Reflections: The dignity of lust
By Al Gini
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In his book Lust, the philosopher Simon Blackburn argues that traditionally we lump sex and lust together, giving both a bad name they do not deserve. For Blackburn, lust need not be excessive, illicit or dehumanizing: Lust can be a virtue and not a vice.

Lust, when properly understood and performed, is, in the words of David Hume, “useful or agreeable to the personal himself and to others.” Lust is about desire that is felt. Lust is about the pursuit of sexual ecstasy.

But, but, but, says Blackburn, the full pleasure of sexual activity requires the presence of another— a partner, a fellow traveler. There must always be an object of lust who is not treated as other, but rather as someone you “desire to please” as much as you “desire to be pleased.”

Citing Thomas Hobbes, Blackburn argues that lust is about two drives or two appetites together: To please < --- > To be pleased. “I desire you, and I desire your desire for me... A pleases B, B is pleased by what A is doing and A is pleased at B’s pleasure.” And so on, and so on, and so on.

For Blackburn, true lust must be more than one-sided. Lust is about communion, harmony and completion. “The subject is not centrally pleased at himself,” says Blackburn, “but at the excitement of the other... There are no cross-purposes, hidden agendas, mistakes or deceptions. Lust here is like making music together, a joint symphony of pleasure and response. There is a pure mutuality.”

Blackburn believes that we should not be “enemies of lust.” “Lust,” he contends, is not merely useful, but essential. “We would none of us be here without it.” Moreover, he suggests that lust, if properly pursued and applied, is an ethical act because it requires us to step outside of ourselves and take into the consideration the feelings, needs and desires of others. It behooves us, says Blackburn, “to speak up for lust,” “to restore lust to humanity,” “to lift lust “from the category of a sin to that of a virtue.”

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