Overcoming the Vice of Pornography: A Virtue Ethics Approach to Conceptualizing and Treating Compulsive Pornography Use for Latter-day Saint Therapists

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Abstract

Thoughtful critics have pointed out a number of conceptual and scientific problems inherent in the most prominent theory of compulsive pornography use, the so-called "disease" model. There is, however, concern that this model may not be adequately able to account for centrally important features of this distressing phenomenon. In this paper, we outline a virtue ethics approach to understanding and treating compulsive pornography use, behavior often explained by researchers and practitioners in terms of the Brain Disease Model of Addiction (BDMA). We argue that a virtue ethics perspective offers a viable alternative conceptual framework more fully able to account for the central features of compulsive pornography use and the experiences of those who struggle with it. In brief, the virtue ethics approach understands compulsive pornography use as a "vicious" habit, one countered by actively developing specific virtues through a repetitive, agentic process of forming a deeper, more holistic moral character and worldview—in particular, a worldview that relies on the grace of our Savior Jesus Christ. The therapeutic aim of virtuous character formation serves to redefine both the process and goals of addiction therapy, while also offering a more coherent conceptual framework within which many common therapeutic tools already in use can still have relevance.

***Keywords*:** Aristotle, addiction, pornography, brain disease model, Virtue Ethics, therapy, LDS therapy

Many researchers have devoted a great deal of time and effort to formulating a comprehensive and coherent account of compulsive pornography use (CPU; Blevins, 2016; Dunnington, 2011; Ley et al., 2014). Currently, the most widely accepted approach is known as the "disease" or "addiction" theory (Ley et al., 2014; Blevins, 2016). This approach, often referred to as the "brain disease model of addiction" (BDMA; Foddy, 2011), holds that CPU is the result of pathological patterns of neurochemical activity occurring in the brain, especially in the dopaminergic reward systems of the brain. It has been suggested that these neurochemical patterns of activity mirror those found in drug and alcohol addictions (see, e.g., Hilton, 2011).

Thoughtful critics have, however, pointed out several conceptual and scientific problems inher-

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ent in the BDMA (see, e.g., Dunnington, 2011; Heather et al., 2018; Overcash, 2021; Satel and Lilienfeld, 2013; Westin, 2020). As a result, many researchers and therapists seem to be searching for a better, more coherent and consistent, perspective from which to make sense of CPU, as well as a framework from which they can provide more effective and helpful interventions (Hall et al., 2015; Heather et al., 2022; Pickard, 2021; Pickard et al., 2015). Additionally, many seek an approach that takes seriously not only the doctrines and commandments concerning the divinely given gift of sexuality (e.g., the Law of Chastity), but also the healing grace proffered by the Savior to those willing to follow Him (see, e.g., Belzman, 2010; Cook, 2006; Dunnington, 2011; Timmons, 2012).

In this paper, we will outline an alternative approach to the BDMA inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics, an alternative we believe can provide a more coherent and appropriate framework for understanding and treating CPU. It is important to note here, at the outset, that virtue is not to be understood simply as chastity or modesty, which is how it often ends up being defined in Latter-day Saint (LDS) vernacular and culture. Rather, virtue is defined as *moral excellence* in general, or excellence of character. In other words, virtue refers to all attributes of character that are integral to being an excellent person (e.g., friendship, prudence, intentionality, etc.), not merely to chastity.

It should also be noted that the term "ethics" is not to be understood as referring to the professional codes of conduct to which therapists must adhere as part of their professional obligations. Ethics is, rather, that branch of philosophical inquiry that seeks to understand how people should behave (i.e., what is considered right and wrong behavior and/or intention). Whereas general ethics is the broad focus on what is considered right and wrong behavior, virtue ethics is focused on systematically identifying what kind of person one should aspire to be (i.e., what character attributes should be acquired through development of virtuous habits) in order to attain moral excellence, live "the good life," and experience human flourishing.

As such, the virtue ethics framework we will present here puts CPU in a conceptual category that accounts for the insights of the more mainstream model of addiction currently in use but avoids the various pitfalls inherent in that approach. The conceptual category to which we refer is *habit*. To accomplish our aim, we will first articulate a few key features of an LDS conception of personhood that are relevant to understanding agency, character, and the possibility of meaningful healing and change. We will also articulate the central and defining features of CPU, in order to provide a clear conceptual foundation from which we can critically compare and contrast the virtue ethics model with the mainstream model of CPU. Second, we will summarize the mainstream model of CPU and briefly review some critiques thereof. Third, we will present a virtue ethics approach and demonstrate how such an approach offers a viable alternative conceptual and practical framework that more fully accounts for the central features of CPU and is more consistent with an LDS conception of personhood.

In a virtue ethics approach, compulsive pornography use reflects a sub-category of habit (i.e., it is a vice). Accordingly, CPU is seen as a "vicious" habit, in which clients are caught up in a particular mode of living (and, as will be argued further, self-understanding) in which they have oriented the habits of their lives such that CPU plays a central role. As part of our discussion we will show how the virtue ethics approach offers a more coherent framework within which many of the therapeutic interventions already in use still have some relevance, such that clinicians do not have to entirely change their approach, even though their understanding of the nature of the problems being addressed in therapy, and the goals they may set for therapy, may well be different. In short, we will show how redefining CPU as a vicious habit, and recovery in terms of the development of virtuous habits, could breathe new life, energy, and hope into our clients' efforts in therapy because their recovery will have the more hope-filled end-goal of becoming holier and developing stronger character, a goal that makes little sense in the mainstream model.

Key Features of the LDS Conception of Personhood

Intrinsic to LDS doctrine and scripture is a particular conception of personhood (see, e.g., 2 Nephi 2; Mosiah 3:19; Abraham 3:22-25; D&C 14:7; Moses 1:3-4, 13, 30-39)—a conception which must be preserved and defended in any model of CPU that LDS therapists are willing to take seriously. Although there are many aspects of the LDS conception of personhood which could be explored, we will briefly discuss only three aspects that we consider most relevant to our analysis and to the model of CPU we are proposing.

First and foremost, LDS teachings concerning the nature of personhood make the foundational claim that *human beings are moral agents capable of acting,* and as such are distinguished from things which are acted upon (2 Nephi 2:14; D&C 93:30-31; see also Williams, 2005; Williams and Gantt, 2020). In other words, human beings are by nature the sorts of beings who make choices and do things of themselves rather than the sorts of beings who simply react out of causal necessity as dictated by some antecedent force or process (e.g., environmental stimuli, id impulses, genetics, etc.). Because human actions are not caused or determined in the same way that the actions of natural objects are, humans have the possibility of being or doing otherwise in given situations, chosen from among possible alternatives of how to act. In short, moral agency implies that human nature is rooted in possibility.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that agency is not best understood as the ability to make free, unfettered choices through some process of conscious deliberation about options from moment to moment in what some scholars have called the "radical choice" model of agency (Taylor, 1999) – a conception of human agency in which the individual is said to possess the power to autonomously choose from amongst alternatives independent of the constraints of context or causality of any sort (see Williams and Gantt, 2022, for a more detailed treatment of this issue). Rather, descriptions of human agency in scripture depict people as having their hearts become fully set upon loving certain acts and things such that they start living in ways focused on the pursuit of those things they love. The Savior Himself has stated that "no man can serve two masters" (3 Nephi 13:24), suggesting that human agency is at least in part about coming to love God or love other things over time, not just about people choosing to follow or reject certain enticements in each given moment. Arising from this example is a morally dichotomous facet of human agency—a choice between a path of conversion to God's ways, or a path of entrapment and ensnarement that leads away from God (2 Nephi 10:23), and in which "hearts are set so much upon the things of this world" (D&C 121:35).

Thus, the second feature of personhood is that *by virtue of their agency, people can set their hearts on certain paths and come to love that which they pursue.* In biblical terms, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6: 19-21). In short, people's hearts can become habituated to pursue certain goals or activities, whether those goals are in-line with God's ways or against them (i.e., sin).

Mercifully, just because people can have their hearts set on sin does not mean their hearts must be permanently stuck seeking after sin. LDS theology teaches that "the Spirit of the Lord work[s] upon… the very vilest of sinners" (Mosiah 28:4), such that through repentance, laboring "without ceasing" (Alma 36:24), and the Atonement of Christ, all mankind can be redeemed, and people can have a "mighty change in... [their] hearts, that [they] have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). More simply put—central to an LDS conception of personhood is the third feature: *all people are capable of change and repentance* through faith and diligence on the Lord's name. So, even though someone has become set in sinful ways, there is always hope that they can be healed and that their very natures can be changed. Caution must be taken, however, that we do not put the onus of change and transformation entirely on the person. As we show forth a willingness to develop new habits, Christ is the one who changes us, our hearts, and our desires, and new habits unfold in that process.

In summary, the LDS conception of personhood describes people as moral agents who can be enticed by, yield to, and can take up pursue particular paths and goals (Williams and Gantt, 2020). As people pursue various path of meaning over

time, their hearts can become habitually set upon those paths and the goals to which those paths are meant to lead them. However, people who find themselves on sinful paths are capable of change, and their very hearts and natures can be healed and transformed through faith and diligence on the gospel path and trusting in the Savior's promises to redeem them. For clinicians of the LDS faith, we believe this depiction of personhood must be foundational to any model of CPU. As we will argue, we believe the virtue ethics model is much more consistent with the LDS conception of personhood than the mainstream model we will describe.

Defining Features of CPU

We recognize that the experience of CPU is, in many ways, unique to each person. At the same time, there do seem to be some central features, common across all experiences of CPU, that unite the experiences of those who struggle with it. Those features help define, at least in part, what CPU is as a phenomenon. We believe that in addition to remaining consistent with an LDS conception of personhood, an adequate model of CPU must also account for its defining features.

First, the central and defining feature of CPU is compulsive behavior, which occurs even when people "are rationally convinced [that] they should not" (Dunnington, 2011, 57) seek after pornographic material. Second, for people struggling with CPU, their behavior is often morally, and sometimes spiritually, salient and distressing to them (Charati et al., 2020). Furthermore, such people often experience their compulsive use as a loss of freedom, with *addiction* being their primary way of both interpreting what is happening to them and understanding themselves (e.g., "I am a porn addict"; Blevins, 2016; Schalow, 2017; Westin, 2020).

Yet, even as they feel a loss of freedom in the face of their increasing pornography use, such people still seem to feel responsible for their actions and will often still refer to themselves as having willpower (Charati et al., 2020). In other words, it seems that people who struggle with CPU paradoxically experience their behavior as something largely out of their control and happening to them and, at the same time, assume responsibility for such behavior and for their efforts to stop their use. In short, CPU comes to play a very central role in the narrative of a person's moral life—it is a meaningful moral problem for which they feel responsible.

The Brain Disease Model of Addiction

Now that several relevant features of an LDS conception of personhood have been presented, and the central phenomenological features of CPU have been defined, we can safely move forward with a critical analysis of the dominant model of addiction (BDMA) and its relation to mainstream conceptualizations of CPU. The following questions will guide our analysis: (1) Is the BDMA approach to CPU rationally coherent? (2) Does it adequately account for the defining phenomenological features of CPU? (3) And, finally, is it consistent with an LDS conception of personhood?

The Brain Disease Model

Much research and theory in psychology on the nature and source of human suffering is founded on a view of personhood that largely attributes human suffering to pathological conditions or diseases (Foddy, 2011). Accordingly, the most common model of CPU is the BDMA. In this model, all psychological symptoms, emotional difficulties, and overall suffering that would bring clients to therapy (including CPU) are thought to be, ultimately, the result of biological mechanisms in the brain (Dunnington, 2011; Foddy, 2011; Slife and Hopkins, 2005; Westin, 2020).

With regards to the specific brain structures involved in CPU, the BDMA asserts that the compulsion to look at pornography arises when the reward centers of the brain are activated, or overactivated, and thus increase dopaminergic activity (i.e., the releasing of dopamine; Chamberlain et al., 2005). It is then argued that oxytocin and several other neurochemicals drive people to create an emotional bond with the dopamine-induced pleasurable feelings elicited by pornography viewing, causing them to repeatedly return to viewing and creating a pattern of compulsive use to which the person is addicted (Hilton, 2011).

For those that endorse the BDMA, then, people with CPU suffer from a neuropathology resulting from changed brain structures and functions that systematically cause them to seek out the

pleasure of *bonding* with the images of pornography (Hilton, 2011). It is in this sense that addiction is often thought of as "hijacking" the brain because such addiction is presumed to be taking control of the brain's natural reward systems (Teresi and Haroutunian, 2011). In sum, the BDMA asserts that the primary mechanism(s) necessarily driving CPU is rooted in brain physiology and claims that CPU is a biological/medical disease in need of medically focused treatment such as pharmacological intervention or treatment in a medicalized context (e.g., a hospital).

Analysis of the Brain Disease Model

In critique of the BDMA, we will first present the scientific evidence against the model, and then the philosophical objections to it. The BDMA has been rejected by many scientists for various reasons (see, e.g., Heather et al., 2022; Heyman, 2010, 2017; Lewis, 2015, 2018). One reason is that there are several neural changes typically associated with substance addictions that have not been observed in studies of pornography addiction, such as unique "long-term changes in the neural circuits involving dopamine, glutamate, and GABA," (Ley et al., 2014, 96) or other changes in neural circuitry that would account for the compulsive craving of pornography, as opposed to simply liking to view pornography much like how one would "like" any other kind of activity (Ley et al., 2014). The brainwave patterns observed in pornography addiction are also not consistent with those observed in other addictive behaviors, especially drug abuse (Blevins, 2016). In other words, CPU does not seem to be neurologically consistent with substance addictions that have long been thought of as brain diseases (Blevins, 2016; Ley et al., 2014).

Moreover, some have even argued that the status of addiction in general as a brain disease is not empirically supported because data on addiction treatment and recovery shows some individuals recovering from addictions independent of any physiological or pharmacological treatment in a medicalized context (Dunnington, 2011; Overcash, 2021; Westin, 2020). Furthermore, some have questioned why, if CPU truly is a brain disease, we have not developed pills, neurological surgeries, or other medical procedures to fix it, much like we have done for other diseases and psychological illnesses assumed to be based in brain activity (Dunnington, 2011; Westin, 2020).

Even if there was no scientific evidence against the BDMA, there are philosophical critiques of the model that undermine its validity or, at the very least, help to point out its inherent problems. We can first start by taking a closer look at one foundational philosophical assumption of the BDMA: biological determinism (Dunnington, 2011; Foddy, 2011; Gantt, 2002; Slife and Hopkins, 2005; Slife and Williams, 1995). Biological determinism is the notion that all human behavior is the necessary result of antecedent, causal biological forces. In other words, given the presence of certain causal biological conditions, A, B, and C, a particular behavior, D, must necessarily occur and cannot occur otherwise than it does, given those antecedent conditions. It is clear that the BDMA, as previously described, assumes biological determinism because it posits that, given certain neurobiological conditions (i.e., dopaminergic activity and hormonal bonding, etc.), CPU must necessarily occur and cannot occur otherwise than it does given those antecedent conditions. In other words, the brain has been hijacked, presumably causing the person to compulsively seek after pornography.

There is at least one central problem with the BDMA and its assumption of biological determinism, however. In order for proponents of the BDMA to validate their assumption of biological determinism, they must first prove that changes in the brain do in fact cause human actions to change and can cause pathological compulsivity that is distinctly different from human actions not considered compulsive, involuntary, or diseased. However, as Overcash (2021) points out, empirically speaking, "change is fundamental to brain. This phenomenon is known as neuroplasticity—the ability of the brain's neurons to reorganize themselves in response to stimuli" (p. 57). So, "in order to argue that the addiction-related neurobiological states are pathological, then, disease-model proponents must do more than simply point to evidence that addiction changes the brain" (Overcash, 2021, 57). In other words, simply pointing out that the brain changes and that neurochemicals fluctuate dif-

ferently when a person is consistently viewing pornography is insufficient to support the argument that such changes *cause* compulsive viewing because change in neurobiological activity is a starting assumption for all human action, both voluntary and involuntary (Dunnington, 2011).

Moreover, if we take the principle claims of biological determinism to be true, several problematic implications follow that serve to fundamentally undermine both the central phenomenological features of CPU and some key aspects of the LDS conception of personhood. To start, if biological determinism is true, then one fundamental aspect of agency—purposive, genuinely meaningful choice—and the ability to heal through some sense of that agency is undermined for at least two reasons. First, the BDMA presumes that healing can only occur by means of some manner of medical/biological intervention. However, as we have noted above, healing from addiction has been shown to occur without any such intervention taking place.

And second, even more importantly, if the thesis of determinism is true, then all human action is rendered intrinsically without meaning. In order for human actions to be genuinely meaningful there must be the possibility that we could have done otherwise than we do, otherwise our acting is simply something that happens to us, something that just happens as it must happen (for a more detailed analysis of this issue, see Williams and Gantt, 2020, 2022; Williams et al., 2021). In other words, there is no such thing as meaningful behavior if the acts persons engage in are the necessitated product of causal forces outside their active engagement and intentional participation (see Slife and Hopkins, 2005; Williams, 2005; Williams et al., 2021). However, this is precisely the logic, and the unavoidable implication of that logic, at work at the heart of the BDMA because of the biological determinism it presupposes.

Taking the logic of biological determinism even further, if its claims of necessity are true, then it follows that the actions of both the compulsive pornography user and the therapist are the necessarily determined products of underlying biological factors, processes, or conditions. In other words, biological determinism does not discriminate between compulsive pornography users and therapists when it comes to accounting for the source of behavior because it is presumed that *all* human behavior is biologically determined. This implication necessarily leads to two additional worrisome conclusions. First, the imputation of any genuine or sustainable moral significance to human action becomes impossible. For legitimate moral distinctions to be made regarding the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness, the rightness or wrongness, of a given action, there must be the possibility for the actor to do otherwise than they have done, and to be aware of alternative possibilities and distinctions in the first place.

However, if all human behavior (including thoughts and feelings) are necessarily determined such that they cannot be otherwise than they are necessitated to be, then any such moral distinctions and possibilities do not in fact exist. Rather, biological determinism entails that we are only aware of and thinking about what we are necessarily determined to be aware of and thinking about, and, thus, we cannot be aware of, think about, or do anything other than what has been dictated for us by the biological conditions that constitute the causal antecedents of our thoughts and actions. Behavior, on this reductive and deterministic view, can be neither genuinely moral and praiseworthy nor immoral and blameworthy. Rather, behavior simply is what it is, a-meaningful and, thus, non-moral.

In short, if the BDMA, rooted in the reductive assumption of biological determinism, is true, then meaning, agency, the possibility of genuine transformative change, and morality are all undermined. This, in turn, means that the disease model of CPU cannot adequately account for the central features of CPU (i.e., morally salient, involving willpower, and being meaningful to the person) and that it is in direct conflict with several key aspects of an LDS conception of personhood (i.e., moral agency and the possibility of genuinely transformative change). This is not to say that the model does not reflect any features of CPU—it does acknowledge compulsivity, after all. Indeed, as Dunnington (2011) notes, "This is, *functionally* [sic], why the disease model of addiction has been helpful to many people with ad-

dictions. It resonates with the addicted person's experience" (Dunnington, 2011, 35). However, the BDMA still falls short of being able to deliver on the promise of including all phenomenological features of CPU and being consistent with an LDS conception of personhood.

The Virtue Ethics Approach

We will devote the remainder of this paper to outlining an alternative approach to both conceptualizing and treating CPU, an approach that draws inspiration from Aristotelian virtue ethics and is more consistent with both an LDS conception of personhood and the phenomenological features of CPU. We will begin by examining the virtue ethics conception of personhood, how that conception makes sense of human action, and how an LDS understanding of personhood dovetails with the virtue ethics framework. We will then seek to account for CPU using the virtue ethics framework, and then conclude with an exploration of the clinical implications (and applications) of such an approach.

Because Aristotle's philosophical work constitutes such a large corpus of writings, with many subtle nuances in logic and a multiplicity of topics and subtopics, for the sake of this brief analysis, we will present only the most relevant concepts in as simple a form as we can to increase their accessibility, recognizing that what we present is only a small part of what Aristotle, and later figures such as St. Thomas Aquinas, have to offer the discipline of psychology.

Conception of Personhood

On the opening page of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle begins his analysis by stating: "Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good. Hence the good has been rightly defined as 'that at which all things aim'" (Aristotle, 2004, Book 1, 1094a, 1-3). Here, Aristotle begins his account of ethics (i.e., the nature of the good life and how to achieve it) by asserting a central and foundational feature of the nature of personhood: *All human action is purposively directed toward the pursuit of some aim or goal, which aims are referred to as goods.* In other words, it is the fundamental nature of human beings to be the sort of beings that can and do act purposively towards the achievement of some end, some of which are uniquely human goods, such as "friendship, belonging, justice, social order, and knowledge" (Fowers et al., 2017). So, here at the ground level of understanding human nature from a virtue ethics approach, we have a view that is already harmonious with the conception of personhood articulated in the doctrines and teachings of the Restored Gospel: Human beings are the sorts of beings who act, with purpose, in a fundamentally moral context of relative goods.

"Aristotle's thinking [about human nature] is teleological (from the Greek words, *telos* meaning 'goal' and *logos* meaning 'knowledge'). This means that he understands [people] in terms of the goals that they pursue" (van Hooft, 2006, 51). In contrast, then, to the more reflexively reactive and mechanical accounts of human behavior so common in contemporary psychological science, the Aristotelian view is one in which human beings are seen first to be purposive actors situated in a world of moral distinctions, enticements, and possibilities.

With that grounding assumption of purposive action in place, we find in Aristotle's writings three other central characteristics of human nature. The first characteristic (often considered to be one of the most important characteristics grounding virtue ethics) is that human beings are fundamentally relational, social beings (Fowers et al., 2017; van Hooft, 2006). Indeed, Aristotle famously stated that "Man is by nature a social being" (Aristotle, 2004, Book 1, 1097b, 11). As we will explore in more depth later, virtue ethics assumes that part of what makes certain goals more worthy of pursuit than others is that those goals are related to our fundamentally social nature. For Aristotle, "close attachments to others are essential for living well" (Fowers et al., 2017, 23), and "one of the clearest ways to see the importance of social bonds is to pay attention to what happens when they are disrupted, lost, or absent" (Fowers et al., 2017, 25).

Additionally, a virtue ethics approach takes human sociality to be central because all human actions and purposes take place within "social realities" (van Hooft, 2006, 50) that help to shape our understanding of which goals are most worthwhile and which are not, and "the more we learn

about the importance of attachment and belonging, the more obvious it becomes that the [idea] of the separate, sufficient individual is just plain false for human beings" (Fowers et al., 2017, 27). In short, human beings are fundamentally relational beings, acting out of particular aspirations in a morally saturated and meaningful social world.

Another central doctrine of human nature in the Aristotelian view is that human beings are rational beings. As van Hooft (2006) notes, "the activities [i.e., goal-directed purposive actions] that are distinctly human are rational activities" (van Hooft, 2006, 50). Accordingly, human beings are "not social in the way that herd or flock or swarm animals are... because we are also rational creatures" (Fowers et al., 2017, 28). In other words, a fundamental feature of human nature is that we are the sorts of beings who can find and generate reasons for our actions. To be human is to be able to aspire to certain ends, as well as to be able to offer accounts of the worthiness or unworthiness of those ends. We can create and find meaning in the actions we take and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We can deliberate on justifications for our actions to make sense of them to ourselves and others. As such, virtue ethics assumes that humans are beings endowed with reason, acting for reasons, and capable of reasoning together with other such beings.

Third, in connection with the previously mentioned characteristics, Aristotelian virtue ethics maintains that human beings are not only aware of the kinds of choices they can make but are also *morally sensitive* to the quality of their choices and actions. To be human is to be aware of and able to consider the moral worth and moral consequences of one's actions, and to be called by our nature to aspire to certain distinctly human ends and to fulfill certain uniquely human purposes (Snyder, 2020; van Hooft, 2006). In short, humans are fundamentally moral beings. Virtue is not some sort of cultural "add-on," or the product of some manner of cognitive ascription serving solely individual purposes; rather, it is our very nature as the sorts of rational, purposive beings we are. Such moral sensitivity is manifest in some of the most important, and most human, questions that we so often ask ourselves: "How should we live well?"; "What is the right thing to do?"; "What is my duty to others?; and "Why is [an action] a good or worthwhile goal?" So, not only are human beings the sorts of beings who act purposively and are fundamentally social and rational, but we are also the sorts of beings who concern ourselves continually with the moral question "how should we act?"

This implies that there is something about being human that means we can evaluate our own motives, think about how best to achieve goals, consider which aspirations are choice-worthy and moral. And, as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor Taylor (1999) points out, we are able to evaluate even our moral evaluations (i.e., judgements) and consider whether such evaluations themselves are moral (i.e., of the many desires we experience as human beings, which are worth desiring; of the many goals we could seek, which are worth seeking, etc.).

After understanding that human beings are intrinsically purposive and characteristically social, rational, and moral beings, Aristotle argues that we all ultimately live our lives in pursuit of what we envision (rightly or wrongly, virtuously or viciously) to be the *good life* (Fowers, 2005). In other words, we are all seeking out those goods that we see as most central to a worthwhile life, or a life that could be considered good, flourishing, fulfilling, and morally excellent. There are a great many goods and goals that human beings can pursue, and not everyone is pursuing the same goods. Rather, all are pursuing what they see as the best goods. As Fowers (2005) has said, "people act and fashion their lives as a whole through pursuit of what they see as worthwhile goals" (Fowers, 2005).

Some readers may assume at this point that a virtue ethics approach holds that *any* vision of the good life is a vision worth pursuing, implying that all visions of the good life (i.e., what is the best kind of life) are equal, which would be a form of moral relativism. It is important, however, to be clear that this is not at all the case. For Aristotle, there are some visions of the good life that can be considered a form of *living well*, and there are others that cannot be so considered. There is, Aristotle teaches, an intrinsic moral hierarchy in human action and human aspiration, a hierarchy by which we can judge the moral desirability and

worthiness of various ways of being, acting, desiring, relating, and living. In virtue ethics, "an unquestionably good life [is] one that expresses human nature in the best ways" (Fowers et al., 2017, 20).

That is, a truly good or virtuous life is one in which the person's intentions and conduct are in accord with and represent most fully those things that make human beings characteristically human in their best form. Living in those ways that embody the moral and practical excellence of human nature are just those ways in which human beings are capable of living a *flourishing* life, a life of genuine depth, richness, existential and moral significance, and in which the achievement of our potential *as* human beings is most fully realized. In other words, a truly flourishing life is one that consists of pursuing choice-worthy ends, for the right reasons, and in the right ways, as one strives to fulfill one's fundamental nature in light of what it means to be a human being. In sum, a flourishing life is, according to Aristotle, one in which we pursue all three aspects of an excellent life to the best of our ability, even though doing so can take time and require significant effort as one works to fully craft one's life in the pursuit of choice-worthy goals for the right reasons and in the right ways (Aristotle, 2004).

It is rather likely that most of us pursue a combination of both excellent and non-excellent visions of the good life. For example, it is generally considered a worthy goal to get a job and pursue some wealth in this life. However, a person could choose to get a job for poor (i.e., not virtuous) reasons, such as out of pride or greed, or they could seek to obtain a job in immoral ways, such as through lying and deceit. In contrast, one could seek out gainful employment, presumably with a reputable and honest employer, in order to be of service to others, to develop one's experience and character, to relieve the burden of supporting oneself from others, or any number of other virtuous reasons. A flourishing life is, according to Aristotle, one in which we persistently and intentionally strive to fully craft our lives in the pursuit of choice-worthy goals for the right reasons and in the right ways (Aristotle, 2004).

Notice that the conception of personhood at play in the virtue ethics perspective entails a good deal of flexibility regarding the many goals that can be seen as worthwhile and emblematic of a genuinely flourishing life. That is, while someone could choose to pursue the goal of being a teacher, another a therapist, and another an engineer or a dancer, the important consideration is always the ways in which, and the reasons for which, they seek to do what they do, to be who they seek to be. There is, thus, always a constraint on what kinds of lives are considered genuinely virtuous, a constraint rooted in a recognition of what it is in our nature that makes us uniquely human and uniquely capable of living virtuous lives.

Making Sense of Human Behavior

The virtue ethics vision of the flourishing human life provides a lens by which we can make sense of and understand the behavior and intentions of human beings in a fuller, more dynamic, as well as intrinsically moral, context. In order to understand why a person acts the way he or she does, one first needs to understand what their vision of the good life is (Titus, 2016); that is, what goods are they pursuing, for what reasons, and in what ways. A person's vision of the good life, whether fully articulated to themselves or not, is nonetheless discernable in and manifested by their actions (Fowers, 2005; van Hooft, 2006). A person's actions are fashioned after those goals and plans which they have chosen as ways to pursue their vision or understanding of what goods are ultimately worth pursuing.

Aristotle argues that the pursuit and achievement of genuinely human goods requires that we develop certain intellectual and character traits or attributes. These attributes are known as *virtues*. As Fowers et al. (2017) note, "Virtues are the capacities that make it possible to pursue human goods. . . . with excellence" (Fowers et al., 2017). This means that virtues are those characteristics a person can come to possess through intentional (and, often, intensive) work and habituation, and which allow a person to function well in pursuit of a good and flourishing life. Often, the virtues are referred to as personal strengths or the developed abilities and habits that allow a person to achieve the goals they choose.

It is important to remember, though, that virtues are not instrumental means for achieving

other, perhaps only individual, goals. Rather, a virtue is a way of life—a way of living and realizing the good life. Thus, virtues are both ends and means. They are those ways of being that are worth pursuing and doing because they are good in themselves. Many people are familiar with virtues such as gratitude, honesty, patience, integrity, courage, diligence, temperance, and gentleness. Most members of the Church would be more familiar with the terminology of *Christlike Attributes*, which describes some of the virtues that those who seek after the kingdom of God should develop as they strive to become more like Christ (see, e.g., *Preach My Gospel*, Chap. 6).

A virtuous person, then, is someone who exemplifies the best type of person that a human being can become, manifesting it both in their genuine desire and their developed ability to act in the ways that their worthy goals and circumstances require. The virtuous person, Aristotle shows, is the person who has developed the ability to exercise good judgment, but such judgment is not to be understood as the mere application of a rule. Rather, the virtuous person is someone who knows the right thing to do in the right way at the right time in regard to the right person(s).

The more a person practices virtue and learns to act in the right ways in the pursuit of certain goods, the more the actions that define that pursuit become habitual, "second nature", or a matter of character (Dunnington, 2011, 68), and thereby reveal both the fundamental nature of human beings as purposive, rational, moral, and social beings and the potential for nobility inherent in all of us (Stichter, 2018). In other words, the behaviors we consistently choose are those that become more and more habitual. As we consistently pursue a sustained vision of the good life and as we develop the virtues and other attributes that allow us to pursue that vision (Dunnington, 2011), those virtues come to define our character or comprise who we are and what we stand for. Indeed, the repeated practice of virtues such that they become our habitual ways of being, thinking, and feeling is not unlike the development of particular skills that over time become precise, natural, and easy to perform (Stichter, 2018). Of course, the same process can work in exactly the opposite direction as we choose to engage in or repeatedly practice vice, and, thereby, come to develop ignoble or inhuman habits and character. We shall have more to say about this issue in a later section.

In regards to compulsive pornography users, Westin (2020) has noted that their CPU often takes on a certain meaning to them, a meaning that often comes to permeate the whole of how they see and understand themselves. For example, compulsive users often label themselves as "addicts," which serves as an expression of the meaning that their compulsive use has in their lives. In a similar fashion, as people develop virtues, and their vision of the good life and those virtues combine into a habitual second nature, their vision begins to take on meaning for them, which is often expressed in the ways such people label themselves.

"Virtuous and vicious acts imply not only 'what we do' and 'why we do it' but also 'who we become through our acts"' (Titus, 2016, 450). For example, simply knowing that someone is a teacher, we may conclude that they are the type of person whose character, or second nature, is that of someone who pursues the good of knowledge and education for the sake of educating others. We can also assume some of the day-to-day activities and habits they engage in as part of their job, and we would hope that this person possesses those virtues that would allow them to be not just a teacher, but an excellent teacher. An excellent teacher, or a teacher considered to be living a flourishing life, would be someone who has developed the appropriate skills and set the proper goals associated with teaching, and who has done so for the right reason in the right way at the right time and in regards to the right person(s). To be an excellent teacher is to have developed all the virtuous requisites for excellent teaching such as humility, patience, prudence, wisdom, gentleness, zeal, and vigilance, to name just a few (Higgins, 2011).

Thus, the life of such a person can be expressed in the concise description of them being an *excellent teacher* because that description has taken on meaning for that person, a meaning that can not only be recognized by others are excellent and morally worthy, but which reveals something profound about the nature of human nature and human possibility. The more the person seeks to be an excellent teacher, the more meaningful the

description of teacher becomes to them – and others – as they develop the habits of a life dedicated to excellent teaching.

In sum, human behavior, as understood from the perspective of virtue ethics, is the outgrowth of five intimately inter-related concepts. First, all human behavior can be understood as reflective of a person's vision of the good life. Second, that vision of the good life is manifest in action. Third, pursuit of the worthwhile goals of a good life requires that people develop intellectual and character traits that help them to pursue their goals with excellence. Those traits are referred to as virtues. Fourth, continual pursuit of a good life and the development of virtues leads to the creation of one's character, a second nature in which the manifest actions of one's chosen virtues and goals become habits. Fifth, the habitual lifestyle that people take on becomes meaningful to them (and others) and comes to represent and organize their day-to-day living and goals. In short, being virtuous and living a flourishing life becomes who the person is—it is their very disposition to be virtuous and to seek after virtue (Titus, 2016; van Hooft, 2006).

Getting Clear on Habits and Virtues

It is possible, at this point, that some readers may come away from our description of virtue, habit, flourishing, and excellence thinking that virtues are the only habitual characteristics which human beings can develop. However, Aristotle is quick to show that the moral character strengths of virtues exist in contrast to immoral character flaws or vices. We are convinced that through careful consideration of both virtues and vices, not only can the lives of human beings be more fully understood, but also that this understanding can help us in very practical ways to more directly and fruitfully help others who are in distress and face certain kinds of moral, psychological, and behavioral difficulties.

From a virtue ethics perspective, we take it as true that people are capable of developing both virtues and vices. They are capable of acting and becoming either virtuous or vicious. And, when sufficiently intentionally practiced, the virtues or vices they choose can become second nature to them, defining in expansive ways their character as the persons they have worked to become. Of course, as we noted previously, the reality is that most people act in both virtuous and vicious ways. Nonetheless, striving to be virtuous is the proper fulfillment of human existence and the ultimate good, the fruit of which is the peace and contentment of a flourishing life (Aristotle, 2004; Fowers et al., 2017; Titus, 2016). A flourishing life is one in which the recursive cycle of habitual living is pointed towards virtue, and a non-flourishing life – a life that is less than fully human – is one that is directed towards and shaped by vice.

In order to provide a clearer analysis of how virtue ethics helps makes sense of CPU and opens up certain avenues for treatment, it is necessary to first characterize the nature of habit more fully. Habits can be thought of as a way to explain why people are so often able to act without having to consciously deliberate on their actions. In other words, the concept of habit can help us understand how people are able to coordinate and aim themselves at certain actions without necessarily thinking about them in a detached, deliberative, or critically reflective way. As Dunnington (2011) explains, "habits qualify and coordinate desires" in that "many habits, and in particular many of the virtues [and vices], cannot be understood apart from the passions to which they give shape and coordination," and as such, "habits are fundamentally strategies of desire" (Dunnington, 2011, 61).

This means that the habits by which we act are designed to "act on cue" (Dunnington, 2011, 62) out of a response to relevant situational stimuli to obtain some end-goal and are reflective of the vision of a good life that the person has continually sought after. The more an action is habitual, the less hesitation there is in a person engaging that habit when a situation calls for it. This means that while people can certainly act in virtuous ways without it being a habitual mode of acting, the more they act in according with a particular virtue and the more they see it as being a part of who they are, the more that virtue becomes a matter of habit—and the more it becomes a matter of habit, the more it becomes a matter of character. Habits, then, are learned through a mix of repeated and deliberate action, and guidance and feedback from trusted leaders, relationships, and even broader cultural norms (Fowers, 2005).

However, it is clearly the case that obtaining some goals, and much of our day-to-day acting, requires more than one habit, skill, or ability, requiring instead a coordination of many of our habits, actions, or abilities. A simple or single habit would be something like brushing one's teeth, which requires very few (if not only one) simple abilities to accomplish. However, a complex habit – for example, something like being an excellent teacher – would be something requiring the coordination of many habits of virtue and many other skills and abilities.

"Habits are difficult to change" (Dunnington, 2011; Schalow, 2017, 61) because "habituation is not automatic" (Littlejohn, 2017), but requires deliberation and repetition (Stichter, 2018). Another way to think about this is that deliberation is the space where old habits meet new habits. To change a habit, then, a person has to engage in a difficult process of re-habituation, which, if a previous habit has been engaged in for years, can be all the more difficult to do. Furthermore, complex habits are even more difficult to change than simple ones (Spalding et al., 2019). Understanding habits and the effort required to change them can help make sense of the fact that even though a person may want to change, they might still have difficulty not engaging in the old habit compulsively.

What is a habit then? We will conclude with the straightforward definition provided by Dunnington (2011): "A habit is a relatively permanent acquired modification of a person that enables the person, when provoked by the relevant stimulus, to act consistently, successfully and with ease with respect to some objective" (Dunnington, 2011). From a virtue ethics standpoint, then, the concept of habit allows for non-deliberative (i.e., involuntary) behavior that is nonetheless meaningful and reflective of the person's desires and even innermost loves (Smith, 2016). That is, while habits may well begin in the context of intentional, deliberative choice, once formed and solidified they no longer require deliberation to bring about their intended ends. That does not mean, however, that their founding intention has disappeared or no longer matters – it is still present at the foundation of the habit itself and continues to live in the continued performance of the habit.

Considering LDS Doctrine

Not only are virtue language and concepts woven throughout gospel teachings (e.g., see Christofferson, 2009, 2026), but the Restored Gospel also further clarifies and expands on the virtue-ethics understanding of human nature and life. Probably the most important way in which the Restored Gospel adds depth and sophistication to the virtue ethics perspective is that it provides for us the revealed and clear picture of what a truly good life is about, what it means to live well in light of the Plan of Salvation, and what our fundamental nature and purpose is as more than merely human beings, but as literal sons and daughters of God. For members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we know of the Plan of Salvation, and we have received restored truths about who Jesus Christ is and the attributes (e.g., Christ-like attributes) we should develop on our path to becoming good and virtuous even as He is.

We know which kinds of goods, goals, and purposes are of eternal worth, and we know the ways that we should act as we seek to fulfill those eternal purposes. We also have in Jesus Christ an exemplar to teach us how we should live, how and what we should desire, and what it is that is worth striving for. Indeed, we have been instructed by apostles and prophets, ancient and modern, that "if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy," then we are to "seek after these things" (Articles of Faith, 1:13).

Furthermore, we have been assured that we are not alone in our pursuit of an eternally flourishing life. Through the power of Divine Grace (Jacob 4:7; Moroni 10:32-33; Titus, 2016), we are enabled and strengthened on our quest for eternal life. As Titus (2016) explains, "the gift of grace builds up natural inclinations and habitual dispositions of human nature in the process called sanctification" (Titus, 2016) as we strive towards being more holy or more in line with an exalted life. For Aristotle, knowledge of the good life is primarily obtained through exercise of our natural, rational faculties (van Hooft, 2006). However, the Restored Gospel teaches us that rational reflection is not the only, or in many cases the primary, way in which we can obtain such knowledge; that is, much that we must know about what is good and right can be obtained through revelation, both ec-

clesiastical and personal. This means that we are not meant to rely solely on our own rational capacities, but can instead seek divine direction, healing, and knowledge about how to live well directly from He who is the Truth (John 14:6).

Accordingly, repentance, healing, and change are possible and as we show forth a willingness to develop new habits, Christ can change us, our hearts, and our desires, thereby allowing new, virtuous habits to unfold in the process. It is in this way that a Latter-day Saint perspective on virtue differs importantly from a merely rational, Aristotelian understanding of virtue ethics. Furthermore, in the Restored Gospel, we are called to be more virtuous through invitations to participate in ordinances and accept covenants that remind us to actively live higher and holier lives of Christian discipleship (Christofferson, 2009) by placing us in a "context of moral duty" (Thayne, 2009) towards God and His children (i.e., our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ). In sum, the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Christian discipleship ultimately shows us what a virtuous and flourishing life truly looks like and what such a life is and must be aimed at: becoming like Christ and joining Him in eternal living.

Now to close our description of virtue ethics, let us review its main concepts. We have described how many of the habits constituting the substance of our daily living and acting, feeling, thinking, and relating can be characterized in terms of both simple and complex virtues and vices. Such habits embody a meaningful vision of the good life that the person has fashioned for themselves and can also reflect things the person has learned from leaders, relationships, and cultural norms. Thus, fully formed and lived habits are those that have become a second nature that, in part, reflects a person's goals, character, and reasons for acting the way they do in the specific situations of daily living. They can also sometimes reflect the culture and context in which the person lives. Vicious and complex habits can be changed (although sometimes with great difficulty) through deliberate and repeated practice of pursuing virtuous actions. The Restored Gospel adds to virtue ethics a clear vision of the truly virtuous and flourishing life that is exemplified by Christ, accessible through revelation, and attainable by His grace.

Virtue Ethics and Compulsive Pornography Use

Our exploration of the basic features of a virtue ethics approach paves the way for a more specific discussion of some of the ways in which the approach can help make sense of CPU. There are several ways to define and explain CPU using virtue ethics. We will start by sharing and then unpacking two quotes that explain CPU in terms that reflect the virtue ethics framework. First, properly understood, CPU is a vicious complex habit guiding a person towards "misguided ends" as "the extreme expression of ordinary human motives" (Fowers et al., 2017, 183). Second, as Schalow (2017) points out, "the self can either 'own up' to its existence or refrain from doing so, find guidance in the boundaries of its existence or transgress them in 'destructive' acts, and, ultimately, set the priorities of life or undermine them in the pursuit of a single indulgence—which, in simple terms describes what addiction *is* [sic]" (Schalow, 2017, 28).

In these two quotes, we find language reflective of the conception of personhood put forth in the virtue ethics framework. Remember that the virtue ethics framework posits that human beings have a fundamental nature – i.e., they are purposive actors and rational, social, and moral beings – and this nature must be reflected in a person's actions in order for them achieve excellence (i.e., moral and practical goodness) in their function or purpose as persons. Also, remember that habit mediates between that fundamental nature and the behaviors a person engages in on a day-to-day basis. The above quotes indicate that CPU is an expression of normal daily motivations and desires that have been misdirected toward improper goals, and which have been reinforced by complex, vicious habits.

In the second quote, for example, the phrase "The self can either 'own up' to its existence or refrain from doing so" highlights that a compulsive pornography user has taken up a vision of the good life that denies or violates the fundamental nature of their moral personhood. A flourishing life, as we have argued, is a life that reflects the nature of one's personhood in excellent ways. In other words, a person who is living a flourishing life is a person who is excellent in the

ways in which they relate to others, the moral depth and sensitivity of their judgment, the emotional propriety of the responses to the world, and are clear and wise in their reasoning. They are someone whose life is directed towards achieving choice-worthy ends. In this light, then, the quotes above suggest that a person caught up in CPU is someone who has been caught up in doing the opposite of flourishing by pursuing non-choice-worthy ends that have been reinforced by developed, complex vices (i.e., vicious habits) of thought, feeling, and behavior. This is the essence of a "vicious cycle," a concept that stems from virtue ethics and which points to the ways in which a person can be caught up in habits of doing that which is vicious or destructive and immoral.

At this point, we anticipate a possible objection to our virtue ethics conception of CPU. Most of those who struggle with CPU, particularly in the Church, are good people who live ordinary, decent, and even (in other areas) quite successful lives. Given that fact, some may wonder whether we are saying that all who struggle with CPU are bad people and are focused on the wrong goals in life. Such is not, however, what we are arguing. We acknowledge that most compulsive pornography users are in fact decent people who generally seek to live virtuous lives and, thus, in most situations, act well. We do not wish to be read as suggesting that people who struggle with pornography are inherently bad or evil or have a vision of the good life that is in fact completely vicious and false.

However, as we will show, it is precisely because the complex habits of CPU are often so nonobvious and so deeply ingrained in the "predicaments" (Schalow, 2017, 28) of daily life that CPU is so pernicious and insidious. In other words, much of our daily living in the modern world helps make it so that compulsive pornography "fits" right into our lives. As Schalow (2017) argues, the habits and vision of the good life that constitutes daily modern living are also constitutive of the "everydayness and 'norms' of addictive practices" (p. 28) in such a way that it can be difficult to even notice their presence (see also, Fowers et al., 2017). In some sense, the norms of addictive practices are easily taken for granted and thus easily hidden in the modern assumptions about how people should live their lives. That is what can make such addictive practices so hard to overcome or replace with more virtuous habits.

Authors such as Smith (2016), Grant (2015), Wilkens and Sanford (2009), Harrison (2016), and Noble (2021) have all convincingly shown that there are entire worldviews, and their associated and sustaining values, practices, and habits, embedded within modern life that serve to educate and shape us in a particular vision of the good life, one that is often contrary to the demands and expectations of Christian discipleship and the Christian vision of the flourishing life. It is this, we will argue, that so often makes it possible for CPU to fit so easily into our forms of modern living, even the modern living of people who are striving to be Christian.

How CPU Fits Into Our Modern Lives

So, what is it about modern living that enables CPU to fit in so easily? For this discussion, we will answer the question in two stages: First, we will describe the modern vision of the good life in which CPU fits so easily, and second, we will discuss the modern-day vices that reinforce it.

It is not surprising that sex, as part of human life and relationships, has come to be a dominating concern of much of modern life because it is everywhere and more easily accessible than ever before (Regnerus, 2017), so much so that the widespread distribution of easy-access porn could be reasonably considered as a major contributing factor to the increased prevalence of CPU. However, it is not just the free and widespread accessibility of sex that is of key importance to our modern vision of the good life. Recall that a vision of the good life defines both who a person fundamentally sees themselves as (i.e., the meaning of their nature) and what goals the person sees as being worthy of pursuing.

With regards to sexuality, then, it has been argued by numerous observers that, in its obsessive concern with sexuality, our modern culture also instantiates for us a particular understanding of what it means to be a person in which personhood is characterized as primarily rooted in an inward, plastic, infinitely malleable and hyper-sexualized self (see e.g., Grant, 2015; Noble, 2021; Trueman, 2020). In other words, sexuality in modern life

has become not just a facet of human nature, one among many, but central to our understanding of both who we are as human beings and who we ought to be (Trueman, 2020). Thus, a normal human desire is easily misguided; sexual desiring becomes central to our self-understanding of who we are and of what the good life is. Even those who do not believe that all sexual desires should be expressed still often accept the idea that sexuality is at the core of human identity.

Littlejohn (2017) and Schalow (2017) have added that, with technology becoming so central to modern life, living artificially chosen lifestyles has become more possible than ever (e.g., created avatars and no moral accountability). Technology has also broadened horizons and created an almost limitless supply of ways to obtain instant gratification for every passing desire, no matter how small (Littlejohn, 2017; Schalow, 2017). We are reliant on technology for work, for play, for relaxation, and for entertainment, and we have come to naturally turn to technology and smart devices when there is a need for fulfillment or a gap in our schedule (Littlejohn, 2017). Take the modern vision of the good life with the centrality of sexual identity and the dominance of technology that constitute the "everydayness" of our lives (Schalow, 2017, 28), then add the addictive "hook" (Schalow, 2017, 47) of pornography (i.e., its pleasure and the need to for fulfillment or relief brought on by some life event such as losing a loved one), and it becomes clear that pornography fits right into our modern conception of the good life. As Noble (2021) states:

> Pornography assumes that we are each our own and belong to ourselves. It's a tool that promises to give us a kind of personal validation, a sense of identity, a taste of meaningfulness, and a glimpse of intimate belonging ... Rather than helping us meet our responsibilities and cope with an inhuman world, it exacerbates our condition... leaving us addicted, depressed, exhausted, lonely, and bored. (p. 63)

In short, pornography promises fulfillment of the desire for the type of good life advertised by modern culture but instead leads to the very emptiness of purpose which people seek to fill through pornography, resulting in an endlessly vicious cycle. In addition to the modern-day vision of the good life in which CPU "fits right in," a number of vices are embedded in our culture and, thus, salient in our day-to-day living within that culture, which consequently reinforces that vision. We will briefly explore just two of those vices.

It can be said that modern technology has left us with more leisure time than ever before (Hütter, 2013; Sherk, 2007). Consequently, our lives are replete with moments of *boredom*. Boredom is a vice, it reflects the abandonment of intentional purpose in favor of bland meaninglessness, uninterest in things that are interesting, and unwillingness to engage in worthy actions and constructive pursuit. Paradoxically, we seem to fixate on feelings of boredom or see them as a problem that needs to be fixed, indicative of a void needing to be filled (Hütter, 2013). Consequently, many of us feel that we must, in every waking moment, be doing something, no matter how dull and unimportant that thing might actually be. With technology readily available, we so often reach for our phones when we feel there is nothing to do, rather than practicing the virtue of stillness (Psalm 46:10). Given that the internet is inundated with pornography, the viewing of which often provides users with bursts of elated energy that seems to counteract their boredom, at least temporarily, it is no surprise that it is something to which we so frequently and so easily turn.

Additionally, our culture's emphasis on the priority of the individual leads many to lean into the vice of *isolation*, which is vicious because it is contrary to our fundamentally social nature (Fowers et al., 2017). Despite the fact that private self-focus and isolation appear to lead to increased depression and anxiety (Mor and Winquist, 2002), much of modern culture bends toward a singular focus on the individual self. By encouraging practices such as taking time to be alone each day as an expression of our authenticity and as a therapeutic intervention to help us "discover [ourselves] and find [our] own voice," our contemporary culture encourages isolation (Carter, 2012a,b). Whether by choice or by circumstance, being alone is part of our daily lives, and that is not necessarily a bad

thing. However, when the isolated, autonomous self and its needs are emphasized and prioritized in our culture (Wilkens and Sanford, 2009), many may come to habitually isolate themselves from others – and, as any compulsive porn user knows, isolation is a recipe for indulgence.

Taken together, the modern vision of the good life centered on technology, sexuality, along with the vices of boredom, isolation, and other such vices, provides the breeding ground for the vicious cycle of "addictive practices" (Schalow, 2017, p. 28) that are at the heart of CPU. Many are caught in this vicious trap in some way or another without even fully realizing what is taking place. All that has to happen for CPU to take hold is for a curious person to indulge in viewing pornography, perhaps even only a few times, and they can subtly and quickly have formed a vicious habit, one that can trap them in a fundamentally inhuman way of understanding themselves and others. Granted, not all people who struggle with CPU fully indulge in the modern-day vision of the good life with all its accompanying vices. Nevertheless, the virtue ethics framework we have outlined here suggests that all compulsive pornography users are pursuing misguided goals and have developed daily vices that trap them in a compulsive cycle of pornography viewing.

Clinical Implications: Catching a Vision of a Virtuous Life

If CPU is properly understood as a vicious, complex habit of living, then healing (i.e., treatment and therapy) cannot simply be about taking a pill, finding some way to "re-wire the brain," or practicing coping skills aimed at managing biological impulses until the compulsion is "fixed." On the contrary, healing is found in dedicating oneself to actively, intentionally living in new, virtue-focused ways that are consonant with a flourishing, genuinely human, life. In other words, helping a client replace vice with virtue is not simply a matter of applying some technique or intervention that works to stop compulsive behavior. Rather, the invitation to virtue is about coming to live a complete, coherent, and worthwhile life in which the viciousness of CPU has no place because the desires which constitute it have been replaced with worthier desires and a better vision of the good life, who one is, and what one is genuinely capable of being. It requires that we completely reconsider the form of life we live day-to-day—our goals and aspirations, our desires, our daily habits, and the meaning of those habits—as we work to re-orient ourselves towards a richer version of ourselves and the flourishing life that comes from living in a more virtuous manner.

In other words, to heal from CPU, a person must reconstruct their life by reconstructing their vision of the good life and replacing the vicious habits contributing to their compulsive use with virtuous ones that provide new life, new purpose, and deeper meaning. For practical therapeutic purposes, this process can be simplified into three general phases or principles of therapy. We say principles because these phases are not necessarily linear.

First, therapists should focus on helping their clients open themselves up to the possibility of a new way of living. Simply put, they need to "catch the vision of a virtuous life." To do this, clients must first come to realize both their own morally agentic nature and the habitual nature of their CPU. In other words, they must come to see both themselves as they really are *and* CPU as it really is so they can see that true healing and change is in fact possible for them. Consequently, clients, realizing their true nature, can open themselves up to considering that the life they are living can be lived in a different way and for better reasons. Accordingly, they can consider a new vision of the good life in which CPU has no place. This is what Schalow (2017) calls "ontological openness," or an openness to fundamental change and transformation from who we were or are to who we can become.

Discussions of the reality and meaning of moral agency, the possibility of transformative change, the distinctions between virtue and vice, and the nature of habits are all ways therapists can accomplish this. Additionally, this phase almost always requires some exploration and critique of a few of the cultural norms and daily habits that we have inherited from our larger modern cultural conception of the good life, norms and habits that help give rise to and sustain clients' CPU. For example, it may be important to help clients see that contrary to what passes for conventional wisdom

in our larger culture, sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual identity are not of utmost importance in understanding who they really are. Rather, clients can be invited to replace concern for sexual identity with a recognition of their eternal identity, and to embrace the revealed truth that they belong to God, not just themselves, and that they have been made in His image and are (and always have been and will be) loved and adored by Him (Noble, 2021). Such critiques can be supplemented by working on clients' rationalizations (e.g., denial) that keep them in thrall to their vicious habits because "viciousness [is] made possible by rationalization [or denial]" (Fowers et al., 2017, 193). An alternative vision of the good life and virtues needed to achieve healing and a flourishing life can then be explored and offered to clients as a real possibility they can envision and embrace.

Second, healing focuses on helping clients develop virtues to replace the vices that reinforce CPU (Dunnington, 2011). Each healing virtue corresponds with one of the four fundamental aspects of human nature, according to the virtue ethics framework. It must be pointed out, however, that these virtues should be practiced for their own sake as corresponding to a better vision of the good life. Virtues are to be sought for and practiced for the permanent changes they can bring about in a client's character and lifestyle, not simply as coping skills or tools (i.e., means to other ends) that can be dropped once the client stops compulsively viewing pornography (Dunnington, 2011; Fowers et al., 2017). In practical implementation, therapists work with clients first to understand these virtues, and then to come up with goals on how to develop such virtues over time, making sure that those goals are at least in part reflective of a lifestyle in which pornography has no place. Overall, the many virtues we will discuss here do not necessarily constitute an exhaustive list, but they could be considered a sufficient list to help the client start to heal and change.

With regards to the purposive nature of human beings, therapists can help clients practice *intentionality*, which is to act with a clear purpose in mind. "We exercise our agency well when we make choice[s] intentionally" (Fowers et al., 2017, 29). This virtue is probably the most fundamental for healing because deliberate pursuit of new habits is how virtue is acquired. Clients can be deliberate without it being a habitual characteristic of who they are. Once acting purposively becomes a habit, however, clients can be said to possess the virtue of intentionality. Accordingly, clients are encouraged to start seeing the ways that they do not act intentionally, especially during times when the temptation to look at porn is strong, such as when the client is idle or bored.

To clarify, intentionality is not the same as busyness, nor does it mean that clients need to become workaholics or fill every waking moment with some intense activity. It means that they learn to be intentional and purposive in how they use their time, such as when using technology, for example. Even when they are simply relaxing in order to restore their energy, they practice purposively choosing to relax and deliberately deciding on an activity that will help them to do so, rather than mindlessly scrolling on their phone or browsing inappropriate websites. A person can act intentionally without it necessarily being a virtue in the sense we have been discussing here, but acting intentionally, with clear purpose, over time leads to a client to act intentionally out of habit.

Although there are other healing virtues pertaining to the purposive nature of human being, we will only briefly mention one more: *temperance*. The virtue of temperance is concerned with both how we engage in an activity, the degree of engagement that is appropriate, and also the way in which we use tools – i.e., for the proper purpose for which they have been given and doing so in the right amount (Pieper, 2020). For example, teaching clients that the proper use of the bathroom is simply to "go to the bathroom" and to get ready for the day, not to scroll on their phones or hide away from prying eyes, because the proper purpose of a phone is communication. As an instrument intended to facilitate communication, a phone does not belong in the bathroom, a place not appropriate for its proper, temperate use.

In the realm of social being, there are several healing virtues for clients to consider. As with developing a virtuous life, the first two steps of the healing process require deliberate practice (Stichter, 2018), often guided by the mentorship or sponsorship of moral exemplars (Westin, 2020). This alludes to the virtue of *friendship.*

We mentioned *honesty* before, and it is probably the most well-known virtue discussed in addiction recovery programs, along with the mentorship involved with the virtue of friendship (LDS Family Services, 2005; Stichter, 2018). Being honest about compulsive pornography viewing with a spouse, other loved ones, and/or appropriate leaders helps clients break the barrier of shame and be more open about their suffering so that they can get help form a variety of supportive sources.

Additionally, we offer that clients need to learn *vulnerability* in order to be able to open up about their struggles, not only with CPU but also with any difficult or stressful life situation. Many clients see pornography as a way to deal with the stresses of life, leading them to isolate themselves when stressed, and forcing them to deal with challenges on their own. Therefore, developing the habit of being vulnerable about stress and other struggles, rather than isolating oneself, teaches clients that they do not have to suffer alone. Further, it has the benefit of keeping them away from the isolation that makes compulsive pornography viewing so easy. Subsequently, clients learn to suffer with others in their pain, which is the virtue of *compassion* or mercy toward others and toward themselves (Fowers et al., 2017; Snyder, 2020).

In the realm of human reason, *prudence* is the virtue of being able to act quickly, wisely, and in the most virtuous way in a given situation. This is why it is referred to as the virtue that organizes all other virtues (Pieper, 2020). Clients learn this virtue by practicing intentionality and by working to deal with problems of life through moments of contemplation in which they slow down their response to difficult situations or even situations in which they are simply bored or idle. *Practical wisdom* (Fowers et al., 2017), what Aristotle termed *phronesis*, is the flip side of the coin of prudence in that it is the virtue of knowing how best to go about enacting the virtue required in a given situation (i.e., implementation). For example, a prudent client, upon finding themselves alone, would recognize that the best thing to do in that moment is to avoid going on their phone and searching for porn. A wise client would then conclude that the best way to avoid their phone is to leave their phone in the room and perhaps go read a book instead.

The last virtue we will briefly discuss, though there are many others which we have already alluded to and will allude to here, has to do with the moral nature of human beings. Knowledge and experience of grace, and the humble recognition of needing help to heal, can help clients develop the virtue of *reverence*, or a deep respect for the complexities of life and the fact that we cannot control every aspect of our own healing, including knowing exactly how such healing will or must occur (Fowers et al., 2017). As Woodruff (2001) states, "reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have" (p. 8). For the client struggling with CPU, then, it is vital that they learn through habitual practice how to appreciate their own limitations and abilities, as well as God's awe-inspiring grace, how to sense when feelings of shame are appropriate and when they are an unnecessary hindrance to progress, and how respect for others as fully human (rather than merely digital images or fantasies for one's own use) entails respect for one's own humanity. Reverence can be nurtured by patiently enduring the sometimes lengthy and often painful process of healing unfolds, as well as through waiting and watching with the Lord as He brings about the awe-inspiring miracle of transformative healing in our souls, and as he does so according to His "own due time" (1 Ne. 10:3) and in His "own way" (D&C 104:16).

As can be imagined, the second phase or principle of therapy we just described, focused as it is on understanding and developing the virtues for healing, constitutes most of the therapeutic process. The first two phases lead up to and naturally give way to the final phase or principle: helping clients re-orient their lives toward the good and virtuous (van Hooft, 2006). Although much of the time and energy of therapy will be focused on the first two steps outlined above, and particularly on articulating and implementing particular virtues, significant efforts in therapy can be focused more generally on helping clients make their lives well-ordered. This can be done by helping them to focus on some of the basic life-skills many therapists are already familiar with in notions of self-care: eating well, sleeping well, exercising, taking care of important relationships, dealing with stress

in healthy ways, etc.

Additionally, this final principle of healing encourages clients and therapists to seek personal revelation about what changes need to be made in conjunction with developing virtue in order to allow healing and fundamental change to occur. We should remember both that it is ultimately only through Christ and His grace that clients' hearts can be healed, and also that they may need the help of others as they work to embrace a new and different way of living in the world. In the end, through grace, revelation, and the deliberate practice of Christ-like virtue, the client's life will become a new life in which pornography use has no place.

Clients are encouraged in all ways to be "anxiously engaged" (D&C 58:27) in the proper pursuit of covenant discipleship and living. This can be accomplished first by inviting clients to refocus their efforts on understanding their covenants more intentionally through (1) careful prayer and scripture study, (2) frequently visiting the temple and pondering on ways to apply the temple covenants in their lives, (3) studying the words of our latter-day prophets, and (4) truly pondering on the words of the sacrament each week. Next, clients can set clear goals and plans in accordance with what they learn and understand about covenant discipleship. Examples of clear, covenant-related goals could include accepting a new calling, preparing to serve a mission, preparing for a temple marriage, preparing to worthily attend the sealing of a loved one, and preparing to serve in the temple.

Having a clearly identified goal that is farther along the covenant path than where the client currently is challenges the client to rise up and be more virtuous than they currently are as they strive to emulate the life of the Savior. As they do so, they must more fully rely on Christ's grace that will sanctify them (i.e., make them more holy and virtuous), "which grace is a gift to man based on his faith. . . to remain loyal to [his covenants]" (Christofferson, 2001). Although it can require a lot of time and effort, transformative change can (mercifully) take place as clients seek after a life of covenant discipleship, a way of living which assumes, like the virtue ethics framework we have presented here, that "just as vital as what [disciples] do, is who [they] are and who [they] are becoming" (*Preach My Gospel*, Chap. 6). And, in so doing and in so becoming, they will receive a "new heart" (Ezekiel 36:26) and have "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2).

In the end, it must be emphasized that any healing achieved through a virtue ethics understanding of CPU and corresponding approaches to treatment and therapy, which are oriented toward the path of covenant Christian discipleship taught in the Restored Gospel, is ultimately made possible only in and through the merits, mercy, and ongoing atoning sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ (Williams and Gantt, 2020).

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