

Lecture Notes 6 : Sex

Lecturer: Nicholas Vrousalis

nv211@cam.ac.uk

Kant's view of sexual love is very bleak and pessimistic:

Love, as human affection, is the love that wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it. But now it is plain that those who merely have sexual inclination love the person from none of the foregoing motives of true human affection, are quite unconcerned for their happiness, and will even plunge them into the greater unhappiness, simply to satisfy their own inclination and appetite. Sexual love makes of the loved person an object of appetite; as soon as the other person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away as one throws away a lemon that is sucked dry. (*Lectures on Ethics* 27: 384)

But what counts as sex? Not surprisingly, this question is very heavily disputed in philosophy.

The nature of sexual desire

desire for sex \neq sexual desire

sexual desire \neq being in physical state of sexual arousal (e.g. priapism)

Lust vs hunger

Thomas Nagel: when you desire sexually you desire a *person*, and therefore something that transcends one's mere attributes:

This is very different from the case of an omelet. Various people may desire it for different reasons... yet we do not enshrine the transcendental omelet as the true common object of their affections. Instead we might say that several desires have accidentally converged on the same object: any omelet with the crucial characteristics would do as well. It is not similarly true that any person with the same flesh distribution and way of smoking can be substituted as object for a particular desire that has been elicited by those characteristics. (Nagel 1979, 43)

All lust, for Nagel, involves (i) wanting another, (ii) wanting that they want you, and taking pleasure from their wanting you. If Nagel is right, then hunger and lust part ways.

Sartrean pessimism

For Sartre a successful sexual relation is, more or less, impossible. In trying to appropriate another's subjectivity you either:

make yourself into an object, in which case you lose your freedom, or you

eviscerate the other's subjectivity, thereby totally defeating the original purpose

The principal problem in sexual ethics is to provide an answer to Sartre's challenge.

Kant's view

In sexual desire proper, the other is desired as a sex, and therefore as an object, and not as a human being. Kant's solution is marriage:

For the natural use that one sex makes of the other's sexual organs is enjoyment, for which one gives itself up to the other. In this act a human being makes himself into a thing, which conflicts with the right of humanity in his own person. There is only one condition under which is this possible: that while one person is acquired by the other, as if it were a thing, the one who is acquired acquires the other in turn, for in this way each reclaims itself and restores its personality. (*Metaphysics of Morals* 6: 278)

Kant's view seems to have been that marriage can and will protect women both from male domination, and from treating themselves as mere means. Even if Kant was right about the latter claim, he was profoundly mistaken about the former.

Casual sex

Onora O'Neill: 'language of intimacy' and accompanying practices, make it both easier to deceive and to coerce other people:

- (1) Casual sex involves relations of intimacy.
- (2) In some cases, intimacy will involve deception or coercion of others.
- (3) Coercion and deception violate the FH, which is necessary for moral permissibility.

∴ (4) Therefore some forms of casual sex are morally unacceptable.

Coercion and deception

A set of actions *S* is coerced if it is impossible for an agent to give free, rational and informed consent to *S*.

According to O'Neill, the FH implies that:

there are two separate aspects to treating others as persons: the maxim must not use them (negatively) as mere means, but must also (positively) treat them as ends in themselves. (O'Neill 1985, 262)

Treating people as ends in themselves

Is the absence of coercion or deceit *sufficient* to establish morally OK sexual encounters? Intuitively, answer is 'no'. People can, and often do, give free, rational and informed consent to all sorts of degrading treatment.

Further non-sartrean worries: (i) commercial culture and stereotypes (ii) persistent social and economic inequality between the sexes.

Suggested Reading

Nagel, T. (1979), *Moral Questions*, CUP, ch. 4.

O'Neill, O. (1985), 'Between Consenting Adults', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, 252-277.