Give me a moral disease

By [Ryan Dueck](#)
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This morning I started reading an(other) article about how the Internet is destroying our brains and rendering us incapable of paying sustained attention to anything for longer than forty-five seconds, but I ended up musing about the honor of being called a sinner. An unlikely trajectory of reflection, perhaps, but I'll try to explain myself.

Frank Furedi's "[The ages of distraction](#)," like many other articles, is concerned about our present state of inattention. Unlike many other articles, he's less interested in assigning blame than he is in locating the problem historically and philosophically—and to remind us that what we are so often tempted to think of as a brand new phenomenon is actually a very old one. People have always struggled to pay attention and to pay attention well. The Internet Age might symbolize a pivotal moment in human inattention, but the challenges it presents are mostly in degree not in kind.

At any rate, as I ~~struggled to pay sustained attention to his argument~~ diligently tracked with Furedi on his brief historical tour of inattention, my thoughts kept returning to a sentence, a phrase, located in the opening paragraph:

> From the later 18th century onwards, anxieties about the 'habit of inattention' were increasingly represented as a moral disease.

A *moral disease*. Interesting.

I tried to imagine anyone explaining our online behavior in these terms today. It wasn't an easy task. Based on my subjective and mostly anecdotal impressions, we seem to be ok with words like "disorder" and "unhealthy" and "broken." But *moral disease*?

There are, to be sure, many laments about the present state of affairs—about how we are drearily and mindlessly clicking our way along endless rabbit-trails of

unproductive indolence and sloth when we should be working, dozing away inattentive hours by grazing on the trivial minutiae of social media. And sometimes there is even the general sense conveyed that we are somehow *culpable* for this state of affairs (i.e., we should be doing *better* than we are—that staring vacantly and compliantly at our phones for ten hours a day perhaps doesn't represent the pinnacle of human achievement). But at least as often, the conversation is about how our social and digital environment is determining behavior, or how our relationship with the Internet is affecting our brain structure, or about how we can recondition or "rewire" ourselves toward healthier and more pragmatic (or productive) ends. The problem is often described in either economic (questions of lost productivity) or medical (questions of unhealthy bodies and minds) terms. Rarely, is it portrayed as a *moral* problem.

A strange thing happened as I made my way through the article. I found myself wistfully longing for these mysterious times when writers could refer to human behaviors with descriptors like "moral disease."

[Yikes! No sooner do I see those words on the page, than I feel like ducking my head, fearing that some readers will be tempted to throw things at me.]

I can almost hear the rejoinders already. *Are you kidding? Thank God we're past those days when people were described as morally diseased! I've heard of so many people who were always and only told that they were miserable sinners! Who would want to go back there?! Of course we're better off with an appreciation of how biological and social and cultural context impact human behavior! Of course we're better off knowing that there are all kinds of complex reasons for why human beings act like they do. Of course we need to always remember that we are victims of so many factors beyond our control.*

Yes. I know. And yet...

There is something crucially important about being human that is lost when we consign phrases like "moral disease" to the dustbin of unenlightened history. We need these terms to remind us of vital truths about what it means to be a human being. This is one of the reasons I still use another unfashionable word to describe myself (and, when I am feeling brave or stupid, others): sinner.

I don't like this word. I don't like that I sin. I don't aspire to sin better or more boldly. I don't much appreciate being on the receiving end of the sin of others, either. But I

am convinced that we continue need this word to remind us of who we are and what we might be. Indeed, we will never cease to need this word if only for the fact that we will never cease to cherish the moral freedom that it entails.

Christianity pays me this compliment of calling me a sinner. In so doing, it reminds me that I am not a slave to my genes or the ever-shifting sands of my own personal preferences or my social location or my upbringing or pop culture or big media or the Internet. I am not doomed to while away listless hours binge-watching on Netflix or playing idiotic games on my phone because I happen to have been born in the twenty-first century Western world or because my ongoing socialization takes place in a context that recasts these (and countless other) behaviors as "normal" or "acceptable."

I am, rather, a moral agent. I am a creature from whom things are expected, *demanded* even. I am accountable to God and to my neighbor. I am called to recognize that there is something *diseased* about wasting endless time and energy and resources on unworthy things, something *diseased* about being unable and unwilling to give my attention to those things that most need it. Something for which I am morally responsible.

This is, it seems to me, rather good news. Good news that we are in danger of ignoring or forgetting in our haste to absolve ourselves of moral responsibility and to (selectively) reframe so much of who we are and what we do in reference to what is (or has been) done *to* us rather than what we daily choose.

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