

## Pornography and *Acedia*\*

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A UNIQUELY toxic combination of the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh has become a widespread, almost normal component of everyday life: the perturbingly pervasive perusal 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”: the very foregoing of the 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 there never will be friendship with God, that there never was and that there 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 to be filled with transient rushes of pleasure—primarily sexual pleasure—to ward off the ennui of life bereft of its very center. But the simulacra that promise such rushes of pleasure betray. They cannot fill the void created by the loss of one’s transcendent calling to the love and friendship of God. Rather, they only increase the craving to fill the void, they breed compulsion, intensify spiritual apathy, and thus encourage *acedia*’s most dangerous shoot to spring forth: despair.

For complex but tangible spiritual and existential reasons, this vice is concomitant with the loss of hope and charity and with a profound weakening if not loss of faith. Its post-Christian secular offshoot, an unthematic despair masquerading as boredom, covers—not at all unlike a

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fungus—the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional life of many, if not most, who inhabit the affluent segments of the Western secular world. Nothing but the old vice *acedia*, spiritual apathy, is the root cause of the typically bourgeois *ennui*, boredom.

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 to despairing of God's love and mercy and eventually issues in a sadness that cannot remain without consequences. For, as 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 has led them tend to avoid such sadness first by shirking and then by resenting and scorning God's love and mercy.

Eventually—and this is the very story of modern secularism—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*, a spiritual apathy that arises from the loss of transcendence and eventually turns against any remnant of or witness to the transcendent dignity of human persons and to their calling to friendship with God. The flight from sadness that begins with avoiding and resisting spiritual goods and ends with attacking them describes with uncanny accuracy the specific resentment 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 offered an astute analysis of this distinctly modern negative spiritual attitude. *Ressentiment*, he claims, arises from the weakness of the will and issues in contempt for 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. Scheler makes a convincing case that *ressentiment* 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 can never 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 the production and consumption of pornography.

Scheler helps us to understand *ressentiment* as the distinctively modern practice of the vice of *acedia*. The typically modern secular condition of

*ressentiment* 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 *Moralia in Job*, Pope Gregory the Great famously assigns six daughters to the vice of *acedia* or spiritual apathy: malice, spite, faint-heartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, and—most importantly for our concern—“the roaming unrest of the spirit,” as the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper aptly renders it. This roaming unrest of the spirit takes initial shape in another vice, one hardly anymore recognized as such, because modernity all too often confuses it with intellectual inquisitiveness: vain curiosity, or the lust of the eyes. Fueled by *ennui* and *ressentiment* 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. Augustine offers a first step toward understanding why the consumption of internet pornography can easily lead to the slow destruction of moral self-possession. Augustine’s analysis in the *Confessions* acquires a fresh, pertinent ring: “The truth 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 which 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 to

stimulate 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 prevalent cultural assumptions, the lust of the eyes is not a "hot" but rather a "cold" vice. The lust of the eyes arises from the roaming unrest of the spirit, which has its root in a spiritual apathy that despairs of and eventually comes to resent the very transcendence in which the dignity of the human person has its root. 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, the ones whose dignity, health, and often lives are consumed in the production of pornography, and the ones 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 good will of a truth that to right reason is self-evident—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 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. (CCC 2354)

The Catholic Church's teaching on the evil of pornography anchors normatively in the dignity of the human person and in the intimately conjoined virtue of chastity. Far from being prudishness—a fearful contempt of sexuality as a "necessary evil," unavoidable but ultimately subhuman—chastity 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, 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, one of the so-called cardinal virtues, which are four habits of excellence that enable the realization of the human good. The first, 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 fear pertaining to whatever threatens our bodily

integrity and existence; finally, 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 pertaining to the most elementary forces of human self-preservation, self-assertion, and self-fulfillment: “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. The proper operation of our helmsman, prudence, presupposes our proper formation in justice, courage, and temperance. Hence, inordinate desire for sensual pleasure—brought about by the absence or failure of temperance—weakens and obstructs the virtues of courage, justice, and most detrimentally, of prudence. Selfless self-preservation protects the inner order of the person against the encroachments of this powerful sensual desire. Without selfless self-preservation, there simply is no true and perfect prudence. And consequently, in sexual matters, without chastity, there is no true and perfect prudence either. Without chastity, the helmsman, prudence, is gravely impaired in steering the ship safely through the treacherous waters of the sexual life to its proper destination. Impaired prudence severely hampers the moral life and consequently greatly diminishes 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. If we want to protect human dignity in sexual matters, we must exercise true and perfect prudence. If we want to exercise true and perfect prudence, we must seek chastity. But before chastity in its proper sense can be restored, we need to practice a more general virtue of chastity, a spiritual chastity. For it is this virtue that addresses the spiritual root of the problem—*acedia*, spiritual apathy. 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 spiri-

tual chastity. . . . Taking chastity in this sense, it 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*, spiritual apathy.

The single most important practice that fortifies spiritual chastity and simultaneously protects 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, omnipresent temptations to indulge in the lust of the eyes, the restoration and protection of chastity requires more pointed and radical practices than the individual practice of prayer alone. In conclusion therefore, I propose one such communal practice and discipline. *Nota bene*, I understand this practice of prayer to be 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.

A 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. This confraternity, Brian T. Mullady explains, "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 Aquinas, 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 Thomas Aquinas 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 from spiritual apathy, *ennui*, *ressentiment*, 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 the spiritual union with God, the discipline of prayer protects most effectively from falling into spiritual apathy and its secular offspring, *ennui* and *ressentiment*. For the one who prays—truly prays—is never either 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 in utilizing the internet.

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