

The Capital Vices: *Acedia's* 'Deadly' Cronies

BY JOHN SPANO

The capital vice tradition—with its origins in the ancient Christian practices of self-examination, confession, mutual correction, and penance—identifies *acedia* and its cronies as barriers to love. The books reviewed here introduce the tradition and offer hope for healing through God's grace.

One can find a proliferation of books offering some insight into the causes of emotional difficulties, providing methods for coping with them, and promising eventual happiness if readers follow the recommended remedies. While many of these books are self-help aids filled with vacuous aphorisms, some are thoughtful studies based upon current research in clinical psychology.

Joining this broad genre are several works that take a different approach to the human predicament by examining the capital vices, which are known more colloquially as the seven deadly sins. The capital vice tradition has its origins in the ancient Christian practices of self-examination, confession to others, mutual correction, and penance. It offers hope for healing and happiness grounded in the Christian message while avoiding the triteness of positive-thinking programs and emphasizing, *pace* most psychological scholarship, the necessity of God's grace for well-being.

The four books reviewed here—Christopher Cook's *The Philokalia and the Inner Life: On Passions and Prayer* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012, 402 pp., \$44.00), Christopher Jamison's *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for Fulfilling Life* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009, 182 pp., \$19.95), Henry Fairlie's *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN:

University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, 224 pp., \$20.00), and Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung's *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009, 208 pp., \$16.99) – provide good introductions to the capital vice tradition and thoughtful reflection on the individual vices.



In *The Philokalia and the Inner Life*, Christopher C. H. Cook – a psychiatrist who directs the Project for Spirituality, Theology, and Health at Durham University in the UK – explores the capital vice tradition via the *Philokalia*, an important anthology of Eastern Orthodox spiritual writings. Those collected works (from thirty-eight figures who lived across a millennium) present a common focus on the watchfulness and stillness needed to reach deification, God's gracious gift of participation in the Triune life.

In the first chapter Cook presents a history of the *Philokalia*. In the next three chapters he examines the eight detrimental "thoughts" – the forerunners to the capital vice tradition in western Christianity – and the means of overcoming them as a step toward deification. Each chapter has a similar flow: after an overview of the classical account of the subject under discussion (e.g., what a "passion" is), Cook moves to the development of the theme in the writings of the desert fathers, highlights the synthesizing work of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), and concludes with a review of the *Philokalia* writers' account of the matter. Cook rightly emphasizes the importance of Evagrius who presented the first systematic account of the eight "thoughts" – gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. Cook is to be commended for presenting a charitable reading of the Eastern fathers who at times appear to condemn all "passions," not just the wrongly directed ones, as well as for his clear exposition of the difficult issue of deification. In the final two chapters, Cook engages contemporary psychotherapy with the teachings of the *Philokalia*, emphasizing their similarities (e.g., both offer helpful means for promoting mental well-being) and differences (particularly concerning the role that God plays in human well-being).

Cook is meticulous in his presentation of the ideas related to passions, contemplation, and deification, a meticulousness that can be distracting in two ways. First, the cataloguing nature of his presentation makes it difficult to find the central thread connecting various parts of a given chapter, especially in the fourth chapter on the relationship among the themes of deification, purification, *hesychia* (a state of inner stillness), and blessedness. Second (and this is less a fault of Cook than of his ancient sources), his fastidiousness reveals the vague ways that the writers in the *Philokalia* often use important terms; especially annoying is the ambiguity surrounding the important concept of "passion" and whether the passions are necessarily

evil or can be directed rightly. Cook's work will be of most interest to those seeking to understand the Evagrian roots of the capital vice tradition and those drawn to the contemplative emphasis of Eastern Orthodoxy.



In *Finding Happiness*, Christopher Jamison, O.S.B., the former abbot of Worth Abbey, a monastery in the south of England, explores the eight Evagrian "thoughts" through the lens of the Benedictine tradition. He offers "stepping-stones" that "can help to steady our stride, giving us the confidence to keep traveling" across the "torrent of modern living" (p. 2).

Jamison frames his work with an analysis of the word "happiness," contrasting the term's feel-good connotation in contemporary western society with the virtue-based account of *eudaimonia* found in ancient and medieval writers. To avoid confusion, he elects to follow St. Benedict's use of "joy" and "delight" instead of "happiness" as a description of the life that all persons desire. This change of words allows Jamison to direct attention away from subjective feelings (which have become the focus of happiness for many people today) and toward the realities that cause joy and delight—namely, contemplation and virtue. The author acknowledges that some readers will find it peculiar to associate delight and joy with the hard discipline required to acquire virtue. To bridge the gap, he offers an account of "freedom" that is quite different from the common notion of doing whatever happens to please one at the moment. Jamison observes how little real freedom many of us have; our inordinate love for food, money, and fame bind us to destructive patterns of behavior that keep us from true joy and delight. Real freedom requires being bound to the virtues and avoiding the vices—especially the ones identified in the capital vice tradition.

Though he presents this as the Benedictine means to happiness, Jamison acknowledges the earlier monastic John Cassian (c. 360-435) as the link between the Eastern and Western Christian traditions on the vices. Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences*, which were major influences on St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543), present in Latin the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers who mostly spoke Greek and Coptic. These two works serve as the basis for the chapters in the second part that are devoted to the eight vices.

Jamison does a nice job of presenting each vice, its characteristic symptoms in the individual, the ways that society engenders it, and some remedies for countering it. For instance, *acedia*, the "loss of enthusiasm for the spiritual life" (p. 48), can make us discontent with our surroundings under the pretense of spiritual dissatisfaction with others, and this makes us desire to escape our current situation. The underlying problem of *acedia*, which Jamison thinks is plaguing most people in contemporary western society, is a lack of spiritual self-awareness, a deficiency encouraged by a tendency to focus upon outward productivity instead of inward transformation.

Jamison's work is a much easier read than Cook's and is obviously directed to a popular audience. Furthermore, Jamison brings a pastoral background to his discussion of the vices and offers rich insights into how these vicious thoughts distort our vision of ourselves and others. *Finding Happiness* could serve as devotional reading for individuals or as a book study for discipleship groups.



While Cook and Jamison examine the vices from an intentionally Christian perspective and write for a Christian audience, Henry Fairlie's *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* is written for "a secular age by someone who may best describe himself as a reluctant unbeliever" (p. 6). However, because the capital vice tradition was formed and developed by Christian thinkers, Fairlie draws deeply from a variety of Christian sources, ancient and contemporary. It is worth noting his particular affinity for St. Augustine as the "great theologian on this subject" (p. 215). He constructs the book along lines similar to Jamison's: an introduction to the topic followed by chapters devoted to the individual vices. Here we see the list reduced from eight to seven, following the shortened list used by medieval writers under the influence of Pope Gregory the Great. The seven, in the order of Fairlie's treatment, are pride, envy, anger, sloth [*acedia*], avarice, gluttony, and lust.

A particular strength of Fairlie's commentary is his emphasis upon the social constructions that encourage and give expression to these vicious dispositions. Though it is as "individuals that we sin" (p. 29), our environment can certainly lead us away from virtue. Concerning the *vice* (rather than just the emotion) of anger, for example, Fairlie begins with the assumption that it is an inordinate desire for revenge in response to perceived injustice – a penchant,

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perhaps, to wrongly believe one has suffered an injustice, or to overreact to real injustice. The western emphasis upon individual rights can be a fertile environment for wrongheaded anger. As our perceived rights expand, perceived injustices naturally increase and we become prickly and suspicious of one another, which explains the culture of anger found in the various groups

fighting for rights. In his chapter on sloth he observes how the rampant individualism of western society, which encourages finding self-fulfillment in whatever activity the individual deems significant, leads to complacency due to the ease of accomplishment. Self-help books that rely on this dynamic may help induce sloth in individuals. Fairlie astutely observes a contemporary expression of sloth can also be in “the whiffling activity of the body,” an idea that he borrows from Dorothy Sayers (p. 120). Motivated by an avoidance of the morally important, the slothful person replaces virtuous activities with outdoor sports, confusing the physical strain with moral strenuousness.

Fairlie’s book is a fun read and is attractive to undergraduates. (I know two professors, one at a private institution and one at a public university, who assign this book in introductory courses.) His approach is reminiscent of Iris Murdoch. Both writers were acclaimed agnostics yet both refused to ignore the moral depth of religious tradition. Both emphasized the need for love of something outside of oneself as the antidote for the moral malaise of contemporary western society. And both fall prey to some inconsistency in holding onto the moral notions of sin, love, and transcendence without any notion of God.



The best introductory work on the vices comes from Rebecca Konyndyck DeYoung, a philosophy professor at Calvin College. Her *Glittering Vices* is philosophically sophisticated and historically attentive both to the origins and development of the vice tradition as well as to its contemporary applications. This does not mean that her book is a tough read: it is clearly written and DeYoung’s intellectual rigor never overshadows her warm personal style. The introduction and first chapter are particularly helpful; they elucidate the nature of vices and virtues as dispositions acquired through practice and sketch the development of the capital vice tradition. Her title, *Glittering Vices*, is meant to indicate why these erroneous ways of life are so common and attractive to us: the vices “glitter” because they deceptively promise a true human good.

The rest of the book follows the pattern of the books already examined, with a chapter dedicated to each vice. Like Fairlie, DeYoung draws openly from cultural expressions of the vices—movies, songs, even diet fads—as well as from a variety of philosophers and theologians. However, distinctive to her book is the centrality of Thomas Aquinas’s analyses of the seven capital vices. The influence of his moral psychology on her work is evident from the beginning—in her accounts of virtue and vice, the distinction between vices and mortal sins, and why these seven are the “capital” vices. In the later chapters dedicated to each vice, Aquinas’s voice remains a steady and insightful guide. This is particularly the case in her chapter on sloth, or *acedia*, the vice that Aquinas defines as “an aversion to the divine

good in us" (p. 85). Among the benefits that arise from her use of the medieval theologian's work are her description of sloth's essential nature, the explanation for its contrasting symptoms of laziness and hyper-activity, and her synthesis of the voices from the fourth-century desert Christians and the later western tradition.

Her insightful appropriation of Aquinas's moral philosophy makes DeYoung's book an excellent resource for an introductory ethics course. Her clear style, ample illustrations, and cultural critiques make it equally valuable for a church group study. If I have a criticism, it is that students may be too content with DeYoung's perceptive and winsome account to dig into Aquinas, Augustine, and Cassian on their own. Such a critique reflects the thoughtfulness of, not a deficiency in, her work.

The capital vice tradition is an excellent resource for those looking for happiness because it excels precisely where most of the self-help books and clinical studies fail: it places the meaning of happiness within the larger human and divine narrative. When we recognize these seven vices as serious faults, or sins (as Fairlie's title reminds us), we are confronted with the truth about ourselves and can then begin to steer our individual lives and social institutions toward what is good. Studying these seven vices, as DeYoung points out, can "offer us a framework for explaining and evaluating common cultural practices" and "yield spiritual rewards" (pp. 19-20). However, the tradition is not content with self-awareness nor does it suppose that individuals can overcome the vices without supernatural help. It places the vices within the larger Christian narrative that tells of a God who became a human being, who died and rose again, and thereby makes possible eventual freedom from these deformations of our humanity.



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