



Pornography and the Spirit of a Man: A Severe Mercy

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Abstract

The harm of the use of pornography is clear within Catholic circles and in some secular circles, including those involved with understanding neuroplasticity, but there seems to be a difficulty with the behavioral psychologists. Neuroplasticity is the readiness of the brain to adapt to new information by an actual rewiring of neural connections and a re-sculpting of neural areas. It appears that the re-sculpting characteristic of habitual pornography viewing is no different from what is characteristic of chemical or other addictions. Although Catholic and Christian models of response to pornography are philosophically and theologically cogent, they may have a human insufficiency if they underestimate the dimension of addiction. Secular models, on the other hand, have become somewhat committed to affirming the innocence of pornography, and evidence against that is hard to swallow. Both Catholic and secular models, may have been blind-sided by the suddenly expanded availability of pornography through the introduction of high-speed internet. What is available now is so far beyond what was available not merely in the fifties, but in the 90's and the turn of the 21st century.

A virtue-based approach could provide a synthetic answer to the problem of pornography on the condition that virtue is understood, with St. Thomas, as a reordering of the passions, of the whole emotional system, and not just of the intellect and will, the executive system. Indeed, the concern in addiction is the connection between executive intelligence and the directed emotional energy which actually governs our actions. More on that.

There is a further issue.

Research into sinful activities raises ethical issues if you are asking participants to practice morally harmful actions so you can evaluate their effects. Ethical research will require a new approach, including a humble and creative consideration of existing information; it cannot always be behavioral experimentation. That is why brain imaging is such a boon.

Introduction

No Catholic doubts that pornography is sinful, and the world of counselors who encourage the use of pornography to 'bring a spark' into marital relations is presumably exclusively secular. Nevertheless, it's a big world, and the pressure on Catholic counselors must be very great, for pornography is mainstream, without any brakes on its cultural intrusion; indeed, it would be hard to put brakes on a worldwide, \$97 billion enterprise.

Nevertheless, it is clear to researchers inside and outside of the faith that the presentation of sex in an impersonal and violent manner affects everyone's sensitivities and behavior (Eberstadt & Layden, 2010). Children are beginning habitual viewing of pornography as young as 11 years, substantially ahead of sexual development. Even adults are hardly prepared to understand what unlimited high-speed access to erotic scripts will really mean for them and whether a marriage will be sparked or short-circuited by sharing such images between marital partners, as presently recommended by many marriage counselors.

Is it addiction?

Into this confusion, as a kind of severe mercy, new sexual disorders have descended, including erectile dysfunction, making users question habits they had come to accept as normal. Erectile dysfunction is not new, of course, but it has become a disorder of younger men, in their twenties or thirties, not their fifties or sixties, recently even in their teens. Medical doctors may prescribe Viagra, but it does not work very well, because it addresses problems of blood pressure and that is not the issue here: the problem is in the brain. It's like an addiction. The more you get of porn, the more you want; the more intense

it is, the more extremities you seek and the more you need for the same high. So, it is definitely like an addiction, but is it one? That is the question.

There are solid reasons for saying it is, and if so, a Catholic counselor needs to understand the extra dimension that this conclusion implies.

Shaded eyes

A further issue also cries out for Catholic moral attention. This issue does not appear in the professional literature, but in personal withdrawal, or “re-booting” accounts. Men say that as they drop porn, they regain the ability to look people in the eyes. This is the condition of empathic communication. If it is at risk with porn, it is infinitely more serious than erectile dysfunction.

We call some sins mortal, because they threaten the entire spiritual life of a person. If pornography addiction threatens the ability of a person to look into another’s eyes, it threatens personal communion. How likely is it that communion with God can survive?

We begin with a sketch of pornography research in general and in reference to erectile dysfunction. Serious ethical issues are immediately evident. Following that, a discussion of how addiction works will prepare us to consider why pornography addiction is likely to happen, how it has been doubted, and what resources are available to the Catholic counselor.

The Literature

Ethical issues

From an ethical perspective, research into the use of pornography is seriously problematic. Participants are sometimes asked to watch even more porn than they already have been, and their personal empathy before and after watching is then tested. Since the immediate and universal finding is that people become less empathic, less troubled by the sufferings of others, specifically less sympathetic to a woman’s possible distress in a situation of rape, how many such tests can still claim to be ethical?

It is offered that the most persuasive results, would require (Kuhn and Gallinat, 2014) that you take recruits who have never watched porn, and see how it changes them to watch a few hours a day or a week. The ethical violation is clearer here, and only one study is reported in which innocence was implicitly, though not directly, at issue. Actors were hired and participants were to show them some videos. Participants were told that some actors were sexually conservative but they had the option of exposing them to pornography or to other material; many chose to expose them to porn. That was a sinful choice whether or not the actors were “conservative” about pornography.

Genuinely ethical research would involve asking people who are already watching pornography to quit for a while. One study did that (Negash, Shappard, Lambert, & Fincham, 2015) for three weeks, but although the effect was unambiguously positive, even in so short a period, there has been no follow-up research. There are websites dedicated to helping people stop watching porn, but the information that these sites might supply is ignored, the claim being that those who wish to stop may be a very special (and therefore irrelevant) group. In their millions! Meantime, getting people to stop when they don’t want to is impractical. So ethical research is on hold.

One might reasonably question whether this is an acceptable state of affairs.

Research on ED and Pornography

Possibly because the psychological professionals have been recommending porn as a marriage enhancer, they are not eager to see it criticized. Prause and Pfaus, (2015) chose to research whether watching porn causes erectile dysfunction (ED), a claim that appears repeatedly in the personal stories on pornography withdrawal sites. Over three weeks, the researchers claimed to notice that viewing pornography strengthened erectile performance, and concluded that ED as a consequence of porn use is a myth; the reverse is true. Porn helps.

Nobody is claiming that ED will follow pornography consumption in 3 weeks, and of course pornography, in the moment, often strengthens function; that is why it is attractive. This non-serious report is the principal finding in the psychological literature on the topic of erectile dysfunction and pornography; that is, the professional literature, to which any student of psychology has access on the worldwide catalog of professional publications, has dismissed the vast and grievous personal witness of ED as a myth; there can be no such consequence of viewing pornography. Information on the dangers of pornography must be sought elsewhere. We begin with the brain research.

Brain on Porn

Neuroplasticity refers to the somewhat unexpected fact that learning so molds the nerves and so marks the brain that you can catch it on an MRI. You can image a man's brain, let him practice juggling for a few months, and get another image that shows greater nerve density in the visual-spatial areas of his brain. In time, without juggling, some of this density diminishes, but the outline is still there. Next time he tries juggling, he'll have a head start.

What happens is that, when in use, individual nerve cells put out more dendrites so as to connect with a larger array of other nerves, allowing the juggler to act more quickly and efficiently on relevant information: where is the ball now; how far do I reach to get it precisely on time; where shall I toss it next, and how hard? All that in a split second, with proper messaging to every muscle involved. Juggling is not an addiction of course. It's just to say that the brain sculpts itself in response to use.

Gray matter

The ventral striatum, which includes the nucleus accumbens, is a region of the brain that lies between the frontal lobes, which govern executive function, and the limbic system, including the amygdala, where we experience rewards and the emotions that motivate us to act. When an intensely rewarding event such as a dose of amphetamine — or orgasm — is experienced, the brain responds with new neurons and chemical markers to help the individual remember how to get that experience again. The brain regions involved in this process have normal and obvious functions: the sex reward ensures the survival of the species, a good thing on the whole.

But what evolutionary function does amphetamine reward have? None at all, of course! Amphetamine access is actually anti-evolutionary in the sense that it makes people, and also rats, do stupid things that don't feed them, don't educate them, and don't protect their young. But amphetamines use the circuits made for sex. These circuits involve the release of dopamine, which says: "Go get it;" Delta FosB is released to hold the memory in place; and the person, or the rat, never forgets how he got his fix.

Dopamine

Now, if a user lived in a park, (Bruce, 2010) with delicious food and plenty of friends and dating opportunities, he might not go for another fix, but life being what it is, the day is likely to come when his

food supply is low, his preferred date is occupied, and the drug is right there. If this situation persists for a while, he may go for the drug again, and then again and again, until he forgets to check how life is progressing “outside.”

Pornography with masturbation (which is its most common accompaniment) accesses the same dopamine circuits as marital sex. That is why some people seem to find that regular sex is enhanced by porn; for a while, arousal may well be increased. Unfortunately it is increased without the involvement of the empathic or personal awareness centers of the brain, and with an increasing disengagement of the executive centers. In fact, there may be a strong executive *disengagement* if these centers are expressing disapproval or caution, or if they are trying to bring up various responsibilities that could interfere with pleasure. Let me emphasize this point.

Caudate Nucleus

People who watch porn regularly have diminished gray matter density in the caudate nucleus compared those who don't (Kühn & Gallinat, 2014), and this is true even when they are compared with people who have a non-pornographic Internet addiction. The caudate nucleus is responsible for messaging between the prefrontal cortex, the executive or thoughtful-decision center in the brain, and the amygdala, the emotion center. If the caudate nucleus is not messaging well, then the emotions are being cut loose from the intellect. We can put it another way: the inclination towards pornography will be harder to resist if the avenue along which the executive system communicates with limbic system is repeatedly shushed. All functions of the brain are “use it or lose it” functions.

Thus, the effective meaning of “less gray matter” in the ventral striatum is: less communication between the executive and the emotion-processing centers in the brain.

Basically, then, the executive area is losing traction, while the emotion centers are cut loose. Putting your executive functions in charge of your emotional responses is, of course, the very stuff of developing virtue; unfortunately, in the situation of pornography usage, this re-ordering must be undertaken while the most important mediating brain structures are compromised.

Addiction Support

If this description of heavy use of pornography is correct, then it is actually addictive, not just metaphorically. Curiously, the DSM-5, (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, version 5) which lists gambling and even shopping addictions, and which is therefore comfortable with the idea of a behavioral addiction, has first relegated pornography addiction to the limbo of further study and then dropped it altogether. Yet, the springing into existence of numerous and vast websites dedicated to helping people quit their pornography habits suggests that a lot of people are suffering something which they themselves have come to perceive as addiction. Gary Wilson (2015), who hosts one such website, says his addiction withdrawal or “re-booting” site, has 20,000 unique visitors a day, unique meaning: not including those who return twice in one day. He says there are two porn addiction withdrawal sites in China which have, together, over a million visitors, and there are many other sites in the US and worldwide.

Withdrawal

Not only that, these websites allow their visitors to post, for each others' encouragement, their re-booting experiences, which sound exactly like withdrawal from drugs and alcohol: craving, tremors, anxiety, lethargy, depression, brain fog, sleeping abnormalities, restlessness, agitation, aches, and temporary loss of libido — including erectile dysfunction.

Erectile dysfunction

Erectile dysfunction hits pornography addicts very hard. Apparently it happens because the physiological tax on the person's system finally becomes so great that the body just checks out. Viagra doesn't help because this is not about blood pressure: quitting helps. Normal erectile function can return within a few days, or a few weeks... or a few months. In the case of the longer time frames, the support of others in re-boot is very important.

Given an open physiological path and the witness of suffering, there is no reason for Catholics to await further research on this one.

Locating the Disorder

Before Catholics can take the initiative, however, there is one issue to clarify. Patrick Williams (2014) identifies men's problem with porn as something that begins and ends in narcissism. He sees it as a turning within for satisfaction. But pornography is more sex-centered, more an issue of sensuality, than self-centered, an issue of pride.

What is disordered?

There are three basic kinds of psychological disorders, narcissistic personality disorders, corresponding to the sins of pride, impulse control disorders, corresponding to the sins of sensuality, and developmental disorders, which generally have no moral import.

Pornography addiction is undoubtedly about impulse control, for its purpose is not merely to view women's bodies, which might be an issue of pride or of misunderstood beauty, but to enable longer, stronger sessions of self-stimulation. The reason that this is growing exponentially right now is that high-speed internet allows access to so many more images, \$97 billion worth annually worldwide; \$13 billion in the US, according to Williams (2014). These many images are important because intense self-sex depends on brain functions that are strengthened by novelty, and this is what the Internet can deliver so effectively.

There is more. The dopamine spike that brings the most pleasure can be upped by a little adrenalin. That means that shock and violence in the pornography increase the intensity of the pleasure. Thus the modern plague of pornography is about a wildly disordered pursuit of addicting pleasure with increasingly degraded and violent imagery. The beauty of a woman's body is barely relevant. For that matter, women are also watching pornography, an issue beyond the scope of this paper.

A Severe Mercy

These complications and the associated withdrawal symptoms should suffice to indicate that we are not dealing with pride or with an error of judgment about visual beauty, but a great harm in sensuality. In this context, we may use the phrase C.S. Lewis introduced – “a severe mercy.” No amount of preaching has been able to break through the fog of secular promotion of pornography viewing, but loss of intimate function has men asking: did I do something wrong?

Coming Clean

When a viewer stimulates his own sexual response again and again over several hours, the dopamine high from his own brain, and perhaps also the following opiate high from the same location, is massive. When the session is over, he sleeps, the dopamine drops, and he wakes up in a low mood —

hung over. He might have work responsibilities, and he might meet them as well as he can, but he mostly wants another fix. It is one click away. Not even that, since his body and his fantasy are ever present, though not as strong as the click.

He will never overcome his addiction until he gives up all these opportunities, just as an alcoholic needs to give up light beer, not just whisky. This means steely discipline of mind and body, not only of digital media. Turning to other addictive substances — alcohol and sugar bingeing — still maintains the dopamine cycle, so such solutions, which carries their own dangers, are, in any case, only marginally effective.

Supposing a man sets out to face these challenges, — and there are medications to help him as for any addict, — there is yet another hurdle, flatline. A man may find that his critical body part goes completely flaccid and unresponsive, seeming even to shrink. For a man whose life has become centered on his sexuality, this is the last insult; and, appearing at the moment he initiates recovery, it is enough to make him suicidal. It can last for days, weeks, months.

Many factors

Each man is different; each has his own history: it depends partly on whether he began to use pornography in his formative years or later in life; it also depends on the usual contributing issues of childhood and family trauma, other addictions that may have come aboard, and the availability of supportive relationships, wisdom, prayer, religious fellowship... Forgiveness is bound to be important, as it is in all personal healing (Kleponis, & Fitzgibbons, (2010).

Eyes have it

One more area in the brain ought to be considered, especially within the Catholic community. Recovering addicts say that they regain the ability to look people in the eye. Although there is (as yet, in 2017) no MRI to prove it, this implies the regeneration of the anterior cingulate gyrus, home of the mirror neurons where we practice empathy by watching another person's face and meeting his eyes. This is another brain area that mediates between executive and emotional functions and it is also known to be compromised in drug addiction.

Meditation

Most intriguingly, this particular area, the anterior cingulate, also lights up during every type of meditation, implying that the practice of meditation could enhance addiction recovery, both in the neuro-executive sense (since the anterior cingulate is another area that mediates between executive and emotional functions) and in the sense of restoring personal communion. Catholics certainly have a good tradition of meditative prayer, though it is not always emphasized equally with liturgical and vocal prayer. The plague of internet pornography addiction might be a call to change that.

Pornography and beauty

As Williams suggests, beauty undoubtedly has a role to play, since it always produces a change in consciousness, and this is essential to healing. It is perhaps why Pope Benedict quotes Dostoyevsky, saying that "beauty will save the world." Nevertheless, the idea that the problem with pornography is a confusion about beauty seems more applicable to the porn of twenty or even fifty years ago. Rehabilitative talk about beauty and creation may be appropriate for men who began intermittent brief pornography viewing after maturity and want to break a sinful habit, not an addiction. But when Williams says that the

problem is narcissism, it may be that he does not understand the depth of the emotional chaos presently in play, or the disorder of the passions, and not only of the mind.

It seems important also to state that pornographic images, especially down the high-speed internet road, are not beautiful by any standard. They are merely interactive with the viewer's activities and the chemistry of his brain. If they make him despise the beauty of a real woman's body, and they commonly do, it is not because they are more beautiful, but essentially because they are more exaggerated, and in the end, specifically, because they are more violent. Men in pornography recovery report that, after a while, if they come across pornography they once viewed, they find it both childish and repulsive. The tenderness and personal communion of a real woman is miraculously beautiful to them, indescribably lovely — once it is possible.

A Catholic Occasion

Catholics are clear that pornography is wrong. Moreover, we are well able to locate the harm of it in the context of the beauty of the human body, the dignity of the person, the call to virtue, and the joy of personal communion, even communion with God. A Catholic institution should easily summon the will to extend the very slight research on pornography withdrawal. Data points abound at withdrawal sites and the professional refusal to follow up on them is disturbing.

The present crisis can be an occasion for greater clarity about the power of the full evangelium to open up the vista of human life on earth.

May our Lady keep us!

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gaged in porn gave it up for 3 weeks to see the results, which were measurable and positive.

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This is the (non-professional) report of an anatomy and physiology teacher and the owner of a secular pornography recovery website that claims to average 20,000 unique visitors a day. It includes reviews of professional literature on the emerging topic of pornography addiction and recovery as well as numerous personal accounts of men in recovery. In view of the ethical problems with experimentation on pornography, an existing large community of ex-consumers is a valuable data source. The accounts are matter for sorrow and seriousness about this scourge. Nobody could read this site and continue to take porn for granted. It is harmful.