



Good Sex: Two Approaches to Sexual Ethics

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Although there are a wide variety of approaches to sexual ethics, most of these approaches can be boiled down to opposing positions—conservative and libertarian. This is not to say that every individual will fall neatly into one or the other of these positions. It just means that when we examine the fundamental attitudes of men and women about sexual matters, they will typically fall into one of these two camps. As we shall see, the libertarian (ethical egoist) position arose out of dissatisfaction with conservative attitudes towards sex and the desire to advance the cause of freedom in all aspects of people's lives.

The classical formulation of the conservative position on sexual ethics is found in the writing of Thomas Aquinas. Beginning on a positive note, Aquinas argues that the sex act cannot be considered evil since it results from a natural inclination implanted by God. Sexual activity, he maintains, is proper and natural when it is performed within the context of a marital relationship and which has as its goal the production of offspring. On the other hand, Thomas argues that sexual activity can be considered wrong if “the act of its nature is incompatible with the purpose of the sex act. In so far as generation is blocked, we have an unnatural vice, which is any complete sex-act from which of its nature generation cannot follow.” Examples of such unnatural sexual activity include masturbation, bestiality, homosexuality, and acts in which “the natural style of intercourse is not observed, as regards the proper organs or according to other rather beastly and monstrous techniques” (e.g., oral sex, anal sex and mutual masturbation). Thomas goes on to say that “every emission of semen, in such a way that generation cannot follow, is contrary to the good for man. And if this is done deliberately, it must be a sin” (see *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III, Part. 2, chapter 122, 126; *Summa Theologica* 11.11, q 154, art 1, 11).

Aquinas' views on sexual ethics have influenced Christian moral thought down through the ages, although the position would undergo a slight modification during the Second Vatican Council. In *Humanae Vitae* (1968), the Catholic Church broadened its views to accept two purposes to the sexual act—the unitive (the expression of a couple's love for one another) and procreative (the ability to produce offspring). These two purposes, according to the teachings of the Church, can never be separated: all sex must express love between the partners and every sexual act must be open to the transmission of new life. The document then goes on to restate the traditional Catholic view condemning “every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, purposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible.” (*Christian Marriage* 11-19). Thus while maintaining the traditional ban on homosexual intercourse and masturbation, the Church during Vatican II made it clear that the use of artificial methods of birth control even within the context of a marital relationship is also prohibited (*Humanae Vitae* 12, 14).

The Catholic position on sexual ethics has invited more than its share of criticism. Carl Cohen, an early critic of *Humanae Vitae*, argued that the necessity for each and every sexual act to remain open to the transmission of life was an unreasonable requirement. This becomes apparent, he says, if we compare sexual activity with another biological function of human beings—for example, eating:

Most men will allow that eating, in addition to its nutritive function, provides certain intrinsic satisfaction that we may call gustatory. A good meal will be rich in protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and so on, but it will also be agreeable to the palate. Eating may fulfill these functions concurrently: but is there any moral fault in eating with the intention to separate them? Sometimes, as when one is ill, we eat for the sake of nutrition, altogether without gusto, often we eat with the deliberate intention of avoiding additional nutriment, yet relishing the taste of the dish (256).

Cohen's point is that just as there is nothing wrong with the desire to eat simply for the sake of pleasure and with no regard to the nutritional value of food, so there is nothing necessarily wrong with the desire to engage in sexual activity at times simply for the sake of pleasure—and presumably for other goals as well—and with no desire for the transmission of new life.

The designation of certain types of sexual activity as unnatural has also struck many as problematic given the diversity of sexual expression in the natural world. For example, although the conservative would argue that homosexual sex is unnatural, this position would seem to be undermined by fairly regular homosexual activity among higher orders of primates. Likewise, scientific evidence seems to be leaning more and more strongly towards the idea that there is a biological component to sexual orientation. Homosexuality, in other words, is a matter of nature and not choice. Far from condemning homosexual activity, then, conservative Christians rather should consider such activity as morally acceptable, since it seems to derive from an inclination implanted—in some human beings at least—by God.

In some ways the Catholic Church was fighting an uphill battle in the 1960's and 70's in attempting to offer justification for its traditional teachings on sexual ethics. These were the decades in which the so-called sexual revolution was changing Western conceptions of sexuality. The widespread availability of birth control served to rupture the already fragile link between sex and procreation. It was now possible to engage in sexual intercourse simply for pleasure and with little fear of conceiving children. The growing feminist movement also began convincing many women that marriage and family life were prisons and that women really didn't need to be trapped in oppressive relationships with brutish men in order to find fulfillment in life.

In the midst of all these changes, libertarian thinkers began to challenge traditional views on sexual morality—particularly those of the Catholic Church. The most notable of these attempts to construct a libertarian approach to sexual ethics is found in Alan Goldman's article, "Plain Sex." In this work Goldman begins by rejecting what he refers to as a "means-end analysis of sex," or those which treat sex as a means to some further end such as reproduction, love, communication, or interpersonal awareness. The problem with such approaches is that they view sex as a means to some higher end, rather than as an end in itself. Goldman rejects such approaches as "extrinsic" (or instrumental) accounts of sex.

Those who connect sex with procreation, such as conservative Christians, he argues, confuse nature's purpose with our own. Even if we argue that nature's purpose for sex is the reproduction of the species, why does this necessarily have to be *our* purpose in having sex? Through the development of contraceptive technology, Goldman says, sex can for all practical purposes be disconnected from procreation. As we have seen above, although the purpose of eating from nature's perspective may in fact be to provide nutrition for the body, most of us eat quite often merely for enjoyment.

Goldman similarly rejects the idea that the goal of sex is to express love between partners. First, there are many other ways to express love besides sex—for example, making breakfast on Sunday morning for one's partner. Second, whereas love may manifest itself in a long-term exclusive relationship, sexual desire can often be fleeting and can direct itself towards numerous objects. One can have casual sex, he argues, but never casual love. The problem that many people have, according to Goldman, is that they confuse love with sexual desire. Such confusion leads them to enter into marriages when all they really want is sex and it leads to jealousy in marriage over what may simply be a passing fling.

Goldman goes on to define sexual desire simply as "the desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces." Sexual activity, therefore, becomes any activity which "tends to fulfill such desire of the agent." Based upon this understanding of sex, he concludes that there are no specific moral norms for sexual activity. The only norms that apply to sex are those that would also apply to any other kind of activity—playing tennis, engaging in business transactions, etc.

What might some of these norms be? Most libertarians would argue that any sex act is morally permissible provided that the parties involved in the act are willing participants—if, in other words, they are acting freely and capable of giving their informed consent. Thus any act (and this would naturally include any sexual act) involving coercion, manipulation or deception, promise-breaking, or some form of exploitation must be considered wrong. Rape would be considered wrong because it involves force; sex with a minor or with a mentally impaired adult would also be considered wrong because such individuals cannot give their consent; bestiality probably would be considered wrong by most libertarians because only a human being can give consent.

If, however, the other party is a voluntary participant in a given sex act, then basically just about anything goes. Ramond Belliotti, for example, believes that incest is wrong only if it is entered into with a child. But he argues that incest between a father and his 30-year-old daughter would be perfectly acceptable if both parties had voluntarily agreed to enter into a sexual relationship and used birth control to prevent the conception of a potentially defective child. Likewise he maintains that an act of adultery would be acceptable if it does not involve promise-breaking, deceit, or exploitation. Thus, if a married couple agreed to allow each other to take lovers, there really should be no problem with such behavior from a libertarian perspective. Other sorts of sexual acts that would undoubtedly be condemned by conservatives—for example, sex between individuals of the same gender, group sex, sado-masochistic sex and all variety of sexual fetishes—would be completely acceptable to a libertarian provided, of course, they were performed by consenting adults.

Many Americans implicitly accept the libertarian belief that the only sorts of acts that are wrong are those that can be demonstrated to cause direct harm to other persons. The libertarian approach to sexual ethics is problematic, however, for a number of reasons. One could certainly argue that if the purpose of sex is simply pleasure, then one would be far better off having sex with prostitutes than entering into any kind of relationship with

another human being. Prostitutes, after all, are completely focused on providing pleasure for their customers and do not place any annoying emotional demands upon them.

The libertarian idea that sex is purely a private affair between two or more individuals in which the rest of society is in no way involved is also somewhat naive. In fact, sexual activity has never and will never be a purely private matter. What an individual does in the “privacy” of his or her own bedroom often has ramifications that affect the rest of society. The rise of STDs and, in particular, AIDS, has occurred primarily because of the increase in casual unprotected sexual intercourse. We have also seen that there has been a dramatic increase in illegitimate childbirth since the 1960’s, an increase which is undoubtedly related to the permissive attitude towards premarital sex that has become endemic in our society. In each of these cases, irresponsible attitudes towards sexual activity have placed an enormous burden upon the rest of society.

Sources

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