This paper is a conceptual analysis of 'procrastination,' a problem which receives much practical attention from academic mentors, as well as clinical attention from providers who work with academics. A more historically based, more scholarly treatment of procrastination may go further towards unraveling its knot. Drawing on authors as diverse as Hesiod, Evagrius, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Johnson, Melville, García Lorca and Pynchon, the paper critiques the now common wisdom that perfectionism lies at procrastination's root, and that a lowering of standards is the way to dislodge the demon.

_Akedia_, the Greek concept from which what we now call laziness or sloth was derived, may be understood more precisely as separation from the object of contemplation. The need for expedient action in many academic circumstances tends to produce precisely this separation. This paper argues that higher, not lower standards may most easily revive enthusiasm, and return languishing projects to a sharper focus. Perfectionism, understood not as adherence to an unattainable ideal, but as respect for oneself and one's work, can serve in such circumstances not as Damocles' sword, but as Ariadne's thread.
Festina Lente: Akedia, Procrastination, and Transcendence

Aldus Manutius, the Venetian teacher, printer, and creator of italic typeface, is credited with having saved Greek literature from further loss by publishing it in fine editions. His busy enterprise employed a number of workers, including a scholar as proofreader; one of his innovations was to bring to the public books of convenient size, at reasonable prices. The dolphin and anchor trademark of his Aldine Press bore the motto festina lente, or 'make haste slowly'—a fitting one for an active man with more than one long-term project.

This muggy and overcast afternoon inspires neither work nor play, and is not conducive to rest. In the cafés, with their plate glass windows, in the offices, behind closed doors, and in the library, with its long tables, people are procrastinating. Lower division students would like to pass required courses so they can get into their majors, but they do not want to study, and are procrastinating by reading Facebook. Beginning graduate students feel the same way, and are doing the same thing. Upper division students and stalled dissertators think they would like to be writing, but are actually being creative with MySpace. Faculty and very advanced graduate students would like to be admiring offprints, but do not want to write their papers. They are applying for jobs, and denouncing each other in confidential memoranda.

Procrastination appears to be one of humanity's greatest and oldest plagues. In Works and Days, Hesiod exhorts us:

Do not put off until tomorrow and the day after.

A man does not fill his barn by shirking his labors
or putting them off; it is keeping at it that gets
the work done.

The putter-off of work is the man who wrestles
with disaster. (ll. 410-413; 1959, 67)

We associate procrastination with sloth, the fourth of the Seven Deadly Sins. Samuel
Johnson decried delay and deferral in pithy remarks like this: "[I]nstead of living, [we]
let year glide after year in preparations to live" (1963, 449 [no. 108]).

Nero is said to have 'fiddled while Rome burned;' in the wake of Hurricane
Katrina, a United States government official shopped for shoes while New Orleans sank.
But high officials are not generally vulnerable to accusations of procrastination or
laziness. Laborers, on the other hand, are often unfairly accused of both. Upwardly
mobile by definition, the middle classes are supposed to be their own watchmen in the
matter of productivity. When their rate of production slows, they fret. Their frustration,
however, is not only with their work, but also with their self-image. They expect to
produce; if they do not, they are not themselves. Some then wonder what is wrong with
them, when they might more properly ask what is wrong with their projects. The self-
doubt this avenue can engender only compounds the malaise.

Procrastination and Play

Procrastination is endemic to academia, we hear, and much helpful advice is
given on how to overcome it. But our work-oriented culture tends to value speed and
quantity over quality of production. Fatigue is mistaken for ambivalence. Realistic goal
setting is taken as a lack of commitment. Recreation is taken for procrastination. Those
who internalize these errors, end up substituting procrastination for play. Procrastinators
often have more in common with Aesop's ant than with his grasshopper. They work, they
run errands, and they fulfill social obligations—but they do not play. Without recreation,
they are not refreshed. They then find ourselves playing, surreptitiously and
halfheartedly, when in fact they need to work. Play and work can be merged in a positive
way, but procrastination seems to be a strange brew made from the detritus of each.

*Perfectionism and Perfectionism*

It is often said that people procrastinate out of perfectionism. Their expectations
of themselves are too high, and their projects loom larger and larger over their heads.
They spend time criticizing themselves, but they accord themselves no authority. John
Locke's *Essay* reminds us that, although our capacities are limited, they can nonetheless
be usefully deployed. Some procrastinators see the length of the road ahead and yet not
the distance already traveled. Like Locke's servant, "who would not attend his Business
by Candle-light, to plead that he had not broad Sun-shine" (I. I. 5, Nidditch 46) they are
too aware of their own limits. Others look at the mountain before them and judge the first
step towards climbing it to be too puny an effort. As with Locke's example of the man
"who would not use his Legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no Wings to fly" (I.
I. 5, Nidditch 46) they overestimate the size of their tasks. Still others are beset by both
problems at once. Like the sailor in the children's story, who had so much to do that he
did nothing, they sit frantically by as their ships sink.

In such cases it is sound counsel to do not what might be ideal, but what is
currently possible. Not only is this how we keep our houses habitable and our children
well enough entertained; it is how we finished the dull prerequisites to the courses we really wanted to take. Stories abound of people who have found themselves doing excellent work on a dreaded project, completing it on time and with pleasure, after according themselves the freedom to do only an acceptable job.

Sloth and Self

We tend to confuse procrastination with laziness, and laziness with sloth, which we believe to be a sin. A deeper investigation of sloth, however, reveals that it is not mere laziness, and the history of the term may help unravel procrastination's knot. Sloth has received a great deal of attention in religious literature. Much of the 'common sense' advice in our culture is religiously motivated or derived—albeit surreptitiously so. In this context, it may be helpful to examine some theological discussions of the matter.

Following St. Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic Encyclopedia indicates that sloth is not so much a disinclination to work as it is "sadness in the face of some spiritual good which one has to achieve" (14: 57). In the Summa Theologica, Aquinas affirms earlier scholars' definitions of sloth as "an oppressive sorrow, which . . . so weighs upon man's mind, that he wants to do nothing" and a "sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good" (II-II, q. 35, a. 1, 2: 1345). The capital virtue corresponding to this sin has been identified as zeal or diligence, but Aquinas also contrasts sloth to the theological virtue of charity, or love. The love of the God and of man, of course, includes love of oneself. This suggests already that a more charitable attitude towards oneself may lead to a reduction in sloth. Arising from a faulty love of self, perfectionism is not a goad but an
impediment to progress. If we allow our energies to stagnate in a struggle for self-acceptance, we have none left for the task at hand.

Pope Gregory the Great, who introduced the Seven Deadly Sins, derived them in part from the heretical Cappadocian monk, Evagrius of Pontus. This scholar identified eight harmful passions, all resulting from an obsession with self. Sloth or, in Greek, *akedia*, was the "midday demon" which distracted ascetic monks from prayer. In *De octo spiritius malitiae*, Evagrius finds the man assailed by this spirit looking out the window, dreaming of visitors, and jumping when the door squeaks.

[He] often yawns when he reads, and he gets tired easily. He rubs his eyes, he stretches out his arms, and he looks up from his book. He looks at the wall, then comes back to read a bit more. Flipping through the pages, he kills time looking at the end of the book. He counts the pages, calculates the number of fascicles, complains about the print and the design.

In the end, he falls asleep over his book; yet his sleep is troubled, as the demon is still upon him (Nault 238).

Both Evagrius and Gregory associated sloth with sadness. As such, it has been considered the most oppressive of sins. A modern scholar describes *akedia* as "[t]he refusal of the greatness of man and the vocation to which he is called" (Nault 255).

*Akedia* leads to a paralysis of action (245) and a "fragmentation of knowledge" (254). The crossroads it represents becomes a snare unless we are able to accept ourselves and remain open to otherness, whether the other is a divine object of contemplation or a concrete task in the world. Overcoming sloth is not simply a matter of getting back to work.
Procrastination and Standards

It is clearly disabling to judge oneself too harshly. This is why procrastinators are so often advised to lower their standards, and reminded that an acceptable project which is finished is worth more than a brilliant one, which remains in progress for too long before going stale. This advice is useful when it restores the hope of finishing one's task. It is less useful, however, when it removes the expectation of pleasure in a job well done. Could it be that more perfectionism, or a greater commitment to well-formed standards, would go further to solve the problem?

My experience with procrastination and procrastinators indicates that a lack of clarity with reference to goals and standards is a more fundamental problem than perfectionism. I find it difficult to begin a project I care about with the expectation that I will do less than my best work. I become confused about the direction of my projects when I put someone else's standards ahead of my own. "The Candle that is set up in us shines bright enough for all our Purposes" (I.i [introduction] 5, 46) says Locke; my understanding may be limited, but I have remained an academic precisely because I wish to use my intellect and training as best I can. When I have attempted to renounce this wish, I have found myself listless and sad, unable to decide what to do or where to begin. I have then resembled the busy sailor, doing nothing because, having rejected what I know to be my best option, I have been faced with too broad a spectrum of second and third choices. In these instances lowering standards has not resulted in freedom, but in disappointment.
Standards and Judgments

Academics are trained to judge, and to do so in concert with the rules and standards of their disciplines, their institutions, and their professional organizations. We make many of our decisions as members of committees and panels composed of other judges, arranged in a hierarchical manner. This system is understood to increase scientific objectivity and enhance fairness. Its design, however, resembles most closely that of the court system, created to bring discrete systems of rules into concordance. Just as the law is not necessarily congruent with justice, the compromises academics may make among discrete systems of rules and standards do not always enhance objectivity, or fairness, or quality. Two heads are better than one in some instances, but in others, too many cooks spoil the broth. Compromises may be reached which satisfy the panel of judges, but which provide no clarity, or which, paradoxically, result in discouragingly low standards.

At one university I know, only books published with university presses in the United States count toward tenure and promotion. This is an attempt to ensure that all publications considered, are truly legitimate. It creates a quandary, however, for scholars in fields where the most competitive, most highly visible publication venues are abroad. Whose standards should they satisfy—those of their institution, or of their discipline? This example, of course, is a very simple one, and there is remedy for the situation it describes. A murkier one is the department which does not distinguish, for purposes of evaluation, among publications which have been cited and those which have not, or among
publications in first-tier, second-tier, and other refereed journals. It does this in an effort at fairness. The result, however, is a tendency to promote less solid scholars over more solid ones.

Faculty members who attempt to navigate such situations find themselves caught between several different sets of rules. In their efforts to meet standards, they subvert their own best interests as well as those of their disciplines. As with the characters in García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, their adherence to incoherent convention forces them to stagnation. Compromise can be valuable, adjustment is often necessary, and there may be more than one set of viable standards. Too great a degree of tolerance, however, brings with it too high a degree of doubt. It is worth remembering that Descartes decided to doubt everything not so as to argue that the world is unknowable, but so as to establish certainty. His was purposeful, not destructive doubt. In the second *Meditation*, he says:

> . . . I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty. (AT 24, Cottingham II: 16)

It may be submission to, or acceptance of, unclear thinking and poorly formed standards which causes procrastination.
Akedia and Achievement

Most of us already know how to overcome procrastination. I do not want to grade papers or clean the house, but I do want the work done. I put on my headphones, crank up the sound on an old rock album with a straight-ahead rhythm, and dig in. I do not want to sit down and work on my article after an atrocious day on campus, so I go out for a walk first. When I sit down in front of the computer, I remind myself why I was interested in my topic in the first place. I take a deep breath, and start a new sentence. And then I'm in. The next thing I know, I have written a page or two which I like, and that atrocious day on campus has faded from view.

Procrastination, however, does not beset the projects we are clear about. I have easily finished projects I found problematic, knowing where the problems lay and remembering that perfect, in the Aristotelian tradition, means complete. But I also know what it is to feel paralyzed by ambivalence or dread, or to write page after page, yet fail to make my argument progress. Like Bartleby, the recalcitrant scrivener in Melville's tale, I have had tasks I preferred not to do. In each of these cases, the problem has not been too much delay, but not enough; nor have I set my standards too high, but too low.

I have accepted deadlines I knew to be unrealistic, mistaking good judgment for fear and laziness. I have committed too early to a project design and then not followed when the material led me in other directions, mistaking serious research and reflection for unnecessary delay. I have attempted manuscript revisions with which I did not agree, mistaking sound training for arrogance. I have taken on projects I found interesting, but would not have chosen on my own initiative—again discounting my own professional
judgment. It is then that I have "languished away in the gloom of anxiety" (Johnson 1969, IV. 346 [no. 134]) that we associate with procrastination.

In each of these instances, I told myself that I could write what I really wanted to next time. I suppressed my expertise and judgment in favor of an institutional or professional need or proclivity. I placed these needs ahead of the needs of my discipline and my own inclinations. I found myself coming to dead ends, and running up against block. Similarly, I have compromised on standards for teaching, and then found myself at sea when it came to evaluating the students. I have allowed vague job descriptions to go forward, and then not known how to rank the candidates. In none of these instances did I defer work. I did defer using the judgment I needed to accomplish my task. The deferral of judgment left me rudderless in seas which should have been familiar.

In some of these cases, the strategy of compromising standards so as to complete a task gained ground over actual academic goals—goals which the strategy had been intended to support, but which it in fact subverted. In the more problematic cases, however, the guidelines being followed were actually antithetical to the primary purpose. Trained judgment became replaced with advice aimed less toward producing solid scholarship and teaching, than toward creating the appearance of these.

In such instances, the intent to be a 'good' academic involves the renunciation of the main goal: the advancement of knowledge, the best tool: discernment or sound judgment, and the strongest ally: well-formed standards. Akedia, we remember, is separation from the object of contemplation. It is hardly surprising that the renunciation of both goal and path should produce akedia.
Advice which seems to speak the issues at hand, but is in fact based on faulty assumptions, can only compound a problem. When neither perfectionism nor a longing for the dolce far niente is the issue, the common advice about lowering standards and moving on ahead is counterproductive. When methodology or the project itself is the problem, procrastination is a misdiagnosis, and techniques for overcoming procrastination are a distraction. The advice we give freshman writers, to choose topics which interest them (but explain their interest) and argue what they will (but argue well), may be more appropriate. Procrastination, understood as a lengthening of the time one allows to think about what one is doing, may be indicated. Perfectionism, understood not as imperfect self-love but as respect of one's judgment and of the work itself, may serve as Ariadne's thread. For indeed, as Johnson said, "Not only in the slumber of sloth, but in the dissipation of ill directed industry, is the shortness of life generally forgotten." (1969, IV, 10 [no. 106]).

Though he confounded his employer by refusing dull tasks, Melville's scrivener did not confound the dark mills of Wall Street. He regained no positive power over his work, or his life. Even in an academic environment which increasingly resembles Wall Street, we may still resist dissipating our energies more actively than Bartleby did—by sharpening our judgment and augmenting the element of play. Aquinas, as Thomas Pynchon points out, admitted that the uneasiness of the mind associated with akedia may pertain to the imaginative power, and is then called curiosity. "It is of course precisely in . . . episodes of mental traveling that writers are known to do good work," says Pynchon. 'Idle dreaming,' he insists, is essential to the writer's task (3).
Together, play and judgment may take us further than the more mundane advice about getting the job done. This is the wisdom of the ages, not a new insight; it leaps from the pages of almost every well known literary or philosophical text. In a landscape devoid of ideals, how can we produce strong work? Or, as the Melodians put it in their retelling of the Babylonian captivity, "How can we sing King Alfa song / In a strange land?" Coupled with freedom from excessive compromise, the freedom to dream can carry us through the crossroads of akiedia, which as we can now see, is the more precise term for procrastination. When next the "midday demon" assails us, we might close our ears to the good sense of Bartleby's employer, and turn to classic authors.
Works Cited


