A FEW introductory vignettes: Alcibiades in *The Symposium* (219e–221b) marvels at how Socrates can maintain his courage, fortitude, and happiness throughout the distinctly unpleasant rigors and duties of a military campaign.

In *The Education of a Bodybuilder*, Arnold Schwarzenegger comments on his early training regimen: “There were certain days when something held me back and I didn’t train as hard as on other days. That was inexplicable to me. Some days nothing could hold me back. Other days I’d be down.”¹

In the middle of his poetic journey through the afterlife, Dante observes a vigorous procession of penitents running rapidly around Mount Purgatory in order to purge themselves of the sins due to their “lukewarmness in well-doing.”²

In the official saint’s *vita* of St. Francis, Bonaventure writes, “Who can describe the fervent charity which burned within Francis, the friend of the Bridegroom [Christ]? Like a glowing coal, he seemed totally absorbed in the flame of divine love. . . . Aroused by all things to the love of God, he rejoiced in all the works of the Lord’s hands and from these joy-producing manifestations he rose to their life-giving principle and cause.”³

A sign hanging at a Philippine Army base reads, "Do Good, Look Good, Feel Good."

Despite the different underlying conceptions of what specifically constitutes the good, these episodes share a common concern with the human person’s delight in actually performing the good. They embrace in various ways an expectation of *eudaimonia* (to use the ancient philosophical term), the happy life of virtuous activity and reflection which good men and women can enjoy. These vignettes suggest, too, that when a person does not actually enjoy performing virtuous deeds and works, there may well be a distinct problem. When there is no pleasure derived from virtue, or when duties are performed perfunctorily and without joy, such acts may cease to be virtuous altogether. And if virtuous activity does not produce a satisfying happiness, would a person not choose to proceed along a different path to a different kind of happiness, perhaps one of the alluring paths of vice? Indeed, in the Middle Ages, acedia—"weariness in good works," to paraphrase Paul in Gal 6:9 and 2 Thes 3:13—was viewed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins precisely because the absence of an experience of joy while doing the right thing so easily led to other sins.

This essay examines this constellation of issues and attempts to articulate its significance for the good life today through a consideration

4. The problem of how to translate *eudaimonia* best into modern English raises certain problems. Gregory Vlastos believes that it is acceptable to render the term as "happiness" as long as we remember that "*eudaimonia* puts a heavier loading on the objective factor in 'happiness' than does the English word" (*Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991], 203). Martha Nussbaum argues that using "happiness" for *eudaimonia* is "misleading, since it misses the emphasis on activity, and on completeness of life, that is (as Aristotle cogently argues) present in the ordinary Greek use of the term, and wrongly suggests that what is at issue is a state or feeling of satisfaction. (Pre-Utilitarian English-language uses of 'happiness' had much of this breadth; but in our time the word is unavoidably colored by Utilitarian associations)" (*The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], 15, n. 5 [Nussbaum's emphasis]). I am convinced by Vlastos's discussion, however, that it is also misleading to ignore the joyful, pleasurable, and happy elements of *eudaimonia*. Accordingly, I have retained the Greek word for this essay and have attempted to keep these concerns in mind in my descriptions of *eudaimonia*. 

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of one particular formulation of the problematics of a consistent enjoyment of the good: medieval understandings of the phenomena of acedia. For the theologians, spiritual counselors, and poets of the Middle Ages saw that by developing their understanding of such phenomena along with effective responses to them, they would be describing—and indeed augmenting—their experience of joy, freedom, virtue, and love. Surely there are lessons to be learned from their writings on acedia, about how to be better lovers, about how to maintain constancy and avoid weariness and laziness in loving.

For a variety of reasons (which shall be discussed below) the problem of acedia—the problem of weariness in attempting to live rightly—has not been on the forefront of most people’s concerns. Nevertheless, frustrations with our ethical and moral lives abound, and enjoying or not enjoying the good remains a genuine, perennial problem, faced daily by those who take reflective, intentional behavior seriously. Hence, this examination of one era’s diagnosis of the problem along with its recommended therapies may be able to shed some light on how we can address the phenomena of acedia as we may experience it in the present. After all, medieval understandings of acedia, developed as they were with the specific historical, sacramental, and cultural contexts of the Middle Ages, point to one of the most sustained investigations of the problems attendant upon eudaimonistic aspirations. Implicitly, then, this study asks of contemporary theologians and philosophers the question: Have their discussions of ethics taken the fundamental problems of acedia adequately into account? This essay will argue that it is just as important to consider the right way to experience the doing of the good as it is to do the good itself. We may know the good, and we may actually do the good, but if we do not enjoy it, medieval writings on acedia suggest, then throughout the long course of our lives we periodically will lose interest in the good, leading quite possibly to profound failures at decisive moments.

In focusing on the precise problem of whether a person actually enjoys doing the good and in arguing for its historical and contemporary

5. For another example of a recent attempt to discuss the importance of acedia for confronting contemporary problems—in this case the difficult challenges of caregiving for Alzheimer’s patients—see my Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer’s Disease and the Love of God (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 161–66.
importance, I am assuming that in many, many circumstances, knowing the good is not so much the problem (as doing the good consistently). I am also, of course, collapsing together a great many different ethical systems and beliefs. But while sources as diverse as the writings of the Stoics and Chretien de Troyes's medieval romance The Knight of the Cart (a story of Lancelot's quest for Guinevere) may disagree dramatically on such things as the value of erotic passion—the former denigrating it, the latter exalting it as the source of the hero's virtue—they mostly seem to converge upon the point that the virtuous person should thrive upon and delight in fulfilling his or her responsibilities both as a citizen and as a lover. And as the opening vignettes and various examples from Aristotle, Plutarch, monastic writers, and others would suggest, acedia or something very much like it remains as much a problem for philosophers and theologians today, as it was for many different schools for well over two millennia.

The first section of the essay will present a discussion of the classical concept of eudaimonia, its importance for ancient philosophy, and the presence of something very much like acedia in the writings of the Hellenistic and Roman philosophers. Next, after a discussion of the importance of joy in Christianity, the origins and development of the idea of acedia will be traced. A brief section will then suggest some of the reasons why acedia has lost much of its medieval meaning over the last five centuries. Then, arguing for the importance of acedia, the next section will study Dante's presentation of this vice in the Purgatorio. His particular presentation is important insofar as it illuminates the reasons why acedia should remain a central category for our lives, providing as he does what is perhaps the finest analysis of a certain kind of moral failure, one unfortunately that is all too familiar. What is more, it takes the form of a narrative of his journey through the cornice of the slothful and conveys as such (much more effectively than an analytical discourse could) the important message that our attempts to live virtuously and love properly depend on our ability to overcome the perpetual dangers of acedia.

In the Middle Ages the problem described as acedia depended in part on a Christian formulation of what the ancients had called eudaimonia.
(Not all medieval authors were aware that they were reformulating a classical ideal, though the medieval reputation of Boethius as a Christian martyr made it much easier for them to integrate his lengthy discussion of happiness in his *On the Consolation of Philosophy* with more traditional Christian themes). The importance of *eudaimonia* was well established in the writings of Plato through the life and work of Socrates. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that the good man is the happy man (and that the wicked man will be quite unhappy). According to this view of human life, virtue was literally its own reward because virtue brought profound pleasures. Indeed, on account of the perpetual misfortunes that could assail men in their fragility as human beings, a eudaimonistic construction of happiness through virtuous self-sufficiency was presented as a hedge against the almost inevitable onset of miseries. While Aristotle assigned much greater significance to the welfare of others in a wise person's happiness, he, too, argued for the centrality of the enjoyment of the good—indeed, taking pleasure from the good was the sign of good character. Subsequent philosophical schools sought to offer their adherents a joyful life of intellectual and moral riches. Even though they differed drastically in their conceptions of happiness and how the virtuous were to live, both Stoics and Epicureans, for example, adhered to some form of what Vlastos has called the "Eudaemonist Axiom" which states that "happiness is desired by all human beings as the ultimate end (*telos*) of all their rational acts." Such happiness was not conceived as a form of antinomianism. Rather, happiness and morality were to become inseparable because "moral conduct offers ... the best prospects for happiness."

While the Stoics in particular eschewed what many (then and now) would call pleasures, they praised the joy of the good life as an intellectual virtue. Their stress on *ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbances, particularly the passions) should not lead us, therefore, to overlook their emphasis on the cheerful, happy element of *euthymia*, a word misleadingly translated as simply "contentment." Seneca himself translated *euthymia* as *tranquillitas animi*, but he also described as the goal of the

6. This is one of the central issues of Martha C. Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

idea: "how the mind may always pursue a uniform and unimpeded course, at peace with itself, viewing its circumstances with a light heart and a joy that is unbroken." The link between happiness, or joy, and morality (the link which acedia attacks or subverts) was thus crucial to ancient philosophy.

While they did not actually use the term, classical writers were concerned with the kinds of problems that medieval writers were to understand through the term acedia. In several works (already cited in the footnotes), Martha Nussbaum has stressed that Hellenistic and Roman philosophy needs to be understood not merely as a series of competing arguments and propositions but as habits of thought, advice, and counsel shared in the context of trying to improve the quality of their adherents' actual lives. And as therapeutic advisors, ancient philosophers recognized quite clearly that there were bound to be difficulties in a life devoted to philosophical ideals. Philosophers could not always expect to be happy, despite their best efforts to live according to reason and to assume control over the passions. Indeed, there are innumerable references in philosophers' writings to those who turn away from philosophy, and lessons drawn from their failures, failures which frequently were due to their not taking pleasure in the good life. More particularly, Pierre Hadot has argued that for ancient philosophers, happiness was "wholly within the present moment" and that people "need not wait for anything from the future to increase it." Because eudaimonia was believed to be available in the present, intense introspection was all but inevitable when a would-be wise person failed to find eudaimonia in a philosophical life. Such failures and their attendant self-examinations naturally led philosophers and would-be philosophers to consider whether happiness was indeed inextricable from virtue (as the Eudaemonist Axiom maintains) or whether happiness was actually attendant upon any number of other possible amoral or even immoral pleasures—a movement of speculation which acedia encouraged.

Examples of concern for what was to be called acedia or sloth


abound. In his essay “On Contentment,” the very eclecticism of which illustrates the shared concern for *euthymia* among ancient philosophers, Plutarch draws on various schools, examples, and arguments in order to demonstrate how it is possible to achieve happy contentment even amid the many possible obstacles life presents, obstacles which include the seeming attractiveness of laziness or inactivity. Specific examples of character studies—not a priori trains of logic—bear the greatest force of Plutarch’s presentation. Thus, he adduces the figure of Achilles sulkily withdrawing from the plains of Troy after his feud with Agamemnon as an example of sorrowful withdrawal from the world—a striking image more likely to spur action than a logically constructed argument. He quotes Homer’s solitary hero who laments, “I sit by my ships, a pointless burden to the world.”10 Plato’s Socrates employed arguments, but as this essay’s opening vignette from the *Symposium* suggests, Plato’s greatest argument for *eudaimonia* was the life of Socrates itself. Socrates’ own eudaimonistic life confirms his description of love (Eros) as a daimon, a child of Resource and Poverty, whose perpetual quest for beauty, completeness, and the good is at once so satisfying and so seeking that it admits of no slacking, no laziness. As shall be made more clear when we come to Dante, discussions of *eudaimonia* and acedia often gravitate toward such narratives or examples because there is something crucial about the power of narratives to articulate the joys of *eudaimonia* and the dangers of acedia.

Despite genuine differences, many pagan and Christian writers and counselors shared the belief that living the good life made a person content, happy, and intensely joyful. It would have been surprising if Christians had not been interested in joy as Paul lists joy as the second fruit of the Holy Spirit—after love—in Gal 5:22 (this passage formed the basis of subsequent Christian teachings on the Twelve Fruits of the Spirit). Similarly, the Kingdom of God is said to inspire joy (Mt 13:44). The church’s debt to the Psalms as a primary source of its prayer life illustrates how easy it was for Christians to formulate an idea of the joyful life of God. Ps 112:1 begins, “Praise the Lord. Blessed is the man who

fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments." And in Ps 119:14, medieval Christians read, "In the way of thy testimonies I delight as much as in all riches." While ancient philosophers argued that the good could be determined by reason, and while Jews and Christians believed that the Law of God was revealed, Greeks, Israelites, and medieval Christians could all experience the delights of doing the good.

Clearly, as a gift of grace, the joy of charity could not be considered identical to the classical understanding of eudaimonia. But the idea of grace as something which transformed the soul was congenial to a kind of Christianized eudaimonia precisely because the process of sanctification—cooperating with persevering grace to become more saintly—stressed the reality of progress and the possibility of perfection. It is not difficult to see how congenial pagan discussions of eudaimonia were to the Christian idea of beatitude. Regardless of whether the good is conceived either philosophically or theologically, Plato’s accounts of Socrates and hagiographic tales of the saints both depict an intense, unflagging enjoyment of the good. (Moreover, the centrality of habit in ancient and medieval Catholic thought and the importance attached to developing the habit of enjoying the good likewise testify to the similarities between the Christian joy of Aquinas and the eudaimonia of the ancients.)

Although the Passion of Christ and its significance for human salvation led Christians to a different estimation of pain and suffering than the ancient philosophers (tears for their sins, for example, were often seen on the saints’ cheeks), such agonies were transmuted by the expectation of the resurrection and the end of all such sufferings. The good life in the present, to use a philosophical phrasing, could be seen as an expectation of the heavenly kingdom, and as such, Christians could be joyful, especially because their good works (particularly prayers) helped Christians experience the Kingdom of God while on earth. While Paul’s own sense of the imminence of the eschaton made him less interested in describing perennial rules for leading the good (Christian) life, his descriptions of how Christians are to live as they anticipate the Second Coming served for centuries as reflection on what the faithful follower of Christ should experience. Thus, in 1 Thes 5:16–18, medieval Christians would read, “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all cir-

11. All quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version.
cumstances.” And in Rom 14:17, the message is clear: “For the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

As both ancient and medieval sources indicate, however, aspirations for a life of joyful goodness entailed the phenomena of what medieval writers called acedia, the feelings of mental torpor, weariness, and disinterest which accompany oscillating experiences of such a life. Few seemed capable of living like Socrates or the saints, though many felt called to do so. Depending as it does on centuries of prior experience and reflection, Aquinas’s nuanced discussion of acedia represents a mature medieval analysis of the vice’s phenomena.

We must now consider the vices opposed to the joy of charity. This joy is either about the Divine good, and then its contrary is acedia, or about our neighbour’s good, and then its contrary is envy. . . . Acedia, according to Damascene [John of Damascus, c. 675–c. 749] is “an oppressive sorrow,” which, namely, so weighs upon man’s mind that he want to do nothing. . . . Hence acedia implies a certain weariness of work. . . . Now this kind of sorrow is always evil, sometimes in itself, sometimes in effect. . . . Accordingly, since acedia, as we understand it here, denotes sorrow for spiritual good, it is evil on two counts, both in itself and point of its effect. . . . [T]he movement of acedia is sometimes by sensuality alone, by reason of the opposition of the flesh to the spirit, and then it is a venial sin; but sometimes it reaches to the reason, which consents in the flight from horror and detestation of the Divine good, on account of the flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit. In this case it is clear that acedia is a mortal sin. . . . Now Gregory [Pope Gregory the Great, c. 540–604] . . . assigns six daughters to sloth, namely “malice [maliitia], spite [rancor], faint-heartedness [pusillanimitas], despair [deseratio], sluggishness [torpor] in regards to the commandments, wandering of the mind [vagatio mentis] after unlawful things.” . . . Gregory fittingly assigns the daughters of acedia. For since according to the Philosopher [Aristotle], “no man can be a long time in company with what is painful and unpleasant,” it follows that

12. While Paul often speaks in these terms, at times he also speaks of righteous deeds as requiring patience and perseverance (see, for example, 1 Cor 15:58). Thus, for Paul doing the good may entail either endurance or empowerment. Medieval writers on the phenomena of acedia tended to presuppose that the pursuit of righteousness, while potentially quite trying and difficult, should lead to empowerment, peace, and joy.
something arises from sorrow in two ways: first that man shuns whatever causes sorrow; secondly that he passes to other things that give him pleasure; thus those who find no joy in spiritual pleasures have recourse to pleasures of the body. 13

A consideration of the evolution of these ideas and a few examples from other medieval writers may serve to help clarify Aquinas’s rich analysis of acedia. As Aquinas’s citations suggest, the Middle Ages inherited many of its ideas of acedia from the Church Fathers. 14 In particular, the origins of the Christian formulations of acedia have been traced to the experiences of the desert monks, men whose lives were focused precisely on prayer. It is not accidental that the particular rigors of eremetic and monastic life were to elicit a profound concern for acedia. Theirs, after all, was the most intense, supercharged spiritual life available to Christians, and it required detailed attention to the quality of their spiritual habits. While Evagrius Ponticus (346–99), a spiritual advisor of monks, was the first major writer to employ the term “acedia” in a specific technical sense (acedia is from the Greek akedia, “lack of care, weariness, or apathy”), the foundation he laid was a blend of the Greek and Roman traditions of spiritual counsel (discussed above) and various biblical injunctions. 15 Prv 4:23 states, “Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life.” Paul writes in 2 Cor 13:5, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” While Paul himself did not employ the word akedia, egkakeo (“to grow weary”), the verb he uses in his injunction “not [to] grow weary in well-doing” in Gal 6:9 (an important passage for discussions of acedia) had a long history of moral reflection in Greek. 16 Various factors combined with these important textual traditions to lead Evagrius to articulate the phenomena of acedia. The strict,


14. The classic history of acedia from which much of this discussion comes is Siegfried Wenzel’s The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

15. For a discussion of the ways in which Christians drew on their pagan predecessors, see chapter 4 of Hadot’s Philosophy.

unchanging lives of monks and the endless cycles of prayers and psalms seem to have led many monks to a listless dread of such repetition. An initial spirited conversion to the intense life of retreat from the world could easily yield to a sense of boredom or desire to wander physically or mentally. The fact that monks were to be patient and to have hope (along with faith and charity, one of the three theological virtues) made the torpor and listlessness of acedia all the more problematic. Was not such sloth a sign that one did not really have hope? And does not such lack of hope indicate that a person really does not possess the joy of charity? And does not a lack of this profound joy indicate that a person's will is not fully aligned with the love of God? Does not such a person entertain doubts as to the redemptive love of God? Such concerns arise precisely because it is not always clear when we are living genuinely a life of faith, hope, and charity (as Paul’s injunction in 2 Cor 13:5 suggests).

Moreover, the long-standing pagan and Christian belief that evil (whether seen as a vice, a temptation, or a devil) has no real power over us unless we cooperate with it willfully, likewise led to an intense concern with the regular “feelings” (to use a modern term) of monks as they prayed. Did one actually cooperate with the temptation to be half-hearted in prayers? (Evagrius had linked acedia to the noontime demon of Ps 90 and its wicked temptations.) Did one genuinely chant the psalms with the proper reverence, or was one’s mind wandering, perhaps thinking about food or sleep or simply being somewhere else? Subsequent elaborations of acedia in John Cassian (c. 360–435) and Gregory the Great (themselves both monks) ensured the place of acedia in the canons of Christian spiritual advice. Indeed, their writings helped generate the topos of the Seven Deadly Sins as a central vehicle for medieval moral reflection.

As acedia came to find a distinct place in the very familiar formal categorization of sins, it became a central concept to the men and women of the Middle Ages. Medieval writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries popularized discussions of acedia and the other sins as the context of spiritual advice passed from eremiticism and monasticism to encounters with the laity in the confessional and in a renewed interest in preaching. Thus Aquinas, who as a Dominican was a member of a religious order dedicated to catechesis and preaching to the laity, writes not just of monastic life but of the lives of all Christians. Hence, it is not surprising to see the concept, if not the term itself,
appear in a wide variety of suggestive contexts. Thomas à Kempis did not use "acedia" in his discussions of either temptation or the need for fervor in his *The Imitation of Christ* (he chose to employ some of Gregory's daughters of acedia), but the phenomena he describes in chapters 13 and 25 of book 1 are clearly the experiences of acedia. For him especially, such torpor and lack of zeal were deadly to the spiritual life because the call to be like Christ admits of no half-hearted attempts.

Pope Gregory VII (1074–1085), himself a former monk, explained his forceful command to the archbishop of Cologne to preach more vigorously the celibacy of the clergy by stating that he (Gregory) did not want to be the "slothful servant" of Mt 25:14–30 who did not return with interest what had been given him by his master.\(^{17}\) Gregory's letters to both ecclesiastical friends and opponents reveal that he took zeal in the performance of the church's duties to be a sign of a prelate's sincerity (including his own). He recognized that it was one thing for a bishop to utter a few mild condemnations against priests with wives and concubines and quite another actually to enforce the decrees. Gregory's own life indicates that he clearly recognized the importance of the example which popes must set.

The nun of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale" provides another illustration of how crucial narratives of worthy examples were. The nun seems to tell her fellow pilgrims the story of St. Cecilia and her preservation of her chastity in order to fortify herself against acedia and sexual temptation. She begins the "Prologue" to her tale with a condemnation of idleness. In a characteristic representation of the phenomena of acedia, she deplores "The ministre and the noircize [nourisher] unto vices / which men clepe in English ydelnesse." Although she does not mention wantonness as being among the physical pleasures encouraged by acedia, the subsequent prayer to Mary clearly asks for aid against sexual temptation, and the emphasis on Cecilia's dedication to chastity makes it clear that the nun senses that proper tales of virginal self-control are an effective remedy to dangers of sloth. Indeed, the manifestation of "levelful bisynesse [lawful activity]" which she recommends against idleness is for her the repetition of a saint's life.\(^{18}\)

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If acedia was a central problem for celibates, it also represented a problem for the lovers in medieval romances. Indeed, it might be possible to argue that the descriptions of love in these tales of knights and ladies were developed, in part, as a contrast to the phenomena of acedia. The stories of three knights, Lancelot, Don Quixote, and Troilus, help illustrate this. In his *Art of Courtly Love*, Andreas Capellanus had declared that “A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thoughts of his beloved.” Such thoughts were, of course, to inspire the lover to virtuous deeds and heights of nobility. Thus, in Chretien de Troyes’s story of Lancelot, *The Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot is portrayed as constantly pursuing the love and commandments of Guinevere. When so doing, he suffers none of the weariness, torpor, or sorrow of acedia, and indeed his unflagging energy is one of the central distinguishing characteristics of his faithfulness as a lover. (The queen soundly scorns him for his single great mistake—his brief hesitation before entering a cart to rescue her, thereby humiliating himself—because the hesitation itself was so much of a failure.) Similarly, Don Quixote’s persevering dedication to Dulcinea, while designed as a parody of medieval romances, is a testament to how central such zeal as a lover was. (And, when all is said and done, it remains possible for Cervantes’s readers to see the good Don as a genuine hero precisely because he does not hesitate where others clearly would.) By contrast, a poor, non-heroic would-be lover is shown to be quite weak when he suffers from acedia, as Gregory M. Sadlek has shown in his analysis of Chaucer’s depiction of Troilus. This knight fails to achieve the love of Criseyde precisely because he is overcome by sorrow, hesitation, doubt, and sloth, and he is completely incapable of meeting the challenges presented to him. Medieval portrayals both of the love of charity and of the erotic love of couples, then, recognized the dangers of acedia.

As can be seen from Aquinas’s recognition of the mortal and venial aspects of acedia as well as from the role of acedia in understanding its role to both chastity and passionate love, two overlapping but distinct aspects of acedia came to inform traditional discussions of acedia in

the Middle Ages: acedia as a sin against spiritual goodness and acedia as what is now called sloth or idleness, a sin of the flesh. While it is possible to distinguish between these two and to see them as divergent, the presentations in Aquinas other insightful medieval authorities suggests that it is more profitable to keep the two aspects together. Laziness, it is argued, should not be separated from the question of spiritual vigor and moral motivation. Idleness, ultimately, may be a sign of sorrow and the failure of joy. In order to bring us back to the medieval understanding of acedia, however, the last section of this essay concentrates on Dante’s discussion of the cornice of sloth in part because he had already separated those who were simply lazy from those whose love was “lukewarm,” those who were insufficiently dedicated to the love of the good and of God. The former he ignominiously consigns to Ante-Purgatory; they are waiting there listlessly. By contrast, his spirited and intricate presentation of the latter suggests the importance of their particular vice for us all.

Finally, there is an important link between acedia and memory. Holinshed’s conclusion to his presentation of the life of Henry V in his *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* indicates that Holinshed recognized the ways in which acedia leads us to forgetfulness. He states that Henry’s virtuous character and deeds “would not be forgotten by sloth” if they were but a “spectacle of magnanimity to have always in eye” and were “encouragement[s] to nobles in honorable enterprises.”

21 This comment seems insightful. There does seem to be a perpetual danger that our dispositions will selectively edit memories, especially ones which would be spurs to unwanted activity. We do need to have proper examples perpetually in the eye. (Is that not part of the reason for having a Crucifix in a Catholic classroom?) After all, when we are captive to acedia (manifesting itself as either simple laziness or a deep opposition to the joy of *eudaimonia* and/or charity), the last thing we seem to want to do is to remember examples of virtue, holiness, or vigor. Once again, we return to the link between telling stories and the success or failure of our endeavors to live wisely and love properly.

Thus, while Greek, Roman, and medieval writers could differ on their conceptions of the good, on what happiness actually is and what it might entail, they generally believed that the good life (monks might well substitute “holy” for “good”) was the happy life and that the failure to experience the good life as pleasurable signaled a problem needing to be addressed. Indeed, it signaled a failure of the life itself. But are such beliefs and arguments viable today? Have the centuries separating us from Seneca and Aquinas rendered obsolete the preconditions for linking goodness and happiness so powerfully or do we still suffer from acedia in some form? To answer these questions, it may be useful to make a few observations about the history of acedia and eudaimonistic thought in the last several centuries. Obviously, the history of moral practice and reflection in this period has entailed many different changes involving many different factors, but articulating a few central matters may be helpful.

The inner logic of acedia as articulated in the Middle Ages depended on a sense of God’s providence and the relationship between daily human activity and the cosmos’s ordered plan. Those who suffered from acedia did not fully perceive this integral relationship, and therefore they could not experience the joy of charity and good works which should come from their participation in the divine workings. As this notion of a divinely ordered, providential cosmos began to give way to an increasing focus on the contingency of the universe in the later Middle Ages, acedia came to represent an improper way of responding to this contingency. It ultimately evolved into melancholy, something which in its modern articulations is similar to, but certainly distinct from, acedia.22 Whereas it was possible for Aquinas to argue that acedia was premised on a false understanding of the cosmos, melancholy would come to represent a true insight into the universe. Thus in later centuries, particularly for the romantics, melancholy would be a sign not of error and wandering but of true understanding and creative potential. The sorrows of melancholy would be a source of poetic creativity and artistic redemption, not of laziness or inactivity. Of course, for modern psychiatry, melancholy or (more precisely) “a Major Depressive Disorder

With Melancholic Features” would be a problem to be treated, possibly by “antidepressant medications or electroconvulsive therapy.”23

Because acedia evolved in the context of Catholic soteriological and sacramental traditions, the Reformation almost inevitably transformed acedia. Luther’s emphasis on Christians as being simul iustus et pecator led Lutherans away from the possibility of a eudaimonistic life because such an emphasis recognizes and even expects perpetual sinfulness and envisions no release in a certain way of life. The implicit ideal of perfectionibility in grace or virtue which acedia at times presupposes was rejected. More importantly, the Reformation’s rejection of Confession and Confession’s concomitant elaborate investigation of different kinds of sins led Protestants away from the medieval typology of the Seven Deadly Sins, a typology which had become the central context for discussions of acedia. (Catholics, of course, retained this topos, and even brought it with them all across the world. Thus, Juan de Oliver, OFM [d. 1599] delivered a Tagalog sermon on catamaran [laziness] and the other Seven Deadly Sins as part of his missionary work in the Philippines.)24 The authoritative formula of these sins was crucial for the concept of acedia because the term itself embraced so many concepts, feelings, experiences, and dangers. In the absence of a tradition of preaching on the specific seven sins, there would be no necessary reason why acedia or sloth would have precedence over torpor, despair, heaviness of heart, idleness, or negligence in preaching or reflection (this list of several of the “cubs” of the “Bear of heavy Sloth” comes from the thirteenth-century Ancrene Riwle, a rule for anchoresses).25 Thus, John Bunyan’s (1628–88) allegorical Pilgrim’s Progress has a very minor role for the personification of Sloth even though many of Gregory’s daughters of acedia appear in his text in various forms.26 (By contrast, the medieval allegory Piers Plowman

26. John Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress (NY: Penguin, 1985), 70–71. Not surprisingly, Robert C. Solomon, a philosopher who vigorously defends taking the passions quite seriously, includes several different categories in his “Emotional Register” which medieval writers could well have subsumed under the single term acedia. See his The
gives Sloth, as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, a significant role in the confessions of Book V.)

While laziness and work remained important issues for many thinkers, the context for considering these topics gradually shifted contexts from spiritual welfare to capitalism as Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* suggests. The category of laziness did retain its moral power; it helped legitimate colonial rule (and in the American south, slavery). Appearing to be lazy in the eyes of Europeans, natives needed vigorous colonial leadership if they were to thrive (anticolonialists felt this argument to be so significant that they repeatedly engaged it in their writings). Consequently, the modern meaning of sloth is much closer to laziness than to the medieval understanding of acedia. So far is acedia from the modern consciousness that modern readers often fail to see descriptions of behavior in medieval literature clearly intended to be acedia in terms of this specific, well-articulated medieval vice. Moreover, as another indicator of the seeming alien quality of acedia, the Blackfriars translation of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* translates his acedia as “spiritual apathy.”

But by far the most important development in recent centuries for a contemporary articulation of acedia is the separation of “happiness” from virtue (and/or holiness). While Kant did not absolutely forbid enjoying the fulfillment of duty, Kantian deontological ethics has generally retained his desire to separate questions of happiness from morality. The happiness of the inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the American Declaration of Independence


does not seem to refer to *eudaimonia* at all but rather to the enjoyment of whatever the individual wants. More dramatically, the Utilitarians' appropriation of "happiness" as a central term for their political agenda separated happiness from goodness because they were willing to let "happiness" be a simple state of pleasure which did not require the exercise of cardinal or theological virtues. Thus, many contemporary philosophers object to translating *eudaimonia* as "happiness" because the common understanding of "happiness" is more Utilitarian than classical. 29 Similarly, many theologians are skeptical about whether it is proper to retain happiness as a central moral category because such a use of "happiness" might suggest that the relationship to the crucified Lord is primarily for personal self-satisfaction.

Other factors contributing to the decline in interest in acedia and *eudaimonia* are worth mentioning. Post-tridentine Catholic moral theology's emphasis on obedience to commandments and fulfilling the law rather than on training in the joy of charity shifted the focus of moral reflection away from "the education of desire." 30 The Enlightenment's declining interest in biblical narratives as the focus of hermeneutics in favor of the investigation of discrete truth claims contained within the narratives (and the corresponding interest in propositional, factual, abstract analysis in philosophy) made it less likely that acedia would retain its power since, as has been suggested, concern with acedia arises in connection with viewing lives in terms of time, duration, and consistency, not in terms of discrete, isolated actions. 31 An emphasis on the primary good as changing the contemporary social order (whether understood as ultimately producing Communism or the Kingdom of God or something else) which has characterized much

29. See the discussion and references in note 4 above.
30. I take this phrase from Livio Melina, "Desire for Happiness and the Commandments in the First Chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*," trans. Margaret Harper McCarthy, *The Thomist* 60, no. 3 (July 1996): 341–59. He argues that this encyclical calls for a bridging of the gap between the earlier, more eudaimonistic, moral theology and modern interests in fulfilling the commandments.
philosophy and theology in the last two centuries is not likely to generate an intense interest in the phenomena of acedia. The focus of concern with acedia is frankly personal, not social. (Curiously, existentialism, a philosophy centered on the person and her choices, seems to be the primary modern heir of medieval discussions of acedia in that existentialists often begin their work with a description of a Nausea or a Sickness unto Despair, to borrow titles from Sartre and Kierkegaard, which employs much of the same language used by medieval writers on acedia.) Modern emphases on the critical or analytical aspects of philosophy, while they do not preclude the possibility of a contemporary construction of eudaimonia (and hence a contemporary philosophical concern with enjoying the good), do seem to lead people away from the eudaimonistic ideal. If Alasdair MacIntyre is correct about the permeation of modern Western culture by "emotivism"—the "doctrine that . . . all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference . . . in so far as they are moral or evaluative in character"—then there simply can be no eudaimonistic ideal. Thus, the modern pose of irony, the mark of sophistication, likewise tends not to generate an interest in linking happiness with virtue. Hence, for all of these reasons and many others, the problem of acedia, of failing to enjoy the eudaimonistic life, is no longer a central one in large part because the contexts and assumptions which bring eudaimonia to its most intense incarnation seem to have changed.

Despite all these tendencies to the contrary, however, the link between ethics and happiness remains. The works by Nussbaum and Vlastos which have been so helpful for this essay demonstrate that some contemporary philosophers remain committed to utilizing ancient ideas

32. Thus, Kierkegaard is even able in some sense to recommend despair, since it is only through profound anxieties that a person can break himself from conventional attitudes and come to recognize the importance of personal choice and the leap of faith. Whereas acedia was almost wholly destructive, this despair (or Sartre's nausea) created the possibility of new life, new freedom, new responsibilities. Josef Pieper observed the link between acedia and Kierkegaard, but unfortunately he did not develop the insight. See his Leisure: The Basis of Culture, trans. Alexander Dru (NY: New American Library, 1963), 38. Regrettably, a thorough exploration of the links between medieval acedia and modern existentialism is beyond the scope of this essay.

33. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11–12. Note, too, that MacIntyre is a central proponent of the importance of narrative for philosophy.
of *eudaimonia* in their attempts to live the good life in the present. Moreover, sorrow, laziness, apathy, and the many other cubs and daughters of acedia are still around. Thus, I would like to return to medieval ideas about acedia, more particularly to a close reading of Dante's presentation of acedia in the *Purgatorio*, in order to demonstrate that the medieval understanding of acedia represents a tremendously important insight into the opportunities and challenges of human existence.

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Cantos XVII–XIX of the *Purgatorio* suggest that acedia is the key to love, freedom, and ethics. Several aspects of these cantos argue for such a startling thesis.

The poetic geography is certainly not insignificant; these cantos are at very center of the *Divine Comedy*. If we consider the first canto of the *Inferno* as a prologue, the middle of the remaining ninety-nine cantos is the middle of canto XVII, roughly at about the point where Dante begins his ascent to the cornice of the slothful. And the hundred cantos of the complete poem themselves are a pilgrimage from the “dark wood where the straight way was lost” of *Inferno* I to the *Paradiso*’s spectacular vision of “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars”—the culminating line of the text/journey. Hence, when Dante chooses cantos XVII–XIX to expound on love—the central theme of the *Comedy* itself—he may well be suggesting something about the significance of acedia. In a poem about love, disordered and divine, Dante presents his understanding of how humans desire, love, sin, and become holy at the cornice of acedia precisely because he recognizes the central point raised by the phenomena of acedia itself: Our moral successes and failures as lovers and human beings depend upon our overcoming “lukewarmness in well-doing.”

Within the scheme of the *Purgatorio* itself, acedia has a crucial place as the middle of seven cornices on which the Seven Deadly Sins are purged. As Vergil explains in these cantos, the three cornices below are

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for pride, envy, and anger—sins in which one’s natural love is perversely directed against one’s neighbor. The three cornices above cleanse sinners of greed, gluttony, and lust—sins in which love is excessively pursuing secondary goods without proper regard for the primal good, God. The three lower sins are sins of the spirit, whereas the attachments to physical bodies in the three upper cornices suggest sins of the flesh. Strikingly, acedia both in traditional medieval discussions and in Dante’s own presentation is a sin both of the spirit and of the flesh. As we have seen, not only does torpor of acedia stand opposed to the excited joy of charity, it also manifests itself as simple laziness. Acedia, then, concentrates our attention on the sinfulness of both flesh and spirit—and as the narrative of these cantos suggests acedia also subtly points our minds toward the Incarnation, the embodied event by which all sins are overcome.

Finally, one other matter illustrating the importance of acedia presents itself. It is subjective to be sure, but as I hope to show in the subsequent discussion of cantos XVII–XIX, it is no less a part of Dante’s argument. It is the sheer power of the poetry—its images (God the falconer), its narrative tenderness (the pathos of asking the condemned Vergil to explain love), its comprehensiveness (humanity past and present is interwoven with the problem of sloth), and its sensitivity to the nature of the sin itself (Dante’s vision of the Siren)—it is the power of these verses themselves which confirm the poet’s insight of giving acedia the central location in his poem about love. The aesthetic vigor of these cantos suggests to me that Dante was writing from a deep introspective intimacy with the problem of acedia, and from his articulation of these phenomena, we may stand to benefit enormously.

In canto XVII, Dante and Vergil journey to the cornice of sloth by ascending from the cornice of the wrathful. But as an indicator of how powerful acedia is, Dante finds that as he is about to ascend to the terrace where sloth is purged, he finds “the power of [his] legs suspended,” and he and Vergil are “stopped like a ship that comes to shore.” This slowing of Dante’s progress contrasts decidedly with his description of his exit from the cornice of sloth two cantos later. There, after having been purged of acedia, he climbs to the cornice of greed as a falcon flies off desiring food. The narrative context of acedia and its accompanying discourses, images, and events is a movement from the weakness of sloth to the power of a love free from the sorrows of acedia.
Dante asks his guide “what offense is purged in this circle?” and Vergil replies that it is the “love of good which comes short of its duty.” But the great epic poet of Rome recognizes that understanding the significance of acedia requires that he take this opportunity given by their delay to reveal (finally, after many cantos) the plan of Purgatory: the seven cornices, the different sins below and above acedia, and the particular—singular!—quality of this sin. “[E]very virtue and every action deserving punishment” spring from the “seed” of love which is implanted in our very natures by the Creator. We are always in a state of desiring or loving, and whether we act virtuously or basely depends on us and on how we come to discern our “happiness” [felicita]. (The link here with eudaimonia, which Dante perhaps derived from Aquinas’s use of Aristotle, is clear.) This provides the basis for the taxonomy of sins. Whereas pride, envy, and anger all share a common desire to see evil befall a neighbor, and whereas greed, gluttony, and lust all share a common love of material pleasures, only acedia is a “sluggish” love which “pursues its good in faulty measure.” The slothful whom Dante will soon see knew what the good was, and their loves were not perverted or misdirected. Rather, because zeal for the good signifies the complete cooperation of the person in the performance of her actions, the slothful’s lack of zeal represents a decisive failure.

This presentation sets the stage for canto XVIII, which begins with Dante asking Vergil to “expound love to me, to which thou reducdest every good action and its opposite.” This is the request which leads Vergil to his substantial discourse on love, free will, and ethics, but the narrative description of the request itself already shows love in action. Vergil is described to the reader by the poet as a “lofty teacher” yet Dante addresses him as “dear and gentle Father.” Vergil, for his part, recognizes in Dante—a man at once a fellow poet and a pupil—the questions Dante now has even before Dante himself vocalizes them. Such knowledge evokes the medieval understanding of how angels could know the thoughts of men and women through their extraordinary powers of reading human expressions (properly speaking, only God can actually read minds). In the space of a few lines and even fewer seconds in the narrated drama, then, the relationship between the two men reaches extraordinary heights of respectful tenderness. Such a sympathetic portrayal of two pilgrims growing to love each other as they journey together is underscored by the continual references to time in these
cantos. Both of them realize that whereas Dante will progress to Paradise, soon Vergil must return to his eternal home, the circle of the virtuous pagans in the Inferno. Vergil had described existence there with stark pathos in Inferno IV: "without hope we live in desire." The regular evocation of time is wholly integral to Dante's presentation of acedia, for acedia wastes time as it wastes lives and loves.

The central thought behind Vergil's discourse is that the "mind, created quick to love, is readily moved towards everything that pleases." This operating principle of motivation creates the impression that a human being is constantly being batted about by desires generated by sense impressions. We see something, we desire it, we take action to get it. Dante at this point raises the crucial question of merit. If the soul is in fact so stirred to animating loves by things outside itself, what does it matter if "straight or crooked" choices are taken in our pursuit of these loves (cf. the loss of the "straight" way in Inferno I and the initial concern of the drama). Vergil replies with a statement of his insufficiency: "As far as reason sees here I can tell thee; for beyond that wait only for Beatrice, for it is a matter of faith." (Beatrice's discussion of the mystery of the Incarnation and its transformation of human possibilities occurs in canto VII of the Paradiso.) Vergil tells Dante what he can about this problem, namely that human beings have free will and this freedom is part of humanity's substantial existence. Free will is grounded in metaphysics, and it "is not perceived except in operation nor is ever demonstrated but by its effect, as life in a plant by green leaves." This faculty "garners and winnows out good and guilty loves," and Vergil declares that those who first "recognized this innate freedom . . . left ethics to the world." Poignantly, the people whom medieval readers would have understood by this noble reference, Plato and Aristotle, were seen by Dante in Hell, in the circle reserved for virtuous pagans.

The exercise of free will and its relationship to proper loves, then, becomes the crucial issue. A few centuries later, in his Leviathan and his Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance, Thomas Hobbes formulated his principles of human behavior, and the contrast between his analysis and that of the medieval poet is suggestive. Hobbes seems to resemble Dante in that he seeks to centralize human motivation in the pursuit of pleasure (and also the aversion to pain). And, like Dante, he takes the role of external stimuli as sources of desire and temptation quite seriously. But because he defines free will as "freedom from" (as
simply the absence of constraints) and not as a metaphysically grounded human faculty which can choose between competing goods and evils, he is unable, Dante would argue, to construct a genuine ethics which contains any moral or emotive force. In Vergil’s discussion of love, Dante directly responds to Hobbes’s fellow materialists, the Epicureans, who did not distinguish between praiseworthy and unpraiseworthy loves, calling them “the blind who make themselves guides.” Dante seems to be arguing that a compelling, adequate ethics must retain the central category of “freedom for” because only when we consider the matter of the ultimate purposes of our freedom can we understand how to experience the joy of virtue. (Hobbes’ ethical system, after all, would be difficult to describe as inspiring or ecstatic; indeed, sloth in Hobbes might be considered as a satisfactory option.)

The contrast between these two different constructions of ethics around the constellation of pleasure, happiness, and love illuminates one of the reasons why the problem of acedia lost much of its urgency in the last few centuries. The importance of the detailed examination of conscience and personal motivation which was central both to ancient philosophy and to medieval concerns about acedia diminishes when the category of “freedom for” becomes less important. Precisely because most premodern philosophers and theologians did not locate the arbiter of ultimate happiness in a subject state of personal pleasure (a move most pronounced in the Utilitarians), these writers and spiritual guides were deeply concerned with the question of whether a person perceived her true happiness in terms of the Good (understood as existing prior to and apart from her) and whether she acted accordingly. These issues require attention to the question of “freedom for”—and to the related matter of teleology and thus also of narrative—in ways that Hobbes and many other modern systems do not.

After Vergil concludes his magnificent discourse on the nature of love and free will, Dante offers a description of how the moon and stars currently appear above the two of them. This dramatic pause at once sets off Vergil’s presentation from what follows and it underscores several features of the presentation itself. In addition to reminding the reader of the importance of time (both to the reader and to Vergil and Dante), the gaze of the poet into the sky and the reference to the stars evokes in the reader’s mind the presence of God and the call of the pilgrim to the heavens. Each division of the Divine Comedy ends with the
word “stars,” and at the end of the *Purgatorio*, Dante is “pure and ready to mount to the stars” where he will come to enjoy the beatific vision itself. The right ordering of love, we might learn from the poet’s looking toward the stars at this moment, is not to be separated either from the brevity of mortal life or from the eternity of immortal life.

At this point, Dante grows drowsy. He is experiencing the effects of sloth, and his tiredness represents one of the daughters of acedia which regularly besets us. It strikes the poet at this particular time, Dante may be suggesting, because such weighty ideas as Vergil has expounded them are inherently taxing (Dante calls his request for this lesson a “load” with which he “burdened” Vergil). Alternatively, the sudden appearance of the penitents which rouses him from his impending somnolent wandering may mean that ideas devoid of personal examples are stultifying. Discourse, argument, reason, and logic may provide truths but they do not, the narrative suggests, have the same power over human behavior as deeds and stories. These need to work together in the intellectual and spiritual formation of the person. The contrast between discourse and active example is underscored by Dante’s imagery. He evokes the image of a Bacchanal to suggest the zeal of the penitents as they come running by, and such a vibrant image contrasts with the stately, measured presentation of Vergil which preceded it.

The penitents on this cornice are running swiftly, being driven on by “right will and just love,” and so eager are they to purge themselves of their sloth that they will not pause even for something as striking as the presence of Dante and Vergil. Dante describes a quasi-liturgical exchange in the procession of souls: “[F]or all that great crowd kept running, and two in front cried out with tears: ‘Mary went into the hill country with haste,’ and ‘Caesar, to subdue Lerida, thrust at Marseilles and then made speed to Spain.’ ‘Haste, haste, lest time be lost for little love,’ the rest cried behind ‘that zeal in well-doing may make grace come green again.’” (The references are to Mary’s journey to see Elizabeth in Lk 1:39 and Caesar’s famous celerity in fighting the civil war.) The last two souls in the procession call out to the others ahead two examples of sloth: the Israelites of the Exodus who all died before their descendants reached the promised land and the group of Trojans who decided not to continue the epic journey to Italy and who thus “did not endure the toil to the end” with Aeneas and “gave themselves to a life without glory.”

There are three striking aspects to this penitential procession worth
consideration at this time: the communal, the liturgical, and the historical. Dante's choice of having the penitents run together in such a processional reveals his understanding of the communal or social aspects of the fight against sloth. (Their formation as a group contrasts with the much more isolated purgations of the angry on the cornice immediately below and the greedy immediately above.) The brief exchange with the Abbot of San Zeno in Verona as he runs past in the procession underscores the importance of the communal struggle against acedia. While little is known of this abbot, the choice of a monastic figure is appropriate given the original eremitic context of acedia. Abbots were particularly responsible for maintaining the proper devotional dedication in their monasteries, and an abbot's giving over to acedia would have had disastrous consequences for the entire community. Likewise, we consistently find ourselves in situations where we need moral support and even pressure. Just after the passage cited in this essay's opening vignettes from the Education of a Bodybuilder, Schwarzenegger states that he required a training buddy to help him maintain his regimen. "He forced me to get off my butt, to get my sluggish body moving." In our lives, we know we should lift the barbell twenty-five times instead of twenty, but without being encouraged or spurred by our friends, mentors, and lovers, we remain satisfied with lesser achievements.

The quasi-liturgical exchange of the penitents is quite significant because, as commentators note frequently, this is the only cornice in the Purgatorio in which the penitents do not call out a prayer. The slothful, in traditional medieval constructions of the term, were seen as being so listless and therefore contrary to the joy and hope of salvation which prayer offers, that it is appropriate that these sinners are so constrained as to be unable to pray. (Recall that one of the earliest reasons for the Christian formulation of acedia was the recognition that some monks were overcome by the inability to maintain their prayer lives because they could no longer experience the zeal and delight of intimate communion with God.) In the Middle Ages, the liturgy and the calendar of feast days were seen as the proper contexts for a Christian understanding of rest. Thus, acedia's temptation to idleness at improper times suggested a person's ultimate antagonism to the Sabbath and to worship (those who are interested in promoting liturgical renewal these days might do well to ponder the phenomena of acedia and their capacity
to insinuate themselves subtly into the spirit). In order to purge themselves of sloth, therefore, the penitents must echo liturgical processions with the vigor of their verbal exchanges and the treading of their feet.

Perhaps most importantly, Dante’s presentation of the slothful and their procession incorporates all of human history (at least all such matters as a medieval Christian would have considered history). Both sacred and secular history are represented, both in their most ancient forms and in the more modern aspects. The Old Testament and the New, and the founding of Rome by Aeneas and the establishment of the Empire by Caesar are invoked. (Dante was dedicated to both the church and the Holy Roman Empire, and he believed that both were ordained by God for the maintenance of Christendom.) For the poet, the slothful require the constant examples of history and human endeavor. Their crying out a story from the Aeneid is far more useful to them than Vergil’s discourse to Dante would have been.

The problem of acedia focuses attention on the importance of narrative, exempla, and history for ethics because the phenomena of acedia are most important as we live our lives as a duration through time. Ethical discussions which focus on specific moments of choice, distinct decisions, or particular actions often overlook this question of duration. I may know what to do at a given moment—but how do I know that I will continue to choose that right course when faced with similar moments in the future? Or, how do I know that I will execute my duty with the same promptness and zeal for the good which I may have felt at that the initial moment? May I not prefer to be more leisurely as I wend my way to the hill country to visit Elizabeth? How do I know that I will not grow tired of dutiful, responsible behavior? Logically, I may know what the correct choice of action is, but in practice, how do I avoid slacking off? The narratives of historical examples, Dante suggests, are the most powerful form of ethical sustenance and empowerment.

Dante’s vision of the siren illustrates precisely how acedia works; this dream reveals quite clearly how powerful the phenomena of sloth can be. Immediately after the procession runs out of sight, Dante’s mind begins to wander though various new ideas. He never states what these thoughts are, though acedia’s traditional symptom of wandering suggests that Dante may be experiencing the effects of sloth as a prelude to their purgation from him. Certainly his experience of the siren conforms to descriptions of the process by which acedia transforms human motivation.
Canto XIX opens with another of the poet’s brief declarations of the particular time of day. At this precise moment, “there came to [Dante] in a dream a woman, stammering, cross-eyed, and crooked on her feet, with maimed hands and of sallow hue.” Clearly she appears ugly and undesirable. Given the previous cantos’ discussions of how the senses present desirable objects to the mind and how these generate longings in us, it would seem that this creature is vicious and is to be rejected. But Dante, echoing Cassian, Aquinas, and many others, describes the process whereby acedia transforms our perceptions of what is ugly into what is desirable: “I gazed at her, and as the sun revives cold limbs benumbed by the night, so my look have her a ready tongue and then in a little time made her quite erect and coloured her wan features as love desires. When she had her speech thus set free she began to sing so that it would have been hard for me to turn my mind from her.” She declares that she is the “sweet siren who beguile [sic] the sailors in mid-sea . . . and he who dwells with me rarely departs, so wholly I content him.” Acedia, many medieval writers declared, is a state in which the mind transforms vice into something not only acceptable but also desirable. In its original monastic context, acedia led monks away from prayer and their vocation to material pleasures or simple indolence, making these seem to be the true source of happiness and contentment. Is not lying on a couch watching television much more desirable than helping the poor?

How does Dante escape the call of the siren? He states that as soon as the siren finished her speech, “a lady holy and alert appeared beside me to put her to confusion.” As the dream continues, this lady calls upon Vergil, and he “seized” the siren and “laid her bare in front, tearing her clothes, and showed me her belly. That awoke me with the stench that came from her.” While some have attempted to identify this lady with a character within the Comedy (such as Lucia or Beatrice), Singleton argues convincingly that this lady needs to be understood in the context of the discussions on love, free will, and ethics in the preceding cantos. He states that she is the “personification” of the “light of discernment” which tells us how to distinguish between good and false loves. Vergil then becomes “the will which acts upon that discernment.”35 The truly wicked nature of the siren is made apparent, and the stench is overpowering—just as the ugliness of sin should make evil instantly repulsive

35. Singleton, Commentary, 452.
to us. Dante’s narrative suggests that even though these matters ought to be clear, acedia’s capacity to warp the mind and to reshape images of sin is so great that careful attention and rigorous self-examination will be needed in order for proper discernment and a faithful will to be operative in us.

As Dante is contemplating this dream, an angel appears to show them the passage out of the cornice of sloth, “declaring quasi lugent [those who mourn] to be blessed, for they shall have their souls possessed of consolation.” Here, as on the other cornices, there is a benediction, and Dante has chosen to link mourners with the slothful because, in the words of Singleton, “this beatitude praises those who, unlike the slothful, have the fortitude to endure pain.”36 For a variety of reasons, chief among them the Passion of Christ, Christianity has emphasized the importance of suffering. (Indeed, in Rom 8, Paul argued that it was precisely through suffering that we become one with Christ.) Despite the emphasis Dante gives to zeal, love, and happiness, Dante maintains the reality of suffering and the need to mourn—how could it be otherwise in such a violent, wicked world? But the sadness of acedia is quite different from feeling the sorrows of the world. The former is either paralyzing or trivializing our lives, but the latter is blessed and ultimately empowering because such mourning is done with the fortitude born of knowing that there is a “Love that moves the sun and the other stars.” As with the Crucifixion, suffering, pain, and grief ultimately are transmuted into joy and triumph.

Hence, Dante’s ultimate deliverance from the cornice of sloth is through Vergil’s use of the image of God the Falconer. Although he has been rescued from the siren, Dante remains troubled. When he reveals his concern to Vergil, the ancient poet replies that Dante has beheld the “ancient witch who alone is now wept for above us; thou sawest how man was freed from her.” But Vergil continues, urging Dante to climb to the next cornice, stating, “Turn thine eyes to the lure which the Eternal King spins with the great wheels [the heavens].” Dante thus describes his ascent, “Like the falcon which looks first to its feet, then turns to call and stretches forward through the desire for food that draws it there, such I became, and such, as far as the rock is cloven to make a way for the ascent, I went on.” This sudden burst of energy reveals that the poet

36. Ibid., 454.
who was stalled at the ascent to the cornice of sloth has been purged of this vice. In Paradiso XI.3, Dante provides the striking image of a bird which "beat[s] [its] wings in downward flight" as a metaphor for the misuse of reason—that which could aid our ascent we all too often use to bear ourselves down. Here, his falcon's wings now are carrying him higher, carrying him toward the vision of God. For Dante, of course, the discernment of good and evil loves requires knowing the primal Love and how He draws us upward.

**Conclusion**

This essay has presented some vignettes and stories and has made some arguments about the phenomena of acedia. Through these, it has tried to illuminate a set of concerns about what happens to our joy, freedom, and love when we cease to experience delight in doing the good. Dante's Purgatorio XVII–XIX suggests, however, that the ultimate test of such discourse depends on whether readers have ever found themselves on the cornice of sloth with the two great poets. Have readers felt themselves slowed in their moral progress or that they are in the desert with the Israelites? Have readers found at times that certain exercises of virtue are simply tedious? Have their minds wandered when they should be concentrating most intensely? Have such erring minds transformed an ugly vice into something desirable and fair? Have readers been properly zealous in the pursuit of righteousness, or have their oars been too slack? Have they been lazy lovers, getting by perhaps, but not really exhibiting the vigor and dedication which are the marks of true lovers?

Medieval counsels on acedia suggest that while these phenomena are quite serious matters, they do have remedies—prayer, work, love, friendship, the exempla of history, and the lure of a great falconer. For some, this falconer may be the "Love that moves the sun and the other stars," but for others, the lure may come from a beloved or from an alluring figure such as Socrates (as the Symposium makes clear, the old, satyr-like philosopher had completely seduced the youthful, beautiful politician, Alcibiades). We may also need to develop the fortitude to mourn both for our own failures and for the sorrows of the world, but, Dante suggests, we may be comforted and anticipate the flight of a falcon as we learn how to love without laziness. ~