



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

---

2009

## Evagrius on Sadness

Douglas E. Christie

*Loyola Marymount University*, DEchristie@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation

Christie, Douglas E., "Evagrius on Sadness" (2009). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 102.

[https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/102](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/102)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

## Evagrius on Sadness

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE

### *Sadness and Christian Spirituality*

SADNESS ONCE FIGURED prominently in the Christian monastic understanding of the spiritual life. The fourth century monastic writer Evagrius of Pontus considered *lupē* or sadness important enough to locate it at the center of his list of eight principal thoughts with which he believed the monk must contend to find his way to God.<sup>1</sup> In the writings of John Cassian and Gregory the Great, *tristitia* retained its significance as a crucial concern for the monk. But as these early monastic taxonomies developed, eventually turning into a catalogue of what we now know as the seven deadly sins, sadness was eventually dropped, first being folded into *acedia* and then into sloth.<sup>2</sup> It is not easy to account for the disappearance of sadness from the monastic vocabulary or to assess the significance of this shift for the later monastic tradition or for the Christian spiritual tradition as a whole. But the loss of sadness as a crucial point of reference for understanding the spiritual life is worth pausing over, if only to consider why it once figured so prominently in Christian spiritual experience, why it occupies such a marginal place now, and whether its

---

1. Evagrius of Pontus, *Eight Thoughts* 5, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans., intro., and commentary by Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 81–83; see also Evagrius, *Praktikos* 6; Sinkewicz 97–98; John Eudes Bamberger, trans., *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, CS 4 (Spencer: Cistercian, 1970) 17. I am grateful to the editor of CSQ and to the anonymous reader for helpful suggestions that added considerably to the clarity and coherence of this essay.

2. See Alan E. Bernstein, “*Tristitia* and the Fear of Hell in Monastic Reflection from John Cassian to Hilemar of Corbie,” *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History*, ed. Robert J. Bast and Andrew Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 183–205.

*Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 44.4 (2009)

spiritual significance might be recovered, not only within the discourse of Christian spirituality but also more generally.

It is possible, of course, that sadness never really disappeared but simply became subsumed into other ideas and forms of discourse, such as *acedia*, melancholy, and what is undoubtedly its most common contemporary expression, depression.<sup>3</sup> Still, one needs to exercise caution in assuming too easy an identification among these different terms and ideas. The early monastic tradition, for example, made a clear distinction between *lupē* and *acedia* and made a concerted effort to describe the characteristic features of each of these troubling *logismoi* ('thoughts'), as well as the best strategies for struggling against them. And while sadness and depression may be understood in contemporary psychotherapeutic thought as kindred elements within a continuum of experience, they should hardly be considered as identical to one another. Sadness, as the early monks argued, has its own distinctive characteristics and ought to be approached on its own terms. This is worth bearing in mind as one considers the meaning of sadness in early Christian monastic literature as well as its meaning within contemporary thought and experience, especially at a moment when our culture seems almost allergic to the idea of sadness.<sup>4</sup> The question I want to focus on in this essay, then, is whether sadness can be understood as having moral and spiritual significance and, if so, how best to understand its meaning within Christian spirituality.

The ancient Christian monastic tradition believed that sadness *did* have such significance, that it was a serious matter requiring the monk's most careful and assiduous attention. If left unchecked and allowed to take root in the soul, sadness could cause one to despair and abandon the monastic life altogether. But if attended to carefully and brought to a

---

3. For a probing analysis of the convergence of these ideas in contemporary experience and the challenge of distinguishing them, see Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead, 2008).

4. There is a burgeoning literature on happiness, much of it arising from the positive psychology movement. See, for example, Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* (New York: Penguin, 2007); Tal Ben-Shahar, *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: McGraw, 2007); and Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Vintage, 2007) (this latter work considers the sources and meaning of happiness, but from a different perspective than that of positive psychology). For a dissenting view, see Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy* (New York: Farrar, 2009).

place of conscious, prayerful awareness, sadness also had the capacity to instruct, to expand and deepen the soul. To face the reality of sadness in one's life was to enter into a serious moral and spiritual struggle that had the capacity to transform one and help one to live more fully into one's spiritual vocation.

But it is not clear whether sadness can still be understood in this way. In contemporary psychotherapeutic discourse, sadness has increasingly come to be identified with depression and as a result is often viewed as part of a pathological condition.<sup>5</sup> Seen from this perspective, sadness becomes a symptom rather than an experience to be probed for its own value. It is a burden that no one should have to carry, an unnecessary and treatable affliction. And since we possess the means for overcoming it, we ought to avail ourselves of these means and do what we can to mitigate its effects on our lives.

Such a state of affairs seems, on the face of it, to reflect a positive movement toward greater psychological health and well-being. Aren't we better off if sadness (especially if understood as a core expression of the more serious phenomenon of depression) can be softened or even eliminated entirely? It may seem so. But recently questions have begun to emerge concerning the significance of what some have described as a "loss of sadness," that is, the loss of normal human sadness as a non-pathological condition. In their important analysis of how the modern psychiatric profession has reclassified normal human sadness as an abnormal experience, Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield have drawn attention to the dangers inherent in defining sadness too simply and to the need to understand and respond to it in a more complex way.<sup>6</sup> The value of sadness is being reassessed and along with it many of our basic assumptions about human emotions.

There is a comparable complexity in the ancient monastic attitudes

---

5. See Gary Greenberg, "Manufacturing Depression: A Journey into the Economy of Melancholy," *Harpers*, May 2007: 35-46.

6. Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder* (New York: Oxford, 2007). See also Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (New York: Oxford, 1994), whose efforts to create a taxonomy of emotions demonstrates a compelling subtlety and complexity. "It might be more accurate to treat sadness, like its opposite happiness, as a *mood* rather than as an acute emotional state. Sad states are not, I think, usually focused on a single encounter but merge with the existential quality of life in reflecting a general relationship with the world . . ." (251).

towards sadness that can, I believe, make a valuable contribution to this larger conversation. In particular, the ancient monastic practice of paying attention to sadness and seeking out its myriad complex sources can help to resituate the experience as part of an ongoing moral, psychological, and spiritual development. The monastic tradition did not in any way minimize the deleterious effects of sadness on the soul, and never romanticized it. Still, the monks believed it was possible and important to engage the experience of sadness creatively and effectively and were convinced that it could be an important teacher. Thus sadness appears throughout early monastic literature as one of the most bedeviling *logismoi*, something so potent that in its wake the monk often felt helpless to continue on the monastic path at all. At the same time, the encounter with sadness was understood as an important and necessary invitation to face oneself honestly and deeply, to grow and be transformed.

But what exactly was the meaning of sadness in early monastic experience? What was the character of the threat it posed to the monk? And what if anything could be done to respond to or resist this threat? These are the principal questions I propose to consider here. I want to give particular attention to the work of the fourth-century monastic writer Evagrius of Pontus, for I believe it is in Evagrius's writing that one encounters the most acute and perceptive analysis of this phenomenon in ancient monastic literature. In examining Evagrius's understanding of sadness, I hope also to shed light on the deep pathos that was attached to the experience of sadness in the life of the monk. The location of sadness within the framework of the principal thoughts or passions gave to the experience a serious moral and spiritual meaning that could not always have been easy to bear (could one be held morally responsible for feeling sad?). Still, by situating it in the way they did, as part of a complex and mysterious process of coming to know the self and God, the monks signaled their sense that here was something of deep value, not easily explained or resolved, but worth attending to. More than this, it had the potential to teach the monk something important about his own identity. Encountering sadness as part of one's life, struggling with it and opening oneself to it, could help one to see and understand those patterns of thought and practice that undermine true self-knowledge and freedom. It could help one to achieve real spiritual depth and maturity.

*Sadness and the Frustration of Desire*

WHAT IS SADNESS? How does it work to undermine the monastic endeavor? One of the difficulties of stating clearly what sadness is arises from its seemingly irreducible semantic ambiguity. The Greek word *lupē* is often translated simply as *sadness*. But it can also be rendered as *grief*, *distress*, or *sorrow*. In its verbal form, *lupeo*, it can mean ‘to pain,’ suggesting a kind of emotional suffering that “make sad” does not quite convey. One scholar has suggested that, at least in the monastic context, ‘gloominess’ might be a more accurate term than any of these. And there is yet a further, quite distinct, set of meanings, closer to ‘irritation,’ ‘indignation,’ or ‘disgust,’ that can also be given to the word *lupē*.<sup>7</sup>

The range of possible meanings suggested even by this brief list points to the complexity underlying the notion of sadness in the early monastic world. And when one considers other, related ideas that gather naturally around the notion of sadness—discouragement or despondency or disappointment, for example—or tries to make sense of the intricate relationship between sadness and desire, or sadness and anger, or sadness and memory, it begins to become clear why no simple meaning can be assigned to sadness. Evagrius recognizes this, coming at his subject from many angles, examining in turn its complex emotional-spiritual ecology, its social-interpersonal dimensions, its physiological effects, its effect on prayer. Little by little a picture begins to emerge of how sadness arises, how it lives in us, how it affects us. But it is a picture full of dynamism and movement, for that is how the monk encounters sadness, as a living, breathing reality, whose meaning is not always easily discernable.

In chapter ten of the *Praktikos*, Evagrius makes one of his most important statements concerning the source and meaning of sadness in the life of the monk: sadness, he says “occurs through the frustration of one’s desires.”<sup>8</sup> This comment arises in the context of an extended reflection on

7. Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 417–22. There are both similarities and differences between the biblical meaning of *lupē* and the meaning of the term that surfaces in early Christian monastic literature. The range of meanings suggested above reflects the kind of usage found in both of these traditions. For the suggested translation *gloominess*, I am indebted to Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB, <[http://www.ldysinger.com/CH\\_599z\\_Asceticism/04\\_x4\\_gloom/00a\\_start.htm](http://www.ldysinger.com/CH_599z_Asceticism/04_x4_gloom/00a_start.htm)>.

8. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 10; Sinkewicz 98. It is not entirely clear from the statement in the *Praktikos* what it means to have one’s desires frustrated. The Greek term *steresis* is itself open to different

the eight principal thoughts and represents one of many attempts Evagrius makes to understand where this particular thought comes from, what it is, and how it works. It is a beguilingly simple statement, reflecting a characteristically Evagrian sense of confidence about the shape and character of spiritual struggle. But if the diagnosis is concise and pointed, its meaning is far from clear.

What after all does it mean to have one's desires *frustrated*? And what exactly is the relationship between sadness and desire? Does sadness arise from the frustration of *any* desire, or must the object of one's desire have a certain potency in the imagination? Further, why should the frustration of desire lead to sadness rather than, say, anger or bitterness? Evagrius himself recognizes the fluid, shifting character of the reality he is describing and the difficulty of locating its source precisely or definitively, noting in the same passage of the *Praktikos* that sadness "sometimes . . . follows closely upon anger."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he describes its capacity to wither the flesh. And he notes ruefully that sadness can hinder, even crush completely, one's ability to pray. It can even lead to madness. So, sadness *can* be understood and diagnosed, but only to a degree. Much of it remains hidden from view, impenetrable, and mysterious.

### *Two Types of Sadness*

CONSIDER THE IMAGE, not uncommon in early monastic literature, of a monk, sitting and weeping. Why is he weeping? Is it sadness? Or is it something else? It is perhaps precisely because of this ambiguity in monastic experience that Evagrius takes such care to distinguish between what he describes as the two main *types* of sadness, that which comes from evil and that which comes from God. Sadness that arises from evil, Evagrius claims, actually surfaces in two different ways: "one appears in the heart without any apparent cause for sadness, the other is forcefully

---

translations and interpretations, including not only *frustration* (Sinkewicz's and Dysinger's translations), but also *deprivation* (John Eudes Bamberger's translation, CS 4:17), as well as *loss*, *negation*, and *privation*. It may well be that these different possible meanings ought to be understood as different ways of expressing particular elements of a complex emotional experience (e.g., the loss of what one desires being expressed as frustration, etc.).

9. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 10; Sinkewicz 98.

begotten of unusual causes.” But Evagrius takes care to note that there is also something called “godly sadness” that “calls the soul back with tears, refusing the joy and sadness of the opposing side, and it worries over approaching death and judgment; little by little it opens to accept this.”<sup>10</sup> There is a clear and sharp distinction being made here between tears that open one’s heart to a more honest engagement with God—something the monastic tradition identifies as *penthos*, or *katanyxis*—and a mood or state that moves in a very different direction, toward a sadness that Evagrius calls “a disease of the soul and the flesh.”<sup>11</sup> According to Evagrius, “in place of godly sadness [the destroyer] tempts the mind with the contrary form of sadness in order to darken the soul.”<sup>12</sup>

There is a tension here, between the clarity and confidence with which Evagrius makes his distinction and the ambiguity and uncertainty concerning how sadness arises and how it affects the monk. To say that sadness arises “without any apparent cause,” that it is “begotten of unusual causes,” or that it “darkens the soul” certainly helps to affirm its mysterious, elusive potency. But it does not shed much light on what it is or how to engage it constructively.

It is a different matter when one examines Evagrius’s basic etiology of sadness, rooted in its complex relationship to desire and anger. The idea of sadness as arising from the frustration of desire reveals how important Evagrius considers attachment—and its corollary, detachment—to be in the ascetic project. And it reveals by extension how memory and regret fuel sadness and undermine the monk’s hope for arriving at a place of peace or stillness. For a person troubled by frustrated desires is in truth someone who has not yet come to terms with the need to relinquish attachment to so-called “corruptible” pleasures of the world. Such pleasures are of course full of allure. But it is not the pleasures themselves that are the problem; rather it is the complicated, often conflicted desire they provoke in the soul of the monk that proves so deeply problematic.

In his work *Foundations*, aimed at those just beginning to walk the monastic path, Evagrius provides a blunt analysis of how deeply enmeshed one can become in concerns that are, at root, ephemeral and unworthy

---

10. Evagrius, Eulogios 6; Sinkewicz 34.

11. Evagrius, Eulogios 7; Sinkewicz 33.

12. Evagrius, Eulogios 7; Sinkewicz 33.



of the monk's deepest commitment: "The person who lives with those who are material-minded and involved in business affairs himself shares completely in their circumstances and becomes enslaved to human impositions, idle conversations, and all sorts of other dangers—anger, sadness, madness over material things, fear, and scandal."<sup>13</sup> Here, sadness is simply one of the several negative consequences likely to arise when one fails to recognize the depth of one's attachment to so-called "material things." But it fits with the idea of sadness arising when desires are frustrated—here the desire being a conscious or unconscious longing for the comfort and security of the life one has given up, and the perhaps still-unresolved hope that these pleasures may yet be recovered. Sadness, along with fear and anger, arises because one is divided, caught between two worlds, unable to move forward or backward.

If one understands the ascetic impulse toward detachment—captured emblematically in Antony's response to the radical call to discipleship of Mt 19:21—as expressing a desire for a single-minded existence focused on God, then one begins to see more clearly how it is that the ongoing struggle to free oneself from attachments might indeed be the cause of so much sadness in the life of the monk.<sup>14</sup> "The monk with many possessions," says Evagrius, "carries around the memories of possessions as a heavy burden and a useless weight; he is stung with sadness and is mightily pained in his thoughts. He has abandoned his possessions and is lashed with sadness."<sup>15</sup> In another place he describes the process through which sadness comes to afflict the monk:

When certain thoughts gain the advantage, they bring the soul to remember home and parents and one's former life. And when they observe that the soul does not resist but rather follows right along and disperses itself among thoughts of pleasures, then with a hold on it they plunge it into sadness with the realization that former things are no more and cannot be again because of the present way of life. And the miserable soul, the more it allowed itself to be dispersed among the former thoughts, the more it has now become hemmed in and humiliated by these latter ones.<sup>16</sup>

---

13. Evagrius, *Foundations* 5; Sinkewicz 7.

14. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii* 2.3.

15. Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 3.7; Sinkewicz 79.

16. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 10; Sinkewicz 98.

Here Evagrius captures the poignancy of the kind of frustrated desire that continues to live on in the soul of the monk long after the fundamental choice for detachment has been made. It is, after all, the *memory* of possessions and home and one's entire former life that the monk now experiences as a "heavy burden and a useless weight." And although Evagrius does not state it explicitly, it is difficult to miss the sense of regret that seems to underlie this experience. Perhaps not an unmixed regret, for one can well imagine that the monk struggling with sadness has also found some measure of peace in his new life. But that is precisely what makes this predicament so difficult, so painful. The memory, by making present all that has gone before, brings to light the conflict between the desire to move on from that life and the positive valuation of its meaning and pathos. This conflict remains a potent force in the monk's soul. His ambivalence reveals a gap in his affections and suggests the extent to which he still remains bound to that other life. A significant part of his desire remains focused on that life, and he finds himself unable to give himself fully to his present existence, as much as he longs to do so. This is fertile ground for doubt, uncertainty, regret, and yes, sadness.

Evagrius recognizes how subtle frustrated desire can be, and how deep into the soul it can reach. In one example, he recounts the case of a monk who worries about a brother setting off on a trip and cautions that: "[The demons] know in fact that out of excessive concern about one's brother they can shape feelings of sadness and so trouble the ruling faculty."<sup>17</sup> Here sadness arises, it seems, out of something close to anxiety or a fear of losing control—the kind of obsessive preoccupation, in this case directed toward the traveler, that one can fall prey to in the misguided belief that it might help allay trouble from befalling him. Why is this a problem? Surely it is not because one should refrain from expressing concern for one's brother. No, it is the *excessive*, we might say *obsessive*, character of the concern that troubles Evagrius. This will almost inevitably provide an opening for further and deeper anxieties, perhaps even develop into a *habit* of anxiety in response to all that cannot be controlled. And this, Evagrius contends, is utterly detrimental to the spiritual life of the monk. This is the meaning of his reference to the "troubling [of] the ruling faculty" that such anxiety produces. Here Evagrius signals how

---

17. Evagrius, *Eulogius* 28; Sinkewicz 55.

profoundly this anxiety can undermine the monk's capacity for *hesychia* and for prayer, which are rooted in this faculty. As he notes elsewhere: "Sunlight does not penetrate a great depth of water; the light of contemplation does not illuminate a heart overcome by sadness."<sup>18</sup>

*The "Therapy of Desire": Engaging and Responding to Sadness*

THIS LAST COMMENT serves as a reminder of just how devastating sadness, if left unaddressed, could become in the life of the monk. It does indeed "darken the soul," leaving one unable, perhaps unwilling to seek God. No wonder Evagrius proves so tireless in mapping its sources and effects. But he is also intent on describing the means by which the monk might learn to engage and respond to the presence of sadness in his life, might indeed learn to overcome sadness and experience the blossoming of joy and true prayer. The ascetic practices Evagrius advocates for addressing sadness can seem laughably obvious, and profoundly unhelpful. In one place, for example, he states that all one has to do to become a "citadel inaccessible to the demon of sadness," is to "[flee] all worldly pleasure."<sup>19</sup> This reminds one a little of the *New Yorker* cartoon of a therapist who looks at his client and says simply: "forget your troubles." The caption underneath reads: "short session."

Can it ever really be that simple? Probably not. Still, for Evagrius, there *is* a kind of simplicity—or at least a single-mindedness—at the heart of his understanding of what it means to become free from the tenacious attachments at the root of one's sadness. But behind Evagrius's counsel one senses a strong conviction that *becoming* free involves a long, painful struggle to come to terms with the nature of one's attachments, or, as we might put it, one's unhealthy fixation on certain pleasures or desires that prevent one from breaking through to a place of authentic freedom. When Evagrius says that "sadness is a deprivation of sensible pleasure, whether actually present or only hoped for,"<sup>20</sup> he reveals just how tangled and complex the longing for pleasure (here understood as

18. Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 22; Sinkewicz 83.

19. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 19; Sinkewicz 101.

20. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 19; Sinkewicz 101.

a virtual synonym for desire) can be. Earlier, it was noted how the frustration of desire works on the monk in light of his past experience, with memory serving to make present (and real and disturbing) elements of a life long gone, elements to which the monk still remains deeply and fitfully attached. Here we see how the frustration of desire can also haunt the monk in the present moment and even in terms of a yet-to-be realized future (that which is “only hoped for”). The monk is faced with the daunting task of coming to terms not only with all that is not as he would have it be in his present life *but also* with the possibility that certain cherished dreams of the future will never be realized. The frustration of desire thus expresses itself as a combustible mixture of regret, disappointment, and loss of hope.

How is one to respond to such a dense, complex, and heavy experience? Evagrius’s preferred strategy for responding to sadness is similar to that which he advocates in response to all the *logismoi* that threaten the monk’s well-being. It is to invite the monk to reorient himself, most often with the help of Scripture and prayer, to recast his thoughts and affections away from the bedeviling thoughts and toward God. This is how the *Antirrhetikos* describes the process: “For the soul that is cast into sadness because of disturbances at night and imagines it will become perpetually dismayed because of its terror, [remember this—Lev 26:6–7]: ‘And I will give you peace in your land, and you shall sleep and none shall make you afraid: and I will destroy the evil out of your land.’”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Evagrius counsels the monk: “Let the joy of peace be the law written on our heart, rooting out sadness.”<sup>22</sup> And he reminds the one struggling with sadness: “Frustrated desires produce plantings of sadness, but prayers and thanksgivings cause these to wither away.”<sup>23</sup>

The emphasis here is on the techniques or strategies for helping the monk overcoming the debilitating effects of sadness. Yet it is also worth noting that sadness itself has a somewhat different character here than it does in much of the rest of the Evagrian corpus. In the *Antirrhetikos* it seems to have less to do with the frustration of desire and more to do with discouragement or loss of hope that comes from being subjected

---

21. Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* 4.11, trans. Luke Dysinger, <[http://www.ldysinger.com/CH\\_599z\\_Asceticism/o4\\_x4\\_gloom/ooa\\_start.htm](http://www.ldysinger.com/CH_599z_Asceticism/o4_x4_gloom/ooa_start.htm)>.

22. Evagrius, *Eulogios* 6; Sinkewicz 33.

23. Evagrius, *Eulogios* 7; Sinkewicz 34.

to forces far beyond one's control—here expressed in terms of “the tumult of the night” and the resulting “terror.” David Brakke has astutely observed that here Evagrius seems to be following the *Life of Antony* and its depiction of withering attacks by the demons that lead to a loss of hope, even to a kind of mental illness.<sup>24</sup> Here is yet another reminder of the tenacious and mysterious character of sadness in the life of the monk. The strategies suggested in the *Antirrhethikos*, then, are more than techniques for solving a problem. They are elements of a deep and painful therapeutic process aimed at helping the monk to see and respond to the entire range and depth of his spiritual experience, including the very roots of discouragement and loss of hope. Only in this way can lasting solace and healing be found.

When one examines this strategy closely, it can be seen to bear a striking resemblance to what Martha Nussbaum has memorably described as a “therapy of desire,” an eclectic and varied approach to philosophical reflection found among the ancient Greeks that she argues had as its aim the healing of the self.<sup>25</sup> Two insights of Nussbaum's analysis are particularly significant for our understanding of Evagrius's response to sadness. One is the importance she attributes to the ancient philosophers' recognition of the existence of unconscious motivations and beliefs. The other is her conviction regarding the importance of reason in responding to these unconscious dimensions of the human person. She points to the Stoics in particular, who, she argues, “most effectively combine recognition of depth in the soul with respect for the pupil's active practical reasoning.”<sup>26</sup> Evagrius certainly owed much to the Stoics, even if his vision of the passions as part of human nature, rather than as foreign to human nature, is more Platonic than Stoic in orientation. Nor did Evagrius believe in the complete extirpation of the passions, as the Stoics advocated; they were, rather, to be moderated, redirected, or, to employ the therapeutic language suggested by Nussbaum, healed.<sup>27</sup>

To have any hope of healing the deep divisions in the soul created

---

24. David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006) 64–65.

25. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), especially ch. 10, “The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions,” 359–401.

26. Nussbaum 490.

27. Brakke 52–55.

by the unchecked force of the thoughts or passions, one must be capable of reimagining the world. For the Stoics, as indeed for Evagrius, this meant both acknowledging the potency and reality of the passions and striving to come to an *understanding* of them, a recognition of the particular claim they make upon the soul and new sense of meaning that can emerge through reflection on and struggle with them. This is why it was so important to uncover not only the proximate causes of sadness—say, the failure to win recognition, disappointment in love, or an aggravated, unresolved dispute—but also the deeper causes, found in the almost infinite number of ways that desire itself can become compromised, distorted, or wounded. Such work is fundamentally integrative in character, the potential meaning of a given experience being inseparable from its emotional texture. Drawing on an example related by the Stoic philosopher Chryssipus—Nikidion grieving for her deceased lover—Nussbaum says: “When Nikidion grieves, she does not first of all coolly embrace the proposition, ‘My wonderful lover is dead,’ and then set about grieving. No, the real, full recognition of that dreadful event is the upheaval. It is like putting your hand straight down on the sharp point of a nail.”<sup>28</sup> Or, as Evagrius says, reflecting on the experience of sadness, it is like looking up from a great depth of water, unable to see or imagine the light of the surface.

Such emotional upheaval, whether grief at the loss of one’s beloved or recognition of the depths of one’s sadness, is itself, suggests Nussbaum, an act of judgment, of knowing, that is, an act of reason (rather, than, as the Platonists would have it, an irrational passion). Stoic therapy, like the ascetic program outlined by Evagrius, is designed to heal this emotional upheaval and bring one to a place of greater stability and even peace (Evagrius’s well-known but often misunderstood *apatheia*). Locating the origins of the emotional upheaval in one’s knowing faculty helps to explain how this therapy, aimed at knowing, or reimagining, works. Stoic therapy can help Nikidion heal her grief, which, as Nussbaum puts it, is experienced as “a wrenching, tearing violation of her self-sufficiency and her undisturbed condition,”<sup>29</sup> in part by opening up a new way of understanding the self in light of this experience. The therapy to which

---

28. Nussbaum 380.

29. Nussbaum 380

Evagrius invites the monk to submit has a comparable healing power. Through a sustained commitment to *reflect* on one's experience of sadness and grapple with its deep sources and possible meaning, the monk can learn to face this particular tearing of the self and begin to reimagine the self as whole and undivided in God.

Does such deep sadness ever dissipate completely? It seems unlikely. But the early monks committed themselves to facing the sadness that sometimes afflicted them and struggling with its possible meaning for their lives. To leave sadness, and the deeper sources of sadness, unaddressed, could spell disaster for the monk. To open oneself to it, honestly and carefully, in the context of prayer, could enable the monk to examine the wounded places in his soul and perhaps even come to inhabit a world infused with some joy, and a sense of hope.

### *Conclusion*

CAN THE ANCIENT monastic effort to understand and respond to sadness help us retrieve a sense of its spiritual meaning and significance? It is difficult to say. The challenges of translation alone are enough to give one pause. How does the monastic understanding of sadness relate to the experience we call by the same name, or for that matter to the much more pervasive notion of depression? It is no doubt best to avoid any simple or arbitrary identification of one phenomenon with another. Yet there are undeniable similarities in the way the ancient monks thought about sadness and the way we have come to think about the many forms of sadness and depression. Like the ancient monks, we too are looking for language complex and subtle enough to help us understand our experience of loss and sadness. If we have arrived at a place that enables us to be more confident about the biochemical dimensions of depressive disorders, we remain unsure about the extent to which this understanding enables us to say all we need to say about such experience. There is a nagging and persistent sense that we need to develop a more encompassing understanding of the mysterious continuum of sadness and depression.<sup>30</sup>

---

30. Constance FitzGerald's important essay "Impasse and the Dark Night," *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joanne Wolski Conn, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Paulist,

It is here that the ancient monastic tradition, with its careful attention to the way sadness can touch and open up the soul, can make its most significant contribution.

One has the sense that sadness remained a persistent challenge for the early Christian monks. Even Antony, the exemplary hero of the ancient monastic world, seems not to have escaped its tenacious grip completely. The exquisite fifteenth-century Sieneese painting by the Master of the Osservanza depicts Antony being tempted by a beautiful young woman. He stands poised almost exactly at the midpoint between his cell and the place where the young woman stands, pausing it seems to consider which way to turn. The young woman gazes at him and he gazes back at her—with an unmistakable look of sadness. Perhaps in that moment he already knows he will not go to her and will turn back again to the life he has chosen. Or it may be that he is genuinely torn, uncertain about what to do. We do not know how long he stood there struggling. All we are left with is the image of a man in the middle of his journey, haunted by sadness.

Department of Theological Studies  
Loyola Marymount University  
One LMU Drive  
Los Angeles, CA 90045  
dburton@lmu.edu

---

1996) 410–50, is instructive in this regard. Focusing on the widespread contemporary experience of impasse, Fitzgerald considers how John of the Cross's language of "dark night" with its careful attention to the importance of desire for the life of the soul can illuminate and give meaning to an experience that might otherwise lack any meaning. See also David Karp, *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection and the Meanings of Illness* (New York: Oxford, 1996). Karp, a sociologist, writes perceptively about the "heightened respect for the value of spirituality in responding to sickness" that he gained during the course of his interviews with those suffering from depression. "I left many interviews with a sense that spiritually engaged individuals were in touch with *something* important." It is what he describes as "value of illness for personal transformation" that emerges as most significant in this regard (190–91).



# CONTRIBUTORS

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE is Professor of Christian Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. He is the author of *The Word in the Desert* and serves as editor of the journal *Spiritus*.

DOMENICO PEZZINI is Emeritus Professor of English Language (University of Verona). His main research focuses on the analysis of medieval English translations of Latin spiritual treatises, liturgical hymns, and saints' lives. He has translated into Italian works of many of the early Cistercians, most recently the sermons of Isaac of Stella, as well as Julian of Norwich's *Showings*.

ISAAC OF STELLA (c. 1100–c. 1178), born in England, entered the Cistercian abbey of Pontigny around 1140 and was made abbot of Stella (Étoile) in 1147. A lover of the Cistercian reform, Isaac's intellectual gifts and academic training gave him a critical appreciation of the emerging scholastic movement in western Christianity.

CHRYSOGONUS WADDELL, OCSO (1930–2008), hardly needs an introduction to the Cistercian community. He was a monk of Gethsemani Abbey and a well-known writer and speaker in the areas of monastic and liturgical studies. His last publications included new critical editions of the early Cistercian narrative, legislative, and capitular documents. At the time of his death in November 2008, Father Chrysogonus was working on the Cis-

*Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 44.4 (2009)