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A New Look at Lust: The Secular View

*Philosopher Simon Blackburn argues that lust “gets a bad press.” His project, based on a lecture sponsored by the New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, is to rescue lust from misunderstandings and historical abuse. In his book, *Lust*, Blackburn presents an updated vision of lust as sexual desire for its own sake. If lust now has a bad press, Blackburn wants to be its public relations agent.*

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When philosopher Simon Blackburn was invited to present a lecture on one of the Seven Deadly Sins, he feared he would be asked to address sloth. “I did worry,” he said, “not because of unfamiliarity with the vice, but because of doubts about having the energy to find something to say about it.”

As it turned out, Blackburn was not invited to speak about sloth. Instead, he was invited to address the issue of lust, and on that topic he found enough energy to say a good deal about a vice that has driven humanity throughout the ages.

Lust, Blackburn argues, “gets a bad press.” His project, based on his lecture sponsored by the New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, is to rescue lust from misunderstandings and historical abuse. He does acknowledge that lust has a bad reputation. “It’s the fly in the ointment, the black sheep of the family, the ill-bread, trashy cousin of upstanding members like love and friendship. It lives on the wrong side of the tracks, lumbers around elbowing its way into too much of our lives, and blushes when it comes into company.”

Blackburn is a philosopher of wide reputation who has taught at the University of North Carolina, Oxford University, and the University of Cambridge. He is an excellent writer who combines both style and wit. In recent years, he has written *Think* and *Being Good*, two works intended to introduce philosophical subjects to a general readership. In those books, Blackburn presents a fundamentally secular understanding of life and a rather dispassionate engagement with philosophical and moral issues.

In his new book, *Lust*, Blackburn presents an updated vision of lust as sexual desire for its own sake. If lust now has a bad press, Blackburn wants to be its public relations agent.

Lust is inevitably compared with love. Blackburn understands the quandary, noting: “We smile at lovers holding hands in the park. But we wrinkle our noses if we find them acting out their lust under the bushes. Love receives the world’s applause. Lust is furtive, ashamed, and embarrassed. Love pursues the good of the other, with self-control, concern, reason, and patience. Lust pursues its own gratification, headlong, impatient of any control, immune to reason.”

As a moral philosopher, Blackburn understands that love requires knowledge, reason, and time, combined with truth and trust. Lust, on the other hand, is symbolized by “a trail of clothing in the hallway” that represents a loss of reason, self-control and discipline.

Needless to say, lust has been a part of human desire and human experience ever since the Fall. Blackburn, who provides no evidence of even believing in anything like sin, sees lust as one of the greatest moral challenges facing modern individuals. “Living with lust,” he says, “is like living shackled to a lunatic.” Frankly, it’s hard to improve upon that description.

Much of the difficulty in addressing the issue of lust in our modern times can be traced to the highly sexualized character of contemporary culture. Even if lust is reducible to sexual desire (rather than desire for power, money, or other

goods), it is increasingly difficult to separate lust from the ordering of everyday life. Sex has lost its public shamefulness, moral boundaries have been pulled down in the name of moral “progress,” and overt sexuality now drives much of our entertainment, advertising, and cultural conversation. How is lust to be separated from all that?

Blackburn defines lust as “the enthusiastic desire, the desire that infuses the body, for sexual activity and its pleasures for their own sake.” That definition is more sophisticated than may at first appear. Blackburn combines powerful concepts like enthusiasm, desire, sexual activity, and pleasure, but focuses his definition of lust on the desire for sexual pleasure for its own sake. This elevation of sexual desire, stripped of moral context and boundaries, well represents lust as it appears in our contemporary world.

The ancients identified the Seven Deadly Sins as pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth. The entire panoply of human sinfulness was, they believed, traced to one of these root sins and the deadly effects that follow. The Christian church embraced the notion of the Seven Deadly Sins and joined them to the Seven Heavenly Virtues, identified as prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity. Presumably, temperance was designed to limit lust, but lust appears to have gained the upper hand.

Tracing the idea of lust through Western thought, Blackburn rejects the common association of lust with excess. Lust is not really about excessive desire, argues Blackburn, but rather a desire for sexual pleasure as an end in itself. Lust met disaster in the form of the Stoics who feared a life ruled by passion rather than reason. The Roman philosopher Seneca popularized a Stoic philosophy in adopting his motto as “nothing for pleasure’s sake.”

Seneca argued that lust was to be overcome for the survival of humanity, even as sexual was to be directed only toward “the continuation of the human race.” Of course, Seneca made this argument about lust in a letter he wrote to his mother, so it is difficult to know how seriously to take his description. Nevertheless, Blackburn takes him at his word.

But if the Stoics represented a significant setback for lust, this deadly sin met its deadliest opponent in Christianity. Blackburn describes this as “the Christian panic” that directed moral scrutiny to sexual pleasure itself, not just to what might be considered “excess.”

Predictably, Blackburn directs his attention to Augustine, the fourth-century bishop whose views on sex have influenced at least fifteen centuries of Christian thought. Augustine, whose youth had been given to sexual excess, was, after his conversion, determined to deny that sexual pleasure was a part of the Creator’s design for human sexuality, even from the beginning. Had the Fall not occurred, Augustine argued, sex would be a purely rational affair, untainted by any physical pleasure. Copulation would be, in effect, just like shaking hands.

Later, as represented in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, the Church argued that sexuality was defined both by Scriptural command and the revelation found in nature. This additional dimension of lust was directed at the “unnatural” desires evident in much of humanity.

Blackburn’s purpose is to overcome all pessimism towards lust. He even defends the use of pornography, which can, he argues, point towards the higher purposes of sex, rather than the lower degradations. He takes on the evolutionary psychologists, arguing that their naturalistic view of sex is too mechanistic. But his main effort is to overcome what he sees as Christianity’s pessimism towards sexual desire as an end in itself. In effect, Blackburn’s effort is to deny that lust should be considered a sin at all, deadly or otherwise.

Blackburn’s short book does not answer all the questions he raises. Even as he attacks Christian “pessimism” and calls for lust to be accepted as a universal human reality, Blackburn does not call for the removal of all moral boundaries on human sexuality.

In the end, *Lust* is a fascinating little treatise offered by a prominent intellectual, safely removed from the hard moral decisions of everyday life. His view of lust is not only sanitized, it is more deeply rooted in literature than in life. Perhaps this is due to Blackburn’s profession as an academic philosopher, or perhaps it is because a modern secular philosopher can talk about sex only in the context of irony.

The Christian worldview finds congruence with Blackburn on this essential point—that lust is best described as a desire for sexual pleasure as an end in itself. Augustine aside, there is no biblical reason to suspect that sex before the Fall would

have been devoid of physical pleasure. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that sexual pleasure is one of God's sweetest gifts to his human creatures. Sexual desire—and the promise of sexual pleasure—is meant to draw us into marriage, toward children, and into fidelity and responsibility. Lust is sinful precisely to the extent that sexual desire and passion are stripped from this moral context. In a God-centered worldview, nothing on earth can be seen as an end in itself—nothing is to be understood as existing for its own sake.

Sexual desire for its own sake is sexual desire stripped of the Creator's glory and stolen from its moral context. What Blackburn celebrates, Christianity rightly condemns. Intentionally or not, Simon Blackburn has put lust back on the line for debate, and his lecture-turned-essay is about as thoughtful a secular defense of lust we are likely to find. There is, of course, an altogether different understanding of lust, but it is not to be expected from a secular worldview. Christianity alone can explain why lust—and sin in every form—is so deadly.

Tomorrow: Another Look at Lust—The Christian View

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