SLEEP, SLOTH, AND SANCTIFICATION

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Abstract. I develop a spiritual theology of the physical act of sleep. The spiritual significance of the physical act of sleep ought to be a relational trust that recognizes my place as a creature that depends on the grace of a self-sufficient provider. After distinguishing this topic from other related themes, I develop a theological anthropology of sleep by considering how sleep brings glory to God and by placing sleep within the redemption narrative. I explore sleep as a spiritual practice and investigate the theme of sleep as trust in Scripture. I exposit a spiritual danger associated with sleep, the capital vice of sloth, and show how the traditional conception of this vice further illumines the spiritual significance of sleep.

INTRODUCTION

As a relatively new father, I have become fascinated with sleep. When my students ask questions about how to bring glory to God with the entirety of their lives, my mind is, perhaps irresistibly, drawn toward wondering how sleep fits. We spend one third of our lives sleeping, more than anything else we do. How can we bring glory to God with this sizable portion of our lives? Recent writings in spiritual formation recommend sleep as a formative practice. The theology behind this recommendation has been briefly outlined; the purpose of this paper is to develop further the significance of sleep as a spiritual practice.

In what follows, I will develop a spiritual theology of the physical act of sleep. First, I will focus the subject of my explorations by distinguishing my topic from other related biblical, theological, and scientific themes. In the second section, I will develop a theological anthropology of sleep in two

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1 "I always thought that theologians spread sleep chiefly by their speaking and writing. And now a theologian wants to spread himself on sleep." As stated by the Doctor in the dialog of Karl Rahner’s, “A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening: On Sleep, Prayer, and Other Subjects,” in Theological Investigations, vol. 3 of The Theology of the Spiritual Life (London: Helicon Press and Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 221.
steps. The first step will consider how sleep brings glory to God through the contrast of his nature with our own. The second step will trace the intersection of sleep with the redemption narrative. The third section explores sleep as a spiritual practice by investigating the theme of sleep as trust in Scripture, by using sleep as an analogy for spiritual growth, by considering sleep as a spiritual practice, and by asking whether spiritual growth occurs while asleep. The fourth section expositions a spiritual danger associated with sleep, the capital vice of sloth, and shows how the traditional conception of this vice further illuminates the spiritual significance of sleep.

Many pitfalls beset our approach to sleep, both spiritually and physically. The spiritual significance of the physical act of sleep ought to be a relational trust that recognizes my place as a creature who depends on the grace of a self-sufficient provider. Sleep can express my limitations and creatureliness in a vivid way. I am constitutionally unable to remain in active command of my life without ceasing. I must, at some point, relinquish control, hopefully to my Creator. Sloth is, in part, a denial of this truth that sleep would teach, and therefore, sleep is a potential enemy of sloth.

DEFINING THE SUBJECT

This paper is about the theological and spiritual significance of the physical act of sleep. I wish to investigate how sleep fits within human life and within growth in the Spirit. The mere fact of sleep, mentioned in several places throughout Scripture, will be of less interest than the meaning of sleep. A wide array of connected topics will be referenced, but not developed in detail. To make the focus of my topic clear at the outset, I will mention some of the areas that are related to my topic, but that are not the subject itself.

Our culture attests to the proliferation of sleep disorders. I will not avail myself here of the findings of the science of sleep and will not treat instances where a medical condition is causing sleep or the lack thereof. Both sleeplessness and excessive sleep may, however, be symptoms of sloth, as discussed below. Even though Scripture has a great deal to say about dreams (and they have been a source of much non-theological speculation as well), I will not develop a theology of dreams.

Scripture also has a great deal to say about rest and the importance of Sabbath-keeping; in the Bible rest has eschatological dimensions. Since rest is not opposed to work (Matt. 11:28–30), it can be an all-encompassing feature of human life. Nevertheless, sleep and rest are not co-extensive. Rest does not always involve sleep (e.g., Gen. 2:1–3), and sleep is not always restful. It could be the case that, when properly pursued as a formative practice, sleep is a form of rest in the biblical sense. I will not pursue that thesis here, since it would require outlining the nature of rest.

Another large section of the biblical message concerns dangers and vices associated with sleep. I will deal with the ancient concept of sloth
quite extensively, as it will illuminate the spiritual significance of sleep more fully. Since I am concerned with the nature of sleep itself, instances of deficiency or excess will fall beyond the scope of this paper; this includes laziness or lack of watchfulness and spiritual practices, such as vigils, that involve not sleeping. Though not referenced directly in Scripture, demonic attack while sleeping may be another potential danger of sleep.\(^2\)

**Sleep and Theological Anthropology**

In order to provide a foundation for the spiritual significance of the physical act of sleep, I will develop a theological anthropology of sleep in two parts. First, I show how sleep brings glory to God through contrast with God's blessedness. Second, I consider the intersection of sleep with the redemption narrative. Rightly understanding the theological anthropology of sleep is necessary for approaching sleep as a spiritual practice. If sleep originates in creation, then engaging in it makes us more fully human and potentially more sanctified. If sleep originates in the fall, then the (non)activity of sleep draws us farther from God's intentions.

*God's Blessedness and Giving Glory through Human Sleep*

Sleep is a human phenomenon, one we share with the rest of the animal world. By contrast, God does not sleep; he never has and does not need to (Ps. 121:4). His unceasing watchfulness comprises an important difference between him and false gods, as Elijah points out to the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

We glorify God by bearing his image and reflect his nature by displaying our similarities with him. We also illuminate God's nature by means of contrast and difference. Sleep is an instance of this latter mode of bringing glory to God.\(^3\) Humans must sleep and can die if they do not. God's sleeplessness shows his independence; our sleepfulness reveals our dependence. We cannot not sleep; God cannot sleep. Sleep brings glory to God by showing that we are not blessed in ourselves and must receive blessing from God's hand.

Independently of the created order and within himself, God is blessed. God's blessedness is the sum total of his attributes and perfections; it is everything that makes God God.\(^4\) Importantly, God is self-existent; he has

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\(^2\) Rahner, "A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening."


the source of life and joy in himself (1 Thess. 1:9; Ps. 36:9; John 1:3–4; Jer. 32:36–41; Zeph. 3:17) and is in need of nothing to possess these things. God did not need to create a world in order to be complete or fulfilled. God's glory is the outward expression of the blessedness of God's being within the created order. His glory is the reflection of the sum total of who he is within creation; his blessedness is the sum total of who he is in himself, independent of creation.

We glorify God in sleeping by contrasting God's nature with our own. If we are to possess existence, life, joy, or anything at all, we must receive them from God's hand as gifts of grace. Simply being a creature is a gift of grace from the hand of the Creator. Appropriately then, we glorify God in sleep without being able to help it. While I sleep, God sustains (Ps. 3:5). Arguably, each of these two activities are indicative of and proper to the kinds of beings God and humans are; they are not transferrable to the other party.

The Redemption Narrative and Sleep

The second approach to developing a theological anthropology of sleep is a survey of the redemption narrative, but this does not contain a wealth of data from which to develop the theological meaning of sleep for the human being. The determinative question is: Does sleep belong to creation or to the fall? In On the Apostolic Preaching, Irenaeus asserts that sleep was not part of Adam's Paradise, which is the reason that God had to induce deep sleep in Adam during the creation of Eve. The clear implication being that human sleep was introduced with sin. It would seem to follow that the purpose of redemption and of glorification would be to remove sleep from our experience.

I suggest that Irenaeus was mistaken on this point. In several places in Scripture, sleep is described as a reward (e.g., Eccles. 5:12). John Baillie opines, "[S]leep is surely one of God's most precious gifts." In sections of

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the law where sleep is implicated, it seems to have the status of a basic human need, one that requires just and loving action. Exodus 22:26–27 directs the return of a cloak taken in pledge before sundown because “that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate” (Exod. 22:27; see also Deut. 24:12–13). Experience confirms the need for sleep and the grace of being able to sleep, as any amount of sleeplessness quickly proclaims. Though God certainly sustains human wakefulness at times for his purposes, it does not appear that sleeplessness or lessening need for sleep are marks of further sanctification and holiness. Jesus slept (Mark 4:35–41), and his doing so does not appear to have been one of the ways he bore the consequences of sin. Gregory Nazianzen theorized that Christ’s humanity hallowed the mundane aspects of human experience, including that of sleep: “And perhaps he goes to sleep in order that He may bless sleep also; perhaps He is tired that He may hallow weariness also.” Therefore, I suggest that sleep is part of God’s creation ordering for human life.

The stage of glorification potentially provides more material for reflection since sleep is frequently used as a metaphor for death within the pages of Scripture. In the Gospel of John, Jesus confuses his disciples (yet again) concerning Lazarus. Jesus uses the euphemism of Lazarus being asleep and the disciples take him literally (John 11). Death is described as sleep, especially for believers (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4). At the same time, the resurrection is sometimes described as waking from sleep (Job 14:12). Psalm 3:5 (“I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.”) and other references to waking from sleep have been interpreted as a reference to resurrection. Augustine saw Psalm 3:5 as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ, and then went on to interpret the remainder of the psalm as referring to Christ and his betrayal.

For our purposes, the parallels between sleep and death are instructive. As I will discuss later, the concern about dying while asleep forms some of

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11 All Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).
13 Gregory Nazianzen, Theological Orations, vol. 7 of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Early Church Fathers Series, 2nd ser., eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Oration XXXVII.2, 338. Yet, the same line includes: “[P]erhaps He weeps that He may make tears blessed.” Tears seemingly being a consequence of the fall, this may be an indication of both sleep and tears being Christ’s human experience of a fallen world. It would not seem that Nazianzen’s formulation should be pushed too hard.
the context of the discussion of sleep in the Bible. The hope of waking from sleep is akin to the hope of resurrection from death. Like death, sleep involves the absence of consciousness and control. We may worry about what happens in the world while we are asleep just as we may be anxious about what will happen in the world when we die. Considering the significance of silence and solitude for spiritual growth, Parker Palmer states, "[B]ecoming totally quiet and unreachably alone are two of the signs that life has gone, while activity and lively communication not only signify life but help us evade the prospect that our life will someday cease." Although silence and solitude are features of death, they are also features of sleep. Sleep and death may induce anxiety because they mean we are alone and quiet, unable to exert control over our lives.

Since many theologians contend that death is part of the fall, the connection between sleep and death raises another potential reason for thinking that sleep is part of the fall. Yet, the connection between the two should not be pressed too strongly. Not all death is described as sleep in Scripture. Bodies require sleep; rest of the soul is necessary too, but cannot replace this feature of our bodily existence. Although a definitive answer may not be forthcoming on this question, I will proceed in the remainder of the paper under the assumption that sleep is part of God's created intention for us. Having placed sleep within theological anthropology, I proceed in the next section to consider its spiritual significance.

SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SLEEP

Sleep as Trust

Physical danger and threat to one's person pervades the passages of Scripture that concern sleep. Dying at the hands of one's enemies, having possessions stolen, or livelihood disappear are all dangers the night may bring. For this reason, the basic theme concerning the spiritual significance of sleep in Scripture is that of trust.  

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17 Even if sleep is part of God's created intention and is not to be eliminated through progressive sanctification, this is still consistent with its elimination in the state of glorification. If, for example, Revelation 22:5 means (non-metaphorically) that the New Jerusalem will have no night, then perhaps there will not be sleep there either. My thanks to Brian Kramer for suggesting this to me. Perhaps sleep is a special grace given to humans in their fallen condition.
18 Perhaps the instance of Jesus sleeping during the storm (Mark 4:35–41) provides a perfect example of the biblical teaching concerning spiritual trust in sleep despite physical peril.
Sleep is used as a metaphor for death, but for many times and cultures other than our own, a closer connection between the two was often envisioned. The night brought genuine threat to one’s person. A vivid example of this comes from Psalm 3 where the context is David’s flight from Absalom. His mention of going to sleep and then waking again in verse 5 is not akin to an inane Facebook status update, but a declaration of the Lord’s great provision for him. Surrounded by enemies, uncertain of whom he could trust, waking up in the morning is attributed to God’s sustenance. Elsewhere in Scripture we see the potential for death and evil to befall one while sleeping. Samson, though complicit, meets the beginning of his downfall while asleep (Judg. 16). David resists an opportunity to have a spear put through Saul’s head while he is sleeping (1 Sam. 26).

Consider the emphatic construction of Psalm 4:8: God alone provides safety. Within that safety, the psalmist may sleep peacefully even in the midst of trial. The context of Psalm 4 is crop failure.19 Both Psalms 3 and 4 can be generalized to a wide variety of trying circumstances. Some commentators have suggested that these two psalms follow the prologue of the Psalms 1 and 2 with a psalm for waking and one for going to sleep. The grammatical construction of 3:5 describes a habitual pattern of trust in the Lord that allows for easy and restful sleep.20 Psalm 127 expresses trust in God for success in one’s endeavors of building a house, guarding a city, and growing a family. Sleepless activity will not insure that the desired outcome will come about. The Good Shepherd causes his sheep to lie down in places of abundance and security (Ezek. 34:14–15; Ps. 23); submission to that guidance and provision is an expression of trust.

Sleep as an Analogy for Spiritual Growth

Sleep can serve as an analogy for spiritual growth. One potentially agonizing truth about sleep is that you cannot pursue it directly. In fact, if you try to do so, you will likely fail: “Ok, I am going to go to sleep now. No, really. Now I am going to go to sleep—right now. Ready, begin!” Direct routes are counterproductive. So we must try indirect routes, and an entire industry eagerly waits to assist us. Yet, one can try all the indirect routes (aside from medication) and not produce sleep. Sleep does not follow of necessity. Sleep, like our very existence, is a grace. It is a gift. It is given and not earned.

19 Gerald Henry Wilson, Psalms, vol. 1 of Psalms 1–72, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 159.
Therefore, sleep can teach us about the spiritual life as an analogy for how the process of sanctification works. As is well attested, spiritual disciplines are indirect. We do not fast for the sake of fasting; it is instrumental. Unless the Holy Spirit moves, unless God works, the growth will not happen. Formation exercises set up the context and conditions for growth to happen, but do not directly produce the growth. Growth in Christ requires effort, but it is grace that engenders results and not earning. As in sleep, a frustration may arise in the exercise of formation practices: all of the conditions may be in place, and yet growth does not happen.

Psalm 127 illuminates the parallel between sleep and spiritual formation practices. On the one hand, the psalm affirms that God's action is necessary for the successful completion of the activities to which we put our efforts. At the same time, the psalm assumes that human effort will be engaged in these projects as well; the psalm should not be read as license for lassitude. In particular, verse 1 sets divine activity and human activity in parallel: "unless the Lord builds . . . those who build . . . unless the Lord watches . . . the watchman stays awake." The same conjunction is present in the third verse as well. Only through the congruence of human and divine action do the outcomes come about.21 This means that we must strike a balance between pure activity and pure passivity with respect to work. The premise of the passage is that God works, and that God's work is that around which human work revolves.22 Eugene Peterson explains, "[R]elentless, compulsive work habits ('the bread of anxious toil') which our society rewards and admires are seen by the psalmist as a sign of weak faith and assertive pride, as if God could not be trusted to accomplish his will, as if we could rearrange the universe by our own effort."23 The gift of sleep in verse 2 provides an important counterbalance to disordered patterns of work. Since God is always working, we are able to express trust in his provision through the inactivity of sleep. By contrast, workaholic wakefulness could be a symptom of lack of trust. Both work and sleep require grace. Although we expend effort, God's action allows the intended goal to come about.

Sleep as a Formative Practice

Recent books in spiritual formation, after briefly developing a theology of sleep, have provided suggestions for how sleep might be pursued as a spiritual practice.24 Although contrasting God's nature with our own in

23 Ibid., 106.
24 John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 49; Dallas Willard, Renovation of
sleep brings glory to God without our awareness, we can be intentional about and conscious of bringing glory to God through sleep. In a way that is not true of other spiritual practices, sleep resists being used as a means of earning. I may be tempted to think that I earn God’s favor through spiritual activities, but the inactivity of sleep resists being interpreted in that way.

One way to engage sleep as a spiritual practice is simply to endeavor to get enough of it. We put ourselves in a better position to work, including doing the hard work of loving others, when we relinquish control in sleep. All kinds of health problems and accidents are attributed to insufficient sleep. We put ourselves in a better position for effective exercise of the fruit of the Spirit when we are well rested! We have all experienced the impatience and irritation that comes from lack of sleep.

Second, we can gratefully receive sleep as a gift that reinforces the loving grace of being a creature. As Ortberg states, “[S]leep is a gift from God... It is an act of trust: I am reminded when I go to sleep that the world is in God’s hands, not mine.”25 When we sleep, we must trust that we will continue to exist and be safe, that we will indeed awake again in the morning, as we saw in the psalms mentioned above (Pss: 3:5; 4:8). This is why “sleeping with” someone implies not merely sexual intimacy, but trust for one’s well being while unconscious and incapacitated. I cannot control the outcome of my life through my work; more work does not insure more security or control. I cannot make myself self-sufficient by avoiding sleep in order to work (Ps. 127:1–2). In a way similar to my roommate in college who believed he did not require the typical amount of sleep, we will be forcefully recalled to our true, dependent nature when our bodies revolt against our intentions should we believe ourselves to be self-caused!

**Spiritual Growth During Sleep?**

If these accounts are correct, sleeping can be used in the service of spiritual growth. Some have gone further and have suggested that growth can occur not only as the result of sleep, but during sleep. Brother Lawrence opined that “those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep.”26 Commenting on this John Baillie explains:

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26 Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, 49.
They wake up better men than they went to bed! If we find this difficult to believe, is it not only because we habitually suppose ourselves to be much more the masters of our spiritual development than we actually are? If some of the processes that are necessary for our physical well-being go on more advantageously in sleep than in waking life, because the will then relaxes its too despotic control, why should not the same be true of some of the processes that advance our spiritual well-being?28

In the plant world, natural growth processes continue while humans sleep. Matthew Henry, commenting on Psalm 4:8, mentions Jesus' illustration of the kingdom of God in Mark 4:26–29.29 While the farmer sleeps, the crops grow “he knows not how” (v. 27). In the plant world, dormancy is essential to the health and continued existence of many plants.30 Wendell Berry's poem “Whatever is Foreseen in Joy” expresses the connection of the agricultural process with the gracious activity of God.

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day,
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.31

Perhaps these agricultural analogies can be carried over to the spiritual life here as they are in other portions of Scripture. I doubt, though, that there is any way to prove that we grow spiritually while sleeping. Our experience of waking refreshed, with new perspective, with new energy and liveliness to face the trials of the day, and with increased ability to make difficult decisions might serve as a kind of confirmation of this.32

31 Quoted in Muller, Sabbath, 232.
Bailie's comment brings out another potential spiritual benefit of sleep: the inability to sin during sleep. Sleep contrasts starkly with the sinful human desire to be self-caused. Augustine contended that the human attempt to be \textit{causa sui} comprises the very essence of sin.\textsuperscript{33} For one third of my life, I must abandon my efforts to dictate outcomes and assert self-willed control over my world and must abandon myself to passivity. It may not follow from this that it is impossible to sin while sleeping, but it certainly puts the brakes on any evil in which I may be engaged.

In Scripture, sleep ought to express trust in the care of God. Since sleep cannot be produced through direct effort, the trustful act of sleep provides a good analogy for all processes of spiritual growth that, through their action, rely on God's activity for results. Therefore, sleep may be a valuable spiritual practice, and spiritual growth may occur during sleep and not merely through means of it. Since some of this may strike contemporary readers as odd or even as misguided, the next section will consider a potential scenario in which sleep is contrary to spiritual growth.

\section*{A Spiritual Danger of Sleep: Sloth}

Although I have made a case for the spiritual benefits of sleep, to support the case further, we ought to consider some of the potential spiritual dangers associated with sleep. My purpose is to consider the spiritual significance of physical sleep itself; for that reason, some dangers associated with sleep can be passed over. For example, in the book of Proverbs in particular, sleep is associated with laziness. Engagement in sleep can be excessive (or deficient) in a vicious and sinful manner, yet this only relates to the spiritual significance of sleep in a secondary manner. A second area of concern is that of being potentially susceptible to demonic influences while sleeping, which, again, does not concern sleep itself, but something that may occur during it.\textsuperscript{34} The area on which I will focus here will be an explanation of the capital vice (deadly sin) of sloth. This exposition will further illuminate a spiritual theology of the physical act of sleep.

Sleep's salutary effect on the soul appears to be at odds with the ancient tradition that identifies sloth as one of the seven deadly sins. If sloth is a vice, then there may also be a danger lurking with respect to sleep. What is the relationship of sleep to sloth?

Many in our contemporary world, interpreting sloth as the absence of activity and being at one's ease, have essentially moved sloth from the category of sin to that of virtue. The pursuit of a yet bigger television for the


\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, Rahner, "A Spiritual Dialogue at Evening: On Sleep, Prayer, and other Subjects."
man-cave represents one of the greater of life’s aspirations for many. The only reason to work is to relax, and to have bigger and better toys to do so. According to this interpretation, sleep would be a potential symptom of sloth, and the ancients were wrong about sloth being a vice.

A second perspective common in our context, especially in our Christian context, is that sloth is a vice because it is opposed to diligence and hard work. Citing some of the many biblical injunctions toward work (1 Thess. 4:9–12; 2 Thess. 3:6–12; Prov. 12:11, 28:19), sloth is equated with idleness and laziness. According to this line of thought, sleep, especially when excessive, may be opposed to virtue. In this interpretation, recommending sleep as a spiritual practice might promote the vice of sloth. One ought not recommend a potentially sinful activity as a spiritual practice; this can only be contrary to purpose!

As it turns out, both of these contemporary interpretations fail to describe what the ancients meant by sloth. In both of the instances cited above, whether sloth is considered to be a vice or a virtue, the ancient conception of sloth is misinterpreted as simply being laziness, which will result in a misunderstanding concerning the connection between sleep and sloth. The relationship of sleep to what the ancients meant by sloth (acedia—from the Greek: “lack of care”) is more complicated; sleep can be an expression of sloth when sleep is excessive, but laziness is not to be identified with sloth. After expositing the traditional notion of sloth as one of the capital vices, I will try to show that sleep can be a means to combat sloth (and hence it is a worthy spiritual practice in our pursuit of sanctification). In what follows, I will shift to using the term acedia in order to signal my focus on the ancient conception of sloth.

In the fifth century, John Cassian’s prescription for acedia was stability of place, that is, staying where you are. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas contended that acedia was a sin against the command to keep the Sabbath (and hence a sin against God-ordained rest). These are our first clues that our contemporary understanding of the meaning of sloth has gone astray. Surely nothing could be more welcome news to the couch potato than hearing, “Stay right where you are. Not only is your body at ease, your soul is being sanctified, too!”

Cassian identifies two kinds of responses manifested by the monk in the grip of the vice of acedia and against which he must battle.

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He must also contend on both sides against this most wicked spirit of *acedia* in such a way as neither to be cut down by the sword of sleep and collapse nor to be driven out from the bulwark of the monastery and depart in flight, even for a seemingly pious reason.\(^{38}\)

*Acedia* tempts the monk toward apathy regarding his commitments or toward avoidance, escape, and distraction from them. Apathy and avoidance comprise two telling symptoms of the vice of *acedia*.

Laziness and torpor can be a manifestation of *acedia*, when they are an expression of apathy or avoidance. This means laziness can be a symptom of sloth, but it is not the disease itself. Another way to put that would be that sloth, as we use that term in our context, can be a symptom of *acedia*, but is not itself the vice of *acedia*.\(^{39}\) In his exposition of Cassian, Merton explains that among the effects or symptoms of *acedia* is “habitual sleeping.”\(^{40}\) However, he asserts that “this sleep is not only bodily but [spiritual].” (Here he is probably referencing Psalm 119:28, which some translations render with “my soul slept.”) The main point is that excessive sleep can be a symptom of *acedia*, but as a capital vice, *acedia* primarily signifies a spiritual condition, rather than a physical one.

Even though excessive sleep and laziness do not capture the meaning of the vice of *acedia*, developing an understanding of *acedia* will still be useful for the purposes of constructing a spiritual theology of sleep. A deeper analysis of the underlying cause of many instances of laziness will be valuable for the sake of increased spiritual perception of the state of the human heart, and as we will see, will yield further insights into the spiritual theology of sleep. Several commentators have suggested that *acedia* is the signature vice of our age.\(^{41}\)

Given Cassian’s basic diagnosis of *acedia* as apathy and avoidance, a second set of potential symptoms includes restless busyness or workaholic frenzy. This further illustrates the way that contemporary expressions of sloth have misinterpreted its original meaning. If one reduces *acedia* to the symptom of physical laziness, then it becomes the opposite of another symptom the ancients believed was indicative of *acedia*. Josef Pieper explains:

The opposite of *acedia* is not industry and diligence but magnanimity and that joy which is a fruit of the supernatural love of God. Not only

\(^{38}\) Cassian, *The Institutes*, 10.5, 221.


can acedia and ordinary diligence exist very well together; it is even true that the senselessly exaggerated workaholism of our age is directly traceable to acedia.  

Excessive work can arise from the desire to escape. In our culture, it is quite easy to beg off various commitments, whether they be church or family, because we insist that we are simply too busy or have too much work to do. We tend to have an exaggerated sense of importance about our work, while at the same time using preoccupation with work as an excuse to avoid other obligations that make a demand on us. For these reasons, the attitudes confronted in Psalm 127 that I mentioned above (e.g., compulsively working to try to control our worlds) can be seen as potential symptoms of acedia. Working too much may cause us to avoid sleep. We may also lose sleep through restless dependence on technology: overstimulation by television or the Internet, sleeping with our smartphones to insure that no update or text is missed, and so forth.

Both laziness and workaholism can be potential symptoms of the deeper spiritual vice of acedia. The apathy and avoidance that are symptoms of acedia, while having physical manifestations, are actually indicative of the spiritual disinclination to fulfill the demands of loving relationship with God or with others. The couch potato and the workaholic are both potentially expressing symptoms of acedia, which in its original conception concerned being lazy about the commitments we have in loving relationships, not about work itself. In the grip of acedia, a person resists fulfilling his/her obligations either through apathetic inaction or through distracted and ceaseless busyness.

The reason the ancients took acedia so seriously, and put it at the top of the list of vices, has to do with the profound, God-given good that the slothful person resists. Being made in the lofty image of God and designed for relationship with him, the slothful person seeks to avoid the demands of that relationship.

As a capital sin, sloth is man's joyless, ill-tempered and narrow-minded self-seeking rejection of the nobility of the children of God with all the obligations it entails. acedia means, in the last analysis, that man will not be what God wants him to be—in other words, that he will not be what he really is.

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42 Pieper, Faith, Hope, Love, 118.
43 See Peterson quotation above (n. 22).
44 Rebecca Konydyk DeYoung, Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 82–96.
45 Pieper, Faith, Hope, Love, 120.
As I discussed above, sleep is one aspect of the way in which we manifest who God is by contrasting with what he is not. We can no more refuse to reflect God in this way than we can choose not to sleep.

Resisting sleep in workaholic frenzy or in mindless and idle entertainment can both be expressions of slothful unwillingness to operate according to our divine design and to fulfill the obligations placed on us by that design. Acedia divides us against ourselves. We were made for relationship with God and others, but acedia inclines our hearts to find our satisfaction in a path of our own design. “We are trying to make ourselves content with being less than we really are.”

In contrast to acedia, trust in God gives our activities meaning and hope. We need not sleep to avoid the demands of responsibilities or avoid sleep in the attempt to ensure the outcomes of our work through our own effort. We work in trust that God works along side of us; we sleep in trust that God provides. Toward the end of his discussion of acedia in the Institutes, Cassian relates the story of Abba Paul who lived seven days journey distant from the nearest civilization and was unable to sell his baskets there for more than the cost of transporting them.

He used to collect palm fronds and always exact a day’s labor from himself just as if this were his means of support. And when his cave was filled with a whole year’s work, he would burn up what he had so carefully toiled over each year ... although the obligation of earning a livelihood did not demand this course of action, he did it just for the sake of purging his heart, firming his thoughts, persevering in his cell, and conquering and driving our acedia.

According to modern eyes, Abba Paul’s procedure is the height of meaninglessness, and might even be welcomed as an existentialist parable of the senseless repetition of human existence, like Sisyphus pushing his rock. It is true that death and time will lay waste to all the products of our work; it is not for that reason futile. We cannot assure that our work will not be in vain. As John Goldingay states concerning Psalm 127: “the best human carefulness cannot guarantee results,” which is not a reason to avoid the effort entirely. Instead, “the text confronts us in our pretensions about our work being indispensable.”

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46 DeYoung, Glittering Vices, 89.
50 Ibid., 505.
dent and solely the result of my own effort. We cannot wrest control of the results we desire as if we were not in relationship with a sovereign, loving God. We must receive what we are given: results from our labor or lack thereof, and the gift of sleep while God continues his vigilant activity.

CONCLUSION: SLEEP AND SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

Why might we be tempted to think that sleep is not part of sanctification or a holy life? Why, for example, did Irenaeus believe that sleep was not present in Eden? One potential motive for a negative attitude toward the spiritual potential of sleep might be a consistently creeping Gnosticism or a desire to escape our finitude.31 In his lectures on Cassian, Thomas Merton describes the “disgust with the place” and with solitude that can easily plague the monk or the hermit. This is the reason why stability of place was a recommended cure for acedia. Merton makes the pastoral observation “that acedia can often be brought about by strain and imprudent efforts to remain recollected. Acedia is very often the punishment for angelism—for an unrealistic view of our nature—dividing man against himself as if the spiritual life were the life of the spirit alone. The body must have its share, or disaster will result.”32 A monk, or an ordinary Christian, might be tempted to spiritual heroism in the form of extreme treatment of the body. The attitude of angelism treats humans as wholly spiritual and without need of attention to the body and so it is a division of a person against him/herself. In dealing with a daughter vice or corollary of acedia (sorrow), Thomas Aquinas prescribes a bath and a nap, that is, care for the body.33

As we have seen, acedia is an attempt to escape from our God-given nature as bearers of his image and to avoid the commitments that come from this lofty calling. It is a capital vice because it habitually refuses the good gift of God and ultimately refuses oneself. It is akin to the servant who receives one talent and buries it in the ground. Part of our God-given nature is our finitude, expressed powerfully in our need to sleep. Denial of the significance of our need for sleep can be an at least implicit denial of God’s good creation. Rejection of our finitude withholds glory from God, who alone is infinite, self-contained, independent, and sleepless. We are not angels, and ought not have an unrealistic view of our nature. Evagrius recommended meditation on Psalm 127:1 to instill humility by remembering

32 Merton, Cassian and the Fathers, 187–188.
God's role in the work we undertake. Accepting sleep and my need for it is one way to accept my proper place.

Sleep is a potential enemy of the vice of sloth, but an ambivalent one. It may war with success or with failure against sloth, depending on the meaning and function of sleep in our lives. Sleep may aid sloth if I use it as a means of distraction or escape from my obligations to God or others. Sleep may weaken the vice of sloth if I use it according to its created intention as a reminder of my finitude and dependency on God who has made me for himself and for relationship with him. Do I approach sleep as a means of trusting God or of asserting my own agenda and trust in myself? Rest in God, rather than self-made activity, combats sloth.

Every day we are given the opportunity to entrust ourselves to the care, provision, and sustenance of God and to remember "that we are not God (who never sleeps), and that is good news." Every day "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16): the grace of life, of existence, of a new day, of provision. Our sleep, just like the "sleep" of death, reminds us that "we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world" (1 Tim. 6:7). In sleep, we give glory to "God, who gives life to all things . . . who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen" (1 Tim. 6:13, 15-16).

Benediction

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all (2 Thess. 3:5, 13, 16).

A Prayer

"O eternal Being, Thou livest in everlasting light; now, as the world's light fails, I seek the brightness of Thy presence. Thou knowest no weariness; now, as my limbs grow heavy and my spirit begins to flag, I commit my soul to Thee. Thou slumberest never; now, as I lie down to sleep, I cast myself upon Thy care. Thou keepest watch eternally; now, when I lie helpless, I rely upon Thy love . . . Before I sleep, I would for a moment rejoice in

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55 Smith, The Good and Beautiful God, 34.
the loves and friendships wherewith Thou hast blessed my life ... whom now, with my own soul, I entrust to Thy keeping through the hours of darkness. And for all who this night have no where to lay their heads or who, though lying down, cannot sleep for pain or for anxiety, I crave Thy pity in the name of our Lord Christ. Amen."\footnote{56}

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\footnote{56 John Baillie, A Diary of Private Prayer (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 35.}