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# OBSCENITY: ITS MORAL MEANING AND SCOPE

JOHN S. CONNOR, C.M.\*

Despite the dangers He knew it entailed, Christ admonished His disciples: "What I tell you in darkness, speak in the light. What you hear in private, proclaim from the housetops."<sup>1</sup> The great risk involved was indicated by the accompanying advice: "Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna."<sup>2</sup> This represents an additional aspect of the crucial challenge which a Christian confronts when coping with important human problems. A Christian must witness Christ's less familiar teachings, in addition to those which are better publicized. This may require enduring those personal discomforts which frequently stem from stiff opposition—whether allegedly loyal or admittedly hostile. The latter antagonism seldom may assume physical proportions, and the former often may be "friendly." However severe the adverse consequences, the overriding obligation still remains. Several somewhat "private" statements of Christ, carrying special moral significance for contemporary social problems, apparently are avoided by many, if not most, contemporary Christian leaders. They seem determined to let these statements languish in darkness and silence, rather than to permit them to enlighten current controversy. Indeed, strange reticence concerning Christ's relevant testimony marks many Christian leaders' contributions regarding disarmament and capital punishment. Notably, Christ observed: "When a strong man fully armed guards his courtyard, his possessions go undisturbed."<sup>3</sup> The context of this statement obviously entails much more than a military meaning. Nonetheless, it lacks full moral significance unless understood as bearing upon the "corporeal connection." Analogies, however,

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew* 10:27.

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew* 10:28.

<sup>3</sup> *Luke* 11:21.

have little value for human beings if simply spiritually interpreted. All told, then, Christ's comment apparently operates to bolster the traditional Christian attitude concerning physical armaments and their use.

Capital punishment, it is suggested, may be considered as carrying Christ's approval, given His recommendations in that respect on the score of scandalizers: "[I]t would be better if anyone who leads astray one of these simple believers were to be plunged in the sea with a great millstone fastened around his neck."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, such a penalty serves a double purpose—saving both the community and the culprit from further depredations. Identifying scandal as the capital offense indicates an intentionally broad coverage, since it naturally embraces various serious crimes and their attendant debilitating social impact. Although restraint certainly should prevail when exercising such an extreme deterrent power, consonant with Christ's merciful judging approach, the message's meaning shows that there are criminal conditions which warrant society's employment of the ultimate sanction. Thus, capital punishment is seen as a society's valid defense against internal aggression, resembling war's legitimate defensive action against external aggressors. Correctly visualized and employed, each principally strives to preserve spiritual values' priority over their corporeal counterparts.

Christian leaders often neglect Christ's statement focusing on obscenity. Although characteristically brief, it discloses the disorder's central source, thereby facilitating an interpretive, corrective, and preventive course of action. Mark's Gospel records the incident involving this concise explanation. While warning His disciples about the Pharisees' fanatical penchant for ritual purification, He tells them:

Nothing that enters a man from outside can make him impure; that which comes out of him, and only that, constitutes impurity . . . . Wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart: acts of fornication, theft, murder, adulterous conduct, . . . deceit, sensuality, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, an obtuse spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have an outline of obscenity's fundamental components along with a link to its proximate cause. Clearer notions concerning the latter will help us understand how it fosters the former.

Judging from the peculiar way Christ used the concept, located after the list of radically disordered practices, one would reasonably say the "obtuse spirit" is the source of the specifically listed evils in Christ's statement. The term describes, therefore, the internal condition marring the individuals who commit the offenses previously mentioned. Those

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<sup>4</sup> *Mark 9:42; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, SUMMA THEOLOGICA II-II, q. 43, art. 3, ad. 1 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. 1947).*

<sup>5</sup> *Mark 7:15, 21-22 (emphasis added).*

perverse engagements represent the "bad fruit" which the defect produces. Consequently, the commission of these offenses manifests a serious ailment.

#### THE MEANING OF THE "OBTUSE SPIRIT"

Obtuse has a readily understandable meaning. It signifies an extra large or loose angular measurement, having a counterpart we classify as acute. The contrasting states reflect an antipathy toward a mediate or balanced position. That intervening middle status actually synthesizes the two opposing tendencies perfectly, achieving compromise. This consolidated arrangement, whereby potential excesses are integrated, attains symmetry when elemental constituents combine. Alternative forces then coalesce, so as to complement one another. The ensuing finely tempered adjustment promotes a sound development, thereby ensuring integrity.

Such a pattern basically characterizes human beings, consonant with their essential structure. Comprised of spiritual and corporeal faculties in an organically unified form, however, human beings are impelled toward compromising between these extremes. Only by balancing subjective resources along substantive or reasonable lines can they develop adequately. That constitutes the key value which must be recognized and respected if human beings are to find fulfillment. "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless."<sup>6</sup> Fundamentally, it requires realities' crucial dominion over the largely subjective.

Before further reflecting on the "obtuse spirit" concept employed by Christ, it is helpful to consider a related statement He made regarding human conduct. Matthew's Gospel reports how Jesus advised His disciples: "Enter through the narrow gate. . . . [H]ow narrow is the gate and straight the way that leads to life. . . ." Here we have a more direct admonition concerning the importance of the mediate or "straight course" for salvation. It demands decisive aiming at the saving "target's eye." The obtuse approach represents a radical dereliction from this critical moral obligation, and an exaggerated independent or "open-ended" attitude, whether individually or collectively affirmed. Asserting their autonomy, subjectivists often interpret reality's theoretical content vaguely or "obtusely." Such objective minimalism supposedly assures them the greatest possible freedom since, allegedly lacking any given guidelines, they adopt self-serving pragmatic norms. The resulting human relationships, however, are often slanted, contrived, and spiritually enslaving. From such a view of life come the practices which Christ enumerated as manifesting the obtuse spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> *John* 6:63; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, I-II, q. 18, art. 1; q. 19, art. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Matthew* 7:13-14.

The flouting of truly reasonable moral norms spawns the corrupted condition properly termed obscenity. Overemphasizing exterior aspects, and subverting of the spirit's rightful dominance, produces an obtuse obscene event. This manipulation characterizes each humanly debasing engagement. Spiritual faculties become effectively reduced to mere instrumental means for indulging corporeal inclinations. Though the aberration's effects may harm others, their impact falls largely upon the perpetrators. As chief "beneficiaries," they necessarily pay the price, in personal defilement, which the deed carries. Therefore, no "victimless" offenses occur here.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE OBTUSE SPIRIT

Resuming our consideration of Christ's statement regarding the "obtuse spirit," and the several examples He gave, we see Him outlining a basic pattern. Three capital vices are mentioned, together with more specific evils stemming from them. Thus, sensuality and two very prominent derivatives, fornication and adulterous conduct, are enumerated. Envy likewise receives emphasis, as does deceit. Arrogance or pride appears too, especially evidenced by its twin destructive manifestations—murder, and theft. Blasphemy enters the description because such an attitude toward God actually underlies the other obtuse stands. Accordingly, Christ emphasized the major corrupting traits that St. John later termed the chief worldly-wise infatuations—"[C]arnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show . . . ."<sup>8</sup>

The three capital vices which Christ stressed and which St. John identified as the hallmarks of the worldly types, represent the major manifestations of the "obtuse spirit." These involvements profoundly and directly damage the subjects. They entail a more concentrated assault upon the spirit's proper dominance, measured against the comparatively indirect kind issuing from their counterparts—covetousness, gluttony, anger, and sloth. The latter reflect a slipping into carnally dominant pursuits while the former require a spiritually subverted commitment. Although the attitudes behind both alternate sinful approaches are basically obtuse, the second can be called practically passive or careless (carnal sin), and the first active or deliberate (spiritual sin).<sup>9</sup> What makes the difference here is that, in spiritual sin, arrogance and deceit combine with sensuality to produce pseudo-sophisticated aberrations on a commercial, professional, and supposedly civilized scale.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 *John* 2:16; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, I-II, q. 77, art. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* I-II, q. 72, art. 2.

## SEXUAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE OBTUSE SPIRIT

Looking at the more explicitly sensual aspects of spiritually sinful obscenity evident in contemporary society, we find many innovative variations. Publicly saleable contraceptive devices, and similarly available advisers for "sexually active" lifestyles, jointly facilitate old-fashioned fornication. Much criticism aimed at the schools' current "sex education" programs provides strong proof supporting the objections of those who perceive a current sexual looseness in society.<sup>10</sup> A certain "professional" tendency toward stressing sexual inclination, thereby promoting personal disorganization, has sparked opposition inside scientific circles. The rationalizing within these circles has become stretched to the state where some have recommended child-sex or "Cradle to Grave Intimacy."<sup>11</sup>

Commercial contributions fostering the sensuality-syndrome extend and compound its influence enormously. Publicly displayed through adult outlets, vicarious experiences of fornication are openly available. These range from the small-scale pictorial scenarios debasing normal human sexual relationships, to full-scale screen and live-on-stage types. More "sophisticated" entrepreneurs obligingly supply striptease services — likewise live, in plush, relatively private surroundings. Similarly, near nude pictorials attempt to emulate the more explicit publications. The "soft-core," as well as its cheaper "hard-core," pornographic press, aided by television and the accommodating daily papers, help make glorified sexuality an acceptable way of life. Indeed, the "pop-porn" industry recently has begun providing "kiddie-porn" entertainment, with apparent court approval in New York State.<sup>12</sup>

The steadily growing demand for divorce and remarriage rights surely displays how adulterous conduct advances under modern conditions. Sexual wantonness being so widespread, the married state can hardly avoid experiencing a corresponding decline. Additional corruptions occur on a more profoundly human plane, where homosexual and lesbian unions are asserted and publicly allowed. These sometimes masquerade behind a supposed sexual transformation by one partner. Throughout such practices today, deceit and arrogant pride display their impact. This combined obtuse output evidences the distortions of a corporeal subjectivity which has supplanted a spiritually centered or controlled objectivity.

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<sup>10</sup> Quay, *Sex Education Fall From Favor Seen*, NATIONAL CATHOLIC REC., June 28, 1981, at 1, col. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Leo, *Cradle to Grave Intimacy*, TIME, September 7, 1981, at 69.

<sup>12</sup> *People v. Ferber*, 52 N.Y.2d 674, 681, 422 N.E.2d 523, 526, 439 N.Y.S.2d 863, 866 (1981).

## OTHER RAMIFICATIONS OF THE "OBTUSE SPIRIT"

Beside the foregoing involvements reflecting the "obtuse spirit," certain other less discernible, yet harmful, counterparts exist. They manifest the sensuality syndrome somewhat more subtly than is done at the sexual level. Self-exalting, "personally liberating," deceit prevails here, deriving sustenance from the agent's commitment to subjective enhancement. These latter urges appear rather covertly, compared with the practices discussed above. This happens because such aberrations transpire along collective lines.

A lavishly promoted, and near-slavishly attended, example in this connection is the entire professional sports system. Its glorified programs offer sensual entertainment, in which athletes pursue fame and fortune by playing games publicly for a fee. This scenario attracts countless enthusiastic observers. Accordingly, both participants and spectators are gradually induced to take seriously, engagements carrying only recreational significance. The obtuse spirit clearly shows through here. Transforming physical diversions into full-scale occupations or preoccupations means that they become degrading obsessions.

Seeking popular acclaim as well as proportionate income-gain through an artfully cultivated showmanship, the players concentrate upon abolishing the distinctions between humanly constructive activity and mechanically repetitive counterfeit activity. Similarly, the observers, seeking entertainment as a release from either burdens or boredom, suppress their natural recreational urges in favor of an artificial or vicarious involvement. Underlying these slick distortions is a drive for self-assertion and satisfaction, fueling the big business which promotes these activities.

Still worse instances of the obtuse spirit appear amid the fine arts. Intellectual and emotional dedication properly characterizes these compositions. Properly conceived and constructed, they especially reflect the human spirit's controlling influence on their composers. This fuller spiritual meaning and moving effect distinguishes the fine arts from the more mundane variety.<sup>13</sup> Evidencing human beings' inclination toward radical independence, "self-inspired" objectors to traditional artistic criteria have always existed. Many technically talented artists fail at bridging the gap between these creative extremes. Indeed, they cannot establish a balanced, spiritually dominant form. They merely succeed in devising sensibly, and hence derive subverted or obtuse interpretations of reality.

Drama and literature excessively emphasizing the absurd, grotesque, and perverse traits mangling human relations represent obscene artistry. These obtuse productions demoralize and subvert their subjects. The au-

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<sup>13</sup> See J. BARZUN, *THE USE AND ABUSE OF ART* 123-50 (1974).

thors usually say this is life as experienced today. Actually, however, they simply tell us about peoples' intensely subjective preferences which presumably will attract many similarly inclined viewers.

Such perceptive temptors often are very successful in their attempt to exploit an audience's latent sensuality, craftily following the line of least resistance. These pseudo-sophisticated tales have an inebriating effect upon an audience, leaving them corporeally "high" but spiritually "dry." Similarly, such literature occasionally reaps double financial rewards, appearing on stage and screen after leading on booksellers' lists. Writers, publishers, and producers consequently cater to peoples' prurient and venal interests.

Much of the same presently marks artistry in sculpture, painting, and music. An obtuse outlook dominates there also. Basic and pragmatic themes lack any meaningful form other than the technically arranged materials employed by the composer. The resulting productions reflect sheer idealizations. This "liberated" primitiveness carries a certain widespread appeal, especially among the younger generation. Furthermore, these works afford near limitless opportunities for relatively uninhibited interpretation, and serve as evidence of the possessors' ultraliberal social status.

Emphasis on the erotic, to a point approaching the psychotic, usually reverberates, if it does not dominate, throughout much of contemporary music. That "free-wheeling" feeling and liquid-like condition helps make the contemporary music all the more acceptable because it further magnifies the mobility and audibility inherent there. Even recognizing that extra emotional enthusiasm is often appropriate under artistic conditions, what actually transpires in the foregoing circumstances prominently portrays obscenity.

Painting often correspondingly manifests the contemporary obtuse taint. The prevailing, modern art approach clearly shows how headstrong abstract ideas become handily concretized in formless fashion. Indeed, the artistic novice might suspect that the paint has been simply shaken off the brush onto the sheet. When less radically "creative" compositions exhibit at least a latently understandable content, they frequently stress a technical, sexual, or sensual subject. Whether physically or metaphysically inspired, then, the artistic import is very much the same. It eschews objective and spiritual meaning while slickly displaying subjective, largely corporeal significance. Thus, it exemplifies obscenity.

Sculpture, today, also amply displays the contemporary commitment to artistic looseness or obtuseness. This art form carries large-scale culpability as well. Its grandly styled sculptures are widely displayed in public, hence promoting the obtuse spirit. These monuments suggest futility to all who see them. Monumentally conceived, these images assert an inclination toward propounding abstract ideas. Although this penchant has



long existed within scientific circles, its penetration into the arts has been more recent. They clearly constitute obscenity.

As with modish drama and literature, the clever composers and interpreters of musical, pictorial, and sculptural media know how to exploit their talents most effectively under compromised conditions. Realizing that novelty and an emphasis upon an emancipated, "open-ended," personal maturity counts most when manifesting artistic competency, individuals concentrate upon devising even more individualized expressive designs. They too see success stemming from a cultivated finesse in satisfying ordinary peoples' sensual curiosity. Since both audiences enjoy much the same artificial approach, experienced at lower and "higher" aesthetic levels respectively, the producers' general popularity encourages an ever stronger self-assertion.

#### SOME MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the foregoing considerations of certain adverse conditions which characterize societal relations today, we can better understand the connection between the "obtuse spirit" and obscenity. Obviously, those conditions display reciprocal subjective and objective states, marring individuals and groups. They display a close relation to human beings' deep-seated proclivity for fostering spiritually corrupting, corporeally dominating stands. As previously noted, this personal disorder reflects two distinct yet mutually complementary traits. One entails an extremely idealistic ideological outlook: wherein human nature is unconsciously envisioned along pseudo-angelic intuitively simplistic lines. It accordingly accentuates expressive effects largely devoid of rational formal content. The other involves an extremely voluntaristic or romantic attitude in which human nature is unconsciously envisioned along instinctively simplistic lines. Consequently, it accentuates expressive effects lacking minimal rational formal content. Both subjectively contrived artistic types evidence the morally corrupted personal status deriving from humanity's supposed autonomous enlightenment. Both, therefore, contribute concomitantly to the obtuse or obscene exhibitions examined above. Although their principally corporeal influence intrudes upon all social artistry, the impact exerted by each extreme wayward wing can be distinguished. Thus, while the idealists and the romanticists flourish alike amid the fine arts, the latter naturally have greater sway among the more primitively sensual outlets.

Civil law rightly fills an ancillary preventive and corrective role here. It, however, cannot possibly cope with the obscenity problem. This is true not only because such social offenses often lie beyond the political power's reach, but because of its historically limited conceptions concern-

ing the obscene—meaning merely sexual “prurience.”<sup>14</sup> That a fundamentalistic theoretical interpretation prevails in civil legal circles is hardly surprising. The allegedly positivistic, amoral, rationalizing attitude existing in our political system, realistically viewed, could not accomplish much more.

It is quite surprising, however, when we find Catholic moral theology largely adopting the same stance with respect to obscenity. As a rather comprehensive study of governmental action against the evil shows, Catholic moralists, like legalists around the world, tend to equate obscenity and specific sexual perversity. The author of the study justifies such agreement by indicating its universal approval:

This is evident in the laws of the various nations. It is found in both the West and the East. It is not a new meaning for it is found in earlier codes, even among primitive peoples . . . . The great value systems as represented by the major religious faiths define obscenity in much the same way as the legal systems. This unanimity points to a natural law [basis].<sup>15</sup>

Being counted with those who oppose obscenity because it violates the natural law certainly is good, yet scarcely good enough for Christians. Natural law underlies supernatural revelation, but surely does not constitute equal truth. The latter fulfills the former through a radically expansive elucidation, which Christ’s teachings demonstrate. The difference between His implicit definition of obscenity and that explicitly advanced by so many Christian moralists exemplifies the disparity. It likewise helps us better understand what motivates the inclination toward theological pluralism and moral revisionism. Both complimentary conditions stress omitting supernatural exactness (“straightness”), while advocating a more natural looseness (obtuseness), at least indirectly. This wider way in principle naturally wins larger numbers in practice—the twin dreams behind pluralism and revisionism, despite Christ’s warning about their destructive potential. Obviously, then, the Second Vatican Council has good reason to tell moral theologians that, “[i]ts scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> T. MURPHY, *CENSORSHIP: GOVERNMENT AND OBSCENITY* 3-37 (1963).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 36.

<sup>16</sup> *THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II* 452 (W.M. Abbott, S.J. ed. 1966).