

Acedia

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Acedia, more commonly called sloth through confusion with its most notable effect, is a disgust with the spiritual because of the physical effort involved. If the spiritual good from which acedia recoils has a necessary connection with the divine good, which should be the subject of Christian joy, it can be a sin, and even serious. Moreover, acedia is one of the capital sins, a common distraction from virtue, producing other, even quite distinct, sins.

The word describing this constant human phenomenon is found not only in the Septuagint Bible (e.g., Sir 6.26) but in Greek and Latin pagan authors; etymologists show that the word should not be derived from Latin *acidus* but from the Greek ἀκίδοϛ (not caring). Whatever its possibly Stoic origins may be, the psychology of the temptation received most careful attention from the desert fathers of the fourth century, who discussed it in the context of other evil thoughts as the *daemon meridianus* (Ps 90.6). Evagrius Ponticus in 383 seems to be the first to have written a description of acedia in his *De octo vitiosis cogitationibus* (*Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, 40:1274), obviously drawing more from actual experience than literary antecedents. The loneliness of the hermitage in the barren desert, a body worn out by fasting, and a mind fatigued by long prayers were conditions calculated to bring on the ennui and restlessness that was called acedia. John Cassian faithfully reported this fairly common trouble to the West in his *On the Spirit of Acedia* (Conferences 10; *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 49:359–369). The description of Cassian luxuriates in psychological detail, showing that acedia can express itself not simply in laziness but even in nervous activity. Evagrius, Cassian, and in fact the entire Oriental tradition had spoken of melancholy (λυπή) as a distinct sin though closely connected with acedia. St. Gregory the Great in his commentary of Job (*Moralia* 31.45; *Patrologia Latina* 76:620) omitted acedia from his list of principal sins and included only sadness (*tristitia*). Nevertheless, as later commentators have pointed out, in one respect the more ancient tradition—the use of the word acedia, or its corruption *accidia*—prevailed. Moreover six "daughter" sins are for the first time explicitly named in connection with this melancholy: malice, rancor, pusillanimity, despair, torpor concerning commandments, and a wandering of the mind around forbidden things. Finally, St. Gregory, or at least the Gregorian pastoral tradition, is responsible for the removal of acedia from its original context in which it was a special temptation for monks, and for viewing it as an interior malaise that expressed itself most frequently in a tardy and slothful performance of religious and other duties (cf., e.g., Rabanus Maurus, *De ecclesiastica disciplina*, *Patrologia Latina*, 112:1251–53; Jonas of Orleans, *De institutione laicali*, *Patrologia Latina*, 102:245–246; Alcuin, *Liber de virtutibus* c.32, *Patrologia Latina*, 101:635; St. Antoninus, *Summa theologiae moralis* 2.10:933–938).

St. Thomas Aquinas opposed acedia to the joy of charity, and in a precise study demonstrated its sinfulness by showing the evil of sadness over a genuinely good object and likewise the excessiveness of even legitimate sorrow when it impedes the performance of duty. The specificity of acedia St. Thomas sees in its opposition to the

divine good as man may participate in it, but the intimate connection of the other virtues with charity permits a wide scope for acedia. Nevertheless, acedia's direct attack on charity's act of rejoicing in the divine good makes it serious matter, although imperfect acts of acedia are found even in the holy. Finally, St. Thomas justified acedia's right to be called capital from its ability to produce other sins. The "daughter" sins associated with acedia in the Gregorian tradition, as well as their proliferation in the encyclopedic effort of St. Isidore (*In Deut., Patrologia Latina*, 83:366), are ingeniously explained (ST 2a2ae, 35; *De malo* 11). While the commentators have remained faithful to the Thomistic synthesis, a popular tendency to confuse acedia with its principal external effect, sloth (*pigrity*), developed. Those aware of more profound interior implications attempted the spiritualization of acedia by "baptizing" it spiritual sloth. This terminology, adapted from St. John of the Cross (*Dark Night ...* 1.7), has the disadvantage of making acedia appear to be an exotic sin reserved for the spiritual elite, whereas the tradition and experience show it to be a very common difficulty.

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