

Sloth, Inaction and Despair

by

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“In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair It is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”¹ This striking quotation from Dorothy Sayers describes the vice of sloth as well as it does the pseudo-virtue of tolerance. Sloth, I will argue, is a vice that is opposed to the effort that goodness requires. It consists principally in inaction and is related to a family of vices that are also vices of inaction, procrastination, apathy, and laziness, and also to the phenomenon known to the medieval tradition as *acedia* or *tristitia*. These vices, while all having an inclination to inactivity, can be differentiated in useful and important ways that shed light on the subject of sloth.

Nearly everyone is familiar with procrastination, which is often associated with laziness, and thus with the concept of sloth. There are at least three forms of procrastination of note here. First I will speak of a less familiar form identified and described by Barbara Moore in her essay entitled “Procrastination: A Modern Malaise”. This essay portrays as a vice a subtle and interesting form of procrastination that resists recognizing the temporal dimension of our life in the world:

Procrastination, or resistance to being on time, implies reluctance to being *in* time. To the procrastinator (and by this I don’t mean someone who occasionally procrastinates, but someone for whom procrastination is chronic and characterological), time is not the indifferent medium within which events occur, but is instead a merciless persecutor that attempts to force compliance with its demands. Working—and, by extension, completing anything on time—means submitting to this tyrant, a tyrant with no patience for explanations or excuses. To procrastinators, completing an assigned task on time means defeat, humiliation, submission. Their sense of autonomy and initiative comes from resistance,

¹ Reed 73

refusal, failure.²

The chronic procrastinator then stubbornly refuses to admit to herself that she is a temporal being in a society built along the observation of distinct temporal units.

Inability or refusal to see reality for itself is failure of moral vision, which can be due to either (culpable or otherwise³) or vice. But while all vice is ignorance, not all ignorance is vice.⁴ Contrary to vice, virtues or good habits incline one to accurate moral vision and therefore to right action. There is a long tradition of moral philosophy that discusses virtue as the pursuit of being conformed to reality. In the Platonic tradition, Iris Murdoch explains that good moral vision is accurate moral vision—the “ability to perceive reality” is “required for goodness” and is “a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self.”⁵ Similarly, the whole thrust of the ethics of the Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor centers on this concept of virtue as the road to reality: “Humility consists not in railing against thy self, or wearing mean clothes, or going softly and submissively; but a hearty and real evil or mean opinion of thy self. Believe thy self an unworthy person, heartily, as thou believest thy self to be hungry, or poor, or sick, when thou art so.”⁶ Humility—proper self-estimation and self-concern (or conversely, proper self-abandonment)—aims at believing what is *true* about one’s state before God and man. For Taylor, as well as for

² Moore 646

³ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q.76.A2: “[I]gnorance denotes privation of knowledge, i.e. lack of knowledge of those things that one has a natural aptitude to know. Some of these we are under an obligation to know, those, to wit, without the knowledge of which we are unable to accomplish a due act rightly. Wherefore all are bound in common to know the articles of faith, and the universal principles of right, and each individual is bound to know matters regarding his duty or state On the other hand, vincible ignorance [ignorance which may be overcome] is a sin, if it be about matters one is bound to know; but not, if it be about things one is not bound to know.”

⁴ Highlighting the nature of vice as ignorance, Aristotle writes: “Now it is true that all wicked men are ignorant of what they ought to do and refrain from doing, and that this error is the cause of injustice and of vice in general” (*Nicomachean Ethics* bk. III. i. 14; p. 123).

⁵ Murdoch 63

⁶ Taylor “Acts or Offices of Humility” sec. 2

Murdoch and much of the philosophical tradition informed by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, vice is not just a bad habit, it is a bad habit because it is unreasonable, irrational, and ultimately logically inconsistent thought, word, and deed.

Indeed, the primary critique that Moore levels at procrastinators is *not* that they are careless or that they need more classes in time management—it is that they are reluctant, or in extreme cases, they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the temporal rules of the universe.⁷ This sort of procrastination stubbornly insists on its own way of doing things (one’s own evil habituated actions) rather than the way of doing things that actually admits the place of the temporal in one’s life. “The other alternative,” Moore suggests, “although difficult to specify, is nevertheless easily recognizable when we meet up with it. It involves willing surrender, as opposed to submission . . . to the task’s requirements, that is, a willingness to be guided by them. But it involves, as well, finding a personal way, one’s own way, of meeting those requirements.”⁸ This is an example of conforming one’s soul to reality in a way parallel to the sort of self-abnegation that Murdoch suggests is required for accurate moral vision. Both authors point to a self-surrender that is necessary for good habits, which is a necessary concept for further discussion of virtues and vices.

In contrast to this fascinating examination of a particular kind of vicious procrastination, there is a more common form of procrastination that is more closely connected to incontinence than to vice.⁹ The common procrastinator is one who puts off,

⁷ Moore tells an interesting story about how the refusal of vicious procrastinators to submit to temporal rules may incline them to ignore other kinds of rules. The subject of Moore’s story continually found herself dissatisfied with her life and her relationships with others because, judges Moore, she refused to play by the rules of what makes and keeps deep, rich, and satisfying personal relationships.

⁸ Moore 648

⁹ The incontinent man knows the principle of reasonable action like the virtuous man and unlike the vicious man. But he is unlike the continent man in that he does not act according to that principle: “For

more or less consciously and intentionally, doing necessary tasks until the last possible minute. The procrastinator who consciously and intentionally decides to put off her work until a time unsuitable to get that work done well because she dislikes it is still vicious, either in a variation of what Moore describes, or perhaps a true vicious aversion to effort, as in sloth. The procrastinator who misestimates (perhaps often) what is “the last possible minute” to complete whatever task is at hand finds herself either completing tasks habitually late or woefully unprepared to fulfill her obligations.¹⁰ It is likely that in some or most cases, this tendency to procrastinate springs out of carelessness or excessive optimism about one’s own abilities (rather than the stubborn resistance to being in time that Moore spoke of). Many procrastinators of either the careless or optimistic ilk seem first and foremost to lack awareness of the limitations of time or effort (or perhaps lack awareness of time in general) or possibly they lack the necessary experience that would allow them to have the proper estimation of their ability to accomplish a given task in a given time frame. However, one could simply be distractible. After all, one need not *intend* to wait until the last minute to complete one’s tasks in order to be labeled a procrastinator, and many so-called procrastinators do not aim as such tardiness or ill-preparedness. If someone procrastinates due to being distractible and overwhelmed by other concerns or interests despite knowing the good she ought to pursue, then she is incontinent rather than vicious. In contrast to the stubborn time-hater of Moore’s description, this kind of procrastinator has failed regarding the will (incontinence) rather

exactly as paralysed limbs when we intend to move them to the right turn on the contrary to the left, so is it with the soul; the impulses of incontinent people move in contrary directions” (*Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 1; ch. 13).

¹⁰ There are some, one might protest, who can put off things until the “last possible minute” but still complete them in a respectable manner. Should these be named procrastinators? Yes, if they have compromised their own standards of good or excellent work in leaving tasks to be done later. Personal ability rather than a mean of general ability should be the standard by which we judge our proclivity to procrastination, laziness, or sloth.

than moral vision (vice), though both fail to act well with regard to their temporal limits and obligations.

In addition, a more radical form of this kind of procrastination also exists—it is characterized by excessive carelessness, excessive imprudence, excessive lateness and excessive ill-preparedness due to a compounding vice, such as apathy, laziness or sloth. “Pure” procrastination has to do with temporal limits and obligations and failures in regard to them. But one may have even more difficulties with procrastination because of the presence of other vices. One can procrastinate with one’s homework because one is avoiding the hard work, because one is bored with one’s work, because one is afraid of doing a bad job, because one is distracted by a thousand competing concerns. Following from this, it ought to be noted that, unlike some of the other vices-or-sins to be discussed, procrastination-as-vice or as-incontinence rarely appears alone. Thus, while it is a mistake to reduce procrastination to laziness or sloth, laziness and sloth often compound procrastination and these vices easily encourage one another to grow and fester. Self-surrender, as Moore noted, will defeat vicious procrastination, and discipline and accountability will help defeat the weakness of the will in procrastination that is due to incontinence.

Furthermore, it may be noted that procrastination, along with apathy, laziness, and sloth, seem to be connected with a failure to act well due to a failure of reason, or of the will, to apprehend the good in the way that is proper. In one sense, all vicious acts fail to act *well*, but not all vice inclines one to *inaction* or to a paralysis or deadening of the will. Lust leads one to act or think badly, but is obviously not primarily about *inhibition of*

action—or what one might call a sin of omission.¹¹ All vices blind us morally, but not all result in an obvious lack of action so much as they lead to a host of bad actions. What this group of vices has in common are failures to act, failures to do the good one ought to do, not committing an evil act one ought not commit. In any sense of the term, procrastination is much more about inaction than action, and one could say that the grouping of vices surrounding sloth are vices in a parallel sense to the way in which sins of omissions are sins. A prayer of confession typically recognizes both sins of commission and omission: “I confess . . . that I have sinned by my own fault in thought, word, and deed, in things done and left undone”¹² All of these vices and sins lead to this sort of blameworthy inaction.

Even more so than procrastination, then, apathy is a state in which people fail to act well, in this case they fail to take proper concern for things worthy of concern. An article about voter apathy in Europe for the ratification of the Constitution of the European Union noted that people tended to feel more apathetic and indifferent when they felt helpless to effect change. The authors cited an experiment concerning “learned helplessness” to buttress their point concerning apathy and perceived helplessness:

But there is a further manifestation of apathy to consider: a behavioural condition associated with it, known as “learned helplessness”. In 1965 a psychologist, Martin Seligman, subjected two groups of dogs to electric shocks. The first group could end the punishment by pressing a lever. These dogs recovered quickly; in a subsequent experiment, they learned to avoid further shocks by jumping a low wall. The second group had a lever that did nothing. They became apathetic and in the subsequent experiment simply cowered on the electrified floor, unable to

¹¹ Speaking of agreement between two thinkers on the moral weight of inaction, Charles Pinches writes: “neither thinker believes that because a particular refraining or omission is an omission and not a commission, it is therefore, based on that fact alone, morally different from another particular action or commission” (171).

¹² The Reconciliation of a Penitent, Form One, *The Book of Common Prayer* p. 447

escape the shocks. They had “learned helplessness”.¹³

Already, then, we see a connection between inaction due to apathy, which in turn is due to hopelessness or despair of a desired outcome. Such hopelessness may or may not be a proper reaction to a given situation. For instance, both the dogs and the voters on the EU Constitution despaired that any action by their part might prove to get around the fate they desired to avoid. However, one may be inclined to have more sympathy for the unfortunate dogs rather than the European voters. This lack of sympathy might result from a perception that the voters’ gave up too easily and perhaps ought not to have succumbed to despair so quickly. We perhaps think that human beings ought to have a bit more resilience to this “learned helplessness” than our faithful canine companions.

On the other hand, the writers of the *Economist* article note that the indifference of European voters to the EU Constitution may be a reaction that the vote deserves. Concerning an instance where the European Union seemed to run roughshod over the will of the people, the *Economist* reports:

In Europe, the treaties of Maastricht and Nice were rejected by Danish and Irish voters, only to be largely implemented later. If the constitution is successfully revived—a big if—it would continue this pattern. Some EU leaders may hope that, if they do this often enough, apathetic voters will learn that they are helpless to stop further integration, even when they want to.”¹⁴

Thus, perhaps this despair (specific to voting for the EU Constitution) might be, to a degree, justified. Or, at least, a certain skepticism (apparent in the voice of the authors of this article) might well be justified. In this case, there is a situation in which apathy (a cousin to sloth) and despair meet. The authors of this article describe the voting populous as apathetic because they do not seem to care about the fate of the EU Constitution, and

¹³ “Two Cheers for Apathy”

¹⁴ “Two Cheers for Apathy”

demonstrate their lack of interest accordingly by not voting. However, the authors then suggest that such an “apathetic” reaction is *justified* because voters have been shown that their voting is useless, and whether or not they agree to the terms the higher ups in the EU want, the EU will see it done despite their vote. It is more useful to talk about this then, in terms of despair rather than apathy. As the article shows, the term apathy is used to describe a state in which people are indifferent to the pursuit or acknowledgement of a good to which they ought not be indifferent. “Apathy” suggests a moral callousness—as if practical reason (which tells us what is good and especially what is good for us) were desensitized, by virtue of the formula of perceived helplessness and thus lack of concern: “There is nothing I can do about this, so why care?”

The difference between this and our European voters or the dogs of the learned helplessness experiment is slight but significant. Both the voters and the dogs cease to perform a particular kind of action—the voters stop voting and the dogs stop trying to escape—because they perceive that any further *action* is irrelevant—resistance is futile. However, there is no particular evidence that they cease *caring* about their fate. It seems like the dogs, at the very least, would still very much like to get out of their predicament, and have a lot of concern and desire that the electric shocks stop. Voters in the EU may be more or less apathetic or despairing. Some may have lost interest in participating in their democratic self-governance while some may have despaired of the efficacy of their participation. But in this article, what the authors have truly described is a case of voters’ despair rather than voters’ apathy.

Just as apathy can be caused and compounded by despair, it can also be caused and compounded by sloth. Instead of despairing of action or change, one can simple give

up on action or change because it seems too difficult, or rather, because it requires more effort than what one desires to put forth. Thus a person who ceased caring about things he ought to care about because he did not feel like putting forth the mental or emotional energy would be both apathetic and slothful. However, one can see that the combination of sloth and apathy is worse than despair/apathy (though, perhaps easier to combat if the person is not intractably slothful), but not worse than “plain” apathy, sheer indifference, or moral callousness—such untroubled indifference is harder to picture than the other forms of apathy.

In addition, one could give up on caring about action and change for another reason—because to struggle to keep on caring about such a thing, or to eventually do something about it, might cost more in terms of personal energy, concern, and heartache than one is willing to pay. Avoiding concern in this way could also be sloth, but it could also be due to fear and/or cowardice. One could fear (or possibly resent) the burden of such concern for a thing, thinking that it could cause one some sort of significant loss or harm that one is not willing to risk. Apathy due to one’s surrender to unreasonable fears would be apathy due to cowardice. For example, many people dismiss or make light of troubles, disappointments, and losses of others because they fear the emotional burden of empathizing or having to acknowledge the depths of another’s loss, which in turn might make them acknowledge their own, which they had been avoiding. This is one way, a common way, of habituating apathy—deadening one’s concerns (dishonestly) in order to escape a burden or concern.

“Pure” apathy, then, is the opposite of the-ends-justify-the-means utilitarianism. Instead of saying that the ends justify the means, the apathetic person perceives that there

is no way of achieving the end (probably falsely—apathy and cynicism run together sometimes) and so does away with both means and ends and judges that means and end ought not be cared about. Apathy says, “Because x cannot change in a way I perceive to be good, there is no reason to have concern for x; I will not concern myself with x.” For instance, one may argue that there is a certain kind of concern that citizens of countries with democratic governments ought to have to participate in said governance. Thus, regardless of the efficacy of one’s participation in one’s government, one still ought to be concerned about it—there is no justification for (although we may understand and have sympathy for such an attitude) abandoning one’s concern for one’s government. In fact, the proper reaction to a perceived loss of political power in a democracy ought to be *greater* not lesser concern. Again, the way to habituate the soul to apathy is to make oneself unconcerned for things for which one knows one should be concerned.

The upside of apathy is that one can defeat this vice by giving evidence of hope to change things. If one can reverse the first part of the apathy’s construal of things (x cannot change in any good or desirable way), then one does not have to slip into an apathetic mindset. The poison of apathy, and especially deeply ingrained apathy, is that it eventually destroys belief in one’s own agency and agency in general. Because apathy tends to be about perceived helplessness (neither I nor anyone else can change x), it often leads to moral disengagement. The apathetic refuse to engage their responsibilities and refuse to exercise their agency in the proper ways. The vice or evil habit of apathy then, leads to great and glaring sins of omission and leads one to increasing degrees of indifference to what is good and to being concerned for what is good. It distorts practical

reason by eroding belief in proper agency or power of the will, and this distortion leaves one insensible to the good one ought to pursue.

There is much debate over the meaning of the word sloth, given that its counterparts in Greek and Latin—*acedia* and *tristitia*—have strong associations with translations of other English words. For instance, although R. R. Reno and Robert C. Roberts both agree that the word *acedia* is closer in meaning to apathy, Aquinas associates both *acedia* and *tristitia* with sorrow, which is something like pain.¹⁵ According to Reno, *acedia* is a complex state of “spiritual apathy”.¹⁶ In his article, “Fighting the Noonday Devil” he neatly encapsulates the variegated forms of *acedia* known to the medieval tradition:

Acedia is a word of Greek origin that means, literally, “without care.” In the Latin tradition of the seven deadly sins, it comes down to us as *tristitia* or *otiositas*, sadness or idleness. But citing synonyms and translations will not do. For the monastic tradition, *acedia* or sloth is a complex spiritual state that defies simple definition. It describes a lassitude and despair that overwhelms spiritual striving. Sloth is not mere idleness or laziness; it involves a *torpor animi*, a dullness of the soul that can stem from restlessness just as easily as from indolence. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of a *sterilitas animae*, a sterility, dryness, and barrenness of his soul that makes the sweet honey of Psalm-singing seem tasteless and turns vigils into empty trials. Medieval English writers often speak of *acedia* as wanhope, a waning of confidence in the efficacy and importance of prayer. For Dante, on the fourth ledge of purgatory, those afflicted by *acedia* are described as suffering from *lento amore*, a slow love that cannot motivate and uplift, leaving the soul stagnant, unable to move under the heavy burden of sin.¹⁷

Roberts agrees with Reno that “‘*Akhdiā*’ is cognate with ‘*khdiv*’ (care, concern) and ‘*khdomai*’ (I heed), and means something like ‘apathy’ or ‘indifference’.”¹⁸ “The earliest writers (Evagrius of Pontus, d. 399; John Cassian, C. 420),” Roberts notes, “do not regard *acedia* as a form of sadness, but it comes to be so regarded with Gregory the

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q35.A1

¹⁶ Reno 31

¹⁷ Reno 32

¹⁸ Roberts 245

Great (d. 604), and this characterization becomes entrenched with Thomas Aquinas's endorsement of it."¹⁹ Speaking in the context of the monastic life, John Cassian says there are two kinds of *acedia*: "one of which sends those affected by it to sleep; while the other makes them forsake their cell and flee away."²⁰ For this reason, Roberts disagrees with Aquinas (and the later medieval tradition) that *acedia* is truly a kind of sorrow. He suggests that sorrow is one of its elements, but that it involves other emotions as well, such as anger and disgust, and so ought not be classified as a kind of sorrow, or even a specific kind of emotion, but rather a troubled spiritual state with emotional elements. However, in this case, Roberts' criticism is somewhat off-target. For Aquinas (and those who follow him in the medieval tradition) sorrow is not the species of emotion concerned with loss as Roberts classified, but is one of the basic passions centered around the possession of an evil: "when the good is obtained, it causes the appetite to rest, as it were, in the good obtained: and this belongs to the passion of 'delight' or 'joy'; the contrary of which, in respect of evil [obtained], is 'sorrow' or 'sadness.'"²¹ Sorrow and pain are synonymous as are joy and pleasure. Thus *acedia* is a kind of sorrow in which one perceives oneself as possessing an evil that is actually good. Where one ought to joy or delight, one finds oneself in pain or sorrow.

Aquinas, Cassian, Roberts, and Reno all discuss the same thing—they all talk about sloth as *acedia* (a kind of sinful sadness) particularly concerning the experience of spiritual dryness and/or despair in the monastery. Reno, however, is something of a transitional figure—he is deeply aware of sloth explained as *acedia*, or a sort of sorrow, but also associates it with laziness and failure of proper action. For instance, in "Fighting

¹⁹ Roberts 245

²⁰ Cassian Conference 5: "Conference of Abbot Serapion. On the Eight Principal Faults."

²¹ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q23.A4

the Noonday Devil,” he gives a modern-day example of sloth-as-*acedia*: “Let me update the whispering voice of sloth: ‘All things are sanctified by the Lord, and one could just as well worship on the golf course as in a sanctuary made by human hands.’ Or: ‘God is love, and love affirms; therefore, God accepts me just as I am. I need not exercise myself to change.’”²² Other authors are more concerned with sloth-as-laziness as a failure of the will that inclines one to morally significant inaction. Thus, we ought to distinguish laziness from sloth before moving on to a deeper exploration of the complicated issues surrounding sloth as it has been understood in Christian tradition.

There is a concise picture of laziness given to us by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*:

Teachers will tell you that the laziest boy in the class is the one who works hardest in the end. They mean this. If you give two boys, say, a proposition in geometry to do, the one who is prepared to take trouble will try to understand it. The lazy boy will try to learn it by heart because, for the moment, that needs less effort. But sixth months later, when they are preparing for an exam, that lazy boy is doing hours and hours of miserable drudgery over things the other boy understands, and positively enjoys, in a few minutes. Laziness means more work in the long run.²³

Laziness, then, acknowledges the good end or purpose in any given situation, and even attempts to achieve this end, only badly. Laziness cares about the end, but because of weakness of will, fails to affix the proper means of an activity to the end. In this case, the lazy boy wants to complete his task, but perhaps is enchanted by a spring afternoon out of doors, and thus memorizes his homework instead of taking the care to do it properly. Unlike the apathetic soul, the lazy boy does care. Like the apathetic soul, he fails to achieve his goal. The apathetic soul fails because he has already given up on achieving

²² Reno 32

²³ Lewis 197

his goal, and the lazy boy fails because he is distracted by his desires for things other than his homework and thus fails to do his work well.

A lazy person who does not succumb to apathy will eventually do the work he ought to do, just poorly and in a less constructive fashion than he might have. Again, this is a failure of proper action. At its heart, laziness is about the disinclination to put forth the proper effort to the task at hand and is probably best thought of as a kind of incontinence rather than vice that sees the good it desires, but does not want to do what is necessary to attain it (again, a failure of the will rather than a failure of moral vision). The boy could have stuck to his resolution to do his homework, but it was such a good day to play outside. Unlike procrastination, this is not due to a misunderstanding of the task's parameters (or temporal parameters), but is rather due to a failure of the will to stay with practical reason. Practical reason succeeds in seeing the given task as good, a reflexive good, good *for me*, to do or to achieve, but is overwhelmed by present desires: i.e., it is truly good for me to clean up the dishes now, but I am distracted by my tiredness and the presence of the television so I do not take the time to clean up the dishes from dinner . . . or lunch . . . or breakfast.²⁴

In addition, there is no sense in which laziness must be regulated to household chores or daily tasks. Just as *acedia* is first and foremost opposed to spiritual good, laziness can be opposed not to physical effort or everyday chores, but to spiritual, intellectual or moral engagement. Indeed, elsewhere in *Mere Christianity* Lewis warns of the importance of eschewing intellectual laziness: "The proper motto is not 'Be good, sweet maid and let who can be clever,' but 'Be good, sweet maid, and don't forget that this involves being as clever as you can.' God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of

²⁴ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q77.A2

any other slackers.”²⁵ In addition, it is quite possible to be lazy about spiritual disciplines. Many people, for example, speak of the good of attending church weekly, reading or meditating on Scripture daily, or otherwise spending the necessary time in fruitful spiritual engagement while they continue to miss church regularly, or more often than not fail to read their Bibles. Much of this has to do with simply being distractible: I know that I ought to read the Bible before a certain time at night—if I do not, I will become sleepy and not really pay attention to what I am doing. But I got caught up watching the news or answering emails and neglected my Scripture reading yet again.

There are many ways in which sloth diverges from laziness, not the least is a general acknowledgement that sloth is, if nothing else, *worse* than laziness. While laziness admits that it is good to clean up after meals in a timely fashion and thus has in one respect accurate moral vision (or well functioning practical reason), sloth does not admit and cannot see the good that laziness fails to act for, hence it is a true vice, a true failure of moral vision. Instead of agreeing with the lazy person that, “I ought to clean up, but,” the slothful says, “cleaning up doesn’t really matter, what difference does it really make?” Likewise, how laziness may be habituated into sloth is easy to see. If reason bows to the weakness of the will present in incontinence and proclaims the action or inaction of laziness to be the truly proper and good action of a situation, one will quickly become slothful as well as lazy.

Perhaps the deepest problem with sloth (as with vice in general) is that the slothful does not know better—he does not know that what he is doing (or most likely, what he is failing to do) is wrong. However, this ignorance is morally culpable.²⁶ An

²⁵ Lewis 78

²⁶ See footnote 3 or *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q.76.A2.

exception to this rule might be the lazy or slothful child who really ought not be identified as such—children have not yet had enough moral training such that we hold them fully accountable for their moral vision (or lack thereof). Instead, we hold their parents responsible for their moral vision, development, and action until they are old enough to deliberate on their actions for themselves. Children, although they become morally culpable in degrees rather than all at once, begin to be responsible when they begin to deliberate on their action. Thus, the child who tries to excuse his messy room or provide reasons for why he ought not clean, bathe, or help with chores is probably rightly identified as lazy. If the child truly believes what he says (as opposed to merely excusing or rationalizing his behavior), then he is slothful—one can imagine a child sitting obliviously in the disaster area that is his room, totally untroubled by the mess surrounding him.

Again, we can imagine two older children, perhaps around the ages of 10 or 12, one who plays outside an hour or so too long while guiltily remembering the chores she ought to do, and another child who feels no such compunction while likewise playing outside and neglecting her chores. The former has had her moral vision trained well enough that she requires only discipline, while the latter lacks the necessary moral formation to enable her to feel guilt for failing to take care of her responsibilities. If the first child makes a habit of “forgetting” to do her chores in favor of playing outside, she is probably lazy. If the second child routinely ignores her responsibilities with no compunction, she is slothful. The second moral fault is obviously harder to correct than the first because it requires a change in moral vision, which one cannot force, only guide through parental discipline and training. And while we may or may not blame (judge

culpable) a 10 or 12 year old for such an instance of sloth, we would certainly blame a slothful adult for a similar lapse.

Laziness succeeds in seeing the dishes as good to clean up but fails to act on this perception, while sloth is oblivious to (willfully or otherwise) the good of doing one's dishes and only sees the promise of rest in the television as a good, not the dishes. Refusal or inability to perceive and acknowledge what is good is a hallmark of vice in general, but sloth is the vice that is unmoved to pursue the good. All sins, Aquinas tells us, consist in turning toward a mutable good, in the case of sloth, inaction and rest, and away from God.²⁷ The habit of turning towards inaction and rest in a blameworthy way is what distinguishes sloth from laziness, which (like some forms of procrastination) is only a kind of incontinence, a weakness of will rather than a vicious failure of moral vision.

But what is the good that sloth is unable to see? The other forms of vice and incontinence so far discussed, procrastination, apathy, and laziness, are concerned principally with inaction. Those who procrastinate, are apathetic, or are lazy routinely fail in their obligations; they sin by omission. The procrastinator fails in terms of his temporal limits and obligations; the apathetic, in due concern for given goods; the lazy, to put forth the necessary effort to complete his task well. Sloth, on the other hand, principally fails to recognize goods as good because it is opposed to the effort that the attainment of such goods requires. Addressing this opposition, Reno writes: "a life *acedia* [without care], is our cultural ideal. Pride may be the root of all evil, but in our day, the trunk, branches, and leaves of evil are characterized by a belief that moral responsibility, spiritual effort, and religious discipline are empty burdens, ineffective and

²⁷ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q20.A1.ad1

archaic demands that cannot lead us forward, inaccessible ideals that, even if we believe in them, are beyond our capacity.”²⁸ It is *par excellence* the vice and sin of omission.

Sloth hates the effort (physical, spiritual or otherwise) that any given good requires—which is why there can be many different manifestations of sloth. It is work, effort, or difficulty that sloth despises. The Proverbs understand this well: “The slothful hideth his hand in his bosom; it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth” and “The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting: but the substance of a diligent man is precious.”²⁹ All vice, as Aquinas explains, is displeased at some “spiritual good which is in each act of virtue,” and this is not particular to any vice, but found in every vice—but sloth hates the effort that the spiritual good requires, which is present in each act of virtue.³⁰ As noted above, Aquinas names sloth a kind of sorrow or pain, but it is easy to relate his understanding of sloth to this hatred, displeasure, or insensibility to goodness because of one’s disinclination to see the good of effort present in any act of virtue.

Aquinas defines sloth in this way: “Sloth . . . is an oppressive sorrow, which, to wit, so weighs upon man’s mind, that he wants to do nothing; thus acid things are also cold. Hence sloth implies a certain weariness of work, as appears from a gloss on Ps. 106:18, ‘Their soul abhorred all manner of meat,’ and from the definition of some who say sloth is a ‘sluggishness’ of the mind which neglects to begin good.”³¹ The sadness here that Aquinas takes to be characteristic of sloth is a sort of deep, generalized opposition of the soul to the good of acting (as we have said before, because of the effort

²⁸ Reno 32

²⁹ Proverbs 26:15; 12:27 KJV

³⁰ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q35.A2

³¹ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q35.A1

required). Instead of wanting to work or do something, the slothful wants to do nothing—because everything he sees to do seems grievously toilsome to him. He cannot see the possible good of doing anything, but rather he sees every possibility (or many possibilities) as bad for him because the work or effort required is construed as being intensely disagreeable or somehow harmful. If this badness is a relative sort of badness intermixed with a recognition of some goodness (as the Proverb says, eating is grievous to me, but perhaps better than starving), then the slothful man will be sad about what he has to do (or possibly angry or resentful). But if the slothful cannot perceive any goodness in the possible range of activities, he will despair, and as Cassian and the Proverbs tell us, go to sleep or otherwise flee his circumstances.³²

Sadness or despair of good may result because one has actually suffered loss of good things, or because one has lost hope in the goodness of a thing for oneself by finding a present good unattainable or unavailable. Reno describes this phenomenon well:

The noonday devil tempts us into a state of spiritual despair and sadness that drains us of our Christian hope. It makes the life of prayer and charity seem pointless and futile. In the heat of midday, as the monk tires and begins to feel that the commitment to desert solitude was a terrible miscalculation, the demon of *acedia* whispers despairing and exculpatory thoughts. “Did God intend for human beings to reach for the heavens?” “Does God really care whether we pray?” “Is it not unnatural to seek solitude and chastity?”³³

This kind of sadness is generalized and directed toward goods that are somehow perceived as absent or unavailable—though in the case of sloth, the absence of goodness is due to one’s own inaction, one’s refusal to pursue a good that seems too toilsome. Because of our disinclination to effort the goodness (say, the presence of God) that is

³² “Slothfulness casteth into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger” (Prov. 19:15).

³³ Reno 32

right in front of our faces seems miles away or otherwise inaccessible. In this way, sloth can result in pervasive melancholy, depression, or despair—although all are thoroughly unnecessary.³⁴ Thus, it is easy to see how sloth could lead a monk to despair or to be angry about being in the monastery. The monk who has despaired of the good of his prayers and having lost this good, has nowhere else to go; he thus goes to sleep. The angry monk who wishes to leave the monastery now thinks he is wasting his time and that there are better things to occupy his attention.

Interestingly, the despair that sloth leads to does not need to be of a form that is that is unpleasant to the one despairing. Wendy Wasserstein describes a slothful attitude (exaggerated for effect) that is quite content with its despair. The main thesis of her book *Sloth* is about the payoff that slothful despair brings—once one has despaired and given up on the pursuit of any and all goods, one is free to be content with content-less existence. The one who sleeps all day and cares for nothing is indeed free from the cares of this world. What Wasserstein’s main character advocates is despair—but it is a despair methodologically pursued by a thorough habituation of sloth and apathy.³⁵ Although despair, the construal that one’s hopes of great importance cannot be realized,³⁶ can both lead to sloth and proceed from sloth, Wasserstein’s character portrays slothful despair (the sloth that leads to despair) as one’s friend and ally. Giving up on one’s hopes is preferable to expending the effort that could possibly achieve them. Such effort actually makes the good one would pursue into an evil, and thus the good becomes the

³⁴ Interestingly, Gregory the Great named six “daughters” or effects of sloth: “malice, spite, faintheartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, wandering of the mind after unlawful things” (*Summa Theologica* I-II.Q20.A3.ob2).

³⁵ Although Wasserstein’s character is “advertising” for sloth, his/her advertisement for sloth is such that it would appeal to very few.

³⁶ Roberts 242

object of avoidance rather than pursuit. This despair is the natural consequence of thoughtful, habituated sloth.

Lento amore is part and parcel with the sloth that Reno, Aquinas, and other authors describe—a slowness and sluggishness to love, apprehend, and pursue goods because of the effort they require. More virulent forms of sloth lead to despairing of particular goods, a whole class of goods such as “spiritual goods” as Aquinas described, or of the Divine Good. In the *Summa Theologica*, despair is first and foremost a sin and a vice that is opposed to the theological virtue of hope, that is, my hope in the goodness of God for me and toward me.³⁷ Aquinas acknowledges a sense in which we use the word despair in very particular ways—“it would be no sin for a wayfarer to despair of obtaining that which he had no natural capacity for obtaining, or which was not due to be obtained by him; for instance, if a physician were to despair of healing some sick man, or if anyone were to despair of ever becoming rich”³⁸—but the sin of despair centers primarily around the friendship of God. However, unlike other kinds of despair that might lead one to violent action against oneself or against others, slothful despair does not tend to do so. It makes one either flee a situation or sleep, as Cassian and the Proverbs tell us. Being centered in disinclination to effort inclines one to accept what one has, to sigh over it, and again, to do nothing. Because taking effort to pursue the good is what the slothful does not do, it is unlikely that he will take dramatic or violent action to end his despair—which may feel to him a more or less pleasant sort of emptiness.

On the other hand, despair can also lead to what appears to be sloth. Although it is typical of our times, as Reno notes, to avoid the effort necessary for spiritual good and

³⁷ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q20.A1.ad1

³⁸ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q20.A1.ad2

growth, inaction or the appearance of sloth can also be a symptom of other problems: it can be a defense mechanism used to escape pain or hurt that is genuinely overwhelming and worthy of sympathy and compassion. In other words, one should not judge every appearance of sloth and despair as due to a vice that hates effort. In times of intense hardship, it is easy to lose hope in things one very much would like to hope for, and hard to see the possibility of fair weather and blue skies in the future when the present seems overshadowed by storms and darkness. Roberts explains the construal of a depressing event as one that deprives “the future of meaning, purpose, and sense The proposition that defines depression as an emotion is, accordingly, *X (an event or state of affairs) implies that for me or persons or things I care about the future is low in prospects for vitality and meaning.*³⁹ Despair, on the other hand, “is a stronger version of depression as an emotion. If depression “says” that future prospects in some important connection of life are dim, despair “says” they are nil. Depression focuses on some event or state of affairs that is construed as dramatically dampening future prospects.” These future prospects “must be currently of momentous importance to the subject.”⁴⁰ Indeed, discouragement (according to Roberts, a much milder “relative” of despair that need not construe its object to be of “momentous importance”) often leads to slothful inaction—because a person does not think that what he wants can be realized. This can be incorrect *and* vicious, but in these kinds of cases, simulacra of slothful inaction may take place because of an incorrect assessment of one’s prospects, not because one is disinclined to take effort. So, the family of emotions including despair, discouragement, and depression

³⁹ Roberts 242

⁴⁰ Roberts 242

(all connected to and opposed to the theological virtue of hope) may also contribute to inaction in the guise of sloth.

All sloth can be a natural sort of defect (one can tend to sluggishness and slowness toward the good, or toward discouragement or despair or seeing negative prospects), or one can become slothful with intention (we can refuse to recognize the good of things that take effort), thus further habituating sloth in a way that becomes more profoundly serious. In order to defeat sloth (or vice in general) one must disbelieve one's own moral vision in favor of a more viable moral authority, whether that be Scripture, a wise person, or one's parents. For instance, if I want to defeat my tendency towards covetousness, the first thing I have to do is recognize that I am covetous. If I am very covetous, that may be difficult—I may not recognize the symptoms of covetousness, let alone think it a bad thing to do the things I am in the habit of doing. I must first believe what a moral authority says about covetousness. In *The Country Parson* Anglican Divine George Herbert discusses the failure of covetousness to apprehend the proper end of wealth and how this failure offends God:

Whosoever when a just occasion calls, either spends not at all, or not in some proportion to Gods blessing upon him, is covetous. The reason of this ground is manifest, because wealth is given to that end to supply our occasions. Now, if I do not give every thing its end, I abuse the Creature, I am false to my reason, which should guide me, I offend the supreme Judg, in perverting that order which he hath set both to things, and to reason . . . in brief, a poor man is an occasion, my country is an occasion, my friend is an occasion, my Table is an occasion, my apparel is an occasion: if in all these, and those more which concern me, I either do nothing, or pinch, and scrape, and squeeze blood undecently to the station wherein God hath placed me, I am Covetous.⁴¹

It is only when I believe what Herbert says here about the proper occasions to use the wealth I have been given that I may begin to habituate the virtue of generosity rather than

⁴¹ Herbert 66

the vice of covetousness. The same is true with sloth—it may be difficult for the sluggard to believe that work will not kill him, or conversely, that expending great effort is actually good and will bear good fruit—but one must submit to a moral authority (i.e., someone with better moral vision and habits than oneself) in order to change one’s vision. The slothful must look to the diligent, the zealous, the steadfast, and the hopeful in order for him to change his habits and thus change his vision.

There seem to be, then, two main avenues to defeat sloth: the virtues surrounding zeal on the one hand and steadfastness on the other. One cures the sadness, slowness, and sinful omissions of sloth by zealous fervor for doing good and by steadiness in the place of temptation. In Purgatory, as “Dante and Virgil doze off on the ledge of *lento amore*, they are awakened by a crowd of penitents rushing by, shouting and weeping with overwrought passion. ‘Sharp fervor,’ says Virgil to those who run by, ‘makes up for negligence and delay which you perhaps used through lukewarmness in doing good.’”⁴² Habituating this zeal or fervor might mean actively embracing doing good things that require effort, like cleaning up dishes or mowing the lawn, while thinking about the ways in which taking effort to do these things is good. One can attempt to overwhelm one’s negative reactions with consciousness of what is good. We can think of how nice the lawn looks and how much we needed the exercise. Refusing to procrastinate, acknowledging everything that is good about one’s tasks without qualification or complaint, and cultivating gratitude for the good for which one has worked may help to defeat sloth’s construal of effort as an evil. Giving thanks to God for the gracious gifts of dishes, a house, and a lawn to take care of is one way of taking captive every thought to Christ and defeating the bad attitudes that encourage us to be or remain slothful. In a

⁴² Reno 35

similar manner, one needs to instill habits that make one more sensitive to and aware of the goodness that one pursues and ought to pursue. For instance, when I am tempted to be cynical and slothful about the good of common household chores I can remember the pleasure that my childhood heroine Laura Ingalls Wilder took in her chores—which quite exceed my own in amount and difficulty. We can look to the admirable and heroic and recall what kind of effort and dedication their achievements took, and remember the fruit that effort bears.

Steadfast courage in the face of perceived obstacles will defeat sloth's tendencies to give up in the face of only minor difficulty and struggle. If sloth makes mountains out of molehills, one should take the courage and faith it takes to scale mountains to the molehill in order to conquer it, and perhaps after such a venture—or many such ventures—one will find that the mountain has substantially decreased in size. Those who struggle with sloth need to take care to remember that more things are worth doing or trying than they think. The slothful ought to make perseverance in completing a task the rule, not the exception. One could take as a model of activity or behavior someone known for industriousness and for having a good relation to that work (i.e., not an ambitious person).⁴³

Both spiritual disciplines that center on hopefulness, joy and goodness, and the disciplines that rebuke self-indulgence are necessary to combat sloth. The slothful especially need to meditate on passages that bring to mind the joy God has in humanity and the joy that each human being is able to have in Him. Promise and remembrance of true joy and refreshment will call us back to rest we have in God and away from the false

⁴³ I had a wonderful roommate my junior year of college whose immaculate housekeeping habits I decided to let influence me. Over the year I was substantially reformed and did not strain our friendship too much through my messy (and slothful) habits.

vision of rest that the slothful finds in his inaction. Reno reminds us that “intimacy with divine things is the proper way toward a passion for divine truth. We cannot enjoy that which we hold at a distance.”⁴⁴ Thus drawing near to Word and Sacrament, and tasting that grace that lifts up our hearts to the Lord encourage us out of sloth and despair and into hopeful and joyous activity. But we must also engage the difficult spiritual disciplines that require self-abnegation, such as disciplines of silence and solitude, and that of fasting, and the disciplines that encourage us to steadfast perseverance, like daily Scripture reading and meditation. Trusting the Lord to do sanctifying work in us through these means rather than our changing feelings and desires builds faith and hope, and giving praise and glory to God despite our state builds constancy in loving God.

Aquinas informs us that charity, the virtue that rejoices in the Divine good, is the virtue to which sloth is opposed.⁴⁵ Thus, habits that incline one to such charity, and thus to joy and delight in the goodness of God, are necessary for the slothful. Earlier I spoke of habits that inclined one to zeal—fervor in doing good. The well-beloved passage of Philippians 4:8 speaks to both zeal and joy in doing good: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”⁴⁶ Habits of turning one’s mind toward what is good will help to increase joy and thus burn away both sloth and despair. Richard Foster, author of *The Celebration of Discipline* speaks of the necessity of a corporate *discipline of celebration*: “Celebration brings joy into life, and joy makes us strong. Scripture tells us that the joy

⁴⁴ Reno 35

⁴⁵ *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q35.A2

⁴⁶ RSV

of the Lord is our strength (Neh.8:10). We cannot continue long in anything without it.”⁴⁷

And finally, singleness of heart is as always the first and last defense against any vice or sin, and sloth and despair are no different. Sloth pulls away from Divine good through seeking its own above the kingdom of heaven and the face of God. Despair fails to believe in the efficacy of the goodness of God toward oneself. Obeying the command to seek first the kingdom naturally destroys sloth and despair, not by combating it, but by seeking again the Good once abandoned. It does us no good to try not to be slothful if we will not follow Christ and pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.” But how do the despairing or slothful seek first the kingdom? The same way all other sinners do: obedience begins and ends in confession, repentance, and prayers for the grace to amend our lives to do what we cannot do and have no desire to do. Such prayerful abandonment to the mercies and grace of God in Christ is the only way to deep moral and spiritual freedom and transformation.

⁴⁷ Foster 191