

FIRST THINGS

PORNOGRAPHY AND ACEDIA

A SPIRITUAL ANALYSIS OF AND REMEDY FOR LUST OF THE EYES.

by
Reinhard Hütter

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A uniquely toxic combination of the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh has become an almost normal component of everyday life: the perturbingly pervasive use of pornography in general and internet pornography in particular, with its dangerous addictiveness and its lethal effect on the Christian spiritual life. To comprehend the spiritual roots of this crisis, we need to recall an all-too-forgotten vice, *acedia*, usually called “sloth” but better rendered as “spiritual apathy.” It is the very forgoing of friendship with God—which is the fulfillment of the transcendent dignity and calling of the human person—and the embrace of the self-indulgent deception that there never was and never will be friendship with God, that there never was and never will be a transcendent calling and dignity of the human person. Nothing matters much, because the one thing that really matters, God’s love and friendship, does not exist and therefore cannot be attained.

Acedia creates a void that we try to fill with transient rushes of pleasure—primarily venereal pleasure—to ward off the ennui of life bereft of its very center. But the simulacra that promise the rushes of pleasure we seek betray us. They cannot fill the void created by the loss of our transcendent calling to the love and friendship of God. Rather, they only increase the craving to fill the void we cannot fill, breeding compulsion and intensifying spiritual apathy, thereby encouraging *acedia*’s most dangerous shoot to spring forth: despair.

Christian spiritual wisdom has always regarded *acedia* as a vice that, unchecked, will eventually prove deadly to the Christian life. For spiritual apathy first leads us to despair of God’s love and mercy and eventually issues in a sadness that will always cause problems. For, as St. Thomas Aquinas observes in *On Evil*, “No human being can long remain pleasureless and sad.” People engulfed by the sadness to which their indulgence in spiritual apathy led them tend to avoid such sadness first by shirking and then by resenting and scorning God’s love and mercy.

This vice's post-Christian secular offshoot, an unthematic despair posing as boredom, covers—like a fungus—the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional life of many, if not most, who inhabit the affluent segments of the Western secular world. The old vice of acedia, of spiritual apathy, is the root cause of the typically bourgeois ennui, boredom.

Eventually the collective ideological, cultural, social, and political aversion to the divine good previously received and embraced will issue in a collective spiritual state of acedia, which eventually turns against any remnant of or witness to the transcendent dignity of human persons and to their calling to friendship with God. This is the very story of modern secularism. The flight from sadness that begins with avoiding and resisting spiritual goods and ends with attacking them describes with uncanny accuracy the specific *ressentiment* and aggression typical of a secular age.

In a seminal phenomenological study, originally published two years before the outbreak of World War I, the German philosopher Max Scheler offers an astute analysis of this distinctly modern negative spiritual attitude. *Ressentiment*, he claims, arises from the weakness of the will and issues in contempt of those moral values one despairs of achieving oneself. This *ressentiment* characterizes not only the modern secular individual but also the most influential strand of modern secular moral theory.

Ressentiment, Scheler argues, motivates the whole modern subjective theory of moral values, an approach to ethics currently best known as emotivism. If moral values amount to nothing but subjective phenomena of the human mind without independent meaning and existence—a position held by a variety of naturalist, positivist, and pragmatist philosophers—one never can be found lacking in light of an objective standard of moral values. As a subtle form of *ressentiment*, the emotivist theory of moral values fails to understand the profoundly problematic nature of pornography. Unable to name an objective standard of moral values, emotivism will in the end find a way to exculpate its production and consumption.

Scheler helps us understand *ressentiment* as the distinctively modern practice of the vice of acedia. The typically modern secular practice carries the inner logic of spiritual apathy further, to the complacent contempt, even under the guise of moral theory, for what imposes itself as truly and objectively good. Ours is, arguably, not a culture of tolerance but a culture of deep-seated *ressentiment*

that makes possible the amorphous yet broad social and political acceptance of pornography. The vast numbers of persons who, unbeknownst to themselves, are indulging in acedia, despair of and eventually come to resent the very dignity of the human person that pornography treats with contempt.

This spiritual apathy breeds other vices. In his overquoted but understudied *Moralia in Job*, Gregory the Great famously assigns six daughters to the vice of acedia: malice, spite, faintheartedness, despair, sluggishness with respect to the commandments, and—most important for our concern—“the roaming unrest of the spirit,” as the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper aptly renders it in his book *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. This roaming unrest of the spirit takes initial shape in another vice, one hardly recognized as such anymore, because modernity all too often confuses it with intellectual inquisitiveness: vain curiosity, or the lust of the eyes. Fueled by ennui and resentment and elicited by the roaming unrest of the spirit, vain curiosity takes the first allegedly innocent step that all too soon leads to the regular, then habituated, and eventually compulsive practice of pornographic voyeurism. When considering the vice of vain curiosity, Thomas Aquinas offers in the *Summa Theologiae* a brief but profoundly pertinent remark: “Sight-seeing [*inspectio spectaculorum*] becomes sinful, when it renders [one] prone to the vices of lust and cruelty on account of things [one] sees represented.”

Christian spiritual wisdom has long taught that the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh feed each other. The concupiscence of the eyes inflames the concupiscence of the flesh, and vice versa. St. Augustine offers in the *Confessions* a first step to understanding why the consumption of internet pornography can easily lead to the slow destruction of moral self-possession. “The truth,” he writes, “is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion. These were like interlinking rings forming what I have described as a chain, and my harsh servitude used it to keep me under duress.” Concupiscence indulged and habituated gathers such strength that it takes on the nature of a certain kind of necessity that compels the will in such a way that the attribute “free” becomes increasingly vacuous.

What seems most characteristic of the compulsive consumption of pornography is that the consumer no longer finds any pleasure in looking at the simulacra. All he has left, when the act is completed, is a

craving for stimulating a desire that will always remain unsatisfied. What is to be learned from the testimonies of pornography's users is the important fact that, contrary to prevailing cultural assumptions, the lust of the eyes is not a "hot" but rather a "cold" vice. It arises from the roaming unrest of the spirit rooted in a spiritual apathy that, again, despairs of and eventually comes to resent the very transcendence in which the dignity of the human person has its roots. The lust of the eyes that feeds on Internet pornography does not inflame but rather freezes the soul and the heart in a cold indifference to the human dignity of others and of oneself.

The consumption of internet pornography harms the one who does the consuming; those whose dignity, health, and often lives are consumed in the production of pornography; and those who have to suffer from the dissolution of conjugal and familial bonds of fidelity, intimacy, and trust. Into that night of moral errancy, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sheds salutary light by reminding all persons of goodwill of a truth that to right reason is self-evident, that pornography offends against chastity:

Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of the spouses to each other. It does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world. It is a grave offense. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials.

The Catholic Church's teaching on the evil of pornography is anchored normatively in the dignity of the human person and in the intimately conjoined virtue of chastity. Chastity is not (as current stereotypes insist) prudishness, the fearful contempt of sexuality as a "necessary evil," unavoidable but ultimately subhuman. It is the virtue that both expresses and preserves the dignity of what is a genuine and surpassing good: the dignity of the human person in sexual matters.

In order to understand chastity rightly, and especially its indispensability for proper human flourishing and the enjoyment of true freedom in all relationships, it is crucial to see how this often ridiculed and

misunderstood virtue is intimately related to another virtue in need of recovery: temperance.

Temperance is one of the so-called cardinal virtues, which can be described as the four habits of excellence that enable human beings to realize the human good. The first of them, prudence, identifies and commands the appropriate specific act; the second, justice, attends to the good of others and hence gives them their due; the third, courage, overcomes the fear of whatever threatens our bodily integrity and existence; the fourth, temperance, protects our inner order from the ever-present power of our internal sense appetites.

Temperance—or better, “selfless self-preservation,” as Josef Pieper felicitously renders this virtue—has nothing whatsoever in common with some bourgeois, lukewarm moderation in matters of food and drink. Rather, *temperantia* is the virtue that preserves the inner order of the human being, directing the most elementary forces of human self-preservation, self-assertion, and self-fulfillment: As Pieper writes, “The discipline of temperance defends [the human being] against all selfish perversion of the inner order, through which alone the moral person exists and lives effectively.” Chastity is nothing but the realization of selfless self-preservation in human sexuality.

Let me use an image. Prudence is the helmsman who directs the ship of our moral agency through the treacherous waters of moral quandaries and spiritual temptations. Our helmsman can operate properly only if we are properly formed in justice, courage, and temperance. An inordinate desire for sensual pleasure, brought about by the absence or failure of temperance, weakens and obstructs the ability of our helmsman to direct the ship. The selfless self-preservation of temperance protects the inner order of the person against the encroachments of powerful sensual desire and thus allows our helmsman to do his job. Without selfless self-preservation there simply is no true and perfect prudence.

And consequently, without chastity, the expression of temperance in sexual matters, there is no true and perfect prudence in the sexual life either. Without chastity, the helmsman cannot safely and confidently steer the ship safely through the treacherous waters of the sexual life to its proper destination. The result is a severely hampered moral life and consequently a great diminishment in human flourishing.

Thus chastity is a virtue not only indispensable for the realization of the virtue of prudence in sexual matters but also for the undisturbed proper operation of prudence in general. In other words, where the virtue of chastity is feeble and frail, the virtue of prudence will be encumbered and possibly corrupted. Those who are not chaste will not be truly or fully prudent.

This has fundamental meanings for the preservation of human dignity. If we want to protect human dignity in sexual and indeed all other human matters, we must exercise true and perfect prudence. If we want to exercise true and perfect prudence, we must seek chastity. But before we can exercise chastity in its proper sense, we must practice a more general virtue of chastity, a spiritual chastity. For it is this virtue that addresses the spiritual root of the problem: acedia. What is spiritual chastity?

“If the human mind,” writes St. Thomas in the *Summa*, “delights in the spiritual union with that to which it behooves it to be united, namely God, and refrains from delighting in union with other things against the requirements of the order established by God, this may be called a spiritual chastity. . . .

Taken in this sense, chastity is a general virtue, because every virtue withdraws the human mind from delighting in a union with unlawful things.” This spiritual chastity arises directly from faith, hope, and charity, which unite the human mind to God. Spiritual chastity preserves the union with God and thereby offers the most salient protection against acedia.

The single most important practice that fortifies our spiritual chastity and simultaneously protects us from acedia is an active and persistent discipline of prayer. Yet because of the unique and distinctly modern attack on the moral integrity of the human person by way of subtle and omnipresent temptations to indulge in the lust of the eyes, the restoration and protection of chastity requires practices more pointed and radical than the individual practice of prayer alone. False self-sufficiency is best overcome communally.

Note well, the practice of prayer is a spiritual discipline categorically different from and not a substitute for the counseling or therapy advisable for those experiencing what clinicians increasingly diagnose as gravely compulsive behavior or addiction. Because the root of the problem is a spiritual one, the healing from the addictive behavior will ultimately be overcome only when the negative spiritual root, acedia, is eradicated. It is the latter that the practice of prayer addresses.

In conclusion, therefore, I propose one such communal practice and discipline. One highly pertinent spiritual initiative that most directly addresses the pressing contemporary problem of Internet pornography—not at its shiny electronic surface but at its hidden spiritual root—is the Angelic Warfare Confraternity promoted by the Dominican order.

The Dominican theologian Brian T. Mullady explains that it “seeks to foster the connection between chastity and the other acquired and infused virtues, especially charity; which enables one to love and reverence [one’s] own body as well as the bodies of others.” The members of the confraternity engage in a disciplined practice of daily prayer and support each other in prayer while drawing upon the intercessions of the Seat of Wisdom, the Mother of God, and of St. Thomas, the confraternity’s patron saint.

Far from being an outlet for pious and prudish impulses, the confraternity’s practice of prayer reflects a pertinent theological truth about the efficaciousness of prayer. As St. Thomas states: “Since prayers offered for others proceed from charity . . . the greater the charity of the saints in heaven, the more they pray for wayfarers, since the latter can be helped by prayers: and the more closely they are united with God, the more are their prayers efficacious.” The prayer that the members of the confraternity pray daily is directed to the one who has the power to protect and to liberate man from spiritual apathy, ennui, resentment, and the lust of the eyes:

Dear Jesus, I know that every perfect gift and especially that of chastity depends on the power of your Providence. Without you, a mere creature can do nothing. Therefore, I beg you to defend by your grace the chastity and purity of my body and soul. And if I have ever imagined or felt anything that can stain my chastity and purity, blot it out, Supreme Lord of my powers, that I may advance with a pure heart in your love and service, offering myself on the most pure altar of your divinity all the days of my life.

The discipline of prayer sustains the spiritual union of the mind and heart with God and with everything that is consonant with the will of God. By exercising spiritual chastity and thereby sustaining spiritual union with God, the discipline of prayer protects us most effectively from falling into spiritual apathy and its secular offspring, ennui and resentment. For the one who prays—truly

prays—is never bored or resentful. The practice of prayer might commend itself as the apposite, grace-initiated preparation for welcoming the virtue of chastity into the human mind and will.

Such welcome is gravely important. For the virtue of chastity is the prime protector of human dignity. In the order of action, conjugal chastity realizes one's own human dignity and acknowledges the dignity of one's spouse. More comprehensively, it is the chaste person whose gaze can genuinely behold and affirm the dignity of the other. It is the chaste person who is free from the lure of the enticing, the titillating, the demeaning, the base, and who consequently can exercise true and perfect prudence.

Reinhard Hütter is professor of Christian theology at Duke Divinity School.