

Theology in Research and Practice

Humility and Despair

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Introduction

Ever since the wife-husband team of Anne Case and Angus Deaton (Case & Deaton, 2015) popularized the term *deaths of despair*, psychologists have become more interested in seeing despair as a psychological phenomenon in its own right, apart from its association with clinical depression and anxiety (Pecchenino, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2020). Despair's central marker is the loss of hope. It is characterized by feelings of social and spiritual isolation, meaninglessness, hopelessness, helplessness, demoralization, and shame (Clark & Kissane, 2002; Pecchenino, 2015). Causes of despair are complex, ranging from individual (e.g., grief, bad health, addiction, abuse), to societal (e.g., social and cultural dislocation, unemployment, economic disaster, poverty), to a combination of both (Johnson & Tomren, 1999; Mair et al., 2012; Pecchenino, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2020). As Shanahan et al. (2020) noted, despair affects an individual on multiple levels—from hopeless and helpless thoughts about oneself and the future, to feelings of excessive sadness, irritability, and apathy, to reckless and self-destructive behavior, to a breakdown in the body's functioning (Shanahan et al., 2020).

How can such an individual be helped? Sometimes, acknowledging and/or addressing despair's *material* causes is enough. But the problem with despair is that it tends to generate a vicious cycle of self-defeat. Often, it manifests in self-perpetuating negative cognitive biases, self-defeating emotional reactions, and self-destructive behavior (Shanahan et al., 2020). To break free, the person must address the psychological and *spiritual* roots of her despair. Here, I offer insights from a Christian

tradition grounded in the monastic spirituality of the Desert Fathers, in the hopes that these might help a therapist seeking to do just that.

Despair in the Deadly Sins Tradition

The Deadly Sins Tradition

The Deadly Sins tradition originated in the desert Christian communities functioning as ancient precursors of monastic communities. These were formed by men and women who fled into Egyptian and Palestinian deserts to pursue salvation through purity of heart and undivided focus on God. They lived either as hermits or in small communities, and their days consisted of prayer, meditation, reading, and simple manual labor, like rope weaving or basket making. Having left behind the many distractions of civilization, they were forced to face their own selves and confront their hidden motivations and desires (Chryssavgis, 2008, pp. 37, 39). Through the relentless practice of individual and communal spiritual discernment, they achieved what Evagrius termed *cardiognosis* (knowledge of the heart)—a deep knowledge of the human psyche.

The desert fathers and mothers detected patterns among the monks' manifold temptations and struggles. They noticed that some of the temptations and sins were rooted in deeper spiritual problems and identified eight "evil thoughts" or "demons" that tended to engender and nourish other sins. By the end of the seventh century, it became customary to talk about deadly vices or sins, instead of evil thoughts or demons, and the number of deadly sins was fixed at the infamous seven.

Why, though, should we pay special attention to these vices? After all, there are many worse things a person can do than, for example, post too many TikTok videos aimed at boosting their vanity. The deadly vices are significant because they constitute the underlying causes of our more "visible" negative traits. The wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers lies in recognizing that, instead of spending our time and energy battling the secondary and tertiary sins, we should address their roots. This insight brings the desert fathers and mothers into such proximity with contemporary therapists' approach

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to the human psyche that contemporary therapists might benefit from listening to the accumulated wisdom of the voices from the desert. This is especially true given that the ancient monks' *cardiognosis* covers not only the nature of the deadly vices, but also the tested and proven ways of combating these "evil thoughts."

Despair as Emotion vs. Despair as Sin

How does despair fit into the Deadly Sins tradition? As its Latin name (*desperatio*) suggests, despair as an *emotion* is a loss of hope (*spes*). As a basic human emotion, hope signifies "a reaching out for anything that is perceived as good, and for the anticipated fulfillment that the possession of something good brings" (Pieper, 1986, p. 27). Consequently, the emotion of despair "implies not only privation of hope, but also a recoil from the thing desired, by reason of its being esteemed impossible to get" (Aquinas, 2012a, p. 372).

Not all despair is considered a sin. Aquinas, for example, takes the *sin* of despair to be not an emotion or mood, but, rather, an error in judgment (Aquinas, 2012b, pp. 187-91). In his account, a despairing person believes that God is good and merciful. Yet, they also believe themselves to be such a great sinner that God's mercy does not extend to them. Consequently, they lose hope of salvation and turn away from the goodness that is God.

This deliberate, volitional act of turning away is the mark of the sin of despair. Anyone can experience despair as an emotion—it is a natural reaction to the irreparable loss of something we love and desire. These non-sinful instances of despair follow the right judgments of reason by giving up on those things which are truly unattainable and by not blocking our ability to perceive other significant goods. The vice of despair, on the other hand, consists of a persistent, deliberate turning away from and giving up of the goods that we should not give up. That we do give them up shows that we are affected by the deadly sins and that our judgment is clouded. Here, I address only the sin of despair.

Despair as the Daughter Vice of Acedia and Pride

The Deadly Sins tradition views sinful despair as a potential "daughter" of two vices. The first vice is *acedia*. It is "a specific temptation that diverse psychological states and demonic sug-

gestions may produce in a monk: the temptation to stop his practice of divine contemplation" (Aijian, 2021, p. 7). *Acedia* is characterized by restlessness and the inability to stick to the tasks of ascetic life. This restlessness can manifest as either apathy or a constant distracting activity and is brought on at least partly by the monk's concern with their lack of spiritual progress. Toiling away every day with seemingly nothing to show for it, the monk comes to see their work as useless and blames this ineffectiveness on their external circumstances (e.g., the people who surround them, a lack of support from their spiritual leaders, etc.). Aijian writes, "The acedious monk has convinced himself that until his circumstances change, none of his work will be effective, and so he stops working, looks for distractions, and imagines a different environment in which he could be effective" (Aijian, 2017, p. 188).

Looking at *acedia* helps us understand how a person might fall into despair. *Acedia* makes us feel that the daily grind of our tasks in pursuit of holiness, a good marriage, good parenting, decent living standards, etc., accomplishes nothing. We perceive the goal as being out of reach, so we are tempted to turn away from it in despair. Yet, something else besides *acedia* is necessary to push the person into *sinful* despair.

The vice that supplies this push is pride. As the first and most fundamental sin, pride is the desire for excellence gone wrong. Generally, it goes wrong in two ways. The first is when we desire to have more excellence than rightly is or ought to be ours. It may manifest as presumption, pretension, arrogance, conceit, excessive competitiveness, or other similar attitudes and dispositions. Think of a person who, while falling apart, nevertheless insists that everything is under control or a person who strives to be the best in their field, not because they care about the subject, but because they want to be better than everyone else. Second, we succumb to pride when we pursue excellence in the wrong way. We want to be independent and self-made, and we do not like acknowledging our dependence on God and others. We grasp for a modicum of control because it helps us maintain the illusion that we are in charge of our lives and destinies. This is the sin of a person who refuses help because they do not want to be in anyone's debt. And it is the sin of one who, despite benefitting from generations of financial and

social wealth-building, maintains that their success is the result solely of their own hard work.

At pride's extreme end lies despair, as, deep down, pride-born despair is twisted self-love. When we become convinced that, for whatever reason, the excellence we crave is unattainable, pride makes us grasp for the next best thing: control. Overwhelming circumstances or acedia can leave a person feeling utterly impotent, which is when pride-born despair might take over. In the face of perceived failure, pride makes us grasp for anything that would allow us to hold onto an illusion of power—like the power to judge oneself. When a person loses hope and feels isolated and helpless, despair allows them to hold onto some vestiges of control: Nobody but the person themselves tells them whether they are worthy. As Thomas Merton (1961) wrote, "Despair is the absolute extreme of self-love. It is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost" (Merton, 1961, p. 140). Unsurprisingly, the Deadly Sins tradition has pointed to proper humility as a remedy for pride. If pride lies at the root of a person's despair, then cultivating humility might help the despairing person as well.

Counteracting Despair

Humility

In the West, humility has had a complicated history.¹ Its popularity ebbed and flowed, but humility (at least cultural and intellectual humility) has made a recent comeback. Psychologists have even linked humility with better physical and mental health outcomes, as well as the strengthening of social bonds, the promotion of social cooperation, and better leadership (Worthington et al., 2016). But what is humility? Currently, several rival conceptualizations exist. For this article, I adopt Aquinas's definition and supplement it with Kent Dunnington's take on the Augustinian account.²

Aquinas understood humility as the right *valuing* of ourselves before God and others (Aquinas, 2012b, pp. 531-543). It is a developed character disposition that moderates our desire for excellence by bringing it in line with our reason's correct estimation of our abilities. A humble person does not strive for something beyond their capacities, but subjects themselves to God and his ordering of things; they also subject them-

selves to other people for the sake of God (Aquinas, 2012b, pp. 535-536). A humble person can do this because they believe God is worthy of their glad submission and they are willing to rely on God for their being, goodness, and self-identity (Dunnington, 2016).

The four markers of humility thus identified are low concern with one's status, other-orient- edness, accurate self-estimation, and owning of one's limitations. A humble person is clear-eyed because a bloated sense of self does not block their view. They see their limitations and failures for what they are. They also see God for what he is: someone greater than their sins, failure, and circumstances. Accordingly, they readily subject themselves to God and others, but not because they consider themselves unworthy. In a very important sense, they do not consider themselves at all. Rather, they subject themselves to God and others because they value *them* and their goodness. Humility functions as an antidote for pride by helping the person "get over themselves."

Humility undercuts acedia as well. Remember, acedia is a temptation to abandon a good but difficult task, stemming from the person's secret anxiety about their efforts' effectiveness. When we indulge this anxiety, our previous desire for the difficult good becomes an aversion. The traditional cure for acedia is *stabilitas loci*, which means remaining in one's place and doing one's work exactly when the temptation to flee into distraction or laziness is strongest. Aijian (2017) compares this cure to behavioral therapy, in which developing a habit to "combat [one's] urge to escape" changes a person's perception of her work and place (Aijian, 2017, p. 194). Cultivating humility can bolster this behavioristic approach. Aijian (2017) points to studies suggesting that maladaptive perfectionism often undergirds avoidance behavior. Our fear of failure can sabotage us, and what we see as a lack of progress can discourage us. By helping us take our eyes off ourselves, humility enables us to stop chasing the phantom of success as we define it and to focus on the task itself.

¹For an excellent overview of humility's conceptual history in the West, see Dunnington (2018).

²By doing so, I do not wish to negate other compelling, yet competing, accounts of humility. For a good overview of other conceptual accounts, see Worthington et al. (2016) and Dunnington (2018).

We have seen how humility targets both *acedia* and pride. I now offer two examples showing how humility targets despair as well.

Narrative Illustrations

The first example is from the Gospel of Matthew 26:69–27:10. Matthew tells of two betrayals: one by Peter and one by Judas. Both men betrayed Jesus at the point when he appeared to be the most vulnerable. Both are undone by their betrayals. And yet, while Judas hangs himself, we next see Peter with the rest of the disciples, on his way to meet the resurrected Jesus. Judas gives in to despair, but Peter is saved.

The second example is from the first book of Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*. Spenser tells the story of St. George and the famous victory of that knight over a fierce dragon. Surprisingly, the dragon did not pose the most danger to St. George. Instead, a weak-looking man named Despaire was the greatest threat. Before St. George was St. George, he was Redcrosse, a knight sworn to protect Lady Una and kill the dragon desolating her land. Redcrosse's pride and lack of care caused his separation from Una, or truth personified, and his entanglement with Duessa, or deception. Redcrosse capped a string of spectacular combat and moral failures by rushing into Despaire's house, thinking he could easily overpower the villain. However, when Despaire spoke, he reminded Redcrosse of all the stupid, shameful acts the latter had committed with Duessa. He showed that even Redcrosse's victories were marred and suggested suicide to break the cycle of ongoing sin. Overcome with guilt and feelings of unworthiness, the knight was about to stab himself when he was saved by Una. She took the knife from his hand, scolded him harshly for his cowardice, and reminded him of God's mercy and his quest to slay the dragon. She ordered Redcrosse to follow her out of "this dreadful place." To everyone's astonishment, he did.

What united Redcrosse and Peter? Why did they live, while Judas died? If my suggestion that despair is rooted in inordinate pride is correct, the answer to both questions is *humility*. It takes true humility to stop looking at oneself and judge oneself by one's own standards. And it takes true humility to respond to a call from someone you have abandoned and betrayed the way Redcross abandoned and betrayed Una.

Could it be that Judas despaired because he could not get over himself? All he saw was his wretchedness and foulness, and he could not imagine how someone like him could be forgiven. Peter, meanwhile, looked at Jesus' goodness, instead of his own smallness and shame.

A therapist, working with a person struggling with despair, might take away three insights from these stories. *First*, a despairing person might benefit from practices aimed at cultivating humility, such as laying one's thoughts bare to God, fasting, acts of service, etc. However, a despairing person should not undertake these practices alone, in isolation from others. This brings us to the *second* insight: a despairing person needs community. When we despair, we cannot rightly see ourselves or our place in the world. We need someone else to remind us that acknowledging our smallness and inadequacy is the first step. We must also relinquish our right to judge ourselves and, instead, submit to God's judgment. In other words, others—be it a therapist or members of a therapy group—must show us that our despair is the ultimate form of self-indulgence and help us get over ourselves.

Third, a despairing person needs to see that they, like every other human being, have a calling, and that this calling is other-oriented. Redcrosse looked up from himself only when Una showed her anger at his readiness to abandon his quest to liberate Una's homeland. She reminded him that he had a task for which the Fairie Queene chose him, and he would be abandoning it by committing suicide. Now, few of us are called to something as obviously heroic as Redcrosse, but we all have a calling to fulfill, and a despairing person might need their therapist's help to remember this. At minimum, everyone is called to the demanding work of being a neighbor and growing closer to God. To do both of these and other worthwhile tasks, we must take eyes off our status or performance and focus on what we are called to do. This allows us to see the hard work of staying in place and showing up, not as pointless and ineffective, but as the very thing that transforms us into who we are called to be.

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