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WES 300

Lust: Sinful Vice or Natural Desire?

For centuries, lust has occupied a contentious place in moral, theological, and cultural debates. Whether viewed through the lens of religious doctrine or human psychology, the question remains: is it a necessary, biological urge, or a dangerous overindulgence in carnal pleasure? In this paper, I will argue why one may think lust is a sin and why one would not. In this paper, I will argue why one may think lust is a sin and why one would not. Drawing from religious texts like the Bible and Dante's *Purgatory*, and contrasting them with modern portrayals, particularly in Hollywood, I aim to explore both sides of the argument. Ultimately, I will conclude that while sexual desire is natural, lust becomes sinful when it grows unchecked and distorts human relationships and intentions.

From a traditional Christian theological standpoint, lust is not only a moral failing but one of the seven deadly sins. The concept of the seven deadly sins originated in early Christian teachings and was solidified by Pope Gregory I in the 6th century. Lust, in this context, is defined as an inordinate craving for sexual pleasure, detached from the sanctity of love and procreation. In *Purgatorio*, Dante places the lustful on the seventh and final terrace of Mount

Purgatory. These souls are purged by walking through walls of flame while calling out examples of chastity. This imagery underscores the idea that lust, while a deeply human vice, must be confronted and purified before one can ascend to spiritual wholeness. Dante writes, "In the fire, they chant of chaste examples to burn away the old desire" (Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXV).

The Bible also unequivocally condemns lust in several passages. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus states, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." This teaching reveals a profound spiritual truth: sin begins not with action but with intention. Lust, even when unacted upon, distorts the heart and mind, turning others into mere objects of gratification. This dehumanization is antithetical to Christian values, which emphasize the inherent dignity of every person. Lust strips away that dignity, reducing individuals to bodies meant only for pleasure.

In today's world, the effects of lust are evident in various cultural and social phenomena. Pornography, for example, is a multi-billion-dollar industry that often promotes unrealistic and demeaning portrayals of sex and relationships. Hookup culture, driven by dating apps and social media, emphasizes instant gratification over emotional connection. The result is a culture that prioritizes self-satisfaction over genuine intimacy. This commodification of the body reflects the sinful core of lust, not the desire itself, but its selfish, obsessive expression. It feeds narcissism, disrupts relationships, and fosters insecurity and unrealistic expectations. In this context, lust

becomes not just a personal vice but a systemic issue that influences how people relate to one another. It prioritizes self-satisfaction, erodes empathy, and promotes transactional relationships drained of love or commitment.

Dante's depiction of lustful souls offers historical grounding for understanding the enduring moral concerns surrounding this vice. Among the lustful are figures like Paolo and Francesca, lovers doomed to eternal windstorms in *Inferno* for their adulterous passion. In *Purgatorio*, the emphasis shifts from punishment to purification. Here, even those who succumbed to lust can seek redemption through repentance and suffering. This duality shows that while lust is a sin, it is not an unforgivable one—there is always the path of transformation. King David's story, recounted in 2 Samuel 11, offers another biblical example. His lust for Bathsheba leads him to commit adultery and orchestrate her husband's death. This tale illustrates how lust can cascade into more severe transgressions, demonstrating its corrosive potential.

However, to dismiss all sexual desire as sinful would be to deny an essential aspect of the human experience. Sexual attraction is a natural biological function rooted in evolutionary survival. It fosters bonding, intimacy, and reproduction—three pillars of human continuity. The Bible offers a more nuanced view in the Song of Solomon, a poetic book celebrating romantic and erotic love. In Song of Solomon 7:6-9, the lover declares, "How beautiful and pleasant you

are, O loved one, with all your delights!" These verses depict sexual longing not as sin but as a divine and joyful expression of love.

Contemporary portrayals of sexual desire, particularly in Hollywood, often present lust as a transformative force. Films and shows such as *Fatal Attraction*, *The Notebook*, or even more lighthearted works like *Sex and the City* romanticize sexual desire as something thrilling and liberating. This framing isn't entirely wrong—it reflects humanity's fascination with passion and the desire to feel deeply. While critics argue that Hollywood glorifies lust, it also occasionally shows the darker consequences, like broken relationships, betrayal, and emptiness, mirroring the theological concerns. *Fatal Attraction*, for example, serves as a modern morality tale, illustrating how unchecked desire can spiral into obsession, destruction, and tragedy. Such portrayals align with historical teachings on lust's dual nature: its capacity to unite and destroy, making them intriguing and engaging for the audience.

Advocates for a more accepting view of lust argue that repressing natural desire can lead to guilt, shame, and psychological harm. The human psyche is wired for connection, and sexuality plays a central role in that dynamic. From a psychological perspective, desire is a form of communication and self-expression. Denying it entirely may hinder personal development and healthy relationships. The challenge, then, lies in cultivating a healthy relationship with desire—one that acknowledges its presence without being ruled by it.

Sex education and modern therapy often stress the importance of consent, respect, and emotional intelligence in navigating sexual relationships. Unlike the rigid contrast of past moral teachings, today's perspectives encourage a more balanced view that accepts desire while promoting responsibility. The line between healthy attraction and sinful lust is drawn not by the feeling itself but by how it manifests in action and intention.

In conclusion, lust straddles the line between instinct and excess, between sacred connection and selfish indulgence. While sexual desire is a regular part of being human, lust becomes problematic when it overtakes reason, empathy, and moral restraint. Through religious texts like the Bible and Dante's *Purgatorio*, we see how lust, when unchecked, leads to spiritual decay. However, modern culture also reminds us of its captivating, although dangerous, power. Ultimately, lust is not sinful because of what it is but because of what it can become. It is the overabundance, the obsession, that makes it a vice. Like fire, lust can warm and illuminate, but left untamed; it consumes everything in its path.

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