

Final Project Part Two: A Summa of My Philosophy

Question: Sex and Morality**Article 1: Is sexual desire moral?**

Objection 1: In *Phaedrus*, Plato introduces the Chariot Allegory: there is a charioteer who drives a chariot with two horses. One horse is of the noble kind, controlled by the sense of shame, and the other is of the ignoble kind, driven by desire. The charioteer falls in love with a youth and his soul is filled with warmth and “pricklings and ticklings of desire” every time he looks at the beloved. (Plato, *Phaedrus*) The bad horse tries everything to drag the chariot closer to the beloved to fulfill the sexual desire, and finally the charioteer and the good horse give in. However, when the charioteer looks into the youth’s face, his memory is carried to the “true beauty” and self-control that he had with the gods. (Plato, *Phaedrus*) His sense of shame then takes over, so he pulls back the bad horse, and only follows the beloved with “modesty and holy fear”. (Plato, *Phaedrus*). At last, the youth responds to the charioteer’s love, and they get to live together. Plato uses this allegory to tell us that only self-control and shame can lead to true love (or *friendship* in Plato’s words), and sexual desire is not moral and has to be restrained.

Objection 2: When A sexually desires B, A only desires B’s body and body parts. Therefore, sexual desire *objectifies* a human being by making the A only pay attention to B’s flesh rather than B’s other “elevated moral status” like dignity, rationality, intelligence, etc. Thus, sexual desire is immoral. (Halwani, *Sex and Sexuality*)

On the contrary, it is written that “[Sexual desire] is a force for good, establishing trust and strengthening human bonds”. (Halwani, *Sex and Sexuality*)

I answer that, reciprocated, non-abusive sexual activities with all participants' consent brings sexual pleasure to every participant. Therefore, if one has sexual desire, he desires to bring pleasure to others as well as himself, strengthening bonds and boosting general well-being (pleasure) within the group -- this might be done unconsciously as most of the time sexual desire is to bring pleasure to *oneself*, yet the result is collectively beneficial. Moreover, some psychologists like A. H. Maslow regard sexual needs as one of the basic human needs. Hence the desire to bring sexual satisfaction is analogous to the desire of satisfying someone's other physiological needs like water, food, and shelter. Therefore, sexual desire, in most cases, is moral.

Reply to objection 1: The idea in the Chariot Allegory that says that sexual desire needs to be restrained is right, for if we just let it control us, we may lose our rationality and engage in risky sexual behaviors like unprotected sex, or we may ruin the relationship by the eagerness to have sex and overlooking the partner's other needs. However, it seems like Plato wants us to completely eradicate sexual desire and, instead, follow the beloved with shame and fear before the relationship is built. This is problematic because in real life, shame and fear don't let the beloved know your affection to him/her, and thus the relationship will not be initiated at all.

Reply to object 2: Not all sexual desire objectifies the partner. For example, a couple might have sex to have a baby. They don't desire or want to seek sexual pleasure from each other's body or body part. Moreover, this idea doesn't apply to cases in which the desire is not related to another's body, for instance: masturbation, exhibitionism, etc,

Article 2: Is sexual activity moral? (Sexual desire and sexual activity are two distinctive terms in the relevant page of Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and some moral topics, like Aristotle's moral virtues, only concern *actions*, so it can only be discussed in this Article.)

Objection 1: During sexual activity, we may lose our irrationality due to the intense pleasure, so we may engage in risky activities like unprotected sex (the sex was initially protected, but when the sexual partner asks to take off the condom for better sexual experience, one may agree to do so), drug-taking, or potentially harmful sexual activities like S.M. Therefore, sexual activity is not moral. (Note that this is different from my response to objection 1 in Article 1 because the risky sexual behavior discussed in Article 1 is caused *proactively* by sexual desire, while the risky behavior discussed here is caused by the loss of rationality due to the intense pleasure *during* sexual activity).

Objection 2: According to Aristotle, temperance is the moral virtue that deals with bodily pleasure. If we are able to perform sexual activities and enjoy sexual pleasure according to the *mean*, that is, at the right time and place, with the right person, and having the right motivation, sexual activity is permissible and moral.

On the contrary, it is written that “there is consensus among philosophers that informed and voluntary consent is necessary for the moral permissibility of sex”. (Halwani, *Sex and Sexuality*)

I answer that, agreeing with Halwani and most philosophers, I believe that all participants' consent is crucial for the moral permissibility of sexual activity because (1) it is the fundamental of a reciprocal, non-abusive sexual activity, for if one thinks that he/she is going to be harmed or not going to get what he/she wants from the activity, he/she will not consent, and no one would

be hurt from a possible problematic sexual activity, and (2) as Halwani points out in *Sex and Sexuality*, in heterosexual sex, “men and women might importantly different differ when it comes to sex”, that is, men are usually significantly better in strength, which may lead to forced subordination that is undesired by the female or, even worse, abusive sexual activity. Therefore, all participants’ consent after making sure that the partner(s) are safe and respectful through thorough examinations will greatly increase the moral permissibility of sexual activity.

Reply to object 1: This is a great argument that challenges the morality of sexual activity because it seems nearly impossible to keep our rationality during intense pleasure, and this doesn’t seem to be able to be eliminated by consent because it’s hard for someone to tell that his/her prospective sexual partner(s) would engage in risky sexual activities beforehand (especially the person typically already has some good feelings about the partner(s) due to the expectation of acquiring sexual pleasure from the them). However, first of all, this idea should not be used to reject the moral permissibility of *all* sexual activities -- this is not likely to happen between a married couple. Moreover, this idea may just provide one more criterion for moral permissibility: if one cannot be *sure* about whether his/her sexual partner(s) will convince him/her to engage in risky sexual activities, he/she should simply not give consent to the sexual partner(s).

Reply to object 2: What “the right time and place, the right person, and the right motivation” are for sexual activities is unclear and tricky to decide (for example, what is the “right time” to have sex for a sex worker? Is it *anytime*?). However, if all the criteria are met, it can almost be confirmed that the sexual activity is morally permissible, for consent is included in the “right person” criterion. Nevertheless, Maslow put personal morality and other self-actualization

activities on the top of the human hierarchy of needs -- the least important of all human needs, while sexual satisfaction is placed among the most basic and important human needs. Therefore, does it mean that for the kind of sexual activities that fulfills human basic needs (rather than purely seeking for pleasure), we should not be considering morality at all? It could be the case that either Aristotle or Maslow or both of them are false (and I personally think that Maslow's model needs to be revised), but this is still a problem that requires further discussion.

Works Cited

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