; this second offspring vice is called *pusillanimity*. Pusillanimity is opposed to the virtue of magnanimity: rather than having an appetite that virtuously stretches forth toward great acts of virtue commensurate both with one's own power and the gift of grace, the pusillanimous person shrinks back in fear of failure and faintheartedness. Pusillanimity (like its opposing virtue, magnanimity) paradigmatically concerns the counsels of perfection, that is, acts that go above and beyond the requirements

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas himself says that ends are goods (see, for example, *ST* 1–2.1.1).

<sup>24</sup> This fits with sloth's typical restlessness: There is no purpose to a slothful life, no positive good it is aimed at; rather, it is escape *from*, not escape *to* something (e.g., "I will go *anywhere*, do *anything* to get away from this"). I offer an alternative way sloth can have a "good end" elsewhere (i.e., the old self as comfortingly familiar), and address a puzzle about how a human being can resist his or her own happiness, given the natural inclination of the will in DeYoung 2004b and 2011.

<sup>25</sup> The connections described here, as is true for most ethical matters, hold "generally and for the most part." The term for "attack" is *impugno, impugnare*.

of basic justice to what might be further required morally of one who seeks perfection in virtue, especially within a particular religious vocation.

By neglecting both ordinary and extraordinary good acts, the slothful person avoids precisely the activities that are means to keeping her friendship with God nurtured and intact. Does she also anticipate and even look forward to the consequence that her neglect will, as its eventual cumulative effect, free her from what she perceives as a burdensome commitment? At the beginning of the process her attention may consciously be focused on the means themselves because they are unpleasant, boring, demanding, tiring, or uncomfortable, and she is searching to rationalize her own lack of motivation to do them. Or, in the case of the counsels, perhaps she may find herself so overwhelmed by thoughts of inadequacy when faced with the call to meet these higher moral demands—by focusing on her own potential failures or difficult circumstances and forgetting about grace—that she cannot bring herself to make even an initial attempt.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the manner of neglect, the picture that emerges is of someone who gradually lets herself slide into a typical form of indirect relationship sabotage, failing to do anything to keep it alive while also failing fully to articulate for herself what she is allowing to happen, but also not objecting to. She may avoid thinking about what she is implicitly choosing or she may avoid letting herself come to a full appreciation of where these means will lead her in the end. Thus there may be multiple layers of avoidance, therefore, at the level of intellect, will, and external action.

The second strategy of slothful avoidance takes the form of escapism or distraction. In this case, avoidance manifests itself as a movement *toward* any available diverting pleasure or activity. Sloth frequently appears in this guise, although it may be least identifiable as sloth in this case because of its active (versus lazy) appearance—hence the many misunderstandings and misdiagnoses of this vice. As is true of its neglectful form, this second form of sloth also enables one to avoid facing up to the oppressive presence of the divine nature in oneself and the attendant claims of such a relational identity. Through what Pascal famously called “diversions”—whether they take the form of work or entertainment—one keeps one’s life, one’s hands, and one’s mind busily occupied in order not to think of anything else, or perhaps even not to have time to think at all. Human beings can be distracted by almost anything—pleasure, work, ministry, philanthropy, recreation, reading, reinventing themselves, redecorating, philosophizing, and entertaining themselves with social media.<sup>27</sup> This is the busy face of sloth, although one may be busy with more or less respectable activities,

---

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Matthew Halteman for suggesting this possible mode of falling into pusillanimity. For a fuller discussion of pusillanimity, see [DeYoung 2004a](#).

<sup>27</sup> The many possible variants of this strategy are no doubt familiar to psychologists and pastors, as well as philosophers, and they are well documented by thinkers as various as Soren Kierkegaard (1983), Josef Pieper (1997), Victor Frankl (1959), Walker Percy (1998), and Evelyn Waugh (1999).

and in more or less addictive ways.<sup>28</sup> The second form of slothful avoidance is therefore summed up by the offspring vice, *evagatio mentis* (literally, the wandering of the mind; similar to activities the writer of Ecclesiastes labels “chasing after the wind”). The slothful one’s lack of purpose—other than distraction—is often evident in the episodic and superficial nature of these activities.

Escape, however, is only an illusion for the one already participating in the divine nature, since that person will only be fulfilled by accepting one’s supernatural end and the means to it. This avoidance strategy is thus an elaborate cover-up in which one tries to avoid facing and owning up to the truth about oneself and what this truth might require of one. Eleonore Stump (2010) writes,

The inability of a person to find a place that meets his needs and desires might stem from a fault in the world around him. . . . But the inability might also stem from a flaw in the rover. A person who is not integrated in himself is someone who (in one way or another) wants and does not want the same thing. . . . A person in such a condition is certainly restless. And so restlessness can arise from an internally divided self. (199)

Slothful tendencies also led the desert fathers to recommend the remedial practice of *stabilitas loci*, that is, remaining in one place rather than fleeing one’s desert cell in search of relief in the form of entertainment in the city. The cell is the place one has committed to living out one’s spiritual vocation and the city represents the life renounced.<sup>29</sup> *Stabilitas* was an external discipline, but one also meant to penetrate one’s character, emotions, and will. So Aquinas includes Isidore’s list of the fruits of sloth—a host of internal and external manifestations of the restlessness evident in a life

---

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas follows the tradition here and says when one turns away from spiritual goods in need of this type of distraction, “carnal pleasures” are usually the natural place human beings turn for substitutes (see *QDM* q. 11, art. 4).

<sup>29</sup> See [Evagrius 2003b](#), VI.12: “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 lest one of the brothers. . . . 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 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.” In [Eight Thoughts \(2003a\)](#), 6.3 he discusses the remedy: “The spirit of *acedia* drives the monk out of his cell, but the monk who possesses perseverance will ever cultivate stillness.”

of slothful escapism. They include the wandering of one's thoughts and uneasiness of mind, *curiositas* in the imagination, loquacity of speech (opposed to the spiritual disciplines of silence and stillness), inconstancy of purpose, and restless movement of the body, both in place (e.g., fidgeting) and from place to place (*ST* 2–2.35.4.obj.3 and 3m).<sup>30</sup> Such symptoms explain why Pieper (1997) claims that perpetual activity is as much a mark of slothful character and culture as inertia and neglect.<sup>31</sup> *Stabilitas*, by contrast, is the practice of stillness.

The picture of the slothful person in Aquinas's account is of a person not at rest with the truth about oneself and not at peace with who one is and is called to be. It is somewhat ironic, given the typical misperception of sloth as (mere) lack of activity, that Aquinas argues that the vice of sloth is most directly opposed to the commandment to rest in God's presence, the principal way to honor the Sabbath (*ST* 2–2.35.3.1m). The restlessness of this slothful escapist strategy, while a less obvious kind of neglect of one's commitment and relationship to God, is the antithesis of real rest, while its apathetic form is a simulacrum of the real thing, a pattern of opposing vices familiar to readers of *ST* 2–2.

In the progression of sloth's offspring vices, the second type of strategy—attack—typically arises nearer to the end of sloth's gradual entrenchment in one's character, after the strategies of avoidance have been tried and found wanting and also when moral malformation has become more deeply ingrained. At this stage of moral degeneration, if others or circumstances confront one with one's rejection of the divine good in oneself, what began as occasional practices of self-deceptive denial and distraction-seeking now through habit typically ripens into cold-hearted *malice* and *rancor*. What began as inertia and a tendency to remain unmoved by a commitment to love progresses into deliberate “detestation” and clear-sighted rejection of anything or anyone that would bring one back toward endorsing or accepting one's relationship to God.

To put the point in terms of Aquinas's own categories of sin, this final condition is not principally a state of ignorance about the good, nor is it a capitulation to weakness due to some overwhelming passion (e.g., desire, sorrow, or fear), although that may be an important source of the problem.<sup>32</sup> In sloth and despair, the will gradually hardens over time; one's character becomes an outgrowth of an aversion consented to over and over until deformation and vice feels more natural than being conformed to

<sup>30</sup> See also Waugh 1999, a story of wandering or flight (Sebastian's family name, Flyte, is a play on this idea) illustrating various forms of *acedia*.

<sup>31</sup> “Not only can *acedia* and ordinary diligence exist very well together; it is even true that the senselessly exaggerated workaholism of our age is directly traceable to *acedia*. . . . Genuine rest and leisure are possible only under the precondition that man accepts his own true meaning” (118–119).

<sup>32</sup> Aquinas does offer one description how a person could become slothful in this way (*ST* 2–2.35.1).

one's true end. Aquinas calls these sins of confirmed malice (*certa malitia*). Sins of this sort are typically actions that result from a will malformed by vicious habits (*ST* 1–2.78.2–3).<sup>33</sup> What the slothful person's moral deformation over time has effected is a character that rejoices in evil and sorrows over good, even her own eternal good. If one is unable at the end of the progression to see good and evil for what they are, this inability is the product of one's own repeated choices and their cumulative distorting effects on the intellect and appetites.<sup>34</sup> This is why, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle puts great emphasis on the cultivation of good moral character through habituation. It is because virtue (or vice) becomes second nature, and “[one's] character controls how the end [i.e., the good] appears to [one]” (1999, III.5, 1114b1).<sup>35</sup>

Thus far, I have examined the first progression Aquinas mentions in connection with sloth's offspring vices. It is a progression from avoidance of the cause of sorrow to outright attack. In this way Aquinas can consistently describe sloth in terms of neglect or inactivity *and* restless wandering, of lack of care *and* outright resentment and detestation.

## 4.2 Degeneration into Despair

Framing the list of sloth's offspring vices as a process of moral degeneration also helps explain despair's role as their *telos* or natural end. Aquinas mentions a second type of progression—this time from the slothful one's aversion from the spiritual goods which are the means to one's attainment of the divine good, to avoidance of the divine good which is itself the ultimate end (*ST* 2–2.35.4). The “spiritual goods” he refers to as means are the acts of virtue that transform and perfect one's character so that one can have full union with God. The end he refers to is the attainment of God himself.

When reading Aquinas one must be careful about how to understand this end, since despair is opposed to hope and hope has a dual object. Hope concerns God in one sense as an efficient cause—that is, as the one who assists human beings in the attainment of their ultimate end—but also in another sense as a final cause. Aquinas argues that, as a theological virtue, hope must have God as its direct object, and says that the hoping one already attains God himself, albeit in the role of (and under the description of) assistant to the end (*ST* 2–2.17.1).<sup>36</sup> Despair, by contrast, rejects

<sup>33</sup> For a fuller discussion of sins of *certa militia*, see McCluskey 2005.

<sup>34</sup> See Aquinas's own description of the progression and its link to sins of *certa malitia* in *ST* 2–2.14.4 and 1 in his discussion of the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

<sup>35</sup> The full discussion is found at 1114b1–25. See also similar claims Aristotle makes in *NE* VI.5 at 1140b15–20, and VI.12–13 at 1144a30–1144b1.

<sup>36</sup> Charity is the theological virtue that loves God for his own sake and is therefore described primarily in terms of union with God, an ultimate end and good that is present, while hope is a theological virtue that loves God because it is through him that one attains that fulfillment, and therefore is a “seeking” or “desiring” form of love, aimed at a future good not yet

God as assistant to one's ultimate end. Understanding the second type of progression among the offspring vices requires understanding how sloth progresses from an aversion to the means that bring one into a relationship of reliance on God to an aversion to God himself, albeit in the role of being a necessary means to one's end.

Aquinas says that the neglectful and escapist avoidance strategies target the means, that is, the spiritual goods or virtuous actions that lead one toward fuller reliance on and closeness to God. Despair, according to his description in *ST* 2–2.35.4, is an ultimate stance of avoidance toward any participation in the “divine good,” considered as the end of those means. Whereas sloth is the gradual movement of distancing oneself from one's participation in the divine nature and its claims on oneself, despair is that movement's furthest limit, term, and end—when one has moved (or removed) oneself, through one's own cumulative choices, out of the reach of any possible movement back toward God. In other words, one has acted, over time, in ways that put one in a state of maximal and permanent avoidance of a relationship with the only person with sufficient power and mercy to bring one to one's ultimate end. To put it even more starkly, in despair one has directed oneself into a state in which there is no relationship left from which to escape, no dependence or expectation to destroy through neglect.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as a movement of the will, the vice of despair is not something one falls into by accident or circumstance, but an attitude toward an end that is intended and chosen, an aversion to God that one has grown to articulate and endorse more and more fully over time (*QDM* q. 8, art. 3).<sup>38</sup> By the time one reaches despair, one has deliberately cut oneself off.

The connection between the objects of sloth and despair further reinforces this reading of the downward spiral from sloth into despair. Sloth is a disorder in the will's desire for God—or more specifically, in one's appetite for one's own participation in the divine nature, which is the gift of charity. The slothful person does not want to acknowledge this gift in her because she does not want to live a life that accords with that gift and its attendant call to progressive perfection. She would rather leave it dormant, or ignore it, than live up to its demands on her. The slothful person chafes against the divine good within; when pushed to acknowledge and accept it, she will push back. Similarly, Aquinas describes despair as a resistance to “God, according as his good is partaken of by us” (*ST* 2–2.20.3). In

---

attained, rather than a “delighting” or “resting” kind. Only when charity informs and perfects hope does one learn to love the person who gives assistance not only as a means to one's own happiness, but also as one who is loved for his own sake. Despair is opposed to hope, and not charity, because despair is a rejection of God as assistant to one's end.

<sup>37</sup> As Aquinas puts it in the questions on the passions, “Despair implies not only the privation of hope, but also a recoil [the opposite movement of desire: aversion, withdrawal] from the thing desired, by reason of its being esteemed impossible to get” (*ST* 1–2.40.4.3m).

<sup>38</sup> This dynamic of despair is thus the mirror opposite of the intensification of desire that comes with the perfection of hope. See the *Disputed Question on Hope*, a. 1.16m.

the case of despair, the partaking relationship refers to the willingness to accept God's gracious assistance, which is necessary for taking one's participation in the divine nature to its perfection, which is one's ultimate end. If the slothful person has already developed an aversion to her participation in the divine nature (an acceptance of which prompts movement toward one's supernatural end), then it would be a natural development for her subsequently to become averse to the necessary assistance God offers to bring that participation and process of perfection in charity to fruition.<sup>39</sup>

Also like sloth, despair involves a failure to acknowledge the truth about the human condition, and thus it completes slothful attempts at a false sort of rest. Aquinas writes, "[S]loth seeks undue rest insofar as it spurns the divine good" (*ST* 2–2.35.4 3m). Those with these vices say to God (to paraphrase Pieper), "leave me alone" (1997, 120). The despairer tries to close himself off from both his ultimate end and his movement toward it, convincing himself that he is in an end-state that he is not and cannot currently be in. Such a person attempts to be "at peace" or "at rest" in a state in which no human being can find rest, because one is still *in via* and in need of divine assistance to reach one's not-yet-attained supernatural end.

The trouble with the form of despair that is the habitual outgrowth of sloth is therefore similar to the problem with sloth itself. Both are located in the will, and both involve choices contrary to one's own fulfillment by rejecting the spiritual and divine goods that are its necessary (or constitutive) means.<sup>40</sup> In Aquinas's view, however, the human will desires fulfillment by a necessity of nature (*ST* 1–2.13.6). This orientation of human nature toward its supernatural *telos* is thus not something one can opt out of; rather, it is a metaphysical reality one can only cover over or deny more or less successfully. This tension is a deeper explanation yet of the "restlessness" often associated with sloth and yields an objective description of despair as another form of the "false rest" of one yet "on the way." It is not surprising, then, that at least their earlier stages, both vices provoke similar avoidance strategies of distraction, denial, and self-deception discussed earlier: these are designed to avoid recognizing and struggling with the tension that comes from being a divided self, or as Pieper (1997, 120) and Kierkegaard (1983, 55) would put it, a self unwilling to be itself.

Recall that the other expression of sloth—like the typical manifestation of despair—is resignation, apathy, and lack of effort. While such symptoms might initially indicate a person who is so overwhelmed by sorrow that she

---

<sup>39</sup> Although Aquinas does not discuss this point in his description of despair, my interpretation of the slide from sloth to despair presumes the infusion of charity, since Aquinas's definition of sloth (i.e., aversion to participated charity, as a present object) seems to require it. Thus the analysis of the relation between sloth the capital vice and despair its offspring offered here would not apply in cases of unformed hope.

<sup>40</sup> Further, both seem to do so in a fairly clear-sighted way, at least in their "terminal" forms. I will address this point in [section 5.2](#).

finds herself unable to stomach actions consonant with her identity and commitments, in the end, they reveal a person who recognizes that she has chosen a hell of her own making and is still unwilling to renounce that choice. By way of analogy, consider the act of forgiveness—initially the hurt of the offense may be so overwhelming that one finds oneself unable, in the face of the offender, to do anything but stand mute, choked by grief and betrayal: even if one wants (at some level) to forgive, one finds oneself currently disabled by the trauma of grief and thus fails to act. As time slips by, however, and one reflects on one's emotions and choices, that hurt may harden into anger and entrenched bitterness, such that given another chance, one now clear-sightedly refuses to forgive because it has become wholly unpalatable. At this more articulate and entrenched stage, the slothful despairer seems to face up to her choice against the good and admit that she has gotten herself into a state in which she can no longer deny her condition, and yet she remains steadfastly unwilling to do anything about it. The desert fathers and Aquinas both describe this state as living with oppressive sorrow: one feels crushed by it, but persists in refusing to move.

In light of this description of despair, I offer the following summary of despair as the *telos* of slothful degeneration: To be in despair is to have recognized that escapist strategies are futile, so that escape from self-chosen sorrow through self-deception, denial, or substitution is impossible. Even so, the despairer still insists on blocking her own legitimate escape from her despair by refusing to be moved by the idea that God's help is a good *for her*. Her slothful (de)formation has led her to see any form of a relationship with God as unbearable for her—as unbearable, in fact, as the current state of misery from which she is unable to escape on her own. Despair, then, is more accurately described as choosing *against* hope than as (mere) hopelessness. The despairer chooses for herself a state of eternal death and persists in choosing to remain there. Understanding sloth as a “source” or capital vice and the progressive moral malformation that results from it thus explains how this form of despair—as a vice and cumulatively hardened state of the will—is possible.

## 5 Does Despair Have a Remedy?

### 5.1 Some Puzzles

So far I have attempted to explain how one might come to have the vice of despair. Is there a parallel story to tell about how to get out of such a state? I will consider the question of despair's remediability in three stages. The first stage concerns a puzzle about the subjective location and source of despair in the soul. Should Aquinas consider despair to involve primarily a cognitive mistake (a misperception of the good) or a movement of the will? If the movement of the will which constitutes despair is caused by a misapprehension or false judgment about the good, which is an act of

intellect, how can despair properly count as a sin of *certa militia*, a vice primarily attributed to the will?

The second stage concerns the proper description of despair's object. Why should despair's object be a good "impossible to attain" when despair also seems to be described by Aquinas as the will's deliberate movement of rejecting God's assistance (implying its possible acceptance of that assistance) and furthermore rejecting it *as a good*? The answers to these first two puzzles will sharpen further questions about the possibility and most promising means of remedying despair, issues I will address in the third and final stage.

According to Aquinas, despair is located in the will, as the virtue of hope is. Aquinas directly addresses the problem of the intellect's role in despair in the context of describing cases in which one still believes that God's assistance toward the achievement of the human ultimate end is possible in general, but fails to believe that this applies in a particular case (i.e., one's own), through one's "particular estimate being corrupted by a habit or a passion" (*ST 2-2.20.2*).<sup>41</sup> This false judgment about particulars is a defect on the part of the intellect. Given that appetite (in this case, the will) follows apprehension (or in this case, misapprehension) in Aquinas's action theory, the movement of aversion or withdrawal on the part of the will subsequently aligns with that judgment (*ST 2-2.20.1*). Then, however, it looks like it is the intellect's (mis)judgment that is the source of despair, and not the will itself. If that were the case, a remedy for despair would presumably involve correcting one's judgments, not reorienting the appetite. At the same time, Aquinas insists that the vices of hope and despair have a *good* as their object, and as such they are properly and primarily attributed to the will. Hence the initial puzzle, and the confusing implications for how to go about remedying despair.

The story of despair as a vice, however, is more complicated, as I have just outlined. Those complications involve the long-term interactions between intellect and will, the sort of interactions characteristic of the development of any habitual disposition. Looking at the dynamics of sloth and despair outlined thus far, one can better understand the way the intellect's ability to judge rightly about what is truly good becomes deformed over time through the corrupting influence of the will. On this reading, as sloth becomes entrenched as a vicious habit (through the will's consent to its attitudes and acts repeatedly over time), the vice would affect not only what the intellect apprehends as good—both in general and particular

---

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas is not making a point here about cases of ignorance in general, but rather a point about whether one can have orthodox faith (true beliefs about Christian doctrine and the reliability of its source) and still have the vice of despair. He thinks this is possible, at least at the general level, though not at the level of judgments about how these doctrines apply to one's own person in particular.

judgments—but also the will’s desire for it *as* good. The intellect thus becomes “corrupted by a habit.” The primary source of sin is the will.<sup>42</sup>

Aquinas’s point about the faculty in which despair is located is worth elaborating further. The malformed disposition of the will may arise from a neglect to consider the spiritual goods at stake—which neglect could in some cases arise from the passion of sorrow—with the result that one drifts away from, does not have the heart for, or fails to engage in formational practices that keep one hopeful and desirous of union with God. These preliminary choices of neglect or avoidance (with their own sources in the passions), if left unchecked, eventually tend to harden into an outright, deliberate rejection on the part of the will, as I have described above.<sup>43</sup> In a merely passion-clouded case of (momentary, single-act) despair, escape may simply consist in finding a way to manage or clear the passion. Given that passions are often fairly transient, this seems to be an easier case of despair to remedy.<sup>44</sup> In the case of the vice of despair arising from long-term cumulative choice and its resulting appetitive malformation, which on my construal appears to have more of the character of clear-eyed malice on the part of one’s intellect and will, despair certainly looks as if its seat is in the malformed will, as Aquinas argues. As a consequence, however, it will be that much harder to cure.

In this case of long habituation, the deformation of the intellect might come in stages, too, tracking the progressive malformation of the will. What might (in theory at least) still be considered a good for others in general gradually becomes abhorrent to the slothful person in her own case. (By way of analogy, take someone who thinks that marriage is generally good, but her own marriage has become unbearable.) When sloth and despair become well entrenched, however, it is perhaps more plausible to think that the vicious person can no longer conceive of God’s assistance as a good for anyone, or a good in any respect. If autonomy becomes her highest value, despair is rooted in prideful independence. (Analogously, she may come to believe that marriage is intrinsically oppressive because the sacrifices it requires are self-stultifying, so singleness is preferable as such.) If she had hope, she would continue striving toward her end, relying on God’s assistance and building confidence upon confidence, as hope is

---

<sup>42</sup> Compare Aristotle’s description of the interdependence of *phronesis*, particular judgments (“having a good eye”), and moral virtue, which regulates appetite, in *NE* VI.11–13 [1143a20–1145a10], a view which Aquinas largely adopts in *ST*.

<sup>43</sup> Note the similarities with avarice: apathy hardens into insensibility to mercy or hard-heartedness.

<sup>44</sup> This is often the case with the carnal vices—the pleasures are vehement enough to momentarily cloud the correct application of general principles to particular cases of action, but they also tend to be transitory enough to blow over quickly, allow one to come to one’s senses, acknowledge one’s mistakes, and feel regret. It might be worth investigating the sorts of cases in which sorrow tends to linger, such as intense grief, and whether this is more a feature of the subject or the object of sorrow. These cases would be an opportunity for sloth, and through it, despair, to gain a foothold, even if one were not culpable for the initiating passion.

transformed more and more by charity's view of God-the-assister as one who is also to be loved for his own sake. If instead she succumbs to despair, she becomes no longer able to see a relationship to God (even selfishly as a necessary means to her own good) as anything but an unwelcome intrusion and hindrance to what she wants, for example, the freedom to rule herself or have her own way.

To the despairing one, the will's progressive deformation then affects the intellect in a vicious cycle, leading one further and further away from God. At first reliance on God appears to require too much of one, and overburdens one with daily commitments and sacrifices that one finds unbearable or too wearying over the long haul. Gradually the despairing person pulls back, justifying and reframing the resulting autonomy from God as "freedom" from an unbearable commitment. Finally alone, the one who despairs not only finds oneself independent from God's assistance and love, but upon consideration finds that this is the state one has chosen and thinks best—a state of despair, and a condition that not surprisingly also conforms to the classic definition of pride. The first puzzle about despair therefore yields the conclusion that one cannot remedy despair by merely correcting someone's beliefs about human nature or describing in more detail the goods one has shunned. The despairer's refusal is not confused in this sense; it is clearly chosen and clear-sightedly endorsed. What is needed is a change of heart: nothing less will do than a rescue from a deeply prideful allegiance to the autonomous self, which validates a vision of the human good free from divine interference. For someone characterized by such despair, help is no longer seen or desired as a good; that is just what it means to have the vice.

Confirming that despair is ultimately located in the will, however, creates another difficulty. The resolution of this second difficulty also impacts conclusions about whether and how despair might be remedied. On the interpretation I just offered, despair as a vice against hope is a state in which obtaining our ultimate end by God's assistance is no longer desired and sought *as a good*. Aquinas, however, describes despair's object as a good which is despaired over because it is *impossible to attain*. On his view, the impossibility of attaining it, rather than its lack of goodness, explains why the will is not moved toward the object.<sup>45</sup> How are these claims compatible?<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> The puzzle here concerns not the moral value of the object in its own right, but according to the subject's perception of it.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Lombardo also notes the complications for Aquinas's account that arise when trying to specify the intentional object of the *passion* of despair as a good from which one is averse (or motivated to withdraw) on account of its attendant (apprehended) impossibility. He thinks the difference Aquinas specifies between hope and daring, on the one hand, and despair and fear, on the other, is tenuous and therefore the distinctions rest more on the phenomenological differences in the experience of each passion. See Lombardo 2011, 68–74. I have argued here, in the case of the analogous affections of the will, that the intentional objects can be explained by a difference in emphasis in their respective complex objects (which

Why does the despairer construe divine assistance to the ultimate end as impossible to attain? I have already noted that it is conceivable in cases of passion-induced despair that one might be overwhelmed by sorrow or fear or guilt or some other emotion and therefore judge incorrectly that God is not able or merciful enough to extend his assistance to oneself in particular. In the vicious case of despair, however, it seems that the judgment of impossibility is the result of the will's *rejection* of it as possible. And this seems paradoxical, since to be able to reject or refuse something—to choose against getting it—seems to imply the possibility of getting it should one choose otherwise. What explanation can resolve this puzzle?

The person who despairs through sloth does not want God's assistance; instead, he detests and abhors it, and withdraws from it with aversion. If one accepts my progressive account of despair as a terminus of sloth, then, one might say that the will's choice is so difficult to reverse by the end of the process of moral malformation as to make turning back toward God and accepting God's help impossible. (Perhaps this could also account for perennial speculation that despair is an unforgivable sin.) The difficulty that makes God's assistance seem impossible, is, on my account, the difficulty created by the despairer's malformed will itself. To overcome this obstacle would require a reverse transformation of the self. To the despairer, this may well seem impossible even if it could (in principle) be considered desirable.

This reading is made even more plausible if one softens Aquinas's reading of "impossible" to follow his own reading in the questions on the passions of fear and daring, to mean something like "difficult or arduous, so as to be almost unavoidable" (*ST* 1–2.41.1c and 3m).<sup>47</sup> Given that the sense of possibility that is relevant here is not metaphysical possibility, but instead concerns the relevant capacities of the agents responsible for obtaining the end, this interpretation also fits the case of hope and despair better. Aquinas defines hope, after all, as desire for a good which is possible to obtain either through one's own power or the power of another. (He calls the latter "expectation" from *ex alio spectare*, i.e., to look outside oneself for help. In framing this definition, Aquinas would likely have had Luke 1:37 in mind: "Nothing is impossible with God.")

What is possible for the agent only with God's supernatural assistance is indeed impossible for her *on her own power*. Her refusal of God's

---

corresponds to the phenomenology of each affective response). Cates (2009) offers a similar reading of the intentional objects of the corresponding passions. Desire and aversion track either the possibility/impossibility of attaining the object as the agent's primary focus, or the goodness or evil of the object. The puzzle I am raising here, however, is an additional complication that arises specifically from the nature of despair as an entrenched and habitual vice, with its ultimate roots in the vice of pride.

<sup>47</sup> See also 1–2.41.4. Again, it would be more accurate to say the threat *appears to the subject* to be irresistible, because it is the agent's perception and judgment of such that prompts the passion to arise. At *ST* 1–2.42.2, Aquinas quotes Aristotle (*Rhetoric* II.5) to emphasize this point.

assistance thus makes any effort she might make in the direction of her end ultimately futile, and makes her estimate of attaining her end as impossible, should she even want to strive toward it, correct. It is no problem that her refusal itself makes attainment of an object impossible, for impossible in this case means impossible for her all by herself. It is her choice to refuse help, and thus her predicament of being stuck with an impossible task is of her own willful making. In other words, she makes her ultimate good impossible to attain by choosing not to recognize or desire God's assistance as a good.

Consider, by way of analogy, a child who wants to complete a project (e.g., a puzzle with 1,000 pieces) which is too difficult for her on her own, but who also stubbornly refuses to accept a parent's help, and who rejects not only the parent's help but anything to do with the parent. In fact, the parent's very presence is interpreted as a threat to the child's desired autonomy and as undercutting her sense of independence. The child, in frustration, may even shout at the parent to leave her alone, and then, realizing that she has just rejected the only means to doing the puzzle, throw the materials for the project off the table in disgust and anger. The despairer's attitude toward her end as no longer desirable *because it is an end that can only be obtained with assistance* is not only consistent with the relevant sense of possibility here, but also reveals its grounding in pride. She wants fulfilment, but on her own terms, without dependence. Her pride explains her taste and distaste for the good: she takes things to be good for her if and only if she can get them on her own. Likely this also implies that such objects be achievable on her own terms, for example, without too much effort, or on her own timing. (Hope, by contrast, is one's "patient expectation of a difficult but possible good.") This is, of course, exactly what one would expect from a form of despair rooted in a capital vice.

## 5.2 Some Possibilities

These two puzzles bring the discussion, finally, to the final question: whether the vice of despair has a remedy, or whether it is an intractable and incurable condition. Aquinas says that all forms of despair are dangerous, on account of despair's self-perpetuating nature: "despair is more dangerous [than hatred] since hope withdraws us from evils and induces us to seek for good things, so that when hope is given up, people rush headlong into sin, and are drawn away from good works" (*ST* 2–2.20.3). The initial decision to reject and pull away is reinforced by further sin which then pulls one further away from the good, and being further away from the good makes one liable to continue to sin, and so on. The vice of despair I have discussed in this essay—as the terminus of sloth's progressive entrenchment, expressing ingrained *malitia* on the part of the will—would clearly be its most intractable form. The process by which sloth gives rise to despair results in a vicious habit deeply rooted in the character of the will and,

because it is so willfully chosen over such a long time, particularly difficult to remedy. (Vice thus serves as a deformed mirror image of Aristotelian virtue-as-second nature.) Further, like sloth, despair also seems to involve the will deliberately turning from the only thing that could be its cure. Once one has reached such an end point, where one has cut off the possibility of desiring to go back, how could one begin to cultivate the desire to reverse the process?

I offer three suggestions. (In so doing, I note that I think Aquinas should be committed to the conclusion that despair, even in this form, ought not to be considered incurable in principle.<sup>48</sup> First, one method of initiating the process of moral reformation might be to offer the despairing one external incentives or sanctions to engage in practices that would lead her back toward a place where her will could and would be moved to accept divine assistance. This could take the form of a sort of Pascalian wager against despair, or a *Symposium*-like seduction, or a process analogous to a MacIntyrean chess game or apprenticeship in a practice (1981, 188–190). The main difficulty would be finding incentives or sanctions that would both appeal to the one in despair (what goods, if any, could genuinely pique and then hold her interest?) and eventually trump her deep-seated rejection of the goodness of divine help. As a caution, I note further that it is characteristic of virtuous practices and spiritual disciplines that they situate one to be potentially receptive of new insight and transformation, rather than guaranteeing that outcome through some formulaic technique or mechanical routine. In Kierkegaardian terms, such practices offer an “occasion” for real change but cannot force change to happen. Such activities also imply placing oneself in a position of teachability, receptivity, and even submission, which means their appeal to a pridefully despairing person would likely be severely limited. In short, this method of countering despair would only appeal to a well-entrenched despairer in rare cases, and even then, would only provide an opportunity to reconsider her stance against accepting anything that might lead her toward a remedy.

Thinking communally about virtuous (re)formation might also lead one to imagine contexts in which the despairer cannot completely extricate herself from formative exercises in which her community regularly engages. If she remains tied to such a community (e.g., a family or church), she will continue at some level to participate in practices which she rejects but cannot completely avoid, and this could function as a sort of analogous form of *stabilitas*. One could hope that going through such motions (e.g., communal gathering, shared meals, or their liturgical counterparts in worship and receiving the eucharist) might be unwittingly transformative, or eventually provide some sort of break-through, or simply serve to put pressure on her attachment to an autonomous self. Such a remedy for

---

<sup>48</sup> See *ST* 2–2.14.3c and 1m. For his earlier position, see his Sentences commentary (1929, 2, d. 43.4.2m).

despair requires deep and enduring ties to places, persons, and practices; unfortunately, such thick communities are increasingly rare. It would also require communities with social structures and stable practices that hold even when individual commitments do not. In summary, with a few notable exceptions, finding contexts in which this first strategy can be effective will be challenging.

Second, the despairing one might find her position unsustainable because of a personal crisis of significant force. She might have an experience that jars her sense of settled values enough to serve as a wake-up call which softens her hardened will, or at least leads her to doubt and reconsider her resignation.<sup>49</sup> Familiar characters such as the prodigal son among the pigs in Scripture (Luke 15) or Jean Valjean when the bishop forgives his theft of the silver in *Les Misérables* illustrate just such moments when circumstances—whether bad or good—shake one’s sense of reality just enough to open a crack in one’s hardened heart. As these stories illustrate, such an episode might be facilitated by deliberately removing certain distractions, props, escape hatches, or comforts, such that a crisis would be precipitated or intensified enough that the despairer would seriously consider backtracking from her entrenched position. Some incarcerated persons, for example, report having such a crisis experience in the first few years of serving out a life sentence, especially if they are held in solitary confinement. In other cases, a jarring episode could be facilitated in some cases by reading about others who have been in the same condition. Through literature or film, for example, one can consider one’s state from a third person perspective and find it wanting in ways not available “from the inside.” Or one may find that part of what made one feel “stuck” in despair was partly the thought that one was alone and no one else understood what one’s condition was like. Unfortunately, personal crises and the breakthroughs they make possible usually cannot be engineered, either by the despairer or those who care about her.

Lastly, the despairer may simply get bored or unhappy enough with what she has chosen to try something else, perhaps only because it is something different. Like the character Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*, drinking Jim Beam in his pajamas while watching the same episode of *Jeopardy!* for the thousandth time, the despairer may conclude that “*Anything* different is good.” The idea is that the despairer might eventually despair over her despair, that is, she may eventually have had enough of being at an impasse or feeling stuck, and find her condition no longer tolerable. This option is premised on the idea that joy in goodness is limitless, but the allure of evil eventually fades. Moreover, Aquinas, following Augustine, holds that none of the despairer’s chosen substitutes for her ultimate end will ever be able to satisfy her, so her restlessness will keep resurfacing.

---

<sup>49</sup> Another way to think of this possibility is as a moral version of what MacIntyre called “an epistemological crisis” which requires “the construction of a new narrative” (2006, 3–5).

Perhaps this list of remedies sounds too bleak and unpromising. In reply, I think this is what one should expect, given the seriousness of the vice. When one is truly in despair, there are no quick fixes. Nor is successful escape easy or assured, given the involvement of the human will. The last two options I suggested are the sort of moment of opportunity the despairing one must take advantage of whenever it happens to arise. The first is the only one that involves a pro-active push from others. If nothing else, this survey underscores the need to catch sloth and despair at their earliest possible stages.

Aquinas himself offers an approach that may be better than anything suggested so far: the hopes and prayers of others on the despairing one's behalf (*ST* 2–2.17.2.obj and 2m; 17.3.obj 2 and c). Numerous authors commenting on the effects of suffering have noted that it is possible to think of faith and hope as communally held goods, such that when one is too full of doubt to trust with confidence, or too weary to hope or pray for oneself, it is nevertheless efficacious for others in the church to do so on one's behalf (Sittser 2015; Billings 2015). Despair may have a similar remedy. Given the progressive decline I have described in this essay, the most effective recourse against such vice would be to cultivate positive practices of hope and to create thriving and attractive communities of mutual encouragement and friendship (DeYoung 2014). Such practices and communities would not only buffer temptations to despair well before they reach their term; they would also provide opportunities for moral and spiritual formation in the opposite direction.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored a particular form of despair that is the terminus and offspring vice of the capital vice of sloth, with an eye toward addressing the possibility of remedying this vice. I have argued that this form of despair is the most difficult to cure on account of its rootedness in a malformed will, and I have described the process of malformation as a slide from sloth into despair.

As far removed as Aquinas's technical account is from the common conceptions of despair (and also from other philosophical accounts), my description of despair in terms of its relationship to the other vices offers both a plausible and even spiritually helpful explanation of a human condition whose progressive character makes it especially important to catch in the early stages. Understanding sloth, along with its various forms and offspring vices, provides an opportunity to recognize the symptoms characteristic of one heading for despair and hopefully to counteract them before they progress too far. Moreover, a clearer understanding of the despairer's

condition and the way it manifests pride may enable others, even in cases in which despair is deeply entrenched, to deal more charitably and effectively with those who are caught in its vicious spiral.

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung  
E-mail: [rdeyoung@calvin.edu](mailto:rdeyoung@calvin.edu)

References:

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1929. *Scriptum super Sententiis*. Edited by P. Mandonnet. Paris: P. Lethielleux.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1948. *Summa theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York, NY: Benziger Brothers.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 2003. *On Evil*. Translated by Richard Regan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 2005. "Disputed Question on Hope." In *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, edited by E. M. Atkins and Thomas Williams. Translated by E. M. Atkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd edn. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Augustine. 2009. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Billings, J. Todd. 2015. *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Cassian, John. 1997. "Conferences." In *Ancient Christian Writers Series*, Vol. 57. Translated by Boniface Ramsey, O.S.B. Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Cassian, John. 2000. "Institutes of the Monastic Life." In *Ancient Christian Writers Series*, Vol. 58. Translated by Boniface Ramsey, O.S.B. Mahweh, NJ: The Newman Press.
- Cates, Diana Fritz. 2009. *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. 2004a. "Aquinas's Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence: A New Measure of Greatness." *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2).
- DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. 2004b. "Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on *Acedia*." *The Thomist* 68 (2).
- DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. 2011. "Aquinas on the Vice of Sloth: Three Interpretive Issues." *The Thomist* 75 (1).
- DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. 2014. "Practicing Hope." *Res Philosophica* 91 (3): 387–410. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2014.91.3.8>.
- Evagrius. 2003a. "Eight Thoughts." In *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*. Translated by R. Sinkewicz. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evagrius. 2003b. "Praktikos." In *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*. Translated by R. Sinkewicz. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frankl, Victor. 1959. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1983. *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Edna Hong and Howard Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- King, Peter. 2012. "Emotions." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, edited by Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

**Acknowledgements** I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 44th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 2009. I would like to thank commenters there and my colleagues in the Calvin College philosophy department for their helpful comments on that earlier draft. Thanks are also due to my anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and constructive suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to the Louisville Institute for granting me sabbatical funding to revise this essay for publication.

- Lombardo, O. P., Nicholas. 2011. *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After Virtue*. 2nd edn. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2006. "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science." In *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCluskey, Colleen. 2005. "Willful Wrongdoing: Thomas Aquinas on *Certa Malitia*." <http://www.historyofethics.org/062005/062005McCluskey.shtml>. *Studies in the History of Ethics* .
- Miner, Robert. 2009. *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Percy, Walker. 1998. *The Moviegoer*. New York, NY: Vintage Press.
- Pieper, Josef. 1997. *Faith, Hope, Love*. Translated by R. and C. Winston. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.
- Sittser, Jerry. 2015. "Adversity and Spiritual Formation." In *January Series Lecture*. <http://www.calvin.edu/january-series/speakers/2015/Sittser/>.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Waugh, Evelyn. 1999. *Brideshead Revisited*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books.