

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

SUMMER 2018

VOLUME 18, NUMBER 1

FOR THE PAST DECADE we have been enriched by the presence of Juan Alcala. First, he came into our classes and asked great questions, then he became a barista, then he became manager of the coffeehouse. After a year away as a fellow at the Trinity Forum Academy in Maryland, he returned and has served for the past three years as Manager of Pascal's Coffeehouse again. Juan has greatly blessed our life at the Study Center and so it was hard to have to say goodbye to him and Kelly and their son Timoteo this spring. Before they head off to graduate studies in Spain, however, we asked him to give us one more essay. We offer it here with deepest gratitude and prayers for God's blessings on Juan and his family.

LEARNING TO LOVE: REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESIRE AND REASON

By Juan Alcala

WHEN AUGUSTINE WROTE, "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,"¹ he inaugurated a tradition of thought on desire that has shaped the course of intellectual discourse on the subject ever since. We are right to listen to him. We are certainly led by our hearts, and God is both the desire of nations and the "joy of man's desiring." As Jesus teaches, we are to consider God as a treasure buried in a field, a treasure for which we'd sacrifice everything. Indeed, it would seem that the desiring part of man is at the center of his being, and that God is man's highest desire.

Augustine's own experience with desire, however, was not as straightforward as his opening lines in the *Confessions* might have us believe. In Book X, he writes,

But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place. It tries to be first and to be in the leading role, though it deserves to be allowed only as secondary to reason.²

These are not the words of a man who considers desire to be an unmitigated good. Indeed, it would seem that we walk in righteousness only insofar as we subject desire to reason, only insofar as our desire plays a secondary role to our thinking. What are we to make of Augustine, then, and the relationship between desire and reason?

Over the past year, I've had the opportunity to lead our baristas in some conversations where we have considered the roles of reason and desire in human experience.

One curious feature of these conversations is that it became difficult to talk about either one of these — desire or reason — without turning it into a totally encompassing framework. We could hardly read James K.A. Smith's *You Are What You Love* without beginning to talk as though desire, and the

liturgies that form it, are the main issues to keep in view when considering the human. Conversely, when working through C.S. Lewis's method in *Mere Christianity*, we began to talk as though reasoning our way through human experience were the key to human flourishing and to relating to God. Although it seems simple enough to say that we need to reflect on both aspects when considering the human being, this conclusion doesn't

“We want a discourse that unites desire and reason in a satisfying harmony.”

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satisfy the way we'd like it to. We want a discourse that unites desire and reason in a satisfying harmony.

What sort of discourse does the Christian tradition provide?

When James K.A. Smith focuses on desire, he does so to restrain our exaltation of reason and to help us recognize just how essentially the human is governed by desire. He takes us straight to Christ:

Jesus doesn't encounter Matthew and John – or you and me – and ask, "What do you know?" He doesn't even ask, "What do you believe?" He asks, "What do you want?" This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because we are what we want. Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow.³

Smith is bent on saving us from the grip of unrestrained reason, and so he directs our attention to our unconscious passionate nature, in short, to human desire. Because of this focus, one can easily misinterpret Smith to be suggesting that we need not pay much attention to what we think about and how we think about it. Indeed, his language throughout his argument may lead to laxity of reasoning. The careful reader will recognize why Smith focuses the way he does: he is writing in the wake of modernity. Smith specifically references the lingering problems introduced by Descartes's view of the human as a *res cogitans*, a thinking thing. In one sense, therefore, Smith is right to focus our attention on desire. We live in an age dominated by an unreasonable exaltation of reason, which paradoxically results in both an excessive dependence on reason and an ironic dismissal of it. Smith, then, wants to help us understand ourselves better by drawing our attention to desire and to how it is shaped by our bodily habits. This focus, however accurate, can lend itself to unreasonable dependence on desire and laxity of reason. We need a more satisfying way of reconciling desire and reason.

Writing long before the modern period, Augustine offers a helpful way to consider the relationship between desire and reason, one that helps us avoid the pitfalls of making too much of either desire or reason. A central feature of the way Augustine understands desire is his distinction between *frui*, meaning *enjoyment*, and *uti*, meaning *use*. Augustine believes that it is an individual's responsibility to relate all earthly things back to God. God alone

is the sole object worthy of enjoyment (*frui*). Everything else is to be enjoyed in a way that regards the object in relation to the ultimate pleasure, God. All earthly things are to be subordinated to him. This doesn't mean for Augustine that earthly goods are to be enjoyed less but rather to be enjoyed for God's sake. In this sense, use (*uti*) is a form of enjoyment. In other words, we can enjoy things either in the order of *frui* or in the order of *uti*. Thus, Augustine can write, "He loves you less who together with you loves something which he does not love for your sake."⁴

Although this rubric may seem rigid, for Augustine it grasps the essential reality of the universe, namely, that God himself is the only object capable of sustaining the pure affection of human beings. All else is useful toward that end. Finding ultimate pleasure in God is man's proper ontological posture, but far from creating a system that deprives human beings of pleasure in everything else, Augustine articulates a way to enjoy everything in the world with the maximum possible enjoyment (*uti*) by relating everything back to the enjoyment of God (*frui*). Augustine's distinction between *frui* and *uti* is meant to maximize, not diminish, joyful satisfaction in this life.

Augustine's theology of desire parallels his theology of language. Just as human language, composed of words, is to be rightly ordered vis-a-vis the Word (perfect knowledge), human desire is to be rightly ordered vis-a-vis the one who is the Word (perfect satisfaction). In the same way that we are selective about which words to use depending on the meaning we want to express, we are to navigate our desiring selves in the world according to the same principle —always oriented toward the Word.

Augustine, then, finds desire to reside at the core of human identity, but he also understands the central role of reason in the work of enjoying God and earthly goods, for one must think about the world and one's relation to it in order not to seek to enjoy (*frui*) that which should only be used (*uti*). Reason helps us achieve maximum satisfaction of our desires by teaching us to orient our ultimate desire toward God and to relate all other desires to that ultimate desire. In short, we can properly desire only that of which we have proper knowledge.

One finds little trace of Augustine's view of desire in our culture today. A current common misconception considers desire as most fulfilled when we have much of it and have unlimited access to it. The premise of the sexual liberation movement, in

all of its forms, can be summed up as the effort to make sex as easy, as plentiful, and as accessible as possible. Without entering into the specific arguments of this issue, one thing is plain, namely, that sexual pleasure today seeks maximum quantity and unrestrained access. In other words, ultimate pleasure in sex is to be able to have it as often as one pleases, with each individual human being acting as the arbiter of his or her own sexual proclivities, in short, to see it as an end in itself.

Another prevalent human desire that we don't typically think of in terms of desire is ambition. We think of ambition in terms of dreams, goals, or aspirations, but we misunderstand what is actually at stake if we don't think of ambition in terms of desire. Simply put, ambition is what you *want* to do most deeply, what you desire to do most strongly. In the United States right now, there is a strong sense that human ambition ought to be unrestrained, unlimited. We teach children, hoping to encourage them, that they can be whatever they want to be and that they ought always to pursue their dreams. Again, without entering into the details of whether these statements are good or bad, we can observe that as a culture we place a premium on being able to do what we want, whenever and however we want to do it.

In both cases we find a commitment to the self's unrestrained freedom, the underlying premise of this freedom being that maximum pleasure in life can be found in unlimited human potential. This philosophy is so dominant today that we scoff, wittingly and even unwittingly, at any limiting force that threatens to govern or shape our desire. We view such forces as affronts to our individual freedom. Simply put, our view of freedom is predicated on the ultimacy of our earthly desires. If we are to be free, our desires are to be our chief ends.

Augustine's view of desire, with his distinction between *frui* and *uti*, flies in the face of this philosophy. For him, sex and ambition were meant to be related back to God. He argues that the subordination of these desires to God does not diminish but maximizes the satisfaction found in the experience of these desires. In other words, desire for sex and ambition are maximally satisfied only when subordinated to the desire for God himself and restrained, shaped, and directed by the limits set forth by God.

Nearly a thousand years after Augustine, Dante Alighieri argued in a similar manner, not only working within the *frui/uti* framework but also imagining the harmony between desire and reason increasing as one draws nearer to God. To the chagrin of many of us who have come to love Dante, he is known in popular culture as that obscure Italian who grossly depicted judgment and hell. What is especially tragic about such a view is that it masks the fact that Dante has written some of the most profound words in

all of history regarding desire. When quoting parts of the *Commedia* one easily risks the misunderstanding that arises from reading only an excerpt of a profoundly contextualized piece of writing. With that warning in mind, consider the following passage from *Paradiso* 33, which describes Dante the pilgrim's final ascent to God Himself:

“ Notice the language Dante uses to describe God. He calls him “the goal of all desires,” worthy of “the ardor of my desire.”

And I, as I approached the goal of all desires,
perfected within me, as I should, the ardor of my desire.

Bernard was beckoning to me and smiling, to
make me gaze upward, but on my own I was
already such as he wished,

for my sight, becoming purer, entered deeper
and deeper into the ray of the supreme Light that
is true in itself.

From here onward my seeing was greater than
speech can show, which gives way before such a
sight, and memory gives way before such excess.
As is one who sees in dream, and after the
dream the passion impressed remains, but the
rest does not return to the mind:

so am I, for almost all my vision has ceased,
but still there trickles in my heart the sweetness
born if it.⁵

Having reached the highest heaven, after passing through hell and purgatory and the heavenly spheres, Dante the pilgrim is now at the threshold of beholding God himself. Notice the language Dante uses to describe God. He calls him “the goal of all desires,” worthy of “the ardor of my desire.” There is a fitness, then, between God's quality as the goal of desire and our desiring potential; the climax of human desire finds its ultimate object in God. Several lines down, Dante also calls God “the

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supreme Light that is true in itself." Thus, God is the ultimate object of both desire and knowledge.

Dante expresses this quality of God profoundly in the final sentence of canto 33. Having turned his gaze toward God, Dante the pilgrim identifies the aspect of God he is beholding. He is surveying the Son of God, who appears to him as reflected light and who "seemed to be painted with our effigy."⁶ In that moment, Dante labors with all his might to understand the dual nature of Christ — the God Man — but finds himself unable. And then comes the final sentence of the poem:

Here my high imagining failed of power; but
already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like
a wheel being moved evenly,
by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.⁷

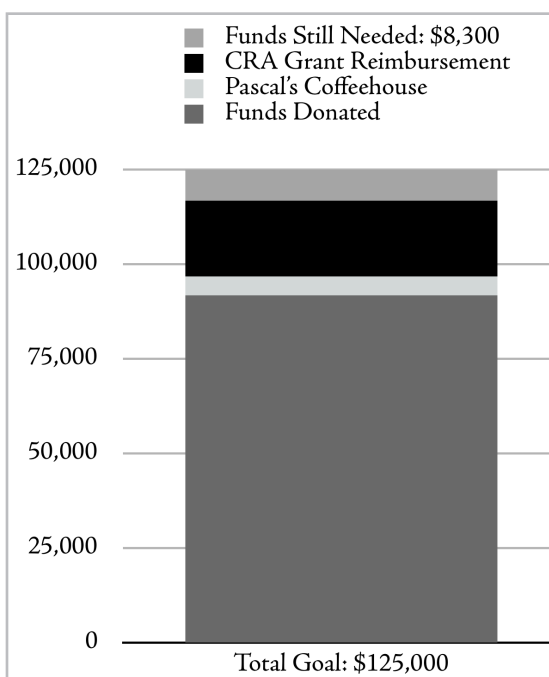
He fails to perceive the depths of God, yet his desire is nonetheless satisfied with the sort of satisfaction Dante has been unpacking all this time. The satisfaction of heaven is not one that causes us to cease desiring, but one that satisfies while simultaneously stirring the ardor of desire. As Dante scholar Lino Pertile writes, "Dante's Paradise, then, is hardly the kingdom of quiet and immobility we might have expected; indeed it is perennial motion, desire and ardour, hunger and thirst."⁸

Although Dante confesses some sort of failure on the part of his reason, his desire is nevertheless stirred and satisfied.

Dante's metaphor reflects the medieval understanding of the heavens. God himself dwells in the highest heaven and his love is thought to be the mover of all things, including the planets, which are conceived as wheels being turned by love. So when Dante writes that "my desire and the *velle* were turned," he is situating his desire within the ordered universe. In the same way that the heavenly spheres are turned and ordered by the love of God, so is human desire turned and ordered.

What is especially illuminating about Dante's language here is that he refers to two different kinds of desire. The Italian word used for *desire* is *disio*, which refers to appetitive desire or primal desire, considered independently of intellect. *Velle*, on the other hand, is the Latin infinitive for *to wish, desire, or will*, which is to be guided by reason. According to Dante scholars Ronald Martinez and the late Robert Durling, "God, then, is the object of the soul's most fundamental desire [*desio*], independently of reason, and God is also the true object of intellect and of will determined by intellect [*velle*]."⁹ The failure of Dante's "high imagining" during his final vision of God, according to Durling and Martinez, refers to the movement from an intellectual posture toward God to an exclusively affective one. But even though

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BUILDING CONVERSATIONS UPDATE

We are almost across the finish line!

Thanks to you, Pascal's and the Christian Study Center will reopen in August with some beautiful renovations and improvements that will enable us to serve better all of those who come through our doors with a genuine vision of Christian hospitality.

Summertime is a slow time for donations and your support for the ongoing work of the Center, or the remaining funds needed for the Building Conversations Campaign, is more than welcome. Please visit www.christianstudycenter.org/about-us/donate to give online or you may send a check to 112 NW 16th St., Gainesville, FL 32603 (please designate any gifts to the Building Conversations Campaign accordingly).

Many thanks to all who have generously supported the campaign.

We look forward to celebrating all we have accomplished together later this year.



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Dante has conceived of the final vision of God in terms of transcending the intellect, the intellectual aspect of the human is not extinguished but now fully integrated with desire, hence the *velle*, desire determined by the intellect. Dante thus envisions movement toward God as the complete integration between man's reason and man's desire. So while we do see the *frui/uti* framework here and throughout the *Commedia*, what we see at the end of the ascent to God is desire so ordered and integrated with reason as to make any distinction unnecessary.

Having reflected on Augustine's and Dante's pre-modern thinking regarding desire and reason, how shall we approach Lewis's rigorous late-modern thinking? Earlier I said that when considering Lewis's method in *Mere Christianity* we began to talk as though reasoning our way through human experience was the key to relating to God, but is this an accurate representation of Lewis's argument?

“ I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage.”
-C.S. Lewis

Lewis's argument in *Mere Christianity* isn't about reason but rather provides an example of reason at work. Lewis is not arguing for good thinking; he is using good thinking in order to reflect on human experience. He starts by observing experience and allows what he observes to raise questions. When he does this, Lewis inevitably reflects on the experience of desire. He does this, for instance, in his chapter entitled "Hope," where he reflects on the experience of unsatisfied desire:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage.¹⁰

Lewis draws on the Augustinian notion of *uti* and *frui*. "Earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy" the ultimate desire of

man, which Augustine saw is God, but only "to arouse it, to suggest the real thing." Earthly pleasure is a sign both to be enjoyed in the order of *uti* and to be used to enjoy God in the order of *frui*.

What we see in Lewis, then, is an understanding of the relationship of desire and reason consistent with Augustine and Dante. This understanding consists in recognizing the centrality of desire but also the role of reason in identifying the proper aims and limits to earthly desire. In reflecting on desire, all three of these thinkers agree that in the universe as ordered by God, human satisfaction on earth is maximized when desire is shaped by reason; yet, they also point us to a full experience of God in the age to come. For Augustine, the troubles of desire will be put to rest, as we ourselves find our final rest in God, the true being behind our deepest longings; Dante envisions perennial pleasure as our highest desires are simultaneously stirred and satisfied by God; and Lewis exhorts us to enjoy earthly gifts to their fullest extent, always bearing in mind that these gifts point to far greater and more satisfying fulfillment in the presence of God. ☩

Notes

1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press), pg. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 208.
3. James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Brazos Press), pgs. 1-2.
4. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press), pg. 202.
5. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Translated and edited by Ronald Martinez and Robert Durling (Oxford University Press), pg. 663, lines 46-63.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 667, lines 130-131.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 667, lines 142-145.
8. Excerpt from Lino Pertile, *Paradiso: A Drama of Desire*, pgs. 154-155, found in Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire* (University of Toronto Press), pg. 167.
9. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Translated and edited by Ronald Martinez and Robert Durling (Oxford University Press), pg. 682
10. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins Publishers), pgs. 136-137.

UNDERSTANDING TECHNOLOGY *and the* SELF

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FROM OUR READING GROUP by TIM SCHUBERT

If the title "Technology and the Self" seems baffling at first blush, it did for me too. But once our small group got into the readings, I began to grasp what all the fuss is about. Technology, beyond being a noble and delightful expression of our creativity, also can be understood as an attempt to transgress prescribed human limits; to avoid, replace or even confiscate legitimate authority; to extend oneself into realms of inquiry and subsequent activity for which we are poorly prepared or even patently unequipped.

For the Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters, the Christian Study Center offered this reading/discussion group addressing from a Christian perspective the beneficial and detrimental impacts of technological advances on humanity, both as individuals and in community. The original inspiration was a growing dissatisfaction with certain aspects of how we use and are used by our digital communications technologies. For all the good they offer, these tools have captivated and mesmerized us in ways that we perhaps did not expect. Other technologies such as genetic engineering and medical advancements got brief attention later in the semester. We hope to pick up these themes again for the 2018-19 school year.

In retrospect, why do we so often overlook the negative impacts of new technologies? After the fact we learn that we are not that skilled or honest at evaluating *all* the impacts of our inventions and discoveries. We are perennially enticed by simple novelties and potential advances while overlooking possible dangers. We couple human curiosity to explore and understand creation (a good thing) with a regrettable tendency to justify almost any human endeavor. Will we ever learn to do better? Might we one day come to know ourselves well enough to identify and thwart these tendencies while still exploring and responsibly stewarding Creation through technology? That's the outcome we hope for in our deliberations.

If you haven't noticed, many in the cognoscente have been cranking out discourses on this topic and continue to do so. Apparently, we are not alone in our concerns. In a very real sense, it is as if a spell is gradually being broken; digital tech users are waking up in greater numbers, and need help avoiding a relapse.

We found three main resources to be especially helpful in stimulating our thinking and enlivening our discussions.

1. *Technopoly – The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, by Neil Postman (Vintage Books, 1992). This 26-year old treatment is uncannily accurate in its assessment and prediction about technology's impact on culture. The final chapter entitled "The Loving Resistance Fighter" offers insightful advice on how an enlightened objector might go about reversing the technological takeover. Postman declares that "technology must never be accepted as part of the natural order of things, that every technology ... is a product of a particular economic and political context, and carries with it a program, an agenda, and a philosophy that may or may not be life-enhancing and that therefore requires scrutiny, criticism, and control." This work was considered foundational to this year's discussions, despite its age.
2. *The Tech-wise Family – Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*, by Andy Crouch (Baker Books, 2017). Crouch gives great advice from the trenches on how to regain control over the use of digital devices in the family setting, though the ideas can have broader application. His recommended list of ten commitments is challenging but not impossible, an absolute liberation if you can hold out.
3. "Attending to Technology – Theses for Disputation," by Alan Jacobs (*The New Atlantis* 48: 16-45, 2016). Here Jacobs presents as aphorisms a revised and extended version of his original 79 theses (in the Hedgehog Review blog "The Infernal Machine," March 2015), and he invites discussion on each one. The specific topic is attention and what technology can do/has done to our attention. (Sounds dull, perhaps because technology has diminished our ability to pay attention!) Attention is a ceding of the sovereignty of the self, sometimes willingly as a gift, and other times as a disciplined rendering of what is due. We are stewards of it, and administering attention wisely requires thoughtful practice. Among other ideas, Jacobs pleads for an "attentional commons"; for ground rules limiting surveillance as a normative form of care, for more silence to allow time to really think, for maintenance and respect for intimacy gradients, for conviviality. It was here I was introduced (perhaps convicted is a better term for

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it) to the Dunning-Kruger effect which is the belief held by many unskilled and unknowledgeable people that they are skilled and knowledgeable. In other words, these people are not just ignorant of their ignorance, they are convinced they are experts. This effect characterizes a good bit of what is presented on the internet, and describes our illusion of being in control of our technological choices. Lest we forget, our knowledge is always limited to one degree or another.

Alan Jacobs' *New Atlantis* article highlighted emerging frustration with technology's specific impact on attentiveness, on mindfulness, on our ability to concentrate, which prompted additional exploration on this subject, leading to the following additional resources:

- *The Listening Life – Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction*, by Adam McHugh (InterVarsity Press, 2015). I suggest you go straight to the epilogue for his embrace of deep listening as a spiritual discipline and nurturing gift to the one being heard.
- *Distraction – The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, by Maggie Jackson (Prometheus Books, 2008). Her insights into the three elements of our attention network (alerting, orienting, and executive) are helpful in getting a firmer grasp on what goes on when we “pay attention” in various ways. *Alerting* attention is initial awareness, the first notice of an incoming stimulus, while *orienting* attention is the act of selecting or sorting out that stimulus from all others to focus on it. *Executive* attention then involves cognitive and emotional processes to prioritize between competing tasks to solve a problem or reach a conclusion. All three must work together to grow intellectually, bring satisfaction and enjoy life. Personal digital communication technologies are inherently capable of overloading our alerting functions in seductive ways, then distorting the orienting and executive functions. Improving mindfulness undoubtedly requires considerable discipline and resolve in their wise use.
- *The Attention Merchants – The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads*, by Tim Wu (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016). An exposé disclosing all the secretive ways our attention is enticed and harvested for various purposes, mostly commercial and political. Since most users of social media are uninformed or indifferent about how their engagement with social media is monitored, manipulated and sold, this practice has outpaced and exceeded the privacy comfort level for many. The perennial conundrum of offering consumers free services splattered with advertising versus paid subscription services prompted Tim Cook of Apple to characterize users of free internet services not as consumers, but as the product.
- *Mindfulness*, by Ellen Langer (Da Capo Press, 1989). Without wandering into the now fashionable eastern mystical approach to mindfulness, Dr. Langer shares the results of decades of her careful psychological research in ways that help us learn second-order mindfulness, *choosing* what gets our attention (what Jackson calls orienting attention). Langer reassures us that trying to remain mindful is not exhausting hard work. Such anxiety comes from perpetual anxious self-evaluation. Mindfulness is invigorating, engaging, and inspiring, made so by the simple act of introducing novelty, deliberately noticing new things in old settings. Boredom arises because we fail to take notice of new things, deny the possibility of a new perspective, and/or create fixed categories that eventually entrap us. Conversely, mindfulness is encouraged when intuition (which bypasses old categories) is encouraged, when uncertainty and possible failure is tolerated rather than dreaded, when distinctions and analogies are employed in problem analysis, creating both new categories and new contexts respectively.

Most of the authorities consulted in our readings acknowledge that whatever we decide to devote our attention to will shape us. For better or worse, we are formed by the objects of our attention. Tactics to improve our goal-focused behaviors emphasize how vital it is to exercise discretion so as not to overload and pollute our finite perception capacities. We find that Scripture offers similar advice in Philippians 4:8-9 on choosing and sustaining attention on a worthy target.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (ESV)

We desperately need trustworthy guidance to avoid mental lassitude and futility. Langer believes that even with the best definitions and research designs, mindfulness cannot/will not be captured and analyzed once and for all. Maybe this is to be expected when the human mind strives to understand itself by thinking about thinking. But as Christians, we have additional mind-renewing resources at our disposal: Scripture, the indwelling Holy Spirit, the wisdom of saints that have preceded us, the company of our local church, and the fellowship of this Study Center. 🙏



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This newsletter is a publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville which facilitates the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life and culture in the university community.



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