The Morality of Going to Bed on Time [1]

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While I was still busy with my postgraduate degree, one of my friends was diagnosed with having Asperger Syndrome (AS). AS is a type of autism: a neurological development condition (i.e. how the brains of such people developed) which leads to people perceiving, reasoning about, and reacting to the world differently than people who are "neurotypical". It seemed quite ironic to me, as my thesis revolved around AS, so I knew a little bit about it. As with many people, the diagnosis brought my friend a sense of relief. She was already in her 40s and could now for the first time put a name to an ever-present feeling of being different from most other people.

An analogy which sometimes accompanies such a diagnosis is that of a light being switch on after living in a dark room. Suddenly everything which has only ever been felt and awkwardly bumped into can be seen clearly. It can be seen what is where and what all fits into what else. Rather than the light revealing a monster (how would you perceive having to wait for a psychiatric diagnosis?), the diagnosis shows the everyday, the *normal*, and provides an answer to the questions of how to proceed going forward and continuing with life.

Because my friend experiences the world differently from the way that I do (and I do not just mean that she has a different personality from me, but her sensory perception and reasoning processes are different on a neurological scale), it is interesting listening to her speak and the observations which she makes about the world "as an outsider". She also sometimes relates the struggles which she has: "problems" which neurotypical people can seemingly deal with in their stride, while it takes a considerable amount of focussed concentration for her to deal with the same problems.

Most recently she told me about what she calls the "morality of going to bed on time". This is not a morality which she thinks should (or is necessary) to be imposed on most people, but rather it is something which she has recognised that she needs in her life. The idea is simple: if she goes to bed after her "bed time" (she has a stable job and needs to get up for work every day), then it is difficult for her to function the next day. What I mean is not just that she has trouble concentrating on her work, but that she has problems interacting with other people. As a person who has AS, interacting with neurotypical people and by playing by "our" rules of social engagement and conforming to our social rituals is not something which comes natural to her1. She often needs to consciously think about what certain social cues (words, hand gestures, and eye gaze) mean2, and what to say or how to react next. If my friend did not have a good night of sleep, then her ability to interact with other people diminishes quickly. And if things get really bad, she may even react negatively when it is not "appropriate" for her to do so.

This got me thinking about my own habits of more often than not missing my bed times. For me the consequences are less drastic than for her. Or are they? When we are tired don't we have less patience with other people, less energy to help out others, give up easier, lose our tempers quicker, snap at other people faster than we otherwise would have? It is true for me. And these behaviours

are sinful. God calls us to and expects from us an incredible amount of patience, sincerity, love and sacrifice; in fact, He expects no less than perfection from us (Matthew 5). Now, of course no one can be perfect: we shall always need to turn back to the Cross to have our shortfalls forgiven. But, if we *can* can do something practical to help us stay away from bad and sinful behaviours and attitudes, should we not make every effort to do that something, especially if it is as simple as going to bed? What is the cost; an hour less on Reddit, the choice of a shorter movie on movie night, not getting carried away with that exciting new book?

And so, perhaps, we should not automatically be absolved from the "morality of going to bed on time" like some people may think. In our everyday lives, we deal with other people and how we treat and react to them matters greatly to God.

- 1. My friend sometimes uses an analogy akin to a shapeshifter which needs to take on a certain shape (like that of a "normal person) when leaving her house. Keeping the shape is not necessarily difficult, but it takes energy and eventually becomes tiring. Her "natural state", which she is in when she is at home alone, is a shapeless fluid, not suitable for the outside world to see.
- 2. Some examples: people who have AS sometimes struggle recognising facial expressions, or, rather, understand what the significance of particular facial expressions at particular times mean. They also find small talk inane, and do not "intuit" something like sarcasm like neurotypical people do: they need to think about it and try to make sense of it.

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