



PORN AND RELATIONSHIPS

A discussion about the problem of
pornography by Matt Fradd



PORN AND RELATIONSHIPS

We've come a long way from Playboy. What used to be a back-alley industry has worked its way into the mainstream of western capitalism. Pornography, for all intents and purposes, is here to stay. Moreover, very few seem to be pitching a fit about it. Research shows only 1 in 20 young adults say their friends think viewing pornography is wrong.¹

For the Christian, the question presses in: amidst changing public sentiments, why not just give in and treat porn like a harmless pastime? Is porn really all that harmful to us?

I won't attempt to get the "last word" on this subject. In reality, no one but God will ever get the last word on any subject, and in our cosmopolitan society—indeed, in every society—it is only arrogant to assume we can accomplish such a feat.

So, instead of a last word, I would like to give you a "first word"—a place to start the discussion and, I hope, deliver a serious challenge to our culture.

My thesis is this: Pornography consumption, even in moderation, is detrimental to individuals, our most cherished relationships, and society at-large. And this is not merely the testimony of the church; it is the testimony of hard science.

Grow Pineapples and Invent Calculators

First, a caveat is probably in order. Christians, unfortunately, are pegged as prudish and anti-sex—as if we walk around with a haunting fear that perhaps someone, somewhere, might be having sex and actually enjoying it. Oh, the horror.

But, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. It is not a hatred or fear of sex that causes us to dislike porn, but rather our love for sex. Pornography is as much a celebration of sex as gluttony is a celebration of food. It is because we believe sex, sexual desire, and the human body are very, very *good that we oppose how they are cheapened—and nothing cheapens sex quite like porn.*

One doesn't have to go far in the Bible to see the goodness of sex. God's very first command to humanity is to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28)—and he doesn't mean he wants us to grow pineapples and invent calculators. In the beginning, God says sex is a celebration of the oneness of marriage (Genesis 2:24), testifying to the erotic bond created in the sexual act.

There's something about the naked human form that draws our eye, and rightly so—because all of us long to go back to the Garden where we were naked and unashamed (Genesis 1:25), before human sin made a mess of sex. The human body, in all its beauty, reveals the profound mystery of the human person, so to inherently desire sex is as natural as the day is long. But as St. Thomas Aquinas rightly said, sin is essentially “misdirected love.” Our culture's love of porn is, in some sense, predictable, but it is a misdirected love—channeling all the raw, creative power God infused into sex towards pixels on a screen.

How Bad Is It, Doc?

In an age where sex is worshipped, God's commands about sexuality are often seen as passé—as arbitrary rules leftover from a fastidious and narrow-minded past. But this flies in the face of what Christianity has always taught about God's moral law. His laws are not *arbitrary*. As our Creator, God knows exactly what will account for human flourishing, and his laws are written *for our good*.

Commenting on the sixth commandment, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 27:28). Our Lord gets to the heart of the commandment itself, and in doing so, directly prohibits all forms of pornography today. The Catechism gives three reasons why (2354)...

1. Pornography “offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other.” Our Creator has made us as sexual beings, and our sexuality is not personal or truly human unless it is used to foster a lifelong mutual bond between a man and a woman. Pornography perverts sexuality by ripping it away from the intimacy of partners in order to make sex an exhibition.
2. “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.” We are creatures made in the image of God, with an inherent dignity, and pornography expressly denies this because it turns people into products.
3. “It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world.” The Porn Industry uses this form of mass entertainment to sell us an illusion of meaning. We buy into

the ridiculous notion that it's actually cool to masturbate alone to eroticized images of people who are only pretending to like you.

Porn is Bad for Individuals

Science is finally catching up to the truth the church has always proclaimed: that pornography does grave injury to us as people—even in moderate amounts.

In the last several years, about a dozen studies have been published showing strong correlations between porn use and brain dysfunctions.² Using a variety of neurological study methods (fMRI, MRI, EEG, neuroendocrine, etc.) researchers have made many disturbing findings...

- The more porn you use, the more the neural connections between your reward circuits and your prefrontal cortex are disrupted. In other words, your ability to control your impulses becomes weaker.
- The more porn you use, the less “grey matter” you have in your brain’s dorsal striatum. In layman’s terms: porn wears out your brain’s reward system, and you become desensitized, leaving you with a numbed pleasure response to sex.
- The more porn you use, the greater your amygdala volume—also seen in people with attachment disorders and those with chronic social stress. In other words, porn only leaves you with a profound sense of detachment from others.
- The more porn you use, the more your brain habituates to novel sexual images. In layman’s terms, this means porn leads to ED or low libido with romantic partners.

Every peer-reviewed study published on the subject points in the same direction: over time, porn does not enhance our brain's sexual enjoyment; it dilutes it. Pornography weakens our self-mastery, conditions our bodies only for fantasy sex, and drives us further and further into a life of detachment.

And this isn't merely for the people "addicted" to the material—everyone agrees porn can be used in excess. In reality, addiction is not a binary thing. There is no invisible line one crosses between "not-an-addict" and "addict." It is a gradual thing. Asking when one becomes an addict is like asking when a cucumber becomes a pickle.

While we are sexual beings, our physiology simply isn't built for the kind of detached, on-tap, and made-to-order sex that porn delivers. We were made for something much better—made for, as the Catechism says, "the intimate giving of spouses to each other" (2354).

Porn is Bad for Relationships

It follows, if porn warps the circuits of our brains, this will naturally impair our ability to relate well to others. And unsurprisingly, the science bears this out as well.

Back in the early 1980s, when video pornography was not yet widespread, researchers from Indiana University and the University of Houston exposed volunteers to less than 50 minutes of non-violent pornography, once a week for six weeks—a fairly low dose compared to today's high-speed-Internet standards.³ Their findings were unsettling...

- Even this small amount of porn exposure had a profound impact on participants' overall sexual satisfaction, showing that consumers eventually compared the appearance and

performance of pornographic models with that of their intimate partners.

- The more porn one consumed, the more attracted participants became to the idea of casual sex (sex without emotional involvement), the more accepting they became of adultery, and the less attracted they were to the ideas of marriage or having children.
- The more porn one consumed over time, the less likely participants would show support for women's rights, and the more likely they were to see women as sex objects—and this went for both male and female participants.

Since then, these findings have been repeated in numerous studies.⁴ Add to this the studies showing the correlation between Internet porn use, loneliness, and depression,⁵ and it is easy to see why porn doesn't fair well for committed relationships.

This is because, for the human brain, the big *O of sex is not orgasm*, but *oneness*—bonding and connecting with another human being. It is written into the very fabric of our hearts and minds, as the Catechism states, “In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion” (2360). Among all God's creatures, we are the only ones that can choose to use sex outside of mere instinct, as a means of forging a lifelong bond. Pornography doesn't just tease our drive for connection; it discourages empathy altogether. Porn doesn't complement intimacy; it competes with it.

Porn is Bad for Society

It also follows that if porn is bad for our closest romantic and family relationships, it does no favors to the overall health of society.

I am reminded here of the example given by Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis who posited a scenario of an imaginary country where you can fill a theater by simply bringing a covered plate to a stage, slowly lift the cover so as to let everyone see, and just before the lights go out, reveal a mutton chop or a bit of bacon on the platter. Lewis asks, “Would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food?”

The same is true in our society as far as our sex instinct goes. More and more, pornographic standards have entered mainstream exhibition, art, and entertainment, and we are paying the price for this as a society—especially women.

- Consider how the average person can't tell the difference between misogynistic and abusive statements printed in racy men's magazines and statements from convicted rapists.⁶
- Consider that those who consistently look at even vanilla, non-violent pornography are more likely to support statements that promote abuse of women and girls.⁷
- Consider how, in the top-selling pornographic films, nearly half of the scenes contain acts of verbal aggression and 88% of the scenes contain acts of physical aggression—and most of these aggressive acts are done towards women who are paid to act as if they enjoy it.⁸ (The point is not so much the effects of this material—though that is a potential concern—but the fact that this is exactly what consumers demand. This isn't the fringe stuff: it is the top-selling pornography.)
- Consider that research from over 40 studies shows the more porn people watch, the more likely it is they will accept “rape myths” (beliefs like, “Women walking around wearing *that* are asking for trouble,” or “Most reports of rape are false,” or “If a girl goes home with a guy, it's her fault if she gets raped.”)⁹

While obviously no one believes all or most porn consumers eventually become violent rapists, in the end, mainstream pornography trains us to believe sex is ultimately about power, not intimacy. In a pornified world, women are taught they must choose between being sexually available or invisible. In a pornified world, manhood is not measured by virtues like sacrifice and charity, but “getting it up and getting off.” No, most men who watch porn are not abusers, but a world saturated with porn is a world where a man’s sexual arousal depends on feeling dominant over a woman, a world where women are presented as objectified bodies whose primary, or only, function is to provide sexual pleasure for men.

The Catechism states it succinctly, that in creating us male and female, “God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity” (2334). If we want to create a society where women are seen as equals, where consent is taken seriously, and where misogyny is frowned upon, porn is the opposite kind of teacher we need.

We Can Change

The porn industry is here to stay, but as a society, how much of a foothold it has is up to each of us. And while breaking the habit isn’t as simple as flipping off a switch, there has never been more help available. Everyday, men and women are turning to the help of spiritual directors, therapy, and supportive communities and leaving pornography behind them.

If the essence of the gospel is, “This is my body given for you,” porn presents an opposite ethic: “This is your body taken by me.” The good news is, in turning away from porn, we don’t walk away empty. We can choose a gospel love that fills us to overflowing.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. What part of this article challenged you the most and why?**
- 2. People often think pornography, “doesn’t hurt anyone.” How do you view this statement after reading this article?**
- 3. The article argues that porn is bad for individuals, relationships, and society. Have you witnessed any of these problems in our culture?**
- 4. What aspects of this issue are you still wrestling with?**
- 5. How do you think God is asking you to grow with respect to this teaching?**

Top 5 Resources

To learn more about the destructive nature of pornography and how to heal from it, be sure to check out these five resources:

1. The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography (ThePornMyth.com)
2. The Victory App (TheVictoryApp.com)
3. Fortify Online Recovery Program (FortifyProgram.org)
4. Love People Use Things Podcast (LovePeopleUseThings.fm)
5. Covenant Eyes Accountability Software (CovenantEyes.com)

Endnotes

¹ Barna Research, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age*.

² Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat, "Brain Structure and Functional Connectivity Associated With Pornography Consumption," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71 (2014):827-834; Valerie Voon, et al., "Neural Correlates of Sexual Cue Reactivity in Individuals with and without Compulsive Sexual Behaviours," *PLoS ONE* 9(7): e102419 (2014); Daisy J. Mechelms, et al., "Enhanced Attentional Bias towards Sexually Explicit Cues in Individuals with and without Compulsive Sexual Behaviours," *PLoS ONE* 9(8): e1054762014 (2014); Paula Banca, et al., "Novelty, conditioning and attentional bias to sexual rewards," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 72 (2016):91-101; Ji-Woo Seok and Jin-Hun Sohn, "Neural Substrates of Sexual Desire in Individuals with Problematic Hypersexual Behavior," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 9 (2015):321; Andreas Chatzittofis, et. al., "HPA axis dysregulation in men with hypersexual disorder," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 63 (2016):247-253; Casper Schmidt, et. al., "Compulsive sexual behavior: Prefrontal and limbic volume and interactions," *Human Brain Mapping* (2016); Mateusz Gola, et. al., "Can Pornography be Addictive? An fMRI Study of Men Seeking Treatment for Problematic Pornography Use," *Neuropsychopharmacology* (2017); Matthias Brand, et. al., "Ventral striatum activity when watching preferred pornographic pictures is correlated with symptoms of Internet pornography addiction," *NeuroImage* 129 (2016):224-232; Tim Klucken, et. al., "Altered Appetitive Conditioning and Neural Connectivity in Subjects With Compulsive Sexual Behavior," *NeuroImage* (2016); Paula Banca, et. al., "Compulsivity Across the Pathological Misuse of Drug and Non-Drug Rewards," *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 13 (2016):627-636; Michael H. Miner, et. al., "Preliminary investigation of the impulsive

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³ Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, "Effects of massive exposure to pornography," in *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (New York: Academic Press, 1984); Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, "Shifting preferences in pornography consumption," *Communication Research* 13 (1986): 560-578; Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, "Pornography's impact on sexual satisfaction," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 18 (1988): 438-453; Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, "Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography on Family Values," *Journal of Family Issues* 9 (1988): 518-544.

⁴ Nathaniel M. Lambert, et. al., "A Love That Doesn't Last: Pornography Consumption and Weakened Commitment to One's Romantic Partner," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 31 (2012):31410-438; Jochen Peter and Patti M. Valkenburg, "Adolescents' exposure to online sexually explicit material, sexual uncertainty, and attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration: Is there a link?" *Communication Research* 35 (2008): 579-601; Jochen Peter and Patti M. Valkenburg, "Adolescents' exposure to a sexualized media environment and their notions of women as sex objects," *Sex Roles* 56 (2007): 381-395; James Weaver, Jonathan Masland, and Dolf Zillmann, "Effect of erotica on young men's aesthetic perception of their female sexual partners," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 58 (1984): 929-930; Elisabet Haggstrom-Nordin, et. al., "Associations between pornography consumption and sexual practices among adolescents in Sweden," *International Journal of STDs & AIDS* 16 (2005): 102-107; Ven-hwei Lo and Ran Wei, "Exposure to Internet Pornography and Taiwanese Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49 (2005): 221-237; Elizabeth M. Morgan, "Association between

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⁵ Vincent Cyrus Yoder, Thomas B. Virden III, and Kiran Amin, "Internet Pornography and Loneliness: An Association?" *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 12 (2005): 19-44; Michele L. Ybarra and Kimberly J. Mitchell, "Exposure to Internet Pornography among Children and Adolescents: A National Survey," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 8 (2005): 473-486.

⁶ Miranda A. H. Horvath, et. al., "Lights on at the end of the party": Are lads' mags mainstreaming dangerous sexism?" *British Journal of Psychology* (2011).

⁷ Scot B. Boeringer, "Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Associations of Violent and Nonviolent Depictions with Rape and Rape Proclivity," *Deviant Behavior* 15 (1994):289–304; Gert Martin Hald, Neil M. Malamuth, and Carlin Yuen, "Pornography and Attitudes Supporting Violence Against Women: Revisiting the Relationship in Nonexperimental Studies," *Aggression and Behavior* 36 (2010): 14–20.

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⁹ Jill Manning, "Hearing on pornography's impact on marriage & the family," U.S. Senate Hearing: Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights, Committee on Judiciary, Nov. 10, 2005.

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