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Scheming: The Consulting Criminal of the Vices

A thesis presented for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Theology at Whitworth University

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Summary of Salient Points

Scheming is a multifaceted perversion of character that is often found in people who have enough knowledge to understand what is good but have not inculcated the habits that would allow them to pursue a virtuous end properly and consistently. These individuals are either morally incontinent, desiring but regularly failing to do what is good, or morally continent, mostly succeeding in doing the good but occasionally succumbing to temptation. Capital vices operate on both continent and incontinent individuals by causing their passions to overwhelm them but when met with a strong resistance can call on scheming to instead attack the framing belief of an action, making an initially perceived wrong appear morally permissible. Scheming is defined by its five essential aspects: collusion with a capital vice, self-deception of the agent, operation from a place of vulnerability, movement of action from passion to malice, and a need for more difficult challenges.

Pride, the root of all vices, operates amidst all five aspects of scheming which results in the agent's perceived telos being perverted from good to evil. As the individual schemes, they proceed toward this new end, self-deceptively believing that they will find happiness and fulfillment there. This inevitably sets the schemer on a path of self-destruction as they move further away from the perfection of their rational nature and are less conformed to the person of Jesus Christ. Scheming directly harms others and the agent themselves, ultimately constituting an abuse of the divine gift of creativity, as the schemer perverts their talent for an evil end. Happily, hope for the schemer is found in God's grace leading to repentance and restoration, the gift that a merciful God bestows upon those who have erred, calling them back into a life of obedience and flourishing.

STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I have composed this thesis and carried out the research which it represents. This thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

Drew Evan Craddock

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Scheming: The Consulting Criminal of the Vices

The British Broadcasting Channel's program *Sherlock* follows the titular detective who serves as an investigative consultant, solving cases that are too difficult for Scotland Yard. He meets his match in the form of James Moriarty who functions as an equally skilled antagonist, assisting criminals with difficult tasks that require an extra level of finesse and subtlety. The villainous Moriarty claims to be a specialist, just like Sherlock Holmes, to which the protagonist responds by dubbing him "A Consulting Criminal."¹ This paper will, through the Thomistic virtue tradition, examine the consulting criminal that assists capital vices: scheming.

While the interplay between Moriarty and Holmes is fictitious, it is experientially clear that the average person will encounter challenges in their life that cannot be overcome by sheer determination alone. In every occupation, one can find themselves in a moral dilemma that requires not only willpower but a measure of moral aptitude. The accountant may want to hide a problem in the budget from his supervisor; the clerk could have the desire to take and eat an item from his coworker's lunch without her noticing; the businesswoman might want to negotiate a deal that will prioritize economic concerns at the expense of environmental ones. Certain skills are necessary to navigate any of these proposed conundrums and emerge unscathed, having achieved the desired goal. It seems there are three ways to respond to these moral dilemmas.

¹ Steven Moffat, writer. *Sherlock*. Season 1, Episode 3, "The Great Game." Co-written by Mark Gatiss. Aired August 8, 2010, in broadcast syndication. BBC, 2010, Netflix.

First, a person of sound character earnestly seeking to follow Christ would make use of the virtue that Aristotle and Aquinas call prudence, or practical wisdom, to determine the proper end of a task and complete it accordingly.² Such an individual would be able to ascertain which end best leads to loving God and their neighbor and then choose a corresponding course of action that leads to that end. In the previously mentioned cases, that action would be to refuse the offending sinful desires. Second, an individual who is committed to pursuing their desire, knowing its unhelpful origin, may use the ability that Aristotle dubs cleverness, where one does not care whether the pursued end is harmful but simply desires a means that will satisfy that end.³ An individual operating out of this faulty imitation of prudence would first determine the least difficult way to satisfy the desire and then would take the corresponding course of action, be it acceptable or improper. Third, and most concerning, an individual might self-deceptively believe that their selfish desire is morally preferable and attempt to satisfy it in a secretive manner so as not to alert others who may not share their belief. This person ends up scheming to achieve their goal.

Scheming is a multifaceted perversion of character that is often found in the person who has enough knowledge to understand what is good but has not inculcated the habits that would allow them to properly pursue a virtuous end. The schemer is deluded into thinking that their self-serving ends are not only permissible but morally preferable. This is effective because many people reside in a state of character known as moral incontinence, or weakness of will. Incontinence is when one knows what is good and has

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. F. H. Peters (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 123-124.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. F. H. Peters (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 130-131.

the base desire to act in such a manner but ends up being overpowered by their passions or an external force to instead do what is wrong.⁴ This makes the incontinent individual particularly prone to resorting to scheming.

Scheming does not operate merely by strengthening the force of one's incontinent desire but by attacking the framing belief of an action. Rather than making a coworker's lunch look so appetizing and satisfying that one succumbs to their passions and can't help but eat it, scheming enables the affected person to rationalize their way into thinking that they are genuinely assisting their coworker by limiting the other's intake of calories, or perhaps that part of the lunch was originally meant for themselves so that they are not stealing. The new belief then, is that one is the hero of the story taking actions that are not wrong but in line with a proper end. This mental twisting of the action's category further deforms an already murky character to the point where actions that an individual would not be otherwise vicious enough to take become seemingly morally necessary. In this manner, the person of incontinent character can be slowly warped by their scheming until they are pulled into a settled state of viciousness.

In this work, I aim to identify and explain the five essential aspects of scheming by providing examples from scripture, focusing especially on the story of David and Bathsheba, and popular culture to demonstrate how this misuse of power and ability deforms an individual's character. Section one provides an overview of how scheming inherently operates in assistance to what will be defined as the capital vices, aiding their wicked ends. Section two depicts the process by which self-deception becomes

⁴ Carr, David. "Varieties of Incontinence: Towards an Aristotelian Approach to Moral Weakness in Moral Education." *Philosophy of Education Archive* (1996): 133.

inextricably intertwined with scheming, causing the agent to view their actions as acceptable. Section three shows how scheming must be kept hidden from others, as it stems from a place of vulnerability or weakness on the part of the agent. Section four examines how engaging in scheming moves sins from weakness of will to intentional wrongdoing, engaging and twisting the rational appetite for its gain. Section five demonstrates how the schemer is never satisfied, lusting after increasingly difficult challenges. The work concludes by detailing why scheming's end is ultimately one of self-destruction and pain, as misusing one's faculties harms not only others but the schemer themselves.

Scheming and the Capital Vices

Scheming does not operate apart from the active presence of a capital vice's corrupting influence. Vices are patterns of behavior that stem from improperly directed inordinate desires and result in the corruption of one's functionality. A vice is capital if, once it claims a hold on someone's life, it spawns a host of other daughter vices that distort and adulterate an individual. Eight vices have been identified and categorized as capital: gluttony, lust, avarice, envy, wrath, sloth, vainglory, and pride.⁵ These are colloquially referred to as the seven deadly sins, with vainglory being omitted from the modern lists. These eight capital vices often set a new ultimate goal in someone's mind, causing them to engage in further reprehensible behavior to meet that goal. Philosopher Keith Wyma shows how this new goal spawns a host of problems, writing "Once we start living for the end or goal of the vice – in a very real sense it can become our god – then

⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos Chapters on Prayer: Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by John Eudes Bamberger*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1970).

other, related (morally problematic) actions will emerge as necessary to that goal, and we'll pick up other vices in those regards. Each capital vice breeds what Aquinas calls 'daughter' vices. ”⁶ It is not difficult to see how a vice like avarice, the inordinate desire for possessions and money, can take over someone's life to the point where they inculcate the associated daughter vices of restlessness, violence, proclivity to deception, and treacherousness. Once one sets the need for money as their primary end, a new set of means becomes acceptable to achieve that end. In this manner, Aquinas deems avarice a capital vice.

Additionally, each capital vice recognizes the human passion directed toward a good end and perverts its course into either an excess or defect of character.⁷ Wrath affects the person who is righteously angry at a wrong, causing them to use excessive force or seek vengeance when it is inappropriate. Sloth takes one's natural desire for Sabbath rest and convinces them to stay a little longer, not to rush to do the work that God has prepared for them. Pride takes the proper love that one should have for one's self, as a priceless being of dignity made in God's image, and convinces them that this love should take precedence over the needs of others. None of these passions is wrong *prima facie*, but a person beset by the capital vices can quickly turn what was meant for good into a deformed evil.

The capital vices can be broken up into three categories, based on the portions of the human mind they affect. To see how the capital vices work, we need to understand

⁶ Keith D Wyma, "Whitworth University," *The Seven Deadly Sins* | Whitworth Today Magazine | Whitworth University, 2021, <https://www.whitworth.edu/cms/our-stories/magazine/the-seven-deadly-sins/>.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 322.

how Aquinas defines the three functional categories of our psychological motivations- the concupiscible appetite, irascible appetite, and rational appetite- and how each of the capital vices fits into the three divisions. Lust, avarice, and gluttony skew the concupiscible appetite, which in its proper function moves creatures away from evil by directing them instead to pleasurable goods. Wrath and vainglory affect the irascible appetite which is designed to give a person the strength to overcome obstacles, moving them towards difficult goods. The concupiscible and irascible appetites together contain the passions, qualities like desire, joy, fear, and anger. Pride, envy, and sloth all pervert the rational appetite, also called the will, which is a human's faculty of volition to move toward a rational conception of a good.

The vices of each appetite corrupt character and create habits that become incredibly difficult to break. Philosopher Rebecca DeYoung likens the practice of moral habit formation to a group creating a sledding track in the fresh snow saying "The first sled goes down smoothly, carving out a rut. Other sleds follow, over and over, down the same path, smoothing and packing down the snow. After many trips a well-worn groove develops, a path out of which it is hard to steer...habits incline us swiftly, smoothly, and reliably toward certain types of action."⁸ Continually practicing a vice such as envy eventually becomes so ingrained in a person that being envious is a constant state of being. By contrast, continually practicing hospitality, generosity, patience, or charity creates a kind of opposite groove to that of the vice.

⁸ Rebecca K DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 7.

However, most people have not practiced either virtue or vice enough to where they neatly fit into one category. Very few people can be classified as truly vicious or virtuous. Instead, as Philosopher Christian Miller puts it, “Most people have characters which are neither virtuous nor vicious. They instead fall in a middle space between virtue and vice... You should assume, in other words, that a person’s character is very much a mixed bag.”⁹ Miller arrives at this conclusion by examining a host of sociological studies which reflect that humans may behave as saints or scoundrels, depending on factors like the amount of sleep they had, whether they are running late, the number of other people around, and several other seemingly disconnected causes. From this, it can be concluded that very few people are truly virtuous, helping others and caring even when it is difficult, but nor are they fully vicious, consistently putting their needs and goals ahead of everyone else’s.

We find most people then, in an incompletely developed state of character, holding both virtuous and vicious tendencies. Unfortunately, even incompletely developed vices still exert a corruptive pull on people’s motivations, actions, and desires. This is where scheming plays such a significant role, aiding a still-developing capital vice’s ability to overcome internal resistance to vicious behaviors in achieving their self-oriented ends. Scheming can aid a vice in any of the three appetites described above, as it provides the tools to convince reason that the appetite in question is justified. In practice though, it is actually providing the vice a means to exert its influence.

⁹ Christian B. Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 156-157.

The way in which scheming affects the concupiscible appetite can be most easily seen through how it aids the work of lust, the capital vice that inordinately magnifies the desire for sexual pleasure. For example, lust might direct a man away from the arduous task of finding sexual love in the proper context to instead seek self-centered gratification of sexual pleasure through a one-night stand, forbidden romance, or a trip to the local strip club. While lust promotes both other people's spouses as sexual partners and pursuing sex through extramarital affairs, this can be difficult to achieve without the ability to deceive and plan well. Furthermore, the lustful man, if he is married, will likely have strong qualms about cheating on his spouse and being an unfaithful husband. Here, scheming's self-deceptive aspect is an active ally convincing him that his needs deserve to be met and that his spouse isn't able to do so. Scheming's skillful aspect can also help him as he coordinates his work and home schedules so that his spouse simply believes that he is out with friends, or his boss thinks him to be on a house call. Additionally, because scheming allows one to mitigate vulnerability, if someone should become suspicious, scheming can help the lustful man weasel his way out of danger with excuses or lines of reasoning that present the facts of the story in a way that saves him from further questioning. The other capital vices of the concupiscible appetite, gluttony and avarice, are symbiotically aided in comparable ways by scheming.

Similarly, the capital vices of the irascible appetite, vainglory and wrath, can employ the expertise of scheming. These vices may be particularly suited to scheming due to the irascible appetite's function to seek what is arduous and overcome a challenge to obtain what is desired. Scheming flourishes when the task ahead is difficult, as that provides the chance to fully utilize its skill set and show off its full array of tactics. For

example, vainglory- seeking approval and fame in inappropriate ways or on inappropriate grounds- boasts a plethora of cases where scheming would be a valuable ally. Imagine a vainglorious woman who wants the acclaim and love of the public but doesn't care much about how to get it, and so puts on a false front of concern for the homeless. She would have to take steps to ensure her true motivations were not revealed. This would require constant acting, putting on a charade in front of everyone she comes into contact with. Even one slip could cause her reputation to come crashing down. However, she is not vainglorious enough to want to directly deceive her closest friends and family, who she wants to be authentic with. Here, scheming's self-deceptive aspect can enter as an ally to vainglory, convincing her that one white lie here or there won't harm these precious relationships. Scheming's skillful aspect also provides ways to grow her reputation in reach and appeal while covering the tracks of any potential slip-up with honeyed words and half-truths. The vainglorious woman would be assisted by scheming as it would allow her to achieve her ends without others realizing what her true intentions are.

Scheming's effect on the passional vices is also realized in the vices of the rational appetite, namely sloth, pride, and envy. These three vices represent a choice that is more volitional in a way that one simply being overwhelmed by their passions does not. As such, scheming's foothold here is even stronger than in the passional vices because its ability to rationalize, justify, and twist logic pairs well with the more voluntary aspects of the will. This is seen particularly clearly in the vice of envy, which causes one sorrow over another's God-given ability or success. The envious man is frustrated when he sees another with an ability that he thinks should belong to him instead. Consider a situation where he sees that his neighbor can paint beautiful pictures

without training and is loved by the community for this ability. The envier may be a decently splendid painter himself, but he is infuriated by his neighbor's superior natural talent. Here, he could act rightly by being happy for the other person and their gift, but his envy brings him to want the other person to lose that talent because he feels that the neighbor is unworthy of such a gift. This creates two problems in the envier's mind. First, how to satisfy the envy? Take away the materials of his neighbor's work? Ensure that he cannot procure new supplies? These may provide temporary relief, but the object of envy, the neighbor's acclaim and talent, will not be destroyed. Here, the process of scheming provides a means to satisfy his envy by discrediting the neighbor. If he innocuously spreads malicious rumors implying that his neighbor's painting style is derivative or perhaps even blatantly stealing from other artists, the neighbor might lose the affection of their peers. Scheming's skillful aspect helps him satiate the envy by manipulating social situations to cause his neighbor to fall from grace.

The second problem that emerges for the envier lies in how he can address the inherent ugliness of envy. This is a complex and difficult task because envy is by its nature an admission that the man is losing when comparing abilities with his neighbor. Scheming's self-deceptive aspect and origin in a place of vulnerability address this struggle. The envier first needs to convince himself that his envy is justified but to do so necessitates self-deception. He must believe that what he is doing is right even if it initially seems extreme. Scheming is what allows him to make this moral framework shift. Then, he must ensure that he is not caught in his wrongdoing because others might not see things his way. Even if he has convinced himself that what he is doing is acceptable, he knows that there are others who would disagree and so he must operate

sneakily. Scheming is uniquely suited for assisting envy because the envious person would like to think themselves in the right and emerge unscathed after enacting their plot while also eliminating their opponent's perceived better standing. Pride and sloth, the other capital vices of the will, can likewise be helped by scheming in a host of similar scenarios.

A key scriptural example of how scheming serves as an aid to the capital vices is found in the story of David and Bathsheba. David, the king of Israel, is looking over his kingdom when he observes Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop. Upon seeing her, he becomes enflamed with desire which sets off a chain of events that result in him lustfully having sex with Bathsheba, vaingloriously attempting to cover the transgression up, and then enviously sending her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. Three capital vices are at work in the king's actions here and all of them are aided by David's scheming. The king first schemes in getting to a position where he can have sex with Bathsheba which would require covert movement to ensure that he is not caught. Scheming is present again in David's attempt to cover up the affair by bringing Uriah home from the battle he is fighting to have him sleep with Bathsheba. This eliminates any concerns that the resulting child will be known as David's.

When this fails, David schemes a third time, using his authority as king to manipulate the war to where Uriah is killed at the hands of the enemy. In this manner, he covers his tracks and puts Uriah's blood on someone else's hands. Scheming actively assists David as he indulges in his vices, both ensuring that he achieves his goals and protecting him from any negative backlash from the people. The king that was previously concerned with doing what was just is twisted by his scheming to the point where he

succumbs to the influence of three capital vices. Lust, vainglory, and envy are assisted by scheming as it eliminates the obstacles in the way of these vices and provides the means by which their disordered ends can be achieved. Each of the capital vices is equipped to call on scheming as a consultant, utilizing its underhanded repertoire.

Scheming and Self-Deception

While scheming is always found in the presence of at least one capital vice, it is also necessarily self-deceptive in nature. Self-deception stems from the root of all vices, pride, which Aquinas defines as one's excessive love or valuation of themselves.¹⁰ Such disordered love can motivate a person to blind themselves to painful truths that would contradict their self-importance. Philosopher Amélie Rorty describes this willful blindness through a story wherein a cancer specialist refuses to acknowledge overwhelming evidence that she is in the late stages of an incurable form of cancer- that she herself is being vanquished by the disease. Rorty does not argue that the doctor needs to profess that her belief is false in order to be self-deceived, instead saying "Without focusing on what she is doing, she can mislead herself, blind herself, distort or misrepresent her actions, attitudes, perceptions, moods, or tastes."¹¹ These methods of deflection constitute a self-conflict that is moved into self-deceit through a second-order hiding of the fact that she recognizes the inconsistency of her beliefs. Analyzing Rorty's analogy, philosopher Keith Wyma says that the agent must recognize that her beliefs are inconsistent and develop a deceptive strategy that will allow her to fall back on what she

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 328-330.

¹¹ Amélie O Rorty, *Mind in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind* (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1988), 212.

prefers to believe.¹² Scheming enables the agent to first avoid the logical end of their belief via deflection and then formulate an ad hoc plan to negate their belief and deceive themselves.

It makes intuitive sense that scheming would have a self-deceptive layer because very few people would ever want to willfully engage in vicious behaviors. Social researchers Ryan McKay and Ben Tappin found in their work on people's self-evaluation that the vast majority of people would describe themselves as just, virtuous, and moral.¹³ People want to be the heroes of their story, not the villains. Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning work *The Denial of Death*, describes the ways in which every person has a fundamental need to be a hero saying "The problem of heroics is the central one of human life, that it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on organismic narcissism and on the child's need for self-esteem as *the* condition for his life. Society itself is a codified hero system."¹⁴ Becker goes on to describe this need to be heroic as a lie that people tell themselves to make meaning and find a way to be enough. To the person who needs to be a hero, which Becker argues is all of humanity, the idea of consciously engaging in villainous behavior is repulsive. And yet, the vices still persist, and human character is compromised to the point where Christian Miller can convincingly argue that no one is truly virtuous as seen in section

¹² Keith D Wyma, *Crucible of Reason: Intentional Action, Practical Rationality, and Weakness of Will* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 2004), 38.

¹³ Ben M. Tappin and Ryan T. McKay, "The Illusion of Moral Superiority," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 8, no. 6 (2016): 623.

¹⁴ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 2020), 7.

one.¹⁵ How do these realities coexist? The answer is clear: people are deceived, specifically, they have deceived themselves.

Consider an illustration of a truly heroic individual: The Batman. Even a hero who cares deeply about doing what is right can justify a selfish choice in self-deception. Such is the case in the critically acclaimed film *The Dark Knight*, where the Batman must decide whether to save the woman he loves and has been friends with since childhood or the morally upright district attorney who could help end widespread corruption and bring justice to the city through legitimate means.¹⁶ Instead of taking the selfless action and saving the district attorney, Batman seemingly abandons his principles and chooses to save the woman he loves. But why? Isn't it Batman's nature to be overridingly obsessed with justice to the point where acting selfishly would be impossible? A potentially plausible response is that Batman thinks that saving the love of his life will enable him to carry on in his own heroic journey so rescuing her is more valuable than the work the district attorney would be able to do. Scheming's role in this decision process is to help Batman convince himself that the right course of action is the one he selfishly wants to take, pridefully valuing himself over what would be best for others. By shifting his perception of the situation, scheming turns the moral water murky, making an end that Batman might initially reject as wrong seem promisingly preferable. Even someone who is created to be the paragon of justice still falls prey to scheming through self-deception.

The self-deceptive method that scheming utilizes is clearly seen in the aforementioned example of David and Bathsheba. Several capital vices are evidently at

¹⁵ Christian B. Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 156-157.

¹⁶ *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

work in David's life, not least of which is the root of pride. Of interest here though is the thought process and motivations that are present in the mind of the king. It is tempting to initially assume that David knows how vicious he has been, sleeping with a married woman and sending her husband to die. From an outside perspective, it is crystal clear that David's actions are beyond any shadow of acceptability. However, the opposite rings true in David's mind. After Uriah's death, he brings Bathsheba, now a grieving widow, into his home as a new wife and she gives birth to a son that he has fathered. There is no remorse or repentance from the king but rather a matter-of-fact way of going about his regular affairs. If not for the intervening presence of God, who is displeased with David's actions, he might have never realized the extent of his wrongdoing.

In response to David's dark deeds, God does not directly intervene by divinely smiting the sinful king. Instead, he quietly sends the prophet Nathan, who is appointed to speak as God's emissary. David's self-deception is not undone by sheer force of will or determination but through an equally subtle and nuanced approach. Nathan tells David a story, which the king assumes is of an event that has happened in his kingdom, of a rich man with a large host of sheep and a poor man who had just one little lamb that he cherished immensely. When the rich man had a guest visit him, he decided to slaughter and serve as a meal the little lamb that belonged to the poor man instead of using an animal from his own herd. David immediately recognizes this as a travesty of justice and demands that the rich man in the story receive the death penalty. He also commands that the rich man make repayment four times what the poor man is owed because of the lack of pity displayed. This emphatic response spurs Nathan into action as he immediately rebukes the king, revealing the story as a metaphor by proclaiming "You are the (rich)

man!”¹⁷ Nathan then reveals what God has to say to David, showing the king his multitude of moral failures. He details the tragedies that will befall David and his family because of his actions against Uriah. Once the tirade has ended, David is left with the realization that he has deceived himself and committed a terrible series of wrongs. David’s inability to initially see his wrongdoing due to self-deception is undone by God’s subtle metaphor that allows him to move beyond the schemes that had clouded his vision.

The clearest example of the dangers of the self-deceptive aspect of scheming is found in examining the motivations of the religious leaders of the Jewish people in the gospel narratives. As Jesus rises in popularity and his words touch the hearts of the common people, the Jewish leaders find themselves waning in social authority. Furthermore, they have heard that the upstart Jesus has been claiming divine inspiration for his mission, going so far as to dub himself the Messiah and call God his father. These actions, if they are done by someone who has the authority and right to do so, should cause the Jewish leaders to humbly submit and follow him. However, if they are done by a radical heretic who does not possess the proper authority, then the false Messiah claiming to be God must be eliminated. Here, scheming enters into the leaders’ overinflated sense of self and convinces them that Jesus is certainly the latter and thus needs to be publicly rebuked.

It is a question of duty and righteousness for the religious leaders to repudiate anyone pretending to be God. They see themselves as the heroes of the story and, as previously discussed, heroes feel the need to make hard choices for the betterment of the

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 12:7 (NIV).

people. Either they can let this dangerous false teacher run free or they can bring him to the Roman authorities to be publicly executed for his blasphemy. In their self-deception, they believe that killing Jesus is the proper thing to do. The text confirms this, saying “Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.”¹⁸ Their pride and wrath at losing status are aided by their scheming and are moved to the point where it becomes morally and religiously imperative for the leaders to seek Jesus’ death. The self-deceptive aspect of scheming convinces them that they are simply obeying what they believe God has commanded them to do, while the vice-serving aspect furthers their own interests and causes them to request permission to kill God’s beloved son. The dangerous consequences of the self-deceptive aspect of scheming are seen at their peak here, as the religious leaders who had earnestly sought the Messiah for hundreds of years become so willfully blinded as to demand the execution of the one they had fervently prayed for.

Scheming and Vulnerability

Scheming’s self-deception is deeply connected to its need to hide from others. This is due to scheming stemming from a position of weakness or vulnerability. If one can operate freely and unhindered because of their absolute authority or strength, then a secretive plot is unnecessary. In this case, the vices are given the freedom to run rampant, but a scheme is not needed. For scheming to operate, an individual must be in a place where at least one party cannot know what the schemer has done. Even in the case of

¹⁸ Matthew 26:3-4 (NIV).

David, who is the rightful king of Israel and wields a considerable amount of authority, there is an inability to move openly, and he thusly resorts to scheming. David knows that if his actions are revealed that the people will turn against him because even he is beholden to a higher law than himself, God's commands in the Torah. If a prophet gets wind of what David has done, then they have God-given authority to hold him responsible for his actions. David understands that what he has done would result in the people turning against him and so must work in secret to ensure that he is not discovered. Scheming necessitates a certain hiding from others and an unwillingness to move in the open.

The religious leaders in the gospels also demonstrate how scheming needs to hide itself as their plot to kill Jesus unfolds. Two of the four gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, record the unwillingness of the religious leaders to move directly and openly against Jesus due to fear of the people's backlash.^{19,20} If the public was aware of the plots of the religious leaders, then they would be stopped, and their malicious desires revealed. Even though the priests and scribes have authority, they are limited in their ability to move against Jesus because the common people believe that he is the Messiah and so their scheming must be done in secret.

This modus operandi stands in direct contrast to the ways in which it may initially seem that the vices present themselves. Wrath, for example, is often seen plainly in the aggressive neighbor who becomes enraged whenever a child accidentally kicks a ball onto his property or in the supervisor who lividly berates her employees for being late to

¹⁹ Matthew 26:4 (NIV).

²⁰ Luke 22:2 (NIV).

a meeting. However, another side of wrath is visible in the buildup and eventual outpouring of resentment over a lengthier time period. Most people do not have such a short fuse that one minor irritant causes them to explode in fury. In *The Inferno*, Dante distinguishes between the open violence of wrath, depicted as people fighting tooth and nail in a muddy swamp and the bubbling hiddenness of resentment, portrayed as those lying in the bottom of the swamp sighing in anguish.²¹ For this second group, a constant process of needling and holding grudges has caused them to think vengefully and begin to desire the downfall of others in their private thoughts. This is the kind of mental operating system that Jesus rejects in his Sermon on the Mount, as he makes an argument showing how anyone who hates their brother or sister has already committed murder.²² It is easy to see how harboring resentment can lead to tangible and visible outpourings of wrath, especially if one begins to secretly plan the violent downfall of another. Here, wrath can call on scheming to help it generate a course of action that will undermine or even destroy the other person.

Such is the case in Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Cask of Amontillado" which depicts in disturbing detail how slights and insults can fester and rot until violence becomes the inevitable end, aided all the while by a devious scheme. The tale begins with the narrator, Montressor, detailing how he has been repeatedly insulted by a man named Fortunato, stating that because of these transgressions, "I must not only punish but punish with impunity."²³ The telltale signs of a wrathful heart are evident here as Montressor's

²¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. Anthony M. Esolen (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 71-73.

²² Matthew 5:21-22 (NIV).

²³ Edgar A Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado," Edgar Allan Poe Museum, July 3, 2021, <https://poemuseum.org/the-cask-of-amontillado/>.

desire for wrongs to be righted goes far beyond what could be required as proper retribution. However, the Montessor family is well respected or at least once was, and the narrator has no desire to tarnish the family name further or out himself as a murderer. The vulnerable aspect of scheming is clearly at work here, as the narrator takes great pains to not be discovered in his wrongdoing. He also ensures that the household staff will not be around to serve as witnesses should questions arise after the unfortunate Fortunato's death. When Montessor finally takes revenge, he does so by tempting Fortunato with a cask of Amontillado wine. Fortunato follows him deep into the catacombs of the Montessor family estate only to find himself suddenly shackled to the wall where he is left to die. Montessor's revenge may be motivated by wrath but the method by which it operates here is one that requires the use of scheming.

Scheming is a particularly useful tool for the vices when a situation is examined and evaluated with a lens for escaping victorious. If one sees a situation in which they cannot both achieve their vicious desire and emerge unscathed, then they will be less inclined to proceed openly and instead opt to utilize underhanded measures. If a challenge could be overcome or a fight won with genuine impunity, then scheming would have no space to operate. It is only when one comes from a place of weakness or vulnerability that their vices will require them to engage in the practice of scheming. When one recognizes that they are in a vulnerable position there is a natural desire to remove the threat to their autonomy or control. This is perfectly acceptable and even commendable when the removal of the obstacle would be for one's betterment and help them grow closer to God and others. However, in the situation where a perceived

vulnerability causes one to solve their problem by deliberately harming another, it is clear that a vice has taken root and is in a position to utilize the tool of scheming.

This can be seen in the story of the Vizier Haman in the biblical book of Esther. Haman serves as the nation of Babylon's second in command, beholden to no one save the king himself. However, the disparity in authority between the two is vast. The king's word is a law to be obeyed immediately, a status that Haman does not possess. So, when Haman is slighted by Queen Esther's cousin Mortdecai, who refuses to bow to him, he is unable to order a swift and public execution for the offender, as the king holds Mortdecai in great esteem. Haman sits in a place of vulnerability because he cannot directly attack Mortdecai or order him executed and be done with the situation without the king knowing. At this point of weakness, scheming finds a foothold to help turn the tables in favor of the vicious vizier. Haman convinces the king that the people who are a part of Mortdecai's ethnic and religious group, the Jews, are constantly disobeying the laws of the king, conveniently leaving out the fact that Mortdecai is Jewish. Haman does not seek vengeance directly but uses his skill of persuasion to convince the person with the true power to act in a way that aligns with his interest. In the same way that Poe's Montessor needs to find a workaround to avoid directly and publicly moving against his foe, Haman is forced to adopt an alternative approach.²⁴ In a place of some understood weakness, scheming is given life and thrives.

One of the clearest cases of scheming being present in a person who is both vicious and vulnerable is in the comic book clashes of Superman and Lex Luthor. Luthor

²⁴ Esther 3:1-15 (NIV)

is incredibly brilliant, constantly devising plans and working through a host of unscrupulous means to meet his ends. However, he has no physical gifts beyond that of a regular human. While one might suspect that this would make him a prime enemy of a hero like the previously discussed Batman, who is also only human but with a judicious set of skills, this is not primarily the case. Lex Luthor is most often and famously paired with the man of steel, whose physical capabilities are nigh unstoppable. Boasting super speed, flight, heat vision, freezing breath, immense strength, and a host of other powers, Superman is practically an invincible foe from a viewpoint like Luthor's. A reader who happens to pick up a comic book might find this pairing laughable. Couldn't Superman simply stop Lex Luthor in an instant? How can this mere human possibly stand up to a being who is powerful enough to withstand a nuclear blast? The simple answer to both questions is that there should be no possible way for Lex Luthor to pose any threat to the hero. However, Luthor continually utilizes a variety of tactics that level the playing field enabling him to harm Superman through scheming. Whether it be assembling a team of supervillains to distract the hero or even curing cancer merely to gain his trust, Luthor is constantly one step ahead of the strong but admittedly naïve superhero. In this way, Luthor is the greatest schemer in all of comics. Scheming serves as the primary vehicle by which Luthor is able to accomplish his wicked works because without it he would stand no chance against Superman. When a vicious intention is recognized as vulnerable the agent turns to scheming, which readily supplies unjust means to eliminate the advantage of another party.²⁵

²⁵ Jerry Siegel, *Action Comics #23* (New York: DC Comics, 1940).

Scheming and Malice

For the schemer to be both self-deceived and actively hiding from others he must possess altered perception beliefs. Vice may generate overwhelming passions but the further presence of scheming results in his understanding of the situation itself being undermined. The schemer's basic fact comprehension is twisted to make him see a wrong end as permissible or even preferable. If he is working at a coffee shop and sees a tip on a table that was not meant for him, rather than simply stealing it before his coworker can notice, an example of being overwhelmed by desire, he may deceive himself and claim the tip was actually meant for him because it came from a customer who is a regular of his, a deliberate misunderstanding of the situation. When his perception belief has been altered in such a way, his choice is no longer an act of passion alone because he has also engaged his will. An action that could previously be described as one of misplaced fervor is morphed into one of malice. There is a certain degree of sympathy for people who are merely overcome by their passions but far less so for those who have engaged their will in their wrongdoing.

Consider a woman who has an excessive anger for her neighbors' raucous parties. Every weekend these neighbors are disrespectfully loud and are constantly keeping the woman up to the point where she simply cannot stand it anymore. Instead of politely but firmly asking the rambunctious neighbors to quiet down, the woman is overcome with frustration and explodes. She insults the neighbors, yells, and slams their door in a show of immense anger. While the woman can be rightly chastised for this overzealous response, there is also a sense in which many people would think it an understandable fault, or at least consider the neighbors' comeuppance deserved. However, the sympathy

and understanding would certainly fade if an onlooker knew that the woman had cruelly thought through every aspect of her outburst and had designed her insults to be as hurtful as possible, targeting each person's insecurities. The knowledge that she was planning her move beforehand changes the moral tone of the situation significantly.

The Thomistic understanding of sin divides wrong actions into two categories, those of passion and those of malice. Sins of passion are moved and motivated by something extrinsic to the will while sins of malice are enacted through the will itself. When the will is involved, there is a level of intentionality that is not present in passion alone. Generally, the vices operate through an overpowering of the sensitive appetites, or passions. However, certain people have established patterns of character that resist the vices' corruptive influence. Like the sledding path that has been smoothed into a groove, some people's habits are so consistent that they have moved into a state of continence. While they might be tempted to do what is wrong, they ultimately end up making the right decision. However, this does not mean that the vices have been completely left behind, as only a truly virtuous person can be said to have overcome them. As seen previously, the main way in which the vices get around the barrier of continence is through the utilization of scheming's ability to attack perception belief in lieu of operating on the passions. In this manner, both the continent and incontinent individuals can be caused to indulge in vice. As one's perception belief is altered, their reason and will are affected, moving the resulting sin from one of passion to one of malice. Aquinas affirms this saying, "Now when a sin is committed through malice, the movement of sin belongs more to the will, which is then moved to evil of its own accord, than when a sin

is committed through passion, when the will is impelled to sin by something extrinsic.”²⁶ Since the scheming process takes place within one’s own will and not from an extrinsic source, the resulting wrong action can only be classified as a sin of malice.

The quintessential example of this is seen in the character of Professor Umbridge from the *Harry Potter* series. Umbridge behaves maliciously towards Harry because she falsely believes him to be telling lies, claiming that the powerful evil wizard Voldemort has returned. For the sake of her government job, it is far more convenient to think that this dark power has been permanently destroyed and any challenge to this belief, especially from a student with considerable sway, threatens her position. As a result, she unfairly gives Harry detention and forces him to write “I must not tell lies” using a quill without ink. After writing this phrase, Harry realizes that the red ink that is forming on the page is his own blood, and the words are being scarred into his hand. Umbridge’s altered perception belief has caused her to view Harry as a threat to society and so she needs to see him tortured until he stops his false claims. Her false perception of the situation results in her committing a sin of malice by scheming to stop Harry, who has done nothing wrong.²⁷

Sins of malice are more grievous than sins of passion because, “He who sins through certain malice is ill-disposed in respect of the end itself, which is the principle in matters of action; and so the defect is more dangerous than in the case of the man who sins through passion, whose purpose tends to a good end, although this purpose is

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, “Question 78. That Cause of Sin Which Is Malice,” *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*: That cause of sin which is malice (Prima Secundae Partis, Q. 78), accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2078.htm>.

²⁷ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2003), 266-267.

interrupted on account of the passion, for the time being.”²⁸ While there is a temptation to treat all sins as equal and thus not differentiate between kinds of sin, this is an equivocation of the term equal. Just because all sin makes one equally guilty of violating God’s law it does not mean that all sin has equal consequences. Through examining Aquinas’ thoughts on what constitutes sins of passion and sins of malice, it is clear that scheming causes an action to be in the family of the more grievous latter category. While indulging in a vice might be merely a sin of passion depending on the circumstance, scheming always pushes wrongdoing into a more sinister affair.

The story of David and Bathsheba also illustrates this point, showing that there is a clear distinction between passion and malice. When David first sees the married Bathsheba and is overcome with lust for her, the reader knows this mindset is wrong because she is not David’s lawfully wedded spouse. It is evident here that David’s passions are overwhelming his good judgment and he has begun to sin in his thoughts. This, however, is not what makes the story so vividly repugnant. Lustful thoughts are certainly wrong but are ultimately a common temptation. The reader is instead far more repulsed when David sleeps with her and then plots to cover up his sexual immorality, ultimately deciding to have Uriah murdered. The first desire, to sleep with a married woman, should receive a harsh rebuke, but the later actions cause a further level of disgust and horror. The two kinds of wrong are clearly distinguished as David’s schemes warrant a far stronger rebuke than his initial lustful desire. Scheming may be fueled by

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, “Question 78. That Cause of Sin Which Is Malice,” *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE: That cause of sin which is malice (Prima Secundae Partis, Q. 78)*, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2078.htm>.

the already inordinate desires of the passions, but it always engages the will and thus moves an action from a sin of passion to a sin of malice.

Scheming and Skill

Scheming's location in the will and its connection to pride give rise to its final aspect, that of escalating skill. The skill required to be an effective schemer will leave one always craving a greater challenge, needing to prove to themselves that they are the best. An ineffective, incontinent individual may find themselves beset by a capital vice, acting self-deceptively, operating from a position of vulnerability, and actively engaging their will to plan the downfall of another, but if they do not have a measure of skill, they will be unable to come close to achieving the end they have aimed at. Consider the case of the intentionally bounded cartoon villain Wile Coyote. The inept predator repeatedly hatches elaborate plans using items from the ACME corporation designed to eliminate the elusive Roadrunner. However, the coyote is unable to ever capture his intended prey due to his own ineptitude and the backfiring of the ACME products he so desperately clings to. Time and time again, the fanatic Wile Coyote is foiled by his actions showing how a poor schemer cannot skillfully overcome the obstacles in their way²⁹

An adept schemer though, knows how to manipulate situations and people, using their abilities to fulfill their goals while simultaneously covering their tracks. The more one practices scheming and develops the tools that will aid the capital vices the less they are satisfied with minor victories. When a woman has the desire to become a chess grandmaster, winning in tournaments against average players slowly loses its

²⁹ "Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner: The 9 Rules of Every Cartoon," Time (Time, March 6, 2015), <https://time.com/3735089/wile-e-coyote-road-runner/>.

significance. In the same manner, if she also excels at scheming, pulling off small malicious plans to cheat and win at local tournaments gradually develops a sense of diminishing returns, to the point where she will no longer be satisfied until she can topple the greatest champions. The escalation present corresponds to the ever-growing sense of pride and a vicious loop is created where the scheme must be even more undetectable and against an even higher level of challenge. In the same way, Moriarty would not be so great a villain if Sherlock Holmes soundly routed him in their every clash. It is his intellect, cunning, and skill that make him such a formidable foe for the great detective and confirm him a skilled schemer.

The film *The Incredibles* depicts just how essential skill is to scheming by showing how the villain's plans succeed as he methodically carries out each step of his evil agenda of revenge. After being slighted by his childhood hero, Mr. Incredible, the powerless but technologically brilliant Buddy becomes disenchanted with super-powered individuals. Buddy adopts the alter ego Syndrome and begins to plan his revenge against all superheroes. He ascertains that every hero's main weakness is their vanity and need to be heroic. Using his technological prowess, he develops robots built solely to challenge superheroes. Then, he lures the heroes one by one to his private island to square off against the lethal robots under the guise of assisting the military in stopping a dangerous rogue prototype. When a hero defeats a robot the accumulated data from the fight is stored and the next version of the robot is upgraded to account for the previous model's weaknesses and efficiently eliminate the superhero. Eventually, Syndrome reaches the point where his creation is able to defeat the hero who snubbed him, the powerful Mr. Incredible. He is only undone by his pride and need to show that he is superior to all

heroes by attempting to underhandedly defeat an even more powerful version of his robot, a task he ultimately fails at.³⁰

No example better shows the skill require to scheme than the actions of the serpent in the garden in Genesis 3. In the story, God has commanded the first humans not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the crafty serpent is displeased with the status quo and seeks to cause the humans to transgress this instruction. Such is the serpent's cunning and deviousness that it only requires a single question and statement to convince the first woman that she should disobey her creator. The serpent is clearly not as powerful as God, lacking all the qualities of the divine, and thus could not challenge God directly. Instead, it operates by preying upon the potentially corruptible nature of the human beings, God's image bearers. A simple, seemingly clarifying question from the deceptive creature prompts Eve to consider what the divine directive is concerning eating from the trees present within the garden. Inlaid within the question is an untruth as the serpent deliberately misconstrues God's command in the question widening it from one tree to every tree, which then creates the space for Eve to misconstrue the command too. In her response, Eve misstates God's commands by saying that she and her husband are not allowed to eat or touch the fruit of the tree or else they will die.

In a single question, the schemer leads Eve to change God's command which previously only excluded eating the fruit from the tree. Now that Eve is off balance, the wily serpent assertively deceives her by equivocating, arguing that the two of them will

³⁰ *The Incredibles*, directed by Brad Bird (2004; Emeryville, CA: Pixar Animation Studios, 2005), DVD.

not die- which is true in the sense that they will not instantly be struck down- but will instead become on a par with God in deciding what is good and evil. In a sense, the serpent schemes at Eve and for Eve. At first, it plants a seed of pride and then it provides the space for the shoot of pride to grow into something it would not otherwise become. Eve's pride has not yet developed enough to simply defy God, but the serpent's influence twists her beliefs and faculties to the point where she takes the one action she was forbidden to do. Both the first woman and man eat from the tree, allowing the serpent to achieve its goal while being able to claim that it has not forced their hand. The brilliance of the schemer is seen in the way in which the serpent appears to have the interest of the humans in mind and convinces them, via disorientation and appeal to their natural desires, to engage in wrongdoing. Through its scheming, the serpent accomplishes what it set out to do demonstrating its skill and effectiveness. Both Syndrome and the serpent show how skill and creativity are vital allies to the schemer, assisting them in carrying out actions oriented towards wicked ends. Through a misuse of ability, the schemer falls prey to the allure of the vices and puts themselves in a better position to achieve goals at which they should not be aiming.

Conclusion

To conclude this analysis, imagine that the schemer has succeeded in achieving their goal. What then? The fundamental problem remains that acting according to vice deforms a human being, altering who they were designed to be. So, a schemer who is beset by a capital vice that alters their ends to evil and who successfully achieves their new, malicious goal would expect to find themselves satisfied, but this is not the case. Rather than peacefully resting in their accomplishment, the schemer will find themselves

profoundly dissatisfied. Even in self-deception, there is a piece of the schemer that realizes they are not fulfilled. They have been twisted into a state of sin that Reformer Martin Luther refers to as “homo incurvatus in se” or “a human turned inward upon themselves.”³¹ Even though they may feel like they have won, the deepest parts of them are churning in agony as they move away from what it means to be human, bearing the image of God.

As God is made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, the divine image is revealed showing humans how they ought to live. Additionally, Aquinas defines happiness for the individual as the perfection of their rational nature.³² Living in a manner that conforms to the life of Christ is how one confirms their identity and fulfills their purpose allowing them to find true happiness. Since scheming aids the vices, engaging in this process necessarily moves one away from the perfection of their nature in Christ. It is simply a contradiction in terms to say that one can be happy and flourish when their actions are in utter conflict with who they have been created to be, meaning that the schemer can never find peace. Two possible courses of action emerge for the one who finds themselves restlessly frustrated that their success has not brought them happiness. On the one hand, they could throw themselves further into vice, confirming their commitment to their evil ends until, like a leper, they no longer feel the pain of their wounds. Or, on the other hand, they could come to a realization that they have deceived themselves and repent of

³¹ Martin Luther, *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961), 159.

³² “Thomas Aquinas: Moral Philosophy,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://iep.utm.edu/thomasaquinas-moral-philosophy/#:~:text=On%20the%20one%20hand%2C%20Aquinas%20follows%20Aristotle%20in,understood%20in%20terms%20of%20completion%2C%20perfection%2C%20or%20well-being.>

the wrongs they have done. Key here is that this requires the assistance of others. Salvation can only be found through an intervention of God's grace.

The differences in these two courses of action are best seen through people that exemplify each choice. Representing the path of falling further into viciousness is the composer Salieri from the film *Amadeus*. After his scheme succeeds to kill Mozart, the object of his envy, the villainous and vengeful Salieri finds himself tormented and still furious at God. Rather than repent of his action and seek forgiveness, Salieri holds on to his anger to the point where he becomes a suicidally bitter old man confined to an asylum. He finally despairingly resigns himself to his mediocrity and futility in opposition to God's will. We as viewers recognize a happiness that Salieri has deprived himself of. If Salieri had followed God's will, he could have been a friend and confidant to Mozart, propelling him to even further greatness. But Salieri's scheming has bereaved him both of the joy of his own ability and the joy of Mozart's genius. His unwillingness to repent has broken him down to the point where only despair and madness remain.³³

In Salieri, we can see that the results of scheming, and failing to repent, are threefold. First, one harms others, as engaging in the process of scheming sets a person against their neighbor. The schemer, through their inordinate love of self, hurts those around them even if the offended party does not recognize the culprit. Mozart believes that Salieri is his friend, but the harm that results from Salieri's scheming eventually leads to Mozart's death. Second, the rationalizations of scheming empower the capital vices to further deform the schemer. The ends of all capital vices are inherently opposed

³³ *Amadeus*, directed by Milos Forman (1984; Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures, 2009), DVD.

to what a human being is supposed to seek. Scheming blinds one to the fact that, in depriving others, they are harming themselves. Third and finally, scheming represents the misuse of a divine gift. The faculty of reason and the ability to plan are talents given by God to steward creation well. Scheming abuses this beautiful gift through manipulating others to achieve a personal goal, failing to properly love God and neighbor.

The other path, repenting and returning to God's will, is seen in the person of King David. We have seen how the story of David and Bathsheba carries all the hallmarks of scheming: the furtherance of the corrupting influence of a nascent capital vice, ongoing self-deception, emergence from a place of vulnerability, malicious intent, and increasingly skillful maneuvering. King David does not realize how thoroughly twisted he has become. However, once David is confronted by the prophet Nathan, who cleverly shows the king the extent of his wrongdoing, David realizes that he has committed an atrocity. Nathan's invective against David does not provoke a vindictive response from the king but a contrite heart. David's first words to Nathan are "I have sinned against the Lord."³⁴ Strikingly, a key difference between David and Salieri is that no one confronts Salieri while David is challenged by the explicitly identified representative of God's grace. Salieri's response to his brokenness was rage and despair, but David's is repentance and taking responsibility. David's understanding of himself and his actions needed to be healed to allow him to realize that he is subject to God and accept all that entails. The king enters a period of mourning and fasting followed by worshipping God, even after his son dies as a consequence of his actions. In this manner, David and God's relationship is repaired, and the repentant king is able to return to a life

³⁴ 2 Samuel 12:13 (NIV)

in obedience to God. Scheming need not permanently sever one's relationship with God because repentance, grounded in the justifying and redeeming work of Christ, still allows a schemer to be restored. However, scheming does twist a person to the point where they can fall into a habitual state of vice if they do not take steps to turn away from their wrongdoing. At this point, it is only through active intercession that one can find deliverance.

In summary, by aiding a capital vice, scheming harms others, oneself, and abuses what was meant to be a blessing. Happily, hope for the schemer is found in God's grace leading to repentance and restoration, the gift that a merciful God bestows upon those who have erred, calling them back into a life of obedience and flourishing.

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