
Schooling the Young into Goodness

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Moral education should provide the young with an understanding of life worthy of themselves—a compelling account of goodness and how to achieve it. If we ask the young only to pursue their desires, should we be surprised if, instead of being uplifted by the freedom we hold out to them, they become bored and disenchanted?

What is the good life? How should we live if we are to be truly happy? Though questions like these may seem to some people today either quaint or misplaced, they are the most important questions that any program of moral education can ask. Indeed, that these questions strike some as helplessly old-fashioned only suggests how estranged we are from what once was considered a given.

What would it be to recover the founding inspiration of moral education? What would its features be? To begin, moral education should be an initiation into a way of life; it should be about schooling the young into habits and practices that will form them in the distinctive excellences of human beings. Those charged with the responsibility of helping the young grow into goodness should teach them to love what is best and to nurture aspirations that are truly worthy. They should strive to cultivate in the young a resilient passion for justice, a costly compassion, and the abiding conviction that fulfillment comes not when our lives are guided by calculated self-interest, but when we expend ourselves for the sake of others. In its most basic terms, moral education is about forming character and changing hearts; it is about offering the young something noble and magnanimous towards which to aspire.

But in a society that embraces its pluralism, we are often reluctant to take up these important tasks because they involve making normative judgments about different ways of life, the practices we should adopt, and the behavior we ought to embrace. Accordingly, we tell students they should clarify their values, but do not tell them why they should value one thing over something else. We make freedom of choice the sovereign good, but then give students little idea of why what they choose might matter. And we tell them to be open to different views – and above all to be tolerant – but often in ways that makes truth seem both expendable and negotiable.

Contrary to the view that claims about the good life are unfashionable or off-limits, the fundamental task of moral education should be providing the young with an understanding of life worthy of themselves – a coherent and compelling account of the good life and how one must live in order to achieve it. The young should be called to an adventure that is both challenging and promising precisely because if they undertake it, they will be transformed in ways that will make them exquisite in goodness and, therefore, rich in happiness.

Such a way of reenvisioning moral education might seem hopelessly idealistic – even irritatingly dogmatic – in an age skittish about making substantive moral claims. But embracing an anemic approach to moral education inevitably results in emptiness and disillusionment. If the moral life asks nothing more of the young than that they pursue their desires, ought we be surprised if, instead of being uplifted by the freedom we hold out to them, they become bored and disenchanting? If we extol personal autonomy and encourage the young to craft a life of their own, yet do not provide them with the form of life and communities that make a good life possible, should we wonder why they find themselves increasingly lonely and aimless?

Traditionally, this crippling disillusionment, and the malaise that results from it, has been called *acedia*, one of the seven deadly sins that were seen to be especially toxic for one's soul and spirit.¹ *Acedia* literally means to be without care, to be infused with an apathy and indifference rooted in the numbing conviction that nothing really matters. Young people today often manifest many of the symptoms of *acedia*, a fact that is not surprising since *acedia* is one of the most striking characteristics of the present age. Further, because we have done little to show young people why they will discover themselves and be fulfilled not in lives of comfort and self-promotion, but in devotion to something greater than themselves, it is not surprising that this is so. This is why the moral education of the young must first confront the toxins of *acedia* that infect so many of us in ways we hardly notice.

THE TOXIC POWER OF ACEDIA

Acedia was a prominent theme in the writings of the desert monks in the early Middle Ages. Often called the “noonday demon,” *acedia* descended on monks who began to find the rhythms and routines of monastic life

not uplifting and inspiring, but monotonous and tedious. Bored by the repetitions that are at the heart of the monastic life, in the “noonday sun” of their vocation, the monks not only grew distracted by the lure of other possibilities, but also questioned the value of their life. Couldn’t there be better ways to seek God? Couldn’t they love and serve their neighbors best if they were not cloistered behind the walls of desert monasteries? Aren’t there more urgent things to do than to recite psalms several times a day, week after week and year after year? In the throes of acedia, the desert monks were tempted to abandon the vocation to which God had called them, and to which they had once been passionately committed, for what they thought would be more fulfilling possibilities. Consumed by tedium, they could no longer focus on a life devoted to praising God, and thus let lesser things bewitch them.

But medieval monks were hardly the only ones to be captured by the wiles of acedia. We see its presence today in the sadness and disillusionment that descend upon persons who no longer believe great things are possible in life. We see it in the deep listlessness of spirit that characterizes persons who move through life engaged by nothing hopeful or worthwhile because they believe such things no longer exist or, if they do, they cannot possibly be attained. Acedia is a diffusive and debilitating sadness—a pervasive spirit of dejection—that eventually gives rise to despair. It is a crippling melancholy that dominates the lives of those who abandon aspirations to moral and spiritual excellence, and replace them with an endless series of stimulating and pleasant distractions.

In *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, Henry Fairlie describes acedia as “a morbid inertia” that can totally shut down a person’s life because he or she long ago stopped believing that life might involve something more, something better, something of such consummate goodness that it demanded their utmost devotion.² Dulled by the stupor of acedia, we

renounce great hopes and grand ambitions for lives that move relentlessly from one activity, one distraction, one titillating triviality to the next. Moreover, because we are busy, stimulated, active, and entertained, we are hardly aware of how empty and meaningless our lives have become, or of the morally and spiritually dangerous predicament in which we have placed ourselves. Do we fear boredom more than meaninglessness because we no

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longer believe there is a grander purpose to life or a truly magnanimous possibility? Are we committed to distracting ourselves through the rest of our lives because there is nothing beyond a cascade of distractions to make us, if only momentarily, feel alive?

Acedia is a moral and spiritual torpor that flows from a loss of belief in anything truly worthwhile and promising, anything genuinely ennobling and good; it is no wonder that young persons today are afflicted with it. The world we adults have bequeathed to them has in many ways stifled their natural sense of wonder and joy and dampened their innate hope about life's possibilities. Students may begin their educational journey seeking something better, something truly magnanimous. But along the way disenchantment and disillusionment settle in because they have taken to heart society's message that economic success and social acceptance matter more than moral and spiritual excellence. Students are malleable and impressionable. If they hear from us that they must put heroic ambitions aside, and that they can hardly afford to count on others in a society that prizes self-reliance, then it is not surprising that their magnanimity is replaced by acedia and their idealism by expedience. Such an unfortunate transformation reflects not an inevitable and wise adjustment to reality, but what is bound to happen when they are taught to aim for nothing more than lives of "comfortable survival."³ Why should we expect them to pursue lives characterized by compassionate service on behalf of others when we have given them a world whose primary idols are pleasure, power, and wealth, rather than charity and justice?

The primary aim of moral education should be to present students with a magnanimous way of life, one that will enable them to aspire to and achieve the greatness for which they, as God's very images, were created to enjoy. That we characteristically forsake this aim for less challenging and less promising goals reveals that the moral and spiritual dejection of soul that is the handiwork of acedia runs rampant in our educational structures and institutions. Brian Hook and Rusty Reno capture this when they contend that "our age is allergic to heroic ambition and inured to the attractions of excellence."⁴ We witnessed this not long ago when one of our students remarked on a course evaluation that while the course material was mildly interesting, "I just want to live my life and not waste it questioning everything." Like this student, there are many others who, by the time they reach the college classroom, have wholly imbibed the casual nihilism and calculated indifference characteristic of acedia. The problem is not that they seek job security, professional certification, and economic survival, but that they often seek nothing more. Like the adults who have formed them, these students, plugged into cell phones, iPods, and Facebook, "float on an ocean of pleasant distraction."⁵

Moreover, we see acedia at work when we ask students questions about the justification of their moral views or the reasonableness of belief in God.

Frequently they respond with the all-too-familiar line, “Who’s to say? It’s just a matter of opinion.” Though such responses may reveal a rather unsophisticated form of relativism at work, more often than not they bespeak a deeper and more dangerous indifference about questions that traditionally have been regarded as ultimately important for life. If this is so, the real challenge, revealed through the torpor of acedia, is convincing them that these questions matter at all, and that a life that fails to wrestle with them is morally and spiritually impoverished.

How can the affliction of acedia be explained? What accounts for its ubiquity? One reason acedia is so pervasive is that we no longer believe in the supremacy of a magnanimous life; put differently, we are reluctant to judge one way of life better than another. Consequently, we implicitly (and sometimes quite explicitly) communicate to students that an individual’s desires, needs, choices, and beliefs are beyond judgment. What matters is not whether those desires and needs are worthy, those choices good, or those beliefs true; rather, all that matters is that they are one’s own. Personal identity and authenticity are secured not through a way of life capable of making one wise, honest, and good, but through self-expression, even though how we choose to express ourselves might change every day. In this milieu, the only way to fail is to be inauthentic. But this is virtually impossible because authenticity is achieved not by following a normative ideal or by submitting one’s life to a moral or religious exemplar. Rather, authenticity is inherently self-bestowed because it consists in nothing more than following one’s own truth and honoring one’s own experience. It is unthinkable that one’s truth might be little more than fantasy or one’s experience impoverished, much less morally

dangerous. After all, there is no higher truth by which all truths must be judged and no accounts of human excellence that might reveal some experiences to be shallow and foolish. This is the harvest of acedia, a collapse into a relativism and individualism so encompassing that few stop to consider the absurdity and despair into which they lead us. If there is nothing more than “one’s own truth” and no meaning to be found in any experience other than the stultifying realization that it is one’s own, nothing finally matters.

But acedia is also nurtured and reinforced by cynicism. There are many ways cynicism is expressed, but one of the most harmful manifestations is distrust of anything that is noble, heroic, or magnanimous; in other words,

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it is cynicism about goodness. Seen through the twisted lens of cynicism, motives that appear to be genuinely benevolent are not only scrutinized, but also judged as tainted, and lives that seem to be dedicated to serving others are exposed as reinforcing structures of domination and oppression. When cynicism prevails, every saint is a stooge or collaborator, every hero a rascal in disguise. Nothing good, excellent, or holy is as pure as it seems, says the gospel of cynicism. No one would really prefer a life of disinterested service rather than a life of self-advancement, cynicism counsels. Thus, instead of emulating the good persons, we dismiss them as fools or frauds. This cynical disenchantment with anyone who strives to be heroic in goodness or holiness is clearly conducive to acedia. But the result of a loss of belief in genuine goodness is only greater cynicism, because after having exposed all aspirations for excellence as fraudulent, we are left with a humanity that not only is mired in mediocrity, but also is held hostage to its worst impulses.

BREAKING FREE OF ACEDIA

How then do we break free from the tentacles of acedia? How should we confront and overcome its life-robbing power? Perhaps the most promising antidote to acedia is to become diligent about cultivating in students a passionate love for and enduring attraction to the good. We begin to overcome the malaise of acedia when we affirm to young people that the fundamental human vocation is to respond to the appeal of goodness. That is a call entrusted to every one of us. Human beings are created to seek what is best, made to hunger for what is true and good and beautiful, because goodness completes and perfects us, particularly the unexcelled goodness that is God. Indeed, the most enduring appetite of our lives is for goodness because goodness, whether found in a flower, a symphony, a poem, or a person, calls us out of ourselves in relation to something else. Unlike acedia, which collapses us in on ourselves and bottoms out in despair, goodness summons us to transcend ourselves in love, service, sacrifice, and faithful devotion. This is why we are happiest not when we struggle to be sure that everything always works to our own best advantage, but when we generously give ourselves for the sake of others. It is why we find joy through acts of kindness and thoughtfulness. Goodness expands our lives because it draws us up and out of ourselves in love of something other than ourselves. That "other" can be a sunset, a spouse, a son or daughter, a pet, a stranger, or God. A life spent seeking, responding to, and being fulfilled in goodness culminates in joy because it is through goodness, especially the goodness of holiness, that each of us achieves the excellence most proper to human beings.

Goodness appeals to us every day of our lives in manifold and fascinating ways, if only we have eyes to see. Goodness calls to us in the patient and faithful love of those who care for us, as well as in the love and affection we are summoned to show them. It calls to us in the face of a child, in the affliction of those who are suffering, and in the opportunities we have to attend

to those who are lonely, sad, or troubled. Each of these is a call to move out of ourselves in love. Goodness speaks to us in laughter and leisure, in friendship and companionship, in prayer and contemplation, and through the discipline it takes to do anything well. Goodness makes its appeal through the truths we discover in great literature, in theology and philosophy, in music and the arts. But it also makes its appeal when we are presented with opportunities to be compassionate, to be patient and forgiving, and to be just and generous. Acedia is overcome through the endless conversions of our lives through which we move out of ourselves by turning to the good. In the Christian life, acedia is overcome as we turn toward Christ and follow him in faithful discipleship, a life that is hopeful precisely because it promises to transfigure us in goodness.

There are many ways to make goodness attractive to young persons. In *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, Brian Mahan speaks of “an epiphany of recruitment.”⁶ He is referring to moments in our lives where we experience being drawn beyond ourselves, moments where we experience a summons to devote ourselves to something challenging and costly, but also captivating and compelling. And we want to respond to these appeals not only because they speak to what is best in us, but also because they reveal to us that happiness comes through giving ourselves for the sake of something demanding and heroic. In “epiphanies of recruitment” we discover that the best lives are found not in “comfortable survival,” but in great enterprises worthy of the gift of ourselves. Jesus’ first followers had an “epiphany of recruitment” when Jesus invited them to “Come and see.” Like the disciples, instead of fearing or fleeing such moments, we should encourage students to embrace them and to recognize in them an invitation to a different – and much more promising – way of life.

But ultimately students will discover in themselves a passionate love for the good only if they see it embodied in us. We will not make goodness attractive to them by talking about it – by endless moralizing or tiresome preaching. We will only inspire them to seek and to love the good when they see

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zeal for the good reflected in who we are and what we do. Students need models and mentors of goodness. They need to *see* the good in order to *love* the good. This is always the case, but is especially so in a culture of acedia. They will hardly be enflamed in their love for the good and they will hardly appreciate its beauty or believe its power, if they see in us the same diffidence we are urging them to discard. The emptiness of acedia will be fully

exposed to young persons not when we lecture them about goodness, but when we live it, and through living it show them why it is the only true path to happiness and fulfillment. The lure of goodness will captivate them when they see how it has deepened and transformed our own lives, and when they see the rich joy that can be found in steadfast love and costly commitments. Put differently, we help them overcome the toxins of acedia through the witness of our lives. In this respect, there is no better antidote to acedia than spiritual friendships and churches marked by faithful discipleship.

VIRTUES FOR THE JOURNEY

Our fundamental responsibility in the moral education of the young is to invite them to a way of life that can best be described as an ongoing quest of seeking the good in order to become good. But because the nature of any quest is to be challenging, the way out of acedia demands that students today strive to acquire the virtues. Virtues are the habits of being and acting, and the qualities of character, that equip us to succeed in the quest for goodness. They are the skills we need to achieve excellence in goodness. All of the virtues are important, but in light of our analysis of acedia, three seem especially crucial: magnanimity, courage, and friendship.

If overcoming acedia hinges on transforming our desires and redirecting some of our ambitions, then it is important that we encourage young persons to become magnanimous. Magnanimity is the virtue that habituates us in aspirations for excellence. Literally meaning to be of “great soul” or “great spirit,” magnanimous persons always aspire to what is best, always reach for what is truly excellent and worthy of their lives, and refuse to “lower their sights” to less promising possibilities. With magnanimity, we become persons who reject puny ambitions and middling hopes, and instead focus our lives on purposes, projects, and goals that demand that we expend ourselves for the sake of something noble. Magnanimity teaches that we find happiness not through self-gratification, not through lives of ease and comfort, and certainly not through wealth, fame, or celebrity, but in risking costly and heroic loves. Indeed, the magnanimous person knows that we grow as humans in the measure that we extend ourselves on behalf of some transcendent purpose. Thus, contrary to acedia, the virtue of magnanimity suggests that our fundamental error is not that we hope for too much, but that we settle for so little.⁷

This should be a central and recurring message that we convey to young persons. And, more than we may sometimes believe, it is what they want to hear. As Brian Mahan suggests, despite displaying all the signs of acedia, students actually “seem to desire something deeper, something more idealistic, something different from what they were told constituted success American style.”⁸ They want to believe that lives devoted to service, compassion, justice, and goodness are better than lives continually centered on gratifying the whims of the self. They distrust what they have been taught about what

constitutes a good and successful life because they have seen how that leads to moral and spiritual dead ends. They want us to challenge them. They want us to summon them to raise their sights to the most unsurpassable possibilities available to human beings. And whether they tell us or not, they know if we fail to call them to be magnanimous, then we have failed them deeply.

Second, there is no way out of *acedia* without courage. Courage helps us deal with all the things in ourselves, in others, and in society that hinder our pursuit of moral excellence. Courage is not needed to sustain one in trivial conceptions of life because trivial narratives of life require nothing of us. It takes no courage to remain steadfast in ways of life that demand no sacrifice, no transcending of one's self, but whose only aim is to comfort and reassure the self. But narratives characterized by ambitions for moral and spiritual excellence cannot be embodied without courage precisely because they demand the transformation and transcending of one's self in faithful and exquisite love. The education of young people must include formation in courage because without this virtue we cannot persevere in our pursuit of authentic happiness and goodness amidst the lure of more immediately gratifying possibilities. With courage, we find the resolve necessary to appraise counterfeit narratives of human fulfillment as the illusions they truly are, and the resolve to continue our initiation into goodness with both hope and joy.

When the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas was writing about perseverance, an important aspect of courage, he said that perseverance helps us endure in the pursuit of any difficult good.⁹ Aquinas had in mind the perseverance that is required to seek the kingdom of God and to aspire to a life of friendship with God. But perseverance is a quintessential element in any magnanimous life precisely because it is hard to aspire to greatness in goodness day after day. The path out of *acedia* and into goodness is long and challenging, one that we are frequently tempted to abandon. This is why Aquinas also said, regarding perseverance, that its "action should continue through life."¹⁰ He recognized that our growth in goodness is always a work in progress, and that it is not without struggle and hardship, and even moments of failure. But with perseverance we do not allow our shortcomings, temptations, or failures to sidetrack us or to diminish our zeal for goodness, no matter how long acquiring it may take.

Finally, a most promising way to overcome the cynicism and malaise engendered by *acedia* is through friendship. This may seem an odd conclusion because while we may appreciate our friends, we might not think of them as essential elements to a life of virtue. But consider what happens to us in the best relationships of our lives. If *acedia* shrinks our world by turning us in on ourselves, friendship expands our world by calling us out of ourselves and teaching us how to care for others for their own sake. Indeed, instead of being captive to the dispiriting effects of *acedia*, friendship liberates us by challenging us to see beyond the pinched horizons of self-concern and self-interest by asking us to identify with the

good of others. The ordinary life of an ordinary friendship is morally important because indispensable qualities of character — qualities such as thoughtfulness, generosity, compassion, patience, and forgiveness — are developed in us in the crucible of friendship. If Aristotle was right in claiming that we become good by spending time with good people, then it is not amiss to focus the moral education of students on developing the kinds of relationships that he called friendships of virtue or character.

Moreover, friendship is important in the moral life because friends — and good communities — help us stay focused on and committed to what is best for us. If we envision the moral life as an ongoing training in goodness, it is easy to imagine how any one of us could grow weary and disheartened because the good we seek is hard to attain and never completely in our grasp. How do we persevere when the goal of the quest continually eludes us? We do so through the support, encouragement, counsel, and companionship of friends who pursue the quest for goodness with us. We do not persevere alone; we persevere *together*, because anything difficult is more easily managed when others share in it with us and, like us, are convinced of its value. Thus, we will help students resist the debilitating effects of acedia when we model for them — and teach them how to develop — the friendships through which they can help each other remain resolute in seeking the most hopeful and excellent possibilities for their lives.¹¹

CONCLUSION

No one is called to become rich or powerful or beautiful or famous. But they are called to become good. Goodness is the way out of acedia because to grow in goodness and to aspire to what is best is everyone's vocation. This is why education should be a thoroughly moral enterprise. We should want young persons to become excellent students, students who can dazzle us with their knowledge and expertise. But we should also want them to become excellent human beings, young men and women who dazzle us as well with their commitment to justice, their compassion for others, and their tireless devotion to something greater than their selves. If acedia bedevils us, and if the young are especially vulnerable to it, then helping to initiate students into a way of life that is truly worthy of them should be the central task of moral education in a pluralist culture. There is no more noble aim, and certainly nothing more urgent, than to encourage students to see that moral and spiritual excellence is not impossibly beyond their reach, but is the very thing for which they are made and through which they will be fulfilled.¹²

NOTES

1 A recent and astute analysis of acedia is Kathleen Norris's *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).

2 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 113.

3 Brian S. Hook and Russell R. Reno, *Heroism & The Christian Life: Reclaiming Excellence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 212.

4 Ibid., 211.

5 Ibid., 212.

6 Brian J. Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2002), 20.

7 On this point see Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 57.

8 Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, 30.

9 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 137, A 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

10 Ibid.

11 Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 29-34.

12 A longer and slightly different version of this essay appeared as "Tracking the Toxins of *Acedia*: Reenvisioning Moral Education," in Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty, eds., *The Schooled Heart: Moral Formation in American Higher Education* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 133-153.



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