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A Society of Excess

In the majority of American communities, people can hardly have a meal without taking a picture of it or talking about how it is prepared. People read about food, watch television shows about food, and have conversations about food, and they willingly give in to the gluttonous culture of modern society. In his explanation of sexual morality, C.S. Lewis states: “you find very few people who want to...do other things with food instead of eating it,” but in today’s society, food is discussed, photographed, painted, read about, and fantasized about in addition to being consumed (Lewis 97). In much of today’s American society, the sin of gluttony is the most trivialized of the seven deadly sins.

Gluttony is a vice that is often both misunderstood and oversimplified. When people try to picture a gluttonous person, the idea that usually comes to mind is of a grossly overweight person. However, the commentary *Glittering Vices* asks a crucial question: “what if gluttony isn’t first of all about overeating or being overweight, about dieting and doughnuts?” (DeYoung 140). Gluttony has to do with pleasure and the desire for pleasure. It is also a habitual vice, a “routine, pattern, or groove that gets worn into our character” (140). The problem with gluttony is not the pleasures themselves or the obtaining of the pleasures, but the *manner* in which a person goes about obtaining those pleasures. If the desire for pleasure is not actively controlled, this vice that involves unrestrained desire “degrades us into mere pleasure seekers” (141).

Today, Gluttony is most often recognized in overeating or eating unhealthily. Henry Fairlie affirms that “in talking of the sin we are talking of excess,” but people do not like to think of overeating as a sin because it is pleasurable and easily committed (167). It is easy for overeating to be trivialized because humans have to eat to live, and in all the eating that must be done, who “has not been tempted to eat a little more than he needs?” (Prose 29). The problem

with overeating is the “inordinate desire for food, a longing so powerful and thoroughly involving that it comes between us and God” (38) that is nurtured by allowing this overeating. Continual overeating makes those who indulge more inclined to immediate gratification, and they can be reduced to mere pleasure-seekers by their appetite. An obvious example of this can be seen in the popular children’s novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The mother of the well-known fat boy Augustus Gloop proclaims, “Eating is his hobby, you know. That’s *all* he’s interested in” (Dahl 22). Gloop’s sole interest in eating and his need for immediate gratification lead to his downfall, at least as far as the chocolate factory is concerned, when he falls into the chocolate river, is sucked up into a pipe, and ruins his chances of inheriting the whole factory.

People either “dismiss Gluttony in all its forms as no more than a relatively harmless overindulgence” or remove blame from the gluttonous and place it on factors other than the mere desire to eat (Fairlie 170). Overeating is often dismissed in American society as not being the fault of the overeater but of “response to an injury or harm we have suffered, more often than not in the distant past” (Prose 61). C.S. Lewis points out the absurdity of a fascination with food when he imagines that if there were:

a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? (Lewis 96).

Today’s America is similar to this supposed country that seems to be lustful for food. For example, this is shown in the way that a social media account known as “FoodPorn” can have over a million followers or how people spend time watching television networks dedicated to the

preparation or discussion of food. In the way people discuss, look at, and think about food, “our attitude toward it has become idolatrous” (Fairlie 159).

In an article about how gluttony may be destroying America, *Relevant* magazine affirms, “Gluttony is about excess, and in the U.S., we know excess” (Ryan). While some people might appreciate the abundant availability of food and proclaim “Murica” as they look at pictures of enormous bacon-laden cheeseburgers, it has to be said that sometimes Americans do not know how to handle their freedom appropriately. It may be disappointing to find that the “annual costs for nutrition-related diseases...exceed \$33 billion” in the United States (Ryan). Also, when one considers the amount of food thrown away in the home as well as in restaurants, it may not be surprising to find that “Americans waste about 20-25% of all food purchased for the home, about 475 pounds per year” (Ryan). Because Americans have food readily available to them at all times, the food crisis in other parts of the world is often pushed out of their minds. People who are well fed do not like to consider that “today, 18,000 kids [worldwide] will die because they are malnourished” (Ryan). Americans do not want to recognize that their gluttonous nature is hurting them, as well as hurting the rest of the world.

While people most often recognize gluttony in the action of overeating, it is often overlooked as also being the excess of other things such as drink, medicine, punishment, or work. An article about this misunderstood vice establishes that there are two ways in which it is misunderstood: “it only pertains to those with a less than shapely waistline” and that “it always involves food” (Carter). Drug-taking, as well as self-diagnosing, are common activities in American society, though “there is a level of pain that we ought to be able and willing to endure, if the only alleviation is the too-ready use of drugs” (Fairlie 165). People who are foremost concerned with their jobs, punishing themselves, or working to live as long as possible are

concerned with something other than God or goodness. The excess when it comes to gluttony pertains to more than just food; it involves having too much of anything that creates an inordinate desire that interferes with the individual's relationship with God. The author of the article on gluttony admits that, "I also starve my soul by other forms of overconsumption. I binge watch *Downton Abbey* (31 hours) and *Battlestar Galactica* (57 hours) even though I've already seen every episode. I stay up too late gorging on Facebook and Twitter" (Carter).

Many Americans can relate to this overconsumption of the entertainment available. In the short story "Fat" by Raymond Carver, a waitress serves dinner to a grossly overweight man who is eating a very large amount of food. The waitress recognizes a parallel between herself and the fat man and reminisces that in the evening she feels "terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy [her boyfriend] is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (Carver 222). This waitress does not have a problem with overeating or with her weight, so why would she feel as though she is fat? She feels "fat" in that she recognizes that like the fat man, she too has entrapped herself in her bad choices and that she chooses to live with Rudy even though she does not like him or enjoy his company. Clearly, this story demonstrates that we can entrap ourselves in our decisions and that bad choices can become bad habits that ruin people, which is the same way gluttony can ruin a person by reducing them to a pleasure-seeker.

Those who are involved in the culture of dieting and weight-watching may argue that at least in their communities, gluttony is certainly not trivialized. These people may even assure that it is strictly avoided. They may demonstrate how fervently dieters avoid overeating and eating unhealthful food, and they may bring to attention the excessive guilt that people trying to be healthy may experience after they have violated their rules of healthy eating. While they may focus on the intensity of not eating that excessive dieters have, they are missing that these

dieters, along with overeaters, have still placed something between God and their soul. They are just as focused on food as the overeaters are, though they may be focused instead on the lack of it. People in American society often applaud these people who are so committed to their bodies, and they may find it absurd that excessive dieters and weight-watchers are gluttonous also. The way that people today do not see the danger of constant calorie counting and repeatedly weighing oneself, or even approve of it, is another demonstration of the trivialization of gluttony.

The five ways that gluttony reveals itself, according to Gregory the Great, are in the phrases “too soon, too delicately, too expensively, too greedily, [and] too much” (Prose 7). The danger of eating “too delicately” is often overlooked in American society, and people may be surprised to find that eating too little is just as sinful as eating too much. Though American society trivializes occasional overeating as being relatively harmless, it also does not want to see any effects of overeating. Emphasis is placed on thinness, and often any fat or largeness of a body is thought to be ugly. People are uncomfortable with the effects of overeating, and so they try to repent from *that* form of gluttony not out of remorse for having placed a desire before God, but out of a desire to fit into today’s standards of beauty. America’s obsession with food is apparent also in the huge culture of dieting present today. Both the overeater and the excessive dieter have an “inordinate interest in eating,” and dieters are “just as obsessed with their food [as overeaters], even if their attention is fixed on a raw carrot and a prune” (Fairlie 162). The side of gluttony that is focused on eating as little as possible has issues with body image, weight, and eating disorders. Diets encourage people to be occupied with the constant idea of food and its effects, and diets often “don’t work because food and weight are the symptoms, not the problems” (Prose 63). Those who try to live eating very little make food the enemy and therefore

do not appreciate the created good that is food, ultimately harming their relationship with God along with the overeaters.

A typical, and possibly familiar, attempt at dieting of an American woman is described in the short story “Fat People” by Alison Lurie. While her partner has gone off to India on a research job, Ellie decides that she would like to lose fifteen or twenty pounds in his absence. She quickly discovers that it is not easy to lose weight, and as she reflects more and more on her weight and eating habits, she “[begins] to notice how many fat people there [are] in town” (Lurie 241). As time passes and she struggles with her strict diet implemented by her coworker, she begins to notice more fat people around her, and she confuses the pleasures of food and sex while also reading and fantasizing about food. The more she thinks about food, the harder it is for her to stay on her diet. In fact, further focusing on food that she cannot have in order to lose weight only succeeds in making Ellie miserable, and she harms her body by skipping meals, greatly reducing meals, and exercising very frequently. Unfortunately, she allows her life to become consumed with food, and her days are spent recognizing fat people and fantasizing about delicious meals. She has paradoxically focused her life on food in order to lose weight, and her gluttonous focus only makes her life difficult.

In America, the diet and weight loss industry is enormous, with \$20 billion as “the annual revenue of the U.S. weight-loss industry, including diet books, diet drugs and weight-loss surgeries” (ABC News Staff). 108 million people, about a third of the U.S.’s population, are “on diets in the United States, [and these dieters]... typically make four to five attempts per year” (ABC News Staff). These numbers show that while being able to consume and waste large amounts of food, Americans are also focused on dieting and refraining from food to an extreme.

In the extreme, those whose lives revolve entirely around weight, dieting, and food are not living much of a life at all. As of 2006, “Eating disorders affect an estimated five million people in the United States,” and Renfrew Treatment Center, an inpatient treatment facility in Florida for women with eating disorders, is well-acquainted with the warped lives of people living for food, or rather for the lack of it (*Thin*). The rules of the center do not deal with principles of living a happy, fulfilling life but instead are necessarily all based on food and procedures for eating. Patients must drink a certain amount of fluid each day, finish all of their food, eat three desserts a week. Furthermore, the patients are allowed only one napkin at a time and cannot have food in their rooms. The rules may sound excessive, but upon listening to the warped views of patients and the physical danger they are in, they are more understandable. For instance, one patient tried to commit suicide after eating two pieces of pizza. Another girl of only fifteen used to play a game with her mother in which they would chew food and then spit it out in order to not gain any calories, misunderstanding both the value of food itself and the function of food to fill the body.

Throughout “*Thin*,” a documentary about life at Renfrew Treatment Center, some patients say revealing things about what the focus on food has done to them. When contemplating her disorder in counseling, one patient says, “I used to have a personality,” and a different one says, “That’s what life becomes.” This same patient expresses what she has lost to bulimia: “I don’t watch TV, I haven’t seen any movies, I have no friends. The only thing in my life is this: I get on the scale, I get off the scale, I get on the scale, I get off the scale... That’s the only thing that matters. That’s pathetic.” Moreover, another patient cries when she recalls seeing people around her enjoying Thanksgiving dinner while she picked at her own prepackaged meal, a revealing moment about this side of gluttony that shows what it can take from a person.

“For every moral virtue there are typically two vices,” and each characterizes one extreme (DeYoung 147). Gluttony is no different, having a side of overabundance and the side of scarcity. The important thing to consider is the manner in which created goods are used and regarded. The sin of gluttony exists in “allowing an appetite to make one so indifferent to beauty,” whether this be through consuming or using things to the extreme or through using things so little that their goodness cannot be appreciated (Fairlie 156). There is a difference between “the human who needs to eat in order to live and the gluttonous sinner who lives to eat” (Prose 39).

The purpose of discussing and dissecting a vice is to ultimately respond to it with the appropriate virtue. In the case of gluttony, the virtue that opposes it is that of temperance. Temperance is a virtue “that perfects man’s ability to act well with oneself from within oneself,” and it deals with and helps to order “desires for the greatest pleasures” (McManaman). A person who is temperate enjoys pleasures in the appropriate manner, time, and amount. A person with temperance is able to discern what pleasures are good and should be presently experienced and which ones should be denied or saved for later, and in this way, a person manages his desires and gets the most out of pleasures. Temperance can also be defined as “the habitual ability to resist the enticement of immediate pleasure to gain a greater though more remote good” or to have the ability to delay gratification (Metaxas). Examples of this ability include resisting a purchase to save money for a more enjoyable good or avoiding checking social media in order to complete a homework assignment. Temperance is an essential habit, and it is the virtue that combats gluttony by using goods in an appropriate manner.

American society is filled with people who are both shameless overeaters and shameless dieters, people who enjoy too much and people who enjoy too little. The sin of gluttony is

rampant in the way the culture simultaneously glorifies and chastises food. Gluttony is so abundant that it is hardly recognized as a sin, except by gluttonous overeaters looking down upon dieters or by gluttonous dieters looking down upon overeaters. It is the common obsession with food and other goods that makes gluttony the most trivialized sin of American society.

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