

Sin as Addiction in Our “Brave New World”

Richard Stivers

We know from scripture that humans sin, are born in sin, and are in bondage to sin. Biblical ideas of sin have a hard time being recognized today, however. Liberal Christianity has de-emphasized sin or reduced it to injustice and inequality. Conservative Christianity has tended to equate sin with personal immorality. In either instance, the truth about sin has been diminished. As Søren Kierkegaard reminded us, sin is not merely a matter of discrete sins but of an orientation, a way of life. Furthermore, scripture makes sin a spiritual matter, not just a moral issue. Idolatry is the worst sin.

To overcome sin we must contest various evil powers as well as our own desires. In *If You are the Son of God*, Jacques Ellul argues that one of the meanings of sin is that of an external power that influences or even controls us.¹ The evil powers that scripture reveals to us do not have an independent existence; they exist only in and through their relations to us. But they are real! There is no principle of evil nor an evil god. In a sense, the evil powers are our unintended creation. Money and political power, for example, are evil powers. Money and politics are not evil in themselves but in the spiritual value we attribute to them.

Scripture indicates that sin is both individual and corporate. The very concept of the “world” suggests as much. Cultures are anchored by a sense of the sacred, that is, by that which is experienced as absolute power, reality, and meaning. Examples of the sacred include nature, the tribe, money, and the nation state. The socially constructed sacred (tacitly, not consciously) provides both meaning and the basis for control in society. All social institutions obtain cultural authority as a result. *Exousia* refers to a spiritual power that the social group employs beyond that which it receives from its cultural mandate. The social group thus becomes more than the sum of its parts, spiritually and not just psychologically. But *exousia* refers to a material power as well.

All members of the group are motivated by covetousness and the will to power, which are the source of sin. The social group provides an absolute identity for the individual and excites the individual’s desire through its internal competition for wealth and power. Hence the group is held together in part by the negative unity of sin. Social institutions do not fully

control the will to power, for, as Max Weber noted, the exercise of power invariably exceeds the limits that cultural authority imposes on it. This excessive power (*exousia*) is both material and spiritual, power and value, human and alien. Sin is, in turn, both internal and external, individual and collective.

Scripture is replete with figures of speech, especially metaphors. God, for instance, is king, fortress, shepherd, and so forth. A metaphor is not to be taken literally, of course; it entails a comparison. What is less well known is compared to what is better known: God is compared to a fortress. No one metaphor is sufficient, for each metaphor reveals different aspects of the phenomenon. To say that “love is a rose” suggests that love blooms and fades, is fragrant, and is capable of inflicting pain. “Love is a journey” implies that love is not static and that the movement may be more important than the final destination. Unlike the logical concept, metaphor never permits us to pretend to grasp the phenomenon as it is in itself. The numerous metaphors about God are a warning not to claim to define and know God as He is. We apprehend God by comparison.

Often neglected in discussions of metaphor is the status of the better-known term. For metaphor to be vital, the better-known term must be common. The metaphorical comparison necessitates reflection on both terms. Consequently, we learn more about what we ordinarily take for granted, the better-known term. This will become apparent as we examine the following metaphors of sin.

The most prevalent metaphor for sin in scripture is sin is bondage or slavery. John, Paul, and Peter refer to sin this way. Jesus says, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Paul states, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). Peter proclaims, “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19). Slavery was widespread in the Roman world, and it was well understood that it takes away secular freedom. In attempting to understand sin, which destroys Christian freedom, the early Christians employed the metaphor that “sin is slavery.” In doing so, they make us reflect on the *institution* of slavery.

In *The Ethics of Freedom*, Jacques Ellul suggests that “sin is alienation” is the metaphor that best resonates with our experiences today.² Ellul was not a Marxist, but he nonetheless employed Marx’s concept of alienation. Under industrialized capitalism, the worker was alienated from his work, that is, he lost ownership and control over the process of work and the product. His work became merely a means of profit for the capitalist, who had made him a “wage slave.” Because work was central to Marx’s view of the human being, self-alienation followed alienation from work. To be alienated means to be possessed by another. Ellul’s book was published in 1975, and parts of it were written in the 1960s. He understood that technology had become a more important factor than capitalism in the organization of society. Consequently, he applied the concept of alienation in a new way to demonstrate that in replacing human experience with objectified expertise, technology was itself alienating.

I think that today, however, another metaphor is more appropriate: “Sin is addiction.” Before examining addiction as a metaphor for sin, I should point out that all three metaphors, enslavement, alienation, and addiction, suggest being possessed by a person or force. Karl Barth once said that rather than say, “I have faith,” I should say, “Faith has me.” The three metaphors for sin suggest that I should say, “Sin has me,” rather than, “I sin.” In addition, all three metaphors reveal something about the larger society. To be enslaved makes manifest the institution of slavery; to be alienated reveals the institution of industrialized capitalism; to be addicted uncovers the technological system.

I will not attempt to define addiction in scientific terms. Is it physical, psychological, or both? Are there degrees of addiction? Instead, I will employ the term in its colloquial sense: something we can’t seem to stop doing even though it’s not necessary for our survival. Or a compulsion from which we can’t or don’t want to escape. Most people associate addiction with drugs and alcohol. Increasing numbers of people talk about addiction to social media, but the list of addictions keeps growing.

Julian Taber, who is a therapist to gambling addicts, developed the Consumer Lifestyle Index/Appetite Inventory.³ It attempts to be a comprehensive list of addictions. The range of addictions is enormous: gambling for money, lying, laxatives, shopping, petty theft, sugar-based foods, tobacco products, exercise, talking for talking’s sake, religious activity, work for the sake of being busy, trying to get attention for its own sake, self-help groups, and so forth. The obvious conclusion is that anything can become addictive. In “The Acceleration of Addictiveness,” Paul Graham argues that technological progress brings more addictiveness.⁴ Technological progress creates ever more products and services to which we may become addicted. Addiction to technology is the necessary result of technological progress. My point is not that addiction is omnipresent but that more of us are perceiving it this way. Talk of addiction brings in more conversationalists every day.

I will discuss addictions to machine gambling, video games, and social media in order to examine the metaphor that sin is addiction. We spend more money on casino gambling than on music, movies, and sports events together. Most of the gambling occurs with slot machines and video poker. One hundred and fifty-five million Americans play video games and spend more than twice as much on them as they do on movie tickets. Soon virtually everyone will have a smartphone or similar device to use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media. Not all players and users are addicts, but much has already been written about the heavy use of these technologies as if it were an addiction.

Enslavement, alienation, and addiction all have sociological contexts. In the former, the context is an institution, in the latter, an entire social environment—technology. Following Jacques Ellul, by “technology” I mean both machines and non-material technologies such as bureaucracy, advertising, and propaganda. Beginning in the eighteenth century, material and nonmaterial technologies advanced together. Nature and human society were increasingly brought under technology’s purview. With the advent of the computer, it became possible to coordinate major technologies to form a system at the level of information. Technology has thus become a system. Human society now opens to two environments nature and technology.

Modern technology shattered the unity of culture. Technology supplants experience and meaning; it is solely about the most efficient (powerful) means of acting. Society is organized at the level of technology but disorganized at cultural and psychological levels. Culture is randomly created and fragmented in its meaning and purpose as a creation. The result is a plethora of moralities and art and entertainment styles. The lack of cultural unity makes psychological fragmentation inevitable: we are reduced to being role players who create multiple images for ourselves and others.

Technological growth has been accelerating for over 150 years, although not evenly across the various sectors. Moreover, there appears to be no purpose or end to it. Implicit in the growth of technology is the mandate “If it can be done, it must be done.” The traditional tension between what is and what ought to be has been superseded by that between what is and what is possible. Consequently we have only limited moral control over the employment of technology. We have become as fatalistic about technology as so-called “primitive” people were about nature. Hence we have an irrational faith in technology.

Technology has an impact on the individual’s psyche just as great as its influence on culture. Technology directly and indirectly provokes a need for ecstasy. The very point of addiction is to create a continuous ecstatic state. Ecstasy is an altered state of consciousness, an escape from the rational self. Ecstasy is a kind of high that can be achieved by rapid, repetitive movement, continuous loud music, drugs, and alcohol, for example.

Cultural anthropologists have a category of religion they call “ecstatic religion.” It includes rites organized to produce

an ecstatic state in the participants. Such rites may involve orgies, drunkenness, and violence. Victor Turner maintains that the rites designed for ecstasy bring about a communion of equals, a *communitas*, whereby status differences and power relationships are temporarily set aside.⁵ A feeling results of one in all and all in one. Some have extended the meaning of ecstatic communion to include communion with machines. Today we have technology to help us achieve ecstasy.

Technological progress has increased the pace of life: we do more in less time. Speed has become an end in itself. Time urgency entails a compulsion to do as many things as rapidly as possible, including a preoccupation with time, rushed speech and eating, driving too fast and angrily, waiting impatiently, and feeling irritable and bored when inactive. Concurrently, we suffer from time scarcity. Family life and leisure mimic the speed of the workplace. With mother and father both working and the children in a plethora of organized activities, parents have to become efficiency experts. Tourism and vacations typically involve stuffing as many activities as possible into the shortest period of time.

Speed itself can produce a mild ecstatic experience. Milan Kundera observes that “speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man.”⁶ We internalize technological stimuli. Wolfgang Schivelbush refers to this as the “stimulus shield.”⁷ We adjust to and normalize the ways that technology alters our sense of time, place, speed, sight, and sound. Each time a faster mode of transportation was introduced, people had to adjust to it, and eventually the previous mode seemed hopelessly slow. Humans internalized the speed of the train, for example, and later, when given a choice, they rejected the horse and buggy. Today we internalize the speed of faster computers and are impatient when forced to use slower ones. We come to resemble the faster technology that stimulates us: we act by reflex, not reflection.

Technology creates a need for ecstasy as an escape mechanism. Anthropologist Roger Caillois observed that the more extensive and intensive the social controls in a society, the more exaggerated the ecstatic response.⁸ We cannot tolerate living in a social world that is too ordered. Never before have humans lived with so many rules—technical, bureaucratic, and legal. The proliferation of administrative laws, bureaucratic norms, and technical rules that accompany each new technology makes it impossible for anyone to be aware of them, let alone remember them. We feel the pressure to escape them in irrational ways: drugs, alcohol, sex, sports, gambling, and so forth. A Columbia University psychiatrist found that the harder college students (especially males) studied during the week, the more they felt the need to escape the rational order of obtaining good grades by giving themselves over to instinctual desire and temporarily losing their conscious selves.⁹

Technology indirectly produces loneliness from which an escape is necessary. Christian psychiatrist J. H. van den Berg demonstrated that the loss of a common morality beginning in the eighteenth century in the West resulted in human relation-

ships becoming vague and dangerous.¹⁰ A common morality in society meant that one could trust people even if one did not especially like them. The decline in trust makes everyone a potential enemy. Loneliness ensues. Van den Berg argues that loneliness is the nucleus of psychiatry, and that all psychiatric disorders are intertwined because all patients share the same existence. For many of us, loneliness does not result in a full-blown psychiatric disorder, but the number of Americans in therapy, self-help groups, and on drugs for depression is legion.

Loneliness manifests itself in many ways, some of which conceal the loneliness. One of them is the need to talk incessantly, sometimes to anyone who will listen, about trivial matters. I can't be lonely if I am talking to people! With the advent of email and social media, we can be in communication with others anytime we feel the need. The result is the ecstasy of communication. The speed by which information is transmitted from person to person produces a mild ecstatic state.

If technology creates a need for ecstatic release, it also produces the means to achieve ecstasy. Machine gambling is a prime example. In *Addiction by Design*, Natasha Schüll interviews gambling addicts and discovers that what they most crave, even more than winning, is the “zone,” in which “time, space, and social identity are suspended in the mechanical rhythm of a repeating process.”¹¹ In other words, a state of ecstasy. Gamblers enter the zone when their actions and the functioning of the machine become indistinguishable. Schüll borrows the term “perfect contingency” to describe the sense that addicted gamblers have of a perfect alignment between their actions and the machine's response. They prefer “sameness, repetition, rhythm, and routine.”¹² Slot machines and video poker are the most popular gambling formats. As gamblers develop a tolerance for the technology (stimulus shield), the games become faster and more complex. For instance, in video poker, Triple Play Draw Poker allows players to play three games at once and make three times as many bets. Triple Play has given way to Five Play, Ten Play, Fifty Play, and even Hundred Play Poker.

Video game addicts too desire to merge with the machine, to achieve communion with it. In *God in the Machine: Video Games as Spiritual Pursuit*, Liel Leibovitz, himself a video game player, describes how reflex replaces cognitive awareness the greater one's skill and mastery becomes. His experience is mainly with the World of Zelda. Repetition is the foundation of play, from the “ballet of thumbs” to returning to the same play section without stop and with little if any variation. The spiritual pursuit that Leibovitz claims is the deeper rationale for playing video games is ecstasy. If ecstatic religion is a legitimate category of religion, then video games are a subcategory. In defense of his interpretation, Leibovitz argues that video games teach one the joy of learning to love the game and designer above all, of giving up “all other ways of being in the world” and of “understanding one's place in the world.”¹³ He calls this a kind of Augustinian condition. I am not arguing that his interpretation is correct but only that he points out how seriously we should take the pursuit of ecstasy through our technologies.

The social media are not ostensibly about communion with a machine but with other people. We must remember, however, that every technology that permits us to communicate with others mediates the relationship. Social media “addicts” appear to spend less time servicing their addiction than do gambling and video game addicts. Nonetheless, a large number of social media users admit that they cannot give up their devices, if only for a day. In the smartphone industry, it is commonly thought that people check their phones at least 150 times a day. Some are even bedeviled by phantom ringing or vibrating phones. One third of Americans claim they would rather give up sex than their cell phones. But is this really about communion with others and creating a community?

In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle discovers that the community of one’s friends, say, on Facebook, is both fragile and enslaving. On social media, people are role players, presenting a self to others that will be most accepted and admired. The relationships established in social media networks are purely aesthetical and superficial. Only face-to-face moral relationships are deep and truly passionate, Kierkegaard has noted. Indeed, the more time one spends on Facebook, the more lonely one feels. Turkle observes that many young people prefer texting someone to talking to her. The reason is that a call involves more commitment than a text. A call could prove unpleasant and demanding.¹⁴

The social media intensify the urge to conform to the group. Turkle discovered that some young people believe that everything they do in public will end up on Facebook or its equivalent. This leads to “anticipatory conformity.” She also claims that the social media are producing “group feelings,” or ecstatic communion.¹⁵ Elias Canetti terms a group that becomes a unified whole the “open crowd,” the truest expression of the crowd phenomenon.¹⁶ Within the open crowd there is a sense of absolute equality, because all divisions among people are momentarily obliterated. The ecstasy that ensues from the use of the social media is not communion that establishes a community, but communion that creates an open crowd, always poised to become a mob. There is no freedom and love in the crowd. Because they wear the mask of love, the social media are the most pernicious of the addicting technologies.

Because we internalize technological stimuli (stimulus shield), we develop a tolerance for them and demand that they be even more intense. This is a classic problem in the acceleration of addiction. The technology industry is accommodating; it designs these technologies to be ever more addictive.

Those who design information and communication technologies and technological products design them to be addictive. In *Hooked*, Nir Eyal discusses in detail how to make products habit-forming.¹⁷ The author has a background in the video game industry and advertising and has taught courses on applied consumer psychology at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. His book is a manual on how to make technologies and products attractive and addictive. He makes no pretense that it is not about manipulating the consumer.

In his model of how to “hook” the consumer, the “trigger” is what sets the behavior in motion. “External triggers” contain information with directions about what to do next. Advertising and word of mouth can motivate the consumer to require a new app for her smartphone, for example. Eyal maintains that the key to creating addiction is the “internal trigger.” Associating a product with desire or fear appears to be the supreme internal trigger. The strongest emotional triggers are visual images. Eyal mentions that the internal trigger for Facebook is the fear of missing out, and, for Instagram, the fear of losing a special moment. The design of variable rewards is essential. Research has indicated that the anticipation of a reward, rather than the reward itself, motivates users. One receives a reward on occasion but not constantly. Those cherished images of family and friends are received only intermittently.

In *Addiction by Design*, Natasha Schüll explores in great detail how the machine-gambling industry probes the psyche of the addict as an aid in designing gambling machines. Addicted gamblers want to play multiple hands or games as rapidly as possible without interruption. Variable rewards are built into the software of the machine to increase with the frequency of the smaller separate bets that gamblers prefer to make. Gamblers can thus enter “the zone” more quickly and stay there longer. Video game designers use a similar psychology to make their games more addictive.

We have entered a new phase of technological progress, in which there is a conscious effort to make us addicted to technology. This is nothing less than an intentional technological totalitarianism. Early on, we were only dimly aware of the totalitarian nature of the technological system. The technological system has now reached a stage in which experts openly discuss the desirability of the total psychological control of humans. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* almost perfectly anticipates today’s technological totalitarianism. In his 1932 novel, Huxley talks about “conscripted by consumption.”¹⁸ We are free, but only as consumers. In his dystopia, freedom is redefined as happiness. In this society, moral relationships are prohibited—no families or close friends—but only transitory, aesthetical ones. Perhaps his most brilliant insight was that pleasure was the chief agent of control. Sex, “soma” (an all-purpose drug for any psychological discomfort), and “the feelies” (cinema with full sensory stimuli) were the main obligatory pleasures. Huxley saw that group therapy would reinforce the controls technicians had established. Are we not in a brave new world with all our pharmaceuticals, self-help groups, social media, advertising, public relations, propaganda, experts on every aspect of life, culture reduced to its lowest level—entertainment—and widespread family dissolution?

What does addiction tell us about individual and corporate sin? Addiction takes possession to its zenith. Slavery and alienation both entail possession but not to the same extent. The metaphor of addiction demonstrates as well that pleasure is the key to sin’s control over us. We love our sin. Addiction reveals the accelerating nature of sin: it is dynamic. We quickly sink deeper into sin. Finally, addiction reveals the totalitarian

nature of sin. Sin wants all of us, all the time. These ideas are explicit or implicit in scripture but not in the form of a single metaphor if only because addiction as we know it did not exist then.

Earlier I suggested that a metaphor makes us reflect on the better-known term, not just the lesser-known term. “Sin as slavery” tells us how the institution of slavery takes away our freedom or enslaves us. “Sin as alienation” informs us how industrialized capitalism strips away our freedom or alienates us. “Sin as addiction” instructs us about how the technological system eliminates our freedom or makes us addicts. Each metaphor invites us to reflect on the specific ways that the world, as the place of sin, controls us.

My point is not that gambling, playing video games, and using social media are evil in themselves but rather that *exousia* are at work in our social institutions with the intent of turning us into idolators. In our world, idolatry is best understood as addiction to technology.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, *If You Are the Son of God*. Trans. Anne-Marie Andreasson-Hogg (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), ch. 1.
3. Cited in Natasha Schüll, *Addiction by Design* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 242–43.
4. Paul Graham, “The Acceleration of Addictiveness.” www.paulgraham.com/addiction.html. Accessed 12 November 2013.
5. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
6. Milan Kundera, *Slowness* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 2.
7. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
8. Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*. Trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press, 1959). See also Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964), chapter 5.
9. Herbert Hendin, *The Age of Sensation* (New York: Norton, 1975).
10. J. H. van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man*. Trans. H. F. Croes (New York: Norton, 1961).
11. Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, 1–27.
12. Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, chapter 6.
13. Liel Leibovitz, *God in the Machine* (Conshohocken: Templeton, 2013), 125.
14. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), chapter 10.
15. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 262, 177.
16. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*. Trans. Victor Gollancz (New York: Seabird, 1978), 16–17.
17. Nir Eyal, *Hooked* (New York: Penguin, 2014).
18. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), 33.