

AQUINAS ON THE VICE OF SLOTH
THREE INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

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DEFINING THE CAPITAL VICE of sloth (*acedia*) is a difficult business in Thomas Aquinas and in the Christian tradition of thought from which he draws his account.

In this article, I will raise three problems for interpreting Aquinas's account of sloth. They are all related, as are the resolutions to them I will offer. The three problems can be framed as questions: How, on Aquinas's account, can sloth consistently be categorized as, first, a capital vice and, second, a spiritual vice? These two questions lead to a third, namely, how is the condition of sloth possible, given Aquinas's moral psychology and the nature of the will?

The resolution of these interpretive issues can help do two things. It can help explain the apparent inconsistency between traditional (ancient and medieval) and contemporary conceptions of this vice, and—if Aquinas's account is right—it can help us diagnose contemporary moral and spiritual maladies that may either go unnoticed or be confused with distinctively modern “virtues” like diligence and industriousness.¹

¹ I argue this point in considerably greater detail in “The Vice of Sloth: Some Historical Reflections on Laziness, Effort, and Resistance to the Demands of Love,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Craig Boyd and Kevin Timpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). An earlier version was published by *The Other Journal* 10 (November 2007) and can be found online at <http://theotherjournal.com/2007/11/15/>.

I. THE FIRST INTERPRETIVE ISSUE: SLOTH AS A CAPITAL VICE

Aquinas's account of the vice of sloth is generally consistent with the tradition before him on this subject—both in naming it a capital vice and in diagnosing it as a spiritual vice.²

Gregory the Great, with his usual rhetorical flourish, describes the capital vices as commanders of a great army of vices, under the ultimate direction of their general, pride.

For the tempting vices, which fight against us in invisible contest in behalf of the pride which reigns over them, some of them go first, like captains, others follow, after the manner of an army. . . . For when pride, the queen of sins, has fully possessed a conquered heart, she surrenders it immediately to seven principal sins, as if to some of her generals, to lay it waste. And an army in truth follows these generals, because, doubtless, there spring up from them impetuous hosts of sins. Which we set forth the better, if we specially bring forward in enumeration, as we are able, the leaders themselves and their army. For pride is the root of all evil, of which it is said, as Scripture bears witness; *Pride is the beginning of all sin*. [Ecclus. 10, 1] But seven principal vices, as its first progeny, spring doubtless from this poisonous root, namely, vain glory, envy, anger, melancholy, avarice, gluttony, lust. . . . Because, therefore, seven principal vices produce from themselves so great a multitude of vices, when they reach the heart, they bring, as it were, the bands of an army after them. But of these seven, five namely are spiritual, and two are carnal.³

² As consistent as the tradition itself, that is: Gregory combines sloth and sorrow under the name *tristitia*, while Evagrius of Pontus (*Praktikos*) and John Cassian (*Institutes, Conference 5*) regard *acedia* and *tristitia* as distinct vices: Aquinas combines sorrow and sloth under the name *acedia*, but defines sloth as a type of sorrow.

³ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* 31.4.5.87-88 (PL 76:0620C-0621D) (trans. John Henry Parker [London: J. G. F. and J. Rivington, 1844]). Gregory continues by correlating each capital vice with its characteristic offspring (based on lists found already in Cassian's *Conference 5*): "But these several sins have each their army against us. For from vain glory there arise disobedience, boasting, hypocrisy, contentions, obstinacies, discords, and the presumptions of novices. From envy there spring hatred, whispering, detraction, exultation at the misfortunes of a neighbour, and affliction at his prosperity. From anger are produced strifes, swelling of mind, insults, clamour, indignation, blasphemies. From melancholy there arise malice, rancour, cowardice, despair, slothfulness in fulfilling the commands, and a wandering of the mind on unlawful objects. From avarice there spring treachery, fraud, deceit, perjury, restlessness, violence, and hardnesses of heart against compassion. From gluttony are propagated foolish mirth, scurrility, uncleanness, babbling, dullness of sense in understanding. From lust are generated blindness of mind, inconsiderateness, inconsistency, precipitation, self-love, hatred of God, affection for this present world, but dread or despair of that which is to come" (ibid.).

Aquinas formalizes Gregory's description of the capital vices in terms of final causality. A capital vice is defined as one for the sake of which other sins are committed on account of its very desirable end.⁴ This very desirable end—as the object or good that defines the capital vice in question—plays its role as final cause on account of its affinity with happiness (*beatitudo*), the ultimate end of human action.⁵ The teleological role of the capital vices in directing action gives them enormous motivating power and influence in initiating other sins, which are committed for its sake or to achieve their ends.⁶ Hence in the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Disputed Questions on Evil* Aquinas glosses the relevant meaning of "capital" as "source" sin or vice.⁷

It is not in this sense [*i.e.*, capital punishment] that we are now speaking of capital sins, but in another sense, in which the term 'capital' is derived from head [*caput*], taken metaphorically for a principle or director of others. In this way a capital vice is one from which other vices arise, chiefly by being their final cause, which origin is formal, as stated above (I-II q. 76. 2). Wherefore a capital vice is not only the principle of others, but is also their director and, in a way, their leader, because the art or habit, to which the end belongs, is always the principle and the commander in matters concerning the means. Hence Gregory (*Mor.* 31. 17) compares these capital vices to the "leaders of an army."⁸

We are now speaking about capital sins as we speak of head meaning source. And so Gregory calls capital sins founts of sin. And so we call sins capital in this way of originating, to which the third meaning of head also consequently belongs. For a ruler evidently directs his subjects to attain his objective, as, for example, a commander deploys his army to attain his objective, as the

⁴ STB I-II q. 84, aa. 3-4; *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations of the *Summa Theologiae* are from the translation of the English Fathers of the Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948, repr. Christian Classics, 1981), quotations of *The Disputed Questions on Evil* are from Richard Regan, trans., *On Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵ Augustine, too, makes this point, describing the "specious vices" as having "a flawed reflection of beauty" and enumerating the ways in which each of the vices offer simulacra of the happiness we can only have in God (*Confessions* 2.7).

⁶ In some cases, the "offspring vices" are the effects of such pursuit (e.g., "restlessness" for avarice).

⁷ Thus this designation is not to be confused with the alternate label for the list of seven, the "seven deadly sins." Aquinas thinks that most of the seven capital vices can occur in a venial as well as in a mortal form.

⁸ STB I-II q. 84, a. 3; see also I-II, q. 84, a. 4.

Metaphysics says. As so capital sins are commanders, and the sins arising from capital sins the army, as it were, as Gregory says.

Therefore, those sins are capital that have ends chiefly desirable as such, so that other sins are subordinated to such ends.⁹

For example, consider the capital vice of avarice or greed. It is a sin whose end is very desirable—for while money itself is literally only a means, symbolically or representationally money promises self-sufficiency. As we know already from Aristotle's ethics, self-sufficiency is end-like and happiness-like enough to stir up great desire and to motivate us to do all else—in this case, commit many other sins—in pursuit of it. So the progeny or offspring vices of avarice include fraud, robbery, insensibility to mercy, and treachery, among others.¹⁰ In similar fashion, the capital vices of lust and gluttony promise pleasure, which also has the nature of an end and is easily mistaken for happiness. Their offspring name the typical dispositional effects of making bodily pleasure one's ultimate end, and so on for the rest of the seven.¹¹

However, the "final cause" pattern only appears to work for the capital vices that are characterized by excessive desires for end-like goods, for the sake of which other sins are committed. Unfortunately, neither of the capital vices of sloth and envy seem to fit this pattern or the explanation of their capital nature that goes with it. Both sloth and envy are defined in Aquinas as forms of "sorrow" or "aversion" to a perceived evil rather than excessive desire or love for some good. In fact, for Aquinas, sloth is characterized by the movement of the will which is the *opposite* of love or desire. Nor does he mention any positive object or good end sought as a happiness-substitute in the account of either vice. Leaving envy aside here, how then can sloth count as one of the seven capital vices?

⁹ *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 1.

¹⁰ *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 3; *STh* II-II, q. 118, a. 8. Note that lists of offspring vices are meant to offer connections between vices that hold generally and for the most part, not to offer an exhaustive list of possible offspring vices or imply that they necessarily follow in all cases.

¹¹ After Gregory, pride is usually not numbered as one of the seven, but stands as their root.

Both in the treatise on the passions and in his descriptions of human action involving the will, Aquinas emphasizes that all movements of the human person—whether in action or in passion—arise from love as their root. The first principle of action is a desire for happiness, a good the will loves by necessity of its nature. So love has priority in the movements of the will. In the treatise on the passions, Aquinas says that love is the most basic or fundamental passion, in the sense that it is the explanatory root of all other movements of the sense appetite. Our aversions, fears, and responses of anger stem more basically from what we love.¹² "And if we wish to know the order of all the passions in the way of generation, love and hatred are first . . . yet so that love precedes hatred."¹³ For example, in the questions on fear and the treatise on courage—the virtue that moderates fear according to right reason—Aquinas quotes Augustine many times over to the effect that "fear is born of love." That is, what we fear is explained by some loved good that we find threatened. The same is true on the level of action and the movement of the will.

The first principle of practical reason is Aquinas's guide, then, for the natural counterpart of loving some good and pursuing it is to avoid and shun the opposite evil.¹⁴ These are not two principles, but different manifestations of the same thing—pursuit of some good and avoidance of some evil that threatens it are, in moral psychological terms, two sides of the same coin.

We should note that it belongs to the same consideration that one pursues a good and shuns the contrary evil. For example, a glutton seeks pleasure in food and shuns the distress that results from the absence of food, and it is likewise regarding other sins. And so we can appropriately distinguish capital sins by different goods and evils, namely, so that one capital sin is distinguished from others whenever there is a particular aspect of desirability or avoidance.¹⁵

¹² *STh* I-II q. 10, a. 2; and I-II, q. 25, a. 2. What we love is what is akin to our nature or fitting to it (*STh* I-II, q. 27, a. 1) and something to which we desire to be united (*STh* II-II, q. 27, a. 2).

¹³ *STh* I-II q. 25, a. 4.

¹⁴ *STh* I-II q. 94, a. 2.

¹⁵ *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 1.

We do not distinguish sins by the difference of good and evil, since the same sin concerns a good and its contrary evil, as I have said [in the response].¹⁶

Since he describes sloth and envy as aversions or avoidances, this implies attachment to some loved good which stands contrary to an opposing evil. This evil the agent then avoids or opposes.

In short, the avoidance of evil can be a goal; it can operate as a final cause. As I have argued elsewhere, psychologically speaking, sloth itself is better characterized as the impulse to escape something burdensome than as something good one desires as a convenient escape or diversion.¹⁷ Nonetheless, what always does the ultimate explanatory work for Aquinas is the underlying attachment to a good which prompts one to avoid a particular evil. The question for the vice of sloth is, then, what exactly is the good that underlies the slothful person's aversion and avoidance? Moreover, is the good loved and pursued and the evil avoided in Aquinas's analysis of this vice the right sort of object for sloth to qualify as a *capital* vice? That is, in moral psychological terms, are they happiness-substitutes and final causes? I will return to these questions after laying out in more detail what Aquinas thinks sloth's object is.

II. THE SECOND INTERPRETIVE ISSUE: SLOTH AS A SPIRITUAL VICE

In the Christian tradition before Aquinas, sloth was consistently categorized as a spiritual vice.¹⁸ Only *vana gloria* and *superbia* supercede it on the spiritual end of Cassian's and Gregory's continua of vices, lists in which the vices are ordered from carnal (lust, gluttony) to spiritual (pride).¹⁹ The earliest

¹⁶ *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 1, ad 12.

¹⁷ Slothful aversion can take the form of open resistance or denial and escapism. See my account in "The Roots of Despair" in R. E. Houser, ed., *Aquinas and the Virtues: Hope* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming). One can imagine the slothful person's state of desire as oriented toward "anything but this."

¹⁸ This did not necessarily or frequently translate into conceptions of sloth that were popular at the time.

¹⁹ G-L-A-L-I-A-V-S is a cumbersome acronym, but gets the point across: the list of vices progresses from carnal temptations to spiritual ones: *gula, luxuria, avaritia, ira, tristitia, invidia, acedia, vana gloria, superbia*.

Christian thinkers to give a written account of *acedia*, Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian, describe the vice as disposing the monk not only to leave his cell or monastery but to abandon his spiritual vocation altogether. For both of them, the target of sloth is nothing less than the religious life and one's commitment to it:

The demon of *acedia* . . . instills in [the monk] a dislike for the place 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.²⁰

Once this [vice] has seized possession of a wretched mind it makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell, and also disdainful and contemptuous of the brothers who live with him. . . . until he is gradually drawn out of his cell and begins to forget the reason for his profession.²¹

Whether to designate sloth as a carnal or as a spiritual vice is another interpretive puzzle in Aquinas. In his introductions to the capital vices in both *De Malo* and the *Summa Theologiae* he initially describes sloth as an aversion to the divine or spiritual good "on account of the attendant bodily labor"²² or as apathy about a spiritual good "that prevents a bodily good" such as "tranquility or bodily pleasure."²³

Moreover, he seems to agree with Augustine's answer to a question about whether the demons can have the vices.²⁴ Augustine says the demons can have spiritual vices like pride and envy, which appear to require only an act of will; however, he denies that purely spiritual creatures like demons can have sloth or any other carnal vices such as lust and gluttony. In answer to the question, "Whether only the sin of pride and envy can exist in an angel?" Aquinas responds,

²⁰ Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos* 6.12 (R Sinkewicz, trans., *Evagrius of Pontus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003]).

²¹ John Cassian, *Institutes* 10.2 and 3 (trans. B. Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 58 [Mahwah, N.J.: Newman Press, 2000]).

²² *STh* I-II, q. 84, a. 4.

²³ *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 1.

²⁴ *STh* I, q. 63, a. 2.

[A]s to affection, only those sins can be in the demons which can belong to a spiritual nature. Now a spiritual nature cannot be affected by such pleasure as pertain to bodies, but only by such as are in keeping with spiritual things. . . .

Sloth is a kind of sadness, where one becomes sluggish in spiritual exercises because they weary the body; which does not apply to the demons. So it is evident that pride and envy are the only spiritual sins which can be found in demons; yet so that envy is not taken for a passion, but for a will resisting the good of another.²⁵

We can gather two things from this first run of textual evidence: First, sloth appears to require a body, for it seems to be related somehow to bodily labor and rest, physical comfort, or other bodily goods. Second, sloth appears to be a vice with a carnal object, since these texts describe the slothful person as averse to the divine good on account of or for the sake of the bodily good which she makes her end instead. On this description, sloth should count as a carnal vice, because it has a carnal object. Physical comfort or pleasure is the good the slothful person has in view.

Complications for this interpretation quickly arise, however, when we see that Aquinas explicitly denies that sloth is a carnal vice, both on Gregory's authority and for his own reasons. He makes this denial in the two articles (one in *De Malo* and one in the *Summa*) in which he explicitly addresses the definition and object of the vice of sloth. In response to an objection claiming that sloth is "sadness over a spiritual good in a particular respect, namely, inasmuch as [sloth] prevents bodily rest"²⁶—a feature that would make it a carnal sin—Aquinas replies:

In order for [sloth] to be designated a special sin, we need to say that there is sadness about a spiritual good in a particular respect. And we cannot say that there is a particular respect insofar as the sadness prevents a bodily good, since

²⁵ *STh* I, q. 63, a. 2, corp. and ad 2.

²⁶ The full objection reads: "People have said that [sloth] is sadness over a spiritual good in a particular respect, namely, inasmuch as sloth prevents bodily rest. But to desire bodily rest belongs to carnal sins. And to desire something and to be sad at its prevention belong to the same consideration. Therefore, if sloth is a special kind of sin only because it prevents bodily rest, then sloth would be a sin of the flesh, although Gregory lists sloth with spiritual sins, as his work *Moritzia* makes clear" (*De Malo*, q. 11, a. 2, obi. 3).

[sloth] accordingly would not be a sin distinct from the sin that concerns the bodily good.²⁷

—which it is distinct from, so the passage implies. The desire for bodily rest can cause us to sorrow over spiritual goods, but this is not what defines sloth as a distinct species of sin. In the *Summa* he is even clearer:

Again, it cannot be said that sloth is a special vice, insofar as it shuns spiritual good as toilsome or troublesome to the body, or as a hindrance to the body's pleasure, for this again would not sever sloth from carnal vices, where a person seeks bodily comfort and pleasure.²⁸

Further, Aquinas sets sloth in opposition to the virtue of charity. Both the virtue of charity and the capital vices opposed to it—sloth and envy—are located in the will, the appetite whose proper object is a rationally apprehended (spiritual) good. In order to set sloth up as a disposition to feel sorrow over the same object charity disposes us to enjoy, Aquinas needs to do some additional work on our common notion of "sorrow." Although we might expect sloth to be found in the concupiscible appetite as its subject because Aquinas describes it as a type of "sadness" or "sorrow," it becomes clear in *De Malo* that he extends passions of the sensory appetite by way of analogy to the will.

And so all the movements of the irascible and concupiscible powers accompanied by emotions, such as emotions of love, joy, hope, and the like, can belong to the will but without emotion.²⁹

But we should note that we can consider [sloth] in two ways, since it is a sadness: in one way as the act of a sense appetite; in the second way as the act of the intellectual appetite, that is, the will. . . . And so sloth, if it should designate an act of the will avoiding an internal and spiritual good, can have the complete nature of sin.³⁰

²⁷ *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 2.

²⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 2.

²⁹ *De Malo*, q. 8, a. 3.

³⁰ *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 1.

Since he takes care to apply his description of slothful sorrow explicitly beyond the range of the sense appetite and designates this form of sorrow as sinful, I take him to be thinking of sloth primarily as an aversion of the will, that is, an aversion to an intelligible or spiritual good paralleling the reaction of sorrow in the concupiscible appetite, where sorrow's object is a present (sensible) evil.

If Aquinas insists on aligning his view with the tradition in making sloth a spiritual vice on account of its spiritual object, as he seems to do, then we have several questions left to answer to resolve the interpretive puzzles we have raised so far. Concerning the second puzzle, what is the object that defines sloth in such a way that it counts as a spiritual vice? And how is sloth opposed then—if at all—to bodily labor or comfort, but *not* in a way that defines it as carnal? Concerning the first interpretive puzzle, moreover, how is this object a happiness-imitator and final cause, such that sloth should count as a capital vice?

It is clear by now that the first two interpretive issues arise from a puzzle about what the object of sloth is.³¹ Once this basic puzzle is sorted out, we will understand how sloth is related to happiness—answering our first interpretive question about sloth's status as a capital vice—and also why it should count as a spiritual vice, our second interpretive question. Unfortunately, the resolution of the first two interpretive issues brings with it a further question. Aquinas's view about the object of *acedia* appears to make sloth psychologically impossible on his own account of the nature of the human will. In the last two sections of the paper, I will treat the object of sloth, and then turn to address this last interpretive issue.

III. THE OBJECT OF ACEDIA

Aquinas defines sloth as “sorrow over the divine good in us” (*STh*) or “sorrow over the ‘interior and divine good’” (*bonum*

³¹ For a more extended exposition of this point, see Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, “Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of *Acedia*,” *The Thomist* 68 (April 2004): 173–204.

divinum) that is the special object of the theological virtue of charity (*De Malo*).³²

Therefore we should say that to be saddened over the special good that is the interior and divine good causes [sloth] to be a special kind of sin, as loving this good causes charity to be a special virtue.³³

Sorrow in the Divine good about which charity rejoices belongs to a special vice, which is called sloth.³⁴

Its opposition to charity goes a long way toward accounting for both the spiritual and the serious nature of this vice. That much thus looks promising for aligning Aquinas's account with the Christian tradition before him. But we still have to explain what Aquinas might mean by the “interior, divine good,” or “the divine good in us.”

Charity, for Aquinas, is our habitual participation in the divine nature by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is a theological virtue infused by grace that enables the will to be oriented toward beatitude or supernatural happiness, which is perfect union of the human person with God. According to Aquinas's definition,

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.*³⁵

Charity is a new and improved “second nature” acquired not by a process of habituation, but by infusion. Our new nature—which is nothing short of participation in the divine nature—is a gift of

³² Technically, slothful sorrow is opposed to joy, the first interior effect of charity (*STh* II, q. 28).

³³ *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 2.

³⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 2.

³⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 24, a. 2 (my translation; emphasis added); see also II-II, q. 23, a. 3, ad 3: “charity is superior to the soul, inasmuch as it is a *participation in the Holy Spirit*” (emphasis added).

the Holy Spirit.³⁶ By charity we become like-natured to God³⁷ and are enabled to achieve union with God, who is our ultimate end. In question. 23 of the *Secunda Secundae*, Aquinas describes charity in terms of friendship, where the friend is “another self,” loved on account of his or her likeness of nature. (Aquinas’s account of charity is, therefore, an unlikely mixture of Aristotelian virtue friendship, albeit of unequal parties, made possible by Platonic participation in the divine nature, a participation now described as the work of grace and the Holy Spirit.) The upshot for our discussion here is simply that the spiritual good that is charity—understood as our participation in the divine nature—is the “interior, divine good” to which sloth is an aversion.

With respect to our first two interpretive puzzles, then, Aquinas now has what he needs: sloth’s object is a spiritual good—the good of our participation in the divine nature. This good, moreover, not only imitates happiness, but *is* happiness, since becoming like-natured to God is how human nature achieves its perfection. So we have found an object that can satisfactorily explain sloth’s status as a spiritual vice and a capital vice.

But this causes an acute problem in its turn: If the slothful person is averse to the “interior divine good” of charity, is she then averse to her own flourishing? How can we sorrow over the presence of the divine nature in us, since union with God is our perfect good? Doesn’t the will by necessity of its nature desire perfect happiness? Joy, not sorrow, is the natural reaction of the presence of a loved good, and if this good is that in which our happiness consists, how can the will sorrow over and resist it? In short, according to his own metaphysical commitments, has Aquinas made sloth a psychologically impossible vice?

³⁶ Not coincidentally, Aquinas closely aligns the virtue of charity with the New Law, “which consists chiefly in the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is shown forth through faith which works through love” (*STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 1) and which is “like an interior habit bestowed on us . . . inclining us to act aright . . . [and] mak[ing] us do freely those things which are becoming to grace, and shun[ning] what is opposed to it” (*STh* I-II, q. 108, a. 1, ad 2).

³⁷ *STh* I-II, q. 62, a. 1: “The other is a happiness surpassing human nature which we can obtain by the power of God alone, by a kind of participation of the Godhead, about which it is written (2 Peter 1:4) that by Christ we are made ‘partakers in the Divine nature.’”

IV. THE THIRD INTERPRETIVE ISSUE: AN AVERSION TO HAPPINESS?

To resolve this last interpretive puzzle, we need to understand what could possibly make the slothful agent view the interior divine good of charity as an apparent evil.

Aquinas’s answer is that this is possible “on account of the opposition of the flesh to the spirit,” quoting Paul in Galatians 5:17.

So, too, the movement of sloth is sometimes in the sensitive appetite alone, by reason of the opposition of the flesh to the spirit, and then it is a venial sin; whereas sometimes it reaches to the reason, which consents in the dislike, horror, and detestation of the Divine good, on account of the flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit. In this case it is evident that sloth is a mortal sin.³⁸

And this divine good is a source of sadness for human beings because of the contrariety of the spirit to the flesh, since “the flesh lusts against the spirit,” as the Apostle says in Gal. 5:17. And so when desire of the flesh is dominant in human beings, they have disaster for spiritual good as contrary to their good.³⁹

The flesh-spirit opposition is not to be understood as making sloth preoccupied with “carnal” goods again, lest we be tempted back into mistaking it for a carnal vice with a carnal object; this is a move Aquinas has already pre-empted. What then does Paul, and Aquinas following him, mean by invoking this distinction?

The answer to this question is more complicated than my earlier work on the vice of sloth suggested.⁴⁰ First, we need to turn to Aquinas’s Scripture commentaries—one on Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians and one on his Epistle to the Galatians. In Paul’s writings, the flesh/spirit distinction parallels the old self/new self distinction, an opposition Paul uses to mark off sinful human nature from redeemed, regenerated human nature. In the Ephesians commentary, the sinful nature includes both the body

³⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 3.

³⁹ *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 3.

⁴⁰ See in particular, DeYoung, “Resistance to the Demands of Love”; and chapter 4 of Rebecca Konnydyk DeYoung, *Glistening Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2009).

and the soul or “inner man,” and the regenerate nature includes both as well. In Paul’s thinking overall, the flesh/spirit distinction and the old self/new self distinction do not indicate a body-soul split. Rather, “flesh/spirit” and “old self/new self” talk signals the difference between a life and character dominated by sinful desires, habits, and actions on the one hand, and the way that that old life and sinful nature becomes transformed by grace into a person’s new life in Christ, with its new desires, habits, and actions on the other. In Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 3—to name a few Pauline texts on this theme—Paul contrasts the sinful nature to one’s new life in Christ in just these sorts of terms. Aquinas’s Ephesians commentary tracks Paul closely on this issue, acknowledging that the battle between flesh and spirit is not a battle between bodily desires and spiritual ones, but a battle between the sinful, fallen self and the new self redeemed by Christ and transformed by his Spirit.

This picture of what’s going on in Paul’s texts—and in a parallel way in Aquinas’s understanding of sloth—supports Aquinas’s claim that sloth is essentially a spiritual vice with a spiritual object. For what the slothful person resists is the whole “new self” (not just the soul), that is, becoming a person transformed by the Spirit of Christ. She resists it on grounds of her residual attachment to the whole “old self” (not just the body), that is, all her habits and desires that are rooted in rebellion toward God and prideful attempts at autonomy.⁴¹

Conflict between the old and new is possible because the transformation between being sinful and becoming redeemed is not instantaneous. This is equally key to understanding sloth as a vice. The infusion of charity orients the will to its supernatural telos and enables the will to reach that end. But this requires a long process of rehabilitation and transformation, a process that requires human cooperation and consent. Infused virtue does not automatically or initially make action in compliance with charity

⁴¹ This sort of rebellion is illustrated, paradigmatically, in St. Augustine’s theft of the pears (*Confessions* 2.4–10).

pleasant or easy.⁴² Rather, this long, arduous process involves the discipline of dying to the old self and resisting its inclinations. There is much effort involved in this daily commitment to transformation. Love takes work.

My reading of Aquinas concludes that this ongoing transformation—with the struggle it often brings to the surface between old and new habits and desires—is the object of the slothful person’s resistance and aversion. So Aquinas summarizes his definition of sloth by saying, “And so when desire of the flesh is dominant in human beings, they have distaste for [this interior divine] spiritual good *as contrary to themselves [sibi contrarium]*.”⁴³

Hence there is aversion to effort and a desire to remain comfortable and undisturbed involved in the vice of sloth. The effort shunned and the comfort sought, however, are not most accurately described merely in bodily, physical terms. In fact, Aquinas, following the tradition before him, notes that one of sloth’s main symptoms is investing great effort in diversionary activities, activities that might well require much physical effort. By remaining preoccupied with these activities, the slothful one avoids accepting the demands made by divine love, demands directed toward the regeneration of one’s nature.

This explains why restlessness (false activity)⁴⁴ and inertia (false rest)⁴⁵—are the twin marks of a slothful character. When the apparent evil feels escapable, a person will go to almost any length to avoid facing up to her identity as a friend of God and the attendant demands of this relationship. This avoidance can show itself in restless activity, diversion-seeking, and even physical

⁴² See Aquinas’s interesting discussion of the different effects of the acquired and infused virtues in the *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 14 and 15, a passage in which he also cites Gal 5:17.

⁴³ *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 2, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ The activity is false because it is only apparently aimed at one’s good. Its pointlessness points to the shunning of one’s true telos: one is in motion, but moving nowhere.

⁴⁵ The rest is false because it names the state of having nothing to do because one cares about nothing or has resigned oneself to doing nothing. This contrasts with true rest, which is a kind of delight in a good attained (or, alternately, true refreshment for the sake of further purposeful activity).

restlessness (talking too much, nervous fidgeting, etc.).⁴⁶ To avoid misunderstanding the vice, however, these physical manifestations should be understood as slothful only insofar as they are symptoms of inner resistance, as Cassian's slothful monks shunned prayer and manual labor *because* these were exercises required by their commitment to the religious life—activities designed to affirm and strengthen their willingness to share in the vocation of the religious community.⁴⁷

On the other extreme, when the apparent evil of our participation in the divine nature feels inescapable, sloth shows itself as inertia, oppressive sorrow, and even despair.⁴⁸ The slothful person cannot bear to give up on happiness but she also cannot bear to endure what true happiness requires of her. The person who cannot be at rest with God's presence in her, a presence which calls her to live out her new identity and shed the old self, therefore tends to one or the other of these two extremes—restlessness or false rest.

In Aquinas's Galatians commentary, his take on the "flesh vs. spirit" distinction gets a slightly different nuance. "The flesh" again is the name of sinful concupiscence, the desires of the sinful nature. But when original justice was lost after the fall, the natural order of the human person—in which reason directs and commands sensory appetite—was lost and replaced by disorder. In our sinful, disordered state, then, concupiscible desires dominate—"concupiscible" here meaning the whole sensory appetite not ruled by (right) reason. In a state where the sensory appetite follows its own way without reason's rule, the good of the individual is framed in terms of goods apprehensible by the sensory appetite. These goods are particular material goods, in contrast to the intelligible goods that reason can apprehend. The conception of one's own perfection—from the point of view of the sinful self disordered by concupiscence, our "fleshy" state—is indeed a good immediately apprehensible by sense (not

⁴⁶ *STB* II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 3.

⁴⁷ See Cassian, *Institutes* 10.

⁴⁸ Despair is one of the offspring vices of sloth. I argue that it is sloth's natural *telos* in "Roots of Despair."

a good apprehensible by reason), that is, a carnal, temporal good. This explains how and why the slothful person has a truncated and distorted view of her own perfection, and why her escapist diversions typically take the form they do. Relationships of love and friendship, spiritual discipline and virtue, or any other spiritual or intelligible goods, are not objects apprehensible by sense. When the fleshly perspective dominates, therefore, "the interior divine good" looks like nothing but a hindrance to the good of the selfish, sinful self.

V. SOLVING THE INTERPRETTIVE PUZZLES

We began with three interpretive issues in Aquinas's texts on the vice of sloth. First, How can sloth be a capital vice, when it is defined as sorrow or sadness over a present evil rather than excessive love for some good that simulates happiness and functions as a final cause for other vices and sins? Second, How can slothful sorrow be "on account of the attendant bodily labor" and not possible for purely spiritual creatures such as the demons when Aquinas and the tradition consistently categorize it as a spiritual vice? And last, If sloth really is resistance to our participation in the divine nature and the attendant demands of charity, how is it possible for the will to resist its own perfection, rather than rejoice in it?

The definition of sloth in terms of the old-self/new-self distinction helps resolve the first two puzzles. Sloth can be a capital vice because it springs from an excessive love for a happiness-like end—the sinful nature and its definition of fulfillment and flourishing. On Aquinas's view, "love and pursue good" and "avoid [the] evils [opposed to it]" are motivational mirror images. Slothful aversion to the divine nature and resistance to its transformational demands is the flip-side of attachment to the sinful nature and a desire for the ultimate good of the "old self." Nothing less than happiness itself—based on what one identifies as one's true nature and its *telos*—is at stake in sloth. Sloth thus fits the pattern of the capital vices, whose

greatly desirable, happiness-like ends spur us on to a range of other vices.⁴⁹ In this resolution of the first interpretive puzzle, not only does Aquinas's account maintain internal consistency on the nature of the capital vices, but it also offers a powerful reason to include sloth among the list of seven "source" sins—a reason often lacking in popular conceptions of sloth in his own time, and certainly lacking in most contemporary portraits.

As for the second puzzle—whether sloth is a spiritual or a carnal vice on account of its object—we can see now that Aquinas can satisfactorily explain why sloth counts as a spiritual vice. Its excessive attachment to the sinful nature, or old self, is the ground of its aversion to the divine interior good that is the new self, the self that participates in the divine nature. From the perspective of disordered concupiscence, the divine, spiritual good can indeed look like an apparent evil to be resisted and avoided. Nonetheless, sloth's object of love is not itself something carnal, such as physical comfort or bodily rest; rather, the slothful one resists the effort of shedding her sinful habits and living in a way more consistent with her regenerate nature.

As if to confirm this point, Aquinas notes that because sloth symptomatically involves significant physical activity (whether work related or recreational) that is designed to divert the person's attention from the transformation to which she is called by charity, it cannot be physical effort *per se* that she resists nor physical comfort or rest that she seeks above all. Rather, the slothful person is averse to any effort—whether physical or spiritual or both—that is required to accept and live out her new "divine" nature. This emphasis is needed to keep from confusing sloth with laziness or resistance to merely physical effort, and also to keep from misreading St. Paul on the definition of the "flesh."

But an important caveat is needed here. Because human nature—both sinful and sanctified—is *embodied* rationality, all

⁴⁹ The slothful person, on Aquinas's account, comes out looking like an Augustinian divided self, torn between loves and ultimate ends: the slothful person sees the demands of new self, but still deep down wants to remain firmly attached to the old self (see Augustine, *Confessions* 8, 10-11). I would argue that this is a point in favor of my interpretation, since Aquinas typically relies heavily on Augustine in his texts on love.

human activity here on earth will involve some physical activity, or involve the body at some level. There is a sense in which no vice is "purely" spiritual for a human being. Even prayer and contemplation use and involve the body. In fact, in his discussion of prayer Aquinas recommends the involvement of bodily movements and material objects, not only because this holds our attention better but also because it accords with our nature as human beings.⁵⁰ Sloth was first identified and analyzed by the Desert Fathers—extreme ascetics whose efforts at spiritual discipline often taxed the body to its very limits. But no spiritual discipline, however moderate, exempts the body. Hence, the vice of sloth—while centered on which "self" or nature the will ultimately accepts and loves, and defined by an object or spiritual good only reason can recognize—will always involve physical effort and the body in some way.

What about the demons, then? It remains true that the demons do not have bodies and Aquinas agrees with Augustine that they cannot have sloth. If, however, sloth is really about the will and our participation in the divine nature via charity, it is not immediately clear why the demons would not be susceptible to this vice. Again, we can return to Aquinas's definition of sloth in terms of the object of charity to resolve this puzzle.

It is not sloth's possible bodily manifestations—for example, the shunning of physical effort—that make it impossible for the demons to have the vice, but rather the manner in which human nature is regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The human will (being less ontologically perfect than the will of a purely spiritual creature such as an angel) requires a long process of repeated action and habituation for the transformation from old self to new to be completed.⁵¹ For human beings, Aquinas describes charity as having a "now and not yet" character—we have the virtue and partake in the divine nature via the Holy Spirit now, already, but

⁵⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 83, a. 13.

⁵¹ Among rational beings, human beings are the lowest intellects and thus also the slowest learners. See for example, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCloskey, and Christina Van Dyke, *Aquinas's Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 23 and 50-51.

still have to act on that virtue and intensify and deepen it for charity to be fully perfected. Aquinas describes it as “a beginning of glory in us” (see *STh* II-II, q. 24, aa. 4-9, on the increase of charity). Like any friendship, which is real and present now yet grows to perfection over time and with continual effort, charity needs daily discipline and commitment over time to be perfected. The demons do not have sloth, not merely because they do not have bodies, but because the orientation of their nature against God took place in a single act of will, rather than the long, temporal process of transformation through habituation that humans must undergo.⁵² For us, it is the day-after-day-after-day character of our commitment, the thousand small denials of selfish inclination, and the wearisomeness of persevering in the good that give sloth a potential foothold.⁵³

This interpretation also makes sense of the remedy the Desert Fathers advocated for sloth: *stabilitas loci*—staying in place, rather than fleeing one’s monastic cell (bodily) or giving in to escapist fantasies (mentally). Evagrius counsels the monks, “You must not abandon the cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses that seem reasonable. Rather, you must remain seated inside [and] exercise perseverance.”⁵⁴ Staying in one place bodily for an extended period of time (even a lifetime) was meant to tutor the soul to find its corresponding rest against temptations to flee love’s demands for the work of regeneration. Exercising perseverance and endurance—virtues involving persistence over time—were the ways monks in their desert cells fought the “noonday demon” of sloth. Aquinas echoes their recommendations:

Now Cassian says, “Experience shows that the onslaught of sloth is not to be evaded by flight but to be conquered by resistance.”⁵⁵

⁵² Both reasons are obviously grounded in the ontological status and nature of their being spiritual creatures, but the main point here is that sloth does not have to do with bodily labor, comfort, and the like.

⁵³ See Kathleen Norris, *Noctidian Mysteries* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1998), 53.

⁵⁴ Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos* 6.28.

⁵⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1, obj. 4.

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Sin is ever to be stunned, but the assaults of sin should be overcome sometimes by flight, and sometimes by resistance; by flight when a continued thought increases the incentive to sin, as in lust; for which reason it is written (I Cor. 6:18) “Flee fornication”; by resistance, when perseverance in the thought diminishes the incentive to sin, which incentive arises from some incidental consideration. This is the case with sloth, because the more we think about spiritual goods, the more pleasing they become to us, and soon enough sloth dies away.⁵⁶

On the last, perhaps most important interpretive puzzle—that of the psychological possibility of sloth—we can conclude that the slothful person is (as all people entrenched in vice are) in the grip of an apparent good, mistaking false happiness for true. She chooses the vision of happiness she can see *when in the grip of the old self and its sinful inclinations* over and against the true perfection of her nature. Like Kierkegaard’s portrait of the self in *Sickness unto Death*, she chooses not to become herself, and must spend the rest of her life trying to avoid facing up to the inevitable outcome of her choice—despair.⁵⁷

Aquinas’s account thus masterfully incorporates the tradition before him on the vices—from Evagrius and Cassian to Gregory—integrating it with Scripture and avoiding easy conflations of sloth with mere laziness or apathy. In so doing, he provides a consistent and convincing account of sloth’s place among the seven capital vices. I have argued that the three interpretive puzzles raised by his account are resolvable by a careful understanding of sloth’s object, its relation to charity and happiness, and the uniquely human dynamics of regeneration over time.

Besides deepening our understanding of Aquinas and confirming the internal coherence of his account of the vices and virtues, this interpretation yields insights into contemporary (mis)understandings of sloth as well, on the assumption that Aquinas is right about this vice. His account of sloth shows us that as resistance to effort—which accounts for the continuity between

⁵⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1, ad 4.

⁵⁷ For a fuller analysis of the slide from sloth to despair, see DeYoung, “The Roots of Despair.”

ancient and contemporary conceptions of the vice—it is not to be confused with resistance to physical effort *per se*. Aquinas teaches us that slothful flight from our own true self and the demands of our divine calling can often take the form of restless activity and busyness, while stability, perseverance in one's commitments, and endurance—even true *rest*—are its unlikely remedies.⁵⁸ Finally, for Aquinas, sloth has much more to do with our aversion to the long, slow process of sanctification than it does to effort or physical work generically speaking. And yet his account, like the desert remedy of *stabilitas*, does not let us forget that all of our works of love or resistance to love are embodied and will involve the whole person, lest we are tempted to overspiritualize or wholly internalize the struggle to put to death the sinful nature.

In all of these ways, Aquinas's account of sloth offers a satisfactory explanation of sloth's perennial importance as a vice, one found wanting in most contemporary accounts and one that vindicates the Christian tradition's inclusion of it on the list of seven capital vices.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Again, these themes are treated in more detail in DeYoung, "The Vice of Sloth."

⁵⁹ I am grateful to members of the philosophy department at Calvin College and to the participants of the Cornell Summer Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy for their helpful comments on previous versions of this article.