RESISTANCE TO THE DEMANDS OF LOVE: AQUINAS ON THE VICE OF *ACEDIA*

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THE LIST OF the seven capital vices[1] includes sloth, envy, avarice, vainglory, gluttony, lust, and anger. While many of the seven vices are more complex than they appear at first glance, one stands out as more obscure and out of place than all the others, at least for a contemporary audience: the vice of sloth.

Our puzzlement over sloth is heightened by sloth's inclusion on the traditional lists of the seven capital vices and the seven deadly sins from the fourth century onward.[2] For hundreds of years, these seven vices were distinguished as moral and spiritual failings of serious and perennial importance.[3] By contrast, recent studies, as well as the popular imagination, typically associate sloth with, or even define it as, laziness.[4] But is laziness in fact a *moral* failing?

[1] Often conflated and confused with the seven deadly sins; see note 3.

[2] See especially Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 56-57.

[3] A capital vice is one that grows up from pride as its root and then in turn becomes a source (*caput*) from which many others spring (*STh* I-II q. 84, a. 3). Capital vices can also easily become deadly (or mortal)—that is, sins that cause spiritual death *via* the loss of charity (see, for example, *STh* II-II q. 35, a. 3; I-II q. 88, aa. 1-2). Aquinas characterizes the traditional list of seven as capital vices and argues that each can become mortal under certain conditions.

[4] See, for example, the following description by Evelyn Waugh in *The Seven Deadly Sins* (essays in the *Sunday Times* reprinted by The Akadine Press, 2002): "The word 'Sloth' . . . is a mildly facetious variant of 'indolence,' and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin, is one of the most amiable of weaknesses" (57). Josef Pieper also comments on *acedia*'s association with laziness in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 118. The ordinary conception of acedia also frequently includes apathy and boredom.

In this article, I will explore Thomas Aquinas's conception of the vice of sloth and his reasons for including it on the list of seven. For this reason, from here on I will refer to the vice by its Latin name, *acedia,* rather than the modern English term, "sloth." Aquinas's account deserves special attention because it stands at a key point in the history of *acedia,* a point at which previous strands of the Christian virtue tradition converge and after which the heuristic force of the traditional schema of virtues and vices is considerably dissipated. His account thus provides an interesting interpretive link between ancient Christian and modern conceptions of this vice.

In part I, I will briefly trace the history of *acedia* in order to uncover the various sources of its association with laziness. In part II, I will analyze Aquinas's two-part definition of *acedia,* noting especially its opposition to the virtue of charity (*caritas*). His characterization of *acedia* as the kind of sorrow opposed to the joy of charity diverges from the tradition (both before and after him) in subtle but interesting ways, and yields an important clue as to why he thought *acedia* constituted a serious and important moral deficiency, warranting its inclusion on the list of seven capital vices.

In part III, I will inquire more specifically into what might cause *acedia*'s sorrow. Here I engage an interpretive puzzle about Aquinas's own description of *acedia,* which turns out to be a necessary further step in clarifying his understanding of this vice: Is physical weariness the cause of *acedia*'s sorrow, as some passages seem to suggest? Or does *acedia* have deeper, spiritual roots? Solving this puzzle helps us understand why Aquinas insists that *acedia* is a spiritual vice and, therefore, much more than laziness. If Aquinas is right that *acedia* is aversion not to physical effort as such, but rather to what it sees as the burdens of a relationship of love, then this feature of the vice, born of its link to charity, confirms its important role in the moral life.

I. The Link to Laziness: A Short History of *Acedia*

Contemporary audiences are not unique in thinking of *acedia* as aversion to physical effort or as associated with states of torpor and inertia. The following cursory survey of the history of *acedia* will reveal both important consonances and dissonances between Aquinas's conception of the vice and the tradition of thought in which he played an important part.

The history of *acedia* may be divided into five main stages.[5] Its beginnings lie at least as early as the fourth century A.D., when the Desert Fathers of Egypt wrestled with this vice and Evagrius of Pontus first compiled a list of eight major vices, *acedia* chief among them. For the desert cenobites, *acedia* named the temptation to escape one's commitment to the solitary religious life, due to both physical weariness (a result of their extreme asceticism) and weariness with the spiritual life itself. Oppressed with the tedium of life and depressed at the thought of his spiritual calling, a monk would look out of his desert cell in the heat of the day and want nothing more than to escape and enjoy an afternoon of entertainment in the city.[6]

From this solitary mode of the religious life with its stringent asceticism, the concept of *acedia* was transplanted into Western monasticism by John Cassian, disciple of Evagrius. Here one's calling to the religious life took a communal form. In this second stage, the vice was understood less as a longing to escape solitary communion with God than as a temptation to shirk one's calling to participate in a religious community and *its* spiritual life.[7] Again, the one afflicted by this vice was aggrieved and oppressed by his commitment to the religious life with its identity and calling—hence Gregory the Great's label for it as a particular kind of *tristitia* (sorrow). But in its monastic form, escaping now

[5] Here I gratefully acknowledge S. Wenzel's excellent historical work in *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967). The stages outlined here are my own.

[6] See especially ibid., 10, 18.

[7] As we will note in part II, this conception of *acedia,* unlike Aquinas's, seems to affect both precepts of charity, that is, one's love of God *and* neighbor.

involved shunning a relationship to God *and* to others who shared that relationship. The inertia and tedium caused by sorrow sapped one's motivation to do one's part in that community; thus *acedia*'s link with laziness, understood as the neglect of one's duties (whether spiritual exercises or manual labor), emerges further.

In the thirteenth century, Aquinas further reworked Cassianic *acedia* and Gregorian *tristitia* in his *Summa Theologiae,* both narrowing and broadening the concept. On the one hand, his opposition of *acedia* to charity more narrowly and precisely located the vice's threat to one's spiritual life. On the other hand, restricting its target to the virtue of charity broadened its application to any human being in any state of life, for Aquinas understood all human beings, simply in virtue of their nature as human beings, as made to live in relationship with God. For all those who accept this relationship and receive the gift of charity, Aquinas counted *acedia* a possibility. *Acedia* thus ceased to be a vice that threatened only those who chose the religious life in the strict sense.

In the fourth stage, the Reformation further broadened the concept of *acedia.* First, it turned away from the tradition-based lists of virtues and vices in favor of what it saw as the more strictly scriptural commandments.[8] Moreover, the Reformers rejected the sacrament of penance, for the sake of which much of the previous analysis of *acedia* and its behavioral symptoms had been done.[9] Thus, the seven great vices gradually lost their status as central heuristic devices in theology and spiritual formation. In addition, the Reformers expanded the notion of one's spiritual vocation to include all forms of work and labor. So shirking one's spiritual or religious duties—the monastic sense of *acedia*—now included shirking *all* of one's duties in life, for example, to one's guild, one's family, one's church, and so on. Since all work can be an expression of one's religious calling, *acedia* came to mean neglect

[8] "*Acedia*" is only explicitly mentioned in the Septuagint once, at Psalm 118:28 (119:28 in modern translations); the Vulgate gives its close synonym "*taedium*" instead, usually glossed by commentators as "*taedium cordis.*" See Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth,* 34.

[9] See Bloomfield, *Seven Deadly Sins,* 91-93, 99.

of one's work in general, while its opposite, diligence, came to be regarded as a virtue.

Because Aquinas's account defined *acedia* as opposing charity, a theological virtue whose object is our friendship with God (our participation in the divine nature), *acedia* was in his view a peculiarly *theological* vice.[10] This explains how *acedia* could be reduced to "mere" laziness in the fifth and final stage of its history—a stage characterized by humanizing and secularizing tendencies of thought that followed the medieval period and were already underway during the time of the Reformation. If one gives up a sense of the person as a being fulfilled only in relationship to God, then *acedia*—the vice that sorrows over and resists our divine identity and destiny—no longer seems to have any application. Evacuated of spiritual content, little is left of *acedia* save aversion to effort in general; *acedia* is merely laziness and its status as a capital and spiritual vice becomes puzzling.[11] On the contrary, Aquinas's conception of this vice entails understanding (at some level) and taking seriously that one is refusing the commitment and calling that a relationship to God entails, in order for it to count as a genuine case of *acedia.*

[10] Wenzel also makes this point (*Sin of Sloth,* 66).

[11] Despite the loss of the "great seven" as a schema by which to measure moral (mal)formation, modern cultures have raised "industriousness" to the level of an important virtue, and the "sloth" opposed to it thus can assume great importance as a moral defect (see, for example, Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love,* 118-22). It is also worth noting that my version of the history does nothing to track Kierkegaardian and Pascalian descriptions of moral and spiritual states that resonate closely with *acedia* (for example, despair, restlessness, and the relentless pursuit of distractions *via* the aesthetic life or *via* empty diversion-seeking), much less the new humanistic version of *acedia* evident in Nietzschean nihilism (the hatred of man, ironically characteristic of Christians, described in part I of the *Genealogy of Morals,* for example) or in Sartre's descriptions of "bad faith." There are two important and interesting questions here (neither of which I will be able to address in the current essay): First, are these genuine cases of *acedia*? And second, would Aquinas (given his definition of *acedia* as opposed to charity) be able to recognize them as such? It would be one thing if Christians could diagnose *acedia* in others who had the vice but were unable, from their own perspective, to recognize and articulate the problem. It would be quite another to claim that one could self-diagnose from within a secular perspective. I think Aquinas would be able to countenance a "natural" form of *acedia,* understood as resistance of the will to its own inclination (born of natural necessity) to the perfection of human nature (albeit not in its perfect, supernatural form). Thus I am inclined to count these latter cases as instances of *acedia,* although in a sense analogous to its perfect form.

Our brief history of *acedia*[12] goes some distance toward explaining the tendency to conflate sloth with mere laziness. In the next section, I turn to Aquinas's conception of *acedia*. By opposing *acedia* directly to charity, Aquinas provides an important clue about the nature and importance of the vice. The resulting conception of *acedia* transcends, but does not jettison, its historical link to laziness.

II. *Acedia*'s Opposition to Charity

In the *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, formation in virtue is the central and primary characterization of the good life for human beings. Aquinas conceives of moral formation teleologically, in terms both of Aristotelian flourishing and ultimately, of Christian sanctification.[13] Thus, the virtues in their most perfect form are certain internal dispositions and principles of action infused by God (specifically, by the work of the Holy Spirit) that enable us to reach our *telos*, becoming like Christ, the exemplar of human perfection and one who lives in perfect communion with God. At its core, then, the moral life involves personal transformation.

Vices, according to Aquinas, are the personal habits that thwart this transformation; virtues are the traits by which we take on the character of Christ. The apostle Paul describes this change in Colossians 3:5-14:

> Your life is now hidden with Christ in God. . . . Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature. . . . You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourself of all such things . . . since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image of its Creator.[14]

[12] As is indicated by its brevity, my account is not intended to be comprehensive. Notable omissions include the story of how Cassianic *acedia* and Gregorian *tristitia* were merged into a single vice and how Evagrius's list of eight reduced to seven, a more biblically symbolic number. See Bloomfield, *Seven Deadly Sins*, 72.

[13] I have argued in more detail for these claims in "Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, forthcoming.

This teleological picture of the moral life as a project of personal transformation stands behind Aquinas's characterization of *acedia*. *Acedia* counts as a vice because it threatens (from within) the process of human perfection and its *telos*, a relationship with God that Aquinas will call charity.

Aquinas defines the vice of *acedia* as "sorrow over . . . an internal and divine good [in us]."[15] The definition breaks down into two main parts. I will examine first what Aquinas means by "an internal and divine good" and, second, what he means by his puzzling description of it as a kind of "sorrow" (*tristitia*).

The "internal and divine good" refers to that human participation in the divine nature which is nothing other than the virtue of charity.[16] *Acedia* is the capital vice directly opposed to the virtue of charity.[17] Thus, we should give a brief sketch of what

[14] See also Ephesians 4:22-24, upon which Aquinas comments: "Hence he [Paul] makes two points here since vices must first be eradicated before virtues can be cultivated: First, he instructs them to put aside their former condition, their old way of living. Secondly, how they must take on a new way of life [characteristic] of Jesus. Three considerations follow. First, what does 'the old man' mean? Some hold that the old man is exterior and the new man interior. But it must be said that the old man is both interior and exterior; he is a person who is enslaved by a senility in his soul, due to sin, and in his body whose members provide the tools for sin. Thus a man enslaved to sin in soul and body is an old man. . . . And so a man subjected to sin is termed an old man because he is on the way to corruption." Aquinas also references the Colossians 3 passage in this section of the commentary, with the following remark, "In Colossians 3: 9 the Apostle indicates how to leave the old man behind: 'stripping yourselves of the old man with his deeds.' The substance of human nature is not to be rejected or despoiled, but only wicked actions and conduct" (*Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew Lamb [Albany: Magi Books, Inc., 1966], c. 4, lect. 7).

[15] *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo*, q. 11, a. 2; see also *Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 35, a. 2.

[16] *STh* II-II q. 23, a. 2, ad 1; and II-II q. 35, aa. 2 and 3.

[17] Even more so than envy (the vice mentioned immediately after *acedia*, in *STh* II-II, q. 36). *Acedia* sorrows over the divine good (the first precept of charity: "love God"), while envy sorrows over a neighbor's good (the second precept of charity: "love your neighbor"). Further, envy sorrows over a neighbor's good as excelling my own (so its object is neither something my own, nor something shared by me). It does not sorrow (at least directly) over the spiritual good of friendship itself, as sloth does, much less friendship with God. For a defense of the priority of loving God, see, for example, *STh* II-II, q. 23, a. 5, ad 1: "God is the

Aquinas means by "charity." It is the centerpiece of his account of the virtues, which are in turn at the center of his account of the moral life in the *Summa Theologiae*. Charity is the "root and mother of all other virtues"; its position parallels pride's with respect to the capital vices. In addition, charity is a theological virtue, which means that it has God as its direct object.[18]

Aquinas characterizes charity primarily as a relationship with God. He describes it as "union with God," "sharing in the fellowship of eternal happiness," "friendship with God," and the "spiritual life whereby God dwells in us."[19] From the beginning, human beings are made in the *imago dei,* and in the end we are perfected only by participating in God's divine nature. Here is the classic definition of charity:

> Charity is the friendship of human beings for God, grounded in the fellowship of everlasting happiness. Now this fellowship is in respect, not of natural, but of gratuitous gifts, for, according to Romans 6:23, "the grace of God is life everlasting": wherefore charity itself surpasses our natural faculties. Therefore charity can be in us neither naturally nor through the acquisition of the natural powers, but by the infusion of the Holy Spirit, Who is the love of the Father and the Son, and the participation of Whom is created charity.[20]

For Aquinas, charity is a deep bond of friendship that makes us all we are meant to be. We might think, as a kind of analogy originally suggested by the apostle Paul, of the way a man and woman become "one flesh" in marriage. Marriage is more than a civil contract; it is a transformation of identity, the kind that comes only through the gift of oneself to another person. Thus, it involves the dying away of an old individual self and the birth of a new unity. In a mysterious way, this new bond of unity enables both members in the relationship to grow and be

principal object of charity, while our neighbor is loved out of charity for God's sake."

[18] *STh* II-II, q. 23ff.

[19] *STh* II-II, q. 23, a. 1; II-II, q. 23, a. 2, ad 2, 3, 5; and II-II, q. 35, a. 2; for descriptions of participated charity, see *STh* II-II, q. 24, a. 5, ad 3; and II-II, q. 28, a. 2. The passion of love is treated at *STh* I-II, qq. 26-28; in q. 28 especially, Aquinas describes love (quoting I John 4) as effecting union, friendship, and mutual indwelling between lovers.

[20] *STh* II-II, q. 24, a. 2.

transformed in ways that perfect their character.[21] Similarly, charity is a relationship of union with God, a participation in the divine nature that completes and perfects us. In Pauline terms, we "put on the new self, which is Christ," thereby becoming fully what we are meant to be.[22]

Aquinas also emphasizes that this relationship of participation in God himself is received only by way of a gift[23]—a gift of the Spirit that requires a gift of ourselves in return in order to count as genuine *friendship,* for friendship requires mutuality.[24] Finally, charity is linked to our ultimate destiny, what Aquinas describes as our *telos*. Our fulfillment as human beings comes with living in God's presence, being in union with him. In the consummation of this friendship, our will finds perfect joy and rest.[25] For now, Aquinas writes, the "grace [of charity] is nothing else than a beginning of glory in us."[26] The marriage analogy again illustrates its "now and not yet" character: spouses are married on the day they take their vows, but being married is an identity and activity

[21] As Frederick Buechner says, "[A] marriage made in Heaven is one where a man and a woman become more richly themselves together than . . . either of them could ever have managed to become alone" (*Whistling in the Dark: A Doubters Dictionary* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993], 87). See also Aristotle's conception of the effects of virtuous friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (9.12.1172a10-15).

[22] Charity involves an ontological change: It is "a habitual form superadded to the [human] natural power [i.e., the will or rational appetite, whose natural object is the perfect or complete good]" (*STh* I-II, q. 23, a. 2; see also *STh* I-II, qq. 1-5). As such, charity orients us to our supernatural end or *telos*. But the *habitus* of charity, as with all the virtues involving the will, is also an internal principle of human moral action and so functions as the source of moral change as well.

[23] "Now, since charity surpasses the proportion of human nature, it depends, not on any natural ability or power, but on the sole grace of the Holy Spirit, Who infuses charity. Wherefore the degree of charity depends neither on the condition of nature nor on the capacity of natural virtue, but only on the will of the Holy Spirit, who divides his gifts according to his will" (*STh* I-II, q. 24, a. 3).

[24] Note that charity is only an infused virtue and has no habitually acquired form. Once we receive the virtue of charity, however, we can choose to exercise it in actions which thereby increase or strengthen it. See *STh* II-II, q. 23, aa. 4-7.

[25] As Aquinas writes in *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 4: "Delight comes to the will from the end [namely, God] being present," for "when human beings attain their ultimate end, they remain at peace, their desires being at rest." "Joy" he names as "the consummation of happiness."

[26] *STh* II-II, q. 24, a. 3, ad 2.

that takes a lifetime of commitment, transformation, and living-in-relationship. So, too, does our friendship with God.

This "internal and divine good in us" is the target of *acedia*'s *sorrow,* which brings us to the second half of the definition. By "sorrow" Aquinas means something more technical than its usual connotation of sadness.[27] The Latin word *acedia* is a transliteration of the Greek ἀκηδεια—literally, "a lack of care."[28] Etymologically, at least, *acedia* is a lack of appetite, unresponsiveness, aversion, and, at its limit, even distaste.[29]

For Aquinas, joy and sorrow are the spiritual analogues of physical pleasure and pain; they name our appetitive reaction to the inner apprehension (by imagination or intellect) of a present good or evil, respectively. Aquinas usually uses "sorrow" rather than "pain" when the evil object in question is a spiritual one.[30] *Acedia*'s sorrow is thus an appetitive aversion to a spiritual and interior good because that good is perceived by the agent as evil in some way (in *what* way we will consider later). In the disputed questions *De Malo,* Aquinas clarifies this: Sorrow about "some

[27] See, for example, his treatment of sorrow in the treatise on the passions, *STh* I-II, qq. 35-39.

[28] Alternate Latin spellings—most commonly, *accidia*—trade on the mistaken etymological link of *accidia*/*acedia* to *acidus* (acid, bitter). Hence the medievals' psychological description of *acedia* as "bitterness." See Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth,* 54.

[29] In framing *acedia* as a special *species* of sorrow, Aquinas is integrating strands of the tradition from Cassian to John Damascene and Gregory the Great (the latter, for example, lists *tristitia* in place of *acedia* in the list of seven found in his *Moralia on Job* XXXI, XLV, 87). See also note 37, below.

[30] We can make this clearer by contrasting *acedia* with courage. In its strict sense, courage stands firm primarily against physical threats to the body—most notably, physical pain and death—to which we (embodied rational animals) have a natural aversion (*STh* II-II, qq. 123-124). For example, in the paradigm act of courage, a martyr sacrifices a bodily good (his or her own bodily life) for the sake of a spiritual good (the truth of the faith). See also *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 1. In general, one can also distinguish three levels of one's "aversion to a present evil" in Aquinas's moral psychology: first, pain as aversion to bodily injury or evil; second, sadness as the passion averse to evil on the level of the sensitive appetite; and finally, sorrow (in the technical sense), which is aversion (disgust, contempt) at the level of intellectual appetite (simple willing). Aquinas uses *dolor* (pain) and *tristitia* (sadness) almost interchangeably for levels one and two, but reserves the technical sense of *tristitia* to refer to level three, on account of a difference in the objects of the respective appetites (sensible objects vs. spiritual objects). See *STh* I-II, q. 35, aa. 1 and 2.

distressing or laborious work" (a martyr's bodily suffering, for example) is not *acedia* because in those cases the sorrow is not about an interior good but rather an exterior evil.[31] Sorrow can manifest itself as a passion (located in the sensitive appetite) or an aversion of the will (the intellectual appetite). In the latter case, it looks more like disgust or contempt than the emotion of sadness typically associated with the term. Aquinas will be concerned primarily with the movement of the intellectual appetite in his definition of *acedia.*

Aquinas's moral psychology links joy, the appetitive state directly opposed to sorrow, to rest in the appetite.[32] Like its analogue, pleasure, joy is a kind of delight in a good that is present and possessed.[33] *Acedia*'s sorrow is therefore a restless resistance to a good (perceived as evil in some respect) that is recognized to be our own.[34] This means that we do not have an aversion to God himself in *acedia,* but rather to ourselves-as-sharing-in-God's-nature, united to him in the bond of friendship. Aquinas says, "*acedia* is not sadness about the presence of God himself, but sadness about some [internal] good pertaining to him which is divine *by participation,*"[35] implying that *acedia* afflicts only those who already have charity.

Aquinas also names joy as the first of three inward effects (acts or "fruits") of charity.[36] *Acedia,* as "a *species* of sorrow," is the vice directly opposing *this* joy. Rather than being lifted up by joy

[31] *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 1, ad 4.

[32] *STh* I-II, q. 3, a. 4; I-II, q. 31, a. 3.

[33] *STh* I-II, q. 31, a. 2.

[34] *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 2. *STh* I-II, q. 35, a. 8: "For the proper object of sorrow is *one's own evil.*"

[35] *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 3, ad 3 (emphasis added).

[36] The other two inward effects are as follows: We have *peace* (*pax, concordia*) when our will is united to God's will by the bond of friendship, so that we share in common the objects of our love, a theme Aquinas takes from Augustine. And we have *misericordia* toward others whom God loves, evidenced by our grief when obstacles stand in the way of their well-being. Joy is defined in *STh* II-II, q. 28, a. 1 as delight "in the presence of one you love"—in this case, God. The effects include fruits of the Holy Spirit, as well as acts (both joy and peace) and virtues (*misericordia*). *STh* II-II, q. 28, a. 4, corp. and ad 3; II-II, q. 29, a. 4, corp. and ad 1; and II-II, q. 30, a. 3.

at one's union with God, the person afflicted with *acedia* is oppressed or weighed down; as one's own, the divine good is seen as an unwelcome burden.[37] What makes *acedia* sinful or vicious, for Aquinas, is that it consists in an intrinsic disorder of our desires: It is *in*appropriate aversion, for it regards our participation in the greatest good and only source of lasting joy with apathy or distaste.[38] *Acedia* perceives this divine good in us as evil—as oppressive or repulsive. To God's offer of the "renewal of [our] whole nature at the center of [our] being," *acedia* turns away from "be[coming] what God wants [us] to be."[39] To mark the contrast, *acedia* is traditionally opposed to the beatitude "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness," where one wholeheartedly yearns to be renewed, that is, to become righteous like Christ.[40]

[37] The sense of *acedia* as experiencing oneself, or an aspect of oneself, as a burden is a theme I first noticed in the words of a twelfth century monk: "Oftentimes, when you are alone in your cell, a certain inertia, a dullness of the mind and disgust of the heart seize you. You feel an enormous loathing in yourself. You are a burden to yourself, and that internal joy you used so happily to experience has left you. . . . The spiritual vigor in you has withered, your inner calm lies dead" (quoted in Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth,* 33). It may seem contradictory or just plain confused to describe *acedia* both as apathy (lack of feeling, with a corresponding inactivity) and disgust (feeling repulsed, with a corresponding act of refusal). The best explanation is that when the one with *acedia* "turns away from" the divine good, this can either be an act of neglect or an act of deliberate rejection. Apathy seems a better description of the former; disgust, or distaste, the latter.

[38] There are actually two potential problems in this vice (*STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1): (1) disorder—one's *affectus* has the wrong object, namely, sorrow over a good—and (2) immoderation—one's *affectus* has the right object, but lacks due measure and falls into excess. This latter problem includes sorrow over genuine evils, for example, grief over a loved one's death that is so great that it immobilizes or paralyzes us from further action. Another example of the same problem would be an occasion in which seeing a grave injustice done causes such great sorrow that it makes us despair of ever making a difference ("Why even try?") so we neglect *misericordia* and its outer manifestation, acts of benevolence. I do not address the second form directly here, nor does Aquinas do more than mention it in the *Summa Theologiae* and *De Malo*.

[39] Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love,* 120.

[40] Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth,* 57. It might seem puzzling that in order to have a vice opposing charity one must first have charity. How can one have two "opposite" qualities at once? The virtue of charity itself is infused by the Holy Spirit, but acting on it is, on Aquinas's account, up to us. It is entirely possible to have a virtue and fail to act on it, or even to act in ways that are not fully consonant with it. (If *acedia* turns mortal, of course, it will be incompatible with charity.) So it is possible to have charity without its "effects"—which include everything from

Now there are times when one might be weighed down by suffering or grief or even physical weariness, and lack inner joy. Or despite a commitment to regular prayer and fasting, one might hit spells of dryness or a lack of devotion. This is not *acedia. Acedia,* as a sin and vice, moves beyond emotion and feeling to what Aquinas calls "reason's consent" to our lack of joy.[41]

As a metaphor for *acedia,* the Christian tradition frequently pointed to the people of Israel, freed from bondage in Egypt and faced with the prospect of making their home in the Promised Land. After the spies' report, however, the Israelites decided that the project of conquering the Canaanite nations looked much less appealing than it did before. God punished them with forty years of wandering in the desert wilderness—a punishment as much their choice as God's penalty. To the offer of a homeland and promised rest, a chance to embrace their identity and destiny as God's own people, the Israelites responded by turning away. As the psalmist recounts, "They despised the pleasant land" (Ps 106:24a). The aridity of the desert landscape, the restless, aimless wandering, and the refusal of their own fulfillment and God's blessing in their promised homeland all have their analogues in the vice of *acedia.*

Another commonly used scriptural portrait of *acedia* is that of Lot's wife: When faced with the opportunity to be saved from destruction, she leaves the doomed city of Sodom but cannot bring herself to turn completely away from her old life (in particular, its sense of home and identity) with all its familiarity. (Familiar miseries, with which one has learned to live, often seem

emotions and actions to other virtues: joy is an act of will (with, one presumes, the concomitant emotional effect), peace is an act of will, and *misericordia* is a virtue. Further, joy is compatible with godly sorrow, because in that case, joy and sorrow have different objects (*STh* II-II, q. 28, a. 2).

[41] While Wenzel is right to characterize it as an "affective disorder," it is also more than that. Virtues and vices involve both a cognitive and an affective moment; the emotions and decisions embody a judgment or view of the world that is also part of what it is to have the virtue. This is especially true of virtues and vices that are located in the will (or rational appetite). Aquinas identifies sloth as involving the consent of the will on several occasions, although he admits that it can be prompted by movements of the sensitive appetite.

preferable to the demands of a new way of life.)[42] In either case, the overwhelming urge is to stay with the comfortable and the known rather than risk change, even if it promises improvement. *Acedia*'s resentment, listlessness, sullenness, and apathy stem from perceiving oneself as "stuck" in a position (the new) that one does not wholeheartedly endorse but that one also cannot fully deny or escape.[43]

Thus, the trouble with *acedia* is that when we have it, we refuse to be all that we are meant to be. This refusal—even when we think it constitutes an escape from an unappealing future—is itself a form of misery. In refusing our *telos,* we resist our deepest desires for fulfillment. This is why Gregory describes *acedia* as "a kind of sorrow." In outlining the sins to which *acedia* typically gives rise, Aquinas likewise explains how they are all attempts either to escape sorrow or to live with inescapable sorrow.[44] The oppressiveness of *acedia* comes from our own self-stifling choice.[45]

[42] Augustine's famous prayer, "Lord, make me chaste . . . but not yet," also fits this pattern.

[43] The examples are from Wenzel; the interpretation of them is my own.

[44] It might be helpful for us in understanding *acedia* to contrast it with despair, a vice opposed to the theological virtue of hope and an offspring vice of *acedia.* Aquinas, following Paul, Augustine, and Gregory the Great, includes three theological virtues in his account of our moral and spiritual lives. The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity. Both hope and charity are located in the will, the appetite that desires our own fulfillment and flourishing. Hope is the virtue that counts on God's gracious assistance in attaining a relationship of union with him. Charity is the virtue that delights in (and constitutes) the present reality of that relationship. Both *acedia* and despair are a kind of sorrow or aversion to what is perceived as a present evil. Despair is the kind of sorrow opposed to hope. It is what we feel when we cannot bring ourselves to believe that God's mercy extends to us. While we accept the general possibility of salvation for human beings, we count ourselves as beyond the pale, beyond redemption, beyond the reaches of God's willingness to help. *Acedia,* on the other hand, is opposed to the joy of charity; it feels dejection rather than delight toward our participation in the divine nature and our relationship to God. So while both are a form of sorrow, their stances toward God are different. For despair, participation in the divine nature through grace is perceived as appealing, but impossible; for *acedia,* the prospect is possible, but unappealing.

[45] In Gabriele Taylor's essay on sloth ("Deadly Vices?" in Roger Crisp, *How Should One Live?* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 172), she argues that the slothful are neither able to live with themselves nor to enjoy living with themselves because it is precisely their selves and the demands internal to them that are the main obstacle to their happiness. Likewise, Pieper identifies sloth with Kierkegaard's despair of weakness, in which one chooses not to be oneself, for to choose oneself is to be constituted by a relationship to the infinite, the ground of the self's existence (*Sickness unto Death,* trans. Alastair Hannay [London: Penguin, 1989], especially 50-51). For Pieper's description, see *Faith, Hope, Love,* 120. See also Aquinas on our endorsement of the gift given (i.e., the new graced self): "It is a sign of humility if we do not think too much of ourselves through observing our own faults; but if we despise the good we have received from God, this, far from being a proof of humility, shows us to be ungrateful: and from such contempt results sloth, because we sorrow for things we assess as evil and worthless" (*STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1, ad 3).

This definition of *acedia*—sorrowing over our friendship with God (and the transformation of our nature by grace effected by it) as something evil—gives Aquinas grounds for maintaining its status as a capital vice, that is, a vice that is the source of many others. It concerns one of the most basic movements of the appetite (sorrow being aversion to a present evil), and it concerns a very desirable good—a key characteristic of the capital vices[46]—namely, a good that is directly connected with our ultimate end and toward which the will is inclined by necessity of its nature.[47] *Acedia* thus involves inner tension, grappling as it does with both a strong push toward and a strong pull away from our ultimate end, friendship with God.[48]

Acedia's opposition to charity, the greatest of all Christian virtues, makes it an extremely serious vice, but how and why the one with *acedia* resists charity is still mysterious. Thus, in the third and final section, I propose to examine the cause of *acedia.* Aquinas's answer to this question resonates with the common understanding of *acedia* as an aversion to effort, but also distinguishes it from mere laziness. Identifying the cause of *acedia*'s sorrow over the internal and divine good of charity helps us fully grasp why he counts it among the spiritual vices.

[46] *De Malo,* q. 8; *STh* I-II, q. 84, a. 4; *inter alia.*

[47] *STh* I-II, q. 5, a. 8; I-II, q. 8, a. 1; and I, q. 82, a. 1. Given the will's inclination to the perfect good as a matter of natural necessity, is a "natural" analogue of *acedia* possible? See note 11, above.

[48] We have already noted that *acedia* is a peculiarly theological vice since its object is our relationship with God (our participation in his nature), called charity. Now charity relates us to both God and our neighbor; however, the way Aquinas describes *acedia,* it appears that this vice grieves over the source relationship (friendship with God), not the concomitant one (love of neighbor). See also note 17, above.

III. An Interpretive Puzzle: The Cause of Sorrow

The difficulty of understanding Aquinas's conception of *acedia* is figuring out what might cause us to sorrow over our participation in the divine nature. What could possibly occasion sorrow over friendship with God? How could we feel *aversion* toward the relationship that constitutes our own perfection, especially aversion Aquinas describes as "dislike, horror, and detestation of the Divine good"?[49]

In what follows, I will consider two explanations of the cause of sorrow over the divine good in us. Each explanation has some basis in Aquinas's texts. Each also pays heed to the strands of the tradition that associate *acedia* with an aversion to effort (the common meaning of "sloth"). I will argue, however, that the second is a better interpretation of Aquinas, and conclude that the effort to which *acedia* objects is not merely bodily toil or difficulty, as its characterization as "laziness" would indicate, but rather the commitment required by being and living in a relationship of love. With this explanation in hand, we can fully grasp why Aquinas insists that *acedia* is a spiritual vice and understand better how, on his conception of the problem, one might become vulnerable to it.

The first and perhaps most straightforward explanation of *acedia*'s sorrow affirms the common conception of this vice as laziness or sloth. We perceive friendship with God as involving too much physical work, too much bodily effort. Going to Mass, doing good works, engaging in spiritual exercises—all of these take too much time and effort. Weariness is often used in descriptions of *acedia* in both *De Malo* and the *Summa Theologiae:*

> *Acedia* is a kind of sorrow, whereby one becomes sluggish in spiritual *actus* because they weary the body. (*STh* I q. 63, a. 2, ad 2, on spiritual creatures)

> [*Acedia*] according to Damascene, is *an oppressive sorrow,* which so oppresses the soul of a person that he or she wants to do nothing. . . . Hence sloth implies a certain weariness of work, as appears from [Augustine's] gloss on Ps 106:18, "Their soul abhorred all manner of meat," and from the definition of some who say that sloth is *a sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good.* (*STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1, on *acedia*)

> [*Acedia* is] sadness about one's spiritual good, on account of the attendant bodily labor. (*STh* I-II, q. 84, a. 4, on sin and vice)

> [T]he reason a person shuns spiritual goods is a kind of weariness, while dislike of toil and love of bodily repose seem to be due to the same cause, viz. weariness. (*STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 2, obj. 3, on *acedia*)

[49] *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 3.

Historically, as we have seen, Evagrius already conceived of the vice in such a manner—especially given the Desert Fathers' stringent ascetic practices—and the Cassianic monastic tradition followed suit.[50] Moreover, Augustine seems to think of it in this way, given his descriptions of the vice in the passages Aquinas quotes in the *Summa Theologiae* and *De Malo*. We can easily imagine cases of human love—caring for an aging parent or a newborn infant, for example—where the sheer physical effort and weariness associated with the task might cause us to shrink back from the relationship.

Nonetheless the conception of *acedia* as a vice that shuns labor of the body (*corporalem laborem*)[51] as such is one that Aquinas considers but rejects. Bodily toil and difficulty are not the causes of *acedia*'s sorrow. Neither is anything like diligence in good works named a virtue. More tellingly, he repeatedly describes the weariness mentioned in the above quotations as the effect of *acedia,* rather than the source of its sorrowfulness. Sluggishness about the commandments, the paralysis induced by despair, the

[50] Evagrius famously called *acedia* the noonday demon, who struck just when the sun was beating down at its hottest and the temptation to sleep was at its maximum. Sticking to one's prayers and religious study required the effort of fighting against one's bodily needs, especially given the physically demanding practices of the Desert Fathers. In the later monastic tradition, *acedia* was the name of the desire to sleep in rather than rise for early morning prayers, or to shirk one's manual labor in favor of relaxation or wasted time chit-chatting or gossiping. There are plenty of examples of this conception to be found in, for example, Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ,* trans. R. Knox and M. Oakley (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), chaps. 10, 19, 20 *inter alia*.

[51] *STh* I-II, q. 84, a. 4.

failure to act caused by pusillanimity in the face of the counsels of perfection—all of these are characterized as the offspring vices of *acedia,* behaviors that follow upon being afflicted by the vice. Responding to the traditional understanding of *acedia* as neglect of good works, Aquinas writes: "Sluggishness about things [that ought to be] done is not sadness itself but the effect of sadness."[52]

While Aquinas will argue that *acedia* is more than laziness, he acknowledges that it can have inactivity as its effect: "*Acedia,* by weighing on the mind, hinders us from doing things that cause sorrow,"[53] and "excessive sorrow . . . paralyzes the soul and hinders it from shunning evil,"[54] to the point that "sometimes even the external movement of the body is paralyzed [by sorrow]."[55] This is an effect of sorrow in general, however, and thus it does not mark *acedia* off in particular. Further, sorrow's direct effect is principally internal (i.e., on the soul). More importantly, identifying neglect and inactivity as the fruit of *acedia*'s oppression does not explain why *acedia* is oppressed at the thought of the divine good in us in the first place.

In fact, even as a result or concomitant effect of sorrow, laziness or inactivity is not a sure mark of the vice. Aquinas divides the daughters of *acedia* into two types: vices caused by having to live with inescapable sorrow, and vices that exemplify our efforts to escape from sorrow when we can. (He describes the effects of *acedia* as "flight" several times in four short articles in *De Malo,* echoing his description in the *Summa Theologiae* of the appetite's natural reaction to sorrow in general.) Despair is an example of the former type of vice; and the "wandering of the mind after illicit things"[56] is an example of the latter. Thus, *acedia* can show itself as a curious mixture of depression or inertia on the one hand, and flight or escapism on the other.[57]

[52] *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 4, ad 3.

[53] *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 4.

[54] *STh* I-II, q. 39, a. 3, ad 1.

[55] *STh* I-II, q. 37, a. 2.

[56] *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 4.

[57] Hence the literary portrait of this vice in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited,* where one character even bears the name Sebastian *Flyte.*

Its tendency to flight prompted Aquinas and others to oppose *acedia* to the commandment to hallow the Sabbath day, which is a "moral precept commanding that the mind *rest* in God, to which the mind's sorrow over the divine good is contrary."[58] "Rest" may be taken here to refer both to stopping "activity" in order to engage in contemplation of God (the antidote to *acedia*'s escapism)[59] and to the joyful peace that characterizes that state of communion: recall that for Aquinas, "rest" and "joy" describe the will's possession of the good desired. When we turn away from fullness and rest, we naturally seek to distract ourselves from facing the resulting emptiness. But even incessant and successful diversions fail to give us real delight; they are, in the well-known words of Ecclesiates, a "mere chasing after the wind." Likewise, this vice can easily assume the mask of diligent activity. As Pascal also notes, a frantically paced life may be as morally and spiritually suspect as a life of idleness.[60] Hence, restlessness, as well as laziness, can be a hallmark of *acedia.*

Acedia, however, names the sorrow itself, which weighs on the soul. In Aquinas's words,

> Sorrow is not a distinct vice, insofar as one shirks a distasteful and burdensome work, or sorrows on account of any other cause whatever, but only insofar as one is sorrowful *on account of the Divine good,* which sorrow belongs essentially to *acedia.*[61]

So the sorrow causes the sluggishness (or the restlessness); however, the question remains, what causes the sorrow? What is it about our participation in God that would make us perceive it as an evil in some way?

[58] *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 3, ad 2; see also *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 3, ad 2 (emphasis added).

[59] See *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1, ad 4.

[60] *Pensées,* trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), nos. 139, 143, 146, 164, 171. Although Pascal is concerned primarily with frivolous diversions, it is ironic that a life consumed with the busyness of doing ostensible works of charity may itself also be a form of resistance to the demands of charity.

[61] *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2. Aquinas describes it as a "constricting" or "weighing down" of the heart, which has the effect (as with sorrow in general) of impeding the movement of the soul as well as the body.

Here begins the second explanation of what might cause *acedia*'s sorrow. Rather than being caused by an aversion to the physical effort associated with charity, it may be understood more fundamentally as resistance to the transformation of the self implicated in friendship with God. Responding to the question of whether *acedia* is a special sin, Aquinas says:

> Therefore in answer to this question we must affirm that to sorrow over this special good which is an internal and divine good makes *acedia* a special sin, just as to love this good makes charity a special virtue. Now this divine good is saddening to us *on account of the opposition of the spirit to the flesh* because as the Apostle says in Galatians 5:17, "The flesh lusts against the spirit"; and therefore when love of the flesh is dominant in human beings we loathe spiritual good *as if something contrary to ourselves,* just as someone with embittered taste finds wholesome food distasteful and is grieved whenever he has to take such food. Therefore such distress and distaste and disgust [*taedio*] about a spiritual and divine good is *acedia,* which is a special sin.[62]

This is one of only two brief passages in which Aquinas positively characterizes the source of *acedia*'s sorrow. That source is the opposition of "the flesh" to "the spirit." But isn't the first explanation of the cause of sorrow merely confirmed by this passage—namely, that the "fleshly" toil involved in spiritual love for God is so onerous that we are averse to the life of the "spirit" on account of it? The present conundrum about why *acedia* is sorrowful (because of bodily effort or some other cause, most notably, a spiritual one) finds its parallel in a controversy over whether *acedia* should count as a carnal or a spiritual vice, positions for which there are again conflicting passages in the *Summa Theologiae*. Both problems hinge on how we should characterize the *object* of *acedia,* so the answer to this question will allow us to adjudicate both disputes at once.

In question 63 of the *Prima Pars,* Aquinas apparently categorizes *acedia,* along with avarice and anger, as a carnal sin rather than as a spiritual sin, like pride and envy. The context is a discussion on the nature of spiritual creatures—in particular, the

[62] *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 2 (emphasis added).

angels. Article 2 asks whether or not demons (fallen angels) are susceptible to only spiritual and not carnal vices because they are spiritual rather than embodied creatures. We rightly anticipate an affirmative answer to the question. The main authoritative source in this text is Augustine's *City of God,* where Augustine denies that the demons can be fornicators or drunkards—that is, susceptible to carnal vices like lust and gluttony. The question thus narrows to whether the demons have only the vice of pride, or whether there are other vices on the traditional list of seven that they also have. Pride and envy seem to qualify as obviously spiritual vices because their objects are a kind of excellence or superiority in another.[63] Pride is aggrieved at the superiority and excelling goodness of God, envy at the superiority or excelling goodness of a neighbor. On the other hand, lust and gluttony count as carnal vices because they have bodily pleasures as their objects.[64]

We can imagine several reasons why *acedia* might count as a carnal vice. Like lust, it might have bodily pleasure as its object. That is, *acedia* might be the vice of inordinately seeking physical rest and comfort ("bodily repose")—"inordinately" meaning that the comfort is sought over and against a spiritual good or is engaged in immoderately (too much). This parallels the case of lust: it can be an inordinate desire either by means of a disorder in its object or in the degree of desire for a licit object.

Acedia might also count as carnal because it involves a passion of the sensitive appetite, namely, sadness. Only creatures with sensitive capacities, which are essentially linked to the body, are capable of a passion in the strictest sense. *Acedia* would thus be like anger, a vice of excessive or misdirected passion. However, this argument is weakened by a distinction Aquinas makes between sorrow and pain (*STh* I-II, q. 35, a. 2 [the treatise on the passions]) and his location of *acedia*'s aversion in the intellectual appetite in *De Malo* (q. 11, a. 1). In the latter passage, Aquinas notes that sorrow and the sin of *acedia* can occur in the

[63] *STh* II-II, q. 162 and q. 36, respectively.
[64] *STh* II-II, q. 153 and q. 148.

intellective appetite as well as the sensitive appetite, so that the excessive or misdirected passions of the sensitive appetite need not be involved at all in cases of *acedia*. There, he also explicitly distances himself from Augustine, who claims that charity's good appears evil "inasmuch as it is contrary to carnal desires."[65]

Despite apparently conceding that *acedia* is a carnal sin in the *Prima Pars*, in the *Secunda Secundae* Aquinas explicitly names *acedia* among the spiritual vices:

> [I]t *cannot* be said that *acedia* 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 pleasures, for this would *not* sever *acedia* from the carnal vices, whereby a person seeks bodily comfort and pleasure.[66]

Here *acedia* is marked out over and against the carnal vices on account of its object, which is a spiritual good. This is the definitive way that Aquinas characterizes virtues (i.e., by their objects) and likewise, the vices. This is also the section of the *Summa Theologiae* that deals with *acedia* directly, and not, as in the passage in the *Prima Pars*, only in passing (in answer to questions about other topics). In the two passages where Aquinas directly addresses the nature of the vice (*De Malo*, q. 11; *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 2) Aquinas numbers *acedia* among the spiritual vices, following the authority of Gregory in the *Moralia*.

Moreover, Aquinas directly counters the characterization of *acedia* as averse to bodily effort or oppressed by physical weariness in several passages. In the principal article from the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q. 35, a. 2), for example, the objector reasons that if *acedia* were aversion to some kind of bodily toil or effort involved in pursuit of a spiritual good, then it would be mere laziness. But that would leave its opposition to charity puzzling. If "the reason why a person shuns spiritual goods is a kind of weariness . . . dislike of toil and love of bodily repose," then "*acedia* would be nothing but laziness, which seems untrue, for

[65] As in the *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 1 passage quoted earlier, Aquinas is quoting a gloss on Psalm 106:18 ("His soul abhorred all manner of meat") from Augustine's *Expositions on the Psalms*.

[66] *STh* II-II, q. 35, a. 2 (emphasis added).

idleness is opposed to carefulness, whereas *acedia* is opposed to joy." Aquinas's reply, as we have just seen, affirms that what distinguishes *acedia* as such cannot be its opposition to bodily labor or effort on the grounds that this would make *acedia* a carnal vice, which it is not. The parallel passage from *De Malo* echoes the same objection and reply:

> [I]t was argued that *acedia* is sadness about a spiritual good for a special reason, namely, inasmuch as it impedes bodily rest or relaxation. But counter to this: to seek bodily rest or relaxation pertains to carnal vices. . . . If then the only reason that *acedia* is a special sin is that it impedes bodily rest or relaxation, it would follow that *acedia* is a carnal sin, whereas Gregory lists *acedia* among the spiritual sins, as is evident in Book XXXI of the *Moralia*. (*De Malo*, q. 11, a. 2, obj. 3)

Finally, in his commentary on I Corinthians, Aquinas also maintains that *acedia* is a spiritual vice on account of its object: "Certain sins are not satisfied [*consummantur*] in carnal pleasure, but only in spiritual pleasure [or the avoidance of spiritual sorrow—the same object is at the root of both], as it is said of the spiritual vices, for instance as with pride, avarice, and *acedia*."[67] Throughout these passages, Aquinas insists that the pursuit of physical comfort or rest at the expense of a spiritual good is not what defines *acedia*.[68] The object of *acedia* is not "friendship-with-God-as-impediment-to-bodily-rest-and-comfort."

How then should we understand *acedia*'s status as a spiritual vice? Returning to our key passage, what does it mean when Aquinas tells us that "this divine good is saddening to us on account of the opposition of the spirit to the flesh" so that "when the love of the flesh is dominant in us we loathe spiritual good *as if something contrary to ourselves*"?[69]

[67] *In I Cor.*, c. 6. Note that avarice also counts as a spiritual vice here, in opposition to its implicit characterization in *STh* I, q. 63, a. 2.

[68] Even when Aquinas does allow that a spiritual good could be "saddening" because it "impedes a bodily good" or "when carnal affection prevails over reason," his concession is a reply to mistaken interpretations of *acedia*, which confuse it with "worldly sorrow" or "sadness over temporal evils"—another reference of Paul's (see *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 3, ad 1).

[69] *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 2 (emphasis added).

The best way to resolve the problem is to think of *acedia* as sorrow at the thought of being in relationship with God because of what I will call "the burdens of commitment." In fact, a symptom of *acedia* is that one perceives being in a relationship and maintaining it as burdens to be borne. Love and friendship are felt as making demands on us, and *acedia* resists them as such. This interpretation pays due attention to the dominance of passages where *acedia* is characterized as a spiritual sin on account of its spiritual object, but it also maintains some link to bodily effort, which is prevalent in both Aquinas's tradition and more recent conceptions of the vice.

The source of sadness in *acedia* is the opposition of "the flesh" and "the spirit." Aquinas is quoting the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:17 here. He is not adopting a Platonic or Manichean dualism that denigrates the material aspect of the person, blaming the body as the source of sinful hindrances while identifying the true self with a person's inner, spiritual aspect (the soul). The problem of sin is not a result of embodiment, even if sin is also manifest there. Thus, winning the war against "the flesh"—if we restrict its meaning to bodily desires, in this case, for ease and comfort—will not make sin or vice go away. Rather, our whole person—intellect, will, sense appetite, and external behavior—needs to be reoriented away from selfishness and alienation toward love of God and neighbor. To interpret Aquinas's use of "flesh" and "spirit" as indicating an opposition in *acedia* between bodily desire and spiritual good runs contrary to his insistence in several central passages that *acedia* should not be defined in terms of its aversion to bodily effort (or desire).

Instead, the most plausible interpretation is to read "flesh" and "spirit" in terms of another pair of Pauline terms, which *are* in opposition—the "old self" and the "new self," sinful and redeemed human nature. As we saw in the beginning of part II, Paul frequently uses these terms to describe the moral transformation of the whole self by the Holy Spirit.[70] Attachment to the old self,

[70] For example, see Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 (quoted at the beginning of part II of this article), and Aquinas's commentaries on them (quoted in note 14, above).

in its alienation from God, is aversion to (becoming) the new self, which is defined by its relationship with God. The old self—"the flesh" (*sarx*, not *soma*)—is not the body or bodily desires, but the sinful nature of the whole person. Sin turns our whole being away from relationship to God, toward self-centeredness and alienation from others. By contrast, the new self, created by charity, orders the whole person toward relationship with God (and neighbor); love opens us up to an identity that is constituted by and consummated in communion with God. (Recall that Aquinas constantly describes the love of charity, as with love in general, as union, friendship, sharing or participating in the nature of another—all relational terms.)

Here is Aquinas's commentary on the "old self" mentioned in Ephesians 4:

> First, what does "the old man" mean? Some hold that the old man is exterior and the new man interior. But it must be said that the old man is both interior and exterior; he is a person who is enslaved by a senility in his soul, due to sin, and in his body whose members provide the tools for sin. Thus a man enslaved to sin *in soul and body* is an old man. . . . And so a man subjected to sin is termed an old man because he is on the way to corruption.[71]

This fundamental opposition of "selves" at the heart of the moral life explains why Aquinas describes *acedia* in the key passage above as loathing spiritual good "as if something *contrary to ourselves.*"

How does the old self/new self interpretation help us understand what goes wrong in *acedia*? *Acedia* sorrows over being in a relationship of love to another. The claims of the other, the transformation of the self required, the commitment to maintain the relationship even when this requires sacrificing one's own desires—these are what *acedia* objects to, not merely the bodily effort they may or may not involve. (As we noted earlier, the person with *acedia* may pour significant bodily effort and emotional energy into the difficult task of constant distraction from and denial of her condition, so the aversion cannot be to

[71] *In Eph.*, c. 4, lect. 7 (emphasis added).

corporalem laborem per se.) Put simply, *acedia* prefers stagnation and alienation to what it sees as the burdens of commitment.

Acedia as aversion to our relationship to God turns away from the claims of a relational identity. Love for another at this level requires vulnerability, challenge, and change; it also involves responsibility and even suffering. In Paul's words to the Colossians, something must die in order for the new self to be born, and it might be an old self to which we are very attached.[72] A deep friendship changes my identity; the deeper the friendship, the deeper the transformation. It is this claim of the other on who I am that *acedia* resists. As Josef Pieper observes, "*Acedia* . . . will not accept supernatural goods because they are, by their very nature, linked to a claim on the one who receives them."[73] *Acedia* resists the self-renewal involved in sanctification. It wants to claim the relationship with God that justifies the self without accepting any further demands to become holy, to be created anew.

Marriage and human friendships make good analogies here. For all its joys, any intense friendship or relationship like marriage has aspects that can seem burdensome. There is not only an investment of time, but an investment of self that is required for the relationship to exist and, further, to flourish. Even more difficult than the physical accommodations are the accommodations of identity: from the perspective of individual "freedom," to be in this relationship will change me and cost me; it will require me to restructure my priorities; it may compromise my plans; it will add obligations; it will demand sacrifice; it will alter the pattern of my thoughts and desires and transform my vision of the world. Stagnating and staying the same is easier and safer, even if ultimately it makes us more unhappy, than risking openness to love's transforming power and its claims on us.

[72] In one of her autobiographical novels, Anne Lamott recounts the words of an old woman at her church who said that "the secret is that God loves us *exactly* the way we are *and* that he loves us too much to let us stay like this" (*Operating Instructions* [New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993], 96; emphasis in original). Those with *acedia* object to not being able to stay the way they are.

[73] Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love,* 119.

Take, for example, a typical situation between a husband and wife. We will assume that, in general, theirs is a relationship of great and enduring friendship. But when they argue at dinnertime and head off to opposite corners of the house for the rest of the evening, it is much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than it is to do the work of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Learning to live together and love each other well after a rift requires them to give up their anger, their score-keeping, their resistance to change, their desire to have their own way, their insistence on seeing the world only from each of their own perspectives. Saying "I'm sorry" takes effort, but it is not simply the physical work of walking across the house and saying the words that each resists.

Do they want the relationship? Yes, they're in it and they're in deep. But do they want to do what it takes to be in relationship? Do they want to honor its claims on them? Do they want to learn genuine unselfishness in the ordinary daily task of living together? Maybe tomorrow. For now at least, each spouse wants the night off to wallow in his or her own selfish loneliness. Love takes effort. Those with *acedia* want the easy life, for they find detachment from the old selfish nature too painful and burdensome, and so they neglect those acts of love that will maintain and deepen the relationship.[74]

Josef Pieper suggests that one afflicted by *acedia* may refuse his own perfection much as someone suffering from a psychological illness refuses do to the therapeutic work necessary for his own healing. This may be because the comfort of familiar miseries is preferable to unknown future possibilities (as we saw illustrated by Lot's wife), but it may also be because the process of healing and the resulting condition of health will bring responsibilities that the individual would prefer to avoid. Pieper comments, "The psychiatrist frequently observes that, while a neurotic individual

[74] Granted, it may be the case that one's tiredness after a long day at work makes one more prone to the initial argument or more reluctant to attempt reconciliation, but in that way, *acedia* is no more carnal than any other sin contingently occasioned by a movement of the sensitive appetite.

may have a superficial will to be restored to health, in actuality he fears more than anything the demands that are made . . . on one who is well."[75]

In addition to the effort required here and now, any serious, long-term, committed relationship—our friendship with God included—requires constant daily care to sustain it. Our relationship to God is "eternal, but daily, too."[76] One with *acedia* is opposed to a life that embraces daily responsibility and the constancy of commitment; the very thought of that kind of relationship makes one weary.

Perhaps this is why various theologians in the thirteenth century and before opposed *acedia* to the petition in the Lord's Prayer for daily bread, which they associated with the Eucharist.[77] Although eating the bread itself is a physical act, by refusing or neglecting it one also rejects the union with Christ implicit in the Eucharist; one resists the incorporation of Christ that occurs when his body (the bread) is made part of our own bodies. (It also shuns participation in the body of Christ that is the church.) It is no accident that *acedia* neglects the very place where the most intimate communion with and participation in God occurs. Further, its opposition to this petition reveals its distaste for the ongoing ("daily") efforts required to maintain our friendship with God over the long haul.

This second interpretation of the cause of sorrow, therefore, has the advantage of explaining how *acedia* can count as a spiritual vice (i.e., one with a spiritual object), and one specially opposed to charity (i.e., friendship/participation in God's nature), while maintaining some link with effort (including perhaps the bodily effort of the first interpretation[78]) as the source of sorrow and resistance. It also privileges Aquinas's definitions of this vice

[75] Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love,* 119.

[76] See Kathleen Norris, *Quotidian Mysteries* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 51-53.

[77] Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth,* 56.

[78] If the first explanation tends to over-physicalize *acedia,* I want to be careful not to over-spiritualize it, for Aquinas thinks that human beings, in virtue of being a unity of body and soul, experience sin and vice in their whole person (in bodily desires, the will, and the intellect), even if the virtues and vices are primarily located in the soul (*STh* I-II, q. 55, a. 4).

in those passages devoted to *acedia* as the central subject of inquiry.[79]

Why then does Aquinas say that the demons, who can have only spiritual vices, cannot have *acedia*?

Aquinas maintains (*STh* I, q. 63, a. 2) that *acedia* "is a kind of sadness, whereby one becomes sluggish in spiritual exercises because they weary the body" (a direct paraphrase of Augustine's own definition of the vice, quoted in *De Malo,* q. 11, a. 1). This limited Augustinian definition names one possible form of *acedia,* which is why Aquinas accepts it here. Nevertheless, it is by no means *acedia*'s only or even primary form. On the Augustinian definition, *acedia* is linked to embodiment, just as avarice is linked to temporal goods (*STh* I, q. 63, a. 2, ad 2). But if this makes a vice "carnal"—something Aquinas never actually says in this passage—then it must be in an extended sense of the term. For when Aquinas discusses avarice in the *Secunda Secundae,* he seats the love of money in the intellectual appetite (the will) just as we saw him do with sorrow in the case of *acedia.*[80] I read Aquinas as implicitly including in the list of vices the demons cannot have (in *STh* I, q. 63, a. 2) any vice possibly involving some bodily connection or expression, in order to honor the authority of Augustine in the *sed contra,* who claims that the demons have only pride and envy. The main issue in the article is the root of the demons' sin, which is why Aquinas spends the bulk of the article explaining how pride is the first sin of the demons, and concludes that "Under envy and pride, as found in the demons, are comprised all other sins derived from them" (ibid., ad 3).

[79] The four passages cited in favor of the first explanation (physical weariness or effort as the cause of *acedia*), except the passage about the demons, are either definitions quoted by authorities (John Damascene, Augustine, etc.) or words put in the mouth of an objector, and two of the four are remarks about *acedia* in texts outside Aquinas's main treatments of the vice (in *STh* I and I-II). I deal directly with the passage in the *Prima Pars* because it appears to be the place where Aquinas himself comes closest to endorsing the "weariness" view.

[80] Avarice involves desiring money for the sake of gaining temporal possessions or goods, and can be counted as a carnal vice in that sense, but the love of money also includes a desire for security and self-sufficiency and self-provision (no need to rely on Providence for the future), as is indicated by Aquinas's characterization of money as a partly spiritual, partly material object in the treatise on justice (*STh* II-II, q. 118).

According to the second interpretation, which I am advocating, *acedia* does not trade primarily on an opposition of bodily toil to spiritual gain. Rather it objects to the effort involved in the investment and transformation of the self over time. If the demons cannot have *acedia,* then, perhaps it is not because they lack bodies, but because their nature is such that it is determined by a single act of will rather than by the lifelong process of moral transformation characteristic of the human condition.[81] Unlike human beings, purely spiritual creatures do not have to commit to an ongoing process of moral transformation and the effort involved in that slow, daily, self-mortifying change.[82]

My conclusion, then, is that the above passage from the *Prima Pars* is not decisive in understanding *acedia* (nor avarice either, for that matter). *Acedia*'s resistance to our participation in the divine nature, to our friendship with God, is resistance to the burdens of commitment—understood as the sacrifice of the "old self," the transformation of identity—involved in that relationship. Our aversion, distaste, and grief are best understood as caused by the demands of accepting the spiritual good of divine friendship and the personal transformation that love requires, and not the sacrifice of bodily comfort or pleasure *per se,* although this may of course be involved.

Here *acedia* reveals its roots in pride. Pride, for Aquinas, is the refusal to acknowledge God's superior excellence. Those with pride shun a relationship with God because it means relinquishing first place for the self; such people prefer alienation so that they can maintain the illusion of self-sufficiency. Those afflicted with *acedia* also prefer alienation so that the old self can remain their first priority. Friendship requires them to share and give

[81] Alternatively, we could simply deny that the demons have *acedia* themselves, and—following Aquinas's designation of the demons as extrinsic principles of human acts—say that human beings have *acedia* because of the demons' corrupting influence, a role in which they manifest pride (i.e., usurping God's role as the extrinsic principle of [rightly ordered] human acts through law and grace, but not the other vices strictly speaking). This follows Aquinas's own comments in *STh* I, q. 63, a. 2, ad 3.

[82] At least they don't seem to have the "over-and-over again-ness" of the self-investment that seems (affectively, emotionally, mentally, and perhaps also bodily) wearisome.

themselves; this investment is onerous and burdensome if they are too attached to their old selves. So the prideful resist a relationship with God altogether because they loathe any form of dependence and submission, whereas those with *acedia* accept the relationship initially, but then resist the demands of love for mutual self-giving and self-transformation. In that sense, *acedia is* sloth, for it wants the easy way out—the benefits of the relationship without the burdens.

Ironically, by their restless resistance to what they see as the burdens of commitment, those afflicted by the vice of *acedia* become a burden to themselves. Perhaps, then, it is especially to them that Christ addresses himself in Matthew's gospel, when he says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30).

Conclusion

Aquinas's conception of *acedia* explains why it merits a place among the seven capital vices. On his account, *acedia* strikes at the heart of who we are called to be by turning us against our own happiness and ultimate end. It does so because it perceives the demands of friendship with God as a burdensome self-sacrifice, and it clings to the old self while resisting the demands of love. In the words of Isaac Watts, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my self, my life, my all."[83] *Acedia* thus involves aversion to more than just bodily effort, although that may certainly be involved; properly speaking, it shirks the long, painful process of dying away to one's whole sinful nature, which encompasses body and soul, action and will. In that sense, Aquinas's characterization of *acedia* explains why it should count as one of the most serious of the vices, undermining, as it does, our fundamental motivation to

[83] Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 384.

engage in the process of forming our character after the pattern of Christ.

Without *acedia*'s link to charity, however, the historical turns that reduced this vice to simple laziness and made diligence its logical counterpoint are perfectly understandable. It is a virtue of Aquinas's account that he incorporates the link to laziness in his characterization of *acedia,* since the element of bodily weariness and physical effort is present in conceptions of the vice from its beginnings with Evagrius and on into the present day. Only because his conception of this vice makes resistance to the demands of charity central, however, can he also pay due to the strands of the Christian tradition that make *acedia* a spiritual and a capital vice. Hence his account stands as a helpful explanation of why *acedia* was taken to be such a serious vice for many centuries, and why contemporary accounts tend to fail to see its importance.[84]

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