

Phenomenology of Being a Survivor of Sexual Violence

November 2021

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When speaking of sexual violence from the perspective of a survivor, there is an important problem. The survivor does *not* want the listener to understand the *sense* of sexual violence. The survivor, however, wants the listener to understand the *reference* of sexual violence. To understand the sense of sexual violence is to be a survivor of sexual violence. Obviously, the survivor does not want this upon anyone, even their worst enemy. To understand the reference of sexual violence is to be an ally. This is what the survivor seeks to convince the listener of: that there is sexual violence in the world, that she or he or they are pointing to it, and that the listener ought to grasp the reference, and also that the listener ought not to understand the sense.

At the face of it, the reference of sexual violence seems easy to grasp. After all, we often define what sexual violence is, for pragmatic and legal purposes. But sexual violence is singular. It is less a concept, and more an intuition.

What, then, can it mean to grasp the reference of an intuition? Grasping the reference of a concept is easy: it often suffices to know the name of the concept, and its definition. Grasping the reference of an intuition is a different problem altogether. Let us use a different, less depressing example. Suppose you just went skydiving. You describe what skydiving is to a friend who has never experienced skydiving before. You talk their head off for an hour about the experience. But at the end of the hour, your friend still does not quite understand what it is to have skydived. They have not experienced it. Later, you feel a sense of vertigo which you know your friend also felt (there was an earthquake, say), and it reminds you of skydiving. You glance at your friend. She is also thinking of what you have told her about skydiving. For both of you, the sense of vertigo itself became a reference to skydiving. Note: the *sense* of vertigo was a *reference* to skydiving. The vertigo *is not* skydiving. The sense of vertigo and the sense of skydiving are

distinct. But the sense of vertigo *is* the reference to skydiving. Some days pass. You say to your friend: remember that earthquake? Both you and your friend now have a symbolic reference (“that earthquake”) to skydiving. Sort of.

The easiest way for your friend to grasp the reference to skydiving, of course, would be for her to go skydiving with you next time. However, this is explicitly *not* what the survivor of sexual violence wants. Most experiences are better the more they are shared. This is *certainly* not the case with sexual violence. In fact, any experience that is adjacent to sexual violence in any way whatsoever *ought not* be experienced by the listener. So the case of a sense of vertigo – a sense similar to the sense of skydiving – is also ruled out.

So now there is a dilemma. How can the survivor communicate to the listener? Art is one way. Sometimes, the survivor has no choice but to be an artist, when having judged that is the only way to communicate what they must communicate. But it must be too much to *expect* of the survivor to be an artist.

A successful communication of the reference of sexual violence requires the listener to cry. But the survivor often doesn’t even want the listener to cry! In this case, what the survivor must do, must override what the survivor wants to do. *The survivor must make the listener cry.* After the listener has cried, the listener might want a name for this singular crying experience. Let us call this, *arran*.

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But there is a physical description of the sense of sexual violence. It is a sensation of spinning. There is a vexing question here. One may experience this sensation by being a victim of sexual violence. But there is a physical phenomenon that corresponds to such a sensation. It is plausible that devices of modern physics, such as a cyclotron, may physically cause someone to experience said sensation. Suppose a set of perpetrators, P, (1) know that victims of sexual violence feel this sensation of spinning. Suppose, (2) also, that by activating a physical device, they may cause a set of people, S, to experience that sensation.

Suppose, now, (3) they activate the physical device. Suppose, even, they (4) activate it and cause profit to be made.¹ What punishment is appropriate for the perpetrators P?

One solution is to generate entropy with the perpetrators. Why would we generate entropy? For the benefit of their victims of sexual violence. In fact, given a perpetrator p and victim v , it is plausible that p “stole” something from v . What did p steal? v ’s soul. v may get this soul back by themselves. This does not always happen, and there must be an intervention. Generating entropy with the perpetrators, for the benefit and pleasure of the victims, is one such intervention. As in: the victim ought be able to use the perpetrators like they are toys, generating entropy here, there, taking pleasure in their begging and physical mutilation.

Take a water mill. Water flows into a wooden wheel. The wheel spins. The flow of water is entropy. The wheel’s spinning is generation of entropy for the benefit of the mill. We may imagine the perpetrators as having turned into water, generating entropy for the mill. The mill is more beautiful when the wheel spins.

This is an old solution.

Let us say we want to find another solution. Obviously, we should take away their physical device, so they cannot activate it again. We should also definitely take all the profit that they caused to be made, and give it as reparations to the set of survivors S. But there remains the question of the moral character of the perpetrators P. As for that, the old solution works over a longer timescale. Over a shorter timescale, we ought obviously improve their moral character. But never mind their moral character. There are legal questions: should p be treated in the same way as one (call this person c) who committed acts of sexual violence without devices of modern physics? Do they deserve the same punishment, lesser punishment, or harsher punishment? Take a simpler example: murder is usually accorded lesser punishment when it is a

¹ Note, P is defined by the conjunction of all four propositions (1), (2), (3), and (4). As for those who satisfy (2) and (3), but not (1) or (4), they should understand that (1) and (4) are the case, but they do not deserve punishment at all.

crime of passion, and a harsher punishment when it is premeditated. So it is plausible that p deserves a harsher punishment than one who commits acts of sexual violence without such devices.

One may object to this opinion by stating that p only indirectly committed the act, whereas c directly committed the act. In general, this objection may say, direct acts have more impact than indirect acts, and where the impact is negative, a direct act has more negative impact than an indirect act.

But in the case of sexual violence, more consideration must be given to the fact that sexual violence is singular. It involves intuition. Think again about their moral character. Our collective goal as a society is ultimately to improve the moral character of its people. Empirically speaking, punishments in the legal system do not improve one's moral character. The longer one is in prison, the lesser chance one has of improving one's moral character (and ultimately falling into the old solution). So c , who was, at some point in spacetime, physically much closer to someone who has intuition about sexual violence (c 's victim/survivor), probably has more chance of improving their moral character. So c 's punishment should be lesser than p 's, and p 's should be harsher than c 's.