

Papers and articles

Sexuality and Perversion¹

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In this talk, I argue for three claims:

– the sexuality of sexual desire, sexual excitement, sexual arousal, sexual activity, and sexual pleasure is a matter of the distinctive feeling involved in all of these; – the idea of sexual perversion is an artefact of a dominant approach to sexual ethics in Western history; – this dominant approach is mistaken precisely because sexuality consists in a particular kind of feeling.

Paradigms and Perversions

If there is such a thing as sexual perversion, then there must be such a thing as paradigmatic sexuality from which perverse behaviour is a deviation.

In traditional Christian ethics, the paradigm is sexual activity that aims at, or is at least open to, reproduction. All other sexual activity is perverse.

It is more common these days for ethicists to claim that paradigm sexuality is communicative of love, intimacy, or at least erotic desire. Perversion is sexual activity that either cannot communicate (masturbation, bestiality) or communicates falsely (pretended intimacy).

Ethicists sometimes argue that perversion need not be immoral, and indeed need not be bad as sex. The claim is just that there is such a thing as paradigmatic sex and that some sex can fall short of that.

Why Accept That Some Sex Is Paradigmatic?

One influential paper on sexual ethics begins: ‘There is something to be learned about sex from the fact that we possess a concept of sexual perversion’ (Nagel).

This has been taken up by many philosophers over the past four decades: the concept of

perversion entails paradigmatic sex from which perverse sex deviates.

We should ask where the concept comes from. Some concepts derive from subjective experience. Others are produced by theoretical reflection. If the concept of perversion is theoretical, then it can tell us only about the theory that produced it. (Compare: fornication.)

Note that perversion is not mere misuse or deviance from normality. It is intentional redirection away from a natural or proper course. Hence perverting the course of justice.

The concept of perversion thus presupposes that sex is teleological. Why think this?

Why Accept That Sex Is Teleological?

Traditional Christian morality holds the teleology of sex to be a matter of divine intention. If we can invoke divine intention here then we can invoke it anywhere, rendering this whole inquiry nugatory.

One might argue that evolution confers teleology. But one should not then conclude that sex has any particular natural goal. The longer you stay alive, the more likely you are to pass on your genes, and the more likely your offspring are to pass them on again. The capacity for sex can have evolved to serve a wide variety of subgoals, such as health and happiness, involved in this.

It might be responded that such further benefits are merely additional to the core function of reproduction. But there seems no reason to say this unless one already understands human sexuality as inherently reproductive. We will soon see reason to doubt this.

A different kind of teleological position holds that the goal of sex is an achievement of civilisation. Human sexuality is cultural, on this view, not merely animal, but is

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teleological nonetheless. Thus paradigm human sexuality might be aimed at intimacy and love (Scruton).

For this to be any more than mere insistence on the primacy of a particular aspect of sexuality, it must be plausible that the clearest way to understand the variety of human sexuality is as so many ways of instantiating or falling short of this paradigm.

This would require either that the concept of sexuality is a theoretical artefact with intimacy or reproduction at the core of the theory, or that it is an experiential concept with intimacy or reproduction at the core of sexual experience. We will see that neither is the case.

The Variety of Human Sexuality

For non-paradigmatic sex to count as falling short of a paradigm like communication, intimacy, or reproduction it must instantiate some 'truncated or incomplete' form of that paradigm (Nagel).

This is at least plausible in some cases, which could involve imagined sexual intercourse: 'no masturbation without representation' (Solomon).

But it does not seem plausible in others, e.g. fetishes, melolagnia, kleptophilia, salirophilia.

If there is something that all cases have in common, then that is the core of the concept of sexuality and there is no space for the paradigm-perversion structure.

Sexual Pleasure

It has been argued that the variety of human sexuality, on this view, is the variety of ways in which people have found that they can bring about this sensation of sexual pleasure (e.g. Soble).

This view implies that sexual desire for anything other than sexual pleasure is a desire for something as a means to sexual pleasure.

Sexual desire does not exhibit this means–end structure. A means is fungible: it can be replaced without loss by another means equally good at producing the end. But a desire for a particular sexual experience, or with a particular person, is not substitutable in this way.

It might be replied that this is just because sexual desire can be mixed up with other desires, such as desire for adventure or variety or intimacy with that person. But this just shows that the point about fungibility is not best understood as a claim about sexual desire.

The point about fungibility is best understood as a point about sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is not simply a sensation that can be brought about in different ways. On any given occasion, the sexual pleasure is suffused with the significance of the activity. It is the pleasure of having *this sex* (where 'this' is defined by the activity, the partner or partners where there are any, and perhaps the time in the person's life or relationship.)

In *Dangerous Liaisons*, Valmont wants to sleep with Tourvel because Tourvel has built her reputation on her chastity. He enjoys the prospect of both her downfall and his part in her downfall. The sexual pleasure he takes in their sexual encounter is unlike any he has experienced before, because of this significance.

Sexual pleasure is not a mere sensation brought about in different ways. But there is a recognisably sexual feeling unifying instances of sexual pleasure.

Sexual Desire

If sexual desire is not desire for something that brings about sensation of sexual pleasure, then what is it? Does it include desire for significance of the sexual activity?

A recent empirical study distinguished no fewer than 237 distinct reasons why people have sex. Examples: for pleasure, for intimacy, out of obligation, desire to raise social status, desire to break up someone's marriage (Meston and Buss).

It is intuitively clear that, for some of these examples, one can desire to have sex for that purpose without having a sexual desire for that outcome. In those cases, the purpose of the sex can (negatively) influence the tenor of the sexual pleasure taken in it.

Likewise, we can imagine a version of *Dangerous Liaisons* in which Valmont

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sexually desires Tourvel's downfall and a different version in which he has a non-sexual desire for Tourvel's downfall which nevertheless colours the pleasure he takes in sex with her.

Sexual desire is desire whose occurrence (not whose satisfaction) involves that recognisably sexual feeling.

The Unity of Sexuality

Thus it seems that the variety of human sexuality is unified by a particular kind of feeling, even though this is not a mere sensation produced by different activities.

Sexual pleasure is an intense form this feeling suffused with the significance of the activity in which the pleasure is taken.

Sexual arousal, excitement, and activity are arousal, excitement, and activity involving this particular feeling.

Sexual desire is a desire whose conscious occurrence is accompanied by this particular feeling, which implies the promise of this kind of pleasure being gained from the satisfaction of the desire.

Since the sexuality of sexual desire, arousal, excitement, activity, and pleasure is defined by

subjective feel, there is no conceptual limitation on the objects these can take.

The range of things that can be sexually desired or in which one can take sexual pleasure is an empirical matter. But notice that there is no conceptual reason to think that all sexual activity involves genital stimulation.

This is why we instinctively understand that one can sexually desire touching rubber, looking at shoes, listening to music, stealing from shops, or tasting sweat, and that one can take sexual pleasure in these things without anything added. The concept of sexuality therefore captures a particular subjective feeling. It is not a theoretical concept, but an experiential one. And its content does not admit of the paradigm-perversion structure. Everything that involves that feeling is sexual, anything that does not is not.

There is therefore no justification for the claim that any particular kind of sexual desire, activity, or pleasure is paradigmatic, and correspondingly no justification for the claim that any is perverse.

This talk summarises themes from the following paper: Jonathan Webber, 'Sex', *Philosophy* 2009. Please do email me with any comments: webberj1@cf.ac.uk

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