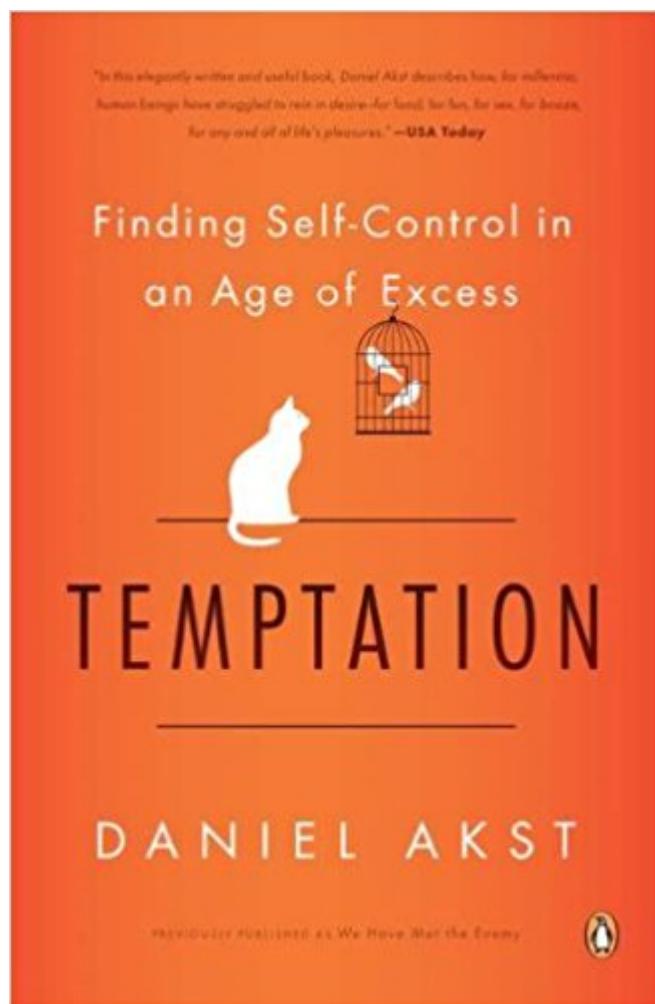


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Temptation: Finding Self-Control In An Age Of Excess



Synopsis

" This elegantly written and useful book . . . describes how, for millennia, human beings have struggled to rein in desire." -USA Today At a time when the fallout from reckless spending and unrestrained consumption is fueling a national malaise, Daniel Akst delivers a witty and comprehensive investigation of the central problem of our time: how to save ourselves from what we want. Temptation reminds us that while more calories, sex, and intoxicants are readily available than ever before, crucial social constraints have eroded, creating a world that sorely tests the limits of human willpower. Referencing history, literature, psychology, philosophy, and economics, Akst draws a vivid picture of the many-sided problem of desire-and delivers a blueprint for how we can steer shrewdly away from a campaign of self-destruction.

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Customer Reviews

In a book full of startling facts, this might be the most startling: of the 2.5 million deaths in the U.S. annually, "something approaching half could be prevented . . . if people simply managed to lead healthier lives." But this isn't a book about living a healthier lifestyle.

It's an exploration of "the challenge of moderation in the face of freedom and affluence." The weapons of mass consumption, Akst calls them, are everywhere. We eat too much food, spend too much money, have too much sex. It's not that we lack willpower; rather, the temptations have vastly multiplied over the years. In the course of defining the reasons why self-control is becoming such a rare commodity, Akst examines our tendency to blame

everything except ourselves, citing a woman he met who blamed excess weight on genetics, fast food, advertising, and high-fructose corn syrup— all while polishing off two plates of waffles and cream cheese. It is this kind of willful self-destruction, Akst concludes, that's killing us in greater and greater numbers. A very thought-provoking and colorfully written book. --David Pitt
--This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

"You wouldn't be able to stop yourself from reading this book! Daniel Akst is among the sharpest, most perceptive writers of his generation, and he is in fine form in *We Have Met the Enemy*."

-Gregg Easterbrook, author of *Sonic Boom* "This book entertains even as it pokes at our most sensitive spots. Daniel Akst handles the touchiest heretical ideas with charm, humor and painless scholarship. With no ax to grind, no cause to serve but reason he opens up the foregone conclusions by which we live and leaves a reader with new and alternate views of ourselves and others. Like the finest essayists Akst makes the deepest ideas fascinating and fun to read."

-Nicholas von Hoffman "The more a society progresses, the bigger a problem self-control turns out to be. If you wish to be ahead of the curve for understanding America's problems, Dan Akst's excellent and informative book is the place to start." -Tyler Cowen, Professor of Economics, George Mason University, and co-creator of the blog *The Marginal Revolution* --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

I read some disparaging reviews after having read *Temptation* and am thankful I didn't see or pay attention to them earlier. Some remarked that they had hoped for more step-by-step instructions (the "answers" I guess) and others said that he didn't provide enough professional/academic robustness. Well, I loved his investigative style, approaching the subject from his own desire to understand it better, many very thoughtful and interesting interviews, and all in all, an unbiased discussion and review of the psychology behind so much of our lives. Yes, there were a few parts that I skimmed. So what. I always found very engaging text later that drew me back into the narrative. And in the end, it has a lot of wisdom. I recommend it highly.

What is your personal self-control issue? your temptation you repeatedly succumb to? super-sized meals? alcohol? sugar? smoking? unbridled shopping and racking up credit card bills? endless computer gaming? consumed by greed? hyper-charged lust? non-stop gambling? repetitively violent? What excessive behavior has infected your life like a plague? It seems to be the lot of human existence. Reading Daniel Akst's recent book, with the telling subtitle, *Self-Control in an Age*

of Excess, again and again I was nodding in agreement and laughing to myself "What fools we mortals be."The real irony of our times is that the great legacy in acquiring liberty, freedom, and rights that so many generations fought and died to realize over the past 500 years now pose a seemingly intractable conundrum: are we unable to free ourselves from our losses of control?Akst contrasts a generation ago when obesity was rare, while today two-thirds of American adults are overweight and nearly half of those qualifying as obese. Rather than control eating and exercising more, 2220,000 morbidly obese people get bariatric weight-loss surgeries each year. Of course, Akst wittily observes, "People have wrestled with their appetites since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden in a self-regulatory lapse of truly Biblical proportions."Democratization of temptation has reached a veritable apotheosis in the United States. Until the recession, writes Akst, "life in this country had come to resemble a giant all-you-can-eat buffet, one that offers more calories, credit, sex, intoxicants, and just about anything else we can take to excess than at time in history."We Have Met the Enemy provides an exceptionally good read on the "perils of prosperity." Akst deftly weaves together anecdotes (often irreverently) and facts from a range of fields, time periods, types of over-indulgences and addictions and means of improving self-mastery and steering ourselves towards what we really want for ourselves. As a professional who promotes win-win solutions to mega-challenges confronting our era, i.e., destructive climate, extinction of ocean, freshwater and rainforest species, oil wars, mass poverty and malnutrition, I find myself reading more and more books on behavior, choice and decision-making by individuals. If it is so hard to self-control one's own behavior, how on earth can we expect humanity as a whole to agree to self-control?Not surprisingly, Akst raises the difficulty with democracy in addressing pressing perils like controlling the burning of fossil fuels to avoid catastrophic consequences. It requires both the willingness of individuals to vote and elect officials who will take action, but the elected ones are subject themselves to the same temptations as the rest of us and the unique temptations of power (as the some 300 lobbyists per member of Congress demonstrate each election cycle).Akst quotes the devastating diagnosis by the ever-observant French traveler around the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in Democracy in America:"The difficulty experienced by democracy in conquering the passions and silencing the desires of the passing moment in the interest of the future can be observed in the United States in the most trivial of things. The people, surrounded by flatterers, find it difficult to master themselves. Every time they are asked to impose some privation or discomfort, even for an aim their reason approves, they almost always refuse at first to comply."Akst gives some glimmers of hope in addressing our personal and social issues of control, which are well worth reading.

"I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies, for the hardest victory is the victory over self." Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) In the annals of human history the primary focus of most people was mere survival. Out of sheer necessity human beings were hunter-gatherers who lived by hunting and collecting food. They were essentially nomads who moved from place to place searching for sustenance. All of this began to change dramatically about 10000 years ago with the introduction of agriculture. The knowledge and skill of learning to care for the soil and growing crops advanced the development of human society, allowing clans and tribes to stay in one location generation after generation. Indeed, mankind has evolved over the centuries to the point that in much of our modern world the problem of survival has been replaced by the nagging and perplexing problem of self-control. This is a fascinating topic. In this new book "We Have Met The Enemy: Self Control in an Age of Excess" author Daniel Akst explores the subject of self-control from a whole host of perspectives. And as Aristotle so aptly pointed out more than 2000 years ago for human beings achieving a modicum of self-control is much easier said than done. As Daniel Akst points out in "We Have Met The Enemy" "For most of us modern daily life is an on-going test of self-control. It's not that we have less willpower than we used to, but rather that modern life immerses us daily in a set of temptations far more evolved than we are". That new Coca-Cola Freestyle machine immediately comes to mind. As marketing and advertising techniques have become more and more sophisticated all of us are exposed to a plethora of offers, products and services that are proving to be increasingly difficult to resist. Some of us indulge in too much food and drink while others buy more house than we can reasonably afford. The incidence of gambling, alcoholism, overspending and a plethora of other addictions continues to rise in our society. Meanwhile, many of the traditional forces that encouraged some semblance of moderation such as close-knit families and organized religion have greatly diminished in influence. So how does the average person cope? Akst turns to the wisdom of philosophers, historians, scientists, economists, poets and writers for answers in his quest to discover that perfect balance between self-control and self-indulgence. Akst also discusses those whom he opines exert too much self-control in their personal lives and what the ramifications of such excessive self restraint might be. Being deeply steeped in the Catholic tradition I am probably one of those people with whom Akst might take issue. Catholicism places a lot of emphasis on self-mastery and although I am weak and prone to failure like everyone else I generally buy into to that position. Having said that, I had never given a whole lot of thought or consideration to Akst's contention that too much self-control can also be debilitating. Daniel Akst has little use for religion and although I do not entirely agree with some of

his conclusions I found his viewpoint on these matters to be enlightening nonetheless. I commend Daniel Akst for taking on such an important and far-reaching topic as self-control. Lord knows this is an issue that all of us need to contemplate and figure out. I knew that I wanted to read "We have Met The Enemy: Self Control in an Age of Excess" the moment I heard about it. I found this book to be very well researched and generally well-written although I must admit that Akst lost me from time to time when the discussion focused on philosophical issues. Still this is a book well worth your time and consideration. Recommended.

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