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Lust

The Seven Deadly Sins

Simon Blackburn

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Contents

EDITOR'S NOTE	ix
PREFACE	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
 CHAPTER ONE	
Desire	13
 CHAPTER TWO	
Excess	21
 CHAPTER THREE	
Two Problems from Plato	29
 CHAPTER FOUR	
Stiff Upper Lips	41
 CHAPTER FIVE	
The Christian Panic	49
 CHAPTER SIX	
The Legacy	65
 CHAPTER SEVEN	
What Nature Intended	69

CHAPTER EIGHT	
Some Consequences	73
CHAPTER NINE	
Shakespeare versus Dorothy Parker	79
CHAPTER TEN	
Hobbesian Unity	87
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
Disasters	93
CHAPTER TWELVE	
Substitutions	103
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
Evolution and Desire	111
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
Overcoming Pessimism	127
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
Farewell	133
NOTES	135
INDEX	143

Editor's Note

This volume is part of a lecture and book series on the Seven Deadly Sins cosponsored by the New York Public Library and Oxford University Press. Our purpose was to invite scholars and writers to chart the ways we have approached and understood evil, one deadly sin at a time. Through both historical and contemporary explorations, each writer finds the conceptual and practical challenges that a deadly sin poses to spirituality, ethics, and everyday life.

The notion of the Seven Deadly Sins did not originate in the Bible. Sources identify early lists of transgressions classified in the 4th century by Evagrius of Pontus and then by John of Cassius. In the 6th century, Gregory the Great formulated the traditional seven. The sins were ranked by increasing severity and judged to be the greatest offenses to the soul and the root of all other sins. As certain sins were subsumed into others and similar terms were used interchangeably according to theological review, the list evolved to include the seven as we know them: Pride, Greed, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger, and Sloth. To counter these violations, Christian theologians classified the Seven Heavenly Virtues—the cardinal: Prudence, Temperance, Justice, Fortitude, and the theological: Faith, Hope, and Charity. The sins inspired medieval

and Renaissance writers including Chaucer, Dante, and Spenser, who personified the seven in rich and memorable characters. Depictions grew to include associated colors, animals, and punishments in hell for the deadly offenses. Through history, the famous list has emerged in theological and philosophical tracts, psychology, politics, social criticism, popular culture, and art and literature. Whether the deadly seven to you represent the most common human foibles or more serious spiritual shortcomings, they stir the imagination and evoke the inevitable question—what is *your* deadly sin?

Our contemporary fascination with these age-old sins, our struggle against, or celebration of, them, reveals as much about our continued desire to define human nature as it does about our divine aspirations. I hope that this book and its companions invite the reader to indulge in a similar reflection on vice, virtue, the spiritual, and the human.

Elda Rotor

Preface

People presume each other to be acquainted with sin. So when the New York Public Library and Oxford University Press asked me to lecture on one of the Seven Deadly Sins, I was modest enough not to ask “Why me?” I did worry in case I got landed with sloth, not because of unfamiliarity with the vice, but because of doubts about having the energy to find something to say about it. Otherwise the field seemed wide open.

This essay grew—but not very much—out of my lecture. The sponsors might have asked a historian, or a theologian, but this is an essay by a philosopher. It is an essay about lust itself, but still more about ideas about lust. Those ideas have a history, some of which I try to exhibit, although this is not a work of history. The ideas also infuse our religious traditions, but although they were draped in religious clothing, we should not think of them as simply belonging to theology. As the historian Peter Brown, whose work I use in the book, nicely pointed out, in the 1960s the theology section of the great Oxford bookshop Blackwells lay through a corridor labeled “second-hand philosophy.” It is people with ideas who try to work out what is the divine

will, on this and every other matter, so by and large we can short-circuit the divine, and just look at the ideas.

It is usual to end a preface with a list of acknowledgments. Here I find myself baffled. A short list might arouse comment, and a long list would be worse still. Yet to thank nobody raises the suspicion that this is purely a work of armchair theory, a piece of furniture associated with only imperfect expressions of lust. Silence is my only option. But I would like to thank the two organizations I have already mentioned, and especially their representatives, Elda Rotor of Oxford University Press, and Betsy Bradley of the New York Public Library, for their support, first for the lecture, and then for this essay.

Lust

Introduction

We might fear that, as so often, Shakespeare got it right straight off:

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.¹

Broadminded though we take ourselves to be, lust gets a bad press.
It is the fly in the ointment, the black sheep of the family, the ill-
bred, trashy cousin of upstanding members like love and friend-

ship. It lives on the wrong side of the tracks, lumbers around elbowing its way into too much of our lives, and blushes when it comes into company.

Some people like things a little on the trashy side.² But not most of us, most of the time. We smile at lovers holding hands in the park. But we wrinkle our noses if we find them acting out their lust under the bushes. Love receives the world's applause. Lust is furtive, ashamed, and embarrassed. Love pursues the good of the other, with self-control, concern, reason, and patience. Lust pursues its own gratification, headlong, impatient of any control, immune to reason. Love thrives on candlelight and conversation. Lust is equally happy in a doorway or a taxi, and its conversation is made of animal grunts and cries. Love is individual: there is only the unique Other, the one doted upon, the single star around whom the lover revolves. Lust takes what comes. Lovers gaze into each others' eyes. Lust looks sideways, inventing deceptions and stratagems and seductions, sizing up opportunities (fig. 9). Love grows with knowledge and time, courtship, truth, and trust. Lust is a trail of clothing in the hallway, the collision of two football packs. Love lasts, lust cloy.

Lust subverts propriety. It stole Anna Karenina from her husband and son, and the besotted Vronsky from his honorable career. Living with lust is like living shackled to a lunatic. In Schopenhauer's splendid words, almost prophesying the Clinton presidency, lust

is the ultimate goal of almost all human endeavour, exerts an adverse influence on the most important affairs, interrupts the most serious business at any hour, sometimes for a while confuses even the greatest minds, does not hesitate with its trumpery to disrupt the negotiations of statesmen and the research of scholars, has the knack of slipping its love-letters and ringlets even into ministerial portfolios and philosophical manuscripts.³

It might seem, then, quixotic or paradoxical, or even indecent, to try to speak up for lust. But that is what I shall try to do. The philosopher David Hume said that a virtue was any quality of mind "useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others."⁴ Lust has a good claim to qualify. Indeed, that understates it, since lust is not merely useful but essential. We would none of us be here without it. So the task I set myself is to clean off some of the mud, to rescue it from the echoing denunciations of old men of the deserts, to deliver it from the pallid and envious confessors of Rome and the disgust of the Renaissance, to destroy the stocks and pillories of the Puritans, to separate it from other things that we know drag it down (for we shall find that there are worse things than lust, things that make pure lust itself impure), and so to lift it from the category of sin to that of virtue.

It is not a task to undertake lightly, and I have to ask questions of myself. Do I really want to draw aside the curtains

and let light disperse the decent night that thankfully veils our embarrassments? Am I to stand alongside the philosopher Crates, the Cynic, who, believing that nothing is shameful, openly copulated in public with his wife Hipparchia?⁵ Certainly not, but part of the task is to know why not.

Some might deny that there is any task left to accomplish. We are emancipated, they say. We live in a healthy, if sexualized, culture. We affirm life and all its processes. We have already shaken off prudery and embarrassment. Sex is no longer shameful. Our attitudes are fine. So why worry?

I find myself at one with many feminists in finding this cheery complacency odious, and not just because the expressions of a sexualized culture are all too often dehumanizing, to men and especially to women, and even to children.

The sexualization of our commercial culture is only a fascination with something that we fear or find problematic in many ways. When I lived in North Carolina, two- and three-year-old girls were usually made to wear bikini tops on the beach, and a six-year-old was banned from school because he attempted to kiss a fellow pupil. In some states, such as Georgia and Alabama, at least until recently, "any device designed or marketed as useful primarily for the stimulation of human genital organs" was regarded as obscene, and possession, sale, purchase, and so on were aggravated misdemeanors punishable by heavy fines and

even prison time. (England is not much better: in England girls can legally have sex at 16 but cannot buy vibrators until they are 18.) When I gave the lecture, some 12 states had sodomy laws that applied to both heterosexual and homosexual couples—Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, South Carolina, Utah, and Virginia. Something similar was true of oral sex. While this book was in press the Supreme Court struck down Texas' anti-gay laws, keeping police at least a little farther out the bedroom (however with three justices dissenting). Like England, nearly all U.S. states deny prostitutes anything like adequate legal protection, in spite of the overwhelming social ills that the prohibition creates, in this field as in others.

Then on May 10, 2002, advised by John Klink, sometime strategist for the Holy See, the Bush administration refused to sign a United Nations declaration on children's rights unless the United Nation's current plans for sex and health education in the developing world were changed to teach that only sexual abstinence is permissible before marriage.

Within the United States, the federal government spends some \$100,000,000 a year of American tax dollars on abstinence-only programs of sex education. This in spite of the fact that abstinence-only programs markedly increase young peoples' health risks by making sporadic, furtive, and unprotected copu-

lations their only option. Human Rights Watch has issued a severe report on teenagers' rights to high-quality health and safety information, which is currently denied to them in schools.⁶ A nice quote from a Texas teacher introduces the report: "Before [the abstinence-only program] I could say 'if you're not having sex, that's great. If you are, you need to be careful and use condoms.' Boy, that went out the window." The report notes that federal programs standardly lie to children, for example about the efficiency of condoms.

This is not, I think, the sign of a culture that has its attitudes to sexuality under control. Similarly in the United Kingdom, the Church of England is currently tearing itself apart over two issues. One is that of gay priests, and the other is that of women bishops. This, too, is not the sign of a culture in which sex is understood as it might be. So there is work to do.

But am I the right person to do it? When I gave the lecture in New York City from which this essay developed, I reflected upon no less than five disqualifications. First, there is my age. In terms of Titian's beautiful painting of the three ages of mankind, I inhabit the background, contemplating spiritual things (fig. 10). Nobody would be asked to give a lecture on lust until of an age when time and experience have blunted its fierce prick. Lust belongs with youth; middle age relies in greater part on memory or imagination. The young are naturally overcome by lust, but

the middle-aged who show an undue interest in it are more likely to be accused of idle lechery. The sins of middle age are melancholy, envy, gluttony, and anger. By the time you are of an age to give a public lecture on lust, lust may have lost a little of its luster.

Second, I had to feel uncomfortable with my sex or gender. I am male, and for a long time now the discourse of sexuality, as the intelligentsia like to call it, has belonged to women and to other groups who feel they need to explain or justify themselves, notably gays. In the standard story, men are the oppressors, and grandfathers make strange bedfellows for victims and the marginalized. But part of my aim is to restore lust to humanity, and at least I can claim to be human.

Be that as it may, there is my third problem, which is my nationality. We English are renowned for our cold blood and temperate natures, and our stiff upper lips. When the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge read the remark of a German writer, that dancing is an allegory of sexual love, he wrote indignantly that "In England, at least, our young Ladies think as little of the Dances representing the moods and manoeuvres of Sexual Passion as of the Man-in-the-Moon's whiskers; and woe be to the Girl who should so dance as to provoke such an interpretation." English passions include property and propriety, both enemies of lust. The nearest we are supposed to get to lust is something like Gainsborough's picture

of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, and one can easily imagine this prim couple saying what the paradigm Englishman Lord Chesterfield said of sex, that “the pleasure is momentary, the position ridiculous, and the expense damnable” (fig. 11).

Other nationalities are amazed that we English reproduce at all. One cannot imagine an Englishman lecturing on lust in France. We tend not to make a fuss. When witchcraft hysteria broke out in Europe in the sixteenth century and onward, a frequent accusation against women was that they had been copulating with the devil, who visited them in evil phallic form at night. But although we have the word for these nocturnal temptations, the incubus (and, even-handedly, one for the corresponding female visitor to men, the succubus), this charge was seldom made in English witchcraft trials. However, national pride requires me to note that, again unlike their continental counterparts, English witches seldom exerted their malevolent powers by making men impotent.⁷

The fourth problem I put to myself was what I anticipated, perhaps unfairly, about the audience. To the English, the American penchant for sharing a bed with each partner’s lawyers, and after that with Jesus, feels uncomfortable. Five is a crowd, and we would be embarrassed, or even unmanned, by a ghostly audience distracting us with whispers of legal and religious proprieties. We like to lose ourselves, a notion which occupies us later.

Fifth, I had to lament my profession of philosopher, recalling the fate of my distinguished predecessor Bertrand Russell, who in 1941 was stripped of his appointment at the College of the City of New York, where he was to have taught logic. After a Catholic-inspired witch hunt he was dismissed on the grounds that his works were “lecherous, libidinous, lustful, venerous, erotomaniac, aphrodisiac, irreverent, narrow-minded, untruthful and bereft of moral fiber.” For the record, occasionally he had suggested that the sexual mores of the 1930s were a little tyrannical, but his relevant writings were about logic, mathematics, and the theory of knowledge—the subjects he had been employed to teach.

In fact, there has always been something incongruous about the juxtaposition of philosophers and lust. There is a special pleasure to be had when we fall, as the medieval legend of Aristotle and Phyllis shows. The story was made up by one Henri d’Andeli, a thirteenth-century poet from Normandy. His poem, the *Lai d’Aristote*, tells how Alexander the Great, Aristotle’s pupil, was lectured by the philosopher on the evils of spending too much time and energy on a courtesan, Phyllis. Alexander gave up Phyllis, but told her that this was upon Aristotle’s advice. Phyllis vowed to get her revenge on Aristotle, which she did by singing and dancing and generally cavorting outside his study. “Her hair was loose, her feet were bare, and the belt was off her

gown." Eventually Aristotle was snared, and, seizing Phyllis through the window, declared his passion to her. She consented to be his, provided he would first satisfy a little whim she had. He must let her saddle him and ride him around the garden. The besotted Aristotle did so, but not before Phyllis had summoned Alexander to witness the humiliation. "Master, can this be?" queried Alexander, whereupon Aristotle warned him that if lust can so overcome wisdom itself, a not-so-wise young man like Alexander must be doubly vigilant against it. In the story, Alexander sees the point and forgives Aristotle. There are many depictions of the scene in stained glass, tapestry, and paintings (fig. 1).

It is all completely apocryphal, telling us only about the medieval imagination and nothing about Aristotle. But it plugs into our sense that young, vigorous warriors and conquerors are suitable candidates for lust, not elderly philosophers. In the story, Phyllis takes Aristotle from contemplation to the worldly, a particularly poignant victory when book 10, the final book, of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* identifies contemplation as the highest activity of man. Also, Phyllis takes Aristotle out of his study to the garden, from the domain of reason to that of nature. There is an evident echo of the garden of Eden and the myth of the Fall. And Christian commentators of the time had no trouble giving the story a misogynistic turn, making Phyllis into Alex-

ander's wife and supposing that the moral is not the victory of lust, but the deceitfulness of woman.

These five obstacles are indeed daunting. But the questions which lust, and still more our attitudes to lust, prompt are too interesting to leave aside. Apart from anything else, what a culture makes of "masculinity" or "femininity" spills into every corner of life. It determines how we grow up. It determines the script we follow, what people become proud about, and therefore by contrast what they are ashamed of or hostile toward. Our anxieties produce fantasies and distortion, aggression and ambition, violence and war. Fascism was perhaps the most obvious political movement that clustered around ideals of the Male, but it will not be the last. Islam's attitude to women and Western women need only be mentioned.

This is a small essay, but the landscape of human lust and human thinking about it is far too large to take in at a glance. People have devoted lifetimes to charting small parts of it. As I write, or you read, neurologists are plotting it, pharmacists are designing drugs to modify it, doctors are tinkering with its malfunctions, social psychologists are setting questionnaires about it, evolutionary psychologists are dreaming up theories of its origins, postmodernists are deconstructing it, and feminists are worrying about it. And a large part of the world's literature is devoted to it, or to its close relative, erotic love. I think of myself

as no more than taking a philosophical stroll in the park, here and there stopping to point out an interesting view. The park is not a paradise. Weeds grow, serpents lie in wait, and people have built slums over parts of it. But we do not have to inhabit them, if we are careful.

CHAPTER ONE

Desire

It is not easy, to say the least, to identify the object of many of our desires. We are familiar with the idea that we may think we want one thing when we really want something else. We have grown used to the idea that we disguise our desires from ourselves, let alone from each other. Perhaps not our doings, nor our sayings, nor even the tales about ourselves we tell in our heads manifest our true desires. Ours is a suspicious age, receptive to the idea that our selves are slippery and mutable, many-layered, sometimes glimpsed but never known, more constructed than discovered. But this is not itself a new idea. Across the centuries a great deal of Christian energy went into spiritual disciplines designed to strip off the false