

# Deadly Sins, Addiction, the Demonic, and Spirituality

DENNIS SANSOM

*I*n this essay, I argue that the classical Christian teaching on the seven deadly sins, and a particular theological understanding of the demonic, can help clarify the power of addiction which begins with the corruption of thoughts about desires. If not rechanneled in the direction of a life of charity toward others and God, these desires can be overcome by perverted aims and goals. In the process, a person struggles against an adversarial imposition of destructive thoughts, and consequently, the best correction and remedy to this process is the restoration of one's mind and life purpose. The practice of habitual prayer and fasting can renew the mind with that of the Spirit, and thus enable a person to regain charity and a life lived in communion with God, and to fulfill one's created purpose.

To accomplish this, I first present a brief overview of the main teachings on the deadly sins, emphasizing insights found in Evagrius of Pontus and Saint Thomas Aquinas. This is followed by an analysis of several explanations of why people become addicts, and in particular, why they enter the state of a deadly sin. I also discuss the possible role of the demonic in understanding deadly sins and addiction by gleaning from three theological accounts (Evagrius, Saint Thomas, and Karl Barth) several relevant conclusions. I close with a theological account of prayer and fasting as ways to prevent and possibly remedy the corrupting effects that the deadly sins and addiction can have on thought processes.

## **DEADLY SINS**

Teachings on the deadly sins date back to the fourth century, and though it appeared they had been forgotten starting around the 18th century with the Enlightenment, within the last thirty years there has been a renewed interest in them, not only for what they tell us about the Byzantine and medieval periods but also for their insights into human nature and the various problems we perennially face.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of sin is more comprehensive than a deadly sin. Many sins would not be considered deadly. For instance, adultery is a sin but lust is considered a deadly sin. Even though the particular act of adultery may cause

great harm to people, a life captured by lust is more ruinous to the person. A deadly sin is a vice, a perverse way of living that not only harms human life, it imperils it. For example, if we are gluttonous with our appetitive drives, we destroy our health and chance to achieve our life goal.

Moreover, the vices do not directly cause us to die, rather, they lead to death. While gluttony does not kill a person, the resulting heart disease or diabetes can cause death. Gluttony is a perverse thought process and will that prevents people from rightly ordering their lives toward proper aims that lead to fulfilling lives. They can be called capital vices. The word *capitis* (from which the English translation “deadly” comes) refers to the head. That is, vices begin in people’s head, in their thinking, in their aims and intentions. They corrupt human life because they involve perverse aims.

Perhaps the first teaching found comes from the fourth century theologian and monk Evagrius of Pontus. He describes eight deadly thoughts: gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride.<sup>2</sup> They distort the natural thought processes toward ruinous consequences. “The mind receives naturally the mental representations of sensible objects and their impressions through the instrumentality of [the mind’s ability].”<sup>3</sup> The mind takes the form of the external object and records it as a copy of the experience. There are three kinds of thoughts: human, angelic, and demonic. The mere mental construction of a representation of an experience is a human thought. An angelic thought clarifies the goodness and divinely given purpose of the objects of experience; however, a demonic thought corrodes a mental representation and consequently leads to a destructive way of thinking about the world, ourselves, others, and God. These thoughts are not mere misunderstandings or reflections on actual objects or features of the world, instead, they are perversions of mental representations and thus are harmful falsifications. For example, in Evagrius’ thinking, a demon would miss form a thought of human physical beauty into a sensual, erotic thought. Under the sway of the demonic, one loses the distinction between truth and reality and becomes enthralled by the distorted images of what is not real and good.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominican priest Saint Thomas Aquinas gives the fullest and most philosophical-theological explanation of the deadly sins. He makes an important distinction between venial and mortal sins, which he explains within his broader theological investigation into whether there is free will or determinism. Free will advocates say that the human will at its core is unencumbered by external forces and is thus the cause of its own actions. Whereas the determinists maintain that external forces, whether heavenly bodies or natural-material states, cause every action with our choices never being the cause of our actions but the effects caused by nature or divinity.

Aquinas rejects both because each fail to acknowledge the complicated nature of the intellect and will. They are never merely subjective choices or the effects of external forces. More precisely, the intellect and will are by their design aimed toward external reality. The intellect aims toward knowledge and truth, and the will aims toward the good and the rewarding. Libertarianism and determinism both fail to understand the nature of the intellect and will; they are intentional agencies defined by that toward which they aim. The cause of a choice is both the aim of the intellect and the will and of the agency of the person that seeks and desires the aim.<sup>4</sup>

In Aquinas' view, the will and mind are most what they should be when they choose and think according to their proper aim. People manifest a certain natural purposiveness to seek and desire what is good and fulfilling and, hence, are most fulfilled and content by seeking these kinds of aims.

Of course, Aquinas knew people make mistakes, sometimes accidentally and sometimes willfully. Whenever someone sins out of weakness or ignorance and can be corrected and pardoned for the sin, the act is called a venial sin. The word venial (*venia*) means pardon. Most sins are pardonable in that a person can and often should be remedially punished for the sin, with redemption the punishment's aim. Sin in this sense is a disorder or sickness of the soul, and disorders can be corrected and sicknesses can be healed. The pardoning of the person actually helps the person to restore health to the soul by rightly aligning the person's intellect and will with respect to the aims that actually contribute to human well-being and flourishing. The venial sin does not destroy the capacity of the person to order one's life properly; it only cripples the capacity.

According to Aquinas, because humanity's fundamental purpose is charity, to love God and one's neighbor, a venial sin indicates an immoderate desire or pursuit, which obstructs this purpose by hindering persons from exercising charity. However, at this stage, enough capacity for charity remains so that through pardoning and correction persons can be reformed and, therefore, helped in order to fulfill the proper goals of human nature. Aquinas illustrates this definition of a venial sin with a person who wants to eat good food but out of weakness or ignorance eats poisonous food. As long as the person still seeks to eat good food, the person can be educated, guided, mentored, or even punished to avoid poisonous food and to aim toward health inducing food.

However, a capital vice is fundamentally different. Aquinas states, "those vices are called capital which have ends principally desirable in themselves in such a way that other vices are ordered to these ends."<sup>5</sup> With venial sins, people commit them out of moral weakness, perhaps due to personal flaws or extenuating circumstances which become overwhelming. With the capital vices, people deliberately and compulsively aim for a vice and thus commit the vice out of necessity. They no longer seek charity or to love God and others. Rather,



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they desire the perverse desire. Because the human intellect and will are not static features, uninfluenced by external reality, but potentialities of thought and agency seeking actualization in objects of truth and goodness, the human mind is susceptible to take on the characteristics of that which it gives ultimate allegiance. In the state of a capital vice, people no longer want or seek charity, and they become incorrigible to any outside punishment, guidance, or instruction.

From a natural desire, people can become intemperate and cause harm to themselves, but in willing a vice, people take on for themselves the identity of the vice, and thus fall into compulsiveness. Aquinas illustrates this by describing a person leaning over a well and seeing their image in the water below. They become so fixated on the reflection that they lean over too far and fall into the well, unable to stop the fall and all the while fixated on their image. In the grips of a vicious disposition, a person makes a corruption of the human will and intellect to be their life's goal.

Saint Augustine, the fifth century Bishop of Hippo, insightfully describes this perverting effect of a deadly sin: "Specious vices have a flawed reflection of beauty."<sup>6</sup> It is not that a person in the vice has discovered a hitherto unknown evil; rather, the person has totally misused a natural desire and need, which by their design are aimed toward a more fulfilling goal than the mere desire and need.<sup>7</sup> A capital vice thus distorts and pollutes what we by nature can and should do, that is, charity.

Aquinas' description of the capital vice of gluttony illustrates the tragic nature of a capital vice. It is normal to eat food, and a fine thing to want to eat fine food. Both reasons of eating can be aimed at health, and in this sense eating would have instrumental value toward a more fulfilling and important aim than merely eating. The aim of health thus necessitates a person to eat good and often tasty food. Thus, eating should always have an instrumental value, justified by its contribution to one's health.

However, with gluttony the aim is strictly the eating of the food, the insatiable eating itself. The aim of eating is thus non-instrumental, and in gluttony the aim and desire converge in one experience. A person may choose which particular food to eat or not to eat; however, in gluttony a person cannot choose not to eat, because the person's identity is now defined by eating rather than according to a more comprehensive and fulfilling aim, such as health. Although the specific choice is voluntary, the root of the choice is now involuntary in that what should be a means toward health, that is, eating, in gluttony becomes a final aim.<sup>8</sup>

Even though a capital vice causes horrible physical and social harm, the greatest harm is that it prevents one from living a life of charity. By nature, human beings are most fulfilled in the love of God and neighbor, yet a capital

vice can distort one's thinking, causing them to reject charity and thus put one at war with one's own humanity. Although alive, the person is already moribund.<sup>9</sup>

People captured by capital vices cannot be corrected by imprisonment or even abstinence, because these measures only deal with the particular choices of the people. Only a life rightly ordered in the direction of charity can overcome a vice, and manage to crawl out of the well.

The deadly sins teach us that human nature is naturally oriented toward truth and goodness and is rightly ordered when committed to the love of God and others. However, when people pervert that orientation by fixating on a vice, they become incorrigible to correction and self-defeating in every decision.

## **ADDICTION**

Addiction is a contemporary parallel to a deadly sin. According to R. Scott Sullender, Psychologist and Professor of Pastoral Counseling at San Francisco Theology Seminary, we live in an addictive-encouraging culture:

In the face of these circumstances, our political, religious, and academic leadership seems to be helpless, clueless, and/or prone to simplistic answers that have failed to stem the growing tide of addictions. At another level, the very culture that decries drug abuse with one voice promotes it with another voice. The United States has embraced a culture that promotes addictive processes, in part because addiction feeds the economic system.<sup>10</sup>

Sullender maintains that our society's promotion of narcissism and continual insatiety heighten the common features of addiction (that is, mood change, habits leading to tolerance, obsessive thinking, loss of control and of willpower, and self-destructive behavior), and consequently we are presently experiencing more addictive behaviors. He focused his book on the seven deadly sins to show how our contemporary society exhibits them and will also suffer from them.

What causes addiction? Why do people become addicts knowing that they will become enslaved and possibly die due to the addiction? Philosopher Francis F. Seeburger of the University of Denver offers this explanation:

The consensus is there is no single identifiable cause or set of causes of addiction. That is so for both psychological and sociological causes. The evidence shows that there is no distinctive "addictive personality," for example, and that addiction is not caused by any specific traumatic incident or by childhood problems. Nor does poverty or any other sociological factor, either alone or conjoined with others, inevitably make anyone subject of that factor into an addict.<sup>11</sup>

There may be predispositions toward addiction, but thus far, according to Seeburger, we have not been able to cite a sufficient genetic or social explanation for addiction. In a simple sense, we could see that taking the substance is what causes addiction, because, we would think, if addicts did not take the substance, they would not be addicted to the substance. However, this simplistic explanation misses the more serious and troubling aspect of addiction which is that it occurs from the wanting, not necessarily the taking, of the substance.

Addicts get caught in circular thinking, claims Seeburger. “Their addictions justify themselves by appeal to the very conditions those addictions have engendered. Then those same conditions are worsened by the continued pursuit of the addiction, which in turn justifies even further intensification of the addictive behavior.”<sup>12</sup> That is, the addict desires the desire to want more of the substance. Once inside the circular reasoning, addicts cannot reason their way out of the addiction. They keep finding ways to reinforce the idea that they should take the substance, all along keeping a false sense of pride that in spite of the numerous past failures to stop, they think they can stop using the substance in the future. Since the object of the addiction dominates their thinking, most addicts have great clarity about their lives, about what they will do each day, and about what constitutes a successful day, that is, satisfying their desire to take what creates the desire.

Consequently, according to Seeburger, addicts do not need a reason for their addictive behavior, even concerning their physical, emotional, and social harm. Seeburger makes the distinction between the choice for the substance and the root of the choice. Every addict can choose to take or not take a particular substance at a particular time. Many addicts refrain for significant lengths of time. That does not mean they have stopped being addicts. What they cannot easily stop choosing to do is the root of the choice, which, according to Seeburger’s research, is “control.”<sup>13</sup> Even though addicts obsessively want and plan for the next consumption, perversely this is also a way of controlling and managing their life. When addicts’ lives have been reduced to so few choices, they find some security and psychological power in willingly choosing the next consumption.

The common denominator in all forms of addiction is people become convinced they must continually remake their own self-identity. An addict’s identity is so fragile and vulnerable that one must constantly be taking the substance to keep from losing one’s identity. The biggest fear is to “lose control” because that would mean personal annihilation. Hence, in this light, the root of addiction is the thought that one can overcome one’s tenuously ambiguous selfhood by securing it through a destructive behavior.

Addiction in this sense follows the course of a deadly sin. A person falls into the obsession of the desire for the particular object (such as opioids, pornography, alcohol and the like), and consequently equates his or her self-identity with the desire itself. They live totally non-instrumental lives, becoming synonymous with their obsessions, and hence incapable of charity. It is unpredictable and inconceivable that people who naturally experience happiness in love toward others and God would succumb to the idea that they would find that happiness in self-destructive obsessions. However, many people do.

## **A THEOLOGY OF THE DEMONIC**

It may seem archaic or too contrary to our contemporary views of science and medicine to claim we need to consider the demonic in developing a spiritual ethic to deal with the deadly sins and addictions. Although the word demon has many fanciful connotations, there is sufficient, reasonable theological explanations of the demonic found in the history of theological reflection. This theology can be used to better understand why people evolve into destructive vices. For instance, from such theologians as Evagrius, Thomas Aquinas, and Karl Barth, a doctrine on the demonic clarifies a fundamental feature of the human experience, that is, we are morally ambiguous enough to be deceived into thinking a vice is a virtue, a destructive behavior is desirable, and, moreover, it takes a heightened inner spiritual life to recognize, prevent, and possibly overcome the effect of the demonic.<sup>14</sup>

## **EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS**

When visited by the first [class of demons], they instill in us mental representations of vainglory or pride or envy or censoriousness. These do not touch any irrational beings. When the second class of demons approach, they move our irascibility or concupiscibility in a manner contrary to nature. These are the passions which we have in common with irrational beings but which remain hidden by our rational nature.<sup>15</sup>

According to Evagrius, demons cause the eight deadly thoughts; a demon for each. They manipulate our thoughts into images opposed to the goodness of the world. Yet, they do not do this by knowing our hearts; only God can have this knowledge. Demons do this by arousing our inherent irascibility and concupiscibility. Even though we struggle with these inherent features, they themselves are not demonic. Demons use them to energize and compel people to believe that a perverted thought can lead to fulfillment and happiness.

As is typical in the early monastic accounts of demons, Evagrius believed demons are ubiquitous and legion. They specialize in deteriorating natural desires and thoughts into corrosive desires and thoughts by directing them on the

path of ruinous effects. Instead of loving others and ourselves, we become vain about our accomplishments and wrathful toward others. Instead of the proper use of appetitive desires, demons pervert them into lust and gluttony, bringing misery upon people.

Since the demonic works through impure thoughts, Evagrius proposes two ways to combat the demonic temptation. First, “Distinguish within yourself the thought he has launched against you, as to what it is, how many elements it consists of, and among these what sort of thing it is that most afflicts the mind.” Second, “investigate this consideration: how angels and demons visit our world, but we do not visit their worlds.”<sup>16</sup> A heightened introspectiveness about our thought processes recognizes when a natural thought becomes twisted into a vice and alerts us to keep the natural thought on loving the good. Moreover, to combat demons, we must understand their origin and work, and thereby be able to distinguish them from venal mistakes and failures.

### **THOMAS AQUINAS**

Accordingly it is clear that in no way are demons naturally evil; it remains then that they are evil by will, or voluntarily.<sup>17</sup>

Because God created all beings to reflect the goodness of the created order of the cosmos, we should not say demons are evil by nature; they are not made evil. Their evilness comes from their rejection of God’s goodness and the goodness of creation. Furthermore, because evil is not an object to choose, they cannot desire evil per se. Rather, evil is the result of willingly rejecting God. Their whole activity is to corrupt and destroy goodness. Therefore, demons cannot create evil thoughts in people, only pervert existing thoughts, thereby causing people to act disproportionately to their rightful place within creation. Moreover, they cannot change the form, or purpose of a person. They can only indirectly alter a person’s life by engendering perverse images of what a person should do.

The capital sins result from demons confusing the intellect into thinking that the desire for a vice is actually a worthy aim of the intellect. This is due to the fact that our proper aim is to live a life of charity in which we recognize and promote the glory of God and the goodness of creation. Hence, contrary to this aim, a demon persuades a person that the desire, such as lust, gluttony, pride, would bring fulfillment and happiness. Yet, as perversion of goodness, they cannot bring happiness, only misery, and even worse, once in the grasp of the deadly sin, people cannot will themselves out of the confusion. Aquinas pertinently concludes his explanation of the issue of demons with a quote from Augustine: “Wherefore, Augustine says in the book *On Eighty-Three Diverse*

*Questions* that the demon fills as it were with befogging mists all the paths of understanding through which the mind's rays diffuse the light of reason."<sup>18</sup>

## KARL BARTH

We must know about [demons], but only as the limit of that to which a positive relationship is possible and legitimate and obligatory. We oppose to them the most radical unbelief. They are the myth, the myth of all mythologies.<sup>19</sup>

Barth builds his explanation of demons on his earlier discussion of evil as *das Nichtige*. "Nothingness is thus the 'reality' which opposes and resists God, which is itself subjected to and overcome by [God's] opposition and resistance, and which in this twofold determination as the reality that negates and is negated by [God], is totally distinct from [God]."<sup>20</sup> Understood primarily as opposition to the creative work of God, evil is the tendency of chaos and destruction to limit all of creation. This tendency is not merely the physical dissolution of objects, rather it is what God rejected in creating a good world and thus this nothingness persists in rejecting God. Consequently, evil exists only as a negation, a parasite, and thus cannot be said to exist *per se*.

The same applies to demons; they exist only as negativity of existence. For this reason, Barth in a dialectical fashion maintains that we should not develop an ontology of demons, for that would admit they have a place within creation, rather, we should develop a theology of the rejection of demons by faith. We should oppose demons not primarily because they harm people but because the proclamation of the Gospel entails the overcoming of demons. We rightly focus on the demonic only by resisting it with the Gospel of love. If we deny this opposition by demythologizing demons into expressions of an antiquated cosmology or psychology, we undermine the message of salvation by undermining the mission of the Gospel to overcome the residual negativity within creation that attempts to disconnect creation from the goodness and power of its Creator. We must admit the demonic because we must admit that God in Christ overcomes the destructive and pernicious work of *das Nichtige*. By admitting the demonic, we proclaim the truth of the Gospel. By recognizing the demonic as "falsehood in its very being,"<sup>21</sup> we proclaim the reality of God as the Creator and Redeemer of the world.

## CONCLUSION

From these accounts, three conclusions are apparent. First, the demonic is reactionary. It cannot create or construct. It corrupts and destroys, as cancer kills living cells without being a cell itself. It primarily perverts thoughts by corroding them, by confusing the proper aims of thoughts and misdirecting them away from love of God, neighbor, and the world. Due to the presence of



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the demonic, we are continually hounded by its persistent parasitism. Thus, we not only have to deal with our moral and volitional weaknesses, ignorance, and mistakes; we also have to contend with a tempting force upon our thought processes that can handcuff our wills with anguishing and despairing desires.

Second, the demonic is not overcome by attacking it directly. In the words of Aquinas, as a “befogging mist,” it eludes definite description and management. In fact, to objectify the demonic would actually reinforce it by forming a false thought that could easily be misused to bring harm. Because of its negativity, we would miss it if we aimed directly for it. Subsequently, we would be mistaken to think that we can oppose the demonic by becoming morally perfect, by confronting it with our own moral strength and purity. In reality, we are inherently ambiguous, and capable of being both good and bad. The demonic would distort such a pretense of moral perfection into the capital sin of pride.

Preferably, since our thought process naturally aims toward what fulfills the intention to think correctly about the world and God, we should think about the images that indicate the divine reality either in revelation, nature, other persons, or artistic depictions. These kinds of thoughts indicate how our lives can be coordinated in communion with God, and thus fulfill our created purpose. These impressions reflect the proper aims of thinking and realizing a life well lived. Of course, we should seek to live morally, but our greatest resistance to the demonic is to focus our thoughts upon the ways God reveals God’s reality in the transcendent realities of beauty, goodness, and love.

Third, we are more likely to prevent and overcome the demonic if we recognize the demoniac’s involvement with the capital vices and addictions. By admitting that we are tempted to corrupt our nature by following perverse thoughts about the aims of our lives, we recognize how important it is to rely upon the salvific work of the grace of God. For, the love of God clearly exposes the negativity of the demonic, and if we ignore the demoniac’s role, we underplay the importance of God’s healing. In light of the divine effort to redeem humanity from the “powers and principalities of evil,” it is critical to understand the seriousness of the capital vices by acknowledging that we not only deal with an addictive-encouraging culture and our own weaknesses, we also deal with adversarial forces and thus must develop proper ways to resist and combat them. By admitting that we face an adversary that eludes direct confrontation, we are more likely to acknowledge the truly effective ways to confront and overcome the demonic.

## **PRAYER AND FASTING**

And he said to them, “This kind [of exorcism] can come out only through prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29).

Although other spiritual disciplines (such as silence and solitude) are helpful in resisting the capital sins, prayer and fasting in particular have special features that enable a person to combat the development of the capital vices and possibly even cure them. These disciplines are said to be preventive ethical actions which help people to rightly orient their thoughts toward charity.

## **PRAYER**

In Romans 8, Saint Paul states that the basis of prayer resides in the triune activity of the Holy Spirit and Christ interceding for us to the will of God. This emphasizes our reliance not on ourselves or on our own prayers, but on God who works through our prayers to form our minds according to the mind of the Spirit. The Spirit has a mind toward us, revealing divine thoughts to our minds and in this way, we learn more how to pray. Christ, who continually intercedes for us in light of the Spirit's thoughts, takes up these divinely shaped thoughts and intercedes to the Father.

We are not the subjects of prayer, that is, the authors legitimizing and vouchsafing them. Rather, the triune God is the subject, initiating and articulating the content of prayer to us. We are the objects of prayer, recipients of the thought-full revelation of the inner dialogue of the Spirit and Son to the Father. As such, when we pray we become informed with the mind of God, in the sense not of esoteric thoughts but the thoughts that express the will of God. As a thought aimed toward an object takes on the formal reality of that on which it thinks, so it is in prayer that our thoughts are in-formed by the Spirit of the redemptive reality and actions of God.

Prayer as the triune activity of God can occur in meditation in which we reflect thoroughly and honestly upon our own thoughts and upon the redemptive actions of God. Also, our thoughts can be oriented toward God by a continual reading of the psalter, by in-forming our memories with the full-range of emotions, life-events, requests, and pleas expressed throughout the Psalms. Furthermore, we learn new ways of thinking by joining with others in prayer, by collectively experiencing the intercessory work of the triune God through common collects and model prayers (like the Lord's Prayer). Since the Spirit is the true subject of prayer who prays through our own spirits, the more we pray in the Holy Spirit, the more we become sensitive to other's spirits and learn ways to discern in their spirits what needs to be in-formed by the Holy Spirit.

As prayer in-forms our thoughts, it can alert us to the demonic corruption of our thoughts, and thereby obviate the progression through venal activities toward addictive and ruinous actions. In addition to utilizing medicine, counseling, and personal support, we can encourage those strangled by the capital vices to formulate a discipline of prayer (meditation, praying the psalter,

communal prayers), and find ways to pray with and for them. Through triune prayer, we can identify the demonic as the corrupting force of thoughts and resist it through divinely infused, proper thoughts.

## **FASTING**

Fasting works in a similar way to prayer. According to the account of the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4, the Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness, where he fasts forty days before the Tempter comes to him with three temptations. Even though each temptation can be seen as the possibility of doing great good for the world (such as eliminating world poverty by changing stones into bread), Jesus correctly sees them (a vision honed by his resolute commitment to follow his messianic vocation) as perverse and pernicious thoughts. It takes an acute awareness of their adversarial intent to recognize that they should be rejected.

Fasting equips us to recognize the subtly and invidiousness of the demonic temptations to believe that vices and addictions can fulfill our lives. The effectiveness of fasting is based on how it influences the perspicuity of our spirits by denying our appetitive needs. Even though we can describe the spirit and body in uniquely different ways, they are inextricably united and influence each other. To sustain itself, the body needs to eat, and when deprived of food, it concentrates more on what it needs to fulfill its sustenance. The spirit directs us toward fulfilling relationships with others. When these relationships are absent, our spirits long for them even more. Consequently, because the body influences the spirit (and vice versa), when we fast, we heighten our needs for food and for what fulfills our nature as relational beings.

Fasting clarifies our minds and focuses us on the essentials for a fulfilled life, making way for the deep needs for God to come to the forefront of our considerations. With such a mindset, we are more readily able to recognize and shun the demonic temptations to turn natural desires into addictive ones. Fasting helps us understand the proper purpose of our thoughts and thus equips us to reject the subtle deviousness of the demonic which serves to occupy our thoughts with self-absorption and turn us away from charity.

We should fast as a discipline to gain clarity on how we form our thoughts, to recognize the subtle allure of perverse thoughts, and to correct the entanglement of corrosive thoughts on our thought processes. In this sense, fasting becomes a preventive ethic.

Human nature consists of both bodily and spiritual pursuits and of godly and rebellious aims. As such, people are susceptible to believing that a vicious destructive goal could be a proper aim for human fulfillment. This ambiguity makes people impressionable to demonic temptations, and subject to the corruption of natural and purposeful thoughts away from a life of charity to one

consumed by a deadly sin, an addiction. Even though medicine, therapy, and emotional support are needed to correct the transition from venal mistakes to capital vices, we must also recognize that these deadly personal and social ills result from an antagonistic threat to God and to a rightly ordered world. In closing, these spiritual disciplines orient our thinking toward charity to God, neighbor, and the world, and thus direct us on the path that brings human fulfillment. Therefore, it is vital to both personal and social well-being that prayer and fasting are promoted as effective preventive and restorative actions.

## NOTES

76

1. For example, even non-religious specialists are utilizing the tradition; see the psychologist Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Diogenes Allen uses them to help build a “spiritual theology” in *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today*, Second Printing edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1997). In addition, William H. Willimon uses them to help formulate a pastoral approach to understanding the church in *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the 7 Deadly Sins*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013).
2. Evagrius, “On the Eight Thoughts in Evagrius of Pontus,” in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, translated with introduction and commentary by Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73–90.
3. Evagrius, *On Thoughts*, 170. My explanation reflects Augustine Casiday’s account; see *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 172–184.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, translated by John A. Oesterle and Jean T. Oesterle, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 243: “If then the disposition by which a thing seems good and befitting to a person is natural and not subject to the will, the will chooses it naturally and necessarily, as all men natural desire to be, to live, and to know. But if the disposition be such as is not natural but subject to the will, as when someone is so disposed by habit or passion that something seems either good or bad to him under this particular aspect, the will is not moved of necessity because it has the power to remove this disposition so that the thing does not seem so to him.”
5. Aquinas, *On Evil*, 312.
6. Augustine, *Augustine, Confessions*, VI, 13, ii, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13.
7. The philosopher Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung of Calvin College rightly states, “My own observation . . . is that the list of vices maintains its appeal because we recognize the way the vices powerfully articulate distortions of deeply [sic] human desires.” *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2009), 39.
8. Aquinas, *On Evil*, 422–423.
9. For a good discussion of Aquinas’ explanation of the self-destructive consequences of the anti-charity characteristics of a deadly sin, see Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, “Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of *Acedia*,” *The Thomist* 68 (2004): 173–204.
10. R. Scott Sullender, *Ancient Sins . . . Modern Addictions: A Fresh Look at the Seven Deadly Sins* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade Books, 2013), 1.
11. Francis F. Seeburger, *Addiction and Responsibility: An Inquiry into the Addictive Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 73.

12. Sullender, *Ancient Sins . . . Modern Addictions*, 21.
13. Sullender, *Ancient Sins . . . Modern Addictions*, 129: “To whatever else they may be addicted; all addicts are addicted to ‘control.’ They are ‘under control,’ that very experience the taking of stimulants and depressants, for example, but not hallucinogens, provides them.”
14. See also Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (New York; C. Scribner’s Sons, 1936), and Arthur Chute McGill, *Suffering : A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).
15. Evagrius, *On Thoughts*, 165.
16. Evagrius, *On Thoughts*, 167.
17. Aquinas, *On Evil*, 457.
18. Aquinas, *On Evil*, 533.
19. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, Vol. III.3, translators G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 521.
20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 305.
21. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 525.



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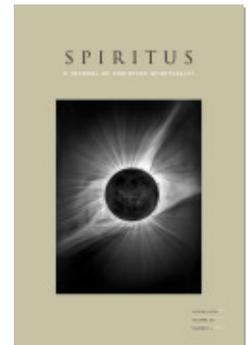
## Deadly Sins, Addiction, the Demonic, and Spirituality

Dennis Sansom

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