

Against “Guilty Pleasures”

I have a burning hatred for the idea of the “guilty pleasure.”

Oh, I understand the concept. You take pleasure from something for which you also feel guilty for enjoying – from watching YouTube cat videos to eating chocolate ice cream.

But as anyone who indulges in these “guilty pleasures” could tell you, the mixture of guilt and pleasure generally cancels out the pleasure. The idea itself is a contradiction, so this should come as no surprise.

Pleasure was meant to be pleasurable. Guilt was meant to be, well, bad. I think we’re able to live with the contradiction only because we’ve accepted contradictions in our moral standards.

If you feel a “guilty pleasure” for eating chocolate, maybe you need to drop whatever moral standard has told you that eating chocolate makes you a less valuable person. Or maybe you just need to stop eating chocolate. But as long as you have the contradiction of “I like this” and “I think this is bad” going on, you’re just going to spiral into more pain.

If you feel a “guilty pleasure” for having sex, maybe you need to question the assumptions and training which told you that you should feel bad for sexual desire. So many people treat their whole sexual lives as “guilty pleasures” without bothering to consider whether they *really* have a reason to feel guilty (post-religious folks especially). At the same time, many people should probably listen to what guilt might be trying to speak out – pleasure is not the end-all, and so much can go wrong (to yourself and others) in the realm of romance that many moderns fail to consider.

When you feel a guilty sense of pleasure, you should know that you’re being called to go deeper into the feeling, and into your conscious and subconscious values. Then eliminate the contradiction. Let pleasure be pleasure again, and let guilt be guilt.

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