

C.S. Lewis on Fapping

First Things recently reposted an [article](#) called “Escaping the Prison of the Self” that includes some insights from C.S. Lewis on the topic of masturbation. What’s interesting is that the excerpt includes no reference to the Bible or religion, but rather focuses on the actual psychology of the act.

According to Wesley Hill, the excerpt shared is “from a letter C.S. Lewis sent in 1956 to Keith Masson, an American reader of his.” That letter is found in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Vol. 3*. Here’s the portion cited at *First Things*:

“For me the real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back: sends the man back into the prison of himself, there to keep a harem of imaginary brides. And this harem, once admitted, works against his ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival. Among those shadowy brides he is always adored, always the perfect lover: no demand is made on his unselfishness, no mortification ever imposed on his vanity. In the end, they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself And it is not only the faculty of love which is thus sterilized, forced back on itself, but also the faculty of imagination.

The true exercise of imagination, in my view, is (a) To help us to understand other people (b) To respond to, and, some of us, to produce, art. But it has also a bad use: to provide for us, in shadowy form, a substitute for virtues,

successes, distinctions etc. which ought to be sought outside in the real world—e.g. picturing all I'd do if I were rich instead of earning and saving. Masturbation involves this abuse of imagination in erotic matters (which I think bad in itself) and thereby encourages a similar abuse of it in all spheres. After all, almost the main work of life is to come out of our selves, out of the little, dark prison we are all born in. Masturbation is to be avoided as all things are to be avoided which retard this process. The danger is that of coming to love the prison."

Yes, yes, we're now in a culture awash in porn and sex, but occasionally it's worth taking a contrarian view of things as hard as that may be. It's even harder when the vast majority of young people regularly engage in it. As a reporter at the *New York Times* [commented](#):

"I spoke with researchers at the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, who walked me through a number of long-term studies that the group has been conducting since 2000 on children's exposure to pornography. In one paper, the group found that 42 percent of online users ages 10 to 17 had seen pornography, and that 66 percent of those had seen it unwittingly, often as display ads on file-sharing sites.

Another study by the same university found that 93 percent of boys and 62 percent of girls were exposed to online pornography during their adolescence. You don't need to be a scientific researcher to realize that's a lot of exposure for children."

The curious question remains about developing habits of selfishness or habits of giving. When it comes to our relationships with our significant others, it's important to remember that love requires sacrifice. That's hard to do if we give ourselves over to selfishness.

And so it makes one wonder if Lewis is on to something about the habits of the mind and the body. Is all the fapping and porn harmless, or are we habitualizing ourselves to expect the impossible of our significant others?