

Article

Correcting Acedia through Wonder and Gratitude

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Abstract: In the capital vices tradition, acedia was fought through perseverance and manual labor. In this paper, I argue that we can also fight acedia through practicing wonder and gratitude. I show this through an account of moral formation developed out of the insight of the virtues and vices traditions that character traits affect how we see things. In the first section, I use Robert Roberts's account of emotions to explain a mechanism by which virtues and vices affect vision and thus moral formation. Then, by looking at the capital vices tradition, I argue that restless boredom is a primary construal of the vice of acedia. Third, I explain wonder and gratitude through the work of G.K. Chesterton and Roberts, respectively. In light of their accounts, I explain how the construals of wonder and gratitude are contrary to the construal of acedia. Finally, I offer some practices that encourage gratitude and wonder.

Keywords: virtue; capital vices; acedia; gratitude; wonder; Aquinas; G.K. Chesterton

1. Introduction

Outside of traditional Christian ethics, the vice of acedia, usually translated “sloth”, is not on standard lists of bad character traits. Acedia is a deeper vice than sloth, though, which is just a form of laziness. Instead, acedia is an avoidance of the demands made on our life by the spiritual or higher goods in our life. As many have recently argued (DeYoung 2009; Nault 2015; Snell 2015; Waugh 1962) and as should become clear once a person reads the classic descriptions of acedia,¹ acedia is a vice we clearly see in our lives and in our times. We avoid the demands of the deeper goods in our lives—the demands of friendship, family, faith, fairness, etc.—through both inactivity or sloth (Netflix, Instagram, favorite avoidance reading, etc.) and through busyness (extra hours at work, packing our calendars, correcting people on the internet, etc.) A survey of self-help books shows such avoidance is a standard feature of human experience (and reading such self-help books is one of the ways some of us avoid the things we should be doing). So, as I hope becomes clear through the treatment of acedia, most of us need to correct for this vice.

In the capital vices tradition, the vice of acedia was fought through perseverance and manual labor. In this paper, I argue that we can also fight acedia through practicing wonder and gratitude. I show this through an account of moral formation developed out of the insight of the virtues and vices traditions that character traits affect how we see things. In the first section, I use Robert Roberts's account of emotions to explain a mechanism by which virtues and vices affect vision and thus moral formation. Then, by looking at the capital vices tradition, I argue that restless boredom is a primary construal of the vice of acedia. Third, I explain wonder and gratitude through the work of G.K. Chesterton and Roberts, respectively. In light of their accounts, I explain how the construals of wonder and gratitude are contrary to the construal of acedia. Finally, I offer some practices that encourage gratitude and wonder. As Roberts and MacIntyre have made clear, virtues must be understood within some moral framework or tradition (Roberts 2013, pp. 13–18; MacIntyre 1981). If we are working within a Humean tradition, gratitude will be one thing, and if we are working within an Aristotelian tradition, gratitude will be another, similar



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but different, thing. In this paper, I work within a Christian moral framework, which affects how I understand acedia, wonder, and gratitude.

2. Virtue and Vice Affect Vision

Our character affects how we see things. The gracious person perceives favors differently from the ingrate; the cruel person experiences the suffering of others differently than the kind person. That virtue comes with a change in vision is a standard insight of the virtue tradition. For example, Seneca explains this insight in terms of what virtue and vice fix our mind on: “Vices assail and surround us on all sides, and they don’t allow us to rise again and lift our eyes to the clear discernment of truth; but they press down on them, keeping them lowered and fixed on mere desire.” (Seneca 2014, p. 111). More recently, John McDowell (1979) argues that virtues are specialized sensitivities or perceptual capacities for virtue salient features. Virtues affecting sight has also recently been important in replying to an objection to virtue theory.²

In the vices tradition, we find the corresponding insight that vices affect sight. Writing from his ascetic experience in the desert in the 4th century, Evagrius Ponticus explains: “Both the virtues and vices make the man blind. The one so that it may not see the vices; the other, in turn, so that it might not see the virtues.” (Evagrius 1972, chp. 62). This affected sight is one of the reasons Evagrius notes for why we need to rely on others in our battle for virtue:

The spirit that is engaged in the war against the passions does not see clearly the basic meaning of the war for it is something like a man fighting in the darkness of night. Once it has attained purity of heart though, it distinctly makes out the designs of the enemy.

(ibid., chp. 83)

Anger and sadness, for example, hinder our ability to see or experience things as they are:

A passing cloud darkens the sun; a thought of resentment darkens the mind.

(Evagrius 2003, sct. 4.6)

A monk afflicted by sadness knows no spiritual pleasure, nor can someone with a very high fever taste honey.

(ibid., sct. 5.5)

Evagrius and John Cassian, who was deeply influenced by Evagrius despite not mentioning him (Stewart 1998, pp. 11–12), thought the mechanics of temptation involve a mental representation of something being introduced to the soul and describe the vices through persuasive personifications causing these representations. The vices move us to focus on certain things—the limitations of our community, the offenses of this or that brother—and then bring us to imagine other things—that I could be holy even if I leave the community, or that I would be holier if I were just free of this brother. These ways of seeing the world are part of what it is to have the vices. We will see this in detail in the next section in the classic description of the monk suffering from acedia.

Recently, Robert Roberts has developed an account of the emotions as concern-based construals.³ Emotions are quasi-perceptual states arising in connection to a care for something. To exemplify how construals work, Roberts provides the image of the duck-rabbit. Construed in one way, the lines make a rabbit; construed in another way, the lines make a duck. The thing in front of our eyes remains the same in both construals, but we experience it differently by emphasizing different features. An emotion is a way of construing something, whether it be a person, object, event, or state of affairs. The construal that is the emotion arises from some care, aversion, or attachment of the person. Imagine that my wife and I take along our three-year-old to a dinner party hosted by Important Person. As we are eating, we hear a crash from the other room and rush to see what has happened. There sits our daughter, surrounded by a shattered vase. The good parent she is, my wife has fear

arising from her concern for our daughter and construes the situation as dangerous. What is salient to her in the situation is the shattered glass around my daughter. I, on the other hand, perceive the situation as embarrassing arising from my concern about the host's opinion of me. What stands out to me is the potential harm this could do to my reputation. Finally, Important Person is angry and perceives the situation as a kind of offense due to his care for the vase. Each of us has a different quasi-perceptual experience—we experience the situation in various ways—connected to our concerns. Such concerned-based construals are what Roberts considers emotions.

Aristotle thought we could find different virtues and vices for different realms of feeling (Aristotle 2000, Books II–IV). For example, there are different virtues and vices for the realms of anger and fear. If Aristotle helps us see the need for virtues to moderate emotion, then Roberts helps us understand how emotions follow from virtues and vices. Virtues, according to Roberts, enable a set of functions, including “perceiving, feeling, judging, deliberating, acting” (Roberts 2013, p. 191). In a variety of ways, virtues (and the same goes for vices), which include some set of concerns, dispose us to feel some range of emotions in some range of situations. For example, the virtue of justice is a concern for justice and disposes the just person to a range of emotions depending on the justice or injustice of a situation, e.g., “joy, hope, gratitude, anger, indignation, guilt, sorrow, admiration, emulation”.⁴ So, virtues and vices are caused by the activities of their type but are also causes of the activities of their type. We become generous through acts, desires, thoughts, and feelings of generosity which then become the expression (and sustaining nourishment) of generosity. As I hope will become clear, Roberts's account provides a way for us to analyze a vice and identify how exactly a virtue will correct it.

As a vice, *acedia* generates construals, but it also needs them. We are historical beings and are continuously changing. A standard thesis of virtue theory is that virtues and vices are formed by habituation. Extending what we usually think of as habituation, Aquinas argues that traits degenerate over time through a kind of erosion if they are not sustained by acts of their kind (Aquinas 1981, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II.53.3). If temperance is not strengthened through temperate actions, desires, patterns of thought, and construals, then actions of other kinds (both non-temperate and intemperate) disrupt it little by little. Over time, such unnourished traits erode away. For virtues, this is worrisome and encourages moral upkeep; for vices, it gives us a point of attack: starvation. If we can keep a vice from the nourishment it needs by performing activities of contrary traits, including the construals of the trait, then the vice will diminish until it erodes away. Like weeds and crops, vices and virtues compete for the same nutrients, which are our varied activity. If we cannot directly pull the weeds, then we can nourish the crops and starve the weeds out. I propose this strategy for fighting *acedia*. To do this, I turn to *acedia* and its construal.

3. The Vice of *Acedia* and Its Construal

Acedia and its experience could be described in many ways, as we will see, but I argue that the common construal of the vice is restless boredom. I develop this by looking at treatments of *acedia* in the capital vices tradition and Roberts's account of boredom. I start at the beginning with Evagrius. In Evagrius's classic description of the monk suffering from *acedia*, which Cassian uses, we see that the experience of *acedia* involves a loss of interest with one's life and a distaste for its demands:

The demon of *acedia*—also called the noonday demon—is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him

to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.

(Evagrius 1972, chp. 12)

The monk's *acedia* makes him see his life as repressive and other modes of life as desirable. Cassian expands on Evagrius's account, describing the monk under the attack of *acedia* as having a "wearied" or "anxious" heart (Cassian 2000, *Institutes*, Book 10, chp. I). Being in this state renders the monk slothful and immobile in the face of all prescribed work, but, because *acedia* is not merely sloth, it does not let him stay still (*ibid.*, chps. II, VI). *Acedia* also manifests as busyness, which is why "sloth" only captures some of what *acedia* is. The restlessness of the monk impels him from one activity to another, avoiding what he is supposed to be doing. So, *acedia* wields both the sword of sleep that fells the couch potato and the sword of busyness that dispatches the workaholic.

In the early capital vices tradition of Cassian and Evagrius, *acedia* and sadness are distinct vices. It is important to clarify that sadness the emotion is not identical to sadness the vice. Most generally, sadness the vice is a kind of despairing sadness that should be distinguished both from being sad about some circumstance, which can be healthy and good to feel, and clinical depression, which is not a moral fault.⁵ Cassian's treatment of the vice of sadness is fairly thin, and the later tradition combines sadness with *acedia* in different ways—Gregory the Great incorporates *acedia* under sadness and Aquinas incorporates sadness within *acedia* (St. Gregory the Great 1844, p. XIII). I am going to follow Aquinas's account of thinking of *acedia* as a form of sadness. The account is complicated, but he argues that *acedia* is "a sadness and abhorrence or boredom" regarding a spiritual and divine good within.⁶ The spiritual good within causes sadness because it conflicts with the desires of the flesh. "And so when desire of the flesh is dominant in human beings, they have distaste for spiritual good as contrary to their good. Just so, human beings with infected taste buds have distaste for healthy food and grieve over it whenever they need to consume such food." (Aquinas 2003, *De Malo*).

On Aquinas's account, the "divine good within" primarily means charity or the infused grace of friendship with God that demands a certain way of life. Extending Aquinas's explicit claims, the spiritual or divine good can also be our friendships, family, vocations, and the general call of all humans to virtue and holiness. Any deep good connected to our flourishing can be a cause of *acedia*. As Heather Hughes Huff explains, "Here is why *acedia* is so difficult to identify: this vice does not attempt to replace our human *telos*, which is to love and serve God, with some secondary good like sex, possessions, or food. It does not inordinately prefer a particular good at all; rather, it says 'no' to a difficult and demanding good." (Huff 2013, p. 46). So, *acedia* is a sadness or aversion to some spiritual good that makes demands on our life.

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung insightfully interprets this distaste for spiritual good as a "resistance to the demands of love".⁷ In Aquinas this resistance arises partly from one's apprehension being bent by her concerns.⁸ Spiritual goods make demands on us that interfere with our lower desires, loves, and projects. We thus construe the spiritual goods as evil and are saddened by their presence. Avoiding the pain of this sorrow gives rise to

many actions “that we may avoid it, or through being exasperated into doing something under pressure thereof.” (II–II.35.4). We then give up, exemplifying slothful acedia, or look for distractions, exemplifying the acedia of busyness.

With acedia and sadness connected, we can incorporate some of Cassian’s treatment of sadness into our understanding of acedia. In the desert account of the vices, there is a kind of overflow or concatenation model of their connection.⁹ When one gives into gluttony, the first of the evil thoughts, one becomes accustomed to being sated and satisfying desire whenever it arises. This overflows into lust, which similarly overflows into greed. In Cassian’s treatment, acedia follows sadness, and we can see a helpful connection between them. A significant portion of his treatment of sadness involves a reading of Proverbs 25:20: “As a moth with a garment and a worm with wood, so sadness does to a man’s heart.”¹⁰ Cassian expands on the verse: “For a moth-eaten garment no longer has any value or good use, and likewise worm-eaten wood deserves to be consigned to the flames rather than to be used for furnishing even an insignificant building. In the same way, then, the soul that is eaten away and devoured by sadness is certainly useless for that priestly garment . . . ” (Cassian 2000, *Institutes*, Book 10, chps. IX, III). The vice of sadness, then, empties the person of their purpose and usefulness for good.

One way of seeing the connection of sadness to acedia is to see this emptiness transition from the person to the person’s perception of their work and purpose. The monk suffering from acedia sees daily work—his prayers, reading, manual labor, etc.—as empty and lacking purpose. The wood and garments are hollowed out by the worms and moths, and they no longer have the solidity and integrity to be useful. Similarly, things like a rule of life and the work of his vocation now lack the solidity and integrity to draw him. Instead, they appear thin, transparent, or hollow. So, under the attack of sloth, he either gives up or moves on to the next thing. Unfortunately for him, neither is satisfying: the sleep of sloth is not restful, and the next distraction will soon become hollow as well. Things feeling empty or hollowed-out is one way to express the experience of boredom.

In his treatment of emotions, Roberts offers a defining proposition that expresses the intelligible character of each emotion. The proposition need not be explicitly thought by the subject of the emotion, but it provides the form or structural content of the emotion (Roberts 2003, pp. 106–12). For boredom, Roberts offers the following defining proposition:

It is very important for me to be interested, absorbed, to have my attention engaged, but everything I currently behold, and everything I currently might do, is uninteresting; may I soon be free from this state of mind.

(ibid., p. 248)

On Roberts’s account, when something is construed as boring it has lost all interest for us. Remember, an emotion is a *concern-based* construal, and the concern of the bored is to be interested and engaged. The pain of this concern not being realized, which Aquinas describes as a sadness, moves us to avoid those things, situations, and people that no longer engage us. We can see this in Evagrius’s monk who has lost interest in the life of the desert and looks anywhere else to avoid the pain of boredom.¹¹ This is the restlessness of boredom in the face of emptied out experience.

Following Roberts, I have claimed that virtues and vices cause emotions, and emotions are concern-based construals. On this account, the vice of acedia generates the emotion of boredom.¹² Through the construal of acedia, we see things as moth-eaten, empty, and hollowed out, as boring. Moreover, this way of seeing them arises from a concern or care within us, which is an aversion to the good that is making a demand on our life. The movement away from the thing perceived as boring is a restlessness in the face of the good which manifests as both inactivity and frenetic activity. If we can cultivate construals contrary to boredom, then we can starve acedia of the nourishment it needs.

4. Wonder and Gratitude Correct Acedia

In this section, I explain how wonder and gratitude both oppose acedia by producing contrary construals. In the next section, I turn to practices that help form these virtues. I understand wonder primarily through two texts of G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* and *Orthodoxy*. In the opening essay of *Tremendous Trifles*, we get a perfectly Chestertonian fairy tale. Two young boys playing in their small front yard are visited by the milkman, who is also a fairy. He offers the boys each a wish, as fairies do. The first boy, Paul, wishes to become a giant so that he can travel about seeing the great wonders of the world.

He went striding away with his head above the clouds to visit Niagara and the Himalayas. But when he came to the Himalayas, he found they were quite small and silly-looking, like the little cork rockery in the garden; and when he found Niagara it was no bigger than the tap turned on in the bathroom. He wandered round the world for several minutes trying to find something really large and finding everything small, till in sheer boredom he lay down on four or five prairies and fell asleep. Unfortunately his head was just outside the hut of an intellectual backwoodsman who came out of it at that moment with an axe in one hand and a book of Neo-Catholic Philosophy in the other. The man looked at the book and then at the giant, and then at the book again. And in the book it said, "It can be maintained that the evil of pride consists in being out of proportion to the universe." So the backwoodsman put down his book, took his axe and, working eight hours a day for about a week, cut the giant's head off; and there was an end of him. Such is the severe yet salutary history of Paul.

(Chesterton 1909, pp. 2–3)

Peter, Paul's more sensible brother, wished the opposite, to become tiny. Their little yard immediately grew to a vast wilderness. Every ordinary and boring feature of the yard transformed into a wonder. Peter "set out on his adventures across that coloured plain; and he has not come to the end of it yet." (Chesterton 1909, p. 4).

The moral of the tale is fairly obvious: real adventure is all around us in the everyday. Yet, we are Pauls that look across the street or world when our yard has become boring. In *Orthodoxy* (Chesterton 1986), Chesterton critiques our tendency to flatten the world from the perspective of his fairy tale philosophy. We do not do this as Paul did, by becoming literal giants, but by seeing things around us as necessarily how they are. Chesterton thinks at least two things contribute to this mindset. We become Pauls by being "scientifically minded." Chesterton's point is not a critique of science or scientists per se, but a critique of those who think necessary "scientific" connections adequately explain the world around them.¹³ So, the "scientifically minded" person experiences the world as just how it has to be according scientific law. We also become Pauls by the repetition of experience. Every time I see moving water it is running downhill, making me think this must be the case. The constant conjunction of two things, whether it be water running downhill, the color of grass, or the humps on a camel, obscures the deeper magic of the connection the way Paul's size kept him from seeing the wonder of the world.

To correct our tendency towards giantism, Chesterton instructs us in a deeper magic through the ethics of elfland. He summarizes:

I have explained that the fairy tales founded in me two convictions; first, that this world is a wild and startling place, which might have been quite different, but which is quite delightful; second, that before this wildness and delight one may well be modest and submit to the queerest limitations of so queer a kindness.

(Chesterton 1986, p. 262)

Examining these two convictions will show us how wonder can be a corrective to acedia.

The first conviction: The world is a wild and startling place. Instead of being surrounded by necessary connections according to scientific law, the fairy tale school teaches

that things could have been radically different. Chesterton explains that we can enjoy the things around us because they do not have to be as they are:

Now, the fairy-tale philosopher is glad that the leaf is green precisely because it might have been scarlet. He feels as if it had turned green an instant before he looked at it. He is pleased that snow is white on the strictly reasonable ground that it might have been black. Every colour has in it a bold quality of choice; the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly spilt blood. He feels that something has been done.

(Chesterton 1986, p. 262)

We are worn down by repetition and our sense of mystery is dulled to the fact that things, even the color of leaves, could have been otherwise. Because thinking about nature through words like “law” and “necessity” can empty things of their mystery, Chesterton prefers words like “charm,” “spell,” and “enchantment” to capture the deeper could-have-been-otherwise in the things joined together (Chesterton 1986, p. 256). Consider the experience of watching a nature documentary about unfamiliar animals. The deer-like creatures from different ecosystems look strange and otherworldly by varying just enough from my local white tail deer to reveal that the familiar might have been otherwise.

Unlike world-worn adults, children can remain enchanted by the same thing, over and over. As I was writing this morning, I made a funny face at my daughters after they mentioned going on a walk in the rain. They then wanted to reenact the scene over and over. Agreeing with my children, Aquinas recognizes that each thing has an unconquerable depth to its being.¹⁴ So, our perception is mistaken when the things around us seem moth-eaten or hollow from familiarity. We need to learn to see things as they are, to recognize with kids that the ordinary is truly extra. Then we might be able to realize, with Chesterton, that we are in a fairy tale. “It was good to be in a fairy tale. The test of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom . . . We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?” (Chesterton 1986, p. 258).

The second conviction is the doctrine of conditional joy: “In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition.” (Chesterton 1986, p. 259). The Japanese fairy tale *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* provides an example of this doctrine. In the story a poor man saves an injured crane and releases it. That night a beautiful woman comes to his door and says she is his wife. He worries that he will not be able to support them, but she is able to weave luxurious clothing that makes them wealthy. The only condition is that he must not observe her making the clothing. One day, his curiosity becomes too much and he peaks in to see the crane making the clothing from its feathers. The condition violated, the crane flies away and never returns. For a time, the man had been given happiness, but happiness has its conditions. “Happiness is bright but brittle.” (Chesterton 1986). Many of us want to rebel against the conditions of happiness. Acedia is just one such rebellion; we see the wonderful as boring and try to avoid the good instead of pursuing it.

Chesterton argues against such a rebellion:

If I leave a man in my will ten talking elephants and a hundred winged horses, he cannot complain if the conditions partake of the slight eccentricity of the gift. He must not look a winged horse in the mouth. And it seemed to me that existence was itself so very eccentric a legacy that I could not complain of not understanding the limitations of the vision when I did not understand the vision they limited. The frame was no stranger than the picture.

(Chesterton 1986, p. 260)

The world is a wild and startling place, and we should not be surprised that great mysteries like friendship, love, and existence have mysterious conditions. Instead of rebelling against the conditions we find on happiness, Chesterton suggests, “Surely one might pay for extraordinary joy in ordinary morals.” (Chesterton 1986, p. 261). Adjusted

for our desert monk: Surely one might pay for holiness by following the community's rule of life.

Chesterton concludes the chapter in *Orthodoxy* on the ethics of elfland again being moved to give thanks in light of living in a fairy tale:

I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have some one to mean it. There was something personal in the world, as in a work of art; whatever it meant it meant violently . . . the proper form of thanks to it is some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them.

(Chesterton 1986, p. 268)

Wonder, especially Chestertonian wonder, includes a moment of gratitude. To understand gratitude, we turn to Roberts's account.

Roberts summarizes his account in terms of three *benes*: beneficiary, benefactor, and benefit. He explains:

So the conditions for gratitude are the following: The situation is that of two parties and a good. One of the parties is the beneficiary, one is the benefactor; and the good is a gift from the one to the other. Gratitude is the beneficiary's concern-based construal of the situation in these terms. The concerns involved are the desire for the gift and a willingness to receive it from the benefactor. Gratitude is correct, as a construal, only if what is given really is a good, and the attitude of the giver really is benevolent toward the recipient.

(Roberts 2007, p. 143)

Gratitude as a virtue is then the disposition to gratefully construe things at the right times and for the right reasons. So, Chesterton (beneficiary) is grateful to God (benefactor) for existence (benefit), and that involves construing it in these terms (although it need not be done explicitly).

Roberts rightly points out that gratitude inflects differently for different moral frameworks or traditions. In an atheistic moral framework, it does not make sense to be grateful to God, but it does make sense to be grateful to other people. In an Aristotelian moral framework, gratitude is a sign of weakness, and the magnanimous man avoids occasions of gratitude because they indicate his dependence on others (Roberts 2007, pp. 137–39; Aristotle 2000, IV.4). Christian gratitude is different from both of these. Consider the Preface to the Mass in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church: "It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord." (The Roman Missal 2011). Christians, then, should give thanks to God, and should recognize that each moment and situation is an occasion for gratitude. Roberts calls this gratitude that goes beyond human benefactors "cosmic gratitude" (Roberts 2014) and argues that Christians, always able to be thankful for their creation, preservation, and the work of Christ, can achieve a kind of emotional transcendence in relation to the ebb and flow of life's events. So, Christians should always be able to construe things, at least at some level of generality, as a good gift from God.

We can now clarify the way in which wonder and gratitude are contrary to acedia. Remember, acedia typically generates a construal of restless boredom in relation to some object. Consider being forced to read a philosophy paper instead of having an engaging discussion with peers. One might construe this with restless boredom and feel the weight of each page assigned push them towards social media, cleaning, or bed. Seeing the reading this way is incompatible with a construal of wonder or gratitude. If you see the reading with a construal of wonder, you see it as full of meaning, mystery, and desirable depth. The wonderful draws us into itself through awe. If you see the reading with a construal of gratitude, you see it as a good gift from a good giver. Wonder and gratitude are complementary and mutually encouraging construals. As we saw in Chesterton, wonder finds its way to gratitude. And if you have ever really been "bowed over" in gratitude,

to quote Roberts quoting Dickens, you know it suggests a humble wonder of the gift and giver (Roberts 2007, p. 144).

Thus, as long as one is construing her rule of life or vocation as wonderful or a good gift from a good giver, she is not construing it as boring. Each moment that sees something with eyes of wonder and gratitude, then, is a moment that the acedia in our soul is starved and disrupted. The problem is that the emotions of gratitude and wonder are not directly under our volitional control. We can voluntarily bring ourselves to consider that something is a gift or is full of wonder in an intellectual way, but this alone does not cure acedia. Indeed, such considerations can sometimes even inflame acedia, which is pained by the presence and demands of the good. So, we need to also find ways to see wonderfully and graciously. In the next section, I explain some practices that help us construe the world with wonder and gratitude. The more we can construe the world as such, the more wonder and gratitude will take root in our soul, building the virtues of wonder and gratitude and starving out the weed of acedia.

5. Practicing Wonder and Gratitude

Although Roberts's rigorous and clarifying account of gratitude helps us aim at a clear target, he provides limited advice on developing gratitude.

Given this perceptual character of gratitude, one obvious way to develop it is to *practice* seeing things this way. How does one practice seeing? By *looking*. Looking is active seeing, and as we succeed in seeing what we are looking for, we train our seeing into conformity with our looking.

(Roberts 2007, p. 146)

Over time our gratitude increases because our active, effortful looking becomes habitual, effortless seeing. This is helpful advice, but it remains fairly abstract. One way to approach growing in gratitude is through the three *benes*. We can practice seeing benefits, appreciating benefactors, and recognizing causes for failing to be grateful in the beneficiary. Approaching these one by one, we find guidance in positive psychology, Aquinas, and Seneca.

The positive psychology movement, which developed out of an attempt to correct the focus on abnormal psychology, offers an account of healthy psychology and well-being.¹⁵ Gratitude and gratitude interventions are a centerpiece of positive psychology, which offers a number of practices, or "interventions", to encourage gratitude. Although the evidence for the efficacy of the practices is mixed,¹⁶ the four main interventions have had beneficial results for many. One review summarizes the evidence for these practices:

Gratitude interventions in adults consistently produce positive benefits, many which appear to endure over reasonably lengthy periods of time. Gratitude interventions lead to greater gratitude, life satisfaction, optimism, prosocial behavior, positive affect, and well-being, as well as decreased negative affect, compared with controls, for up to six months.¹⁷

The first two interventions are similar, counting blessings and "three good things," and involve recording things one is grateful for. Each day, one takes the time to identify and record blessings or benefits. This concrete way of practicing seeing, as Roberts recommends, solidifies the things one is grateful for by recording them in a journal or in a brief list. The practice of recording encourages the practice of seeing and remembering seeing in that way. These two practices focus on the benefit part of the construal and thereby train our ability to see gifts.

The next gratitude intervention focuses on the benefactor. Recognized as the most powerful intervention, the "gratitude visit" involves writing a letter of gratitude to someone to whom one is grateful (Lomas et al. 2014, pp. 8–9). This practice emphasizes the deeply interpersonal nature of gratitude (unlike the others in which the *benefactor* feature of the gratitude construal is sometimes left off), and encourages seeing the person we are thankful to in addition to seeing the benefits given. Although beyond the studied intervention,

one could extend the “gratitude visit” into a daily practice of expressing gratitude to one’s benefactors. Just as the three good things or counting one’s blessings interventions encourage seeing benefits, daily intentional expressions of gratitude should encourage one to see benefactors.

The last positive psychology intervention, grateful self-reflection, begins with a journal or brief list and adds reflection on that list in a way analogous to an examination of conscience. One asks oneself questions like, “What did I receive? What did I give? What more could I do?” (Lomas et al. 2014, p. 7). We can expand this intervention with the practice of contemplating the virtues and vices. In doing this, we seek to understand their nature, how they work, and to appreciate their distinctive value or disvalue. Two examples show how contemplating virtue and vice can both make our examination of conscience richer by allowing clearer perception and deeper insights into our character and enabling us to have more effective strategies for improvement.

Let us first take the example of contemplating a vice. In the desert the monks studied the vices the way one at war studies an enemy. Understanding the enemy’s strategies, patterns of action, and causes of his actions help one form an effective plan for battle. Although writing in a different moral framework, Seneca, a Roman Stoic, can provide insight into gratitude and ingratitude for Christians. Aquinas, for example, quotes Seneca often in his treatment of gratitude. In *On Benefits*, Seneca treats the three *benes* in detail, providing a theoretical account of gratitude and a lot of practical advice on the giving and receiving of gifts. Seneca identifies three causes of ingratitude:

Now we must consider what it is that most makes people ungrateful: it is either an excessive regard for oneself—the deeply ingrained human failing of being impressed by oneself and one’s accomplishments—or greed or envy. Let us start with the first. Everyone is generous when judging himself, which is why each person thinks that he has earned all that he has, that it is merely repayment of what is owed, and that his real value is not appreciated by others.

(Seneca 2011, Book 2, 26.1)

While excessive self-regard causes us to misconstrue gifts as deserved, greed makes us always want more. We cannot properly recognize something as a benefit if every gift is seen as inadequate and enlivens our desire for more. Finally, envy causes ingratitude by encouraging ungenerous comparisons to others and undue regard for our own interest. Seneca helpfully shows how one might intervene to alter the unhealthy construals promoted by envy:

But envy is a more violent and relentless failing than all of these. It unsettles us by making comparisons. “He gave me this, but he gave this other fellow more, and that fellow got his sooner.” Next, it never makes the case for someone else but always puts its own interests ahead of everyone else’s. How much more straightforward and sensible it is to exaggerate the value of a benefit one has been given and to realize that everyone assesses himself more generously than others do. “I should have received more, but it would not have been easy for him to give; his generosity had to be shared among many recipients Complaining won’t make me worthy of greater gifts; it will just make me unworthy of what has been given.

(Seneca 2011, Book 2, 28.1–2)

Here we see concretely how the vice promotes one set of construals that, through self-talk, can be counteracted by promoting the construals of a contrary virtue. Understanding the causes of vice can thus help us intervene to promote virtues.

We can learn how to pursue a virtue from understanding why we fail to attain it, but we can also better pursue a virtue by understanding its nature. Just as understanding the nearby relatives and classifications of a fish can better help the fisherman catch it, so we can better pursue gratitude by understanding how it relates to similar virtues and which cardinal virtue it is classified under. Aquinas’s classification of the virtues can help us

better see and appreciate gratitude in this way. As he works through the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—and the cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, courage, and temperance—Aquinas analyzes them according to three types of parts (II-II.48.1). Integral parts are the features someone must have in order to perform acts of the virtue. For the virtue of prudence this includes things like memory and foresight (II-II.49). Subjective parts of a virtue are species of the virtue. These have the full character of a virtue but a narrower object. For example, the subjective parts of temperance, which is moderation in physical pleasures, have to do with the pleasures of food (abstinence), drink (sobriety), and sex (chastity).¹⁸ Finally, potential parts have a likeness to the principal virtue but lack its full character.

Gratitude, Aquinas argues, is a potential part of justice. Justice is giving a person her due to return to a kind of equality (II-II.58). Returning my sword to me, with proper consideration of my mental state, brings us back to a kind of equality. Yet, in many cases, only a likeness to equality can be achieved because the debt can never be repaid (II-II.80). We must honor God because of the excellence of the divine nature, but our acts of worship and honoring can never do justice to who God is. So, the virtue of religion, which concerns such honors, has an imperfect likeness to justice (II-II.81). After treating the virtue of religion, Aquinas turns to the virtue of piety which concerns what children owe their parents (II-II.101) and the virtue of observance, which concerns what an authority (II-II.102–5), whether it be the government, a military commander, or a teacher, is owed. These relationships, similar to our relationships with God, involve both due honor and inequality. Aquinas then turns to gratitude (II-II.106–7). Understanding how gratitude relates to other virtues can help us better understand our target. With gifts, justice does not require they are repaid in a way that returns the beneficiary to equality to the benefactor, but there is a “debt of gratitude” to use Roberts’s language (Roberts 2007, p. 136). Giving the benefactor her due, which can be as little as being willing to repay the favor (II-II.106.6), has a similarity to the demands of justice, and can help us understand the demands and importance of gratitude. Thus, contemplating gratitude in itself and in its related virtues and vices can help us grow in gratitude.

Finally, we return to wonder, and Chesterton provides three disciplines that encourage construals of wonder instead of boredom. In *Tremendous Trifles*, Chesterton contrasts his school with others who think we find the extraordinary by travel to far off and strange places (I unapologetically quote at length):

But the object of my school is to show how many extraordinary things even a lazy and ordinary man may see if he can spur himself to the single activity of seeing. For this purpose I have taken the laziest person of my acquaintance, that is myself; and made an idle diary of such odd things as I have fallen over by accident, in walking in a very limited area at a very indolent pace. If anyone says that these are very small affairs talked about in very big language, I can only gracefully compliment him upon seeing the joke. If anyone says that I am making mountains out of molehills, I confess with pride that it is so. I can imagine no more successful and productive form of manufacture than that of making mountains out of molehills. But I would add this not unimportant fact, that molehills are mountains; one has only to become a pigmy like Peter to discover that.

I have my doubts about all this real value in mountaineering, in getting to the top of everything and overlooking everything. Satan was the most celebrated of Alpine guides, when he took Jesus to the top of an exceeding high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth. But the joy of Satan in standing on a peak is not a joy in largeness, but a joy in beholding smallness, in the fact that all men look like insects at his feet. It is from the valley that things look large; it is from the level that things look high; I am a child of the level and have no need of that celebrated Alpine guide. I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help; but I will not lift up my carcass to the hills, unless it is absolutely

necessary. Everything is in an attitude of mind; and at this moment I am in a comfortable attitude. I will sit still and let the marvels and the adventures settle on me like flies. There are plenty of them, I assure you. The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.

(Chesterton 1909, pp. 6–7)

The first Chestertonian practice of wonder is the making of mountains out of molehills. If we can become Peters, we will be able to see the adventure in the everyday.

To see the mountain in the molehill, we must be willing to look until we see it. Instead of being entertained by superficially observing people of foreign cultures, we should turn to our neighbor. Chesterton explains:

The school to which I belong suggests that we should stare steadily at the man until we see the man inside the frock coat. If we stare at him long enough he may even be moved to take off his coat to us; and that is a far greater compliment than his taking off his hat. In other words, we may, by fixing our attention almost fiercely on the facts actually before us, force them to turn into adventures; force them to give up their meaning and fulfil their mysterious purpose.

(Chesterton 1909, p. 5)

Chesterton wants us to stare long enough to see things for what they really are, wonderful.¹⁹ Familiarity blinds us to the true magic of things, and we must fight to see it. “We must invoke the most wild and soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there.” (Chesterton 1987, *Everlasting Man*, Introduction). One very pleasant way to do this is to read more Chesterton!²⁰

The next practice provides another route for us to really see things, the “test of fairyland.” (Chesterton 1986, p. 254). To do this we take something constantly conjoined in our experience and see if we can imagine them being disconnected. Separating some things, like $2 + 2 = 4$, is unimaginable, but most things in our experience can be imaginatively separated. Consider previous examples and imagine the color of a leaf or the direction water runs. Imaginatively disconnecting features and things—leaf and green, water and downhill—helps us see contingency in the connection. Our familiarity with fantasy and science fiction genres makes it especially easy for us to imagine the possibility of separation. Yet, it is not mere contingency in the connection that interests us; separability of two things implies their being put together.²¹ This practice helps us see the enchantment—the something-having-been-done—within them. To see them as wonderful in this way is pleasant. “It is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or a griffin, a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he didn’t.” (Chesterton 1986, p. 158).

The third practice approaches from yet another angle:

It is a good exercise, in empty or ugly hours of the day, to look at anything, the coal-scuttle or the bookcase, and think how happy one could be to have brought it out of the sinking ship onto the solitary island. But it is a better exercise still to remember how all things have had this hair-breadth escape: everything has been saved from a wreck.

(Chesterton 1986, p. 267)

Everything has been saved from the wreck of non-existence and is a “Great Might-Not-Have-Been.” (ibid.) Chestertonian wonder in the previous practices brought out the contingency of the connection of features within things, but this practice touches the contingency of each thing’s existence. Our contingency and the contingency of everything saved from the wreck returns us to gratitude. Surely Robinson Crusoe gave thanks for every single thing that washed ashore. Because the contingency Chesterton is concerned with has purpose behind it, revealing an intention in the connection or existence, the gratitude construal has a benefactor.

These practices put us in a place to construe things as they really are; they help us see. Proper vision includes wonder and gratitude, which both fight acedia. They fight it first by starving acedia through preventing the construals it needs to survive. If we see something as wonderful and as a good gift from a benefactor, then we cannot also see it as boring. They also fight acedia by disrupting it. As they produce the virtues of wonder and gratitude in us, they change us from a person with patterns of acedia to someone with grateful and wonderful dispositions structured to think, desire, construe, feel, and act as the person full of gratitude and wonder would. Thus, we can correct acedia through the pursuit of wonder and gratitude.²²

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Notes

- ¹ Such recognition was the surprising experience of Kathleen Norris reading Evagrius, “As I read this I felt a weight lift from my soul, for I had just discovered an accurate description of something that had plagued me for years but that I had never been able to name. As any reader of fairy tales can tell you, not knowing the true name of your enemy, be it a troll, a demon, or an ‘issue’, puts you at a great disadvantage, and learning the name can help to set you free. ‘He’s describing half my life,’ I thought to myself. To discover an ancient monk’s account of acedia that so closely matched an experience I’d had at the age of fifteen did seem a fairy-tale moment. To find my deliverer not a knight in shining armor but a gnarled desert dweller, as stern as they come, only bolstered my conviction that God is a true comedian.” (Norris 2014, pp. 4–5).
- ² One of the ways recent virtue ethics is responding to the situationist challenge is by developing an account of virtue affected perception. Nancy Snow, building on work in psychology, argues that human agents respond not just to the “objective situation,” but to the meaning the features of that situation have for the agent. The same situation would then have different meaning for a person, partially depending on which virtues or vices they have (Snow 2009, chp. 1).
- ³ Roberts develops this view at length in *Emotions* (Roberts 2003), considers the ethical dimensions of emotions in *Emotions in the Moral Life*, and offers a popularized summary in *Spiritual Emotions* (Roberts 2007).
- ⁴ See (Roberts 2013, p. 198). Roberts briefly surveys a number of virtues and how emotions relate to them in this section.
- ⁵ See Solomon (2015) for a historical survey of depression that includes acedia.
- ⁶ See (Aquinas 2003, *De Malo*, Question 11, Article 2). See Aquinas’s other treatment of acedia in ST, II-II.35.
- ⁷ See (DeYoung 2004, 2011, 2012). See also Nault (2015) for a historical survey of views of acedia with a focus on Aquinas.
- ⁸ In terms of lower appetites and reason, flesh and spirit: “So too, the movement of sloth is sometimes in the sensuality 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.” (ST II-II.35.3.f).
- ⁹ “Although these eight vices, then, have different origins and varying operations, yet the first six—namely, gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, and acedia—are connected among themselves by a certain affinity and, so to speak, interlinking, such that the overflow of the previous one serves as the start of the next one. For from an excess of gluttony there inevitably springs fornication; from fornication, avarice; from avarice, anger; from anger, sadness; and from sadness, acedia. Therefore these must be fought against in a similar way and by the same method, and we must always attack the ones that follow by beginning with those that come before. For a tree whose width and height are harmful will more easily wither up if the roots which support it are exposed and cut beforehand, and pestilential waters will dry up when their rising source and rushing streams have been stopped up with skillful labor.” (Cassian 1997, *The Conferences*, p. 189 (Fifth Conference, X.1–2)) The concatenation model and other models are helpfully laid out in Wenzel (1968).
- ¹⁰ As quoted by Cassian, *Institutes*, IX.II.
- ¹¹ Roberts’s defining proposition helps us see the unity between two types of boredom distinguished by Peter Toohey: situational and existential (Toohey 2011). Situational boredom “is the result of predictable circumstances that are very hard to escape. Long speeches or long church services or long Christmas dinners are typical examples. This sort of boredom is characterized by lengthy duration, by its predictability, by its inescapability—by its confinement.” (p. 4) In contrast, existential boredom can “infect a person’s very existence.” (p. 5) Toohey thinks the situational boredom gets improperly spiritualized in the capital vices tradition, but his discussion is still helpful to see the various ways boredom is characterized.

- 12 This is not to say that acedia *only* generates boredom.
- 13 Philosophers, of course, debate whether laws of nature are necessary, but within a Christian framework where things are created from nothing, laws of nature must be contingent.
- 14 Pieper (1999, p. 60): “Accordingly, for St. Thomas, the unknowable can never denote something in itself dark and impenetrable, but only something that has so much light that a particular finite faculty of knowledge cannot absorb it all. It is too rich to be assimilated completely; it eludes the effort to comprehend it.” Aquinas recognizes the limits of our cognitive faculties in *Expositio in Symbolom Apostolorum*, prologue: “But our manner of knowing is so weak that no philosopher could perfectly investigate the nature of even one little fly. We even read that a certain philosopher spent thirty years in solitude in order to know the nature of the bee”.
- 15 See Martin Seligman’s two books for a sense of the history and development of positive psychology, *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman 2002) and *Flourish* (Seligman 2011). See also the entry on gratitude in Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson and Seligman 2004) in which they identify G. K. Chesterton as a “prototype” for someone who sees gratitude as a cardinal trait (p. 553).
- 16 Davis et al. (2016, pp. 20–31). “Our results provide weak evidence for the efficacy of gratitude interventions. Gratitude interventions outperformed a measurement-only control with psychological well-being as an outcome (small effect size with only five samples) but not with gratitude as an outcome.” (p. 26).
- 17 Lomas et al. (2014, p. 9). Again, however, the evidence for these conclusions is mixed. See previous note.
- 18 See (Seneca 2011). For a recent argument that there should also be a species of temperance related to sleep, see Dahm (2020).
- 19 Applying Chesterton’s recommendation for looking until you see connects to the capital vices tradition on acedia in an inverted way to Kierkegaard’s aesthetic treatment of acedia in *Either-Or*. Kierkegaard’s aesthete assumes that things are really boring and we must learn to look at things until we can find or construct something entertaining about them. Chesterton, on the other hand, thinks we must look to see the wonder that is truly there. For Kierkegaard’s aesthetic treatment of acedia, see Brandt et al. (2020).
- 20 Although, I do not interact with it in this paper, Chesterton’s *Manalive* would be a great place to start.
- 21 Aquinas (1968), *On Being and Essence*, chp. 4, para. 6; (Aquinas 1981) *Summa Theologiae*, I.3.4. Of course, being able to conceive of or imagine separability in some sense is probably not sufficient for actual separability. See Anscombe (1974).
- 22 Thank you to my students in Foundations of Ethics at Franciscan University of Steubenville for discussing these ideas with me semester after semester. Thank you to Joseph Cherney for inviting me to speak about this at the greatest Chesterton conference that never happened. Thank you to my Deadly Vices course of Spring 2020, especially those who read the first draft of this paper (the rest of you can read it now). Finally, thank you to Hannah Fordice, Caryn Rempe, and the editors of this volume for their feedback.

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