

Confessions - Book X - Chapter Xxxv

by St. Augustine

Transcript

54. Besides this there is yet another form of temptation still more complex in its peril. For in addition to the fleshly appetite which strives for the gratification of all senses and pleasures--in which its slaves perish because they separate themselves from thee--there is also a certain vain and curious longing in the soul, rooted in the same bodily senses, which is cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning; not having pleasure in the flesh, but striving for new experiences through the flesh. This longing--since its origin is our appetite for learning, and since the sight is the chief of our senses in the acquisition of knowledge--is called in the divine language "the lust of the eyes."^[380] For seeing is a function of the eyes; yet we also use this word for the other senses as well, when we exercise them in the search for knowledge. We do not say, "Listen how it glows," "Smell how it glistens," "Taste how it shines," or "Feel how it flashes," since all of these are said to be seen. And we do not simply say, "See how it shines," which only the eyes can perceive; but we also say, "See how it sounds, see how it smells, see how it tastes, see how hard it is." Thus, as we said before, the whole round of sensory experience is called "the lust of the eyes" because the function of seeing, in which the eyes have the principal role, is applied by analogy to the other senses when they are seeking after any kind of knowledge.

55. From this, then, one can the more clearly distinguish whether it is pleasure or curiosity that is being pursued by the senses. For pleasure pursues objects that are beautiful, melodious, fragrant, savory, soft. But curiosity, seeking new experiences, will even seek out the contrary of these, not with the purpose of experiencing the discomfort that often accompanies them, but out of a passion for experimenting and knowledge.

For what pleasure is there in the sight of a lacerated corpse, which makes you shudder? And yet if there is one lying close by we flock to it, as if to be made sad and pale. People fear lest they should see such a thing even in sleep, just as they would if, when awake, someone compelled them to go and see it or if some rumor of its beauty had attracted them.

This is also the case with the other senses; it would be tedious to pursue a complete analysis of it. This malady of curiosity is the reason for all those strange sights exhibited in the theater. It is also the reason why we proceed to search out the secret powers of nature--those which have nothing to do with our destiny--which do not profit us to know about, and concerning which men desire to know only for the sake of knowing. And it is with this same motive of perverted curiosity for knowledge that we consult the magical arts. Even in religion itself, this prompting drives us to make trial of God when signs and wonders are eagerly asked of him--not desired for any saving end, but only to make trial of him.

56. In such a wilderness so vast, crammed with snares and dangers, behold how many of them I have lopped off and cast from my heart, as thou, O God of my salvation, hast enabled me to do. And yet, when would I dare to say, since so many things of this sort still buzz around our daily lives--when would I dare to say that no such motive prompts my seeing or creates a vain curiosity in me? It is true that now the theaters never attract me, nor do I now care to inquire about the courses of the stars, and my soul has never sought answers from the departed spirits. All sacrilegious oaths I abhor. And yet, O Lord my God, to whom I owe all humble and singlehearted service, with what subtle suggestion the enemy still influences me to require some sign from thee! But by our King, and by Jerusalem, our pure and chaste homeland, I beseech thee that where any consenting to such thoughts is now far from me, so may it always be farther and farther. And when I entreat thee for the salvation of any man, the end I aim at is something more than the entreating: let it be that as thou dost what thou wilt, thou dost also give me the grace willingly to follow thy lead.

57. Now, really, in how many of the most minute and trivial things my curiosity is still daily tempted, and who can keep the tally on how often I succumb? How often, when people are telling idle tales, we begin by tolerating them lest we should give offense to the sensitive; and then gradually we come to listen willingly! I do not nowadays go to the circus to see a dog chase a rabbit, but if by chance I pass such a race in the fields, it quite easily distracts me even from some serious thought and draws me after it--not that I turn aside with my horse, but with the inclination of my mind. And unless, by showing me my weakness, thou dost speedily warn me to rise above such a sight to thee by a deliberate act of thought--or else to despise the whole thing and pass it by--then I become absorbed in the sight, vain creature that I am.

How is it that when I am sitting at home a lizard catching flies, or a spider entangling them as they fly into her webs, oftentimes arrests me? Is the feeling of curiosity not the same just because these are such tiny creatures? From them I proceed to praise thee, the wonderful Creator and Disposer of all things; but it is not this that first attracts my attention. It is one thing to get up quickly and another thing not to fall--and of both such things my life is full and my only hope is in thy exceeding great mercy. For when this heart of ours is made the depot of such things and is overrun by the throng of these abounding vanities, then our prayers are often interrupted and disturbed by them. Even while we are in thy presence and direct the voice of our hearts to thy ears, such a great business as this is broken off by the inroads of I know not what idle thoughts.

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