

Climbing Mount Purgatorio: Reflections from the Seventh Cornice

Hamza Yusuf
Director, Zaytuna College

*But virtue, as it never will be moved
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven;
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage*

- William Shakespeare

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

– Alexander Pope

*I love the forest. It is bad to live in the cities: too many are in heat there...
And behold these men: their eyes say it—they know nothing better on
earth than to lie with a woman.*

*Mud is at the bottom of their souls; and woe if their mud also has spirit!
Would that you were as perfect as animals at least! But animals have
innocence.*

*Do I counsel you to slay your senses? I counsel the innocence of the
senses.*

– Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

What is desire? In Plato's dialogue, *Philebus*, Socrates provides one answer, stating that hunger, thirst, and such appetites fall under the realm of desire:

Socrates: We commonly talk, do we not, of a man "having thirst"?
Meaning that he is becoming empty.... Then is his thirst a desire?
Protarchus: Yes, a desire for drink.
Socrates: For drink, or for replenishment with drink?
Protarchus: For replenishment with drink, I should think.
Socrates: When one becomes empty then, apparently he desires the
opposite of what he is experiencing; being emptied, he longs to be
filled.

From this perspective, desire is an attempt at filling emptiness or a void within us. The desire may be profound, such as a desire to know why we are here when we confront a void without that knowledge. The desire may also be less than profound, such as the desire to own objects that preoccupy and entertain us so we do not have to confront those voids. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates tells us that when a man who is strong desires to be strong, or one who is swift wishes to be swift, what he really desires is to remain strong or swift. Since we cannot guarantee the continuance of such traits, Socrates concludes that what man really desires is in the future and not in the present; in other words, it is "that of which he is in want."

Another perspective on desire worth contemplating comes from the 13th century poet, jurist and theologian Rumi, who begins his *Mathnawi* by describing the sounds of the reed flute as mournful because they are cut off from the source; Rumi explains that being severed from his source, man enters a mournful state, and his hollowness and emptiness sets him on his goal to find his heart's desire. The English word "desire" hints at this celestial meaning of humanity's need to reconnect with its source. "Desire" is derived from the Latin word, "*desiderare*," meaning "to long for, wish for" but originally meant "to await what the heavens would bring" from the prepositional phrase, "*de sidere*" ("*de*" meaning "from," and "*sidere*" meaning "heavenly body, star, constellation"). "We are stardust / We are golden / And we've got to get ourselves / Back to the garden," sings Joni Mitchell. This essential desire to get our selves back to the Garden of Eden, or to break the chain of Samsara and enter into Nirvana (annihilation of the self) is a sacred perspective of desire.

However, the world by its nature is dazzling. Its myriad forms entice men and women who are seduced by its resplendent ornaments, and their pursuits and desires fragment. Some seek power, some wealth, some love, and some set their sights no higher than seeking physical pleasure. Each of these pursuits, however, is rooted in desire, in our craving directed at the ephemeral, which can become insatiable and destructive.

Humans have both animal desires, which we call appetites, and rational desires, which Spinoza in his posthumous *Ethics* refers to as "will." Can desires be considered right or wrong? From a modern perspective, few desires would be categorized as wrong per se. In

our individualistic Western societies, people are encouraged to pursue their “heart’s desire,” as long as it does not exploit or hurt others.

Both rational ethics and religious ethics, however, distinguish quite clearly between right and wrong desires, and posit that wrong desires may result in damaging and destructive pursuits that shatter one’s psychological well-being and wreak havoc on human relationships.

Desires are essential for human survival and happiness, but become destructive when they are perverted, excessive, or deficient. All wrong desires share the misperception of the true nature of the desire for one of three reasons: what is desired is a partial good, yet it is desired excessively as a sole good; it is a means to a good, but is taken as an end in itself; finally, it is something that appears to be a good but is only an illusive good. This last reason is most pernicious and particularly pronounced in carnal desire.

Perhaps better than any other writer in the English language, Shakespeare describes the state of one under the influence of illusive destructive desire in Sonnet 129:

*The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and, till action, lust
Is perjur’d, murd’rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed 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 know well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.*

While here Shakespeare refers to sensual lust, his words hold true for other types of lust - for blood, power, and wealth. For once lustful craving takes hold of one’s heart, one indeed becomes “mad in pursuit and in possession so.” The depths of human depravity are startling, and once we lose our balance, the fall can be long and hard, causing pain for those who witness it, and despair -- even death -- for the one falling.

In the Islamic tradition, the root of such destructive tendencies in the pursuit of desire is the *nafs*, an Arabic word which can loosely be defined as the ego, but more appropriately is the tainted soul. This tainted soul resembles a wild animal. In Islam, the untamed *nafs* is both the single most destructive force in our world, and also the source of our special nature and distinction among other creatures; when refined and tempered, it can soar with

the angels. According to the Qur'an, the *nafs* has three phases, and the first is known as the compulsive or commanding soul (*nafs al-ammaarah*). This is the infantile self that demands and compels one to act in pursuit of the self's desires. This lowest aspect of the self is aided by three other destructive elements: the passions (*ahwa*, plural of *hawaa*), the illusory nature of the world (*dunya*), and an obsessive and compulsive force referred to as Satan (*Shaytaan*), which according to the Prophet Muhammad, flows in the very arteries of men and women. In Islamic theology, all of these poisons can be controlled and overcome by sincere human struggle that is easier done when aided by divine grace, but which can be achieved by anyone who engages in that struggle, regardless of faith or belief.

The most stereotypical pursuits of the *nafs* involve pleasure, wealth, fame and power. It is the quest of pleasure that preoccupies most of us. The most base of these are sensual pleasures, including eating, drinking, resting, and recreation, but which culminate for most people in the greatest of bodily pleasures: sex. Both moral philosophy and religion recognize the dangers of the wanton pursuit of pleasure, and both prescribe temperance as the key virtue that can contain pleasure so it remains a beneficial good and not a cause for destructive behavior.

Moral philosophers, working within the ethos of the secular, have recognized that man without virtue is worse than a brute. In *Politics*, Aristotle writes: "If he have not virtue, man is the most unholy and the most savage of all animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony." Virtue, for Aristotle, was not predicated upon a belief in some divine order but rather in the compelling argument that reason presents to the reflective person of how one should order one's life.

Religious tradition, however, is not merely concerned with a person's psychological or rational well-being, but more importantly, with the supernatural element of man, otherwise known as the soul.

In the Catholic tradition, it is the soul that is at risk when a person commits a sin. Deadly sins are those that "kill the life of the soul leaving the sinner without sanctifying grace."¹ Interestingly, in the Catholic formation, the seven deadly or mortal sins are states, not actions. They relate to the will of a human and not to any one act. In the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, souls not sanctified in this world must be purged of their wrongs before entering Paradise; the souls are not purged of the act of sin but rather of the stain of sin. The seven deadly sins are understood to be the matrices from which all individual acts of sin emanate. The sins themselves are distortions of the human being's desire, perversions of the direction of one's love and its ultimate object. Thus, paradoxical as it may seem, love is at the root of sinfulness.

¹ *Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, Edited by Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 779.

In Dante's *Purgatorio*, there are seven cornices on Mount Purgatory, corresponding to the seven sins. The lower purgatory consists of the cornices wherein the sins of love perverted are purged: pride (*superbia*), which is a perversion of self-love resulting in contempt for others as opposed to love for them; envy (*invidia*), which entails a perverted love of one's own goods or the desire of goods that one does not have which leads to one's hope that another will be deprived of his goods; and wrath (*ira*), which is the perversion of justice that results in revenge or spite. In the middle cornice of Mount Purgatory, we find the sin of love defective, which is sloth (*acedia*). Unlike the modern sense of sloth, *acedia* was understood as a lack of spiritual desire, a neglect of one's duty to engage in spiritual struggle with the self. It is the failure of one to love the *totum bonum*, the real goods in proper measure needed for a happy life, and the *summum bonum*, the highest good, with all one's heart. Finally, upper purgatory involves the sins of excess. In it we find avarice (*avaritia*), which is excessive love of the mineral kingdom embodied in gold and silver; gluttony (*gluta*), excessive love of the vegetable kingdom embodied in food; and lust (*luxuria*), excessive love of the animal kingdom as embodied in carnality.

Mount Purgatory has at its base pride, which is the deadliest of the seven sins, and as one moves beyond the "cold sins" into the "hot sins," it is on the seventh cornice that we confront lust. In Dante's schema, this is the last sin to be purged before one can enter the earthly paradise, symbolizing the tenacious hold that lust has on the individual.

In his *Inferno*, sins are in three categories, and the one concerning lust is that of incontinence, which also includes gluttony. Lust, interestingly, is the least of these sins punished in Dante's hell. We find those lost souls who are condemned to the second circle as a result of their lust described as being blown about by a violent gust of wind that symbolizes the violent force of the desires that caused them to go astray. The Arabic word for passionate desire, *hawaa*, is a direct cognate of the word for wind, *hawa'*, the root word meaning "to fall down." These are souls that were unable to withstand the power and force of their urges, and were blown over by their passions and fell into the state of incontinence. In the *Purgatorio*, however, on the seventh and final cornice, the lustful sinners are found marching through a wall of flame to purge them of the fires of their misdirected passions.

To understand the sin of lust, one must first understand the concept of sin in the Abrahamic faiths. The word "sin," which, outside of the religious circle, has fallen out of favor in the modern world, is possibly related to a Saxon word that meant "to wander." Sin is an English translation of the Hebrew term "*het*," which like both its Arabic and Greek counterparts -- *khati'ah* in Arabic and *hamartia* in the New Testament -- is originally an archery term that meant "to miss the mark." Sin was also used in archaic English as an archery term for a miss. The idea being that sin, in a metaphysical sense, originates in a sound attempt at achieving a good but "misses the mark" by mistaking an apparent good for a real one. Repentance is, in essence, redressing the miss and realigning one's spiritual sights for the next attempt.

The goods to which humans and men in particular, aim are referred to in the Qur'an as pleasure, wealth and power. "*Made to seem pleasing to humanity is love of desires for mates [pleasure] and children [power], and heaps and hoards of gold and silver [wealth], domesticated horses, and cattle, and fields [wealth and power]. Those are the conveniences and enjoyments for the life of the world, while the finest resort is the presence of God*" (3:14). Pleasure, wealth, and power are means, not ends. The true end is ultimate concern. The pursuit of these attractive goods as ends can lead to despair for those who attempt to create meaning out of their pursuit once they are revealed to be baseless. Shakespeare's Macbeth, whose blind pursuit of power leads him to the abyss of despair, ends his life concluding that he is a mere shadow, without substance trapped in a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Like Macbeth's pursuit of power, revealed to him in the end as empty, the lust-driven pursuit of bodily pleasures is another attempt at sustaining one's meaning for the time being. Lust was referred to as the sin of "*luxuria*" in Latin. From it, comes our English word, "luxury"; the Latin meaning, however, was closer to exuberance, or superfluous abundance. Lust is only possible with animal spirits and with vitality, and the excessiveness of it was a luxury, hence the name. In her essay on the deadly sins, Dorothy Sayers identifies two main reasons people are susceptible to the sin of *luxuria*:

It may be through sheer exuberance of animal spirits: in which case a sharp application of the curb may be all that is needed to bring the body into subjection and remind it of its proper place in the scheme of man's twofold nature. Or—and this commonly happens in periods of disillusionment like our own, when philosophies are bankrupt and life appears without hope—men and women may turn to lust in sheer boredom and discontent, trying to find in it some stimulus which is not provided by the drab discomfort of their mental and physical surroundings. When that is the case, stern rebukes and restrictions are worse than useless. It is as though one were to endeavor to cure anemia by bleeding; it only reduces further an already impoverished vitality. The mournful and medical aspect of twentieth century pornography and promiscuity strongly suggests that we have reached one of these periods of spiritual depression, where people go to bed because they have nothing better to do. In other words, the "regrettable moral laxity" of which respectable people complain may have its root cause not in *Luxuria* at all, but in some other of the sins of society, and may automatically begin to cure itself when that root cause is removed.²

Is the "root cause" not lust, but simply boredom? Kierkegaard believed that man's inability to find any real meaning in life resulted in an indifference, cynicism, and boredom with it. The aesthete, who believes he is leading a life in pursuit of pleasure, exemplifies the nihilistic malaise of the modern age. The aesthete's hedonistic life is

² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New Hampshire, Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1949), 121-122.

rooted in his boredom. The irony is that the things that he finds to entertain and distract him from his boredom soon become the very sources of boredom: “The boredom that comes later is usually the fruit of a misguided diversion. It seems doubtful that a remedy against boredom can give rise to boredom, but it can give rise to boredom only insofar as it is used incorrectly.”³

In *Pornified*, an excellent study on the insidiousness of pornography, Pamela Paul arrives at a similar conclusion about the road to boredom:

So many women and all so easy; a man tends to gorge. And once he’s seen a thousand bare bottoms—no matter the variety of form and function—they start to look the same. Men pummel through woman after woman, plunging into an inevitable cycle of diminishing returns. In one study by James L. Howard, Myron B. Reifler, and Clifford B. Liptzin, cited in the 1970 federal report on pornography, men who were shown pornographic films for ninety minutes a day, five days a week experienced less sexual arousal and interest in similar materials with the passage of time. What initially thrills eventually titillates, what excites eventually pleases, what pleases eventually satisfies. And satisfaction sooner or later yields to boredom.⁴

This is the inevitable state of the aesthete who lives for pleasure. He seeks pleasure to remedy his boredom, yet the very thing he seeks as a remedy becomes a source of his spiritual ailment once again.

Consciously or not, the hot sins of *gula*, *luxuria*, and *avaritia* are rooted in attempts to address one’s spiritual vacuum. Each begins with the pursuit of real goods, but not correctly as the means to real happiness that comes from an integrated ethical life rooted in virtue and responsibility. Rather, they are an end in themselves, the pursuit of pleasure for pleasure’s sake. Eating not to live, but living to eat; loving not to give, but lusting to take; accumulating wealth not to support, but to create a false sense of security. In short, they are sins driven by emptiness within, mere distractions to avoid confronting a lack of knowledge about life’s purpose and relevance.

Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), the great Spanish ethicist and theologian of Muslim Andalusia, believed that at the core of the human being was dread, that every action that motivated man was an attempt to ward off an underlying anxiety (*tard hamm*): “Thus the seeker of wealth in fact seeks to repel through it the anxiety of poverty; the seeker of fame is primarily concerned to repel the anxiety of subordination or subservience; the seeker of

³ Ibid., 55.

⁴ Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005), 83.

pleasure simply wishes to repel the anxiety of missing its enjoyment.”⁵ Eight centuries later, we hear an echo in Kierkegaard’s observation that the seeker of pleasure is attempting to repel boredom, an idea consonant with Ibn Hazm’s notion of repelling anxiety because boredom’s real threat is that in a state of ennui, we are facing a terrifying confrontation with our mortality and irrelevance.

Kierkegaard rightly and insightfully reminds us that to seek pleasure and avoid pain is a quality we share with all sentient creatures. It is not a choice in reality to seek pleasure but rather a capitulation of choice. “Choosing” the hedonistic life of an aesthete is not a choice, but an abstention of choice. This is profoundly consistent with Islam’s doctrine of freewill, a doctrine embedded in the Arabic language itself. “To choose” in Arabic is “*akhtaara*,” and “choice” is “*ikhtiyar*.” The tri-radical source of the word is “*khayr*,” which means “good.” The verbal form “*akhtaara*” literally means “to choose good for oneself.” Hence, from this perspective, choice is the act of *choosing what is good*.

Sayyid Naquib al-Attas, the contemporary Malay philosopher, persuasively connects the notion of choice to the idea of freedom:

The choice that is meant in *ikhtiyar* is the choice of what is good, better, or best between the two alternatives. This point is most important as it is aligned to the philosophical question of freedom. A choice of what is bad of two alternatives is therefore not a choice that can be called *ikhtiyar*; in fact it is not a choice, rather it is an act of injustice done to oneself. Freedom is to act as one’s real and true nature demands—that is one’s *haqq* [truth] and one’s *fitrah* [original nature] demands—and so only the exercise of that choice which is of what is good can properly be called a “free choice.” A choice for the better is therefore an act of freedom, and it is also an act of justice done to oneself. It presupposes a knowledge of good and evil, of virtues and vices; whereas a choice for the worse is not a choice as it is grounded upon ignorance urged on by the instigation of the soul that inclines toward the blameworthy aspects of the animal powers; it is then also not an exercise of freedom because freedom means precisely being free of domination by the powers of the soul that incites to evil.⁶

This enslavement to the inciting soul (*nafs al-ammaarah*) is entirely ignored in our public discussions about freedom. Moral freedom, the freedom to act prudently and virtuously, is dismissed in any discussion of freedom in the modern context of political and circumstantial freedom. Destructive moral dissolution, which was once rightly termed licentiousness, is now considered a type of freedom. According to the Qur’an, these destructive tendencies are a result of the dominance of the commanding self (*nafs al-ammaarah*), infantile and domineering, in its unrestrained state.

⁵ Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (New York: Leiden, 1991), 170.

⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: ISTAC, 1995), 33.

That “unrestrained” submission to one’s appetites was seen by the 20th century American philosopher, Mortimer Adler, as a reversion to childlike behavior:

To give vent to all the promptings of desire, without regard to the demands of society or reality is to revert to infancy—a state characterized, according to Freud, by “the irreconcilability of its wishes with reality.” Because children “live at the beck and call of appetite, and it is in them that the desire for what is pleasant is strongest,” Aristotle thinks it fitting that we should speak of self-indulgence when it occurs in an adult as a “childish fault.”⁷

Similarly, the 14th century Egyptian poet, Imam al-Busiri, in his section on the caprices of the soul, cautions against letting desire take charge of one’s self:

*Do not attempt to break its appetites through wanton indulgence
Notice how food only strengthens the glutton’s craving*

*The self is like an infant – if you leave it, it will grow up loving to suckle,
But if you wean it, soon it will lose its desire for the breast.*

*Divert the self’s desires and avoid empowering it –
Whenever desire takes charge, it either destroys or defiles.*

*Shepherd over it as it grazes freely in the field of actions,
But should it find the pasturage sweet, restrain its casual roaming.*

*How often it has found some deadly pleasure delightful
Not knowing that poison lies hidden in cream!*

*Be on guard against its traps of hunger and satiety –
An empty stomach can be worse than a full one.*⁸

The wantonness and self-centered nature of the aesthete prevents him from any mature relationships; others are merely toys in his pursuit of infantile self-gratification and he is quite literally a “playboy.” Kierkegaard wisely identified the aesthete as being on a continuum of pleasure -- from the crude plebian pleasures of the brutish class to the rarified genteel pursuits of the elite. In other words, whether it is Oprah or opera, the sundry indulgences of humanity find the matrix of their pursuits in the same loci—the center of the self and its desires.

⁷ Mortimer Adler, *The Great Ideas: A Lexicon of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 151.

⁸ *The Burda of Al-Busiri*. Trans. by Hamza Yusuf (Essex: Sandala Ltd., 2002), 6.

Kierkegaard believed that each of us is confronted with a choice—an “Either/Or” choice. It is either to renounce our freewill and to choose not to choose in our pursuit of pleasure, or to embrace our true self and pursue not pleasure but the ethical life of virtue, which is rooted in commitment to others. He wrote:

What, then, is it that I separate in my Either/Or? Is it good and evil? No, I only want to bring you to the point where this choice truly has meaning for you. It is on this that everything turns. As soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads in such a way that there is no way out for him except to choose, he will choose the right thing... Consequently, either a person has to live esthetically or he has to live ethically.⁹

Profoundly important to this challenge is the understanding that in choosing the ethical life, one does not renounce pleasure. It simply becomes meaningful in ways unimaginable to the aesthete. Kierkegaard writes, “I am no ethical rigorist, enthusiastic about a formal, abstract freedom. If only the choice is posited, all the esthetic returns, and you will see that only thereby does existence become beautiful and that this is the only way a person can save his soul and win the whole world, can use the world without misusing it.”¹⁰ The pleasure monger can only misuse the world because he takes as means other people who should be seen as ends unto themselves. He exploits them for his pleasure or participates in their exploitation by feeding the machine that is exploiting them. The ethical person, on the other hand, is transparent to himself and hence to others. Kierkegaard states, “The person who lives ethically has seen himself, knows himself, penetrates his whole concretion with his consciousness, does not allow vague thoughts to rustle around inside him or let tempting possibilities distract him with their juggling; he is not like a magic picture that shifts from one thing to another, all depending on how one shifts and turns it.”¹¹ He can now develop in his life “the personal, the civic, the religious virtues, and his life advances through his continually translating himself from one stage to another.”¹²

This ethical life is the life of the second stage of the soul known in the Qur’an as the reproachful self (*nafs al-lawwaamah*). It is an introspective self that does not commit wrongs willfully but always strives to do what is right, and if the self gets the better of a person in this stage, he or she feels remorse and redresses the wrong. The ethical person may lust but will struggle against that impulse and, more importantly, will not “love to lust.” Commenting on the Qur’anic verse, “*Made to appear good to humanity is love of pleasure from spouses, children ...*” (3:14), Fakhr al-Deen al-Raazi writes:

⁹ *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, The Essential Kierkegaard*, 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82

Desire falls into two categories: physical and metaphysical. The physical desires are found in everyone immediately, but spiritual desires are revealed only after the physical ones are experienced by the self except in that rare individual. Thus, one's desire for bodily pleasures is something the self is naturally inclined toward and is a fixed faculty of the human, whereas his inclinations to spiritual delights come as a result of short-lived epiphanies that dissipate with the least of causes. Hence, it is of no surprise that the majority of people have extreme predilections toward bodily pleasures. As for spiritual predilections that only occurs among unusual people and only for periods that are limited in their duration. For this reason, God said, "*Made to appear good to humanity is love of pleasure.*"¹³

While these pleasures are not intrinsically negative, they become so with immoderate indulgence. Moderation is the route to an ethical life that results in happiness. Extremes on either side of the golden mean are physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually harmful. Both moral philosophy and religion warn of the dangers of intemperance, as expressed in gluttony, drug abuse, sexuality and other wanton behavior. Sidi Ahmad Zarruq, the fifteenth century scholar and Sufi master, said, "The self by its nature is inclined toward extremism in both guidance and deviance." Religion has too often been sexually repressive, such as the "religulous" categorization of masturbation as a mortal sin jeopardizing the eternal soul, which, in the light of social science's discovery of its ubiquitous nature, does not leave much room in hell for sinners. Moreover, shame-based societal efforts that use religion as a means of restraining licentious behavior end up failing if the behavior can be hidden from public view. The anonymity and privacy afforded by modern technology enables people to pursue their pleasures without fear of exposure and subsequent shame. Both religion, and a commitment to an ethical life outside of religion, can effectively address the problem for many individuals struggling to keep their lust in check.

From an ethical perspective, commitment is the ground of ethics. No man can respond virtuously without commitment. W. H. Auden alludes to this in his poem entitled "September 1, 1939":

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
"I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work."

It is a daily struggle to be committed, to not succumb to solipsistic egoism. Chastity, which is too often conflated with prudery, is not abstinence from sex but the ethical

¹³ Fakhr al-Deen al-Raazi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1990), 7-8: 170. Author's translation.

regulation of it. As Saint Thomas Aquinas stated: “It belongs to chastity that man may make a moderate use of bodily members in accordance with the judgment of his reason and the choice of his will.”¹⁴ Of profound importance for the well-being of men and women is the move beyond lust into the realm of love, which binds one person to another, as he or she is bound to oneself. Love is the gravitational force that holds families together and sustains even the common weal, for without some love of our fellow men and women, the common weal is without true defenders. Lust, on the other hand, is merely self-gratification. It is devoid of ethical responsibilities or a commitment to another. Dante, in his experience on the seventh cornice of lust, finds the penitents recalling the great acts of lust past:

“Sodom and Gomorrah,” the new souls cry.
And the others: “Pasiphae enters the cow
to call the young bull to her lechery.”

The reference to Pasiphae comes from Greek mythology in which Apollo and the nymph Perseis conceive Pasiphae. She becomes the wife of King Minos of Crete and the god Poseidon sends Minos a bull as a gift for sacrifice. Instead, Minos adds it to his herd of bulls. In revenge, Poseidon makes Pasiphae fall in love with the bull. She then commissions Daedalus to make an effigy of a cow with wicker and cover it with a hide so she can conceal herself inside and have the bull mount her. The result is the Minotaur, half bull, half human. The clear message is that lust gives birth to monsters.¹⁵

True love -- not the bestial “love” of lust -- is the desire to give pleasure to the other as well as receive it, the former being generally the stronger desire. But acts of betrayal can destroy love; it is chastity that enables one to ethically commit to another without the destructive element of betrayal. Marriage has been the foundation of not just advanced civilizations but aboriginal communities as well. It is intriguing that while many traditional cultures are seen as patriarchal in which marital taboos have maintained male dominance over the females, the reality is quite the opposite -- curtailing men’s lust by commitment to the marriage bed is the victory of distinctly female virtue over male nature.

In their book titled *Brain Sex*, Anne Moir and David Jessel address gender differences, albeit with some broad generalizations:

While men are turned on by glossily reproduced pubic regions of impersonal pin-up, women achieve moderate erotic stimulation from something very different—the imagination of a sexual relationship. Just as they are more likely to be aroused by the pornographic depiction of a couple coupling, they find gratification in the bodice-ripping romances of popular fiction, which have an overwhelmingly female readership.... Men

¹⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 151, Art. 1.

¹⁵ From *John Ciardi’s commentary on the Purgatorio of Dante* (New York: The Modern Library, 1996), 279, 284.

want sex, and women want relationships. Men want flesh and women want love. Just as the boys wanted the balloons, toys and carburetors, the girls have always wanted contact, and communion, and company.¹⁶

This assessment, though hyperbolic, is generally supported by what neuroscience is revealing to us about the way men's brains are wired as opposed to women's brains. And while there have been many positive outcomes in the past forty years and undeniable ground covered concerning the necessary rights of women leading to a more just society as a result of the women's movement, there has also been a concomitant downside. The sexual freedom that has accompanied the new found rights has had a tragic side effect that victimizes women. The predominately male characteristics of sex without love, pleasure without commitment, and desire for women without inhibitions have overturned the more communitarian female virtues of loving commitment, meaningful sex and modest social proprieties that engender respect of the opposite sex.

Chastity, while far too often perceived as an antiquated "woman's virtue," has been a steadfast guardian of human well-being and an effective restraint from falling into the potentially bottomless pit of lust and wantonness.

But human beings ultimately find more satisfaction from ethical, intellectual and spiritual awakenings than they do from sensual awakenings, especially when they are experienced within the nexus of moderation, virtue, and love. We often associate appetites with base instincts and neglect the very real rational and spiritual appetites of human beings.

Mortimer Adler writes:

Those psychologists who find in man two distinct faculties of knowledge—the senses and the reason or intellect -- also find in him two distinct faculties of appetite or desire. The distinction is perhaps most sharply made by Aristotle and Aquinas, who claim that "there must be one appetite tending towards the universal good, which belongs to reason, and another with a tendency towards the particular good, which appetite belongs to sense."¹⁷

When pure lust is sought after, the venues for intellectual and spiritual pleasure are often blocked. It is chastity which regulates one's sexual desire, enabling an exploration of the other necessary aspects of life that afford one a fully human experience.

Chastity (*'iffah*) in the Islamic tradition was, as in the Hellenistic and Christian tradition, seen as one of the four cardinal virtues, and one that protected the individual from his own destructive inclinations as well as the community from moral disintegration caused by licentiousness. And while Muslim society was notably far more sensual than European Christian culture in its respective history, the religious elite was constantly lashing out at

¹⁶ Anne Moir, Ph.D. and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women* (New York: Delta, 1991), 107.

¹⁷ Mortimer Adler, *The Great Ideas*, pg. 150.

the loose morals of many of the Muslim societies throughout their fourteen hundred years. Imam al-Ghazzaali, an influence on Aquinas and perhaps the single greatest Muslim religious thinker, says:

The virtue of chastity concerns the control of one's bodily appetites and sexual desires. It is in order to insure the self's subordination to its rational component so that its enjoyment or restraint is in accordance with one's intelligence. It is a moderate position between licentiousness and lack of desire. Wantonness is excessive sexual appetite and extreme pursuits of pleasure that the rational component rejects and forbids.... Thus, it is necessary that a man is vigilant about his appetites, as the majority of men err on the side of excessiveness, especially when it comes to the genitals and the stomach, not to mention money, power, and fame. Excess and deficiency are both blameworthy in regards to chastity.... The desire for sexual intercourse is natural in order that the species is compelled to procreate and to ensure the survival of the species. Hence it is sought after for two reasons—to have children and to remain chaste in the marital bond—and not simply for pastime and pleasure. And when one does seek enjoyment and sensual pleasure from the act, it is in order to ensure the maintenance of mutual love and affection to keep the bond of marriage strong through sexual pleasure.¹⁸

Al-Ghazzaali goes on to explain that the inculcation of modesty is essential to a chaste society. Modesty is not the same as excessive shyness or prudery that prevents people from fully participating in life; rather it is a sense of shame in relation to blameworthy traits that are rationally discernable and not simply societal norms that pass themselves off as universal morality. Modesty concerning sexual matters is deeply natural to the human being, but it can be stripped off a person, and films and visual media are unprecedented means to that end.

In Plato's *Philebus*, Protarchus states:

When we see someone, no matter whom, experiencing pleasures—and I think this is true especially of the greatest pleasure—we detect in them an element either of the ridiculous or of extreme ugliness, so that we ourselves feel ashamed, and do our best to cover it up and hide it away, and we leave that sort of thing to the hours of darkness, feeling that it should not be exposed to the light of day.¹⁹

The idea that sexuality is something best performed in the dark or behind closed doors is universal and found in other species; it is not limited to prudish puritans or priggish busybodies who, like “Old lady judges watch people in pairs / Limited in sex they dare /

¹⁸ Abu Hamid al-Ghazzaali, *Mizaan al-'Amal* (Egypt: Dar al-Ma'arif, n.d.), 269-270.

¹⁹ Plato: *The Collected Dialogues*, pg. 1148.

To push fake morals, insult and stare,”²⁰ but concerns decent people who recognize the threat that a sexualized culture presents to both children and people committed to marriage. The notion that viewing people in heightened states of pleasure is natural is a view pushed by pornographers and their victims. In reality, it is quite alien to most people around the world, and until recently, was limited to the dark recesses of the peep show or the windowless sex shops found in the sleaziest parts of a city. Voyeurism is a pejorative concept in English and yet pornography is essentially just that.

As Pamela Paul states, pornography is “anti-sex and anti-freedom.” She continues: “[Pornographers] have sold America on the idea of fantasy while inciting us to ignore reality. Those who have been silenced have only served to further legitimize pornography with their lack of censure.”²¹ It is only by sincerely examining the pernicious effects of pornography in the last thirty years, during which time it has been normalized, and by freeing ourselves from the prejudices of any one religious perspective, that we can come together and examine the social costs of lust-gone-wild and its impact on the most vulnerable segment of our culture: our youth.

It is now worth examining a mystical perspective to this argument that celebrates Kierkegaard’s third and most celestial life, the religious life. This life represents, in the Islamic tradition, the third and final stage of a human’s spiritual development designated in the Qur’an as the soul at peace (*nafs al-mutma’innah*). Both Christianity and Islam share the concept of the Beatific Vision: “Blessed are the pure at heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). Maintaining the heart’s purity is a particular focus of the Abrahamic faiths. The Qur’an says, “*On the Day of Judgment, nothing will avail a person, neither wealth nor children, only a pure heart*” (26: 88-89).

Purity of heart is a birthright. The innocence of children is celebrated everywhere and that is precisely why, of all the heinous and dark crimes of men, none elicits more revulsion than pedophilia, which is the defilement of a child’s innocence. We know that children must lose their sexual innocence eventually, but every decent parent’s desire is that it takes place in adulthood with mutual love and respect.

Lust is a manifestation of the Eros impulse that Sigmund Freud rightly identified as the great force of life that opposes our death instinct. When channeled into the pure love of another, it becomes life-affirming, enabling us to experience that person at the deepest and most intimate level with absolute presence in the moment. Simone Weil wrote:

Every desire for enjoyment belongs to the future and the world of illusion, whereas if we desire only that a being should exist, he exists: what more is there to desire? The beloved being is then naked and real, not veiled by an

²⁰ Bob Dylan, “It’s Alright, Ma.”

²¹ Pamela Paul, *Pornified*, 276.

imaginary future.... Thus in love there is chastity or lack of chastity according to whether the desire is or is not directed towards the future.²²

It is in the present that we can love and experience the divine in that love. The purity of that love is sustained by presence and destroyed by desiring something else at the time, whether it be another lover or simply the onanistic self-pleasure provided by an objectified human. According to Islamic and Christian tradition, the single most corrupting inroad into the heart is through the “concupiscence of the eye.”

Not for nothing does the Holy Scripture name “concupiscence of the eyes” among the three powers which constitute the world that “lieth in the power of evil” (1 John 2, 16; 5, 19). It reaches the extremes of its destructive and eradicating power when it builds itself a world according to its own image and likeness—when it surrounds itself with the restlessness of a perpetual moving picture of meaningless shows, and with the literally deafening noise of impressions and sensations breathlessly rushing past the windows of the senses. Behind the flimsy pomp of its façade dwells absolute nothingness; it is a world of, at most, ephemeral creations, which often within less than a quarter hour become stale and discarded, like a newspaper or magazine swiftly scanned or merely perused; a world, which, to the piercing eye of the healthy mind untouched by its contagion, appears like the amusement quarter of a big city in the hard brightness of a winter morning: desperately bare, disconsolate, and ghostly.

The destructiveness of this disorder, which originates from and grows upon obsessive addiction, lies in the fact that it stifles man’s primitive power of perceiving reality; it makes man incapable not only of coming to himself but also of reaching reality and truth.

If such an illusory world threatens to overgrow and smother the world of real things, then to restrain the natural wish to see takes on the character of a measure of self-protection and self-defense.²³

We live in a visual culture; never before has humanity been threatened by the devastating effects of concupiscence of the eyes. It is an appetite that desires not to perceive, but simply to be excited. “What this seeing strives for is not to attain knowledge and to become cognizant of the truth, but for possibilities of relinquishing oneself to the world,” writes Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Chastity of the eyes concerning its lust is the single most difficult form. Far easier is it for a man to abstain from an illicit physical encounter with a woman than to lower his gaze from an exposed cleavage. Yet according to the teaching of the Prophets, this too is adultery of the heart; its perniciousness is

²² Andre Comte-Sponville, *Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 180.

²³ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1966), 201-202.

perhaps of a lesser degree, but its effects on the soul are, over time, potentially devastating.

Add to natural desire the artificial exposure to pixilated images of naked forms on the computer and semi-clad pictures of men and women that bombard us from billboards and magazine covers on checkout-line shelves; such stimuli are so overwhelming that our culture's capacity to continue to generate real meaning is threatened. After reflecting upon the Mosaic injunction -- "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water beneath the earth" -- Neil Postman observed:

It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture.... People like ourselves who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction.²⁴

What is so incredibly troubling about our conversion to a print culture is that so much of it involves sexualized and sanitized images of the female body. Divorced from their humanity, airbrushed and presented in false and unnatural postures, with bee-stung lips, enhanced breasts and thighs acquired through punishing diets and grueling exercise, such pictures and films depicting the exploited model or porn star are a serious threat to every man's realistic expectations of a wife, mate, sister or mother, and women in general. Society's eyes are under assault, and that means our hearts are as well. The Qur'an advises men and women to lower their gaze when exposed to the opposite sex and attraction is felt: "*Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity; that is purer for their hearts, and God is aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they too should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appears.*" (24:30). Imam al-Ghazali says:

[Lust]²⁵ is nothing but a wellspring of excessive sexual desire, and is the disease of an empty and unconcerned heart. One should be on one's guard against its preliminaries by abstaining from repeated glances and thoughts. Otherwise it will take firm hold of one and be difficult to shake off.²⁶

We must keep in mind that the "repeated glances" al-Ghazali speaks of were in 11th century Iraq, a society extremely conservative in dress and behavior. The current crisis of image overload is something that far more easily corrodes the spiritual potential of a

²⁴ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: New Penguin Books, 1986), 9.

²⁵ Although Dr. Timothy Winter's translation is "amorous passion," the Arabic text says "*ishq*," and I prefer to use the word "lust," as that is clearly what al-Ghazzaali is referring to in this particular passage.

²⁶ Imam al-Ghazali, *Disciplining the Soul and Breaking the Two Desires*. Translated by Dr. Timothy Winter (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 169.

person. Any serious attempts at meditation, prayer, or even leisurely reading are affected by the images that have been allowed into the heart through the inroad of the eyes.

The Arabic word for “eye” is “*‘ayn*,” which also means “wellspring” and “essence.” The word for pupil is “*insaana*,” which also means “human being.” Hence, the eye is reflective of the essence of the human being, and its center is the pupil, created to witness the beauty of this world and gaze upon the beatific vision of the next. We are creatures designed to witness and reflect. The pupil constricts with worldly light and dilates in darkness and when stimulated by pleasure. Moulay al-Arabi al-Darqawi, the famous North African saint of the eighteenth century, wrote:

Oppose your passion and whims. If you do that you will see wonders. Good character [virtue] is Sufism with the Sufis and religion with the people of religion. You should always flee from the sensory as well since it is the opposite of the meanings. Two opposites are not joined together. Whenever you strengthen the senses, you weaken the meanings, and whenever you strengthen the meanings, you weaken the senses.... Each person has inner meanings just as the seas have waves. Had people known this, sensory things would not have distracted them from meanings. Had they known this, they would have found that inside themselves are oceans without a shore. God is the authority for what I say.²⁷

Al-Darqawi is, in essence, referring to pleasure, which Socrates has argued in the *Philebus* is important -- but only after truth, measure, reason, and right opinion. All of them relate to *meaning*. The meanings that lie hidden in the sexual experience are like waves of the ocean. However, they can only be revealed through an ethical commitment to love. In Islamic tradition, women have always been associated with the divine. Women are an apotheosis of divine mercy in the world, particularly embodied in the mother. The Prophet Muhammad said, “No one degrades women except vile and contemptible men.” Rumi says in his *Mathnawi*:

Made attractive to men is love of desires ...
God has made [woman] attractive, so how can men escape from her?
Even if a man is Rustam and greater than
Hamzah, still he is captive to his old woman’s command.
The Prophet, to whose speech the whole world
Was enslaved, used to say, “Speak to me, oh ‘Aishah!...”
The Prophet said that women totally dominate men of intellect and
possessors of heart,
But ignorant men dominate women, for they are shackled by the
ferocity of animals.
They have no kindness, gentleness, or love,
Since animality dominates their nature.

²⁷ Mawlay al-Arabi ad-Darqawiy, *The Darqawi Way: Letters of Mawlay al-Arabi ad-Darqawi* (Norwich: Diwan Press, 1979), 36.

Love and kindness are human attributes, anger and sensuality belong to the animals.

She is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved. She is the Creator – you could say she is not created.”²⁸

The 13th century Spanish scholar, philosopher, and mystic, Ibn Arabi, considered the most perfect contemplation of the divine in the world to be women. He writes:

In relation to the Prophet, women are as the Universal Nature is to God in which He revealed the forms of the Cosmos by directing toward it the divine will and command, which, at the level of elemental forms, is symbolized by copulation.... Whoever loves a woman in this way loves with divine love, while he whose love for them is limited to natural lust lacks all true knowledge of that desire. For such a one she is mere form, devoid of spirit, and even though that form is indeed imbued with spirit, it is absent for one who approaches his wife or some other woman solely to have his pleasure with her, without realizing whose the pleasure really is. Thus he does not know himself truly, just as a stranger is not known until he reveals his identity. As they say:

They are right in supposing that I am in love

Only they know not with whom I am in love.

Such a man is really in love with pleasure itself and, in consequence, loves its repository in women, the real truth and meaning of the act being lost on him. If he knew the truth, he would know whom it is he is enjoying and who it is who is the enjoyer; then would he be perfected.²⁹

In our Western tradition, William Blake wonderfully expresses a glimpse of this same meaning:

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God
The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

Chastity and purity have always been the great virtues that come naturally to women but which men must learn. The Qur’an uses Mary, the mother of Christ, as the great paragon of chastity and purity of the heart and describes her as an ideal. “*And God has made an example for those who believe of Mary who guarded her chastity, so We breathed some of Our spirit into her, and she confirmed the pronouncements and the scriptures of her Lord, and she was among the devout.* (66/11-12).”

²⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: the Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 169.

²⁹ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Translated by Ralph W. J. Austin. (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999), 275-278. I altered some wording based upon my Arabic edition of *Fusus al-Hikam*, Ibn Arabi. Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah:Beirut. 2004. Pg. 515-18.

It is from women then, that men learn chastity and purity, which in turn protect the sacred nature of women, alluded to in the Arabic word for woman, *hurmah*, which means “what is sacred.” Now, the failure of men in imitating women in their natural virtue has resulted in women rejecting the double standard and imitating men in their natural vice.

The spiritual power of women is great, but so too is the power of their physical attraction to men. It is this power that causes vile men to want to dominate women, and virtuous men to honor and protect them. But that physical power of the female form over men is a sensory power that veils men from her metaphysical meaning. Her sensual form prevents the man lost in carnality from knowing her spiritual reality, that she is the source of mercy in the world. The Arabic and Hebrew word for womb (*rahm*) is derived from the word for mercy (*rahma*) and an expression of the creative power of God in man. In degrading woman, we degrade the highest qualities of our human nature; in elevating her, we elevate our highest nature. When her natural virtues—compassion, kindness, caring, selflessness, and love—predominate in men, men are able to overcome their natural vices and realize their full humanity. When, however, those virtues are absent, men descend to the lowest of the low and are worse than beasts. In unveiling the outward beauty of a woman, we become veiled from her inward beauty.

As a poet from the distant past wrote:

I said to my rose-cheeked lovely, “O you with bud-like mouth,
Why keep hiding your face, like flirting girls?”
She laughed and said, “Unlike the beauties of your world,
In the veil I’m seen, but without it I’m hidden.”³⁰

³⁰ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 136.