

Why “pornography” and not “sexual images”: Science and faith or science vs. faith

A review of

Wired for Intimacy: How pornography hijacks the male brain

By William M. Struthers

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In his introduction, the author identifies himself as a neurobiologist and a person of faith who teaches at a Christian college. As both, he presents himself as uniquely trained and positioned to address the personal and social problem that pornography poses. Especially for the lay male audience for whom he writes, Struthers’ expertise as a neuroscientist lends an authority to his arguments that a lesser trained professional might not have. Struthers contends that repeated use of pornography alters the neural pathways in the brain which are “hardwired for intimacy”. The change in wiring in turn reinforces the use, having thus “hijacked the male brain.” Pornography in this context is deleterious to men’s capacity for intimacy with women. Because pornography objectifies women, it distorts the image of God that both men and women are meant to reflect. Reversing the effects of pornography is defined as sanctification. Struthers’ language is the language of his Christian faith. The thrust of his thesis is to heal the addiction through faith; neuroscience is used to support his arguments.

The book is divided into two sections: the first, *How pornography works*, explores the relationship between mind and body and concludes that pornography corrupts sexual

intimacy with women and friendship with heterosexual men; the second, *Healthy masculinity and sexuality*, expands on the mind-body relationship, or more accurately the mind-soul relationship. It is in one's soul that one most closely approximates the *imago Dei*, i.e., the image of God, in whose likeness man is made. Healthy male sexuality reflects that image and relates to the image of God in women, more particularly, to wives. Each chapter contains a list of references made in the text. Many are faith-based volumes published by Christian-identified houses with professionally recognizable journals and books interspersed. There are several quotations from the Christian Bible. Thus, Struthers means to use professional literature and his expertise to bolster his religious thesis and his faith to guide his scientific one.

Science, faith, and epistemology

The application of selected data from science to support broad tenets of faith is a fundamental problem for a psychologist. Trained as a scientist-practitioner, psychologists consider faith and science as mutually exclusive spheres (APA, 2007). Yet for Struthers and his readers, science and faith are inextricably entwined. Thus, what Struthers discusses as *pornography*, a scientist-practitioner might frame as *sexual images*? This difference is at the heart of the problem Struthers' book poses for a psychologist.

Science and faith conflict when either fails to respect their profoundly different epistemologies, i.e., the methodologies by which each studies the nature of a thing observed. (Classical Greek philosophers called the study of the nature of things *ontology*.) Both science and faith seek to understand what sexual imagery and its effects

are. Science will use empirical investigation, while faith applies revelation to investigate sexual imagery. So, what science observes as *sexual imagery* Struthers' Christian faith considers *pornography*. Differences between science and faith widen when science uses what it observes about sexual imagery and its effects to illuminate only, leaving the determination of its value and the manner of its use to others. Because revelation has already deemed sexual imagery to be pornography, faith will seek to limit or prohibit its use as harmful. This process of establishing the value and purpose of things is what the Greek philosophers called *ethics*. While science does not dictate how or whether knowledge is used, revelation does, in effect determining the ontology of pornography with Christian ethics. This may be good faith but it is bad science.

When the world is understood, when it is reliably known, and when its purpose and value are also understood and agreed upon, things make sense. This leads to a unified reality that is universally shared. The alignment of those three processes engenders a deep and satisfying harmony. This is what the Greeks called *aesthetics*, the “aaah” experience of knowing and having everything its place. The order in which questions are asked and answered is pivotal. From ontology to epistemology to ethics and, finally, to aesthetics; omit one or reverse the order, and distortions and disagreements follow.

A case in point. Struthers's uses the interaction of brain on behavior and of behavior on brain to extrapolate that repetitive use of pornography alters neural pathways. As well reasoned an extrapolation as that may be, without empirical tests to support his hypothesis it remains a hypothesis. No such studies are cited, so the dots he draws never

really connect. Again, he offers an extended metaphor substituting “viewing pornographic material or images with or without acting out” for “substance abuse” in the DSMIV-TR (2000) criteria for substance abuse to pathologize pornography and its use as psychologically unhealthy.

Hence, Struthers’ book is more about *ethics* than science. He applies selected findings of science to strengthen his Christian ethics on pornography because he has already defined sexual imagery as pornography and, therefore, *ontologically* harmful. This may be faulty empirically but it is rationally consistent with his Christian faith. Determining an knowledge of the entire natural world and human experience of it from revelation would subordinate science to faith rather than keep it separate from it. To agree to this would disqualify psychology from any meaningful authority to evaluate Struthers’ arguments or to reach conclusions about sexual imagery that might differ from Struthers.

A revolution in paradigms of sexuality

There is yet another major concern that Struthers’ book raises. Struthers promotes a paradigm of sexuality based on polarities of sex and gender that a growing body of research is questioning, and commonplace experience contradicts. Such a traditional model does not and cannot embrace the range of human experience or accommodate all the evidence emerging from research regarding human sexuality. Kuhn (1962) has likened this problem to a scientific revolution in which scientific findings overturn a dominant paradigm, replacing it with a new one, much as Copernicus replaced Ptolemy. Once adopted, the new paradigm completely replaces the former such that the old paradigm is meaningless. Kuhn suggests that during the destabilization of a dominant

paradigm there is considerable ambiguity and ferment in intellectual and social intercourse. Such circumstances spawn deep anxiety and confusion that press people to search for solid conceptual ground, often by adhering to the conventional paradigm.

We are witnessing such a paradigm shift in our models of human sexuality (Cerbone, 2007). Accumulating evidence from research on gender, sex, and sexual orientation has eroded confidence in traditional models of sexuality but has yet to provide viable paradigms in their place. If this analysis is so, the conceptualization of sexuality on which Struthers' book is based may exemplify an attempt to shore up a faltering paradigm of sexuality with selected data from neuroscience. The polarities in his system cannot embrace the complexity or the variety of sexual experience readily observed.

For example, presumably, the altering of neural pathways affects non-heterosexual men who use pornography compulsively. Yet, there is no such discussion. Why? Struthers does mention homophobia, a term usually used to refer to fear of homosexuality. While he references homophobia as a negative consequence of pornography, in omitting homosexuals from his discussion, homophobia becomes heterosexual men's fear of intimacy with other heterosexual males. Once again, this evidences the inadequacy of the paradigm of sexuality that pervades Struthers' book. Women, too, are referenced only as the wives of heterosexual men, reinforcing a religious value that only in marriage can sexual intimacies be healthy and holy. His treatment prompts the question: what might women say to this?

That he may teach what he writes raises another troublesome question about the nature and purpose of training. To question his model of human sexuality is not to question his right to teach it or to teach it as religion; it is to question his teaching it as science, even when he teaches his Christian heterosexual male audience. This is not a free speech issue but a science and education issue. Teaching it as religion is his right, but, as with the recent tumult about creationism, teaching it as science may violate students' right and need to access *all* the findings of science.

These are substantial issues for practice, for education, for science, and for the public interest that a psychologist cannot ignore. There is no intent to question the faith of the author or his audience, the primacy of faith in the lives of people, or its powers to heal the soul. Rather it affirms the responsibility of a psychologist to adhere to the best data of science and to apply those findings according to the best principles of scientific investigation, even when that psychologist embraces the tenets of faith or seeks to promote them. History provides many examples of the reconciliation of faith and science when each respects their different epistemologies. Eventually whatever conflicts constellate between them, science prevails and God remains both God and in his/her heaven.

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